



Operation Reunion (Cutter's Code Book 2)

By Justine Davis

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"I thought you were through with me."

What does the dog know? When Kayla meets Cutter, the big, brown Belgian, she's at a crossroads. She's certain she's about to clear her brother of her parents' murder. But Dane, her longtime love, is just as sure that she's wasting her life. One man needs her. The other, apparently, doesn't... Although it breaks her heart, the choice is made.

Only, Dane Burdette isn't going anywhere. As loyal as that dog, he still loves the beautiful girl next door, even if her life has been derailed. And when danger comes back to their small town, he knows she—and their love—is at risk. Kayla has made her quest her life. Neither Dane nor Cutter will let it take her life, too.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Justine Davis lives on Puget Sound in Washington State, watching big ships and the occasional submarine go by, and sharing the neighborhood with assorted wildlife, including a pair of bald eagles, deer, a bear or two, and a tailless raccoon. In the few hours when she's not planning, plotting, or writing her next book, her favorite things are photography, knitting her way through a huge yarn stash, and driving her restored 1967 Corvette roadster—top down, of course.

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Kayla Tucker stared at the note in her hand. She was barely aware of the woman opening the post office box next to her, stepped out of the way of the man emptying trash, ignored the girl chattering loudly into her cell phone, all without looking up from the page obviously torn out of a spiral notebook.

The note wasn't signed. If it had been printed, she could have pretended it was a mistake. That he hadn't written it. But there was no mistaking the handwriting; the slightly crooked hand, falling off the lines in her brother's typical way, was definitely Chad's.

Of course it was, just like all the others.

The writing blurred suddenly. She blinked, once, twice, then a third time. The last line swam, then cleared.

I'm sorry. I love you, sis.

She swore inwardly. "Then why did you leave, damn it? We could have fought this!"

Furious, mostly at herself for letting this latest in the long line of notes get to her, she wadded the ragged-edged piece of paper and the envelope into a tight ball. Dane would be unhappy yet again, she thought.

No, she thought as the memory stabbed at her. Dane Bur-dette would not be unhappy. Because he wasn't around anymore. He'd given up on her at last.

His image shot through her mind, vivid and painful. Tall, lean, dark, silky hair that kicked forward over his brow, golden eyes alight as he looked at her, flashing his killer smile. The smile that had grown rarer and rarer as the time passed.

Smothering the usual ache at the thought of the man she'd once expected to spend her life with, she slammed the small metal door of the post office box closed, turned the key and yanked it out. She turned on her heel and walked toward the door. She tossed the wadded up note into the trash can just outside.

"Kayla!"

The last thing she wanted to do just now was talk to someone. But she thought she recognized the voice, so she stopped, turned. And was enveloped in a huge hug.

"I'm so glad to run into you this morning. I was going to call and tell you—Leah and I actually went out to dinner last night."

Kayla managed a smile for the older man who several weeks ago had brought his reluctant wife to the

counseling group she ran. "I'm glad to hear that, John. How did it go?"

"Not perfect, but better than I expected. And she's encouraged enough to try something else now."

"That's good to hear. Very good."

She meant it. She'd started the group for victims of violent crime as a means to help herself after the brutal murder of her parents, but in the process she had found a calling. She'd even gone back to school so she could be certified. And moments like this were why. Leah Crandall had been mentally immobilized after her son had been killed by an armed robber at a convenience store, and this was the first time she'd done anything socially normal in more than a year.

Kayla hoped they would make it, she thought as John promised he and his wife would continue with the group and would see her at the next meeting. So many marriages didn't survive the death of a child; the murder of that child only made it worse.

The overcast morning matched her mood as she headed for the parking lot. She glanced down the row of parked vehicles toward her own, the little blue coupe Dane had always kept in perfect shape for her. She spotted a familiar motorcycle parked across from it and slowed her steps. Rod Warren truly was the last person she wanted to see now. Or ever. She'd had an aversion to him ever since she'd found him trying to burn holes in the wings of a living butterfly with a magnifying glass when they were kids. She'd tried to stop him, even though he was older and bigger, and had in return been pinned against a wall and groped in a way she was too young to completely understand.

But Dane had, and when she'd told him about it, Rod had later shown up with a split lip and a black eye, and he'd kept a wide berth from then on. Still, she'd never forgotten the repugnance she'd felt. But the rider of the motorcycle with the picture of a nude female arranged in a particularly obscene way on the tank was thankfully nowhere in sight, so she kept going.

She was almost to her car when she changed her mind.

She should keep the note. The envelope with the postmark at least; this might be the one time when it helped. She turned around and began to walk quickly back. She felt the breeze of her own movement edging her tears sideways across her cheeks.

A loud clank echoed against the block wall of the post office. And the trash can she'd tossed the crumpled note into rolled into her path. She stopped, staring. There was no wind to catch the now-empty metal container, nor anyone to knock it over. The janitor had worked his way around to the other side of the building, and nobody else was even close.

No human anyway.

But there was a dog.

Sitting beside the toppled trash can was a dog, a striking animal with a thick, longish coat colored black from the tip of his nose past his upright, alert ears all the way down past his shoulders, where the color of his fur changed to a rich, reddish brown.

He was looking at her rather intently.

And he had what she would swear was her note between his front paws. It had to be, she thought. The can had just been emptied before she'd tossed it. The wadded paper and envelope lay on the cement in front of

him as if carefully placed. He must think it was some sort of ball to play with.

For a moment she pondered the dangers of approaching a strange dog. He wasn't huge, but he was far from small. Big enough to be intimidating, to make her wary.

And then he grinned at her.

She knew it was silly, but she couldn't think of any other way to describe it. His mouth opened, revealing some formidable teeth, but it was impossible to be frightened when his tongue lolled out on one side and the corners of that mouth seemed to curl upward.

Just when she had decided it might be safe to pet him, at the same time reaching for her note, he moved. He grabbed up the note and she froze. But he was holding it in a way that seemed oddly gentle. Like Dane's sweet Labrador, Lilah, used to hold her pups long ago, so gently there was barely a dent in the fur. The memory made her ache even more for the man who had left her.

And then the dog got up and started to go toward the parking lot.

Angry at herself for tossing the note in the first place, Kayla didn't know what to do. She wanted it back, desperately now, but she didn't want to provoke a strange dog into biting her.

The dog stopped. He looked over his shoulder at her. And waited.

Images from countless movies and television shows flashed through her mind. Was she supposed to follow him? Did dogs really do that? He took a couple of steps, still looking at her, the note still held almost delicately in his mouth.

She followed tentatively. He started off again. Not running, not teasing her as some dogs did, playing a canine version of keep away; he just trotted off. He headed into the half-full parking lot, past the obscene motorcycle and toward the second row of vehicles. When he looked back yet again, as if to be certain she was following, she could have sworn his dark eyes were urging her, compelling her somehow.

Kayla shook her head sharply.

"It's a *dog*," she muttered under her breath.

She picked up her pace, determined now to retrieve the note. She'd only thrown it away in the first place because she was so upset over Dane.

She passed her own car, then the big pickup parked next to it and the tiny electric car next to that. With her mind distracted for an instant by the absurd contrast between those two vehicles, she was late to realize the dog had come to a halt beside the driver's door of the next car in the row, a dark blue SUV that was a few years old but looked in perfectly maintained condition and had the glass hatch in the back raised up.

Her breath caught as the driver's door swung open and a man slid out. She stopped sharply, momentarily unable to move. He was tall, lean, hair as dark as midnight, with a forbiddingly strong jaw. But that jaw was unshaven, and his tousled hair spoke of a hurried morning rather than trendy style. Still, she took a step back instinctively.

He hadn't seen her yet. He crouched down beside the dog, who was fairly wiggling with pleasure yet holding gently on to that ball of paper. Kayla felt her anxiety fade as the man smiled and reached out to scratch below the dog's right ear.

"That'll teach me to leave the back window open. What'd you find, boy?"

The man's voice was low, steady, strong. He took the paper wad from the dog, who surrendered it easily and looked almost humanly satisfied, as if at a job well done. And then the dog looked back at her, staring in a way she'd never seen from any animal. She felt pinned in place, for a moment helpless and unable to move.

Meanwhile, the man had taken the note out of the crumpled envelope. *Her* note.

The spell broke. "That's mine," she said, afraid after she'd spoken that she'd sounded like a spoiled child who'd had a toy taken from her.

"I gathered," he said, and she realized she'd been wrong; he'd known she was there all the time.

And then he straightened. And she realized just how tall he was.

Most men seemed tall to her, at five-three. But this one had to be at least six feet, and something about the way he held himself made him seem even bigger. That he was obviously fit and strong only added to the impression.

She sucked in a breath, trying not to be intimidated. Nothing would happen here, in such a public place as the post office parking lot.

Then his face changed, softened, and his icy blue eyes warmed.

"Hayley," the man said, his voice raised just slightly.

Kayla frowned, puzzled. Then had her answer as a woman stepped past her, a post office receipt in one hand.

The dog greeted the woman effusively, on his feet, tail wagging madly....

Users Review

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Donna Bohannon:

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Mattie Priest:

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