

CHAPTER ONE

Jessie Spenser pulled her right foot out of her high-heeled shoe and stretched her toes. Damn things were tight; how other women wore them she'd never understand. She rubbed the bright red patch on the side of her foot, the first telltale sign of a blister. She wished she'd stuck to her military boots, but the fashionista customer at MARK'S DINER, Jessie's roadside restaurant, had insisted they go with the simple black dress. She appreciated the effort, but would rather be wearing jeans, a black MARK'S DINER t-shirt, and a camo cap.

Besides, this was a special occasion, and if she could survive Marine boot camp, she could survive an hour dressed properly for her inauguration as the Town Council member from Litchfield's 4th District. She believed that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and she'd come out stronger after the full-contact sport of Litchfield's political arena.

From her vantage point on the dais on the brick plaza in front of City Hall, Jessie had to admit that downtown cleaned up nicely for Inauguration Day. The gutters on Main Street didn't contain beer cans, newspapers or crack pipes. OPENING SOON signs filled every unoccupied storefront. The nearby stoplight was free of panhandlers.

Too bad that it was all a fake, thanks to THE GUYS, the self-baptized name of the current officeholders. They'd decided to spend money putting lipstick on a pig to keep them in office instead of spending it where it was needed. Money better spent repaving the pothole-filled roads, filling the empty library shelves and funding special ed services for kids like her son, Bart. Money that they'd raised with continual property tax and water rate increases. Money that

ranked Litchfield as the costliest and worst-run municipality in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Jessie knew two things. One, she was no accountant and had no idea how the money flowed through the city's books. But she had her suspicions where it ended up; in the pockets of THE GUYS' and their smarmy leeches.

And two, as sure as spring followed winter, the town would revert to its prior state. The gutters would be dirty because the street sweepers were playing cards in the Department of Works garage, if they showed up for work at all. The signs would fade before any new occupants arrived and sag as the tape lost its grip. Panhandlers would return to their posts at the primary downtown intersections since the cops would no longer have given them money and a ride to a fast-food restaurant in the next town.

None of this shocked her; it had been going on for decades, one mayoral administration after another. Doing just enough to stay in office by perfecting the art of promising better times ahead and delivering glittering baubles and shiny trinkets as proof.

A new jungle gym would be installed to great publicity. There'd be a groundbreaking ceremony, shiny shovels and all, for a proposed business or apartment building which would mysteriously never be built due to financing issues.

But the best distraction was two-time incumbent Mayor Ralph Norwood's project at Lake Williams. You had to give the man his props for envisioning a way to turn the lake into a public works extravaganza. (To be truthful, the lake was more of a big pond than a lake, but who's going to quibble. Certainly not Peyton Williams, the godfather of Litchfield mayors, the mayor all subsequent mayors hoped to copy, the mayor who renamed the body of water for himself in a still-talked-about ceremony with bands, fireworks, and hot-air balloon rides over the lake.)

Ralph's project was a thing of beauty. A shiny metal boardwalk with ten-foot interlocking pieces floating across the lake, connecting parks on opposite shores. On opening day, news trucks had jockeyed for position to broadcast pictures of families with strollers and the elderly in wheelchairs enjoying the sun while walking on water. It was a masterpiece of using your office to stay in office while generating great public relations.

But like the streets, the signs, and the panhandlers, the shiny new boardwalk was showing signs of distress. It had been a cold winter, and Lake Williams froze early. The shifting and heaving ice had realigned the formerly straight structure into a zigzag pattern. But the election was over, and Ralph would have four years to create another distraction.

Jessie scanned the backs of the nearby heads. White hair. Bald spots. Untrimmed ear hair. Today was nothing special to them; they'd won their mayoral and Town Council re-elections in landslides. But it was a big deal to her.

She'd run on a dare from her customers after listening to one too many of her rants about Bart needing more help. They'd stuffed coffee cans with their change, held signs at busy intersections, and driven little old ladies to the polls, and she'd won by twenty-one votes.

It'd been their first defeat in decades.

Bored with the view, Jessie pondered which letter she'd place on the sports jerseys she'd give them after she caught them stealing.

A for abuse of the public trust?

B for bribery?

C for corruption?

She settled on a giant capital A for the front and back, with their name emblazoned across the shoulders. Of course, the A would have to be scarlet; that had a Nathaniel Hawthorne, Puritanical New England ring to it.

But how many jerseys would she need?

There was Ralph. Fred Wenham, Ralph's predecessor and a council member. Brad Malden, Fred's predecessor and Town Council President. And she couldn't forget Jude Townsend, Treasurer; Garth Tweedle, Police Chief; and Joe Curley, Town Attorney. She'd order an even dozen just to be safe.

She looked out at the several hundred people attending today's event. They were mostly town workers ordered there to keep their jobs. Her customers and Bart were in the back rows. Her godfather, Butchie Dalton, easily identifiable by his grand head of white hair, sat tall. She exchanged waves with them.

Mayor Norwood was sworn in first. His day job was as a salesman for the local food purveyor company, and he looked the part: well-groomed in a nice suit, in shape, always with a smile and a hearty handshake. This was his third term, his last if you believed him, and then he'd follow the path of every prior mayor by cruising to a Town Council seat victory and eventually becoming Council President. He might as well print his business cards now rather than waiting.

Jessie was sworn in last, and then Ralph gave a speech. By the time the other council members had spoken, only Jessie's cheering section remained. Her hands trembled and her voice cracked as she read a one-page speech about being inspired by her dad, Mark, for whom her restaurant was named, and to promise to work for a better government.

Then that was that, and the formal ceremony was over, but not the post-inauguration reception inside City Hall. For a small city, Litchfield had a surprisingly grand building with

marble floors and stairs and a rotunda with a pastoral scene on the vaulted ceiling. It must've looked great a century ago when it was built, but now the floor was scuffed, the steps had furrows, and the colors were faded.

Jessie stood with her beer, watching others flitting about, smiling, saying witty things, and backslapping. That was until Ralph came over.

“Having a good time, Jessie?”

“Swell.”

He laughed. “Getting elected is one thing, staying elected is another, and getting things done is a third. You want to make a difference?” He gestured around the room. “Do favors for these people and vote the right way. Then you'll have chits to call in later. That's how politics works around here.”

“That's stupid. No wonder we're ranked last.”

“You don't like it? Quit.”

“No, I'm staying.”

“Good. Now, let's be nice to our important constituents.”

“You mean rich constituents, right?”

“Right.” He rested his palm on her lower back, an inch or two above her butt, steering her toward a group of well-dressed businessmen and women.

“Mister Mayor,” she said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Yes, Madame Councilwoman.” He matched her smile.

“Move that hand, or I'll break your arm off and beat you to death with it.” Her words echoed off the hard surfaces. Heads turned. She hadn't counted on the rotunda's acoustics carrying her threat beyond Ralph.

But he didn't miss a beat, and his hand found her elbow. "Better?"

"Better."

Jessie lasted ten minutes sucking up to the "important constituents" before her face ached from over-smiling, and she excused herself, joining the long line at the ladies' bathroom. She'd considered using the men's room; it was no big deal. She'd done it in barracks and squatted in fields and deserts. But that'd freak everyone out, so she waited. She entered the third stall and texted Bart that she'd be home soon.

Someone entered the stall to her left, latched the door, and sat down. The toilet crunched against the tiles. She heard heavy breathing, then silence. Not that Jessie was eavesdropping, but there'd been no noise from clothes rustling or zippers tugging. It was probably nothing. Her neighbor might hate big gatherings too and needed to escape to keep her sanity.

A movement to her left caught Jessie's eye and she looked down to see a rounded shadow under the wall, a few inches into Jessie's stall.

She froze. The shadow moved closer, becoming the outer edge of a black shoe.

Jessie walked her feet to her right.

The shoe crept closer. It was a flat, shiny shoe with a black bow on top.

Jessie moved again, her knees now touching the toilet paper dispenser on her right.

The shoe slithered closer, exposing white skin marred by a dark brown blemish with a single hair in the middle. The wearer's foot was crammed in tighter than the contents of a sausage casing, creating substantial toe cleavage.

Jessie'd heard of something like this in the news. A U.S. senator had been caught by an undercover airport security guard assigned to stop men from soliciting sex in bathrooms. The senator defended himself, saying that he was a "wide-stance guy." But the court found him

guilty, especially after others came forward with similar solicitations. He'd resigned and gotten divorced in rapid succession.

"I'm out of toilet paper. Have you got any extra?" the neighbor asked. Her voice was husky but feminine.

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

The foot disappeared, and a ringless hand with age spots took its place.

Jessie removed a spare roll and handed it to the neighbor.

"Thanks," and the roll disappeared.

It was all a big misunderstanding; a bad combination of beer and adrenaline had let Jessie's imagination run away with her. She'd stick to ginger ale for the rest of the party.

She heard a "Psst" and looked down. The hand was back, this time waving a white business envelope. What the hell was this woman doing, sending her a thank-you note for the roll of toilet tissue?

Jessie saw that the top left corner had writing and craned her neck to make out what it said. It was Litchfield's City Hall address, pre-printed in bold black ink. Jessie looked for a delivery name or address but it was blank. The flap separated from the back side, and Jessie saw a twenty-dollar bill on top of a thick wad of money.

Jessie'd counted money and made bank deposits thousands of times. She knew cash, and her guess was that the stack totaled in the thousands.

What the hell was going on? First, her neighbor invaded her space, asking for toilet paper; that was a bit creepy at first, but turned out to be perfectly innocent. Then Fat-foot waves a money-filled official government envelope at her?

Everything her customers ranted about day after day was true, and Jessie had a front-row seat. She accessed her video recording app, catching the hand in action.

“Take it.”

“What’s it for?”

“A down payment for playing along.”

Jessie scrunched toward her right wall, knees together, arms clenched against her chest, still recording. There was no way she was going to take it. She’d be a criminal just like the people she abhorred.

Unless.

What if she took it? She could turn it over to the police or the district attorney. They’d get fingerprints and identify Fat-foot and any others who’d touched it. That’d get rid of the scum.

But who could she trust? Not Chief Tweedle; his nickname was Tweedle Dumb. Or Town Counsel Curley; he’d never prosecute one of his buddies. She could ask her sort of boyfriend, Officer Lucas Barre, to help, but he’d get fired if he were caught going around Tweedle. She’d have to find someone else.

There was another reason to take it. The voice had said it was a down payment, which meant there was more to come, with more chances to catch Fat-foot.

Jessie bent over, but stopped. Moving that last inch, that minor distance, would cross the line between honesty and criminality. If she were caught...

Caught?

She hadn’t considered that. What if this was a setup, a sting? The Feds did it all the time, making an offer, catching the government official on tape, careful to be sure that it wasn’t entrapment.

Or it could be THE GUYS, getting her to accept the money and having her on a recording. Fat-foot could be doing the same thing as Jessie.

But she didn't think she'd be prosecuted. And even if she was charged, she had her video evidence that Fat-foot had approached her.

Jessie wrapped her left hand in toilet paper and took it.

The shoe vanished, the metal door creaked open, and the occupant hustled away.

Jessie dressed quicker than if she'd been caught having sex on her parents' bed and stuffed it in a pocket. The contents were half an inch thick but felt like an anvil.

She ran into the lobby. No one was walking fast. She roamed around, looking at people's feet, but she didn't see any flats, bows, toe cleavage or hairy moles.

Her mouth was dry, her armpits wet and her stomach knotted. She felt like everyone was staring at her, noticing the giant bulge in her dress. She needed a drink and searched for a waiter doling out champagne. Screw the ginger ale. She locked eyes with Ralph.

He crossed the room and handed her a crystal fluted glass. "Congratulations on joining the team, Councilwoman Spenser," he said and tilted his glass toward her. He smiled, as calm as if they were at a backyard barbecue. He must know what had just happened. Fat-foot must've run out, given him a sign that the deal was done, and then disappeared.

Jessie's hand shook and liquid spilled over the rim as she reciprocated.

"Nervous?" he asked. He caught the attention of a passing waiter and ordered him to clean the spill, wielding the power of his office as if it were second nature.

"Yes, Uncle Ralph. I mean, Mr. Mayor," the waiter said, and the spill disappeared. He topped off their glasses and returned with a platter of hors d'oeuvres.

"Ladies first. The lobster roll is fantastic."

Ralph was right; the sandwich was incredible. “As good as in Maine. And yes, I am a bit nervous.”

“And, Madame Councilwoman?” he asked, enunciating every syllable.

She remembered teachers using that tone when prompting for an answer. “And yes, I’m a bit nervous, Mr. Mayor.”

He smiled, a mini-king acknowledging a subject. “Bart must be very proud of you, Jessie.”

“He is. He’s a good kid.”

“I understand you requested special ed services for him?”

She was tempted to toss her drink in his face. Ralph knew the answer: she’d talked with him during her fight with the School Board. He’d said he’d look into it but he’d been no help. He even knew that her request had been denied and yet here he was, playing dumb.

Ralph waved to a middle-aged man across the room wearing a too-tight sports jacket.

“You see Oliver Fairhaven over there?”

Jessie knew him and didn’t like him; he was the head of the School Board and Ralph’s boss. “Sure.”

“I think he’ll support your application this time.”

“But what about the other kids who need help? The council needs to approve money for them, too.”

“Then their parents should win an election,” Ralph said. He leaned in close. “File that request ASAP. And take a look at his products. Outstanding quality and a few pennies more, but you get what you pay for. He’ll hook you up.” He moved away and spoke normally. “Now, I’ve got schmoozing to do.” He turned to the man behind him, and they shook hands vigorously.

“Jessie, I’d like you to meet someone special. Lee Whitman. He owns Litchfield Construction Company. Mr. Whitman paid for that lobster roll you inhaled.”

Jessie had heard of him from her patrons. They said he made Scrooge look benevolent. They shook hands.

“Oh, it was great, Mr. Whitman. Thank you.”

“Lee is fine. My guys love your restaurant.”

“That’s why I do it. That and for the gossip.”

“Any gossip about me?”

“Only that the porta-potties could be cleaner,” she lied.

“They can be gross. I’ll look into it. You gotta give a poop about their poops, you know,” he said, laughing too loud at his own joke.

Ralph joined in the overreaction.

Jessie smiled, not wanting to regress to grammar-school bathroom humor.

“Nice meeting you, Jessie. Try the shrimp; it’ll melt in your mouth. Ralph, have you got a minute?” he asked, and they walked to an unoccupied corner.

A bribe. A donated party that cost more than she made in a week. Special Ed services miraculously available if she bought expensive food from Ralph’s employer.

She wanted to puke.

CHAPTER TWO

“Jessie, some guy’s at the back door for you,” Tracy called out from the cash register end of MARK’S thirty-foot-long counter. Tracy was the only waitress; her blond-streaked hair was piled on her head, held in place by a yellow wooden pencil.

Jessie gave the griddle’s contents a quick flip, then passed through the pantry and dishwashing area to the back door.

A man was waiting, tapping his foot on the precast concrete steps and leaning on the handrail made of galvanized steel pipe. He wore a green fleece jacket with LITCHFIELD PURVEYORS above his heart and ROB in script letters on his left pocket. A pile of food was on the top step.

“Can I help you?”

“Sign here, lady,” Rob said, holding out a blue-encased tablet.

“Sign for what?”

“Your order. It says so right here. ONE DELIVERY. MARK’S DINER.” He held the tablet device closer to his face. “Yep. Sold by R. Norwood. \$257.33.”

“Who the hell are you?”

He pointed at his shirt and read the company name. “And I’m Rob.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Hey, I don’t know what you tell you, lady. The guys fill the truck and I go where my sheet says. And it says you.”

Her phone rang. The caller ID read LPC, and she answered.

“Jessie!” a booming voice said. “Oliver Fairhaven here. How was Rob? Courteous as ever?”

“Yes, Oliver. A very nice guy. How did you know he was here?”

“We have GPS tracking.”

“What the hell is he doing here? I use Norfolk Provisions.” Her phone pinged with her email alert.

“You should check that.”

She opened the message from the Litchfield School Board. Bart had been approved for special ed services starting today. She gasped.

“I hope that sound meant that it was good news.”

“Uh, yes. Sure. This is great.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

“I don’t...” But she did. Ralph’s comments. A new food provider. Bart’s new classes. Quid pro quo.

“Is the order complete?”

Rob showed her the invoice; it was her usual daily order, only 10% higher than she usually paid. So much for Ralph’s “a few pennies more” comment.

“Yes, it’s complete. The same brands, too. How did you know?”

“Trade secret. Now, if you can sign the screen with a finger?”

She did, and her phone pinged again. This time it was her receipt and an invoice.

“The tablet registers when a shipment is signed for and connects to our billing system.”

“Pretty high-tech. Now, about...”

“New customers get a week's grace period before you need to pay. But you need to sign up for our automatic payment plan. Nice talking with you, Jessie,” Oliver said and ended the call.

“See you soon,” Rob said after stacking the items inside and leaving for his appointed rounds.

Jessie tilted against the handrail, her face in her hands, and cried. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Jessie, honey, are you okay?”

Jessie showed Tracy her email. “OMG, that’s great. You got it. You won.”

She was right; it was great for Bart. Tracy just didn’t know the cost.

“Hey, Mom, my bus is here,” Bart called from inside the restaurant. “And I’m getting new classes.”

Jessie wiped her tears, ran through the diner, and walked him to the bus. “How’d you know about the classes?”

“I got a text. Okay, Mom. Bye,” he said and bounded onto the bus.

She shuffled back to the diner. She hadn’t really paid for Bart’s special classes. Just like she hadn’t accepted the money when she handled it with tissue paper.

She walked past the bathroom and saw herself in the mirror. This is how it began. She was as bad as they were. She turned away, disgusted.

But she had customers waiting. She summoned her ‘everything’s great’ face and walked to the griddle. She flipped pancakes, rolled sausages and broke egg yolks while returning to the conversation streams. Caught up, she bent down to tie her boot. The cash was still under the griddle in a Ziplock bag.

“Jessie, phone!” Tracey called out, holding a black landline phone.

“Hello?” Jessie asked.

“Jessie? Rick here. We’ve been doing business since you took over. Why’d you drop us? And why didn’t you call us instead of Oliver Fairhaven, that over-charging bastard?”

“He called you?”

“Said you asked him to. That you were too embarrassed to fire us yourself. So, I gave him your order history just like we always do when we lose a customer.”

Ralph and Oliver had played her like a Stradivarius. Ralph dropped the hint. Oliver fired her supplier, got the order and delivered it unannounced. Bart gets the news before she could tell Oliver to stick her order where the sun doesn’t shine. This wasn’t their first time running this scam.

“I’m sorry, Rick. I’ll give them a try to see how it goes.”

“I can tell you how it’ll go. Your checkbook will be lighter by 10%, that’s how it’ll go. I thought you were better than this.”