



THE  
*Dashwood*  
BILLIONAIRES

*That*  
**CONFLICTED**  
*Feeling*

NICKY REDFORD

# THAT CONFLICTED FEELING

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THE DASHWOOD BILLIONAIRES

# NICKY REDFORD



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## About the Author

*For everyone who's fallen flat on their face and didn't have a  
hot billionaire to pick them up.*

## **POLLY**

**I**t's already one of those days. And the wall clock over the root vegetable display says it's only 8:43 a.m.

At least I think that's what it says. It's hard to be precise when the big hand is shaped like a stick of celery and the little hand looks like a pickle. Or is it a zucchini? I've never figured that out. It amuses the customers though.

The knot in my stomach tightens as I look back down at the email from the shop's new landlord saying the rent's going up in a couple of months. Margins are already tight enough around here, mainly because I insist on paying local farmers a fair price for their produce.

Concern about how I'm going to pay Carly at the end of the week is shattered by the sound of her voice from somewhere behind the back office.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she shouts as the door squeaks past the point where it sticks, and rattles shut.

I close the laptop and slide it onto the shelf under the counter.

"Morning," I call back, adjusting my ponytail.

"Seriously, Poll," she yells. "Just get some oil or something and I'll fix the bastard."



Even though I can't see her, I know for sure she's yanking off her hat, unwinding yards of scarf, and hanging her patchwork coat on a hook behind the office door.

It'll take more than a squirt of oil to fix a door that's refused to shut with anything less than brute force for the last six months, and there's no way I'm going to ask this new money-grabbing landlord to fix it. I'm not talking to him about anything unless it's absolutely necessary.

Carly emerges through the beaded curtain from our office/kitchen/storeroom/broom closet, her nose ring glinting in the flickering light from the fizzing bulb over the organic Cortland apples. Her sunflower tattoo peeks out of her V-neck T-shirt as she ties her *Polly's Produce* apron around her back.

"So, did you grow the balls to talk to your mom about at least getting a walking cane?" she asks.

My best friend is like a second daughter to my mom, and a sister to me—sometimes a slightly annoying one who reminds me of the things I'm avoiding.

"She said she didn't feel as bad last night, so I didn't have the heart to bring it up." I shorten the right strap of my overalls to stop it falling off my shoulder.

"Jeez, Poll." The messy bun on top of Carly's head wobbles in time with her frustration. "She'll end up like Mrs. Bentley if you don't stop worrying about upsetting her."

She nods past me to the front door where Mrs. Bentley's concerned face, topped by a sparkly pink knitted hat, peers through the window.

Mrs. Bentley broke her hip ice-skating a year ago. She's seventy-five. And she's only now starting to get around properly with a walker. She comes here every morning, as much for the exercise as our spectacular local fruit and veggies. And maybe even more for the company.

"My mom has arthritis, not an irrational desire to pirouette on the frozen lake. And she's only fifty-five."

Carly narrows her eyes as she peers at Mrs. Bentley. "I'll go grab the new potatoes from out back, and leave Mrs. B to

you. She doesn't look happy."

Carly disappears with a clicky swish of the beaded curtain.

She's right. Rather than the usual smile that crinkles her entire face, the only part of Mrs. Bentley that's crinkled this morning is her forehead. Since I'm fairly sure that coming to see us is the only thing that gets her up and about in the mornings, I shove my money worries to the back of my mind and slap on a smile.

I flip the front door sign from "Veggie Sorry, We're Closed" to "Come In, Lettuce Serve You!"

The old brass bell jingles over my head as I open the door. "Morning, Mrs. Bentley."

"Oh, dear Polly." She looks like she's about to tell a small child their puppy's died.

"Are you okay? You look worried. Carly's just fetching some super cute baby new potatoes that might cheer you up."

She ker-clunks her walker a step closer to the doorway. "Potatoes won't cut it today."

*Ker-clunk.*

"Lord, it must be bad." As far as Mrs. Bentley's concerned, potatoes might be the answer to world peace if only someone would give it a shot.

*Ker-clunk.*

She's halfway through the door.

"You know my nephew is..." She tries to move her walker again, but it won't budge. "I think I'm stuck on that nail again."

"Oh, sorry. I keep forgetting to hammer it in."

It's the third time in the last couple of weeks she's gotten caught on the nail protruding from the doorframe. Carly extricated her the first time. But she was much happier when old Jerry the cobbler unstuck her a few days ago. She blushed. And giggled.

“Here, let me.” I grab the sides of the walker and lift it over the nail.

“There you go. Freedom.”

*Ker-clunk, ker-clunk, ker-clunk*, and she’s in the middle of the shop.

She spins around as quickly as a senior with a freshly healed hip can, and plops herself down in the seat of the walker.

“Whooo, that’s better. Right.” She looks up at me from under the pink sparkles. “My nephew who’s on the council told me something.” She takes my hand. “And I’m afraid you’re not going to like it.”

I knew it. They said they’d order the summer hanging baskets from the local nursery, but I had a feeling it was all talk. They’re such a bunch of penny pinchers, I’d always suspected they’d end up going to some discount giant like Garden World instead.

“You’re worrying me, Mrs. Bentley. Go on.”

“It’s on the down low,” she whispers. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone.” She leans to look around me and check no one’s coming in. “But I can’t keep it from you.”

She’s on the verge of tears. Maybe it’s not the hanging baskets after all. Maybe it is something actually bad. My heart sinks.

“I look forward to seeing you girls every morning.” Her voice has gone a little shaky. “You’re so good to me.”

I crouch down beside her as she puts her other hand on top of mine. “What’s going on, Mrs. B?”

“It’s the site of the old theater.”

The Picture House, a bit farther along on the opposite side of Main Street, burned down last year. Such a shame. The art deco building was a real treasure, and there’s been a giant hole there ever since.

Mrs. Bentley screws up her mouth. “A planning application’s gone in.”

Ah, right. Now, what could upset her this much? A sex shop? Actually, after the way her face lit up at Jerry, maybe not. Whatever it is, it can’t be the catastrophe her expression suggests.

“Okay. For what?”

“Oh, Polly.” She strokes my hand. “Oh, dear Polly.”

She casts her moist gaze around the shop, then settles back on me. “A Yellow Barn. They want to put a Yellow Barn there.”

I pause for a second.

Yellow Barn?

That can’t be right. She must have misunderstood. I blow out a breath and my stomach relaxes.

“There’s no way Yellow Barn would want to come to Warm Springs. We’re way too small for a giant supermarket. But even if they did, it would be out of town with the big box stores. Not here, on Main Street.” I squeeze her hand. “Your nephew must be mistaken.”

“I wish he was, my love. But they’ve definitely put in an application.” She pats the back of my hand. “And they’d be right on your doorstep.”

Yup, a grocery store with the might of Yellow Barn would crush me like a crisp spring pea under a giant rainboot. Not to mention it would be a garish monstrosity with its bright yellow storefront and hideous red and black logo that would ruin our charming street.

But that can’t possibly be what’s happening. It makes no sense. So everything’s fine.

“What the hell’s up with you two?” Carly returns from the back and plops a crate of potatoes on the counter. “You look like you’ve lost a basket full of kittens.”

There must be more worry on my face than I thought. But I refuse to believe this is anything more than a rumor.

Mrs. Bentley beckons her over.

Carly leans in ready to humor whatever non-catastrophic catastrophe is about to be related to her.

“Yellow Barn wants to open here,” Mrs. B whispers. “Where The Picture House was.”

Carly bolts upright. “That would fucking kill us.” She puts a hand on Mrs. B’s shoulder. “Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

Mrs. B shakes her head. “You never can.”

I let go of her hands and stand up. “Can’t be right. Must be a misunderstanding.”

But there is still a niggle in my gut. Mrs. B isn’t stupid. And her nephew’s been on the council for years.

I turn to Carly. “You help Mrs. B find what she needs. I’ll arrange these potatoes out front.”

Stacking fruit and vegetables into pyramids always calms me in a crisis.

“Er, okay.” Carly furrows her brow, apparently confused as to why I’m not reacting a lot more to this devastating news. “I guess we can talk about it later.”

I grab the crate off the counter and muster a smile. “Everything will be fine.”

I head to the front door as Mrs. B eases herself up from the walker seat and Carly tells her something about collard greens being good for the bones.

As I stride out the door my attention turns to the vacant lot down the street where The Picture House once stood.

But suddenly my left leg won’t move past the doorframe.

That dumb nail.

There’s no arguing with physics, though. With the leg of my overalls caught, and the rest of my body still propelling

itself purposefully toward the display table, my body arcs downward.

I fling the crate toward the table to try to save the potatoes, and throw my hands out to try to prevent my face from slamming into the sidewalk.

One elbow jars and my palms sting, yet I end up in a plank pose not a whole lot worse than in my last yoga class.

But the crate didn't quite make it to the table, it's rebounded off the edge, and crashed to the sidewalk, sending adorable baby new potatoes flying in all directions. They bounce around me like ping-pong balls and roll toward the road.

Before I can return to a vertical position, the glinting silver wheels of a large shiny black car pull to a stop in front of the shop, crushing three potatoes.

Well, isn't that exactly how this day's going?

With a heavy sigh I let myself drop to the ground and rest my forehead on my arms. The cold of the concrete instantly seeps through my overalls and T-shirt.

Good God, is it even 9 a.m. yet?

Just inches away, a car door opens then closes.

The heavy clunk is followed by two footsteps.

"Are you okay?"

**POLLY**

Being flat on my belly on the sidewalk is bad enough without someone standing over me.

If I ignore him, I'm sure he'll go away.

"Seriously. Are you okay?" The voice is a bit closer this time.

Guess he's not going away.

I peek over my arms.

Those are highly polished black shoes. I've only seen those kinds of shoes on people I never wanted to see again.

The pin-striped legs above the shoes bend as their wearer crouches in front of me.

Yup. Definitely not going away.

"I'm fine, thank you," I say to the sidewalk.

There's a snort of suppressed laughter. "Okay. But maybe I could help you up. Even if you are, you know, fine."

A hand moves down into my line of sight. It's smooth, and the nails look recently clipped, but not filed. Like he cares about his appearance, but not too much.

"Like I said, I'm fine. Thanks." I ignore the outstretched perfect hand and push myself up onto my knees. Ending up

eye to eye with the man crouched before me.

Eye to sparkling eye.

Two of them.

Blue.

And twinkly.

I don't think I've ever been so twinkled at.

"I just..." I drag my eyes from his and look down at my grubby, scratched palms. "My pants got, er, well one of them did, one leg I mean, it got, um, stuck. It got stuck."

Suddenly a bit sweaty, I twist around to unhook myself from the nail.

But before I can stretch back far enough, he leans in and beats me to it. A crisp white cuff with a silver cufflink in the shape of an M peeks out from the arm of a jacket that matches the pants. He grabs my hem and jiggles it off the nail.

As he pulls back there's a waft of herby hair product. Hmm, rosemary with a hint of mint.

"There you go." He straightens to an imposing height, his broad frame blocking the early spring sun, and offers me his hand again.

I pretend I haven't noticed his hand, get to my feet, and dust myself off, refusing to look up. I don't need another encounter with those baby blues.

"That was all fairly dramatic." There's a smirk in his voice.

He needs to go away now.

"Definitely a nine out of ten from the Bulgarian judge for the midair double axel."

Oh, good. He thinks he's funny.

I take a deep breath, pull my shoulders back, lift my head, and find myself face to chest with a blue tie with tiny yellow dots. It rests on top of the crisp white shirt that sits snugly against his pecs.



With a mind of their own, my eyes keep going up to a chin with the perfect amount of one-day stubble, lips that are quirked into a half-smile at one side, brows raised over those bright eyes, and thick dark brown hair that he's currently pushing his fingers through.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh." He drops the smile. "It actually looked painful. Maybe you should check your knees."

There's no way in hell I'm lifting up the baggy worn legs of my overalls in front of Mr. Twinkles. Not least because my legs haven't seen a razor since the last time I wore a dress, which was at the harvest festival. My policy of prioritizing my mom and the shop above everything else—and by "everything else" I mean men—means I have neither the time nor the need for personal grooming.

"They're fine. All of me is fine, thanks."

"Your hands definitely look a bit scuffed."

He reaches out as if he's about to take one and check it over. I step back and whip both hands behind my back. But that thrusts out my chest, like I'm trying to show it off to him, so I stuff them in my big patch pockets instead.

Maybe I'm a bit dazed from the fall, but he doesn't seem real. It's like this guy in a pin-striped suit suddenly fell from the sky. He looks very Manhattan.

The only city folk we have up here are the hipsters whose artisanal soda making, small batch chocolate production, and specialty pickling, have been priced out of Brooklyn so they move upstate for cheaper rents. Warm Springs is close enough for them to hand-deliver products to the New York City stores that sell them for ludicrous markups, but too far away for daily commuting, so we're still a reasonably priced place to live and run a business.

Well, until my shop's new landlord showed himself to be a money-grabbing devil.

I've been silently staring at Mr. Twinkles's perfectly structured face for way too long now. Why is he still here anyway? Smiling. And being annoying.

I blink myself back to reality and tear my eyes away from the chiseled cheekbones and plump lips. They land on the potatoes crushed in the gutter.

“You squashed Peter’s potatoes.”

He follows my gaze.

“Oh, sorry. Do you have more for him?”

“They’re not *for* Peter. He grew them. They’re from Peter’s farm, farther up the valley.”

He cocks his head. “You know who grew the potatoes?”

“I know who grows everything.”

I point through the shop window.

“The broccoli’s from Rolling Ridge Farm. Ed and Vera’s is always greener than anyone else’s. The chard was grown on a gorgeous acreage near Millstock by Ted James. His family’s farmed that land for four generations. The apples come from Lennard’s Orchard in Chippingwood. Shall I go on?”

“Nope. Think I’m all good for the family history of the produce, thanks.” He looks at the Polly’s Produce sign etched on the shop window. “Polly?”

I nod.

“Hi, Polly. I’m Max.”

He holds out his buffed hand again. It would be rude to refuse it a third time. I wipe my right hand down the side of my overalls, wince as the graze catches on the fabric, and gingerly take his hand.

“Thought it looked sore. I’ll be gentle with it.” He twitches his brows the tiniest bit. It’s a big enough movement to be saucy, but small enough to allow for plausible deniability that he’s done it at all.

And he is. Gentle, that is. He gives me a light but firm shake, then flips my hand over and skims his thumb across my palm, skirting the scrape. “You should put something on that.”

Whatever that tingle is that's running from my hand up my arm has to stop. It's not helpful at all. I need that hand back. Right now.

As I pull away, his fingers drag slowly across it, causing a flutter my stomach hasn't felt for years.

Good God. I bet those fingers have skills.

Potatoes.

Must focus on potatoes.

I drop to my knees and pick up the ones scattered at my feet, which has the bonus of hiding how red my cheeks must be. They certainly feel like they must be midway between pomegranate and plum.

"I have to fix the display. I'm running behind this morning."

Oh, God, he's gathering potatoes now as well. With his pin-striped butt in the air. Those buttocks and thighs are clearly not lacking time in the gym.

"Thanks, but I can manage," I insist. "And you must have important things to hurry off and do."

He picks up the crate from the sidewalk, puts it on the table that's topped with plastic turf, and drops his handful of potatoes in it.

"Okay. Well..." He's interrupted by a ringing phone that he pulls from his inside jacket pocket. Lord, that shirt really does hug his chest.

"Bye, then. I guess." He laughs almost awkwardly for one so seemingly confident, and taps the phone. "Hi, Mom," he says as he walks toward the car.

I do a weird tiny wave, but thankfully he's already turned around to open the back door.

The *back* door?

My eyes flash to the driver's seat, which I now see is occupied by a well-dressed older man with a neatly trimmed beard and a big warm smile, who returns my awkward wave.

A chauffeur.

Mr. Twinkles has a chauffeur.

Carly appears in the doorway. “Who’s the hot dude in the suit?”

I drop the last of the potatoes in the crate alongside the ones touched by his gentle, yet firm, hands.

“Shouldn’t you be taking care of Mrs. B?” I ask.

Carly stares at the black car, which looks about as out of place here as a fox in a chicken coop. “She can’t decide between tarragon or thyme for her chicken tonight, so I’m giving her a minute.” She looks back at me and gasps. “You’re blushing. Who the hell was he?”

“No one.” I grab the crate from the table. I can’t build a pyramid from bruised produce.

She steps aside to let me through, as the car pulls away.

“Well, he didn’t look the type to do his own shopping,” she says, following me back inside.

“He was no one.” There’s no time for this nonsense. Not when I might have a planning application from a hideous discount grocery giant to stop.

I plop the crate on the counter and turn to Mrs. B, who’s still pondering the herbs.

“You enjoyed thyme with your chicken a couple of months ago, Mrs. B. And a squeeze of lemon. You said it made all the difference.”

I reach into the toolbox under the counter, grab the hammer, and head back toward the front door.

That goddamn nail.

**MAX**

“**H**ow lovely to hear you laugh,” Mom says in my ear as I slide onto the back seat.

I laughed?

As George pulls us away from the curb, I look back just in time to see Polly disappearing into the shop. She even looks defiant from behind. And it’s obvious there’s a perfectly pert butt hiding under those loose overalls. I had no idea baggy denim could be so alluring.

“All this fresh air must be messing with my head,” I tell Mom. “A weekend at your place and now a night in Warm Springs? Jeez. Way too much greenery. Don’t worry, I’ll be back to the grumpy son you know and love once I’m home, breathing in pollution to the sound of honking horns.”

“You’re not talking while you’re driving, are you?”

We crawl in the slow traffic along the historic Main Street lined with red brick and clapboard buildings.

“Nope. George came up on the train to drive me back.”

I pull the phone away from my ear and hold it up as Mom sings, “Hi, George.”

“Hello, Mrs. Dashwood,” he calls back. “Thank God Max brought the Mercedes and left the Lamborghini at your place. I

hate driving that thing.”

I’m pretty happy about that decision too, since the shitty bed at the Park ’N’ Sleep I had to stay at last night—to be here for this morning’s unnecessarily early meeting—has left me with a crick in my spine and there’s plenty of space to stretch out in the back of this car.

I put the phone back to my ear. “Anyway, is everything okay, Mom?”

We pass the striped awnings and sidewalk displays of the neighborhood butcher, florist, and coffee shop. The new Yellow Barn store will have a department for each of those.

“Everything’s perfect.” There’s a huge smile in her voice. “I know I’ve said thank you for the house a thousand times, but I just needed to say it again. It was such a lovely weekend with all of us together for the first time in so long. And the village kids loved the Easter egg hunt. We’ll definitely open the grounds for that every year.”

“And there you were, thinking the house and property would be too big.” I’d spent months trying to convince her it wasn’t, that she would want a large family home where we could all gather at the same time.

“Only at first. I was worried about me and your dad rattling around the place on our own. But now that we’ve had a couple of days with the whole family here, it feels like a real home. And with Owen proposing to Summer, and them wanting to have their wedding by the pond, well, the whole place already has meaning and a place in our hearts forever.”

My cousin from California popped the question to his girlfriend of only two months yesterday, right before I got the call to come here to sort out a hitch with the Yellow Barn planning application.

Two months.

Insanity.

I mean, his fiancé seems nice and all. But it can’t be possible to know you’ve met the right person after only eight weeks.

I'm happy to be married to my business. We're a perfect match. I completely control it, it makes me piles of cash, and it doesn't insist I spend weekends with its parents.

"Anyway, we'll never be able to thank you enough," Mom says for the quadrillionth time since my two brothers, two brother-like cousins, and I, bought the old rundown estate house for them. After months of painstaking renovations, my parents finally moved in right before their wedding anniversary on Valentine's Day.

"You couldn't deserve it more. You both sacrificed enough for us. It's your turn to be taken care of now." I pick some potato dirt from under a fingernail. "I just wish Dad would relax about it a bit."

"Oh, Maxie. You know he finds it hard. He just thinks it should be him who looks after you all, not the other way around."

"Well, it's definitely our turn."

"Anyway, that's all I called for. Thank you. For everything. Tell George to drive safely."

"I'll make him stick to the speed limit the whole way." George shoots me a glance in the rearview mirror. "Don't eat all the leftover Easter eggs at once. Bye, Mom."

She blows a kiss through the phone at me, just as she's done at the end of every call since I was thirteen, when I flipped out about how embarrassing it was.

"Marvelous woman, your mother," George says. "Maybe one day you'll meet someone you want to build a family with."

Here we go. "Subtle, George. Subtle. You usually do better than that."

I grab my laptop from the seat beside me, open it, and look for the spreadsheets on the Warm Springs Yellow Barn proposal that my domineering CFO, Tarquin, sent this morning.

“Well, I hate to see you wasting your life on constant work and those, erm, ladies I drive home from your place at three a.m.”

“They’re not hookers, George. You say it like they’re hookers.”

“I know. But they’re also not exactly anyone you’d take home to meet your parents either.”

“Well, you would know. You probably had longer conversations with any of them than I did.”

I focus on the numbers in front of me, not only to see if there’s a way to refine them to make this store even more profitable than I think it will be, but also to avoid being dragged into George’s plans for my future wife, two-point-four kids, and golden retriever.

“That young lady seemed nice,” he says.

The projections on the screen show what an opportunity this growing town is for my company.

“Who?” I murmur.

“The one you just helped.”

I look up. His attention is fixed on the road ahead as we pass between two fields. One with sheep, the other with some sort of green crop starting to grow. Christ, I can’t wait to see the New York skyline.

“I only helped her because you pulled over and insisted I did. I’d have been happy to cruise right on by. We’d be half an hour closer to civilization by now if we hadn’t stopped.”

And I didn’t help her much. Polly was too proud to let me. And so proud to know every last detail of who grew her produce. I suck in my lips as they threaten to curl into something resembling a smile. She didn’t seem to like me at all. And she sure as fuck would like me even less if she’d known why I was there.

“I have good instincts,” says George. Without moving his head, he looks back into the rearview mirror and waggles his



eyebrows at me. “And I’ve never seen you date anyone that adorable.”

“Like my mom said, George. Eyes on the road.”

---

“Morning, Mr. Dashwood,” chirps the new receptionist as I emerge from the elevator and step onto the white marble floor of the executive level of my office tower.

I nod and smile so I don’t have to say “Morning” without adding her name. Which I’ve forgotten.

My company, Harvest Enterprises, uses the top two floors of the building. We rent out the rest to select businesses. There’s always a long waitlist for space, but few companies make it through the strict vetting process.

It’s called Harvest because I pick up any business that’s good and ripe and ready to go. Like this skyscraper, the Yellow Barn grocery chain, a mattress-in-a-box company—as long as it’s not illegal or cruel, if it makes good money, I snap it up for my portfolio. I enjoy how different they all are. It keeps me on my toes. Like having a bunch of kids with different personalities.

Outside my office, my executive assistant, Charlotte, straightens her pastel color-coded files on the new shiny white shelves behind her desk.

“Ah, there you are,” she says. “Tarquin keeps calling for you. Wants to go over the spreadsheets. Says you’re not answering your phone and I’m to make you call him back the second I see you.”

Her ponytail swings from side to side as she talks. It would irritate the living shit out of me if it weren’t attached to a head that contains the answer to almost any question about my own company that I could ask.

“I *was* answering my phone. Just not to *him*.”

I took Tarquin on as CFO six months ago to help level up the business with his cutthroat ways. I hadn't anticipated his inability to ever turn off his shark-like manner. But he's a brilliant finance guy, so he stays.

Charlotte chuckles. "You can't still be scared of him. You do know you're his boss, right?"

"That's a stretch. When was the last time you called me Mr. Dashwood?"

"Three years ago. At my interview."

She's like the annoying but monumentally efficient little sister I never had. Though I doubt my youngest brother would gaze so adoringly at her if she were our sister.

"If I weren't certain that, if I dropped down dead right now, you'd step over my still warm corpse and run this place better than me, I might have something to say about that."

"Coffee?"

"Read my mind."

I swing open the glass door in the glass wall of my office and drop my laptop and the Yellow Barn store plans on my desk.

My shoulders instantly drop away from my ears. Hell, it's good to be home.

I amble across the room to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Even on the increasing number of days where I feel trapped in a glass box, shuffling papers, and having soul-sucking conversations about letters of intent and indemnities, this view lifts my spirit. The afternoon sun glints off the East River. Fuck, this city is a beauty.

Charlotte does her trademark two taps on the door behind me.

I turn to see her stick her head around it and cut her off before she even opens her mouth. "Tell Tarquin the Terrible I'll call him back. In a minute."

“It’s not that. Someone from the Warm Springs planning board wants a word.”

“Christ.” I fling my arms out. “What is it with these petty small town council people? I already dealt with this once today. “

“I’ll put him through to your cell.”

She ducks back around the door. My phone rings two seconds later.

“Hi, Max Dashwood.”

“Ah, yes. Mr. Dashwood. Hello again. This is Councilman Stevens. We met this morning.”

“Yes, it seems like only moments ago.” I let my sarcasm hang in the air for a second, but he doesn’t respond. “What’s the problem? I thought I solved the issue with the paperwork earlier.”

“Yes. Yes, you did, Mr. Dashwood. That was great. But there’s something else.”

I rest my hand on the window and lean forward. A cruise boat inches along the glittering water. The deck looks packed with tourists.

“I must have already filled out every form in your building, Councilman.”

“Oh, it’s not about the forms.” He takes a deep breath and expels it loudly. “Thing is, somehow, news of your application has leaked out. We certainly haven’t released it yet. But we’ve had a flurry of objections in the three hours since you left.”

“Objections? What kind of objections?”

“Oh.” He lets out an awkward half laugh. “All kinds. From calls for a ban on all large corporations moving into town, to the dearly deceased owner of The Picture House returning to haunt any chain store built in its spot, to a kid who says he hates the color yellow.”

Well, if that’s the best they’ve got, no problem. “That’s all just petty local nonsense. I’m sure we can ignore it.”

“Hmmm, well, I’m *not* so sure. Warm Springs residents aren’t really the type you can ignore. We just convened a quick emergency session of the planning board, and voted to put your application on hold until we’ve spoken with you formally again.”

Jesus Christ. I quietly thump the window with the side of my fist. I’m doing the best I can to keep a lid on my frustration because I need this infuriating man on our side. But he’s turning getting on my nerves into a fine art.

“There’s nothing more I can tell you, Councilman Stevens. I’ve given you every detail of the project I have. Unless you need my blood type, and the name of our apple supplier’s pet ferret, what more can you possibly want?”

I’m absolutely certain Polly would know the name of any ferret owned by one of her apple suppliers. And why has she popped into my head again?

“Obviously, Mr. Dashwood, we absolutely support Yellow Barn’s investment in our town.” His nose whistles as he inhales deeply. “But we are going to need some assurances from you.”

I do not have the patience for a small-town guy on a power trip. “Tell me what they are.” I grit my teeth. “And I’ll do my best to give them.”

“Excellent. We’ll do that at our next meeting. We need you to attend and take questions from the board.”

Oh, what a waste of fucking time. “Be happy to. By video chat.”

“We need you here in person, Mr. Dashwood. We’re an in-person kind of town.”

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut and dig my nails into my palm. “When’s the next meeting?”

“The day after tomorrow. Wednesday. Six p.m.”

“I’ll be there.”

I hang up. “Fuck.”

There are two more quick knocks behind me, and Charlotte strolls in with my coffee. “That doesn’t sound good.”

I shake my head. “Have to go back to Warm Springs to clean up another mess.”

Me and my bright business expansion ideas. Spot the growing communities, I said. Get Yellow Barn into them before any other supermarket chains, I said. Then once the communities are bigger and other grocery stores want to move in, we’ll already have the customer loyalty, I said.

I owned this.

“And you’re absolutely sure you can’t trust any of the Yellow Barn execs to go deal with it?” asks Charlotte.

“Of course not. They’d do everything they could to make sure the plans were *not* approved.”

The Yellow Barn execs hate the idea almost as much as they hate me. Bunch of lazy asses who’ve been resting on their laurels for years till I bought the company and made the unreasonable suggestion that perhaps they should actually do some work to justify their fat cat salaries. There’s no way any one of those resentful bastards would make the slightest effort to sweet-talk the council. They want to see my first idea for the chain fall at the first hurdle.

Maybe they don’t realize I haven’t failed at anything yet.

Well, not in business, anyway.

“Whatever you’ve planned for me for Wednesday,” I tell Charlotte, “unplan it.”

I don’t need to look around to know that glee has spread across Charlotte’s face. As much as she loves scheduling, she loves the challenge of rescheduling even more.

“On it,” she says with all the joy of a kid about to unwrap a stack of Christmas gifts.

As the door closes behind her, I lean against the window again.

Maybe having to go back there isn't so bad. Maybe not being able to pass this down the line to someone else is a good thing. It's been years since I've gotten my hands dirty in the nitty-gritty of getting a project off the ground. And that's what I always loved about this business. It was the fun part. And I've been removed from that for years now.

My mind darts back to Polly in her overalls lying at my feet this morning. And the curve of her breasts on either side of the bib when she sat up.

I rest my forehead against the cool glass.

And watch a tiny tugboat in the river pushing a giant load.

**POLLY**

**M**y phone rings as I park my beloved vintage VW bus outside the council building.

Converting the bus so I could drive from farm to farm to collect supplies for the shop was the last thing my dad did for me. When he'd finished, Carly flexed her artistic muscles and added the "Polly's Produce" text, and illustrations of an array of fruits and vegetables to the outside.

And it's Carly on the phone. "Hey, Poll. Bad news. The Bearded Bean twins aren't going to meet you there. Something to do with a clogged coffee roaster. Or grinder. Or...I dunno, something's clogged."

"Well, shit. That leaves just me." Every person who said they'd be here to protest when the Yellow Barn exec arrives for this evening's meeting, has now pulled out. "So much for community spirit."

"Want me to close up the shop and join you?" Carly is always the most supportive friend I could wish for.

"No, you stay there. Opening late on Wednesdays has been working. Let's keep the money coming in while we still can."

"You coming back here, then?"

"Hell, no. I'm staying." I sit a little taller. "I'm not going to let some corporate boss storm into town and walk all over us

without a fight.”

“Try as hard as you like,” Carly says in a lower voice, as if there’s someone in the shop she doesn’t want to hear, “but it’ll never undo what happened to your parents.”

“I know. But I can try to stop it from happening to me.”

“Go give ’em hell.” I can almost hear her punch the air. “And I’ll go break it to the Duckworths’ new housekeeper that she’d better take those brussels sprouts out of her basket or Mr. Duckworth will fire her before she makes it to her second week.”

I hang up, jump out of the van, slide open the side door, and start hauling out the placards my mom, Carly, and I made last night for the dozen people who’d promised to join me here. To be fair, they did all have good reasons.

Mrs. Bentley was worried that, if she came, her nephew might realize it was she who’d told me that the council’s called a Yellow Barn honcho to meet with the planning board this evening. She also told me the only reason he’s been called back is because of the flood of emails and phone calls we managed to scramble together right after she first told me about the plans on Monday morning.

At least that shows the council might listen, and protesting is worth the effort. But I guess persuading people to come out and picket the meeting is harder than getting them to send a quick email.

The farmers who said they’d come are all stuck at home for some animal-birthing or equipment failure reason or other. The florist has a sick dog, the baker needs to help her kid with a homework emergency, and now the coffee twins have a bean-related catastrophe.

The town hall is set back from the road, behind benches and raised planters. I lug the placards from the van two at a time and prop them up against the wall beside the entrance. I don’t have enough arms to hold them all up, but I can definitely make a good display. And they’re pretty eye-



catching. Mom and I painted the words, and Carly added the illustrations.

My favorite is the cartoon face on the verge of vomiting above the slogan, “Yellow Barn Puts The Gross In Grocery.”

I lock up the van. It’s ten to six. The corporate monster will be here soon.

Shame there’s only me here. I’d wanted this guy—I’m assuming it’s a guy, it’s always a guy—to see how much Warm Springs people value the personal touch of local businesses and that we’re not a bunch of small-town pushovers.

I grab the vomit sign, and the one that says “Cheap Food. But At What Cost?” along with Carly’s drawing of a giant boot crushing a tiny clapboard shop, and pace up and down in front of the row of the other placards.

I should have come up with a chant. If the others were here, we’d definitely have a chant by now.

Ah, here we go.

A gleaming black car slows down and stops right in front of my bus.

It looks a bit familiar. But why would I recognize a flashy car?

The back door opens.

A tall, dark-haired man in a suit tailored to perfectly fit his ridiculously well-proportioned body unfolds himself and steps out.

Oh, well, shit.

Shit it all.

Shit it all to high heaven.

And back again.

My stomach drops. And flips. And wobbles. And adds a few somersaults in case that wasn’t enough acrobatics for one internal organ.

If it isn’t Mr. Twinkles himself.

He does up the middle button of his jacket, pulls down his white shirt cuffs, and looks up toward the building.

Then at me.

I can almost see the glint in his eyes from here.

He casts a sideways glance at my bus. One side of his mouth curls up as he strides toward me.

My placard-holding arms have accidentally drooped to my sides. I thrust them high in the air as he stops in front of me and smirks in a not unattractive way.

“Hello again, Polly.” He raises an eyebrow at my signs. “It looks like you’re protesting against something.”

Jesus, that face.

I waggle my placards at it. “I think it might be you.”

“Surely not. I’m the charming gentleman who unhooked you from your doorway. My name’s Max by the way.”

He offers me a hand to shake. But there’s no way I’m putting down one of these signs. Or touching him.

He lets it hang for a second before casually pushing it into his pants pocket. “Sorry, you seem to have your hands full. Why on earth would you want to protest against me?”

His mock-innocent face is particularly annoying. But no less handsome. Which is even more annoying.

“Either you’ve coincidentally shown up in an executive car and an executive suit at exactly the time the executive from Yellow Barn is due here for the planning board meeting. Or you *are* the executive from Yellow Barn.”

He slides the hand from his pocket and points at me. That finger has just been right next to his—

“You’d make an excellent detective,” he says, thankfully interrupting where my mind was heading. “But I don’t work for Yellow Barn.”

“Oh.”

Maybe he's not the devil. Maybe he's not that annoying. Maybe it's not so bad that my arms are trembling not just from the weight of the picket signs.

"My company does own it, though."

Christ, who is this guy? "You mean you're the executive who owns all the Yellow Barn executives?"

He nods.

What is he, some sort of global business mogul? "You realize that's worse, right?"

"I'd like to think it puts a little distance between me and the grocery store that is, apparently, er, 'gross.'" He nods toward the placard in my right hand and runs his hand down his red tie.

My mind flashes back to the tingles that rippled up my arm when that exact thumb stroked the palm of my grazed hand just two days ago.

"If you're fighting to bring one of those huge hideous stores here," I tell him, "there's about as much distance between you and Yellow Barn as there was between the peanut butter and jam on my toast this morning."

"Ah." His smile reveals a row of perfect, white, expensive dentistry. "Now there is some common ground between us. I'm very partial to a good strawberry jam. Yellow Barn has an excellent one in its Fruity Fiesta range."

"Where are the strawberries from?"

He shrugs.

"How much are the farmers paid to grow them?"

He shrugs again. "Whatever the going rate is for strawberries, I'd imagine."

"Sure about that?" Giant companies almost always undercut market price.

He ignores my question, and runs those baby blues along the placards lined up along the wall behind me. "You seem to have considerably more signs than hands."

My shoulders are burning with the heat of a thousand ghost peppers, but I will not put these two signs down while he can see me. I will not give in.

“The other people got delayed.” There’s no way I’m telling him they didn’t show up.

“Right, yeah.” He emits a skeptical chuckle. “Or, maybe, they simply don’t care. Maybe they’d be happy with the Yellow Barn special of ten pounds of potatoes for a buck on the first of every month. Everyone needs to eat, Polly.”

“My customers value quality produce. They like that it’s grown by people I know. And they like the personal touch of our service. No one in your produce department would remember Mrs. Bentley likes thyme and lemon with her chicken.”

“Maybe Mrs. Bentley could remember that for herself.” He pulls back a crisp cuff to reveal a large aviator-style watch. “Well, I have to go explain to your delightful council people what a huge benefit Yellow Barn would be for Warm Springs.”

“But you know it wouldn’t be.” My body temperature shoots up, not just from the effort of holding the placards, but from frustration at this soulless ass. “You know it would destroy pretty much every business on Main Street. Apart from maybe Jerry the cobbler. I bet you don’t have a cobbling department.”

He mimes writing something on the palm of his hand.

“Add cobbling department,” he mutters.

It would be funny if there weren’t so much at stake. Instead of making me laugh, it raises my blood pressure. “You know you’d be wrecking the heart of our community purely for profit. And you simply don’t care.”

“I know nothing of the sort. If your business and everyone else’s businesses are as loved by the locals as you say, they’ll be loyal to you and not succumb to the money-saving charms of a heartless retail bastard like me.”

He steps away toward the glass double doors of the town hall.

“Nice to chat, though.” He nods toward the line of picket signs again. “Hope your friends turn up soon.”

I’m suddenly aware of how alone I am, and completely on display. It’s like one of those nightmares where you’re giving a speech, then look down to see you forgot to get dressed. I must look pathetic.

“It really isn’t only me, you know. There’ll be more people next time.” Now I sound pathetic, too.

He purses his lips and nods as if to say, “Yeah, yeah.”

I resist the overwhelming instinct to run away and escape this humiliation. Mine and my mom’s futures depend on my making a success of the shop, so I hold my ground.

“This isn’t the end of it. There’ll be petitions. And demonstrations. And...flyers.”

He holds up his hands in dramatic surrender. “Oh. Well. If there’s going to be *flyers*.”

He spins around, pretends to walk toward his car, then turns back, raises his eyebrows, and smiles. It’s a smile that lights up his face, makes his eyes sparkle, and probably wobbles the bellies of every human who finds men attractive.

Handsome jerk.

“Cute van-slash-bus thing, by the way,” he says as he heads for the town hall.

That suit fits his backside as perfectly as it fits his shoulders.

I drop the placards to my side. My arms are killing me.

**MAX**

**P**olly's oblivious to me approaching.

She's slumped low in the driver's seat of her ridiculous bus. Glued to her phone. Feet clad in socks with a weird pattern on them, up on the dash next to the steering wheel which is wearing a blue and white polka dot cover. The position pulls her overalls tight around her thighs.

I rest my elbow on the open door. "You're still here?"

She bolts upright and pulls her feet down. Her face flushes in exactly the same way as when I touched her hand outside the shop. Blood rushed to parts of me in that moment too.

"It's not nice to sneak up on a person."

"Hardly. I walked right over here in a completely non-sneaky way." She tucks her feet up under her, as if to hide them. "Oh, come on. What are they?"

"What are what?"

"The socks. What's on the socks?"

"Nothing."

"Go on. Show me."

She sticks out her chin and shakes her head like a defiant child, her ponytail jiggling from shoulder to shoulder. "My

socks are none of your business.”

She’s hilarious. And annoying. But in a cute-annoying kind of way. I mean, it’s hardly like she can cause any actual trouble for me.

“Then they must be extremely embarrassing.”

“No. Just private.”

Yeah, extremely fucking cute. “Private socks?”

She shifts uncomfortably and sighs. “Can we please forget about my socks?”

Maybe. For the moment.

“How come you’re still here, anyway?” I ask her. “Waiting for something?”

“You.”

Oh, now that’s interesting. I put my hand on my heart and affect a dreamy gaze. “Aw, how sweet.”

“So? What happened?” she asks. “Let me guess. You offered them a stack of gold bars and they waved your application through?”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh, they made you fight for it, did they? Well, good for them. Maybe they do have spines after all.”

Her commitment to the cause is admirable. “Maybe the meeting is no more your business than your socks are mine.”

I step back and look her bus over from fender to fender. “This is quite the ride.”

She smiles and her shoulders relax a little. “It’s a 1968. My dad fixed it up, bit by bit. He fiddled with it for months to knock it into shape and get it all tuned up.”

I lean in over the passenger seat and peer into the back. “So, where’s the stove and the, er...” I look her right in the eye. “Bed?”

Color floods her cheeks and she turns away. The ability to make her blush fills me with almost as much pride as when I

got the full scholarship that meant I could go to college. Polly dismisses me with a wave.

“When I decided to start the shop, my Dad took all the camping stuff out so I could use it for collecting produce and delivering orders. It was my celebratory shop-opening gift from him.”

I look at the lettering, vegetables, fruit, and flowers painted on the side. “This his artwork too?”

“God, no. He couldn’t draw a stick man. That was all Carly. My assistant at the shop.”

“And is your dad okay with her drawing all over it?”

“He never got to see it.” She looks down and picks at the edge of the driver’s seat.

Well, whatever that story is can’t be good. As I flounder for a way to dig myself out of that one, she fortunately speaks first.

“Anyway.” She looks back up. “What happened?”

“It was a private meeting.” I tap the side of my nose. “You might be able to help me with something, though.”

“You think I might help you get permission for the store?” She half smiles and blows out a puff of air. “I know you’ve only just met me. But you have met me.”

“Yeah. I have, haven’t I.” And I must admit, it’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time. “I actually just want to know what the best hotel in town is.”

“You’re *staying*?” I doubt she’d sound more disappointed if she discovered her entire stock of avocados was rotten.

“I should probably be offended by the tone. But, yes.”

“Why?”

“Never you mind.”

“If you don’t tell me, maybe I’ll tell you the worst hotel is the best one.”

“Now, how am I supposed to trust you?”



“Because I have an honest face.” She cups her hands under her chin and gives me an angelic smile.

It is, indeed, honest. And beautiful. In a farmy kind of way.

“Seriously, what’s the best hotel? And where is it?”

“There are only two. The Warm Motel, and The Springs B&B. Cockroaches have been known to check *out* of The Warm Motel.” She puts a finger to her lips and looks me up and down, deep in thought. “But actually, hmm.”

“Okay. The Springs B&B it is.”

“Well, there is a Park ’N’ Sleep on the highway outside town. You might like that better. It’s nice and, you know, generic, faceless, bland, corporate, soulless—”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I get the gist.” I make the windup gesture. “I’ve stayed there before. It hurt my back. Where’s the non-cockroachy B&B?”

“See the The Moody Rooster Pub over there?” She points toward a half-timbered building farther down the street. “Directly behind it.”

“Great, thanks.”

So, we’re done here. But my feet haven’t moved. Nor have my eyes. They’re still glued to the delightful face before me. How can the human equivalent of a sharp stone in your shoe be so hard to walk away from?

She tips her head to one side. “Anything else?”

I grab two placards sitting on the sidewalk next to me and look from one to the other.

“Careful you don’t go without ‘Ban The Barn’ or ‘Show Yellow Barn The Red Light.’”

She leans between the front seats and reaches back to slide open the side door. The bib of her overalls stretches to the side, revealing the full curve of a perfect handful of a breast under her T-shirt.

“You can drop them in there on top of the rest.” She plops back into her seat. “If you’d like to be helpful.”

There's a chance she caught me checking out her boob. Oh, well. Who cares? I toss in the signs and dust off my hands.

Now I have to leave. I can't stand here bantering with this feisty produce seller for the rest of the evening. Though it definitely wouldn't be the worst way to spend a couple of hours.

The door makes a satisfying *thunk* as I slam it shut.

"Thanks," she says, pulling on a boot.

"Ah-ha." I point at her socks. "Goats."

She flops back in the seat and sighs. "Yup. Goats."

"That's not so bad. Why would you be embarrassed to have goats on your feet?"

"I didn't want to have to explain my socks to you. We have goats. My mom adores them. Makes soap from their milk. I sell it at the shop." She rolls her head across the headrest to look at me. "Goats are kind of a thing at my house."

"Maybe that's nothing to be ashamed of. Anyway, I hope the rest of your evening is protest-free."

She pulls on the other boot, then turns the key in the ignition. "My time will only be protest-free once the council has refused you permission to open your monstrosity."

The top half of her body crawls across the passenger seat to grab the door and pull it shut, closing me out. Then she yanks on her seat belt and chugs away without a backward glance.

As the bus passes me, the rear doors come into view for the first time. Painted across them are the words, "Warning: Delicious On Board!"

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"So, you stopped to chat to the young lady on the way into the meeting *and* on the way out?" George says, as I get into the back seat of my waiting car.

“Oh, stop it. This is the business stage of my life, remember? Not the relationship stage. And even if it were, I couldn’t have a relationship with the one woman hellbent on crushing that business.”

George twists to look over his shoulder at me. “I think that’s what you like about her.”

“I can assure you, I don’t like *anything* about her.” I am a little buzzed after our interaction, like my spirits have been lifted. But that must be from the fun of the fight, the joy of toying with someone who thinks they can beat me when I know for sure they can’t. Not from anything George is talking about.

He nods. “Right, yeah.”

“Anyway, there I was, thinking you’d ask how the meeting went.”

“I assumed it was a success, like they usually are. The chats with women, usually not so much.”

“You complained the other day about the number of them you drive home at 3 a.m. That must represent some degree of success.”

“Hmm, well.” He raises his eyebrows. “Like you said, you didn’t talk to them as much as I did.”

Time to move on from George’s assessment of my choice in female company.

“Well, this meeting with the council wasn’t a roaring success either. They say they want to give the store the go-ahead. But after the flurry of complaints they’ve had, they’re worried about not being re-elected if they do. So the spineless fools are going to put it out to public consultation before they consider approving the plans.”

George starts the engine and puts the car in gear.

“Oh, and we’re not heading back to the city,” I tell him. “At least, I’m not. I need you to drop me at a B&B that’s apparently behind that pub over there. Then you can take the car and head back.”

“You have to stay?”

“Well, that bunch of charmless council bastards doesn’t have a hope of winning over public opinion, so I’m going to have to stay here a few days and do it myself.”

George pulls away from the curb as I call Charlotte.

“I’m not in the mood for cheering another success,” she says against a background of clattering sounds.

“What’s that noise?”

“I’m cooking dinner. Like normal people do at eight o’clock on a Wednesday.”

“Well, I need you to rearrange my schedule for at least the rest of this week.”

“You know no one else would drop what they’re doing in the middle of their evening to do that for you, right?”

“Maybe. But I know for sure you’ll jump at the chance to rearrange the colored sticky tabs all over whichever floral-covered planner you’re on right now.”

“Why? Why does everything need to be rescheduled?”

“I have to stay in Warm Springs for a few days. If any meeting you’ve already got me down for is critical, make it a video call and I’ll fit it in. Otherwise, I need you to book me a bunch of stuff up here—interviews with the local paper, radio station, community websites, and whatever else might constitute a media blitz in these parts.”

“Why?”

“I need to win over the locals.”

“Oh, God help them all.” Sometimes her sarcasm rivals mine.

“My idea to expand Yellow Barn into growing communities depends on it.”

“Ah, well, if it’s about showing their lazy ass execs that you’re right and they’re wrong, I’m all in. Not to mention you’d be unbearable if your first idea for a new acquisition fell

at the first hurdle. There'll be a new schedule waiting for you when you wake up."

"Great. And get the spare keys to my place from Elliot and go grab some clothes for me. Some jeans and, well, anything I've got that makes me look less corporate and more down with the locals."

"Well, that's definitely the toughest assignment of the day."

"Hey. I have casual clothes."

"Yeah, gym gear. I'll send a package in the morning. Once I know where you're staying."

"Thanks." I hang up.

"You know who'd appreciate Charlotte's organizational skills?" George asks as we round the corner behind The Moody Rooster.

"Are you saying I don't?"

"I mean appreciate in a *romantic* sense."

George's two kids are happily married, with kids of their own, and his wife passed away a few years ago. It might be his new life mission to pair off me and my brothers.

"Jesus, George. What is it with you and matchmaking right now?"

"Elliot."

Elliot is my youngest brother. Owns a multimillion-dollar software company with my cousin Owen—the cousin who got engaged in my parents' garden over the weekend. Owen runs the West Coast side of their business out of San Francisco, and Elliot runs the New York end from two floors below me. And yes, he and his company had to go through the same vetting process as everyone else to get an office in the building.

"Oh, Christ. Don't. Even I've noticed him staring at her butt. But you know how I feel about mixing business and family. It's a giant no. Never. Not under any circumstances. I made the brothers and cousins all shake on it, years ago. So,

do not go encouraging that, George. I don't want to have to fall out with my little brother about it."

"I think they'd be adorable together."

"And I don't want to fall out with you either."

George stops the car outside a three-story Victorian house with bright window boxes at every window, lace curtains behind them, and a glossy bright pink door. *The Springs B&B* is written in a curly blue font on a yellow sign.

"How quaint," George says.

My phone rings.

Charlotte.

"I booked you into a place called The Springs B&B. Apparently it's the only decent place to stay. You might have preferred the Park 'N' Sleep again, but I figure if you want the locals to adore you, you'd better stay somewhere a little more community oriented."

"I finally beat you to something. Sitting outside it now. It looks like a florist shop threw up all over it, then wrapped it in candy-colored fabric, and tied it up with a lacy ribbon."

"Hmm. I'm looking at the interior pics. You might find it a bit, well, floral."

"Great."

"Staying there will be good for the cause, though. You'll win, Max. I know you'll stop at nothing. I knew that in my first week, when you parachuted out of a plane with the private jet guy."

"Terrifying." I shudder at the memory. "It was terrifying. And my ankle's never been the same since that landing. Worth it, though—the luxury private plane rental biz has been a winner."

I doubt I'll ever do anything actually life-threatening to push through a deal again. I look back up at the B&B's pink door. Retina-threatening, maybe.

“You know, being on the ground here has already put a spring in my step and made my blood pump a bit harder. I’ve missed the thrill of being hands-on with a project.”

Charlotte’s door buzzer goes off in the background. “Gotta run. Decided to abandon cooking dinner and order pizza. More efficient.”

“You’re a life saver.”

“I know.” She hangs up.

George looks at me in the rearview mirror and raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure it’s the thrill of the project that’s put the spring in your step and made your blood pump harder?”

I tilt my head at him and open the car door.

“Drive home safely, George.”

Now to win this town over. And I know exactly who to start with.

**POLLY**

“Seventeen signatures. Not bad for the first day we’ve had it out,” Carly says, examining the petition on the counter. She tips the clipboard sideways.

“Someone’s even written ‘Stick it to The Man’ in the margin.”

I’m still shell-shocked from yesterday evening’s revelation that The Man is Mr. Twinkles. And for the last twenty-four hours, my brain has been replaying the nanosecond when I caught his eyes snap from my left boob to my face as I reached back between the seats to open the van door.

“I thought more people would sign.” I drop the handful of dimes I just counted back into their compartment in the cash register with a clatter. “I thought there’d be more outrage.” I note the dimes total on the end-of-day tally sheet.

Carly walks to the other side of the shop and tuts at the radishes. “The new guy from the sandwich shop made a real mess of these. He rummaged for ages. Said he needed the perfect shape for garnish.” She gets to work restoring order to radish world. “Anyway, I’m still appalled that the hot potato-crusher dude from the other day is in charge of the Yellow Barn nightmare.”

“What difference does it make who’s in charge of it?”



No need to take the nickels out of the drawer to count them—there are five.

“Because of the way he looked at you,” Carly says.

An unexpected thrill runs through me. He looked at me in a *way*? “No idea what you mean.”

I punch my list of numbers on the tally sheet into the old big-buttoned calculator, write the number at the bottom, and deduct this morning’s float. I might as well put “not awesome” instead of the total.

“Don’t pretend you’re shocked and outraged.” Carly continues shuffling radishes. “I wasn’t even that close, and I could tell he had a glint in his eye when he was talking to you out there.” She waves the leafy green end of a bunch in the direction of the sidewalk.

“I suspect he always has a glint in his eye.” And he probably gets a kick out of knowing he can turn a woman into a gibbering lump of jelly with one flick of an eyebrow.

I press a button on the register, and the daily report chugs out.

“And does Mr. Twinkles always check out people’s butts when they turn around?” Accidentally referring to him as Mr. Twinkles to Carly was a big mistake.

But he looked at my backside? “Probably.”

Well, I guess I did look at his butt when he bent over to pick up the potatoes. My mind flashes back to the pin-striped fabric pulling across the firm round cheeks that sat on top of muscular thighs. It was quite an excellent rear end.

I rip off the report and check it against my register count. A perfect match. All hopes I might have miscounted by a couple of hundred dollars are dashed.

There’s nothing left I could cut back to make up for the rent increase. Well, not apart from Carly’s hours. But the mere thought of that makes me want to throw up. I couldn’t do it to her. She’s always been there for me. She’d never let me down like that. Not to mention, I couldn’t work all the hours myself,

seven days a week, and be able to help Mom as much as I want to.

Carly moves some radishes from the bottom of the pile to the top. “Well, all I know is, if some hot guy looked at me the way he looked at you, I’d be pretty fucking happy about it.”

I paper-clip the report to the tally sheet, slide it inside the cash bag along with the day’s takings, and turn to Carly.

“Oh, come on. Are you saying you’d be happy if that guy wore a fancy suit and traveled in a chauffeur-driven limo? Yeah, sure. We’ve all seen the trail of destruction those people leave behind when they swoop into town for their own ends.”

“And I know exactly why you think that. But sometimes, Poll, maybe the right person isn’t who you’d expect them to be.”

“Have you been sucking on some overripe kombucha? You’d run kicking and screaming from someone like that.”

“I just thought, finally, there might be someone to shake you out of your man doldrums. Maybe it’s time you get back in the saddle. It’s not as if you didn’t enjoy regular rides in college.” She steps back from the radishes, hands on hips, to check her artwork. “I’m purely looking out for you and your lady fig.”

Lady fig is Carly’s term for figs. And female genitals. It’s grown on me.

“Me and my lady fig are extremely happy on their own, thank you. We’ve been busy focusing on the shop and helping my mom.” I fiddle with the zipper on the cash bag. “And don’t make it sound like I slept around. There were only two, okay, three college boyfriends. They were fun. I enjoyed them.”

“Sometimes loudly.”

Carly and I were roommates. Her art school and my university were close enough for us to rent a place together.

“Well, I sure as hell don’t have time to be entangled with anyone right now,” I tell her. “Least of all one about to crush our livelihood.”

With a flourish, she places a bunch of radishes on the pinnacle of the newly tidied stack and points at it like a magician's assistant. "Ta-dah."

"And anyway." I snatch up the cash bag. Maybe it'll be heavier tomorrow. "Someone like him wouldn't give someone like me a second glance."

I pull the float drawer out of the register as Carly approaches.

"I'm pretty sure your ass got a second glance. Maybe even a third."

"You're mistaken. Anyway, stop it."

"Don't dismiss it out of hand, Poll. That's all I'm saying. And give me that." She takes the drawer from me. "I'll lock it away while you close up."

She rattles through the beaded curtain as I flick off the lights and head to the front.

I stretch onto my tiptoes to reach the broken string of the window blind, just as a face appears inches from mine on the other side of the glass.

I screech, jerking back and clutching my chest. My heart bounces like one of those extra-bouncy rubber balls—not only because I'm startled, but because of who's done the startling.

Max opens the door and sticks his head around. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

His smile is almost as dazzling as his blue eyes.

His tie's pulled loose and the top button of his shirt is undone. Like he's ready to transition from the business part of the day to the fun part.

The newly visible lower area of his neck looks like one of those spots you'd want to kiss. If you were into kissing the necks of billionaires whose business plan you're trying to destroy before they destroy yours, that is. And I have zero desire to kiss any necks anyway, least of all necks attached to livelihood crushers.

“I’m closing. Did you want something?”

The door jingles shut behind him as he steps inside.

He pushes his hands into his pockets and again my mind goes straight to what they’re now nestling against. What does it look like down there? Good God, must not think about his penis.

My gaze slides up the buttons of his shirt to his smiling lips that are parted to reveal gleaming white teeth, cheekbones that have just the right amount of chisel, and those goddamn eyes.

The bouncy ball has dropped to my belly and is now boinging away in there.

He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head, revealing a tiny bit more of that neck. “Do you have a moment?”

What the hell does he want? “Not really. I need to close up and get back to help my mom.”

I squeeze sideways past him to lock the door to prevent any last-minute produce browsers following him in and keeping me late. But he doesn’t move. There’s not quite enough space, and my back brushes against his arm.

I am absolutely not okay with the shiver running down my spine. And the fact it hasn’t stopped at the base of my spine but is spreading to my lady fig is completely unacceptable.

I turn the latch and flip the sign to “Veggie Sorry, We’re Closed.” As I try to squeeze back around without any shiver-inducing brushes with that arm, Carly calls out from the back.

“Okay, the cash register’s locked up, and I’m...” She emerges through the curtain and freezes mid scarf wrap. “Oh.” A grin that would make the Cheshire Cat proud spreads across her face. “Hello.”

“Hi,” says Max, as if he’s charming. Which men about to destroy your life never are.

“Well. Okay. Time for me to go.” She locks eyes with me. “I’ll leave you to, er, it.”

“I’ll be out of here in a minute too.” I give her an exaggerated nod. “In a hurry. No time to hang around.”

“I don’t think you have anything to rush away for,” she says. “You take all the time you need. I’m off. Bye.”

And with one more dramatic wind of her scarf she disappears back through the curtain.

“She seems interesting,” says Max.

“That’s Carly. My assistant. And best friend. The one who did the artwork on the bus.”

I jump again as her head reappears between the beads.

“Oh, she’s back,” says Max, recoiling.

“Forgot to say, Poll. I heard the figs might come early this year.” She can barely keep a straight face.

“I heard the opposite. More likely none at all. Probably a total fig drought.” I’ll kill her. “Anyway, thanks for the update. Goodnight.”

“Night, Poll.” She waves at Max. “Good night, Man In Suit.”

“Goodnight, Woman In Scarf,” he replies, slightly puzzled. He turns to me. “Is she a bit odd?”

“A bit. But she’s also the best. Anyway, I have to go. What did you want?”

He takes a breath and looks at me thoughtfully. “I thought about what you said about the possibility of a new Yellow Barn affecting your business. And your livelihood.”

Well, I hadn’t expected to get through to him that quickly. How delightful that he’s so open to input. Maybe he is kind of hot after all.

“And I wanted to make you an offer.”

“An offer?” That might have been a little loud.

“Yes.” He looks around the room, sizing it up. “I could buy your shop.”

Oh, no. He’d better not be doing this.

I fold my arms and hold them tight across my chest to stop my hands from shaking. “You could *what?*” And I don’t care if that’s too loud.

The rubber ball bounces against the inside of my rib cage this time. But not for any reason that’s good.

“And I could sweeten it a bit.” He smiles like this is the most normal, casual thing in the world for him. “You know, to give you enough to tide you over. While you figure out what you want to do next.”

So, he assumes he can buy me off, and that’s that? I’m dealt with?

Red hot fury boils up from my toes and burns my face.

“Oh, no.” One of my arms has unfolded itself and I seem to be wagging my finger at him. “Oh, no, you don’t. Do not do this.”

He shrugs.

“Okay, I could sweeten it a *lot*. Then you’d have a comfortable buffer zone before you needed to earn anything again.”

I can’t look at him. I can’t look at the perfect lips and the perfect hair and the perfectly kissable neck.

I take a step back and turn away. But I can’t let him get away with this. I spin around to face him again.

“Hell, no. You do not get to show up in my town and my shop, expect to buy me off, then build a giant monstrosity of a glowing yellow store, and waltz out again leaving a trail of lives ruined behind you. Oh, no.”

If anyone took my blood pressure right now, their machine would short-circuit.

“That sounds a bit dramatic.” He holds out his hands. One of them gave me tingles the other day. Now I want to slap them both away. “I was only—”

“Is this what you always do? Someone opposes you, so you wave a bunch of money at them and they disappear?”

I can't listen to this. I can't listen to another rich asshole who thinks they can waltz into my life, drive a bulldozer through it, and waltz away again.

"Well, you can't buy me," I say. "I'm not for sale. And I'm going nowhere."

I reach around him to unlock the door, and this time he steps aside to give me a wide berth.

The bell almost flies off its hook as I sweep the door open and point to the street. "But you are. Goodbye."

He holds his palms up at me. The smile is gone. Someone who hadn't seen this all before might think he looks genuinely remorseful. "Okay. I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you. I'm sorry if I came on a bit strong. Let's sit down and talk it through quietly. I can explain."

There's no way in hell I'm giving in. But I know my dad would have told me I don't have to shout and stomp. So I take a deep breath.

"Not a chance. Mom's not feeling great. I need to get home to help with the goats."

"How about later? I could take you to dinner."

Christ, get the message, Mr. Twinkles. Let it go. "You can't buy me with dinner, either."

"Well, when would work for you? Fit me in whenever you like. I'm flexible."

With another deep breath, my heart rate comes down a little, and the fog of fury starts to clear from my brain. He thinks he can sweet-talk me around, does he?

I look him over—from the perfectly styled hair to his perfect stubble, his perfect white shirt, perfect expensive suit, and perfectly shiny shoes. These are not the signs of an outdoorsy type. Or anyone who's ever carried a goat feed bucket in their lives.

An aura of calm wraps around me. "Actually, you know what. Maybe now *would* work."

He smiles again. “Well, that’s great.”

“I have chores to do, but you’re welcome to talk to me while I do them.” The hose leaked yesterday, and the goat enclosure hasn’t dried out yet. “Yeah, now might be the perfect time.”

“Great.” He rubs his hands together. “Let’s go.”



**MAX**

The door to the Polly's Produce old VW bus creaks as I get in and slam it shut.

I pick a few bits of unidentifiable greenery off my seat and take a deep breath. "Good God. This thing smells like the inside of a plant pot."

Of all the things I thought I might do for the sake of my company, riding in a produce bus to watch a cute woman in overalls tend to her goats was never on my list.

Polly leans toward me as she clicks her seatbelt in place. It's the first time I've been close enough to notice the freckles on her nose and cheeks.

"I guess it must be a step down from a chauffeured limo," she says.

"It's not a limo. And George is not a chauffeur." I twist around to take in the debris littering the back. There's a bunch of crates, all empty apart from one containing chilis, some sacks, and various leftover leafy bits. "My car does smell better than this though. By which I mean, it doesn't smell."

Her mouth curves into a wry smile, as if me not liking the van makes her happy. But it's not that I don't like it—it fits Polly's personality, or at least what I know of it so far, perfectly.

Her small, delicate fingers turn the key in the ignition and, remarkably, the old thing clatters to life. “I transport way more plants and fruit and veggies in here than people.”

“Do you prefer their company?”

She turns her head in slow motion to look right at me. “Depends on the person.”

I haven’t seen fire like that in someone’s eyes since my mom told my dad there was nothing to be ashamed of in letting their kids buy them a big house.

Polly holds my gaze for a microsecond too long. Just long enough to quicken my pulse. Then turns away and checks over her shoulder before pulling out into the street behind the shop.

“To me, it’s a fresh, natural aroma,” she says.

I take a deep breath to try to slow my misbehaving pulse, not to ingest more of the “aroma.”

“It reminds me of all the small farms I collect the produce from,” she continues. “And the lovely loyal customers who I deliver to.” She’s pretty damn serious about all this community-spirited stuff. “Oh, and a goat gave birth in the back of it once.”

Well, that’s definitely brought my pulse rate crashing back to normal. “*What?*”

“Don’t panic. Not recently. This thing sat in a shed for years before my dad fixed it up. I used to play in it when I was a kid. Pretended I was driving and camping in all kinds of places. I must have left the back door open, and Lara hopped in and made herself comfy.”

“Who?”

“Lara. The goat who gave birth in the back.”

“Oh, right.”

This is going off track. I need to remember I’m here to get the cute farmy girl to accept my offer, call off her protests, and shut up about how awful she thinks a Yellow Barn would be for Warm Springs.

In business, getting someone to do what you want starts with making a connection. Since we obviously have zero in common, I don't have much to go on, other than what little I've learned about this town.

I point at the floral cover on her driver's seat. "That's almost as flowery as my B&B room."

I grab the dash as she takes a corner way too quickly and the bus leans to one side. "Jesus. Did we just go up on two wheels?"

"You wanted to talk. If you don't like it, I can take you right back to the B&B." A broad smile creeps across her face and lights it up, like she deliberately threw us around the bend to make me uncomfortable. "I'm sure Mrs. Lovewell would love to see you back early. She's nice."

She sticks out her tongue and bites down on it. The glimpse of the pink tip causes an inconvenient stir in my groin. "I guess from that expression you know exactly what she's like. You could have warned me."

"That would have been no fun now, would it?"

Mrs. Lovewell is about seventy. She looks like she wakes up with her bright white hair coiffed and lacquered and as if no amount of B&B housekeeping would chip her purple nail polish or smudge her orange lipstick.

"She does love a handsome young man," Polly adds.

My head snaps to look at her as she realizes what she's said. Her smile fades and her freckled cheek apples turn a lovely ripe pink.

"I'm handsome?"

I'm building a connection. Not flirting. But it's definitely not disappointing to learn she likes the way I look.

"I said *she* would think you are."

"You didn't. You said she loves a handsome young man. Like it's a fact I am one."

The desire to tease her, to make her cheeks redden and her eyes flicker with the spark to fight back, is completely irresistible. It seems to cause a fresh rush of blood to my heart that makes me feel a little more alive.

She turns her head to look out of the side window, hiding her face from me. “I just meant she’s a bit of a flirt with the guys. Mainly ones young enough to be her grandson. That’s all.”

“Well, now that’s a blow to my ego.” I make an exaggerated pout. “Not only because you don’t think I’m handsome. But also because I was under the impression Mrs. Lovewell thought I was special.”

We’re already leaving town behind and heading into farm territory. I need to get on with the matter at hand.

I tap the dash. “Bet you’d like to upgrade this thing for something clean and new? Like maybe a Mini or something. I could see you puttering around town in a Mini.”

She slams a hand on her heart, like I knifed her in the chest. “Why the hell would I want to upgrade this van? I don’t want something new at all. I love this thing. My dad poured his heart and soul into fixing it up for me.”

Oh, shit. Forgot about the link to Dad, who seems not to be around anymore.

“Okay, maybe not *instead* of this. But you could have a normal car as well. And save this for, you know, special vegetable-related occasions.” I gesture to the rear of the van. “Or animal births.”

As the traffic thins out, she leans on the gas, forcing my head back against the headrest.

I point at the road ahead. “That looks like a pretty sharp bend. Can we stay on all four wheels this time?”

“I’ve been driving on these roads since I was sixteen.”

She squeezes the brake, and my armpits go sweaty as I grip the handle over the door like it might somehow save my life.

Turns out the corner was deceptive, gentler than it seemed, and we round it without incident.

I breathe again and smooth my jacket under the seat belt. “A Mini would corner way better than this thing, you know.”

“You mean the Mini I could buy if you bought me out of the shop for a ludicrous amount of money to make me shut up and go away?”

I angle myself toward her. The waning early evening sunlight glints off the gold bits in the strands of hair that have fallen loose from her ponytail.

Must keep my mind on the reason I’m here. Which is business, nothing but business. “You’re looking at it all wrong. Think of it as an opportunity. An opportunity to do something new.”

She smooshes her lips together and shakes her head.

It might be harder to convince her than I thought. Maybe I’ll have more luck when she’s not driving. “How far to your place?”

“Not far.” She tips her head to one side. “We should talk about *you* for the rest of the way. You know plenty about me. I know nothing about you.”

She’s smart enough to want to figure out my vulnerable spots. Exactly what I’d do if I were her. Well, I’m not falling for that. “I’m boring.”

“Oh, I’m certain there’s zero chance you’re boring.”

“I spend more time sitting in my office staring at spreadsheets than doing anything else.” Her life could not be more opposite. “You think that’s boring, right?”

If I were honest with myself, I’m starting to think it is too.

She takes her left hand off the wheel and rubs her right arm, her fingers disappearing under the edge of her T-shirt sleeve. “So, is this the first time you’ve been out in the real world for a while?”

“Yup. And I’m starting to see what I’ve been missing. If I weren’t sitting amid bits of old lettuce in a relic of a vehicle being driven by someone who probably shouldn’t have a license, I’d be swinging back and forth in my giant leather executive chair, looking out of my enormous fifty-fifth-floor window at the view over Manhattan and the river, with my assistant bringing me one of her perfectly made double shot cappuccinos.” I throw my hands up in an exaggerated shrug. “I mean, who wouldn’t choose the lettuce?”

No way am I going to admit to her that trying to save this project myself, without delegating it to someone else, is actually the most fun I’ve had in years.

The fact I can’t stop looking at the spot on her arm she just rubbed—and wish I could touch it myself—is completely irrelevant.

She drops her hand to rest it on the shifter. “It’ll actually be a few weeks before we get the local lettuce.”

There’s open road ahead now with fields on either side. I brace myself this time.

Sure enough, she steps on the gas again. “I looked you up. Your company owns a bunch of big things, not just Yellow Barn. How did you end up doing all this buying-up-businesses stuff? What was the first one you bought? How did you afford it?”

Was she researching me just to get to know her enemy better? Or because she thinks I’m interesting? Either way, if she wants to know what she’s up against, I’ll share. “I didn’t buy the first one. I won it.”

“Won it?”

“In a dare.”

She flicks her eyes from the road to me. “*What?*”

“Heard of Preston Cayman?”

“The billionaire investor guru guy? From that entrepreneur TV show?”

“Yup. Well, he came to give a talk to my MBA class.”

“Where did you do your MBA?”

“Harvard.”

She snorts. “Of course you did.”

Now I have an excuse to touch the spot on her upper arm that I’ve been eyeing. I give it a playful prod. “You’re assuming Mommy and Daddy pulled strings and bankrolled me, aren’t you?”

Her bare forearm breaks out in goosebumps. How very satisfying.

“Maybe,” she says.

“And you’d be wrong. It was the exact opposite. I had scholarships and worked two jobs while I was there. No one gave me anything.”

“Anyway.” She swirls her finger in a get-on-with-it motion. “Preston Cayman. Go on.”

“After his lecture, three friends and I hung back to ask him some questions, and he ended up inviting us out to dinner.”

“Somewhere swanky, I bet.”

“He took us to a ludicrously pricey ‘exotic food’ restaurant. The kind of place where they serve alligator steaks, and python, and some little green things that are apparently the world’s most expensive vegetable.”

“Hop shoots.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Hop shoots.” She has a deliciously satisfied expression. “The world’s most expensive vegetable.”

“Oh, right.” Of course she’d know that. “Maybe that was what it was.”

“But python?” She makes a retching sound. “People eat *snake*?”

“People who have more money than sense apparently do. Anyway, after the meal, he said he was ordering dessert for everyone. But when the server came, she put plates in front of

me and my friends with a bunch of hideous things on them. We each had one of those giant white grub things I'd seen them eat on *Survivor*, a sheep's eyeball, a bull's testicle, and a warthog anus."

She glances at me. "An *anus*?"

"That's the only one that bothers you? And watch the road, please." I point through the windshield. "You're bad enough when you're looking where you're going."

She pulls an insanely sexy half-smile as she turns her attention back to the road.

"Anyway," I continue, "Preston was a dick and a bully. He told us if we didn't have the balls to eat what was on the plate, we didn't have the balls to make it in business."

"What an asshole. I'm not watching that show again." She brushes a loose strand of hair off her face. "None of you ate that stuff, right?"

"One of the guys got straight up and walked out. One of them nibbled on the edge of the testicle, burst into tears, and sat there sobbing. The other managed the eyeball, tried to get the bug down, but threw up, right there on the table."

She places a hand on her small, curved belly. "Oh, God. And you?"

"Preston just sat there, looking at me over the pool of vomit. There was no way I was going to let him bully me and make a fool of me like that. But I wasn't prepared to walk away either. I knew there had to be a way to leverage it to my advantage."

She cocks her head. "Sounds familiar."

"I'll ignore that and assume you want to hear the rest of the story."

She moves her hand from her belly back to the steering wheel and drums her fingers on it.

"Anyway, I'd done a ton of research on him before his talk, so I could pick his brain and try to learn from him. And I knew he'd bought a food truck business a few months before



that he wasn't utilizing to its full potential. He wasn't giving it the resources it needed to grow. He wasn't really interested in it—he'd bought it just because someone else wanted it. But I knew it could be a goldmine in the right hands."

Sheep in the field whizz by as Polly puts her foot down to try to make it through a green light at an intersection a little way ahead.

"So, I told him I'd eat everything on the plate if he'd give me that company. He laughed. And he must have thought there was no way I'd do it because he held out his hand and shook on it."

"Oh, shit. You didn't?"

"I ate everything."

The light turns yellow just as it's fifty-fifty whether we'll get through it. Polly's thigh shifts as she lifts her foot off the gas. I slap my hands on the dash to brace myself against the inevitable as she slams on the brake.

"Everything? The bug and the anus and everything?" she says as we come to a crashing halt, just over the line, and the light turns red.

The sudden stop forces me forward against the seatbelt, then throws me back against my seat. She looks at me like I'm being overly dramatic.

I hold her gaze silently for a moment before replying. "Yes. Everything. I ate everything."

She puffs out her cheeks. "This is making me gag."

The old-fashioned handle squeals as she cranks the window down.

"I kept it all down by sheer force of will till I was outside, around the corner, and well out of his sight. Then I threw up, like I've never thrown up before. Or since."

She inhales a big gulp of fresh air. "Jesus. You're a determined devil, aren't you?"

I shrug. At least she's got the message about who she's taking on here. She might think community spirit can fight my money and corporate power. But it would take something to beat me on sheer will.

"It was worth it. That's how I got my first business. I built it into a successful franchise, sold it, and bought the next thing. And on and on. And now I have a billion-dollar portfolio."

She purses her lips and blows out a giant breath with a "shhhh" sound.

"Glad you asked?"

"It's not the answer I was expecting." The light turns green. She thrusts the van into gear and we rattle on our way. "Anyway, we're almost there."

Buildings start to come into view, and we head into a residential area that pops up almost out of nowhere.

"It's weird. I thought you were taking me into the countryside, but it's more built up again now."

"It used to be all wide open." She gestures toward row after row of homes. "But a developer came in, bought up a bunch of farms, somehow persuaded the council to rezone the land, and this is what we have now."

She catches me unawares, yanks the steering wheel to the right, and sends me flying into her side.

Once I see we're pulling into a driveway and I'm not going to die, all I can think of is that I wish my arm were bare like hers so I would have felt her skin against mine.

I right myself. "You did that deliberately, didn't you?"

I can tell from the smile on her face she thinks I'm going to hate whatever is about to happen. And that she's planning to love it.

Thing is, I'm Max Dashwood. And I don't lose.

**POLLY**

“**S**orry,” I say as Max pushes himself upright after slamming into me when I yanked the van into our driveway.

I toss a mental bucket of cold water over the fire ignited within me by the contact with his arm and shoulder, ignore the delicious herby aroma of the hair that almost headbutted me, and shove away all thoughts of our bodies crashing together in less dressed circumstances.

“Like I said,” I tell him. “Not used to driving with passengers.”

He rakes his fingers through those luscious brown locks. What would they feel like raked through *my* hair?

His hand comes to rest on the back of his neck, fingers turning white as he digs into the muscles. “There should be an alert system for the locals when you’re out on the roads.”

It’s fun to see him a little off balance. I bet that doesn’t happen often.

And his cheeky banter is as much of a turn-on as his looks. But this is not the time for falling for anyone’s gorgeous, sexy shenanigans. Least of all those of a man whose giant store will wreck my little one if I don’t stop it. I can’t allow myself to be distracted off course.

I pull up behind my mom's car with its "Goat Mom" sticker in the back window. Then back up a little, so we're in *just* the right spot.

Max jumps out with the eagerness of a kid at a theme park and yelps a surprised "Urgh" as he lands in the ever-present puddle that dries out only on the hottest of summer days.

Excellent. First, he hates the van, now he has wet feet. No one threatens to destroy my business, then tries to buy off my protests, without paying for it.

A Mini. Pah.

He might be here to talk me around, but I'm here to make the next hour of his privileged life an utter misery. He needs to realize he's picked a fight with the wrong person.

Max has already bounded around to my door by the time I open it, a smile on his face that appears genuine despite his feet marinating in brown water. But he's probably very practiced at the fake smile.

"You okay?" I ask, expecting a tirade about how the filthy countryside has damaged his handcrafted shoes.

"Absolutely fine," he says, as if steeping thousand-dollar footwear in mud is completely normal behavior for a city slicker.

There's a line around the bottom of his pants where they soaked up the puddle, and those shoes are a much darker tan than they were a minute ago.

"This is great." He gestures to our little white house, the outbuildings, and goat enclosure. "At least the developers didn't snap up your land. This is huge."

I won't wreck his good impression by telling him the furnace has been on the fritz for months, my mom's bedroom window leaks when the rain blows in a certain direction, and the roof of the goat house could collapse at any second.

I hop out of the van and slam the door. "It might seem huge to someone who lives in the city and thinks growing

parsley in a pot in the kitchen constitutes landscape gardening.”

“Plants are more my little brother’s thing. He did give me some sort of green thing once.” He pulls a sad face. “It died. And I never got over the failure.”

Now, there’s a man obsessed with accomplishment. “Anyway, this place isn’t huge anymore. Look how hemmed in we are by the townhomes.”

“You think they’re close?” He laughs. “The nearest ones must be, what, two hundred feet away?”

I point farther into the distance, where there’s a bit of an incline toward a small hill.

“See those houses over there?”

“The blue ones?”

“Nope. The ones beyond them.”

He moves to stand next to me so he can follow my finger. His arm rests against mine, causing the same tingle down my side as when he prodded me on the way here.

Damn my body for reacting to him like this. My brain yells at me to step away. My heightened senses yell louder to stay right where I am because they’re having way too much fun.

“All the way over there? Yeah,” he says.

“That used to be the edge of our farm.”

He turns to look at me, eyebrows raised. “Of your farm? This farm?”

“Yup. It was started by my dad’s grandparents.”

“Wow.”

“And now most of it is townhouses.”

“So, you sold the land to the developers?”

I snort. “Something like that. The only decent patch of open land left around here is the Harringtons’ field across the street. And that’s only five acres now.”

My eyes are drawn to his lips as they curl into a smile. “I noticed that as you flung me into the van door. It’s enormous. Hilarious you think it’s ‘only’ five acres.”

“Anyway, I have chores to get on with. And, you said you wanted to talk.”

As much as I’d like to stare at his lips and rest my arm against his for the next few hours, that is not the point of this exercise.

He tiptoes around the muddy patches as he follows me to the goat enclosure. He’s putting on a good show of not being uncomfortable, though. Guess that’s how focused he must be on buying me out of his way.

“You have a lot of sheds.” Is that his best effort at farm-related small talk?

“Only three. That one’s a regular garden shed. That one’s for goat feed. And the big one has all my dad’s old tools and stuff in it. That’s where he worked on my bus.”

I leave out the part about the feed shed having a big rotten patch at the back that will soon serve as a second entrance.

“Does he still fix up old cars?”

I usually say this more gently. But what the hell. “He died.”

“Oh. God. Sorry.” He’s obviously mortified.

Maybe there is a human under there and he’s not totally a money-making robot. Perhaps it was cruel of me to be so blunt.

“He was going to build another shed with power and everything for my mom to make her soap in. She wanted to expand into other goat milk products like lotions, bath soaks, and stuff. But he died, then she got arthritis. So, she just makes small batches of soap in the kitchen. When she’s up to it.”

“Is the arthritis what you meant when you said she’s not feeling good?”

Like every good salesman he remembers what you tell him.

“Yup. It comes and goes. Sometimes she’s fine. Today she wouldn’t be able to carry the feed.”

As we reach the gate to the goats, the five girls and two babies run over, bleating, their little tails wagging like crazy. “These are the chores I told you I have to do.”

He leans on the metal gate and smiles, seemingly unworried about the rust marking his jacket.

“They’re cute chores, though.” I point at the older girls one by one. “Meet Sara, Siobhan, and Keren.”

“Unusual goat names.”

I reach over and give them each a head scratch. “Named after the members of Bananarama. My mom’s favorite band when she was a teenager. The babies don’t have names yet.”

Keren nudges my hand for more scratches.

“They seem like they behave more like dogs than goats.” His face is full of wonder, like he never gets out and the girls are the first new thing he’s seen in a long time.

“Then I guess you’ve never met goats before. This is what they’re like. And these ladies need feeding and watering.”

“Okay.” He dusts off his hands and is all business again. “While you’re doing that, let’s discuss how I can make your life amazing.”

So he thinks anyone who doesn’t live in a fancy house or drive a fancy car can’t have an amazing life?

“My life is great, thanks.”

Apart from the stress of the shop not making enough money, the rent going up, and the gut-wrenching fear I might have to lay off my best friend. Not to mention the sleepless nights over how the hell I’m going to take care of this place and Mom.

I swing open the door to the feed shed and point at the floor-to-ceiling pile of hay bales. Mr. Twinkles isn’t going to

want to go near those things.

“You can make yourself useful and grab one of those.”

“Sure,” he says.

Without missing a beat, he takes off his jacket, hangs it on a nail behind the door, pops off his cufflinks, drops them in his pants pocket, and starts to roll up his sleeves.

Little by little, two strong forearms with a dusting of dark hair and a couple of thick veins come into view. I have to clamp my lips together to suppress the urge to let out a long “pew” sound.

He grabs the twine around the nearest bale and swings it up in front of him as if it were a bag of feathers. Christ, those arms could pick me up and toss me over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry like it was no effort.

“Where do you want it?” he asks.

Does he really not care that he has bits of hay all over him? “Careful, it might mess up your shirt. And pants.”

“It’s fine.”

It can’t be. He sounds like he means it, but I don’t believe him.

I turn my back and force my brain to refocus from the thought of those arms looping around my waist to the much less sexy activity of scooping whole grain from the feed bag into a bucket.

“I understand your point that some local businesses would be affected by a Yellow Barn,” he says. “But you must realize it would create way more jobs than would be lost.”

I plunge the scoop deep into the grain. “People’s lives aren’t about math.”

“But we’d employ cashiers and stockers and janitors who might not otherwise be able to get jobs in Warm Springs at all.”

One more scoop and the bucket’s almost full. I grab the two milk bottles that Mom left here for me and balance them



on top of the grain.

I turn back around to face Max. He looks like something from a hot farmers calendar. “Mr. April Tosses Hay Bales After A Hard Day At The Office—And We Mean *Hard*.”

“Please don’t insult me by making out you’re performing a community service.” I heave up the bucket and nod to the door behind him. “Back to the goats.”

He walks out ahead of me, the muscles across the back of his shoulders bulging under his white shirt with the effort of carrying the hay.

“The store would actually do a lot for the community,” he says.

If he continues to spout this garbage, I’m going to struggle to hold on to my fury.

Unable to see where he’s going over the bale, Max squelches into the biggest muddy puddle. The brown liquid oozes over his foot as it disappears completely beneath the surface. There’s a sucking noise as he pulls it out as if nothing’s happened and continues toward the five bleating faces.

His right shoe and the bottom of his pant leg are shiny with thick brown mud.

At least that’s some form of punishment for his completely cold-blooded argument.

“It would provide access to affordable food for way more of the local community you care so much about,” he continues, as if nothing’s happened.

Why is he ignoring it?

“That doesn’t make it right.” I catch up with him at the enclosure and swing open the gate. “To sell produce at those prices you must pay the farmers a pittance.”

The girls immediately swarm around him, trying to nibble the hay. I make no attempt to shoo them away.

“You can drop it in the rack over there,” I tell him.

He slops across the ground that's still soaked from the hose leak. His feet must be so sodden and cold by now he might as well be barefoot.

“People who live here have to schlep way out of town for affordable groceries,” he says tossing the hay into the rack. “A Yellow Barn close by would mean they wouldn't have to drive to the superstore anymore.”

One of the babies who can't reach the hay grabs Max's pant leg and pulls. He does nothing, just lets her.

Where's the clichéd city boy I was expecting? The one who'd be yelling about the dirt messing up his expensive clothes and lashing out at the small animal tugging on them.

“She's never seen anyone without their pants tucked into muck boots before,” I explain. The aching muscles in my arm relax as I drop the bucket next to the grain trough. “And cheaper groceries aren't always better, you know.”

He looks down at his shoes, socks, and pants caked in mud. He has to be furious. *Has* to be. Not only because of the value of the ruined clothes, but also because of how uncomfortable his feet surely are.

Then he bends down and undoes, with some difficulty, the soggy shoelaces. I try to get a grip and prevent my face contorting into an expression of utter disbelief, but I'm not sure I have a good enough poker face for this.

“But we'd bring what they want to Main Street.” He pulls off a shoe and plants his argyle-socked foot firmly in the mud. “They would be spending locally.” Off comes the other shoe.

He lifts a pant leg and peels off one soaked, muddy sock, then the other, and tosses them aside. His bare feet are bright white against the mud.

He looks up at my, presumably, astonished face.

“What?” He smiles and shrugs. “My feet were already soaked anyway. And I can get more purchase with bare feet than slick shoes.”

What's going on? What's wrong with him? What's he playing at?

"I've eaten a giant bug and an anus, remember?" He tilts his head to one side, a wicked gleam in his eyes. It's irritatingly attractive. "If I have to walk barefoot through mud, and possibly some goat poop, to get you to accept my offer, I will."

Damn him. This was *my* game. He's not allowed to change the rules.

His feet slurp across the wet earth as he walks over to me like he doesn't have a care in the world, his pant legs dragging in the dirt.

"Come on then. Tell me. How much for the shop? How much do you need to fix this place up?" He throws his arms wide and gestures around us. "The paint's flaking off the window frames of the house, the sheds are starting to rot, and the roof on that thing"—he points at the goat house—"looks like it's only staying up as a favor."

So he's taken it all in, huh? A hot rush of fury rises within me. He'd appeared to be just casually looking around. But no, he was assessing the place for weak spots. And he clearly thinks I'm one of them.

I bend down to take the baby bottles out of the bucket and to hide my flaming cheeks.

"You know it makes sense." He's acting like he's fully in charge of the situation now, like this is his boardroom, not my home. "If I buy the shop, it'd give you and your mom a nice cushion. You could even give your eccentric assistant a nice layoff package. And maybe there are some specialty tools your mom could get to help her still enjoy the soap making, even on her bad days."

Every suggestion is like a punch in that soft spot right below my ribs. As enticing as his offer is, I am not giving in to this man and his giant checkbook.

I tip the grain into the feeder trough. "You don't want my shop. You want me to stop the protests against yours."

“Isn’t it the same thing?” He looks down as the baby nibbles at his pant leg again.

“I need to fill up the water.” I step away to turn on the hose attached to the goat house.

“Look,” he says, skidding in my direction. “Your life could be so much better if you had enough cash to renovate this place.”

He’s right. Of course, he’s right. At some point my mom will need grab bars and ramps in the house to help her get around. Maybe a special bathtub or something. I look up at the goat house roof, Lord knows it could do with some patching—or ripping down and rebuilding.

Naming my price and taking Max’s check would solve all of that in an instant. No more shop worries, no more house worries, no more Mom worries. How can it not be tempting? Only a crazy person would turn that down, right?

But it would make me feel as dirty as Max’s socks. I’m not taking the devil’s dollar.

I can make the money we need myself. I know I can make the shop a success. My business. That I started. I don’t need to sell my principles to a rich fly-by-night for a giant handout.

I stick the end of the hose in the water trough. “I can take care of everything.”

The kid yanks at his pants again. This time there’s a ripping noise.

Good for you, little one. I stifle a snicker.

Surely, he’ll give up now and leave.

But he casually bends over and rolls up the non-yanked-on leg, revealing a perfectly shaped, worked-out calf. “Might as well try to save one leg.”

There’s a cold splash on my knee, and I look down to see the other baby yanking the hose out of the trough. I lunge for it before she can run off with it. Maybe she’s developed a hose fetish and it was she who caused the leak the other day.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” I get my fingers around it just in time, water spurting all down my front until I manage to get a better grip and direct the spray off to the side.

But now she thinks it’s a great new game of tug-of-war. Her little feet dig into the mud as she pulls with all her baby-goaty might. Her teeth must be about to puncture the hose, and I do not want to have to buy a new one.

Max squelches toward me, dragging the kid attached to his pant leg behind him. “Here, let me try.”

I hold up a hand. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Okay, okay.” He squelches backward.

I do not need his help. With this or anything else. Ever.

With both hands back on the hose I try a short, sharp tug. Success!

As it springs free from the tiny yet vise-like jaws, water spews out in a high arc. It lands directly on Max’s head as he’s bent double trying to pry the other kid off his pants.

He yelps in surprise and suddenly straightens.

Startled by the cold water, he’s already slightly off-balance on the sloppy ground when the baby gives his pants an extra hard tug and his feet slide from under him, sending him crashing down on his backside, legs straight out in front.

“Oh God, are you okay?” I race to the spigot and turn off the hose. Perhaps this is getting out of hand.

Max’s eyebrows are up around his hairline. But he grins and says, “Absolutely fine,” as the baby goat now pulls at his sleeve.

As if without a care in the world, he tucks her under his arm, grabs the milk bottle he’s landed right next to, and shoves it in her mouth. “Here you go, you little terror.”

Well, shit. I’m done for, aren’t I?

I mean, look at him.

I was supposed to be showing him he'd met his match. But perhaps I've met mine.

Everyone should have someone who looks at them the way Max looks at a suckling baby goat.

He strokes her head, his muddy forearm muscle flexing, as she gulps down the milk and gazes back at him with equal adoration.

If it weren't for the dirt and half his hair being plastered to his head with hose water, and the fact he's sitting in a muddy puddle that must have soaked through to Lord knows where, he'd be back on the hot farmers calendar, this time as "Mr. June—He Could Suckle You Too."

Maybe he isn't one hundred percent fancy suits and cutthroat business instincts. Maybe he has a caring, human, almost compassionate side. And maybe if I could tap into that, I could make him understand how hard his store would hit the local people, and talk him around.

A warm ray of hope grows within me as I soak in the sight of Max in the dirt with a baby goat under his arm.

I can do this. Not only for me and Mom, for the whole of Warm Springs too.

But, good God, I have one hell of an adversary.

As my eyes drift from his mud-smeared face to the goat sucking on the bottle, they're drawn lower, under the goat's rear end, to where a yellow stain spreads across Max's white shirt.

He looks up, locks eyes with me, kisses the goat on the head, and smirks.

**POLLY**

I have no idea how long I've been frozen to this spot, sinking in the mud, and staring at Max feeding the baby goat—the baby goat who's emptied her bladder on his shirt. I might have entered a parallel time continuum populated by hot guys and cute animals.

But I do know my heart beats a little faster and opens up to him a little more with every passing millisecond.

My trance breaks as he puts down the kid and the milk bottle. With a flurry of bleats, the little goat trots off to join the others, happy now she has something in her tummy.

Max gets to his feet and twists to check the back of his pants, which must be one giant, soggy, muddy mess.

Then he turns to look at me and stands there, head cocked to one side, hands on hips, bare feet caked in mud, one pant leg rolled up, the other with a hole nibbled in it, sleeves pushed to his elbows, and a giant goat pee stain on his shirt.

It's the hottest sight I ever did see.

And that's what tips me over the edge. Like a volcano that's been ready to erupt for decades, laughter bursts out of me.

First my head flies back. Then I fold in half with one hand holding my stomach, the other on a knee to keep me steady.

“Oh.” I can barely get my breath enough to force out the second word of the two-word sentence. “God.”

“Are you having a seizure?” he asks.

I shake my upside-down head.

“I look *that* funny?” he asks.

I nod my upside-down head.

“Did you do this on purpose?”

I manage to gulp in some air and pull myself vertical.

But then I see him again, this beautiful man with his finely tailored, pee-soaked shirt plastered to his solid pecs, his perfectly formed forearms splattered with mud, and one ankle that’s more attractive than any ankle should be, sticking out of the bottom of a chewed suit leg. And here I go. I’m off again.

My stomach actually hurts now.

“Still think I care?” he asks. “How about this?”

He yanks his tie free from its knot, then slides it through the collar of his shirt. What the hell is he doing?

“See?” He holds it at arm’s length, then drops it in the mud. “Don’t care.”

“No, no,” I splutter at him, my laughter coming to a sudden stop. “I’m sorry.”

“You know what else I don’t care about?”

Oh, I am on a handcart straight to hell—he’s unbuttoning his shirt.

His expression says *bring it on*.

My body replies with all the *hell yes* signals it has.

My fingers itch to help with the unbuttoning, my mouth wonders what that smooth spot between his pecs tastes like, when it doesn’t taste of goat pee, and my lady fig is incoherently screaming her face off.

But my brain has more sense and drags me right back to reality, adding a sharp slap to the face just in case I wasn’t



sure.

“It’s fine.” I wave at him to indicate he should stop. “I get it.”

But he yanks the shirt out of his pants and undoes the final two buttons. It’s like I’m getting a private performance of a particularly mucky version of *Magic Mike*.

The strip of flesh on display through his open shirt is hypnotic—the dip in the center of his chest, the glimpse of an ab outline, and the downy trail just above his pants.

Oh, holy shit, he’s taking the whole thing off.

Now there are square shoulders and curved biceps and wide pecs and pink nipples, and the whole hot damn kit and kaboodle is on display.

“Christ, Max, it’s okay. You have fully demonstrated you don’t care about material things. Or being clean. I get it.”

He holds out the shirt at arm’s length, like he did the tie. “Did you?”

His nipples stare right at me.

“Did I what?”

“Deliberately bring me here to deliberately get me filthy in the hope it would piss me off, so I’d stop trying to financially compensate you?”

Damn him. *Damn* him.

He sees right through me. And there I was, thinking it was me who’d seen right through him.

But I take serious issue with the spin he’s put on it.

“Financially compensate me? You can dress up the words any way you like, they still mean buy me off and shut me up.” I press the heels of both hands to my forehead. “But, for the love of God, put your shirt back on.”

It’s actually the last thing I want him to do, but it seems like the right thing to say.

“Well, you haven’t pissed me off. I don’t care.” He drops the white shirt in the mud on top of the tie.

I turn my back on him. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Is there an etiquette book that advises on the appropriate reaction when a perfect male physical specimen is half naked and covered in dirt in your goat field?

The sound of his feet slapping in the mud as he walks up behind me sets me off again, and my body rocks with silent laughter as I lean forward, gripping my sides, and try to get my breath.

“Oh, God...I can’t...” I flap my other arm behind me in apology. “Sorry...” I gasp. “I just...can’t...”

“You did, didn’t you?” His voice is right behind me now.

I straighten and wipe away the tears of laughter building in my eyes as I turn around.

My heart jolts. I didn’t realize he was *that* close. “Oh, my goodness.”

Lord, yes, there he is. Very close indeed. There are just inches between his bare chest and my fully clothed one.

A giggle catches in my throat as my laughter comes to an abrupt halt. I’m suddenly warmer than anyone wearing a T-shirt on a spring evening should be.

And I can almost hear my breasts screaming to be unleashed and pressed against his smooth chest.

He twinkles down at me from behind thick dark lashes. “You planned this.”

He lingers on each word as his mouth quirks at one side, and he nods knowingly, as if he beat Miss Marple to figuring out whodunnit.

I’m at eye level with his fine collarbone, which is crying out for a damn good kissing. My trembling fingers instinctively move to my lips.

He takes half a squelch closer, and his breath warms my face, setting my heart and my pulse in a battle to outrace each

other.

My eyes drift up and fix on his pillowy lips as they form the words, “That was sneaky.” He draws them out, emphasizing each syllable. “And manipulative.”

I lean toward him like there are Max magnets on the tips of my nipples.

The other side of his mouth joins in the smirk. “And quite brilliant.”

He thinks I’m brilliant at something. This billionaire, community-wrecking hunk of gorgeousness admires my business tactics. I can’t imagine ever receiving a higher form of praise.

His fingers brush my upper arm, then wrap around it in the same gentle but firm way he shook my hand outside the shop.

He leans down toward me, so close he must be able to hear the banging of my heart.

I tip my head back to see what’s going on behind those bright, fascinating eyes. When I find them, they latch onto mine, and hold on tight. They don’t waver, not even the tiniest fraction. And they set a thousand butterflies in my belly dancing to the beat of my pounding heart.

Good God, he’s going to kiss me.

And against every ounce of better judgment I’ve ever had about any incredibly bad idea, I’m going to let him.

I sure as hell know I don’t need a man in my life, and if I did there couldn’t be one more wrong than this one, but hellfire, I want him with a burning desire I’ve never had for anything, or anyone.

His lips part.

I lift my chin.

And I’m about to close my eyes...just as he raises his other hand, a fistful of mud oozing between his fingers, and lunges for the back of my T-shirt.

I scream and yank myself free in the nick of time.

And right at this moment, the back door to the house opens and my mom appears.

“Polly! Who is this poor man? And what have you done to him?”



## MAX

She was going to let me make a move on her, wasn't she?

And from the lusty haze in her eyes and the flush in those plump lips, it would have been one hell of a kiss.

The twitch in my crotch as the bib of her overalls almost brushed my bare chest nearly swayed me from my revenge mission to shove a handful of mud down the back of her shirt.

But I was determined not to be the only one covered in wet dirt. And I almost made it.

She nearly fell for it. And I nearly fell for her.

If only I'd kept my hand out of her sightline until it was all the way around her back, maybe I could have tasted that sweet-looking mouth *and* got my muddy revenge.

But with the prospect of some lip-on-lip action followed by the sudden appearance of her mother, my dick now has whiplash.

I'm not sure if Polly's embarrassed or furious. She turns her beet red face toward the house. "Nothing, Mom. It's fine. He's leaving."

I drop the mud and wipe my hand on my pants. They can't get any dirtier after all.

I give her mom a smile and wave with my cleanish hand, like it's perfectly normal there's a filthy half-dressed man standing in her goat enclosure.

I drop my voice to a whisper and lean toward Polly. "How do I leave? You drove me here." I gesture from my head to my feet. "No cab is going to let the topless creature from the Black Lagoon in their car."

"He is not leaving here in that state." Polly's mom calls back. She shifts her attention to me. "Come in, my dear, and clean up. I'll take care of your clothes." She pauses. "You do have clothes, don't you?"

Suddenly feeling very exposed and a little chilly, I fold my arms across my chest.

Maybe I got a bit caught up in my refusal to give in to Polly's stunt. I know what game she's up to. I'm certainly not new to off-the-wall negotiation tactics. Mud and goats is a first, though. The important thing is to never cave. And that's okay. Because I don't cave.

Months of research tells us Warm Springs is the perfect location for the first store in my plan to open Yellow Barns in small, but growing, communities.

I will not fall on my face at the first hurdle. If it kills me—and judging by the way today's going, perhaps it will—I will win support from the locals so the councilmembers aren't afraid to approve the store. Even if it means I first have to win over the ringleader of public opinion in the form of the most stubborn goat-loving grocer I've ever met.

“Yes, Mrs., um, Polly's Mom.” I turn to indicate my shoes, socks, and shirt. The baby goat's now chewing on a sleeve. “They're over there.”

“Gloria. Call me Gloria.” Her gaze shifts to her daughter. “Good God, Polly. Get that kid off his shirt and bring the poor man and his clothes inside.”

I return Polly's hard glare with my most annoying smile. “I like your mom already.”

“She believes in being polite and kind to all people.” She grits her teeth. “Even if they are trying to ruin her daughter's life.”

I'm suddenly aware of how hard my nipples are. It had better be due to the chill in the spring evening air, not with how much of a turn-on this woman's sass and drive are.

She thrusts her hands in her overall pockets. “And you're not going to have long to get to know her because you're going to get cleaned up and out of here quicker than you can say ‘new suit.’”

She stomps off across the enclosure to gather up my things.

And I've discovered there is apparently one person whose instructions Polly follows.

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I'm naked in Polly's house.

In the shower and this pale blue tub, where she no doubt stands naked every day.

My dick hardens at the thought of that round pert butt and those perky breasts standing exactly where I am with trickles of water flowing over them.

My mind rewinds to a few minutes ago when she looked up at me, expecting me to drop my mouth to hers. I could have kissed her. She would have let me. And I can't shake that possibility out of my head.

But an entanglement with a woman is the last thing I want at the best of times. And an entanglement with the ringleader of a protest against me would be messier than a shit fight in a cesspit.

Far better I stick with the women George disapproves of. Much more convenient.

And anyway, getting my hands dirty working at the ground level on this project has got me all fired up and energetic again. I just need to do more of this. It's more fulfilling than any relationship could ever be.

I turn the temperature to cold for a second and shock my body into behaving itself before shuddering and turning off the icy stream.

I reach around the shower curtain, grab a giant fluffy pink towel, and step out of the retro tub into the retro bathroom. A pale blue sink and pale blue toilet match the tub. The walls are half tiled in white squares topped with a row of black, and the floor is a black and white checkerboard. Is this the 1960s? To match the bus?



Man, it's good to be clean. Acting unbothered by all the dirt was hard work. And I don't ever want to be peed on by a goat again. Or any living creature for that matter.

Lord knows how Polly and her mom are getting on with the impossible task of cleaning up my clothes. Gloria insisted it was worth them trying, and it was all I could do to convince her not to take my underwear as well as everything else.

But the pair of boxers sitting at my feet on the bathroom floor look like I got caught short after a bad buffet. There's no way I'm putting those damp, muddy things back on my freshly scrubbed body.

The only alternative item of clothing is the bathrobe Gloria's lent me that's hanging on the bathroom door. It's pink. With green cartoon goats all over it. Of course it is. And it's the size of an average woman. Not a six-foot man who goes to the gym six days a week. Seven if I have the time.

Thankfully the sleeves are wide, so I can get it over my arms, but they barely reach my elbows. It wraps around me with an overlap of only about six inches and ends just above my knees. I'm going to have to be careful here. Sitting would probably not be the best idea.

And if I look at Polly for too long, there'll be more than my knees on display.

The mirror over the sink reveals I am exactly the spectacle I feel like. I push back my wet hair. I mean, you might have to wear a woman's goat-patterned bathrobe, but it doesn't mean you have to have bad hair.

I fold up my underwear, damp side in, and shove them in the pocket.

As I open the bathroom door, Gloria's voice carries up the stairs from the kitchen. "Could you wring out this shirt? I don't think my hands can manage it today."

"You should have tossed it in the washer," Polly snaps.

"I dread to think what that would do to this fine fabric," Gloria says.

“Then you shouldn’t have bothered at all. I’ve got plenty of big old T-shirts he could wear instead.”

The thought of wearing an item of Polly’s clothing is more appealing than I would have imagined. Enough to make me disappointed they’ve washed my shirt.

“There was goat pee on it, Polly. Goat pee,” Gloria says. “You can’t send that man home with goat pee on his shirt.”

“*That man* is going to destroy my shop,” Polly whispers. “And almost everything on Main Street. You shouldn’t care which variety of pee he has on his shirt.”

The spark that burns inside her is hot as hell. And makes me smile.

“Of course, I’ll do it.” Polly sighs, her voice softer. “Sit down, Mom. I can see you holding on to the counter. Please sit down.”

Gloria did look like it was an effort for her to get around when she ushered me into the kitchen earlier.

“He seemed nice, though,” says Gloria in a hushed and disappointed tone.

Mothers always love me. Not women’s mothers—I sure as hell never get as far as meeting them. I mean friends’ moms, the ones who always gave me an extra helping at dinner and told their sons they should study as hard as me.

Polly makes a *hmp* noise. “I’m not sure. Maybe.”

Wow, high praise indeed from someone who seems to loathe my existence. I strain to hear as Gloria lowers her voice. “And he’s very handsome. Nice chest.”

Silence.

Polly’s probably pulling a face.

I make deliberately heavy footsteps on the stairs.

“Anyway,” Polly says louder, like her mother hasn’t just been discussing my naked torso. “This is rinsed. I’ll toss it in the dryer.”

As I walk through the kitchen doorway she steps back, my wet shirt in her hands, and looks me up and down. She sucks in her lips for a second to stop herself from laughing. “Very fetching.”

I pull the bathrobe around me as tight as I can. “Yes, thank you. I must find out where to source the fabric and let my tailor know.”

“Come in, sit down.” Gloria beckons me from the kitchen table. “It’ll take your shirt about twenty-five minutes to dry.”

“Hopefully twenty if I switch it up to high,” Polly calls from the other side of the wall, as if getting rid of me five minutes sooner means a lot to her.

I size up the chairs at the table and wonder how I’m going to sit down without a bathrobe fallout incident.

“Polly will make you some tea. And I have your trousers drying by the heater.” Gloria points to my pants hanging over the back of a chair. “If I’d tried to rinse the mud out of that wool fabric, it would have made it worse. Best to dry them out, then I can brush it off. And you can send them to a dry cleaner when you get home.”

I clutch the robe to my stomach, pull out a chair, and wonder if I’m brave enough to give it a go. “It’s kind of you to help me out. And was that your soap in the shower? Polly told me you make some. It’s amazing. Was it cinnamon?”

Gloria smiles and her cheeks pinken as she dismisses the compliment with a wave of her hand. “You have a good nose. I got Polly to put a fresh bar there for you specially. Thought it would be more masculine than the lavender one we’re using.”

I gingerly bend my knees, push the bathrobe between my legs, and carefully lower myself into the chair, thankfully without incident.

Polly reappears, the sound of the dryer rumbling behind her.

I tuck my legs under the table.

“Right,” she says, as if on a mission. “If you’re stuck here for a while, I’ll make tea to kill the time.” It looks like it’s an effort for her to keep her eyes on my face and not let them stray to the debacle taking place from my neck down. “Preferences?”

“Whatever you have most of,” I tell her.

Gloria tugs at the sleeve of the bathrobe. “Sorry about this. If only I’d kept some of Marty’s things, you’d have been much more comfortable.”

“Was Marty your husband? Polly mentioned he passed away.”

Gloria plays with the edge of a placemat on the table.

I glance up to find Polly’s face has turned hard.

“Yes, Marty was my dad,” she snips. “Pick a tea.”

I don’t know the first thing about tea, don’t even like tea. I have coffee at work, made by Charlotte.

“Polly.” Gloria frowns. “I didn’t raise you to have manners like that.” She pats my arm. “I recommend the ginger, tangerine, and pink peppercorn. Polly makes it.”

“Well, then that’s definitely the one I want.”

“She makes all kinds,” continues Gloria. “I keep telling her she should sell them in the shop. But she’s too modest.”

Polly turns away to fill the kettle. “They’re not good enough to sell. Nowhere near as good as your soaps.”

“Never had any confidence in her own talents,” Gloria says to me as if Polly isn’t there. “Anyway, Marty had this beautiful tartan bathrobe that we got on a trip to Scotland years ago. Would have fit you perfectly.” She runs her fingers around the edge of the placemat again. “But we donated his things to his favorite charity store. They rescue old farm animals.”

Polly might not want to talk about him, but Gloria seems to.

“Was it recently that you lost him?”

“Three years, seven months,” Polly chimes in before her mother can answer.

She puts the kettle on the stove with a clatter.

Gloria looks up at me with a faint smile and nods. “We think he was so stressed from the loss of the land that his heart couldn’t take it anymore.”

“The loss of the land?” I look over at Polly and point out the kitchen window. “All the land over there? That you said used to be part of the farm?”

She leans back against the counter and picks her fingernails. “Yup. Just over two hundred acres.” She looks up and meets my gaze. “Now we have *one*.”

“How come you sold it? You don’t seem happy about it.”

Gloria rubs her wrists as if they’re painful. “They made it sound like a much better deal than it turned out to be. It sounded like we’d get to keep this little corner of the land and be comfortable for the rest of our lives. Except that’s not how it turned out.”

She adjusts herself in the chair.

“There was a clause in the contract that said the price the developer would give us would be halved if the council didn’t give consent for their plans by a certain date. The developers and the council all told us not to worry, there was no chance of it not going through by then, and it would be fine. But it wasn’t. The plans weren’t approved until a week after the date.”

Gloria’s eyes well up as Polly joins in. “Everyone thinks the councilmembers were in cahoots with the developers, that they got kickbacks for delaying the approval so the bastards could pay everyone less.”

“Marty thought he’d allowed us to be taken for a ride.” Gloria’s voice cracks. “He never got over the stress of it. He had a heart attack. Out there with the goats.”

“Yup.” Polly slowly slides her gaze from her mom to me. Her eyes find mine and lock onto them, burning into me like a

laser. “A bunch of rich guys in suits swooped into town and took advantage of the locals. Then they went back to their office towers and billion-dollar companies, leaving behind a bunch of devastated lives.”

Well, I guess that explains everything.



## POLLY

Mom peeks over Max's shoulder and grins at me as they hug goodbye. His freshly laundered shirt hugs the contours of his strong, broad back.

This has been one of the most excruciating half hours of my life. Trapped in my own kitchen with someone who tricked me into thinking he was about to kiss me. And someone who knows I would have let him.

Can't believe I fell for it.

Of course, he wouldn't want to kiss me. No one like him would ever want to kiss someone like me. How could I let myself believe that for a second?

It's beyond embarrassing.

Humiliating. Mortifying. All-consumingly shameful.

All I wanted to do was shut myself in the laundry room till he'd gone. But I guess he would have had to come in there to get his stupid shirt out of the dryer.

Mom did what she could to brush the dirt off his pants. My eyes are drawn to his backside that's still quite brown. And still exactly the size and shape of a butt you might want to sink your teeth into—if it didn't have that thin coating of dried mud on it that might, or might not, contain goat poop. And if it wasn't attached to a community-wrecking, business-destroying, kiss pretender.

"Thank you for cleaning me up, Gloria. At least I'm decent enough to be seen in public now."

I've had quite enough of him charming my mother. "Oh, I'm pretty sure Mrs. Lovewell wouldn't have objected if you'd shown up in the goat bathrobe."

He turns to face me. "I'm pretty sure I'd have been arrested before I got there."



Looking down, he smooths his shirt over his left pec. “You did a great job too. No one would even know I’d been peed on.” He lifts just his eyes, peering at me under his brows. “Unless they got extremely close to me.”

Damn him. Damn him and his eyes. And his chest. And whatever he was keeping a close handle on under the bathrobe.

“All right, well, anyway, let’s get you back to town.” I toss his jacket, which I’d brought in from the feed shed, over my arm and jingle the bus keys.

“Oh, don’t forget your soap.” Mom tries to head back to the table but stops and winces. When she’s having a flare-up, she often forgets and tries to move like usual.

Max puts his arm around her, guides her back to the chair, and eases her down.

It’s hard to know if he’s naturally helpful and caring or if he’s doing it only to try to get me on his side.

And, good Lord, my mom’s fickle. She’ll lean on him, no problem. But will she let me get her a walker, or even just a cane? No way in hell. Apparently, she’d be very happy if I got her a Max, though. Well, that’s not happening. Definitely not.

“Thank you. Here you go.” Mom reaches across the table for the shoebox of soaps she had me put together a few minutes ago.

I’m sure the last thing Max wants is homemade goat milk soap. It’ll probably go straight in the garbage as soon as he gets back to the B&B. Or he’ll give them to Mrs. Lovewell, and she’ll adore him even more.

Mom lifts the lid and peers inside. “You didn’t give him anything sweet or flowery, did you Polly?”

“What do you mean? That’s all I gave him. It’s one hundred percent sugar plums and cupcakes in there.”

“She’s kidding.” Mom rolls her eyes and nudges Max with her elbow like they’re old pals sharing a running joke. Then she points at the contents of the box. “Look, there’s a couple

of the cinnamon ones you liked, a cucumber with mint, a eucalyptus, and my favorite, spicy lemon.”

“Do you make a cupcake one, though?” Max asks. “Or was that a joke?”

“No joke,” I answer. “It’s the most popular one at the shop. Well, that and the mocha.”

Max picks up one of the bars and examines the brown recycled paper band around it that’s stamped with Mom’s logo and the ingredients.

“Gloria’s Goat Bar.” His mouth quirks up at one side as he nods and his bright blue sparklers look from Mom to me. “Cool name. You two are quite the entrepreneurs, aren’t you.”

“Never had an employer in our lives,” I tell him.

Max places the soap back in the box, puts on the lid, and tucks it under his arm.

“Thank you. I’ll enjoy them. Now, I believe my chariot awaits.”

I hand him his jacket.

“So lovely to meet you, Max,” says Mom. “I’m sorry my daughter made such a mess of you.” She looks around him at me. “She knows better.”

I open the back door and gesture for him to go ahead of me.

“You go lie down,” I tell Mom. “I’ll be right back to make dinner.”

She slowly mouths back, “Very handsome.”

Oh, for pity’s sake! She can’t want me to be with someone who represents everything that’s already wrecked our lives and is now about to wreck them even more.

I give her a hard stare, then head out to meet Max at the van.

Now that he has his jacket on, if you saw him only from the front and from a distance so you couldn’t spot the hole in

his pant leg, you'd never be able to tell what he's been through. What I put him through.

He climbs in, sets the box of soaps on his lap, shuts the door, and gives me that cheeky smile through the window.

As I walk around to the other side, I give myself an imaginary punch in the face and a damn good talking-to. Must not fall for the charm. Must not fall for the charm. Must *not* fall for the charm.

When I climb in next to him, he makes a dramatic grab for the handle over his door, his knuckles turning white. "I'm going to hold on this time."

Oh, why does his amusing sarcasm and the glint in his eye that goes with it have to make me want to stroke his cheek and run my fingers through his hair, while my lower belly quivers like Jell-o on a plate? Why does it have to be *him* who does that? Why can't it be someone normal who makes me feel like this?

"Don't worry. I'll go easy on you." I know there's a flash of flirtation behind my own eyes as I say it. I can't help myself. How does he do it? He's the one man on the planet who should *not* make me behave like this, or make me feel like this.

I turn on the engine and crunch over the gravel to the end of the drive.

"I assume I'm taking you back to the B&B. Hope you have something to change into." I gesture to his general head-to-toe attire, then point at his lower leg. "Shame about the pants."

He examines the goat-engineered hole in the leg. "The suit's toast, to be honest. But I don't need one up here anyway. And my assistant already sent up some other clothes for me this morning."

"What does 'sent up' mean to you? You'll get things air-dropped by helicopter or something?"

He shrugs, like he can flick a switch and it will happen. "My assistant grabbed some things from my closet, and my driver brought them up."

“Oh, the luxury of having staff, huh?”

“They’re actually kind of like family. She’s definitely like an irritating little sister. And he’s quite fatherly.”

We leave the townhouses behind and head between the fields back to town.

“So,” he sighs. “Did I pass the test?”

“It wasn’t a test.”

“What was it then? Did you think if I tangled with a few goats and some mud I suddenly wouldn’t want to open a store here? Or was it purely revenge?”

Putting it like that makes it all seem foolish. But one thing I can say for sure is that having my heart go pitter patter at the site of him feeding a goat, and struggling to take my eyes off the patch of his chest my mom’s bathrobe couldn’t cover, were definitely not the objective.

Nor was being on the verge of kissing him. My cheeks heat at the hideous memory of it. I can’t imagine a time when I won’t burn with embarrassment and shame and feel thoroughly disappointed in myself every time I think of that moment.

All I’d really wanted to do was show him I’m not a pushover who’ll cave in to his whims with one waft of a check. “You can’t buy me off.”

“Because you think I’d promise to give you enough for a comfortable life, then leave town, and things would turn out a lot less great than I’d promised. Like the developers did with your parents.”

He thinks he’s figured me out now, huh? I wish Mom hadn’t started that story. Information is power to people like Max Dashwood.

I grip the steering wheel, stare straight ahead, and put my foot down. He needs to be out of my bus and back inside Mrs. Lovewell’s floral paradise as soon as possible.

He swivels in his seat to look at me. “Why didn’t you tell me about your dad?”

My stomach tightens. Christ, I do not want to talk about this. “It’s none of your business. You’re a virtual stranger. But I did tell you he died.”

And there’s his hand on my shoulder. And there’s a shiver down the entire right side of my body. Goosebumps sprout on my arm, just like they did when he poked me on the way here. He must be able to see them. More embarrassment.

“Not because of the stress of losing the farm, you didn’t.” His voice is warmer. But that’s probably a technique they teach you in business school—get the prey to trust you.

I keep my eyes fixed ahead and try to hide the fact that everything inside me is swooshing around. “It doesn’t matter why it happened.”

The traffic lights are on my side this time, and the edge of town comes into view. Thank God. Almost there.

“It absolutely matters,” he says. “Because you think I’m doing the same thing. You think I’m the next person to sweep into town in a suit and a fancy car, and offer you cash for your business—the business that lives in your heart. You think I’ll destroy it, rip your life apart, then just disappear, leaving behind my giant ugly grocery store and your life in ruins.”

“And that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

He slowly moves his hand off my shoulder, his fingers leaving behind a trail of tingles that start a party in my underwear. Complete with hats, streamers, and door prizes.

He plays with the corner of the shoebox, like a small boy who knows he was in the wrong but doesn’t know what to say. Not something I’d expect from the confident, swaggery, owner of a billion-dollar corporation.

We pass in front of the council building where, at some point in the not-too-distant future, a vote will seal my fate.

I’m still going a bit too fast as I swing the van left onto The Springs B&B’s street. Max slams into the passenger door with a “Fuck.”

I squeeze my thighs together to try to shut up what's going on between them and throw him a sideways look. "Thought you were holding on."

I pull up outside the bright pink door and yank on the hand brake. "Here we are. There you go."

He makes no move to get out.

"So, you're holding up a giant mirror to me, right?" he says. "Trying to make me see the money-grabbing, community-destroying monster staring back at me."

I point at his chest and accidentally brush his jacket with my finger. "A money-grabbing community-destroying monster, with a goat pee stain on his shirt."

He chuckles and half closes his eyes. "You're great."

Oh, no. Not flattery. I will not fall for empty flattery.

Max needs to get out now, so I can go deal with real life. With running a bath for Mom to ease her aching joints, and with making our dinner.

"Actually, no," he says through a wide smile as he pokes me in the thigh. "You're *terrible*."

A jolt of electricity sparks through my body from the spot where he touched me.

Flirty poking? He's doing flirty poking.

Flushed with heat, I instinctively poke him back, right in the pee stain. "I'm not. *You* are."

Christ, I'm flirting back, like an awkward teenager. But, holy hell, that pec is as firm as the new season turnips. I barely make a dent.

He's virtually facing me now, holding the shoebox over whatever crotch business was hiding behind my mom's bathrobe a little while ago. He runs his tongue along the top row of those perfectly crafted white teeth and locks eyes with me under raised brows.

"You thought I was going to kiss you, didn't you?"

Oh, Jesus. My insides curl in on themselves. The embarrassment is crushing.

I turn away and look out of the side window. “No. When? No. Of course not.” I focus with all my might on Mrs. Lovewell’s lace curtains. “I have to go.”

He doesn’t even try to hide his snicker. “You totally did.”

I shake my head, even though he can see only the back of it.

“And you wanted me to,” he adds. The new husky tone in his voice lights an extremely unwanted fire between my legs.

But there’s also a self-satisfied smile in his voice that’s beyond annoying. I point at the bright pink front door. My face must be almost the same color. “Don’t you need to go get changed, or be flirted at by Mrs. Lovewell, or something?”

“I prefer the way you’re flirting with me.”

I spin around in my seat as fast as I can while being strapped in by a seatbelt. “Oh, my God. What’s wrong with you? I’m not flirting. Why would I ever flirt with someone who’s trying to destroy my life?”

“I don’t know. But you’ve been doing it since you fell at my feet outside your shop.”

I twiddle a loose thread dangling from my polka dot steering wheel cover between my fingers. “I didn’t fall at your feet. You stood next to me *after* I’d fallen.”

He takes my thread-twiddling hand in his.

My insides unfurl, my heart races, my belly flutters, and I don’t even know what you’d call the thing my lady fig is doing. But all of it is completely unacceptable.

“You can’t do that,” I whisper.

He looks down at my hand, strokes his thumb across the back of it, and quietly and calmly, as if lulling a baby goat to sleep, asks, “Can’t do what?”

I’m almost hypnotized by the back and forth action of his thumb. “Hold my hand.”

I can barely breathe.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because it’s terrible.” My voice comes out like a strangled whisper.

He half sighs, half laughs. “See. That’s one of the reasons you’re great.”

Then he lifts my hand.

It’s heading to his mouth. I know it’s heading to his mouth.

I should snatch it away. I should reclaim my hand and not let him do what he’s about to do.

But I also really want him to do it.

The desperation to feel his lips on some part of me has beaten my good sense into submission. My thighs clench as his eyes meet mine and he presses his lips right above my knuckles.

Mr. Twinkles is kissing my hand. The CEO with the driver and the New York City office tower and the billion dollars’ worth of companies, who’s going to open a grocery store that will ruin my life, is sitting in my produce delivery van, wearing a suit my goats have chewed and peed on, and he’s kissing my hand.

I must be having an out-of-body experience. Or have been abducted by aliens. Or at least be high off the aroma of the chili peppers in the back.

His lips are warm and slightly parted so the damp inside edge is against my skin.

My eyes drift shut for a fraction of a second as tingles shoot up my arm and across my chest, then leap down between my legs.

All I want to do is pull back my hand and replace it with my mouth.

But, in a flash, it’s over.



He gently places my hand back on the steering wheel. As if in a stupor, I let him.

“Thanks for the ride,” he says with a smile that could make panties spontaneously fall off.

He opens the door, slides out, then ducks back in to give me a little wave.

“Terrible,” I squeak out. “You’re terrible.”

With a quick shrug that says *shucks*, he shuts the door, strides around the front of the van, and skips up the steps, throwing a grin at me over his shoulder as he disappears through the pink door.

My head flops back against the headrest as I fill my lungs. Now I’m not being hypnotized by those mesmerizing blue eyes, the flirty banter, the sexy smile, and the hand-kissing, I realize I’ve been holding my breath for way longer than is probably healthy.

I blow out the air slowly and try to bring my heart rate back down to something below being-chased-by-a-pack-of-hungry-drooling-grizzly-bears pace.

Hello, reality. I think I might be back.

He’s only being nice to shut me up, isn’t he? It’s all it can be. He’s trying to get revenge for my revenge. He thought I’d played a game with him with the goats and the mud. And now he’s playing a game with me, with the flirting and the hand-kissing.

I stare at the pink door he disappeared through.

I can’t let his store open. Not only because it would destroy my business and my ability to give Mom everything she needs. But also because of all the other businesses. And the community spirit.

I can’t give up the fight because of one breath-stopping hand kiss.



## POLLY

“**H**e *kissed* you?” Carly clutches an eggplant to her chest. And given the pitch of her shriek, most of the neighborhood dogs will come streaming through the door any second.

“My *hand*.” I set a fresh supply of recycled brown paper grocery bags on the counter and snip the string around them. “I said he kissed my *hand*.”

“How have we made it to almost closing time the following day without me knowing about this?” Carly asks, shocked, appalled, and almost bouncing with excitement all at the same time. “Why didn’t you tell me? What happened to the whole ‘soul sister’ thing?”

“I needed time to process it. And I didn’t want you to think I might be swayed by it.”

“Why in the name of holy fuckery are you *not* swayed by it?” She holds up the eggplant and waggles it at me. “I mean, what the hell’s wrong with you? A hot billionaire kissed you, Poll. He’s offered you enough cash to keep you and your mom comfortable for the rest of your lives. But you want to cling on to the shop?” She spreads her arms wide, holding the eggplant out at full stretch. “And, get this, you still want to organize a *protest* against him?”

I pull the string from around the bags.

“Where the hell have your principles suddenly vanished to all of a sudden?” I wind the string around my fingers. “People like that can’t be allowed to get away with walking all over us, with thinking we’re merely pawns in their money-making games.”

She bangs the eggplant down on top of the others. I look up from the string-winding and nod at it. “That’ll be bruised now. Take it home for dinner.”

She leaves it where it is and strides up to the counter.

“Look, Poll.” She plants her elbows on top of the stack of bags to stop me working on them, and rests her chin on her hands. “You know I understand. You’re fighting for a principle because your folks were so burned before. Of course, I understand. But this wouldn’t be the same. It’s a giant check that would end all your worries about the shop, and you could fix up the house. Or you and your mom could move, or do whatever you want to do. And live happily ever after.”

I open the counter drawer and drop the string loop into the pot with all the other string loops. They’ll come in handy for something one day.

Carly grabs my sleeve, tugs my left arm toward her across the counter, and takes hold of my hand. “And this deal might come with a side helping of a smart, sexy, rich-as-fuck dude in your bed.”

She has no idea how unlikely that is. I didn’t tell her about the muddy, almost-kiss humiliation. Too shameful.

“You can put that idea out of your head right now.” I snatch back my hand.

She straightens and smiles. “A smart, sexy, rich-as-fuck dude who’s kissed that very hand I was just holding.”

“It was actually this one.” I wave my right hand at her. “And I can’t believe you’re saying this.” I take the rubber stamp and ink pad out of the drawer. “It’s you who taught me to fight against plastic straws in the school cafeteria, to shop at the thrift store, and to stand up for Arti Shadwick.”

Arti was in our class in middle school. A gang of bullies took his glasses and smashed them. His parents couldn’t afford new ones, so Carly organized a collection. And when the big dumb guys weren’t punished, she gathered witnesses and a petition, took her case to the principal and they were suspended.

She should have been a lawyer. But she went to art school instead. Hence, she now sells produce with me.

“But I love you. And your mom.” Her words make my heart swell with how lucky I am to have her as my best friend.

“And my only priority here is what’s best for you guys.”

When we were kids, Carly’s mom had to work all hours to make ends meet after her dad left. Carly would come home with me after school and have dinner with us most days till her mom picked her up on her way home from her evening job. She’s family.

I press the stamp into the ink pad with one hand and rub her arm with the other.

“I know. I love you too.” I give her a gentle push. “But get off the bags.”

I bang the stamp onto the top bag, then peel it off to reveal a perfect Polly’s Produce logo. Designed by Carly, obviously.

She tips her head sideways to examine it. “I keep thinking I should add some flowers. Maybe inside the o’s.”

We both look around as the door jingles open. It’s the first arrivals for this evening’s protest strategy meeting.

“Last chance to call it off,” says Carly, her expression like a kid begging to stay up late.

I grab the bags and stamp off the counter, slide them onto the shelf underneath, and slowly shake my head.

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Half an hour later, the shop is abuzz with about twenty people hopped up on freshly ground, home-roasted, artisanal coffee brought by the coffee twins and organic cane sugar donuts from the baker.

After the letdown of no one turning up for my demo outside the council building, my heart is full from this energetic show of support.

“Okay, okay,” Carly shouts as she flaps the front door to and fro to ring the bell. “Pray silence for our fearless defender of the community.”

That’s me, apparently.

The chatter stops and everyone looks at me.

Suddenly the magnitude of what I've taken on is like the weight of last year's potato harvest on my shoulders.

How can I, a twenty-five-year-old purveyor of produce, expect to beat a national giant like Yellow Barn? Particularly when their secret weapon is Mr. Twinkles Hand Kisser and his monopoly on the world's charm reserves.

I've never been a leader. Carly's always been the one to charge ahead, and I've been delighted to support from behind. The main reason I started my own business after my marketing degree was because it had been drummed into us that we should aim to lead a team. No thanks.

And right now, I've never felt less like a leader. More like a shrimp swimming in a vast ocean trying to rally all the other shrimp to fight a shark. I've never felt so tiny. And overwhelmed. And like I've bitten off more than I can chew and am choking on it.

But there's a sea of faces waiting for me to show them the way—the coffee guys who moved here from Brooklyn to save their business from rent hikes, the baker who opened just two months ago as a new start for her and her little daughter after her toad of a cheating husband left, the florist who's so close to retirement she can almost sniff it and wants to hand down the business she's been building for thirty years to her granddaughter. And my mom, sitting at home with her aching arms and legs, who'll need ramps, grab bars, and a downstairs bathroom before too long.

They're all looking to little shrimpy me.

And I can't let them down.

I take the deepest breath I've taken in weeks and clap my hands.

“Okay. First, thank you all for coming. I know some of you have traveled from out of town to be here this evening.” I nod at Ed and Vera, who've driven more than an hour from Rolling Ridge Farm. “We all love how special Warm Springs is, how unique our small businesses are.” There are nods and a

hiss of yesses from my fellow Main Street shop owners. “And how much the residents value us.”

Mrs. Bentley claps from the seat of her walker and gives me a “Hell, yes!”

Carly appears at my side, drops an upturned crate at my feet, and tugs at my elbow till I stand on it.

“So, here’s what I’m thinking. Tomorrow morning, first thing, we picket the old Picture House lot. Some people might not know yet that Yellow Barn wants to build there, so we’ll raise awareness. I’ll make a sign-up sheet for email addresses for anyone passing who shows interest. We can use it to get even more people out next time and to remind them to bombard the councilmembers with phone calls, emails, and—”

“Poop in their mailboxes,” interrupts the shoe store owner’s little boy.

His mom shushes him, and a titter runs through the gathering.

“I admire your spirit, but I was thinking more of a letter. Or maybe a flyer.”

My mind flashes back to my one-woman picket outside the council building, when Max pretended to be terrified by the idea of a flyer campaign. If it hadn’t been so irritating, it would have been funny.

“Anyway, Carly’s spent a lot of the day nailing placards together.” I point at the stack of blank signs in the corner by the carrots. “So, grab one on your way out, and I look forward to seeing your slogans on them tomorrow morning. I’ll be there at six.”

“Polly.” One of the bearded coffee shop twins raises his hand. “I have some journalist friends. One’s at the local TV affiliate, and one’s at the *Upstate Post*. I’ll give them a shout later, see if I can get them interested.”

There’s a rumble of agreement from the crowd and nodding aplenty.

He turns to everyone. “It’s amazing what some people will do for a bag of free trade artisanal roasted beans.”

The coffee drinkers raise their cups in gratitude.

“Fantastic.” I pause because I’m not sure if that’s Atticus or Aramis. If one of them would shave off their beard, it would make life a lot easier. “News coverage is exactly what we need.”

“And I have an old farmer pal out west who stopped selling to Yellow Barn,” says Ed as he tugs on his cap. “Said he’d never work with them again. I’ll find out what that was about.”

“Excellent. News coverage *and* dirt will be powerful weapons.” I scan the enthusiastic faces staring at me. “Right, let’s brainstorm some placard slogans while we finish off the best coffee and donuts in Upstate New York. And tomorrow morning we’ll show Yellow Barn no one messes with Warm Springs and gets away with it.”

There’s a hearty round of applause, a whistle from Atticus...or maybe Aramis? And a “Whoop-whoop!” from Mrs. Bentley.

Carly leans in to my ear. “No one messes with Polly’s Produce, you mean.”

I squeeze her arm. “We can do this, can’t we?”

She joins in the applause.

“*You* can. Yes.”





## MAX

I turn away from Mrs. Lovewell's heaving cleavage as she bends unnecessarily low to place oatmeal, toast, and coffee on the daisy-patterned tablecloth in front of me.

Every variety of flower must be represented in this breakfast room in some form. Each of the round tables is covered with a different variety of tablecloth. One's tulips, one's daffodils, one's roses. That's the extent of my floral identification knowledge, so Lord knows what the other three are. In the center of each table there's a vase of plastic flowers matching the tablecloth. I, obviously, have daisies.

Then there's the wallpaper, which is a riot of petals and foliage. If Mrs. Lovewell stood with her back against it, I'm not sure I could tell where her apron ends and the wall begins.

"I do hope you slept well," she breathes as she tucks the empty tray under her arm. It smushes her breasts closer together, making them bulge over the edge of her deep V-neck.

I fix my eyes straight ahead on the TV that's tuned to the local morning news. "Great, thanks."

Not totally true, but I'm not going to tell her that.

I'd actually woken up on and off all night with gut ache after spending yesterday evening at the local seafood restaurant. Worth it, though—the two members of the planning board I'd plied with crab, shrimp, and sub-par white wine ended the night fully onboard to vote in favor of the store.

Add them to the other councilmember whose three-hour demonstration of the intricacies of his model railway I endured earlier in the day, and I have three of the eight committee members on board. Just two more, and it'll be mission accomplished—enough for a majority vote.

Mrs. Lovewell and her breasts are still standing over me, presumably waiting for my verdict on the food.

“Thank you for breakfast.” I’m not sure my stomach’s ready for this oatmeal yet, but I dip the spoon in, hoping it might be a signal for her to leave.

It isn’t.

I continue to stare at the TV.

“Main Street woke up early this morning,” says the news anchor, who looks like he retired to the boonies after too many years in war zones. “Amid rumors a large grocery chain could be heading to the old Picture House theater site, local store owners have mounted a spirited protest.”

An anti-Yellow Barn protest? Ha. I’ve seen one of those before. It was just Polly and a bunch of signs.

“Reporter Jen Andrews is live at the scene. Jen.”

I pause with my mouth open and the spoon halfway there. Jen Andrews is standing in front of a sea of placard-holding protestors. It’s quite the turnout.

“What the hell?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Mrs. Lovewell leans in. “Careful, I think the lady on the tulip table might be a bit sensitive to bad language.” She nudges me with her elbow. “Not me, though. I swear like a sailor when I’m not in front of the guests.”

It’s all I can do not to *shush* her so I can absorb the debacle on the screen.

“Yes, Ted. Thanks,” says the reporter with an earnest nod. “The owners of mom-and-pop stores that go back generations, as well as new entrepreneurs who’ve made Main Street their home, fear for their futures if Yellow Barn gets its way and turns this site”—she swivels and points dramatically at the empty lot—“into a store that could put them all out of business.”

The twenty or so people behind her start a chant of “Save Our Street” and pump their signs up and down in time to it.

The shot pulls back, revealing even more people.

“Shit.” The spoon drops from my hand and falls into the bowl with a wet thud.

But maybe they’re not all real protestors. Maybe most of them were only attracted by the TV crew as they were passing, and don’t even know what’s going on.

“You join me as the anti-Yellow Barn campaign leader is about to address the crowd,” Jen Andrews continues. “I’ll step back so we can listen in.”

Oh, Jesus. I have a bad feeling about this.

Behind Jen Andrews, a diminutive figure in denim overalls, shiny blue rain boots, and a pink baseball cap, climbs onto the back of an old hay cart that’s attached to a tractor parked in the middle of the lot.

My heart rate picks up.

She has a megaphone in her hand.

“Oh, fuck no.” Before I realize what I’m doing, I slam my hands flat on the table making the daisies shake, the spoon rattle against the bowl, and the coffee slosh in the mug.

The woman at the tulip table gives me a hard stare and a passive-aggressive sigh.

Mrs. Lovewell rests her hand on my shoulder and puts her mouth way closer to my ear than is necessary. “Don’t mind her. Is everything okay?”

She follows my sightline to the TV and squints at it, like she needs glasses but won’t give in. “Is that Gloria and Marty’s daughter? Polly?”

I nod slowly. Part of me wants to smile in admiration for the dramatic upping of her protest game. Part of me sees her hand wrapped around the handle of the bullhorn and wonders what it might feel like wrapped around something else she might like to press her mouth to. And part of me is fucking furious this is getting so out of hand on my watch.

My armpits are a bit clammy. And it has nothing to do with Mrs. Lovewell’s hand still being on my shoulder.

“I’ve never thought of her as a troublemaker,” she says.

The protestors turn and swarm around the hay cart. Polly certainly knows how to pull a crowd.

She raises the megaphone to her mouth. “Yellow Barn has discounts in place of a soul.”

Her audience cheers and applauds.

“It has big stores in place of a heart.”

More cheers and applause and placard waving.

“It has national domination in place of community spirit.”

Now the cries of “Save Our Street” are back.

Polly gives the chant a moment to breathe.

I can’t take my eyes off her. Look at what she’s pulled off. I have to admire it. But it’s fucking infuriating.

“That girl’s a fighter.” Mrs. Lovewell gives my shoulder a squeeze before finally sliding her hand off.

“Yes. Thank you. I know.” I stand up and rub my forehead.

I have to crush this campaign before it gathers momentum and gets out of hand. The locals need to realize a Yellow Barn would be good for them. And the councilmembers need to be assured that approving the plans would be good for their re-election.

“Takes after her mother,” says Mrs. Lovewell. “And she’s just as beautiful. Marty was the luckiest guy in town when he snagged her.”

“Right. Yes. She’s very attractive.” What the hell am I saying?

Why am I standing in this shrine to all things floral, with someone who looks like she runs a bordello, discussing the hotness of a woman who wouldn’t look out of place in the pages of a farming magazine?

Polly puts the megaphone back to her mouth. “They treat their suppliers so badly they can barely survive.”

There are boos from the crowd.

What's she talking about?

"They pay farmers next to nothing."

Louder boos.

"And charge them for their produce to be packaged."

Hisses are added.

"What the fuck?" Now I'm sweaty, angry, and more than a little bit turned on.

"What's wrong, love?" Mrs. Lovewell's hand is back on my shoulder.

The camera zooms in so closely on Polly I can tell her lips are brushing against the bullhorn. "And they have to have it packaged at plants owned by Yellow Barn." She punches the air. "Plants owned by Yellow Barn that charge double the going rate."

Gasps of horror mix with the boos, hisses, and chants.

Oh, no. I'm not having that.

"What the fuck is she talking about?" I point at the screen and look at Mrs. Lovewell. "We don't do that."

Mrs. Lovewell steps back and holds the tray in front of her like a shield.

"*We?*" She furrows her brow.

The reporter steps back in front of the camera. "As you can see, a passionate protest here, with some serious allegations against the company. Yellow Barn was recently acquired by Harvest Enterprises."

"Oh, Jesus." My heart plummets to the floor.

I drop my face into my hands and push my fingers through my hair. I hadn't expected my company's name to be dragged into this.

"And we can see in this next clip," Jen Andrews goes on, "exactly what kind of attitude the owner has to business."

"*What?*" My head snaps back up to see cellphone video of me giving the commencement address at a New York City

high school.

The rat-a-tat-tat in my chest is probably what's known as palpitations.

"No, no, no-no, no." I wave at the screen as if that might somehow make me vanish from it.

Mrs. Tulip Table is more transfixed by me than by the TV.

First there's a wide shot of the school auditorium, then a close-up of me with a clenched fist, shouting, "Get out there and crush them. Be the best. Be the biggest. Crush the competition." Cheers almost drown me out as I raise my fist into the air for the punchline. "Big and small. Crush them all."

Mrs. Lovewell looks from the screen to me and hugs the tray to her bosom. "That's you."

"Completely out of context." I jab my finger toward the TV. "I was saying that was the advice someone gave me when I started out. If they hadn't cut it off there, you'd have heard me say I disagreed, that I believe in fair competition, treating others as you'd want to be treated, and all that nice stuff."

My voice is loud, but I can't help myself. Why does the media always have to have a hero and a villain?

Mrs. Lovewell takes a step back. "You didn't sound very nice."

"And that's what they want you to think. Here's the adorable little local produce seller." I point at the TV. "And here's the big, bad, out-of-town monster." I point at my own head. "But I am nice. You know that."

Mrs. Lovewell looks like she might be changing her mind about me.

"I fed goats yesterday. They ruined my suit." I gesture to the shirt, sweater, and dark jeans I'm wearing instead. "I'm nice. I'm very nice."

Now she looks like she thinks I'm losing it.

The TV cuts back to the reporter who now has a judgmental raised eyebrow.

The growing crowd behind her is in full chant mode. “One, two, three, four. Yellow Barn must shut its door. Five, six, seven, eight. Mass-produced is what we hate.”

That’s it. Enough. I need to get there, and get there now, before the news crew leaves, so I can set all this straight. If only George were here and sitting outside with the engine running.

I grab Mrs. Lovewell’s soft upper arm. She looks down at my hand.

“Sorry.” I let go. “Could you call me a cab, please?”

She casts her eyes over my food and pulls a sad face. “But you haven’t touched your breakfast.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

But I need her help. Must remain polite.

I scoop up a spoonful of oatmeal and shove it in my mouth.

“It’s delicious.” I try not to shower her with bits of oats as I talk. “But I need to get to that protest right now.”

“I don’t think you’ll be popular if you show up there,” she says.

That I can deal with. Winning people over is my forte.

I just need to get the hell there. “Please, Mrs. Lovewell.”

My hands are in a prayer position. I haven’t begged this much since my top hat landed on my brother Connor’s row of hotels on Boardwalk when I was eight. I hated losing at Monopoly. Or anything. Still do.

“Could I possibly have a cab? Please? Sort of...now?”





## MAX

That was the longest ten-minute car ride of my life. And it should only have been five, but the driver had about as much urgency as a sloth having a slow day.

If he'd concentrated more on hurrying up, and less on telling me how Warm Springs used to be called Warm Spring until they found the second spring, I might not be leaping out of the back seat, blood pumping in my ears, right as the TV news truck pulls away.

"Shit." I slam the car door shut with such force I spin around as Mr. Slow-and-Chatty pulls away.

"Fuck." I kick a stone, sending it veering off into the gutter. All it succeeds in doing is reminds me of Polly's precious potatoes rolling under the wheels of my car as she fell flat on her face.

I ram my hands on my hips and take in the scene.

Two tables are set up on the sidewalk with a *Stop Yellow Barn* banner strung across the front. Passersby stop to chat with the two women behind the tables before writing something on papers attached to a clipboard. There must be a petition. Or a sign-up sheet for more protests or something.

Behind them, the campaigners are gathered on the empty lot, chilling out after all the excitement and the departure of the news crew. Two guys with beards wander around handing out coffees.

And, over to the side, there's the pink hat.

And the blue boots.

And the most adorably hot nemesis anyone could wish for.

I'd like to tell myself the quiver in my belly is from the thrill of a business battle. But I know it's because of the way the blonde ponytail sticks out the back of her cap, the way she hitches the fallen overall strap back on her shoulder, and the way she smiles and hugs the woman handing her a donut.

I need to get a grip. I'm in charge here. There is no reason the plans for our store should be refused. We're doing nothing wrong. Business is business.

I fill my lungs to calm my pulse and do my best casual, couldn't-give-a-shit stroll over to Polly.

She holds the donut, which now has a bite out of it, in one hand, her phone in the other. With her head down over the screen, she doesn't notice me approach.

"Well, you're quite the TV star."

She looks up, startled, an attractive wash of pink spreading across her cheeks. "You saw?"

"Yup." I tuck my fingers inside the front pockets of my jeans and rock back on my heels as if I don't have a care in the world. "Looks like you want to put me out of business."

"Funny." She shoves the phone in her back pocket. "I thought that was exactly what *you* were trying to do to *me*." She points the donut at people gathered by the tractor. "And to Ed. And Erin. And the coffee twins."

She takes another bite. Sugar lingers on her lips.

"I could sue you, you know." Of course, I wouldn't. But everyone needs to be clear what the rules are.

Her tongue peeks out and makes quick work of the sweet white powder. "Oh, here we go." She throws the non-donut hand in the air. "Now the big shot's calling in his lawyers because he might not get his own way."

Another bite and, oh, what I wouldn't give to lick that sugar off for her.

But I need to get my mind out of my crotch and back on the problem at hand. "I'm serious. What you said on TV is libelous. I could sue you. And the station for broadcasting it."

"Everything I said was completely true." She shoves in the final morsel of donut.

"No, it's not. Yellow Barn doesn't make suppliers pay for packaging their own produce. Nor does it charge them crazy

rates for it. That's absurd."

She sucks her sugary fingers. I'm sure she doesn't need to do it quite so slowly. Or with her lips quite so puckered. Or with quite such relish.

She casually shrugs one shoulder. "You go over there and tell that to Ed, whose friend in California used to sell avocados to them. And never will again. He was almost bankrupted by a contract they wouldn't let him out of."

"Bullshit." Is it, though? She seems very sure. "You need to stop all this before you get yourself in a lot of trouble."

"Sue me. Open and shut case. You lose." She turns and walks off.

Oh, no. She doesn't escape that easily. This needs to be resolved. I stride after her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm chilly. Need to get my coat out of Ed's tractor."

I stay on her tail as she stomps around to the back side of the hay cart, away from the protestors.

Time to turn on my charming voice.

"Come on, Polly. Have you thought some more about what I said? You could stop this, take a nice check, and have a nice life." I pause. I know her soft spot. "And so could your mom."

As we reach the tractor door, she spins around on her shiny blue heels.

"Don't you dare." Her face is flushed again, but this time it's definitely with anger. "You're already trying to blackmail me into shutting up and going away. Don't try to emotionally blackmail me with my mom as well."

Fuck. Okay, maybe that was a little low.

Christ, this should all have been so simple, but now it's a growing mess because this woman won't let anything go.

Judging by the turnout here, and the people lining up at the tables to fill out whatever those forms or petitions are, this thing is gathering momentum. So there's no guarantee the

protest would be over even if I put a stop to Polly's involvement.

I guess I could buy off all the store owners, but that would be a bit annoying. And I don't really want to own an entire street.

I need to calm this thing down just enough that the councilmembers don't feel the tide of local opinion is against Yellow Barn.

"I'm sorry." I clasp my hands in a pleading fashion. "That wasn't fair."

She opens the tractor door and leans in to reach her jacket.

Seriously. Whose butt looks good in overalls? How does she do that?

My eyes are still lingering at hot ass height when she turns around. It's impossible for her to have not noticed.

"You know what I think?" she asks, shoving one arm in the dark green utility jacket.

"I think you think a lot of things. And I think you're about to tell me some of them. Extremely clearly."

"I think it would make a big difference if you got to know everyone." Her other arm flaps around behind her, fishing for the other sleeve. "I think there might be a teeny-tiny window in that cold corporate heart of yours." She narrows her eyes at me in thought. "And if you get to know them, that window might open a tiny crack. And maybe you'll understand. And you just might change your mind."

Now that is a good idea. But not for the reasons she thinks. Getting to know the locals, particularly those with voting powers on the council, is exactly what I need to do. Find out what makes them tick. And Polly's actually offering to help with that? Jackpot.

She continues to flail around for the flapping jacket.

"Here, let me help." I step in close, so close I can see the morning sunlight catch her blonde lashes under the peak of her cap. Polly stills, her eyes locked on mine.

My forearm brushes her waist as I reach around her. Despite the multiple layers of clothing between us, a thrill rushes through me that would be more in line with a flesh-on-flesh encounter.

She turns away, looking over her shoulder to watch me catch hold of her jacket. The action reveals a smooth expanse of neck, that my other hand itches to reach up and stroke. My head instinctively tips to the side, my lips wanting to follow that imaginary stroke with imaginary kisses. Christ, what would that *actually* feel like?

Silently, Polly pushes her hand into the errant sleeve and watches its path as I slide it up her arm and ease it over her bare skin.

I can't help but wonder what it would be like to do the exact opposite. To slip her clothes *off*, to reveal her bare shoulder.

My dick is sure it knows exactly what it would be like and is generally pretty happy with the idea.

Polly slowly turns her head back and lazily lifts her sun-kissed lashes until the blue eyes beneath them meet mine.

The bib of her overalls rises and falls more deeply than before. And I swear it has a slight tremble.

"It's the Spring Fair tomorrow," she says quietly. "Everyone will be there."

I'm still holding her jacket collar and can't bring myself to let go. Can't bring myself to lose the physical connection to her.

"I could take you around," she continues, as if we're not really standing inches apart, our warm, quickening breath on each other's faces. "You could meet people. Real, actual people, who'd be affected by your store. And talk to them."

She drops her head, breaking eye contact, leaving me looking down on the pink peak of her cap and feeling like something's missing.

She makes to move away. But, half a step back, she hits the side of the tractor and jolts in surprise, like she'd forgotten it was so close behind her. Then she leans back and rests against it, as if instantly accepting she's unable to get any farther away.

Why is she having such an effect on me? Why am I so entranced by the pink rim of a baseball cap and so desperate to tip up the face under it so I can lose myself in those fiery eyes again?

I've blocked off this whole part of me for years. Not one of the women George has deemed unsuitable for me has even scratched the surface, never mind broken through. So how has Polly chipped away at that outer shell so quickly that I'm thinking more about how sweet her lips must still be from the donut, than how to get her to understand that a Yellow Barn wouldn't be all bad?

I grasp the other side of her jacket collar.

She lifts her head enough for me to see her face but keeps her eyes down. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you. You said you'd help me and take me to the fair. So, I'm helping you with your jacket."

She looks from one of my hands to the other. "It's on now," she says softly.

I nod. "It is."

Finally, her lashes lift and her eyes are on me again. Yes, they can have so much spark and spirit and fight, but right now they're soft and warm and have the same look in them as when she thought I was about to kiss her on Wednesday evening.

"But you're still holding onto it," she murmurs with a slight smile.

I can't let go. She fascinates me, infuriates me, and turns me on all at the same time.

"I am" I tell her, my heartbeat picking up the pace and my dick straining to move northward.

"Okay," she says slowly. "So. Shouldn't you let go?"

My need for her is overwhelming. I move my foot forward slightly, between her blue boots, to test the water.

And oh, sweet Jesus, she leans in and brushes herself against my firming cock. How I stop my eyes from rolling back in my head, I will never know.

“Good God,” she sighs and places the hand I kissed yesterday on my arm.

She’s chosen to touch me. And it’s the privilege of a lifetime.

I’ve never been nervous to touch a woman before, but there’s a tremor in my hand as I let go of her jacket and slide my fingers up to her warm, creamy neck. “You see a tiny window in my heart, huh?”

She nods almost imperceptibly. “I do.” Her gaze lingers on my lips.

As I trace her jawline with my thumbs, her mouth drops slightly open. That one small movement sets my pulse pounding—it might be the sexiest thing I have ever seen.

She runs her fingers down my sleeve until they meet the bare skin at my wrist, sending tingles shooting up my arm and short-circuiting to my groin.

“The baby goat,” she breathes. “I saw you with the baby goat.”

She slides her other hand inside my jacket and rests it on my chest where it rises and falls with the thump of my heart.

“If there is a window in there,” I tell her, “it’s been locked for years.”

This woman’s presence and touch is more than a regular turn-on. Whatever she’s stirred up inside me is more of an inner yearning, a need.

But kissing her would be a terrible idea.

Awful.

She’s trying to destroy me.



And I might destroy her.

Fuck.

It would be beyond bad.

But do I *want* to?

More than I've ever wanted anything.

Giving in to this would be reckless at best, disastrous at worst, and yet I lean down toward her, my body winning over my brain, and press my mouth against the lips she offers up to me. The perfect pink lips that still taste of donut sugar.

For a fraction of a moment, she pulls back slightly, as if having second thoughts. Then she takes my bottom lip between hers and runs her tongue along it.

Heat surges from my chest to my belly, to my crotch, as I cup her fresh face in my hands.

And here it is. The worst business decision of my life.

As she melts into me, the chant starts up again on the other side of the tractor.

“One, two, three, four. Yellow Barn must shut its door.”



## POLLY

My knees tremble against the top of my boots as Max holds my face and sucks on my top lip, then the bottom, sending shivers right to my core.

What the hell am I doing?

I open my eyes a fraction and peek out to see his, tight shut and rimmed by thick, dark lashes. There's a slight furrow in his brow, like he's lost in me. Like he means it.

But how can he mean it? Why would a man like him ever want someone like me?

Although I know this is the worst idea in the world, it doesn't stop me from wanting to lose myself in him too. Whatever this magic is that he's performing on my mouth, completely dissolves my self-control. Giving in, I allow my eyes to drift shut again as I part my lips allowing his tongue to meet mine.

Oh, sweet Jesus. He's gentle, unrushed, almost caring. And I might have turned from a human into a puddle of mush.

It's been so long, I wasn't sure I'd remember how to kiss even if I wanted to. But my body seems to know exactly what to do with Max. I disappear into him, as every nerve that's been asleep for years wakes up with a start and springs into tingling life.

Every thought in my head falls out and is replaced by a starry sky as I soak him in. There's a faint taste of toothpaste and a waft of the same rosemary and mint hair product I first smelled when he unhooked me from the door nail.

My grip must be bruising his arm. But far from pulling away, he leans in and presses my vibrating body against the tractor. His soft kiss turns urgent, like there's nothing he wants more right now than me.

Tender fingers stroke the back of my neck, sending shivers coursing down my spine and banishing any shred of rationality

I might have had left.

All that remains are the somersaults in my belly, the wetness at my center, and the throb in my clit, as I bear down on the strong, firm thigh between my legs. He eases it upward to hit precisely the right spot, and I sigh into his mouth as he grazes his long, hard dick against my belly.

Good God, I'm dry humping a smoking-hot billionaire against the side of a tractor while the protest I organized against him gathers steam on the other side.

This is not how I saw my day going.

I slide my hand across his chest and find the firm pecs I'd admired when they were peeking out from my mom's bathrobe.

It's exciting. And delicious. And the hottest thing I've ever known.

And it's also a very, *very* bad idea.

The chant from the other side of the vehicle cuts through my lust-fogged haze.

"Five, six, seven, eight..."

My body and my mind have never been so conflicted. No matter how much I want this, no good can come of it. Not for me, not for Mom, not for the town.

Why would Max Dashwood ever want to kiss me anyway? Is this just an extreme schmoozing tactic to get me on his side?

I can't fall for it. I have to stop. I have to make myself stop.

His heart thuds under my hand as I ease my mouth from his and force myself to do one of the most difficult things I've ever done—pull back and slide out from between him and the tractor.

I can almost hear my lady fig yell, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Max looks dazed. "Is everything okay?"

He slides the fingers that just a second ago were tickling my neck, through his lush, sexy hair.

Jesus, he's so handsome. And charming. And he wants to kiss me.

But I can't. I simply can't.

Someone has to have principles around here.

I yank my cap farther down my forehead, snatch my jacket tight across my chest, and fold my arms over it. "You can't get me to call off the protest by kissing me."

"You think *that's* what I was doing?" He looks almost offended. "I mean, obviously I do want you to call it off. But that's not why I kissed you."

I can't allow myself to believe that for a second. "Yeah, sure." I snort and shake my head. "You think if you ravish me against the side of a tractor, I'll do anything you want."

He tilts his head and does that thing where he smiles with one side of his mouth, like I amuse him.

"I 'ravished' you?" He presses his lips together to suppress a laugh. "I thought I'd traveled to Warm Springs, not the eighteenth century."

"You know what I mean." I kick at the dirt.

"Should I have asked your mother's permission to be your gentleman caller? And given you time to change into your best petticoats before we take a turn about the park?"

He twirls his hand and does a dramatic, sweeping bow.

It's hilarious. And infuriating. And makes me want to jump on him.

Why does the man who is all the things, and who lights a previously unsparked fire in my body and my brain, have to be the man whose enormous business will crush my tiny one? Why is the universe playing this evil trick on me?

"I'm saying, you can't just make the whole problem go away with amazing kisses and all that, you know, pressing-me-against-the-tractor stuff."

“You thought it was an amazing kiss, huh?”

Oh, why did I say that? No adjectives were required. “It was a kiss. It doesn’t matter what I thought about it.”

He closes the gap I’d put between us. “I thought it was amazing too. And I hope the tractor wasn’t the only thing you could feel pressed against you.” He twitches his eyebrows at me. And, holy hell, that smile.

“Oh, for the love of God.” The heat of embarrassment, or shame, or whatever the hell this new thing is he’s making me feel, burns in my face.

All I want to do is throw my arms around his neck and press my entire body against him. But I can’t let myself. I must get away from him before I cave. “I have to go.”

As I try to walk by him, he takes hold of my arm. His touch sends a tingly shiver down my side and reminds me how damp my underwear is.

We stand frozen for a second, side by side, facing opposite directions, heads turned to stare at each other.

“I didn’t kiss you to change your mind. Fuck knows I’m extremely aware of how strongly you feel about the store. And I’m extremely aware of how bad of an idea kissing you is.” He tips his head back, looks at the sunny sky for a second, and sighs before locking his twinklers back on mine. “But I did it anyway. Because I wanted to.”

And I wanted him to want to. I’ve wanted him to want to kiss me since the day he unhooked me from the shop door. And I wanted to kiss him back. And I want to kiss him again now.

But that would make me more shortsighted than a mole wearing a blindfold.

Completely stupid.

And irresponsible.

I need to fight for my business so I can take care of the future.

And I can't fight against his store *and* do kissing things with him. Those two things are mutually exclusive.

But, oh my good Lord, those lips look even better now I know what they taste like.

"I couldn't help myself," he continues. "You drive me crazy."

He leans in and moves his mouth in the direction of my cheek. The entire side of my body from my neck to my ankle is awash with goosebumps before his mouth even touches me. My eyelids drop of their own free will as he brushes his lips against my cheek with the lightest butterfly kiss.

He pulls back and looks at me. "I think I mean crazy in a good way. But I'm not totally sure."

He lets go of my arm and I haul myself out of his magnetic field. "I have to go check on the people I'm organizing to stop you having your businessy way with our town."

I take a couple of steps away from him, somehow unable to tear my eyes from his face until the last second.

"You're still taking me to the Spring Fair, tomorrow though, right?" he asks.

I gaze into those baby blues. There is a window in the heart behind them, I'm sure of it. No one rolls around in mud with goats just to prove a point. And he wouldn't have looked at the kid with such softness and warmth when he bottle-fed her if he had no soul.

Maybe *that's* the real him. Maybe the hard-nosed, tough-negotiating, business dude is all a front. Maybe my plan to take him to the fair will work, and getting to know the real people whose real lives would be shattered by his store could change his mind. It's certainly worth a try.

"Definitely." I wave both my hands at his face. "But there can't be any more of that kissing stuff. You're going to meet the people, get to know them, like them, and understand you can't open a store that would hurt them. And that's it."

He gives me an aye-aye-cap'n salute. "Till tomorrow."

“Meet me at the fountain in the town square at ten.”

I walk away as fast as I can without breaking into a trot and head around the back of the hay cart toward my protestors.

“Great job, Polly,” one calls out as I walk by, unable to stop my legs from marching me right through them.

“You showed them,” another says, as someone else pats me on the back.

Their voices and faces are a blur.

“Loads more signatures and emails,” shouts one of the women on clipboard duty as I hurtle past.

I nod and smile while my heart races and my feet propel me like a high-speed homing pigeon down the street to the shop.

As I step inside, Carly looks up from the carrots she’s tying into bunches with the string I’ve been saving from the paper bag bundles. Finally, a great use for it.

She recoils, her eyes wide. “What in the name of holy fuck has happened to you? You look like you found out you won the lottery, then set fire to the ticket.”

I chew my top lip and wrinkle my brow. Carly can read me like a book. A kid’s book. With lots of pictures and not many words.

She simultaneously squeals and slaps her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, my good fucking God. You *didn’t*?”





## MAX

Five minutes to ten on a Sunday morning and I've already been pacing around the town square fountain, which shoots water from a stone dog's mouth, for fifteen minutes.

A plaque tells me the water feature is in memory of a dog that rescued a kid from one of the springs decades ago. I've read it five times.

The last time I was this early and this nervous before meeting someone was when I was buying the office tower two years ago and desperate not to miss out on a prime piece of real estate that would reap benefits for the rest of my life.

Maybe how alive I've felt these last few days isn't only due to the excitement of getting my hands dirty with work again. Maybe it's also due to wanting to get my hands on something else entirely.

How has Polly got under my skin? No woman gets under my skin. Ever. But since she speed-walked away and disappeared around the back of the tractor yesterday, she's been right there, barely beneath the surface, the whole time.

While I wined and dined a councilman at lunch yesterday, Polly's overall-clad butt floated constantly across my mind, along with sparks of the spirit it must have taken to stage that one-woman picket outside the council office the other day.

During two video conferences with people back in New York, my brain was peppered with images of her freckled nose, the outline of her cupid's bow, and how her breasts curve slightly outside her denim bib, as well as the deep love she has for this town and its people.

And when I called the head of Yellow Barn to find out what the fuck the deal was with farm suppliers being made to pay rip-off prices to have their produce packaged, I was admiring the devotion she has to supporting her mother. And also, my dick ached to press her up against some farm equipment again.

I take another turn around the dog fountain, which sits in the center of a paved circle dotted with ice cream and pretzel vendors. It's a beautiful, blue-skyed, sunny day and warm enough for shirt sleeves. On the sidewalk side of the circle, a large banner with the words *Warm Springs Spring Fair* hangs between two lampposts.

Large lawns extend on either side of the fountain area. Today they're covered in stalls, tents, enclosures, and, at one end, a performance stage.

Festivities are only just kicking off, but already families, couples holding hands, and a smattering of tourists wandering around, are taking in the day's offerings. Some are munching breakfast tacos from the food truck. They're making my stomach rumble despite it already being filled with Mrs. Lovewell's hefty oatmeal.

My pacing comes to an abrupt halt as I spot her.

My pulse quickens at the sight of an almost entirely different Polly.

She's wearing a dress.

It's floaty, with splashes of color, and stops around her knees, revealing smooth, pale calves previously hidden in overalls. Over the dress, a short cardigan hangs open to frame her chest and the vee of skin revealed at her collarbone.

It's the first time I've seen her without a ponytail. Her blonde hair hangs a little way below her shoulders and floats up as she walks toward me, her thumb hooked in the thin strap of a small bag hanging across her body.

How in the name of fuck am I supposed to not kiss her again?

Her eyes sweep the area until they meet mine. Her pace instantly slows. She half raises her hand in a tiny awkward wave and presses her lips together in a tight smile, as if to hide them from me.

A deep flutter ripples through my core, something I haven't felt since I was fourteen and Briony Mayweather, the head cheerleader, finally spoke to me.

All I want to do is grab Polly around the waist, pull her to me, and pick up where we left off against the tractor.

But I need to focus on today's mission—learn who the influential people in this town are and what makes them tick so I can win them over.

I take a deep breath, straighten my shoulders, and hook my thumbs in my jeans pockets.

She stops about six feet from me and looks off to one side where a small boy is throwing a ball for a tiny, wagging dog. "Morning," she says.

"Morning." That seems to be all I can manage. Where the hell has Mr. Smooth-Talking Charmer run off to today? Maybe my quickening pulse frightened him away.

"How was the rest of your day yesterday?" she asks as her gaze follows the little pooch running back with the ball.

"All work." I pause. "Oh, and you were right."

Thought that might get her attention. Now she looks at me with exaggerated surprise.

"Surely not." She raises her eyebrows. "About what?"

"I spoke to the head of Yellow Barn about farmers being ripped off over packaging. It will never happen again."

I emphasize the last three words.

She steps closer and tilts her head as her mouth curves up at the corners. "You did that? Put a stop to it?"

"Yup." I raise my palms to the sky in a shrug. "I keep telling people I'm nice. But no one will believe me."

"Ha. Well, that's hardly surprising." Those hot blue eyes bore right into mine. "You should see the length of the petition now. Lots of people have signed up for the next protest."

"And when will that be?"

She drops her chin and looks up at me. "No general gives away their battle plan to the enemy, do they?"

Ah, so she is still a little flirty.

Yeah, kissing her. That's pretty much all I want to do. And maybe slide a hand up that dress.

"Anyway," she says. "Let me introduce you to some of the people whose livelihoods you're planning to ruin. Then maybe you'll grow a soul, scrap the plans, and I can stand down my troops."

"It's because I have a soul that I built my company in the first place." It's more of a reminder to myself, but it sneaks out under my breath.

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind." This is not the time for my life story. Even though I'm pretty sure she'd be both surprised and understanding if she knew. "Come on. Take me to meet these fine people."

I offer her my elbow, but she ignores it and walks ahead, leaving me hanging and needing to trot to catch up. "What's the Spring Fair all about anyway?"

"All sorts of things. It began forever ago to mark the start of the new growing season for the farmers. But now it's also about saying goodbye to winter and hello to spring. Time to get outside again, a fresh start, renewal, new possibilities. All that kind of stuff."

"Sounds like a hippie festival," I say as we pass a stall of watercolor paintings where the artist is working away at an easel.

"You say that like it would be a bad thing."

"Ha. Well, my cousin just got engaged to one. And he's the last person to hang out with hippies. Well, I suppose she's not an actual hippie. Maybe hippie-adjacent."

"Yay!" The cry comes from the guy manning the balloon darts game. It seems a skillful player has just burst three in a row. The sign on the front of the stall says, "\$1 per game. Seniors' Home Ping-Pong Table Fund."

Polly joins in the applause as we stroll by. "So, there is precedent in the Dashwood genes to have your mind

changed?”

“Not when we’re dealing with a business decision that was my idea, there isn’t. So don’t get your hopes up.”

The guy at the next table is selling handmade candles and doing a demonstration of how to make them with a camping stove that looks like a fire hazard.

“Your mom should be here with her soaps.”

“She used to be, but she’s not felt up to it the last couple of years. And I couldn’t guarantee to be able to run it for her because of the shop. I’ve left Carly there on her own today, which isn’t very fair. Sundays can be busy.” She looks down and plays with the strap of her bag.

Interesting that she’s kind of dumped on her best friend to be here. Could that mean her motives aren’t purely business related? And that they might be kissing related too? “So why did you take time off from the shop to come here today?”

“For the greater good.” She flings her arms wide. “I’m trying to save the whole community.”

“From me?”

“Hell, yes.”

Christ, she is a fatal combination of attractive and sparky.

I lower my voice. “Are you also trying to save *yourself* from me?”

She pretends to ignore me. But her cheeks are a touch pinker, and her mouth curves up slightly as she focuses on a tent off to the right.

“Ah, this will be good,” she says and grabs my sleeve. Even though she doesn’t touch my skin, contact with my clothing is enough to send a ripple of lust to my groin.

She pulls me through the tent entrance, past a sign reading, “Rita’s Wreath Wrapping.”

“Rita Wiggins is fun. You’ll like her. She’s on the council and definitely won’t want you here. Her daughter just opened a bakery on Main Street. You’ll kill her.”

“The one who made the donut you were eating at the protest?”

She nods.

“Well, I can vouch for the stray bits of sugar being exceptionally delicious.”

She points her finger at the tip of my nose but doesn't quite touch it. “Stop it.”

She seems pretty determined to not fall for my charms today. But this time her face fully reddens.

“Actually, did you say her name's Wiggins? And she's a councilmember?” The name Wiggins is on my list of members of the planning board.

“Yup. For years.” Polly pulls her cardigan across her chest. “And she won't like you.”

Well, here's the perfect opportunity for me to fix that.

At the far end of the tent, tables are laid out in a horseshoe shape. At the bottom of the curve stands a woman with long, curly gray hair. Wreaths in the shape of the New York Yankees logo hang behind her. One made from twigs, one entirely of leaves, and the other covered in flowers in the famous blue and white Yankees colors.

“What's the deal with the Yankees?”

“Massive fan. Huge. You should see her basement. Enormous TV and walls covered with Yankeesabilia.”

Now this is information I can work with.

Around the tables, people are seated in front of piles of materials. There are twigs, various leaves and flowers, and implements that look like they're designed for medieval dentistry.

“There's a spot left,” says Polly, pointing at the one empty chair. “Nothing says community spirit like Rita's wreath-making class.”

“Are you trying to make a fool of me again? Like with the goat feeding?”

“Nope.” She shakes her head with an exaggerated innocence that makes me chuckle to myself. “But if I were, this would be way less likely to end up with you wearing my mom’s bathrobe.”

She’s doing a fine job of flirting for someone who keeps telling me to stop.

“You’re still thinking about that, huh?” I raise my eyebrows at her, then stride up to Rita Wiggins and offer her my hand and my most dazzling smile.

“Ms. Wiggins. Max Dashwood.”

Rita’s face lights up as she takes my hand. “Nice to meet you. Are you a friend of Polly’s? I saw you over there with her. You’re tall and—” Her eyelashes flutter as she looks down. “Well, you’re tall. So, you stood out a bit.”

“I am definitely a friend of Polly’s. Amazing woman.”

“Oh, she is. The way she runs her shop and still manages to put her mom first. Amazing. The way she stepped up after her father died.” She leans over the table toward me and lowers her voice. “Such a sad business.”

“Yes, very sad.” I point at the logos of greenery behind her. “Those are fabulous. You must be quite the Yankees fan.”

“Oh, they are my life.” She takes a big breath as if about to launch into a long, baseball-related ramble, when someone nudges her and points at their watch.

Rita turns back to me. “Sorry, my dear,” she says, as if I must be devastated not to hear her thoughts on whatever batting statistics she was planning to share. “I have to start the class.”

I could win this woman’s vote right here. “Well, I’d love to join in. Okay, if I take the last spot?”

She smiles. “You’ll certainly change the demographic somewhat.”

I cast my eyes around the table. All the heads are female. And gray, apart from one that’s the bleachiest of blondes. “Great, I’m all for standing out and bucking the trend.”



As I take my seat, Polly gives me a thumbs up. For a nanosecond, I feel guilty she thinks I'm doing this for her.

But my instinct to win at business at all costs takes over as Rita claps her hands. She gets the attention of everyone around the tables and the growing crowd. Who knew wreath-making was a spectator sport?

"Let's get to it," she announces. "This is a rapid round. I'm starting the clock at five minutes. Let's go!"

Oh, sweet Jesus. So not just wreath-making, but *rapid* wreath-making? On the upside, I guess it means I won't be stuck here for long.

"Start by taking the grape vines and twisting them into a circle."

Grape vines?

Everyone's grabbing the long spindly twig things. Oh, they're bendy. Okay. A circle. I can do that.

"And secure it with floral wire."

Good God, these women are on a mission. And they have surgical-level skills. They twist and poke the vines, wrap bits of wire, and snip off the ends with the tool that looks like a tooth puller.

A drop of blood appears on the end of my finger as I twist the wire to hold the vines in a circle. Jesus, this shit is sharp. How are these women's hands not shredded to ribbons?

I suck on my finger and look over at Polly who winces on my behalf.

"Looking good," our fearless leader says. "Max, for a neater finish, you might want to tuck in some of the ends."

I glance around the table. The ladies have all formed neat circles. Mine looks like it's stuck its finger in a socket.

Not to worry. It's not like I'm here to learn a new and completely useless skill. I only need Rita to like me enough to vote to approve the store. And maybe for Polly to like me enough to... Well, just liking me would be a start.

“Oh, thanks Rita, but I think I’ll stick with the rustic and natural look. I hear it’s all the rage.”

Half the other wreathmakers chuckle and give me a bless-his-heart-for-trying look. The rest seem to disapprove of me not taking it seriously.

Polly meets my eyes and laughs, like we’re sharing a private joke. And, oh my God, those legs have been wasted inside overalls.

“Now the best part,” says Rita. “Take whatever decorations you like and twist them into the vines. Secure them with wire where you need to.”

I’m supposed to attach this pile of leaves and flowers to the vine circle? In an artistic fashion? In the remaining three minutes? I shouldn’t care. This doesn’t matter. But my competitive nature can’t help but kick in under the pressure of a ticking clock and the fact everyone around me is better at this than I am.

“You don’t have to stick to what’s in front of you. There’s plenty of greenery, florals, berries, and what have you to go around. Swap as much as you like,” Rita tells us.

There are some twigs covered in leaves that look like they’ll provide maximum cover with the least amount of effort.

I poke half a dozen of them into the vine hoop and lash them on with wire, without any bloodshed this time.

I snatch another glimpse of Polly, who’s now chatting easily with an elderly man. He looks at her with real affection. It takes a special kind of person to have an entire town be so fond of them.

The woman in the next chair takes pity on my efforts and points at some clusters of red stuff.

“The winterberry would look nice with the eucalyptus.”

I guess that means the leaves I’ve shoved in are eucalyptus. I think that’s in one of the soaps Polly’s mom gave me.

“Thank you. Good idea.”

In they go. I attach one, then a second, before Rita declares, “Time’s up. Tools down.”

I look up to find quite a crowd has gathered. And they’re clapping. Maybe floristry is what passes for excitement around here.

As the applause fades, I point at my pathetic offering with twigs, leaves, and berries sticking out at random angles. A blind badger with its paws tied behind its back and zero interest in wreath-making would have done a better job. If only my mother and her legendary green thumb could see this. She’d be both appalled and bent double in hysterics.

“Is there a prize for the worst one?” I ask the room.

That gets a good laugh. I can win over this town. I know I can.

“Well, I bet your lovely friend over there would consider your wreath a prize in itself.” Rita points at Polly, who instantly turns as red as the berries falling out of my wreath. “I bet she’d tell you that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Polly looks like she wishes she was the beholder of an invisibility cloak, or that the ground would open up and suck her into the earth’s core, or that a giant hand would swoop down from the sky, lift up the tent, toss it aside, then pick her up and carry her off to a far-flung land never to be seen again.

Her embarrassment is also something I can work with. “You know, I think you’re right, Rita.”

Everyone’s eyes turn to Polly, who shakes her head slowly from side to side.

As I pick up the wreath, half a dozen leaves and a couple of berries drop out. And a twig unfurls and pokes me in the hand.

I step around the row of ladies and their perfectly organized creations and head toward the cutest, sexiest produce seller imaginable—who still looks cute and sexy even

though she's now holding her palms up at me and mouthing "no" exaggeratedly.

As I get right up to her, she sucks in her lips and her brow shoots sky high. It's the look of dread you'd expect from someone who thinks they're about to get a custard pie in the face.

"I made this especially for you," I declare.

The crowd emits a collective *aw*.

Unable to do anything else, she takes it from me, slowly and in silence, and looks up at the roof of the tent as if searching for that giant hand.

"It might not be perfect," Rita says from the head of the table, her hands clutched to her chest. "But it's the love that goes into it that matters most with a fertility wreath."

The crowd erupts into applause. And a couple of wolf whistles.

*A fertility wreath?*

My eyes dart across all the signage. Where the fuck did it say this was a *fertility wreath-making* lesson?

Oh, there. On the list of classes on the chalkboard over to the side. "10:15 a.m. Rapid Fertility Wreath-Making Challenge."

A snicker builds in my throat as I look at Polly's beautiful, mortified face.

"Well," I say, as the applause subsides, "I guess that means the sex is going to be awesome."



## **POLLY**

**A**pparently, I'm the only person who doesn't find this funny.

I stare at Max's broad grin, surrounded by people clapping, whooping, and wolf-whistling.

My face is so hot even my ears are burning.

Max is obviously exceptionally pleased with his own joke. He nods at Rita, who is possibly the most enthusiastic applauder.

So much for the idea she'd tell him his store will destroy her daughter's bakery. Not only does she not hate him, she seems to find him positively adorable.

I'll have to revisit this issue another time. Right now, my priority is to escape this hideous humiliation.

I force a tight smile and do my best ventriloquist impression as I try to talk to Max without moving my lips. "Out of here. Right now."

I grab the elbow I'd declined earlier and march him out of the tent, waving polite thank-yous to the crowd.

The sun hits my eyes, making them instantly start to water. I let go of his arm. An arm so firm it makes me wonder how tight he might hold me.

"I can't believe you did that. So unfair." I turn my back to the sun and run a finger under my lower lashes.

"Oh, God. Are you actually upset about it?" He puts his hand on my shoulder and dips his head to get a better look at my face. "I thought it was funny. And I thought you'd think it was funny too. Are you upset, though?"

He strokes his thumb rhythmically across my shoulder, the warmth of his touch heating my skin through my thin dress and light cardigan.

"I'm so sorry," he says, biting his top lip in concern. "I would never have said it if I thought you'd be so upset. You

seem to give as good as you get. So I thought you wouldn't mind the joke."

His tone is genuine, the stroke of his hand affectionate. There's a chance he might be honestly concerned he's hurt my feelings.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's just the sun making my eyes water."

He looks relieved. "Thank God for that."

But maybe it's only because he's worried that the more he pisses me off, the less likely I am to call off the protests.

"I might not be upset. But it doesn't mean I'm not furious."

He tips his head to one side. I hate it when he does that. It sends an irritating flutter to my lower belly. How can just tipping your head to one side be so annoyingly hot?

"It was *kinda* funny though, wasn't it?" He has that cheeky smirk again.

Maybe. But I'm sure as hell not going to admit it. I look down at the wreath looped over my arm, digging into my flesh. "And now I have to carry this thing around all day?"

"There must be a big garbage can here somewhere." He looks around.

"Oh, God, no. Rita would be horrified." I hold it out to him. "You made it. You carry it."

He takes it from me, and I dust off my hands. "All right, I'm supposed to be introducing you to people whose lives you'll destroy. Can't be hard to find one. Or a dozen. Let's go."

"What's going on over there?" asks Max, pointing to an area fenced off with chicken wire and surrounded by kids.

"Looks like the tortoise race."

"An actual tortoise race? I thought those things only happened in cartoons."

“Yeah, people do all sorts of things to raise money for stuff. Like the guy with the balloon darts earlier. And like that.” I point a little way ahead to a large display covered in wine bottles and glasses. “Gerald Montgomery always sells a bunch of his wine to raise money for something for the school.”

I step to the side and look around the people gathered at his table. “Yeah, I think the sign says it’s for the library this year.”

“He has a winery near here?” asks Max.

“Ha, no. He’s an enthusiastic amateur. Think he makes it all in a spare bedroom. He’s actually an accountant and a councilman.”

“Is everyone here a councilmember?”

“He and Rita might be the only two.” I gesture across the lawn littered with stalls selling honey, pottery, knitwear, and things that have been whittled. “Most of the stands are creative things. The games are usually run by the Women’s Volunteer Society and the Lion’s Club. And it’s mainly farmers doing the animal stuff.”

I point back to the tortoise race, where the kids are jumping up and down like it’s the finish line at the Kentucky Derby. Nearby, a table’s set up with a tiny teeter-totter, some building blocks, and a mini basketball hoop for Norma’s parrot to show off its tricks later. And next to it is a shed leading to an enclosure where there’ll be some sort of llama event.

“Oh, look. There’s Cynthia’s seedling stall.” I point to a little white tent where Cynthia is arranging tiny pots in rows on a table. “She has the florist shop on Main Street. Your store with its bargain basement floral and plant section will destroy it. Right when she’s trying to pass it on to her granddaughter. You definitely need to meet her.”

“I’d rather go see what Mr. Montgomery has to offer.” Max strides toward the wine.

I grab hold of his shirt sleeve—best to avoid contact with his actual body—and pull him toward Cynthia. I’m absolutely



certain she'd tear a large strip off him given half a chance, and that is the exact local discontent I've brought him here to experience.

"I'll meet her in a minute," he says, yanking his arm away and snatching the fabric from between my fingers. "Let's do Gerald first."

He strides off, leaving me trotting to catch up. "Are you a morning drinker or something?"

"That's more my brother Connor's thing. I'm just here to meet the local artisans."

The group of people who'd surrounded Gerald's table walk away in a flurry of thank-yous and clinking bags.

"So, you're the legendary Warm Springs winemaker," Max declares as he surveys a display of enough bottles to put a liquor store to shame.

"Oh, I don't know about that," says Gerald, rubbing his ample belly with delight at being thought a legend. "I don't believe we've met before. Are you a friend of the lovely Polly?"

"I am," Max says with a big smile as he casually drapes his arm around my shoulders like it's a completely normal thing to do.

I ignore the tingle it sends down my neck and duck out from under it on the pretext of browsing the wine at the other end of the table.

"How's your mom doing, Polly?" Gerald asks. "Not seen her around for a while."

I pick up a bottle and examine the homemade label. "She's having a good day today, thanks. I left her cleaning the kitchen, even though I told her not to." I point at the label. "Is this a new one? Gooseberry and zucchini?"

"Gooseberry and zucchini wine?" Max tries to cover up the horror in his voice by tacking on a compliment. "What a fascinating and incredibly unusual combination."

He steps up behind me to check the label, like he's convinced I can't have read it right. The heat from his chest warms my back and sends a shiver down my spine.

"I have some open for sampling if you'd like." Gerald's rear end comes into view as he bends over and delves into a cooler. "You should try some beet and blackberry too. Oh, and I have some of the parsnip and prune left over from the winter."

Max leans in so close my ear tingles from his breath as he whispers, "I bet he does."

I put my finger to my lips to shush him and to stifle my laugh, but a half-choked snort still leaks out.

"Gerald is famous for his unique fruit and vegetable combos," I explain to Max as Gerald emerges, red-faced, from the cooler with three partially consumed bottles.

"Like to add something new to the repertoire every year." He plunks them proudly on the table. "Here you go."

He lines up six small plastic tasting cups and pours us both a splash of each of the three wines.

"Start with the lightest first, the gooseberry and zucchini. And work your way up to the beet and blackberry. That one's much meatier."

Max holds up his first tester to tap it against mine.

"Here goes," he says, as if he's back at the exotic food restaurant and about to force down some unmentionable animal part.

We both take a sip.

Now, I don't know much about wine. But I have smelled toilet cleaner. And this tastes exactly like that smells.

Max squeezes his eyes shut and looks like he's fighting with all his might to hold his head still and not shake it like a dog with something stuck in its ear.

"Oh, that is good," he says, managing to convince Gerald his eyes were closed in pleasure rather than impending nausea.

“Unique. Definitely unique.”

Gerald straightens his shoulders with pride. “Ah, well if you like that, you’ll like the parsnip and prune even more.”

He points at the pinkish wine in the middle cups.

Max throws me a look out of the corner of his eye that says *how the hell do we get out of this?* He valiantly picks up a drink, takes a sniff, purses his lips in barely disguised revulsion, and nods.

“So, Gerald,” he starts.

I fight the giggles, knowing the only reason he’s making conversation is to avoid tasting it.

Max waves the cup around as he talks, like he’s trying to accidentally spill the contents. “I hear you’re on the local council.”

“That I am, sir.” Gerald rubs his belly again. “Thirty years and counting. It’s like my family. Served on almost all the committees in my time. On planning at the moment. A real responsibility to save our unique architecture.”

“And prevent hideous monstrosities going up in their place,” I say to Gerald, while staring hard at Max.

“Definitely that too.” Gerald nods.

“Yup.” I keep my attention on Max’s firm cheekbones, strong jawline, and plump lips. “We lost a real treasure when the old Picture House burned down, didn’t we, Gerald?”

“Oh, now, that was a jewel of Main Street,” he says. “And so many happy memories from when I was a kid watching movies with my old grandad.”

Two couples arrive beside us and start browsing the wines.

Max seizes the opportunity to avoid an awkward conversation and another wine-tasting. He puts down his cup and pulls a wallet from his back pocket.

“You know what, Gerald, I don’t need to taste any more. I was so taken with the gooseberry and zucchini that I’ll take one of those, please.”

Gerald points at him knowingly. “I could tell you liked that one right away.” He nods at me as he reaches for a fresh bottle and hands it to Max. “A man of fine taste you have here, Polly.”

“Don’t I just.”

Max hands him a twenty in exchange for the bottle.

“Oh, it’s okay,” he says as Gerald opens a cashbox. “Keep the change and throw it in the library fund. There’s no better cause than children’s literacy.”

“Let’s not forget this.” I pick up the wreath at Max’s feet as he raises the wine bottle in a cheers gesture and guides me away from the table, his hand in the small of my back.

I know I should ease away from it, but I find myself stepping closer and almost tucking myself into his side as we walk away.

“I think this stuff stripped off half my tastebuds,” Max whispers as Gerald starts plying the next customers with samples.

I can’t suppress the laughter any longer.

The recollection of his screwed-up face makes me laugh so hard I bend over and bash my knee on one of the pokey vines sticking out of the wreath. “Ow!”

The ridiculousness of the whole wreath episode suddenly hits me like a slap in the face from a fertility goddess and cracks me up even more.

“Are you okay?” Max bends down to look at my knee. “You might have drawn blood.”

I flap my free hand at him, unable to talk, tears about to spill out. He rubs my back to help me catch my breath.

“Do you always laugh like this? Or is it reserved for me covered in mud? Or me unwittingly making a fertility wreath? Or, you know, just me in general?”

“Oh, Lord.” I put my hand on my chest as I finally manage to fill more than five percent of my lungs with air.

“You’re quite the giggler, huh?”

How funny Max should use that exact phrase.

“My dad called me The Giggler.” I get my breath back as I wipe away the tears. “But I’ve laughed at you more in the last couple of days than I’ve laughed at anything for, well, actually, I can’t remember how long.”

He stops rubbing my back and his hand comes to rest at the very base of my spine, right above my butt.

I raise my eyebrows and look at him out of the corner of my eye. “Careful.”

He pulls his hand away. Slowly. “Sorry. It felt good there.”

Yes, it felt good there. Better than good. Better than any hand in the small of any back should feel. Definitely better than the hand of a corporate giant that crushes everything it touches should feel.

I tuck the offending bit of vine back into the wreath.

“Seriously, though.” He points at my knee. “You are bleeding a bit. Let’s sit down and take a look at it.”

I look around. “There are no benches or anything.”

“How about behind there?” He points toward the shed attached to the empty enclosure.



## MAX

“This is a nice sunny, sheltered spot,” says Polly as she drops onto the grass and leans back against the shed. She sets the goddamn wreath down next to her and stretches those sexy legs straight out in front.

A cheer erupts from somewhere behind us.

“Someone must have finally won the tortoise derby,” I say and sit down next to her.

“Wait till the snail race starts. That’s when things get really wild.” She pulls her knees up to her chest and examines the damage caused by the wreath. “It’s not bad at all. It’s only a bit of a scratch. It’s stopped bleeding already.”

It’s a knee. Just a knee. Just a knee with a graze on it. Knees are not hot. Knees are not body parts to lust over. So why am I having to grip the wine bottle to stop myself from stroking this particular one?

In an effort to distract my hands further, I unscrew the cap off the wine. “I can disinfect it with some of this if you like.”

She flinches and covers the wound with her hand to protect it. “Hell, no.”

I look at the bottle and shrug. “Well, it’s open now.”

“Oh, you’re not.” Polly recoils in horror.

“Oh, I am.” I take a sip and semi-choke. “This one tastes like tepid battery acid, as opposed to the chilled battery acid Gerald served us.”

Polly rests her head back on the shed, revealing the smooth front of her throat, and laughs. “Urgh. Why would you punish yourself more?”

I hand her the bottle. “You try.”

“You haven’t exactly sold it well.” She takes the bottle anyway and, without wiping the rim, puckers her lips and places her mouth right where mine just was.

She takes a small sip. “Hmm, actually not as bad on a second try.”

She passes it back.

I take another mouthful. “You know what? I think I can actually taste the gooseberries this time.”

The bottle goes back and forth, tasting a little less horrific each time. Polly laughs more with each sip. I’ve never met anyone so joyous.

The tiny window she said she saw in my heart? It eases open a little bit more with each laugh, letting in more of her light.

She places the bottle on the other side of her, next to the wreath, and shakes her head. “I can’t believe we’re sitting in a field, behind a shed, drinking bad wine before lunch.”

“When do you prefer to drink bad wine?”

“Preferably never.”

She pulls her knees up under her chin again, and I catch sight of the wreath wound on her knee.

The magic gooseberry and zucchini potion has weakened my resolve.

“Here, let me see that.” I run my middle finger gently around the edges of the red mark. My hand tingles at the touch of her skin, the blood flowing back up my arm warmer than when it left.

Polly falls silent and watches me touch her, watches my finger needlessly circle the scratch again. And then one more time. Exactly as I did with the graze on her hand outside the shop that morning.

I turn my head to look at her and smile. “It’s already healing. I think you’ll live.”

Her eyes meet mine and she nods slowly.

The desperate need to touch her, to kiss her, to connect with her, consumes me, despite how much it conflicts with our businesses and lives.



Without breaking eye contact, I cup her whole knee in the palm of my hand and stroke the top of her shin with my thumb.

Her breath hitches.

It's like I'm touching the most precious, private part of her. This couldn't feel more intimate if I were holding her breast, or if I'd slipped my hand between her legs.

Polly holds my gaze. The laughter in her eyes is gone, replaced with something more tender, a connection that says her pulse is racing as much as mine, her body flushed with the same heat, her core pulsing with the same desire.

There's a tremble inside me and movement in my groin. I want nothing more than to slide my hand right up her leg and gently lay this smart, determined, beautiful woman on her back.

But this is not the moment for that.

Instead, I lean in and lightly rest my cheek against hers.

Her breath next to my ear sends a shiver down my side.

Why is the woman who wants to drive me out of town the woman I want in my life more than I've ever wanted anyone? She should be like an annoying fly I need to swat out of my path. But all I want to do is wrap my arms around her, nurture her, and help her grow. And have an enormous amount of smoking-hot sex with her.

"I said no more amazing kisses." Her breath turns the shivers down my side to goosebumps.

I rest my lips against her earlobe. "Would you like some terrible ones?"

Her body rocks with a chuckle.

I brush my mouth across her temple, in front of her ear, and down to her jaw. I want to taste her, inhale her, consume her in every way. My hand slides down from her knee, over her smooth calf, and to her ankle, and I fight the raging desire to move it in the exact opposite direction.

She rests her head against mine, her breath deepening.

As I slowly pull back, slipping my cheek across hers, I catch a glimpse of her cleavage pulsating with her heartbeat.

She wants this too. Rationally, she knows it's wrong, just like I do. Not only because we're opponents, but because I live in the city. And I work like my life depends on it. If I make time for anyone, it's my parents. Never for relationships.

But I've never met anyone like Polly.

She moves her hand to my leg but doesn't look up, all her attention trained on her fingers as they make gentle, hot circles on my thigh.

And that's it.

The tension is too much to bear.

I crack.

I lift her face and capture her mouth. Her lips grab at mine as mine grab at hers, and those fingers sink into my thigh, lighting a fire in my boxers.

"Such a terrible idea," she says, coming up for a breath.

"I don't care."

I bury my tongue in her mouth, our tastebuds searching for each other.

I finally allow my hand to go where it's wanted to go since the moment I saw her walking across the square in this dress.

Her inner thigh is soft and warm.

But she pulls back, breathless.

I've gone too far.

Offended her.

Pushed her too soon.

Christ, I'm a clumsy fucking idiot.

"We can't make out on the grass outside a shed." And oh, thank fuck, she smiles. "Anyone could walk around here and see us," she whispers.

Her chest rises and falls in time with her deep breaths. And all I can think is how badly I want to press my mouth to those breasts.

We can't walk away from this now. I want her. She wants me. I look around—there has to be a way.

“Could we make out *inside* the shed?” I jerk my head toward the door a few feet from where we're sitting.

“Oh, my God.” She takes my face in her hands and lets out a burst of the laughter that gets me every time. “You are terrible.”

“Come on.” I stand up, offer her a hand, and adjust my vertical cock to a less uncomfortable position with the other. She lets me pull her to her feet.

“Oh, hang on,” she says, turning back for the wreath and wine.

“Pretty sure the world wouldn't end if we forgot either of those.”

“But if anyone sees them, they might come looking for us.” She gathers them up, like a master criminal hiding the evidence.

The bolt on the shed door slides back with a squeak. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dark inside.

But when they do, there's a surprise waiting. “Holy fuck.”

“Ow,” Polly yells when I step back and land on her foot in my shock at seeing three pairs of glassy eyes staring back at me.

“What the fuck are these?”

She leans around me to look. “Oh, shit. Llamas.”

“Llamas?”

“Yeah, this is the enclosure where Audrey's doing rides for the kids on her llamas.”

I can't believe this. Cockblocked by a trio of llamas.

Well, fuck that.

I take Polly's hand again and pull her inside. "Come on."

She resists. "We can't. That's crazy. Maybe the llamas are here to stop us doing something we might regret."

"The only thing I'll regret is not having my mouth back on yours sometime in the next ten seconds."

She peers around me again. "Does it smell?"

"I don't care. There's a corner over there behind that pile of hay, or straw, or whatever the hell it is."

Giggling, she follows me inside and shuts the door behind us.

There's one small window on the far side behind the llamas, but other than that it's dark and private. And actually, doesn't smell bad at all.

As she turns and carefully places the wine and wreath on one of the bales, I slide my arms around her waist and rest my aching cock against the butt I've admired since I first saw it pointing skyward on the sidewalk.

"This is the craziest thing I have ever done," she says, tipping her head back against my chest as her eyelids give up the fight and drop shut.

I bury my face in her hair and inhale a giant lungful of her sweet fruity scent as her hands slide down the outside of my thighs, setting off fireworks in my groin.

"Yeah, the llamas are a trip," I whisper as I nibble the edge of her ear.

"Hmm, them too. I meant my complete inability to keep my hands off a man hellbent on destroying me."

She buries her fingers in my butt cheeks and my heart damn near bursts free from my chest.

"Christ, you taste good." I suck and nibble and lick her neck, goosebumps erupting under my tongue. She falls back against me as I reach down and scoop my hand under her dress. There'll be no stopping halfway up her thigh this time.

She shudders and sighs at my light teasing strokes on the way up. It's as much a tease for me as for her.

As I reach the prize of her oh-so-damp underwear, I slide my other hand up to the breasts that I'd watched beating at the neckline of her dress only minutes ago.

She gives herself over completely, relaxes back against me, and surrenders all control. I can't imagine that happens often.

My dick strains against my jeans, my heart thumps against her back as I press my groin harder against her ass and slide a finger inside her panties.

She groans, reaches up behind my neck, and pushes her fingers through my hair.

I lose myself in her warm, soft silkiness. "Christ, you're wet."

I suck on her earlobe as she pushes her butt back into me.

"Christ, you're hard," she says.

I'm tempted to bend her over this hay bale and bury myself inside her. But I want to watch her come, I desperately need to see her face as she lets go, see the real Polly, the one without a mission and a cause to defend.

As I stroke deeper into her smooth wetness, she parts her legs. It's an invitation I will not refuse. I circle her soaking entrance and slide my other hand inside the top of her dress. Her back arches in response, thrusting her breast further into one hand and her center down onto my other.

I slide in two fingers and could come right here and right now from the sensation of her warm, slick channel.

She gasps and drops the side of her face against my chest.

"You feel delicious," I tell the top of her head.

She slides one hand between us and palms my desperate cock through my jeans. "So do you," she pants. "I can't bear it."

"How about this?"

I stroke her clit with my thumb as my fingers rock in and out. And finally, my other fingers find her rock-hard nipple. My mouth aches to suck on it, but she's clearly enjoying this too much for me to turn her around any time soon.

I lick my way up and down the side of her neck as I flick her clit and her nipple and hump her ass with my straining dick as she rocks harder and harder against me until finally that's it. Her body pulses around my fingers.

I pull back to see her face as she comes undone, gasping and rocking against me, her eyes tight shut, lost in pleasure, giving herself entirely to the moment, entirely to me.

She comes to rest, head dropped forward.

"Oh, my good God," she breathes as if it's all one word.

I slide my hands out of her underwear and bra, circle my arms around her, and pull her tight against me. "You have no idea how good it is to press my body against you."

She turns around and wraps her arms around my neck. Finally, I get to taste her sweet lips again.

As my desperate tongue finds hers, she slides her hands down to my belt.

"Your turn," she whispers into my mouth.

The thought of her fingers on me is almost too much to bear. But as she slips her hand inside my jeans, something catches my attention.

"What's that sound?" I raise my head to look over her shoulder.

She pauses for a second to take it in. "The humming, you mean?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"It's them." She jerks her head back toward the llamas as her fingers creep tantalizingly close to my aching, desperate dick.

But that noise is...distracting. I grab hold of her wrist to stop her. "Seriously? The llamas are humming?"

She looks up at me, her pupils dilated, her lips full and flushed. “Yeah, llamas hum,” she says, like *how the hell doesn't everyone know that?* “When they're stressed.”

Well, isn't that interesting. And off-putting.

As desperate as I am to bury myself inside this amazing woman's body, or mouth, or hand, I sure as hell can't do it in front of a bunch of llamas doing an impression of a high school a capella group.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” I step back, reclaim my belt, and do it back up.

“Humming llamas don't do it for you?”

Oh, my God. That smile, that flirtation, that absolutely everything that isn't right for me.

I steal one more deep kiss from those sweet, plump lips.

“What we just did was more than enough pleasure for me,” I promise her.

And it's true. I might want to have her all ways till Sunday, but it can wait. Knowing I made her feel as good as I think I made her feel is a level of satisfaction I can live off for a while.

I grab the wine and the wreath.

“Let's go. Aren't you supposed to be introducing me to some people who'll hate me? And breaking my heart with stories of how I'm going to destroy them?”





## POLLY

The sun is like a lightning bolt to my brain as I stumble out of the dark shed where I just had world-rocking finger sex in front of a bunch of llamas.

“Oh, God.” I shield my face from the brightness.

“You okay?” Max rubs my back and plants a peck on my temple. Look at him, being the perfect combination of smoking-hot one minute and tender and caring the next.

It also gives me another waft of eucalyptus. I’d initially thought the aroma was coming from the wreath. It wasn’t until we sat down by the llama shed that I realized it was coming from him—that he’d actually used one of Mom’s soaps.

“My head’s suddenly throbbing,” I tell him.

And it’s not the only thing that’s throbbing. The ripples at my center have barely subsided. I can still sense where his fingers were.

“You know, mine is a bit too,” Max says. “Maybe it’s this.”

I peek under my fingers to see him holding up the gooseberry and zucchini wine. “We drank half of it? In a few minutes? Urgh.”

Christ, I still haven’t introduced him to any of the Main Street shop owners yet, and that was the whole point of being here. At no time should the point have turned into a mind-exploding orgasm witnessed by three agitated llamas. My selfish desire for this smart, funny, skillfully fingering man has ruined Operation Meet The People.

“Do you need to lie down?” he asks.

I drop the hand covering my eyes so I can roll them at him. It hurts a bit, but it’s worth it. “Seriously? Now you’re inviting me to bed?”

He gives me a smile that lights up his face with mischief. “Because of your headache. Not because I want to lie down with you. Which I do. But maybe now’s not the right moment.”

“Yeah, all I want to do is get out of the sun, drink a bucket of water, and close my eyes for a bit.” I point at the bottle in his hand. “That stuff is lethal.”

“I’ll call a cab. I remember the name of the company that took me to your protest the other day. Hard to forget Calamity Cabs.”

“You’re safe. It’s named after the wife of the guy who started it in the seventies. Not their driving record.”

“Jeez, Calamity is an even worse name for a person than a cab company.”

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“Hey, sleepyhead. We’re here,” Max says softly as he pushes the hair off my face.

I open my eyes to discover I’ve snuggled onto his shoulder, nodded off, and we’re now outside my house. The last thing I remembered was telling the driver where to go, then Max suggesting I close my eyes when I complained my head was banging like a heavy metal drummer.

“Oh, God. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He presses his lips softly to my forehead. “It was actually nice having you nap on me.”

There it is again, that window to his heart. And right now, all I want to do is fling it open and climb through.

Very aware that we’re being watched by a cab driver—which is better than llamas, or is it?—I pat Max’s thigh discreetly.

“Okay, well thanks for the ride home.” I turn to the driver. “And thank you too.”

The cabbie nods.

As I open the door to climb out, Max points at the wreath and half-empty wine bottle at his feet. “Don’t forget these.”

“Touching. No thanks. You can keep them as mementos.” But then I think better of it and turn back. “Actually, I will take this.” I grab the wreath. “I bet Carly can make something of it for the shop. The wine’s all yours though.”

By the time I’ve walked to the other side of the car, Max is out and waiting for me. Does he think I’m inviting him in again? I’m not inviting him in again. I need to take some aspirin, get over this damn afternoon hangover, and process exactly what just happened.

He takes my non-wreath-holding hand in his. “I’d like to take you on an actual date.”

And he means it. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he means it. I don’t think it had occurred to me that he might actually like me.

Dare I let myself believe that might be a possibility? That spending time with this man and getting to know him better would be a good thing? That getting closer to Max wouldn’t lead me to nothing but a world of hurt? Is there a possibility that our obvious mental and physical connections could overcome our differences?

Good God, it’s tempting.

And, for the love of lady figs, those twinklers are hard to resist. “You mean something without wreaths, wine, and llamas?”

“Well, there might be wine. But it won’t have seen a gooseberry or a zucchini in its life.”

“Don’t you need to work? I thought you were only here to work?”

He squeezes my hand. “I can juggle things around. Well, my assistant can.”

“And what makes you think someone whose business you’re trying to crush would want to go on a date with you?”

“Because maybe—and I can’t believe I’m about to say this—but, maybe, sometimes something comes along that’s bigger than business. But it’s still a deal you can’t pass up.”

It would be helpful if he weren’t being so goddamn perfect right now. It would be helpful to be able to tell him to take a hike, it will never work, we’re too different, and are currently on opposite sides of a picket line.

But maybe it’s time to give it a little try. Maybe it’s time to open the window in *my* heart a little.

“Okay, we can try a date. No sheds, though, right?”

“Oh, I promise you, there won’t be a shed in sight.”

He strokes my cheek, tips my face up to his, and rests his warm lips against mine. The pain in my head eases a little and my insides turn to jelly.

“I’ll pick you up at eleven tomorrow morning.”

“A *morning* date?”

“A whole day date.”

“A whole day? But I have to work.” Now I sound like him. And if even he can juggle things to make this happen, maybe I should make an effort to do that too. “Carly works Mondays, though.”

He ducks back into the cab.

“Great.”

“But I already left her on her own today. I can’t do that to her two days run—”

“See you in the morning.”

He flashes me a dazzling smile, shuts the door, and waves as the car moves away.

Shit.

Am I falling for him? The last man on earth I should fall for. The man whose every reason for existence is in conflict with mine. Am I falling for him?

I turn and head down the driveway.

Maybe it would be okay to fall for him. I'd like to think I could spot someone pretending to be into me. He definitely doesn't seem to be pretending. Our pull toward each other is obviously mutual. It'd be impossible for me to feel it this strongly if it were only me.

It's a remarkable thing. He drove away thirty seconds ago and already I miss looking at his face, miss him being within touching distance, miss wondering what playful, teasingly sarcastic thing he might say next. And maybe when something as out of the ordinary as this crosses your path it would be stupid to ignore it.

I open the back door to find Mom and Carly standing by the kitchen window. Carly with an expression somewhere between *I told you so* and *when does he buy you a yacht?*, and Mom with a concerned smile.

"Don't start." I scrunch my eyes and press my palm to my forehead. "Neither of you start. I have a throbbing headache and need to lie down."

"We saw you kiss him," says Carly.

I prop the wreath against the shoe rack. "I gathered that from the looks on your faces."

"And we saw the way you were smiling to yourself as you walked down the driveway," says Mom as she reaches for a chair and slowly lowers herself into it. "I haven't seen you smile like that for a long time." She rests her elbows on the table. "Actually, I don't think I've ever seen you smile quite like that before."

"Yeah," says Carly, leaning on the counter with one hand on her hip. "That's a real 'I want to bang him' smile."

"Carly," Mom and I snap in unison as I grab a glass and fill it from the tap.

"Or maybe an 'I've *just* banged him' smile," she adds, lips puckered.

Mom tuts the tut of a woman who knows there's no point attempting to tame Carly.

“Oh, stop.” I press the cool glass to my forehead. “I’m in pain. Why are you here anyway?”

“Thought I’d catch up with your mom—coincidentally at exactly the time you might be back from your date with Mr. Twinkles.”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“You go lie down for a while,” Mom intervenes. “You can tell us about it later. But please be sure he’s not one of those flashy city types who swoops into town, snatches what they want, then swoops out never to be seen again and doesn’t give a damn about the mess they leave behind.”

And there she goes. Voicing my exact fears.

We’ve seen it all before.

I vowed never to fall for it.

But Max is so real. No way could he fake that combination of passion and affection just to try to get me to disband the protest. No. If he didn’t care, he’d brush me off like an annoying piece of lint on his fancy suit and destroy Main Street without giving me a second thought.

He wouldn’t have kissed me on the cheek by the tractor or on the temple outside the shed or given me that tender kiss on the lips by the cab just now. Those are not the actions of someone who doesn’t give a crap.

And Lord knows, those are the things that are sending me head over heels for him. Along with the charm, and the banter, and the twinklers, and the shoulders, and the butt.

I’d written off the idea of ever feeling like this about anyone. Sure, I liked the boys I dated in college. And there weren’t as many as Carly always jokes. But most of them felt more like friends I slept with than people who blew my mind and rocked my world in the way everyone says the “right” person does.

I did think I was in love with the last one, Michael, though. But he showed his true colors a few months after graduation when my dad had his heart attack and was rushed to the

hospital. Michael refused to go with me. He'd started his first job in the actuary department at a big insurance firm in Manhattan a few weeks before and said he couldn't drop everything and race to be with me or his bosses would think he had a bad attitude.

He never liked the idea of me opening the shop up here anyway. He thought I should use my marketing degree to climb the corporate ladder in the city. I guess he never really knew me.

I have a vague recollection of standing outside the hospital, phone to my ear, shouting something about his priorities always being out of whack, and that was the end of him.

It was also the moment I banished the idea of having any man in my life. And the moment I became very clear about my own priorities—making sure Mom is as okay as she can be without Dad, and building my business with a social conscience that would have made him proud.

And those are the only two things I've thought about for the three years and seven months since.

But now here's Max and the whirlwind around him that's churned up feelings I didn't even know I had in me. And while at first it looked like his priorities were even more out of whack than Michael's, the more I get to know him and pick up bits and pieces—like how genuine he is with people even if he does have ulterior motives—the more I'm willing to accept I might have misjudged him.

I pause on my way toward the stairs and the lure of the cool sheets on my bed.

"I think he's for real, Mom. I'm trying to trust my judgment. And I think you can trust it too."

She nods, but there's something behind her eyes that says, "Yeah, I thought I was right to trust too."

"Oh, and Carly. Could you open up the shop tomorrow? I'm taking the day off. To go on an actual date."

“A second day off work? Two consecutive days off work?” Carly’s hands fly to her cheeks, and she drops her mouth wide open in exaggerated shock. “And a *date*? Did you hear that, Gloria? A date. Did someone steal the Polly we know and love and return an identical impostor who’s remembered they used to have a sex drive?”

I shake my head the tiny amount the throbbing will allow and head upstairs.

“And I know you did it,” Carly calls after me. “I can tell.”





## POLLY

**T**his pink lipstick is way too bright. Looks like I'm making too much of an effort.

As I grab a tissue from the box on my dresser to wipe it off, Mom appears at my bedroom door.

"You look beautiful. I love that dress even more than the one you wore yesterday. The skirt swirls beautifully, and the buttons down the front are so cute. Seems like years since I've seen you in anything but overalls." She smiles and leans against the door frame. "Max is one hell of a lucky man. There was me thinking he must already have everything anyone could ever want. But now he might have you too."

"Well, we'll have to see about that." The tissue quivers in my trembling hands as I bring it to my lips.

"Oh, don't wipe it off," Mom says, walking in and sitting on the edge of my bed. She's having a good day today. "It's bright and happy and perfect."

I check it out again in the mirror. Maybe she's right.

She looks down and picks at her fingernails. "Just had a call from the doctor."

Those words are never followed by anything good. My stomach lurches and my mouth goes dry. "With the latest blood test results?"

She nods and pokes at a hangnail. "She was nice about it, but the gist of it was that while I'll always have good days, I should start planning for there to be fewer of them."

"Oh, Mom."

I drop to my knees and take her hands. First, she loses most of the farm, then my dad, and now she's losing her mobility. My heart aches at the knowledge of what a struggle life will become for her.

And one thing's for absolute certain, I'll be by her side every step of the way to make sure she has all the help and support and love that she needs. I can't be my dad, but I can be everything else.

Yet look at what I'm doing right now—planning to head out for a day of self-indulgent pleasure, leaving her by herself. The news is like a punishment for my selfishness.

“That’s it. I’m not going. I’ll stay home.” I straighten and grab the tissue from my dresser.

“Oh, I am not having you ruining your day for me. You leave that lipstick right where it is. I’ll be fine, honey.” She smiles like she hasn’t a care in the world, but her eyes are glossy. “I’m great today. Look at me.” She holds out her arms and does a little shimmy. “You go have fun. One day at a time and all that.”

We both jump as the sound of the back door slamming ricochets through the house.

“What the fuck is that noise?” cries Carly’s voice, making it up the stairs ahead of her.

Mom raises her eyes to the ceiling with exasperated affection. “I guess she let herself in.”

“You’re supposed to be opening the shop. And what noise?” I call back. “Oh, that.”

It sounds like an approaching speeding train mixed with the threshing of a combine harvester and the whirring of a helicopter.

Carly barrels into my bedroom and heads straight for the window as the sound gets louder. “Of course I’m going to open the shop. Just stopped by on my way. To make sure you don’t get cold feet and back out of your hot date.”

“We’re not on your way to the shop. We’re twenty minutes *out* of your way. And the shop should have opened fifteen minutes ago.”

Carly squishes the side of her face against the glass to look up at the sky. “Jesus Christ. Are we being invaded?”

To be fair, it is getting pretty damn loud. I join her at the window. “What the hell is it?”

I follow her gaze upward as, oh holy shit, a helicopter comes into view, preparing to land in the Harringtons’ field across the street.

“Hell, no.” This had better not be Max. He’d better not be making a scene like this. “For the love of God, no.”

If he thinks this is impressive, he couldn’t be more wrong. It’s nothing but a sickening, wasteful display of wealth.

Carly gasps and grabs my arm so hard it instantly cuts off the circulation to my hand. “It’s him, isn’t it?” We watch as the sleek black aircraft touches down on the grass that’s blowing in all directions. “He’s picking you up in a fucking helicopter.”

Mom rolls her eyes at Carly’s language and moves between us. “Either he’s completely smitten. Or he’s a complete asshole,” she says in a totally matter-of-fact way.

“Gloria!” Carly gasps and slaps her hand over her mouth in mock horror at Mom’s language.

Mom slips her arm around my waist as she stares at the helicopter. “He certainly didn’t seem like an asshole.” She’s almost as wide-eyed as Carly at the scene in front of us.

Unable to bear to look at the unfolding ridiculousness outside, I sit back down at my dresser. “Well, you two obviously think he’s pretty damn great. So, you can both go on this date with him. Because I sure as hell am not getting into that thing.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, have fun with it,” Carly says. “For once in your life, enjoy something for yourself. Just go and have a great day. That’s all.”

“She’s right.” Mom turns to look at me. “Like I said, one day at a time.”

Are they right? Maybe they’re right. I mean, I had convinced myself it was worth spending one day of my life with Max, just to see how it goes, to see if he’s as much the

real thing as I think he might be. But that was before the doctor's phone call. And the goddamn helicopter.

I rejoin them at the window in the vain hope it might be the strangest of strange coincidences, and perhaps someone else entirely is landing a chopper in the field across the street for reasons that are absolutely nothing to do with me.

Then Max jumps out of it.

"And there he is," says Carly, clapping her hands like an excited child.

It is quite the sight. His hair blows all over the place as he ducks his head and runs to the edge of the field, dark jeans hugging his athletic legs. He grabs the top of the low fence and swings himself over, then crosses the road and jogs down our driveway.

"Here." Mom picks up my purse from the bed and passes it to me. "Go. Have the completely self-indulgent day you thoroughly deserve." She turns to Carly. "And don't you even think about closing the shop at lunchtime to come check on me." That happened once before, and Mom was furious. "I'm fine. No aches, no pains." She does a twirl. "Go open the shop. Let's all have a lovely day."

"You two can fight about that between yourselves," I say as I head out the bedroom door. "But I need to get that helicopter out of here right this second."

"Now there's a sentence you never thought you'd say," Carly calls as I hurtle down the stairs and fling open the front door at the exact moment Max reaches it.

And that's it. One look into those eyes, which sparkle with life like no others, and I'm lost. Like I knew I was the first time I looked into them outside the store. The life behind them, the heart behind them, the pull on my soul behind them.

The checked shirt fits snug across his shoulders and chest, a little bit of hair peeking out of the V of the open neck. The sleeve pulls tight around his bicep as he raises his hand and pushes his fingers through his hair. The fingers that worked such magic yesterday.

“Hi,” he says, lifting his mouth at one corner. “I’m here.”

I can barely hear him over the helicopter racket.

“I noticed,” I shout back.

Returning to my senses, I pull the door shut behind me and head up the driveway ahead of him.

“We need to get that thing out of here right now,” I yell over the rhythmic swooshing of the blades.

He trots up beside me. “You don’t seem pleased.”

“Pleased?” I say and point at the giant gleaming beast parked across the street. “You thought I’d enjoy this unseemly display of money-money-money?”

We trot across the road.

“It was the easiest thing to use,” he says, as if it were a totally ordinary thing for someone to think, “Hmmm. Shall I take the bike, the car, or the chopper?”

I try to swing my leg over the fence, but my dress gets caught.

“Allow me,” he bellows.

He bends over, wraps his arm around my thighs, and throws me over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift. I’ve barely realized it’s happening before he plops me down on the other side of the fence, swings his legs over, and joins me.

God, that was...gallant. Is that the word? It was definitely strong, and swift, and in control. Pretty much all the things Max seems to be. And it’s made me go a little wobbly.

I grab a handful of hair that’s blown across my face from the draft of the helicopter and make a largely fruitless attempt to hold it back. What a waste of half an hour with the curling iron.

“Mr. Harrington won’t be happy you landed here.” I have to virtually scream over the noise now.

Max lowers his mouth to my ear. “He’s fine. I asked permission. No need to worry.”

He smiles and takes my hand, and we run, heads down, knees bent, to the chopper, where he helps me up into the back seat.

The noise isn't much better inside.

Max follows me in, shuts the door, and hands me a headset. "Put these on. And your seatbelt."

"Good to go, Mr. Dashwood?" the pilot asks in our ears.

"Yes." Max's voice buzzes through the microphone as he looks at me. "I have everything I need now."

He takes my hand and gives me a smile that brings such a warm glow to my heart I almost forget I'm sitting on the luxurious leather seats of a helicopter he seems to own. I'd be just as happy if I were next to him in a rusted-out old truck.

"Whoa." I grab Max with one hand and the seat with the other as the chopper swings into the air.

He puts his arm across me, like a warm, muscular security bar. "It's okay. You'll get used to it."

"Where are we going anyway?"

"You'll see." He kisses the back of my hand.

And I watch the house with my mom and Carly in it, as well as the goats in their enclosure, turn into small dots below.





## MAX

Forty minutes of admiring the scenery and refusing to tell Polly where we're going later, I lean across her to point out of the window.

I'm not sure if it's an accident or if there's a force field around her that constantly pulls me in, but my bicep brushes her breast. The thought of being just a few layers of fabric from her nipple sends a shiver rippling up my arm and shooting down to my cock.

I have to take a breath before I can talk. "That's the answer to your question."

She looks down at the huge lake surrounded by dense trees.

"We're landing on water?" Her wide eyes turn to me. "The helicopter's amphibious?"

She's adorable. Distractingly adorable. Inconveniently adorable.

Usually, if someone stands between me and a business move, I'm focused solely on how to block their protests, not how best to kiss my way around their neckline.

"Ha, no. Look there. In the middle of the lake."

As the chopper takes a wide turn and starts to descend, what looked like a lump of rock from a distance is revealed as an island. With a helipad on it.

Polly cups the microphone to her lips and peers at me. "Please don't tell me you own an island too."

"No. But my cousin Walker does."

"The one who's marrying a hippie?"

"Good memory, but no. This cousin is more like a brother. Long story."

She returns to the view of the island. “It’s so green. Apart from the swimming pool. And the houses. And that rocky patch.”

“Yeah, the cliff. There’s a look-out spot on top.”

“Does Walker work at your company too?”

“Nope. Heard of Toasted Tomato brew pubs?”

“I’ve seen ads for them,” she says, watching the water ripple as we swoop low over it. “The ones with all the celebs.”

“That’s his company. Well, half of it. He started it with his best friend from business school.”

As the land comes up to meet us, Polly flinches and sinks her fingers into my thigh. Being the thing she instinctively reaches for when she needs to feel safe produces a surge of satisfaction and pride that swells my chest.

That’s a first.

I’ve never wanted to be needed by any woman before. I’ve always powered forward, scattering everyone except family in my wake. What the hell is it about Polly that makes me want her to need me?

Yes, she’s beautiful. Yes, she’s funny. Yes, she’s feisty and gives as good as she gets from me. But there’s something else. An indefinable something else.

I’ve spent the last ten years breaking everything down into precise, quantifiable items on spreadsheets to make the best business decisions I can. Not being able to define something frustrates the fuck out of me.

When did I change from wanting her to call off the protests to just wanting her? And from wanting her to wanting her more than just for now, for more than just her body? Wanting to spend the day with her, a day I’m sure she’ll light up with her spirit, determination, and compassion?

The pilot artfully touches the wheels of the helicopter back down on terra firma.

“There you go, Mr. Dashwood,” he says into our ears. “Call me when you’re ready to return.”

“Thanks, Lewis. Great flight.” I reach forward and pat his upper arm. “We’ll be a few hours. Guest house number three has been set up for you. Make yourself at home.”

“How many guest houses are there?” asks a surprised Polly.

“Five. Plus the main house. Oh, and the housekeeper’s cottage.”

I take off my headphones, open the door, and jump out. I can’t hear her reply over the noise, and I’m not sure if her expression means she thinks that’s amazing or extravagant.

I take her hand as she climbs down, and we jog out from under the slowing blades. We come to a halt before the wet rocks on the shoreline, still hand in hand.

She pushes her windswept hair off her face and shields her eyes from the sun as she slowly turns her head from left to right, soaking in the blue water that surrounds us.

“Stunning,” she breathes. “It looks like there isn’t another living soul for miles.” She takes a pair of sunglasses from her purse and puts them on, instantly turning from shop girl to off-duty Hollywood starlet. “And there was me thinking a ‘date’ would mean lunch at the diner.”

I had considered that for a moment, but it likely wouldn’t have blown her away. And as much as I now have other motives for wanting to spend time with her, I do still have a job to do—I still have to convince her to stop this ridiculous anti-Yellow Barn campaign.

“Between the shop and your mom, you probably don’t get to leave town much.” I start to walk away, pulling her arm to full stretch. “So, I decided you deserved to go somewhere new.”

“Look at you, being all thoughtful. Maybe there is something soft beating inside that hard, businessy exterior.” She allows me to lead her to the shoreline boardwalk. “Where are we going now?”

“You’ll see.”

The helicopter blades fall silent behind us as we make our way along the wooden path that gradually climbs above the water toward the tall cliff at the opposite end of the island.

Polly gasps as a building comes into view between the trees.

“Oh, wow. Is that the main house?”

“Nope. That’s on the other side. This is a guest cottage.”

“That’s one of the small ones? Good God.”

“They’re all a bit different. Look.” I point at the next one along as we approach it. She’s silent. “Don’t you like it?”

“Of course.” She glances down. “But expensive luxury stuff always makes me a bit uncomfortable. Anyway, I thought this was going to be a quick date. I thought you were drowning in work.”

“I had a video conference early this morning, then told my assistant to cancel everything for the rest of the day. She asked if I was having a stroke.”

Polly’s eyes crinkle as she laughs. “You don’t really have time for this, do you?”

I shrug. “Maybe this is business. Maybe I’m trying to use a private island to dazzle you into becoming a Yellow Barn fan.”

She comes to an abrupt halt, her brow furrowed over her sunglasses.

“Is that the real reason you brought me here? You’re still trying to buy me?” She snatches her hand from mine and plants it on a hip. “Do you still think I’m a pushover? Have you really not gotten the message? The last attempt cost you a suit, remember?”

She looks on the verge of digging in her heels and demanding to go home. That’s the last thing I want. Not just because I need to change her mind, but also because I can’t stop looking at her glossy pink lips and am desperate for the chance to lick them and suck on them.

“Oh, I most definitely do not think you’re a pushover.” I gesture for her to follow me up the slope. Please, God, let her come with me. “I’m taking a day away from the grind. If I can manage that, how about you do me a favor and just go with it too?”

She grunts, screws up those perfect lips, and slowly follows. My stomach relaxes with relief, and I slow so she can catch up.

“The way the houses are tucked into the trees is really thoughtful,” she says as she looks around.

The breeze catches her hair and blows it across her face. She pulls it back, but a strand sticks between her lips and she pushes it out with her tongue.

Yup, distractingly adorable.

What was she talking about? Oh, right, the houses. “Yeah, it’s higher up here, and they managed to give them all clear views of the water but keep enough greenery between them that they’re all private. Not that it matters. When the whole family’s here we’re in and out of each other’s places all the time.”

“You’re close with your family?”

“Yeah. Me, my two brothers, and two of my cousins are tight. We all get pissed off with Connor’s antics at times. He’s my middle brother. But it always works out that at least one of us has patience with him at any given moment. And we all dote on my mom and dad.”

“You make it sound like the perfect family.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. We’ve had our tough times. But maybe that makes us closer.”

She opens her mouth like she’s about to ask about those times. So I talk before she can. “We’re here.”

I point to a gap between the rocks that line the water side of the boardwalk. “Careful. It’s a bit steep. Stay right behind me.” I step off onto the pebbled path.

“*Steep?*” she says, one hand firmly braced on a large rock. “It’s almost vertical.”

“It’ll be worth it when we get to the bottom.” I reach back and hold out my hand, but she ignores it.

“It’s okay. I can manage.”

I keep my arm out in the hope she’ll change her mind and I’ll get to hold her hand again and be the thing she reaches for when she feels unsafe, like she reached for my thigh in the chopper.

But, nope.

Christ, I hope I haven’t upset her. I don’t want to ever be the cause of that beautiful smile disappearing from her face. “Are you sulking about me trying to buy your support with an island day trip? It was a joke.”

“Not sulking.” She tentatively steps one sandaled foot on the pebbly path. “Just don’t need your help.”

So stubborn. I drop my hand to my side. “If you say so.”

The stones shift under my feet as I turn away and head down. “Yellow Barn would be great for Warm Springs, though. It might drag it into the twenty-first century.”

“There’s nothing wrong with maintaining the heritage and spirit of a town.” Her voice gets farther behind me as I tramp down the slope. She’s obviously finding it slow going. “Imagine if everywhere looked exactly the sa—Aaargh!”

There’s a loud rattle of pebbles. I turn around to see her sliding toward me as if she’s on skis, arms outstretched as she tries to regain her balance, mouth wide open and emitting a cry that vibrates in time with the bumps of the pebbles under her feet.

Before I can reach out to catch her, she slams right into me. And grabs me around the waist to steady herself.

The force of the impact rocks me backward.

Christ, I can’t afford to fall and bang my head on a rock. I have shit to do that requires me to not be concussed.

I lean into her downhill momentum and manage to keep us both upright.

Her face is squashed against my chest.

She must be able to hear my heart beating. It's racing, not just from the fear of flying backward to my potential doom down a steep, pebbly path, but also because the body of my fiercest challenger is unexpectedly flattened firmly against mine.

Our chests rise and fall in rapid time with each other, the mounds of her breasts pressing against my lower ribs.

My hands come to rest on her hips, my fingers finding the lines of her underwear through the thin dress. Holy fuck. The hottest opponent I've ever had wears panties held together with something resembling fine string. There's a rush of blood to my crotch as I imagine slipping my fingers under the sides and sliding them off.

"It's good that you didn't need any help," I tell the sweet-smelling top of her head.

She slaps her hands on my chest and pushes away. Thank God, or she was about to feel more than my chest beating against her.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" Her face is half hidden by hair that fell across it with the impact. "Bringing your nemesis to a remote private island where they *accidentally* fall down a rocky path is all very Agatha Christie."

Before I realize I'm doing it, I've scooped her hair across her forehead and off her face. "You know, I didn't even think of that." I tuck the stray strands behind her ear. "You're clearly even more cunning than me."

She looks down at the few inches of space between us, her eyes visible over the top of her sunglasses, their lashes batting up and down. The smooth skin of her forehead has a dewy glow, and her cheeks are flushed, probably with the embarrassment of crashing into me. But, good God, I hope it's

also because she feels the heat between us. The type of heat that's not caused by the sun.

Though the shock of finding her body plastered against mine has faded, the thumping of my heart hasn't. And I'm pretty sure hers hasn't either. The pale skin of her chest looks even more kissable than it did in the helicopter as it rises and falls against the neckline of her dress.

I drop her hair behind her ear and run the back of my fingers down her cheek and along her jawline. Her eyelids stop batting and come to rest closed.

For a moment it feels like we're going to stand here, frozen in time, forever. But then she slowly drops her lips to meet my hand, and the heart that she joked was softening surges with the need for those lips on mine right now.

I lift her face and lower my mouth to hers, brushing my bottom lip across her cupid's bow, as she flicks out her tongue and tickles me with it.

Her hips sink toward mine as our tongues meet, dissolving all thoughts of work, the new store, and the council vote. I lose myself in a slow, warm kiss that's so much more intimate than the fumble in the llama shed.

The world is silent, apart from the thumping of my heart and the water lapping on the pebbles.

That is, until Polly's stomach emits a long, low growl.

Her lips break into a smile against mine, and I rest my forehead against hers. "Hungry?"

She nods. "I skipped breakfast."

"Then it's a good job I planned ahead." Even though I could spend the whole day—and Christ knows how many more days after it—with my body against hers, our lips locked together, I turn my back to her and press her hands on either side of my waist. "This way. And hold on tight this time."

We shuffle down the stony slope like kids pretending to be a train till we reach the bottom. "Here we are."



She continues to hold onto my waist and rests her cheek against my arm to look around me. “Oh, wow. It’s a mini beach.”

“Yeah, this cove is sheltered. And if everything has gone according to plan, the housekeeper should have left something for us right over there.” I point at a group of large rocks at the base of the cliff wall that towers above us.

Polly’s hands fall from my waist as I tentatively jog over pebbles that rattle and shift underfoot. I look behind the biggest rock and drag out a basket and one of Walker’s Toasted Tomato branded coolers.

Polly makes short work of stamping down and flattening out an area to lay out the blankets and cushions that were in the basket, using one of the big rocks as a backrest, while I open the champagne and pour two drinks.

She kicks off her sandals, sits down cross-legged, leans back against the cushions, and pushes her dress down between her legs.

I kneel beside her and hand her a glass. “Here’s to not murdering my rival on a secluded beach.”

“Reassuring,” she says as she chinks her glass against mine and takes a sip.

She tips her face to the sun and releases a contented sigh.

Dragging my eyes away from the sight of her glistening lips, I reach back into the cooler.

“I’d thought there would be actual lunch in here, but it looks like this is all there is.” I hold up a glass container, two giant chocolate cupcakes visible through the side. “Apparently we’re going straight for dessert.”

Polly sets her glass down on the large flat rock we’re leaning against as I take the lid off the container.

“Bring it on,” she says as she lifts out a cake as delicately as if it were a butterfly.

“I was really hoping for a sandwich or something.” I double check the cooler just in case I missed anything. “I don’t

have much of a sweet tooth. And, good God, these things are as much frosting as they are cake.”

“It’s a work of art, though,” Polly says, turning it around in her hands. “Look how much care’s gone into it. The raspberry swirls in the frosting. This little chocolate lattice thingy stuck in the top. It looks like the housekeeper made these with love.”

We nestle back on the cushions and dig into our cupcakes silently.

Apart from Polly’s contented sighs and groans, that is.

“You’re making sex noises to the cake.”

She stops mid-chew and peers at me over her sunglasses. “I’m not.”

“You are. Like this.”

I stick out my tongue as far as I can and wiggle it deep into the frosting on my cake like I’m in a porn movie, then close my eyes as I take a long slow bite and emit an exaggerated erotic moan.

She punches my arm. “That is totally not what I was doing.”

“It totally was.”

She crams the last huge lump of cake in her mouth as unsexily as possible, her body rocking with laughter so much that some of the frosting rubs off on the end of her nose.

She pulls herself together and chews silently, completely unaware of the frosting-on-nose situation.

“You’re concentrating super hard on not making any sounds now, aren’t you?”

She nods, and snort-coughs as she tries to laugh, chew, and breathe at the same time. It’s deeply satisfying to know I can read her perfectly.

“Please don’t die choking on a cupcake.” I pat her on the back. “I’d never be able to carry your corpse back up that slope.”

Her body shakes with more silent laughter, and she yanks off her sunglasses to reveal tears trickling down her cheeks. Fuck, she's not just annoyingly adorable, she's annoyingly hilarious too.

“You are such a giggler.”

She points at her hamster cheeks.

“And you can't talk, can you? Because you're laughing so hard you can't swallow that cake.”

Her shoulders shake harder, as the trickle of tears turns into a river.

And it's so infectious I can't help but join in. “Sorry, I'm trying to be sympathetic. But it's impossible.”

She cough-chokes some more, and I rub her back harder as if somehow that might help.

“Okay, now focus. Take a deep breath through your nose. And think of something completely not funny.” What's the least amusing thing I can imagine? “Like dead kittens.”

It has the exact opposite effect, and she falls onto her side across my lap. Desperate to laugh out loud, but unable to if she wants to keep the precious cake in her mouth, she repeatedly slaps the blanket.

Her body rocks to and fro across my thighs. The tip of her nose still decorated with frosting.

It's the most crazy-beautiful sight I've ever seen. Her unbridled, uncontrollable joy is as refreshing as a walk in the rain on a hot summer day.

But also, she needs to swallow that cake before she chokes on it for real.

“Maybe this will stop the giggles.” I roll her flat on her back across my legs and lean forward, slowly extending my tongue until I can scoop the frosting off the end of her nose.

She stills instantly.

The only movements are the rise and fall of her chest, breathless from the pent-up laughter, and the wafting of her

lashes over eyes that are locked with mine.

She wraps one arm around my waist as her back relaxes onto my lap, and she slowly chews the cake. Finally, and without breaking our gaze, she swallows it.

“Damn.” I snap my fingers. “I didn’t quite get it all.”

Resting my hand on her hip, I lean back down and make two small, slow circles with my tongue to remove the remainder of the frosting from her nose.

I pause for a second, my mouth still hovering over her.

She slowly brings her hand to her face and points to her lips.

“There might be some here too,” she breathes.

“You know what?” I say in a shocked whisper. “I think you’re right.”

Her eyes drift shut as I run my tongue around the outline of her frosting-free lips.

The full weight of her head falls back onto my leg as her mouth drops open and her tongue reaches out to connect with mine.

It sparks a shiver in my chest, a heat in my groin. A voice in my head awakens, telling me I’m the luckiest man alive and—regardless of the circumstances that pit us against each other—I must not fuck this up.

I gently take her top lip between mine, then the lower. Her fingers press into my back as I slide my hand up from her hip and stop just short of her breast.

She sucks me into her warmth, our lips locked around our stroking tongues.

As I slide my hand back down over her belly, she makes a quiet whimper.

I pull back slightly and smile, my lips still against hers. “Does that mean I’m almost as pleasurable as the cake?”

She strokes my cheek and chuckles. “It actually means you’re pressing on my belly, and I really need to pee.”

I straighten and shake my head. “Seriously?”

She nods, pushing herself up off my lap.

I point to the other side of the beach. “How about over there, behind that bigger rock?”

Her hand flies to her chest and her mouth drops open. If she were wearing pearls, she’d be clutching them. “Oh, I’m not peeing in public.”

“Public?” I fling my arms wide and swing them around. “The nearest person is probably five miles away.”

“I mean outdoors. I’m not peeing outdoors. Or in front of you.”

“I’d turn my back.”

“Or behind you.”

So much for my attempt at romantic champagne on the beach. I tilt my head and sigh. “Do we need to go back to the house?”

“Does it have somewhere to pee that has walls and a ceiling, that isn’t covered in rocks, and that has a flush function?”

“It does.”

“Then yes, please.”



## POLLY

If it were possible to walk with my legs crossed I would.

Finally, as we reach the end of the wooded path across the island, the trees clear to reveal a beautiful shingled house. A deck leads up to open French doors with long white muslin curtains billowing out of them.

“Let’s go in this way. It’ll get you to a bathroom quicker.”

He sweeps back one of the curtains and guides me in ahead of him. His hand in the small of my back sends tingles up my spine.

The tingles radiate across my whole body when I realize we’re walking into the most spectacular bedroom I have ever seen. My hands fly to my mouth as I gasp at the sight of something out of the pages of a design magazine.

It’s huge, with whitewashed wood floors, white walls, and a vaulted wooden ceiling. There’s a cream chaise along one wall. The rest of the furniture is in a pale wood. Including—right in the middle—a king-sized four-poster bed hung with the same white muslin as the curtains and dressed with heavy white sheets.

“I take it from that expression that you like it?” says Max with an affectionate smile. “Your mouth is actually open.”

I cast my eyes around the room again, struggling to soak it all up at once. If the bedroom is this gorgeous, what must the rest of the house be like?

“It’s beautiful. Unreal.” I hop from one foot to the other. “But I’ll appreciate it a lot more once I’ve been to the restroom.”

He points to a door on the opposite side of the room.

I half skip, half trot, and open the door to a bathroom that might be bigger than my bedroom.

Amid the blessed relief of peeing, I take in the claw-foot tub, the glass-walled shower with a rain head the size of a

dinner plate, and the pale blue and brilliant white tiles that surround them. The walls are wainscoted with what looks like weathered driftwood, matching the vanity.

I dry my hands on the whitest, thickest towel I've ever felt and head back to find Max leaning against the open doorway looking out, his back to me.

I walk up behind him, slip my hands around his waist, and nestle into his back. He smells of Mom's cucumber-and-mint soap. How funny he's tried more than one of them.

"Now I can admire everything properly," I tell the spot between his shoulder blades.

He turns around to face me and taps his finger on my nose. "You might have caught the sun. This is a bit pink."

He replaces his finger with a gentle brush of his lips. What is it with this man and his nose kisses that make my entire body tremble? A warmth blooms in my belly and spreads down to my center as he pulls me to him and moves his mouth to mine.

Maybe I'm heady from the surroundings, the helicopter, the island, the beach, the stunning bedroom. Or maybe it's just Max and a unique part of him that stirs a unique part of me. But whatever it is, my body yearns for him.

I push my fingers through his hair as he grabs my butt and presses himself against me. Our mouths move as one, in a long deep kiss that tells me there's more to it for him than a meaningless hit-and-run.

Will I still campaign like hell to stop his store? Of course.

If I fail, will his business still crush mine? Of course.

But maybe Max was right earlier when he asked me to just go with it.

What was it Mom said this morning? One day at a time?

Perhaps she was right too. Who knows what the future holds? The only part I'm sure of is that mine will focus on Mom's welfare and happiness. And that won't leave much time for me.



So maybe I should take this now, while I can. While I have the chance to experience the most magical feeling anyone has ever stirred in me. This chance might never come again.

Might he break my heart tomorrow? Shatter my livelihood the day after? Of course.

But today is spectacular.

Okay, Mom. One day at a time.

As I sink into him, Max slides his hands lower and strokes the spot where my butt meets my thighs. A shudder of need ripples through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. As it passes through my center, it makes me instantly wet. I crave him, every part of him, and want more than his fingers inside me this time.

He tears his lips away and strokes my cheek. "I want you so much. More than I've ever wanted anything."

The truth behind those words resonates in his voice and in the heat radiating from his body.

I still can't help but tease him. "Even more than whichever business deal you wanted the most?"

He presses a finger to his lips and looks skywards, pretending he needs to give it some deep thought. "Hmmm. Maybe."

I poke him in the chest, like I did when I dropped him off outside the B&B. "Oh, how romantic."

He settles his head against mine again, running his fingers up and down my spine, leaving tingles in their wake.

"Seriously, Polly. This is a whole new experience for me. I know it makes no sense for either of us. But you light a fire in me I never knew was there to be lit."

His words set off a surge of reassuring warmth deep within me. So it's not only me who's never felt this before? Is he saying this is so remarkable, so magical and unique, that it's all new to him too?

He scatters kisses up the side of my neck that make my body hum with desire.

“But there’s no rush,” he whispers when he reaches my ear. “We can go slowly.”

That’s music to my ears too, because I want this feeling to last forever. At the same time, I also want to rip off his jeans and have him inside me right now.

If the fire I light in him is anything like the raging inferno he’s torched in me, we are in for one hell of an explosion.

“You’re right. It makes no sense.” I slide my hands over his pecs and undo the buttons of his shirt. Slowly, like he asked. My eyes feast on his bare chest, my fingers drawn to his nipples, my mouth to his collarbone. I dot kisses along it as I tell him, “It’s very inconvenient.”

He lets out a breathy laugh, puts his hand under my butt, and scoops me off the ground. My legs instinctively wrap themselves around him and hold on tight.

He sits me gently on the edge of the bed and kneels before me, like I’m a precious gift to be worshipped. My dress has buttons all the way down the front, something that did cross my mind when I chose to wear it. He makes swift work of the top few to reveal the lace bra I dug out of a storage box from under the bed this morning.

He emits a sigh heavy with desire and strokes the swell of my breasts. “I’m excited to see these. I know they’ll be beautiful.”

Every nerve ending in my body springs to life as he pushes the dress off my shoulders, unhooks my bra, and slides that off too.

He leans back to take me in. “Even more spectacular than I imagined.”

He cups my breasts and thumbs both nipples, sending a bolt of desire shooting between my legs. My eyes close, my head drops back, lost in the sensation of his hands on me.

When he replaces one hand with his mouth, a sound comes out of me that I don't recognize.

I bury my hands in his soft, thick hair as his mouth moves lower. He continues to unbutton my dress, planting kisses where each new inch of flesh is revealed, until the fabric falls to my sides and I'm sitting here in only my underwear.

"Time to lie down," he whispers against my skin while he eases me onto my back and moves over me.

I need to touch him. I need my hands on him.

As he straddles me, my desperate fingers fly to his belt and zipper and plunge into his boxers. What a prize I find there. He's rock-hard, long, thick, and silky smooth.

He closes his eyes and groans as I spread the dripping precum over the tip and work it up and down.

"Fuck," he pants after only a few seconds. "You have to stop. You have to stop."

He pulls my hands away.

"You don't like it?" I ask with a flirty smile.

"Yeah, that's right. It's awful. You must never do that again." He slides down my body, pulling off my lace panties as he goes. "And I think you're about to hate this too."

His tongue flicks my clit as he parts me with his fingers.

My back arches into the heavy white sheets as unbridled pleasure courses through my veins and consumes me.

"Terrible," I gasp. "Truly terrible."

The pressure of his tongue increases, making rhythmic circles, as one finger, then another, finds my entrance.

For the second time in two days, I have this remarkable man's fingers inside me. But this time the tongue he uses to create his sparky banter is creating sparks of a whole different kind.

I grab the sheets as I start to rise and rise. But as I teeter on the point of no return, the fingers and the tongue disappear.

My groan must sound like disappointment.

His mouth works its way back up my body to my neck, setting fire to every inch of skin it touches.

“Never fear,” he says against my ear, the warm breath sending a ripple of goosebumps all the way to my feet. “I want to come with you. I want us to do it together.”

He climbs off me, and I miss the heat and weight of his body instantly.

But the sight of him removing his jeans and boxers to reveal a proud dick that looks even better than it felt, and strong firm thighs that call for me to dig my fingers into them, is worth the price.

He pulls his wallet from his jeans, takes a foil square from it, and in a flash, he’s sheathed and back over me.

Desperate for his kiss, I pull his face down to meet me and find the taste of myself on his lips. His tongue strokes mine, and the head of his dick rubs against my clit in the same rhythm.

We gasp together as he slides the tip inside me.

All efforts to take it slow are pointless.

I thrust my hips up to meet him. I need all of him, and I need him now. There’s bliss in the pain as I adjust to his size. Bliss in it having been so long, it’s almost like my first time.

He plunges deep inside me. Filling me completely.

Good God, how can someone so wrong for me feel so right?

I’m lost, gone, rocking back and forth with Max, my ultimate competitor, inside me.

His beautiful face strains as he holds back, on the edge and waiting for me, being generous again, just like yesterday, when his only mission was my satisfaction.

“I can’t hold on,” I breathe into the crook of his neck as my fingers dig into his shoulders.

“Thank fuck for that, because neither can I.”

Now we have each other’s permission to let go.

I give myself to him fully, writhing in ecstasy beneath him, contracting against his thrusts and spasms. For wave after wave, my cries mix with his gasps and groans as we climb and climb together, then crash over the top in one giant, thrashing explosion of joint ecstasy.

He drops on top of me. Our chests, slick with each other’s sweat, slide together.

I soak him in, inhaling the cucumber-and-mint aroma I’m so familiar with.

“Oh, my God,” he pants against my shoulder, then turns his head to look at me. “Even better without an audience of llamas.”

And we lie here, joined together, laughing.

As our breath returns to almost normal, he rolls off me with a soft kiss on my lips and pads to the bathroom.

The breeze through the open doors is suddenly cool against my damp, exposed body. I pull back the covers and crawl between the softest sheets I’ve ever felt, propping myself up on the mountain of fluffy white pillows.

I never would have thought I’d be able to let myself relax amid all this luxury, and let myself go along with it purely for the fun of the day, without thinking about tomorrow. Maybe it’s because none of it is ostentatious or obnoxious. Maybe because *he* isn’t.

It’s all simply beautiful.

And so is he.

I lean back and close my eyes.

Even though my sense of logic can find a thousand faults with the idea of being with Max, my body knows different.

My mind and body are fulfilled in a way they’ve never been before. Is this what it feels like when it’s right?



## MAX

The most ridiculous smile stares back at me from the bathroom mirror as I wash my hands.

I can't put my finger on it, but there's something different about my reflection. Something in the set of my face or the look in my eyes.

Maybe I did originally stay in Warm Springs because I wanted to prove something to the useless Yellow Barn executive team that opposed my business strategy. And maybe I did think the extra spring in my step was from the thrill of getting my hands dirty working on a deal at the grassroots level for the first time in forever.

But I can't kid myself any longer.

How alive I've felt these last few days has nothing to do with the thrill of the business chase. It has everything to do with the naked woman lying in the bed on the other side of this wall.

I haven't even thought about work since my meeting first thing this morning. Well, there was that brief moment when I wondered whether it was fair to ask Charlotte to deal with Tarquin the Terrible's demand for the mattress company's cash flow statement to be reconfigured. But fuck it, she'll be fine. And I haven't even been tempted to look at my phone since Polly opened her door and berated me for showing up in the helicopter.

Apart from the foolish grin, I do still look like me. But I don't feel like me. Everything's a bit lighter inside.

Like I might start singing.

Or do a little dance.

And that's fucking weird.

Or is it what I'm actually supposed to feel like? Do I maybe feel more like me than I've ever felt?

Fuck. This whole really-liking-a-girl thing is confusing as shit.

And anyway, the girl I like is out there wearing nothing but the sheets, and I need to get right back to her while I have the chance.

When I climbed off her and walked out of the bedroom, it seemed perfectly fine to be completely naked, but I'm suddenly self-conscious at the thought of striding back in with everything dangling about.

Yeah, I'm definitely not myself.

I wrap a towel around my waist and wander out of the bathroom to the sight of Polly propped up on a pile of white pillows, with the white duvet pulled up just enough to cover the perfect breasts I would never tire of teasing with my tongue.

Maybe it's a good thing I decided on the towel because there's a whole lot of standing to attention and not much dangling going on.

"There you are," she says, looking so serene with a contented smile and hair splayed out either side of her on the pillow mountain.

I head over to a row of cabinets and open a door that conceals a fridge. "Thirsty?" I show her a jug of water packed with berries and sliced fruits.

"Looks good. And I don't mean just the water." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"If you've never had semi-naked waiter service before, you've never lived."

I grab two glasses from the side, fill them up, and hand one to her.

I turn my back as I drop the towel and cover my eager-for-a-second-round dick with the duvet as I slide back into bed beside her.

She turns to face me, her cheek against the pillow, and reaches up to draw a slow circle on my shoulder with her



finger. A shudder runs through me—partially because her finger’s chilly from resting on the glass, and partially because my body finds it impossible not to react to even the slightest touch from her.

“So, tell me,” she says. “What’s the long story about why the cousin who owns this place is more like a brother?”

I dip my finger in my drink and swirl the fruit. It couldn’t do any harm to tell her. I mean, it’s not like it’s a secret. I just don’t usually talk about family stuff. But, I suppose I do know plenty about hers.

“There’s not only him. He has a brother too.” I jab my finger at a slice of strawberry. “Their parents died in a car accident when they were kids. So, my mom and dad took them in and raised them with me and my two brothers.”

“Shit. How sad.” Polly’s brow pinches with concern. “That’s why you’re all so close?”

“Yeah. When we were kids, someone referred to us as ‘brousins’. You know, like a cross between brothers and cousins. And it kind of stuck. So yeah, we’re not five brothers, but we are five brousins.”

“Cute.” She trails her finger down my arm, making the hairs stand on end. “Raising five boys must have been quite the task.”

“My parents, particularly my mom, are the most patient people I know. That gene definitely skipped me.”

“They probably had nannies and stuff, though, right?”

And there we go—the same preconception every new person I meet has—that if I have money now, I must have always had it.

I pull the slice of strawberry from my drink and rest it, dripping, against her lips. She takes it between her teeth and pulls it into her mouth as I run my wet finger along her full, pink, lower lip, making it glisten from the moisture.

As I’m about to lean down to lick it, she takes my finger in her mouth, circles her tongue around it, and sucks it clean. The

tip of my rock-hard cock shifts against my bare stomach.

“Go on,” she says. “Did you forget you were telling me about your family?”

“Suck my finger like that again and I’ll forget my own name.” I tap the end of her irresistible nose with it and take a breath. “Anyway, no. My family’s not like that. I went to college on scholarships, and I ate a plate of revolting animal parts to get my first business, remember?”

“I thought maybe that was just because you’re independent and wanted to make your own way.”

“Nope. Well, I am independent. Like you. But my dad was a Boston city bus driver.”

“Really?” Her head jerks off the pillow. That’s obviously not what she was expecting.

I run my finger around from her forehead to her cheekbone and push a few errant strands of hair off her surprised face. “After Walker and Tom moved in, Mom started cleaning for people in our apartment building, so she could bring in extra cash but still be close by for us.”

“Wow.” She looks around the room. “But you and Walker seem to have done all right for yourselves.”

“All five of us have. My middle brother, Connor, has a toy company. The types of toys that help kids learn stuff. Elliot, the youngest, has a tech business with my California cousin.”

“Is the California guy the one marrying the hippie?”

I nod. “And Walker’s brother, Tom, has a music label in London. He went there to stay with family when he was sixteen. He’d been going off the rails a bit, so my parents thought it would be good for him to get away for the summer vacation. And it worked. He pulled himself together, and ended up loving it there so much he stayed. These days, it’s Connor who’s the one busy ruining his own life.”

“What’s his issue?”

I shake my head. “Wish I knew. In my more sympathetic moments, I think he’s struggled to handle the success. And the

money that comes with it.”

My mouth’s dry from sharing information I don’t usually talk about outside my family, so I take a sip of water. After placing the glass on the nightstand, I turn to face Polly and wrap my leg around her waist. I slide my hand up her smooth outer thigh and rest it on the side of her butt.

“Sounds like ambitious genes run in your family,” she says.

“I’m not sure about that.” I run the fingers of my other hand along her collarbone and down between her breasts. My eyes follow every inch of their movement over her delicious, velvety skin.

Her softness, her empathy for others, is like catnip for my secrets. Knowing she’d understand everything makes me want to tell her more. To reveal things I’ve never revealed. I want her to know more about me than the surface-level appearances of hard work, designer suits, and a sharp tongue. I want her to know we have more in common than she thinks. That we have shared experiences that connect us more than she knows. And I know enough by now to be sure she’d react with nothing but compassion.

“The sibling drive for success might be more to do with the family meeting I called when I was fifteen. I made the five of us swear a pact to work our asses off to make our fortunes so my parents would never have to work a day in their lives again.”

My fingers continue their trail under the lower curve of her breast. My mouth waters at the thought of wrapping my lips around that hard pink nipple, and my cock throbs with desire to rub against it.

“Wow.” Polly’s face is etched with compassion. “That’s very self-aware for a teenager. It really must have been a struggle, then.”

I nod. “It was tough for a while.”

I slide my fingers lower, to her belly button. I want nothing more than to continue its journey south, back to her warm, wet

center, and stroke her until she comes against my hand. But in this moment, I have a choice to tell her more. To tell her something I've told no one. Not even my brousin. Maybe that would be even more intimate.

That might be a good choice.

So, instead, I trace a line across to her side and rest my hand on her waist. "I didn't realize *how* tough, though, until one night I was coming down for a drink of water and heard my dad crying to my mom."

Unable to look Polly in the eye, I watch my finger circle her hip bone.

"*Crying*," I repeat and swallow hard.

It's like I'm right back there, sitting halfway down the stairs, craning my neck to peer through the gap in the living room door. Seeing my father kneeling on the floor in front of my mom, his head in her lap as she strokes his hair.

Exactly as it did then, my chest burns with the pain of every one of his sobs.

"My dad. A man's man." There's a fire in my throat. "He'd be mortified if he ever found out I saw that."

I turn my head and look away from her, watching the thin white curtains by the French doors ripple in the warm breeze. "He told Mom he didn't know if they could make rent the next month."

Polly smooths her hand flat against my cheek, absorbing some of the pain she no doubt detects in my words. "How old were you then?" Her voice is soft.

I concentrate on the wafting curtains. "Ten."

She strokes my cheek. "Oh my, God. That's so much for a young boy to see."

I rest my fingers on top of hers and interlace them against my face. "Then a couple of months later, we were suddenly moving."

I pull her hand to my mouth and drop my lips to her palm, inhaling the comforting scent of her skin. “Mom and Dad told us it was time for a big adventure and a move to a whole new place. But the new place was smaller and farther out of the city, and we five boys had to share two bedrooms.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been for them.” She rests a warm hand on my leg under the covers.

I nod and gather the courage to say the words that have only ever sat in my mind and have never crossed my lips. “I think we were evicted.”

My heart aches exactly like it did then, and the need to take care of my parents consumes me again.

But this time, Polly’s arms wrap around my neck as her naked chest presses against mine. This time, there’s someone to hold against me, to share it with.

“Christ, Max,” she sighs. “Did you tell the others?”

I shake my head against hers. “Never. But I thought about it over and over, for years. And that’s why, when I was fifteen, I sat the guys down and made them agree to the billionaire pact.” My fingers trace a path up and down her spine. “My parents sacrificed a lot for us. And I wanted us to be able to take care of them as soon as possible. And in the finest way possible.”

She pulls back and rests a hand over my thumping heart.

“So, *this* is why you’re a workaholic?” She looks right at me. And I know she sees me. “This is where it all comes from?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“And it’s why you can’t stop. You’re worried it might all go away. And why, even though Yellow Barn wouldn’t die without a store in Warm Springs, you’ll fight tooth and nail to make sure it gets one.”

I curl my mouth up at one side. “I might be slightly competitive, yes.”

She chuckles and looks up at me from under raised eyebrows. “And possibly obsessive about making cash?”

“Possibly.” I loop my arms around her waist and pull her back against me. “But it also means I totally understand why you’re so passionate about the little guy not being trampled by the big guy. We were the little guys for a long time. So, of course, I understand your fear of that.”

Her head slumps against my shoulder. “Thanks for the reminder.”

I run my fingers up and down her spine as she talks into my neck. “Once you’ve won the Yellow Barn battle—and of course you will, because me and my protests don’t stand a chance in hell against you—once you’ve done that, you’ll leave town and move on to your next project.” She pauses to swallow. “And the next girl.”

I jerk back like she’s punched me. “Oh, Christ, Polly. No.” I tilt my head to try to meet her gaze. “Is that what you think? That there’s a girl in every grocery store town? And after this I’ll slide right along to the next in line?”

She looks down at the warm space between our bodies. “I’m not sure.”

I tip her chin and search her blue eyes. This time I see something much deeper, something behind them—a place in her heart, her mind, her soul—that I’ve never seen in anyone before.

“How can you say that?” I ask. “I canceled two meetings to be here today.”

She gives me an ironic half-smile, and for the first time I realize how tragic it must sound to have that as your benchmark for being crazy about someone.

She strokes my thigh. “But you’ll still be gone soon.”

I squeeze her other hand between mine. “Not far, though. I only live in Manhattan, for God’s sake.”

I’ve never had any trouble walking away from any woman before, but the thought of not seeing Polly again makes me

sick to my stomach.

I take her face in both hands. “I don’t want to walk away from this, do you?”

Her eyes lock on mine. “No. But that’s because I think it’s special.” She runs a finger up my thigh and strokes the sensitive crease where my leg meets my groin, tantalizingly close to my balls. “I mean, I wouldn’t have sex in front of llamas with just anyone.”

Phew, the fun quirk to her lips is back.

“Oh, well, yeah.” I wave my hand and dismiss it with a shrug. “I do that all the time. So that was nothing to me.”

She makes a fist and gently punches me in the bicep. Her smile widens, sending relief flooding through me.

“Hell, Polly. I think it’s special too.” I scoop her back toward me, cradle her against my chest, and rest my chin on her head. “I didn’t want to spend time on business today. I wanted to spend it with you. I lie in bed at night wondering how I can spend more time flirting with you, not how I can broker the next deal. I’m not interested in looking at plans for the new store anymore. I’m interested in gazing at you in your overalls and imagining what’s underneath them.”

I bury my face in her hair and kiss the top of her head, then move down to her forehead. She lifts her face as I dot kisses down to the slightly sunburned tip of her nose, then press my lips against hers.

“Don’t you get it?” I breathe against her mouth. “I want this to be more than a fumble in a llama shed.”

Her lips curl into a smile against mine. “I’m deeply flattered.”

“Seriously. And I want it to be more than one afternoon away from the rest of the world on this island. I want you to be part of my reality. I want to see what this is, to explore it beyond right now.”

As every muscle in her body relaxes against me, every worry flies out of my head.

“I’d like to find that out too.” Slowly, she lifts her lashes until her eyes meet mine. “I know it makes no sense. But it feels right.”

And, suddenly, I understand all the feelings I’ve had since I met her. Why she’s the magnet I’m drawn to.

It’s the connection with that part of me I see behind her eyes.





## MAX

The helicopter blades swirl over our heads as I duck and run toward it, hand in hand with the last woman I should be hand in hand with.

She could still take me down, still mount a big enough protest to terrify the councilmembers into refusing permission for the store.

I know she would never let anything that's happened between us today sway her into calling off her campaign. And I wouldn't want it any other way. Her spirit, her force of nature, her willingness to fight for her beliefs, is part of what I adore about her.

And business is business. She has hers and I have mine. And we both know we have to fight for them. We might be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but we are equals in so many ways.

Polly laughs and bats me away as I put my hand under her sexy butt to help her into the chopper.

What a day it's been.

I feel like I've spent the last few hours in one of those soft drink commercials where everyone's rollerblading in the sunshine, frolicking in the spray from fire hydrants, and cuddling puppies.

I had no idea the relief that would come from fully opening up to someone, from voicing my secrets and fears, from becoming vulnerable. I didn't think I'd ever tell anyone about the night my dad cried. And I had no idea of the burden I was carrying from holding it inside until I let it out and felt the weight lift.

Polly showed me I was right to trust her, right to believe she'd react with the warmth and understanding that I knew she would. She showed me people are stronger together when they know everything about each other. That there is a strength in vulnerability.

In barely a week, this remarkable woman has changed my life and my perspective on it.

Christ, I only came to Warm Springs to sort out some messy paperwork. Who the hell could have predicted it would lead to me falling head over heels for a grocer who hated me?

When I made the pact with my brothers and cousins seventeen years ago, we pledged Business First, Life Later. I've pounded that motto into them ever since. But Polly's right. There's a point at which one more million—or even one more billion—doesn't make that much difference.

I've done the Business First part.

Now it's time for the Life part.

As the chopper takes off, the woman who challenges my mind, makes my heart sing, and lights a fire in my balls, rests her hand on my thigh and watches the island fade away below us.

I can only hope to make her as happy as she already makes me.

"It was amazing," she whispers into the microphone of her headset. "There'll never be a better day than that."

My mind fast-forwards to our wedding day and the birth of our first child. They'll all be the best days too. But the day we realized we were meant for each other will always be the *first* best day.

I take her hand from my thigh, kiss it, and press it to my chest.

As we fly over the forest and head back to the real world, both our phones spring to life in a flurry of pings and buzzes.

"What the hell's going on?" She reaches into her bag.

"There's no cell service on the island, we must have just gotten back in range."

For the first time in my life, I'm tempted to ignore mine. But if Polly's looking at hers, I guess it's fine to have a quick glance.

“Oh, no.” Her hand flies to her mouth, the color draining from her face.

“What? What’s happened?”

She scrolls down her screen. “Shit. No.” She looks like she’s about to cry.

“What, Polly? What?”

She slumps back in the seat and drops the phone to her lap. “Mom. She’s had a bad fall. Carly’s at the hospital with her.”

“Shit. How badly hurt is she?”

“Don’t know. They’re waiting for X-rays.”

My heart sinks, not only for Gloria’s suffering, but also because I know Polly is going to blame herself for not being there.

I need to get her to that hospital as fast as possible. “Which hospital?”

“St. Lawrence Memorial.”

I click a switch on my headset so I can talk to the pilot and lean forward to touch him on the arm. “Can we land at St. Lawrence Memorial Hospital?”

“I’ll check, sir.”

Lewis says some pilot things into his microphone and starts having flight conversations about hospitals and helipads.

Polly’s hands are shaking as she texts at a frantic pace. “Christ, it’s too noisy in here to call.”

I need to be the calm, supportive one, the person she relies on in a crisis. I take a deep breath and put my arm around her but can’t pull her to me because of the seatbelts. “I’ll get you there as quickly as I can. I promise.”

She shakes off my arm and doesn’t look up from her phone.

“If I hadn’t come here with you, this wouldn’t have happened at all.” She almost spits the words into the mic.

A knot forms in my guts and tightens. Our first best day is ruined already. And there's a chance she might be remembering all the reasons she hated me in the first place.

"Mr. Dashwood." The pilot's voice in our ears. "I can't land at the hospital, but I can land at Cranbrook Airfield nearby."

I turn to Polly. "Is that closer than landing back at your house?"

She nods without looking up.

"Okay, do that," I tell the pilot. Then I text Charlotte to book a car to meet us there. I place my hand gently on Polly's leg and rub it with my thumb.

"It's all going to be okay. I'm right here," I tell her.

She snatches her leg away, drops her phone into her lap, and turns her body to stare out of the chopper in silence.

She's going to blame me. I know she'll blame me.

I punch my leg in frustration.

I might lose her, right as I've found her.

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Polly's feet barely touch the ground as she sprints across the tarmac from the helicopter to the waiting black SUV.

I just about keep up and jump in beside her.

"St. Lawrence Memorial Hospital. As fast as you can," I tell the driver.

"On it, sir."

As we speed away, Polly hits the call button on her phone.

"We'll be there soon," I tell her.

They're the first words I've spoken to her since she turned away in the back of the helicopter. Between her staring alternately out of the window and at her phone and her reluctance to let me touch her, it seemed wiser not to push it.

“I need to talk to Carly,” she says without looking at me and moves the phone to her ear. Her side of the conversation is brief and filled with tense pauses as she listens to her friend.

She might not want me to talk to her but fuck that. She’s desperate with worry, and I’m desperate to help her. I sit on my hands to stop myself from touching her, since that didn’t go well the last few times.

“What’s the news?” I ask when she hangs up.

“The doctors are with her. But they’re still waiting for the X-rays. Carly was talking to me from the hallway outside her room.”

“But is she conscious and okay?”

She snaps her head toward me, and the eyes that meet mine have lost the softness, brightness, and life they’ve had all day. They’re now cold and hard. “She’s conscious, yes. But that doesn’t mean she’s okay.”

Her mom might be perfectly fine. Polly might be overreacting. But there’s no way in hell I’m going to say that.

We sit in silence for the rest of the drive to the hospital, my arms yearning to envelop her, my heart aching to take care of her and shoulder her pain.

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Polly careens breathlessly through the door of her mom’s hospital room with me half a step behind.

“Oh, Mom,” she cries, flinging her arms around Gloria’s neck. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Gloria, the picture of calmness, smiles at me over Polly’s shoulder as she pats her daughter on the back. “It’s fine. I’m fine. You have nothing to be sorry for.” Her eyes are a little glazed. “Have you two had a lovely day?”

“Well, you’re not actually *totally* fine, are you, Gloria?” Carly says, from a chair on the other side of the bed.

Polly bolts upright and stares at her friend. “What do you mean?”

Carly nods at Gloria to tell Polly herself.

“I might have a teensy-weensy bit of a fracture.” Gloria holds up her thumb and forefinger to indicate how minuscule she thinks the break is.

“A *fracture*?” Polly asks. “You’ve broken something?” She turns to glare at Carly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Only just got the X-ray results after you called from the car,” Carly says. “You were nearly here, so I figured we’d tell you in person.”

“Just a little break.” Gloria’s words are slightly slurred now. “Just in my leg. It’ll be fine.”

“Where in your leg? And what happened?” Polly turns to Carly again for an explanation.

“Just somewhere in my shin,” Gloria chimes in. “Doctor says it’s not that bad. Six weeks in a brace to heal and I’ll be good to go.”

Polly takes her mom’s hand. “You must be in so much pain though.”

“Oh, they have me on some great drugs.” That’ll explain the glazed eyes and the slurring.

“Pain medication is excellent these days,” I offer, desperate to contribute something.

Polly shoots a sideways glance vaguely in my direction, like she’d forgotten I was here and wishes I wasn’t.

She turns her attention straight back to Gloria. “How did it happen?”

“I think maybe I thought I was doing better than I was.”

“Yes,” Carly says.

“And maybe I was trying to do too much.”

“Yes,” Carly says again.

“I picked up some magazines from the living room floor and turned and somehow fell weirdly, hit the coffee table sideways, and sort of twisted and ended up on the floor and couldn’t get up.” She giggles. “So silly.”

“I only found her by chance,” Carly says. “I had a funny worried feeling, so I called her. There was no answer. I kept trying, and nothing. So I got more worried and closed up the shop for a bit to check on her. And found her lying there.”

“Thank God, you did,” Polly says to the woman who’s as much of a sister to her as Walker and Tom are brothers to me.

She rubs her mom’s hand. “How long had you been stuck there?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I might have passed out a little bit.”

“*Passed out?*” Polly looks from Gloria to Carly and back again. “I should never have left. If I’d been home, this would never have happened and all your bones would still be in one piece.”

“Oh, you can’t lock yourself up like a prisoner with me for the rest of your life, my love.” Gloria quirks her eyebrows at me. “Especially when you have a handsome young man to have fun with.”

I open my mouth to make a joke about going to look for a handsome young man, but Polly cuts in. “I don’t need to have fun with anyone. I need to run the shop and make sure you’re okay. That’s all I need.”

“Oh, Poll. Come on.” Carly half closes her eyes like she’s said this a thousand times. “You need a life.”

Since I seem to be the subject of a family dispute, I should probably make myself scarce for a bit.

“I’ll go grab us some coffee or tea. What would everyone like?”

“Oh, a caramel latte would be lovely,” Gloria says as if I’d offered her the world. “I only have those when I’m out.”

I guess the drugs must be good if she thinks lying in a hospital bed with a broken leg constitutes going out.



“Herbal tea for me please,” Carly says. “And anything with chamomile for her.” She points at Polly. “To chill her out.”

“Nothing for me,” says Polly as she looks right at me for the first time since we got on the helicopter. “And Carly can get the drinks.” The hard, steely eyes are back. “I think you should go.”



## POLLY

“She’ll be fine till you get home, Poll. You’ll drive her nuts if you keep calling.” Carly staggers in the front door of the shop with a stack of empty crates as I finish a call with my mom and shove the phone in my pocket.

Main Street is closed off today for the first farmers’ market of the year, and Carly’s busy setting up our stall.

I slump against the berry rack. “Thanks. That’s exactly what she just told me.”

Because she passed out when she fell, Mom was kept in the hospital overnight for observation and didn’t get home till yesterday afternoon. I wanted to stay with her today, but she insisted I come in so Carly would be free to run the stall and we can make the most of one of the busiest days of the year.

“Beautiful morning out there.” Carly peeps at me over the top of the crates as she passes by on her way to dump them out back. “You know, your mom and I think—”

I silence her with a glare that would rot the tomatoes she’s just stacked. If she tells me one more time how crazy I am to send Max packing, she’ll end up wearing one of those crates as a necklace.

How could I have been so selfish as to jet off on a helicopter to have mind-blowing sex with a billionaire on a private island while my mom was lying unconscious on the living room floor with a broken leg?

The one moment in the last few years that I didn’t have the shop and my mom at the forefront of my mind, the one moment I allowed myself to sink into selfish pleasure, look what happened.

I will never forgive myself.

And I will absolutely never let it happen again.

Carly re-emerges through the beaded curtain with a box of Mom’s soaps.

“This is the last thing I need for the stall, then we’ll be good to go. Great turnout today. Everybody’s here.” She pauses on her way out and looks back at me. “Stop worrying. She’s in a leg brace now anyway, so there’s a limit to the amount of trouble she can get herself into.”

I grab the mop out of the bucket of hot soapy water I filled a few minutes ago and start to tackle the red stains on the floor caused by the shoe store owner’s little boy, who knocked over a basket of raspberries and stomped all over them. It looks like a crime scene.

Mom’s putting a brave face on her injury. I know it. She says she’s fine, but no arthritic woman with a broken leg can possibly be fine.

And this accident has brought thoughts about the future racing to the forefront of my mind. She’s only going to get worse, not better. We’re going to need grab bars and ramps and a downstairs bathroom sooner than I had anticipated. And when the time comes, Lord knows how I’m ever going to get her to accept she needs a walker.

I guess we can all see where I get my stubbornness and perseverance from.

The mop seems to be spreading the raspberry stains around rather than removing them.

I lean on the handle and take in the hustle and bustle of everyone setting up in the street outside.

Farmers from outside of Warm Springs, local food producers and artisans, and makers of small batch honey, preserves, and pickles are all busy setting out their offerings in the morning sunshine.

In the same way that the New Year marks a fresh start for many people, the first farmers’ market always offers me that same hope and promise for the seasons ahead. My eyes settle on Ed and Vera sharing a joke as they pile their stand high with broccoli.

Then my heart pauses for a beat, as the back of a tall, broad-shouldered man moves in to chat with them. It jolts

back to life at many times its usual pace, and my stomach flips, sending a wave of heat washing through me.

There he is. The man of my dreams, who I sent away two days ago, just hours after he told me he wanted me to be part of his reality.

Yes, his words filled me with a newly discovered form of joy and made me look forward to the future more than I'd done in years, but I was swept up in the moment, not thinking or being practical. I mean, how could my brain possibly do its best work while my bare flesh was pressed against his between those luscious sheets as the gentle breeze wafted in off the lake?

Sometimes you have to let your head rule your heart. This is one of those times. Even though Max stuck right by my side and raced with me to the hospital without thinking—the exact opposite of shitty Michael refusing to go with me when my dad was sick. And even though the hurt on his face as he bowed his head and walked out of Mom's hospital room ripped me in two.

I have to be strong.

For Mom's sake.

But there he is, the picture of charm itself as he shakes hands and chats with Ed, Vera, and the other farmers.

He looks so much more at home now than he did the morning he climbed out of the back of his car all straitlaced and buttoned up in a suit and unhooked me from the doorway.

Today, his plaid shirt is rolled back at the cuffs, revealing the strong forearms that have wrapped around my waist and pulled me to him, and his jeans sit snug against the thighs I stroked as we lay naked in bed and he opened up about his family and told me his deepest of secrets.

My heart surges with love and lust, but my blood runs cold knowing I have to prioritize my mom, not my own feelings. The conflict is too deep.

While I might have kidded myself in the moment yesterday that I could have both, Mom's broken leg has shown

me I can't.

His smile, the brightness in his face, his ease with the farmers as they point to their produce and answer his questions, that's who he is. Not the big business mogul but the man who can get along with everyone.

He's not the bossy leader who pushed his brothers and cousins to make their fortunes. He's the scared ten-year-old listening to his dad sob about their money worries, who grew up determined to make sure that never happens to anyone he loves ever again.

He's not the heartless wheeler and dealer.

He's the man who carries the responsibility for his family on his shoulders, who's worked so hard for so long that it's now a habit he doesn't know how to quit.

But it doesn't alter the fact that he's trying to bring a giant, ugly store to Main Street that would ruin me and wreck all my plans to make the shop a success so I can take care of Mom and secure a future for us both.

My chest rises as I take a huge breath to try to calm my racing pulse.

The council's vote is coming up, and while the protest and the petition seem to have had some impact, I'm not confident it'll go my way.

Yesterday, I bumped into a councilmember who works at the hospital. She told me she's a definite "no" vote. But she's the only one who's told me that for certain.

I tear my eyes away from Max as he picks up one of Angus's candles, sniffs it, and asks him a question. I go back to mindlessly sliding the red raspberry mush pointlessly around the floor.

The familiar *ker-clunk* of Mrs. Bentley's walker gradually gets louder behind me, and I turn to see her coming through the door.

"Fixed the nail." I point at the spot where the offending item that's ended up causing more trouble than I could ever

have imagined was located.

“Great, yes,” she says dismissively as she makes her way toward me at a rapid rate. She stops in the middle of the raspberry massacre, turns, and drops into the seat, a bit winded from what must have been extra rapid ker-clunking to get here.

“I have news,” she says with a similar expression to the one she had the day she told me plans for a Yellow Barn had been submitted to the council.

I clasp the top of the mop handle in both hands, rest my chin on them, and smile at her. “Haven’t been much of a fan of your news lately, Mrs. B.”

“Well, I’m afraid this is no better, my love.” She shifts in the seat. “Worse, in fact.”

I drop my forehead to rest on my hands and close my eyes. “Okay, hit me with it. I’m on a roll with bad news.”

“My nephew says the planning board’s ready to vote on the Yellow Barn store at next week’s meeting. And enough councilmembers now support it for it to pass.”

Knowing it was inevitable doesn’t stop the churning in my gut. My eyes sting and a lump grows in my throat as I lift my head to look at Mrs. B.

“Well, I guess we fought the best fight we could.” I make a sweeping gesture at the store. “Get your quality fruit and veggies while you can. Before all that’s available is cheap, tasteless garbage.”

“My nephew says the ‘yes’ side will swing it by just two votes.” She turns to look through the window at the happy, bustling street and sighs. “If only that executive guy hadn’t given Rita Wiggins a Yankees season ticket and topped up Gerald Montgomery’s library fund so it buys a bunch of computers on top of everything else he wanted. Maybe they might have been noes instead of yeses.”

Did she say what I think she said?

My blood runs cold, my fingers turn to ice, and my stomach plummets to the tiled floor then bounces back up to

my throat. “What’s that, Mrs. B? Who did that? What executive?”

“Apparently, there’s been an executive from the company in town for a few days, and he got to know the soft spots of some of the councilmembers and used it to his advantage.”

I follow her gaze to where Max is scrutinizing some incense sticks Angus is showing him.

My blood is no longer icy cold. It’s boiling. A raging boil. And bubbling up to my burning face.

He used me.

The bastard used me.

He went along with me trying to help him get to know and understand the locals, not because he was open to learning the effects his store might have on them, but because he was using it for intel on how he could buy them off.

“The bastard used me.”

“Polly!” says Mrs. B, her mouth open in shock. She might never have heard me swear before. Carly usually has the monopoly on workplace profanity.

My heart pounds, sending a banging, raging pulse to my head.

The mop handle clatters as it bounces on the tiled floor. I must have let it go.

I can’t bite my tongue. I can’t.

I race to step around Mrs. B in her walker but lose traction on the watery raspberry mush. Both feet slide from under me as I fly back and land perfectly in her lap.

“Ooph,” she cries as I climb off her knee and skid again.

This time I grab onto the edge of the cabbage display and just about keep myself upright. “God, I’m so sorry. Are you okay? Did I hurt your legs? I dropped on you pretty hard.”

“I’m fine. Perfectly fine. But you are obviously not, my dear.” She leans forward and holds onto my arm. “You look



like you're either about to sob your heart out or punch someone on the nose."

I look out at Max again. "Yeah, I'm not sure which it is either." I turn back to Mrs. B's concerned face. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Heart pounding like a caged animal in my chest, I march out the front door, step over a splattered chocolate ice cream cone on the sidewalk, dodge between smiling early shoppers, and come to a stop behind Angus.

There's a swooshing noise in my head that I've only ever heard while underwater. Or when my ears are blocked from the shower. My armpits are sweaty, and my face must be the color of the raspberry mush.

Max looks up from examining the label on a mason jar candle.

He smiles at me over Angus's shoulder, like I didn't really throw him out of Mom's hospital room less than forty-eight hours ago. "Hey, Polly. How's your mom?"

"How's my mom?"

Angus turns and smiles. I ignore him. "My mom has a broken leg, thanks to you."

"Thanks to *me*?" Max jabs his finger into his fabulous chest.

"Oh, don't look at me like a puppy I just kicked." Angus looks from me to Max and back again as I continue. "If you hadn't been so busy chopping me to islands, I'd have been home, and her leg would still be in one piece."

Angus looks back at Max. "Chopping?"

Max shakes his head at Angus in a *don't worry about it* gesture. He holds the candle up to me. "Maybe you should have a sniff of this. Angus says lavender is calming."

Angus gives me an earnest nod. "Oh, yes. Very."

Is there anything more annoying than someone—never mind a hot-as-hell billionaire whose business will crush yours

but whose penis you allowed inside you anyway—telling you to calm down when your head feels like the top of it is about to blow off and spew brain innards everywhere like a blender without a lid?

No.

No, there isn't.

I jab my finger toward him. "And don't you tell me to calm the fuck down."

A woman passing by puts her hands over her little boy's ears, pulls him tight to her side, and tuts at me as she struts away.

"First time I've heard you say 'fuck,'" Max says, his brow furrowing.

"If we weren't in polite company, I'd be using it a lot more."

"Oh, don't consider me polite," says Angus, waving at us to carry on and not mind him.

Max puts the candle down and walks around Angus's stall toward me, weaving between an elderly man walking a dachshund and a woman biting a chunk out of the French loaf protruding from her bag.

I hold up my palms. "No. Don't come over here and try to win me over with all your charmy charm and your twinkly eyes."

"My eyes twinkle?"

Jesus. "Not the point."

"What is the point, Polly?" He turns his palms to the sky. "What's going on? What's bothering you?"

"What's 'bothering' me?" I make air quotes around 'bothering' like only total assholes do. "What's bothering me is that you *used* me."

He looks baffled. Not fake baffled. But like he genuinely doesn't have the first idea what I'm talking about.

“I’m crazy about you, Polly.” And hurt. He looks hurt. Not fake hurt. Actually hurt. He puts a hand to his chest, and his voice quiets. “I would never use you.”

“Aw,” says Angus as he rearranges the tea lights.

Some shoppers stop behind Max to take it all in.

How dare he tell me he’s crazy about me. And how dare he do it in front of a street full of stallholders and local produce lovers.

“No, you’re not. If you were, you wouldn’t have used me for information on Rita and Gerald, and then”—My racing mind can’t find the right word. Or the wrong one. Words are extremely tricky right now—“sexed me in the llama shed.”

“Sexed you?” comes Mrs. Bentley’s voice from behind me. She ker-clunks closer. “In a llama shed?” She points at Max. “This handsome fella?”

“Well, that’s very nice of you,” says Max, doffing a nonexistent cap at her.

Jesus Christ. “You used me to find out what made them tick, then you bought them off.”

Oh, God, this is awful and out of control, and more people have stopped on either side of us. I’m now making what is officially known as a scene.

“Oh.” Max sighs as he looks to the sky and his shoulders relax. “You’re upset about the season ticket and the donation.”

He says it as if, now he understands, he thinks I’m making a fuss about nothing.

“Yes. Used me. For info. And bought them off. And tried to buy me.” I swallow past the throat lump that’s now the size of a dragon fruit and twice as spiky. “By whisking me off to an island. A private *island*.”

“Was there more sexing there?” asks Mrs. Bentley, who’s parked her walker and is using it as a front row seat for the impromptu street entertainment.

The adrenaline that took control of my senses and sent me storming out here to give Max a large chunk of my mind is draining away.

My arms are limp now, my hands cold.

The anger in me starts to fade and is replaced by heart-stabbing hurt and grief at the loss of the amazing man who I allowed myself, for one brief island moment, to think Max was.

I poke an icy finger into my chest. "I am not for sale."

All the fight's gone from my voice.

A tear rolls down my cheek.

Some of the bystanders shake their heads and walk away.

"It's business, Polly." Max's voice is calm and affectionate. "That's all. That's how it's done. It's not buying them off or bribing them. It's schmoozing. Everyone does it."

"You're just the same as them." The words crack as another tear spills out.

"As who?"

"The people who bought the farm."

He steps closer, his brow pinched. "No. Christ, Polly. Don't compare me to them." He's hurt and pleading. "You know I'm not like that. I'm fair."

I have no energy left to tell him to back off. No energy to back off myself. I just stand there, like a rag doll about to crumple, as the floodgates open and tears pour silently down my cheeks.

I drop my head and manage to squeeze out a faint whisper. "You're not."

He reaches out to touch my arm, and I don't have it in me to move away.

His fingertips graze my skin as, out of nowhere, an arm swoops in, wraps itself around me, spins me around, and marches me back toward the shop.

“Fuck off, you total bastard,” Carly yells over her shoulder.



## **POLLY**

“O kay, Miss Doom and Gloom. That’s a week of you looking like the last dog in the shelter.” Carly grunts as she stretches up to reach the broken cord and pull down the blind over the front window at closing time.

“So, are you more upset the council voted ‘yes’ last night, or that you haven’t heard from Max since you yelled at him so spectacularly?”

It’s hard to know where the scales of misery fall on that particular conundrum.

I repeatedly stick and unstick my fingers from a tacky patch on the counter where I’d absentmindedly put a bag of potatoes on top of someone’s grapes earlier. That’s how much I haven’t been able to concentrate. I would never knowingly damage a perfectly good bunch of Concords.

Despite what Max did, the thought of never seeing him again feels like being kicked in the heart by a horse. Or an elephant. Or a hippo. Or any other kind of weighty animal.

I’d never imagined falling for a suit-wearing CEO—or for anyone at all, really. Never imagined experiencing that instant connection when you look in someone’s eyes, whether they twinkle or not, and connect with something deep behind them. Never imagined being so stimulated by someone’s mind as well as their body.

I open the register and count out Carly’s pay for the week. Lord knows how much longer I can keep doing this. As it is, the shop doesn’t have the margins for me to keep paying her and the higher rent and to fix the furnace and the rotten shed at home. God help me once the Yellow Barn opens and steals a bunch of our customers.

I keep telling myself that, logically, it’s better that I’m out of the Max thing sooner rather than later. If I’d gone on kidding myself it could work, it would only have been more painful when it inevitably didn’t.

Telling me he didn't want to give me up while he was all caught up in his small-town adventure is one thing. Making it work after he'd left town and returned to his Manhattan life would have been a whole different story.

But still, every time I think about it, it's like a cold blade stabs into my chest and slices down to my stomach.

I grab an envelope from the counter drawer and tuck Carly's pay inside.

I can't shake off the constant gnawing in my stomach. Since what Carly now refers to as The Farmers' Market Meltdown, I've only been able to pick at food, and sleep has been a rare treat.

Every time I try, my brain defaults to Max's eyes when I first looked up at him as I lay in a heap on the sidewalk. Or him sitting in the muddy goat enclosure with that cute and sexy smile on his face as he bottle-fed the kid. Or his mouth between my legs as I sprawled at his mercy on those butter-soft white sheets at the island house.

I take a deep breath and pull back my shoulders. "I'm mainly upset that Mom's hands are hurting. She was going to try to get ahead with prepping herbs for the soap while she sits and rests her leg, but now she can't even do that."

"Oh, Christ," says Carly. "That must drive her nuts."

"Yup. And she drives me nuts with how nuts it drives her. Anyway, take this." I hand her the envelope. "Make the most of it while the shop's still here and I can still pay you."

She runs her fingers around the edge of the envelope. "You never know, we might survive it."

I snort and shake my head. "Come on, I'll give you a ride home. I'm going your way this evening. Need to pick up something on the way back."

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The grab bar, brackets, and screws stare up at me from the bathroom floor.

Mom's been having trouble getting on and off the toilet with the cast on her leg, so it's time to seize the moment. She needs it to help her on bad arthritis days anyway, but she'd never let me install one for that reason. She'd see it as a sign of the beginning of her decline. But if I can get this thing in under the guise of the broken leg, then it'll be a winner.

She was napping on the sofa when I got back, so I sneaked by and thought I could present her with the finished, fully installed handle by the time she wakes up.

Great idea, I thought.

How clever I am, I thought.

It'll give my brain something to do other than play reruns of Max's vibrant smile, magnetic eyes, shoulders, thighs, and, well, everything, I thought.

My thoughts were all stupid.

How could I possibly think it would be that easy?

I've never had any problem setting my mind to a task and getting it done. I've always worked on the basis that I can figure out anything if I try hard enough.

Well, on this occasion, it turns out that thought is stupid too.

I slide my back down the tiled wall till my butt hits the floor and read the instructions again.

First, you need to find the wall studs. There's a bunch of my dad's old tools in the shed, but I've no idea if there's a stud finder among them. Or how to use one if there is.

Then you need to drill holes.

Of course, you do.

There's definitely a drill out there. But I've never used it without Dad figuring out exactly the right spot and pointing at it for me. I'm not in the least bit qualified to single-handedly make holes in the walls of the family home.

My eyes sting and the instructions start to blur.

What possessed me to think I could put this thing up with just the screwdriver from the shop toolbox? Of course, it's not that quick and easy.

Christ, I'm such an idiot.

I've kept on keeping on for so long, opening the shop and supporting Mom, that this sense of helplessness is new.

It's embarrassing and humiliating, and I don't know what to do with it.

I've never been so disappointed in myself.

All the stresses of knowing my business has no chance of survival, of seeing Mom in pain and knowing there's more to come, of allowing myself to fall for the perfect man who then rips out my heart just like I knew he would, swirl together in a whirlpool of hurt before surging to the surface.

I can't keep it in any longer. Here, alone in the bathroom, sitting next to the final straw of the grab bar I can't install, it all spills over.

I pull up my knees and rest my head on them as my body shakes with silent sobs.

If my dad were here, he'd fix it. He'd make everything okay.

You know who else would fix it?

Max.

Not by being rich and throwing money at a handyman to do it. But by sitting here on the floor with me, figuring it out with me, putting his arm around me, and supporting me.

He wouldn't have taken more time off than he's done in years to fly us to the island if he hadn't thought he'd found something even more important than work.

He wouldn't have been by my side at the hospital if he hadn't wanted to support me and take care of me when I was so desperate with worry. And I know he'd never have left if I hadn't sent him away.

And he wouldn't have looked so bewildered and helpless as I turned away from him after The Farmers' Market Meltdown if he hadn't truly believed that what he'd done was the right thing for his business. Maybe it's not his fault that he's been around the business philosophy of you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours for so long that giving lavish gifts to councilmembers seems like normal behavior to him.

His company was built on a burning desire to change his family's life, to make sure his parents never have to worry again. So, he'd understand that all I'm trying to do is take care of Mom.

But where he's succeeded, I'm failing.

I let the last round of sobs drain from my body, lift my head, and wipe my face.

I might be failing, but you know what? At least my morals and my social conscience are intact. Dad would be proud of me for that. And he'd be proud of me for trying.

I reach up, snatch some toilet paper from the roll, and blow my nose.

Right. I need to gather up this stuff and hide it before Mom wakes up and sees it.

Then tomorrow, I'm going to buy a stud finder.



**MAX**

“**M**ax?” Charlotte calls from behind me as I stand gazing out of my office window.

I drag my glazed eyes away from the hawk that’s been circling the top of the building opposite for who knows how long and turn to look at her. “No need to yell.”

“Well, apparently there is, because that was the third time I’d said your name.” The bird must have hypnotized me. “What the hell’s wrong with you? You’ve been weird since you got back from Warm Springs last week. Like you’re in a trance. Is there something in the water up there or something?”

I ruffle the carpet pile with my toe. “Something.”

Charlotte makes a long squeaky kind of gasp. “Ah! Maaax Dashwoood.” She draws out my name to five times its actual length.

She appears by my side and looks up at me, as shocked as if she’d caught me adding a sticky note in the wrong color to the wall planner. Except she’s smiling. “Did you meet a *girl*? Who you actually *liked*?”

Fuck, is it that obvious? At least to someone who knows me well enough to predict my every thought before I’ve even had it. “It doesn’t matter who I did or didn’t meet.”

I knew letting myself get close to a woman would never go well. I’ve always known the only things that can be depended on to give my life meaning are work and success. So, it’s all my own fault.

There were so many reasons that getting involved with Polly was a bad idea. But it never occurred to me that one of them might be that I could get hurt.

Obviously, I’ve heard people talk about being heartbroken. But I thought all they needed to do was pull themselves together, snap out of it, and get over it. I had no idea that it was called heartbreak because it actually feels like someone’s

punched their fists through your ribs and is trying to rip your heart in half like it's a ream of paper.

I thought burying myself in the business for fifteen hours a day this last week would get me over it. But no, even work—the one thing I thought I could always rely on to solve all my problems—isn't fixing it.

“If you say so,” Charlotte says, raising her eyebrows then walking over to my desk to pick up some files. “Anyway, Tarquin the Terrible wants to talk to you. I told him you'd call him back when you have a minute. Thought I'd buy you some time to steel yourself.”

Unusually, he's exactly the person I want to talk to. “I was just thinking about calling him anyway.”

“Voluntarily? When was the last time you didn't do everything you could to avoid him?” She rests her hands on her hips. “Seriously, are you sure you can't fire him for bad attitude or insubordination or for being a rude asshole? There must be other chief financial officers out there who're as good but also pleasant.”

I shake my head. “I wouldn't have employed him if he wasn't in a league of his own. I can't afford for him to work for the competition.”

“Shame he doesn't often remember it's you who owns the company, not him. You wouldn't let anyone else talk to you the way he does.”

“I let you talk to me like that every day. Maybe I should fire you and get someone who calls me Mr. Dashwood and hangs on my every word.”

“Aw,” she says as she heads through the door. “Under all this glass, concrete, suits, deals, and piles of cash, you're a big old softy, aren't you?”

The door has barely closed when it reopens just far enough for Charlotte to poke her grinning face back around. “You like a *gir-ir-l*.”

I never knew it was possible to give the word girl three syllables.

“Out.” I point at her with my outstretched arm. “Or I’ll reassign you to Tarquin.”

There’s that annoying little sister thing again. The thing where they’re generally right. I’d never live it down if she knew I’d fallen for a goat-owning potato seller on my trip to the boonies.

Although, I’m sure she and Polly would be immediate friends. Everyone would adore her. My brothers, my cousins, my parents. How could anyone not adore Polly?

Jesus, I fucked that up.

I don’t think I’ll ever get over the fact she thinks I used her and betrayed her. It’s amazing how you can go around doing business-as-usual every day and not see how it looks to outsiders.

Well, at least not until the person who’s stolen a large chunk of your heart yells at you over a candle stall and explains it in single syllable words. Loudly.

In that moment there was no point trying to explain it to her or make amends. She was so clear. The only dignified thing I could do was exactly what she wanted. And that was to completely disappear from her life.

She’ll never disappear from mine though.

I guess occasionally, if you’re lucky, someone crosses your path and changes you forever.

I take a deep breath and pick up my phone.

Okay. Tarquin. Time for me to do it.

This might actually make me feel better.

He answers on the first half ring. “Ah, Max.”

I fumble for the volume control. Why do I never remember to turn it down before I talk to him?

True to form, he dives right in. “So, I need you to do something about—”

“Actually, Tarquin, I need to talk to you.”

“Well, you need to wait.”

“No. No, I don’t.”

Silence.

It was that easy? All this time, all I had to do was tell him no? Huh.

“Okay, then.” I must sound as surprised as I am. “I need you to pull the funding from the Yellow Barn expansion into smaller communities.”

“Are you unwell? And heavily medicated?”

“Never healthier. I have other plans for that cash.”

I amble back over to the window. The bird’s still doing its thing.

“Nope. Not doing it,” he booms. “That project was your idea. And it was a stroke of genius. All the numbers pan out. Fantastic investment. Cows will fly before I pull the money out of that.”

*Cows?*

“Pigs, Tarquin. Pigs will fly.”

“No. Cows. Way less likely than pigs.”

I am not going to be drawn into a debate about the flight potential of various farm animals. “Well, anyway. It’s not only my idea. It’s also my money.”

He doesn’t even try to disguise his snort. “Max, you brought me in because I know how to handle your financials so they make you even more cash than you already have. Just let me do my job.”

“Things have changed, Tarquin. Or maybe I have.” The hawk gives up circling whatever prey it had its eye on and heads off to the horizon. “A Yellow Barn would kill Warm Springs. And probably the Main Street of every other town we were planning to put one in.”

“You can’t pull out now. It would be a sign of weakness. Sharks have to keep swimming, Max.”



I don't think I've had a single conversation with Tarquin where he hasn't used a shark metaphor.

"I'm not having it on my conscience. Maybe it's time this company developed some principles. Maybe it's possible to make a fortune *and* have morals."

His snort is even louder and more dismissive. "I don't know about that."

"Well, I sure as hell am going to try. Get me a meeting with the head of Yellow Barn. I have a better idea for them."

"Complete madness. Financial insanity." I can almost hear him shaking his head. "You didn't get where you are today by making financial decisions based on morals and principles."

"Then it's time I start. Arrange the meeting. And tell Charlotte when it is. No need to call me back."

I hang up and let out a long breath as I rest my hand on the glass and lean into the view. The sun's breaking through the gray clouds over the river for the first time all day.

And there's another one of those little tugboats, pushing a giant load it has no right to be able to control through the busy channels.

That window in my heart that Polly thought was cracked open a tiny bit? This past week I've tried with all my might to pull it shut. But something seems to have jammed it open.



*Two weeks later.*

## **POLLY**

**M**y stomach churns as I brace myself to say the words I'd hoped I wouldn't have to say, the words I've been putting off for weeks.

I've looked at it from every angle, and there's no getting away from the fact that, to have any chance of making the shop a success in the face of the Yellow Barn invasion, I have to cut costs.

And there's only one cost left to cut.

I've felt sick with dread all day. And now my heart races like I'm about to jump off a cliff as I hand Carly her weekly pay. The envelope trembles in my hand. I can't even look her in the eye.

"This really might be your last one." The words catch in my throat, and my voice cracks as I try to explain. "The rent goes up starting next month. And I'm not sure there's much point throwing good money after bad when we all know how this is going to end."

I'm letting her down. I'm letting everyone down. Including myself.

Carly looks at me like I've told her carrots grow on trees.

"Hey. Where's the defiant spirit to battle through adversity gone?" She bats me playfully on the cheek with the envelope. "Who stole Polly the fighter and replaced her with this wet dish rag?" She slaps herself on the head with the envelope in realization. "Oh, yeah. Mr. Twinkles."

She might be joking, but it is like part of me went with him when he left town. Alongside the knotted pain in my stomach, there's a hollow emptiness. And I can't shift either of them. No amount of throwing myself into work, taking care of everything at home while Mom's leg heals, and playing cards

with her in the evenings to relieve her boredom, ever distracts me from the gnawing hurt of Max using me.

Yet, despite what he did, I can't stop myself from missing him, needing him, craving his company.

There's a familiar ker-clunk in the doorway.

"Why the sad faces, ladies?" asks a smiling Mrs. Bentley.

"Oh, you know how it is, Mrs. B," Carly says. "Just preparing for the inevitable loss of our reason for getting up every morning."

"Well, you girls are definitely one of *my* reasons for getting up every morning. So don't let me down now." She moves further into the shop.

Ah yes, Mrs. Bentley. She's also on the list of people I'm letting down.

"We're doing our best." I lean forward and rest my forearms on the counter. "But I'm not sure it'll be enough given what we're up against."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. B comes to a halt in front of me. "Have you not seen the sign?"

"You mean some mystical message in a piece of burned toast or something?" Carly asks.

"No. I mean the big wooden one on the Picture House lot." She looks happier than I've seen her in ages.

My heart sinks. I thought for a second she might have had some good news. "Yeah, I saw someone putting up something there when I was rearranging the sidewalk display a few minutes ago." I dismiss it with a flap of my hand. "It'll be some info about the new store."

"Well, then." A knowing smile grows on Mrs. B's face as she parks her rear end in her walker seat. "I'll wait here while you girls go and read it."

I ease up off the counter and rearrange the pens in the onion-shaped pot next to the till. "Thanks, but I've heard

enough about that Yellow Barn store to last me a lifetime. I don't need to read any more."

"Yeah, we don't need our noses rubbing in it, Mrs. B." Carly grabs a basket. "How about you tell me what you want, and I'll get it together for you while you rest?"

Mrs. B folds her arms. "I want you two to go read that sign."

She looks like the cat that got the cream *and* swallowed the canary.

Carly strides to the entrance and grabs one side of the doorframe, swinging her top half out and kicking one leg back, like she's in a 1940s musical. "Can't read it from here. Too far away."

"You've got legs, girl." Mrs. B points in the direction of the sign.

Carly drops the basket and holds up her hands in surrender. "Okay. I give in. I'll go look. Coming with me, Poll?"

"I'd rather stay here and do a year's worth of bookkeeping."

Carly turns to Mrs. B. "She hates bookkeeping even more than she hates Yellow Barn."

"Yes," I tell them. "But I'd cheerfully do it while someone pokes my eye out with a parsnip, if it meant I didn't have to think about that store ever again."

"Okay. Got the message." Carly skips out the door. "I'll report back in a minute."

Mrs. B gives me a mischievous side-eye. "You'll wish you'd gone."

"Oh, I doubt that very much."

"Have you heard from that handsome young man again?" Lord, this woman has a wicked smile. "You know. The one who 'sexed' you in the llama shed."

No matter how hard I try, I can't turn back the tide of heat rushing to my cheeks. Nor can I stop my mouth from lifting a little at the corners.

"That's unfair, Mrs. B, and you know it. I was upset. And it came out all wrong."

She laughs. "Have you, though? Back in the day, I wouldn't have said no to a fine man like that." She smooths her skirt across her thighs. "He would have had to have committed a high crime indeed for me to kick him out of bed."

"Oh, he definitely committed a high crime." You can't come back from a felony like betraying my trust.

"Here she is," says Mrs. B as Carly flies by the window and grabs the front door as she fights to get her breath back.

Unable to talk, she waves and beckons me toward her.

"Nope." I cross my arms and clutch them tight to my chest. "Don't care."

Well, maybe I'm a bit intrigued. She did run back here pretty damn quickly. And she knows better than to drag me up the street to look at a "Yellow Barn Coming Soon" billboard. Which is what I imagine it is.

"Poll, come on," she pants. "You need to see it."

"If it's so exciting, just tell me."

"For fuck's sake." She lets out a breathless sigh as she walks around the back of the counter, grabs me by the overall strap, and pulls me toward the door.

As much as I don't want to know what Max is up to, I also really do.

Of course, I do.

And not only with his business. I want to know what he thinks about when he wakes up in the morning, if he still smells of Mom's soaps, and if he remembers licking the chocolate frosting off my nose. And whether thinking of me makes his insides ache as much as mine do every time I think

about him. And if that ache isn't easing for him either, no matter how many days go by.

"Okay," I tell Carly as she leads me across the shop. "But we can't leave this place empty."

"What am I?" asks Mrs. B, arms akimbo. "Fresh air?" She waves us away.

Carly drags me outside as Mrs. B calls after us, "I'll make sure no one steals anything while you're gone."

As soon as my feet hit the sidewalk I'm filled with hot, panicky dread. I'm really not sure I can handle this.

"Seriously, Carly." I swallow past the rock in my throat. "I don't think I can take any more reminders of Max." There's a prickling behind my eyes. "It hurts so much."

"Well, you need to see this," Carly says as she frog-marches me up the street like we're trying to make the last bus, and its doors are closing.

A couple minutes of pedestrians scattering to the sides later, she grabs my shoulders and swivels me to face the sign. I squeeze my eyes closed just in time.

She leans into my ear. "You have to open your eyes."

"Nope." A tear leaks out as I press them even tighter shut. "It's only going to say 'Yellow Barn Coming To Wreck Your Neighborhood Soon' or something."

"For fuck's sake, Poll. I wouldn't have dragged you here for that. Stop being a child and just look at the fucking sign."

I shake my head slowly. No good can come from seeing something that reminds me I allowed myself to fall for a man who turned out to be everything I'd convinced myself he wasn't.

Carly rests her chin on my shoulder, and her voice softens to a gentle whisper. "I could read it to you. But I want you to see it for yourself. Please look, Poll. For me."

I sniff.

“Now you’re being pathetic.” She squeezes my shoulders, not whispering any more. “Just fucking read it.”

I can’t let myself sob on the sidewalk in front of everyone. If I’m going to read this thing, I can’t sob.

I take a giant breath and peel open my damp eyelids.

Half the sign is taken up by an artist’s impression of a huge vegetable garden.

The words Yellow Barn are at the top in giant letters.

My eyes dart across the other words, picking them out at random, unable to focus on reading them in order as my heart rate rises.

There’s “sponsored” and “community garden” and “teach kids to grow their own food” and “unite the neighborhood.”

A sense of hope rises in my chest, but I can’t allow myself to believe it. I must be misunderstanding. The Max I knew was business at all costs.

“*What?* I don’t understand. I can’t—”

Carly jumps in front of me. “It’s not going to be a store, Poll. Yellow Barn’s going to turn the site into”—she turns to read from the sign—“a community garden to teach generations of adults and kids the importance of learning where their food comes from through the love of growing their own. The first of the new national Yellow Barn Grow Together initiative.”

She grabs my shocked, damp face with both hands.

“You did it, Poll.” She pulls my forehead to her mouth and slaps a kiss on it. “You fucking did it.”

It’s impossible to take in. A thousand thoughts swirl in my brain.

There isn’t going to be a giant grocery store on Main Street. Polly’s Produce might survive. Mom and I might be okay. And I might get to keep Carly on.

“You’ve gone pale,” she says.



I put a hand to my clammy brow. “I do feel a bit dizzy.”

“Get the blood to your head.” She bends me over at the waist.

I rest my hands on my knees as it sinks in that Max decided not to open the store. He got permission for it and decided not to. But he’s not selling the land. He’s donating it to the town as a community garden. And it’ll be the first of many Yellow Barn-sponsored community gardens around the country. So people can learn about growing their own food and kids can see where it comes from. And we can all “Grow Together.”

Max did that.

He’s trying to put it right.

Tears of relief trickle from both eyes. I hadn’t misjudged him after all. It’ll just take some time for him to stop being that scared ten-year-old boy who fights tooth and nail every minute of every day to make sure his family never gets evicted again because they can’t pay the rent.

Carly rubs my back. “Any better?”

I wipe my cheeks and straighten slowly so I don’t pass out. “We need to get back to the shop. Mrs. B’s there on her own.”

As we walk back down the street, my head feels like it’s floating above my shoulders, the sidewalk is spongy under my feet, and everything looks fuzzy around the edges. It’s like I’m in a dream where the whole world is made of marshmallow.

I can’t be kidding myself, can I? It has to be Max’s idea. Those are all the things I told him were important to me. And now he’s made them important to his company. And maybe, just maybe, to himself.

“Why didn’t he say anything?” I ask out loud to myself as much as to Carly.

“Well, you did tell him in front of the whole farmers’ market that he was a total bastard who could fuck off.”

“It was actually *you* who said that.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. But, in my defense, he did give that impression.”

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “If you didn’t really know him.”

I’ve never seen an expression that says *I told you so* more than the one on Mrs. B’s face when we walk back into the shop.

“Good grief,” she says. “You weren’t expecting that, were you, Polly? You look as dazed as if you’d been slapped across the face with a wet tuna.”

“I’m a little surprised, yes.” I hold onto the stand of red, green, and yellow peppers. “And still a bit wobbly.”

“I’ll get you some water,” says Carly as she skips out the back.

“And it’s not only the community gardens, you know,” says Mrs. B, like she has top-secret intel. “My nephew told me Yellow Barn’s also going to start giving an area of each of its stores over to local producers. Not just fruits and vegetables, but locally made things too, like your mom’s soaps, or Angus’s candles—things like that. All kinds of things.”

This is all too much to take in. My mind and my heart don’t know what to do with themselves. One minute I think my trust was betrayed by the man of my dreams, who was about to put me out of business. The next, it turns out he listened to everything I said and has completely reversed a lucrative business plan.

“I can’t believe it, Mrs. B.” I let go of the pepper stand and try to pull myself together.

“I think you had more of an effect on that handsome young man than you realized,” she says with a wink.

Carly rattles back through the beaded curtain with a glass of water. “Here you go.”

I glug it down and plonk the glass on the counter.

“Okay.” I clap my hands. “First things first.”

I wrap my arms around Mrs. B's neck. "Thank you for being the best customer any grocer could wish for."

She pats me on the back. "But I hardly ever buy anything, my love."

"I don't care. You've contributed more this morning than a lifetime of shopping could."

I turn to Carly. "And could you please take care of the shop for the rest of the day?"

She shrugs. "Sure."

"And then go deal with the goats? And help Mom with dinner? And everything else she can't do with that cast on?"

She nods. "Um, yeah. Why?"

"And spend the night with her?"

"The night? Yes, of course. But what are you up to?"

"I have to go somewhere."

"When?"

"Now."



**MAX**

“**W**hat do you think, Max?”

Rick, who’s been giving a boardroom presentation on “Supply Chain Management for the Twenty-first Century” for the last half hour, seems to be under the impression I’ve been paying attention.

I’m not sure how he’s managed to shoehorn this topic into our meeting about investing in product-based businesses, but he’s definitely well prepared.

Guess I must be faking my interest okay, though. Or maybe Rick’s mistaken me chewing my pen, swiveling in this unnecessarily ostentatious leather chair, and wondering what Polly’s doing right now, for total fascination with “the four stages of the chain.”

Guess what, Rick? You’re confusing me with someone who gives a fuck.

Your endless PowerPoint bore-fest is no match for the images of Polly, clothed and unclothed, filling my head. Or even the thought of those damn llamas when I was about to lose myself in her for the first time.

And I’m sorry, Rick, but “no chain, no gain” is not funny, no matter how many times you say it and laugh at it yourself. The only reason I’m smiling is because I’m remembering the look on Polly’s face as I held the little goat.

Shit.

What I’d give to see her face one more time.

Polly’s, I mean. Not the goat’s.

Though, the goat was pretty damn cute.

One thing being in business has taught me is that if you make a mistake, you have to learn from it. Losing Polly is the biggest life mistake I’ve ever made. And I’m determined not to ignore everything I learned from her.

So here I am, carrying that forward into a better future not only for the business but for neighborhoods across the country with the “Grow Together” community garden initiative.

Meanwhile, back in the terminally dull present, I try to conjure up a response to Rick.

“I think that—”

I have no clue what words I hope will miraculously fall from my mouth to complete that sentence, but before I can find out, Tarquin the Terrible butts in from across the table.

“Are you okay, Max?”

Every muscle around the table tenses. And there’s a sudden and widespread need to fiddle with pens.

Charlotte looks up from her spot in the corner where she’s been hunched over her laptop taking notes the whole time.

Tarquin continues. “Everyone’s a bit concerned about you.”

His tone is more impatient than “concerned.”

Charlotte looks at me, bug eyed.

A sharp intake of breath runs around the room. Almost every face at the table turns down, presumably in the hope Tarquin doesn’t call on them to back up his “everyone” claim.

The only one brave enough to take him on is Diana, my chief marketing officer. “I don’t think this is the time or place, Tarquin.”

“What better time than when the department heads are all together?”

“I don’t think we need to stage an intervention right this second,” says Diana.

What the fuck?

“An *intervention*?” I look from Diana to Tarquin, then at each of the faces around the boardroom table, most of which now find Rick’s supply chain management handouts utterly fascinating.

The atmosphere is hot with everyone's desire to leave.

Everyone except Tarquin, that is. "Well, you haven't exactly been at the top of your game lately, have you?"

Best CFO in the country or not, I'm done worrying about pandering to his shitty attitude purely so he doesn't go to work for the competition. There's something to be said about being happy in the workplace. Maybe the dollar doesn't always have to come first.

Now there's something I never would have thought pre-Polly. She's taken the blinders from my eyes.

"Okay, Tarquin. Here's the thing." I roll my chair back from the table, stand up, and button my jacket.

Everyone looks up from their pretend document reading. They've all been on the sharp end of Tarquin's tongue at some time, and I sense a general hope this might be the moment he gets his comeuppance.

And it might have been.

But everyone suddenly turns to look through the glass wall into the main office, where people have risen to their feet, engrossed in a commotion at the end of the room.

Whatever's going on is out of our line of vision, but there are muffled raised voices.

"Looks like a security issue. I'll see what's up," says Charlotte, possibly grateful to have a reason to leave.

As she opens the door, some of the hubbub leaks in.

A loud voice from around the corner says, "Ma'am, you can't just—"

Followed by a female voice saying, "It's fine. It'll be fine."

And a different voice says, "But you can't bring *that* in here."

"Typical," says Tarquin. "Incompetent security." He points his company logoed pen at me. "You need to hire a new firm, Max."

At the far end of the glass wall, a huddle of security guards comes into view. They're clustered around someone clearly trying to get away from them. It's like a press scrum around the latest celeb.

Amid the melee of legs are two that end in shiny blue rain boots.

And four that are white and fluffy. And not human.

The eyes of everyone inside and outside the boardroom follow the gaggle as they make their way alongside the long glass wall toward the boardroom door.

"Honestly, you won't be in trouble," the woman says.

And at that moment my stomach does a series of backflips, my heart swings on a trapeze, and the rest of my internal organs stumble around my body in clown feet as every buzzer, alarm, and claxon in my brain goes off at the sound of Polly's voice.

She's still hidden inside a ring of security guards as one of them says, "Ma'am, you can't be up here."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she says. "I understand about the policies. But I think it'll be fine. Are you sure he's down here?"

Charlotte's voice pipes up from somewhere in the ruckus. "She doesn't have an appointment. But I think it might be okay."

Charlotte letting in someone without an appointment is a first. But then she's never had any trouble grasping the gravity of a situation.

My mouth curves up at the corners, using muscles that haven't seen action for weeks.

I'm suddenly warm all over. My hands shake as I unbutton my jacket to let in some air.

Good God, the effect this woman has on me is unique, startling, and has knocked my world off its axis.



As Polly and her donut of security guards reach the door, she bursts through them.

Her eyes immediately find me across the other side of what now feels like a giant island of boardroom table.

She's flushed, breathless. Beautiful.

And wearing the fertility wreath around her neck while leading a baby goat on a leash. How I adore all the ways in which she is completely ridiculous.

"Polly, what are you do—"

I take one step toward walking around to scoop her up, but she holds up her palm. "Wait there a minute."

"Er, security?" Tarquin says. "Can six of you really not manage to stop one small woman from accessing a private floor? Not to mention one who's leading some sort of... sheep." He pauses and screws up his nose as he flaps his hand in the general direction of the baby goat. "Get them the hell out of here."

The biggest and burliest of the guards grabs Polly's upper arm and I want to punch him in the face. But I'm all the way across the other side of this obscenely large table, so I point at him instead.

"Get your hands off her." He drops her arm like it scalded him. "Security can all leave. She stays." I swing my pointing finger till it's aimed right at Tarquin. "And you. You can shut the fuck up."

Every face in the room turns to me. Apparently telling Tarquin to shut the fuck up is way more shocking than the fact a woman in overalls and boots, with a wreath around her neck and a goat on a leash, has suddenly appeared in the executive boardroom of a billion-dollar corporation.

Good God. All I want to do is kiss her, and beg her to forgive me for being an insensitive ass. But she obviously has something to say, and I need to give her the time and space to do that.

Charlotte squeezes her way back into the room against the tide of departing security guards.

“You wouldn’t happen to be from Warm Springs, would you?” she asks Polly.

“Yes,” Polly says with a surprised smile.

“And would you happen to be extremely into community gardens and local artisan products, by any chance?”

“Er, yes.” Now she’s puzzled.

Charlotte looks at me with a giant smile. “I knew it!” She makes a tiny silent clapping action and turns back to Polly. “Well, you’ve traveled a long way.” She looks down at the kid on the end of the leash. “And with a goat. So, you must have something important to say.”

“Yes. Or, well, at least I *did*...” Polly’s eyes dart around the room, taking in everyone staring at her. The executives have expressions ranging from amused to horrified to completely baffled.

Charlotte looks like she’s about to start bouncing on the spot.

“I wasn’t expecting to say it in front of an audience, though,” Polly says, the confidence with which she’d blustered her way through security and into the room starting to fade. Her gaze rests on the screen displaying Rick’s Venn diagram slide. “And it looks like I might have interrupted something important.”

“There is absolutely nothing in the world more important than the fact you are here.” I nod at the kid. “Both of you. Somehow.”

She brightens. “Oh, we came in the bus.”

“You *drove* here? In the VW? Where the hell did you park it?” I ask.

“Oh, nightmare.” Polly flaps her non-goat-holding hand. “Driving in Manhattan is bad enough. But try finding a spot for my bus.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Charlotte says, wringing her hands. “I’m dying here. Stop it with the parking. You don’t drive all the way here, with a goat, if you don’t have a speech.”

Polly nods and winces as she adjusts the wreath around her neck. I know from experience, that thing is sharp.

Even though my heart is trying to squeeze out from between my ribs and fling itself at her, I glue myself to the spot and hope she’s about to tell me something good.

“Right. Yes.” She clears her throat. “You’ve done an amazing thing. Not opening the store. I know how hard that must have been for you. How hard it must have been to go against all your business instincts.”

“Fucking stupid, more like,” mumbles Tarquin.

I give him a look that seems to successfully say *don’t you fucking dare interrupt her* because he shuts up instantly and stares at the floor.

Polly glances at him, then gives me a coy smile.

“And I love how you stand up for me like that. Your support means everything. I always thought accepting help from anyone would be a sign I couldn’t cope, couldn’t look after myself. But nothing ever felt as good as the moments you took care of me—like when you made all the plans to race me to the hospital as fast as you could, and you wanted to be there for me and Mom.” She looks down and shakes her head. “I was a dick to send you away.”

I clench my toes in a vain effort to grip the floor and prevent myself from ignoring her instruction to stay put. But, Christ, every pore of my being is desperate to sprint around this giant fucking table, gather this amazing, beautiful, unique woman into my arms, and never let her go.

“And no.” She turns to Tarquin. “The community garden project isn’t *fucking stupid*. It’s amazing.”

His mouth silently opens and closes. The shock of being told he’s talking shit by anyone—least of all a woman with a goat on a leash, and a bunch of badly organized twigs around her neck—preventing any words coming out.

I could not love her more than I do right now.

“And you didn’t even do it for me,” Polly continues, turning to me and putting her hand on her heart, in the center of the wreath. “You did it because you wanted to.”

I nod. “I did. I did want to.”

She puts a finger to her lips to shush me. “I need to finish. Before I chicken out.”

“Yeah, Max.” Charlotte backs her up. “The woman has a speech. She’s in charge of this room right now, not you.”

Absolutely she is. And in charge of every tingling nerve ending in my body.

“I always knew there was a bunch of squishy stuff inside you,” Polly says. “I saw it the moment you held this little girl and fed her.” She points at the goat. “I saw it when you told me about what happened when you were a kid.”

Oh, good God. My racing heart pauses for a second’s panic that she might be about to tell the secret I’ve only ever told her.

“And I know that’s what’s driven you and fed all your decisions. I know now that was all part of what got you here, of the business life that became hardwired into you. I didn’t understand before, but I do now. And I’m sorry I thought you used me for info on the councilmembers.”

I should have known better than to think she’d spill my secrets. Of course I can trust her—with my childhood stories, my heart, and the rest of my life.

“I thought Warm Springs could teach you about community and thinking about others and that you were the one who had everything to learn. But I was wrong. I had so much more to learn than I realized.” Her mouth turns up at one side as she gives a self-deprecating shrug. “I thought I had everything figured out. Obviously not.”

Her defiant self-belief and resourcefulness has been one of her most attractive features from that first morning on the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry I sent you away. I only hope you can forgive me.” Even from here I can see her eyes fill up. “I missed you.” Her voice cracks. “I want to be with you.”

Oh, my God. I close my eyes and let out a giant sigh of relief. She wants to be with me. I’m the luckiest man alive to get another shot at this. I must not screw this up.

Silence hangs in the air for a second.

“That’s the end of my speech,” she says. “It’s your turn now.”

All eyes are back on me.

Where the hell do I even start? With my wonder that she would want me? With how ridiculously adorable she, the wreath, and the goat look together? Or with the monumental impact she’s had on every part of me?

“It was a beautiful speech. I’ll never be able to compete with that.” I put the side of my fist to my mouth and cough as I try to pull myself together. “But I can tell you that those few days in Warm Springs changed me. You changed me, made me see everything afresh. Made me realize there can be other things in life that are just as fulfilling and rewarding as chasing the next deal.

“I might have fought like hell to get here.” I indicate the fancy boardroom we’re in. “But you’re right, I have enough already. I’ve achieved enough already. And now I can use my powers for good.”

The goat lets out one loud bleat. An affectionate chuckle runs around the room. Polly and the kid have already won everyone’s hearts. Apart from Tarquin the Terrible’s—he rolls his eyes. But then, I’ve never been sure he actually has one.

“The Grow Together initiative wouldn’t be happening if I hadn’t met you,” I tell her.

Polly stoops to pet the goat. “I just heard about it this morning. And I came straight here.” She swallows hard. “To tell you I’m sorry.” Her eyes glisten in the overhead lights. “And that I love you.” She plays with a bit of vine

sticking out of the wreath. “Even if you are shit at making wreaths.”

“That’s the most beautiful thing I ever heard.” Charlotte wipes an eye. “How the hell did you get this lucky, Max?”

I slowly turn my head from side to side. “I have no idea.”

I really don’t. And I sure as hell can’t keep my hands off Polly now.

The quickest route is straight across the table. I sit on the edge, swing up my legs, and scoot my backside across the polished surface.

Either I’m so keen to get to Polly that I’ve developed super-human strength, like a mother who can lift a car when their baby’s trapped under it, or the cleaners have used some extra slick furniture polish, but one quick push and I slide straight to the other side.

I can’t get my feet on the ground in time.

The entire room flinches on my behalf and emits a sharp gasp in anticipation of a painful impact.

With a winded “oomph,” I land on my butt at Polly’s feet. And at perfect goat face level.

Polly drops to her knees beside me. “Oh God, are you okay?”

Across the room, Tarquin shakes his head and turns his back, muttering, “I can’t fucking believe this.”

“Yeah, in one piece I think.” I rub my tail bone. “It’s sweet of you to wear this hideous thing.” I reach for the chaotic bundle of twigs around her neck. “But please take it off.”

“I tried to throw it away.” She ducks as I lift it over her head. “But I ended up pulling it off the compost heap and cleaning it up.”

“You are ridiculous.” I take her hands in mine. “But that was a beautiful speech. And if my outlook has changed, it’s all because of you.”

The emptiness that's been inside me for the last couple of weeks is gone. The only person who will ever fill it perfectly is here. A sense of peace settles over me, like I know the future is going to be brighter than I ever expected. Brighter and warmer because it will be filled with more than money and success.

I look into her full eyes and find that place deep behind them that connects with a place deep inside me. "And I love you too."

I jump as a goat nose pokes into my ear, ruining the moment.

"Lacey!" cries Polly.

I pick up the kid and plop her into my lap. "She has a name now? Lacey?"

"Yup. She and her sister are named *Cagney and Lacey*. Mom's favorite TV show when she was a teenager."

"Well, the last time I had her in my lap was the moment I knew I was going to fall for you." I scratch Lacey under the chin as she nuzzles my neck. "How could I not fall for the woman who tortured me into sitting, barefoot, in a muddy field, being peed on by a goat?"

I reach my arms around Lacey to take Polly's hands again.

"Never thought I'd say this with quite such an audience." I look around the room at the executives staring down at us. "But you made me a better person right in that moment. You're making me a better person right now. And I'd like it if you'd go on making me a better person."

Behind Polly, the door opens, and Tarquin disappears through it. Before it can fully close behind him, George walks in. I'd completely forgotten he was waiting downstairs for me.

"Goodness me," he says, taking in the sight of me on the floor with a goat in my lap and surrounded by all the executives. "You weren't answering your phone, so I got worried and thought I'd better—" His gaze lands on Polly kneeling beside me. "Oooh."

A smile creeps across his face, lighting up his knowing eyes. “Well, this is a bit of role reversal, you at the young lady’s feet.”

“Indeed. And you can clock out early, George,” I tell him. “I think I have a ride home.”

Polly strokes Lacey’s head. “You most definitely do.”

As she leans over the goat and presses her lips to mine, applause fills the room.

I’m fairly sure it started right where Charlotte is standing.





## POLLY

The warm, bubbly water envelops me, and my muscles instantly relax as I slip into the deep, free-standing soaker tub by an enormous floor-to-ceiling window. The view of Central Park is breathtaking.

The bathroom gleams with white marble and is almost the size of my shop.

Max's penthouse is enormous. Beautiful, but unnecessarily enormous. And unlike my place—which is all homey, covered in family photos and mementos, constantly smells of whatever soap Mom's making, and where there's always a chance you might trip over a bag of goat feed—this place looks almost untouched by human hand.

I let my head fall back against the tub as I dig my fingers into a hard knot in my left shoulder. I hadn't realized how tense I must have been on the long drive here.

It was only as I was crossing the George Washington Bridge to Manhattan that it occurred to me Max might not even be in town. Or at his office. Or even that he would agree to see me.

And now, after the adrenaline rush, I'm fit to flop.

"Never expected your view to be so green," I call to the man I now know to be the love of my life, who's in the kitchen.

It's the most spectacular thing I've ever seen. Like something from a movie. Except you'd think it had been faked because it's so perfectly framed. The whole length of Central Park spreads out before us.

"It's my bit of the countryside in the city." Max appears, carrying two glasses of champagne. A partially unbuttoned white shirt with rolled up cuffs and bare feet protruding from the bottom of suit pants have never looked so good. "I enjoy watching it change with the seasons."

He hands me a glass and drops a kiss on my forehead.

“I love how it’s dotted with cherry blossoms,” I tell him.

He perches on the edge of the tub, dangles his fingers in the water, and runs them up my arm. A shiver skitters down my side, making my heart flutter and heat pool between my legs.

“Wait till you see it in the fall. And when it’s covered in snow. It’s beautiful all year.” He scoops up bubbles and plops them on the end of my nose. “Just like you.”

I bat his hand away. “Oh, look at you being all corny and romantic.” The bubbles tickle my nose, so I wipe them off. “What a fantastic spot to relax after a day at work.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He dips his hand fully under the water this time, and drags his fingers achingly slowly from my hip, down the outside of my thigh, to my knee. The wave of pleasure causes my head to drop back and my eyes to drift shut.

“I’ve never used it,” he finishes.

“Seriously?” My voice comes out lower than usual. I raise my heavy eyelids just enough to see the sexy smile of the man who is all mine. “You’ve never used this tub?”

“Nope. I always shower.” He swirls the bubbles in a circle above my belly, the edge of his rolled-up shirt sleeve now damp. “This bubble bath is from the welcome pack when I moved in. Two years ago.”

I take a sip of champagne, giving me bubbles inside as well as out.

“Well, we need to change that right now.” I take his glass and set them both on the low table next to the tub. “Go on.” I gently tap the foamy water. “In you come.”

I try to lift his heavy thigh off the side of the tub and swing him in, but he laughs and jumps back. “You’ve already ruined one suit, remember?”

But he doesn’t need asking twice. And he doesn’t hang around.

First the shirt comes off, revealing the broad, firm chest I'm desperate to run my fingers down until they reach the outline of those abs.

The sound of his belt unbuckling causes a ripple in my stomach that sinks low and deep. The sight of what's revealed as he pushes down his pants and underwear sets my heart racing with anticipation and my lady fig yearning to take him in. From how tall and proud and stiff he's standing, it looks like he's as desperate for me as I am for him.

I pull my knees to my chest as he steps into the tub, his bouncing dick level with my face. And I can bear it no longer—I need to taste and feel that thing of beauty in my mouth right now.

Leaning forward, I run my fingers from the tip down to the base, over his balls, and back up again.

“Good God, Polly.” His head falls back as his eyes close. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

Switching my fingers for my mouth, I glide my tongue up his deliciously smooth, silky shaft. My clit throbs as I wrap my lips around the tip and take him slowly into my mouth inch by inch.

He rocks back and forth as I suck and stroke, and massage his balls, until he can bear it no longer.

“I have to have you, Polly.” He sinks into the water. “I have to touch you and feel you and have you.”

I wrap my legs around him as he slides me toward him and captures my top lip between his. We suck and lick and nibble and stroke our tongues together like we can't get deep enough into each other's mouths.

He slides his hands over my wet breasts, teasing my nipples, making my entire body vibrate with the weeks of pent-up need for him.

I stroke my hands inwards across his firm shoulders, run my fingers up his neck, and rake them into his thick, dark hair, the water making it shine.

“I’ve thought of little else but this.” He sighs against my neck. “About you, about your fierce determination, about your body.” He nibbles my ear lobe. “About how much I want all of that—all of you—in my life every day.” His breath and his words send a wave of goosebumps down my side.

“I want all of you too,” I whisper into his damp, herby scented hair, as I tighten my legs and draw myself even closer to him.

He scatters kisses down my neck and slides one hand under the water.

A giant breath escapes me when his fingers find my center and I slump forward, resting my head on his shoulder, and plunge my hands under the bubbles so I can touch him too.

The sensation of his smooth, hard length in my hands as his fingers circle and tease my clit and my entrance is a magical combination.

I push myself up so I can enjoy the lustful expression on his face. “I’ve never needed anything as much as I need you right this second.”

He pats me on the backside. “Then you’d better get off me while I grab a condom.”

“I’m on birth control.”

“Oh, that’s exciting.” He runs his hands down my thighs. “And I’m clean.”

“Me too.”

“Then you shall have me,” he says with a smile and a flick of his eyebrows as he slides down the tub and lies back, pulling me on top of him.

I pause for a moment with his tip resting at my entrance, reveling in the moment right before he’ll be inside me, skin on skin, for the first time.

As I ease myself onto his length, he fills more than that most intimate part of me. He fills my heart, my mind, my soul. We’re joined together in a heady combination of lust, love, and mutual respect, and I know we’re one and the same. We’re

hard workers who love our families and want the best for them. And now we want the best for each other too.

Waves of bubbles slosh around us as we rock against each other.

He leans down and captures one of my rock-hard nipples in his mouth. A gasp bursts out of me as I arch into him. Then his finger is on my clit, and I'm gone. Lost in the sensation of him moving inside me, his teasing tongue and teeth, and the circling of his finger.

I'm vaguely aware of water washing over the edge of the tub as he climbs toward the point of no return with me. My fingers dig deep into the muscles of his shoulder, his into my butt as he pulls me hard against him while wave after wave of pleasure build within us, until we burst and explode together.

There's just me and Max, the fireworks shooting through my body, and the future that lies ahead of us.

The movement of the water gradually slows as we come down from our high and catch our breath.

I stroke my wet fingers over his forehead, down the sides of his temples, over his perfect cheekbones and around the outline of the lips I want to kiss forever. They slowly turn up a little at the corners.

"I love you," he whispers against my fingers.

Those three little words cause a surge of something within me that I've never felt before. Coming from Max's lips they have such power, such weight, that they fill every pore of my being, every empty corner I didn't even know was there.

I rest my forehead against his and gaze into the blue twinklers that had me from the first moment I lifted my head from the sidewalk and looked into them.

"I love you too," I tell the man I once tried my very hardest to hate, and brush my lips against his.

Max pulls me into a deep, tender kiss.

But the meaning of the moment is shattered by frantic bleating that gradually gets louder.

I peel myself off Max to look in the direction of the commotion, and find a little black and white face peeping around the bathroom door.

I suspected Lacey would escape the makeshift enclosure we'd made for her in the laundry room. At least we'd found a use for the untouched hampers, ironing board, and drying racks. I'm pretty sure Max didn't even know they were there.

He chuckles and scoops more bubbles onto the tip of my nose. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it?"

"Hope so. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Neither would I." He squeezes my butt. "I'm about to say something I never thought I'd say to the woman of my dreams who's just made mind-blowing love with me in my bathtub, but...go tend to your goat."

I ease myself off him and grab a giant fluffy towel from the rack next to the tub as I stand up. "I suppose I should take her out for a walk. I've never kept a goat inside overnight before, but that seems like a sensible thing to do."

"Okay." Max makes a big splash as he sits up and kisses my thigh. "You go be the eccentric lady walking her goat along a Manhattan street. I have a couple of calls to make. And I'll fill up your glass for when you get back."





## MAX

“This is a long way to travel in a bus.” I shift in the passenger seat and look over my shoulder. “Especially with a goat in the back.”

Polly slaps me on the arm. “She’s been so good. And she’s been asleep for ages.”

“Yeah, that hour of bleating must have been exhausting.”

After my first chance to sleep late in years, a fabulous breakfast delivered from my favorite restaurant, and some not-sleeping back-to-bed time, we’ve hit the road to get Polly back to Warm Springs.

“We’re nearly there anyway.” She concentrates on the open country road ahead and rests her hand on my thigh.

There’s been a constant tremor in my stomach ever since we set off from the city. I think she’s going to be happy with what I’m about to show her, but there’s always a chance that her independent spirit might rule the day and it could all go horribly wrong.

I twine my fingers through hers.

“Mom was so happy you could get away at the last minute and come home with me for the day,” she says. “She’ll have had Carly running in circles to tidy up and make things nice for you.”

I lift Polly’s hand to my lips and kiss the back of it. “I think she should already be beyond standing on ceremony for me. I mean, the last time I was there I was wearing her goat bathrobe, which barely covered my essentials.”

“Here we go.” Polly turns smoothly into the driveway.

“What? No yanking the wheel so hard I slam into the door?”

She pulls on the hand brake and gives me a peck on the cheek. “Not trying to get rid of you this time.”

We're barely out of the van when Carly comes bounding out of the house and wraps Polly in a giant hug.

She looks at me over Polly's shoulder. "You'd better be good to this girl, Max."

"You can bet your life on it. I'm certainly betting mine."

Carly releases Polly and slides open the side door of the van as the bleating resumes. "I'll take care of Lacey. Cagney's missed her. You guys go inside," she says.

I drape my arm around Polly's shoulders as we make our way into the house to find her mom sitting at the kitchen table pulling apart sprigs of lavender. Her broken leg is strapped up in a brace and resting on a stool.

"Look at you up and at it." Polly stoops to embrace her. "Guess I didn't have to feel guilty about leaving you."

"Never. And least of all when it means such fabulous news. Come here, Max." She beckons me into a three-way hug. "I'm so happy my headstrong daughter saw sense."

What finer welcome into a family could anyone wish for? I'm sure my folks will accept and embrace Polly as warmly as Gloria has done with me. They'll no doubt also be surprised—and relieved—that I've accepted it is possible to discover a meaning to life other than work.

"Once you're all healed up, perhaps you'd like to meet my parents," I tell her. "I think you and my mom would get along great."

Gloria lets go of me and claps her hands to her cheeks.

"Oh, Max." Her eyes mist over. "I would love that."

I straighten and rub my hands together. "Anyway, ladies." Here we go. The tremor in my stomach turns to a full-on quake. "There's something I'd like to show you both."

There's no going back now.

"Show us?" asks Polly. "What is there here for you to show us?"

“Are you able to move?” I ask Gloria. “I mean, outside, for a little walk?”

Polly frowns and rests her hand on her mom’s shoulder, as if to hold her in the chair. “She’s supposed to keep her weight off that leg.”

“No worries,” Carly says, as she walks in through the back door. “Mrs. Bentley stopped by yesterday and dropped off a spare walker.”

“Yes,” Gloria says. “I practiced with it a little, and it made all the difference.”

“Well, I don’t know.” Polly pulls a face somewhere between worried and skeptical.

“Being able to get up and about really cheered her up.” Carly pointedly emphasizes the last four words as she stares hard at Polly.

Polly sighs, taking the hint. “Oh, okay. Well, as long as you’re not on your feet for too long. And rest properly afterward.”

Carly disappears to get the walker.

Polly turns to me. “What do you have to show us?”

“It’s just out here.” I nod toward the back door.

“Right *here*?”

I’m not sure if she’s more pissed off or intrigued. “Yup.” I chew on my bottom lip, hoping to hell I’ve done the right thing.

“At *our house*?” she asks.

This is either going to be the greatest surprise ever or a humiliating disaster. “Well, not quite. Let me show you.”

“Here you go, Glo.” Carly wheels the walker into the kitchen and holds it steady as Gloria eases herself out of the chair.

“It’s good to be vertical,” she says with a big smile.

“Oh God, please be careful, Mom.” Polly purses her lips and rubs her forehead.

“Don’t worry.” I stroke her arm. “We’re all here to look out for her.”

Nothing has ever filled my soul and given me more purpose than the thought that I’m now here for Polly.

And I’ll still be here when she, no doubt, tells me she doesn’t need help and can take care of everything all on her own, thank you very much.

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Five minutes later, and we’ve almost made it to the end of their driveway.

“Where the hell are we going, Max?” Polly does not look in the mood for a surprise. “There’s nowhere to walk to from here, and Mom can’t make it much farther.”

In my enthusiasm, I hadn’t thought to let this wait a few weeks till Gloria’s leg was fully healed. Maybe that would have been better. But I was so caught up in everything last night that I wanted to arrange it all straight away. My stomach churns, but I’m in too deep now. There’s no backing out.

“I’m doing fine,” Gloria says, as she takes a deep breath and leans heavily on the walker.

“We’re going right over there.” I point at the field across the street.

“The Harringtons’ field? What for?” A look of realization dawns on Polly’s face. “Oh, Christ, the helicopter’s not coming, is it? You’re not flying us somewhere, are you?”

I can’t help but chuckle at her horrified expression. “No. But now you come to mention it, that would be a quicker way home than having George come and pick me up.”

Carly leads the way across the road. “One last little push, Glo. Max wouldn’t have brought us out here for nothing. You can do it.”

Relieved that at least one person has faith in me, I jog ahead and open the freshly installed gate in the fence.

“That’s new.” Polly turns to Gloria. “When did the Harringtons add a gate?”

Gloria shrugs and concentrates on not bashing her splinted leg into the side of the walker.

With everyone safely in the field, I steel myself and hope for the best.

Fuck, I hope I’ve done the right thing.

In my heart I know it couldn’t be more right—for me and Polly and for her mom. I only hope Polly doesn’t see it as me interfering too much in their lives.

I take a giant breath. Here we go.

“Okay. Well. This is it.” I spread my arms wide. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

They all look around the five acres of grass like they’re trying to find Waldo.

“I’m lost,” Polly says.

“Yeah,” Carly says. “And I’m a bit hungry. Could you hurry up and tell us so we can have lunch?”

And I thought negotiating multimillion-dollar contracts would be the most nerve-wracking thing I’d ever do. I dig my nails into my palms and dive in. “Polly, Gloria. Would you like to live here?”

“*What?*” they ask in unison.

Polly looks as confused as if I’d just asked her to name her top three vegetables—there’s no way she could pick just three—and holds onto Gloria’s walker to steady herself. I could probably knock her down with the feeblest of feathers right now. Hopefully that’s a good sign. I certainly have no choice but to plow on as if it is.

“I know it’s not like the huge farm you lost to the developers. But it’s big enough for a nice house and a cottage for you, Gloria.” I point to where the field slopes up toward

one side. “I thought the main house could go up there, farthest from the road. And your place could be in the opposite corner, Gloria, so you have some privacy.”

“For *me*?” Gloria says, still processing the first part of the news. “You want to build a new cottage for *me*?”

Oh, God. Is this a case of like daughter, like mother, and Gloria is the one who’ll think I’m interfering and trying to control their lives?

Maybe I should walk this back a little. “Or you could keep your house across the street, and we could renovate it. Whichever you prefer.”

Carly paces around us, her eyes roving the field as if she can see the vision of the future homes coming to life before her eyes.

But Polly and her mom continue to stare at me—baffled, or furious, it’s hard to tell.

My heart turns its beats-per-minute setting up from “a lot” to “panic stations.”

“And I’d love to build you a workshop for the soaps and all the other stuff you want to make. All completely accessible in case you’re not having a great day.”

But they just look more bewildered, not less. My stomach gnaws away at itself.

I’ve pulled deals back from all-is-lost moments before. I must be able to do this.

“Maybe we could get you an assistant to help, so you never have to stop soap-making if you don’t want to.” I pause for a breath. I’ve just done a lot of garbling. Possibly with a slight hint of desperation.

“Hold on,” Polly says. “I need you to rewind a bit here.” She circles her finger in the air. “Are you saying you bought this field from the Harringtons?”

Oh, yes, maybe I did dive headlong into the future without explaining the fundamentals and letting it all sink in. “I did.”

“When?”

“Erm.” This is the part that’s important to her? “Last night. While you were out walking Lacey. And I had the gate put in this morning because I knew your mom wouldn’t be able to hop over the fence.”

“Last night?” Now she looks completely stunned. “You arranged all this last night? In less than an hour?”

“Yes. Well, with some help from my assistant. But I’d been thinking about it from the moment I first landed here in the helicopter. You guys would get to have more land again but barely have to move. Just across the street.”

Carly slams her hands on her hips and swivels to face Polly. “He bought you a fucking field, Poll.”

Polly nods in slow motion. “He did. He absolutely did.” She says it slowly as a huge smile spreads across her face, and she turns to me. “You bought me a fucking field.”

And there it is, the joy I wanted to see in her eyes.

When she moves closer and wraps her arms around my neck, the tightness in my chest eases enough for me to finally breathe. Every muscle relaxes, my shoulders drop, and my heart soars. She’s happy. That’s all I’ll ever want.

“And we’re going to build a house.” Her face is aglow. “And maybe one for Mom.”

I circle my arms around her waist and turn to Gloria. “You can think about it, Gloria. No rush to decide. Whatever you want.”

“But what about you?” Polly cocks her head to one side, a playful grin curling her lips. “Where will *you* live?”

“Well, I was thinking maybe in that house over there.” I point toward the top corner of the field again. “With you?”

Polly’s brow furrows. Oh God, is this too much, too soon? Does she think I’m pressuring her? “I mean, I’m not trying to rush things, it’ll take a while to build a house. And by then, hopefully...maybe...you might be ready to live with me?”

“Oh, of course,” she says, like it’s already a done deal. “But I’m worried about what you’d do about work?”

“I can commute.” I point to another corner of the field. “Thought the helipad could go over there.”

She pulls away, eyes wide, head shaking from side to side. “Oh, no, you’re not having—”

I place my hand gently over her mouth. “Kidding. I’m kidding.” She punches me on the arm. “I could stay in the city one or two nights a week, and work from here the other days.”

“Yeah, right. Sure, you’d be able to bear being away from the office.” She laughs and rolls her eyes. “But the workaholic is who you are. And I love you exactly the way you are. So, whatever works for you.”

“And if you’d like to join the family business, you’re welcome to come and run the Grow Together initiative. It has to be rolled out properly. And there’s no one I’d trust to do that more.”

“That’s a great offer.” She taps her chin and looks to the sky, as if deep in thought for a moment. “But I think I’d like to work on making a success of my own business, thanks.”

“And that would be great too. So, can I assume the answer is yes? You’d like to live here. And you’ll have me?”

She flings her arms around me again. “Of course, I’ll have you.”

“Me too,” Gloria says from the seat of her walker.

“And me?” Carly says. “I can visit, right?”



# EPILOGUE

*Two months later*

**MAX**

The turnout for the grand opening of the inaugural Grow Together community garden in Warm Springs is even better than I'd hoped.

It's a glorious summer Sunday, and the crowd is abuzz with chatter and laughter. An old guy is dancing with three little kids to the small brass band that's set up in the corner. And there are long lines for the ice cream, coffee, and donut stands. As well as for Gerald Montgomery's wine stall, Lord help us. All of which are free, courtesy of Yellow Barn.

I couldn't resist the chance to have Gerald here for old time's sake. Polly laughed when she saw him setting up and asked me when the llamas would be arriving.

Gerald's brought along his daughter's roommate to help. Apparently she's a master's student at NYU and needs every odd job she can lay her hands on to get by. She's certainly doing a grand job working the crowd with trays of samples of his various flavor concoctions.

There's a good press turnout too. A photographer from the local paper is wandering around snapping the festivities, and the same TV crew that covered Polly's protest is back for the story's happy ending.

"This is fabulous, Max," my mom says as she admires a healthy row of lettuce. "The best idea you've ever had."

I'm so glad my parents and brothers could be here today to see what we're doing. The whole area's now divided into individual plots where people can grow whatever they like.

"If I'd known all it would take for you to think I'd had an amazing idea would be for me to buy a piece of land and give it away, I'd never have bothered working my ass off to build a

billion-dollar business.” I wink at her. “It’s definitely fun though.”

“And here’s the wonderful woman who inspired it all.” Mom claps as Polly and her mother approach between two raised vegetable beds. Gloria’s leg is healed, but she still needs a cane for the time being.

Mom loved Polly the moment they met. The first time I took her home to meet my parents, they bonded over a shared love of soil and all things that grow in it. Mom’s always been an avid gardener, so she’s in her element enjoying her first summer working on the huge grounds of the new house.

We spent yesterday there so Polly could meet my brothers, who were visiting for the weekend.

The youngest, Elliot, came up to help Mom out. He inherited her green thumb. His Manhattan apartment and office—which is in my building—are overrun with plants. Pretty sure he prefers them to people.

Connor was there because he needed some peace and quiet for a couple of days after getting a rocket up his ass from the board of his company. They’re mighty pissed that he was in the gossip columns yet again. An owner who rolls out of bars at two in the morning latched onto a bottle of Jack Daniels, a cigarette, and a couple of models isn’t the greatest image for an educational toy company.

But he was definitely on his best behavior yesterday. He even washed Mom’s beloved old truck. He’s a good guy, when he’s not being a dick.

The good thing about them being there is that I was able to persuade them both to come here with us today before they head back to Manhattan. It’s a shame that the other two brounsins can’t be here—Tom’s in London, and Walker’s somewhere out near Cape Cod locked in tough negotiations to buy a big piece of property to expand the brewery business. But at least having the others around will help make everything I have in store today special.

Polly's got an expression like she's trying to remember if she left the goat pen closed.

"Everything okay?" I ask her.

"Not sure. I'm a bit worried about Connor." She looks over to where he, Elliot, and my dad are lined up for donuts.

"What the fuck has he done now?"

Mom pats me on the chest. "Give him a break, Max. You know he's upset about the board. At least he had the sense to get out of the city. Give him some credit for that."

Polly leans into my ear on the opposite side from my mom. "He smells like Gerald's wine. And he's getting a bit loud."

Connor's antics have ruined so many things lately. And now he's on the verge of ruining his own business. The board thinks he's damaging the reputation and, more importantly, the value of the squeaky-clean company.

I'm beyond caring what he ruins for himself, but if he ruins today for me, I will fucking kill him.

"Your dad will keep him in check," says Mom. "You concentrate on enjoying the day, and don't worry about it."

Polly nudges me and pecks me on the cheek. "It's time for your speech."

The nerves that have been fluttering around my stomach all morning go into overdrive. Not because of the public speaking—I've done that a thousand times before. But because of what I'm planning to say.

"Okay, here goes." I stride over to Ed's tractor and hay cart, which are parked on one side of the garden. The same tractor I first kissed Polly up against. Now it's forming the backdrop for a whole other momentous event.

I grab the megaphone—yes, the same one—and climb up onto the cart.

The brass band winds down to silence right on cue, and every face in the crowd turns in my direction.

I swallow hard as my usually steady hand shakes when I raise the bullhorn to my lips. The TV crew and photographer point their cameras right at me.

“Thank you all for coming today. I can’t tell you how much it means to me, and to the whole Yellow Barn and Harvest Enterprises families, to have your support for the new and exciting direction we’re taking in this community and in many more communities to come.”

I pause for the smattering of claps.

“But I can tell you all with absolute certainty that we would not be here today—I would not be here today, these vegetable plots would not be here today—were it not for the greatest gift Warm Springs could ever have given me.”

I rest my hand on my chest. “My heart. My love. My Polly.”

She physically squirms as everyone turns toward her and offers a rousing round of applause and some whistles. I’m too far away to see clearly, but I’d bet my Lamborghini her cheeks are the most gorgeous shade of pink right about now.

Mom might be the most enthusiastic clapper of them all. Dad joins in as he, Connor, and Elliot arrive next to her, clutching donuts. Even from up here I can tell Connor is probably as flushed as Polly. And he’s a little unsteady.

But, for now, that’s his problem. I need to focus on this most important of moments.

“You’ve changed this community, Polly. And you’ve changed me.”

An “aw” passes through the crowd.

My stomach, empty from me being too nervous to eat Mom’s breakfast this morning, flips over and over.

“I arrived in Warm Springs excited by the thrill of being involved at the ground level of a project for the first time in years. It made me feel like I was an important part of something again.”

A sea of smiling faces looks back at me as I pace across the hay cart.

“But eventually I had to admit to myself that it wasn’t trying to get approval for the store that was thrilling and exciting. It wasn’t the work that was filling a hole inside me I hadn’t realized was there. It was Warm Springs’s favorite produce seller.”

There’s some clapping, a couple of wolf whistles, and a cry of “No, Adam” from a woman trying to stop a small boy digging up some sort of vegetable with his bare hands.

“So, Polly, I have a question for you. An important question. So important, I have some friends here to help me ask it.”

Right on cue, Carly leads a line of Polly’s most ardent supporters from behind the tractor.

The coffee twins, donut baker, and Gerald have abandoned their stalls to join in. Also, there’s Rita Wiggins, several of Polly’s beloved farmers, and, bringing up the rear, Mrs. Bentley. Some of them are carrying placards. Mrs. B needs both hands for her walker, but she has no trouble starting up the chant they came up with for me.

“One, two, three, four. Max loves Polly more and more. Five, six, seven, eight. He knows you are his perfect mate.”

They get through it three times before lining up beside the hay cart. My stomach crawls up my body, past my banging heart, and sits in my throat as Carly counts to three and they flip their placards around to face the crowd.

People at the front point and laugh.

That wasn’t what I was expecting.

I lean forward to look around at the signs.

POLLY WILL MARRY YOU ME?

Shit.

I signal to Gerald and Rita to switch places. The laughter changes to cheering and jumping up and down.

But the only thing that matters is Polly's reaction.

She stands like a statue with one hand over her mouth. My stomach lurches. This could go either way.

A beaming Gloria grabs her other hand.

Mom, Dad, and Connor all throw their arms around her at the same time. Elliot reaches around and pats her on the back.

The huddle eventually parts to reveal Polly—a huge, if shocked, smile on her beautiful face. Thank God for that.

First things first, she hugs her mom, then helps her to sit down on the edge of a raised vegetable bed.

Then the applause builds again as she heads my way. She weaves and dodges through the crowd and jumps up onto the cart beside me.

I put down the megaphone and drop to one knee in front of her and a whole town that loves her almost as much as I do.

“I know the signs have already asked you, but I want to ask you myself too.” I take her hand as she looks down at me, a tear rolling down one cheek. “Polly, you unique, overall-wearing, goat-loving, old bus-driving, ridiculous woman. I love the way you fight for what you believe in. I love the way you stack produce in perfect pyramids. And I love the way you laugh so hard you can't breathe. You have opened my eyes and my mind and my heart to a love and a life I never knew I had in me. And now, I wouldn't know who I am without you. Would you promise you'll spend the rest of your life with me? Will you marry me?”

She nods her head like crazy, and I think I just about hear a tiny “yes” squeak out. That's good enough for me.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a ring of braided grape vines that Rita made for me and slide it onto Polly's finger.

“You can have whatever real one you'd like. But for now, I wanted you to have a perfect, tiny, fertility wreath.”

The crowd erupts into even more applause and cheers and whistles as I get up off my knee and scoop my wife-to-be in the air.

She throws her arms around my neck and whispers, “I might be about to start humming. But also, I love you.”

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We rejoin the crowd that’s now even happier than it was before. More people have joined in, dancing to the brass band that is belting out *Walkin’ On Sunshine*.

The photographer and news cameraman circle us as my dad raises his plastic cup of Gerald’s new blueberry and rose petal wine into the center of the ring formed by me, Polly, my parents, her mom, Elliot, and Connor, who definitely shouldn’t be having any more wine.

Just as Dad’s about to speak, Carly appears out of nowhere, grabs Polly from behind, and bounces her up and down amid much squealing and hugging.

Elliot pushes his glasses up his nose as he turns to survey the crowd for the four-hundredth time since we arrived.

He leans into my ear. “Is Charlotte here? Or coming?”

Ah, so it’s my assistant he’s been looking for. “No. I invited her, seeing as how she organized so much of it. But she’s at some event to do with her boyfriend’s job.”

“She has a boyfriend? She’s never mentioned a boyfriend.” The blood drains from Elliot’s face, then surges back to just two spots, one on each cheek, which stand out bright red against the fair skin around them.

“Yeah, for a couple of years I think.” How could he not know that? He’s outside my office chatting to her all the time. I know nothing about anyone’s private life, but even I knew that.

Elliot looks down and stares into his wine.

“I’d assumed she must be single,” he says without blinking. “Because, you know, she works such long hours for you all the time.”



Well, thank God she has a boyfriend. Elliot's office is just two floors below mine, and I'm not a fan of personal lives tangling with the workplace.

I'm particularly not a fan of the idea of *my brother's* personal life tangling with *my* workplace. Charlotte is like my right business hand. The last thing I need is to risk losing her because she got involved with my brother and he pissed her off.

Particularly since my previous assistant quit because of Connor-related shenanigans. After that nightmare I made all the broussins shake on an agreement that we would never mix business and family in any way. We call it "The Subclause" to the pact we made all those years ago to make our fortunes so we could take care of our parents.

Elliot's shoulders rise and fall with a massive sigh. I almost feel sorry for him. If anyone had stood between me and Polly, I'd probably have driven a tank over them to get to her.

I pat him on the back. "But you know what, she'll be back at her desk at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. And every other day. Just like normal. You can talk to her any time you like."

He nods into his drink.

Dad raises his glass again, making his second attempt at a toast. He coughs to get everyone's attention. The buzz of congratulations—and the shrieks coming from Carly—quiet down.

"Welcome to the family, Polly," he says. "And, of course, Gloria. We could not be happier and more honored to have you both officially in our lives."

"And I'm delighted you're generous enough to share your wonderful son with me," Gloria says.

"Yeah," Connor says, raising his cup. "Another one bites the dust, eh, Max?" He slaps me on the back. "It was only a few months ago you said Owen was out of his fucking mind for getting engaged to that hippie. Now look at you."

“Connor, please,” Mom whispers, as he knocks back the contents of his cup.

Gerald’s daughter’s roommate approaches with a fresh tray of samples at precisely the wrong moment.

Connor spins around to face her. “Yay. More fucking awful wine.”

He launches himself at the drinks, sending her hurtling backward toward a row of neatly staked tomato plants. Her foot catches on the wood edging around the bed and flies out from under her.

There’s a cry of “Oooh!” as her tray arcs in the air, cups of wine scattering to the four winds, and she falls hard on her back, squishing the plants. Connor lands flat on top of her. Her poor bemused, stunned face peeks out around the side of his head.

The photographer snaps away and the cameraman zooms in.

“Oh, Christ,” Dad says, slapping his hand to his forehead. “If this makes it to the New York papers, it could be the final straw. He could lose everything he’s worked for.”

The poor woman, her face the shade of Gerald’s beet-and-raspberry wine, shoves Connor to the side and slides out from under him. She stumbles upright and dusts off dirt and bits of tomato foliage, leaving Connor lying face down in the dirt among smashed plants and snapped canes.

Mom rushes over to help. “Are you okay, my love? You took quite a tumble.”

The woman nods and frantically picks up the tray and gathers the plastic cups like she wants to get as far away from Connor as she can, as quickly as she can.

Dad drops his mouth to my ear.

“Why can’t he do himself a favor and clean up his act and get himself together, like he always was before?” His teeth are gritted. “Why can’t he stay away from all the partying? Why can’t he settle down with a nice, normal young lady?” He

looks over at the mortified wine server as Mom helps to retie her apron. “Someone like that poor girl he just sent flying.”

“I think what he needs right now is a good cup of tea,” says Gloria. “How about we all go back to our house and celebrate with some of Polly’s herbal concoctions?” There are nods of agreement all around. “And you can all meet the goats.”

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If Connor continues behaving like this, he’ll end up being voted off the board of his own company.

Know what he needs? His image improved by a fake relationship with a wholesome girl-next-door, that’s what! You know, someone exactly like the poor woman he just sent flying into the tomato plants.

Her name is Rose, by the way. And she hates him. But she’s also broke and has nowhere to live, so...

*Get their story in [That Fake Feeling](#).*

And if you’d like some more of Max and Polly, *download their [free steamy bonus scene](#)!*

## **OTHER ROM-COMS BY NICKY REDFORD**

### **The Dashwood Billionaires**

That Stranded Feeling

(Owen & Summer)

That Conflicted Feeling

(Max & Polly)

That Fake Feeling

(Connor & Rose)

That Friendzone Feeling

(Walker & Emily)

That Geeky Feeling

(Elliot & Charlotte)

That Reunited Feeling

(Tom & Hannah)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicky Redford writes bladder-threateningly funny rom coms with all the steam and all the feels.

She loves heroes who think they know what they want (they're wrong, obviously), the feisty, independent, heroines who don't take their crap, and the sparky banter that inevitably ensues.

Nicky learned the word "cock" at an inappropriately young age from a Jackie Collins novel that either her mother or grandmother left lying around—she doesn't recall which, they don't talk about it. But it sure got her hooked on romance.

When she discovered Nora Ephron movies, Nicky found her jam and fell head over heels in love with smart, romantic comedies. If anyone tries to say *When Harry Met Sally* is not the greatest film ever made they will be treated to a very detailed explanation as to why they are wrong.

Nicky aims to bring you page-turning raunchy rom coms to brighten your day, put a smile on your face, and make you need to sit on an ice pack.

A British Canadian who lives in Toronto, Nicky likes to be invited to everything, but go to nothing.

Her previous life as a journalist has left her with a love of deadlines—without them, you'd find her watching dog videos and make-up tutorials all day long.

Never miss a new release, a special offer, a freebie, or a funny story, by signing up for her newsletter, The Redford Files:

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