



Love Grows

Author: *K.J. Wrights*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Angel Whitlock, owner of Dig It nursery, knows three things. She knows everything about native Australian plants, she knows that her friends will always have her back, and now she knows that she needs to post a 'position vacant' sign when Kahlia goes on early maternity leave.

Steph Thatcher applies for the position, and while she's got a great reference, her background is somewhat sketchy. Angel has always thought of herself as a good judge of character and Steph feels like a good person. A hot, very pretty, good person.

When the local council decides to rezone the adjacent land and allow Walker's Industries to build an enormous lifestyle warehouse at the end of the road, Dig It, Coffee and Crystals, Mrs G's fish and chips, and Ted's Used Books band together to fight the decision.

Meanwhile, Angel and Steph can't help their growing attraction, but, when they decide to act on it, all manner of secrets are revealed.

Can Angel's nursery and the other businesses tough it out against a company set on destroying their very existence? And can Angel's heart survive Steph Thatcher?

A feel good story about the power of community, plants, Tarot and friendship. And love.

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Chapter One

Coast Banksia

(banksia integrifoli)

Generally a large coastal tree but does adapt well when cultivated as a Bonsai. The large leaves will resize by about two-thirds and become very compact and dense. The bark becomes fissured with age and may sound hollow when tapped.

“O h, you have got to be shitting me!” I threw the council notice at the replanting table, and stared forlornly as the paper settled onto the loose potting mix.

“What?” Lucas, the high school kid who worked on Thursday afternoons and Saturdays at Dig It, paused, then held up his hands which were encased in gloves two sizes too big so he looked like a muppet.

“There’s a Walker’s being built down the road,” I ground out, pointing aggressively at the unfolded letter.

Lucas gasped. “But they can’t!”

“Ha! Try telling that to Walker’s. They’re a bloody noxious weed.” I plucked up the paper and read aloud the relevant points. “Blah blah Walker’s Lifestyle Warehouse comprising nursery, trade, hardware, and home appliances.” I paused, then restarted. “Blah blah thirty days to lodge a complaint with the council blah blah ninety days if lodging a joint complaint on behalf of more than one business. Please contact blah

blah Jesus Christ.” I looked up.

“I’m not sure he’s the bloke to chat to.” The dry response from Kahlia produced a withering look.

“Ha bloody ha. This is serious. A Walker’s nursery could wipe us out.”

Kahlia rolled her wheelchair closer to the potting bench, now repurposed as a conference table for our spontaneous board meeting. “You’ve got the complaint letter already drafted in your head, haven’t you?”

I nodded, then leant down to scratch Tough, our work dog—a rescue dog of the white and grey scruffy fur variety—on the head. He wagged his tail, which should have made me smile, but even his efforts couldn’t resolve my despair.

Kahlia grinned. “How many swear words does it have?”

“Many. It starts, ‘Dear Council of Fuckwits, don’t destroy my nursery. Signed Angel Whitlock.’”

Lucas snorted, his long blonde hair flopping about his face, and removed his enormous gloves. “Down the road where?”

I shook off the remaining dusting of dirt.

“Straight across the highway by my estimation. The council’s helpfully provided an unnecessarily complex schematic map of its location, but...” I squinted at the paper. “Yep, looks like it’s right across the highway.” Then I sighed. Right across the highway if you walked a hundred metres down to the corner where our road came to an abrupt stop at a ‘T’ intersection with that very busy four-lane highway. There was a very real possibility that customers would drive into an airport-sized Walker’s

Lifestyle Warehouse carpark to purchase their next Grevillia or eucalyptus seedlings rather than pop into my boutique nursery. Dig It would be digging itself out of a financial hole. Then I blinked.

“It’s right on the highway.”

Lucas shrugged. “You said.” He picked up Tough and tucked him under one arm like he was carrying a football, which was essentially what Tough resembled.

“No, Listen!” I flapped the letter at him, then waved it at Kahlia. “We really, really have to put in a complaint. That land is still semi-commercial. They can’t put the warehouse there because a Walker’s Lifestyle Warehouse is fully commercial. The zones don’t work.”

“Unless the council is rezoning.” Kahlia leant back in her wheelchair and arched her spine, then rolled her head on her neck. “I have got to get another massage soon.”

I grimaced in sympathy. According to Kahlia, now six and a half months along, pregnancy and a wheelchair were often incompatible. Then I flicked my finger, taking in both members of my attentive audience.

“They haven’t rezoned yet. They’re just announcing it like they have. Or will. Or are going to wait until the cheque from Walker’s clears because surely they’d have to be paying them under the table.” I squeezed the letter until a concertina-ed end stuck out on either side of my fist like a bad news bon bon. “I need to chat to the others.”

The others were Jules, who owned Coffee Crystals next door, which was a cafe that made money to support the lack of customers for her crystals, gems and the once-a-week Tarot readings given by Jules’ partner, Pip.

Then there was seventy-five year old Ted, whose entire life was his pre-loved books

shop, Ted's Used Books . Pushing through the door—the little bell at the top announcing your entrance—and stepping inside was like travelling back to the 1920s or so. Ted had ladders on wheels, overflowing bookshelves, a cataloguing system that made sense to Ted alone, and the musty smell created by years of literary love.

Mrs Georgopolis's fish and chip shop was on the other side of Ted's, and she was known far and wide for her triple-fried chips. After multiple rounds in the boiling oil, the chips were more grease and batter than actual potato, but that's what made them so delicious. She was also known to be a right old grump but it was all bark and no bite. She told Lucas to get a haircut last week because apparently he wouldn't find a girlfriend if he couldn't see anyone. Then she gave him an extra scoop of chips and two more potato scallops. Her age was a mystery, but Kahlia reckoned she was sixty. Tiny five-foot-four Mr Georgopolis, who manned the chiko rolls and Dagwood dogs fry station, wore a permanent smile that lifted his moustache into a joyful bow. He was utterly devoted to his loud, larger-than-life wife.

I'd need all of them onside if our objection was to be taken seriously. Ninety days. It was doable.

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As I had predicted, Mrs Georgopolis had many opinions about the rising cost of potatoes, Covid, the Australian Prime Minister, teenagers, and Walker's Lifestyle Warehouses.

"This they cannot do," she said loudly from behind the counter, pointing towards the end of the road with a pair of tongs so that little pieces of batter were scattered into the air. "That giant will block the sun. I not sell lifestyle but they might sell the fish and the chips, and not as good as here. Here the customers say we are the best."

I highly doubted that Walker's would have a side hustle selling overly-fried food in

the far corner next to the camping equipment, but I needed Mrs Georgopolis to be completely invested in our legal battle.

“They might not, Mrs G, but they could take customers away because they’ll finish their shopping at Walker’s then go through the Macca’s drive through further down the highway. It’ll have an impact,” I said, drawing circles with my finger in the salt on the formica bench. The fish and chip shop really was the poster child for the health and hygiene department regulations, because the aluminium splash backs and floor tiles gleamed. Mr G cleaned constantly, while his wife dealt with the proliferation of customers. This was an establishment that was loved, even with the salt snow on various horizontal surfaces. “And the builders doing the reno on those heritage houses two blocks away might duck across the road.” I tilted my head in sadness.

“Parking.” Mr G’s soft voice cut through the silence, and both Mrs G and I turned. “The parking at new warehouse is free and here it is the meter. People save their money.” He nodded, smiled, and returned to unpacking frozen pieces of whiting.

My mouth turned down. He was right. That was another point in Walker’s favour and I didn’t want too many points on that side of our battle.

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Jules had pinned her council notice to the board behind the enormous espresso machine, and was glaring at it when I walked in.

“Have you seen this?” Jules jabbed at the air near the board, making the side ponytail of brown hair on the left side of head flick about. The right side of her head was shaved with a zig zag pattern shaved closer to the skin. It was all very cool and totally Jules.

“Yeah. It’s what I’ve come to chat about. We get ninety days if we all band together

to lodge a complaint. Are you in?” I raised my eyebrows questioningly, then grinned. “Also, any chance of a medium flat white?”

“Sure, and yes to being in on the complaint.” She fiddled around with a customer’s order, snapped the lid on the cup, and shouted, “Small skinny latte for Stellar!”

I turned, stifling a smile. It took only a few seconds for a woman to look about at the various tables, then slowly leave her seat, and make her way to the counter.

“Is that order for Skylah?” she asked tentatively. Her face was a constellation of confusion.

Jules delivered a beaming smile. “Yep. That’s you.”

“But...” The woman took the cup. “Um...thanks.” She gave a wry smile, shook her head, then wandered away to sit with her friends amongst the cascades of crystals and spiritual artefacts overflowing into the seating area, effectively blending the two spaces into one.

Jules had sourced, from various locations, couches that crouched next to low coffee tables, Pip’s Tarot card reading chair and table arrangement in the corner, and mismatched seats snuggled up to circular or square tables near the counter. It was warm, inviting, and I had occasionally taken advantage of the space to bringing a book from the dust-gathering pile next to my bed, and curl up in one of the armchairs for my lunch break.

I chuckled, watching the confused customer. Jules had seen an episode of some TV show where Starbucks customers in America were constantly either having their name written incorrectly or replaced with an entirely different name on their takeaway cup. Since there wasn’t a Starbucks in Melbourne, Jules had decided to give her customers the American experience. The new names were always nice and

friendly and, oddly enough, a lot of people loved it, turning up from adjacent suburbs just to respond to a disembowelled version of their own name, or their pseudonym, yelled across the space. They turned up for the coffee as well. Jules' coffee was exceptional.

"So, do we need a lawyer or something for the complaint?" Jules wiped down the counter with a tea-towel, then tended to my order.

I hummed in thought. "I'll say yes, because we'll need to make sure the council takes us seriously."

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"Oh, lass. I did wonder when that great Martian landscape would be filled with industry. It looks like it will be sooner rather than later." Ted pushed his glasses higher up his nose, stepped carefully off the bottom rung of the rolling ladder, then tilted his chin towards the back of the shop. "Do you have time for a cuppa?"

"Sounds lovely. Thanks." I followed behind, enjoying the gentle squeaks and creaks of aged floorboards. A box of 1990s National Geographic magazines perched on the little ottoman footstool, so I picked it up and placed it on the ground beside the stool then sat, watching Ted putter about with the box of teabags, sugar, and the electric kettle.

"We'll be the 'overcoming the monster' archetype," he said, a quick smile on his lips which sent wrinkles scurrying up his cheeks to land beside his blue eyes.

I grinned. "Knew you'd find an analogy."

"Can't help it, love. It's in my pores." Ted passed over a mug of strong tea, then sat carefully on the armchair. "Now, joining in your council complaint sounds grand, but

I'm not sure I've got it in me to fight that fight." Before I could respond, he lifted a finger to point at the ceiling. "But because we're raising an army and with your dependable leadership, lass, I think we'll make just enough noise. So, yes. Count me in."

I wanted to hug him, but the dust from the books always tickled my nose and if I was in the process of embracing the man, then sneezed and squeezed, I'd put him in the orthopaedic ward at Royal Melbourne Hospital. So I went with a heartfelt, "Thank you."

"I know Walker's won't be selling books. Not much money in it, really. But it doesn't matter what they sell, love. It's what they represent. Here, all four of us are a community. It's the same with those three shops down the other end of Jameson Street. The news agency, the op-shop, and the chemist. They'll be affected, too. The product doesn't matter. I like to think that we actually see our customers. Customers don't dash in, grab an item or two, and dash out, without saying even a word to the shopkeeper. For some of our customers, even the young 'uns, we're a moment of connection. It was like that for my father when he ran the shop, and that's a good enough reason to sign on."

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I bounced on the balls of my feet as I entered the nursery, pausing to admire my archway of Australian native bushes at the entrance. The grevilleas, banksia and proteas were super choices and, with Lucas' help, they'd created an enticing portal into another world. Well, I liked to think so.

I resumed my bouncing. Everyone was on board and now we could go about the business of finding a lawyer who was thorough, could write frightening letters, and wasn't exorbitantly expensive. That last thought popped my happy balloon. Bugger. Where were we going to find a lawyer who'd do some cheap scary letter writing? I

would have to ask at the community advice centre to see if they knew some professionals who did pro bono work.

Spotting Kahlia in the tiny closet I hilariously referred to as an office, simply because it housed a laptop, a printer, and a filing cabinet, and could be locked via a flimsy hollow-core door, I strode over and delivered a double thumbs up at the entrance.

“Everyone’s on board for the petition letter,” I announced, then paused as I took in Kahlia’s pale complexion. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Angel, I’m going to have to take you up on that offer of early maternity leave. It’s getting impossible to do my job properly. I’ve been hiding it but I just can’t anymore. My blood pressure is through the roof and I can’t lift things like I should be able to.” Tears gathered at the corner of her eyes, and I rushed forward, dragging over the stool I’d made out of packing pallets last month.

I held her hand in both of my own.

“Hey. Hey. It’s fine. That’s why I offered it. I actually knew you’d been struggling and was going to mention it this week. I know the government workplace employee rights backwards and forwards and I’m supposed to offer you alternative work within the business.” I spread my arms out wide. “What alternative work is available? But even if I could offer anything, I’d pretend I couldn’t because I want you to access your maternity leave early. You get paid, I get an allowance from the government and a pat on the head, and my employee and friend is safe from commercial-grade bottles of ultra-enzymed tomato plant growth spray.”

Kahlia smiled.

I continued. “Then you come back when you’ve done your year at home after Sprout is born.”

Kahlia yanked a tissue from a nearby box. “Thanks, Angel,” she said wetly, dabbing her eyes. “It’s not just the physical stuff. Mum’s doing my head in, and I need to be at home just to save my sanity a bit. She needs to give me some space, and I know mental health is on the list of valid reasons to access early leave.”

“Of course it is.” I frowned. I didn’t facilitate a Saturday morning mental health group for no reason. Bonsai Brains was my initiative, something to be proud of, and helping kids find peace for an hour a week meant the world. I understood mental health.

“Yes, well, she’s been hovering over Derek and me. I mean, she’s been so supportive but she’s moved from support to strangulation. I can’t keep explaining to her that nappies can be changed on a lowered table and that Sprout won’t roll off. The only person who’ll be rolling around is me. But I feel really gaslit and I’m starting to doubt my ability to do this.” She patted her rounded abdomen. “Which might be adding to the high blood pressure.”

Tough, who was asleep under the chair, wriggled awake at the patting noise.

“Probably,” I agreed. “And that’s another reason to go on leave. Derek will be happier as well, because I know he’s been anxious. Your mum can get her stress feathers smoothed and maybe give you some space.”

I reached for the laptop where it sat on top of the filing cabinet, tabbed through various websites, found the government forms, sent them to the printer which sprang to life, and spat out the seemingly endless ream of paper.

“Done,” I said firmly, and Kahlia, after pulling me into a hug—the intensity of the squeeze probably indicating the level of relief—rolled off to see to the delivery of the banksia seedlings from the Yarra Valley.

Shit.

I always knew that finding a replacement for Kahlia was going to be necessary but it was much sooner than I'd planned. Tapping absently at the space next to the track pad, I eventually pulled up a blank document and began drafting a 'Staff Required' sign.

The potential staff member would need to be local. I gave a low hum of disagreement with that idea. Maybe not local, but Kahlia's replacement would need to be someone who understood the idea of a boutique nursery, community, and customers as actual people. So I wasn't going to place a link on SEEK dot com. A simple sign in the front window felt exactly right.

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Chapter Two

Bottlebrush

(callistemon)

Bottlebrushes dislike being overwatered – water only when the soil is dry at fingertip depth. A fertiliser designed for Australian natives should be applied in spring. Bottle brush tree care tends to be minimal. These plants are generally hardy and resistant to most diseases.

The mud cake was a supermarket special but Kahlia still cried as if it was a three-tiered farewell bonanza. I rubbed her arm.

“No need for tears. You’ll be back here before you know it. And with a baby attached!” I grinned. Kahlia wiped her cheeks and laughed.

“True. I’m a huge ball of excitement, anxiety, sadness, trepidation, and rampaging hormones. It’s a lot.” She gave an enormous sigh. “Derek is all the anxiety-laden words as well, but he’s been so amazing. He’s starting his twelve weeks paternity leave two weeks before little one here is due.” Kahlia patted her very round stomach.

Lucas shoved a large slice of cake into his mouth. His very valued presence at the tiny good luck party was due to his decision to skip the last lesson of the school day.

“I have science last lesson on Fridays,” he’d explained when he’d turned up earlier. “We’re doing plant cells at the moment, and I figure that by working here I’ve

absorbed enough chlorophyll to pass the end of term test.”

His excuse was laughable. There was cake for a valued colleague and friend, and he was a teenaged bottomless pit when it came to food. A match made in heaven. Tough trundled over, his legs almost too small for his round body, and was startled when confronted with a surreptitious piece of cake which Lucas waved in front of his nose. My dog was another bottomless pit, and while his teenage years were long gone as he was now ten years old, he could still put away a decent slice of caramel mud cake

Derek arrived to pick up Kahlia and received hugs all round. Then, after scoffing down his own slice, he gave in after we insisted that he and Kahlia take the remainder home. Lucas announced that he should be going as well, and so after I received another hug from Kahlia and Derek, and a fist bump from Lucas, I leant back against the front counter and sighed happily. I had a good team, but I really hoped I'd find another member of that good team soon.

“Excuse me?”

I lifted my head to find a rather attractive possibly-thirty-something woman standing in front of me, her blonde hair caught up in a low ponytail, wearing what had to be one-hundred dollar jeans. And heels. With a beautiful leather portfolio satchel. I blinked at the entire package. Well, hello .

Assuming the woman was a customer, I pushed off the counter and took a step forward to see if I could assist.

“Hi! How can I help?”

“Oh! I saw your ad in the window looking for another staff member and I'd like to apply if the position hasn't been filled?” The woman lifted the end of her sentence and her eyebrows at the same time, and the effect was rather lovely. “My name's

Stephanie—Steph Wa—Thatcher. Sorry. I should have led with that piece of information.” She gave an apologetic-sounding, kind of nervous quick laugh and stuck out her hand. I held her beautifully-manicured hand briefly in my own. A very classy person inquiring about a not so classy job, which was interesting. I was more curious about why she’d stuttered over her own name. Maybe recent name change due to divorce? I pushed my curiosity away. It really didn’t matter.

I sized her up. Slim, my height but maybe a touch taller.

“Hi, Steph. I’m glad I chose to go with the local ad-in-the-window yesterday because it has certainly brought quick results. I’m Angel Whitlock and the owner of this place, Dig It .” I swept my arm about. “So you’ve come to the source.” I grinned. “Let’s do a doorstep interview. Key points of the job and all that.” I pushed one of my wooden pallet creations towards her. “Here. Grab a stool.” We ended up like two chess players without a table, our knees nearly touching.

I held out three fingers. “Point one is that you dislike killing plants.”

Steph smiled, then smothered the smile with a soft bite on her bottom lip. She nodded seriously. “Got it.”

“Point two is that you have a sense of humour. Essential because plants aren’t funny and it’s boring using up your best lines on a eucalypt. People are much more responsive.”

Stephanie allowed her smile to bloom. It was friendly, rather genuine—I had a good radar for genuine smiles equalling genuine people. It boded well for the humour content in point number two.

“What’s point three?” she asked.

“I need someone who knows what they’re doing with native plants besides not killing them.”

Stephanie laughed softly, then pulled an A4 paper from her satchel. “Here’s my resume.”

I took it and scanned over the relevant details. Steph Thatcher. Thirty-two. Degree in Business. I raised an eyebrow at that. A degree in business was not plant-related unless Steph had worked on ensuring that kentia palms were installed in every office on her floor of the skyscraper she’d interned at. Then I noticed it: a reference from Kirk Monash.

“Kirk Monash,” I said nodding slowly. “Impressive. I know him just in passing, because he buys his natives at the same wholesaler as I do. His company is always featured in the top landscaping magazine.”

Steph beamed. “He’s a really nice guy. He helped me understand a lot when it comes to plants like these.” She tipped up her chin to encompass the entire space.

“All right, well, if Kirk says you’re all good when I chat to him later, then I reckon you’ve got the job.”

I studied her. “Point four, though. I’m a bit worried about...” I circled a finger at Steph’s heels and designer clothing. “Working in a nursery means dirt in odd places.”

Steph stared down at her feet. “I truly debated about the heels.” She grimaced at me.

I chuckled. “And not the squizzillion-dollar jeans and shirt?” Then I gestured at her clothes again. “I’m serious, though. People won’t trust you if you look like you’re pretending to be here for an ethnographic study.”

A look that resembled anxiety crossed Steph's face, and I figured she was either concerned about presenting an ethnography report or finding a new wardrobe.

“Don't worry too much. We wear aprons to ward off all nature attacks, but plain old jeans and a T-shirt or something is fine.” I pulled my phone out of the apron top pocket. “I'm going to give Kirk a ring if you don't mind me doing the reference check now.” I raised my eyebrows in question, and Steph beamed.

“That's absolutely fine. I'll hang out with the plants and reassure them that if I get the job, I'm contractually obliged not to let them die.”

We grinned at each other, which was rather nice in a weirdly flirty manner. I blinked then whirled around and hurried to my office, shut the door, sank heavily onto the chair, and dialled Kirk's number.

“Kirk Monash speaking.”

“Hi, Kirk. This is Angel Whitlock from Dig It.”

“Hi there! What can I do for you, Angel?”

“I have Steph Thatcher here applying for a job.”

“Steph Thatch—oh! Steph Thatcher. Right.”

I frowned. “Kirk, she's written you down as her referee.”

“Yeah, yeah, all good. Yeah, Steph's worked at quite a few of our jobs. Usually the high-end, crisp-and-clean landscaping, but she's really shown her love for natives. Steph's all about planting for sustainability to match the ecosystem that's present in the area.”

“Excellent. What else can you tell me?”

“She’s a good worker, Angel. Really meticulous and loves to learn. I reckon you’re on a winner there. I’d hire her in a flash.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me. Thanks, Kirk.”

“No worries. Cheers, Angel.”

I rang off and tapped the top of my phone to my lips. Kirk was a very good reference to have, yet initially he’d been confused as to who Steph was. I shrugged. Probably because he employed a dozen or more people and an intern or whatever helper Steph had been wasn’t high on his radar.

I shrugged again. Stephanie Thatcher checked out, and as far as I was concerned, despite the holes in her resume, she had the job. After exiting my office and locking the door, I looked for Steph, and found her communing with the callistemon , accompanied by Tough, who looked like he’d fallen in love with Steph from the way he was closing his eyes with bliss at the head rubs he was receiving.

“I see you’ve met Tough.”

“Is he? Tough, that is?”

“Absolutely not, but we foster potential here at Dig It.”

She laughed.

I nodded. “Anyway, your reference checks out, so you’re hired. When can you start?”

Steph’s grin bloomed. “Oh, wow! Thank you so much. I can start as soon as you need

me.”

“Goodo. It’s a casual position so if tomorrow works, then eight o’clock?”

“I can definitely do that.”

“You might want to keep wearing your hair up. Plants have a way of transferring accommodation. Not that your hair wouldn’t look nice when it’s down. I mean, it’s—” I cut myself off. What the ever-loving hell? I was flirting. I think.

“Uh. We’ll get the paperwork underway tomorrow then. Tax declaration and all that. Meanwhile.” I pointed towards my right. “Jules stays open on Friday afternoons for all the caffeine tragics like me, so how about a coffee?”

I was on the receiving end of another grin. In the small space of time I’d known Steph, I was already the president of the Steph Thatcher’s Grin Appreciation Society.

We stopped at the floor-to-way-above-head-height cyclone-fenced gate so I could lock it, then I attached a lead to Tough’s collar and walked the few metres to Jules’ cafe.

I wondered at myself. I had met Steph all of two seconds ago and here I was asking her to join me in a cup of coffee. Quickest date invitation in history, which it wasn’t. A date that is. Good grief.

After Jules had called out our ‘fun’ Starbucks-experience names—me: Starfish, Steph: New Girl—we sat at a two-seater table close to the very blurry line that was the cave of mystical wonders and the cafe’s white linoleum. Tough flopped at my feet which made me look like I was wearing white coarse-hair sneakers.

“Starfish?” Steph asked, blowing on her coffee.

I laughed. “Yep. Sand angels at the beach kind of look like starfish, therefore I’m now a sea creature.”

Steph laughed in return, and I pointed a finger. “Don’t laugh too hard. You’re going to be New Girl for the entire year.” Then I smirked as her face dropped.

“So, I don’t get a cool name?”

“That is a cool name. Shiny, sparkly, new.”

I hadn’t meant it to sound so intimate or make my voice so husky. I obviously had the beginnings of laryngitis because again what the hell? I hunted about my brain for something bland to chat about. We’d already covered the essentials.

“Can I ask about your address? It’s in a pretty swanky suburb.” There. Bland. But truthfully, I was intrigued.

Steph put her cup onto her saucer. “It’s my parents place. Well, was. They died six years ago, and I inherited it.”

I automatically reached across the table to touch her hand. “I’m so sorry. That...I didn’t mean to dredge up the past.”

“You didn’t know, and it’s fine. I know the apartment has a street number and postcode that raises a few eyebrows.” Steph moved her hand from under mine to pick up her cup, cradling it near her mouth. “But I live where I live.” She took a sip.

“I live in my parents place, too,” I said. Then I rushed to explain that I wasn’t a forty-year-old woman who hadn’t left home. “Four years ago, they decided that they’d travel the world and last year ended up in France and never left. They gave me the deeds to the flat not long after they settled in Normandy.” I warmed at the memory.

Mum and Dad had beamed in via the wonder of the internet, the screen nearly bursting with their happiness, as they led me on a shaky laptop tour of their little cottage in Honfleur and I suddenly became the owner of a lovely little flat in Melbourne.

“Where’s your flat?”

I pointed back at the nursery. “Go past the nursery then after three steps.” I raised my finger to aim it at the second floor of the 1970s two-storey block of flats. “Up there on the second storey.”

Steph laughed. “Handy.”

“Very handy. In case of?—”

“Plant emergencies?” That grin made itself welcome again.

I released my own grin, adding an eyebrow lift. “You never know when a wisteria is having a moment.” We held eye contact and the smile that the joke produced.

Then I panicked. Was I flirting? Was Steph flirting? Why was there flirting? Was I now a clueless lesbian who thought mutual grinning constituted a flirt of some sort and not synchronised satisfaction at a situation?

I dropped my gaze and glared at my coffee.

“So what will I be doing tomorrow?”

I looked up. “Well, probably dealing with a few customers, actually. It’s Saturday so we get quite a bit of foot traffic. Expect random drop-ins.”

“I can do that. Quite prepared for people-ing.”

“People-ing. Good word, that.” Then it occurred to me. “Your resume was a bit light on as far as job experience goes. I know you worked with Kirk but what else have you done?”

It was Steph’s turn to stare into her coffee. “So, you know that my parents died when I was twenty-six. I didn’t do much after that. Just travelled a lot. Did some overseas work in bars. That sort of thing. Poked my toe into the family business.” She met my eyes. “I have a brother who is eight years older than I am.”

I smiled. “Same age as me.”

“It’s a good age. The tree of common sense has mostly established itself by the time you’re forty. Not quite in my brother. His common sense tree is working hard not to pop its clogs.”

I stared, then fell about laughing.

“Pop its clogs?”

That grin. “Uh huh. I’ll make sure the Dig It ’ s plants and any wooden footwear are kept separated.”

* * *

Later, after we’d confirmed an eight o’clock start, said goodbye, and I’d settled into my comfy couch with its flowery 1980s fabric with Tough curled up in the corner, it occurred to me that Steph hadn’t answered my question about where and what she’d been doing since graduating university. I did quick calculations. Twenty-six when her parents died. Twenty-one or twenty-two when she finished uni. So what was she

really doing for four years? Curious. I told myself it didn't matter. I was simply being nosy. As far as I was concerned, Steph Thatcher was good people and I had a highly tuned antenna for good people. It hadn't steered me wrong in my entire adult life.

Chapter Three

Emu bush 'Kalbarri Carpet'

(*Eremophila glabra*)

A native ground-cover with soft silvery foliage and gold tubular flowers. Perfect for native gardens, wildlife gardens, winter gardens, feature ground-cover or as a weed suppressant. Containing the plant in a pot is also an option. Prefers free-draining soil, but can handle heavier soils. Plant in full sun to light shade and mulch after planting to retain moisture particularly if growing in southern states.

“So, you decided on colour coordination,” I said to Steph when she turned up at ten to eight the next morning. I pointed to her dark blue shirt and jeans. “Excellent. Although, the apron might clash.” We grinned at each, which made me feel funny in my stomach. Far out. I was forty years old and behaving like a teenager with a tiny work crush.

I handed over the apron I was holding, and Steph whipped the straps over her head and tied the apron to her slim torso. I grimaced as she had to double the straps over to make it fit properly.

“I’m sorry. It was made to fit me. I don’t have any small sizes yet, but I’ll order you one.” That was me: a sturdy chunk of timber. I wasn’t overly vain about my appearance. I wouldn’t have sent ten small hoop earrings like a caterpillar up the outside of each ear if I were. I just liked the look of them. And body wise? I gave an internal shrug. I was okay with strong, medium height, stocky, and looking like the

sort of competent lesbian who could star in an advertisement for Subaru.

I gestured for her to follow me around the nursery.

“So, Dig It has been in business for twenty years. I took over the running of the place when I got my diploma of nursery management and horticulture. Mum and Dad insisted that I have a strong sense of business as well as an understanding of Australian flora.”

“That’s young to start managing a business,” Steph commented as she caressed a leaf on each plant every time we stopped on our tour.

I shook my head. “I didn’t start running the place until I was thirty. I finished high school then went straight to uni. I was doing an arts degree.” I flipped my hand. “Human rights and social science.”

Steph’s eyes lit up. “That’s a fantastic major to study.”

“Oh. I didn’t finish it. Uni wasn’t for me. My brain wouldn’t work the way it had to, so I couldn’t keep up with the lectures, and the tutorials, and the assignments. Let alone the exams.” I shrugged. “I left after two years.”

Steph continued fondling the leaves. It was very distracting. Suddenly a hot little sizzle, like when your stomach has stumbled onto a rollercoaster going full tilt and you’re gleefully tossing handfuls of glitter while screaming in fear, whispered through my body.

“What did you do then?”

“Well, I started working here. My parents were pretty laid back with the dropping out of uni thing. They just wanted me happy, and working here made me happy. Then I

did the diploma and here we are.”

“That’s so understanding.” Steph smiled, then her face fell and she folded her arms. “I went from high school to a year as an exchange student in Italy then to a bachelor of business and economics with an honours year, and then I had to start at my parents’ business.”

That solved my curiosity from last night.

Steph gave a little half smile, almost in resignation. “Seventeen at high school, then twenty-four when I started at middle management. Talk about young. It was a lot.”

I gestured for her to follow. “Sounds it.” Then my curiosity leapt into my frontal lobe again. “If it’s okay to ask, what was your parents’ business?”

Steph’s expression was hard to read. Her face had shut down and I assumed it was because of my question. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean?—”

“Developments,” she answered and went back to fondling fronds.

“Okay.”

Developments was an incredibly vague line of work to be in. All manner of questions filled my mind. Development of what? Developing where? I left the questions unasked because Steph’s expression didn’t invite any more.

“Well, I guess your parents’ business is still going.” Not a question. A statement left hanging.

Steph gave a quick laugh. “It is. My brother runs it. I have a somewhat casual role to play, hence my request to be a member of staff here.”

“And the plants love you already.” I gestured at the tables at the back of the nursery.
“And that’s where I utilise my love of social science and wellbeing.”

We made our way over to the tables and I opened a locked cabinet, then swung back the metal grill door to reveal the ten bonsai plants I kept there.

Steph gasped. “They’re beautiful! Where did you get them?” She peered into the large cabinet.

“These lovely specimens were donated by one of our customers who wanted them tended to by people who would appreciate the entire process.” I stroked one of the pots. “These are for my bonsai group: Bonsai Brains.”

Steph looked like she wanted to chuckle but seemed to hold it back, so I smiled which did the trick. She let out a short laugh.

“Bonsai Brains?”

“Yeah, there’s a group of ten teenagers, aged sixteen or seventeen, who come in on Saturday afternoons to spend an hour looking after their particular bonsai. The kids are recommended by the therapist at the private psychiatric hospital in the next suburb. She vets the patients and sends the ones who would benefit the most in my direction. If I’ve got a vacancy that is, which I haven’t at the moment. Bonsai Brains has been full for about four months. It’s therapy for their anxiety or neurodivergence or diagnoses like bipolar. Anything that means their brain stops them from slotting into society easily because society sure doesn’t shuffle over to fit them in.”

Steph held my forearm. “That is amazing. So what happens to the bonsai plant if someone leaves?”

Normally I wave my hands about while I talk but I liked the feel of Steph’s hand on

my arm, so I stayed still for a moment.

“They leave the bonsai to the next person. Part of their therapy is the permission to let go. Lots of neurodivergent people have a hard time letting go because it means something in their routine disappears.”

“Change is hard.” Steph let her hand drop and I missed it immediately.

“You’ll be meeting some as they come in today. Be aware, though. You’re a change. They might blank you for a session.”

“I’m in their session?” Steph’s eyes were round.

“No, I run it. You’re in charge of...” I gestured to the entire nursery.

Steph blew out a breath. “So much easier.” Then she grinned. “I bet your customers are also into routine. This place strikes me as somewhere that invites neighbours and many people from surrounding areas to buy plants and stay for a good chat.”

“Exactly. A lot of folks make an afternoon of it. They visit Ted’s book shop, buy a classic or two, drop by Jules’ place to grab a coffee and get gifted a new moniker, then come here and buy something nice for their patio or balcony.” I entwined my fingers. “We, all of us, are an important part of these people’s weekend. They’re regulars and I’d hate for that to go.”

“Would it?”

I growled. “It will if bloody Walker’s gets their way.”

Steph looked like she was holding her breath, and I gave her a quizzical look. I about to ask if she was okay but the thought of Walker’s was still filling my brain.

“Walker’s is building a warehouse on that enormous block of land down the road.”

“Oh!”

“Yep. Bloody noxious weed that they are. Say goodbye to Dig It and Coffee Crystals because we’re suddenly competition with our similar stock, but also Mr and Mrs G with their takeaway and Ted with his books. They’ll have dwindling foot traffic and eventually they’ll have to sell up. It sucks.” I slammed the door of the bonsai cupboard, and drove the lock into the slot. I turned to find Steph with a look on her face like she was contemplating something important. Probably my news.

“It would affect them that much?” Steph whispered.

“Absolutely.” I gestured for her to follow me down to the register counter. “Think of a giant supermarket going in up the road from a small well-loved fruit and veg place who had regular, local trade. They’d try hard to keep their customers, but eventually people go to the big supermarket because.” I fisted my hand then pointed a finger. “One. It’s convenient. Two.” I poked out another finger. “They can get everything they need, not just fruit and veg, and three.” I paused, then threaded my hand through my short strands of hair. “I don’t have a three. I reckon one and two are awful enough.”

“Has it been approved yet?”

“The Walker’s Warehouse?” I turned the EFTPOS machine around, ready to show Steph the ins and outs of working the till. “No. We’ve got ninety days to lodge a complaint. It’ll have to be an official one from a lawyer.” I set the stack of empty boxes ready for customers to take their potted plants home without getting their car seats dirty. “I’d prefer one we know, but the local guy in the next row of shops said he wouldn’t take on Walker’s if we paid him a squillion dollars.”

Steph straightened the brown paper bags on the counter. “One of my friends is a lawyer. She’s super busy at the moment, but she’d know of someone who could take on Walker’s.”

I paused in my sorting. “Really? That’s terrific. Could I have your friend’s office number? Maybe we can set up an appointment for next week.”

Steph jerked, sending a cascade of bags to the floor. She stooped to pick them up. “Oh! How about I call her first? You know, introduce the idea and see if she’s got a person in mind.”

I blinked at the intensity of Steph’s answer, then smiled. She obviously felt as strongly about the situation as we all did.

* * *

Once the EFTPOS and general purchasing tutorial was over, I left Steph to it, only pausing to wander out of my little cupboard-office when I heard Pip’s voice at the front.

“Hey, Angel. Steph here has agreed to a Tarot reading when she’s finished today.” Pip beamed and I turned to Steph, whose eyes were sparkling. With joy? I hoped so. I really wasn’t into Tarot and crystals and all that, but Pip was and I wasn’t about to rain on anyone’s parade. It made her happy and that was all that mattered.

“Make sure she’s not going to get hit by a bus, Pip. I need my staff members safe.”

Pip tossed a mock glare at me, then grinned. “Just as well I like you, because that sort of comment makes me want to un-feng-shui this place.”

I laughed, and Pip gestured at my lurid orange shirt, the sleeves and upper torso

peeking out from beneath the apron.

“Latest op-shop purchase?”

“Absolutely.”

Steph grinned. “I love op-shopping. I get the best bargains on designer labels.” I wouldn’t have picked Steph for an op-shop frequent flyer but maybe her fancy jeans from yesterday were hidden gems from her neighbourhood charity store.

I nodded. “Exactly. I go to op shops because it’s like a pick ’n mix buffet. You never know if the stuff will fit and that’s a fun guessing game. In a regular shop you have to go in, get the clothes you want, go to a tiny cubicle, pull across the curtain which never goes all the way, and try on stuff all the while looking in a mirror straight out of a circus.”

Steph and Pip cracked up.

I laughed at their reaction, then pointed to Steph. “How has it been so far?”

“Fine. Not that busy but busy enough. It was lovely, actually. I had a couple from Canada who wanted ten ornamental plants for their front entrance area. The woman wanted an English cottage garden and the man wanted Australian natives, so I recommended a few Eremophila and a collection of the Boronia.” Steph raised her eyebrows in a hopeful query.

“Diplomatic and perfect. Well done,” I said, impressed, and Steph let out a huff of breath in relief.

“Meanwhile,” she said. “I called my friend Kat, who’s the lawyer I was talking about. She said she’d find a colleague who could take on our complaint because apparently

it's fairly simple to irritate a council into compliance."

"Yay for annoying," I said, my smile underlining the mock frown I wore. I noticed straight away that Steph had joined in on our ownership of the issue as well. She'd said, "Our complaint," and I couldn't stop the warm glow in my veins.

Pip laughed, then tipped her head at the door. "Your crew are here."

I looked over and saw that at least half of my Bonsai Brains group had walked in. I gave them a wave, then followed through with sweep of my hand to indicate that they could head on back to the tables and that I'd be there in a moment.

"I better go," announced Pip. "The senior citizens mini bus is on its way and we'll need all hands on deck."

I patted Steph on the back. "About fifteen old ladies will descend on this nursery in about sixty-three minutes after they've each eaten a vanilla slice and drunk an entire pot of tea. They're all yours."

"What?" Steph wore panicked look.

"Don't worry. They don't buy much. One or two might but that's all. It's more." I put on a highly affected ninety-year-old voice. "In my day we would grow pumpkins in a patch the size of the MCG then enter them into the local agricultural show and win first prize. Remind me to bring in my trophies next month." I rolled my lips together as Pip cracked up.

Steph stared, then laughed. "Okay. So while you're bonsai-ing, I'm dealing with multiple clones of my grandmother." She flipped her hand as if to 'Am I right?'

"Pretty much."

Pip agreed, nodding. “Well, I better go,” she repeated. “There’s a couple of the younger seniors who like their cards read. Although I did have one last month who said not to bother because she could get hit next week by a delinquent riding a mobility scooter in the corridor of the aged care facility and no Tarot reading would help that.” With that, Pip skipped off next door.

“Before you dash off, Angel.” Steph touched my arm lightly. Which was nice and sent odd, uncalled for, and what-the-hell butterflies cascading through my stomach. “I won’t interrupt your Bonsai Brains, but if I get into an awkward spot, can I give you a wave or something?”

I grinned. “A wave, which may need to have more speed to it than a simple greeting, is a perfect SOS.”

She huffed a sigh of relief. “Good. I just thought you’d be in the middle of doing a therapy?—”

“Not a therapist. Or a counsellor, for that matter.”

“Oh.”

“I am absolutely not qualified to deal with anyone’s important head stuff. But!” I held up a finger and Steph sent me a quizzical frown. “I am qualified to provide a plant each for a group of kids who need focus, companionship, and quiet. They’re always surprised at how much they have in common and yet they’re all so different. It makes for a camaraderie that I could never provide if it was just me, talking at them about a plant.” I nodded slowly. “I give them space. They bring the support.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Thank you, and because it’s so important to me, I’m going to fight the Walker’s

place with every cell in my body.” I wiped my hands down my apron. “Right. Bonsai Braining.” I left Steph to it, and walked down the back of the store to greet my collection of ten young people.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am

Chapter Four

Lilly Pilly

(*Acmena smithii*)

Excellent blank slate for bonsai as it heals well from cutting and the new growth is particularly eye-catching, as it emerges in striking red and glossy shades. It is evergreen with vibrant, rounded, glossy green foliage and dense growth. Low maintenance and tolerant of various conditions.

I t was after a full week: the first Saturday, the Wednesday and then Saturday—today—that I decided Steph had a magnetic device attached to her body. Nothing else could explain Steph's pull, Steph's ability to make me aware of her location anywhere in the nursery. Perhaps it was a chemical imbalance.

“Angel, what’s attraction? Like, what makes something or someone attractive?”

I blinked away the weird thoughts, and focussed on Kadee, one of my weekly Bonsai Brain attendees. The earnest expression on her face indicated the seriousness of her question. She’d even placed her tweezer spatula next to her bonsai as if having nothing in her hands would fully respect my answer.

“I’m sorry, Kadee. I didn’t hear you.”

Nice.

Kadee didn't frown at my disengagement. In fact, her expression was pretty much default: eyes boring holes into the person she was talking to, intense stillness as if to glue the respondent to their spot in case they actually walked away. Paul, another member of the group, possessed a somewhat similar fear. He spoke rapidly without pause as if he feared if he took a breath, someone would fill in or finish his sentence with a word that he didn't want or need and then he had to use the word because the other person had taken charge of the conversation. Therefore, rapid speech that lacked punctuation. Paul had such interesting things to talk about and on his 'safe' days, he would regale us with anecdotes of other students' exploits at his high school.

"So, what's attraction?" Kadee peered around her piece, and pinned me to my spot at the head of the long table. "I'm trying to work out what makes something or someone attractive. My therapist said I should try to find attractiveness in the world, but it's hard when it's all black. Black's not that attractive unless you're Jenna Ortega's nails. What do you think is attractive?"

Touched that Kadee would want my opinion, I pushed away the image of Steph standing in a field holding a bouquet of dried proteas and folded my arms on the table.

"I'm not sure. Maybe honesty. Kind eyes, I guess," I replied. "A nice smile."

Kadee nodded. Then, at the other end of the table, Benji lifted his hand, the collection of bracelets clicking together on his wrist. I'd given up trying to get Benji to stop doing that particular gesture like he was in school, but apparently he needed to so he could create space for himself.

"Smiles mean you're happy and what if you're never happy," he said softly, his blonde curls falling over his eyes.

I gazed at him. "Permanent happiness sounds exhausting, Benji. But happiness can be

other things. Like me in this place. If I went around grinning like a clown, radiating permanent joy and happiness, then we'd have no customers. Can you imagine the Google reviews?"

The other teens looked up at the joke, either appreciating the effort or theatrically rolling their eyeballs.

"In this place," I continued. "I'm satisfied. I'm pleased. I'm content. I'm...well, you get the idea. I'm versions of happy and sometimes those states of being don't need a smile, but can be quite attractive to someone. They can see those versions, and be drawn to them." I looked at Kadee. "How's your Lillypilly *Acmena smithii* going?" I insisted on not patronising my Bonsai Brainiacs and used the scientific names for the plants whenever I could.

"It's good. I trimmed the primary buds to balance the top layer."

"Happy with it?"

"Yes." Then Kadee jerked. "I'm attracted to a plant?"

"Why not?" I shrugged. "I have a strange fascination with the Green Mist Acacias which many would deem unhealthy."

This time there was more laughter and less eye-rolling.

* * *

On Thursday, Lucas picked up the mail from the post office.

"Bill, junk mail, junk mail..." he paused. "And something from Melbourne City Council." He tossed it over to me, and I quickly slid my finger under the stuck-down

flap. I shook out a piece of paper with single-spaced text.

Steph wandered over. “Anything interesting?” She stood at my shoulder, not reading the letter, but more like just being close. I looked up and fell into those brown eyes, which were looking back with interest.

Maybe Steph was having attractive thoughts as well. Perhaps she needed her own bonsai.

“It’s an invitation of sorts to attend the next council meeting—tomorrow night—to express our concerns in the hope that we might put aside our decision to fire off a fancy lawyerly letter.” I pointed at my chest. “Which we’re still doing, by the way.”

“So, are we going to the meeting as well?” Lucas asked, his brow wrinkled.

“You don’t have to, mate, but if you want, you can come and grumble loudly.”

“I kinda have to stay home and grumble loudly at my Economics essay. Sorry.” He looked contrite

Suddenly Mrs G stormed into the nursery, waving the paper and shouting in broken English.

“This. This council is having the meeting.”

“Tomorrow night,” Steph and I said together.

“Look. Is here. Tomorrow,” she continued, like a veritable steamroller. “At six o’clock.” She thrust the thin paper into my hands and stabbed a finger at the tiny writing.

“It’s really unfair. I’m glad you got a copy as well,” I placated.

Mrs Georgopolis puffed with pride. “I am important community member. This.” Again, the stabbing finger. “This. They ask for concerned citizens. That is us. This is not community feeling. This Walker ’ s is not community.” With that, she turned on her heel and marched back to her shop.

“Unfortunately, the council and Walker ’ s are meeting their legal obligations, because advertising the meeting is mandatory,” Steph said quietly. “They have to hold an open forum, and besides, council meetings are not allowed to be conducted behind closed doors,”.

I turned to her more square on and raised my eyebrows.

“Want to come along?” I scanned the letter again. “Says here that the reps from Walker's will be there, including the head honcho himself, Ben Walker.”

“Benjamin,” Steph muttered.

“What?”

“He likes to be called Benjamin, so I’ve heard.” Steph shrugged in a somewhat stilted manner, but I grinned.

“Awesome. Ben, it is.” Then I waggled the letter at Steph. “Probably Benjamin. So? Coming along?”

She gave another shrug. “Ok. I’d like to support you—the nursery, I mean.” Steph blushed and I blinked. Either I was being a clueless lesbian—highly likely—or Steph’s face had just admitted to a little attraction as well. Interesting.

I tucked the letter into my apron pocket, and tipped my chin at the door. “I’ll just duck next door to see if the others know about this.” Then I pursed my lips. “It’s only tomorrow night, so that’s heaps and heaps of notice, isn’t it?” I said, the sarcasm dripping from my words.

Having confirmed that Ted and Jules had received their notice, were happy to close early tomorrow, and were all prepared to meet at the council chambers on the dot of six o’clock, I strolled back into the store, nodding with triumphant satisfaction. I was met by Lucas, who was bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet while pushing a cart of eight bird’s nest ferns that had arrived from Plants Galore in the ten minutes I’d been gathering the mob and the tiki torches.

“I texted Paul,” he announced. “He’s in the ornithology club at school and reckons that the Walker’s Warehouse is being built on the nesting area of the Eastern Australian spotted finch. He’s passionate about habitat loss.” Lucas gave the cart an extra heave. “He can be a bit of a firecracker in meetings and would love to be there to ask pointy questions.”

With visions of all-out brawls at the bird society’s weekly get-togethers, and a promise that Paul would be wearing his best enviro-politics T-shirt, I delivered a small punch to the air.

“Great. We’ve got another member for our swarm of concerned citizens.”

Steph laughed. “We’re a swarm?”

“Yep. Small, yet mighty. A sixteen year old bird spotter is our secret weapon.”

Lucas cracked up. “And on that note, I’ve gotta get going, Angel. Sorry for the short shift but I’ve got biology tomorrow and I need all the hours of sleep I can get to tackle a cow’s eyeball.”

Steph and I both said, “Ew,” simultaneously, and Lucas grinned, pushed back a couple of palm fronds into their correct angle, then whipped off his apron, folded it, and dropped it on the counter.

Steph gave him a quick wave, then turned to me face on. “Your argument is based on the lack of community, isn't it?”

“Yes!” I replied, emphatically. “Can you imagine those Walker’s staff members not knowing a thing about their section or being so arrogant to customers who don’t know anything? I’d hate for people to experience that. That’s why this place works. I refuse to be one of those lesbians in the nursery or hardware section who doesn't give a shit and props their Blundstone-clad foot on the bottom rail of the shelving rack and gives the customer a smirk that says knowledgeable, patronising, and prone to using words like 'gauge' and 'penetrating oil-based outdoor deck stain’.”

I took a deep breath as Steph blinked rapidly.

“O-okay. Is this why I’m coming tomorrow night? To keep you from saying things like that?”

I gave her a long look, then laughed. “Probably. Maybe you haven’t met too many smirking, hardware lesbians, but they’re out there,” I said dryly.

“I’ve met a few. They’ve exchanged their Blundstones for Colorados when I’ve come into their sphere of engagement at Kings and Queens .” Steph’s cheeks pinked and I realised that she’d very casually, very quietly, let me know that not only were we part of a small posse of shop owners but members of another small community as well.

Hmm.

I helped Steph move all the ferns to the back of the store.

“Do people really buy these?” Steph asked. “They come across as the sort that would be prone to invading the world given half the chance.”

I let go of my trolley to laugh. “Diabolical plants with a world domination fetish.” I gazed at her mouth which had stretched into a smile, and she seemed to take in my entire face, stopping at my own smile, my eyes. There was an enormous—probably tiny—amount of silence that was warm and rather nice.

“You never know. We’ll have to watch them carefully and create care pamphlets for customers,” Steph said so softly I had to lean in to hear her. Perhaps that was her plan. Good grief. It was all a bit much, so I stepped back.

“It sucks that the meeting is on a Friday night. It’s like they expect no one to turn up.” I widened my eyes in innocence and Steph chuckled. “So, thanks for saying yes to joining us. It means a lot, because you’ve only been working here two weeks. I like that your ideals match this place. I think it’s one of reasons I hired you. Plus, you’re good with the customers.”

Steph blushed slightly. “The senior citizens were a highlight. They’re a hoot. In fact, I’m enjoying everything about Dig It, including all the people here. Everyone.”

Everyone, which, because she was gazing at me so intently, felt like one in particular.

* * *

Our little posse of five—me, Steph, Jules, Mrs G, and Ted—settled into our seats in the arc of chairs available—with an ocean of carpet separating us and the council tables—and were ready to register our verbal complaint via the medium of calm yet clipped lecturn-gripping points of contention. I reckon the others were hoping I’d drunk some camomile tea or something so I could get the Yelling McYelling situation in check. I’d completed my own meditation of scratching Tough’s belly

before leaving him at home with a chew bone.

There were a surprising number of people. Probably fifty, which made me wonder if Walker's had pissed off that many. Though, after the first fifteen minutes, I discovered that not everyone was there for the Walker's issue. A small-scale developer and his lawyer were there to complain about the caveat placed on the building they wanted to demolish and how dare the council deem the one-hundred year old home a heritage listing. While the to-ing and fro-ing continued, I scanned the twenty council members. Old white bloke, old white bloke, old white bloke, middle-aged white woman, Asian woman, generic twenty-something guy, old white bloke, another old white bloke, a Sikh man with a beautiful red ombre turban about his head, more white people, and then the Walker's crew. A maybe forty-something man with clipped and heavily gelled hair in a very expensive-looking suit radiated so much confidence that I knew it would come across as arrogance when he stood to speak. I made a bet with myself that the super confident guy was Benjamin Walker. I leaned sideways and murmured to Steph out of the corner of my mouth.

"Is the suit who dipped his head in a bucket of gel our buddy Ben?"

Steph snorted, but I didn't get to see the grin because she had slumped down further on her chair, almost at one with the fabric, and pulled the fedora-style hat further over her face.

She'd turned up at ten to six wearing the hat, pulling the sides over her hair.

"Nice hat, Steph," I'd complimented. "I love it, but from the way you're yanking it down, it's almost like you don't want anyone to recognise you." I'd laughed, and rubbed her shoulder. She smiled at the gentle tease, then grimaced.

"I've got a bit of a headache so shading my eyes from the fluorescent lights is necessary."

“Oh. Shit! That sucks. Go home and have some quiet time with a Panadol or two.”

Steph had straightened and gently waved her hand in dismissal. “Oh no. I really want to see this tonight.”

She seemed overly enthusiastic about witnessing a bunch of people having a massive whinge at the council, but I loved the fact that she was as passionate about our community of shops as we were, despite being our newest recruit.

Steph whispered a “Yes,” in response to my question about suit dude, and I gave myself a mental high-five for winning my bet. Seated beside Benjamin Walker was another bloke who looked like he was aiming for the boss twin trophy. He had the look of a Yes Man. The next person along was intriguing. A fabulously sexy, incredibly intimidating, ice queen-style woman with shoulder-length blonde hair sporting a razor sharp fringe that looked like it would deliver a thousand paper cuts if you ventured anywhere near it. She was scanning the crowd, then her gaze landed on me. I felt like I was being x-rayed. It was disconcerting. Ice queen women weren’t really my type—I preferred the natural, bit chaotic, version—so I was incredibly relieved when her gaze moved on. She paused on Steph, who was still at one with the itchy blue upholstery on the chairs. Her headache was obviously still making itself known, so I stroked her upper arm in sympathy as we sat, and Steph looked up through her eyelashes from under the brim and smiled warmly.

“We come now to our last order of business.” The mayor’s voice cut through my musings—my feelings—and I straightened my spine. Suddenly I was an alert meerkat.

“The potential development of a Walker Lifestyle Warehouse on the north side of the A83 highway. This portion of the meeting is open to citizens to express their concerns, if there are any, regarding the development. Please take note of your time allocation.” He gestured to his right, and all the councillors directed their focus, like

fox terriers on a ball, to where he pointed. “We are fortunate to have Mr Benjamin Walker, CEO of Walker Industries with us tonight, accompanied by Mr Harry Kirlew, state manager of Walker Lifestyle Warehouses and Ms Katherine Marcheson, senior lawyer at Walker Industries.”

Ice queen woman was a lawyer. I wasn’t really surprised. I figured you’d need frozen veins to write the policies, procedures, and smart lawyerly language that steamrolled over small businesses. I narrowed my eyes and metaphorically pushed up my sleeves as Benjamin stood at his place at the long council table.

“Let me begin by saying how symbiotic it will be when the Walker Lifestyle Warehouse is built. We support local communities, and inject funds into sporting groups, and supporting charities is a Walker trademark.” He smiled, all teeth and Teflon.

“What does that have to do with us?” Jules hissed. I had the same question.

Benjamin wasn’t looking at the audience. It was like he was pitching an idea to a shareholder’s meeting where people were already on his side in the first place.

He didn’t see us as individual people, and the thought made my blood boil.

Steph must have felt me vibrating with annoyance, because she slid her hand over and gripped my forearm, which caused the vibrations to pivot like an expert footballer to warm tingles brought on by a rather lovely woman.

Two weeks. That was the total amount of time Steph had worked at Dig It, and here I was with warm tingles and a slight flush to my skin all because my forty-year-old heart had decided it really liked Steph. I wanted to quash this brilliant idea of my heart but forearm touches and smiles and delightful repartee were difficult to ignore.

“If I could direct your attention to the first slide.” I jerked myself back from Magical Smiles and Touches land and focused on the large screen that Benjamin was gesturing towards. It contained a stock image of a smiling young person diligently typing into their phone while an aisle of hardware paraphernalia had been green-screened behind them.

“One of the more exciting aspects of the Walker Lifestyle Warehouse is the concept of hardware hacks!” He beamed.

“What the hell’s a hardware hack?” I muttered.

Benjamin ploughed on. “The proposed warehouse on the A83 highway will be a flagship store showcasing the hardware hack innovation.” He flicked to the next slide, which contained the same stock image but now the customer was aiming their phone at a QR code. “At the end of every aisle will be a QR code that sends a customer to a link where they can follow a Walker instructional video to create the item. And all the materials needed for the item they want to build are in that aisle! It’s all at their fingertips! Then!” His grin was a beacon of bright teeth and the ultimate joy in his own genius. “Once they have used the hack, they upload a video or photo of their finished product to any social media platform, tag our company in their post, and earn loyalty points according to the number of likes they receive. It’s revolutionary!” He gestured to the audience in the manner of ‘isn’t it obvious?’

I scanned the applauding councillors. Most were caught up in Benjamin’s enthusiasm, nodding like those bobble-head dogs on the dashboard in cars. Harry—Mr Yes Man—was nodding along as well. Katherine Marcheson wasn’t. The look on her face was indecipherable, but enthusiasm certainly hadn’t made an appearance.

I wondered why we were hearing the sales pitch. What about the rezoning? The location? The taking away people’s livelihood section? It was like they were trying to

white-wash the whole situation. Convince us to drop our objection because Walker's was too wonderful to touch.

Benjamin was still going. "We want to encourage the millennials, the....what's the one younger than them?" No one answered. "Doesn't matter. It's the blokes, the chicks with tools, all the DIY-ers, the lesbians who give any project a go." I gave a soft growl, and Steph's hand smoothed its way down my forearm again.

"We want to give lifestyle influencers the ability to access the tools and materials right at their fingertips. Everyone wants to think that they're a carpentry genius, or a storage magician, or a spray paint ...He faded off as if he'd exhausted his repertoire of nouns.

"Savant?" Katherine supplied, with a raised eyebrow, and a few members of the audience snickered.

Katherine Marcheson seriously had no love for Benjamin Walker. I wondered why.

Benjamin continued blathering but I tuned him out. I wasn't interested in his sales spiel and I'd heard all I needed to hear. I mentally sorted out my questions and rebuttals ready for my turn at the microphone.

"We would like to welcome pre-registered members of the audience who have questions regarding the Walker's Lifestyle Warehouse."

Paul, Lucas school buddy, leapt up, all gangly limbs and enthusiasm. "I'm Paul Invaker, the president of Harriston High Ornithological Studies Club. Mr Walker, what are you doing to protect the Eastern Australian Spotted Finch's nesting area?"

Benjamin looked confused, then turned to Katherine, who gave a slight smile.

“Paul, that is an excellent question,” Katherine began in a smooth voice. “We’ve dealt with this before. Construction on the Sydney Walker’s Lifestyle Warehouse was stalled last year due to an environmental impact study conducted by the New South Wales Conservation Commission. I’m assuming you are aware of their thorough process since you are bringing up this question.” She stared at him and if I hadn’t known better, I could have sworn Katherine was literally telling Paul to get in touch with the Victorian version of the Conservation Commission to set up a meeting about spotted finches. “We do everything within our power to protect the environment.” Again with the stare.

Harry, his military-style haircut, sharp suit and eyebrows all forming a symphony of irritation muttered quite audibly, “There aren’t any bloody finches.”

“Mr Kirlew, the Eastern Australian Spotted Finch lives in grasslands like that over on the proposed site. That enormous area allows for the Eastern Australian Spotted Finch to feed on fallen seeds on the ground and eat some flying insects, especially when feeding their young.”

I was in love with this kid. What an earnest warrior.

“Paul, all I can say is we do everything within our power to protect the environment and will comply with any findings from the Conservation Commission.” Katherine gave him a slight smile.

“Well, ok,” Paul said. “Thanks. I’ll look into it further.” He stepped back from the lectern and arranged himself into his seat as only a teenager can.

Jules stepped forward. “I’m Jules, the owner of Coffee and Crystals, and I’m concerned that the cafe in your warehouse being so close to the highway will take away business from my cafe.”

“I’m sure there’s room for two cafes,” Benjamin laughed, which seemed to set fire to Jules hair follicles.

“That’s just placating me with a crystal ball. You don’t know that,” she said, outraged, then she shook her head. “Look. The warehouse? Great idea. The location? Shit idea. Why can’t the warehouse be moved back further from the suburban stores? The council has that area zoned as semi-commercial. You can’t build there anyway, unless the council change the boundaries.”

The mayor spoke up. “All concerned parties are entitled to put forward a complaint about the relocation of any zone boundaries.” It was like he was reading from a script.

Jules sighed. “Fine. I’ll get onto that.” She walked dejectedly back to her seat, just as I left mine. Right.

“Angel Whitlock. Owner of Dig It, the nursery next to Coffee and Crystals. Now, Benjamin. Can I call you Benjamin? Great.” I didn’t give him time to answer which seemed to irritate him. “Have you looked into how much damage your warehouse is going to do to the local shops?”

Benjamin scoffed. “I understand the necessity of environmental studies but a financial societal-type study would be a complete waste of time. A Walker board member or shareholder would need to be employed in one of your shops to establish a full picture of the impact and that’s unlikely to happen.” He laughed.

“It’d be a damn sight better than just plonking your warehouse over the road without thought.”

I was pissed off.

“Look,” I continued, gripping the microphone stand with one hand like a 1980s glam rock singer. “I like the idea of a Walker’s Warehouse. I was in Sydney last year and needed some tools for my friend’s reno and you lot had everything I needed. So, I get it. But not there.” I pointed vaguely in the general direction of the proposed site. “I also get that there’s a market for the hack-yourself-into-a-corner influencers, but not at the expense of us.” I gestured at the group behind me. “Some of our stores have been here for decades. You’ll demolish us. A Walker’s Lifestyle Warehouse is a great idea, but the positioning is all wrong.”

“You realise that to capture the market of influencers and their need for hacks, we will need proximity,” Harry piped up.

“Yes. And again, not there.”

Then curiosity got the best of me. “You do realise that the original meaning of the word ‘hack’ is to make an absolutely awful attempt at something? The original hack. Temporarily functional but not necessarily reliable or beautiful.”

This seemed to completely throw the mayor, most counsellors, Benjamin, and Harry.

Eventually, Harry answered. “Well, language is changing. We’re keeping up with modern media and modern media is TikTok and YouTube.”

Jules whispered loudly. “Ask them what happens if the influencer fucks it up.”

I grinned, then paraphrased. “What if they don’t create the project successfully? Like match it to the actual product shown in the video? Can they still upload their attempt?”

We were now so far off topic but it was fascinating how people were responding to the question. Katherine seemed glued to the to-ing and fro-ing between Benjamin and

me. Harry was shifting in his seat, either uncomfortable in his inability to answer the questions or he was still pissed about Eastern Australian Spotted Finches. The mayor kept muttering, “Well now” at random intervals.

“Absolutely they can,” Benjamin stated firmly. “Customers receive a loyalty point on their account simply by tagging us with their hack.”

I groaned. “I really dislike that word.”

Benjamin laughed. “Don’t tell me you’ve never used a hack.” He laughed derisively.

“Of course I have. I just didn’t use the word ‘hack’.”

He looked confused. “What did you use?” he asked.

“Common sense.”

Katherine, along with our group, snorted, and I studied her. She gave me a long look in return.

“Angel, I am assuming that you’re going to lodge a formal written complaint within the allocated ninety days?” she asked.

Again with the coaching. It was looking more and more like Katherine, senior lawyer, was sitting on a thin fence with this development. She definitely had a foot in the concerned citizens camp. I wondered why. I heard Steph deliver a single hum beside me, and out of the corner of my eye saw her turn side-on to the front tables.

“Ms Whitlock, while I understand the need for democratic process.” Benjamin threw me a smile—the teeth and Teflon version. “I’m sure we’ll be able to come to an amicable and forward-thinking agreement that will be of benefit to all parties.” The

smarminess was dripping off his tongue and all over the walnut stained table. “But if you must lodge a complaint, then make sure it’s within the time frame.”

I decided then and there that Jules needed to sell Benjamin Walker voodoo dolls in Pip’s crystals section of the cafe.

“That’s all we have time for tonight,” the Mayor spoke up. “Thank you to those who registered and put forward their concerns. Thank you to our guests for their attendance.” There was a smattering of applause led mostly by the councillors and Benjamin and Harry themselves.

The meeting ended immediately after the mayor’s thanks and we were ushered towards the exit by the single security guard who’d been asleep in the corner the entire time.

Our small group stood huddled under the light of the lamppost nearest the forecourt of the council chambers.

“Well, as far as meetings go, I’ve attended better,” Ted said, his hands flipping in a gesture of resignation.

“Did you not want to say anything?” Steph asked, her hat now sitting properly on her head.

“No, love. Been there, done that. I just came for moral support. Young Jules and Angel here did a good job with our concerns. Nice and passionate.”

“I am also passionate but my English is not so good. I would have the stage fright,” Mrs G announced. We all raised our eyebrows. I couldn’t believe any situation where Mrs G would have stage fright when speaking her mind.

After a few “See you later”s, Ted, Jules, and Mrs G departed, leaving Steph and me under the lamppost light.

“How’s your headache?”

“It went. Probably about halfway through your interrogation of m—of Benjamin. It was fantastic to watch.” She grinned.

“I can’t say I’m a huge fan of Benjamin Walker. Fancy suggesting that a board member go undercover. What a jerk.” Then I pointed randomly. “But I do like the idea of the QR code, of generation whatever Tik-Tokking their way through the construction of a flat-packed laundry cabinet. But Dig It will feel the financial pinch.” Then I pointed again. “Oh! I tell you who was pretty interesting was the lawyer, Katherine. She really looked like she was coaching Paul, and then Jules. And wow, she isn’t a super fan of Benjamin. It was like she was stepping into both sides of the issue.” I chuckled.

Steph rolled her lips together.

“Angel, I need to tell you something,” she said, frowning.

I contemplated her. Her eyes were darting about.

Suddenly, Paul was upon us. “Thank you so much for the opportunity to have a question for the council.” He waved his arms enthusiastically “The local paper wants to interview me about the Eastern Australian Spotted Finch! That’s so cool!” He put out a fist, which I reciprocated, tapping his, and he repeated the gesture with Steph. Then he was gone, galloping after a tram as it trundled past. I looked back at Steph.

“I want a hundredth of his energy.” I grinned. “You were going to tell me something?”

Steph waved her hand as if to brush away the question. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll see you tomorrow, Angel.” Then, after another arm rub, she walked toward the overflow carpark of the local shopping centre, presumably to her car.

I sat astride my motorbike for a moment before starting it, wondering what seemed so important to Steph to put a frown on her face but not important enough so she could easily erase it.

Chapter Five

Bookleaf Mallee

(*Eucalyptus kruseana*)

An unusual and very attractive small tree with tiny, round, blue-grey, stalkless leaves which cling densely to the branches. Bunches of creamy-yellow flowers arrive between Autumn to Winter. The Bookleaf Mallee thrives in sunny situations. Prune at an early age to establish the desired form.

I passed the frowny-shaking-your-finger-you've-been-naughty letter back to Craig, and grinned.

“I reckon that’ll put the wind up them,” I said cheerfully.

Craig Grady, the lawyer who had taken on our official complaint pro bono, smiled in return. “It should do. It’s not the first time a large firm has ridden rough shod over small businesses.”

“Well, I can’t thank you enough. I wasn’t convinced that a law firm like yours would take on such a trivial thing.”

Craig had phoned me on Monday and explained how his friend Kat, who was friends with Steph, had asked if he had the time to do a favour for her, which he did, so would I meet with him at his office on Thursday? I hadn’t quite believed him, even more so when I’d turned up not half an hour ago at a beautiful heritage-listed house

that had been converted into six offices. The brass plates at the front door announced a variety of professions, including an architect, an accountant, a creative media agency, a consultant—that label sounded exquisitely vague—one law firm, and then another law firm: Cooper, Marks, and Grady. I could tell from the law books and what looked like journals bound in leather on the oak bookshelf that lined Craig's office—a Booktokker's wet dream of a green screen—that the firm was successful. I was very glad that Steph knew people.

“It's pro bono, Angel. We like to look after community. It's what makes the world better, doesn't it?” He quirked a smile, and I smiled in return. Craig was good people.

Back at the nursery later that day, I thanked Steph profusely.

“Craig's a top bloke. He's looking after everything, but he said to wait until the final week of the ninety days so the warehouse is stalled as much as possible.” I beamed with happiness.

Steph laughed. “Lawyers know all the loopholes and tricks of the trade. Particularly how to put the wind up local councils.”

* * *

Steph worked every day that week, despite being a casual employee. We seemed to have an influx of customers, double the amount we normally had mid-week, so I was glad she was around. To attend to customers. That's all. Not because I liked looking at her. Our customers came in groups: one from another retirement village and another from a care facility which looked after young people with special needs who were mostly in wheelchairs. That group was thrilled at the wide aisles which I had set up so Kahlia could navigate easily amongst the plants. I smiled to myself when all the kids exclaimed at the spiky ferns, the furry flowers of the kangaroo paw, and the pungent scent that was released when they rubbed the leaves on the Eucalyptus

kruseana . Then my eyes grew moist at how they were thrilled to purchase a living souvenir of their visit. One of the girls had run a string of happy face emojis on her touch pad which I was overjoyed to see when the carer turned it my way. I looked up to find Steph watching me, a smile on her face and a look of...something. Admiration? No, more like contemplation. Maybe affection. Whatever it was, I enjoyed the feeling in my veins.

I was starting to feel things for Steph, which was silly and irrational. Affection wasn't that quick, surely. Attraction, sure. But bigger feelings?

Unfortunately, there's always one customer who tries really hard to make their interactions with society very trying and ruins my musings. During the week, a husband and wife—I know this because he called her 'my wife' at the register—strolled in to investigate the stock. She grabbed his hand and dragged him over to the display of small-leaved Tamarinds.

“Gerry! Look at these! They'd look wonderful in that sunny part of the lounge room,” she enthused.

I didn't quite hear all of a Gerry's reaction, so I wandered over to offer my help.

“The Tamarinds are great indoors, particularly with muted sunlight.”

“See, Gerry?” She peered at my name tag. “Angel thinks it's a great idea.”

“Yeah. Well, I'm sorry but the prices are inflated here, Susan.” He ignored me. “We'll get one when that Walker's opens. You'll get your little plants there.” He picked up the pot plant I'd indicated and peered at the label. “Not just better prices but less boring plants, I'll bet.” His smirk took in both of us.

I saw red. Not only because he'd just dismissed the small-leaved Tamarind which was

an epic little shrub, but he had dismissed his wife who had excellent taste in plants, then he'd stood right there and insulted my nursery.

I levelled a glare at him.

“Well, that small-leaved Tamarind you're holding is from northern New South Wales and thrives under indoor sunlight. It grows to be a small, dense bush that produces large red/orange fruits with a delicious, tangy pulp which is perfect for jams. Did you know that it has been recognised as part of the First Nations diet, and even though it often looks drab, the Tamarind is strong and has cute little cream-brown flowers in November to January, but by all means, wait until you can shop in the Walker's nursery where all the noticeably half-dead potted varieties will be more to your?—”

A pair of arms wrapped around my torso and dragged me back a step. Then Steph appeared in front, facing Susan and Gerry, who were staring, their eyes darting between me and Steph.

“I'm sorry. Angel is needed in the office to sign some urgent paperwork so I'll take her to that paperwork now and be right back.”

Steph spun around and grabbed my hand, leading me quickly to the office door. Tough looked up from his water bowl.

“Stay,” she whispered. Both Tough and I blinked and froze. Then Steph hurried off to assist at the counter where clearly Susan had won the debate and was purchasing her plant.

Steph bustled back to me, and I folded my arms.

“That was?—”

“That was necessary. I’m sorry I manhandled you a bit, but?—”

“A bit?” I glared. “I wasn’t finished with?—”

“Oh, yes, I really think you were.”

I shook my head. “Lucas and Kahlia don’t grab their boss.”

Steph laughed. “Consider it an intervention by a staff member who doesn’t want their boss to lose sales which would result in that staff member losing their job. I was going for self-preservation.” She grimaced at me then rolled her lips together, all sparkly eyes and cheekiness.

I laughed. “Fine”. Then I realised that I hadn’t actually minded Steph grabbing me around my waist. She had lovely arms. Strong. I imagined Steph riding pillion on my motorbike, holding onto me as we rode through the hills outside Melbourne. Yum.

“Are you mentally finishing your monologue of pissed-off-ness?”

I blushed. I wasn’t about to tell Steph what I had been thinking. That would have been awkward. Things like motorbike rides and picnics and maybe dates at the movies were not for open discussion.

* * *

The weird thing about attraction is that you can’t keep your eyes off the person you’re attracted to. Nor stop your body from being in their space. It’s a phenomenon that people should study. Perhaps they had and I should spend some time down Google rabbit holes. I needed to know, because all I was doing for a week after the let’s-grab-Angel yummy moment was gravitating towards, looking at, and thinking about Steph.

“It’s very distracting,” I muttered into the bonsai cupboard as I checked on the plants.

Jules’ revelation only a couple of hours prior only increased the delight that was Steph Thatcher.

“So, you’ll be interested to know that Steph speaks Greek,” Jules had said, leaning over the counter at her cafe.

I frowned. “She does?”

“Yep.”

“And you know this...” I faded off.

“She was chatting with Mrs G when I popped in to get a couple of battered pineapple rings for Pip. You know how she gets those cravings when she has several readings scheduled.”

“Okay?” I rolled my hand to move her story along.

“Well, Mrs G was saying that she hadn’t followed all of the meeting debate and had taken such a dislike to Benjamin Walker that she tuned him out. Then Steph launches into fluent Greek to fill her in, then Mrs G hugged her!”

“Looks like there’s more to Steph than meets the eye.”

“Your eye, anyway. I’ve seen your eyeballs wandering, mate.”

“I do not have wandering eyeballs.”

“When it comes to Steph Thatcher you do.” Jules wagged a finger at my face.

“You’re attracted to her.”

“No,” I lied.

“You’re lying. If you sat down with Pip right now, she’d be pulling out the Lovers card and laying it in its position.”

My understanding of Tarot fortune telling was very poor despite our community of shops possessing a resident expert.

““The what?”

“The Lovers Card in the Future position. It means a future destined by love.”

“Oh, good grief.” I sighed dramatically. “I love you and Pip but I am not heading towards a future with my employee.

I returned to my chat with the bonsai, my thoughts meandering about Jules’ revelation that Steph spoke Greek and how she was convinced I had a thing for Steph. Then I looked up and my gaze landed squarely on Steph, who was looking right back at me. She quirked a smile, gave me a wave, then held eye contact until we both blushed and looked away.

Maybe I was attractive to Steph for her to blush like that. Or she was early menopausal.

If we were a Netflix series, the lesbians would be yelling “Just kiss already!” at their screens.

I wandered over.

“You speak Greek?” I cocked my head.

Another lovely flush pinked her cheeks. “Yes. I assume you know that information because Jules was in Mrs G’s shop at the same time I was attempting to explain council by-laws.”

I grinned. “Nothing gets by Jules.” That was true statement. Jules’ commentary to me about my supposed attraction proved that point.

“Where did you learn it? Duolingo?”

Steph cracked up, and held my forearm. “No. At school.”

“What school teaches Greek?”

Suddenly Steph’s face froze. Not for long, but just long enough for a person—me—to wonder why. “At Killington. Killington Girls Grammar.”

That probably explained the stilled expression for a moment. Generally there are three types of people who come from the private school system: the Look-at-me-I-am-an-enormously-rich twat, the I’m-sorry-I-had-no-choice souls, and the Mumble-mumble-extensive-apology-for-being-wealthy-I’ll-give-money-to-charity-forever folk.

Steph looked like she sat in number two quite comfortably. Killington cost thirty-thousand a year, her parents must have had some serious money.

“Nice school.”

“I enjoyed learning there. The subject list was extensive and I figured that if I was going to interact with people in Melbourne, which has the third highest Greek-

speaking population in the world, then Greek it should be.”

Sounded sensible.

“Yeah, it goes Athens, then Thessaloniki, then Melbourne, then back to places in Greece. Melbourne multiculturalism right there.”

Steph grinned. “That was my thinking.”

I studied her: her slight frame, her hair that fanned away from her face, her brown eyes. It was a particularly lovely package to look at. “You’re a bit of an enigma, Steph Thatcher.”

She laughed again, then, almost as if she weren’t thinking about it, shuffled a little bit closer. “I’m really not. Ask me anything.”

I blinked as common sense left my body. “Okay. Do you want to go to the movies on the weekend?” I blinked again. Wow. That was unexpected. Who knew that question was lurking?

Steph’s eyebrows rose. “The movies?”

“Yeah. Like at the actual movies in a cinema where you can’t pause and duck off to the loo then cook a three-course meal then binge watch the next in the series. That sort of movies.”

She rolled her lips in thought or maybe to suppress laughter. Her expression was cheeky.

“Like the movies where people don’t talk all the way through?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, thrilled that Steph was a convert. “You get it.”

“And have mastered the art of opening a packet of chips in silence?” Steph was on a roll and I was there for it.

“Oh my god. I love you,” I blurted out, then turned bright red, the skin on my face aflame. “Not, you know...It was more a turn of?”

“We connected over our loathing of noisy packets of chips. It’s okay, Angel.” She did the forearm-grab, coupled with a smooth-slide-down to my wrist.

“That’s...that’s exactly what we did,” I stuttered. “So...?”

“I’d love to.” Then... then her gaze travelled up and down my body and I felt it in every stitch of my cargo pants and polo shirt. And undies, if I were telling the truth.

I wondered what Pip would make of this latest development. She was probably hunched over her Tarot cards gleefully predicting Steph and I were riding off into the sunset.

“Another question. How are you on a motorbike?”

* * *

Apparently, Steph was an enthusiastic pillion passenger, as she’d ridden all the way around Europe for six months on the back of a friend’s bike when she’d been on an extended holiday after finishing uni. Another piece of the chronological puzzle that was Steph Thatcher.

My pride and joy was a 1200cc Triumph Tiger. Black, white, and chrome, with gold forks. I’d fallen in love the moment I’d seen the ad for it in one of the magazines

Jules kept in stacks for lost introverts who looked like they needed a prop so they could hide from the world for a bit.

That was four years ago, and here I was, pulling up to the apartment block in Steph's swanky neighbourhood. I'd only turned off the ignition when Steph appeared at my side and brushed the leather on my back.

I felt it through the material.

"Hi! Thought I'd meet you down here."

I pulled off my helmet. "Hi, right back." I rubbed at my short, choppy locks, and we grinned at each other. Nope. This wasn't a date date as such. Yes, it was. Oh boy. Grinning and shoulder rubs and...it was a date.

I kicked the stand down and climbed off, plopping my helmet onto the left hand grip. "I've got my spare helmet here for you." I undid the back pannier and pulled out the flashy, eye-waveringly neon green helmet. Steph eyed it, then laughed.

"That's been attacked by a wayward teen with a spray can, hasn't it?"

I laughed and passed the helmet over. "Or something. Not so wayward. One of my Bonsai brainiacs last year did it for me. He had a way with street art. He'd even bonsai in a somewhat morally grey manner."

"How..." Steph giggled. "How can you bonsai in a morally grey manner?"

I pointed to the very tip of my index finger. "That much. Just that much of the plant? Slice, don't cut." I nodded wisely and I don't think Steph could tell if I was being serious or not, because she was definitely holding back a giggle. Then I winked and she let it out, still going as she set the helmet on her head. She reached through the

visor window to brush hair away, then pulled at the tabs underneath. Her fingers fumbled with the catch, so I plucked the two connectors from her hands and clicked the pieces together.

“There you go,” I said quietly. My assistance had brought our bodies into each other’s space. Our gaze held. I reluctantly lowered my hands, my fingers missing their touch on Steph’s soft skin, and I breathed softly. Carefully. Steph’s lips slowly parted, then she stepped back.

“So, a Triumph, hey?” she said, zipping up her own leather jacket.

“Absolutely.” I threw my leg over the bike, kicked up the stand, and held the bike steady while Steph got on the back.

“Do you want to me to hold on to you or use the grip bars behind?” Steph’s voice floated in under my helmet and into my ears. I shivered.

I cleared my throat. “Hang on to me, if you like.” Please say yes. Please say yes.

Steph answered by wrapping her arms about my waist, holding fast to the front of my jacket.

My bike thrummed to life. So did I.

* * *

Popcorn duly placed in between our lush Gold Class seats in the cinema, we both sighed as we raised our footrests, and appreciated the luxury. I’d insisted on paying for the tickets since it was my invitation and because I’d wanted Gold Class, even though it was expensive with its recliner chairs. With a twenty-four patron capacity, it was a well-known fact that kids usually weren’t in attendance because a family

usually had to shell out a hundred bucks or more to purchase Gold Class tickets just to entertain their eyeballs. And that was before buying food.

I like kids. I just don't like kids who are brought up as pause-on-demand, talk through a show, self-entitled munching machines who think that empty chip packets are fidget toys.

Truth be told, I liked teenagers more, but then I could handle anything from surly grunts through to hyperactive excitement with obligatory arm-waving.

"This is lovely, Angel. Thank you," Steph whispered, despite the screen still showing the ads and the 'switch off your phone otherwise you're a dickhead' warning.

"You're welcome," I whispered just as quietly under the volume of the phone company ad that was blaring through the Dolby surround sound. "Wait until you see the movie. The reviews are great."

We reached for a handful of popcorn at the same time and I paused.

"A little bit of a 'Lady and The Tramp' moment, hey?" I laughed awkwardly.

Steph hovered her hand over the bucket. "Somewhat. Touching fingers over popcorn is quite the movie cliché."

Be bold, Angel.

"Well, cliché be damned. I say let's go for the total package. Here, I'll play my part." I dropped my fingers into the bucket as Steph lowered hers, and we laughed softly as our skin became smooth with butter. I plucked out a few pieces of popcorn, tossed them into my mouth, quickly licked my fingers, then found the napkin the staff left on each section divider. I looked up to find Steph studying me in the half light, her

hand still in the top layer of popcorn. Her lips parted, her eyes widened, then she shook her head, and refocused on the bucket, or her hand, or the popcorn, and looking remarkably like she'd been caught catching her breath by my unconscious gesture. I blushed, which was silly because I wasn't the one getting all flustered by finger licking. Perhaps I was flustered because she was flustered. Oh God, this was a bad—good—idea.

Thankfully, the movie started as the cinema was plunged into darkness and we were taken on a sci-fi journey full of animatronics, robots, gun-toting women, and aliens. And not one flustered lesbian to be seen. Except me and the one I was sitting next to.

* * *

“Thanks for the movie,” Steph said as she hauled off her helmet outside her apartment building.

I leant back against my bike. “You’re totally welcome. It was even a good movie which was a bonus because sometimes reviews can be diametrically opposed to the actual film content.”

Steph grinned. “Do you want to come up and...?”

Gah. I hated when that question in particular faded off because I knew the ‘and’ was always going to be sensational and out of reach and the amount of yearning I was experiencing made the ‘and’ full of potential.

“Um, I better get going. We’ve got an early morning delivery and I need to be there to sign it off.”

It was a weak excuse, but I wasn't ready to let Steph know that I would be an enthusiastic participant if we'd decided on the ‘and’.

Steph's face fell a little, which sucked because I guess she was all about the 'and' as well. But then she stepped forward. Close enough for me to see the sparkle in her eyes from the street light.

"Well, thank you again. I'll see you tomorrow at nine." She leaned down a little, and I truly thought she was going for a cheek kiss. Sensible, rational, first-date-platonic cheek kiss. So I moved my head infinitesimally to catch it, but I moved the wrong way and our lips touched for one brief moment.

Explosions.

Oh, yum.

Oh, shit.

I pulled back. "Sorry. That was..."

"No, sorry. I didn't..."

We stared at each other, then laughed.

"Goodnight, Angel. Now stay still this time." Steph gave a singular soft huff-chuckle then kissed my cheek and my entire forty-year-old body broke into goosebumps.

"Bye," she whispered, then walked up the short footpath to the entrance, scanned a card, and turned and waved.

* * *

Work the next day was a funny mixture of smiles that recognised each other and blushes that saw right through our blasé and pedestrian conversations. Because We

Were Not Going To Mention That Kiss.

“It wasn’t even a kiss, for Christ’s sake. It was a mere brushing of lips,” I muttered.

Which is generally known as a kiss.

Oh my god.

Chapter Six

The Moreton Bay Fig

(*Ficus macrophylla*)

An enormous tree with a canopy up to twenty metres wide. If growing one from seed, the Moreton bay fig tree should not be planted in the ground. This tree is very aggressive and its roots can cause a lot of damage. It is perfect for bonsai due to its aggressive growth and ability to be trunk-braided.

Steph was a natural with the customers. She really listened to their needs and wants regarding the plant, where the plant was going, or what the plant was for. That last one was important. I believed in plants having a purpose besides filling an empty corner or sitting on a window sill. Plants could heal. Sometimes they were the reason for a person to stay put on earth.

It sounded all a bit philosophical but both Lucas and Kahlia had jumped on board with my thinking. And now so had Steph. My heart warmed.

Mr G was delivering our homemade hamburgers for lunch—additional pineapple and beetroot for me. Steph's level of wide-eyed appall at my additions made me laugh.

“You're ridiculously Australian,” she said, still staring at my creation.

“And proud of it. Besides, there's no rule book for a hamburger in Australia.”

“No, but I’m sure having both pineapple and beetroot heaped on top of the regular lettuce, cheese, meat, tomato, sauce business is just taking it too far,” she chuckled.

I delivered a one-shoulder shrug at her, grinned, then took an enormous bite, and Steph shook her head then turned to Mr G and delivered a string of Greek. His face lit up and he quickly responded, hands gesturing elaborately now that he’d been relieved of lunch.

“Mr and Mrs G have had some customers mentioning the Walker’s Warehouse getting built. The customers are not happy, particularly the tradies on the reno sites around the corner. Those guys will be there for another six months or so doing the row of heritage townhouses, and apparently they’d be pissed off if Mr G’s place shut up shop.”

I grinned and softly bumped Steph’s shoulder. Her paraphrasing was adorable. I was absolutely positive Mr G hadn’t used the words ‘reno’, and ‘pissed off’.

I caught Lucas eye from a few metres away, where he was barcoding bags of potting mix, and he gave me the thumbs up. For what reason I had no idea. Perhaps because Steph was doing so well with all the customers. But he followed the gesture with a nod and an accompanying smirk.

Impudent, observant teenagers were annoying.

* * *

I was tapping away at the keyboard that afternoon when Steph knocked on the open door.

“Hi,” I said, looking up, then I hit enter and stood. Tough shook himself awake and walked out. Clearly I’d interrupted his slumber under my desk.

“Hi, yourself.” Steph stepped into the office which really only fitted two people in relative squishiness but the person I was squished to was very welcome. I grabbed my takeaway coffee while I waited for her next sentence. The cup was still warm and I sent a silent thank you to Jules and her knowledge of customer’s preferences. Mine was extra hot. I searched for the little drinking hole in the lid with the tip of my tongue and held Steph’s gaze, which I really, truly, hadn’t meant to make flirty or sexy, but the action made Steph’s breath catch, then she exhaled slowly. I was simply trying not to spill coffee on myself, but apparently the tip of my tongue was breath-hitch-worthy.

Steph watched my mouth. She watched my tongue dart out. She watched my throat moving as I swallowed. She watched me and I felt swallowed whole by her gaze.

I lowered the cup.

“Angel, “ Steph started.

“Yes?”

“I like you. You give me goosebumps.”

Unexpected. And lovely because Steph’s goosebumps were reciprocated.

I blushed. Steph was so bold. I thought I was a blunt, unfiltered sort of person, but not when it came to declarations about attraction. I was a little shy when it came to that sort of thing. I preferred subtly declaring attraction through the medium of shivering with joy when on a motorcycle ride with a really pretty woman’s arms wrapped around my waist.

“I like you, too,” I said, picking at the lid of my coffee cup. Brilliant. Next thing I’d be turning the toe of my boot around on the concrete.

“You’re unexpected.” Steph leaned against the desk, resting the palms of her hands on the edge, fingers hanging over. She delivered a slow smile. “I’m attracted to you.” Then she tilted her head. “I love how attraction can’t be helped. It’s just what it is.” She flicked a finger between us. “I can’t help being attracted to you but it’s very okay if it’s not reciprocated.”

I set my cup of coffee on the top of the printer.

“Steph, I’m attracted to you as well. You’re really pretty and lovely and slightly taller than me which is kind of nice.” I blinked, then grimaced at the admission.

Steph smiled.

“And,” I continued. “You seem to look past the bit of roundness going on here.” I waved vaguely at my body. “I’m hardly prime real estate. I’m forty and a bit pudgy with some rough edges, like a house that’s seen a good life so far but the lawns haven’t been mowed for a while.”

Steph paused for a moment, then cracked up, bowing forward so that she nearly fell over. Then she straightened and reached for my hand, squeezing my fingers. “Haven’t you mown your lawns for a while?” She winked and I blushed, quietly dying inside.

“I...It was an analogy,” I muttered.

“Angel.” She held my hand more firmly. “I’m only in my early thirties but I decided long ago that when attraction exists, there’s no use fighting it. It only results in angst, longing, and yearning, and while that’s dramatic and creates great fiction, I choose to tell the person straight up that I’m attracted to them. And.” She held my other hand, bringing us closer together. “It would have been fine if you’d said that the attraction wasn’t mutual. We’d move on.” She tugged me even closer. “But it is mutual.” She

gazed into my eyes.

“By the way,” she said. “I don’t look past all of you. I see you and find the whole package rather delightful. You are gorgeous and generous and kind and funny and I like all of those qualities.”

Steph was so fearless and I wished I could be just as much. I wanted to tell her that I thought she was funny and her humour had me in fits of laughter all day. I wanted to tell her that when the breeze from the streets came through the front doors, her hair moved almost in slow motion and I wanted to touch it.

I had a go at the fearless.

“Well, if we’re giving compliments. You are also gorgeous and?—

Steph cut me off as she stood, leaned forward, and delivered a full on hold-onto-my-shoulders lip-smothering kiss. My mouth then caught up and joined in wholeheartedly.

When she broke away, she slid her hands down my arms and brought them to my palms.

"Sorry. I didn't ask permission."

I huffed a quick laugh, somewhat dazed.

"Permission granted from now on. If you want to, that is."

“Yes, please,” she replied. “I liked our date the other night.” Then she smirked. “And our kiss.”

“It wasn’t meant to be a date date but apparently I’m a delusional lesbian with a huge dose of cluelessness.”

Steph cocked her head, still holding my hands. “Do you want this?”

I hummed. Did I? My body was certainly a fan. My heart said that I should give it a chance. That was all the permission I needed.

“Kisses, and looks-but-not-looks, and brushing against each other accidentally-on-purpose, and dates?”

Steph smiled, then enveloped me in a beautiful hug. “Yes.”

I rested my cheek against her chest. “Okay.” Then I smiled into her apron string. “I like the way you manhandle me.”

There was a cough at the door, and we sprang apart. Well, I did the springing. Steph simply stepped backwards to lean against the desk again. So smooth.

Lucas stood there, grinning.

“Just letting you know that I’m off and I’ll see you next week.”

I nodded, shot finger guns at him, which was seriously uncool but I was flustered, and Lucas knew it because he rolled his lips in to stifle another grin.

“Goodo. See you then,” I replied, slightly manic, my voice pitched higher than normal.

“Okay. Oh, bye Steph.” With another look at me, he disappeared from the doorway.

I repeated my thought from earlier. Impudent, observant teenagers are annoying.

Steph laughed at my expression and delivered another lovely kiss.

* * *

On Saturday, I found my gaze drifting over to Steph who was chatting and laughing with Lucas at the front counter. We'd had a few kisses during the week similar to those first ones in the office. One memorable moment occurred at the small loading dock at the back roller door. I was sitting on the bars of the miniature forklift—the kind that has a one-person plate for standing on at the back and hand-held operating device and the capacity to lift a pallet of bags of soil, etcetera. Steph grinned, reached for the hand-held controller, and pressed it to raise the forklift arms. I gripped the edge of the steel bar to steady myself, not only because of the bar's movement but also because I felt myself liquifying in Steph's intense gaze. Within a few seconds we were at eye level. Steph pushed the stop button, then hung it over the handle. She stepped forward so that I was compelled to open my legs to let her into my space.

“Hi there,” I said, grinning. “So this is what it's like to have your head in the clouds.”

Steph laughed. “Hardly. You're a head shorter. That's all.” She pressed into my body and I squeezed my legs.

“I don't know what this is but I'm enjoying you.”

“Me, too.”

I patted the forklift bar. “Probably shouldn't use business equipment like this. We could be breaking some sort of workplace health and safety law.”

We shared a grin, then I put my hands on either side of Steph's head and brought her

lips to mine. It was a gentle kiss: a one-two-three pressing of lips, until I couldn't wait anymore. I slipped one hand around the back of Steph's neck and held her against me, held the kiss, held her cheek with my other hand, then dipped my tongue into her mouth. Just a touch, and she gasped. I'd never felt anything like this before. Sure I'd had girlfriends because of that common attraction situation. But the attraction with Steph was lightning. I couldn't help myself. We weren't just colleagues or friends now. We were something else. Affection was seeping in.

I shivered at the memory, then returned my attention to the Bonsai Brains and found that Kadee had followed my gaze to the front of the store. She'd paused her tiny clipping and wetting of her base sponge to deliver a tiny nod.

"Does Lucas work every Saturday?" she asked.

"Yep. Every Saturday and Thursday afternoon."

Kadee lowered her voice to a murmur. "Would you introduce me? I can't do it myself. He'll probably think I'm pathetic. I'll stumble over words and things. I've heard him talking to the customers and he's so smart, and I'm a nobody."

My heart broke. "Kadee," I whispered. "You're not a nobody at all."

"Nope. Definitely a somebody," Benji piped up, joining our quiet conversation from where he sat next to me. He'd stopped raising his hand to speak which was a positive step. "I think your idea is excellent, Kadee. Lucas respects Angel and that means your introduction will transfer the respect across to Lucas." He waved his hand to make his point, his bracelets jingling and clicking together. "Not that he'd only respect you because of Angel's say so. He'll work out how great you are all on his own. He seems like the sort of guy who would pay attention to people." Then he gave a definitive single nod.

It was one of the longest passage of conversation that Benji had uttered in ages. He nodded again, his floppy blonde locks dancing about, then bent his head over his work.

Kadee and I made eye contact.

“What Benji said,” I answered quietly. Kadee had a fan club consisting of me and Benji and whether she liked it or not, we’d be waving pompoms at the edges of her bravery.

I was touched that Kadee wanted me to act almost as an old-fashioned chaperone. I tried to fulfil my duties when the teens had packed up and were heading to the door.

“Hey, Lucas,” I called, grabbing his attention. “Kadee was telling me that the Moreton Bay Fig would make an excellent addition to our nursery.” I smiled at Kadee. “A *Ficus macrophylla* in miniature, right?”

Kadee took an enormous breath. “Absolutely,” she said, the air in her lungs whooshing out. “It’s capable of being tamed and cultivated.”

Lucas nodded in thought. “It could, you know. What about the Port Jackson Fig?”

I took a small step back so that Kadee was on her own. I willed her on.

“I guess so. It’s more dense than the others.” She took a step forward, and I cheered internally.

Go, Kadee!

“I’m just going over to the azaleas to commune with the tan bark,” I said. “Safe sleeps, Kadee.”

Then I surreptitiously glided away.

Steph caught up to me when I'd rounded the corner.

"That was sweet. You're rather lovely, Angel Whitlock." She grinned and reached for my hand. "I'm glad you let that part of you show. Some people don't and make others dig deep just to discover it."

"That's me. What you see is what you get," I replied, and shrugged, swinging our joined hands.

"I like what I see." Steph gave me a top to toe scan and I shivered with delight in all the best places.

I blushed.

"Why do you wish safe sleeps to the Bonsai kids?" Steph reached for my other hand. I liked hand-holding. It was intimate, as if our palms were having their own little tryst while the rest of our bodies could maintain a whole conversation.

"Those kids have an hour with each other on Saturdays. Hopefully in that hour their demons don't sit on their shoulders and whisper horrible things. But the rest of the day? Those demons steal those kids, so why should the night take them as well?"

Steph blinked, her eyes glistening. "You are seriously wonderful," she whispered, then leaned forward to kiss me.

Chapter Seven

Lemon Silver Cloud Bottlebrush

(*Callistemon pallidus*)

A very adaptable species as it can be found in all soil types and locations. It is a dwarf form of the larger wild *Callistemon* species, around head height when mature, although it can be trimmed to be even further smaller. Lemon Silver Cloud Bottlebrush has plum-coloured soft new leaves that age to silver-grey, contrasting with its small pale flowers.

“They wouldn’t be instructional videos, Angel.”

Steph was in my office again, having delivered a coffee and kisses. I grinned, then wrinkled my brow.

“Videos?”

“You’re not listening,” Steph sighed.

“Very difficult to listen when my ears are filled with the sound of blood rushing about sending messages that a beautiful woman is kissing my lips and touching my tongue with hers.” I shrugged innocently.

Steph laughed and gently swatted my shoulder. “If you don’t listen, I’ll withdraw the kissing.”

I gasped. “No! I’ll be a good girl.”

That hadn’t meant to have sounded as flirty as it did but the way it made Steph’s eyes darken was wonderful. I wondered if we’d get to a moment when I could say ‘good girl’ again and receive a similar response. The idea made the hair on my skin rise with anticipation.

“Right. The listening,” I continued, and pulled out a plastic milk crate, upturned it, then sat and gestured Steph to the office chair.

“I was saying that someone, probably Lucas, should make some fun videos about the plants here. Maybe put together some reels.”

“I’m not opposed to it as such, but it’s a fad and I don’t think it’s going to increase customers.” I shook my head then looked a little sheepish. “I don’t want to look like we’re copying Walker’s QR TikTok business model.”

Steph huffed. “Believe me. That QR thing is not a business model.” Then she studied me. “You think your customers wouldn’t increase?”

“Foot traffic might, but I’m positive that sales wouldn’t increase. I reckon most of the people carrying hashtag handbags will be tyre-kickers.”

Steph nearly fell off the chair with laughter. “Hashtag handbags!”

* * *

Having persuaded Steph that Dig It wasn’t hash-tagging anyone, I went off to set sprinklers and the mist system for the ferns. It wasn’t as if I was violently opposed to the idea of a video or two. It just seemed like a waste of time.

I shrugged as I reset the timer to daylight savings time, then paused to contemplate Steph. Steph and the kissing situation. It was all a bit fast. One minute she's starting at Dig It—six weeks ago—then the next minute, she's kissing me senseless. Attraction had no rules. It was chaos in your loins.

Steph said she needed to leave right on the dot at the end of her shift each day for the next two weeks. Something about tending to some business. Fair enough. It wasn't any of my business to know what her business was.

My pausing allowed me to peer around the dwarf sickle ferns and stare at Steph. That blonde hair. That slim figure. Those expensive-looking clothes that I couldn't dissuade her from wearing to a job which generally meant communing with potting mix. Then I locked eyes with her, catching her staring right back. Probably just as lasciviously.

Whenever we were together, we brushed arms. Hands. We'd caught each other sneaking looks, like now. I'd kissed the top of her head yesterday when I found her squatting down, surrounded by terracotta pots. It was warm and comfortable and new and I loved it. I hadn't ever felt this seen, or had this much attraction aimed at me as I had from Steph.

Maybe this attraction train was going somewhere. Maybe the train had come to the end of its line and stopped indefinitely at the fun and yum station. Who knew? But it was delicious.

Jules thought it was hilarious.

"Told you," she said the next day, leaning on her counter.

"No need to be rude," I retorted, sipping on my coffee. I waved to Pip who was setting up her cards. "Apparently Steph and I are enjoying each other's company."

“Apparently?” Jules cocked her head

“Yes. Apparently.”

“You haven’t talked about it?”

I sipped again. “Yes. Of course we have. We’re adults, for god’s sake. Steph said that you can’t help attraction and I agreed then she kind of said that just enjoying that attraction was enough.”

“Kind of said...” Jules threw me a slow smile. “Sounds like a proper adult conversation.”

“Shut up.” I gave her a ‘no hard feelings’ eye-roll and headed back to the store.

Where I found a bloke in a tweed cap standing at the front counter.

“Hello. Do you work here?”

I looked down at my gardening apron with Dig It emblazoned across the front. I guess it could have crossed his mind that I’d stolen the apron and worn it about the suburb as an accessory.

“Yep. I’m Angel. How can I help?”

I spotted Steph who was walking towards me, then, as the bloke took his cap off to reveal a buzz cut hairdo, she stopped in her tracks, then spun around and marched away so fast that the fronds of the nearby plants swayed in her wake. I blinked. That was weird.

I turned towards the obtuse bloke.

He smiled, and suddenly a flash of recognition zipped through my brain.

“My name’s Harry Kirlew. I’m the state managing director of Walker’s Warehouses.” He smiled again. A lizard’s smile. Slimy and liable to bite. A Yes Man.

Taking my gaze away from his disingenuous smile, I looked at his hand which he’d stuck out in greeting. I oversaw a mini debate in my head between disgust at shaking Harry’s hand and manners. Manners won out, and after a brief touching of palms, I barely refrained from wiping my hand down the side of my jeans.

“I remember you from the council meeting. What brings you here, then, Harry?”

He smiled again. It was the sort of smile that looked like he’d been to Facial Gesture Gym to focus on that particular mouth movement. “Well, Angel. I do think we might have got off on the wrong foot.”

I tilted my head. “Really? I reckon my feet are firmly pointed in the right direction.”

“Look, I understand how?—”

“You know what? You don’t, actually. You don’t understand how it is. This place...” I waved my hand. “It’s my life, and your warehouse is going to kill it.”

Essentially true.

Then I asked the obvious question. “Why are you here?”

“Ah. Well, I wanted to have a reasonable discussion and also, of course, to visit your establishment—all of your establishments—to get the real story, so to speak. It was mentioned at the council meeting—I believe it was you, perhaps—that we really should glean an understanding of how local businesses would be impacted.”

I blinked at him in disbelief. “Glean? What have you gleaned so far, Harry?”

“I see just how much community is here and I value that as an outstanding element to the structure of our society.” It sounded like he’d flipped a switch and an auto response unit took over. It was pure advertisement speak.

Which was apt because then he handed me the project brochure for the warehouse. It was smooth and glossy, just like Harry. And Benjamin Walker for that matter. I flipped through it, feeling the silkiness of the expensive paper, noting the stock photos of a laughing couple who’d found another laughing couple and now they were laughing together. Why were people in stock photos always laughing? The whole brochure was fake and felt very much like I imagined a Walker’s manager would behave if they were schmoozing a new client for the circular saws display of the tools section.

I handed it back to him.

“No, thanks,” I said.

He frowned, his eyebrows in that same pointy, irritated angle as from the meeting. “Look, we all want the best outcome here. This new warehouse will be Walker Industries’ biggest. It’ll be our flagship, and I thought I’d visit to see your wonderful establishments. Partake in a coffee. Perhaps purchase lunch then buy a...” He peered at one of the potted plants with its label sticking out of the soil. “Grevillea, while I was at it. I also wanted to find out if you would reconsider your complaint.”

I registered two things. Craig’s awesome cranky letter had been received, and we were the only opposition that Walker’s was up against. I was instantly proud of our little group.

Harry continued, inhaling deeply and seeming to grow another inch in his already six

feet or so. “It would be detrimental to your businesses if you continued with your complaint.”

I blinked. “It will be more detrimental if we con—” I blinked again. “Did you just threaten me?”

Harry harrumphed then jammed his cap back on his head. “No, of course not. I was simply imparting business advice.” Then after a long stare and a tight smile, he wished me a good afternoon and strolled from the store.

What the actual hell?

* * *

I found Steph in the office.

“Are you okay? You looked like you saw a ghost.” I held her hand, and cupped her cheek with my other hand.

“No. No ghosts. Just...I thought he looked like someone I used to know...” She held my gaze. “From ages ago and therefore not relevant, but I wasn’t about to engage in a conversation. Sorry for being weird.”

“Look, I’ve seen weird in my life and you, Steph Thatcher, are not weird. So don’t worry about it. I’m glad you didn’t come over. It was Harry What’s-his-face from Walker’s . He was basically threatening me with a smear campaign if we didn’t withdraw our letter of complaint.”

Steph straightened, eyes ablaze. “Oh my god, he didn’t! That asshole!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. He was careful, though. He didn’t say it outright. It was

more like,” I paused. “A join-the-dots to get the answer.”

“But that’s absolutely illegal, almost.” Steph paced in the little bit of floor space that the office had, then tossed her hands, all the while muttering to herself. She came to a dead stop in front of me. “What were they thinking?”

I shrugged.

Steph grabbed the sides of my head and planted a big kiss on my mouth. “Do you mind if I finish early? I have something I need to attend to.”

I shrugged. “Sure. It’s only another hour until closing. I can’t imagine a stampede of customers in that period of time.”

* * *

There was a stampede during the week, however. Each day, a constant stream of people filtered through the front door. Some customers. Some browsers.

I wondered why until Lucas waved his phone in front of me on Thursday afternoon.

“Look at this!” He wriggled his hand, which I grabbed to hold the phone still.

“What am I looking at?”

“Us. Dig It. We’re on Insta. We’ve even got an account.”

I plucked the phone out of his hand and tapped the account icon. It wasn’t Dig It.

“ NatsNatives ?”

“Isn’t it cool?” enthused the young customer at the counter. Her friend nodded in confirmation. “It’s that tag PlantsGiveMePower , like an affirmation, right? Think of all that oxygen!” Then the teens grabbed their pots and bounced out through the exit.

I stared at Lucas, who grinned.

“Well, yeah. Not technically Dig It , but NatsNatives mentions us and does these cool dancing plant videos, like stop motion, which people are copying in their own vids and tagging the account. That tag, PlantsGiveMePower , means we’re getting business from dancing potted plants.”

He laughed, then doubled over as he caught my expression. “Angel, this is good news. Don’t be old.”

I glared at him. “I’m not being old. I’m being confused.” I circled my finger at my face. “See? Confused.” I returned my gaze to the screen. The plant, a callistemon , was demonstrating a wonderful interpretation of the Macarena to the dulcet tones of Jennifer Lopez. Viewers could tap the screen to pause the dancing and read the info boxes which gave handy bite-sized hints on how to care for that particular native plant and how it related to mental health.

All the facts were correct. It was very clever, very catchy, and very generous. Whoever Nat was, they were delivering customers to my door.

* * *

“Have you worked out who your Insta angel is, yet?” Pip slapped my hand as I moved one of the Tarot cards.

I was sitting opposite her at the Tarot table at the far edge of Jule’s cafe. Once a month, Pip conducted community forecasts. Everyone in our little tribe had their life

map checked or whatever Pip decided was the most appropriate activity for her practice. It was my turn in her roster, and because I was somewhat of a skeptic, picking at the cards to get the process moving along was par for the course. I curled my fingers away at Pip's soft physical admonishment.

"No idea but it's hilarious seeing a few teens or twenty-somethings come in to take selfies with plants."

Pip laughed, then sobered. "Right. What's your question?" she asked, staring at me intently.

"I don't have one."

"Fine. I'll give you a question. Repeat after me. Where is this mooning over Steph heading?" Pip picked up the first deck of cards.

"I don't want to know where it's heading. I like where it is right now," I said, ignoring her instruction.

"Angel."

"Okay, fine. Where is this thing I have for Steph heading?" I looked at the deck in Pip's hand as I asked my question. I knew the drill. "Three?" I asked, knowing that Pip's expertise ranged from simple readings through to multiple card spreads for sessions that lasted up to half an hour or more.

"Lovely," Pip said, her black curls bobbing in a symphony of spirals as she shuffled the cards. Then she placed the pile in front of me and watched like a hawk as I lifted a third of the cards with my left hand, placed the new stack next to the original one, then took another third to place it on the other side.

“So, three today,” Pip confirmed. “Let’s do a ‘defining ourselves in chaos’ session.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so dramatic.”

“And you’re so much fun,” she laughed, then wiggled her finger at the cards. “Come on.”

I turned over the first three cards of each pile and laid them in front of me while Pip collected the remainder, then we contemplated what message I was about to receive.

“Have you breathed?” Pip asked, seriously.

“Yes, Pip. I’m breathing.”

“Angel...I’m going to assume your snarkiness is because you’re afraid of what the cards will say. I know you’re a skeptic, but I was right about Tough, wasn’t I?”

“I’m not afraid,” I denied. “I’m like I always am. I have a healthy dose of?—”

“You’re afraid.”

“No. How could I be afraid of something lovely like kisses and?—”

Pip gave a delighted squeak. “You have?”

“Well, she kissed me first. A couple of weeks ago. Then there’s been kisses and nice moments where we’ve shared long looks and—” I snapped my mouth shut.

Pip grinned. “You don’t need the cards. Looks like you know what you’re doing.”

I laughed, then relaxed my shoulders. “No, I need the cards. I have no idea what this

thing with Steph is. Do I want to take it further? Maybe. Do I want it to be a thing? Also maybe. She's very forward and I love it in a breathtaking sort of way."

"You're a butch lesbian who's shy yet utterly thrilled because a bold femme-adjacent woman kissed you."

I frowned at the cards, then frowned at Pip. "I don't like these sessions."

Gales of laughter from Pip.

"Come on," she encouraged through her last remaining giggles. "Lean into your intuition. You know the cards aren't fortune-telling. They're for personal discovery. Your first card represents what you can do to surrender to the the change in your life. Your second offers direction on caring for yourself during this process, and the third card serves as a guide for centring yourself in the midst of this change."

I squinted at her. "Right."

"You've had a three-card spread before so you know it's linear. Let's look at card one."

We studied the beautiful drawing of a horse and chariot.

"Ooh. The Chariot. Nice," whispered Pip.

"What?"

"Because it's facing you, it means the drive for adventure. Transporting you toward a new relationship or career, although the chariot can also show an important journey, and learning. The horses represent libido." I hummed at Pip's raised eyebrows. "So there is also the possibility of sexual adventure here. The horses echo the dark and

light aspects of the journey ahead.” Pip delivered a deep breath. “Clear?”

“Very. Is there more?”

“Oh, yes. The cards always say more than a simple statement. Look.” She pointed to the dark and light horses. “Ego and arrogance bring problems to your journey.”

“Just as well I’m not full of myself.”

Pip’s face was neutral. “It means don’t close doors just because you think you know it all.”

“Blunt.” I pursed my lips. “Can we go to card two? It’s Temperance,” I chortled.

Pip grunted. “Yes. Well, this is good for you. Caring for yourself, remember? Patience is essential for the control of volatile influences and opposing demands, like the council complaint, maybe. This card says to use your experience and diplomacy to harmonise conflict and keep projects moving forward.”

I huffed a laugh. “Diplomacy isn’t a strong suit.”

“Rubbish. You are diplomatic when you need to be. But,” she tapped the card, “you have to watch for moments of reconciliation so that relationships can be repaired.”

“Who am I going to piss off this time?”

Pip studied me. “Protect yourself, Angel. Maybe it’s you that gets hurt rather than someone else.”

I contemplated the idea. Who was going to hurt me? I couldn’t see any possible candidates.

“What’s this one say? The Hermit?”

“Third card, so a guide for centring yourself in the midst of this change. The Hermit is for circumstances that dictate you spend time alone. You seek wisdom, but to find it you need to distance yourself from friends and lovers. Time alone will create perspective, and encourage healing. The Hermit shows a recuperation period.”

We stared at the card in silence for a few seconds. Then I looked up. “I’m going to be doing a fair bit of reflection soon, hey?”

“Looks like it. Doesn’t hurt to sometimes.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“So, that’s it. Interesting check up, Angel. Thank you. I’ll see you next month.” She sounded so much like a medical professional that I laughed, then pushed back my chair and gave her a brief hug.

“Thanks, Pip. I’ll write all that in my journal.”

That was something else Pip insisted upon: a journal for our Tarot sessions. I filled mine in just for curiosity sake. It was interesting to flip back a few pages and reflect on how accurate or not each session had been. Surprisingly, many were dead right.

Chapter Eight

River Wattle

(*Acacia cognata* Fettucini)

A compact form of *Acacia cognata* and makes an attractive foliage plant all year round with its variegated weeping foliage which gives a wavy appearance. Small ball-shaped flowers appear in spring. Fairly self-sufficient.

“...a small native bush to put on my balcony. Something not too outlandish.”

“Got the very plant right over here.” Lucas gestured for the woman to follow him and I blended into the fernery to eavesdrop on his interaction. They stopped at a collection of mini natives potted into blue ceramic pots. “This is the *Acacia cognata* Fettucini . Pretty hard to kill if that’s what you’re after as well.”

The woman laughed. “I’m not too bad at keeping plants alive, but an anti-death plant sounds self-sufficient and hardy. Thanks.”

“No worries. Which one do you want? That one,” he pointed to a pot at the back, “looks the healthiest, although no plant would be game to be sick on Angel’s watch.”

I rolled my lips in.

“Angel?” The woman reached over and picked up the plant.

“The owner.” Lucas began walking towards the counter. “Did you want anything else?”

I knew I had a unicorn working for me because Lucas was incredibly chatty, and based on what I knew, teenage boys generally only spoke in a melodic sequence of grunts.

The woman waved her debit card over the card reader, waited for the beep of joy from the machine, and picked up the potted plant.

I drifted forward as she left.

“You’re going to need a raise if you continue schmoozing the customers like that.”

He grinned. “I’m emulating my mighty leader.”

I laughed. “Just to forewarn you. I’m holding at bay a very interested Pip who can’t wait to Tarot you.”

He squinted. “Is it my turn?”

“Nope. But apparently you and Kadee having coffee last week has piqued her interest and she is desperate to see what the cards say.”

“Oh, geez. Okay. I’ll drop by this afternoon, otherwise she’ll bug me to death.”

“Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.” He leaned against the counter.

“How’s it going with Kadee?” I’d gone into mum-mode. Not just for Kadee, but for

Lucas. They were my kids, like all the Bonsai Brainiacs, and my interest in this budding relationship was rather parental.

He pursed his lips, then folded his arms. “It’s nice. I like her a lot. I know that she’s one of yours and I’m—we’re taking it slow. Lots of conversation and coffee. And cake.” He grinned, then sobered. “I’ll take care of her heart, no matter where things go, Angel.”

“I know.” I patted his bicep. “Take care of yours, too.”

* * *

Speaking of taking care of hearts, Steph turned the heat up a notch a bit later in the week.

“Are you interested in dinner at my place?” Steph’s mouth quirked up into a soft smile.

I leaned over my hands that were splayed on the potting table. “Hmm. Let’s see. A hot woman who keeps kissing me wants to have dinner with me at her house.” I hummed and looked at the roof. “Ooh. I’m not?—”

Steph took a step towards the table, caught up her shoulder-length blonde hair in her fingertips, and smoothed it behind her ears, then leaned over her hands as well so our faces were brought closer.

“I can guarantee excellent food. I make a great paella.”

I brought my gaze back and looked into her eyes. “Will there be dessert?”

“Depends on what type of dessert you like.”

Our gaze never wavered. “I don’t think I’m ready for that type of dessert yet,” I whispered.

Steph brought her lips to brush against mine. “Just as well I’m not ready either.”

Our lips touched again, then we pushed and softly pulled in the timeless actions of a toe-curling kiss. Then she slipped her tongue into my mouth and I nearly levitated through the roof.

I pulled away, breathing quickly.

“Dinner sounds great. I’ll bring dessert.” I ran my finger over the knuckles in her hand. “The edible kind.” Then I jerked my hand away. “Oh! The, you know, the bought-from-the-store edible kind.”

I must have blushed a decent shade of crimson, because Steph laughed softly then kissed me again. “I am enjoying you. I’ll cook. You bring dessert.” Then she picked up my hand and drew circles in my palm. “How about tomorrow night at seven? You know where I live. Buzz for apartment eight.”

The hand-holding, finger-spirals, whisper-murmuring, and eye-contact were sending goosebumps rippling across my skin. Steph spotted the hairs standing to attention on my arm. She narrowed her eyes and grinned, then she leaned past my face to whisper in my ear. “You’re not the only one with reactions like that, Angel Whitlock.”

Gah. What was it about a woman saying my full name that reduced me to a liquified mess? So damn sexy.

Steph left, after another soft kiss, and I stared at the table not really looking at anything at all. I wondered when I’d be ready for the fancy dessert. Maybe soon. Steph was incredibly desirable, incredibly sexy, and it wasn’t as if I was a lost cause

in the bedroom. In fact, I regarded myself quite skilled. But this thing with Steph felt like it needed tending with soft movements. I had no idea why.

Meanwhile, I needed to think of a dessert and a gift. A gift that said, “Hi. Thanks for the invitation. I like you. This is all very fast but I like the speed. Please put your lips on my lips and maybe other bits. You’re so ridiculously attractive. Dinner was awesome.”

I wondered what type of gift said all that.

* * *

It was Ted who gave me the answer.

“Is she a reader?”

I squinted at him. “Based on absolutely no information whatsoever, I guess so.”

“Books are always appreciated. Even if the person doesn’t read them, they generally like the way the books look artsy on a bookshelf.”

I laughed. “I reckon I’m right that Steph will enjoy reading what I give her.” I slid past a pile of books precariously perched on the edge of the step ladder and wandered up to Ted’s small but growing queer fiction collection. I ran my finger along the spines. It was a visceral sensation of happiness when I huddled into a shelf, touched the books, and angled each one out so the title was revealed before I pushed it back into place.

“Ooh,” I whispered, tugging out the new Milena McKay. I propped that against the line of books, then chose a sapphic thriller and a romantic comedy that sounded like fun after reading the blurb. I bundled all three into my hands and went to pay.

“No need, Angel love.”

“Yes need, Ted darling,” I countered, glaring at him, and he laughed.

“Righto, then. Next time I visit Dig It, I expect to pay as well.”

I tapped my card, then held up the three books as a sort of salute. “No chance.”

* * *

I opened the pannier and grabbed the bag holding the hand-crafted vanilla bean ice cream and the books wrapped in silvery paper and a crossed ribbon, then I made my way into the foyer of Steph’s apartment block.

I stopped when I got to the panel of intercom buttons bearing people’s names. Apartment eight’s button was nestled in amongst the thirty-two options listed in four vertical lines. I blinked. Thirty-two apartments. The building was a decent size but seemed much taller than only eight storeys if I was working on a standard apartment block arrangement of four units per floor.

I walked back out onto the footpath, looked up, and silently counted. Sixteen. That meant only two apartments per floor. Wow. I was right. This area was swanky.

I wandered inside, mentally preparing myself for Steph’s huge apartment. A tiny wave of imposter syndrome reared its head.

“It’s Steph and she inherited the apartment and it’s not her fault she lives like a rich person, because she doesn’t act like it, so shut up,” I mumbled to myself as I poked at the button next to the name ‘Thatcher’.

“Hi,” said Steph, her voice tinny in the intercom. “Come on up.”

After a brief trip in the lift, and a knock on her door, I was welcomed with the lovely sight of Steph in jeans, a light cashmere jumper, and bare feet. Swoon.

I pointed to her feet. “You have a beach in your apartment?”

Steph looked down and laughed. “No, but I do have wooden floors.”

“Ooh. Yes, please.” I toed off my low cut motorcycle boots, picked them up, then crossed the threshold and left the boots inside the door with my jacket.

I handed her the bag and the parcel. “These are for you. Dessert. The fancy kind of ice cream that comes in teeny tubs so I bought two. And the parcel is to say thank you.”

“For what?”

I stepped closer, my socks sliding a little on the polished floorboards. I reached up and pulled her face towards mine, then lightly kissed her lips. “For dinner. For you. For just because.” I peppered her lips with more soft kisses at each statement. She grinned, then hugged me, the bag holding the ice cream swishing softly at my back.

“Well, I accept any and all gifts. Thank you.” She pointed into the apartment. “Make yourself at home. I’ll pop this into the freezer.”

Making myself at home meant following Steph to the kitchen because I had taken a look at the lounge room on the way and it looked like a space that needed a tour before making myself comfortable. Knick knacks, photos, books—yay!—and beautiful furniture. The kitchen was just as lush and just as homey. I hitched myself onto a stool at the marble bench and cupped my chin in my hands, then Steph dragged around another stool and mimicked my pose. Our faces were close.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked quietly.

“Lamb shanks in red wine.” Steph raised an eyebrow

“Really? That’s one of my favourite meals.” Steph was ticking boxes. So, so many boxes. The other type of dessert was a strong possibility.

“Do you want to open your gift?” I asked, and Steph’s face broke into a delighted smile.

“Absolutely.” She sprang off the stool and fossicked about in the second-from-the-top cutlery drawer, then stood, brandishing a pair of scissors like an adorable serial killer.

Snipping aside the ribbon, she tore through the wrapping and squeaked at the books.

“I haven’t got any of these! Thank you.” Then she pointed the scissors at me. “Ted?”

“Yes. I’ve convinced him that the entire sapphic population of Melbourne will flood into his shop if he stocked all indie and small press authors as well as the mainstream ones. He wholeheartedly agreed and prepared sandbags of books ready for the onslaught.”

Steph leaned over the counter and kissed me.

“Thank you. You’re very sweet.”

“I’m a giant marshmallow.”

“Yes.” She giggled and grabbed my hand, leading me into the lounge. I was right. It did require a tour. There were pictures of her parents, of places she’d travelled to, piles of books arranged artfully and one bookshelf holding sapphic books where

every title was categorised by trope.

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. I take my pseudo-librarian role seriously,” Steph threw a mock frown at me, and I laughed. It was lovely. The hand-holding, the shoulders bumping, the occasional kiss, the quiet voices. I loved all of it.

Steph ran her finger along the spines of the books, then made little spaces to house her new novels.

“You should wear sexy glasses when you do that. It’d be like you’re cosplaying a trope.”

Steph laughed. “I should. Too bad I don’t need glasses, but it’s definitely a thought. Maybe on your next visit, I’ll shuffle a shelf or two then sort the books wearing tweed and lens-free spectacles.”

I looked at her, then fell about laughing. “Oh my god. The specifics.”

Steph joined in with laughter of her own. “Right. Dinner.”

Still with my hand clutched in hers, she brought me to the dining table. Scandinavian piece, I guessed.

“Sit. I’ll bring it over.”

Our conversation meandered throughout dinner. Catching glances, smiling, making serious eye-contact that, if we’d held it for too long, would have let our food go cold. As it was, we took our time to get to know each other over the meal.

Much later, as I ate a luscious mouthful of the creamy dessert, I asked the question that had been buzzing in my head for the evening. I'd spotted a framed picture of Steph's parents but I'd not seen one photo of a man who looked like Steph anywhere in the lounge or kitchen. "What does your brother do? You rarely mention him at all."

Steph looked at her placemat. "Oh..." A shadow seemed to pass over her face, then she stood to collect our bowls. "He's in building development." She gave me a tight smile, then bustled into the kitchen.

I nodded slowly. Okay. That was deliberately vague. Fancy address, brother in a potentially lucrative career, fluent Greek. I felt like, with my question, I'd helped close some shutters into Steph Thatcher's heart and mind and that wasn't what I wanted at all. But suddenly, with all the kisses and long looks and handholding and soft touches on arms and backs, I wanted to know everything about her. I knew she was beautiful, sexy, hot, empathetic and just a good person, but I wanted to know the who. The when. The why. The how. All of the how. Including how she'd gotten under my skin in the most sensual manner possible.

If I wasn't careful, I'd be Steph's something, and I'd been burned before when I'd been someone's something. Yet how had she become so important to me in such a short time?

"Do you want a tour or is that a bit bougie?" Steph was at my shoulder.

I stood, and reached for her hand. Steph was nearly always the one instigating the hand-holding. I wanted my fair share.

She led me to the study which contained the overflow bookcase.

"I have an addiction," she said, shaking her head with a grin.

“That’s okay. I collect plants. It’s why I sell them all. So I can buy more.”

She laughed.

“This is my room.”

It was muted pastel and white. I thought I knew enough about Steph to say that the room was very Steph. Classy, feminine but not overly. King size bed without fifty-gazillion pillows sprawled across the top of it

She waved at the bathroom door. “Toilet, bathroom, laundry, etc.”

Then just as we were about to breeze past what had to be the spare bedroom. Steph paused, shook her head, then tugged on my hand to lead me away.

“You okay?” I pulled her back.

“It’s just the spare room so no big deal.”

I paused. “Okay. Cool.” I stepped forward to make my way back to the kitchen, but Steph pressed her hand to my chest. She seemed to come to a decision.

“Promise you won’t be mad.”

“Depends on the thing. What am I not being mad about?”

She let go of my hand and opened the door. I was right. It was a spare bedroom but the bed had been pushed up against a wall so there was more floor space. There was a rather expensive-looking camera on a tripod, which was aimed at a portable green screen and a native Lilly Pilly had been arranged in the middle of a piece of black matting. A large roll of florist’s wire sat behind the tripod.

I looked quizzically at Steph who was holding her hands together, fingers entwined.

“So, you know that idea I had about the reels on Insta and the videos on TikTok? I know you said that it would be a waste of time, but you didn’t say no. Not really. But I wanted to have an attempt at doing it.” Steph’s hands and fingers were tightening their grip on themselves. “If it was a complete failure then so be it. But it hasn’t been. So NatsNatives presents info about native plants and mental health and accompanies it all with a dancing plant.” She ran out of breath.

I narrowed my eyes at Steph, then gazed at the equipment. “O-kay.” I drew out the word.

“Well, that right there is NatsNatives . Me. I’m Nat or my mother was. Natalie. She was the green thumb and I just thought that if...” Steph faded off because my face must have shown the conflicting emotions across my face. Surprise, slight sense of betrayal, sympathy. Probably impressed as well, when I really thought about it. All in a continuous loop.

“And no one else knows?”

“No. I nearly didn’t show you tonight. I debated all day and only just then at the door, did I know you’d be okay with this.” She grimaced. “I think.” Then she sighed. “I didn’t want you to think it was silly.”

I gently disentangled her fingers and held her hands. “I think it’s inspired. So much better than the QR TikTok videos thing that Benjamin Walker was going on about. This is educational, and fun, Steph. I really thought it would be a waste of time, but I was wrong,” I admitted. “It’s perfect.”

Steph blew out a breath.

I pointed to the little Lilly Pilly. “Is this your next star?” I asked with a wink, and space and time did that little narrowing and widening thing that they do when moments happen between two people who are highly attracted to each other. Steph’s lips parted slightly at my wink. Well, then. I added winking to the things that made Steph’s motor run.

“Yes. I’m going to add some text boxes about the spoons theory. The one about limited energy resources and how spoons represent both the physical and mental load required to complete tasks. This video’s about not taking too much on, as a human or as a plant.”

I stared at the plant. The whole idea was so clever, and to have made such a snap judgement about the videos’ worth simply because I didn’t want it to look like what Walker’s was doing was just plain stubborn.

Turning back to Steph, I blew out a breath. “You’re amazing.”

Steph grinned. “Want to help me make this video?”

“Okay.” I was starting to feel like I needed to be in Steph’s personal space every minute of every hour. Not just because of the kisses and sexy glances. But for the smiles, and the jokes, and the general goodness of her. The Lego block of attraction had joined with admiration, and now affection. Steph was addictive.

I was instructed to stand behind the camera and press the shutter on Steph’s command. She made minuscule adjustments to the tiny twigs and branches after each time I created a photo that wirelessly arrived on the computer monitor on the desk at the edge of the room.

“There. That should do it. I’ll put the info boxes in tomorrow,” Steph said, standing and brushing her hands over her thighs. She beckoned me to the monitor and we

stood, bent over, heads nearly touching, as the software created a hilarious stop-motion video of a Lilly Pilly executing an extremely accurate version of the oscillating impact sprinkler dance.

I chuckled again then turned my head towards her, nearly brushing her cheek with my nose. "This is so cool," I murmured. She drew back and smiled.

"I'm so glad you're fine with this. As I said, my mum was the green thumb, and she was really into the idea that plants could heal people, or at least bring some comfort." She leaned into me and together we stood, holding each other's hands and smiling softly.

Then I lifted our combined hands to my lips.

"I'm not mad at all." I kissed her knuckles. "In fact, it's kind of a turn-on." Then I shook my head in wonder. Steph was awesome. I released her hands and lifted mine to place them lightly on her waist. "I think you're terrific," I whispered. It was time to be bold. Shy, yet bold. I slowly slid my hands from Steph's waist up, up to her ribs, then cupped her breasts.

The little hitch in her breath just about dissolved my kneecaps.

But I wanted more.

I angled my head so my kiss, which had started off as an 'I like you' kiss, turned into one that advertised 'I'd like to fuck you'. My hands twisted into Steph's hair. Her fingers wove themselves into mine. Then my hands were on her breasts, thumbs brushing across her nipples. I couldn't get enough of her breath, her soft sighs, her hum of appreciation. A low moan. That might have been me. And still we kissed, and nibbled, and angled our heads so that more and the most could be drawn from our lips.

I caught Steph's hands and, then holding fast eye contact, brought her index finger to my mouth and dragged my tongue from the base to the tip. Steph's eyes blew wide.

"Angel," she hissed.

I sucked the fingertip into my mouth.

I didn't know about Steph's situation—well, I could give a pretty good guess—but I was a hot, wet mess and I wanted to do something about it.

"I need you," I stated, leaning up to kiss her jaw, then licking the length of her neck.

"Yes. Oh, god, please."

"Take these off," I said, stepping back and circling my finger at her clothing. Steph, her eyes hooded with desire, complied, undoing each item of clothing so that only her underwear remained. She reached behind to unhook her bra but I stepped forward and caught her wrists.

"How about I do that?" I murmured at her mouth, then kissed her deeply while I unhooked her bra and felt her breasts against my chest.

"Undies, now."

Steph stepped back and with a teasing smile, slipped her thumbs into the sides of her underwear and slid them slowly down her legs.

"Your turn," she said, with an arched eyebrow.

I stepped towards her again.

“Nope,” I growled. “What do you want?” I walked her backwards towards the bed. “I could just kiss you deeply, wantonly, or touch and fondle your breasts.” I continue to suck at her skin and kiss the lines of her collarbones, and all the while, Steph caught her breath in quick gasps. I pushed her gently onto the bed and scooted her into the middle. She reached for the buttons on my shirt but I clasped her hands in mine.

“Uh uh. This is all for you. Don’t touch. Be a good girl.”

Good girl . I’d never said that to a lover and I had no idea why it fell out but the words sparked something in me. An escalation of desire. It sparked something in Steph as well, because I was presented with another pair of wide eyes, pupils huge, accompanied by a bottom lip bite and nipple-puckering. Oh boy. I felt ten feet tall and bullet proof from the way that Steph’s gaze was devouring me.

I leant over her, my knee holding her leg bent, tight against my body. I slid my hand down to her sex, lightly touching her wet folds.

All the while kissing her jaw and her lips, stifling her moans.

“What do you want?”

“Angel,” she whimpered in between kisses. “I—God, fuck me, please.”

“I will but don’t come until I say so,” I said, and lightly bit her earlobe.

I played with her clit, pulling at it with my fingertips.

She gasped. “Angel! Oh, god. Please!”

“Not yet.”

I was so wet that I knew my undies were soaked but it didn't matter. I wanted this to be all about Steph. I wanted to bring her to an orgasm that shook her entire being.

I gently pushed two fingers inside and the action caused Steph's body to bow in pleasure, presenting me with her erect nipples to suckle and flick with my tongue.

Her chest and neck were flushed.

I fucked her slowly, pushing in, then pulling out completely, then pushing back in. All the while holding her gaze, her eyes wild with lust.

I withdrew my fingers until just the tips were inside Steph, then brushed my thumb over her clit. Her entire body jerked in pleasure.

“Yes. Yes. Angel, I need?—”

I thrummed against her clit, then pressed my lips to her ear.

“You've been such a good girl. Would you like to come?”

Who the hell was I? This dominant, fully clothed being. This lover. I didn't even know myself. But I liked it.

“Yes. Please,” Steph moaned, her breath coming in short gasps.

I held her there at the edge for one more flick, then I whispered, “Now.”

It was like a lightning bolt ignited Steph's body. She shouted as she came, shuddering and grunting through her teeth. She clung to my shoulders, clutching at the fabric of my shirt as I eased her through her orgasm, soft push-pull movements with my fingers, the aftershocks rippling through her muscles. Finally, her eyes found mine

and I smiled.

“You are so very, very gorgeous,” I murmured.

I received a soft smile in return.

“I thought we weren’t having this type of dessert yet,” Steph said, her eyes hazy with post-orgasmic bliss.

“I was greedy.”

She laughed, then raised an eyebrow. “I want just as much.”

Steph pushed up to deliver a scorching kiss, her tongue playing with mine, then, when I pulled back, breathless, I took in the sight of Steph resting on her elbows, legs splayed, muscles loose. Oh my.

My expression must have been a news bulletin because Steph giggled. “I need you and your clothes separated.” Then she sobered and sat up, turning to face me on the bed. “Oh! Unless, you know, you want to stay dressed. That’s totally?—”

I kissed her. “I have no idea at all why I’m still wearing clothes,” I whispered, and Steph giggled again.

I climbed off the bed and feeling emboldened by Steph’s gaze, undid the buttons on my shirt, pulling my arms from the sleeves, unzipping my jeans and slipping them off my legs, and over my feet. Socks, bra, and undies all went in record time, and suddenly I was nude. In all my glory.

Steph licked her lips, her body lying supine.

“Oh, Angel. You are gorgeous as well. Get on this bed right now,” she commanded with a grin, and her tone did things to my libido. Talk about revved up. Apparently I wasn’t the only one who became aroused with a bit of dominance and direct instruction.

She shuffled over and patted the space next to her. We faced each other and smiled. Then kissed. Then touched, drawing our fingertips in lazy lines over hips, dipping into waists, and up over the ribs in each other’s torsos. Finally, Steph circled one of my nipples, trailing her fingers around in ever widening circles until she cupped my breast.

“I think I’m in love with your boobs,” she stated matter of factly, and I laughed.

“They’re big enough to handle any type of love.” I looked down at her hand as she squeezed the shape of my breast.

“Lie down,” Steph said, gazing at me with her eyes dark with lust. I couldn’t say no. I rolled onto my back and Steph sat up then straddled my waist, leaning over to kiss me. My hands fluttered at her breasts, ribs, and settled on her upper thighs, my fingers splayed over her skin. Steph’s hair tickled my face, and I smiled into her kiss.

“You taste like vanilla and something exotic,” I said, kissing her quickly, both of us peppering each other with our lips.

Then Steph held my face in her hands. “Angel. Are you okay with me tasting you?”

Apparently, asking for permission to go down on me was an aphrodisiac because suddenly I was even more wet than I had been.

“Yes, please.” I held her gaze as she slithered down my body, stopping at my breasts, pushing them together so she could dart her tongue between the nipples. It was

exquisite and my breathlessness was evident, because Steph looked up, tongue pointed, and deliberately slowed down, grinning wickedly as she tended to each nipple.

Bloody hell. So hot.

Then time stood still as Steph hovered over my pelvis, pushed my knees apart, and dived into my sex. She held on to my thighs, grabbing handfuls of my flesh.

I kept my head up to watch. I normally don't like how my body looks all flattened out, with the soft rounded lower belly still there even lying down. But right then, it didn't matter. How could I not look? A beautiful woman with eyes only for me was teasing me, tonguing me, sending me on the fast track to a thundering orgasm. Steph was unbelievably sexy. I was sexy. The whole situation was sexy as fuck.

And again Steph met my eyes, holding my gaze as she lightly flicked the tip of her tongue over the hood of my clit. A grunt-moan sort of noise forced itself out of my mouth. I couldn't even get my bearings because Steph was licking, and sucking, and teasing, and it was all so much that I came like a runaway train.

"Fuck. Oh, fuck! Yes!" I clutched at the doona, the back of Steph's head, the edge of the bed, back to the doona. I didn't know what to hold on to but it didn't matter, really. Steph had hold of me and she was taking me for a ride.

Finally, after giving my clit another quick flick with her tongue which sent a remaining shudder through my body, she made her way up and snuggled into the crook of my neck.

"I can hear your heartbeat," she said.

"Right now, I'm tachycardic. Christ, Steph. That was incredible."

I felt her smile against my skin.

“I’ve read enough sapphic novels to get the gist but I had absolutely no idea I needed to hear ‘good girl’. But, I really, really like it,” Steph whispered.

I chuckled and the movement jostled her head.

She pulled back to look at me. “Will you stay the night?” There was vulnerability in her question.

“I’d love to.”

Chapter Nine

Golden Wattle

(*Acacia pycnantha*)

A child-friendly, without toxins, indigenous species. It grows quickly into a hardy, spreading shrub or small tree. Produces fluffy, golden blossoms in late winter. Aboriginal uses: the hard wood can be used for making tools, weapons, and musical instruments. The pollen and sap have uses in making medicine, glues, dyes, perfumes and are used for ceremonial decoration. Dried/hard seeds can be ground into flour.

It was just as well that the next day was Saturday and Lucas was working because Steph and I were completely useless and any boss worth their salt would have fired both of us. Lots of “Hi gorgeous” amongst the pots. Many kisses in between rows. It was a wonder that the plants weren’t leaning in just to suck up all the happy hormones to create a cocktail with their chlorophyll.

Only one piece of news broke into our thoughts.

“It’s a boy!” Lucas shouted from the front of the store. “Check your phone, boss!”

Sure enough, after I unlocked my phone and Steph and I read the text, we discovered that Kahlia had delivered—early like I’d said she would—a gorgeous baby, now forty-eight-hours old, with the brightest of blue eyes and the gummiest of smiles. Well, sort of a smile. More like the internationally recognised expression of “What the fuck?”

I sent off a capital letter reply, with attached congratulatory GIFS.

On Sunday, we closed early and, after meeting Lucas on the footpath outside the shop, we attached ourselves to the trio of Jules, Pip, and Ted to walk the block and a half further down our street to Derek and Kahlia's place.

Steph had brought a bag of goodies, including boxes of sensible things like bum wipes and expensive things like a handmade wooden toy that I knew was over the hundred dollar mark.

"It looks like you went to the Walker's Bulk Grocery Warehouse and filled a trolley." I grinned at her, taking in the soft breeze blowing her hair about. Her twinkling eyes. Her smile that I had claimed as mine. Delicious.

"Not exactly but I know people who know people, so it was easy to get my hands on..." She swung the bag to finish the statement.

"I must get to know your people who know people. They might like to meet my people."

Steph giggled. "We can arrange that one day."

We were without Mr and Mrs G because they went to Greek church on Sundays to engage in the Paschal celebration of the Resurrection, which, according to Mrs G was, "Better than the church my parents took me to when I was the little girl. Pah! The boring tone. I am helping with the afternoon teas at this parish only because the worshippers, they are happy and appreciate my coffee. I make the cakes, yes?"

They sent their best wishes and a giant basket of onesies and bits and bobs that they thought were necessary for a baby. Lucas was lugging that in his arms as we slowly—Ted's pace—made our way along the footpath.

Derek and Kahlia's little flat was a one-bedroom shoebox but the landlord had gone all-out on the fixtures and accommodations for Kahlia's wheelchair. Kahlia reckoned their place could be the cover of an International Disability Awareness brochure because the landlord had sent in a team to widen corridors, drop bench heights, organise a roll-in shower, build ramps at the front and back doors, and install air-conditioning for when summer and Kahlia had their seasonal argument. It helped that the landlord scored a healthy rebate from Disability Services Australia, but even still, it really was extensive and Kahlia and Derek were thrilled.

Denise, Kahlia's mum, opened the door, peered at the six of us, and blanched.

"Oh! Hello. What a large group of people!"

I stepped forward. "Hi, Denise. We've spoken on the phone before once or twice. I'm Angel Whitlock, the owner of Dig It. This is Steph and Lucas my colleagues, Jules and Pip from Coffee and Crystals and Ted from Ted's Used Books. We're just here to see Kahlia and Derek and the new arrival. And you, too, of course." I grinned at her, and she seemed to relax.

"Well, come in. I'm sure I can make room. You know, the flat is just so small and sometimes?—"

"Mum. It's okay. Please." Kahlia's voice carried across the little lounge room. She sounded exhausted yet thrilled that we'd all turned up for a visit.

We took the few small steps into the flat and Lucas thrust the basket of baby stuff into Denise's hands just so she had something to do rather than wring her hands to death. Lucas could read a room.

Derek rose to meet us, enveloping us in individual warm hugs, while we murmured our congratulations. Even Steph. Then I remembered that Kahlia and Derek had no

idea who Steph was.

“Derek, Kahlia? This is Steph Thatcher, the latest recruit who I...welcomed to the jungle.” I went for the grunge-growl of Axl Rose from Guns 'N Roses at the end of the sentence but all I got were crickets. I sighed. People didn't appreciate good rock 'n roll anymore.

“Hi, Steph. It's nice to meet you.” Then Kahlia tilted her chin. “All of you get over here for a group sort of hug. I want a selfie.

Kahlia's grin was the first thing I saw when I walked past Denise, who was still clutching the basket and now our bags of presents, and looking unsure whether she should intervene in the staff reunion.

I pointed to the basket en route to the ottoman next to Kahlia's chair. “Present from the G's,” I said to her and Kahlia gasped at the basket's size. “Yeah. I think Mrs G made some things, then decided that a whole aisle at Target needed clearing.”

“It's so generous. You're all so generous,” Kahlia said, her eyes blinking back tears as she took in all of our gifts. “Sorry. No water restrictions this side of Melbourne. I'm a permanent faucet.”

Denise, having divested us of the basket and bags, placing them near the cot, turned to her son-in-law. “Derek, Kahlia needs a tissue. We should have some nearby. I should have thought of that. Perhaps?—”

The baby, tucked into a handy sling so that Kahlia could hold him close and still manoeuvre her chair, cooed loudly as if to say, “Hello? Remember me?”

It had the desired effect because all of us leant around the back and sides of the wheelchair to admire one gorgeous teeny, tiny baby.

“Can I touch him? His cheek?” Steph asked, almost reverently.

Derek chuckled. “Of course. Better yet...” He and Kahlia were definitely linked via ESP because Kahlia undid the catches and passed the baby up to Derek’s waiting hands. He turned to Steph. “Want a hold before any of this lot?”

Steph’s face lit up and she shuffled onto the couch.

“Oh, how is that fair? That’s new girl privileges. Right, your coffee name’s going to be Queue Jumper from now on,” Jules harrumphed.

While I was waiting, I heard Pip start up a conversation with Kahlia about her latest crystals pack and, when Kahlia felt more inclined, how a three-stone reading would be awesome and amazing and cool. Ted got talking to Denise, who had begun unwrapping the baby items from the gift basket and lining them up on the floor against the TV cabinet.

After my brief hold just to say hi, the baby started to get a little fractious, but Kahlia motioned to Ted, who had been waiting in line as if we were playing the children’s party game, ‘Pass The Parcel’. He sat on the armchair.

“He’s just a little tired,” Kahlia said, soundly equally as tired. “But would you like to have your hold of him?” Her voice was vulnerable like she needed everyone in attendance to lift her child. To see her and Derek as two people who had made this incredible being. Maybe to bear witness to community. I got teary at the thought.

“Of course. Come here, wee mite.” Ted opened his arms, and suddenly the squorks and squarks stopped. Here was a person of great wisdom and comfort, according to?—

“Kahlia, what’s the baby’s name?” I asked. It seemed like such an obvious question

but in deference to today's society of pronoun and name awareness, it was never certain. Particularly with our rainbow collection of humans.

"Leroy," Derek said, puffing up with pride. He rested his hand on Kahlia's shoulder and looked down at her face, both of them with the sun radiating from every pore. More teary thoughts trickled through my brain.

Meanwhile, Leroy was having a whale of a time listening intently as Ted softly crooned a song that was probably last published on a cassette tape, then Leroy inhaled deeply, and farted, probably making Ted eternally grateful for nappies with grip tape.

"Fractious farting?" Lucas asked.

I clapped him on the back. "It should be a topic in all high school health classes. How to deal with babies. Best contraception ever."

Everyone laughed, except Denise who was starting to fuss.

"Kahlia, sweetie, are you ready for a nap? I can tell when you need to get out of your chair. Perhaps?—"

"Denise," Pip broke in. "I understand from Kahlia that you have a passion for the Tarot. I have a brand new pack that came in a couple of days ago. Would you like to come and assist me in having the Earth Mother bless the cards? We could do it this afternoon. Perhaps walk back to the shops with all of us? I think Kahlia and Derek have got Leroy sorted for a bit."

Denise turned to Pip, and behind her mother's back, Kahlia mouthed a very articulate, "Thank you so much," with wide eyes, almost weeping with gratitude.

“Well...well, that sounds delightful, Pip. Thank you.” I could see Denise was torn between helicopter-parenting or healing.

Tarot won out. Probably because of Derek’s response, which included words like, “Great idea, Pip”, and “Don’t forget your bag, Denise. It’s behind the coffee table.”

Chapter Ten

Hong Kong Orchid Tree

(*Bauhinia blakeana*)

A beautiful evergreen tree with large, thick green leaves that grow to 7-10 centimetre long and 10-13 centimetre wide. Fragrant pink-purple flowers, about 10-15 centimetres in size, bloom from late spring until early autumn, the large elegant flowers are 10-15cm in size. An excellent feature tree for medium to large gardens and for mass plantings in parks. Will grow to a height of 8 metres and a width of 5 metres but can be trimmed to a smaller size.

Steph and I held hands on the way back from Kahlia and Derek's place. After we said goodbye to Lucas, who leapt onto a tram that was trundling by, Pip and Denise walked ahead nattering on about sage, crystals, and the mystical energy of the high priestess in the major arcana. Ted and Jules, walking behind us, were also chatting but stopped suddenly and I looked over my shoulder to investigate the silence. I discovered the silence was their pointed looks at Steph and me, our hands linked together, and their matching eye-twinkles threatened laughter. I mock-glared at them, then widened my eyes as if to say, "We can catch up later if you're that desperate for gossip."

Which apparently they were. I kissed Steph goodbye after she quietly cited that she had work to do on her dancing plants. I grinned. I wondered if a plant could moonwalk. Steph would probably make it happen. I kissed her again simply so I could lean in to tell her I'd text her later.

Pip took the keys from Jules' pocket, then guided Denise into the cafe, flicking on lights as she went. They settled into the Tarot corner and bent their heads over Pip's new cards.

"Right, Whitlock. Inside." Jules jerked her head towards the cafe. I groaned, and Ted put his hand up.

"I will bow out of this most likely highly entertaining interrogation. I'm old and a Sunday evening gin and tonic awaits." He leaned towards me. "Good for you, Angel love. Your last girlfriend was not a patch on a delightful woman like Steph. I'm happy for you, wherever your relationship goes." He rubbed my shoulder as I blinked back tears. Ted was the ultimate granddad and although he had grandkids of his own, I'm positive he felt that he held that position in our little community.

* * *

"So, spill."

"Nirelle was not a patch on a delightful woman like Steph," I said, repeating Ted's words, then took a sip of my tea.

"Oh my god, it's like getting the purple out of an amethyst," Jules moaned, then grinned to show how much she liked teasing me.

"Come on. Steph and I are enjoying each other."

Jules raised an eyebrow. "How much en?—"

"No." I shook my finger at her. "No amount of your addictive Earl Grey will convince me to spill on that particular topic. Besides, that section of any discussion is none of your business."

Jules nodded and shrugged a shoulder, then leaned forward. “So,” she stretched the word out. “Is it going anywhere?”

“Christ, you’re nosy.” I took another sip of tea.

“Yes. Consider me a caffeinated confidante. I’m like a counsellor to guide you to your light.”

“I should leave just because of that last sentence,” I snarked, but couldn’t help laughing.

“Okay,” I continued. “I’m basically a happy, slightly round, lesbian. Nobody special really, who is okay with that label by the way.” I pointed at her because she had opened her mouth to protest. “And this gorgeous blonde co-worker, who is clearly wealthy I think, so I don’t know why she needs the job, but I don’t care because that gorgeous blonde who works with me wants to kiss me, and I don’t know why but it’s lovely,” I rambled.

Jules stared at me, then shook her head. “You are,” she said with a frown.

“I am what?”

“Someone special, for fuck’s sake!”

I blinked. Jules rarely swore. It was always for a good reason and right now, she had decided I was the good reason.

“You are someone special, Angel. You are so important here in our little row of shops. You are compassionate.” She ticked off fingers. “Look at the Bonsai Brains. Look at the oldies from the aged care homes. Look at how much time you give to your friends. Look in the mirror for god’s sake and you’ll see a woman with laugh

lines and a smile that reaches the sky and, ah shit. Now I'm teary." She squished her lips together and sniffed.

I held her hand over the table. "Thank you. Sometimes I forget to acknowledge myself. I tell everyone else and not myself." We shared a look, then I grinned. "I'm just so thrilled that she wants me."

"Of course she does. Look at all that stuff I just said. You should be wanted. You should be kissed like you were when she was saying bye before. You and Steph look good together." She breathed in heavily. "Right." She brushed her palms together. "That's me done. What's on your mind?"

I cracked up.

* * *

Steph and I continued our kissing and whatnot—the whatnot being getting handsy in the office after closing time—throughout the week.

I pulled away breathlessly one evening.

"You haven't see my flat. Want a tour?"

Steph stared at me then a slow grin formed on her lips. "Pick up line or an actual tour?"

"Oh, a proper tour, but it'll last two seconds, then we can get back to this." I lifted my hand from her waist and pressed a finger to my lips, then used that same finger to press it to hers. Steph smiled mischievously then lightly bit the tip. "I like all of that idea," she said suggestively.

Based on that single gesture, I quickly grabbed my bag, she grabbed her backpack, and, holding hands, we made our way up the back steps of the building next door to my little flat with Tough beaming up at Steph. Mercifully, it was clean and tidy. I wasn't a messy person so bringing a guest home didn't required the person getting left on the landing while I tornadoed about the place flinging underwear into broom closets.

My flat wasn't much to write home about. It was small—lounge room, kitchen, single bedroom, bathroom—but it suited me perfectly. I'd collected lots of knickknacks on my travels during my twenty-two years of adulthood so I led Steph on a journey through the life of Angel, the wanderer. So many photos of me standing next to some type of awesome plant I'd come across in jungles, back gardens, and on one memorable occasion, in Hong Kong where a Cantonese grandmother who had to be a hundred and one and spoke no English whatsoever caught me admiring her *Bauhinia blakeana* and had her grandson take a photo of the two of us standing there, grinning like loons, leaning into the space created by an orchid tree.

Tough walked past us with a wag, then made himself a dog-version knickknack on the couch.

“Are you hungry?”

“I am, actually,” Steph replied, standing behind me with her arms wrapped around my waist. She rested her chin on my shoulder as we continued to stare at jade lions and mini Thai long boats. It was very warm and snuggly and I was enjoying this woman so, so much. I turned in her arms.

“I can cook something, or we can order in.”

“Can we cook something together?”

I grinned. “Absolutely!”

Later, with a simple and delicious pasta consumed, I found myself on my back with a wonderfully nude Steph rising above me like a goddess, straddling my waist and rocking gently so that I was panting words like, “Yes,” and “Steph!” Eventually she leaned forward and I lifted my knees, holding her in position. We kissed slowly, languidly, smiling against lips. Then Steph leaned even further so my mouth was in line with her swaying breasts. Teasing me. Taunting me with their movement so that I was unable to catch the nipples between my lips. I growled and heard Steph’s quiet chuckle above me.

“Say please,” she whispered, her voice ragged.

I stuck out my tongue and lapped at the nipples as they passed.

Steph hissed. “Oh, God, Angel. Say please. I’m begging you!”

I laughed softly. “Kind of cancels out the initial begging.”

Suddenly, Steph wrapped her arms around me and rolled us so I was on top. “I want you to fuck me, then I want more and.” She paused in her wriggling, and held the sides of my face. “I want more of you. The kind of more where we do this but we go walking in the neighbourhood and you point out fancy plants. Where we takes rides on your motorbike and end up in little towns at local pubs.” She kissed me tenderly. “That type of more.”

I felt tears pricking at the back of my eyes and blinked them away. “That’s a coincidence because that’s what I want, too.” Steph Thatcher felt like the real deal and who was I to question? She was a people person and genuinely cared about customer’s plant experiences. She did a great job at the nursery. So much so that when Kahlia returned, I was going to ask Steph to stay on. And she was hot and funny and

sexy and enjoyed being with me and no matter what or where this thing with us was going, I wanted all of it.

Then we grinned, then, without any preamble, our lips crashed together and we were on the train to Orgasmville.

* * *

Later, snuggled together with Steph's breathing making me feel all warm and fuzzy, I remembered her words about going for rides on my bike past the city. I hummed in thought as an idea took hold.

"I thought you'd be asleep," Steph said, her voice muffled in my breasts.

"You, too." I pulled back, still holding her hip close. "I have an idea. Do you want to go hunting for treasure?"

Steph smirked. "I thought we just did."

I blushed and poked her ribs, which made her giggle.

"No, actual treasure hunting. Gold detecting. Hunting for iron." I peered at her, hoping to see a positive reaction.

She gasped. "With a proper gold detecting wand thingy?"

I widened my eyes in disbelief. "My wand thingy is a Detect 5000, I'll have you know. A wonderful piece of gear that has helped me find all sorts of interesting iron pieces for the nursery."

Steph cracked up and fell into my chest. "You are so sexy."

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll take that as a yes, then.”

Steph held my gaze. “You can take that as a yes. We’re off to find treasure.” Then raised an eyebrow, and grinned.

Chapter Eleven

Dunna Dunna succulent

(*Lawrencia helmsii*)

Often mistaken for cacti as it is very cactus-like in appearance. The shrub has a candelabra-shaped growth which superficially gives the plants a ‘cactus look’. Flowers are yellow/green and are produced from mid-winter through spring to early summer. This species is most commonly associated with soils that are crusted and therefore seed access and germination would be very difficult for most plants. It does well in home gardens as it has a higher tolerance of other minerals than general garden plants.

Steph had been in my life for two whole months and yet it felt like the best part of a year. I grinned inside my helmet as I turned up at Steph’s place on Sunday that week in what I called my biker pants: denim pants that fitted beautifully on my thighs and had a leather strip stitched along the outside seams. I pulled off my helmet and fluffed up my short hair hoping to impress. When Steph bounded down the walkway from her apartment wearing hiking boots, designer jeans, and an empty backpack, she took one look at me and smiled like a cat that had got the cream.

“Ooh. Look at you. Yum,” she purred, and I preened, pressing my foot, which was holding the bike steady, into the ground so my thigh tensed. Steph’s smile widened to a grin. “Yeah, yeah. We all know you’re built like an Adonis. Now, you promised me a thicker jacket.”

I kicked down the stand, then dismounted and gave Steph a lingering kiss with little pecks just to say “Hi,” which made her tighten her hold around my body. We were about to give the neighbours quite the show.

I broke away. “It’s in the pannier. Hold on.” I lifted the lid and pulled out one of my older jackets that had fitted me ten years ago. Good thing leather lasted forever.

Steph shrugged it on and tucked her chin to sniff the lapel.

“It smells like you,” she said with a sigh.

I gaped. “I...I don’t know how to answer that.”

Steph giggled. “I mean it smells of fresh earth and tending to plants. And some petrol.”

I bobbed my head from side to side. “Okay. I can handle that description.”

* * *

I’d told Steph that we were going to the outskirts of Ballarat, which was famous as the centre of gold mining during the 1800s. Technically, we weren’t supposed to be taking lumps of interesting iron, like gears and cranks, from the national park that surrounded the mine shafts, because...well, the mine shafts. Many were still open at the top or covered in a layer of thin mud and light dirt. Death traps.

Steph’s eyes had widened, her mouth was open, and she froze. “You’re kidding? This is properly dangerous. We could die, Angel.”

I laughed. “We’re not going to die. I always stay around the edge of the park, because the unchecked mines are all in the centre. Besides, the big pieces are further in and I

don't want them. The best little stuff that I pot the succulents into are at the perimeter."

Steph didn't look convinced.

Meanwhile, we were sticking to the highway's sweeping bends on my beautiful bike. The latest injection of funds into the Victorian department division of roads maintenance meant that the camber of the road was exactly right, the white lines were crisp, some even textured, making the tyres buzz to alert sleepy drivers, or give riders a heart attack.

Soon enough, we rode through the red soil drifting across the asphalt and between rolling hills that flattened out to display the vista of the town. The skyline was marked with the towers of the three working gold mines in the region.

I rolled to a stop on the side of the highway leading into Ballarat and turned the bike into the lay-by area. One car was already parked and I could bet what he was up to. Gold detecting was the favourite weekend activity around here, particularly the faintly illegal kind.

The eucalyptus trees bowed over the picnic tables the magpie and cockatoo population had defecated on, turning the brown-painted timber to a muddy white and grey. No picnic there. Good thing we were riding into town for lunch. The cinder block toilets would most likely be filled with unflushed bowls and a collection of annoyed spiders; another reason for lunch at an actual establishment.

I was very glad that I had my jacket on and so did Steph because it was cool while we were travelling, but that didn't explain the goosebumps. They were entirely Steph's fault. My reaction was visceral to Steph's body, her looks, her smiles, her kindness, her Greek-speaking ability which was an odd linguistic point of arousal. But there it was. I was falling for her.

I parked the bike near the car, then grabbed the parts of the metal detector to lock together. The dinner-plate-sized detector went on last, just after the electronic alert system that immediately started beeping.

“There’s gold here!” Steph cried, then fell about laughing at the long look I gave her.

“It’s shale,” I commented dryly. “Come on, shove the little spade, the dust brush, the water bottle, and the old newspaper into your backpack.”

The brush, water, and spade were self-explanatory but Steph was clearly confused by the newspaper.

“Um?”

“Oh, it’s for wrapping the little pieces of iron. I can’t carry much weight on the bike and I don’t need the pieces rattling around in the panniers. So I pack them in a bit plus it keeps rust flakes out of my gear. No rust anywhere near my bike, thanks very much.” I puffed up with importance and again Steph fell about laughing.

“Come on,” I said with a grin.

* * *

It turned out that metal detecting with Steph was a lot of fun. After I’d given her instructions on how to use the machine, she promptly waved it about like a conductor in front of an orchestra.

“Gah. Steph! That’s...” I cringed, then she stopped and smirked at me, while moving the detector in the manner I’d shown her.

“You’re a tease,” I said, pushing up on my toes to whisper in her ear.

“Oh, I know I am. Wait until we get home and I’ll show you how much.”

We grinned at each other, then suddenly the little indicator gave off a different alert and we both stopped. Steph slowed down her movements until I saw the tiniest piece of iron under the disc.

“There!”

Steph laid the detector down carefully and pulled out the spade. I grabbed a small stick and squatted down, tracing the outline in the dirt of what I thought it was; a fly cog. Steph dug following my line and sure enough, a fly cog emerged from the dirt. I picked it up and dusted it off. It was only a hand span in size but a number of little wedges of open space were perfect for a cute miniature garden of succulents. Someone from the care facility was sure to fall in love with it.

The rest of the morning went the same way. Lots of “Eureka!” for bottle tops, and “I’ve found something awesome!” for beer cans, a few “I’ve got it this time!” for coins that were interesting and some odd bits of metal that were probably two hundred-year-old bolts from some gold mining setup. I’d put those in the pile of trinkets I had in a bowl at the front of the store where the little kids could take one when their parents bought a plant.

Our detecting didn’t always lead to detecting. Sometimes when I squatted down, Steph did as well, and we got a few kisses in before one of us nearly toppled over. One time, I looked about, then leaving the detector on the ground, backed Steph up to the nearest smooth-barked gumtree. I spun us around because, with my boots standing on a root, it put me at eye level.

“Hi, there, sexy bush woman,” I said huskily, and her eyes grew dark.

“Hi, there, right back, gorgeous thing you. Just to let you know,” she whispered, her

voice easily heard over the silence of the bushland. “I’m so turned on that you could make me come through my clothes.”

I gasped, then after quickly looking around again, I held Steph to me, while I ran my fingertip across her breasts and nipples, then slid them down so I could undo the zip on her jeans. I slid my hand inside her undies.

“Forget clothes,” I muttered. Then pressed my lips to hers. My finger slipped through her slick folds. “Fuck, Steph. You’re so wet.”

“I told you,” she panted.

With our mouths open and tongues twisting together, I manipulated Steph’s clit, rubbing and tweaking it. “What do you want?” I whispered.

“What can I have?” Steph gasped.

“Ask me.”

“I want you to make me come,” she moaned.

I rubbed faster. Then stopped.

And Steph keened into the air.

I moved my hand from her hip to her mouth and stifled her moans. “Sh. Sound carries in the bush.”

“Oh! Angel, I’m—I want to come.”

She grunted and groaned against my hand, while I worked her clit. Suddenly, she

went rigid and clutched at my shirt, shaking as she came silently, her trembling body saying more than any words could.

She dropped her forehead to my shoulder while I carefully zipped up her jeans, then I held her to me as we leaned back onto the trunk of the tree.

I was in the bush, metal detecting and having tree sex. I was exceedingly happy. I was doing all those things with a person that I might have fallen in love with.

* * *

In the late afternoon, I dropped Steph back at her place and both of us agreed that we were absolutely wrecked.

“Shower is a must,” Steph said, wrapped in my arms as we leaned against the bike. “Then a cheese toasted sandwich and bed.” She looked at me. “Is it okay if you don’t stay over?”

“Of course it’s okay,” I replied. “I’m in need of all those things as well. In fact, I’m even leaving the pieces we found still wrapped in the pannier. I’ll just unload the detector. I’ll get to the rest in the morning.”

So, after kisses and sexy words, I rode home and duly showered, ate dinner, and went to bed, dreaming of Steph being in my arms for more than just an orgasm or two.

* * *

Steph was barcoding potted *Lawrenca helmsii* succulents on the two flatbed trolleys. I came up behind and hugged her around her waist.

“Careful. I’m armed with a pricing gun. You’ll be marked at a discount.” She turned

in my arms.

“I’m priceless,” I said, grinning.

Steph sobered. “Yes,” she said simply and my heart soared.

“How well did the pieces clean up?” she continued.

“Oh!” I pulled away. “I have to shove them into the coke bucket.”

“Coke?”

“Yeah. Best ever rust remover before a vinegar wash.”

I hustled to the back of the store to the table where I’d set up two large tubs, one filled with coke and the other with vinegar. Next to the buckets were my rubber gloves, a steel scrubbing brush, and the wrapped bits of metal.

Suddenly, Steph yelled. “Mail!” It was an excellent imitation of Lucas’ baritone, and I chuckled. It was probably a bill or something equally as horrible, but I figured I should investigate. I looked at the contents on the table, seemingly vibrating with potential, and said, “Stay,” to the pieces, then wandered down to the front.

“It’s got a council logo on the front,” said Steph, handing me the envelope.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. This’ll be a letter saying they’re going to stick a roundabout through Mrs G’s chip shop.”

I tore open the envelope and shook out the letter, then scanned the words.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

“What?” Steph ducked her head so she could read my expression.

“We won. We bloody won. Walker’s has to move one kilometre back from the highway, so that people will need to travel to the warehouse via a side road. Yes! This is amazing.”

I tossed the letter on the counter, grabbed Steph around the middle, and swung her in the air. She squealed, then when I placed her feet back on the ground, a shadow passed over her face and she didn’t look as excited as I thought she would.

Probably didn’t enjoy the swing around. I was about to apologise when she grinned at me.

“Go. Go, do your coke immersion then we can tell the others,” she said, making shooing motions.

I rushed back to the iron work, still scattered over the newspaper. Carefully putting to the side the evidence of our win over big business, I donned rubber gloves and picked the first piece, pausing to smile at the age of the photo in the paper underneath.

Suddenly, my hand froze mid-air, then I placed the cog piece down, took off my gloves, and brushed the iron flakes away.

I knew that face, that body. I knew that woman intimately. But the caption was surely incorrect. ‘Stephanie and Benjamin Walker attend the opening of the first Walker Warehouse in Ballarat’. I studied the photo in disbelief. There was Steph—Stephanie bloody Walker—with slightly longer hair, dressed in a business suit and heels, standing between an anonymous guy and her brother. She didn’t look overly happy to be there. I knew Steph’s smiles and that one plastered on her face was one of simply tolerating the situation.

“I can’t believe this,” I whispered, then after moving all the iron pieces off the paper, I gave it a final shake and marched down to the counter.

Chapter Twelve

Paterson's Curse

(*Echium plantagineum*)

An invasive weed which produces purple-blue flowers. It is highly competitive in pastures, replacing desirable plants without contributing to forage value. Paterson's Curse reduces pasture productivity and is toxic to livestock. This weed can degrade the natural environment, compromising habitat values by crowding out and suppressing native vegetation. Regular monitoring, and early treatment are essential.

Luckily there weren't customers because they would have run a mile at the expression on my face. Hurt, confusion, betrayal, anger. One giant facial cocktail.

"What's this?" I thrust the paper in front of her. She squinted at me, then put the pricing gun down and took the sheet of newspaper. Then went deathly white.

"Oh, Angel. I?—"

"You lied to me!" I burst out.

Steph dropped the paper and wrung her hands. "I was going to tell you. I promise. I am Steph Walker. That is true, but I'm also Steph Thatcher. It's my mother's maiden name."

"It doesn't matter. You're Stephanie bloody Walker." I flung my arm in the direction

of the road at the end of our street. “You’re in charge of all of that up there. So what are you doing here? Slumming it with the plebs? Having a laugh with the board about us poor folk?”

“No! I’m here to make sure you don’t lose your customers, your business. I’m here to?—”

“Rescue?”

“No! I wanted to immerse myself in community. It’s what my mother always believed. To run a successful business, the business must make a difference by retaining the small communities that breathe air into large industry.”

Steph had tears in her eyes.

“Pretty words. You didn’t have to go undercover.” I was vibrating with hurt and anger.

Steph tossed her hands. “Yes, I did. You would never have told me about Bonsai Brains, or how Ted looks after everyone, or the oldies from the next suburb over who come to talk about bean sprouts, or that you’ve made the whole nursery accessible for hypersensitive people and wheelchair users.” The tears were now falling down her cheeks.

“You don’t know that,” I said, my own tears making their way into my eyes.

Steph rubbed at her face. “Come on, Angel. You and I know perfectly well?—”

“Don’t presume to know me,” I snapped. “This whole time. Nearly three months, Steph. Three months and there were ample chances for you to say something.”

I thought about the council decision in the letter on the back table.

“Did you convince the council, or tell your brother to back off?”

Steph exhaled loudly. “No. I simply talked about community. I told the board the truth.”

Suddenly, I didn’t want to hear her sensible arguments. Her justifications.

I rounded on her and glared. “What car do you drive?”

Steph blinked, and the silence grew awkward.

“Go on. What car do you drive?” I repeated.

Steph paused, then sighed. “This year’s Mercedes S-class coupe.”

I threw my hands in the air. “Exactly. You have no business here.”

Steph clutched her hands at her chest, pressing into the fabric of the apron. “What does the type of car I drive have to do with this? You ride a very expensive motorbike. I don’t understand?—”

“The company pays for it, don’t they?” It was a stupid point to belabour but all I could hear was white noise and that I didn’t want that apron on her anymore. She had no right to wear it. “You don’t belong here, particularly if all you’re doing is reconnaissance.”

“You know that’s not true.”

My tears fell. “And...” I felt so used and embarrassed. “And we had sex, for Christ’s

sake, Steph.” My hands squeezed into fists. “And I have feel...”

Suddenly I couldn’t say anymore.

Steph’s eyes were filled with sadness and I wanted to dash it away. But I was too hurt to appease her level of pain, because it matched mine.

“Just leave,” I said in resignation, then it was as if all the effort in my body to remain upright went, and I sat on the stool on the other side of the bench.

Steph still had her hands at her chest. The colour of her face had changed from undercoat white to milk. “You’ll be short-staf?—”

“I don’t care.” I grit my teeth. “I’ll work it out. Just go. Please.” My voice cracked on the last word and I turned away. When I turned back, there was a neatly folded Dig It apron on the counter and Steph had gone.

So had my heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Kangaroo Paw

(*Anigozanthos* x hybrid)

Native to Western Australia, they grow from underground plant shoots that produce long strappy dark green leaves. The flowers are tall stems that end in a furry claw-shaped flower which is where the plant gets its name as it resembles a kangaroo's paw. Each "finger" is a tubular flower that is filled with nectar. There are two types of Kangaroo Paw: tall and short. The taller varieties are more adaptable to their surrounds and will tolerate a broader range of soil and climate types. They are the easiest to grow. The smaller varieties are better seen as short-lived perennials and are more suited to pots. They usually flower all year round, however they are not as tough and will require more care than their taller friends.

"We won!" Jules yelled from the counter as I wandered in. I didn't know why I was there. I could have been at home with Tough, cuddling his wiry-haired body, but instead I'd closed the nursery and gone next door.

"Yippee," I said morosely.

Jules pulled her head into her neck and raised an eyebrow. "Um...you okay?"

Pip suddenly appeared in my line of sight. "Come with me," she said, authoritatively.

I balked, halfway between the cafe and the crystals. "I don't want a reading or?—"

“Come with me. I just want to talk, and don’t diss the Tarot, by the way.”

Pip was a force when it came to digging into the human psyche and interrogating people, so I followed her over to the Tarot table.

“Sit. Spill.” Pip folded her arms over themselves and leaned forward. I sat like a recalcitrant teenager until Pip’s glare had me sitting up. For a twenty-nine-year-old woman, she had my forty-year-old self worked out.

“Steph isn’t Steph,” I started vaguely.

“Okay?”

“She’s Stephanie Walker and was doing some sketchy undercover thing that carries on the beliefs of her mother who was all about communities being rescued before big business rolled in and squashed everybody.” I took a deep breath.

“She said that?”

“No. Not those exact words.” I poked at a tiny loose crystal on the round table top. “She reckoned that she wasn’t going to give the okay to the board until a...study, I guess, had been done on how the warehouse would affect us all.”

“Sounds quite sensible and thorough,” Pip said, nodding.

“Pip! She lied to us!”

I couldn’t see how Pip didn’t understand, particularly because she was all in favour of revealing people’s truths.

“Uh huh,” said Pip

“What? What’s ‘uh huh’ mean?” I answered belligerently.

“I’m not surprised, that’s all. She had a lot hidden when I did her reading.” Pip quickly pointed a finger at me. “Don’t say a word, Angel Whitlock.” Then she withdrew her finger and continued. “Do you remember your cards and the thoughts behind those cards from your reading?”

“Not really.”

“You didn’t reflect on your last journal entry.” Pip pursed her lips. “Fine.”

I aimlessly played with the crystal again, then, because there was silence, I looked and fell into one of Pip’s searching looks.

“Steph is important to you,” she said gently. “I think this is why it’s hurting you so much. You have an aura about you, like Steph is your...spark? No.” She shook her head. “More like she’s the candle to hold your light. Don’t lose your light just because you’ve thrown away your candle.”

“I haven’t thrown away my candle, Pip.” I shook my head.

“Haven’t you?” She studied my face.

“Gah! No! I just...I’m hurt and embarrassed, that’s all.” I restarted my little crystal football game.

“Because Steph wanted more information?”

I looked up. “Because she deceived me and everyone else. It’s not right.”

Pip hummed. “It’s a little morally grey but if you put that aside, you fell in love with

Steph before you knew who she was. So you've fallen in love with a person rather than a company's representative."

I jerked. "I haven't fallen in love."

"Haven't you?" Pip repeated.

"I don't like these Tarot sessions," I said, as I scooped up the little crystal and handed it to her. "Way too much like therapy"

Pip beamed. "Thank you!"

* * *

I engaged in some sad, weepy internet searching where I just looked at images of my Steph then realised that she wasn't my Steph at all. The articles and captions were the most difficult to endure. I found out that Steph was the majority shareholder of Walker's. The big boss. Which was information I didn't know what to do with in my brain, so I shoved it in a box in the corner of my mind and threw myself into work for the week.

Steph had been right. We were short-staffed.

Pip came in on the Tuesday when the oldies bus turned up. She was a godsend with that many people to deal with. She even took them all off my hands when they were done by shuttling them next door for coffee, cake, and a three-colour crystal reading if they were so inclined.

Denise, Kahlia's mum, came for a half day on Wednesday. She tried valiantly but didn't know one end of a native cacti from the other, so I left her at the counter the whole time because the prices were on the plants and the register wasn't hard to

manage. I was so grateful that I must have looked slightly manic when I grabbed her shoulders and beamed into her face.

“You are so wonderful to do this. I can’t thank you enough!”

“Oh!” Denise gave a sudden, startled smile. “It’s nice to feel needed. Kahlia and Derek are so competent with the baby and I sometimes feel a little like an unnecessary piece of Lego when I’m there. It’s nice to feel useful, isn’t it?”

“Denise? Are you a hugger?” I always checked.

“Yes?”

I pulled her to me.

* * *

Mrs G looked up and waved as I strolled through the curtain of multicoloured plastic strips at the doorway to her shop on Wednesday afternoon.

“Hi. Sorry I haven’t been in to see you yet. Flat out at the moment.” I said, and felt my small smile of greeting drop. “I’m a staff member down,”

“Ah, my Angel. I heard.” Mrs G wiped her hands on a tea towel then came around the counter to sit at one of two squeaky metal chairs that were offered to customers. “Sit. Sit.”

I dropped into the other chair which gave an alarming lurch, but with a quick bum shift, I righted it so it stood proudly on four legs.

“I know we are the winners but maybe we are the losers as well?” Mrs G said, and I

wanted to bury my face in her shoulder and cry.

Mrs G must have seen this idea cross my face because she shuffled around, dragging the chair which squeaked on the lino, and put her arm around my shoulders

“Maybe we have lost a person from our community. I know about this plan of Steph’s, yes?” I rolled my head to look at her eyes, then snuggled back into the scents of salt, vinegar, and baklava.

“She’s obviously been along and told everyone,” I mumbled.

“I think she is very brave, our Steph. She did not lie.”

I jerked but she held me tight. I was nearly in a headlock.

“Mrs G. You’re kind of squashing me,” I said into the neck strap of her blue and white checked apron.

“Oh. Sorry.” She patted my cheek as I moved back. “Angel, love. It is normal to tell little white lies when courting. We exaggerate, no? Make sound better. Mr G, when he was courting, I asked him what he did. He said he owned a shop. No. He worked in a shop. No difference to me. I was his love focus.”

“His love focus?” I could feel tears looming again. Mrs G put her hands on each of my cheeks, and squeezed gently.

“Your Steph. She is your love focus,” she said, staring into my eyes, then she released my head and puffed out her chest ready to expound on her next piece of advice. “So what that she is director of company? You saw real Steph. I know this in here.” She slapped her ample bosom and nodded affirmatively. “I know this.”

* * *

“You, too?” I sat heavily on the small stool that Ted called ‘Angel’s Stool’ probably because I sat there the most and depleted his stock of loose leaf tea.

“She did tell me quite a good deal of the ins and outs,” Ted said, patting my knee, then turned to switch on the other overhead light. With Ted’s little flat above, two larger buildings butted up against each side, and the whole store at the front, it made for a dark tea room.

I took the proffered cup. “Thanks. Ins and outs is a funny way of saying she confessed.”

“Well, to confess means that she’d have to be guilty.”

We stared at each other. Finally, I spluttered. “But she is!”

“Of what?” Ted cocked his head to one side.

“Of...of being someone she wasn’t.”

“But she was being herself in person, just not in name.”

“Yes, her name. Instead of being Steph Thatcher, potential girlfriend, she was, she is Steph Walker, not-at-all potential girlfriend.”

“Angel, love.” I stilled my hands, the tea sloshing in the cup as Ted gazed at me intently. “I think Steph told you who she was very early on.”

I peered morosely into the slowly spinning liquid. “I’m not sure I’ll get over her.”

“Yes, you will.” Ted stood up and plucked the mug from my hands. “Particularly if you start to think of her as innocent in all this.” He tipped out my cup and refilled it with more hot tea. “Your brew got cold.”

“What?”

“Your cup of tea needed a refill.”

“No. What did you say just before that?”

“Think of her as innocent then work backwards. Something about getting a court to decide,” he muttered, gathering his jacket.

“What are you up to?” I stood as well.

“Nothing. I’ve not seen hide nor hair of little Tough today so I thought I’d invite myself down to yours for dinner. Lock up after you, please, lass.”

* * *

On Friday morning, I had hit rock bottom. I hugged myself in the office, spinning slightly on the business chair.

“Mail!” shouted Derek, who had been kind enough to give me a couple of hours even with a fussy newborn at home.

I shouted in return. “I don’t want it. It’ll be awful news, and?—”

A hand holding an envelope appeared around the doorframe and wiggled at me. The rest of Derek’s body followed, his face wearing a cheeky grin. “It’s in a pink envelope with love hearts on it. I doubt that Melbourne Electric is dabbling in

empathy.”

I laughed and took the rectangle, sliding open the flap.

Then I chuckled. “This is so very Ted, and Jules, and it’s amazing.”

“What?”

“It’s an invitation to a community party for tonight at the cafe. Knowing Pip, there’ll be sparkles and glitter and crystals everywhere and all light sources will scatter beams that will give us epileptic attacks. It sounds wonderful.”

We grinned at each other. “What else does it say?”

“Didn’t you get one?”

“Yeah, but it got snaffled away by a woman who was breastfeeding and watching Wheel of Fortune. I wasn’t interrupting either of those things, no matter how much I love her.” He nodded slowly with eyebrows raised high.

“Okay. RSVP is ASAP. That’s nice and balanced. I’ll do that now. It says dogs are allowed—of course—but not to bring kangaroos because there’s enough already.” I stared at Derek. “What the hell?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. It’s Ted and Jules. Who knows?”

* * *

I was right about the glittery stuff everywhere. The ceiling looked like someone had shot stick-on stars at it from a canon. But it was delightful. Everyone had dressed up. Ted was in his ‘good suit’ as he called it.

“It’s my only suit but don’t tell anyone,” he whispered to me.

Jules was in blue and pink dungarees, hair all teased up.

I’d gone for black denim and a soft blue collared shirt. It was a celebration after all. Even still, I couldn’t quite pull myself out of my hole. I was completely heartbroken, because I was starting to think that Steph could have been my one. I truly felt that we were good together. Cute, and fun together. Sexy as anything together. Just all round better together.

I walked across and hugged Derek, bent to hug Kahlia, and kissed Leroy on his little fuzzy head.

Lucas got a bro hug, and Kaydee, who Lucas had invited, got a wave and a smile. I was in silly yet silent raptures of delight to see the two of them together. Normally, Kaydee was very selective in who she hugged or touched, but the touching she was clearly thrilled to do tonight was Lucas’ hand and she didn’t seem inclined to let that go. The way she looked up at him was gorgeous. Heart eye emojis all over the place.

I imagined that was how Steph and I looked. Well, how I had looked at her at least. Or she had looked at me while she lied.

“Stop it,” I hissed to myself.

I got kissed on both cheeks by Mrs G, and Mr G gave me a demure hug, but with the largest smile in the world.

The sound of the door opening cut all conversation.

Steph stood there; one foot in, one foot holding the door as if she wasn’t sure whether to continue her inwards journey.

Our eyes locked and all I could see was how sad she was and also how beautiful she looked in her pink party dress with her white sneakers and the glittery ceiling reflecting onto her skin and how much I missed her and had it only been a week because I think I'd been heartbroken for much longer, hadn't I?

"Ah! Good! Ted announced. "Right on time."

I spun around. "Right on time for what?"

Ted didn't answer, but pulled out a chair and patted the space next to him for Kahlia to roll up into. He opened his arms to encompass all of us.

"For our kangaroo court council celebration party," he announced proudly.

"What?" I asked, but my question was lost in the cheering. Then Mr and Mrs G whipped out a pair of ear protectors for little Leroy and Kaydee and set off party poppers around the room so that paper streamers rained down on us.

Then I noticed that Steph had stepped right inside the cafe, walked straight over to Ted, and hugged him.

In fact, everyone received a brief hug or a wave, but her smile was tentative.

Then Steph turned to me and it was as if the lights chose that moment just to shine on us.

"You..." I started. I wanted to say 'I miss you', 'I want you,' 'I love you' but maybe not in front of eleven people and a dog.

"You look amazing," Steph said, her eyes only for me.

“So do you.” Then I pointed at Ted, but spoke to Steph. “Why are you here?”

“Ted invited me to explain myself.” Steph grimaced, and her eyebrows wrinkled. “Again.” Then she cast a wobbly smile at everyone. “Can I crash your party for a bit? I like that I’ve been given the chance to explain everything while you’re all here. I know I’ve seen each of you this week but...well, it’s important.”

Jules pulled a chair out from the nearest table and gave it a little shove so it skidded across the tiles to the middle of the floor area, so if Steph did sit there, then we’d be arranged in a sort of ‘U’ shape.

“Aaaaaand...go!” Jules declared.

While Steph tentatively took her seat, I heard Mr G ask Lucas what a kangaroo court was.

Mrs G piped up, halting all conversational murmurings. “I know this. It is when we do the talking about the decision but this decision is already made so right here we have young and sweet Steph Thatcher, or Steph Walker, whichever Steph she is, she is Steph, yes?”

She looked pointedly at me.

“Oh, come on. I don’t...I can’t do—” Talk about deer in a pair of headlights.

“I didn’t lie,” Steph said, softly.

“She didn’t lie,” Pip agreed.

“Oh my god,” I sighed. My face must have looked like an emotional Picasso, but I was beginning to see after all the chats this week that maybe I hadn’t seen the grey.

All I'd been looking at was too much black and too much white. And right then, all I was looking at was Steph sitting there in the spotlight and I wanted to pick her up and kiss her.

I had to find out one thing, though. "There was never any need to lodge a ninety-day complaint, was there?" I asked.

Steph frowned. "Of course there was. It was necessary to keep Walker's on their toes."

I scoffed. "You talk about the company like it's a whole separate thing from you."

"It is!" Steph stood and crossed her arms, staring me down. We stood like two opposing chess pieces. "How many times can I say this, Angel? I'm Steph Walker. Yes, I will admit that. But in my heart, I'm Steph Thatcher because I carry on what my mother instilled in me, which is that community is paramount to creating good society. And you all are good people. I am more my mother than Walker's Industries." Steph waved her hands about. "You're a community and I would never have known that unless I became part of it. Although I think I knew from the very first day you welcomed me and took me for coffee next door. Your community welcomed me in whether I was a Walker or a Thatcher. You welcomed me and I couldn't ever let that be lost because I fell in love with all of you." Steph inhaled. "I uphold my mother's ideals despite it frustrating Benjamin. I walk a fine line between creating profit for the company and not alienating the shareholders by vetoing what I think are poor decisions." She inhaled again. "I'm not about to shit all over my parents' gift by being a 'yes man'. Natalie Thatcher raised both of us to be more than that. To see the big picture as well as the tiny details. Benjamin has lost sight occasionally of some of the details in a few of the proposals, which is why I go and find out the bigger picture."

Steph placed her hands on her hips and glared. "So, yes, I inserted myself and I'm

sorry. But you all made the council rethink its plans. You fought for your place, your shops, and you won. But Walker's is not the dragon. It can exist and will continue to. But not there." She pointed to the highway. "Anyway, I'm glad the council agreed to your terms, I'm glad you won, and I'm glad that you invited me to say what I had to say." Steph seemed to run out of puff.

"I'm mad at you," I said, emotions running rampant in my voice. "I'm mad at you because I feel hurt and betrayed. But mostly I'm mad at you because I've fallen for a person who I thought could be my someone. And now I find out that you're a company representative, and not that person."

Steph hung her head and I desperately wanted to take one more step closer so I could lift her chin with my finger and tell her I loved her but I couldn't.

"You were so unexpected," Steph said, quietly. "I?—"

We stood. Frozen.

"Steph," I said. "You walked into the shop, right through the plants all beautifully arranged and knocked on the door to my heart. And I let you in."

"I let you in, too." Then Steph took that step forward so we were within the boundaries of hand-holding. Slowly I reached for her hand, brushing her fingertips with mine, so eventually when our palms held each other, it was a relief. "That moment when I kissed you, when I held you, when I touched you...I knew. I knew love and now I've painted it with rust. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for anything to happen with us. It just did and I'm so sorry for hurting you even—what are you doing?"

I'd kissed her.

Then I did it again with more feeling and depth and I would have continued but a polite cough alerted me to that fact that we had an audience.

“Right,” Ted declared. “I think you two need a moment alone.”

There was a gasp from Mrs G. “No moment. Look. They are in the love. What is this moment business? Pah. They kiss, everyone is happy, we eat.”

I hung my head as everyone fell about laughing. It was like a dam had burst. Then I felt Steph’s other hand sandwich mine.

“Can we? Can we talk, please?”

I looked at her and nodded, leading her to the chairs near the discounted crystals in their glass cabinets.

We sat with our knees almost touching.

Steph smoothed my cheek, and I nestled into her palm. Gosh, she was so pretty.

“I missed you this week,” I said softly.

“I missed you terribly. I’d lost you and I couldn’t bear it. I wante—what are you doing?” she repeated from before.

I’d begun making soft beeping noises just like the metal detector did when nothing was underfoot but it was tracking.

“Angel?”

I leaned forward into Steph’s space, close enough to lean in for a kiss.

“I’m finding you, Steph. You’re my precious metal and it took me ages to work that out. I want to be your lover but now I’m in mid air with nowhere to land. What do I do with this information? Can’t you see how hurt I am? Well, I was hurt. Not so much now. But I was. I felt betrayed, because it felt like I fell in love with Steph Thatcher and suddenly you were Steph Walker.”

Steph’s eyes sparkled with tears. “You love me?”

“Yes!”

“But I’m the same person.”

“You’re Steph Thatcher-Walker,” I said.

“I’m your Steph. I just wear a fancy business suit on some days.”

I couldn’t help it. I leered. “Really?”

Steph threw her head back and laughed and it was the most delicious sound in the world.

I brought my head closer to hers, feeling her breath. Then I felt it. A tiny kiss on my skin, just above the spot where my dimple started near my cheek.

“Hey, Angel?” Steph murmured.

“Yeah?”

“I love you, too.”

My heart exploded with confetti and dancing cats in top hats and canes. I blurted out

the first thing that came to mind.

“I want to grow a tree with you.”

Steph tilted her head. “Like...an actual tree?”

I was so bad at this. “Well, okay, if you want to but I was speaking metaphorically. I want us. I want this.” I brushed her sternum and then mine and I was positive that I’d spoken softly but apparently we had a captive audience with listening devices.

“Put the soil in and grow the tree, Angel!”

Ted sounded like he was yelling for his favourite football team.

I blushed, then yelled back. “I own a nursery. I know how to grow a fucking tree!”

Eighteen months later.

Mountain Ash Gum Tree

(*Eucalyptus regnans*)

The tallest flower and the second tallest tree species in the world, it attains a height of about 90-100 metres and a circumference of 7.5 metres. It is a hardwood and has a straight, strong trunk with smooth bark. The Mountain Ash is unusual in that it only grows from seeds inside the hard nuts which are released following fire. Then it thrives on sunlight as it grows rapidly up to a metre a year. After a fire, hundreds of seed pods are released and grow rapidly towards the sun. One tree can create an entire forest.

“I ’m so proud of you,” Steph murmured as we walked into the council chambers. I squeezed her hand in reply. Both of us were dressed in our flashiest suits: Steph’s a pencil skirt high heel combination that had made me weak at the knees for eighteen months now, me in a bespoke pants suit that Ted had helped me with by recommending a tailor he knew. The reason for all the flashiness was the ceremony for the services to community awards that the council gave out each year. It just so happened that the person receiving the services to the community (children) award and the services to the community (disabled) award was me, Angel Whitlock.

I thought it thoroughly ironic that the last time I was in this chamber, I’d been growling at Benjamin Walker and deciding he was a wanker. Now, here I was dating his sister and deciding that actually, after meeting him, Benjamin Walker wasn’t really such a wanker after all. Just rather full of himself with a lot of hot air which a

bit of harmless teasing always popped. He'd been invited to our little community Christmas party last year and he'd declined—something about Chinese investors which had been news to Steph and I'd heard her the next day giving him a bollocking on the phone about Christmas was all about people being more important than business.

She had the authority to get stuck into her brother like that considering she was the majority shareholder and the younger sister. It still blew my mind—maybe a bit less now—when Steph picked me up in her latest model Mercedes, stepping out in sunglasses, business wear and heels. It blew up a a lot of places on my body as well. She volunteered at Dig It a few days a week and offered ideas like when she shifted all the child-friendly plants down to the bottom shelving in the store when we realised that Leroy was escaping into the foliage. I also found out who Kat was. Katherine, Ms Icy, from the council meeting. Steph had giggled when she'd heard what my first impression of Kat was.

“Oh my God. She only does that.” She pretended to wipe her hand down her face so that it revealed a stern expression. “To keep the board in check. Being senior lawyer on the Walker's board requires a poker face, chiselled hair and an eyebrow that can hit the ceiling. In reality, Kat is a huge softie, owns a Labradoodle and plays online ‘Grand Theft Auto’.”

It took me a minute for my brain to reassign my visual imagery for Katherine Marcheson.

Mum and Dad had beamed in via FaceTime last night to congratulate me. They'd already met Steph virtually and as they'd done in every other video chat, after they'd given their laptop a hug to simulate the real version, Steph and my parents spent an inordinate amount of time gushing over European architecture.

That was the elephant in the room sometimes: the fact that I earned significantly less than Steph and wasn't as worldly got stuck in my head little. It worried me that I

wasn't enough. She'd reiterated again only last week when I came home with the suit from the tailor's.

"Sweetheart, you look stunning."

Cue massive imposter syndrome. "I feel a bit like a fake," I'd replied, with a grimace.

"Why?" She looked so concerned.

"I'm a uni drop-out who runs a nursery. I..."

"What?" She'd come close and held my waist, staring intently.

"I worry I'm not enough."

Steph had tugged me into her so our bodies were flush, then leant back a little so she could look me in the eyes.

"Angel Whitlock, you are more than enough, but if enough is where you need to be then yes, you are enough. You are a business owner, a valued member of the community, a winner of awards for being the kind, thoughtful person that you are. You are gorgeous. You are enough. I am proud to call you my lover."

And with that I'd cried, right there in the bedroom of my little flat next door to my little boutique nursery.

Dig It was still the same size but the growth in popularity was astounding. Steph still made her NatsNatives TikTok videos which were very successful. We had so much foot traffic that I was incredibly grateful I had wide accessibility aisles so people could browse without elbowing each other. Kahlia asked tentatively one morning last year if she could run classes for people with disabilities on how to look after natives.

“I won’t take up too much space,” she’d said, her fingers twined together over her chest, almost as if she were praying.

“That sounds like the most brilliant idea ever. There’d be heaps of people living in assisted or shared housing that could look after succulents or smaller plants. You’re a genius.” I’d leapt up and hugged her and she’d let out a whoosh of air that was laden with relief and joy.

So now, along with Bonsai Brains, we had ‘Know Your Native’: a name which had been Lucas’ idea because he said it worked well with his initiative of creating music—instrumental, mostly—playlists that could be streamed from QR codes attached to each species’s display in the nursery.

“Chill while you’re vibing with your Acacia.”

I’d stared at him. “Vibing...with an Acacia...” I’d faded off.

“Come on, Angel, don’t be old.”

So we started to become known as that nursery, whatever ‘that’ meant. But it was working. We had mini-buses of the elderly, disabled, the neurodivergent and the simply curious. We were even the third stop on the bus tour of Rainbow Melbourne. That was once a month, so we always shuffled the plants about to create the colours of the pride flag. And the passengers always left holes in our floral artwork with their many purchases.

“And now, the award for?—”

I straightened in my seat on the stage, having joined the other recipients in an arc of chairs behind the small awards table and the lecturn with the microphone. The Mayor smiled at me.

“This year’s service to the community (children) award and the services to the community (disabled) award goes to Angel Whitlock.”

I almost burst into tears. These awards were everybody’s, not just mine. But, as their representative, I pulled myself together, stood, and strode forward to shake the Mayor’s hand, who seemed to either have forgiven me for making his life a bit miserable last year or he’d forgotten who I was in the first place. Probably that one. I held both glass trophies while the photographer got her ‘Mayor gives local person an award’ photos, and because speeches weren’t being offered and I was the last awardee, I made my way off the stage to my group of supporters waiting at the side.

Ted relieved me of the trophies while I was hugged by everyone who had decided to come along including Mr and Mrs G—I was enveloped in a bosom that smelled of patchouli, and the faint scent of fried oil. Jules and Pip sandwiched me between them with made Leroy crack up, because, at one year old, he seemed to think that everything was hilarious and me being squished in a cuddle was super funny. He bounced on Derek’s hip, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Handicapped woman coming through. Mind the wheels. They’re expensive.” Kahlia rolled through and looked up, “You, Angel, are my friend and my employer and the best human ever and I love you. There. I said it,” she sniffled, then cried properly when I hugged her. Even Tessa, my cousin, whose job as a nanny gave her barely a spare moment, dashed in at the final applause to give me a congratulatory hug, before having to return home to the kids of the latest celebrity she was working for.

It was a given that we’d return to the cafe for a celebration feast. Mrs G had mentioned it, but it was Mr G, in his quiet voice, that had made the point that last time we’d had a group community feast because of the council, we’d tried poor Steph in a kangaroo court, so it was time to eradicate that memory. Everyone agreed with that logic.

After waving everyone off with ‘See you soon’, and ‘Drive safe’, Steph and I walked

to the undercover car park. We'd taken her Mercedes instead of the bike, purely for logistics.

"I'm not getting on your bike in a skirt. It's literally impossible," Steph had said, hands on hips. Hence, Mercedes. I wasn't complaining.

Steph stopped me at the passenger door, gave me the keys, and leaned in to kiss me softly.

"I'm so proud of you. I adore you, Angel Whitlock," she whispered in that way she did which made all the hairs on my skin stand up. "I want?—"

I wasn't having that. This called for bold butch energy.

I leaned forward so her back was pressed against the black panelling of the car. I gave her a wicked grin. "Let me tell you what you want. You're going to be a good girl later and come so hard on my fingers and my tongue that you can't breathe and then I'm going to start again."

Steph gasped, her mouth open for a second, then she grinned, her eyes ablaze with sudden lust.

"Okay," she purred.

Here I was, full of love for my business, my staff, my friends, my lover.

Talk about growing a tree.