

To Get Me To You

by Kait Nolan

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Written and published by Kait Nolan

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Cover design by Robin Ludwig

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To The Pie Society,

For your unflagging cheerleading, support, and stream of small town Southern gossip. You are an inspiration.

With love,

Kait

Acknowledgments

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Love and thanks to you all!

Chapter 1

There was no escaping now.

As the steady click of sensible heels on asphalt grew ever closer, Campbell Crawford shut his eyes and repressed a curse. Where the hell had she come from?

To give himself another few moments to arrange his face into something resembling polite civility, Cam ducked back into his truck.

“Mr. Crawford, I need a word.” Agnes Crockett used the same stern tone she used to call his name when she’d taught trigonometry back in high school.

Resisting the urge to hunch his shoulders, Cam tucked a cardboard tube of landscaping blueprints under his arm and turned to face her. “Yes, Mrs. Crockett. What can I do for you?”

Mrs. Crockett peered up at him from beneath her umbrella, a bright floral affair completely at odds with her no-nonsense demeanor. “I have a matter that needs to be brought up at the next City Council meeting. It’s about that stoplight at Market and Spring Street.”

Not again. If he had a nickel for every time somebody griped about that stoplight, he could buy a round of drinks for everybody waiting inside the Mudcat Tavern.

“The city needs to fix the sensor. Cross traffic from Market Street gets stuck entirely too long, when nobody’s even coming the other direction. Why, I sat there for a full *five minutes* today without a soul passing by on Spring Street, and I was late to Bitsy Elliott’s daughter’s baby shower. When is that sensor going to get fixed?”

Cam privately thought that, given the state of the city coffers, it would be more likely the stoplight would be entirely decommissioned and they’d go back to the four-way stop, but that wasn’t something he was about to share with this particular constituent. “I certainly understand your concern, Mrs. Crockett. Now we talked about this the last time—”

“You said I had to fill out this form.” She dug around in her purse and came up with a sheet of paper that she thrust at him. “I want that traffic light fixed.”

Cam took the paper. She’d filled in the blanks by hand, her slanted scrawl covering most of the page. He bit back a sigh and refrained from mentioning that it was a web form she was supposed to submit online. “Ah, yes, ma’am. I’ll see that it’s put on the agenda for our next City Council meeting.”

“See that you do. I’ve been put off for the *last time*, young man.”

Aware that his shoulders had hunched up by his ears, Cam forced them down. “Yes, ma’am. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go meet a client.” He tapped the blueprint tube and softened the diplomatic brushoff with a smile. “You have a good evenin’, now.”

He called the escape good when he made it to the door of the Mudcat without pursuit or an order to detention.

Somebody had Garth Brooks playing on the jukebox. The hot fiddle licks of “Callin’ Baton Rouge” were punctuated by the crack of billiard balls from the far side of the bar. Christmas lights still twinkled around the perimeter, as they probably would until Valentine’s Day or Easter. Cam felt some of the stress of the day leech out as he crossed to the high-top table in the corner, where his cousin, Miranda, was already taking a pull on a Sam Adams.

“You’re late.” She set down the bottle. “Had a real pisser of a day at the clinic, so I

started without you. Two days after Christmas and there's already an outbreak of flu. And *not* the strain they were predicting when they formulated the flu shot this year. You have a client meeting?"

Cam laid the blueprint tube in another chair. "No, this was just cover. Got ambushed by Mrs. Crockett in the parking lot."

"The stoplight again?"

He cocked thumb and forefinger at her. "Got it in one. I'm late because I was working on mixing potting soil today, and I figured you'd appreciate me showering and changing first so as not to smell like manure."

Miranda leaned over and gave an exaggerated sniff as he shrugged out of his wet coat. "Much obliged then, cuz." She settled back in her chair. "Did you hear about Travis Hugget?"

"What about him?"

"Remember he's been dating that girl from college—Gwen something or other—long distance for more than a year, since she took that job in New York? Apparently, right before Christmas, he went up there to her fancy Wall Street office and proposed, right as the entire company was coming out of a staff meeting."

Poor bastard. He had plenty of reason to know that was a disaster waiting to happen.

"Not only did Gwen say yes, she quit her job right then and there, and they eloped."

Cam swiped Miranda's beer and tipped it back to wash the sour taste of envy from his mouth as he revised his opinion. *Lucky bastard.* "Good for them."

Aware of his cousin's *I shouldn't have said that* expression and sensing an imminent and entirely unnecessary apology, Cam wiped the scowl from his face. Christ, when was his family going to stop pussy footing around it?

Miranda's phone rang and she glanced at the screen. "It's Norah. I need to take this. Go get yourself a beer and bring me another since you polished mine off. And put in an order of cheese sticks while you're up there. I'm starving."

"Your wish." He saluted and headed for the bar, sending a silent thank you to Miranda's old college roommate for the distraction.

Adele Daly, the opinionated owner of the Mudcat, worked the taps as she chatted with Abe Costello about Ole Miss's chance at making it to the Final Four.

"I'm tellin' you, if they can just take out Emory, they've got a shot," Abe insisted.

Adele slid a glass of IPA down the bar into a waiting hand. "My money's on State. They've been burning up the courts this season."

Easing between two stools, Cam propped himself on an elbow and nodded a hello to Abe. "Adele, would you be so kind as to get me a Killian's and put in an order for cheese sticks and another Sam Adams for Miranda?"

"You want a bottle or tap? Keg's fresh."

"Tap then. And better add some chili cheese fries to that order. Miranda doesn't strike me as being in a sharing mood tonight."

"You got it, sugar pie."

Cam lounged back against the bar and took note of the glass of scotch Abe was nursing. "Are we celebrating or commiserating?"

"Little bit of both. I got an offer on my land."

"That acreage over by Hope Springs?"

"Yep."

Cam straightened in surprise. Abe was a local man, born and raised in Wishful. That land

parcel had been in his family for generations. “You’re selling?”

“Thinkin’ ’bout it. It’s a damned good offer. Well above market value.” He sipped the scotch and grimaced, more a testament to the situation than the drink.

“Who?”

“Nobody local.”

Cam had figured that. Nobody local had that kind of money to throw around. In the wake of the plant closing, a lot of people didn’t have any money at all. Heirloom Home Furnishings had been the primary employer in town. When they’d opted to move their operations to Mexico eight months ago, it had gutted the town’s economy. That was just the latest blow in a long line of economic downturns over the last few decades. Their population was shrinking as more and more good people were forced to go elsewhere to support their families.

“But you can’t sell. That land’s part of your family history. Part of Wishful’s history.”

“History don’t pay the bills, son.”

It was an unfortunately familiar story. Loss of workforce and population also meant loss of business. Abe’s farm supply company took a hit when Cam bought the nursery five years ago. Cam had a wider variety and better stock, and with local propagation, he was able to offer better prices than the other man. But nursery and garden stock wasn’t Abe’s bread and butter. If the farm supply was suffering, this was the first Cam had heard about it.

Adele set Cam’s beer on the bar. “It’s too bad the city can’t make an offer on that parcel. Be nice to make a formal park out there by the springs. Like that plan you drew up. It’d be a great addition to the town.”

Cam’s mind started to spin. “Who’s brokering the sale?”

“Sally Forester on my side. Other folks got an attorney from out of town.”

“Hold off on making any final decisions, Abe. If anybody’s gonna buy that property, the city ought to have first crack at it.”

Abe grunted in acknowledgment, but it was a hollow victory. Buying more land was only one of many things the city couldn’t afford to do. The truth was, the town he loved was dying, and Cam didn’t know how much longer they could limp along as they were. What they needed was a miracle, and despite the holiday season, those were in pretty short supply.

~*~

“And how is my sister from another mister?” Miranda’s voice rolled out of the car speakers, a welcome breath of the South that made Norah Burke ache with homesickness.

“Tired. It’s a long drive back from New York.”

“Why on earth didn’t you fly?”

“Because nobody’s invented a teleporter yet. Flying would take just as long, and I’d be one of a hundred other irritable sardines, who want to be home already. At least on the road it’s quiet.”

“You totally live in the wrong city for quiet. Are you home yet?”

“Got a couple more hours. But I’m about to break it up a bit and make a stop in your honor.”

“Off I-90? Oh my God, are you in Morton? You’re going to Have Your Cake, aren’t you?”

Norah laughed at the mix of accusation and longing in her friend’s tone. “Guilty.”

The stretch of road immediately off the interstate had mushroomed in the past three years with the usual contingent of fast food restaurants, gas stations, and a couple of chain hotels. Pleased at the evidence of growth, Norah bypassed them all, following the signs for downtown

and sending up a silent prayer that Have Your Cake would be open until six.

“Best road trip discovery *ever*. I love their caramel cake. The perfect marriage of salty and sweet, with four layers of lovely, moist cake... What made you decide to stop?”

“I was missing you.” It was the truth, even if it didn’t touch on all the whys. “How is everybody?”

As she navigated through town, Norah listened to her friend’s account of this year’s holiday hijinks. It was almost like listening to the summary of a Hallmark Channel movie, for all she could relate to to Miranda’s sprawling family, with aunts, uncles, and cousins galore. They were as close to normal as Norah ever got.

“—oh, and the boys had a poker tournament to decide who got the last slice of Grammy’s chocolate pie.”

Amusement and envy warred. Grammy’s chocolate pie was a thing of legend. “Who won?”

“Reed, who was totally the dark horse in that race. Everybody assumed Mitch would win because he always does. He said to tell you hello, by the way.”

“Tell him hi back and ask him when he’s coming to Chicago again for another architectural convention.”

“I still can’t believe you went on a date with my brother.”

“It wasn’t a date. It was a pity tour of the city, since you didn’t warn him you wouldn’t actually be able to leave the hospital to see him.”

“That’s why they call it residency. And anyway that’s not the way *he* tells that story.”

“Then Mitch is a liar liar pants on fire.”

“Why don’t you come down here and tell him that yourself? You keep promising to visit.”

“I know, I know,” Norah groaned. “It’s been way too long. But work’s been *crazy*. I had a hard enough time getting off to go to New York for the holiday. I can’t possibly ask off again so soon. Maybe closer to summer.”

“Summer? You *do* remember what Mississippi is like in the summer?”

“Honey, given the winter we’ve been having, I’d relish the chance to wear some short shorts and a tank top instead of a winter coat that makes me look like the Michelin Man.”

“I’ll remind you of that when you come and do your impression of the Wicked Witch of the West. How did Christmas go on your end? Was Rockefeller Center fabulous? I’m getting my vicarious white Christmas fix through you.”

“It was gorgeous. The Plaza was amazing, and midnight mass at Saint Thomas was simply beautiful. Christmas in Manhattan is definitely a unique experience.” And she’d have traded it all for one zany family dinner with the Campbells.

“Did your dad manage to refrain from harping on you about going back to law school?”

“Actually, he’s dating somebody. Some high-powered exec who looks like Hollywood’s idea of Wall Street. They went to Saint Bart’s, so it was just me and Mom. *She* got called in to emergency surgery, so I spent my holiday blessedly harp-free.”

Miranda didn’t buy her breezy, no-big-deal tone for a moment. “Wait, so you were *alone* for Christmas?”

Sensing the edge of a blistering rant, Norah felt compelled to head Miranda off. “Not all of it. Between surgeries, Mom and I had a blast shopping for Operation Santa Claus, and she got out of surgery in time for a late Christmas dinner.”

“That’s awful.”

Norah bit back a sigh as she turned onto Main Street. Miranda's outrage on her behalf was well-intentioned, even if it solved exactly nothing. "Well, it was certainly better than if Dad had tried to include Lillian. We're a weirdly civilized modern family, but I don't think we're *that* civilized. Besides, it gave me some quiet time to catch up on this radical thing called reading for pleasure."

"You should've come here. You know you're always welcome."

Norah knew they'd fold her into the flock. It was part of the Campbells' charm. But there were a hundred reasons keeping her from following through on the invite Miranda made every year. "And I appreciate the offer. Now I'm going to let you go because I'm pretty sure I drove past Have Your Cake while I was running my mouth."

"Buy two pieces and have one in my name."

"And will those calories vicariously travel to *your* hips?" Norah circled the block for another pass.

"They will in spirit."

"Give your family my best."

"Love you."

"Love you back. Talk soon."

Norah didn't have to hunt for parking. But for a handful of cars, downtown Morton was deserted. She got out and climbed over the mounds of dirty snow to the sidewalk and took a good look around. No sign of Have Your Cake. Thinking she parked on the wrong block, she began to walk.

Maybe they're still on shortened holiday hours. Not what she'd have recommended to business owners in the wake of the holiday. They should've been taking advantage of post-Christmas shoppers with gift certificates and Christmas money.

A shop window across the street had *Going Out of Business* painted across the glass. The sign above the awning indicated it had been a florist. Even with the poor economy and reduced discretionary income, a florist should have been able to make it through the Christmas season. In another window on her side, she saw a For Rent sign. A lone, headless mannequin stood inside, one arm lifted like it was waving goodbye. One empty retail space she could dismiss, but two? That didn't fit with her expectations.

Three years ago, she'd been brought in as the voice of the marketing team that convinced the town of Morton that Hugo's ValuCenter would be a partner to the community, a harbinger of new economic growth. She'd seen their multi-phase plan for sustainable community development, had been the one to sell city leaders on the concept. So why was everything closed?

The next couple of spaces were occupied by a law office and an accountant. But the space after that had a discreet For Sale sign and the name of a local real estate company. Cold fingers walked down her spine as Norah looked into every window on the entire three block stretch.

Based on the community development plan, downtown Morton should've been a bustling retail corridor, full of local vendors and craftspeople. Exactly what it had been, at the heart, when she and Miranda had discovered the place years ago, but bigger. And yet more than seventy percent of the retail space sat empty. It was such a far cry from the bustling, quirky town she remembered, she half wondered if she'd come to the wrong place.

"What the hell happened here?"

One business still had active clientele at this hour. Crossing the street, Norah stepped

inside the Five O'Clock Shadow. The bar was dim and quiet. A few people looked up when she came in, then went back to their drinks. Their low murmurs of conversation barely competed with the classic rock playing over the speakers. She noted a handful of suits and some business casual attire, suggesting that this was probably a hang out for the office workers and city government employees who worked further down the street.

Loosening her scarf, Norah crossed to the bar, where a mustached man was drying glasses.

“What can I getcha?”

She slid onto a stool. “Directions, I hope. I’m from out of town, and it’s been a few years since I came through here. I was hoping you could tell me where Have Your Cake moved to.”

“Didn’t move. Closed along with just about everything else down here.”

She’d been afraid of that. “What happened?”

“Same as happened lots of other places. We got a Hugo’s ValuCenter.”

Norah swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “I’d heard that they were in to being partners with the community.”

The bartender snorted. “They’re like any other politicians. Telling people exactly what they want to hear to get in, then going back on their word. Within six months of opening for business, they added an in-house florist, a bakery, a butcher, on top of all the other products they already carried. They undercut local prices, all in the name of *value*.” The word rolled off his tongue like something foul. “Local businesses couldn’t compete. Those of us still standing are the ones who aren’t in direct competition. Everybody else ...*poof*.”

Numb, Norah thanked the bartender for his time and headed back to her car. Her stomach roiled.

Hugo’s had done exactly what she’d promised the town they wouldn’t do. She’d *seen* the proposal, *seen* the plans to integrate, not overtake the community. Was there a statute of limitations clause she’d missed? Had they performed some kind of bait and switch with the final contracts? Had her partner failed to do proper due diligence on the company? She had, in effect, lied to the townspeople. Used all her skill in persuasion to talk them into something that had decimated the character of the town.

How did this happen? Where did I screw up?

She didn’t know. But as soon as she got to the office in the morning, she was going to find out.

Chapter 2

Standing shoulder to shoulder with her intern, Norah surveyed the mountains of folders spread across the conference table.

Cecily took a bracing breath. “This calls for ordering in. Do we want Chinese, Indian, or Greek?”

“None of the above. You are going home like the good little, not-excessively-overworked intern you’re supposed to be.”

“But I can help.”

Aw, she’s like your mini-me, Norah’s conscience cooed. *The earnest, good-hearted workaholic. Encourage that so y’all can have no life together.*

“It’s not about can, it’s about should. And you *should* have a life after work. Now go ahead and scoot or you’re going to miss your TaeBo class.”

“You did not just tell me to scoot. You’ve been talking to your Mississippi friend again.”

Norah just arched a brow.

“Fine, fine. But I’ll be here bright and early tomorrow. I’ve got some concepts kicking around in my head for the Rembrandt job.”

“I look forward to hearing them. To. Mor. Row.”

“Yes, boss.”

As Cecily walked out, Norah’s personal assistant walked in.

“Don’t even start with me, Christoff.”

“Not even back a day and you’re covered up. We aren’t *that* behind from the holiday.”

As he moved toward her desk, Norah automatically closed the files she’d pulled herself earlier in the day. No reason to alert anyone else to her inquiries until she decided what to do about them.

“I’m just trying to get ahead a bit so I can take New Year’s off.”

He collapsed gracefully into one of the visitor’s chairs and crossed his Ferragamo boots.

“Honey, we both know you’re going to bring your fabulous dress and get ready here, before you and Mr. Tall, Dark, and GQ show up fashionably late for whatever It Party is the place to be.”

“Just because it’s what we did last year...”

Christoff shut her up with a Look. He tapped the side of his nose. “I am wise to your ways, milady. You shouldn’t be hitting the ground running this hard until after the first of the year.”

Norah sighed. “I have my reasons. Now go ahead and get out of here. I mean it. Out of the office.”

He crossed his arms. “I don’t like abandoning you while you’re drowning.”

“I am not drowning. Go home and watch your DVR backlog of Project Runway. All this will still be here tomorrow.”

“Only if you *promise* you’re not going to work half the night. I’m calling up here in an hour to make sure you’ve left.”

“Fair enough. I promise.”

He made an *I’m watching you* gesture with his fingers. “I’ll know if you just don’t pick

up.”

He probably would. Norah had long since stopped wondering how Christoff knew the things he knew. She plastered on an indulgent smile and made shooing motions until he walked out of her office.

As soon as the door shut, Norah wilted, letting go of the *Everything's Okay* facade she'd been using all day. Everything was most definitely *not* okay. Rising, she crossed to the window of her office, staring out at the twinkling lights of the Chicago skyline. She'd worked her ass off for Helios Creative to earn that view, done good work. Exceptional work. She was tenacious and she was thorough. The harder the sell, the more determined she became, rallying to the challenge like a heavyweight going into a title fight. Her honeyed eloquence had produced the highest success rate of anyone in the firm, save her boss, and she'd rocketed through the ranks to Vice President of Sales, getting dubbed The Closer. Together, she and Pierce Vargas were an absolute marketing dream team. Everybody said so.

But what was the price? How many lives had she destroyed in her pursuit of success?

The door behind her opened, but she didn't turn.

“Finally took the lock off, huh? I was starting to wonder if you were avoiding me.”

“I had a lot of work to do.” She watched Pierce cross the room in the reflection, dispassionately noting the artfully mussed hair, the tailored suit trousers that still held a crease even at this late hour. He always looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of a magazine ad. So did she. It was part and parcel of the job. Perfect. Polished. Professional. As he slid his arms around her waist, they looked every bit the power couple.

Pierce dipped his head to press a kiss to her neck. “Welcome home, babe.”

Norah stiffened and stepped away, wishing viciously for a tumbler of scotch she could drain before hurling the glass at his head.

Not a stupid man, Pierce stayed put, angling his head to study her. “Something wrong?”

“How long have we been partners?”

“In bed or out?” He flashed a glib smile. “Did I miss an anniversary or something?”

When she didn't soften, he sobered. “We've been working together for a little over three years. Why?”

“I stopped in Morton on my trip back yesterday.”

“Where?”

“Morton, Indiana. Hugo's ValuCenter hired us to convince the town to let them build there. Y'all brought me in to do the pitch on behalf of the clients.”

“Okay. That was one of the first jobs we partnered on. So?”

“So the infrastructure of local businesses has been gutted. The downtown is all but dead because they completely violated their promise of non-competition in multiple areas. The promise I made the townspeople in good faith when I did the pitch.”

Pierce's expression softened and he crossed to her. “Is that what's got you upset? Sure it sucks for them, but you didn't do anything wrong. It's business, and if the town didn't get a non-compete clause ironclad in the legal stuff, that's on them. It happens. It still has nothing to do with you. You did your job. We both did.”

She spun away when he tried to pull her into his arms. “That's the problem.”

“I don't follow.”

Trembling with rage, Norah reached for the file on her desk, tossing it toward him. The contents spilled across the surface, onto the floor. Headlines jumped out in glaring black and white, damning Hugo's business practices, outing their impact on other small towns in other

parts of the country. A stack of bad publicity that proved the company had never meant a word of the promises she'd made on their behalf. Publicity she hadn't seen when they brought her in at the last minute to do the pitch on behalf of Hugo's.

"You knew. You were the one who did due diligence on this job. You knew before I ever made the presentation, and you didn't tell me."

Pierce eased a hip back on the credenza and crossed his arms. "You're right. I didn't tell you."

"Why?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't do the job if you were aware of the company's...shall we say, checked past."

"Of *course* I wouldn't have done it. It's an ethics violation, Pierce! We—or, at least, you—were aware that this company could seriously damage that community, and you said *nothing*."

He shrugged. "It was a huge account, and the firm couldn't afford to lose it over your moral compass. So I gave you an edited version of the company's plans. It worked. The client was happy. And you were well on your way to this corner office. End of story."

"You *manipulated me*."

"Norah, you're really blowing this out of proportion—"

"Am I? Am I really? How often did you do this? How many times have you fed me a *revised* version of the truth and sent me in to *lie to people*?" She knew her voice was rising and struggled to find some control.

"Hey now, what is going on in here?" Philip Vargas, founder and CEO of Helios stepped through the door. "I can hear you from down the hall."

Norah turned to face her boss. "Philip, I am sorry to inform you that your son has committed a serious ethics violation. At least once, perhaps more, in the name of profit. And he dragged me in as an unwitting accomplice."

Philip gave an exaggerated sigh. "This is why we didn't tell you. You're our best closer. We couldn't have your over-developed conscience getting in the way."

She gaped at him. "*We*? You knew?"

"Of course, I knew. I know everything that goes on in my company. I know what assets I have and how best to use them."

Use. The word rang in her head. She was an asset. Never before had that word made her feel cheap.

Philip continued, "You happen to have an element of southern charm to go along with that keen mind. Clients eat it up. You do your job and you do it damned well. We just keep you informed about what you need to know to get the job done without you having hysterics over things like truth, justice, and the American way." The derision in his tone felt like acid.

With a dawning horror, Norah realized that neither Philip, nor Pierce, nor the company she'd devoted her life to for the last six years were who she thought they were. She was the only one in the room with an ounce of integrity. She squared her shoulders. "I won't be party to that kind of manipulation again."

Philip shrugged in a gesture so redolent of Pierce only minutes before, Norah felt her head spin. "Fine. You're fired."

Norah's mouth dropped open.

"For every award you've won in this company's name, there are dozens of hungry young neophytes dying for your job. You're replaceable. And if you bother spreading this little story,

you can be sure I'll blackball you. You won't ever work in this business again. Think about that while you're standing in line for unemployment."

She looked to Pierce, but he said nothing, looking disgusted by her behavior. A year and a half wasted on a man who couldn't be bothered to defend her. "We're through."

"Oh, I think that's been made abundantly clear."

Philip stepped out and called for the security guard. "Please escort Miss Burke from the building and take her keys once she's gathered her things. C'mon, son. I'll buy you a drink."

Norah was still staring at the door minutes after they walked out. Daryl, the security guard, stood awkwardly beside her desk as she piled her personal effects into a box. Riding on temper and righteous outrage as he escorted her to the elevator like some kind of criminal, Norah was grateful no one was left working late to bear witness to her humiliation.

Daryl didn't quite meet her eyes as the elevator doors opened at the parking garage. "I'm sorry about this ma'am, but it's company policy."

"Not your fault."

Fury carried her through traffic. Indignation had her deliberately taking the stairs up to her fourth floor apartment so she could burn off some of the excess energy. Not until she locked the door to her apartment and dumped the box on the kitchen table did anything else filter past that initial reaction shock and outrage.

Shaking, Norah sank into a chair and buried her head in her hands.

"What have I done?"

~*~

Cam really should've been working on year-end reports. It would save him time come tax season. Unfortunately, he much preferred mucking around in the dirt to the spreadsheets that tracked the income and expenses of his business. But since it was the dead of winter, that mostly meant mucking around in virtual dirt, except when he was in his greenhouses. Cam clicked his mouse and dragged to adjust the fence line on the park he wanted to build on Abe's land out at Hope Springs. He'd been fiddling with this design for the better part of four years, mostly for fun, but with a thread of pipe dream in the back of his mind. It had begun as a distraction for his mom while she was in chemo, and he'd made idiotic deals with God that if she made it through, he'd find a way to make it a reality.

Sandra had not only survived, she'd gotten re-elected mayor—a post she'd left for only a six-month hiatus during the worst of her treatments. Cam had taken that as a sign from the Universe that it was time to move forward with the park. His first year as a Councilman had quickly put an end to that idea. But he couldn't seem to let it go in the wake of Abe's announcement.

A murmur of voices preceded the unceremonious opening of his office door by his nursery manager, Violet. "See there, told you he wasn't really workin'."

Cam rose as his mother stepped inside.

"Hey baby. Sorry to interrupt."

He managed, just barely, to stop himself from asking if everything was okay. She was tired of the worry, tired of the solicitude, and just wanted life to get back to normal. "You're not interrupting a thing." He slid his arms carefully around her, thinking she still felt too fragile in his embrace.

"I'll just leave you two to it. Cam, I'm flipping the sign."

He let his mother go. "See you tomorrow, Vi."

Sandra peered, unabashed, at his monitor. "The park at the springs? What's got you

looking at this again?"

"Did you know Abe's looking at selling his land out there?"

His mother eased into the chair on the other side of the desk. "No, I hadn't heard that."

Cam told her what he'd heard at the Mudcat the other night. "Any idea who the potential buyer might be?"

"Not a one. Do you think he's serious?"

"Seems like. I told him to hold off on making any final decisions."

Sandra looked at the screen then back at him. "You want the city to buy it?"

"That's not news." Before she could say it, he said it himself. "I know the city can't afford it. But he can't sell that land, Mom. It can't change. It's too important to the history of the town. The springs are its heart."

Sandra gave him a look of affectionate forbearance. "The heart of this town is its people."

"And we're losing them left and right." How many families had picked up and left in the last six months? "Everything's changing and I don't know how to stop it."

She rose and came around the desk to frame his face in her hands. "Oh my baby, you've never dealt well with change. That's probably my fault. I did everything I could to keep things the same for you after your dad left."

"You aren't to blame for anything that happened after that." God knew she'd done the best she could, and that was a damned sight better than plenty of people had with two parents.

"Be that as it may, the fact is that life is change. You either adapt and survive or you stagnate and die. I know you love Wishful exactly as it is, and you want to preserve it. That's admirable and is part of what endears you to many of your constituents. But if we're going to make it in today's world, we may have to do some things for our town that we won't necessarily like. We need jobs to keep the people. Without them, we have no town."

Something in her tone put him on edge. "Is there something you're not telling me? Some new development?"

Sandra lifted her hands for peace. "I don't know anything yet. Vick's making noises about having some potentially interesting news by the next City Council meeting."

Cam scowled. City Planner Victor Burgess was as close as he had to a nemesis. Cam felt like he spent more than half his time and energy as a City Councilman trying to block whatever cock-eyed scheme Burgess came up with, in order to keep Wishful from turning into yet another soulless, cookie cutter suburbia. "God forbid the man actually spend some time thinking about what's truly *good* for this community."

"Now son, that's not fair. Vick does think he's doing what's best for Wishful. It just happens you two don't see eye to eye on what that actually is."

"And we never will."

"Campbell, our town is in trouble. Whatever it is he's got up his sleeve, I want you to give it a fair chance. Promise to at least hear him out."

Cam managed not to grind his teeth. "Yes, ma'am."

He understood that Wishful needed help. It needed jobs and an influx of serious cash into the economy. But he couldn't help hoping that there was some other way than courting the big industries that would come in and change the entire tone of the town.

"That's enough about that. No reason to borrow trouble before we absolutely have to. Are you about done here?"

"I ought to be working on year end reports but, as Violet pointed out, I'm not. You wanna go grab some dinner? We can be completely decadent and hit up Tosca. Ask for extra cheese on

everything and tiramisu for dessert.” Cam laid a hand over hers. “You deserve to splurge. You’re still not back to fighting weight.”

Sandra turned her palm up and squeezed his fingers. “It’s been eighteen months, baby. I’m fine.”

Eighteen months, two weeks, three days since the chemotherapy was pronounced a success. Cam wondered if he’d ever stop counting the days. Probably not, if only to give thanks for each additional one.

“Anyway, I can’t. I’m going over to help Molly put together a welcome home party for Liam.” She tugged her hand away and picked up her purse.

“Welcome home?”

“He’s leaving the service and coming home to Wishful.”

The eldest of four, Liam Montgomery and his two brothers had been in the Marines almost as long as Cam could remember. “Wow. I know she’s thrilled. Anything I can do to help?” *Please say no.* All he really wanted at this point was to get on home. But if they needed anything, he’d suck it up and deal.

“Not right now, but I’ll let you know. The party’s at Speakeasy day after tomorrow.”

Translation: *Your presence is expected.*

Cam held in a sigh. Yet another social engagement he couldn’t dodge. At this rate he was earning some serious cave time. He rose to escort her out to her car. “I’ll be sure to make some time to stop by and welcome him home.”

Sandra rose to her toes to kiss his cheek. “Go home and enjoy your quiet, darlin’. I know you’re always worn out by all the social of the holidays, and Miranda’s going to expect you at her New Year’s Eve party.”

He groaned. “Why do I need to be there? The world is going to be there.”

She patted his cheek. “Because you are *not* spending another year at home *alone* with your dog. You need to be out with other young people having a good time. And you will go because she’s family and it will make her happy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sometimes family obligations were a real bitch.

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