

The Christmas Camel



VERED EHSANI

THE CHRISTMAS CAMEL

A TeaTime RomCom Story

VERED EHSANI



STERLING & STONE

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CHAPTER ONE

“I’m not flying home just to bail you out of jail, Duchess. Not again.” I tried to sound like I meant it this time. Like I was mature. Determined. Calm. Or at least, not hysterical.

Last thing I needed was to let my emotions get the better of me. I was *not* going to make a fuss, throw a thirty-something’s version of a tantrum, and get kicked out of Hill of Beans for disturbing the peace.

Not this month, I silently vowed.

Oh, yes, this was a new me. A less impulsive, more in control Mollie Stanton. A version of me who was determined not to let Duchess Delilah — a.k.a. my grandmother — wind me up.

The old lady was good at doing that. She was always doing something to push me off of the rails of *responsible adulthood* and into a train crash of *oh my word, I can’t believe we just did that*, usually ending in a situation that was borderline illegal or traumatic. Sometimes both.

And my therapist wondered why I had issues.

“Tell her how you feel,” my therapist advised me. “Just say no.”

Sure.

If anyone bothered to actually listen to my stories, they’d understand that *No* wasn’t part of Duchess’ vocabulary. Neither was being called Granny, Gran, Grandmother or any other cozy title.

My childhood and adolescence were littered with situations that required a firm commitment to boundaries. Or safety. Or whatever normal parental figures applied to the miniature humans living with them. But not Duchess Delilah.

Take the time I launched a homemade rocket from my bedroom window. I was aiming for the moon, but it landed on the barn roof and burst into flames.

“Duchess,” I’d asked. “Is it okay if I climb onto the roof?”

“Of course, dear,” she’d replied.

“But isn’t it dangerous?”

“Now, Mollie. What’s life without a little danger?”

Oh, I don’t know. Maybe *safe*?

Duchess was too busy applying her makeup in preparation for another attempt at revitalizing her TV career. Too busy to allow herself to be distracted by parenting a child climbing rooftops.

I was never able to get Duchess to understand why this was a problem for a young, impressionable child. Or a less impressionable teenager who still needed a few boundaries.

Whenever I tried, she'd derail the conversation. She was always interrupting me. Even my—

“But Mollie!” Duchess' voice pierced through the speaker.
—thoughts.

“Why don't you want to come home?” she argued. “You love Teaville. Especially the farm.”

She interrupted *everything*. My entire life was a series of interruptions, and it was all her fault.

“It's not my fault this time,” she insisted into the silence. “I swear on the life of my grandchildren's children.”

Thanks a lot, Duchess. I'm sure my future children appreciate that.

“You know, Duchess,” I mused, “I had a premonition this morning that something was amiss.”

“Extraordinary.”

“Yup. To be honest, I knew the moment my phone rang.”

“You don't say?”

“Okay, maybe not when it *rang*, rang. But the minute I answered and heard your voice, I had a gut instinct someone was in trouble.”

“You're truly a protégé.”

Not really. My gut had been trained since mid-childhood to recognize when trouble was afoot. Which was pretty much all the time when my grandmother was involved. She was in trouble with the law as often as I was in the midst of a

breakup. Almost as if her inability to commit to staying on the right side of the law mirrored my inability to commit to staying in a romantic relationship.

So despite her current situation — safely behind bars — I was really the one in trouble. Because of course I was going to have to use my gift budget to post her bail. Twelve days before Christmas. After a nasty breakup, to boot. And weren't all breakups nasty? All of this within eight days. Because the universe hated me.

I stared at the box of tissues on the table. There was a pile of crumpled ones next to them. Maybe being out in public in my current condition wasn't a good idea.

Duchess huffed in my ear. "Mollie? Hello?"

My therapist had continually reminded me to count backward as a useful tool to calm down. It seldom worked, but I was determined to make it work.

Ten... Nine...

"When can I expect you here?" Duchess interrupted my thoughts, as usual.

"Don't you have any friends you can harass... I mean call?"

Eight... Seven...

"Of course I do, my darling. Esther and Mahvash. They're practically family."

"Then..."

"They're here with me right now."

“That’s great. So why not ask them to—”

“So make sure you bring enough to bail them out as well.”

Six... Five...

“Are you still there, Mollie?”

Unfortunately, yes. Four...

“Did you hear me? Maybe it’s the phone line. A bad connection? You’re far too young to be deaf.”

“I hear you just fine, Duchess. This really isn’t a good time.”

“Tell me about it. The jail cell stinks like a urinal.”

Three...

“The judge said she won’t let me out unless I have a guardian this time. Or a guard. Something like that. I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“You mean a guarantor.”

“Precisely. Those lawyers speak a lot of legal mumbo jumbo, don’t they?”

“Right. I’m kind of going through a midlife crisis at the moment, truth be told.”

“And I’m going through a *late-life* crisis. So which do you think is more urgent?”

Two... One...

Nope, it didn’t work. The therapist was wrong. Counting backward didn’t help at all. I quietly began to have a meltdown, praying no one in the cafe noticed.

“I shall take your silence to mean you understand the issue at hand,” Duchess continued. “I could drop dead at any minute, before I’ve had a chance to sort out my crisis. You’ve got at least half your life ahead of you to screw it up some more, then solve it.”

“I’m nowhere near the halfway mark.”

“Even better. After all, you’re only what... thirty—”

“Thirty-three.”

“How’s thirty-three anywhere near midlife?”

“I feel so much older.”

“It’s decided, then. You’re too young for a crisis. If you want a decent crisis, come home right now.”

“Great motivational speech.”

“Why’re you having a crisis, anyway?”

I groaned and closed my eyes. “Luke broke up with me last week.”

“Why?”

“I proposed to him.”

“Good for you. And?”

“He told me I was rushing things.”

“Weren’t you dating for... what, three years?”

“Three years and four months.” I pulled out the last tissue from the box and cleared my nose loudly.

“You poor dear.”

“I was kind of upset.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I said three years and four months wasn’t rushing things.”

“Exactly correct.”

“I told him I’d waited long enough. Supported him in pursuing his dreams. He’s always putting his career first, all the time. Never us. And I’m not getting any younger.”

“Isn’t that the sad truth.”

“So I wanted an answer right there and then.”

“Bravo! How daring of you.”

“He said I was being pushy. And slightly crazy.”

“Oh, my.”

“So I threw a mug at his head.”

“I hope you didn’t miss.”

“Of course not! But now the mug has a chip in it. It was my favorite mug.”

“He broke up with you over such a trifle?”

“Yes... No. Not exactly.”

“And they call me crazy.”

“They’re right, whoever *they* are.”

“How fortunate for me.”

I inhaled deeply, trying to calm the quiver in my voice and my hands. “He’s starting a new job as CEO. He said he’ll be

too busy to have a wife. Or a girlfriend, apparently. Basically, he only has time for himself and his new job.”

“Too *busy*?” Duchess repeated. “That sounds like code for him wanting someone who’s more eye candy than brains.”

“Shockingly, that doesn’t make me feel better.”

“As you said, Luke never put your relationship first, dear.”

“An accurate observation.”

“To be honest, he was always too ambitious for my taste.”

“Your taste has nothing—”

“In fact, this situation reminds me of a scene in episode seven, season four of *Duchess of Danger*.”

Here we go, I thought, bracing myself for another life lesson from a soap opera.

“My character had to choose between saving her career-obsessed husband or her secret lover—”

“Duchess, this is *nothing* like that.”

“It has the same emotional resonance, dear. Such a pity you don’t have a lover.”

“I don’t want a secret lover or a career-obsessed husband.”

“A wise decision.”

“Twelve days before Christmas,” I moaned, “and he dumps me. Who does that during the holidays?”

“Honestly, honey, it’s about time.”

“Seriously?”

“That man wasn’t good enough for you. He didn’t balance you.”

“You say that about every guy I bring home.”

“Precisely. You have terrible taste in men, Mollie.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“That’s not the point.” I pounded a fist on the empty tissue box, crumpling it against the table. “I’m in my thirties. I’m supposed to be *adulthood* over here. Taking responsibility. Putting down a mortgage. Ready to commit to a long-term relationship. Or at least a long-term job. The sort of things grownups do.”

“Gracious,” Duchess huffed. “What nonsense is that therapist stuffing into your head? Growing up is so terribly overrated, not to mention terrible.”

“You’re not helping.”

“It’s not my job to help you, Mollie. That’s your job.”

“I’m terrible at my job.” I rubbed my forehead like I was trying to exfoliate it with my fingertips. “Why are we having this conversation?”

“Because you clearly still need me to guide and inspire you.”

“*Inspire?* I’m still mad at you.”

A sigh whistled through the phone’s speaker. “Still? Really, Mollie. Holding a grudge is an undesirable trait.”

“So is sneaking behind your granddaughter’s back and...” I pinched the bridge of my nose hard enough to bring me to my senses. Probably hard enough to leave fingernail imprints in my skin as well. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I’m not going there. Not again. We’re not having this conversation. Why are you calling me?”

“We’ve gone through this already. I’m in jail. I need you to bail me out. I do hope you’re not suffering from early onset of dementia.”

“Time’s up!” a muted voice shouted in the background.

“Time’s up when I say it’s up,” Duchess shouted back. “I have to go, darling. Forget about Luke, and come rescue me. See you tomorrow.”

I stared at my phone, tempted to throw it against the wall so she couldn’t call me back when I didn’t show up. But that phone was worth more than the momentary satisfaction of breaking it was worth. Which meant I had no choice. I had to give into the inevitable.

I was going home to Teaville for Christmas.

CHAPTER TWO

“You purchased this place sight unseen?” Incredulity coated Johnny’s voice like syrup on pancakes, except not as sweet.

“The Great & Small Clinic,” Darren said, almost smiling. The name itself felt like a sign, a nod of approval from the forces that be.

“What?”

“The name of the veterinary practice.”

“Whatever,” Johnny scoffed. “So did you?”

Darren clenched a pair of socks, wondering if he’d already packed his hand gripper. The exercise tool was great for building up hand strength, but also for stress relief. And judging from the way this conversation was going, he was definitely going to need it.

He eyed his suitcases, momentarily considered rummaging through them, then decided against it. At least, not in front of his brothers. Socks weren’t a decent replacement, but they would have to do.

His hand convulsed around the balled-up socks. “Not unseen. The current owner gave me a video tour—”

“Oh! He gave you a video tour. Hear that, Matthew? He gave our brother here a video tour.”

Matthew nodded along, focusing on his large bag of M&Ms.

Johnny gave up on Matthew. “Listen, this old guy—”

“Dr. Blanchard.”

“This Dr. B guy. He could’ve been anywhere when he gave you that video tour. A hospital lobby. The Hilton... Well, not likely. I doubt there’s a hotel worthy of the name in a small town. But you get my point.”

Darren did, and a worm of anxiety twisted in his gut. He popped a piece of cinnamon gum into his mouth. “It’ll work out,” he said for at least the third time in the past ten minutes.

Johnny snorted. “You keep telling yourself that, doc. Say it enough times, maybe you’ll actually believe it.” He tugged the socks out of Darren’s grip and tossed them into a suitcase. “Can you believe it, Matthew?”

Matthew shook his head and reached into the bag holding his rapidly diminishing supply of candy.

“What he said,” Johnny said. “You sure you can’t back out of this? Did you put money down already?”

“I don’t want to, and yes.”

“Bad move, bro. Bad. Move.”

Darren glanced around the room, then bent down and checked under his bed. Of course, there was nothing there. He never understood why anyone stored anything under their bed. That's what cupboards were for, and drawers. The floor was no place to toss your clothes and other items.

"This is it," Darren murmured. "It's what I want. Some country living will do me good. All of that calm, peace and quiet."

"They got roosters in the rural areas," Johnny said and gave an exaggerated shudder. "Those aren't quiet. And all that manure."

Darren stood, straightening his shirt and adjusting his belt. "The occasional rooster won't bother me."

"Have you even been to this place?" Johnny asked.

"Your concern for me is touching."

"More like confusion. Teaville. The name alone tells you that place is trouble."

"It's the most innocent name ever."

"My point. It's *too* innocent. Probably the setting for a future Stephen King movie. Out in the middle of nowhere. Where no one can hear you scream. Except all those crowing roosters. Sounds like a nightmare waiting to happen." Johnny turned to Matthew. "I mean, have you heard of the place?"

Matthew shrugged and emptied the bag of M&Ms into his open mouth.

“See?” Johnny asked. “We haven’t heard of this place. Had you ever heard about it before you bought into the old vet’s practice?”

“No, but I haven’t heard of a lot of places. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means it’s too small to be heard of, which means too small for anything newsworthy.”

“That’s another perk of the place.”

“That it’s boring?”

“That it’s peaceful.”

“What I said. Boring.”

Doing his best to ignore Johnny’s doubts, Darren studied the contents of his suitcases, satisfied with the results. Everything was neatly folded. Placed in perfect alignment. Color-coded. Black socks tucked in one corner. White socks in the other. Shirts and pants neatly rolled to minimize creases.

“So you know nothing at all,” Johnny persisted.

“I know it’s big enough to have a vet clinic, and that’s all I need to know.”

“You do know that rural equals livestock, right?” Johnny asked. “Bovine, horses and... I don’t know. Sheep and stuff?”

“I am aware.”

“Brother,” Johnny said, chuckling. “Do you even know how to look after livestock? Because that’s what they have in rural farming towns. Not small, household pets. I mean, your

practice here is all about little animals. Not giant barnyard creatures.”

Darren flipped one of the suitcase lids closed, then carefully zipped it shut, making sure not to catch anything in the teeth. “An animal is an animal. Fundamentally, there’s not much difference between a sheep and a dog. Or a person, for that matter.”

Matthew huffed a laugh.

Johnny wasn’t nearly as discrete. He tilted his head back and howled with laughter. “Are you serious right now?”

“Anatomically, most mammals share more similarities than differences.”

“Oh, Darren. Look at this place. It’s clean enough to eat off the floor.”

“Why would anyone want to eat off of the floor?”

“They wouldn’t. I’m just saying, your apartment’s clean enough that if something fell, it’s not picking up any germs. Because there aren’t any here. You’re going from this...” Johnny gestured wildly with his arms, “to a small, country town which is probably full of cows and cow droppings and whatever else they have up there.”

Darren sat on the edge of his bed, hands tightly clasped together. As soon as his brothers left, he was absolutely going to rummage through his suitcases and find his hand gripper. “I need a new job.”

“Lotsa jobs here. You just need to lighten up.”

“No. I need to get away.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “You hearing this guy? He needs to get away. You make it sound like we’re with the mafia.”

“We’re neck deep in politics. Close enough.”

“Please. All this because Mother asked you to support her upcoming campaign?”

“That’s where it starts. But it’s a slippery slope. Here, Darren, sign this card. Hey, Darren, come to our fundraiser. Oh, Darren, would you mind standing onstage next to your mother while we take photos? Next thing I know... *BAM!* I’m right in the thick of it.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

Darren stood up. “Politics is nasty and divisive. I want nothing to do with it. I went to school to be a vet, not a politician.”

“You can’t run away from your family.”

“I’m not. I’m running away from their politics.”

“With our last name? Good luck with that. Have you seen the headlines lately?”

“Yes, and that’s another reason why I’m leaving.”

“When we need to stick together? This is when loyalty matters the most. You running away, that sends a bad message to people who rely on us.”

“I hope you don’t mean the voters are relying on me to stick around.”

“Of course not. But Mother is. And she’s going to need all of us by her side.”

“For the PR photos? No, thanks.”

“People will know who you are. The moment you tell them your name.”

Darren shrugged, trying not to let his concern show. “So it’s a good thing I’m not going to use our family name.”

“Yes, because that’s *so* honorable. Lying about who you really are.”

“I won’t lie, either. I’m using Mother’s maiden name as my last name.”

Johnny snapped his fingers. “Sneaky. Maybe you’re better suited for politics than you think, Darren.”

“Not even close.”

“Basically, you’re running away.”

Darren sighed. “Pretty much.”

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I’ve made my decision.”

“That’s not an answer. Hey, Matthew, help me out here.”

Matthew glanced up, a smear of melted chocolate at one corner of his mouth. He shrugged.

“You see?” Darren gestured to Matthew. “He doesn’t have a problem with me going.”

“He just ate an entire jumbo bag of candy. His blood sugar level is too high for him to have a problem,” Johnny snapped.

“And why this place of all places? It’s on the other side of the country.”

Darren kept quiet for a moment. That was one of its selling points. No one from his politically inclined family was going to drop by to say hello in a rural town with no political importance. Or rope him into another campaign. Or push him for a public endorsement as a respectable community member. Or ask him for any favors. He’d be free and clear, to follow his own life, his own dreams.

“It’s not like we do anything illegal,” Johnny added, looking hurt.

“I know.” Darren was pretty sure that was true for his family, but less confident that applied to everyone in Mother’s political camp. But now wasn’t the time for unfounded accusations. “It’s time for me to grow my business. The setup is perfect. Dr. Blanchard’s practice is a lot bigger than mine, and he wants to semi-retire. He’ll stay for a year as a partner in the clinic while I get to know all of the clients—”

“Yeah, getting to know cows sounds like fun.”

“He already has an experienced receptionist, and a healthy client list. It’s perfect. I need some calm and sanity after...” He gestured vaguely, wishing he’d never started that last sentence.

“After we all got dragged into that political scandal, you mean? It wasn’t even our fault.”

“That’s the point. It doesn’t matter whose fault it is. There’s so much mudslinging going on that the truth is

completely irrelevant. I need a place where people just get on with their lives.”

Johnny scuffed. “Does Mother know that?”

“She has her own life. Why can’t I?”

“Because we are who we are. And the family needs to stick together. You know who she’s going up against in this election. It’s a huge deal. If we don’t stick together, we’re going to lose.”

“No. She *might* lose this election. But the rest of us? What are we going to lose?”

Johnny shook his head. “I don’t know, bro. You don’t have to go across the country to grow up and have your own life.”

“In this case, I do.”

Darren glanced at his other suitcase. It was filled with books. Half of the suitcase was reserved for books on veterinary-related topics. The other half was for his absolute favorite book series ever, *All Creatures Great and Small*. He’d never been a fan of ebooks.

Johnny tapped one of the books and studied the cover. “You know reality isn’t like the TV show.”

“TV show?”

“Yeah. These books were made into a TV series.”

“I prefer the books. And I know it’s not *exactly* the same.”

“Not even close.”

“I’m going.” Darren closed the lid on the second suitcase.
“And that’s it.”

Johnny held up his hands. “Hey, it’s your life. Just out of curiosity, what’s the largest animal you’ve ever dealt with?”

“Apart from you?”

“Hilarious.”

“A golden retriever.”

“Then I hope you’re right.”

“About?”

“All mammals being similar and all.”

“It’ll work out,” Darren said, and began searching for his hand gripper.

CHAPTER THREE

I was not-so-secretly hoping there wasn't a flight until the next week. Or the next year. Not because I was a nasty grandchild. And if I was, it wasn't my fault.

It wouldn't have hurt for Duchess Delilah to have to sit in a jail cell and reflect on her life choices. Not that she would have, but it would've been nice to imagine her using that time for a little self-improvement.

But no. The next flight was a redeye leaving that evening. There was one seat left, the digital travel agent told me. As if it were meant to be. Of course. Because the universe hates me.

Only one ticket left. The words taunted me in bright red next to the *Purchase* button. This had serious implications. The first and most disappointing: I had no excuse to delay, or to leave Duchess in a cell pondering the series of bad choices that had led her there.

The second implication: the flight was totally full. No spare seats to stretch out on and catch a few hours of sleep. Not even room to wiggle my elbows. I'd probably have a mouth breather sitting next to me. And a cranky, screaming

child in front of me. And someone coughing up their lungs behind me.

A message popped up. *Your session is about to expire. Do you want to continue?*

“I’m about to expire, and not really,” I said, but gave in to the prompt to continue my session. At this rate, I’d need a session with my therapist.

It’s only for a few days, I reassured myself.

I was feeling optimistic at that thought, until the helpful digital travel agent informed me that my preferred dates were fully booked. The next available flight was a week into the future. A whole week with Duchess Delilah.

I started reassessing my decision to bail her out. I didn’t really have to go, did I? Planes would be filled with snott-nosed kids and other offenses. I mean, in a way, me not going was a little bit of tough love. It would be good for her.

But then I thought of her cellmates stuck in there with her. Mahvash and sweet, frail, extremely elderly and arthritic Esther. Duchess’ best friends since they were three. They were Teaville’s version of *The Three Musketeers*, or the three witches from *Macbeth*, depending on who you asked.

I couldn’t leave those two in jail. If history was anything to go by, they were there only because of Duchess and her shenanigans. And I couldn’t very well show up with bail for only two of them. Well, I could, but Duchess would insist that Mahvash remain behind as a sacrifice for the team.

I gave myself a mental pep talk while my cursor fluttered over the *Purchase* button. One week, that's all it was. I could survive a week. After all, how much trouble could I possibly get into in seven days?

I didn't dare answer that. Because... Duchess. I desperately wanted to discuss the risks of spending seven days with Duchess, but I didn't have a cat I could talk to. Or even a houseplant. I was staring at a computer screen, silently arguing with an artificial, algorithm-driven travel agent who was now informing me that three other people were looking at my ticket at that very moment, and I better buy it or forever lose it. And my session was about to expire again.

"Don't tempt me, digital travel agent," I warned. But in the end, I beat out those three others and bought the ticket. A one-week, roundtrip ticket.

I decided to be very clever and avoid packing anything big enough to count as check-in luggage. I'd at least avoid the inevitably long and painfully slow line to the check-in counter. All I had was a carry-on case and my laptop bag. I didn't need a lot of clothes. After all, I was only going for one week. Just seven days...

Duchess Delilah better appreciate this, I thought as I quickly packed my bags. Of course, she probably wouldn't. But I wasn't doing this for her. And it was only one week.

I held onto the promise like a mantra. *It's only one week. Just seven days.* I silently chanted the words over and over as I waited for my driver (he was late). Stood in line to go through security (it was long). Hurried to my gate (the airport was

crowded). Then stood in another long line to get onto the plane. A line filled with screaming, cranky children, and cranky parents ready to scream. The usual Christmas madness.

This was yet another reason I didn't want to travel. It was the Christmas holidays. I shouldn't be doing this alone. Speaking of which...

"I can't believe he broke up with me," I finished the thought under my breath. "Right before—"

"Excuse me?"

My head jerked up so fast, my jaw slammed shut, trapping the tip of my tongue between my teeth. I tried not to grimace too badly.

The passenger in front of me was looking back, a confused wrinkle between his eyebrows. No doubt he was wondering from which insane asylum I'd escaped. A stethoscope poked out of his jacket pocket. A doctor, then. For all I knew, he worked in a hospital for the non-criminally deranged. Although I had a hard time imagining his somewhat handsome features in a loony bin.

"I'm not loony," I blurted out, sounding pretty much like a crazy person denying their insanity.

The confused wrinkle deepened and multiplied. "I... hope not?"

Please stop talking, I silently begged myself, struggling to come up with an explanation for my erratic behavior. I wasn't even home yet, and I was already acting weird.

“A nervous flyer?” the doctor asked, his tone clinical. I half-expected him to pull out a prescription pad.

I wanted to deny it, but I figured being nervous was better than being crazy. Going with the lesser of two evils, I nodded.

He held up a hand gripper. “You may want to try one of these. They’re great for stress.”

Fantastic.

“Sure,” I said.

Then a flight attendant summoned the next passenger, and everyone shuffled forward like a line of tired zombies. The potentially awkward conversation with the doctor died a quick death.

As people oozed through the airplane with all the energy of an invasion of slugs, I realized my flaw in bringing a carry-on case. The overhead bins were filling up fast.

I stared past the line to my seat — back of the plane, next to the stinky toilets, because of course. All the bins were full except one. It had a pocket of space the exact size of my carry-on. If I was lucky and willing to dig my elbows into a few passengers as I squeezed past them, I could claim that space as my own.

I was so willing to do that. And more.

Except the doctor was blocking my path. He wasn’t a large guy, but had wide shoulders and a solid build, like his hands weren’t the only part of him working out. So even a modestly muscular fellow would block the aisle.

Whoever had designed the plane's interior must've owned a chicken factory before joining the aerospace industry. They had perfected the art and science of stuffing the maximum number of living creatures into the smallest possible space that was legally allowed.

Even then, I had my doubts this was legal. Definitely not ethical.

"Excuse me, sir," I said, putting on my polite voice. "My seat's up ahead. Do you mind—"

"Mine, too," the doctor said.

"Great."

My plan of being as antisocial and introverted as possible for the entire flight was now ruined. I felt a certain social obligation to engage in idle chitchat while waiting for whoever was taking their sweet time to find their seat so the rest of us could sit in ours.

Why was this so difficult?

A woman with a whiny baby sat in a row near mine. I was torn between congratulating myself for guessing this would happen, and despair that it was happening.

Only one week. Just seven days. Then I get to do this trip in reverse for New Year's.

Despair won.

The doctor paused at the next row. I peered past him. A part of the storage space above my row was still free. As soon

as everyone removed themselves from my path, I was claiming that overhead bin. I wanted my carry-on with me.

But the doctor was also studying the overhead bin situation.

“Excuse me, sir,” a flight attendant said, absolutely zero patience remaining. “Please take your seat.”

Behind me, the lineup of passengers built up. Angry mumblings added to my irritation.

“There we go,” he murmured.

Before I could wail in protest, he sidled down the aisle and shoved his carry-on in the one remaining space. My space.

The flight attendant pushed past the doctor as if sensing my anguish. She snatched my carry-on out of my hands. “Plane’s full. This will have to be checked in.”

“But—”

“You’ll get it at the end of the flight.” With practiced ease, she practically threw my case over the heads of the other passengers. Another flight attendant caught the case and carried it toward the front of the plane.

It’s not a big deal, I told myself, but tears pricked my eyes. I rubbed them away. *Not a big deal*.

The doctor held up another carry-on.

How many carry-ons does one guy need? I thought.

“Sir, there’s no room left,” the same flight attendant said. It was like she had a radar for this. She reached for his bag.

“I need this with me,” he explained.

“Hey, can you hurry up?” someone shouted from behind me.

“Sir, there’s no room,” the flight attendant said.

The baby started wailing in earnest. Why did the universe have to make my worst dreams come true?

The mother of the screaming offspring shrugged and looked almost apologetic. “Charlie isn’t feeling too well.”

“Join the club,” I muttered.

“Sir, your bag, *now*,” the flight attendant said.

“There’s space there,” the doctor said, pointing to the bin over the middle back row.

I stood on tiptoes again, shifting my angle. There was one more space left. It was mine by rights and by whatever laws governed the use of overhead bins on a full flight.

“That’s mine,” I said, but it was too late.

The doctor enthusiastically swung his bag around. A combination of momentum and horrible luck caused the bag to bump my head and knock me off balance.

With a small scream, I tripped over someone’s handbag which *wasn’t* safely tucked under the seat in front of them. I landed awkwardly next to the mother and her screaming offspring.

Just then, the baby decided he’d had enough. Projectile vomit burst out of him and splattered all over the front of my shirt.

Trying not to scream and almost succeeding, I crab-walked away from the sick baby, staring at the disgusting, sour-scented, milky substance dripping down me.

“I’m so sorry,” the mother said. “And so is Charlie. Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

The doctor crammed his second bag into the space that was rightfully mine, then took his seat, totally oblivious to the disaster he’d singlehandedly created. Maybe not singlehandedly, but he had a major role in my current predicament.

“Do you have a change of clothes?” Charlie’s mother asked.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’ll get a fresh T-shirt from...” My voice faded as I realized I no longer had my carry-on. Which meant I didn’t have a change of clothes.

Which meant I was going to spend the next several hours smelling like baby vomit.

I crawled into my seat, wincing at the horrified expressions of my fellow passengers. Mopping up the vomit with a handful of paper towels, I tried to ignore the dank stench of my shirt, the cold air blowing on my chest, and the lack of inflight entertainment. I scowled at the doctor. But his back was to me, so the look was lost on him.

Besides, my mood had little to do with his storage-stealing antics. That had merely been the last straw on the proverbial camel’s back. The real issue was my ex-boyfriend who no longer had time for me.

This flight is like my life, I miserably mused. Luke and I had been on a journey together. Up until recently, I'd believed we were boarding at the same time, our seats were in the same row. We'd share our lives and suitcases.

He'd proven how wrong I was. We weren't even on the same flight. While I rode in Economy next to the flying pit latrines, he sat up in First Class, his own interests and career getting priority seating.

I'd been willing to sacrifice everything for our relationship, but Luke had been thinking only of his next promotion.

I pressed my face against the small window next to me and cried.

CHAPTER FOUR

My carry-on was the last to arrive on the conveyor belt, which made no sense. It was the last bag checked in. Shouldn't it be the first one out?

By that time, I was used to the stench of baby vomit. But in consideration of the taxi driver who was going to take me to the police station, I changed my shirt, then headed out on my rescue mission.

Only seven days, I kept reminding myself all the way to the police station in the center of Teaville.

But when I walked into the station and saw Police Chief Mary Maftechuck's dour expression, I inwardly gasped, *It's a whole, entire week!*

"Merry Christmas," the chief said with zero merriment in her tone or expression.

"Yup, real merry."

She tilted her head toward the corridor leading to the cells.
"You know the way."

“Sadly, yes.” I dropped my luggage and stepped into the corridor, then paused.

Chief Maftechuck studied me, one eyebrow raised.

I held my hands together in a prayer pose. “I just need a minute.”

“Take all the time you want, honey.”

I wished I could. Instead, I forced my leaden legs to move. When I reached the corner, I stopped again. Baby vomit was easier than this. I focused on summoning the strength I’d need to herd three ladies of a certain advanced age out of the jail cell and through an innocent, unsuspecting town.

“She’ll come,” Duchess’ voice echoed from around the corner.

I needed more time. Because once the chief unlocked that cell, it would be the beginning of the end. I pulled out my phone, turned on the camera function, and peaked it around the corner.

Duchess was standing in front of the bars, staring at a metal tray she was holding out in front of her. I knew exactly what she was doing. She was imagining she was in front of a camera, talking to her devoted audience.

“She’s a good kid,” Duchess continued. “She should be. I helped raise her, so why not?”

“Who’re you talking to?” Mahvash interrupted.

I tilted the phone slightly. Mahvash was slouched on a bench, looking as tired as I felt. Esther was curled up next to

her, asleep.

“Shh,” Duchess said. “Keep quiet, you elderly hag. I’m practicing.”

“I’m younger than you.”

“By three months. At our age, that doesn’t count. It’s barely a drop in the bucket of our long and well-lived lives.”

“You do realize that if I’m an elderly hag, then so are you?”

Turning away from the bars, Duchess tossed the metal tray across the jail cell. It bounced off of the rim of the toilet. “Confound it. I missed.”

“Were you trying to land it in the toilet?” Mahvash asked.

“Only accidentally. I was aiming for your head. My eyesight’s not what it used to be.”

“You know they’ll use that to deliver our next meal, don’t you?” Mahvash pointed at the tray. “And they certainly won’t wash it.”

“Hygiene is overrated.”

Mahvash looked to the ceiling, hands gesturing as she babbled in Persian.

“Shh. You’re going to wake up the two in the next cell,” Duchess warned.

I tilted my phone. Two men occupied the other cell. They definitely didn’t look like anyone I wanted as my neighbors. Was I being judgmental? Maybe. Pragmatic? Absolutely.

“What’re you practicing?” Mahvash asked.

“The pilot episode for my big comeback,” Duchess answered.

“Ay, baba. No one wants to watch that many wrinkles.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I always do. I also speak for everyone who watches TV. You’re past your due date. There’s no comeback. Not this time.”

“We’ll see about that.” Duchess returned to the bars and stared straight at my phone. “Now, Mollie. Don’t you think you’ve been hiding around the corner long enough?”

“She’s here?” Esther shouted, suddenly waking up.

“She is,” Duchess said even though I still hadn’t revealed myself.

“The Three Witches, free at last,” Esther cheered

“You mean Three Musketeers,” Duchess corrected.

“Pretty sure our nickname was Three Witches,” Esther said. “Wasn’t it, Mahvash?”

“You’re not wrong,” Mahvash replied. “Back in high school.”

“And we still got it,” Esther said.

I turned back to the chief, who was watching me with a bemused smirk. “Are you sure I can’t leave them in here?”

Chief Maftechuck held up the paperwork, smirking. “Not anymore.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Darren was relieved that his brother had been completely wrong. The Great & Small Clinic — Dr. Blanchard’s quaint country practice — was exactly as he’d seen in the video tour. Except for the one-eyed, evil-looking beast hissing at him from under the front desk where the receptionist should be sitting. That thing was definitely not part of the promo video.

He tried to keep his expression unconcerned as the old vet grabbed the creature by the scruff and pulled it out into the open. It looked even more evil in full light, its fur all staticky.

Dr. Blanchard lifted the creature into his arms and held it up for inspection. “It’s a good thing you’re here, then, Dr. Little. We’ve got a full day ahead of us. As usual, lots of humans demanding our urgent attention. They all think they’ve got an emergency on their hands, they do. You’ll help me out today, and we’ll discuss the other details afterward. That all right?”

Darren was still wondering what manner of beast the other vet was holding. It had some similarities to a cat, but also a bit of a badger to it. “Sounds great. I appreciate you making the rounds with me, and introducing me.”

“Absolutely. I said I would, didn’t I? So that’s what we’ll do. It’s my way of welcoming you to Teaville, where it’s always teatime.”

Not sure how it could always be teatime, Darren smiled anyway. “Great. Who’s first on the list?”

“Well, I’d know that if Esther was here.”

“Esther?”

“My... *our* receptionist.”

“She’s out on an errand?”

“Not exactly. In fact, why don’t you go fetch her? And take this fine fellow with you while you’re at it.” Dr. Blanchard practically tossed the mutant creature at Darren’s head. The beast hissed as it sunk its nails through Darren’s jacket.

Definitely a cat. A mutant cat. Like no other cat he’d ever seen. And he practically specialized in cats. And small lapdogs and hamsters. But this?

“My pleasure,” Darren lied. “Where is she?”

“Last I heard, in jail.”

Darren prepared to smile, his lips twitching upward in anticipation of the punchline.

The old vet didn’t look like he was punching anything. He nodded toward the door. “It’s across the town plaza. Can’t miss it. Chief Maftechuck keeps a tidy place over there. She also serves very good tea if you’re ever in need. Off you go, then.”

“Esther’s really in jail?”

“I’m sure it’s just a little misunderstanding. It happens from time to time. Probably the old chief teaching her a lesson or two about life choices.”

“That happens often, then?”

Dr. Blanchard chuckled as he rifled through a stack of papers on the desk. “You can’t imagine how often it does. Aha! Here’s the list of clients for today. First one on the schedule... Oh, dear. The Stanton Farm.”

“After I retrieve Esther, we’ll head over there.”

“*We?* Head over to the Stanton Farm?” The old vet practically doubled over in laughter, tears leaking out of the corner of his eyes. He wiped them away with all the joy of a child who’s been given unlimited credit in a candy store. “They’re part of the reason I’m retiring, young man. I’ll give you directions. It’s easy enough. To get there, that is. After that, may God help you.”

“What’s the issue with the Stanton Farm?” Darren asked, picking up the appointment book.

He was surprised the appointments were maintained on paper, rather than on a digital calendar. That was definitely one thing he was going to have to upgrade. Hopefully, his new receptionist Esther could keep up with technology. But judging from the way the office was set up, he might have to look for a new one.

Darren glanced down the ledger to the day’s date. “Administering medicine to the Stanton goat.”

“Yep. I’m very busy today. I’ll join you for your afternoon appointments if you get back.”

“You mean *when* I get back,” Darren corrected him, wondering if the vet was suffering from early onset dementia. It certainly seemed like it. He hoped that Esther was in better shape.

“Sure. When. We’ll talk then. I have an urgent game of golf waiting for me.”

“It’s just a goat,” Darren said. “Not a whole herd of them, right?”

“Then you should manage just fine,” Dr. Blanchard said, patting his arm and giving him a once-over. “At least you’re big enough to be able to handle Lady. With a bit of luck.”

“What’s luck got to do with it?”

“With Lady? Everything.”

“Lady’s the owner of the goat?”

“Ha! You’ll need more than luck to handle *her*.” With that rather mysterious comment, the old vet shuffled away, flipping the appointment book closed on his way past.

Darren opened his mouth and closed it a few times. Early onset of dementia. It had to be. “Where’s the farm?”

Chuckling, Dr. Blanchard pulled out his phone. “I’ll send you the pin. Remember to rescue Esther first. Just in case Lady gets the best of you. You can take my truck to the farm. Daisy’s vintage but reliable. Most of the time. Take care of her.”

With a last guffaw, he tossed a set of keys toward Darren.

Darren almost dropped the cat while fumbling to catch the keys. “What do I do with this... fine feline?”

“That’s Prince Charming. Give him to the chief. He’s hers. And they definitely make a pair. Welcome to your new clinic.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Sign here,” Chief Maftechuck ordered in a bored-to-tears tone, tapping her chewed-up pencil on the document. “And here.” She flipped the pages to the next signature line. “Now over here.”

“Am I famous?” I joked.

The chief gave me a disinterested stare and flipped to the back of the document. “And here.”

“Shouldn’t I be doing this at the courthouse?”

“Closed for the holidays. Sign.”

“Fine. Are we finished?”

Chief Maftechuck slapped the document on the desk. “You read the fine print?”

“Sure, why?”

“Hurry up over there,” Duchess commanded loudly from the cell. “Some of us would like to use a private toilet sometime today.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t broken the law — *again* — you wouldn’t need to worry about privacy,” I shouted back.

“You’re now the guarantor,” the chief said as if explaining basic math to a toddler.

“Yes, that’s clear. Thanks.”

“Esther really has to go urgently,” Duchess shouted.

“Do not!” Esther yelled.

“I don’t care!” I bellowed.

Chief Maftechuck continued, “And you’re responsible for her—”

“This could get nasty,” Duchess warned.

“Thanks for your help, chief. I’ll read the details myself.” I snatched up my copy.

Shrugging, Chief Maftechuck sauntered down the corridor, swinging her keychain. “Esther Mbugwa, Duchess Delilah Stanton, and Mahvash Yazdani. The court hereby grants you bail.”

“Marvelous. Take your time,” Duchess said. “We’ve got ourselves an elderly lady in here with urgent needs. Hold it in, Esther.”

“I’m fine,” Esther said. Her voice was croaky, like she was still smoking a pack a day. Then again, I wouldn’t put it past her to sneak a few cigarettes out behind the barn.

“No, you’re not,” Duchess snapped. “Chief, can you move any faster?”

The chief didn’t bother replying, which was probably the best reply. A key rattled against metal, followed by a sharp *click*.

“Finally.” Duchess marched down the corridor, her boot heels snapping against the tiled floor. “What I endure for my art.”

I groaned, crumpling my copy of the bail agreement in my hands. *Only one week. Just seven days. You’ve got this.*

Duchess patted my arm. “Hello, dear. Don’t you even want to know what happened—”

“Nope,” I replied.

“Or if I’m actually guilty?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I didn’t do it, Mollie.”

“Still not interested.”

“You mean you have no interest whatsoever as to why I ended up in jail,” Duchess demanded, “and why you had to fly over here to bail me out?”

I thought about that for about a fraction of a millisecond. “Yup. That pretty much sums it up.”

“Your lack of curiosity is alarming.”

“No, it isn’t. But do you know what *is* alarming? My grandmother, in jail for *any* reason. And me having to bail you out. Now that’s alarming.”

“Speaking of alarming,” Chief Maftechuck said and held up what looked like a really ugly goth bracelet. “I need to secure this on Duchess’ ankle.”

I gawked. “What is...” Suddenly, it dawned on me. “Is that an ankle monitor?”

Chief Maftechuck smirked. “Why, yes. Yes, it is. Once I’ve fitted it, I’ll give you twenty minutes to get back to the farm, then I’ll activate it.” The chief gestured for Duchess to come closer. “It has to stay on until the trial. It’s part of the agreement that you just signed.”

I smacked a hand on my forehead. “She’s under house arrest.”

“They all are. But only your grandmother needs to wear a monitor.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” I said.

“Then don’t,” the chief wisely suggested.

“But why is she the only one getting a monitor?”

“She’s a runaway risk. So she has to be monitored.”

“I’m a runaway risk, too,” Esther declared.

“You can barely walk, never mind run,” Mahvash said.

“This is not going to end well,” I muttered.

“You’re correct,” Duchess said. “Those things are dreadfully unfashionable. Don’t you have any in more feminine colors?”

The chief slumped heavily in her chair. “No. Here are your personal effects.” She handed a phone and a set of keys to Duchess, and a heavy wooden walking stick to Esther.

“I’ve been falsely arrested,” Duchess said. “For no crime whatsoever.”

“There’s a crime, all right. A few actually. For a start, someone defaced public property,” the police chief said, not even bothering to hide her suspicious glance directed at Duchess.

“I’m not the defacing kind,” Duchess retorted.

“You mean she vandalized something?” I asked.

“She did,” the chief replied.

“What happened to innocent until proven guilty?” Duchess huffed.

“The Tea & More Christmas Fair,” the chief continued.

I whistled. “That’s the mayor’s pride and joy.”

“And someone damaged the mayor’s flower arrangements, plus stole his banner.”

“Why would you do that, Duchess?” I quickly held up a hand. “Forget I asked. Your ways are a mystery.”

“Amen,” Esther cheered.

“Why would I rip up his stall?” Duchess asked. “It was already ugly. As for stealing his banner...” She shuddered. “Again, why?”

“Is it the banner of him with that big-shot politician?” I asked, dreading the answer. “The one who’s running for office again this year. What’s her name?”

“Patricia Williams. It is. Our mayor’s very proud of that banner,” the chief explained wearily, as if she’d already gone over this multiple times. Which she probably had, knowing Duchess.

“It was probably photoshopped,” Duchess muttered. “I can’t imagine anyone from Teaville getting close enough to someone as important as Mrs. Williams to have a photo taken.”

“At any rate,” the chief continued, “that banner was a part of the mayor’s flower arrangement in support of the Williams campaign.”

“Is he allowed to do that at the fair?” Mahvash asked.

“Exactly,” Duchess said. “Down with the electioneering scum!”

“You’re not helping,” I muttered.

The chief shrugged. “There’s no law against it. But do you know what there is a law against? Stealing and defacing public property.”

“That banner wasn’t public property,” Duchess argued. “It was the property of the mayor.”

“It’s also illegal to steal or deface private property.” The chief glowered at Duchess, and gave a slight shake of her head in warning.

I doubted my grandmother would heed any warning short of a prison sentence. So I stepped in between them, forcing a smile and reminding myself I was only here for seven days.

One agonizing week, then I was on a plane back home.
“Thanks so much for releasing her on bail.”

“Not willingly,” the chief said.

“The condemned have rights, you know,” Duchess shouted as Mahvash and I attempted to lead her away. “Innocent until proven guilty!”

“Give me a minute,” Esther said, shuffling toward the station’s bathroom. “I really gotta go.”

Duchess gave us a condescending look. “I told you so.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

While we waited for Esther to finish in the bathroom, the chief clicked on a small TV bolted into the wall behind her desk.

The TV presenter, Nancy something or other — I recognized her blindingly fake blond hair from our high school days — was chattering excitedly with a political pundit about the latest election. “It’s a close race between Williams and Jones, wouldn’t you say, Robert?”

Robert looked like he was a walking advertisement for a teeth-whitening product. He grinned widely into the camera. “Absolutely, Nancy. In fact, it’s really going to be down to the wire. One candidate is fighting to protect her family’s political dynasty. The other is determined to create hers.”

“Who would you peg your money on, Robert?”

“Well, Nancy, the new contender Sarah Jones is putting up a valiant effort. However, if I were a betting man, I’d still back the incumbent, Mrs. Patricia Williams. She’s been around for long enough to know how to play the game, and her family has deep roots. The Jones campaign will need a lot more than pretty speeches to move into the front of the pack.”

I turned away, disinterested and disgusted. It was the same news everywhere, rehashed for a different audience. Ambitious people who valued their status over their girlfriends... or whoever.

“How I wish I had some of their publicity,” Duchess said and nodded at the small TV.

“Why?” I asked. “It’s all bad.”

“There’s no such thing as bad publicity, dear. It’s always good. Imagine what their social media following is like.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Who cares?”

“For those of us starting out in life, it’s important.”

“You’re hardly starting out... You know what? It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m starting out in my second rebirth as a TV celebrity, I’ll have you know,” Duchess said.

“You don’t even have a Twitter following—”

“LiveLyfe, Mollie, not Twitter. Get with the times.”

Fortunately, the inane conversation was interrupted by the bell over the front door. It tinkled cheerfully, and a vaguely familiar voice called out, “Hello? I’m looking for the police chief.”

The chief swiveled slowly in her chair. “That would be me. Oh, sweetheart! Come here, my lovely one.”

I gawked at the chief. She wasn’t prone to outrageous remarks. That was my grandmother’s department. “Who?”

“Oh, my,” Duchess drawled. “He *is* rather lovely. Although he’s more your style than mine, Mollie. But still—”

“Prince Charming, my precious,” the chief cooed, waving the visitor forward.

“Forget the cat,” Duchess said. “I’m talking about the other male who just strolled in.”

“Please, don’t,” I said, turning around, then gasped. Standing in front of me, holding the chief’s beloved cat, was the doctor who stole my overhead bin space. “You!”

The man gave me a cool, appraising look. “Have we met?”

“No, and you are...?” Chief Maftechuck asked.

“Dr. Darren Wi... Little.” The doctor nodded once sharply. “Dr. Little.”

“Did he say Dolittle?” Esther demanded as she exited the bathroom.

I smirked. *Perfect*, I thought. *From now on, doctor, you shall be known as Dolittle. Punishment for crimes against your fellow passengers.*

“No,” Dolittle said, the first hint of a frown creeping across his forehead. “Dr. Little. I’m Dr. Blanchard’s new partner.”

“How disappointing,” Duchess said with a regretful sigh. “So handsome, and so unavailable.”

“Excuse me?” Dolittle asked.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Duchess assured him. “You’ll find people very open-minded in Teaville.”

Dolittle froze, as if his brain had momentarily glitched. I very briefly sympathized. Duchess Delilah Stanton had that effect.

“Ah...” He stared around the circle of women. “It’s not like that.”

“Never is, Dolittle,” Esther cackled.

“No, I mean I’m his *business* partner. I bought into his practice.” Dolittle paused. “The veterinary clinic.”

A laugh spluttered out of me. “You’re *that* type of doctor. So not a real *doctor*, doctor.”

“I’m as real as it gets,” Dolittle said, his posture stiff, his expression almost as hostile as the cat struggling in his arms. “Veterinary medicine is as difficult, maybe even more difficult, than human medicine.”

“Sure it is.”

“He’s a doctor, is he?” Duchess purred, raking her gaze over the vet. “Fairly young. Handsome.” She grabbed his left hand. “Possibly single.”

Dolittle slid his hand free.

“You can give me a checkup anytime, young man.”

“Please stop talking,” I whispered.

“I don’t treat people,” Dolittle said.

“Are you saying cats aren’t people?” Chief Maftechuck asked, standing up and reaching for her cat.

Dolittle stepped toward the chief's desk. Prince Charming hissed, squirming to get free. Fed up with the delay, the cat scratched the vet across the hand.

Yelping, Dolittle snatched his hand out of reach, and the whole situation became unstable. The cat leaped out of his arms and sailed across the room in a dramatic arc.

The chief held up her hands and caught the cat. "What sort of a vet are you, anyway?" she grumbled as she stroked Prince Charming. "Tossing feline people around like that. My poor baby. Dr. Blanchard would never do that."

"That thing scratched me," Dolittle stated.

"That *thing* is a cat," I said.

"Of course Prince Charming scratched you," the chief added. "You were holding him too tight."

"You're really a vet?" I asked, not hiding my skepticism. "You're too well dressed to be a country vet."

"Thank you?" he said.

"That wasn't meant to be a compliment," I said.

"I..." The man rubbed the crinkles out of his forehead and focused on the chief. "Dr. Blanchard sent me to return your cat, and to fetch Esther. Apparently, my receptionist is a criminal. Is she here?"

We all looked over at Esther.

"Too late," Esther said and smacked the vet on the shin with her walking stick.

“Ouch!” Dolittle hopped on one leg, grimacing as he rubbed his shin. “What was that for?”

Esther’s mouth puckered in distaste. “Took too long.”

“I just arrived here. How was I to know you were locked up?”

“Excuses,” Esther muttered as she hobbled past him.

“Serves you right for calling her names,” I said. “And it’s not her fault she’s in here. The real criminal is over there.” I pointed at Duchess.

“Thanks for bailing us out, Mollie,” Duchess said as she sauntered past me. “Come along, Esther. Time to go home.”

“You want a bone?” Esther asked.

“Home,” Mahvash clarified.

“Don’t worry,” Esther said, tottering after Duchess. “You’re not alone. You have us.”

“We know you can hear just fine, Esther,” Mahvash said.

“No bears ‘round here.”

“You’re not deaf!”

“A girl can always try,” Esther grumbled, patting the chief on the arm. “See you later, my child.”

“What do you mean, *my child*?” Dolittle asked.

“She’s my mother,” the chief reluctantly admitted.

Dolittle’s head slowly swiveled, his eyes glassy. I didn’t blame him. This sort of shock and awe was a regular

occurrence when engaging with Duchess and her antics. “You let your mother associate with criminals?”

“Not just associate,” I said, grinning. “They all live together.”

“It was part of the last parole deal,” the chief added, studying the contents of her tea cup. “They live close by, so I can keep an eye on my mother. Even if I do have to pay her rent.”

“You’re getting a fantastic deal,” Duchess said.

“Wait.” Dolittle inhaled, a raspy, hollow sound.

I snickered, wondering how long it would take for Duchess to break his mind. At this rate, not long.

“Her *last* parole deal? You mean, this isn’t the first time my receptionist was arrested?”

“Not this year, at least,” Chief Maftechuck said.

“What kind of a life would that be if we played by all the rules?” Duchess asked.

“A law-abiding one?” Dolittle answered.

“Obedience is terribly overrated, young man,” Duchess announced. “Or is it sanity that’s overrated? I always muddle those two up.”

“Stealing a person’s bin space should also be a crime,” I said.

Dolittle turned to me. “What?”

“Nothing. Did I say something?”

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash muttered. “Can we go now?”

“You’re crazy,” Dolittle whispered.

Duchess smiled. “Thank you.”

Prince Charming jumped onto the desk and glared at Dolittle.

The vet backed away, reaching for the door. “I think I’ll go now.”

“Good idea,” I said.

“So are you really single and *not* gay?” Duchess asked.

“Please stop talking,” I said.

“I’m not asking for myself, of course,” Duchess continued as the front door rattled shut behind the escaping vet. “I must say, that man is a tall glass of chocolate milk on a hot day.”

“So inappropriate,” I said.

Esther swatted at Duchess’ leg with her walking stick. “Don’t be silly.”

“You tell her,” I said. “He’s a stick in the mud. And aloof. Did you see the way he looked at us?”

“Nah.” Esther grinned. “He’s no stick. Or milk. He’s a cuppa coffee with a dash of cream.”

The two women howled in laughter as they exited the police station. Mahvash drifted behind them with all the energy of a condemned convict.

“I’ll drive us,” I called after them.

“That’s never happening,” Duchess replied merrily.

“Nice try,” Esther cackled.

“Please arrest me,” I said to the chief, more than happy to resort to begging if need be.

One of her eyebrows tilted upward. “On what charges?”

“On the crime I’m thinking of committing.”

“Doesn’t work like that. We only arrest you for crimes we think you have committed. Not what you’re thinking of committing.”

“Just my luck. Can you at least make her stop talking?”

“I wish I could.”

“And did you really give her the keys to her car?”

“You want me to confiscate the car?”

“Can you?”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“Probably not.” I peered out the front window.

Duchess was waiting for me at the edge of the town plaza, her attention fixed on her 1969 black Dodge Charger parked across the street. She’d driven the same model in *Duchess of Danger*, the TV series in which she’d played the lead character Duchess Delilah. The show ran for seven full seasons, then was canceled without warning halfway through season eight.

My grandmother never recovered.

The sports car had been a purchase inspired by the resulting midlife crisis. We all prayed she’d get over the crushing disappointment, recover her senses and sell the

speedster. She hadn't, and the car had stayed, collecting enough speeding tickets to cover a wall. *Why have a speed limit if you don't occasionally break it* was one of Duchess' life mottos.

"Should she even be driving?" I asked.

The chief shrugged. "Probably not."

"So why are you letting her?"

"Have you ever tried stopping her?"

"Good point." I pressed my face against the window, wondering how I'd ended up here.

"You better hurry, or you'll miss your ride," Chief Maftechuck warned.

"I can walk from here."

"Go with her. Someone has to make sure she doesn't kill anyone."

"How did this happen?"

"Life. And your grandmother. You have my cell number?"

"You have a cell phone?"

"Here." The chief held out a card. I started to take it, but she pulled it back. "Only one I have. Budget cuts. Just record the number."

"Thanks."

"I may have to arrest them again at some point anyway."

"Promise?"

The chief thought about it. “Knowing those three, I’m sure I will.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Still rubbing his shin where his elderly receptionist had smacked him, Darren cautiously approached Dr. Blanchard's vintage pickup truck.

Vintage? More like wreckage, Darren thought. The truck was so ancient, it had lost all identifiable markers. No brand or model. Every surface was scratched, faded, and dented.

The original paint was long gone as well. Various layers of poorly applied color clashed under the grime and rust, suggesting several bad paint jobs over its many years of service. It looked like it should be in a scrap heap, not on the road. Dr. Blanchard had told him to take care of the vehicle, but it didn't look like anyone else had done so.

Darren exhaled heavily as he searched the key ring for a security fob, already making a mental list of everything he needed to do. Near the top of that list was getting a decent vehicle. In frustration, he muttered, "Where's the alarm button?"

"It doesn't have one."

He glanced around and suppressed a groan. The snarky woman from the police station nodded at him as she escorted the criminally inclined gang of elderly ladies across the road.

“People don’t steal cars around here anyway,” she added.

“Especially if they look like this one,” Darren said.

“Don’t judge Daisy based on her paint job.”

“I suppose it’s perfectly reliable under the hood despite its decrepit condition?”

She snickered. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Then?”

“I’m just saying don’t be prejudiced.”

“I’m...” Darren snapped his mouth shut. Why was he bothering? It was clear these women were mentally unstable.

“Now, Mollie,” one of the three elderly delinquents murmured. “Don’t tease the vet. Look who’s just exited Harry’s Hair Salon.”

Mollie looked around and rolled her eyes. “Great. It’s Miss Myrtle.”

“If we’re not careful,” the elderly lady continued, “she’ll tell everyone you and this young man are an item.”

Darren almost choked on his words. “Why would she do that?”

“Because Miss Myrtle is the town gossip,” Mollie explained. “You definitely want to be careful around her.” She gestured down the block.

Another elderly woman stood in front of the hair salon. She was dressed in a frilly frock and a purple hat. Her knobby hands gripped onto a walker that had wheels in front.

Darren shifted uncomfortably under Miss Myrtle's sharp-eyed stare. Was there anyone under sixty living in this town? Apart from Mollie and himself, Darren had yet to see any youngish people around. More importantly, did Miss Myrtle recognize him?

"Maybe she'll tell everyone *I'm* with the new vet," Esther said.

Darren turned his attention to the truck, ignoring the women's cackling as they strolled toward a black sports car that looked almost as old as Daisy although in much better shape. And who named their vehicles?

Are you sure you know what you're doing? His brother's words floated up from a memory.

Irritated by more than the condition of his ride, he brushed aside his brother's words. He tapped the address of the Stanton Farm into a map app, then looked up, preparing to make a good start to his new life.

His view centered on Mollie walking arm in arm with Esther. The two of them were whispering conspiratorially together. Esther produced a witchy cackle. Mollie tossed her head back, hair floating around her like a dark cloud, and laughed.

The boisterous sound reverberated around him, inviting him to join. Not that he was going to accept the invite. He

needed to focus. To prove to everyone, but especially himself, that he could do this. Start afresh. Have a life without his family's activities overshadowing his own.

So he had to stay out of the limelight, which meant avoiding anyone who had to rescue her grandmother from jail. Definitely *not* someone he wanted to spend too much time around. He took the memory of Mollie's wide, bright smile and stuffed it into a mental box, then shut that box into a deep part of his brain along with all the other boxes filled with memories he wanted to forget.

Then he yanked open the door of the truck so forcibly, the hinges squealed in protest. The seat cushion sagged and squeaked under his weight. He studied the interior and frowned when he saw the stick shift. Additional proof that this truck was an antique.

Purchasing a new vehicle slid to the top of the list.

Putting the stick shift into neutral, he twisted the key. A harsh grating noise rewarded his efforts. He tried again with the same result.

Miss Myrtle hobbled past him, leaning on her rolling walker. She stared at him from under her purple hat, no doubt judging him solely based on his inability to get the relic of a truck working.

He waited until she'd disappeared around the corner before trying again. "Come on," he said, willing the engine to come to life. Instead, it died again.

A third time, and the engine finally turned over with a painful belch. A puff of black soot from the tailpipe filled the rearview mirror.

“Gotcha.” He put the truck into first gear, and the engine stalled, collapsing into silence. He smacked the steering wheel, and leaned back into the seat.

Darren saw Mollie a second before she saw him. He hesitated, wondering if he could pretend not to notice her. By the time he decided — *Yes, pretend I don't see her, and pray she doesn't notice I can't start my vehicle!* — she'd definitely seen him, and strolled over.

I've got this, Darren vowed and twisted the key again. The truck spluttered, gasped and died.

A soft giggle made him warily glance out of the side window.

Mollie was grinning at him. “Having trouble with Daisy?”

“Why're you still here?”

“Esther forgot her dentures in her cell. Push her into second.”

“Why would I push Esther anywhere?”

“I mean Daisy. First gear doesn't work.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Are you a mechanic?”

“No. Are you?”

Her eyes narrowed, a dangerous spark in their depths. “I suppose you think I know nothing about cars because I’m a woman? How stereotypical.”

“No, it’s not that. I...” Darren gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles jutting up like a series of miniature volcanoes about to explode. “I mean, *do* you know anything about cars?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“I know more than you about this one.”

“I know less than nothing. How is this helpful?”

“I’ve driven the truck before. Have you?”

Rather than admit the obvious, he stared straight ahead, vowing not to mention this bizarre interaction to his brother. Johnny would mock him forever about it. Grasping for something to say, he asked, “Why were you driving this truck?”

“I used to help the old vet during summer holidays. Work experience. Earn a few extra dollars. He taught me how to drive. Take care of Daisy. She’s an oldie but a goodie.” Mollie tapped the windowsill, then sauntered toward the police station.

Darren stared after her, his mind reeling.

Who forgets their dentures?

“Time to look for a new receptionist as well,” he said and put the truck into second gear. This time, the truck reluctantly rolled forward.

CHAPTER NINE

There were a few positive aspects of my visit. One was seeing my Great Dane again. The moment I exited the Dodge Charger, the oversized dog bounded toward me, his ears flapping like he was about to fly away. He greeted me with a smear of drool on my shirt, and an enthusiastic series of barks.

“Good boy,” I cooed.

The other positive thing: I was staying in the cottage.

“It’s all set up,” Duchess promised as she led the way from the main house to the two-room country cottage. “You might need to do a bit of dusting and such.”

“A bit?” Mahvash muttered.

“Dusting isn’t my forte, that’s true,” Duchess acknowledged.

I exchanged knowing looks with Mahvash, and I resigned myself to a couple of hours of deep cleaning.

“Have you told her ‘bout the—” Esther began.

“Not now,” Duchess interrupted.

My shoulders immediately tensed. “Told me about what?”

“What did I just say?” Duchess produced a dramatic sigh as she unlocked the cottage door. “I feel as if I’m perpetually talking to myself. No one listens to a lady who’s lived to a matured age.”

“Maybe if you answered the question, we would,” I said.

“Nonsense. Fortunately for me, I enjoy my own company.”

“Makes one of us.”

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash said, her eyebrows furrowed disapprovingly over her nose.

“Don’t *ay, baba* me,” Duchess retorted.

“You didn’t tell her about Carmel?”

“Of course not. What’s the fun in that? She needs some spontaneity in her life.”

“Ay, baba.”

“Who’s Carmel?” I asked.

“You’ll meet her soon enough. Here you are.” Duchess flung open the door, and a puff of dust danced in a sunbeam. “Welcome home.”

“I’m just visiting,” I reminded her. “Unwillingly.”

I dropped my bag near the entrance and allowed myself a small smile. The cottage had a warm, cozy feel to it. While I didn’t admit it out loud, the place did feel like home.

Movement caught my eye. I glanced at the large bay window facing the forest and unsuccessfully tried to stifle a shriek. “What is that?”

“Yes!” Duchess cheered. “This reminds me of a scene from episode three, season seven of *Duchess of Danger* when I was kidnapped by a—”

“Ay, baba.”

“Exactly,” I said, pointing a finger at Mahvash as I watched a camel stroll past the cottage. “Why do we have a camel?”

“To be fair,” Duchess said, “you haven’t lived here for a while.”

“Not the point.”

“We have a camel. How is that an issue?”

“Who keeps camels in their backyard?”

“Camel herders, for one,” Duchess said, counting on her fingers. “And there’s a growing interest in camel milk.”

“Still not the point.”

“Then what is? Children these days.” Duchess strode past me, poured a tall glass of water, and handed it to me. “You need to hydrate after a long trip.”

I downed half of it in two gulps, then stared at the rest in disgust. “I need something stronger.”

“I thought you don’t drink.”

“I don’t. But I’m having second thoughts about that.” I took another gulp.

“She’s pregnant,” Esther added.

Water sprayed like an ungraceful fountain all over Duchess.

“Really, Mollie,” she chided, “If you can’t abide by simple etiquette, how are you any better than a camel?”

“This is so wrong,” I gasped while choking and coughing.

“I quite agree,” Duchess said, “You need to work on your table manners. Carmel is an integral part of my proposal for a new reality TV show I want to produce.”

I groaned, closing my eyes. “You never give up, do you?”

“Is that a serious question?”

“Maybe we should leave her alone to unpack,” Mahvash suggested.

“No way,” Esther said, knocking her cane against the wooden floor. “This is better than Netflix.”

“We’re going to raise camels,” Duchess said.

“That has to be one of the most harebrained ideas yet,” I said. “And given the long list of such ideas you’ve had, that’s saying something!”

“Nonsense. It’s a unique premise.”

“Who’d want to watch a trio of witches raise smelly—”

“Carmel isn’t smelly,” Duchess huffed. “And we’re The Three Musketeers, not witches.”

“Definitely The Three Witches,” Esther stated.

“It won’t work,” I said with all the confidence that our family history had given me and began unpacking my carry-on

case.

Unfazed by that little thing called reality, Duchess said, “Then we’ll pivot to my backup premise.”

“I don’t want to—”

“You’ve heard how dogs can provide a sort of therapy to distressed humans?”

“You want to train a camel to be an emotional support animal?”

“Precisely.”

“You know what?” I held up my hands. “It doesn’t matter. None of this does. Because I’m only here for a week. So by all means, raise camels. Another business that won’t succeed.”

“That’s mean,” Esther said, grinning like she was okay with it.

“No. It’s reality,” I said.

“Precisely,” Duchess said. “Reality TV.”

“I’d like to finish unpacking now.”

“You might have to clear off some camel poop in the process,” Duchess said. “Carmel sometimes sleeps in here, and she isn’t house-trained yet.”

“Of course she isn’t,” I whispered.

BANG!

The sound of a vehicle backfiring was followed by the ear-scratching shriek of worn-out brakes.

“Sounds like Daisy,” I said, stepping outside.

Esther crowed, “We got a guest.”

I turned my back to the cottage — which I might have to share with a camel — and walked with the others toward the main house as Daisy rolled into view.

“It’s that new vet,” Mahvash said. “Let’s try not to startle him too badly.”

Esther made a disgusted noise. “What’s the fun in that?”

“Who needs a vet?” I asked.

“Lady,” Duchess replied.

I glanced over my shoulder at the enclosure next to the barn. The fenced-in area was reserved for our resident Boer goat, the last remaining survivor of Duchess’ attempt at goat cheese production. Lady weighed more than I did, and was meaner than me before my morning pot of tea.

As if sensing my gaze, Lady popped her reddish head over the fence and gave me a yellow-eyed glare. She pounded a hoof against a fence post. The whole structure shook under the force of the blow.

“I see her pleasant personality is still intact,” I said.

“She’ll be in a better mood after she’s had her medicine,” Duchess said with an uncharacteristic lack of confidence.

“You mean when she tramples over the vet,” Mahvash said.

“Then it’s a jolly good thing our new vet is bigger and beefier than the old one,” Duchess declared. “Not to mention younger, more virile and visually more appealing.”

“Duchess,” I warned. “You can’t say things like that in public.”

“This is hardly public, my dear,” she murmured, then waved as the vet stepped out of the truck. “Hello, Dr. Dolittle!”

I snorted a laugh.

“It’s Dr. Little,” he corrected. He remained by the truck, studying the farm as if expecting a horde of animals to stampede toward him. It wasn’t an altogether inappropriate expectation. “I’m here to see Lady.”

“We’re ladies,” Esther said and cackled.

Dolittle’s full lips thinned as he pressed them into the straightest line I’ve ever seen a pair of lips make. “The goat.”

“What I said,” Esther said.

“Ay, baba.” Mahvash sighed and headed for the main house. “I’m going inside now.”

“Lucky you,” I said.

“You’ll show the vet around, won’t you, Mollie?” Duchess asked.

“Actually, I—”

“I have to film a scene while the light’s good.”

“And I have an actual job,” I said. “You know. Paid work?”

Duchess wasn’t listening, as usual. The three elderly women disappeared into the main house, leaving me to handle

the vet.

“Just one week,” I whispered. With that thin ray of hope, I turned to deal with our visitor.

CHAPTER TEN

Dolittle strode toward me, a black leather bag swinging from one hand. Duchess was right about one thing. He was definitely taller and more muscular than Dr. Blanchard.

“So this is the Stanton Farm,” Dolittle mused.

“Is that a problem?”

“No.”

“You made it sound like one.”

He shrugged, his shoulders barely contained in his sports jacket.

“Don’t think I’ve forgiven you for stealing my overhead storage.”

He stared blankly at me.

“You know. On the plane.”

Again those lips flattened. “Did I?”

“You did.”

Pulling out his hand gripper, he nodded and studied me as if I were the patient, or a just-discovered breed of exotic

parrot.

“Apology accepted,” I added.

He cleared his throat and started to speak, but a deep, throaty howl interrupted him. He paused, his head tilting slightly. “What was that?”

“Our puppy.”

On cue, the Great Dane bounced toward us, howling a greeting. Long strings of drool trailed out of his giant jaws.

Dolittle shuffled a step back. “That’s not a puppy.”

“Nervous?”

“No.”

“Good. He’s quite friendly. He just wants to say hello.”

“He looks like he wants to eat me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Psycho’s all heart.”

“You named him *Psycho*?”

“It’s poetic irony. Or something like that.”

At the last second, the giant dog slid to a stop in front of us. Long trails of mud-stained drool slapped against the vet’s expensive-looking jacket. Dolittle’s face screwed up in disgust, then outrage as Psycho snatched at the hand gripper and chomped on it.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing the dog’s head as he drooled a small puddle on Dolittle’s shiny shoes. “You might want to change into less fancy clothes when you’re making your rounds.”

The dog dropped the hand gripper. It lay between us in several pieces.

The vet rubbed at the furrows in his forehead. “That was my only one.”

“Psycho has a chewing fetish,” I explained. “Maybe while you’re here, you can take a look at Carmel as well.”

“Who’s Carmel?”

“Our pregnant camel.”

He blinked slowly as if trying to process the words. “You have a camel?”

“I did say *our* pregnant camel. So yes. Yes, we do. You mean you don’t have any experience with camels?”

“Most people don’t.”

“Most people don’t know what they’re missing.”

“Right. Where’s the goat?”

I spun on a boot heel and wordlessly led the way to the enclosure. Psycho padded behind us. Lady eyed Dolittle suspiciously, her nostrils twitching.

“Here she is.” I gestured between the goat and the vet. “Lady, Dolittle.”

“She’s huge.”

“She’s a Boer goat. Who did you bring to help you?”

Dolittle gave me a disapproving look which seemed to be his default expression. “No one.”

“Of course you didn’t. Fine. I have a few minutes to spare. I’ll give you a hand.”

“I have it under control.”

“I doubt it.”

“I don’t.”

I bristled at his arrogance. “Listen, Dolittle—”

“That’s not my name.”

“Close enough. *Dr. Little. Dolittle.* It sounds the same.”

“*Doctor* and *Do* sound nothing alike.”

“Say it fast enough, they do. You know everyone’s thinking it.”

“They can think it all they want. As long as they call me by my actual name.”

“Keep dreaming. Are you sure you don’t want my help?”

He rolled his shoulders a couple times, as if warming up. “I’m sure.”

“I’m telling you. You’re going to need it.”

“No. I won’t.”

“Fine. Works for me. Watch out for the geese.”

“Geese?”

I waved at the flock slowly ambling toward the enclosure. “The geese.”

“They’re just birds.” He set his bag on the edge of a trough of water and began rummaging through it. “How bad can they

be?”

“They’re *geese*. They’re ferocious.”

He smirked. That’s when I knew he was in big trouble and totally out of his depth, which wasn’t my problem. *My* problem was strutting out of the main house, armed with a tripod and camera.

“You’re on your own, Dolittle,” I muttered and hurried to intercept Duchess.

“How’s our new vet doing?” she asked when I reached her.

“About to get his arrogant, know-it-all butt handed to him by a goat,” I said. “Or the geese. I have bets on the goat, though.”

“Pity. What do you think of him?”

“I try not to.”

“I think he’s a cold glass of chocolate milk on a warm day.”

“I’m lactose intolerant.”

“Since when?”

“About two seconds ago.”

“How fortunate that I’m not.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, silently repeating the mantra, *Only one week*. Feeling slightly calmer although no less concerned, I fixed her with what I hoped was a firm and uncompromising stare. “Duchess. Remember what I told you on the way home?”

“You’re single, alone and lonely?”

“I never said that.”

“It was implied, dear.”

“No, it...” *Deep breath in. Count to...* “Doesn’t matter. I have a call in half an hour.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes. *That*. I’ll be in my office.”

“You mean the greenhouse. You can use my study, if you want.”

“No, thanks. The greenhouse is perfect. Great lighting. And it’s private. I’m not to be disturbed. This is an important call. Maybe the most important one of my life.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“I mean it, Duchess. I need this call to go perfectly. I’d suggest you go for a long drive, but since you’re under house arrest—”

“No fault of my own.”

“Right. Just... Please. Stay. Away.”

“As you wish.”

It wasn’t much of a promise, but I didn’t dare push the issue. Duchess would only keep arguing with me. Probably give me a lecture about following my dreams. No, thanks. I’d seen where that had led her. And Luke, for that matter.

A cacophony of bird honks shattered the air.

“Or maybe the geese will get to him first, after all,” I said.

“What’re you...” Duchess paused, looking past me. “Yes, I do believe the geese have discovered our new vet. Poor man.”

“Please. He absolutely deserves it.”

I looked over my shoulder in time to see our flock of geese hurtle into action. Honking in outrage, the large birds flapped their wings with enough force to churn up a small dust cloud, and waddled rapidly toward Dolittle.

The man held his ground for a moment, maybe in the misguided belief the birds would back down. They didn’t.

“Their wings are strong enough to break your leg,” I shouted. “Get out of their way!”

Dolittle didn’t give any indication he’d heard me. But he did sit on the top of the fence, lifting his legs out of reach. The geese clustered around him, clacking their beaks.

“Yup,” I said, grinning. “I see he’s got that totally under control.”

“What a racket,” Duchess complained. “I do hope he finishes up before I start recording.”

“Where’re you recording?”

She waved a hand vaguely, encompassing the house, the forest, or the entire town. “Here and there.”

“Not near my office, right?”

“Of course not. The greenhouse isn’t very interesting for my reality show, Mollie.”

“So you’ll stay away and keep quiet?”

“What a terrible thing to ask of me.” Duchess fluffed up her hair, giving it an extra little flounce. “What’s so important about this call, anyway?”

The background noise faded as the geese gave up on their attack. They waddled away, leaving Dolittle to his work.

“It’s an interview,” I reluctantly admitted. “For a new position. A promotion, actually. And I really need that promotion.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to grow up.”

“Gracious. What an absurd idea. Growing up is dreadfully overrated.”

“That’s not what my bank says.”

“They told you to grow up?”

“No. They told me I need a better income stream if I want a loan. This new role will give a definite boost to my bank account. Then I can move out of the rental dump I live in, and buy a better place.”

Duchess jostled her tripod, looking almost pensive. “You want this promotion so you can tie your neck to a mortgage, basically handing over your new home to the bank if you don’t pay? That sounds like a dreadful plan for growing up.”

“As dreadful as it might sound, that’s the plan.”

“I don’t know why you can’t move back here.”

“You know why,” I retorted, my tone bitter. “After all, you know all about mortgages.”

“But this is a perfectly good home. Especially for raising children—”

“Duchess?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Stay. Away.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

This is it, I promised myself as I angled my laptop until its camera captured my head and shoulders. The promotion I'd been working my whole life to attain.

Maybe not my *whole* life. I was pretty sure I wasn't thinking about promotions when I was still an innocent child, unaware of the challenges of adult life.

But I'd absolutely been dreaming about an escape since starting my life as a miserable copywriter. Not that I wasn't good. I was. But now I wanted... I *needed* to move on. Up. Out.

I checked the camera's view. Being in a greenhouse, I was naturally surrounded by plants and glass walls. Immediately behind me was a leaf-filled metal shelf, Mahvash's small but highly productive herb garden. Her pride and joy. It conveniently provided the perfect backdrop. Duchess' colorful tropical flowers filled up the rest of the greenhouse. The air was rich with perfume and moisture.

I studied my face framed by my laptop, wishing I'd had time to get my hair trimmed. I *would've* had time if I hadn't

been summoned home to deal with a certain aging relative. Even so, I looked as good as I was going to look. At least my clothes weren't covered in Great Dane drool, so there was that going for me.

The glass wall in front of me faced an English-style garden beyond which was the goat enclosure made up of three lines of white picket fence set against the outer stone wall surrounding the farm.

Dolittle was standing next to the water trough, preparing a syringe. He filled it carefully and didn't bother to hide what he was doing from Lady. Probably figured she wouldn't know what was happening.

Boy, was he wrong.

Knowing Lady's propensity for causing trouble, I silently wished the new vet good luck and Godspeed. He was going to need both.

I returned to my own business. Being inside a greenhouse meant my office was warmer and more humid than most. I could already feel beads of sweat forming under my hairline. Not exactly how I wanted to show up for an interview. I stood and opened the door, relishing the cool breeze, before returning to my seat. On the way, I managed to bang my hip painfully against the corner of my desk. That was definitely going to bruise.

But absolutely worth it if I got the promotion.

I better get this promotion, I thought. The prospect of spending even one more day in my current role made my

bruised hip and sweating hair seem delightful in comparison.

Rubbing the grimace off of my face and replacing it with a convincing smile, I logged into the video call. Selina Cruz, the branch manager, was already there, looking suitably serious. We exchanged nods, a few pleasantries, and then it just got awkward. What do you say when it's just you and your supervisor, two heads floating on a screen?

Before it became painful, Stanley Moore from HR appeared in a corner of my screen. "Right, ladies, let's get this party started."

Selina's flat smile looked like it was carved on stone. I took my cue from her and restrained a nervous giggle.

The questions were pretty routine. My answers flowed easily, and I began to relax. I absolutely had this job. Buoyed by hope, I started mentally planning my celebratory party.

"What's that behind you?" Stanley Moore interrupted himself and my happy thoughts.

All party planning dissolved in a second of outright panic. I'd given Duchess very specific instructions. *Stay. Away.* Instructions couldn't get simpler than that. How difficult was it for her to keep herself out of trouble and out of my life for one measly hour?

I glanced over my shoulder, tensing in anticipation of some minor disaster only Duchess could create, then exhaled in relief. It was only the camel on the other side of the herb shelf. Carmel was knocking over half of Mahvash's herbs while devouring the other half.

I could deal with a camel and a destroyed shelf garden.

I smiled at the confused interviewers. “It’s a pregnant camel. I want to reassure you that I can absolutely handle the higher-level tasks this promotion will demand from me—”

“Why is there a camel in your house?” Selina asked.

“It’s not actually *in* my house. It’s in my greenhouse.”

“Your office is in a greenhouse.”

“Yes.” I tried to look surprised that not everyone had a greenhouse office and a camel. Based on Selina’s stony expression, I didn’t pull it off too well.

“Why do you have a camel at all?” Stanley asked.

“Good question...” My brain stumbled around for a suitable response that wouldn’t make me sound crazier. No inspiration was forthcoming.

Say something. Anything. Break the silence! I opened my mouth and blurted out, “You know how dogs provide emotional support?”

Selina’s gaze sharpened. “Do you need therapy?”

“No... No! Of course not.” I tried for a sophisticated, knowing laugh. It sounded like I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, which wasn’t far from the truth. I cleared my throat. “It’s for my grandmother. Dementia.”

“I see.” Selina lost interest.

Then Stanley launched into another monologue about the specific requirements of the new job — the ones not listed in the official advertisement. I nodded along, desperately trying

not to zone out, and failing miserably. I already knew what the job required. I wrote up the job description, after all. Besides, the view in front of me was far more interesting.

Dolittle had finished with his preparations and was now striding toward the enclosure's gate with more confidence than any man had a right to possess. Because when it came to the family goat, you could never be overly cautious. The new town vet had no idea what was in store for him.

Lady had an inbuilt radar for detecting trouble. That's how she'd survived this long. Or maybe the old goat was too stubborn to die. And she must've figured the strange man sidling up to the gate had bad intentions.

As if to prove her point, Dolittle held up the syringe.

"And I really feel positive that this new role will *blah blah blah*," Stanley continued.

"Mm, hm," I agreed.

The vet stepped into the enclosure, carefully closing the gate behind him. Bad move. He'd made his escape that much more difficult to achieve.

"And we need someone dynamic..."

Dolittle slowly approached Lady, hands out, placating her with his body language. Yeah, that wasn't going to work.

"...reliable and committed to our vision."

"I'm absolutely reliable and committed," I said.

"You're also knowledgeable about our systems..."

I nodded and rubbed my mouth, trying not to smile as Dolittle herded Lady into a corner of her enclosure. This definitely was *not* going to end well for one of them, and my money was on the goat winning this round. I didn't feel an ounce of remorse. After all, I had offered to help.

"In fact, I feel very positive about seeing you in this position," Stanley concluded.

"Great," I said, still gazing over my laptop and through the greenhouse wall.

"It is, isn't it? We have a couple of other interviews, but so far you're definitely the strongest candidate. Particularly since you're coming from inside the company—"

"What's going on behind you, Mollie?" Selina demanded.

"I told you, it's the camel," I said, not bothering to look. Esther was right. Living here was as entertaining as a Netflix comedy special.

"That doesn't look like a camel."

Suddenly, Lady decided she'd had enough. She stomped her front hooves, then lowered her head, preparing to stampede the vet.

Dolittle might be beefier than the goat, but he was still outmatched. At least he had enough sense to realize it. Gripping the syringe like a white flag of surrender, he turned and ran... in the wrong direction. He was heading toward the tall stone wall which made up one side of the enclosure.

Realizing his mistake, he dodged, zigzagged and managed to face the right direction. Despite the situation, his expression

wasn't nearly as shocked and panicked as it should be. Our gazes met. I nodded encouragingly.

He ran toward the fence, arms pumping, muscles bulging slightly under his clothes. His fancy sports jacket flapped behind him like a cape. With an impressive display of agility, he stepped onto the lower rung of the fence and began swinging his other leg over. Maybe he was going to make it after all.

But Lady was faster.

Uh oh.

I jumped up, sending my chair crashing behind me, and screamed, "Twist to the side. The goat!"

My warning came too late. Lady rammed Dolittle in the butt. He flipped over the fence and landed in the trough. Water splashed everywhere as he rolled around, trying not to drown.

"Who you callin' a goat?" Esther demanded behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. Wrinkly, arthritic Esther was studying the shelves of demolished herbs wearing only a skimpy bikini.

That should be illegal.

"Esther! Get some clothes on."

"Whatcha think I'm wearing?"

"Not enough," I said.

"Uh, Mollie?" Stanley tentatively said.

“Close your eyes!” I ordered the shocked heads on the screen. I spun the laptop around so that it faced the glass wall just as Dolittle fell out of the trough, the syringe poking out of his thigh.

Lady smacked against the picket fence. The wood shuddered under the blow.

Dolittle stumbled up, staring defiantly at his nemesis. He realized his mistake when the enraged goat attempted to scale the fence.

HONK! The flock of geese waddled into view, with Psycho trotting behind them.

“Run, you fool,” I shouted.

Dolittle hesitated, as if determined to demonstrate that vets do not run from animals.

The goat’s front legs curled over the top of the fence.

Dolittle turned and ran toward the greenhouse, not paying attention to what was in front of him. He was too focused on the vicious pack of geese right behind him. They waddled rapidly, wings flapping fiercely. Psycho joyfully bounded behind them, barking in tune to the birds’ honking and cackling.

“Mollie, what’s going on?” Selina asked.

“Are you safe?” Stanley added.

Dolittle faced forward just in time to slam into the side of the greenhouse. He bounced back, leaving a wet, human-shaped outline on the glass, then fell on his back, unconscious.

“Who was that?” Selina’s voice filled the silence.

“Sorry, can’t hear you. You’re frozen. Bad connection,” I shouted back and slammed my laptop shut.

Yup. I *definitely* nailed that interview.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Someone was kissing him.

Darren kept his eyes closed as he tried to figure out who was kissing him so fervently, and why. Not that he was complaining. The way he felt, he definitely deserved a lot of love and care. But this felt out of place.

“Don’t worry, I recorded everything,” a woman shouted, making his head ache even more.

“No one cares, Duchess,” another woman yelled. She sounded familiar.

Darren struggled to remember a name or a face. Or anything that would explain the kissing, the shouting and his headache.

“I care,” the woman named Duchess said. “What a fantastic video. Such serendipitous timing. What are the odds that I’d be filming at the exact moment Lady launched Dolittle into the air? And then the geese chase... Marvelous. Absolutely stunning. Oh, Mollie! It’s going to make a mean virus.”

“You mean a viral *meme*, don’t you?”

“That, too. Although it does rather ruin the theme of this episode. Peaceful country living—”

The other woman — Mollie — sounded like she was choking. Or trying not to laugh. It was hard to tell with the way the world was spinning. And who was Dolittle?

Darren struggled to remember what had happened, and why he felt like he’d fallen off of a cliff. Maybe he had. He was lying on the ground. Small pebbles dug into his back. His thighs. His neck. And his head wasn’t the only part of him that ached. Everything did, especially his leg—

“Carmel, get off of him,” Mollie said.

Pieces began to click together, like a painfully complicated puzzle with jagged sides and strange patterns.

He’d arrived at his new home this morning. A small town.

He’d picked up the keys to his new clinic, met his partner, his criminally inclined receptionist, and a few other colorful town characters.

And his first assignment... The one the old vet refused to accompany him on... The Stanton Farm.

Those women!

Darren spluttered as two thick, hairy lips covered his face. Instinctively, he slapped at the kisser. His hand hit warm fur.

Fur?

Darren opened his eyes, wincing against the sharp sunlight stabbing into his eyeballs. But that wasn’t the worst of it.

A pregnant camel stood over him, her floppy lips hovering over his face. He stared into her eyes. Thick eyelashes fluttered as if she were flirting with him.

“What’s actually happening right now?” he whispered.

The camel puffed out her lips, spraying him with spit.

“Carmel, get away from that. You don’t know where he’s been.” Mollie appeared in the corner of his vision. She pushed at the camel.

Reluctantly, Carmel stepped aside. One large hoof drifted over his head.

Don’t step on me, please don’t step on me, Darren thought but forced himself to remain still. There was less chance of getting hurt if he acted like a log than a squirmy creature underfoot.

The hoof clumped down next to him. Then the camel ambled away.

“Thank you, heavens,” Darren said. But the words were garbled and mashed together. Like his mouth didn’t quite work the way it was supposed to.

“Is he alive?” Duchess asked. “Because if not, it wasn’t our fault. I’ll erase the footage so the courts can’t use it against us. Such a great pity. It’s stupendous content. What you think, Mollie?”

Mollie knelt next to him. Her face was blurry yet also radiant, as if the sun had positioned itself to shine upon her, and her alone. Or maybe that was just his vision. It was all so confusing.

She brushed a hand against his cheek and neck. Her skin was soft, leaving a tingling sensation across his face. “He has a pulse.”

“Thank heavens,” Duchess exclaimed. “I can keep the footage.”

Darren stared at the face floating above his, mesmerized. “Are you an angel?”

“Guess he hit his head pretty hard,” a woman with a chain smoker’s voice said, then cackled wildly.

“We need to call a doctor, Duchess,” Mollie said, leaning closer and peering into his eyes.

“Dr. Zane is too expensive,” Duchess said.

“Then what do you suggest? You want to leave him here like this?”

“Of course not, dear. We can’t have him messing up our view. We’ll drag him out of sight.”

“Duchess. Call Dr. Zane.”

“Fine. I’ll call him.”

“Dr. Zane is a woman.”

“Then I’m not going to call Dr. Zane, am I?” Duchess headed to the house.

“Dr. Sewell is retired,” Mollie yelled after her. “And didn’t he lose his license?”

“He’s affordable and good enough.” A door slammed, ending the conversation.

“Unbelievable,” Mollie muttered. “Dolittle, can you hear me?”

“It’s Dr. Little,” Darren said, except it came out sounding shockingly like Dolittle. Even his own mouth wasn’t listening to him.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

Darren squinted at Mollie’s hand. It wavered in front of him, blurring around the edges until it looked like there were three hands instead of one. “Five?” he guessed.

“Close enough.”

“How many—”

“One.”

“How is that close enough?”

“At least you saw a finger.”

She had a point. Not a great one. Because the difference between one and five was... He struggled to do the math. What was the difference? Wearily, he wiped at his face, grimacing at the slime covering it. “What was that camel doing?”

“Kissing you.”

“You’re lucky you don’t have a mustache,” an ancient-looking woman with the chain smoker’s voice said as she hobbled up to them. “Remember what she almost did to the mayor’s goatee?”

Mollie shuddered. “Do we really want to remember?”

“What did she do?” Darren asked. He probably didn’t want to know, but if he was talking, he was alive.

“Almost ate it,” the old woman enthused. “She hates facial hair like nobody’s business. Isn’t that right, Mahvash?”

A slightly less elderly woman appeared nearby, her eyes squeezed shut. “Yes. Esther, there’s no blood or protruding bones and such, is there?”

“Nope, you old hag,” Esther said cheerfully. “You’re in no danger of faintin’ today.”

“Thank heavens.” Mahvash opened her eyes, and gave Darren a sympathetic look. “You really should’ve brought Dr. Blanchard.”

“He should’ve accepted my help,” Mollie retorted. “Typical man. Too ambitious to...”

That was when Darren’s brain must’ve figured it was as good a time as any to black out, because he lost all consciousness.

He woke up to Mollie shouting, “Duchess, no!”

“We can’t have him dying on us,” Duchess yelled. The strange sentence was followed by a wave of cold water that splashed against his face and drenched his shirt and jacket.

Darren sat up sharply, spluttering as water dribbled into his eyes and mouth. The world twirled around him.

“Lie back down,” Mollie ordered. “What if he has a concussion?”

Darren squinted at her. At least she wasn’t blurry anymore.

“He looks fine,” Duchess said.

“Thank you for your unprofessional diagnosis,” Mollie said. “Let’s ask an actual doctor. Doctor Sewell, what do you think?”

A man older than dirt hobbled forward. He was the oldest living person Darren had ever seen who wasn’t either in a wheelchair or in a coffin. He marveled that Dr. Sewell was capable of resisting gravity. He looked frail enough to fall over at the tremor caused by an earthworm.

“What was that, young lady?” Dr. Sewell asked. His voice was scratchy and strained, as if it took effort to push air up his throat and out into words.

“Do you think he has a concussion?”

The doctor leaned forward and nudged Darren’s ankle.

Pain shrieked up his leg, and Darren convulsed away from the doctor. “Ouch!”

“Definitely a concussion,” the doctor said. “And a badly sprained ankle. This young man isn’t going anywhere.”

“And by that, you mean I’m going home for bedrest?” Darren asked, silently pleading with the decrepit old doctor to agree with him.

“Not with that concussion. Unless someone’s at home with you?”

Darren wanted to shake his head but suspected that would hurt too much. “No,” he admitted. “I just arrived. But I’m staying at the motel—”

“Which motel?” Duchess demanded.

“Beaver Motel.”

“Absolutely not,” she said.

“Can’t have you staying alone, especially not there,” Dr. Sewell agreed. “Not in your condition. So it’s settled.” He turned to go.

“What’s settled?” Mollie asked.

“He has to stay with someone,” the doctor replied. “And you’re a someone. I recommend you ladies keep an eye on him. No point having our new vet dying on us, now is there?”

“But I feel fine,” Darren protested.

“That’s what they all say,” Dr. Sewell said. “Right before they die from concussion.”

“We absolutely can’t have that,” Duchess said, exchanging a knowing look with Dr. Sewell that didn’t bode well for anyone. “It’s settled. Dolittle will stay with us until he’s fully healed.”

“An excellent idea, Duchess,” Dr. Sewell said.

“It’s a terrible idea,” Mollie said.

“I agree,” Darren said. “I can’t stay here.”

“Obviously not,” Duchess said, indicating the ground. “We can’t leave you outside in the dirt. You’ll get in our way. What do you take me for? Think carefully before you answer that. You should know I have a video of you making an idiot of yourself, and I’m not above using it. Mollie, help Dolittle to his quarters.”

“It’s Dr. Little,” Darren corrected.

Mollie asked, “What quarters?”

“The guest cottage, of course.”

“But that’s my cottage, where *I’m* staying.”

“Not anymore, my dear.” Duchess paused, glancing at the two of them. “Unless you plan on staying with him.”

“No,” Mollie gasped.

Darren spluttered, “Absolutely not.”

“Pity.” Duchess sighed and took Dr. Sewell’s arm. “I suppose Mollie can stay in my study, then.”

“Are you serious?” Mollie huffed.

“You’re all crazy,” Darren stated. “All of you. Certifiable.”

Mollie scowled at him. “And your point is?”

Ever so slowly, Darren eased his head back to the ground, closed his eyes, and wished his biggest problem was a camel kissing him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Unbelievable,” I muttered for the umpteenth time as I helped Dolittle hobble into the cottage. *My* cottage.

“Careful,” Dolittle said through gritted teeth.

“Exactly. I told you to be careful around Lady. I even offered to help. But no. The great Dolittle—”

“Dr. Little.”

“Doesn’t need anyone’s help.”

Dolittle replied with a heartfelt groan, his rigid expression contorting in pain. I immediately bit back more angry words. He deserved a bit of sympathy. Even if he was stealing my cottage from me. Or even if I did warn him about the goat. And the geese.

Despite all of this basically being mostly his fault, he was hurt. Maybe not in a life-threatening way, but pain was pain. He was also soaked all the way through. I could feel his firm muscles shivering. Not that I was focusing on his muscles. But he was definitely fit. Did he go to a gym, or—

“What kind of a vet are you, anyway?” I blurted out to distract myself from focusing on anything about his physique, or how he might look in a tank top while pressing weights, or...

He glanced sideways at me, his expression wry. “Not a good one, it seems.”

“I didn’t mean... I’m sure you’re perfectly adequate,” I hastily amended while kicking open the cottage’s front door with more force than necessary. “At least you’ll have some privacy here.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be watching over me in case I have a concussion?”

I was about to retort that the only thing I’d be watching over was my kettle, when I caught his smile. It flittered briefly through the pain, a hint of humor that immediately retreated.

He caught my stare, and his lips flattened out again. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said, focusing on getting him to the sofa, then getting myself out of here.

Remember Luke, I reminded myself. Twelve days before Christmas. Who does that? Too busy for a wife. Hah! Always putting himself and his career first before—

“Miss Stanton—”

“Mollie,” I automatically corrected.

“I’m sorry I’m kicking you out of your cottage.”

“Me, too.” I pulled my arms free as he sunk onto the sofa.

“I’m happy to stay at the motel.”

He sounded sincere while I sounded like the human version of Lady the goat.

I sighed, pushing away my irritation at losing my cottage. “Don’t worry about it. It’s only for a few days.”

At least, I hoped it was only for a few days. Then again, I was only here for seven days. But as I’d feared, Day One had already landed me in trouble, courtesy of Duchess Delilah.

“Again,” I grumbled.

“You mutter to yourself a lot,” Dolittle said.

“And you don’t listen to instructions.”

“Fair enough.”

I stared around the main living area of the cottage. I hadn’t even finished unpacking, but clothes were still scattered around the place.

“Do you need help packing up your things?” Dolittle asked, plucking a sock off of the sofa and gingerly holding it out.

“Are you in a position to help?”

“Not really.”

“So you just want me out of here quickly, is that it?” I demanded, snatching the sock from him. “It’s not going to bite you, you know.”

“If you say so.” He gave me a quizzical look, like I was a new species of tree frog he’d just discovered and was trying to

figure out how poisonous it was.

I glared at his sprained ankle. “What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“No. It’s something. Tell me.”

“Has anyone told you that you have terrible bedside manners?” Dolittle asked.

“Good thing I’m not a doctor or nurse, then. Speaking of, what was that thing about rice and sprains?”

Dolittle almost smiled again but didn’t. “Rest. Ice. Compress. Elevate.”

“Right. I forgot we had a doctor in the house,” I said, dragging the coffee table closer and helping him lift his leg. “We shouldn’t have bothered with Dr. Sewell.”

“No, he was very helpful,” Dolittle said, wiping dampness off of his face. “If my ankle wasn’t injured before he kicked it, it definitely was afterward.”

I snorted a laugh. “And he might’ve encouraged Duchess to toss the bucket of water.”

“I assumed that was you.”

“I was tempted.”

“I’ll have to remember that for my patients.”

“I don’t suggest you toss anything on the livestock around here.” I fluffed up a throw pillow and shoved it under his calf.

He hissed sharply. “Easy with that.”

“Are you one of those men who makes a big fuss over a small injury?”

“It’s a big enough injury to leave me stranded here.”

“Just for a day or two. Then you can go back to wherever you’re staying.”

“Beaver Motel.”

I shuddered involuntarily. “You’re still going to stay there?”

“Until I find a more permanent place, yes.”

“You’re checked in?”

“Yes.”

“Have you spent the night there yet?”

“No. I dropped my bags and went straight to the clinic.” He crossed his arms. “Why?”

“You might want to find more suitable accommodation sooner than later,” I suggested, slumping onto the sofa next to him without thinking. “That place has a bar. It gets loud at night. You don’t strike me as the kind who likes a lot of noise.”

The straight line of his mouth curved downward. “That’s unfortunate. I was hoping for some peace and quiet in the countryside.”

“You picked the wrong countryside to move into, buddy.”

“Why? Is everyone else like...” He snapped his mouth shut.

I smirked and nudged him with my elbow. “Like my grandmother?”

He shrugged slightly.

“No, they’re nothing like her,” I said. “She’s pretty mild compared to some of your other clients.”

He deflated slightly. “I see.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“You think so?”

“Of course not. I think you’re way over your head.” I grinned, patted his knee and stood up.

“Do you have some frozen peas?”

“No, but I do have a job.” I strode to the kitchenette and rummaged through the freezer.

“I assume it’s not as a doctor or nurse,” Dolittle said.

“Definitely not. Copywriting. No frozen peas.”

“Anything cold will do.”

“Got it.” I tugged out a slab of deeply frozen meat. It wasn’t as malleable as a bag of peas, but it was definitely cold. My fingers burned with the intensity as I carried it into the living room and place it on Dolittle’s ankle.

He winced, then sighed as the cold took effect. “Sounds interesting.”

“Peas?”

“Your job.”

“Not really.”

“You don’t like it?”

I shrugged, not interested in discussing the issue. I started picking up my items and stuffing them back into my carry-on.
“It’s a job. Pays the rent.”

“A job should do more than that.”

“Like get my ankle sprained, and my butt kicked by a goat?”

Dolittle made a disapproving noise. “Maybe not the goat part. But it should bring you some joy.”

Squeezing my bag shut, I straightened up and surveyed the cottage, searching for any remaining items. I had a nagging feeling that I’d forgotten something but couldn’t figure out what. Hopefully nothing important.

Satisfied that the place didn’t look like a suitcase had exploded in it, I turned to the vet. He was still watching me like I was the next best thing to Netflix. Or a poisonous frog.
“Does your work give you joy, Dolittle?”

“Yes. When I help a sick animal get better, it makes me very happy.”

“That must be nice.”

“It is. And you?”

“My paycheck makes me happy. I think I’m done here. I’ll be back before dinner to make sure you’re still alive. Try not to succumb to a concussion while I’m gone.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You do that. Disposing of dead bodies isn’t in my job description, either.”

“Does copywriting involve a lot of bodies?” He frowned at me while trying to cover a yawn.

“I wish. That would make it more interesting.”

“Really.”

I backed toward the door, silently instructing my mouth to stay shut. Sadly, the instructions didn’t reach my vocal cords in time to stop me babbling, “Yeah, so don’t die. Just get some rest. But not too deeply. Don’t fall into a coma.”

A ferocious knot took up residence between his eyebrows. “I’ll try not to.”

“Because that would be inconvenient.”

“Yes. It would.” He sounded confused.

I sounded like a crazy person.

I reached for the doorknob and twisted, but the door was already ajar. I stumbled out. “Okay, then. No dying. No comas. And...”

I slammed the door on his bewildered expression before I could spout out more nonsense. Then I leaned against the wall and stared at Lady patrolling her paddock.

Half a day down. Six and a half more to go.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A persistent ringing intruded on his dream.

Darren was pretty certain it was a dream because since when did camels talk? This camel looked familiar. Not that he had a lot — or any — experience with camels, except...

“Excuse me. Have we met before?” he asked the camel. Even if this was a dream, he was determined to be polite.

“Carmel,” the camel said. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Ring, ring!

Darren nodded and rubbed his head. It ached. In fact, his whole body was sore. “Why are you in my dream?”

The camel fluttered her big lips at him. “No, silly. You’re in *my* dream.”

Ring, ring!

Darren woke up with a start.

His room was dark. Had he missed his flight? He’d promised Dr. Blanchard that he would arrive before Christmas. What day was it?

Ring, RING!

Groaning, Darren rubbed at his head again. His skull felt like it was about to split in two. A vague sense that something wasn't right in the world lingered at the edge of his awareness.

He reached for his bedside lamp. It wasn't there. He lowered his legs to the floor, flinching when one of his ankles twinged painfully. Carefully balancing on his pain-free leg, he stood up, fumbling in the dark, reaching for the main light switch. Instead, he banged his shin against a low table.

Darren didn't have a table in his bedroom.

He gingerly patted the table until his fingers brushed over the cool, hard surface of his phone. He tapped the screen. Light stabbed at his eyes, blinding him.

Ring, ring!

After a few failed attempts, he slid the digital button to one side. "What," he mumbled. "Why..."

A familiar chuckle pinged in his ear. "Lower your phone. I don't want to look at the inside of your ear canal."

Darren squinted at his screen. Johnny's characteristic smirk greeted him.

"How was your first day in... What was that little town called?"

Using the light from his cell phone, Darren found a lamp, and switched it on.

He definitely wasn't in his own bedroom. He wasn't even in his motel room. Memories slunk through the grogginess,

clearing away the brain fog.

“Those Stanton women,” he muttered.

Johnny laughed. “You’ve been busy, then.”

“No. It’s not like...” Darren rubbed a hand down his face, urging his brain to finish waking up. Otherwise, this conversation was going to get out of control. “You don’t understand.”

“Can’t choose between them? Life must be tough. Maybe small towns aren’t such a bad option after all.”

“I mean they’re all crazy.”

“Crazy’s good.”

“Wrong kind of crazy. And their animals. They named their dog Psycho. They have a pet camel. And their goat attacked me.”

Silence.

“Johnny?” Darren held out the phone to make sure he hadn’t inadvertently hung up. He hadn’t, and the seconds ticked by.

He massaged his forehead, and regretted saying anything at all. It wasn’t like him to spout out whatever was top of his mind without filtering it carefully. He blamed his momentary lapse on his concussion, and the general insanity of this place. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah. I am. I’m trying to process what all of that actually means.”

“It’s nothing. Really. A few glitches.”

“Glitches? You just told me you were attacked by a goat.”

“And a flock of geese.”

“Geese attack people?”

“Apparently so. They’re quite vicious.”

“Maybe you should come home now.”

“It’s fine. Once they let me leave here, that is.”

A deeper silence followed. Johnny broke it with a loud throat clearing. “Who lets you leave *where*?”

“The Stanton women. I’m stuck here on their farm.”

“You’re stuck on a farm with a bunch of crazy women.” Johnny hooted a laugh. “Gotta say, bro, I wish I had your problems.”

“Did I mention I have a twisted ankle?”

“Nope.”

“And possibly a concussion.” Darren thought about his weird dream. “Almost definitely a concussion.”

“A concussion? That’s serious. Should I be worried? Or send in a rescue team?”

“No.”

“Want me to tell the family—”

“Absolutely not.” All fears of talking camels and concussions vanished before the vision of his mother and her entourage descending on Teaville. “You don’t tell her any of this. It’ll be okay.”

“I don’t know, bro. Crazy women breaking your ankle and your head—”

“It’s a bad sprain, and the goat did it.”

“The goat did it?”

“Yes. I think the geese helped.”

“So the geese are in on it?”

“Yes.”

Johnny stopped talking. That in itself was a worrying sign.

“I’m fine. Really,” Darren insisted. “It just hurts. And they’re not all bad.”

“Who? The geese?”

“The women. The granny is the real nutcase.”

“You don’t say?”

“She was in jail this morning.”

“The *granny* was in jail?”

“Along with my receptionist. I may need a new one.”

“A new receptionist, or—”

“That’s what I said. Why are you repeating everything?”

“I’m trying to make sense of what is essentially nonsensical!”

It was Darren’s turn to keep quiet. His head still ached, but at least his brain was now functioning almost normally. He reviewed the conversation, grimacing at how much he’d

inadvertently blurted out. If his mother heard half of this, he'd never have a moment's peace.

Darren sagged into the sofa, his eyes unfocused.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Johnny asked.

"About?"

"You not being cut out for all that... country living. Large animals. Crazy farm women."

Darren didn't want to admit he'd been thinking the same, so he shrugged.

Johnny nodded, his smirk fading into an unusually thoughtful expression. "Maybe you aren't. But you're there now. You've committed money. Foolishly, I might add."

"You didn't need to say that."

"Yeah, I did. My advice? Just stick with it for a little while longer. Maybe things'll settle down."

Darren tried not to show his surprise. As the oldest brother, he'd always been the one to encourage the others. Johnny was the sarcastic troublemaker, not the one to dole out reassurances. "Thanks for that, Johnny."

"Yeah, sure. That's what brothers are for."

"I'm not giving up."

"That's the spirit. Assuming you survive long enough."

Darren huffed. "And there's the little brother I know."

"You betcha."

A sharp rap on the cottage door interrupted them.

“I think one of them is here,” Darren said.

“Hey, Dolittle?” Mollie’s voice slid under the door and flowed around him. “I saw a light on. I’m guessing you’re awake. At least I hope you’re not dead. You hungry?”

“No,” he said, raising his voice just as his stomach grumbled.

“She sounds pretty,” Johnny said, his smirk at full force.

“How can you tell by her voice?” Darren asked, not really interested in the response because this was Johnny, after all. Even if he was right about Mollie.

“I have my ways.”

“Talk about nonsensical.”

“Dolittle?” Mollie said. “Are you coming?”

Darren sighed.

“You gonna be okay?” Johnny asked. “Does this require a family intervention?”

“Absolutely not,” Darren said as the front door creaked open. “I have to go. If you don’t hear from me in the next day or two, file a missing person’s report.”

“Better yet, I’ll let Mother know—”

“No. Promise me you won’t.”

Johnny sighed. “I’ll do my best. Later, bro.”

The door started to open.

Darren slid his phone across the table, and prayed Johnny would keep his promise. The last thing he needed was for his

mother to show up in a situation that was already crazy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The door swung wide open, and Mollie flipped on the main light, momentarily blinding Darren.

“You don’t know how happy I am you’re alive,” she said. “Esther was worried we’d have to call the morgue.”

“Good to know.”

“We’re having dinner. Duchess said I should help you to the table.”

“That’s very kind of her,” Darren said and meant it. Maybe he’d judged the Stanton women too harshly.

“Her exact words were, ‘Go see if the idiot is still alive, then help his crippled self get over here. I’m not waiting all night to eat dinner.’ Or something like that.”

No, he’d judged them perfectly.

Mollie held out a set of crutches that looked older than Esther. “Dr. Sewell left these for you. He said to keep weight off of your ankle. In case that wasn’t obvious.”

“Did he say when I can leave?”

Mollie grinned. She was kind of cute when she smiled. Cute for a crazy person. “In a hurry to leave, are you?”

“I don’t want to impose on your kind hospitality.”

“Who’re you kidding? I just got here, and I’m counting the minutes until I can go.”

“I can appreciate that.” He waved Mollie’s help aside and managed to stand with the help of the crutches, then followed her out of the cabin.

Darren expected her to turn toward the house. Instead, she angled toward the barnyard.

“Didn’t you say we’re having dinner?” he asked, jabbing a finger toward the house.

“I did, and we are.”

Dread settled like a heavy meal in the pit of his stomach. “Then why are we heading toward the...” His sentence shriveled up as he caught sight of the scene.

The three old jailbirds were sitting around a picnic table, setting up a small buffet of food. But they weren’t the only ones getting ready for dinner. Psycho the mutant Great Dane was sitting on a stool at one end. Carmel the camel stood patiently near the other end. Lady the goat was lounging nearby, picking at a bale of hay. Only a few storm lanterns and the night’s starry sky illuminated the dinner table.

Darren’s lips felt stiff as he tried to say something more appropriate than, *You’re all insane*. “You must be kidding,” he blurted out instead.

“No kids around here. Dinner time is family time.”

The flock of geese honked as they flapped their wings and trotted in front of Darren. He held up a crutch as if it were a sword, preparing to swat the evil birds if they dared lunge at him. He'd had enough animal attacks for one day. For one year, more like it.

But the geese ignored him. They clustered around a bucket of grain and immediately began pecking at it.

“About time, you two,” Duchess said. “What were you doing in that cottage?”

“Please stop talking,” Mollie said, covering her face with one hand.

Darren decided to sit next to the camel. She seemed the safest bet, which didn't say much. But the worst she'd done was kiss him. Unlike everyone and everything else around the table who had alternatively tried to attack, bite, kick, or humiliate him.

Mollie slid into the spot next to him.

“You always eat like this?” he asked tentatively, studying the food. At least it looked edible, and smelled tasty.

“Pretty much.”

“Didn't you miss this, Mollie?” Duchess asked.

“Leave her alone,” Mahvash said.

“Yeah, Duchess,” Esther added, smacking her lips noisily. “Too much talkin'. Not enough anything else.”

“I’m simply suggesting that maybe she wants to consider moving back,” Duchess said.

“We know what you’re suggesting,” Mollie said. “And no, she doesn’t.”

Darren glanced sideways at her. She had a sullen expression, one that she was trying to hide by noisily slurping at a tall glass of water.

“At least she’ll be here for Christmas,” Mahvash murmured.

“The Stanton Christmas tradition isn’t the same without her around,” Duchess added.

“She and her are right here,” Mollie said.

“So glad she’s not missin’ that,” Esther enthused.

“What tradition?” Darren dared to ask.

“It’s...” Mollie huffed. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s eat.”

“Good idea. Want some chicken, Dr. Small?” Esther asked, holding a carving knife the size of a machete in her quivering hands.

“It’s Dolittle, Esther,” Duchess corrected.

“Actually, it’s Dr. Little,” Darren said, wondering if Esther should be using such a sharp knife near her own or anyone else’s fingers. “And no, thanks. I’m a vegetarian.”

Esther smiled, exposing bits of food stuck between her teeth. “Okay, Dr. Small. I’ll give you some vegetables with your chicken.”

Mollie grabbed Esther's hands, lowered them and gingerly extracted the excessively sharp and dangerously large blade from them. "It means Dolittle doesn't want to eat chicken."

"Pork, then?"

"No, Esther. No animals."

Esther's face twisted in disgust. "So what's he eatin'?"

"Salad, for starters," Mollie suggested.

Esther gagged. "He's a rabbit now?"

"He'll have the beans." Mollie passed a bowl to him.

Darren gave her a grateful nod, then quickly looked away. He didn't care what that doctor had said. He was returning to Beaver Motel tomorrow morning. First thing. Or second, after breakfast.

"How long are you planning on staying, Mollie dear?" Duchess asked with what sounded like deceptive sweetness.

Darren lowered his gaze and studied his plate. Somehow, food had appeared on it, including a heap of steamed broccoli and a mound of mashed potato.

He glanced up. Mahvash give him a quick smile and nodded once. He nodded back. Maybe they weren't all crazy after all.

"One week," Mollie said, certainty coating the words.

"Oh, dear," Mahvash murmured.

Mollie's head snapped up. "What do you mean, *oh, dear*?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

“I know you mean something.” Mollie leaned her elbows on the table, staring at Mahvash and toying with the carving knife. “Spit it out.”

“No spittin’ at the table,” Esther snapped. “You can spit after dessert.”

Carmel leaned over Darren’s plate and licked up all the broccoli, leaving a trail of drool. She then meandered away. Darren was tempted to follow the camel.

“What did she mean, Duchess?” Mollie demanded and jabbed the knife in Duchess’ direction. “I know you know.”

Darren’s shoulders hunched instinctively. As crazy as his own family was, this one definitely took the cake and everything else along with it.

Duchess simpered. “It’s not much, really. Nothing to concern yourself—”

“You better tell her,” Mahvash said.

“Gracious. So much fuss.” Duchess picked up her cutlery. “Our bail agreement was very specific. You remember the document you signed?”

“I’m aware. I paid the chief your bail. What’s the deal?”

“I assume you didn’t read the fine print?” Duchess asked.

Darren stared at Mahvash, who shook her head. He wondered if it was too late to request room service. Or take-away.

Yes, maybe he should admit that he was very tired. In pain. In danger of succumbing to his concussion. And desperately

needing to retreat to a place where no crazy women were sitting around the table with barnyard animals and discussing bail agreements.

Carmel returned and sniffed at his untouched mashed potatoes.

“What did it say?” Mollie asked, a wary tone in her voice.

Darren’s heart contracted just a bit. He recognized that tone. It was the sound of defeat, of surrender before you even knew what you were surrendering to. His mother had the same effect on him and his brothers.

“The judge was quite adamant that whoever posted our bail must remain in Teaville as our guardian and guarantor,” Duchess said. “Or something to that effect.”

A deadly, uncomfortable silence settled across the table. Even the geese stopped their chattering and stared across the table at him. As if he was to blame for whatever was going on.

Psycho took the opportunity to steal the remaining chicken from the platter, and bounded away into the shadows.

“What do you mean exactly?” Mollie asked.

Duchess cut into her food. “My understanding is that you won’t be able to leave before the court case.”

Mollie stood up so fast, the geese all exploded in a flurry of flapping wings and alarmed honking. Psycho growled, and Carmel nuzzled Darren’s hair with her big lips.

“What you mean, I can’t leave?” Mollie’s voice pitched upward. “When’s the court case?”

“You know how it is,” Duchess said, eyeing her fork.
“Courts are backed up. It could be a few months.”

“A few months?” Mollie shrieked.

“Let’s discuss this after dinner, shall we?” Mahvash suggested.

“It was only supposed to be for one week,” Mollie shouted, holding up her serviette and flicking it over her head.
“Seven days only!”

She hopped off of the bench and sprinted past the barnyard, into the darkness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It's not a big deal. It really isn't a big deal. I can work from here. I'll manage, I told myself.

I kept telling myself this as I jogged past the barn and into the orchard.

Not a big deal? It's a HUGE deal. Still, I'll manage. I can do it.

But the worm of doubt crept in. Could I really manage? I'd been home for twelve hours, and already things had gone haywire.

I was now stuck in town indefinitely, thanks to contractual fine print. *Who reads that stuff, anyways?*

I was required by that same contract to monitor my grandmother.

I'd been kicked out of my cottage.

And our goat had injured the town vet whom I now had to babysit.

Never mind that Dolittle kind of deserved getting his butt handed to him by an old goat. After all, he'd disregarded both

my advice and my generous offer to help. He'd brazenly stolen my overhead bin space, reminding me of my broken heart. And no, I was *not* above holding a grudge.

Plus, he was a man. That fact alone immediately put him high on my list of people with whom I didn't want to associate. But I was equally positive that the only reason he was injured and had taken over my cottage was because of Duchess.

Somehow, she had a way of creating disaster where ever she went. And now I was stuck here for who knew how long.

"Always read the fine print," I muttered.

Especially when it came to bailing out Duchess and her fellow witches.

I focused on counting backward from ten. I lost track at eight.

Maybe Duchess was right. Maybe the therapist was useless.

Then again, this whole situation was Duchess' fault, so...

I marched around the orchard, unable to stomach the thought of going back to the dinner table. My thoughts hissed out of me in a whispered stream of irritated sentence fragments. By the time I realized where I was, it was too late.

I stopped next to the swing set. It was covered in a thin coating of rust, enough to guarantee a case of tetanus to anyone who scratched their skin on it.

But that wasn't the real problem.

The two-story wooden structure nestled against a large tree at the edge of the nearby forest definitely was.

Swallowing hard, I stared at the play castle, memories flitting around like a swarm of fireflies.

Me as a young child drawing out my perfect playhouse in crayons, and handing the crumpled, jam-stained result to my parents.

My dad studying it with all the seriousness of an engineer as he promised to build me the best playhouse / treehouse / castle combo ever.

Mom and me preparing snacks while Dad sawed and hammered for three entire weekends, then painted all the walls purple.

Then the castle-warming party. The three of us crowded inside, admiring the fairytale creation.

One or the other of my parents cuddling with me on the cushions, reading countless books. Or having a tea party. Or playing board games.

How many marvelous adventures had occurred within the walls of my childhood castle?

My throat constricted as I stared ahead. Of all the locations on the farm I could've wandered to, why did I have to end up here? I hadn't gone inside the castle since...

I instinctively took a step back, a hand brushing against a swing. The chains squeaked.

“Are you okay, Mollie?”

Startled by the proximity of a male voice, I twirled around. I fisted my hand and swung my arm, just like my self-defense instructor had taught me. My right hook landed with a painful crunch on someone's nose.

“Ouch!” Dolittle tottered backward and flipped over a swing. His crutches went flying, and he toppled to the ground, his limbs sprawled like an awkward starfish.

“Dolittle?”

“Whadja sink?”

“Are you okay?” I exclaimed and reached out an arm to help him up.

He swatted my hand away and pinched his nose. “Why’d ja da dat?”

A small, slightly hysterical giggle escaped me. I clapped a hand over my mouth before his garbled words inspired more. I’d punched the guy hard enough to make his nose bleed, and now I was laughing at him?

“I’m so sorry, really, I—”

“Are all you Stanton women this crazy?”

I froze, staring at his bleeding profile. “You think I’m crazy?”

He struggled to sit up, still clutching his nose to stem the blood. “Yesh. You punched me.”

“And you scared me.”

“How?” He released his nose and gestured around us. “We’re on your farm in the middle of nowhere, on the edge of

a small town that's also in the middle of nowhere. We're literally in the middle of the middle of nowhere. What's out here to scare you?"

"If it's so *nowhere*, then why did you come here?" I pushed at his shoulder, anger percolating through my veins, flushing my skin with a dangerous heat. I didn't know who I was angry with, or why. Maybe everyone and everything.

My brain searched for a source. I wanted to blame my mood on the day's events, the proximity of the castle, my aching knuckles, and most of all, on Duchess. I added Dolittle to the list even if it wasn't fair to do so. Knowing it was wrong made it worse, which in turn made me angrier. I thumped his shoulder again.

He didn't flinch or move. He had a lot more muscle under there than I'd expected. He rubbed under his nose. "Are you done hitting me?"

"Maybe." I sat on a swing, glaring at him. "You moved here willingly. I had no choice. Who's crazy now?"

"I thought it would be a peaceful place."

"Now *that's* crazy."

"Apparently. Can I borrow that?" He pointed at my hand.

I glanced down. I was still gripping my serviette from dinner. It was linen. Duchess always insisted on setting the table with her best of everything. She was very particular about her linen.

Bloodstains would be pretty difficult to remove.

“Sure.” I dropped the serviette on his lap. While he blotted under his nose, I peered closely, the swing creaking back and forth. “I think it stopped bleeding.”

“It still hurts. Like someone with a big fist just punched it.”

I held up my fist and grinned. “What can I say? I punch above my weight.”

He frowned. “I have no idea what that actually means. And I’m not sure it’s something to be proud about. Punching your guests in the nose is not proper etiquette.”

“Now you sound like my grandmother.”

Dolittle shuddered. “I should hope not.” He pocketed the bloodied linen, then sat on the other swing.

“I really am sorry,” I whispered.

Dolittle’s swing bumped against mine. The motion startled me, but I resisted the impulse to push back.

“Nothing broken,” he said. “Just my pride.”

“You mean you had some left after this morning?”

He replied with a soft chuckle, “Good point.”

We sat side by side at the edge of the orchard. Fireflies twirled among the tall grass, and the star-encrusted sky glowed above us. I kicked gently at the ground, the squeak of the moving swing gradually fading, to be replaced by crickets.

Dolittle nodded at the two-story castle. “Quite an impressive structure there.”

I didn't dare look at my castle, nor could I look at him. I nodded and hummed noncommittally.

"A garden shed?"

"Hardly."

"It could be."

"How does that look like a garden shed?"

We swung in silence for a moment. Then Dolittle said, "Do I have to drag it out of you?"

"Probably."

I could sense him studying me. I met his inquisitive gaze. He didn't look away. Nor did he insist on an answer.

"It's my playhouse," I finally said. "A castle, really." I chewed on the inside of my mouth. "It used to be dark purple," I added. "That was my favorite color. Still is."

"A purple castle. I like it."

"My parents built it for me."

"Ah." In that one syllable, he managed to sound too knowledgeable for my comfort.

The anger that had been simmering flared up. He hadn't done anything wrong, but that didn't stop me from glowering at him. "What do you mean, *ah*?"

He shrugged. His thin sweater stretched across his wide shoulders. "Just that. What happened?"

"Life. Death. And everything in between."

I expected him to mumble an awkward apology, like most people do when faced with someone who's experienced loss in their lives. But he kept quiet and watched me, his gaze empathetic yet without pity.

I could feel my right eyebrow twitching upward, the same expression my grandmother used on me whenever I did something that surprised her. I rubbed at the eyebrow angrily, forcing it downward. "You didn't strike me as the type."

"Which is..."

"The understanding type."

"I see." He shifted his gaze to the castle. "Have you been inside it since?"

I turned away, blinking angry tears. He'd asked the one question I didn't want to answer. I didn't even want to contemplate going back in there. The castle was filled with memories of people taken from me too soon. I couldn't bear to revisit those memories alone, because in the shadows lurked the memories of life after...

Dolittle cleared his throat softly. I almost expected him to ask again, or to ask why I didn't want to go inside. But instead he said, "It looks like someone's been taking care of it."

I reluctantly forced myself to look at the play castle. Even in the dim light, I could see he was right. It had been abandoned for more than twenty years. Left exposed to the elements and the green fingers of the forest, the small building should've been a tottering stack of decaying wood.

Yet the castle was in excellent condition apart from the faded paint color. No rot or breakage. No weeds or vines curling around it. The shingles were in perfect alignment. I imagined the inside being in the same degree of repair. Not that I was about to check, but the thought helped loosen the constriction in my throat.

Someone had been maintaining my castle.

But who? Esther? Her arthritis wouldn't allow her to do that kind of work. Mahvash? She avoided the forest for fear of snakes. Duchess? But why had she bothered?

"Don't want to talk about it?" Dolittle asked, his voice gentle, barely a whisper.

"Not really. It doesn't matter."

He nodded.

I studied his profile, waiting for him to insist on an answer. Or to ask a similar question from another angle. Or if he was discomfited by the topic of death like many people were, to quickly talk about the weather.

But he didn't. He sat on the swing in silence, staring out at the view. Stoic. Calm. Not at all flustered or overly curious. Purely present. It was both oddly reassuring and unnerving.

I mentally searched for something to say to shift conversational gears, and latched onto the first idea that popped into my addled brain. "Do you ever smile?"

And this is why he thinks we're crazy.

"When I have a reason to."

“I guess we haven’t given you too many reasons, huh?”

His mouth twitched, but he remained quiet.

“Was that an almost-smile?”

He glanced sideways at me, one corner of those full lips definitely lifting up. “Perhaps.” He looked at the forest. “It’s peaceful here.”

“I’m not sure your nose or your ankle agree with you.”

“I mean, this moment. Here. Now. You never get this level of quiet in the city.”

“True. But you also don’t get goats, geese and camels chasing after you in the city.”

“No. Just thugs and paparazzi.”

I shifted my swing so that it nudged his. Metal chains clanked against each other. “Paparazzi? You? Why would they be interested in a vet?”

“They’re not. But my family...” He bit off his sentence, his teeth clicking together. He stared up at the sky. “Like I said, it’s peaceful here.”

I was tempted to push for more details. There was a juicy story in there somewhere, and I wanted it. But he’d respected my unspoken desire to drop a painful subject. So I closed my mouth on the volley of questions and swallowed them, contenting myself with a comment. “If you’re avoiding paparazzi, you came to the right place. The closest thing we have to paparazzi is Miss Myrtle.”

“The town gossip?”

“That’s the one. And she’s fairly harmless. Usually.”

“Another plus for Teaville.”

“What are the others? Apart from being so quiet.”

“I’m still figuring those out.”

My imagination spun in the warm night air and the comfortable silence that settled around us. Too comfortable.

Stay uncomfortable, I warned myself. If Luke had taught me anything, getting comfortable was a bad idea. I was definitely in no shape for another relationship. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Okay, that was probably an exaggeration. But this? This was way too soon. Even if Dolittle was nothing like Luke.

“Maybe it’s not so bad here after all,” Dolittle murmured.

“Were you just having a conversation with yourself?” I asked. “Because it sounds like you were, and I just heard the tail end of it.”

“My brother doesn’t think I can make it out here. That my city clinic was only popular because of family connections.”

“He sounds pleasant.”

“He means well. Sometimes I wonder if he was right.”

“No, I’m sure you’re an adequately good vet.”

“That was... encouraging. I think. Thank you.”

I glanced at him at the same time as he looked at me. And for a second, we understood each other.

“Family makes us all crazy,” I said.

“On that, we can agree.”

We exchanged knowing smiles. It was a sweet moment. Almost romantic, with the fireflies, and a few bats flitting between the branches of nearby trees while we basked under starlight.

Before it became anything more than a moment, Carmel lurched out of the shadows and spat a mouthful of regurgitated broccoli on Dolittle’s head.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dolittle lurched forward, swiping at the vegetative goop dribbling into his eyes. Blinded and distracted by the broccoli, he almost fell over.

“What was that?” he demanded, dragging a hand down his face.

“Partially masticated broccoli,” I said. “Do you always overreact?”

“How is this an overreaction?” He bounced on one leg, trying to balance himself, and waved a crutch to keep Carmel’s green-flecked mouth at bay.

Carmel sniffed the end of the crutch, then gnawed on it.

“Be careful with her,” I warned.

Dolittle stared at me in confusion for a moment. He had long eyelashes, and his eyes reminded me of Carmel’s. I snorted a laugh.

“Being spat on isn’t amusing,” he said sternly. “And I am being careful.”

“Good. Because she’s pregnant.”

“I knew that.”

“Which is why you’re playing tug-of-war with her?”

Dolittle tugged his crutch free. “Has anyone given her a checkup?”

We both stared at the camel who wiggled her jaw lazily. Perhaps she was preparing another mouthful of mushy greens.

“No idea,” I said. “But here’s a thought. Why don’t you, since you’re the vet?”

Dolittle reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a stethoscope.

“You just happen to have that with you?” I asked.

“I always carry it. It’s a habit.”

“Strangest habit ever.”

“I’m sure you can think up stranger ones.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or insulted.”

He shrugged and put the earpieces in his ears.

“How much experience do you have with camels?” I shouted.

“I can hear you just fine,” he said, setting one crutch against the swing.

“Oh.” I lowered my voice. “How much?”

He frowned.

“You can say none,” I continued. “Or zero. None whatsoever. That’s the appropriate response for most people.”

And I'm pretty sure a city vet is no exception."

"How about an inappropriate answer?"

"That's my department. Be honest."

He sighed. "I think you know."

"I want to hear you say it."

His eyes were so narrow, all I could see were twin lines of thick eyelashes. "Absolutely none. Not many people keep camels as pets. Happy?"

"Almost always. Did you know camels are very intelligent?"

"Good for them."

"Yes. They're also loyal to those they like."

"You don't say?"

"And they hold grudges."

His mouth flattened into a straight line. "You're making that up."

"Am not. In fact, they remember both their friends and their enemies. The only animals that hold grudges better than camels are humans and tigers."

He gave me a wary look, studying me for any hint I was teasing him. "Seriously?"

"Look it up. Google is your friend."

"Siri hates me."

I shrugged. “Different company. Point is, first impressions with camels are critically important.”

“We’ve already met.”

“Not officially. The last thing you want is a camel who has a grudge against you.”

He shifted his wary gaze to Carmel. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. And Carmel will track you down. If you don’t believe me, ask Esther.”

“I thought you said Google was your friend.”

“Esther’s in second place. She told me all about Carmel, how she used to live with a traveling circus and learned how to break out of her stall. She’d cause havoc.”

“Who, Esther or Carmel?”

“You have a sense of humor after all.”

“How did she break out? I don’t see any opposable thumbs.”

“No, but check out those lips. She knows how to use those, or so I’m told.”

Dolittle’s gaze flitted between Carmel and me, fascinated. “Then what happened?”

I leaned against Carmel’s shoulder and rubbed behind her ear. She groaned in delight. “Apparently, she didn’t like her trainer. And when Duchess offered to buy Carmel from the circus, the circus was more than happy to hand her over. But on the way out, Carmel took her revenge.”

“You don’t say.”

“She stepped on the trainer’s foot, spat in his face, then yanked off half his mustache. She’s not a fan of facial hair on men, so you should be safe.”

Dolittle rubbed a hand down his face. “That sounds painful. And disgusting.”

“That’s not the end of it. She also urinated on him.”

“You know, she looks radiant and healthy. I really don’t think she needs a checkup.”

“You’re supposed to be the vet.”

“I am.”

“Well then, Dolittle, it’s time you prove it.” I pinned him with my best imitation of a no-nonsense look. “Be nice, show some respect, and the two of you will be best friends. Otherwise, she’ll break your other ankle.”

“Are all your animals so vicious?”

“Only with people they don’t like. And on Sundays.”

Dolittle sighed, then hobbled toward the camel. “I can’t afford a broken anything.”

“I’ll make sure to put a good word in for you.”

Carmel’s nostrils flared, and her head drifted upward as she peered down her long nose at Dolittle.

“Does she like sugar cubes?” Dolittle asked.

“Who doesn’t? But they’re really bad for her teeth, so don’t give her any.”

“That’s good, because I don’t have any.”

I kept rubbing Carmel’s long neck, willing her not to urinate on Dolittle. He might be a city slicker, but he wasn’t a bad guy. Maybe he was even a good one.

Carmel seemed to think so. She fluttered her lips, lowered her head and sucker kissed him. Her big, floppy lips engulfed half of Dolittle’s face.

“Oh, look, she likes you,” I announced.

“It feels like she’s about to bite off my head.”

“Nope. Just your hair.”

“Really?”

“Nope. She only does that with facial hair. You’re safe.”

As if to confirm my observation, Carmel leaned closer and wrapped her long neck around his shoulders.

“What she doing now?”

“It’s a boa constrictor move that camels use.”

“You’re making that up.”

“Yes, I am. I think she’s showing you affection.”

Dolittle narrowed his eyes at me. “I think I like the camel better than the owners.”

I shrugged. “Be careful. She’s loyal to us first.”

He almost smiled, and reached up a hand to rub Carmel’s nose. “You’re actually quite sweet.”

“I’m assuming you’re talking to the camel, and not me,” I said.

He gave me his sideways look accompanied with a frown. “Obviously.”

I suppressed a sigh. It didn’t bode well for me that a broccoli-regurgitating camel received more compliments than I did. My life had officially reached a new low.

Why do you care if he compliments the camel? I silently chastised myself. *Keep to the program. Survive until the court case. Then run away. There’s no room for getting caught up with the town vet.*

By the time I finished reminding myself that getting comfortable around a man was definitely *not* a good idea, Dolittle had moved to Carmel’s shoulder and was holding up the round end of the stethoscope.

“I’m not sure what a camel fetus sounds like,” he admitted, “but I’m going to assume it’s pretty similar to any other unborn mammal. We should definitely hear a heartbeat by this stage.”

“Sure. You’re the vet.”

He glanced sideways at me with a subtle hint of a smile. “I’m glad you think so.”

He set the stethoscope’s head against Carmel’s bulging belly. He moved it around, as if searching. His features relaxed, and he smiled, a brief flash of joy that caught me by surprise. “There it is.”

“What?”

“The heartbeat.” He waved at me. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Can I?”

He nodded and gestured for me to hold the round end. Then he removed the stethoscope from his ears, settling the earbuds over mine. For a second, our gazes snagged against each other. He was standing close. Way too close. But before I could get flustered or step back or do something to get out of the situation, the sound of a large heartbeat distracted me.

Tha-thump. Tha-thump.

“That’s the baby?” I whispered, my eyes widening, my own heartbeat speeding up.

Dolittle was still holding onto the stethoscope, his hands balanced on either side of my face. “It is. There’s nothing like the sound of an unborn baby’s heartbeat to remind us how marvelous life really is.”

He was right. There really wasn’t.

He was standing close enough for a hint of cinnamon to waft across my cheeks as he exhaled. His cologne swirled under my nostrils. He definitely smelled better than Luke ever had. But that was completely irrelevant.

And he’s still too close.

“Thanks for...” My arms jerked upward, knocking the stethoscope loose. “I should really... you know, deal with Duchess and her whole court case thing.”

Dolittle looked as confused as I felt, but he recovered faster. “Of course. Good luck.”

But I was already jogging away from the vet and the pregnant camel.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I tried to push the whole orchard scene out of my head while I marched toward the house. This wasn't the time to think about cute vets. Or romantic settings. Or delicious cologne, or cinnamon-scented breath, or...

You're thinking about all of those right now, I thought, interrupting the train of thought. Because this was one train I wasn't catching. In fact, I was going to avoid any trains or other modes of transportation that involved handsome men, sexy cologne, and...

"Stop!" I hissed, visualizing the train going off the rails. "Remember Luke? Focus. Focus!"

Thoughts of Luke and his twelve-days-before-Christmas breakup did the trick better than any train-related metaphors. Men were a distraction I didn't need or want right now. My life was complicated and annoying as it was. I didn't need to add to it.

What I needed was to solve my main problem.

My seven-day trip had been extended to indefinite. And that just wouldn't do. It wasn't just my job that I needed to get

back to. I could do most of the work remotely, if I needed to. Unless I got the promotion. But after that horrendous interview, it was highly unlikely. I'd be lucky to keep my job.

No, the real issue was being stuck here. On Stanton Farm. With Duchess Delilah. For months on end. My face contorted into all sorts of grimaces just contemplating my predicament.

I needed a way out of this, and fast. I wasn't going to change my ticket. First, because I'd have to pay a fee to do so. *Thanks, cheap-o airlines.*

More importantly, I'd vowed to leave at the end of seven days. I intended to keep that promise to myself, regardless of Duchess' shenanigans.

Except for one not-so-insignificant issue...

I'd blindly signed a bail agreement that tied me to my grandmother as effectively as if I was the one wearing the ankle monitor.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, storming through the middle of the geese flock. The creatures clacked, honked and snapped. Their wings fluttered in agitation. But none of them dared bite me. I'd help raise them, after all.

"You're lucky we don't eat geese for Christmas," I said, exercising my foul mood against the relatively innocent birds. It wasn't their fault I was stuck.

The largest of the geese hissed at me.

"Just kidding," I reassured the flock's leader. "I wouldn't dream of eating you, Shirley." I paused my onward march to rub the back of her head.

She clicked her beak a few times, but accepted my apology.

Why had Duchess been arrested?

My hand still resting on Shirley's head, I stood very still and gazed around the dark farmyard while I pondered the question. The picnic table had been cleared. Duchess, Esther and Mahvash had retreated to the house, no doubt conspiring on ways to keep me here longer. Or perhaps plotting a new plan to relaunch Duchess' career. Either way, I was certain I hadn't seen the last of the police station.

I needed to have a chat with Duchess. If I knew why she'd been arrested...

Dolittle hobbled into view, pausing on the path leading to the cottage. *My* cottage. He leaned against the crutches and stared up at the sky. I glanced up briefly, wondering what he was looking at apart from stars.

Shirley nudged my hand. I ignored her.

HONK!

The geese's irritated sound startled the silence. Dolittle looked in my direction and waved.

Reluctantly, I returned the wave, trying not to scowl. After all, it wasn't his fault I was stuck here. It *was* partly his fault I now had to sleep in the main house, increasing the time I'd have to spend with Duchess.

"You okay?" he called out.

"Stellar."

I turned my back to him and bumped into Carmel.

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?” Dolittle asked.

“Yup. I’m sure I’m perfectly okay.”

Bypassing Carmel, I kept my gaze on the house, determined not to look over at the cottage. I couldn’t afford to let anyone — vet or camel — soften my mood. I needed to be completely furious in order to handle my grandmother. Otherwise, she’d work some angle on me, and by the end of our conversation, I’d be nodding in agreement to whatever she told me.

“Not anymore,” I vowed. It was time for me to be the adult in the room, to hold my ground, set some boundaries, and figure out how to get the charges dropped so I could leave.

Carmel followed me into the house. I didn’t stop her. *No distractions*, I vowed.

Duchess was sitting in the library, nursing a tall cup of tea and a small biscuit. The coffee table was covered with the usual detritus of unpaid bills, wishful thinking and cake crumbs.

Carmel ambled across the room to a potted plant and began decimating the flowers.

“Why were you arrested?” I demanded.

Her right eyebrow arched upward. “Now you’re curious?”

“No.” Determined to stay angry and uncompromising, I dragged a chair noisily across the floorboards, slammed it so I was directly in front of her, and slouched. “I’m not curious. I

actually don't care. But I'm not going to be stuck here for months on end."

"You make it sound like *you're* the one with the prison sentence looming over her head," Duchess said, not at all perturbed by my foul mood or the prospect of prison.

"Truthfully, it kind of feels like that."

"I thought you loved the farm."

"I do," I snapped. "I don't like being forced to stay here, though."

"I'm under house arrest, but you don't hear me complaining."

"Because it's your fault you were arrested!" I sat on the edge of the chair and met her bemused gaze with my furious one. *Stay angry*, I reminded myself. *Don't let her win this conversation.*

"You're slouching, dear," she said and sipped at her tea.

"Yup. I am. So tell me. Why were you arrested?"

She settled deeply into her arm chair, rolling her shoulders as if preparing to do gymnastics or something else acrobatically inclined. "Since you asked, and so pleasantly, too, I'll tell you a story."

I waved a finger at her. "No. No stories. The truth. I want to hear the truth. What really happened? What did you do to get arrested?"

"I just told you, I'm going to tell you the story. Patience, my dear Mollie. It all started last Wednesday morning."

We were going to be here a while. I could tell by her voice. Her intonations. The eagerness with which she relayed every word and description.

I got up and collapsed onto the sofa, stretching out my legs. I might as well get comfortable. Not too comfortable, of course. Knowing my grandmother, she'd take what should be a two-minute summary and drag it out into a miniseries during which she would reference *Duchess of Danger* at least three times.

“In fact,” Duchess said, “the whole situation reminds me of season four, episode seven, when I was framed for murdering the Duke...”

Yup. This was going to take a while.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Duchess Delilah's Story

Finally, Mollie's going to listen to the truth, otherwise known as *my* side of the story.

I relish the moment, gazing at the scene. Flames crackle in the fireplace. Steam curls up from my teacup. Carmel the camel is standing nearby, munching on a potted begonia. It's perfect.

"Anytime," Mollie says. "Now would be great."

So much impatience. It must be a generational issue.

"Very well," I say, focusing on being magnanimous, on setting an example of long-suffering patience. "So there I was, reminding my two best friends that it was Thursday—"

"I thought you said it started on Wednesday?"

"Wednesday, Thursday. All the days blend into one."

Mollie isn't impressed.

"Yes. Now that you mention it, it was a Wednesday morning, as it always is."

“What is always on Wednesdays?” Mollie asks.

“You’ll find out soon enough, if you stop interrupting me.”

“Sure. Proceed.”

“Where was I?” I stop to sip some tea. “Oh, yes. I was telling Mahvash and Esther to shake a leg. Or a hip bone. It’s time to jump into the Charger, and hit the town.”

Not that any of us do much jumping these days. But the sentiment is still there. The heart is willing; the body, not so much.

The mists of time drift through my library, taking me back to the recent events leading to my unjust persecution. I’m a few days younger, and without an ankle monitor. The sun is shining. The morning is glorious. Not a hint of premonition that the day is about to swirl down the drain...

“Let’s go, ladies,” I announced as I entered the kitchen.

“In a minute,” Mahvash said. “I’m washing my walnuts.”

Or maybe she said she was washing her wrinkles. I wasn’t paying attention to the details.

“Can’t go. My sciatica is actin’ up,” Esther complained.

“You don’t have sciatica,” Mahvash reminded Esther as she did every Thursday. And Wednesday. And every other day.

“You know what day it is, don’t you?” I added. “You don’t want to miss Wild Wednesday at Webber’s, do you?”

Esther puckered up her lips. “Nope. But it’s the forced march afterward that I wanna miss.”

“The walk is good for you,” Mahvash said.

“And it’s tradition,” I added. “Brunch and a pleasant forest walk afterward.”

“Since when is *that* a tradition?” Mollie again interrupts my story.

The mists of time evaporate with a sad *pop*, and I’m back in the present with an ankle bracelet and an impatient audience. “Since almost forever,” I explain. “Now are you going to let me tell the story, or keep interrupting?”

“Go ahead.”

I stare at my granddaughter. I wish she weren’t so unhappy. But there’s not much I can do about that. She’s going to have to figure this one out on her own. My job is to tell her the story of how I was unfairly arrested. So I continue.

“Esther finally agrees she doesn’t have sciatica, and the three of us pile into the Charger.” I pause, relishing the memory of sitting behind the steering wheel of my 1969 Dodge Charger.

I’m suddenly reminded of season one, episode three of *Duchess of Danger*, when I win my sports car during a daring and cutthroat card game. Then my suitor for most of season one teaches me how to race it. It was the most invigorating, stimulating, exciting—

“Duchess,” Mollie interrupts my reminiscing. “Stop talking about *Duchess of Danger*, and tell me what happened.”

“Was I thinking out loud again?”

“Yup. You were.”

“It can’t be helped. It was such a marvelous episode. And Jorge Gonzalez was magnificent as—”

“I swear I’ll leave if you say another word about that episode.”

Young ones these days. They simply don’t appreciate a well-told story. I sigh, gazing at my granddaughter in disappointment. It’s not entirely her fault. But still...

“If you insist,” I say. “Where was I?”

“You were getting into the car.”

“Right. We finally convinced Esther that our usual weekly outing was a good idea, and piled into the Charger. After a hearty brunch at Webber’s, I took us along the route that goes outside town. It’s perfect for revving the engine and letting one’s hair down. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Good to know.”

“We drove to Teatime Forest. There’s a fantastic hiking trail that goes to Tea Spout Waterfalls—”

“I know.” Mollie gestures for me to hurry up.

“Heavens, so many interruptions! At this rate, I’ll never finish my story.”

“At this rate, I’m going to be stuck here forever.”

“Unlikely.” I peer over my cup at her. “Forever is far too long. We all die eventually.”

“That’s... Please continue.”

“At any rate, we reached the trailhead, and took our usual route to Tea Spout Waterfalls where we stripped down and—”

“Please stop talking.”

“Don’t you want to hear the story?”

“Can you please skip the parts where you forget that this isn’t a nudist colony?”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know. Our bodies are perfectly natural, God’s gift to us.”

“Maybe some bodies are, but no one wants to think about their grandmother being naked and swimming in a public pond.”

“No one was around to see us.”

“So no witnesses?”

I nod. Finally, she understands. “Exactly. There were no witnesses to see us arrive at the trailhead, or hike along our usual trail, or indulge in a deliciously naked swim—”

“Yuck.”

“And no one saw us return to the trailhead. No witnesses at all. It was midmorning on a Wednesday. At that time, everyone is either at school or at work or shopping or at the hair salon or—”

“I get the point. Moving along.”

“No one saw us there. So I have no one to prove that we were actually there all morning.”

“I see. What happened next?”

“As per our usual routine, we drove the outer road back. I don’t mean to shock you, but I must admit I was driving a tad bit fast.”

Mollie does the eye-rolling exercise that young people do these days. For a second, I think her eyes are going to roll completely backward and expose only her whites. But she manages to control the eyeball rolling to a bare minimum. “A *tad* fast, Duchess?”

“Perhaps more than a tad.”

“You were breaking the speed limit again, weren’t you?”

“You make that sound like a crime.”

“Because it is.”

“But the legal speed limit is so dreadfully low. Boring, really. Who thought up those numbers? And why didn’t they just add a few more on top of it? Or better yet, do away with laws about speed altogether.”

Mollie’s giving me a judgmental stare. “Statistically, the rate of accidents goes up with the speed limits. Especially when a sports car is being driven by an elderly lady who shouldn’t even have her driver’s license still. And that’s not the point. Were you arrested for speeding?”

I sigh, infusing all of the sorrow and self-pity I can muster. Which is quite a bit, since Duchess Delilah was particularly elegant with her sighs. I learned a lot from *Duchess of Danger*, particularly seasons two and three when my arch nemesis—

“You’re doing it again, Duchess,” Mollie drawls.

“No, dear. I *wasn't* arrested for speeding. That minor infraction, I could handle. I was arrested for stealing.”

“Oh, right. You stole the mayor’s prized banner—”

“*Allegedly* stole. Plus *allegedly* trespassed and *supposedly* vandalized one of the mayor’s godawful flower arrangements.”

“From the Tea & More Christmas Fair.”

“Yes. The annual disaster that this town insists on hosting.”

“It’s part of the town history, Duchess.”

“I know. I was the one to propose it. I now regret that impulse deeply. It’s dreadful. All of those tourists flocking into town every year. In a few days from now, this whole place will turn into a quaint version of Disneyland.”

“I wish.” Mollie thinks for a moment. “So why would the police chief suspect you as the vandalizing thief?”

I produce another dramatic sigh that would make the fans of *Duchess of Danger* weep with longing. “The truth is... there’s a witness.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

I spent the tail end of my childhood and all of my adolescent years under Duchess' care, so I was used to all manner of shenanigans and wild stories. But theft was a new low, even for her. And of course there was a witness. One she'd conveniently forgotten to mention.

I allowed myself a moment to gawk at Duchess, who seemed both unconcerned and unrepentant. Carmel's chomping and Duchess' tea sipping were the only sounds.

Finally, I snapped out of my shock. "So you *did* steal the banner?"

Duchess did a dramatic, soap-opera-worthy sigh as if she were about to wilt away into the arms of a handsome costar. "How you wound me."

"But you just said there was a witness!"

"Not to the actual theft. I most certainly didn't steal or damage anything apart from the speed limit. And neither did Mahvash or Esther."

"Right. You're just *accused* of stealing the banner."

“Don’t forget trespassing. And vandalism.”

“Right.” My mouth went dry. “That’s almost as bad as stealing his banner. The mayor prides himself on his arrangements.”

“I don’t know why. They’re hardly worth the vases in which they’re placed.”

“He wins a gold medal every year for those flowers.”

“There’s no accounting for taste.” Duchess shook her head. “Apparently, these so-called prized flower arrangements were in the same location as the banner. Not that any of us can confirm or deny their location, since we were never there.”

“He’s going to send you to prison and throw away the key,” I whispered.

“Nonsense. We’re entirely innocent of any crime apart from speeding and a bit of nudism. And really, since we weren’t caught for attempting to break the sound barrier or for stripping to our skin, you can’t say we *actually* committed any crime.”

I slapped a hand on my forehead and groaned. “That’s not actually how it works. Crime is... Never mind. So... trespassing, vandalism, and theft.”

“Precisely. Although they can hardly charge someone for trespassing on what is essentially public grounds. Or at least, it will be after the grand opening of the Tea & More Christmas Fair. Then they’ll be begging people to come.”

“But until that time,” I said, “it’s trespassing.”

“Not that I’d bother to go there, before, during or after hours. And I certainly wouldn’t go near that man’s ridiculous flower arrangements, his egocentric banner, or anything else of his.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“After all, I don’t want any flower pollen on my Charger’s interiors, and that banner would bring down the value of anything it touches.”

“Duchess, this isn’t a joke,” I warned. “The mayor takes that fair, his exhibits and his photo with Mrs. Williams very seriously.”

“There’s no need to lecture me. I’m quite aware of what Mayor Murphy thinks about himself.”

“No wonder you have an ankle monitor on you. He’s going to throw the book at you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you get a lifetime sentence for this.”

“Your confidence in me is touching,” Duchess drawled. “But you’re forgetting two important facts.”

“Which are?”

“I didn’t do any of it. Plus, no one is going to throw me into the penitentiary for stealing a banner or defacing a few flower arrangements. Even assuming I did it, which I didn’t. And what sort of mayor busies himself with arranging flowers, anyway?”

“Not the point. And I’m not convinced.”

“About what? My innocence, or the punishment meted out to banner thieves?”

I didn't dare answer.

Mayor Jonathan Murphy was not a forgiving man. He was, however, an avid amateur gardener. When it came to the town's annual Christmas fair, he was extremely competitive, almost to the point of obsession. He'd won at least one gold ribbon every year since I could remember. And usually more than one.

A few years ago, one of the high school students had drawn a rude face on the underside of the mayor's gold ribbon squash. That student had spent the holidays in juvenile detention, doing community work. But vandalizing an entire flower arrangement was a whole other level of criminality.

As for his banner, that was one of his prized possessions. Stealing his banner from its strategic location at the fair was nothing short of a declaration of war. Duchess didn't seem to appreciate how much trouble she was in.

“Assuming you didn't do it,” I said slowly.

“There's no need to assume. I didn't do it.”

“What did this witness see that convinced the chief to arrest you?”

She shrugged with complete indifference. “On the way back home from the forest, we drove past the fairgrounds as we always do. Esther made the mistake of waving to one of the guards. I don't know why she bothers.”

“She's being friendly.”

“We can see where that landed us. Unfortunately, her timing coincided with the approximate time of the trespassing, vandalism and theft. They naturally assumed it was us making a quick getaway. I argued that we were nowhere near the fair —”

“But you drove right past it! And Esther waved to a guard. Someone saw you there.”

“I was hoping he wasn’t paying close attention.”

“So you *lied* to the police chief?”

“Yes, and I almost got away with it.”

“Unlikely. Your car is very distinct. It’s the only one of its kind in the area, which makes you hard to miss.”

“How very true. My Charger and I are definitely memorable.”

I rolled my eyes. “Duchess, in this case, that’s not a good thing.”

“My poor Mollie.” She tittered. “Being memorable is *always* a good thing.”

“What about Esther and Mahvash? They were with you. They can testify that you didn’t enter the fairgrounds.”

“My accomplices, according to the good mayor of Teaville. But I think it’s more than that. Someone out there knows the truth about what happened on Thursday—”

“You mean Wednesday.”

“And they’re hiding it.”

“Excuse me?”

Duchess nodded, looking like a sage old woman just for a moment. “That’s right, Mollie Stanton. We are being framed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I stared at her, not realizing that my jaw had dropped until she wiggled a finger at me.

“You’re starting to drool, dear. And your shoulders are slouching terribly.”

I wiped at my mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m still recovering from shock.”

“It is shocking, isn’t it? That anyone would feel ill will against me—”

“That’s not the shocking part, Duchess.”

Duchess sniffed at her tea. “If not that, then what?”

“That you believe someone has gone through so much trouble to frame you. Why would they?”

“Since you asked—”

“I can’t believe my grandmother is a first-class thief.”

“First class is correct, but the thief part is not.”

“And that she actually believes she’s being framed. This was a waste of time.” I stood up, preparing to hide in my

temporary bedroom.

With a startled snort, Carmel jerked her head out of the flowerpot, petals and bits of soil pattering onto the floor. She blinked lazily at me, then resumed her evening snack.

Duchess set aside her teacup with a sharp *click* of porcelain. “You don’t know all of the facts.”

“Oh, please, enlighten me.”

“In recent years, I’ve had several real estate agents and neighbors approach me about selling the property.”

“The farm?”

“Yes. Our family’s farm. They give me the usual trite story that I’m getting on in years, and can’t possibly manage the farm on my own.”

“They do have a point.”

“An irrelevant one. But it’s a prime piece of real estate.”

She wasn’t wrong. Stanton Farm boasted almost twenty acres of old forest and a dozen more acres of farm land, plus a pond and stream. The place was a paradise for anyone wanting to live in the country, or develop an organic farm, or open up a bed and breakfast. All things I’d considered doing before I’d given up on those unrealistic dreams and left.

“At any rate,” Duchess continued, “a few weeks before I was framed for theft and other crimes, another agent approached me. Miss Beaver—”

“Beaver? As in Sharon of Beaver Motel?”

“The same. Miss Beaver also works as a real estate agent on the side.”

“That’s new.”

“Miss Beaver is working on behalf of a client who has a lot of interest in my property, and a big budget to match. Almost every day until I was arrested, she’d call or visit. She became progressively pushy.”

“Who’s her client?”

“She wouldn’t say, but I made a few polite inquiries and now strongly suspect that her secretive client is Mayor Murphy himself.”

“So you’re suggesting the mayor is framing you so he can buy your property? That sounds a little farfetched. Even for you.”

“Thank you, dear. However, I don’t think the mayor is framing me.”

“That’s good to know.”

“It’s Benson, our next-door neighbor. He’s been eyeing my property from the very beginning. He always drops hints — and not very subtly, I might add — that I’m getting on. That I can’t handle the farm, and that the property needs a real farmer to look after it. He’s the one who set me up.”

“What’s that got to do with Miss Beaver?”

“She married his nephew but cleverly kept her maiden name. She knows how much this place is worth, and is

probably feeding him ideas. He wants me out of the way so he has a chance at taking the farm.”

Carmel started snuffling at a vase of roses. I wondered if flowers were good for pregnant camels. I also wondered when I could get my cottage back. More than that, I wondered how much trouble I'd be in if I ripped up the bail agreement and boarded the next bus, plane or train out of here.

“Benson knows very well the girls and I go out every Wednesday morning for our brunch and hike,” Duchess continued, oblivious to my mental musings. “We take the same route there and back. We've been doing so for years. I know he knows, because he calls me every Wednesday afternoon to complain that the dust caused by my speeding makes his asthma act up. We've had the same weekly conversation for years.”

“Then maybe you should slow down when you drive past him.”

“That's not the point. Really, Mollie. You're the one with a university education. Can't you keep track of what's relevant and important, and what's not?”

“Why did I agree to fly back home?”

“Because you miss it here.”

“Not really.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes for a moment as I pondered everything she'd told me.

“The point is, if this false charge sticks, and I have to go to court, we might have to sell this place so I can pay the legal fees.”

The idea of Stanton Farm being sold off — probably to some city slicker developer who'd build condos, a shopping center and a parking lot over it — made me slightly sick. “They can't do that.”

“Do you really believe I'm a thief, Mollie?” Duchess asked in a soft, tentative tone.

I looked at her, searching for any indication that she'd crossed a line and succumbed to a life of crime. Her lips quivered ever so slightly, and her eyes glowed with an uncharacteristic fear. She wasn't that good of an actress to be able to pull off such a vulnerable expression.

“No. I don't think you're a thief.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Which is why I'm going to solve this mystery, clear your name, and get the charges dropped so I can board my plane at the end of the week. Now.” I snagged a scrap of paper and a leaky pen off of the coffee table. “Let's begin.”

“Begin what, dear?”

“With anyone who has ever wanted to buy the property. Or has a grudge against you.”

“A grudge? Imagine that.”

“Basically,” I continued, warming up to the task, “we're going to make a list of all the possible suspects who might have any reason at all to frame you for a crime as boring as stealing a mayor's banner and vandalizing his flower arrangements.”

“Grudges? A *list*? You make it sound like I have a lot of enemies.”

“Don’t you?”

Duchess sniffed disdainfully. “Of course not. I can’t imagine anyone having a grudge against me apart from that irritable old goat, Benson.”

“Really?”

We stared at each other, unblinking. My eyeballs began to ache as they dried out, but no way was I backing down.

To my surprise, Duchess surrendered with a flutter of her fake eyelashes. “Very well. I’ll tell you.” She frowned slightly. “But you’re going to need a much bigger piece of paper.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It turned out Johnny was right.

The countryside was full of roosters.

Darren dragged a pillow over his head, hoping that would muffle the noise. Not even close. Either there was an entire flock of roosters right outside his window, or a giant rooster sitting on the roof. The result was the same other way.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo.” Well before sunrise, the screechy ruckus pummeled at his eardrums like invisible jackhammers determined to break through to his brain.

Blurry-eyed, Darren fumbled to one side, patting the side table until he found his phone. Bright light lit up a small soapstone statue of a chicken that stared at him in stony condemnation. Ignoring the chicken, he checked the time.

Way too early to get up.

Groaning, he collapsed back on the bed, staring up at the shadowy ceiling.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

The thing sounded like it was in his cottage.

You mean Mollie's cottage, he corrected himself. This was her place. She gave it up so he could have privacy while he recovered from the goat and geese assault.

It had been pretty decent of her, now that he thought about it. Maybe she wasn't as bad as the three elderly women. At least Mollie seemed more or less stable, especially when it had been just the two of them in the orchard. He'd almost imagined—

“COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!”

“Would you keep it down?” Darren grumbled. He flung off the blanket and flipped on a light, convinced the bird was stalking around the cottage. Before he could think it through, he knelt down and peered under the bed. “Are you in here? This is stupid. Of course you're—”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo?”

Darren jerked upward, banging his head on the bed frame. Scowling and rubbing the bump that was certainly going to come out, he limped toward the sound of the creature. It sounded like it was behind the curtains. He ripped them aside, and stared into the beady eyes of the largest rooster he'd ever seen. It wasn't the giant bird he'd imagined sitting on the roof, but it was big.

“Go. Away,” he said, tapping the window.

The bird squawked and clicked its beak sharply against the glass.

“No, don't do that. Go find yourself a hen. Make your noise elsewhere. Go on. Shoo.” He clapped his hands.

The rooster flapped its wings and strutted along the windowsill.

Fed up, Darren wrenched open the window. “You have no business waking up decent, law-abiding folk this early in the morning. Go harass Duchess.”

Startled, the rooster leaped off of the windowsill. With a final screech, the bird glided to the ground.

“And that’s that,” Darren muttered, slamming the window closed, pulling the curtains against the predawn light and hopping back to bed. He just settled in under the warm blanket when...

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

“I have a good recipe for rooster soup, I’ll have you know,” he shouted.

There was a moment of silence. Darren held his breath. Could he really be so lucky?

A sharp peck of a beak on glass was followed by a defiant crow.

“Bloody farm animals,” he grumbled. He clicked off the light, and stared at the dark. Except it wasn’t so dark anymore. Sunrise was on its way. The rooster stopped making its horrific racket.

The countryside is supposed to be peaceful and quiet, he thought and decided not to mention any of this to Johnny. The less ammunition his brother had to tease him with, the better.

The rooster pecked at the glass a few more times, rustled its wings, and left.

“Finally.” Darren settled back to sleep, but a soft creaking noise startled him. Without moving, he peaked through slitted eyes.

The cottage door was opening.

A shaft of watery sunlight spilled across the entrance. A shadowy person crept inside, tiptoeing stealthily.

I could've sworn I locked that door, Darren mused. *Not only is the countryside not quiet, it also isn't that safe.*

The person stayed in the shadows, reaching for the chest of drawers. With great care, the thief pulled out one of the drawers and began pilfering the contents.

Darren clenched his fists. Enough was enough. The Stanton women might be certifiably insane, but they had given him their cottage to use, took care of him to the best of their ability, and fed him well. He wasn't going to lie down while some thief rummaged through their possessions.

He considered sneaking up to the thief and wrestling him into submission. But with his injured ankle, he wouldn't be that stealthy.

Instead, Darren reached over to the side table and grabbed the stone chicken. Flipping on the light, he tossed the statue at the thief and shouted, “What are you doing?”

The chicken bounced against an armchair next to the chest of drawers.

“Argh!” The thief’s arms flung upward, tossing a load of undergarments into the room.

A black lacy bra flew across the small space. It landed on Darren’s head, one cup hovering in front of his face.

Darren pushed the bra away from his eyes and stared at Mollie, dumbfounded. The weirdness of the situation reminded him of last night’s dinner around a picnic table with farm animals.

“I knew I forgot something,” Mollie gushed, her face flushed as she began collecting her garments. “My underwear and PJs. Can you imagine forgetting underwear?”

“No. Not really.”

“I guess not.” Her giggle ended in a hiccup. “Sorry. May I?” She pointed at his head.

Darren’s fingers tightened on a lacy edge before he realized it. Flustered, he dropped his hands, leaving the bra where it was. “By all means.”

She tiptoed over and gingerly reached for the bra. “I’ll just...”

“Right. You should definitely...”

“Yup. Excuse me.” She whisked the bra off and dropped it on the bundle of clothes clasped to her chest. “Really sorry about that.”

Darren waited for her to leave, trying not to look at the bra. But she stood there, awkward and confused, chewing on her lower lip.

His gaze drifted to her lips before he caught himself. Frowning, he mentally grasped for something to say. He normally despised small talk. But this situation definitely called for a verbal intervention, or he'd never be able to look at her without imagining her bra on his head.

“So... Does that rooster always perch outside this window?” he asked.

“Yup.” Mollie nodded a few times. “Every morning.”

“Great.”

“Sure is. Did he wake you up?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry about that.” She cleared her throat. “And your ankle. How's it feeling, by the way?”

“It's not worse than yesterday.”

“The optimist, I see.”

“Well, it's not.”

“I suppose that's positive, then.”

“If you say so.”

Silence returned. Darren couldn't think of any other topic for small talk apart from the weather. Discussing the weather was the lowest form of small talk, and he wasn't going down there. Besides, the lacy black bra kept distracting him.

Mollie stood nearby, hugging her pile of clothes. Her eyes twitched to the side, as if she were judging the distance to the door so she could make her getaway.

“I guess I should be going,” she said. “Before this becomes any more awkward.”

“Speaking of clothes,” he said and winced.

“Were we?”

“No. I think I was having a conversation in my head.” He almost added he’d been thinking about her bra, but that sounded very wrong even to himself.

“I understand those.”

“Do you?” Darren hurried on before she could elaborate. “I need to get my clothes from the motel.”

She looked him over, smirking. “It’s not like you’re naked.”

Darren was again struck speechless, a situation that seemed increasingly common around the Stanton women.

“Did I just say that?” Mollie hung her head. “Sorry. It happens every time.”

“What happens?” Darren asked tentatively, unsure if he really wanted to know.

“Inappropriate humor. This place...” She indicated the cottage, or maybe the entire town. “Being here. With Duchess and the other witches. It’s like a virus. Or a curse. Do you believe in curses?”

Darren rubbed at his jaw while picking through his scattered thoughts for an even slightly appropriate response.

“No. When you say virus—”

“It’s contagious. Be careful. You should definitely get out of here as soon as possible.”

“I intend to.”

Mollie studied the pile of underwear and PJs in her arms, while Darren forced his gaze to the ceiling, in the opposite direction of that black lacy bra.

“I can take you to Beaver’s this morning,” Mollie offered.

“Great. Thank you. It’s a date.” He grimaced. Being woken by a rooster had really left him out of kilter. “I mean, not a... You know.”

Mollie backed away slowly. “It’s an appointment. To get your clothes.”

“Perfect. An appointment.”

“And you say I’m the crazy one,” Mollie said, grinning as she scooted out of the cottage. The door slammed behind her.

Darren fell back on the bed. “It’s a date?”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo.”

Darren clutched a pillow over his face, wondering if it was possible to smother himself back to sleep, and if curses really existed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” I asked for the second or maybe third time. “If you really have a concussion, shouldn’t you be in bed? The doctor recommended three days at least.”

Dolittle sighed. I noticed he did that a lot. Was it a reaction to me, my family in general, the town, or was he always so wistful?

“I’d like to have a fresh change of clothes,” he finally spoke, his words measured and precise. “It’s a good way to start the day.”

“Every day?”

He said nothing, just stared straight ahead. He was probably counting backward from ten, or whatever tools his therapist had given him. Or maybe he was one of those rare types of people who didn’t need a therapist.

Weirdo.

Darren pulled out a pack of cinnamon-flavored chewing gum. He offered me a piece.

“Clean clothes are so overrated,” I babbled around the gum as I steered Daisy sharply around a corner. “Remember that time when we all lived in our pajamas for days on end?”

“I’d rather not.”

“My personal record was a whole week. Same PJs, day and night. I don’t think I even showered.”

Dolittle’s next sigh was louder. My suspicion felt confirmed. I couldn’t believe anyone sighed this much normally. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned my personal record in the hygiene department, or lack thereof. Some details should never be shared.

“Is Beaver Motel as bad as you say?” he finally asked.

“Even worse.” Daisy’s front passenger tire rolled onto the sidewalk, and I jerked the steering to stay on the road. “Sharon Beaver makes Miss Myrtle look practically benign.”

“What has that to do with the motel?”

“Everything. Trust me, you need new accommodation.”

“And a change of clothes. I think I have camel saliva on my shirt.”

“It’s camel something, that’s for sure. I’d offer to lend you a clean shirt, but we definitely don’t have anything in your size. Or style.”

“And I’m all about style,” he mused.

“Oh, look, you have a sense of humor. So you’re not a stick-in-the-mud after all.”

“Who said I’m a stick-in-the-mud?”

“Nobody.” I revved the engine, and the truck hurtled toward a four-way intersection.

One of the great things about old Daisy was that her engine was loud enough to drown out conversation at any speed over forty kilometers an hour. I pushed us to fifty. The truck’s frame shuddered with the effort, smothering any risk that Dolittle might attempt to pursue the topic.

“And we’re here.” I veered into the Beaver’s parking lot and pumped the brakes a little too enthusiastically.

Daisy jolted to a convulsing halt. Dolittle snapped forward, the tattered seatbelt only catching him after his head was halfway to the windscreen.

“Oops.”

“I thought you said you could drive this... relic,” he gritted out, giving me his narrow-eyed side glance.

“I can, and I did. You’re welcome. It’s not my fault the seatbelts don’t work very well.”

Another long-suffering sigh.

Dolittle wrestled with the door handle, then hopped out. I hurried around the truck to make sure he didn’t trip over his crutches. I didn’t want to be known as the woman who killed the town vet. The Stanton Farm had a bad enough reputation as it was without me adding to it.

“I think I need a painkiller,” Dolittle said, sagging against the door and rubbing his forehead. “This truck is killing me.”

“I don’t tend to carry them around. Painkillers, not killer trucks.”

He pushed his medical bag into my arms, his eyes squeezed shut.

“But you do,” I said. “How very prepared of you.”

“One never knows when one might encounter an animal in need of assistance.”

“Indeed, one doesn’t know, does one? And why are we speaking in third person? Never mind.” I opened the bag and rummaged around inside. “What am I looking for?”

“Yellow pills in a plastic bottle.”

I found two bottles that fit the description. One contained pills the size of elephant tranquilizers. Another had more appropriately sized pills that could actually fit down a human’s throat. I popped the lid off of the second bottle. “One lump or two?”

“Two.” He snagged them off of my hand and swallowed them dry. He then eased onto his crutches and started limping toward the motel. “How are you handling being back home?”

“Let’s see.” I paused to consider the question. “I haven’t murdered anyone yet. So that’s a positive development. Which makes it sound like I have done so in the past. Maybe we should just skip that question altogether, shall we?”

Dolittle paused in his painfully slow hop across the parking lot, and studied me. His blank expression suggested he was struggling to make sense of me. Like I was a three-

dimensional puzzle that had never been solved. He wasn't wrong.

"At least I didn't vandalize the mayor's flowers," I continued to babble under his bewildered gaze.

His eyes widened.

"Duchess," I explained. "The mayor'll definitely want payback for the murder of innocent flowers."

Dolittle started coughing loudly.

"Are you choking?" I demanded, thumping his back. "Just so you know, I have zero medical training."

"People go to jail for that?"

"For not being medically trained?"

"For damaging flowers."

"That makes more sense." I inhaled deeply. "It's possible. Flowers are very important to Mayor Murphy."

Dolittle's puzzled expression deepened as wrinkles colonized his entire forehead.

"Don't be fooled by this town's pleasant appearance," I continued.

Dolittle wiped at his mouth and resumed hobbling. "I see."

"Do you, though?"

"No. Would the mayor send an old woman to prison over such a trifle?"

"First off, never let my grandmother hear you call her old. Even if she is as ancient as dirt. She has a wicked right hook."

“It seems to run in the family.”

“Exactly. Second, it’s a *fancy* bunch of expensive flowers, arranged in a dramatic and beautiful way. At least, that’s what I’ve heard. I’m not interested in flowers. And did I tell you about the stolen banner?”

“She also stole his banner?”

“Allegedly.”

“It still sounds a little extreme.”

“What can I say? The Tea & More Christmas Fair is extremely competitive.”

His eyebrows quirked upward. “Competitive?”

“You heard me, Dolittle. You don’t mess with the Christmas Fair. Blood has been spilt over the tomato category. And don’t even get me started on the giant vegetable section.”

Dolittle went very quiet and still, the way a person does when they’re in the presence of the criminally insane or a rabid dog. He leaned heavily onto his crutches, as if engaged in a battle with gravity. I gave him a moment to collect himself.

He eventually cleared his throat. “You know, Mollie, in the real world... and by *real*, I mean normal... Out there, *Christmas* and *competitive* aren’t words that usually go together in the same sentence.”

“You mean like in the association game? I say a word. You tell me what you associate with it.”

“Yes. I say Christmas. You say gifts. Or charity. Or—”

“Yup, I get the point.” I grinned and nudged my shoulder against his. “But you’re not in the real world anymore, Dolittle. You’re in Teaville. *My* world. And over here, the Tea & More Christmas Fair is a really big, very competitive deal.”

He bent his head lower, as if peering through my eyes into my soul. “You’re never going to call me Dr. Little, are you?”

“Definitely not. No one else will, either. Better get used to it.”

Dolittle sighed and remained deeply silent or deeply disturbed. Possibly both. It was for the best. He needed to focus his energy on moving.

Fortunately, his room was on the ground floor. As he fiddled his key into the lock, I sensed an ominous presence. I glanced over my shoulder.

Squinting at me from across the parking lot was Miss Myrtle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Hurry up,” I whispered, lowering my head and praying the town’s most successful gossip hadn’t seen who was about to enter a motel room with the new vet.

The squeak of the door opening mingled with Dolittle’s sigh. I pushed him inside, hanging onto his elbow when his crutches threatened to trip him, and slammed the door as soon as we both crossed the threshold.

“Problem?” he asked.

“So many.” I peeked through the door’s peephole.

Miss Myrtle had shifted her rolling walker and had pushed it off the sidewalk and into the parking lot. Her face was wrinkled up like an expired apple.

“We have to be quick about this,” I said, turning around and bumping into Dolittle’s chest. I was still hanging onto his arm.

I tilted my head back. He had the usual bewildered expression that I seemed to inspire in him, but it quickly morphed into bemusement and something else I didn’t dare try to define.

I slowly released his arm. “I didn’t want you tripping.”

“How very thoughtful,” he murmured.

“Yup. That’s me. Miss Thoughtful.”

“You say that like you don’t believe it.”

I didn’t respond, caught in the intensity of his gaze. A few seconds passed before I snapped out of whatever trance this was.

“Mollie,” Dolittle said, his hand brushing against mine.

With a strained giggle, I sidestepped him. “Okay, then. Shall we pack?”

Inhaling deeply, I surveyed the room. I expected to see an explosion of clothes across every surface, with more spewing out of a suitcase. That was what happened when I traveled, so I assumed it was normal operating procedure for any traveler.

But the motel room looked completely untenanted. As if no one had been inside since maid service.

“Are you sure we have the right room?” I asked.

“Yes.” He studied the key in his hand. “Unless this works for multiple doors, in which case I definitely need to move out.”

It was my turn to keep quiet.

Dolittle sat on the edge of the bed, and stretched his leg out straight, wincing.

“Still hurts?”

“It’s only been a day.” He pointed at the chest of drawers under the TV screen. “Most of my clothes are in there. The books are in the bottom drawer. And my suits are hanging up in the closet.”

“So let’s be clear. I’m not a moving agency. Nor am I the maid service.” I smiled at his bewilderment. It was endearing. “I know you’re injured, concussed, confused, and whatever else. But you’re going to have to help.”

“Are you Stanton women always so difficult?”

“I think you mean *empowered*.”

He slid to the floor, pulled out the bottom drawer, and leaned against the bed. “More like pushy.”

“You say pushy. I say empowered. Let’s go with empowered.”

“That’s exactly what a pushy person would say.”

“You’re welcome to stay here for the night.”

“I appreciate empowered women.”

“That’s what I thought.”

We worked in silence for a few minutes. I dragged out both suitcases, tossed them onto the bed, then began stuffing shirts and pants into one of the suitcases. “I’m not hearing you work,” I said, glancing at him.

Dolittle was staring at me, slack-jawed. “What’re you doing?”

“Packing.” I held up a shirt and waved it at him. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re desecrating my clothes.”

“How do you pack?”

Dolittle gestured with a two-finger wave for me to come closer. I sat next to him on the floor and handed a dress shirt to him.

“Watch and learn.” With military precision, Dolittle folded the sleeves of the shirt along tight lines. Then carefully, as if making a sushi roll, he rolled up the shirt. “This way, there’s less creasing when I unpack it.”

“This way, we’ll be here all day.”

His mouth curved up at one corner.

“You know the farm’s only ten minutes away,” I added, studying his lips’ upturned corner. “Ten minutes. Not ten hours. I don’t think your clothes are going to crease that badly in ten minutes.”

“I don’t want them creased at all.”

“Why?”

“Because if they’re creased, I have to iron them.”

“I see the issue, and the solution. Don’t iron your clothes. I don’t.”

“Never?”

“Never, ever.”

We stared into each other’s eyes, amazed by the other’s inability to function effectively in the world. At least, that’s what I was thinking, along with how gorgeous his eyelashes

were. I just assumed he had similar thoughts minus the eyelash-related one, because he had on his puzzle-solving expression.

Suddenly, his mouth twitched upward into a brief smile, a radiant, shockingly bright smile that left me momentarily stunned. He bumped his shoulder against mine, then didn't move away. "You got me there."

"Where?"

"Of course you iron, Mollie. *Everyone* irons."

"Nope. Not really. Not me."

"Maybe you don't iron your sheets—"

"You iron your sheets?"

"And my dish towels."

"You know what that's called, Dolittle?"

"Ironing."

"No. That's called obsessive-compulsive. It's a disorder."

"You say disorder. I say..." He paused. "Order?"

"Spelled O-C-D."

"Now you try."

Snorting in disbelief, I took the next shirt and laid it out like he'd shown me, then folded over the sleeves. "This doesn't look right." I started the sushi roll anyway.

Dolittle chuckled and placed his hands over mine. "Like this. Take your time. It's quite meditative, really." He finished the roll.

But I wasn't paying attention to the shirt anymore. His warm hands engulfed mine. I glanced sideways at him, catching his eye. My pulse quickened.

This is a bad idea, I reminded myself. I'm not sticking around, and I'm not getting involved.

My hands didn't agree because they didn't pull free. The treacherous extremities were happy to stay in his grip all day.

"Thanks for helping, Mollie," Dolittle said, his voice low, pensive.

"Sure. Of course." Flustered, and feeling the heat surge into my cheeks, I quickly stood up and grabbed the two neatly rolled shirts. Turning my back to him, I carefully placed them in the suitcase. "I actually need your help with something. You see, I believe my grandmother—"

Dolittle giggled.

In disbelief, I turned around. He had a hand over his mouth, and looked as shocked as I felt.

"Are you okay?" I asked, sliding down next to him again.

"Something's not right," he replied, frowning.

"No kidding," I muttered under my breath.

"I'm feeling a bit funny."

"Funny ha-ha? Or funny as in you're going to throw up?"

"Just funny." He lifted up his arms, then let them flop onto his lap. He then leaned precariously close to me, his cinnamon-scented breath tickling my nose. "Can I tell you a secret?"

“Only if it doesn’t involve body parts buried in the backyard, or hidden in deep freezers.”

“Why...” Dolittle rubbed at the confusion lining his forehead.

“Never mind.”

He blinked lazily as he looked at me. His eyes were unfocused. He wiggled his fingers, then tapped my nose. “You’re an intriguing woman. In a weird way that I can’t really... figure out... But...”

I shifted away from him. “What’s going on?”

“Why? What did I just say?”

“Something that you’ll probably consider inappropriate later.” My gaze alighted on the medical bag. “What’s in the pills I gave you?”

“Painkillers. Anti-inflammatory.”

“The smaller versions of the horse pills are just painkillers, then?”

“What smaller version?” His head flopped against my shoulder. “I think we’re gonna be best friends,” he said drunkenly.

“Oh, boy.”

“I feel like dancing. You feel like dancing? Let’s go dancing.” He struggled upward, using the bed as support. His injured ankle totally forgotten, he staggered toward the door.

I leaped up, wondering if I should try to tackle him. “That’s a really bad idea, Dr. Little,” I said, panicking so badly

that I even used his correct name.

“It’s a quaint idea.”

“I think I gave you the wrong pills,” I admitted. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I did. Because you shouldn’t be acting like this.”

“I think it’s marvelous.” Dolittle flung open the door and stood there, hands on hips, chin lifted proudly.

I lunged forward and grabbed him by the waist, tugging him away from the door before anyone saw what would certainly become the Christmas scandal of the decade.

Despite his intoxicated state, Dolittle was still a lot stronger than I’d ever be. In fact, everywhere I touched was corded muscle. I tried not to dwell on that too much. I’d drugged the vet. Innocently, of course. But still, I was responsible for his current behavior, and I wasn’t about to ogle the poor guy.

Dolittle grabbed me in his arms and stared intensely at me. “Has anyone told you what beautiful eyes you have?”

“This is so awkward. And so, so inappropriate.”

“Beautiful eyes.”

I planted both feet against the doorjamb. Using brute force and leverage, I swiveled the vet so that he was facing inside the room.

“Miss Stanton!” Miss Myrtle shouted.

I inadvertently glanced in the direction of the outraged voice. Miss Myrtle was halfway across the parking lot,

gawking at the sight of Duchess Delilah's granddaughter manhandling the town's new vet into a motel room.

"Fine morning, isn't it?" I called back and gave Dolittle an extra-enthusiastic push using more force than necessary.

Dolittle and I crashed onto the bed. Springs bounced beneath us in a squeaky chorus.

I wriggled out of Dolittle's embrace, slid to the edge of the bed, and kicked the door shut in Miss Myrtle's astonished face.

I then rolled Dolittle over, almost hyperventilating. Vandalizing flowers was one thing. But murder? What if I'd poisoned the vet? And did I have enough time to hide the body before Miss Myrtle called all the neighbors?

I checked for a pulse. It was there. A bit sludgy. But beating. I placed my hand on his chest and felt gentle movement. He was breathing. Heart and lungs were all working. He was alive!

I collapsed next to him, tension exhaling out of me. I tried not to imagine how he was going to react to the incident when he was sober.

Of course, the minute I tried not to dwell on it, all sorts of horrid possibilities popped into my mind. Some of them involved another trip to the police station. If he'd had any doubts about the sanity of the Stanton family, those were all laid to rest now. He'd probably assume I'd drugged him intentionally.

“You’re not in a coma, are you?” I grabbed his shoulders and shook them. When that didn’t get a response, I patted his cheeks. “Hey. Dolittle. Are you okay? You look okay. Actually, you look great.” I grimaced. “You didn’t hear that, right?”

His breathing deepened.

Desperation took hold of me, and I slapped his face. “Wake up!”

“Ouch,” he moaned, holding up an arm. “Think I twisted my wrist.”

“I think we twisted more than that.”

“Brilliant,” he mumbled, grabbing my hand as he fell asleep.

I lifted our clasped hands, then let them fall to the bed. “Yup. Really brilliant.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

For the second day in a row, Darren woke up with a sense that the world wasn't quite the way it was supposed to be. He also woke up to the jarring notes of a rooster crowing its lungs out immediately next to his window.

“Go away,” he grumbled, tugging the pillow over his head, wincing at the pain in one of his wrists.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” The cacophony pierced through glass, pillow stuffing and his eardrums to rattle around inside his aching head.

And his head felt very, *very* heavy.

He tried to piece together what had happened since arriving in Teaville. Day 1: he was attacked by a goat. Geese were also involved, along with a minor concussion and a twisted ankle.

Day 2: Mollie had offered to help him collect his clothes. One minute, he was folding socks and meticulously placing them in tidy, color-coded rows into his suitcase; the next...

“She drugged me!”

Darren's outrage faded as he considered the series of events that had led to the inadvertent drugging. He didn't blame Mollie for mixing up the medicines. He should've administered the pills himself. Better yet, maybe he should've followed the doctor's advice and stayed in bed.

Worse than the innocent mix-up with the medicines was the presence of Miss Myrtle. He had a vague memory of her watching the whole sorry affair. How he'd stood in front of his motel room, acting intoxicated and ridiculous. Mollie had wrestled him to the bed, no doubt trying to save them both the humiliation his behavior would cause.

What had Miss Myrtle imagined was going on? Worse still, who had she told?

Two days in his new home, and he'd already messed up both his reputation and Mollie's. He'd be surprised if she ever spoke with him again.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

Gritting his teeth, Darren tugged the pillow off of his face and flung it at the window. The curtains were still open. The pillow bounced against glass with a soft *pfft*, then flopped to the floor.

The rooster perched on the windowsill and peered at him, challenging him to come out and make it be quiet. It pecked at the glass a few times, in case there was any confusion.

“I swear, bird,” he threatened. “If I weren't a vegetarian...”

But even the thought of eating a rooster as annoying as this one curdled his gut. He left the threat unspoken. Maybe it was better that way.

They don't understand you, he reminded himself. But the way that rooster was staring at him almost made him reassess his decision to live a no-meat lifestyle.

His cell phone rang.

Still glaring at the rooster, Darren fumbled for his phone. “What.”

“Oh, good, you're awake,” Dr. Blanchard's voice chimed into his tender head. “And you're a morning person as well.”

Darren straightened up, combing fingers through his hair even though it was a voice-only call. “I'm definitely awake.”

“How's the concussion and ankle?”

“Fine.” Darren ended the staring contest with the rooster. The bird crowed in victory. “How did you know—”

“Duchess Delilah's video is making the rounds.”

“What video?”

“It's called...” There was a shuffling noise. “Here it is. It's called *Lady and the Vet*.”

Darren closed his eyes. “Ah.”

“The one she filmed while you were getting chased by the goat and geese combo. And was there a camel involved?” Dr. Blanchard chuckled. “It's a funny episode. It has a lot of views on LiveLyfe. It's... What do the young folks say? Oh, yes. It's *viral*.”

Darren pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting with a drug- and concussion-induced nausea compounded by a growing sense of pending humiliation. “Is it, now?”

“Everyone in town’s seen it. You’re famous, Dolittle. Or is it infamous? Oh, and one more thing. Just between you and me, you want to be careful with Miss Myrtle. Her phone tree is almost as popular around here as LiveLyfe.”

“That’s not exactly how I wanted to start my new life.”

“Good news is no one’ll have any problem recognizing you around here.”

“For the wrong reasons.” The pounding in Darren’s head intensified. “I feel like I’ve been drugged.”

“A normal symptom with concussion.”

“No, I—”

“Benson just called. One of his cows has udder problems. A blocked teat. Probably mastitis. I figure you can handle this one on your own, even with your current limitations. And it’s just around the corner from the Stanton Farm.”

“Brilliant.”

“It is, isn’t it? I’ll text you the details. Try not to get into any trouble today.” Dr. Blanchard hung up in the middle of a guffaw.

Darren gingerly lay back down and watched the rooster strut back and forth on the windowsill like it was on guard duty. “Come to the countryside. It’s quiet and peaceful here.

Ha! What they don't tell you is that you can never sleep in. And the humans are crazier than the animals. Brilliant idea."

He pulled up the FASTr app. His ankle was still not in good enough condition to drive, nor did he think he should try with the hangover smacking his brains around. Walking was out of the question.

He also didn't want to rely on Mollie. Not that it wasn't pleasant spending time with her. It definitely was. But her driving scared him even more than her unwillingness to iron her own clothes. More importantly, she probably hated him by now after he had made them both the center of town gossip.

"I can make arrangements for myself," he said. "And I'm talking to myself. Not a good sign." He suppressed a yawn, wondering if he had time for a siesta. Did they do that in the countryside? Probably, because how else were they going to make up for all the sleep lost due to crowing roosters?

He requested a ride. It took several seconds longer than he was used to. The result was not promising.

No service in your area.

Darren shook the phone. "What do you mean, no service? I'm still on the same planet, aren't I?"

The pecking of a beak against the window seemed a fitting answer to his desperate question. He was on the same planet, but not in the same world. He'd left that other world the moment he boarded the plane.

"I'm going to blame you for this," he said, pointing a finger at the rooster.

He tried another ridesharing app. Maybe FASTr wasn't working in Teaville, but surely others were.

No service.

No vehicles in your area.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!

“This is ridiculous.”

The rooster battered its wings against the window.

“I'm not talking to you.” Darren rolled away from the window. “Siri, what taxi companies are in Teaville?”

There was a moment of silence. What if Siri didn't exist here? That would be the ultimate proof he'd fallen into an alternate universe.

“Searching for taxis in Teaville,” Siri finally replied. “No results for that search.”

Darren glanced at the details. There was an airport taxi company, but that was at least half an hour away outside of town. “You've got to be kidding.”

“No. I am not. Would you like me to find taxi-related jokes for you? What do you call a taxi—”

“I don't care.”

“No. The correct punchline for that joke is—”

“Stop. Please.” Darren punched his thumb against the screen multiple times. “So it's either walk, or...”

He sighed and tossed the phone on the side table. *Clunk.*

Catching a ride with Mollie wasn't the *worst* thing that could happen to him today. Assuming she didn't hate him for ruining her reputation — he wouldn't blame her if she did — and as long as he didn't accept any medicine from her...

And hoping her grandmother didn't film him in any other ridiculous confrontations with livestock... Plus, praying Miss Myrtle hadn't gossiped about him to everyone, and wouldn't find him in any other compromising situations... And fervently begging the internet gods that Duchess' video wasn't as viral as the old vet had suggested, and that not everyone had seen it...

Johnny's right. Moving to the countryside was the worst idea ever, he thought forlornly, staring out the window. The rooster blocked his view.

“Go away.”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

“I'll eat all of your hens' eggs if you don't let me sleep.”

The rooster twitched its head to the side. It must have decided that his threat was in vain, for it puffed out its chest and attempted to break the world record for loudest bird ever.

Darren tugged the blanket over his head and prayed for unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I'd hoped to finish breakfast and retreat to my greenhouse office before Dolittle made an appearance. I had a list of suspects, and I was determined to launch my investigation today. More importantly, I didn't want to relive the humiliation of yesterday.

Given how my life had turned into a train wreck in recent days, I wasn't surprised when my hopes went off track, and he hobbled out of the cottage just as I sat down at the picnic table.

"Can I do take-away?" I muttered, staring into my tea rather than risk meeting Dolittle's gaze. No doubt he was furious at the hotel incident. Who wouldn't be? I'd drugged him into oblivion, then had to haul him by his feet to the truck. I probably bumped his head on the curb.

Fumbling with his crutches, he sat next to me.

Why? I silently asked the universe. *Why do these things happen to me?*

I didn't receive a clear answer, but I was pretty sure that if I ever did, it would involve the universe hating me. I was so

caught up in my misery, I didn't notice all the morning greetings until Dolittle cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, okay?" I blurted out before he could condemn me in front of the three elderly ladies.

"What'd you do this time?" Esther asked, grinning in anticipation. "Steal anything from the fairgrounds? Runs in the family." She cackled in glee.

"I'm not a thief," Duchess declared.

"Neither am I," I said, wondering if theft was a lesser crime than drugging the vet. "Why would you assume that?"

Esther shrugged. "Like I said. Runs in the family."

Dolittle interjected with a sharp huff that sounded suspiciously like a sigh. "I need a FASTr or taxi. Are there any?"

"Here?" Esther's cackling descended into *evil witch territory* as she doubled over. Her gnarled hands gripped the table for support.

"You poor man," Mahvash murmured.

Duchess shook her head, giving everyone a disapproving look. "Why? Have you someplace to go?"

"The Benson farm," he said, glancing at Esther, who was having difficulty recovering from her laughing bout.

I reached over and smacked Esther on her back a few times — just in case she was actually choking rather than hysterically laughing — and mentally reviewed my list of

suspects. Benson was definitely on it, according to Duchess. “His farm is just around the corner,” I said, a plan forming.

“You can walk,” Esther wheezed. “Back in my day, we walked three hours to school, and another three hours back. Didn’t hear us complaining. Didn’t hurt us none, neither.”

“But you weren’t on crutches,” I said, giving Dolittle a tentative smile.

He didn’t look like he hated me for the drugging incident. Or maybe the concussion was working in my favor, and he’d forgotten about the whole thing.

A girl can always hope.

Now feeling doubly bad for hoping he had a concussion, as well as for drugging him, I said, “I’ll drive you over.”

Dolittle’s eyebrows crooked upward. “Really?”

“Oh, lookee here,” Esther said, giggling softly.

“Stop it, Esther,” Mahvash said, staring into her mug like it held the secrets of the universe. “They don’t need that kind of pressure.”

“What kind of pressure?” Dolittle asked. “The cow’s going to be okay.”

“Who you callin’ a cow?” Esther asked.

Dolittle’s mouth twitched as if he wasn’t sure if he should smile, frown, or run away. It seemed to be a common reaction from him, at least around us.

“Ignore her,” I suggested. “Esther’s going senile.”

“And proud of it,” Esther stated.

“I’ll see you in the truck,” I said and left, snagging an apple and a bagel on the way.

Dolittle must’ve figured escaping was the smart decision, because he was right behind me.

I hadn’t been exaggerating about the Benson farm being literally around the corner. Without crutches, it was a ten-minute walk.

“Now I feel silly letting you drive me,” Dolittle said as we turned into the driveway.

“Don’t worry about it. What’s *that* doing here?” I gestured to a campaign sign stuck into the ground.

“Maybe he supports Patricia Williams,” Dolittle suggested, his tone subdued.

“Waste of time,” I retorted. “Just another politician spreading her lies.”

“Do you know her?”

“I don’t have to. Now remember why we’re here.”

“To give his cow a checkup.”

“No.” I rolled my eyes at his confusion. “I mean, yes, that’s our ticket inside. But we’re really looking for evidence. Focus.”

“Ah.”

Just then, a large, grizzled man wearing faded jeans and a suspicious expression strode into view. He watched us as we

exited the truck. “You’re Blanchard’s new partner, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Dolittle said, holding out a hand. “I’m—”

“Aren’t you that vet who got chased by an old goat?”

I hid my smile.

“Saw it on LiveLyfe,” Benson continued. “Funniest darn thing I ever did see. You’re staying at the Stanton Farm, aren’t you? Just ‘round the corner. You drove here?” Benson shook his head. “Waste of fuel, that is.”

Dolittle dropped his hand when Benson didn’t take it. “The crutches slow me down.”

“Both your legs broken?”

“No. A sprained ankle. And a twisted wrist.”

Benson made a disgusted noise. “All this for a sprained ankle?”

“Surrender,” I whispered to Dolittle. “It’s easier that way.”

Shockingly, Dolittle took my advice and kept quiet.

Benson looked him up and down. “Come on, then. Most of my cows are out in the pasture, but I kept this one in a stall. Easier that way.” Without waiting for a response, he stomped toward a sun-bleached barn, grinding his boots into the ground as if he was angry with it.

Dolittle hesitated, his head tilting until he caught my gaze. He opened his mouth, then frowned, shook his head, and followed Benson.

Men. Weirdest things in all creation.

Benson led us into the barn, his strides long and determined. I had to pause until my eyes adjusted to the gloom. The air smelled of sweet hay, warm horses and manure.

Dolittle stopped next to me. He was leaning heavily on his crutches, his sprained ankle held gingerly above the ground, one hand over his nose.

“This is what Johnny meant,” Dolittle said.

I swatted at Dolittle’s arm. “You can’t plug your nose like that.”

“Then how should I do it?”

“You shouldn’t do it at all. You’re a vet. You work with animals, remember?”

“Not animals that make this much manure.”

I snickered at his pained expression. “You’ll get used to it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Breathe through your mouth.”

“Does that make it better?”

“Not really.” I tugged his arm down, then didn’t let go.

He glanced at my hand. I jerked my hand away, flushing.

Dolittle cleared his throat. “Mollie, I actually meant to ask you—”

“You two coming or what?” Benson called back.

I almost asked Dolittle what he'd meant to say. That he was going to charge me for drugging him? Sue us for allowing our dangerous livestock to attack him? Move back to the motel because that was safer than the cottage?

Before he could say anything, I hurried after Benson. The crutches clumped against the hard dirt floor, going at a much slower pace.

"He's going to manage okay?" Benson asked when I caught up with him.

I glanced back. Dolittle had a stoic expression on his face. "Sure. He'll be brilliant... I mean, great."

Benson didn't look convinced but kept quiet until he stopped in front of a stall where a nervous-looking cow stood. "There she is," he said, pointing at the cow in case we were confused. "You okay, doc?"

"Fine," Dolittle said in a strained voice.

"Good. I'll leave you to it, then. Let me know when you're done." He marched away with the same ferocity he'd entered the barn, not looking back. That was a good thing, because Dolittle was again plugging his nose.

"Stop doing that," I hissed.

"Don't they ever clean this place?"

"This is clean. There's just a few droppings here and there."

"Right."

“Let me guess,” I said, leaning against the stall door. “You didn’t have cows in your city clinic.”

“The biggest thing I had to deal with was a Labrador.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How much experience do you have with cows?”

He hesitated. “I studied them in school.”

“And?”

“I visited a farm a few times.”

“This is a disaster.”

Dolittle sagged next to me. “What am I doing here, Mollie?”

The way he said my name snagged up my ear. He sounded desperate and lost. Vulnerable, even. I tentatively laid a hand on his arm. “You can do this. I have faith in you.”

“That makes one of us.” He looked over at me and took my hand as if he was going to shake it. Instead, he held it. “Thanks.”

My skin tingled. *Remember Luke*, I reminded myself, but the thought didn’t have the same power as it used to.

Grateful the dim light hid my flushed cheeks, I smiled despite the warning voice in my head. “Anytime.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It was, in hindsight, a sweet moment. Fortunately, it quickly passed. The cow kicked at the stall door and mooed forlornly at us.

Startled, Dolittle withdrew his hand and stared at the cow. The cow stared back.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” I said, trying to verbally prod him into action by what I hoped was a more businesslike tone. I had my own agenda, and it didn’t involve standing around and holding hands with the new vet.

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to encourage me, or if you’re being ironic.”

“Both?”

“Thanks.” Dolittle seemed to have recovered from his vulnerability. His expression serious and focused, he peered into the stall. “It seems to be mastitis.”

“If you say so.”

“Look at the inflammation.”

“No, thanks.”

“Probably bacterial. I may need to give her an injectable antibiotic.”

“Do you always talk to yourself while you work?”

I received the now familiar *Dolittle frown* for my efforts at levity. I grinned. “While you handle this, I need to do... a thing.”

“What thing?”

“An important thing.”

He straightened up, his gaze fixed on me, silently interrogating me.

“Fine,” I huffed. “Duchess thinks someone is framing her for the theft and vandalism.”

“You believe her?”

I bristled at his skeptical tone. “Someone has to.”

His gaze turned thoughtful but still intense. I was tempted to turn my back on him, but before I could, he asked, “What’s your plan?”

“You deal with the cow’s masted udder.”

“Mastitis,” he corrected.

“What I said. I’m going to scout around for stolen banners and bits of flower arrangements.”

“You’re going to trespass.”

“It’s not technically trespassing if he knows we’re here, now is it?”

“It is if you go snooping around where he hasn’t invited you to snoop.”

“I prefer the term *scouting* around. I’m scouting for clues.”

Dolittle massaged his forehead, pressing the creases down. “I’m not sure I can handle this by myself.”

“He won’t even notice me.”

“I mean the cow.”

“Oh.” I looked at the cow. “She’s pretty calm.”

“For now.”

“You have two crutches, and at least one working hand. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Dolittle sighed. “Mollie...”

My breath caught in my throat at his imploring tone, stopping me before I could hurry away on my mission.

“I need your help,” he admitted. “My mobility’s limited with these crutches, and I have only one functioning foot.”

“Do you usually use your feet to give an injection?”

“No, I—” He stopped when I smirked at him. “You’re definitely in the wrong profession. You’d do well as a comedian.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I don’t get this promotion.” My words reminded me of the worst interview in the history of interviews, and I grimaced.

“You said you’d help me.”

I tossed up my arms and let them fall heavily to my side. “If I said Santa Claus was coming to town, would you believe me?”

“I trust you, so yes.”

I opened my mouth, a retort on the tip of my tongue. But I quickly squashed that tip between my teeth when I realized he was serious. Rolling my eyes, I stepped up to the stall door. “Fine. I’ll help you. But after this, we’re looking for the stolen banner.”

“We?”

I paused. “Yes. We.”

“You think Benson has it?”

I pulled the piece of paper from my pocket and shook it at his face. “Here’s the list of suspects. Everyone in the past ten years who showed any interest in purchasing our farm.”

Dolittle stared at me, his expression blank. “Your suspects are everyone who’s ever suggested they might like to buy a farm in Teaville?”

“Not just any farm. Our farm.”

The cluster of wrinkles between his eyebrow seemed to form a large question mark.

I scowled. “Don’t judge me. Focus on your job, vet, and I’ll focus on mine.”

“As you wish.” He gave me a bemused look. Maybe he was always this confused. Or maybe it was being here in Teaville with us.

All things considered, I decided it was probably our fault he was so bewildered by life.

He slid open the stall door and stepped inside. “Let’s take a closer look at my patient.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“It’s big.”

“It’s a cow.”

“I mean the pile of manure in here. He needs to clean these stalls out more often.”

I stepped into the stall after him. “Seriously? It’s not that bad.”

Dolittle handed his bag to me, rested his crutches against the wall, then pressed a hand against the cow’s back. She shuffled restlessly under his touch.

“What’s the diagnosis. Is it that mast thingy?” I asked, standing close behind him.

“Mastitis.” He leaned forward on one leg, studying the cow’s udder. He reached down and poked at the infected teat. “Yes, it’s definitely—”

And then it happened.

With an outraged snort, the cow sidestepped away from us while kicking Dolittle’s shin.

“Ouch!” he gasped. His hand slid off of the cow. He tottered forward, his arms pinwheeling. He tried to stop his fall by grabbing the closest thing he could. Me.

He latched onto my arm. My feet twisted and slid as his weight dragged me down. The next thing I knew, I was also falling. I landed on top of him, and our foreheads bumped. Too stunned to feel pain, I stared into his eyes, our noses almost touching.

“You okay?” he whispered.

I nodded. “You?”

“Nothing broken except my pride.”

“That’s good,” I murmured, gravity tugging my face closer to his.

The cow moaned, snapping me to my senses. I rolled off of him and rubbed my forehead.

Dolittle sighed, then sat up sharply, looking alarmed and disgusted as he plucked at his shirt. “Did we land in...” He groaned, unable to finish.

“It’s just some damp hay.” I tried to sound reassuring, but a snicker escaped my control.

He gave me a disapproving frown. “Do you know why it’s damp?”

“It’s a damp barn, Dolittle.” I snorted a laugh.

“This is *not* funny.”

“No,” I gasped between guffaws. “It really isn’t.”

“Then stop laughing.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right.” The barn echoed with my laughs.

“You’re a horrible woman,” Dolittle said.

“You’re almost smiling, too. Come on. Admit it. This is funny.”

His mouth curved up in a reluctant smile, and his expression softened. “Maybe a bit.” He hesitated. “This isn’t how I imagined my life as a country vet.”

“Life’s seldom how we imagine it. Which is probably a good thing, considering how bad some people’s imaginations are.”

“I suppose.” He stared at me thoughtfully in a way that made my stomach squirm. Or something squirm. Maybe there was some little creature in the hay underneath me. But whatever it was, there was a lot of squirmy feelings going on. “You’re not how I imagined you’d be.”

I sobered up. “How’d you imagine me?”

“Insane, like your grandmother. Angry, like your goat.”

“I’m nothing like my goat.”

“I see that now.” He stopped talking, his gaze tracking across my face.

Before it became too awkward or whatever it was becoming, I started to move away, then gasped in pain.

“Mollie?” He reached out and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“My ankle,” I whimpered, clutching my bent leg to my chest. “I think I twisted it.”

“Show me,” he said, his voice commanding.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Maybe just a bruise.” I tried to put pressure on my foot and stand up. Pain pierced up my leg. I squealed and collapsed against Dolittle.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me up before my head fell into a cow patty.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“Of course. I don’t want my partner in crime smelling like cow dung.”

“We haven’t committed any crime yet.”

“Let’s keep it that way, shall we?”

“No promises.”

He slowly removed his arms and gingerly prodded my ankle. “Does this hurt?”

“No. Because that’s not the ankle I twisted.”

“Right.” He prodded at my other ankle.

I gasped, and my leg jerked upward, almost kicking Dolittle’s nose. “That’s the one.”

He grabbed my leg and lowered it, his hands firm and confident. “Try not to kick my face while I inspect your ankle.”

“Try not to hurt my ankle while you’re inspecting it.”

He gently prodded and massaged. I did my best not to complain or kick his face. I succeeded in the first, but almost failed in the second.

“It’s confirmed,” he murmured. “You’ve definitely twisted your ankle.”

“How am I supposed to find the banner thief now?”

He reached for his crutches. “Good thing I have two of them.”

“Great,” I groaned. “Just great.”

“Let’s finish with the cow,” Dolittle said, “then I’ll help you.”

“As long as you don’t call me a cow.”

“Why would I...” He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “My bag, please.”

Sniggering, I slid his bag over. Despite his injured wrist and ankle, he administered the injection quickly. The cow hardly reacted apart from swishing her tail in his face.

“Are we done here?” I asked, peering over the stall door. “I have a thief to find.”

“We’re done.” Dolittle handed me a crutch, then hopped out of the stall after me. “Are you sure—”

“Absolutely. I plan to catch my flight. And the only way I can do that is by catching the real thief.” I took a few steps with the crutch pressed into my armpit. “How do people manage with these things?”

“With great difficulty,” Dolittle said, gripping my arm when I started to wobble.

“Thanks.”

“We must look ridiculous.”

“Speak for yourself,” I huffed. “I never look ridiculous.”

“Really?”

“Except when I’ve twisted my ankle. Who cares what we look like? As long as we can walk.”

“You have a point,” Dolittle said.

“Bet you hated to admit it.”

He looked over at me. “Not really.”

I hurried forward as fast as my crutch would allow rather than consider what he meant. I led the way as we searched the entire barn. Every stall and hay stack. Despite Dolittle’s initial reluctance to engage in anything that might hint at trespassing, he didn’t balk at the task.

Eventually, I had to admit the truth. No banner. No entrails of flowers. Nothing.

“Unbelievable.” I knocked my crutch against an innocent bale of hay in irritation. The hay caught at the tip, and I almost fell over.

Dolittle caught me in his free arm. We almost fell over together again, but he straightened up, pulling me close.

“That does it, then,” I said, debating how I could gracefully extract myself from his arm, or if I should.

“We go home?” Dolittle asked.

“We go to his house.”

“That sounds like breaking and entering.”

“Who says anything about breaking? I bet his front door is unlocked.”

Dolittle’s full lips flattened out into a disapproving line. “That’s still considered breaking and entering.”

“Maybe in the city. Here, it’s considered a neighborly visit.”

His arm tensed around my waist. “Mollie...”

“You done?” Benson bellowed from the other end of the barn.

“Yes, sir,” Dolittle said, pulling away from me.

“You don’t have to sound so enthusiastic,” I muttered.

Benson strode toward us, a chicken under one arm. “She okay, then?”

“I am,” I said. “Thanks for asking.”

“The cow’ll be fine,” Dolittle added.

Benson glanced between the two of us. If he noticed anything odd, he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he stroked the chicken. “Can I pay in installments?”

“Is that what you did with Dr. Blanchard?” Dolittle asked.

“Yup.”

“Then I suppose it’s acceptable.”

“Good. Here you go.” Benson thrust the chicken at Dolittle. “I’ll have the rest for you next week.”

“But...” Dolittle gawked at the ball of feathers in his arms. “You can’t pay me in chickens.”

“Course not. Just the first installment.”

“What am I going to do with a hen?”

“Whatever you want.” Benson paused. “She lays eggs.”

“I don’t want eggs.”

“Then eat her.”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“Then eat vegetables while you eat the chicken.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Her name’s Speckles,” Benson said as he strode away from us.

Dolittle made a choking sound. “You named her?”

I snickered. “Welcome to the country, Dolittle.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I knew we were in trouble the moment Duchess marched into the kitchen, a dangerously steely glint in her eyes.

I was already up to my neck trying to prove her innocence and keep my job. Dolittle didn't have another client scheduled yet, so I had to wait until I could snoop around another suspect's barn. The last thing I needed was Duchess dragging us into a new disaster.

Duchess set down her camera, shoved Speckles the chicken off of a chair, and exclaimed, "I know what we need to do."

"Enjoy our midmorning tea?" I suggested.

"Make some decent coffee," Dolittle said, eyeing his cup.

"That's tea, not coffee," I said.

"That explains the taste."

"What's wrong with tea?" Mahvash asked, her finally plucked eyebrows arching high as she joined us at the kitchen table.

Dolittle glanced at me, that slightly confused and endearing frown combining with an unspoken question. I gave an imperceptible shake of my head, hoping he had enough smarts to recognize that this was definitely not an argument he could win.

“Nothing at all,” he replied, nodding at Mahvash.

Speckles squawked beneath the table. Dolittle sighed.

“I said, I know what we need to do,” Duchess repeated, raising her voice.

“Heard you the first time,” Esther grumbled. “We’re old, not deaf, you know.”

“Sometimes, I wish we were,” Mahvash said.

Duchess slapped both of her hands on the table, making the teacups and Dolittle rattle. “We need a TV-worthy idea to upload to my LiveLyfe channel. That means I’m open to any and all ideas, ladies.”

“Does that mean I’m exempt?” Dolittle asked, already sliding his chair back.

“Did I say you were exempt?” Duchess demanded. “My reality TV show—”

“We got enough reality here,” Esther said.

“It needs more...” Duchess rubbed her fingers together and gazed at a distant horizon invisible to all save her, “*pizzazz*. As entertaining as Dolittle’s escapade with Lady was —”

“There was *nothing* entertaining about it,” Dolittle stated in a flat tone, staring at Speckles. The chicken had clambered onto his lap.

“LiveLyfe stats say otherwise,” Duchess retorted. “And those numbers never lie. My video was trending for a while, but now—”

“You didn’t ask for permission to share that video of me,” Dolittle said, his eyes narrowed.

“Duchess prefers to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission,” I explained.

“I never beg.” Duchess held up her phone and stared at the screen forlornly. “Sadly, views and shares have decreased, and my ratings have fallen off of the Top Ten List. We need something more enduring, a longer-term project that will capture the attention of the ignorant, entertainment-addicted masses.”

“Wow,” I said. “It’s great to see how much respect you have for your audience.”

“They don’t need respect. They need entertainment,” Duchess said. “Which means *I* need ideas, ladies. Now. It’s a matter of national urgency.”

“Cooking shows are always popular,” Dolittle said.

Everyone stared at him, probably wondering the same thing I was. Where was the punchline to his joke?

But the man didn’t deliver any punchline. He was deadly serious. I swallowed hard, then started choking, a mixture of green tea and disbelief spluttering out of my nostrils.

“Oh, dear,” Mahvash murmured.

“Cooking?” Duchess stood up as straight as an enraged senior citizen could. “Are you suggesting that I center my show around *me* in the kitchen, *cooking*?”

Dolittle again looked at me for assistance. There was no saving him from this one. I shook my head, and waited for the inevitable lecture.

“I suppose, young man, that you’re making the suggestion because that’s what women do? Is cooking the sum of their ambitions?”

Dolittle drummed his fingers on the table as he considered his options. “Not at all,” he finally said in an admirably cool voice. “Men have cooking shows.”

“Oh. *Men* have cooking shows.” Duchess leaned her fists on the table. “Therefore, cooking shows are now acceptable, are they? Because *men* have them?”

“You really can’t win this one,” I said softly.

“I got an idea,” Esther said. She smacked her gums and held up her dentures like a flag.

“One issue at a time,” Duchess said. “And currently, the issue at hand is a man who clearly doesn’t understand his position in this household.”

“It’s a good idea,” Esther persisted.

“Really, Esther,” Duchess said, turning her irritation away from Dolittle, but only for a moment. “It can wait.”

“Been thinkin’ about it all day,” Esther said.

“We’re not documenting how to look after your dentures,” Duchess snapped.

“That’s yesterday’s idea. I got it all figured out.” She snapped her dentures into her mouth. “Let’s enter the Tea & More Christmas Fair’s beauty pageant. Give ‘em a run for their money.”

“No running,” Mahvash said, rubbing her hips. “My joints can’t handle it. Low-impact activities only.”

“Not talking ‘bout your knees and hips, and all your other aches and pains,” Esther grumbled. “I’m talking about the pageant. We enter the team category.”

“You mean *teen* category,” I corrected her.

But Esther wasn’t listening. “We can use our high school nickname. The Three Witches—”

“The Three Musketeers,” Duchess said.

“I’m pretty sure we were called the witches,” Mahvash said.

“Yup, what I remember, too,” Esther continued. “The Three Witches enter the pageant. Run for Christmas Queen. Or King. Or whatever people run for in those pageants.”

Duchess tapped a finger against her lips. “You know, that’s actually not the worst idea ever.”

“It’s *absolutely* the worst idea ever,” I said.

“Worse than a reality TV show about dentures?” Duchess asked.

“It’s absolutely the *second* worst idea ever,” I said. “And I know something about bad ideas. As do you.” I glared at Duchess, but bit the tip of my tongue before I could say anything more. The last thing any of us needed was to dredge up skeletons or anything else related to our history.

Esther nodded enthusiastically, while Mahvash flinched and started topping up everyone’s cup. Dolittle glanced at me, caught the tail end of my glare, and became very interested in his tea, slurping it down at an alarming rate.

“Exactly.” Duchess gazed around the room. “Let’s do it.”

I wondered if I was the only one without dementia. “Did we not all agree it’s the worst, or possibly second-worst, idea ever in the history of bad ideas?”

“Yes, and that’s precisely why it will work,” Duchess concluded, her lips stretching into a wicked witch smile. It didn’t bode well for any of us, and certainly not for the innocent people of Teaville who assumed beauty pageants were the domain of the young and vaguely pretty.

“That’s not how ideas work,” I exclaimed.

“Poppycock,” Duchess said, lifting up her chin. “In fact, we should enter if for no other reason than to overturn ageism.”

I slumped forward, my forehead knocking on the table. “Please let this be a nightmare.”

A warm hand gently settled on my shoulder. I glanced sideways. Dolittle rubbed my back, nodding reassuringly when

I met his gaze. The tension in my shoulders loosened. At least one person in the room understood what I was feeling.

I straightened up, immediately regretting doing so when he withdrew his hand. “You can’t enter the pageant because... you’re under house arrest!” Relief stretched across my face in a wide smile. Finally, a reason that no one, not even Duchess, could refute.

“We’ll ask for an exemption,” Duchess argued. “Or participate virtually. That’s common nowadays, isn’t it?”

“No,” I quietly wailed.

“Entering the pageant has such potential for numerous episodes,” Duchess continued. “Not to mention the possibility for scandal. Imagine the publicity!”

Dolittle sat back on his chair, a slight grimace marring his expression before he resumed his stoic look. Speckles pecked at the crumbs on his plate.

“I’ll definitely use my stage name,” Duchess said. “Duchess Delilah. What a grand entrance that’ll make.”

“Royalty never gets involved in something as sordid as pageants,” I said.

“In real life, you’re right,” Duchess said, looking far too pleased with herself. “But this isn’t reality. It’s reality TV. Alternate dimensions are perfectly acceptable.”

She had a point. I’d yet to watch a reality TV show that had any relationship to any reality I knew of. But still... This idea was rapidly degenerating from second-worst idea to the most disastrous idea ever in the history of bad ideas.

“I know what our team’s slogan will be: *We shoot straight from the hip*,” Esther suggested. “Even if we need hip replacements.”

“Not all of us,” Duchess said testily.

“Most of us,” Esther said.

Mahvash nodded. “She has a point.”

“I think the idea has some potential,” Duchess said.

“For trouble,” I ground out through gritted teeth. “No one is going to vote for you.”

“Who cares?” Duchess said. “The entertainment value alone will be worth it.”

“Worth what?” I said.

“All the shenanigans we’ll have to make up in order to maintain publicity.”

“Sounds like politics,” I said.

“A political pageant,” Duchess mused. “How marvelous.”

“No!” I shouted, standing up hard enough to send my chair crashing against the wall.

“Mollie?” Dolittle murmured, his hand brushing over mine. This time, his touch didn’t calm me.

“It’s not marvelous,” I continued, my voice raised. “It’s a dirty, rotten, mudslinging business full of lies, cheats and scandals.”

“We talking politics or pageants?” Esther asked.

“Exactly,” Duchess said, her eyes lighting up like Christmas ornaments. “The perfect ingredients for a reality TV show. We’re going to pack them in the aisles. Or the rankings. Reviews. Whatever it takes.”

“They might just vote for them, you know,” Mahvash said.

“What you mean, *them*?” Duchess frowned. “You’re all in on this.”

“I’m not,” Mahvash said with admirable conviction.

“Me, neither,” I said, with considerably less confidence.

“You can definitely count me out,” Dolittle said.

“Nonsense,” Duchess stated. “We’re entering that pageant, and we might just win it. This is going to be fantastic.”

“This is going to be an unmitigated disaster,” I said.

“Who’s voting for The Three Witches?” Esther cheered.

“We shall call our team The Three Musketeers,” Duchess said. “And our slogan will be *All for one and one for all*. It’s not original, but no one will care!”

“This is voluntary, isn’t it?” Dolittle softly asked.

Mahvash gave an uncharacteristic dismissive snort. I wondered if I could bribe the judge to speed up the court case. Or reverse the bail agreement. If Duchess was in jail, she couldn’t enter the pageant. Could she?

“We have to solve this crime,” I whispered to Dolittle. “Before...”

He nodded. “Agreed.”

“We’ll need a social media campaign manager,” Duchess said, eyeing Dolittle and me like we were fresh mince pies at a fair.

I groaned, rubbing my forehead, knowing what was coming next.

Duchess didn’t disappoint me. She placed her hands over mine and gripped them with deadly intensity. “And I know who’s going to help us win.”

“I’m really busy trying to prove your innocence, and I have another job,” I said, scrambling mentally for any possible way out of this dilemma.

It was one thing to babysit Duchess and her fellow witches when we were all bumbling around on the farm. It was a whole other level of crazy if I actually had to help her manage her entrance into a beauty pageant. No other grandparent I knew of would even consider doing such a thing, not even as a joke.

Yup. It’s official now. The universe absolutely hates me.

“In addition to LiveLyfe, I have a Twitter account,” Duchess said.

“Who’s the twit?” Esther demanded.

“Twitter, Esther,” I said. “Where people share stories in 280 characters or less.”

“That’s a lotta characters,” Esther complained. “I can barely keep track of three.”

My brain was still scrambling for a way out. In a flash, it settled on our family history, a history filled with bad ideas. Before I could think it through, I blurted out, “It costs money to enter a pageant. Do you have any financial backing for this?”

In the silence, I realized belatedly that I’d just dragged the rotting skeleton out of the family closet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Into the shocked silence my truth bomb had created, Mahvash whispered, “Did you have to bring that up?”

For a second, I regretted it. Why couldn't I keep quiet, keep my head down, and stay focused on solving the crime so I could get out of here?

But another part of me — admittedly the less rational, unforgiving part — rejected the forgive-and-forget approach. Even if dredging up skeletons and muck wasn't helpful, Duchess deserved it.

I glanced sideways at Dolittle, waiting for him to ask the obvious. He didn't, though. He sat still, only his eyes moving. They met my gaze.

Before the empathy brimming out of them could weaken me, I looked away and reminded myself to count backward from ten while breathing deeply.

Ten...

“I did apologize,” Duchess said.

“No,” I said. *Nine...* “You conceded defeat, then asked for a loan to pay back the other loan. All so that you could be back in the limelight, front of stage.”

“And it almost worked,” Duchess retorted.

“Not even close.” *Nine... No, I already said that. Eight...*

“Bah.” Esther thumped her walking stick against the table, dangerously close to Dolittle’s leg.

“Even Esther agrees with me,” Duchess said.

Six...

“No, she doesn’t,” I said. “That was her disagreeing *bah*. And I for one am glad it didn’t work. Politics is a dirty business, and politicians are nothing but crooks.”

Dolittle cast a concerned look in my direction.

Duchess sniffed derisively. “I prefer the term *entrepreneurial*.”

“Thieves. The whole lotta them,” Esther declared. “Too bad it didn’t work. I even had our party slogan all worked out.”

Dolittle eased his chair back, maybe to get away from all the crazy women at the table. He dragged a hand down his face, smoothing the confused wrinkles furrowing his forehead. I didn’t blame him in the least. Interacting with The Three Witches had that effect on most people.

“Bet you wish you weren’t here now,” I said, bitterness creeping into my voice.

Dolittle gave me a sideways glance. “I wouldn’t say that.”

My skin flushed, and I looked away before I could misinterpret his look. “Point is, politics is always a bad idea.”

“No arguments there,” Dolittle murmured softly.

“That would be a first,” I said. *Five, or is it four now?*

“So you three were running for office?” he asked, gesturing around the table.

“Not me,” Mahvash said, gesturing with a thumb at Duchess.

“We woulda ruled the roost,” Esther said, pounding a fist enthusiastically on the table. “Taken over. Launched a revolution!”

“I don’t think a town mayor is in any position to launch more than a public service campaign,” I said.

“We coulda done great things.”

Dolittle’s mouth twitched in an intriguing effort to not smile. The result was a bemused grimace.

“That’s why Mayor Murphy’s really pressing charges against me,” Duchess declared in a conspiratorial tone. “Because he’s bitter I almost beat him.”

I leaned forward, my elbows digging into the table. “He’s pressing charges because you defaced his flowers and stole his banner. And you didn’t *almost* win that election. You absolutely lost. Lost! By a ridiculously huge margin!” My voice had pitched into a shout by the end, and I forgot all about counting backward from ten, or deep breathing, or anything remotely reasonable.

The mournful yet aggressive honk of a goose infiltrated the silence.

“It’s not healthy to hold grudges, dear,” Duchess finally said.

“It’s hard not to,” I said, seething, and turned to Dolittle. “Want to know why I’m holding a grudge?”

He blanched. “I’m not sure that’s a good—”

“Duchess Delilah over here couldn’t convince anyone to fund her. So she took out a loan to pay for her terribly planned election campaign. Guess what she used as collateral?”

Dolittle wore a carefully crafted neutral expression, as if fully aware he was entering a family minefield and doing his best to avoid getting blown up.

“The farm,” I whispered. “She mortgaged the farm. *My* farm. The inheritance my parents left for me...” I choked on the words but didn’t stop. “And of course she lost the election. By a landslide. No revolutions, only a debt hanging over us.”

“I’ve been paying it back,” Duchess murmured.

“And that’s why I left,” I concluded, my breath coming out in angry huffs. “Because what was I supposed to do with a mortgaged farm? I couldn’t apply for another mortgage to develop the place into...” I tugged my fingers through my hair and glared at the table.

“Into what?” Dolittle gently asked.

“Her dream—” Mahvash began.

“Nothing,” I snapped.

Duchess' chair skidded across the floor, and she strode out of the kitchen. Mahvash wordlessly followed.

Dolittle remained in his chair but sat back, retreating from my view, no doubt wishing he'd taken his tea or coffee in the cottage. His movement brought me to my senses. It was one thing to air dirty laundry among family, but a completely different story to do so in front of a guest. Even though Dolittle felt like more than a guest.

I forced a smile, stuffing my anger and pain in the pit of my stomach. "It doesn't matter anymore. That's history. Let's just not repeat it, shall we?"

Esther squinted at me. "So you don't think we should enter the beauty pageant?"

"Dear heavens, no," I said.

"We could win, you know." Esther grinned, her dentures wiggling loosely in her mouth, and left the table. "Revolution, witches! Revolution."

Dolittle gazed after Esther, his eyebrows bunched together. "She's joking, right?"

Now it was my turn to massage the deep furrows out of my forehead. "I wish she were."

A door slammed from the direction of Duchess' study. I closed my eyes, wishing I'd never boarded the plane. Had it only been a few days ago? It felt like months. Years, even.

"I gather politics is a conversation best avoided at family gatherings, then?" Dolittle asked.

“Something like that. Let’s just say I’m not a fan.”

“Noted.”

Something in his tone snagged my attention. “Why?” I demanded with more heat than I intended.

Dolittle hesitated. “No reason in particular, except I’d like to understand you better.”

“Good luck with that.” I thought of my ex-boyfriend, and his new job. Too busy to have a wife, or so he said. Being CEO wasn’t the same as running a town or a country. But he was a politician just the same. I could sniff them out as easily as Dolittle sniffed out dung in a barn.

“What was Mahvash saying about your dream?”

The dangerous question nudged me out of my angry musings. I straightened up. “Nothing.”

“It doesn’t sound like *nothing* to me.” Dolittle’s voice was carefully modulated as if he were trying to calm down a nervous client of his. The animal kind, not the human kind.

Speckles clucked in agreement. Or maybe she disagreed. It was always difficult to tell with chickens.

“It’s history now.” I stood up, making sure to scrape the chair noisily against the floor to interrupt Dolittle in case he persisted. Snatching my crutch, I turned away. “Let’s go. We have a case to solve.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

In silence, Darren tucked Speckles under his arm and followed Mollie out of the house to where Daisy was parked.

A few times he considered saying something — anything — to ease Mollie’s distress, to distract her from whatever had just happened. But each time he opened his mouth, the sight of her tightly hunched shoulders dissuaded him.

Politicians are nothing but crooks...

Darren inwardly flinched from the memory of her words. She’d spoken them in a moment of anger, but he got the sense she believed it was true. What would she think if she knew he came from a family of politicians and political activists? And since when had he started to care what she thought?

He stopped his awkward, one-crutch walk, stunned that he really did care. His chest constricted at the idea she might apply this disdain against him and all the Williamses. He wasn’t a crook, and neither was his family.

The flock of geese waddled toward him.

Not wanting a repeat of his first day on the farm, he got out of their path. “Mollie?” he called out.

If Mollie heard him, she didn't respond. Instead, she hobbled rapidly, using her crutch to swat at a tall clump of grass. "She's such a politician, through and through," she muttered. "Can't trust her as far as I can throw her, maybe even less."

Darren's eyebrows rose. Maybe now wasn't the best time to discuss his family's occupation. "Are you planning on throwing your grandmother?"

"One can always dream."

"Speaking of dreams—"

"Don't." Mollie wheeled around and brandished her crutch like a sword.

Darren jerked backward to avoid being jabbed. Unbalanced, he leaned heavily against his crutch, using it to stay upright. Speckles squawked unhappily.

"There's nothing to discuss," Mollie continued.

"It sounds like there's a lot to discuss," he said, keeping his voice soft. "Dreams are always worth discussing."

Mollie scoffed, turned around and limped toward the truck. "Not these ones. Not anymore."

He hurried after her, distracted from dreams by the sight of the truck. Should he mention that maybe neither one of them were in any condition to drive, physically or emotionally? Daisy was an old manual vehicle and needed a driver with two functioning legs to shift gears. How were they going to step on the clutch with a twisted ankle?

“It’s always the same story, and I’m fed up with it,” Mollie said. She wrenched open the door and climbed inside.

Metal slammed against metal, startling the flock of geese into a honking panic. At least the geese waddled away from him, rather than at him.

Before they could change their minds, Darren climbed into the passenger seat. He automatically snapped the seatbelt around him. Even if it was tattered and not nearly tight enough to save him from whiplash, it was better than nothing. He hoped. Speckles settled onto his lap, content to stare straight ahead. They sat in silence for a moment, each lost in thought.

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” he finally asked.

Mollie glared at the windscreen, her hands choking the steering wheel. Darren almost repeated himself, suspecting she wasn’t listening to anyone except the angry voices in her head.

“I should never have come back,” she said, using her crutch to press on the clutch.

Darren gripped the edge of his seat. “Is this a good idea?”

“Of course not. It’s a terrible idea. The Three Witches entering a beauty pageant? Second-worst idea ever.”

“I was referring to using a crutch to operate the pedals—”

“The family is already the laughingstock of Teaville, thanks to Duchess’ shenanigans over the years,” Mollie continued. “I like to think I don’t care what people think... But I kind of do, you know?”

Darren nodded, thinking back to the incident at Beaver Motel. Maybe Mollie hadn't forgiven him, then. His heart sunk.

"I'm just grateful she's under house arrest and can't get into too much trouble."

"Never underestimate a determined woman with an internet connection," Darren said and almost mentioned his mother's ambitions. But this definitely wasn't the right time to bring up all of his family baggage.

"Isn't that the truth?" Mollie muttered.

The engine roared to life, accompanied by a puff of soot, a rumble he felt through his seat, and a disturbing, metallic rattle that didn't bode well for their journey.

"Maybe we should rest our ankles," Darren suggested. "Give them a chance to heal."

Mollie squinted at him while grinding the gears into reverse. She didn't bother to look out a window or at a mirror as she revved the engine. The truck hurtled backward. More outraged geese honking ensued. Speckles fluttered her wings in a fit of panic.

"Or you could help me exonerate my grandmother so I can escape from this place," she said.

That's right, she's leaving here as soon as she can, Darren thought. He sighed. "I'm surprised you want to keep her out of prison."

Mollie slammed on the brakes right before Daisy hit a tree. She then pushed the clutch down and shoved the gear into

first. “Don’t think I haven’t thought of it.”

Darren hesitated, then tentatively reached out a hand and laid it over hers. He enjoyed how the two hands fit each other. “Why don’t we take a break from all of our snooping?”

“You mean sleuthing.”

“That, too.”

Mollie continued to stare out the windshield, the truck idling. It sounded like a rocket preparing to launch into the sky and explode. “What do you have in mind, then?”

Darren tapped his crutch onto the floor, pondering the options. “I was hoping you’d have a suggestion. I’m new in town, you know.”

Mollie’s expression softened. “Do you want to go somewhere that doesn’t involve barnyard animals and crime solving?”

Darren surprised himself by chuckling. “Something like that.”

“Was that a hint of mirth?”

“Maybe.”

“Is our stoic vet actually on the verge of laughing?”

Another brief laugh escaped him. “Don’t sound so surprised. I know how to laugh.”

“It’d be nice to have more evidence of the fact. You have a fairly pleasant laugh. And not a bad smile, either.”

“Not a bad smile, or a good smile?”

“It’s decent enough.”

“That’s a lot of compliments all at once, Miss Stanton.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Dr. Dolittle. You have to fit through barn doors, after all.”

Darren sobered up, at a loss for what to say now.

Fortunately, Mollie never seemed at a loss for words. “Where do vets usually go when they’re not being chased by goats and stepped on by cows?”

“A restaurant for lunch?” The idea popped into his head and out of his mouth before he could assess the implications.

“Is that an invitation?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

The vague sense of confusion he was starting to associate with being around Mollie settled across his brow. “Yes. It’s a date... I mean, an invitation.”

“Sounds like a date.” Mollie grinned, her humor back in full force.

“A date that isn’t a date.” Darren watched the geese graze on a patch of grass nearby, half-hoping she’d agree to it, and half terrified that she wouldn’t.

Mollie played with the stick shift. “I can live with that.”

“Assuming we survive the drive over,” Darren said, trying to lighten the mood.

Mollie gave him a smile that was both wicked and oddly alluring. “Oh, we’ll survive, Dolittle. We will survive.”

Before he could think twice about the whole date-that-wasn’t-a-date invitation, she stepped on the gas pedal. The resulting roar and squeal of tires sent the geese into a frenzy of flapping wings.

“Let’s hope so,” Darren said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

My hand still tingled where Dolittle had touched it.

Don't think too much about it, I silently warned myself even as a happy yet nervous flutter circulated in my innards. I half-hoped the flutter was caused by last night's dinner. Or maybe worms.

As the flutter expanded, I had to admit to myself that this wasn't a case of worms or indigestion. I should've been worried but wasn't.

Besides, Dolittle was nothing like Luke. Maybe Duchess had been right about my taste in men. Maybe it was time for me to look elsewhere, to avoid ambitious, CEO-wannabes, and look for more humble types.

Like a small-town vet, perhaps?

If I hadn't been driving a manual truck that needed one hand on the clutch and the other firmly affixed to the steering, I would've slapped my forehead in the hope of knocking some sense into me. But both hands were fully engaged with keeping the truck in the right gear and on the road. And besides, was it such a bad idea?

It's the Christmas holiday, I thought. Why not enjoy some seasonal cheer? I glanced sideways at Dolittle and was startled when I saw him studying my profile. “What?”

That half smile brightened his features. “You were smiling. I was just wondering—”

Ring, ring!

The jarring blare of a cell phone cut through the moment, making both of us jump. A silly, nervous twitter of a laugh escaped me.

Dolittle recovered first, answering his phone like the professional he was. “Hello, Dr. Blanchard...” He nodded and hummed. “Understood.” He tucked his phone back into his pocket. “Mollie, I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I blurted out, already knowing where this was going. Disappointment zapped the happy flutters into sour curdles. He was canceling lunch. I knew it, could see it in his expression.

“Dr. Blanchard needs me in the clinic for the afternoon. His golf game is going overtime, and Miss Myrtle’s miniature terrier has a vaccine appointment.”

I nodded, focusing on not letting my disappointment show. I should be used to it. Luke did this all the time, canceling dates and other engagements at the last minute to accommodate his job. All of his very important meetings with more important people, and eventually—

“Why don’t you join me?” Dolittle asked.

“What?”

“At the clinic. We can order in some lunch.”

My heart restarted with a slight jolt. “Really?”

“Really.”

Not like Luke after all, I thought. “That’s a relief.”

“Why?”

I grinned. “I mean, what a relief we won’t miss lunch.” Before he started getting that bewildered expression I always inspired in him, I quickly added, “Fair warning. Miss Myrtle’s dog is the craziest mutt ever. Don’t be fooled by its diminutive size.”

Dolittle leaned back in his seat, looking far too confident. “Small dogs, I can handle.”

“Where have I heard those words before? Oh, yes, when Lady—”

“It’s a dog, not a goat.”

“Clearly, you’ve never met Mr. Dickens.”

“The dog’s name is Mr. Dickens?”

I gave him a wicked smile. “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”

We reached the clinic a couple of minutes later. I was surprised to see Esther sitting behind the front desk, awake and alert. She waved us toward the examination room, looking suspiciously pleased about something.

When she winked at me and gestured at Dolittle, I pursed my lips and shook my head. She gave me two thumbs-up in response.

“Gracious,” I muttered, following Dolittle and ignoring Esther’s cackle.

As I entered the examination room, Miss Myrtle pointed at me and snapped, “What is *she* doing here?”

“Miss Stanton is assisting me,” Dolittle said, unflustered as he set Speckles onto the side counter. “As you can see, I’m on crutches.”

She sniffed derisively. “You’re on a single crutch, and so is she. How’s she going to help you?”

Dolittle shrugged into a lab coat. He then rested a hand briefly against my lower back as he stepped around me.

My back had never felt so good.

“How’s Mr. Dickens doing?” he asked, peering at the plastic carry cage on the examination table. A low, angry growl greeted him.

“My poor Mr. Dickens doesn’t like vaccines,” Miss Myrtle said. “He’s miserable, he is.”

“Can’t imagine why,” I muttered.

Dolittle did his almost-smile, his eyes sliding to one side to look at me.

“I can’t bear to watch him in pain,” Miss Myrtle moaned. “I’ll be outside in the waiting room.”

Mr. Dickens released an eerie howl.

“But we may need your—” Dolittle began.

Miss Myrtle shoved her walker through the doorway, sniffing loudly and dramatically, almost managing to look as miserable as the dog sounded.

“—help,” he finished.

I smirked.

“I guess that means you really will be helping me,” Dolittle said. “This’ll be quick, then we’ll have lunch.” He gave me a smile that sent my heart pitter-pattering in a direction that still felt dangerous, but increasingly less so.

“If you say so,” I said.

He prepared the vaccine, then reached for the carry cage.

I grabbed his wrist and didn’t let go. “Aren’t you going to wear gloves?”

“My hands are clean.”

“I’m not worried about hygiene. You need a set of leather gloves. Thick ones. Mr. Dickens is formidable.”

“You mean miniature.”

“His teeth are still sharp despite their size.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Did you learn nothing from the goat incident?” I gave his wrist a squeeze.

“Noted. But it’s just one tiny dog.”

I stepped away from the cage. “That’s not just any tiny dog. Mr. Dickens is psychotic and possibly possessed.”

“You think the dog is possessed?”

“By a demon. You might want to—”

I expected the long-suffering sigh. What I didn't expect was Dolittle snagging my hand and lifting it to his lips. I froze in awe, wonder and a touch of terror.

“I'm somewhat of an expert on dogs, especially small pooches. Even possessed ones.” Releasing my hand, Dolittle opened the cage door.

Mr. Dickens didn't waste time. With demonic speed, it lunged for freedom, lips curled back to reveal tiny fangs.

But Dolittle was faster. He snatched the dog midair and clutched it to his chest. “See? Nothing to it.”

“It's not its size you need to worry about,” I began.

The diminutive dog punctuated my sentence by opening its mouth wider than possible for a normal, non-possessed canine. It then clamped its dagger sharp fangs into Dolittle's exposed forearm.

“Mother of...” he bellowed, his arm flinging upward. His crutch flew across the room, clattering to the floor by my feet.

The dog wrapped all its legs around the arm, its teeth sinking deeper.

“I told you that dog was possessed,” I shouted, ducking as Dolittle jerked his arm up and down in a futile attempt to loosen the beast attached to him.

“I thought you were exaggerating!”

“I never exaggerate... much. Stand still.”

Dolittle yanked at Mr. Dickens' collar, but it was no use. Extracting those fangs would require at least three hands, an exorcism and possibly a crowbar.

As Dolittle battled with Mr. Dickens, I hobbled closer, holding both crutches in front of me in a cross formation. I needed to protect my face in case the dog decided to leap at me. If we were lucky, the sign of the cross would expel whatever demon possessed the freaky little mutt.

“It won't let go,” Dolittle grunted.

“I realize this is a terrible time to tell you I told you so—”

“It really is.”

“But I did!” I lowered the crutches since the whole cross thing wasn't doing anything, and Mr. Dickens had no interest in my face. “How can I help?”

He winced. “Hold it while I try to...”

Dropping the crutches, I stood immediately in front of Dolittle and grabbed the dog by its scruff and back. “Got it.”

Dolittle stuck his fingers into the dog's mouth, trying to loosen its jaw. With a growl, the dog released its death grip. Dolittle yanked his arm away.

I turned slightly, my arms rigid and straight, so that the dog's flailing limbs and slathering mouth faced away from the two of us.

“I've never seen a dog do that,” Dolittle huffed.

“He's an unusual one,” I admitted.

“Unusual?”

“Actually, the term we normally use around here is possessed. I did mention that to you, as well.”

“You did.” Dolittle rubbed at his arm, then picked up the syringe, his jaw tense, his eyes steely with determination. “Possessed is definitely accurate.”

Before the dog could wiggle out of my grip, Dolittle plunged the syringe into the wriggling creature, then pulled the carry cage closer. “On the count of three...”

“Three,” I said and thrust the dog into the cage.

Dolittle slammed the door shut.

“Is my Mr. Dickens okay in there?” Miss Myrtle called from the other side of the door, her voice frail and wobbly.

“Absolutely, perfectly healthy,” Dolittle said, then muttered, “Are all animals this unbalanced around here?”

He picked up the carry cage, opened the door, and pushed the cage with a howling dog at the startled elderly woman. He then slammed the door shut and sagged against it. Perhaps he worried that Miss Myrtle might try to open it, or that the dog would escape and come after us for demonic revenge. Both options were very real possibilities.

I started to laugh. My eyes teared up, and I wiped at them. As I did so, I glanced at a red puddle on the floor.

Why’s there a red puddle? I idly thought even as a dawning horror gripped me.

My gaze followed the trail of red splotches to Dolittle’s shoes, then up to his arm.

I shrieked.

“What?” he demanded, looking around for another unbalanced animal to wrestle.

My hand shaking, I pointed at his bitten arm. “You’re bleeding!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Dolittle raised his arm, frowning at the two sets of deep punctures. Blood bubbled out of them and dribbled down his forearm and onto the floor. “It appears I am. You’re not going to faint, are you?”

“You’re suffering from blood loss,” I gushed, “and you’re worried about me fainting?”

“I can only deal with one problem at a time.”

“Stanton women do *not* faint.” I grabbed his arm with both of my hands, as much to steady myself as to bring his arm closer for inspection. “What if Mr. Dickens has rabies? You’ll die. Or we’ll have to put you down like some dirty, stray, mangy dog.”

“Your concern for me is touching,” Dolittle said dryly. “But vets have to have rabies vaccines. I’ll survive.”

“You’re still bleeding. And those bites are infected.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Dogs lick themselves. Of course Mr. Dickens’ teeth are covered in infectious drool. Or do you have a vaccine for

that?”

“Rubbing alcohol and a gauze pad should do the trick.”

“Alcohol? That’s a terrible idea. It’ll hurt like—” I glanced up and forgot what I was going to say. I also forgot about the dog bites. His face was close. Very close. I could smell a hint of his chewing gum. Cinnamon. Very cinnamony and fresh.

“I like cinnamon,” I murmured.

“That’s interesting,” he said, his forehead furrowing with Stanton-induced bewilderment.

“I mean, we need to get this cleaned up.”

But neither of us moved. My hands still gripped his forearm. His cinnamon breath brushed over my face.

“While I don’t think I’ll get rabies or an infection,” he finally said, his half smile reappearing, “I would prefer not to give Esther more work.”

“Esther?”

“You know, cleaning up the blood from the floor.”

“Don’t worry about that. Esther never cleans up anything.”

“Ah.”

I stepped backward toward the counter, tugging him after me. “She’d probably make more of a mess if you asked her to.”

Not wanting to let go of him, I fumbled with one hand for the rubbing alcohol. Speckles hopped out of my way, then fluttered onto Dolittle’s head.

“This might be a two-handed operation,” Dolittle noted.

“Unfortunately.” Turning away from him, I reached for the alcohol, then latched onto something else. “Surgical iodine!” I announced, holding the bottle up triumphantly.

“Much better,” Dolittle said.

I snagged a clump of cotton wool and soaked it so thoroughly that reddish iodine splattered onto the floor, mingling with the blood.

“Sorry,” I said in warning and eased the saturated cotton over the two deepest fang marks. “Does that hurt?”

“You’re being very gentle. Maybe there’s hope for you in the bedside manners department after all,” Dolittle said.

“That’s the blood loss talking. Plus, you have a chicken on your head.”

“No career in health services for you, then?”

“No, thanks.”

“Then what?”

I dabbed at his arm, making sure iodine covered all the holes and scratches. “I always wanted to open up a bed and breakfast on the farm. An organic garden on the side to supply the restaurant. Free range chickens...”

Speckles squawked and glided to the floor.

“Something like that,” I ended.

“That sounds amazing, Mollie.”

“Dreams usually do. Until you wake up.”

“We’re awake now.”

“So is the bank that owns my farm’s mortgage.”

“Ah.” Dolittle pinned me with an unwavering stare.

The intensity made me squirm. I returned my attention to the vicious dog bites. “You know what... It doesn’t matter.”

“You say that a lot. But what if it does matter?”

“Dreams are nice to have, and then there’s this little thing called reality.”

“Does reality mean keeping a job you hate?”

“Sometimes. Yes.”

“Mollie.” He exhaled my name in a cinnamon-scented breath. “You can fail at something you hate just as easily as you can fail at something you love. But when you do what you enjoy, you come alive in the process. That alone is worth the risk.”

I thought about Duchess and shook my head. “I’ve seen what happens when you chase after a dream.”

“You don’t have to chase a dream to enjoy your life. Just don’t chase after a nightmare.”

“I’m not.”

He said nothing, his gaze deepening as if he saw through the flimsy surface of skin and lies.

“Going after a promotion is not a nightmare,” I argued, looking away again.

“It is if you don’t like the work. Why not work the farm like you planned? Guest cottages, restaurant—”

“I should never have told you.”

“It’s a good plan.”

“Except the bank owns the farm now.”

“That can always change.”

I glanced up at him, preparing to argue, but the words dried up. I blindly patted his arm with the iodine-soaked cotton, unable to look away.

“I think those are clean enough now,” he said, his gaze drifting from my eyes to my mouth.

“Right.” Without looking away, I reached for a box of gauze pads and knocked it over. Gauze scattered across the counter.

“Maybe I should do that,” he said.

“No. You’re too injured. I got this.” I fumbled with a pad, struggling to peel off the backing.

“I’m sure you do.”

“See?” I held up the peeled pad, then carefully placed it over the puncture wounds. “I’d make a brilliant medic.” I squeezed the gauze into place, grinning up at Dolittle.

“I can see that.” But he wasn’t looking at my patch job. His free arm encircled my waist, his head tilting down toward mine.

I leaned in, inhaling the warm zing of cinnamon.

“Mollie,” he murmured.

Bang, bang, BANG!

A heavy fist rapped sharply at the door, startling me. I started to step back.

Dolittle’s other arm wrapped around me, pulling me closer. “We could pretend we’re not here,” he whispered.

“We could.”

Another knock, this time louder. “Dr. Dolittle? Are you going to stamp Mr. Dickens’ vaccine card, doctor?” Miss Myrtle demanded.

Dolittle leaned his forehead against mine.

“She won’t leave until you do it,” I said, fervently wishing she’d leave, or that her dog would morph into its true demonic form and devour her.

“I figured.” He sighed, but this sigh had a different quality to it. Not so much a bewildered, *what do I do with this crazy Stanton woman* sigh, but another one. Wistful, longing.

“Dr. Dolittle?” Miss Myrtle said. The handle rattled as she began to open the door.

Dolittle released me, snatched up Mr. Dickens’ file, and limped out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The afternoon passed in a pleasant blur of flirtatious glances, knowing smiles, and a steady stream of small, non-possessed animals and their relatively sane humans.

I kept hoping for a quiet moment during which we could return to the examination room in private and pick up where Miss Myrtle had interrupted us.

Sadly, it was not to be. The pleasant little bell over the front door cheerfully announced each and every visitor, inconveniently interrupting me whenever I was about to sidle up to Dolittle for another hug. I didn't mind too much.

Or more truthfully, I *did* mind the constant interruptions, but it gave me a chance to better appreciate Dolittle's ability to engage with the less ferocious town residents with confidence and expertise. His experiences with Lady, the geese and Mr. Dickens aside, he was actually a good vet.

I'd just finished placing an order with the deli across the plaza when Esther bellowed, "Customer on line three."

"We don't have different telephone lines," I pointed out. "We don't even have a landline."

Esther held up the office cellphone. “Customer on line one, then.”

Dolittle chortled as he took the cell phone.

“Bets it’s Miss Myrtle again,” I whispered to Esther.

“Good afternoon, Miss Myrtle,” Dolittle said, giving me a knowing look.

“Called it,” I said.

“I understand, but I’m sure Mr. Dickens didn’t suffer from separation anxiety for the one minute he was separated from you,” Dolittle explained, his voice patient, his expression mildly exasperated. “I’ve never known of a dog to be irreparably traumatized by a brief visit to the vet...”

“That would explain a lot,” I said.

Dolittle struggled not to smile. “Yes, Miss Myrtle. I’m quite certain the vaccine will in no way interfere with his appetite... Yes... Uh huh... Rabies is a normal, routine vaccine... No, I didn’t insert any nefarious spy technology into the vaccine. You and Mr. Dickens are perfectly safe.”

I snorted a laugh as I wiped down the front desk. “You won’t convince her.”

“Crazy old bat,” Esther shouted.

“No bats here, Miss Myrtle,” Dolittle said, frowning at Esther. “Just an old cat I have to look after.”

He hung up before Esther’s cackling and my laughter raised any of Miss Myrtle’s suspicions. “The two of you, really. A bit of professionalism wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Only thing amiss around here is Mollie, who’s still a *Miss*,” Esther declared. “Get it?” She laughed so hard, she coughed up her dentures.

Dolittle carefully replaced the cell phone on the front desk and sighed.

“Seems us Stanton women still have that effect on you,” I said.

His puzzled expression was adorable. I snuggled up next to him, gripping his hand in both of mine.

“Come now, Esther,” I lectured. “Dolittle is still in recovery from growing up in the city. He’ll settle down. Eventually.” I gave him a cheeky look.

“Ain’t nothin’ slicker than a city slicker,” Esther said.

“That makes no sense,” I said.

“It does if you know what I mean.”

“Please stop talking.”

Dolittle shook his head, but at least he didn’t try to smother his smile.

“I could get used to that,” I said. “You smiling more, frowning less.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he murmured, brushing a hand down my arm.

My smile widened. Yup. I could definitely get used to this.

Lunch arrived soon after, perfectly timed to coincide with a lull in visitors. The three of us sat in the waiting room and

enjoyed pleasant conversation and decent sandwiches with a side order of flirting. Speckles sat next to us, devouring Esther's crusts.

The whole scene reminded me of sitting on the swings with Dolittle in the orchard, discussing my play castle. Even though the air was full of veterinary smells — rubbing alcohol, animal fur and medicine — the same sense of peace and tranquility from the orchard permeated the atmosphere.

Which was why I should've known it wouldn't last.

"What time are you closing up?" I asked as I stood, preparing to collect our trash.

A sharp *bing* interrupted Dolittle before he could reply. I expected him to dive for his phone the way Luke did, but he didn't shift his gaze from me.

Knowing how attached some people were to reacting instantly to any phone notifications, I decided to avoid disappointment by asking, "You don't want to answer that?"

He shrugged and picked up his phone. I waited for him to reply to the text message, but he didn't. He frowned at his phone.

"Dolittle?" I prodded.

"Hmm," he said. "Not sure."

"You don't know your own clinic's closing hours? Or you aren't sure if you want to answer the text?" I snorted a laugh while eyeing the phone with growing suspicion and concern. "Maybe you're not as slick as Esther thinks you are."

“Oh, that boy’s slick,” Esther reassured me. “So slick, you won’t even—”

“No,” I interrupted. “No. Just... no.”

Dolittle’s hand tightened around his phone. His eyes flicked back and forth as he reread the text.

“Everything okay?” I asked, wishing he’d say something. Or laugh it off. Or—

“Trust Johnny to screw up the simplest thing,” he muttered.

“Who’s Johnny?” I asked, relieved he hadn’t mentioned a woman’s name. Not that I was the jealous type, but this situation was beginning to unnerve me.

Dolittle closed his eyes and tapped his phone against his forehead.

“Phones tend to work better when you use your fingers to type a text,” I joked.

He didn’t respond.

I stepped next to his chair in the corner of the room, trying to catch a glimpse of the phone’s screen while I rubbed my hands across his shoulders. They were tense. I could feel the knots even under his muscles. “Are you—”

Dolittle convulsed at the touch, jerking the phone against his chest, almost as if he didn’t want me reading over his shoulder. “Nothing.”

My eyebrows rose. “—okay?” I finished.

Dolittle pocketed his phone, then reached up and gently directed me into the seat next to him.

Now I was really worried. Rather than sit, I moved out of reach and leaned against the wall.

“Mollie,” he began on a loud exhale. “There’s something I —”

The clinic’s front door swung open to the sound of the bell tinkling above it, and the door handle hitting the wall. “Such exciting times we live in,” Miss Myrtle announced as she marched in, Mr. Dickens strutting at her side. The small terrier snarled at us.

“You still here?” Esther demanded.

“Yes.” Miss Myrtle picked up Mr. Dickens before the dog could take a bite out of our ankles. “And you’ll thank me when I tell you the big news.”

“Now what?” I asked, giving Dolittle a shrewd look designed to make him squirm. The look was wasted on him, as his eyes were closed.

“Hello, Mollie,” Miss Myrtle simpered. “I didn’t see you there. You’ll never guess what’s happening.”

“I’m not a fan of guessing games,” I drawled.

“I am, pick me!” Esther yelled. “Earthquake. Flood. Famine.”

“No, nothing like that,” Miss Myrtle said.

Esther wasn’t done, though. “Alien invasion. Or... zombie apocalypse. Yes!”

“No. Teaville will play host to truly important people,” Miss Myrtle declared.

“As opposed to...” I said, letting the sentence linger.

“Zombies are important,” Esther muttered. “Aliens, too. ‘Specially when they—”

“We’re going to host a very serious political rally,” Miss Myrtle said.

“That’s good,” I said. “Because I despise the ones that aren’t serious. They’re far too funny.”

“Yup,” Esther said, holding up the clinic’s cell phone. “Just saw the post on LiveLyfe. That political lady, Williams, is comin’ to town, just like Santa Claus. Ha! Told you aliens were coming.”

I blinked slowly. “Williams—”

“Don’t be so provincial, Mollie,” Miss Myrtle said. “Mrs. Patricia Williams. She heads that famous political family. She’s running for re-election. And for some reason, she’s decided to come here as part of her campaign. Of all places. Imagine that!”

I glanced at Dolittle, who was studying the tiled floor with more interest than white tiles warranted. “Yes. Imagine that.”

“Do try to contain your enthusiasm,” Miss Myrtle snapped, then made a dismissive sound. “I see my efforts are wasted here. The informed residents among us will be keenly interested to learn how our town is about to be transformed into a political hub.”

“Because that’s what the town needs,” I retorted. “To be a hub for mudslinging and meaningless promises.”

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Miss Myrtle patted her little terrier terror and opened the door. “Come along, Mr. Dickens. We’d best be off, then.”

Esther cheerily waved. “You’re off, all right. Off your rocker.”

I waited for the door to swing shut, and the bell to stop its happy little tune. Then I stared across the room at Dolittle. “Care to respond to this exciting news, doctor?”

He leaned back, his head tilted so he could meet my gaze. His expression was strained, almost shocked, as his mouth opened. I silently prayed he had a reasonable explanation for his odd behavior.

Before he could speak, the door opened with another ring of the bell.

“I swear I’m going to crush that bell...” I vowed through gritted teeth as I turned to glare at the intruder. My next words fainted into a soft gasp.

Striding into the clinic was none other than Mrs. Patricia Williams herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The door flapped shut with another annoying tinkle of the bell. Numb with shock and disbelief, I stared at a woman who frequently appeared on headline news and in front of large, enthusiastic crowds.

What was Patricia Williams — politician extraordinaire, matriarch of a dynasty and frontrunner for the upcoming elections — doing here? In *Teaville*? Specifically, in a veterinary clinic!

Mrs. Williams slowly glanced around as if looking for something. Or someone. She hadn't yet noticed Dolittle or me.

Esther slapped her walking stick on the front desk. "Eh, aren't you that politician?"

Mrs. Williams' head jerked up sharply. She gawked at Esther but quickly recovered her equanimity. With a well-practiced smile and a photo-worthy pose, she nodded. "Patricia Williams, at your—"

"That's her, Mollie!" Esther yelled. "That's the Williams woman. Just like Miss Myrtle said, the old gossipmonger." Not easily inhibited by social expectations regarding normal

behavior, Esther clambered onto her desk and waved her walking stick over her head like a lasso. “She’s the one who’s gonna turn Teaville into a political circus!”

“Why, I hardly think so,” Mrs. Williams replied to the accusation.

“Please make her stop,” Dolittle whispered.

I wasn’t sure if he expected me to do anything, or even who he wanted to stop. Esther who was now standing on the desk, pointing her walking stick like she was about to bayonet someone with it? Or the astonished Mrs. Williams? Or perhaps the whole situation? I could sympathize with all three options.

I stepped away from the wall and into the middle of the waiting room. I positioned myself in front of Esther just in case she decided to use her walking stick for anything apart from walking, and angled my head so I could also keep an eye on Dolittle. “Can we help you?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” came the terse response.

“Do you have an injured pet?” I suggested. “A sick puppy? A pregnant camel, by chance?”

Mrs. Williams harrumphed. “A pet? Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because you’re in a veterinary clinic,” I said slowly. “Most of our visitors tend to have pets. Or livestock. But the vet makes house calls for the bigger animals.” I gestured to the door. “I’m not sure town bylaws will allow cows to wander around on the streets.”

“What a peculiar young woman,” Mrs. Williams said.

“I get that a lot.”

But Mrs. Williams was no longer paying me attention, which was probably just as well. She’d continued her survey of the room and spotted Dolittle slumped in the far corner. “Darren, my darling boy. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? How you ended up here of all places boggles the mind. So quaint and out of the way. I suppose it has its charms.”

“Who’s she callin’ out of the way?” Esther demanded.

Dolittle stared past Mrs. Williams at me. “Sorry, I was trying to tell you—”

“Darren, is this how you greet your mother?” Mrs. Williams released a controlled laugh, gazing around as if including us all in the joke. “I traveled across the country to see you. Come now. A hug, at the very least.”

I silently mouth, “Mother?”

Leaving his crutch, Dolittle stood up and stiffly embraced Mrs. Williams. His *mother*.

“What’d she say?” Esther demanded. “Why’s he hugging *her*? She’s far too old... argh!”

I quickly turned in time to grab Esther’s arm before she fell off of the desk. “Get down from there before you break something,” I ordered.

“Don’t worry,” Esther said while I assisted her to a safer location. “The vet has insurance for his office supplies.”

“That’s not what I... Never mind.” I glanced at Dolittle, silently willing him to explain how this was happening. How

had he failed to mention his relationship with a political celebrity? And why was he using a different last name?

But Dolittle wasn't looking at me. He wasn't looking at anyone. "I wasn't expecting you, Mom," he said, his expression strangely aloof, serious, his voice carefully modulated. It reminded me of my first impression of him when he'd just arrived in Teaville. Had it only been a few days ago? So much had happened since that first morning. But clearly not enough for me to really know him.

"Yet here I am!" Mrs. Williams gushed, pivoting around as if to prove her presence.

"Here you are," Dolittle agreed, his hands stuffed into his pockets. "Why?"

"Goodness, Darren." Mrs. Williams patted his cheek. "Of course I had to come. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

"No," Dolittle said. "It wasn't."

"Johnny assured me it was a wonderful idea, a fantastic stunt."

"Stunt?" I repeated.

Mrs. Williams dismissed me with a glance. "Of course you weren't seriously going to move here. Not permanently, to such a small town. But you forced my hand. Well done. This is going to play out perfectly with voters."

"What will?" Dolittle asked, his features hard.

"I can see the headlines now," Mrs. Williams continued, holding up her hands as if stroking the headlines floating in

front of her. “Big city vet woos small town on behalf of mother’s campaign.”

“And sprains his ankle in the process,” I muttered.

“And then the whole family goes home triumphant.” Mrs. Williams lowered her arms, ignoring me. “It’s a news story I’d expect Johnny to create. But you? Hmm. It seems political genes run in the family.”

In the strained conversational pause that followed, a brief, strangled laugh crept out of my throat. “So... This is really your mother?”

As if seeing me for the first time, Mrs. Williams turned to me with a smile as authentic as plastic, and just as stiff. “And you are... his assistant?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Sure am,” Esther added. “Been workin’ here since forever.”

Mrs. Williams’ expression shifted into a wide smile as she extended a professional handshake. “Patricia Williams. It’s always lovely to meet my constituents.”

“Huh. That’s odd. We’ve never had the pleasure of your visit before,” I said.

“An oversight on my part, I’m sure.” Mrs. Williams grasped Dolittle’s arm. “Darren neglected to inform me of his dramatic move, but as soon as Johnny explained it to me, I felt it was a perfect opportunity to visit the townsfolk.”

I nodded along. “I never heard Dolittle mention his mother before. But I guess everyone has to have one, right?”

Mrs. Williams blinked a few times in confusion. “Dolittle?”

“The townsfolk’s nickname for Dr. Little,” I explained.

A bewildered expression — painfully familiar — settled across her face. I was starting to suspect that the Stanton power to confuse Dolittle was not limited to him but extended to his entire family.

“Dr. Little? You mean Darren?” Mrs. Williams forced a laugh, the sound hollow and grating. “How droll. What on earth inspired you to use my maiden name, Darren? Such a funny thing to do.”

“Yes. So funny, isn’t it? Droll, in fact,” I said, numbness settling into my chest.

“Mollie, I can explain,” Dolittle hastily interjected before his mother could speak.

“Isn’t that what they all say?” I asked, bitterness coating my tongue.

“Please listen, really,” he said.

But I was done with listening. I was done with the town, with Duchess Delilah, with Darren Dolittle. I’d heard enough. “I have to get going. I have a pregnant camel to feed and...” I slid my crutch under my armpit. “Nice meeting you, Mrs. Williams. And if I don’t see you ever again, enjoy your electioneering... I mean visit.”

I snagged the truck keys, and hurried out of the clinic as fast as my crutch and injured ankle would allow.

“Mollie, wait,” Dolittle called out, fumbling with his own crutch.

But it turned out I was faster at hobbling on a crutch than Dolittle was. I reached Daisy by the time he’d stepped out of the clinic.

I glanced behind in the rearview mirror as I pressed on the gas.

Dolittle stood in front of his clinic, staring after me, crutch in hand. He shouted something, but I couldn’t hear over my increasingly ragged sniveling. His image blurred as my crying intensified.

I blinked and wiped the tears away. More kept flowing, like I was a never-ending fountain of sorrow. Seeing Dolittle in the mirror wasn’t helping.

I flipped the rearview mirror to face the ceiling. Gripping the steering wheel, I floored the accelerator, urging Daisy to greater speeds. Rolling down the window, I let the roar of Daisy’s engine drown out my sobs, and the wind dry my tears.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Darren watched the truck trundle down the road. Only when it rounded the corner and disappeared from his view did he look away.

The clinic door clanged open, the bell tinkling. Esther marched past him, swatting at his legs with her walking stick. She just about hit him, but he'd anticipated her mood and blocked the blow with his crutch. Not that he blamed her.

I should've told Mollie sooner, he thought, staring blankly across the road at a collection of vehicles that hadn't been there earlier. A swarm of people started taking over the town plaza.

His mother's entourage.

That snapped him out of his daze. He limped back into the clinic.

"What was that all—" Mom started.

"Why are you really here?" Darren interrupted. His teeth clenched together so hard, his jaw started to hurt.

But the pain in his jaw was nothing compared to the memory of Mollie running — or hobbling really fast — out of the clinic and out of his life.

He was under no illusion. He'd screwed up badly. Thanks to his mother's political ambitions and Johnny's machinations, Mollie probably assumed he'd planned all of this. That he was nothing more than a conniving social climber.

"What? I'm not allowed to visit my son?" Mom said, sitting primly on the edge of one of the chairs in the waiting room. Speckles pecked crumbs around her shoes.

"You're right. You visited me, so now you can go. I'm sure you have a lot to do."

"I do, of course, but I have a few hours in between speeches. Why is there a chicken in your clinic?"

"Payment for services rendered."

"How... quaint. I was hoping we could spend some time together. Maybe take some family photos in the countryside?"

"To help with your campaign?"

"It wouldn't hurt."

"Go ahead and take your photos, but I'm not going to be in them."

Mom clucked in disapproval. "You're not still mad about the whole scandal, are you?"

Darren crossed his arms, his thoughts caught between a sharp retort and concern about Mollie. She'd been crying

when she reached the truck. He could tell by the quiver in her shoulders, the way she rubbed under her eyes.

He should be going after her, not having this useless argument about politics, family history and other dramas. All the things that he'd hoped to put in his past by moving here. A fresh start.

"No, I'm not mad." He leaned against the front desk. "I've moved past it, along with all of this." He waved toward the window, encompassing the crowd starting to gather around the campaign vehicles.

Mom hesitated, and the carefully constructed mask of a powerful, knowledgeable politician slid away. It was a rare moment, and Darren relished the sight of his mom peering through the politician.

She looked over at him, her expression open and sincere, almost vulnerable. "Johnny's right, then. You really did run away."

Darren exhaled heavily. "Not so much running away as... needing some space."

"You certainly have a lot of space here." She laughed softly.

"Politics isn't my thing, Mom."

"I know. But that doesn't mean you have to abandon us."

Darren pushed away from the desk and sat next to Mom. "I haven't. I just don't appreciate being dragged into it every time your campaign hits a slight bump."

“It’s hardly a slight bump. Have you been following the election news?”

“I do my best to avoid soap operas.”

“It’s a soap opera, all right, thanks to the competition.”

He gently nudged his shoulder against hers, then gave her a one-armed hug. “I’m sure the indomitable Mrs. Williams can handle a bit of competition.”

“I’m sure I can.” She leaned her head against his. “It would be easier with my whole family around me.”

He nodded, not daring to reply.

“You want me to win, don’t you?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure.” He met her astonished gaze. “It might be good for the family if you occasionally lost. You’re too obsessed about winning.”

“That’s the whole purpose of running an election.”

Darren leaned his elbows on his knees and wondered how Mollie was doing. Was she back on the farm, tossing his clothes into the goat’s enclosure? He almost chuckled at the imagery. He deserved that and more.

“Please come back,” Mom said softly. “Your old clinic is still there. You can get it up and running again in no time. You were very successful.”

“I was very bored.”

“Ah. So Johnny was right.”

He sat up straight. “About what?”

Mom waved a hand toward the front door. “Was that her? The Stanton woman whose goat attacked you, and in whose house you’ve been locked up?”

“I’m not locked up there, obviously. And the goat didn’t exactly attack me. More like stumbled into me.”

“And you say you’re not a politician,” Mom cooed. “How big was this stumbling goat?”

“Really big. The size of a small cow.”

“Impressive.”

“She is. Impressive. And smart. Funny—”

“Are we still talking about the goat?”

Darren tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. “Maybe not.”

“Ah. I see.” Mom nudged him. “Is she the reason you’re staying here, then?”

“You’re not going to argue with me about coming home?”

Mom grasped his hand in both of hers. “I may be an indomitable politician, but I’m a mother first and foremost. I can see when I’m on a losing ticket.”

“I think I’m the one who’s lost,” Darren murmured. “I didn’t tell her everything.”

“And by everything, you mean me?”

He glanced at her.

“Well,” Mom continued. “We all stumble. It’s what we do after we stumble that determines if we fall on our faces, or just

down on one knee.”

Darren held up his crutch. “I twisted my ankle.”

“Ankles heal. Hearts do, as well. They just take longer.”

Darren thought about Mollie’s expression as she fled the clinic. He shook his head. “I don’t know if that’s always true.”

“You won’t find out sitting here.”

“You came here to convince me to leave.”

“And take election-winning photos,” she added with a knowing smile.

“Sure. But now you want me to stay?”

“I want you to be happy, Darren.” Mom’s eyes glistened, and she tightened her grip on his hand. “I worry about you.”

“Don’t.”

“It’s a mother’s job to worry. I want the best for you. I want you to have happiness. Success—”

“What if I can only have one of those?” Darren asked.

“Is it too much for a mother to hope that her child will have both?”

“You can always hope.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. Outside, a storm of photographers and event planners swirled around the plaza. But inside the veterinary clinic — his clinic — it was calm. Peaceful. And in the quiet, he made his decision.

Darren helped Mom to stand, then opened the front door.
“Looks like you have an election to win.”

“That I do.” She stood next to him, studying his profile.
“And you?”

“I have an apology to make.”

Darren waited until Mom entered the frenzy colonizing the town plaza, where she turned into Patricia Williams, political extraordinaire. She glanced over her shoulder once, smiled at him, then disappeared inside a cloud of cameras and onlookers.

Huffing a laugh, Darren locked up the clinic. Only then did he realize he didn't have transport. Mollie had taken Daisy, FASTr wasn't available in Teaville, and an airport taxi would take a while to arrive.

He glanced at one of the campaign vehicles, tempted to ask someone to give him a ride or loan him a car. But that wouldn't help his cause. What would Mollie think if he showed up like that?

Despite the urgency he felt building up in his chest, Darren gripped his crutch and hobbled in the direction of the Stanton Farm.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

To this day, I don't know how I made it back to the farm without having an accident. Yet somehow I managed not to hit any pedestrians, cows, dogs, sheep and other town residents on the way. I also avoided sidewalks, street lamps and parked cars.

Come to think of it, the absence of any sort of collision was a proof of miracles. Or guardian angels. Probably both. Because I definitely needed both.

I was startled out of my teary-eyed, snotty-nosed trance when Daisy backfired and stalled in a loud *harrumph* of disgruntled engine noises. I glanced around, taking in the main house, the cottage farther down the property, the barn and orchard.

Lady stalked around her enclosure, threatening a squirrel who dared to dart along the top of the fence. Psycho was chasing after the geese, making sure they were well exercised. The late afternoon sun was hovering at the edge of the forest, the sky streaked glorious tangerine and plum.

It all seemed so idyllic. Peaceful country living at its best.

I burst into another fit of wailing and chest-convulsing sobs.

Nope, there's nothing peaceful or pleasant about the countryside, I decided there and then. It was a total mess. A disaster, just like my life. I should never have come.

Yes, that would've left Duchess and her two best friends locked up in the slammer. But they would've been released. Eventually. Teaville's police station only had so many holding cells, and Chief Maftechuck was more or less reasonable... *ish*. She would've sent The Three Witches home, ankle monitors on the lot of them.

"But of course you came," I bitterly reflected, almost falling out of the truck in my daze.

A curtain fluttered in one of the windows of the main house.

That was the last thing I needed. A grandmotherly inquisition into my completely failed romantic life. Keeping my head down, my eyes focused on the gravel driveway, I limped as rapidly as my crutch allowed. I hurried past the house, veering toward the cottage on automatic.

Except I wasn't staying at the cottage.

Dolittle was. It was his abode now.

Well, too bad for that, I thought. No doubt Dolittle was neck deep in political plots with his mother. *The* Patricia Williams.

"How does a man fail to mention that his mother is a political powerhouse?" I demanded, scowling at a goose.

The large bird seemed to shrug. It honked back at me before waddling after its flock.

By the time I ensconced myself in the cottage, I'd calmed down to a slightly less sniffly mess. After washing off all traces of tears, I began pacing around the main room, trying not to admire the ridiculously orderly nature of Dolittle's unpacking.

I'd been in a new room for a total of half an hour before it looked like — in my grandmother's words — my suitcase had exploded and jettisoned an alternate universe's worth of clothes and other fashion-related paraphernalia. But in Dolittle's universe, everything was neat, orderly, folded up along straight lines.

It was mindboggling.

“Straight lines. Ha.” I glared at a tablet carefully positioned on the coffee table. “No, you definitely weren't shooting straight with me, Dr. Dolittle.”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” The raucous crow was followed by a sharp tap on glass.

Startled, I turned around and stared into the beady eyes of the farm's resident rooster. Except we didn't have a rooster.

“Go back to the Benson's farm,” I ordered. “Where you belong.”

The rooster tapped the window again.

Huffing, I turned my back on the bird and continued pacing around the cottage. I wrangled with my memories, arguing with myself about what had really happened in the

veterinary clinic — both before and after Mrs. Williams' arrival.

The afternoon *before* had been amazing, *before* we'd been rudely interrupted by family and other disasters. And *after* that?

I flung myself onto the sofa, slouching. I couldn't decide if I was irreconcilably angry with Dolittle, or deeply hurt. Either way, he had to do some serious explaining.

Maybe there was a logical explanation for it all.

I sat up straighter as the thought created a flare of hope. Maybe, like me, Dolittle had been on the run from his family, trying to avoid certain crazy characters. I could understand that. Sure, he lied about his last name, in a roundabout sort of way. But could I blame him? How would the townspeople have reacted if they knew who he was related to?

My breathing settled down, and my heart rate followed. My eyes dried up, as I began to reassess the situation. Yes, it made perfect sense. And he hadn't lied about anything else, had he?

I again thought of those few precious moments in the examination room. The two of us, alone, while I fixed up his arm. The hint of cinnamon on his exhale.

Yes, there had to be a good reason for what he did. I wasn't going to give up right now. No way. Or at least, I'd give him a chance to explain before I threw something at his head.

My gaze strummed over the tablet, then flipped back.

I glanced around the cottage, as if on the off chance someone had snuck in without me noticing. The only set of eyes watching me belonged to the rooster.

Licking my lips, I picked up the tablet. “It won’t matter, because it’ll be password-protected,” I reassured myself. “Because who doesn’t lock their devices these days?”

“Cock-a-doo?”

“Stop judging me,” I huffed.

If the tablet was password-protected, I could touch the screen as much as I wanted to. It meant nothing. It wasn’t snooping or sleuthing or anything approaching unethical.

I was almost satisfied with that justification when a sly thought interjected, *But what if it isn’t locked?*

Well, that was the universe clearly signaling to me that I was allowed to snoop around his personal devices.

“Yeah, because that’s how it works,” I muttered, my hand hovering above the tablet. “If it’s not locked, it’s okay to snoop. Really?”

Before I could think twice, I flicked my finger across the screen.

The screen lit up, showing that the tablet was in fact locked. I exhaled heavily, partly in relief, partly in disappointment. Until I saw a notification perfectly visible on the locked screen. It was from the LiveLyfe app, displaying a message from some guy named Johnny.

Head's up, bro. Mom's heading your way. Prepare to take family photos for the campaign trail. You know how it is. All part of the grand plan.

I reread Johnny's message several times, the skin around my eyes tightening, my heart beating loudly. Grand plan?

This had all been a politician's ploy to gain more votes after all. It made sense. Why else would a successful city vet come here, to Teaville of all places?

Political genes run in the family. Wasn't that what Patricia Williams had said?

Dolittle had known all along. Mrs. Williams had sent him here to prepare the way, all part of her grand plan to improve her election campaign.

Darren Dolittle or Little or Williams or whatever his name really was — he was just another ambitious man. Climbing the ranks. Doing what he had to do to win. Putting his family's political dynasty ahead of whatever we'd been about to have.

And he definitely didn't have time for a relationship.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

You know how it is. All part of the grand plan.

Of course. Just when I thought I found a guy who wasn't another Luke, a social climber, career before family — in other words, a masculine version of Duchess — *this* had to happen.

The universe hated me.

I stalked around the room, kicking at whatever happened to be in my way. Unfortunately, none of Dolittle's possessions were on or anywhere near my feet. And that simply wouldn't do. I flung open the wardrobe, tossing neatly hung shirts onto the floor.

The rooster crowed.

“Stop judging me!” I shouted, waving a fist at the bird.

Pretty soon, I'd emptied the wardrobe. But hey, why stop there? I yanked open drawers and flung neatly rolled socks into the growing pile of clothes. Who actually rolled their socks in neat curls and stored them according to a color code?

“A social climber, and a neat freak,” I grunted. “What was I thinking? What did I possibly see in him? Huh? You answer me that.” I glared at the rooster. “You’re a guy, right?”

The rooster took a few nervous steps along the windowsill, no doubt debating the wisdom of loitering around the Stanton Farm too long.

Yeah, join the club.

I finally finished emptying all the drawers. I saw his suitcases tucked neatly into a corner. One was full of books. I dragged the other one out, stuffing the whole pile of clothes into it. Then I shut the lid, but it wouldn’t close completely. So I kneeled on it, bouncing up and down.

“Dr. Williams,” I muttered. “I think it’s time you—”

“Mollie?”

The rooster and I squawked in startled unison at the sudden intrusion. Swiveling on my knees to face the door, I lost my balance and fell backward. Clothes erupted out of the bulging suitcase.

Dolittle slowly entered the cottage. He eased the door shut behind him, watching me as if I were a rabid dog, or a ferocious goose.

My cheeks flushed at the unspoken judgment, and I spluttered, “I’m not the one with issues.”

His eyebrows peaked upward. “Can we talk about this?”

“What about?” I scrambled back to my knees. “My incredibly efficient packing methods?” I leaned on the

suitcase, stuffing clothes back inside and zipping the whole mess shut. “You take way too long to pack. Did you know that? And who files their socks by color? Any guy who actually takes the time to iron everything... I should’ve known.”

With great care, Dolittle shifted the speckled hen in his arms and lowered it to the floor. Speckles clucked and pecked at the hardwood floor. “I know what it looks like—”

“Do you?” I stood up, pushing sweaty strands of hair away from my face. “Because it looks like you lied to me.”

“Only about my last name.”

“Oh, sure. Only your *last* name. But that’s where it all starts. It’s downhill from there.”

“I’m still me.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“I didn’t want to be known as the political celebrity’s son. Do you blame me?”

My jaw tensed as I prepared to volley a response. But truthfully, could I? I used to deny having anything to do with my grandmother. On a few occasions, I went so far as to claim I was an orphan. So... yes, I could understand wanting a fresh start.

Instead of admitting to any of this, my mouth opened and released a swarm of angry words. “And that’s your justification? All part of the grand plan, wasn’t it?” Bitterness coated my tongue.

A frown colonized his forehead. “The what?”

I jumped off of the badly packed suitcase and snatched up the tablet before I could think better of it. “The message from Johnny. Your mother’s grand plan. And you’re part of it.”

He glanced at the tablet, comprehension dawning. “You read my messages?”

“It was right there on a locked screen.”

“You feel that justifies it?” His expression hardened.

I almost started to squirm but resisted the hint of guilt. “When you put it that way... maybe?”

“You could’ve just asked me.”

“You don’t even deny being a part of it.” My raised voice startled Speckles, who waddled under the table.

“You mean, a grand plan?” Dolittle made a dismissive noise. “My mother always has plans. That doesn’t mean I’m a part of them.”

“Right.”

We stared at each other in silence, the sense of a chasm growing between us.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter.” Except it did. I swallowed past a heart-sized constriction in my throat and hurriedly pressed on. “Anyway, I’m pretty sure you’re not in any danger of falling into a coma, or whatever a concussion does to you. So I guess you’ll go back to your motel... or back to the city with Mrs. Williams?”

Dolittle's expression was as readable as the side of a barn. A sharp *ta-ta-ta* on the door interrupted the edgy atmosphere. Without a word, Dolittle reached back and opened the door.

A mob of flashing cameras blinded me.

"Mr. Williams," several reporters shouted.

"Do you have a comment on your mother's recent campaign glitch?"

"Are you joining your mother's campaign team?"

"Any political ambitions of your own, Mr. Williams?"

More flashes sparkled in the dusk. I blinked against the glare.

"Is this your girlfriend?" another reporter screamed above the others trying to push their way in.

"Absolutely not," I yelled just as Darren managed to shut the door.

He sagged against the wood, staring at me, arms crossed over his chest.

"So, Dr. *Williams*. Do you?" I demanded.

"Do I what?"

"Have political ambitions? Will you be joining your mother on her campaign trail? Maybe in office?" My voice pitched an octave higher than normal at the end, and my breath came in heaving gasps. My cottage was surrounded by paparazzi! Since when did that happen in Teaville?

Count backward, I reminded myself. *Ten... nine...*

“You’re not Dolittle, or Little,” I continued, unable to stop myself as hysteria bubbled up. “I suppose you’re not a vet, either?”

“No, I’m a vet.”

“Is your real name even Darren? Or is it Paul, or Stephen, or...” I gasped to a stop.

“Everything else I told you was the truth. I’m Dr. Darren Williams. I’m a vet. I wanted to tell you but—”

“But what? All you needed to say was, ‘Mollie, guess what? My last name’s Williams. Yes, *that* Williams. Card-carrying member of one of the major political families in this country.’ Was it really so difficult?”

His eyes narrowed. “It was. Because once someone knows who my family is, they look at me differently.”

“I’m looking at you differently now, Dolittle.” I met his glare with my own. “Because you’re a liar. You lied to me. You put career ahead of... other stuff. And not even your own career!”

Just like with Luke, I thought. Someone else’s career is more important than their relationship with me.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said more to myself, and to the memory of Luke and all the other failed opportunities. “This was never going to work.”

“Why?” Dolittle demand.

“Because I’m leaving. As soon as possible.”

“Because of the farm’s mortgage?”

I hesitated. “Partly.”

“What about your dreams?”

“What about them?”

“They’re important. Follow them.”

“Like how Duchess and Luke followed their dreams?” I scoffed.

“Who’s Luke?” Dolittle asked.

“It doesn’t matter! I’ve seen where that gets people. Obsessed. Overly ambitious. Only thinking about their own success at any cost. Do you know what the cost is, Dolittle? Everyone else’s dreams.”

“Ah.”

“What? I know that *ah*. What is it?”

“You’re scared.”

The fire on my face went icy cold, and my limbs froze. “Am not.”

“And you make excuses.”

“The mortgage is real, Dolittle.”

He stepped closer until a whiff of cinnamon brushed across my skin. “So is your fear. Dreams don’t have to lead to emotional or financial ruin, Mollie. They should inspire us to work for a better tomorrow, not keep us locked away in an impoverished yesterday.”

“I’m not poor.”

“You’ve thrown out your dreams without giving them a chance. You don’t have to leave Teaville. But if you’re going, then be honest about the reasons.”

“Honest?”

“Yes. It’s not your grandmother’s obsession about her LiveLyfe channel, or my mother’s political ambitions. It’s you. You’ve made the decision to give up. You are choosing to go back to that soulless, uninspiring job. Don’t blame the rest of us.”

The ice keeping me frozen melted in a flash of volcanic heat that swelled up through my chest and erupted out of me. “You’re telling *me* to be honest? That’s rich. You lied from the moment you arrived.”

“We already discussed that,” Dolittle said. “People treat me differently when they know about my family.”

“You can’t escape your family.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now? Running away from home to escape Duchess’ crazy schemes?”

I jabbed a finger into his chest. It was like stabbing stone. “Don’t call her crazy. Only I get to do that.”

He glowered at me.

“You’re just like the rest of them,” I added.

“The rest of who?”

I kicked at a pair of socks that had escaped the suitcase. I was too angry to articulate a response, especially since there were so many possible answers. Ambitious politicians.

Obsessed grandmothers. Corporate climbers. CEO candidates. People who put themselves and their own dreams before everything and everyone else...

Before I could question any of these assumptions and let doubt take over, before I could remind myself that Dolittle was nothing like Duchess or Luke, I pointed at the suitcase. "Get. Out."

"Gladly." Dolittle scowled at the rooster still sitting outside the window. "I definitely won't miss the neighbors."

"Out of my way!" Duchess' voice pierced through the wood and the hostility zapping between us. "Get off of my property. You have no business being here. I'm calling the police."

"Don't make me use my walking stick," Esther bellowed.

"You can't smack them, Esther," Duchess warned.

"Sure I can. Watch!"

A muffled exclamation of surprised pain followed. The cottage door swung open. Duchess pushed Esther inside, then quickly followed, slamming the door behind her. She locked it, and leaned against the door, as if expecting the horde of reporters to barge in and trample over her.

"Have you seen what's going on out there?" Duchess gushed. "It's an absolute circus. A news frenzy! Do you have any idea what's happening? It's marvelous."

"Yes, we know, and no, it's not," I said, stepping around Dolittle and reaching for the door handle.

“So why are they all here?” she continued, blocking my exit. “Do you think they heard about my show? I told you it had a great premise!” Her eyes lit up, and she smiled like a child who has just found out Santa Claus really does exist.

“No, Duchess,” I said. “They’re here for Dolittle. Or rather, Dr. Williams.”

“Who’s Dr. Williams?” Esther demanded, squinting around the room. “How many doctors you got hidin’ in this place?”

Duchess finally moved out of my way, her gaze settling on Dolittle. “Williams, as in—”

“Yes, Duchess,” I said, tugging at the door. “Williams, as in *the* Patricia Williams. This is her son. Say goodbye. It’s time for Dr. Williams to go back to wherever he came from.”

I swung open the door, and elbowed my way through the milling journalists, leaving behind confusion and the shattered pieces of my heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I locked the door to Duchess' study / the guest room where I was staying, and called for an airport taxi.

This is how I'm going to spend Christmas Eve, I thought with growing despair. In the airport, waiting for a flight.

It was the right thing to do, even if the timing was dismal. I'd stayed in Teaville too long. I shouldn't have come here in the first place.

As for Dolittle, he'd lied. Or mislead me. Or not fully explained. Whatever. He'd tricked me into thinking, feeling even, that maybe...

I froze. What had I been thinking? Feeling?

Duchess' strident voice pierced through my misery and broke my trance. "Last chance. Get off of my property!"

"Hurry along now," Mahvash added.

"Yeah, what they said," Esther cheered. "Or I'll order my dog to attack."

Psycho yipped happily while geese honked and hissed.

The reporters reluctantly drove off, wisely not daring to challenge three elderly ladies armed with a flock of geese and a giant dog.

Once the last car left, a moment of silence descended. It was broken by a tentative tap on the study door.

“Mollie, are you okay?” Duchess asked.

Esther snorted. “Of course she’s not.”

A hushed conversation happened in the hallway, then Mahvash asked, “Do you want a cup of tea?”

“Sure, ‘cause that’ll make her feel better,” Esther grumbled.

“I’m good,” I forced through a constricted throat.

More murmuring. Duchess whispered something about a spare key for the door.

“Leave her be. She needs space,” Mahvash hissed.

“Plenty of space around here,” Esther said. “It’s a farm.”

Another quick exchange of muted words.

“We’re going to the barn,” Duchess announced. “To... check on Carmel. Do you want anything?”

“From the barn?” Esther demanded. “Your brain’s addled.”

“I’m good,” I repeated the lie.

More soft words, then they left. An empty silence descended on the house. While I waited for the taxi, I spent the time packing.

It shouldn't have taken that long. All I had was a laptop bag and a carry-on. My normal packing habits included tossing a pile of clothes into a suitcase, and sitting on the lid to compress the mess while I zipped it up.

Normal had left the barn a while ago.

I caught myself folding and rolling a shirt with ridiculous care. Just the way Dolittle had taught me to when we were moving him from the Beaver Motel to the cottage.

Tears blurred my vision as I studied the straight lines, the neat creases. Using a sleeve to wipe my face dry, I shook out the shirt and made a point of pounding it into a crumpled ball and stuffing it into my small suitcase.

Halfway through clearing up the study, I heard Daisy's engine rev. The noisy blast of exhaust startled the geese into a raucous cacophony of protesting honks. Psycho launched into a barking fit.

I glanced out the window in time to see the Great Dane chase after Daisy. Dolittle was driving. Speckles stared out the back window. Did the little hen look a tad mournful?

"It's a chicken," I muttered. "Down payment for services rendered..."

I smiled through my snivels, recalling Dolittle's expression when Benson handed him Speckles after we'd treated the cow.

The two of us sitting on the swings while fireflies flittered around us.

In the clinic, me cleaning the bite marks while Dolittle pulled me closer, and then the two of us—

“No!” I shouted, jumping on my small suitcase and pummeling the lid shut.

This was all for the best. Dolittle was most likely going back to the big city with his big city, politically ambitious family.

Or maybe not, a treacherous voice suggested.

It didn't matter, because I was definitely leaving this place.

You're scared. Dolittle's words whispered around me.

I rubbed at my face, trying to drive the memories and the tears away. But he'd been right. I was afraid.

Rather than think about those fears, or dwell on the possibility that I'd screwed up, I cleaned up the guest room, returning it to its previous condition as a study.

By the time I finished packing, the airport taxi had arrived. The car's honk set off the geese who replied with their own honks, clacking their beaks and flapping their wings in warning.

I slipped out of the house, grateful the three crones were in the barn. No one apart from the geese noticed me leave.

The taxi was parked at the bottom of the driveway as per my instruction. I wasn't going to risk being spotted getting into my getaway vehicle. I dragged my carry-on over the gravel, not caring how much the small wheels complained at the abuse. A cool wind tossed my hair around, partially blocking my vision. Dark clouds scuttled across the dusky sky.

The taxi driver stepped out of the vehicle, preparing to assist me. I smiled, nodded encouragingly, and pushed my hair off of my face. Almost there—

My phone blared a cheerful tune which encouraged the geese to launch into another round of hissing and honking.

“Not now,” I grumbled, almost dropping my crutch as I fumbled with my phone. I answered without looking. “What?”

“Where are you?” Duchess began.

“Gone,” I said, glancing behind me. No one was in sight. Maybe she didn’t realize I was still on the property. I lengthened my stride.

“Mollie...”

Why had I even answered? I was tempted to turn off the phone. Better yet, I could jump into the waiting taxi and toss the phone out the window. Turning it off was definitely the logical, more affordable option. But chucking a phone out of a moving car? That would feel way more satisfying.

“Are you still here?” Duchess continued.

“I’m on my way to the airport,” I blurted out, waving at the taxi driver in case he had any notion of leaving without me. “If I have to stay there all night until they find me a seat, so be it. I doubt there’s too many people flying on Christmas Eve, so I should be good.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call Chief Maftechuck and tell her I had a mental breakdown. Or something like that. She’ll believe

me, all things considered.”

“Mollie, I—”

“Whatever new disaster you’ve gotten yourself into, you’re going to have to sort it out yourself, Duchess. That’s what being an adult is all about.”

“It’s Carmel.”

I stopped my forward rush, the squeaky little wheels of my carry-on trailing behind my heartbeat. “What about her?”

“She’s in trouble. I think she’s in labor. But we can’t reach her.”

“What do you mean, you can’t *reach* her? Did she climb a tree?”

“No. She’s outside of the electronic ring. The chief would love nothing better than for me to break the conditions of my bail.”

“Right. Your ankle monitor.” I stared down the driveway at the taxi. So close, yet... “What about Esther and Mahvash?”

“Esther can’t manage alone, not with her wonky hips—”

“Nothin’ wonky about these babies,” Esther’s shouted over Duchess.

“Shush, you old hag,” Duchess said. “As for Mahvash... You know how she is with blood and other bodily fluids. She’d probably faint the moment Carmel sweated.”

“I’m not that bad,” Mahvash said.

“Sure are,” Esther said. “Even worse.”

“Keep quiet, you two,” Duchess snapped. “I’m on the phone.”

I stared at the gravel, wanting to cry. Of course Carmel would chose this night of all nights to go into labor.

“Mollie?”

“What about Dolittle?” I asked, grasping onto hope. “Call the vet!”

“I’ve tried. He’s not answering his phone. I’ve left a message, but... What if he’s too late?”

“You expect me to deliver the baby?” I asked.

The taxi driver’s eyes opened wide. “No baby deliveries allowed in my taxi, lady.”

“At least you can keep her company,” Duchess persisted. “And wipe her brow or something.”

“She’s a camel,” I gritted out. “I don’t think they sweat.”

“Please, Mollie.” Duchess’ voice was plaintive, almost desperate. “She needs us.”

I shook my head.

The taxi driver took it as a sign and retreated into his baby-free taxi, holding out a hand.

Defeated, I gave him a few bills and turned back to the house. “Fine,” I huffed. “I’m just here.”

“Hey, she’s still here,” Esther yelled.

“Yes, she is,” I admitted. “Where’s Carmel?”

“Where you don’t dare go,” Duchess said cryptically.

“What’s that supposed to...” My words trailed off.

Duchess didn’t say anything, letting the silence stretch between us.

And in that silence, I knew exactly where Carmel was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

As I hustled through the orchard, I considered how much I knew about camels and delivering babies.

The sum of all my knowledge was woefully inadequate, and possibly incorrect.

“Please come back, Dolittle,” I whispered under my breath.

What if he’d taken my words literally? *Get out.* For all I knew, he was at the airport, or speeding down the highway with his mother.

By the time I exited the orchard, night had settled over Teaville. A damp wind whistled through the grass, slapping at my cheeks. Storm clouds brewed ominously above the forest.

The three elderly ladies were standing near the swing set, the edge of the electronic circle keeping Duchess under house arrest. They stood side by side, watching me approach. The Three Musketeers, or more accurately the three witches from *Macbeth*. Shadows and the edge of the storm played across the landscape like a scene from *Macbeth*.

A trickle of starlight glanced across Duchess' face. Her features were scrunched up in anxiety. It was an expression I wasn't used to seeing on her. Fear leached into me.

"Keep going," Duchess shouted, waving at me. Her jacket billowed around her like a cape.

I lurched past her, staring at the dark play castle. I hadn't been inside since...

My forward momentum drained away, and I stumbled to a stop. I glanced back at the three women.

"I have faith in you," Duchess said.

"You can do this," Mahvash added.

"Go kick some butt," Esther yelled, raising her walking stick into the air. "And save our camel."

I nodded, blinking back tears and the initial splattering of rain.

"Mollie, wait!"

Out of the shadowy orchard, Dolittle appeared. He hobbled toward me, his medical bag thumping at his side. Psycho bounced after him, long ears flapping in the wind.

"Hurry," I said. Without thinking, I instinctively reached out a hand to him.

He didn't hesitate and latched onto my hand. His momentum tugged me forward into a limping run, heading straight for the castle. He only stopped when we reached the arched entrance.

“What?” I asked, raising my voice above the wind that was now shaking the trees. Thunder boomed overhead.

He glanced at me, his eyes pinched in concern. He squeezed my hand. “This can’t be easy. Wait here, if you want.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. He understood so well.

I glanced over my shoulder at Duchess, Mahvash and Esther. Three silhouettes set against the roiling darkness. In that moment, they weren’t the musketeers or Teaville’s Three Witches. They were three wise women, standing watch, lending me their strength.

Nodding, I looked at Dolittle and lifted up our clenched hands. “Let’s go save our baby.”

His eyebrows arched upward. “Not quite accurate, but I appreciate the sentiment. And your help.” He reached into his medical bag and pulled out a small lantern with a powerful light.

Keeping close to him, I followed him inside the castle. No ghosts of Christmas past lingered inside to haunt me. Only an ornate metal bench on one side, and Carmel standing in the corner, her hoofs pawing at a large piece of partially demolished material.

I gawked. “That’s the mayor’s banner,” I exclaimed and pushed open a set of wooden shutters. “Duchess, we found the stolen banner. Carmel has it!”

“Good for her,” Duchess yelled back. “I hope she chewed his face off.”

I studied the banner. “Yup. At least, part of his photo.”

“The facial hair part?”

“That’s it,” I said, grinning. “She removed his goatee.”

Esther cheered, Mahvash muttered, and then I forgot all about the banner.

Dolittle pulled out bits of medical stuff and began inspecting the camel.

I hovered nearby. “Is she okay?”

“Yes.” Dolittle rubbed Carmel’s side. “She’s close to delivering. It looks like she’s got this under control.”

“That’s good, right?”

He gave me one of his half smiles. “Definitely. There’s not much we can do except wait and watch.”

I hugged myself, shivering. In my mad dash, I’d left my sweater and luggage on the driveway. Dampness pressed against my skin, along with a cold breeze sneaking through the shutters.

Dolittle shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around me. His hands lingered on my shoulders.

“Thanks,” I whispered, then quickly sat on the metal bench. “My throne.”

Dolittle glanced around for another. I patted the space next to me. He sat, our shoulders wedged together. I huddled closer as the first gust of the storm shook the castle.

“How long will it be?” I asked.

“Not long. A few hours.”

“A few hours?” I shrieked softly. “How is that *not* long?”

“Did he say hours?” Mahvash called out.

“Yes,” I shouted.

“I’m getting us some tea, then,” she replied.

“We should probably keep our voices down,” Dolittle suggested. “Animals like quiet during labor.”

“Got it.”

The minutes ticked past. Mahvash stuck a basket through the castle entrance at some point. A flask of tea, some snacks.

“Does Carmel need anything to eat?” I asked as Dolittle and I enjoyed the refreshments.

“Not yet.”

At some point, my eyelids grew too heavy to prop open. I nodded off, my head resting on Dolittle’s shoulder.

“Mollie,” he whispered minutes or hours later. It was hard to tell how much time had passed.

I was lying halfway on the bench, my cheek pressed into the metal work. My head jerked upward, and I fell to the ground. “I’m awake. I...” My voice faded as I admired the scene.

Dolittle stood next to Carmel, murmuring encouraging words.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Any minute now,” he said. “Bring me the blanket.”

I was about to ask what blanket when I saw one had been deposited in another basket near the entrance. I brought it over to Dolittle.

“Ready?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I replied. “For what?”

Carmel snorted and moaned.

“For this,” Dolittle replied as he grasped the head of a baby camel. With practiced hands, he helped the little creature slide into the world, then wrapped it in the blanket.

I knelt next to him as he lay the camel on the ground, and started to cry.

Dolittle looked up at me, his smile wide. He hugged me close and pressed a kiss on my forehead. “It’s a healthy girl.”

“Carmel, you did it,” I sobbed, leaning against Dolittle and stroking the baby camel.

Carmel turned to sniff her baby, then lick the damp fur.

“We should give her some space,” Dolittle suggested, releasing me.

I staggered to my feet. Sticking my head out the window, I waved at the three women sitting on the swings. “Carmel’s fine. And so is her baby girl!”

“Is she cute?” Esther asked. “All of her fingers and toes intact?”

“She’s a camel, not a human,” Mahvash said.

“Forget this.” Duchess stood up, the swing creaking from the sudden motion. “I’m going to see our baby.”

“Duchess, no!” I shouted.

Duchess didn’t hesitate. She was in full *Duchess Delilah* mode. She strode past the swing set, a grim determination lighting up her eyes. She glanced downward as if daring the ankle monitor to stop her.

It didn’t. But it did set off an alarm. Her ankle monitor began to beep at her. With every step, the beeping intensified in volume and frequency.

“That thing gonna explode?” Esther asked with unseemly enthusiasm.

“Ay, baba.” Mahvash grabbed Esther’s arm and helped her navigate the terrain to the castle.

“Did your grandmother just break the conditions of her bail?” Dolittle asked as he joined me at the window.

“Yup.”

“And is that the sound of her ankle monitor summoning the police?”

“Again, yes.”

“This should be fun.”

I leaned against him, enjoying the warmth of his arms around me. “That’s how things roll on the Stanton Farm.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Any further conversation was interrupted by three elderly ladies storming the castle.

“She’s gorgeous,” Duchess gushed as she sat next to Carmel and stroked the camel’s nose.

“A miracle,” Mahvash added.

“Christmas,” Esther declared, patting the baby.

“Yes, it actually is,” Dolittle said, checking his watch. “It’s almost morning.”

“Not that,” Esther huffed. “This! The baby’s name. Christmas the camel.”

I nodded appreciatively. “We could do worse.”

“It’s perfect,” Duchess said.

And for the first time in a very long time, I found myself agreeing with her.

Light was just touching the skyline when exhausted, covered in various camel fluids and fur, I led the way out of the castle. Carmel and Christmas followed slowly behind us, Carmel nudging her newborn into a shuffling, stumbling toddle.

“Look, she’s walking already,” Mahvash cooed.

Esther patted the baby camel. “Proud moment. This was the best Christmas Eve ever.”

“Given how many you’ve had, that’s saying something,” Duchess drawled.

A new and unnatural light caught my attention. A swirl of red and blue. “Duchess? About that ankle monitor.”

Duchess straightened her back. “This reminds me of season six, episode three of *Duchess of Danger*. Stay back. I’ll handle this, ladies.”

“I’m also here,” Dolittle murmured.

“I know that,” Duchess snapped. “Just look after my baby. And my granddaughter.”

I blushed. “I’m fine, Duchess.”

“Nonsense. But you will be.” With that enigmatic statement, she strode ahead of us, reaching the driveway just as Police Chief Maftechuck exited her vehicle.

“Do you think she’s going to get arrested again?” Mahvash asked.

“Probably,” Esther enthused.

“And on Christmas Day,” Mahvash said, clucking her tongue in disapproval. “Such an inconvenient way to start the day.”

Duchess was energetically gesturing with her arms, first at us, then at the sky, and at the police car. As if in summary, she kicked up a leg to show off her ankle monitor.

The police chief leaned against the hood of her vehicle, looking decidedly bored and unimpressed.

“It really wasn’t her fault,” I shouted, running to join Duchess. “Our camel had her baby last night. We needed her help. And we found the mayor’s banner! The camel stole it

because she hates facial hair, and the mayor has a goatee, so Carmel—”

Chief Maftechuck held up the palm of her hand, effectively stopping my sleep-deprived, frantic explanation. “That’s more details than I want at this time of the morning, especially on Christmas morning.”

“But my grandmother’s innocent! Or rather, not guilty of banner theft.” I gave Duchess a one-armed hug. “We can prove it.”

“I look forward to the proof. I actually came by to check on an electronic glitch.”

“A glitch?” I repeated.

The chief yawned. “Yes. It seems these ankle monitors sometimes have them. They give false alarms. Or so I’ve heard.” She glanced past us. “Congratulations, Carmel. And good thing we can’t arrest camels. I’ll come by later to remove the ankle monitor and the mayor’s banner.”

Esther raised her walking stick. “Good decision, chief, or else you’d have to arrest the whole lot of us.”

“Not really,” Dolittle said.

“Definitely not,” I added.

“I’m tempted to, let me tell you,” Chief Maftechuck said dryly. “Merry Christmas, ladies.”

“I’m still here,” Dolittle said.

The chief smiled, and slumped into her vehicle. “And Dr. Williams? Please advise your mother not to hold impromptu

political rallies. We may be a small town, but such events require a permit.”

I glanced at Dolittle. He looked away, frowning. The chief sped down the driveway, tires spitting up gravel.

Duchess clapped her hands, drawing our attention to her. “Ladies, I believe it’s time we enjoy the Stanton Christmas tradition.”

“I best be going,” Dolittle said, his voice subdued.

“Nonsense,” Duchess said. “By *ladies*, I of course meant you as well. I intend it as a generic, gender-neutral noun. Tea, scones, and stockings over the fireplace. What could be better?”

“I might need something stronger than tea,” Dolittle admitted, rubbing a hand down his face. He looked as tired as I felt.

“Whiskey’ll do the trick,” Esther said. “Put some hair on your chest.”

“Thanks, but I...” He glanced in the direction of the orchard, then sighed as he approached Daisy. “I need to go.” He nodded at us, his gaze lingering on me before he followed the chief’s example and drove away.

CHAPTER FORTY

“Maybe you were right,” I said with great reluctance, every word dragged out of me by the heaviness in my heart.

“There’s no maybe about it.” Duchess paused, studying me over her tea cup. “About what specifically am I correct this time?”

“My love life.”

Duchess pursed her lips. “Such as it is.”

“What love life?” Esther asked.

I wanted to give them both wilting glares, but the only thing wilting around here was my energy.

“It’s like episode four,” Mahvash mused.

“On season seven of *Duchess of Danger*—” I added.

“You mean episode seven, season four,” Duchess corrected. “When Duchess Delilah has to choose between saving her career-obsessed husband or her secretive lover.”

I sighed. “That’s the one.”

“Oh, my.” Duchess set down her cup. “Is Dolittle your lover now?”

“No! And Luke’s not my husband.”

“I’m confused, dear.”

“Emotional resonance.”

“*Duchess of Danger* is a marvelous metaphor for reality,” Duchess said. “Particularly the romantic sort.”

I slapped my forehead. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation. It’s happening. Again.”

Duchess looked askance at me. “What’s happening?”

“No one’s gettin’ arrested, are they?” Esther asked, her toothless gums mushing together.

“This,” I said, gesturing at the four of us. “Comparing real life to a soap opera.”

“How is that a problem?” Duchess demanded.

“It’s childish and... unrealistic, that’s what.”

Esther smacked her gums. “That a bad thing?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s immature. Irresponsible. And it inspires activities and life choices that are definitely, absolutely not safe. Maybe even illegal.”

“Again, I fail to see the issue,” Duchess said.

“Of course you don’t understand. I’ve spent the past several years trying to undo your approach to child rearing.”

“You know what the problem is?”

“So many.”

“It’s that therapist of yours. He—”

“She.”

“She’s putting very bizarre ideas in your head.”

“Your form of childrearing wasn’t exactly in line with health and safety regulations,” I pointed out.

“Meaning?”

“You let me wander around the farm unsupervised!”

“You were a free-range child.”

“I ate unwashed berries.”

“I prefer the term organic.”

“And I prefer my food washed.”

“Hygiene is overrated.” Duchess picked up her cup. “I raised you naturally. A few bumps and scratches plus a bit of dirt in the food along the way was to be expected.”

“So you’re comparing me to organic produce?”

“If produce could talk, then I suppose I am.”

I groaned. “My life is such a mess.”

“It really is,” Esther interjected.

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash groaned.

Duchess frowned them into silence. “Then tidy it up, Mollie.”

I stared at her through slitted eyes. “You’re one to talk.”

“A fair point.” Duchess raised her hands in surrender. “I suspect this is one of those *do as I say, not as I do* situations.”

“What’re you saying?”

“Everyone deserves a second chance.”

My lips curled in distaste. “You’re telling me to go back to Luke?”

“Heaven’s, no!” Duchess tutted. “Why did you really propose to Luke, dear? I never saw the two of you lasting long.”

“I don’t know.” I glanced at Mahvash and Esther for help, but they were watching the conversation like it was a tennis match. “That’s what people do when they’re in a serious relationship. The next step is to get married. Isn’t it?”

Duchess shrugged. “You tell me. Was it a serious relationship?”

“We were dating for three years!”

“Yes. But was it a *serious* relationship? Time is no indicator of depth. It might suggest that you had nothing else better to do for three years. Or rather, no one better to do.”

“Duchess,” I groaned. “Please don’t say things like that.”

“I’m just saying, Mollie dear. You can’t judge the depth of a relationship by the amount of time you spend with the person. Sometimes it does take three years. And sometimes, only three hours.”

“About the time to deliver a baby camel,” Esther said, cackling slyly.

“Truth is...” I hesitated. What was the truth? “I despised Dolittle for the first few hours that I knew him. But now...”

“I see.” She nodded, staring out of the kitchen window at the sweep of open land that stretched toward the forest surrounding our property. “Do you know why I stayed on the farm? Why I took care of every building and item on it, including that purple castle of yours? Why I didn’t move away in search of better opportunities and let the property grow wild?”

I frowned at the strange and uncomfortable shift in conversation, thinking of the castle’s well-maintained condition. “Because you love it here?”

“No. I mean, of course, I love the place despite its lack of film studios and handsome actors. I enjoy living in a small town, most of the time. Barring random and unfounded incarcerations.”

“Not all of them were unfounded,” Esther muttered, but Mahvash shushed her.

“Mollie, I stayed here to look after it...” Duchess grasped my hand. “Because you love it.”

I searched her features for any trace of levity, of wicked humor. But there was none there. She was deadly serious. “You maintained the farm. For me?”

“I know how much you love this place.”

“And she gave up a number of film offers to stay here,” Mahvash said quietly.

“You did?” My eyes watered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to pressure you, nor did I expect you to forgive me.” Duchess squeezed my hand. “I still kept hoping, praying, that one day you’d realize the truth. That your real dream is to be here on the farm, not in some big city. That’s my dream.”

“To live in a big city?”

“No.” Duchess paused. “Well, yes, that too. But my biggest dream? I wanted you to return and fulfill *your* dream of running an organic farm and a hotel—”

“Bed and breakfast,” I said, my voice squeaky.

“Precisely, my dear. That’s what you always wanted to do. I never understood why you turned your back on it. Copywriting. Who does that?”

Esther nudged me with her walking stick. “She’s still got your sketchbook.”

I started sniveling.

Duchess smiled. “Yes. It’s full of marvelous design ideas for the farm and the hostel—”

“Bed and breakfast.”

“The type of crops you wanted to grow. How you’d grow them. You even designed a restaurant, I believe.”

“An organic restaurant,” I whimpered between chest-convulsing sobs.

“That vet boy’s a vegetarian,” Esther pointed out.

“That’s not the same as organic,” I whispered. “But I get the point.”

“Do you?” Duchess asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why’re you still sitting here, talking to a gaggle of elderly ladies?”

“Who you callin’ a gaggle?” Esther asked.

I jumped up. Duchess was right. It shocked me to say it to myself. But she — my grandmother a.k.a. Duchess Delilah — was right.

“You can convince him,” Mahvash prompted. “Tell Dolittle to come back to the farm where he belongs.”

“Go after that salad eater!” Esther cheered.

I hesitated, the sting of Luke’s rejection pricking at my courage. “What if he says no?”

Duchess leaned back, a wickedly mischievous glint in her eyes. “What if he says yes?”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

For the first time in my life, I came face to face with a radical realization.

Duchess had never put herself first, after all.

Sure, she'd been a bit lax in the parenting department. I'd eaten my bodyweight in unwashed fruit every summer. Climbed onto rooftops unsupervised. Wrestled goats and geese for fun. And she was still obsessed about her onscreen career.

But she'd held the fort — or the farm — all these years, sacrificing her own plans while she waited for me to face my fears and embrace my dreams.

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” I whispered as I hurried out of the house.

Even Dolittle.

Especially Dolittle.

Just because he'd failed to mention his real last name didn't make him a serial liar. He was compassionate, empathetic, kind, loyal. And the neatest neat freak I knew. I

couldn't see myself folding socks and storing them according to color. As for ironing... That was never going to happen.

But in the grand scheme of things, none of that was important. This was a guy who was comfortable with unanswered questions. He'd even forgiven me for drugging him. He hadn't been on board with Mrs. Williams' grand plan. And if the animals of Teaville and their humans were really lucky, he wasn't leaving town.

But was I?

Deciding that was a question for another day, I turned to the driveway. Daisy was gone. A hollowness started to creep across my chest. How was I going to find him—

“Need a ride?”

I spun around. Duchess was striding toward me, swiveling her car keys around one finger. Her boots kicked at the gravel on the driveway.

“Thanks,” I said and reached for the keys.

“Not a chance. I'm driving.”

“Not a chance,” I repeated. “This is one scene I need to do on my own.”

Duchess looked me up and down, slowly nodding. “You know, I think you're right. You *are* ready to drive the Charger.” She tossed the keys at me.

I fumbled, almost dropping them in shock. “You mean it? You're letting me drive?”

“You can handle her.” Duchess hesitated, glancing at her prized car. “No speeding allowed.” She twirled and marched to the front door of the house.

“Why have a speed limit if you don’t occasionally break it?” I repeated Duchess’ motto.

“Road trip,” Duchess shouted into the house.

“Bout time,” Esther yelled back.

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash said as she followed Esther to the car. “It’s not Wednesday, is it?”

“It’s a Christmas special,” Duchess explained.

“Wait, what?” I stuttered, my exhausted brain trying to grasp the situation and failing miserably. “You’re *all* coming?”

“You don’t think we’d let you drive off in my precious Charger unaccompanied, do you?” Duchess asked, patting the black hood.

“Yes?” I whimpered.

“And they call me crazy,” Duchess said. Smirking, she slid into the front passenger seat.

“Cause you are crazy,” Esther said. “We all are. Certifiable.”

“Speak for yourselves,” Mahvash said.

I contemplated asking or even pleading for everyone to get out and leave me alone. A grand romantic gesture really shouldn’t have an audience. Especially an audience consisting of three grandmotherly figures looming over my seat.

But one look at my passengers' excited expressions killed the temptation. Besides, what if Dolittle was on his way out of town? There wasn't a second to waste with arguing, which was exactly what I was doing. Wasting time.

"Road trip it is," I said to the accompaniment of cheers, hoots and Esther declaring she'd forgotten her dentures again.

I hopped into the driver's seat, wishing I had a moment to relish the sensation. *Later*, I promised and adjusted the rearview mirror.

Carmel and Christmas stood right behind the car, staring at me with matching liquid black eyes.

"You really are a miracle, Christmas," I said. Grinning, I started the engine, revved it a few times, startling the camels, geese and a Great Dane.

Now it was time to find me a vet.

Buoyed by the outrageous level of old lady energy in the car, I set off full of optimism and high expectations. Teaville wasn't that big. There weren't that many places where Dolittle could go to. Daisy didn't have great mileage, so he definitely wasn't driving out of town.

I mentally listed the places in which I was most likely to find a veterinary doctor new to town: The Great & Small Clinic; Beaver Motel; the local airport; Teaville Train Station; and the bus depot.

My insides shriveled as I thought of all the possible routes a city-bound person might use to leave town.

Duchess patted my hand. “Don’t worry, Mollie. We’ll find that boy and bring him home.”

“Even if we gotta tie him, gag him, and toss him in the trunk,” Esther whooped.

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash muttered.

“No tossing him anywhere,” I said.

Esther scowled at me in the rearview mirror. “That’s no fun.”

I headed for the clinic first, since that was the most obvious destination for a vet. But I knew before I got out of the car that he couldn’t be there. Daisy was nowhere in sight.

On the off chance he’d parked elsewhere, I knocked on the door, trying the handle. It was locked. I peered through the window. No one was there. Not even Speckles.

Determined not to worry, I returned to the Charger and drove toward Beaver Motel. No Daisy there, either.

Had Dolittle decided life in the countryside wasn’t so peaceful after all? Had he come to his senses and was even at that moment heading out of town? Were we, as Esther claimed, certifiably crazy, and the only way to avoid the Stanton Farm was to escape Teaville?

I continued driving aimlessly around town, windows rolled down, listening for the telltale revving and backfiring that was typical of Daisy. But the town hummed with that special silence and peace which only happens on very rare occasions when everyone stays at home. No doubt the town’s human

residents were all gathered around Christmas trees or breakfast tables, enjoying family and quiet time.

Everyone except me and my elderly posse, apparently.

The excited chatter and laughter faded with each passing kilometer. After an hour of driving, the long night began to catch up with me. My eyeballs felt scratchy. My initial optimism had faded away to an acceptance that I had missed my chance.

Dolittle was gone.

“We headin’ back?” Esther grumbled. “My bladder needs attention.”

“I told you to go before we left,” Mahvash said.

“That was hours ago.”

“We’re almost there,” I said, having already given up the search before I’d consciously thought about it.

Wheels crunched on gravel, shaking me out of my dejected daze.

“Mollie,” Duchess began.

“It’s fine,” I mumbled. “It doesn’t matter. I...” I stumbled out of the Charger, patting the hood the way Duchess Delilah always used to do in *Duchess of Danger*.

“Mollie,” Mahvash said. “Look. It’s Daisy!”

I turned toward the main house and froze. Daisy was parked farther down the driveway, near the barn.

“Dolittle?” I whispered.

Esther whooped. “That salad boy can’t get enough of us!”

My heart picked up pace. Gripping my crutch, I walked, then awkwardly jogged toward the barn. “Dolittle!” I shouted as I entered the barn.

But it was quiet, apart from gentle animal noises. I exited, looking around. Had he gone to the main house? The cottage?

Instinctively, I knew he hadn’t.

He’s just checking up on the camels, I told myself, trying to dampen my excitement with that inconvenient little thing called reality.

Figuring the camels were in the castle — the one private, safe place out of range of the aggressive geese and crazy goat — I threaded my way through the orchard. I reached the swings and gripped the frame for support. “Dolittle?”

Dolittle glanced over his shoulder, a paintbrush in one hand, a tin of paint in the other. A smudge of purple paint was visible on the side of his nose. “I was wondering where you were.”

I slumped into a swing, gawking at the castle. At the *dark purple* castle. “You remembered,” I whispered, my legs refusing to move.

“Dark purple. It wasn’t that difficult.”

Speckles waddled toward me, a couple of purple splotches on one of her wings. She clucked and pecked around my shoes.

“But you remembered,” I repeated and stood up.

Dolittle set down the tin can, then reached into a bag nearby. He held up another brush. "It'll go faster if we work together."

"I have a better idea," I said, closing the distance.

"Does it involve a certain Stanton Christmas tradition?"

I wrapped my arms around his waist and tipped back my head. "Eventually."

"Ah," he replied with a knowing smile, then said no more.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Dolittle and I would probably still be down by the castle in an amorous embrace if a baby camel hadn't bowled into us. We all collapsed in a pile of legs and hooves.

Carmel strolled over to inspect the tangled heap, looking mildly bemused. With a curl of her lip, she ambled toward the main house, not looking back to see if anyone followed her.

"Think we should go?" I asked, finally disentangling myself.

"If you want."

"Not really," I said, leaning against him.

He chuckled and picked up Speckles. "I am curious about this Stanton tradition."

Hand in hand, we trailed behind the camels through the orchard and to the house. Psycho bounded up to us, barking excitedly at the baby camel.

Esther spotted us first and bellowed, "'Bout time. What took you so long?"

“Don’t answer that,” Duchess warned, opening the patio doors to let the animals inside. “I don’t want to know.”

Carmel started munching on the Christmas tree ornaments. Christmas lay down by the fireplace, Speckles nestled on her back. Pinned to the mantle nearby were several mismatched, oversized socks, each carefully labeled with our names. Everyone had one, including Dolittle, Psycho and Carmel.

“Sit over here, you two,” Duchess said, indicating the loveseat.

“Subtle,” I muttered at her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied innocently.

When we were all seated, Esther stood in front of the fireplace. “It’s time,” she said, cackling and rubbing her gnarled hands energetically together.

“It’s time, indeed,” Duchess intoned.

“It’s time for tea!” Mahvash concluded.

“I see why they’re called The Three Witches,” Dolittle whispered to me.

I leaned into his embrace. “Get used to it. It only gets crazier.”

He shrugged. “I can live with that.”

“It’s time,” Esther shouted. “Christmas time.” She pointed a knobby finger at the small clock above the mantle, then frowned. “It doesn’t feel right. We normally do this one minute after midnight.”

“We were delivering a baby at the time,” I reminded her, stifling a yawn.

“Pretend it’s still dark outside,” Esther commanded, staring greedily at the Christmas tree. “Let’s open our presents.”

“How about we start with the socks, and leave the presents until we’re more awake?” Duchess suggested.

“That’s actually a very reasonable suggestion,” I mused.

“I’ll try not to let your implication that I’m normally unreasonable affect my mood,” she said, rubbing Christmas’ nose. “Esther, Mahvash. Shall we?”

The three elderly ladies gave each other conspiratorial smirks. I stared at the Christmas stockings with growing apprehension. My experience with the contents hadn’t always been comfortable. Duchess and her friends often saw this as an opportunity to impart life lessons.

Esther in particular had a peculiar concept of what was appropriate as a stocking stuffer. One year, she put a packet of condoms in my stocking. I was twelve at the time.

“What have you witches done this time?” I demanded.

Dolittle gave me one of his bewildered looks. “It’s just a Christmas stocking, Mollie.”

I snorted. “Which shows how much you *don’t* know about the Stanton Christmas tradition, dear Dolittle.”

“Go on, then, Mollie,” Mahvash urged. “It’s safe. I promise. No jump scares this year.”

Mahvash was the most reasonable and balanced of the three. She hadn't thought the condoms were a great gift, either. Esther and Duchess were responsible for the more bizarre and befuddling shenanigans.

I exhaled slightly, relaxing against Dolittle. Like he said, how bad could it be? Pushing away from the relative safety of his arms, I tiptoed past the sleeping baby camel and removed my stocking. Holding it away from my face — one could never be too careful with such items — I peeked quickly inside. Apprehension gave way to disappointment.

“There's nothing in here,” I said.

“Dig deeper,” Duchess said in a whispery, mysterious voice.

I rolled my eyes. “You don't need to use the mystery TV voice on me. Season four, episode five of *Duchess of Danger*.”

“Should I be watching that show?” Dolittle asked, his eyes half-lidded as he met my gaze.

“Absolutely,” Duchess declared. “It explains everything you ever need to know about life.”

I gave an imperceptible shake of my head and mouthed, “No way.”

Dolittle chuckled.

“It was worth a shot,” Duchess said. “But seriously, Mollie. Dig deeper.”

I plunged my arm all the way in, up to my elbow. My fingers brushed against an envelope. I tugged it out. “It looks a

bit thin for any reasonable amount of cash to be in there.”

“There’s definitely no cash in those stockings,” Duchess remarked dryly.

“Yeah, ‘cause we haven’t robbed any banks lately,” Esther added.

Dolittle started to laugh, then stopped when no one else laughed. “That was a joke, wasn’t it?”

“You’ll get used to it,” I said, silently praying that was true.

“Ay, baba,” Mahvash huffed. “Open it.”

So I did. Inside was a letter. The first thing I saw was the logo of the bank. The same bank that owned the farm’s mortgage. I opened my mouth to protest, then picked out a few words.

My chin quivered, and I could feel my eyes getting moist. I blinked rapidly. This was no time for tears.

Dolittle leaned forward, snagging my hand, his grip warm and reassuring. “What’s wrong, Mollie?”

Tears escaped my efforts even as my smile widened.

“This is very confusing for me,” Dolittle said. “Is she happy? Sad? Can someone please explain?”

“How?” I whispered. “How’d you do this? You didn’t rob a bank, didn’t you?”

“Just said we didn’t,” Esther barked.

Duchess leaned back in her chair, beaming with self-satisfaction. “It turns out popular channels on LiveLyfe can earn a lady some decent income. And I have more fans than some TV shows.”

I flung my arms around Duchess. “You did it.”

Duchess patted my back. “I should never have mortgaged the farm to begin with. It’s yours, my dear. It’s always been yours.”

I held up the letter. “Duchess paid it all back.”

“And then some,” Duchess added. “Which begs the question. Where can I invest my newfound income? Perhaps an organic restaurant and hostel—”

“Bed and breakfast,” I corrected.

“You could rent out the cottage to mature, stable, long-term tenants of a veterinary persuasion,” Mahvash suggested as she read a message on her phone.

“Or give it to your chicken-loving salad-eating vet,” Esther added.

I collapsed onto the sofa next to Dolittle, crumpling the letter against my chest as I leaned against his. “That sounds about right.”

Dolittle sighed. It wasn’t his bewildered, *what just happened* sigh. This one sounded like contentment. Like home.

Carmel shambled behind the loveseat and tried to snack on the letter. I tucked it into a pocket. That letter was worth a lot.

As in a whole farm and its future.

“The chief wrote me.” Mahvash held up her phone.

“We goin’ back to jail?” Esther asked. “Cause I’m really enjoying not being in jail right now.”

“No. The mayor’s agreed not to press charges against Carmel.”

Duchess snorted. “How magnanimous of him. Can you imagine, carting a camel off to jail?”

The three ladies launched into an energetic debate about what they would do if the mayor or the chief came after their camels. Their words faded into the background as I tipped back my head to admire Dolittle’s profile. “So, Dr. Dolittle. You want to move back into your cottage?”

“If it’s still free. I heard it’s a popular place for people of the veterinary persuasion.” He leaned closer. “Out of curiosity, are you ever going to call me by my real name?”

“Which name would that be?” I asked.

“Any of them.” His cinnamon-scented lips brushed over mine. “Darren. Williams. Even Little.”

“Ah.” I smiled into his kiss. “*Those* names.”

“Although Dolittle is growing on me.”

“You did say you wanted a fresh start,” I reminded him.

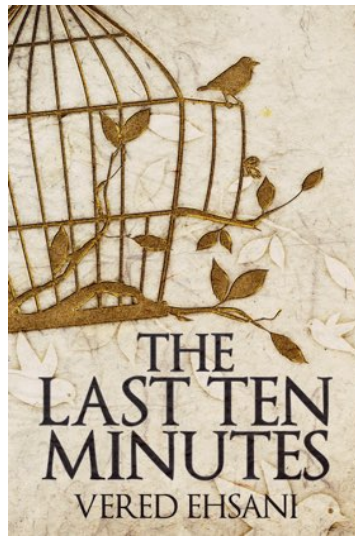
“Dolittle it is, then,” he said, sealing the deal with a kiss.

Despite the speckled chicken pecking at our shoes... the Great Dane clambering onto our laps... Carmel the camel

breathing down our necks... The Three Witches — or Musketeers, depending on who you asked — arguing in the kitchen...

It was the best Christmas kiss ever.

WHAT TO READ NEXT



**Zain Fischer has been trapped
in this examining room forever.**

At least it feels that way.

In this strange cancer clinic, the doctor never comes and the nurse won't answer questions. Zain is lost, wandering endless hallways as she tries to find her way back to Reception, but every door she opens leads to another painful memory of loss and regret.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *The Christmas Camel*.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider writing a review of it on your favorite bookseller so other readers might enjoy it too. Just a couple of sentences would mean a lot to me.

Thank you!

Vered

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vered Ehsani has been a writer since she could hold pen to paper, which is a *lot* longer than she cares to admit. Her work in engineering, environmental management and with the United Nations has taken her around the world. She lives in Kenya with her family and various other animals.

The monkeys in her backyard inspire Vered to create fun, upbeat adventures with a supernatural twist. She enjoys playing with quirky, witty characters who don't quite fit the template for 'normal' despite their best efforts. She's perfectly comfortable exploring the brighter side of human nature.

Are you looking for a mind-refreshing dip into a charming, fanciful world? Then welcome. Sit down with a cup of tea and prepare to be reminded that life can be a delightful place.

Write to vered (vered@sterlingandstone.net) — she loves connecting with her readers!