

Max and Amanda

By Kate Simon

Max Powell sat down at the booth with Frank McCarthy. It had been a long morning and he was starving. His business of renovating houses was profitable but today was particularly exhausting. Mrs. Lindsey's designer kept changing the plans. They'd redesigned the kitchen twice. Fortunately, Mrs. Lindsey was willing to pay for the overages upfront.

"Have you talked to the designer?" asked Frank.

"Yeah. I told her if she makes anymore changes, she'll be doing them herself."

Dorothy came over to their table. "Hi guys, the usual?"

"Yes, please," said Max.

"Cheeseburgers and sodas, coming up," she smiled as she wrote on her pad. "Hey, did you see what the wind blew in?" she asked as she pointed to the end of the counter.

Max had never had a heart attack but he thought this it what it felt like.

"It can't be," said Frank.

"Oh, it is," said Dorothy. "Amanda Miller, although that may not be her name now if she's married. I hear she's in town to sell her parent's house."

"How do you know?" asked Frank.

"When will you learn, darling. I am the font of all knowledge in Boyertown. I'll be right back with your drinks."

Frank had finally noticed Max hadn't spoken. "Max, are you okay?"

"Huh, yeah, of course."

"It was long time ago." Girlfriend was too simple a word. Amanda Miller had been his whole world when he was eighteen.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"When she left town for college." The pain of that day was suddenly as fresh as it was forty-five years ago. She still had long blonde hair, although there were streaks of

white. She took her take out order and turned to leave. All those years melted away and her saw the girl she'd been. He didn't see the gentle lines on her face. All he saw were the same bright green eyes of the girl he'd loved.

Amanda couldn't believe all the crap in her parent's house. The realtor told her she had to get rid of all the personal stuff in their house before she could even think of selling. Between going through her parents' things and staying in her old bedroom, she'd been plagued with nightmares. Should she get rid of the furniture? Why did they have so many pictures? How was she suppose to decide what to keep? Her parents came to her in her dreams, questioning all her decisions. She woke up exhausted. All she wanted was some strong coffee and a burger with fries.

She didn't want to stay in town longer than needed. She'd come back a couple of times a year to visit but she preferred it when they came to visit her and Malcolm in New York. Boyertown held too many memories. She'd had a happy childhood but she'd always had a powerful desire to see the world. That meant leaving everything and everyone behind for college. It meant leaving Max. She loved him but she couldn't see tying herself to this small town for the rest of her life.

The waitress handed her the order and she turned to leave. Time stopped. The years had softened his looks. His hair was shot with grey. One thing hadn't changed. Max Powell had the bluest eyes he'd ever she'd ever seen. Her heart pounded in her ears. She did what she'd done before. Amanda ran.

Max couldn't focus at the jobsite. He looked around and saw the men were on track. He turned to Frank. "You make sure that bizarre tile gets laid right. I'm going back to the office."

Frank had been his number one for twenty years. He knew Max too well. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he growled. "We have more jobs going than this. I've got contracts to review. You handle this. I'm going back to the office."

"Sure thing, boss."

Max walked to his truck and slammed the door. What was wrong with him? Frank deserved better from him. He went back to the office and blew past his receptionist. He closed his office door and sat behind his desk. He opened one of the files on his desk. This was the next project. A flipper got in over his head and Max bought him out for cheap. He'd assemble a crew, work for a few weeks and sell the house for a good profit. He looked at the contracts and they were all a blur. He couldn't think of anything but her. He hadn't seen her for decades. Then she shows up.

They'd agreed when she left for school that was the end. Neither of them wanted a long-distance relationship. Amanda had plans. She was going school in California to study photography. Then she was going to travel the world. Max was going to trade school. Construction was in his blood. He'd spent summers working with his father in his construction business. He went to trade school to fine tune his skills. His plan was to show his father he was worthy to take over the business. It was the proudest day of his life when his father handed him the keys to the office and retired.

Max spent the first couple of years trying to get over her. He poured everything into his work. He remembered when he saw her wedding announcement in the local paper. She married a junior stockbroker who had a cushy job in daddy's firm. Amanda looked like an angel in her wedding gown. It was the first time Max ever cried. It was also the last. He locked his feelings for Amanda Miller away and laser focused on his work. He'd had a few relationships over the years but none of them stuck. They weren't her. Now she was back.

Amanda looked over the types of stains and had no clue which one to pick. She was going to take a break from inside the house and work on the outside while the weather was good. The deck hadn't been treated in years. The wood seemed solid so she was going to stain it and freshen up the garden.

She spotted a guy in an orange vest. "Excuse me. Could you help me with some stains?"

"Sure, what kind of stains are you looking for?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me. The deck hasn't been treated in a few years. I need enough to cover the deck and the railings."

"Well, I would recommend this stain. It will last for years."

"I just need it to last until I sell it."

Max stopped buy the home store to pick up the special-order hardware for the kitchen cabinets. That damn designer and her client would be the death of him. Normally he'd send one of the men, but he needed an excuse to get out of the office. He'd been hiding out for days. He needed to get on with his life. Again.

He was headed toward hardware when he saw her. He overheard her asking for help from someone who knew nothing but how to sell the most expensive thing on the shelf. He hesitated. He shouldn't. He was opening old wounds. Who was he kidding? The wound was already opened and bleeding all over his life.

"That's the wrong stain," he said. Amanda gasped and turned around. They were as close as they were that day at the airport.

"Max," she whispered.

"That stain is very difficult to use. I could take a look at your deck for you, if you like."

"Max," she said again.

“I heard you were in town to sell your parent’s house. I was sorry to hear your mom had passed.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m still in the business. I can help.”

“Why would you help me after all these years?”

“Because you need it.”

“Max, I don’t...” She ran her hand through her hair. “I can’t ask you to help me.”

“You didn’t. I offered. I need to pick up an order, then I can follow you back to your house. I’ll give you an idea of what you need to do before you sell.” Amanda followed him to the service desk while he paid for the damn porcelain hardware with the blue flowers.

He pulled his truck behind Amanda’s Audi. He followed her to the same house he’s spent a great deal of his teenage years. The house had seen better days, but it was on a half acre in the best part of town. He pulled into the driveway behind Amanda. He tried to focus on the house. Siding was past it’s prime as was the roof. The lawn needed to be re-sodded and it could do with some flowers. Anyone looking for houses would drive right past this one.

Amanda fiddled with the keys. “I’m sorry the house isn’t exactly tidy. I wasn’t expecting guests.”

“That’s fine.” The inside of the house was in the same state as the outside, generally sound but in need of updating.

“I’ll show you the porch. I thought I’d do some work outside before tackling anymore inside.”

Max looked around the porch and it was as he suspected. The railings were loose and parts would have to be replaced. This was more than a quick paint job. “I’m afraid a bit of stain won’t solve this. It needs some work.”

She sat down on a deck chair. “Damn.” She looked back at the house and shook her head. “Why did I get stuck with this pile?”

“Because you were their only child.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound so ungrateful. It’s just a lot to take on.”

“Can your husband help?”

She looked startled. “How do you know I was married? I’m not wearing a ring.”

“Local newspaper. Was?”

“Malcolm died last year. Heart attack.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She sighed and looked up at him. “I didn’t mean to be short with you. The realtor told me I had to clean out the place before I sold it. It’s just so much to go through. They kept everything, even all my stuff. There’s a box of my old track trophies. They even saved my cheerleading outfit.” Tears ran down her face. “What am I supposed to do with it?” Max pulled her to her feet and held her close, letting her cry herself out.

Amanda finally pulled away and wiped her cheeks. “I’m so sorry.” She ran into the house and grabbed a roll of paper towels. She pulled one off, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Max followed her inside and waited for her to speak. “I don’t know what came over me. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

She looked at him and his heart ached. “Mom was all I had left.”

“She was a nice lady. I used to see her in town.”

“Mom never said, but I guess she wouldn’t,” she smiled.

Max couldn’t go down this road. “Why don’t I take a look at the rest of the house. I can give you an idea of what it would take to get it ready for sale.”

He followed Amanda around the house, room by room. Amanda’s bedroom was the same as it had been in high school. They’d snuck up here more than once when her parents weren’t home.



“You see what I mean? They never changed anything.”

“Or they were preserving happy memories,” he said. He was rewarded with a small smile.

“So, what do you think?”

“The house is solid but needs updating and a new roof. As it is now, you could ask three hundred and fifty thousand. You’d get it but it would take awhile. Houses in this neighborhood with smaller lots are going for five hundred thousand. If you put in fifty thousand, you’ll get at least five hundred thousand.”

“Oh God, how am I supposed to do that? Hiring people. Months of work. I’m supposed to be in California for a job next month.”

“Photography assignment?” he asked.

“How did you know?”

“Local papers can be very informative. ‘Boyertown native has showing in New York gallery’.”

Amanda smiled. “You’ve kept track of me?”

“Amanda Miller is a very well known photographer. I’ve seen your work. You’re very good.”

“Thank you.”

“You didn’t go by Brookstone.”

She leaned back and smiled. “You have been keeping up. I’d already made a name for myself as Miller when I got married.”

“Good. I don’t think I could get used to calling you by any other name.” Max took a breath. He needed to get back on track. “I’ll go back to my office and draw up some plans for you to review.” He looked at her and realized he was assuming a hell of a lot. “You could get other contractors in but honestly, I’m the best. I’ve been doing this forever and I have the crew to do it.” He risked a smile. “I’ll give you the friends and family discount.”

“How can I say no?”

“Good,” he nodded. “I’ll have a storage unit sent over for things you want to keep. I’ll send some men to help with the heavy stuff.”

“Max, I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m just helping out an old friend.”

Amanda chuckled. “Watch who you’re calling old.”

Max drove to the job site with the damn porcelain hardware. If it weren't for them, he wouldn't have seen her. He wouldn't have offered to redo her house for such a low-ball estimate. He'd cover the overages himself. He slammed his hands on the steering wheel. He was out of his freaking mind.

He got the box of hardware out of his truck and walked into jobsite. The men had gotten a lot accomplished in the last few days, but he wasn't surprised. He always hired the best. He found Frank in the kitchen and handed him the box. "Your hardware."

"Did you go to the factory? What took so long? You left two hours ago."

"Let's go outside."

Frank shook his head. "This isn't going to be good."

Max closed the door behind them. "I ran into Amanda Miller at the store."

"And?"

"She was trying to buy stain for a deck and the guy was selling her the wrong stuff."

"Let me guess. You came to her rescue."

"She was in over her head. Dorothy was right. She's here to sell her parent's house so I took a look. It's sound but needs updating. I'm going to draw up some plans while I get some guys over to help her clear out the furniture."

"As in now, right away?"

"Yes."

"You do realize that we have a waiting list of clients."

"I know. They're going to have to wait a little longer."

"How long do we have?"

"One month."

Frank's mouth opened but he didn't speak. He took a breath. "We'll have to pull every guy we can and anyone else they know."

“I realize I’ve put us in a difficult position.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Yeah, I am but I know you deserve better from me. I’ve been a dick this week and I’m sorry.”

Frank softened. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“Look at it this way. The sooner we sell her house, the sooner she leaves town and things get back to normal.”

Frank nodded. “Sure thing, boss.” He went back in the house to install the cursed hardware. Frank didn’t believe him any more than he believed it himself.

Amanda was showing the men which pieces of furniture to store as she packed up her mother's china. She would have to find a home for it at her apartment in New York. Her mother would come back from the dead and smack her upside the head if she didn't. Max kept his word and had two men and a storage container in her driveway first thing in the morning. She was surprised when he called her last night, but it was the house phone. Another thing that had never changed, and he still remembered.

The men carried out the last of the boxes from downstairs. It was amazing how fast the rooms emptied when she had help. She'd boxed up the everyday flatware and dishes and most of the appliances for donation. She left just enough so she could prepare a few meals. She didn't want to go out to eat. It had been too many years and she didn't look forward to accepting condolences or recounting her life to everyone she met. She was startled by the ringing wall phone. It had only rung once before. "Hello Max."

"You don't have caller ID on that thing."

"You're the only one who's called me."

"Did the men I sent work out?"

"Yes, they worked very quickly. We got the entire downstairs cleared and I've boxed up things for donation. I'd like to donate most of the stuff upstairs."

"I have some people I work with. They will take the cabinets and the appliances too."

"Excuse me?"

"We'll need to gut the kitchen."

"Are you serious? That will take forever."

"No, it won't. I have the plans drawn up. Why don't I stop by with them?"

"It's getting late. I don't want to hold you from anything."

"You're not. How about a couple of cheesesteaks from Gino's?"

Amanda smiled. "I haven't had one of those in forever."

“Okay, I’ll be by in an hour.”

“I’ll see you then.” She hung up the phone and smiled. She went to the bathroom to wash off the dust of the day. Her heart was fluttering like it always did when she was with Max. She shook her head. “Get real,” she said to no one. “He could be married with ten kids.” She ran a brush through her hair and looked at her reflection. Her hair was whiter every year. Who was she kidding? He was just helping an old friend.

Max picked up his order from Gino’s and got in his truck. He set the cheesesteaks next to the plans. He’d try to convince himself Amanda was just another client. He failed. He knocked on her front door with the cheesesteaks in one hand and the plans under his arm.

“Hello,” she said as she reached her hands for the bag. “Come to Mama!”

He smiled and closed the door behind him. He followed her into the kitchen where there was small table and chairs. “You’ve made a lot of progress.”

“More like your men did.” She opened the fridge. “Is soda alright? I’m afraid I don’t have any beer.”

“Soda is fine, thanks.”

She set out paper plates and glasses. She poured the soda and sat down. “I can’t tell you how long it’s been since I’ve had one of these.” She took a bite and smiled. “You remembered the mushrooms.”

He smiled. “Yeah, I remembered.” He took a bite as he remembered all those times they’d sat in a booth in Gino’s.

Amanda took a sip of her soda and took a breath. “I need to talk to you about the work. I can pay your guys for today and for the storage, but it’s going to take me some time to liquidate assets to cover the rest of the work. The house is paid for but Mom’s insurance only covered the funeral and minor debts.”

“That’s okay. I’ll cover the expenses and you can pay me out of the proceeds.”

“I can’t ask you to do that. It could take months before you see your money.”

“Once I’m done the house will sell in a week, if that.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Because this is what I do for a living. I’ve sold half a dozen houses in this neighborhood in the last three months.”

“Really?”

Max smiled. “I’m very good.” He enjoyed Amanda’s blush. “How was your cheesesteak?”

“Delicious, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s take a look at the plans.” Amanda cleared the table and Max rolled out the plans. “The goal is to update the house to meet current standards without going over the top. We’ll gut the kitchen and donate the cabinets and appliances. We’ll update the cabinets and backsplash. I’ll put a light hardwood floor through the whole house.” He pointed to the walls behind him. “I’ll take these out. They aren’t structural and they improve the flow.”

“Improve the flow?” she smiled.

“Yeah, everyone is about open concept,” he chuckled.

“You design all this yourself?”

“I’ve picked up a few things over the years. I do most of it but I have a designer who takes care of the staging.”

“Staging?”

“Once we’re finished, we bring in furniture and décor to give people the idea of what it would look like if you lived here.”

“You buy furniture?”

“No. I have a warehouse. We buy very little for the staging. We take it all out after we sell.”

“Wow. You have quite the operation. I don’t remember your father’s business being like this.”

“Dad contracted jobs, mostly with a small crew.”

“I remember you worked with him during the summers.” She smiled, “You always got very tan.”

“I joined full time after school. I expanded the business over the years.”

“Good for you,” she smiled. “You know about my life but I don’t know about yours. Do you have a family?”

Max started to roll up the plans. He did not want to go there. “No. As soon as I get the permits, I’ll let you know. It should be fairly quick.” He stood and started to leave. Amanda put her hand on his arm. “Did you ever marry?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you never came back. You were supposed to come back.” Max grabbed his plans and went out the front door.



Amanda packed what few things she had brought with her into her suitcase. She'd still been shaking when the text came through last night. "What did he mean, because she hadn't come back?"

*"The men and I will be there at seven tomorrow. It will be very loud and dusty. You'll be better off in a hotel."*

*"I'll get a room at the Gardenside."*

*"Good."*

*"We need to talk."*

*"No."*

If a text could be terse, Max had managed it. Amanda didn't care if he wanted to talk or not. She put her luggage in her car and set the results of her very early coffee run on the trunk. At seven a.m. sharp, Max pulled up to the curb, followed by two trucks of men.

"The door is open," she said as she held up a large coffee. "Max?"

He walked toward her and reached for the coffee. "Thank you."

Amanda didn't let go. "You can talk to me here or inside. Your choice."

"Fine. In the car." He opened the door and got in the passenger side. He took a sip of the coffee and set it down. "Black, extra sweet. You remembered."

"Of course, I remembered."

He looked straight ahead at the men carrying in their tools. "I'm sorry about last night."

"Don't apologize. Tell me what you meant."

"I'd always thought you'd come back. Then I saw your wedding announcement. That's when I finally accepted you were gone."

She reached for his hand. "Max, that was ten years after I left."

“I know.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “I had no idea.”

He looked away from her. “Was he good to you?”

“He was a good man. He had his interests and I had mine. I spent some time traveling for my work. He worked a lot and did well for himself.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“He was good to me. We were the best of friends. He was a kind man.”

“But?”

Her eyes filled. “He wasn’t you.”

Max reached for the tear that had run down her cheek.

“How did we get here?” she asked.

“We made choices, Amanda. We can’t change that. All we can do is move forward.”

“Is that what you did?”

Max picked up his coffee and opened the door. “I should get to work.”

Amanda handed him a brown bag. “Muffins.”

He gave her that lopsided smile she’d always loved. “Thanks.”

Amanda set her luggage down in her room and clicked on the television. She hoped the noise might drown out her thoughts. She had thought of Max over the years, quite a lot in fact. Every time she talked to Mom and Dad about what was going on in town, she'd think of him. Every time she went home, she dreaded taking her parents out. She might run into him or someone from high school. She had put Max and Boyertown behind her years ago. Her life was in New York and LA. She couldn't go back. At least, she didn't think so.

She pulled out her laptop and connected to the hotel's Wi-Fi. She used FaceTime to call the publisher who'd hired her for the Oscar shoot. She was supposed to shoot the nominees before the ceremony and the winners after. She wasn't looking forward to it, despite the paycheck. She preferred landscapes, cityscapes, even abandoned houses. But her portrait work was very popular. She'd done covers for all the major magazines. She was doing this as a favor to her best friend, Julie Hill. They had started in the business at the same time, Amanda in photography, Julie in editing.

"Hey Julie."

"Amanda. How are you doing?"

"Okay. I got through the funeral. Thanks again for flying in for it. I can't tell you how much I appreciated it."

"Of course, sweetie."

"I got the packing done. I was trying to sell the house but it needs work before I can put it on the market."

"Ah, crap."

"Exactly."

"What are you going to do?"

"An old friend is a builder. He's helping me."

"He? Oh, God, Amanda, not him."

“Yeah.” One night after too much wine, Amanda had told Julie about the boy she’d left behind. “I ran into him in the store and he offered to help. He already has a crew at the house. I’m staying at a hotel.”

“How long is this going to take? The Oscars are in five weeks.”

“He says it will be done by then.”

“Are you okay? You sound off.”

“We talked. It was difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“He said he thought I would have come back home.”

“Oh, God. How is it going to be working on the house together?”

“He doesn’t need me for manual labor. He’s got a big crew.”

“A big crew? How much work has to be done?”

“At least fifty grand.”

“Shit! Can you manage that?”

“It would have taken me too long to liquidate funds. Max said he’ll do the work and get the money back from the sale.”

“Wow. That’s not something you do for friend. Are you sure he’s over you?”

“Julie, it’s been more than forty years.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Amanda sighed and looked at her best friend. She could always call her out. “Seeing him like this, I’m not sure if I ever got over him.”

Waking up to four inches of snow was not the most auspicious of starts. Max had his crew starting on the inside. The upside to being a big fish in the medium size pond of Boyertown was he knew everyone. He'd built most of their houses. So, it didn't take much to get the permits pushed through. They started with removing kitchen cabinets and unhooking the appliances. They were in good shape; they were just dated. They definitely wouldn't get top dollar in this neighborhood. The Habitat for Humanity truck would be here in a few hours.

Max normally didn't get too involved with the demo anymore, but it felt good. It was keeping his mind off Amanda. Well, sort of. They pulled apart the kitchen cabinets and found a small spoon behind the counter. It was a silver spoon with a Mary Poppins figure on top. It must have been Amanda's. He tucked it in his jacket pocket while the men wrapped the appliances in plastic.

The truck came and went with the old kitchen as the truck with the new flooring arrived. Timing was everything with a project like this. The flooring would sit in the garage until the crew stripped out the old floors.

"Hello?" The front door opened and Amanda stepped in. She was carrying two dispenser boxes of coffee from the local donut place.

"Amanda."

"I saw the snow this morning and I thought you and your men could use some coffee." She handed him the boxes. "I have cups and milk and sugar in the car."

Frank came out of the kitchen and reached for the coffee. "Thanks. Would there also be donuts?"

"There would be," she smiled.

"Amanda, you remember Frank McCarthy."

She extended her hand. "Yes. You were in my chemistry class. You had a crush on Bonnie Stewart. You were always getting in trouble for talking to her."

"Yeah, old man Davis finally separated us, but it didn't take."

“Oh?”

“I married her right after graduation. Five kids, ten grandkids.”

Max saw Amanda’s smile falter.

“That’s great. Congratulations.”

Max needed to divert this conversation. “I’ll help you with the donuts.” He followed her out to the car and grabbed the two boxes of donuts while she got the rest. “It was really nice of you to do this.”

“I appreciate how you put everything on hold to help me.”

“We’ve made a lot of progress. We’ve cleaned out the kitchen. The next step is pulling up the old flooring and putting the new stuff down.”

Amanda looked into the kitchen and whispered, “Wow.”

“I almost forgot, I found this.” He pulled the spoon from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked at the spoon and her eyes welled. “Amanda?” The men were circling around the coffee and donuts. He took her down the hall to one of the bedrooms and closed the door. “Talk to me.”

“I got this when I was six years old. I loved the movie. My mom got me this and I was so upset when it was lost.”

“I found it behind one of the drawers.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek. “Thank you. I’m sorry. I seem to be a weepy mess since I got here.”

“You’ve been through a lot.”

“I wasn’t here enough and now it’s too late. I miss them so much.”

Max didn’t think before he pulled her into a hug. It felt so good to have her in his arms again. He placed a kiss on top of her head.

“Max,” she whispered and she gave him a soft kiss.

Max held her close as the kiss ignited old flames. If he was thinking clearly, he would have told himself what terrible idea this was. Amanda was grieving. She was going to leave again. All he could think was she was here, now and he'd loved her all his life.

Amanda pulled away and tried to compose herself. "I'm sorry, Max." She smiled a bit. "I seem to be always apologizing to you."

"Amanda, it's okay. We go back forever."

She noticed his voice was a little hoarser than a minute ago and she had to smile. She held up the spoon. "Thank you for finding this. My mom gave it to me when I was six. It's real silver. We would have tea and I would use this spoon. I felt so grownup." She looked at him and smiled. "You didn't just find a spoon. You found a memory. A very happy memory."

"I'm glad."

She put her hand on his chest. "You're a happy memory too."

He held her wrist tight. "I'm no memory. I'm very real."

"Yes, you are," she whispered. "I don't know what to do about it."

He released her and sighed. "Maybe we should deal with the house?"

"Good idea."

"For now," he smiled.



Kissing Amanda now felt different than it had in high school. It was so much more. All those years of longing poured into one kiss. He had to keep his distance. She was going to leave again. He needed to focus their attention on the house.

“They’re about to start ripping up the floors.”

“I’m sorry, I’m keeping you from that.”

“First, stop apologizing. Second, ripping up the flooring is a tough job on the back. The upside to being the boss is I get assign the young guys to do that stuff. There is some paperwork I need to review with you. It’s at the office. Can you meet me there around twelve?”

“Yeah, sure. Your Dad’s office was on Union St.”

Max smiled. “It’s my office now and I’m on Clinton.” He pulled a business card out of his wallet. “Here’s the address.”

Four hours later and Max was putting together invoices for Amanda’s review. He pushed his reading glasses up on his nose and reviewed the listing agreement for his real estate branch. This was everything she would need to ready the house, sell it and leave town.

“Hello?”

Max looked up to see Amanda standing in the doorway of his office. “Please come in.” He stood and indicated the chair across from him. “I’ve got the invoices for you to review.” He realized Amanda hadn’t sat down. She was looking at a photograph on his office wall. It was of an abandoned building on a hill. In the night sky was the big dipper. She turned to him with a shocked expression.

“This is one of mine.”

“Yeah, I got it from a gallery in Philly.”

“It was from a shoot in British Columbia.”

“I thought it was beautiful.”

“Thank you. How long have you had it?”

Max smiled. “About ten years. I like being able to tell clients I knew the photographer.” Amanda sat down opposite him and he pushed the file toward her. “Here’s the list of the materials that I’m putting into your house. I wanted you to see where the money is going.”

“I trust you,” she smiled.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve seen me. I may not be who you remember.”

“You always were a good guy. You’ve haven’t changed.” She flipped through the pages and stopped. “These are just the materials, the floors, the appliances, the painting. There’s nothing here for labor.”

“I told you I’d give you the friends and family discount.”

“Max, that’s crazy. When we remodeled our place in Manhattan, the labor costs were as much as the materials.”

“That’s New York, not Boyertown.”

“Max, why are you doing this?”

“Because I can.” He smiled as he gave her another file. “This is the paperwork to list the house when we’re finished. I told you I’ve sold half a dozen houses in your neighborhood. I’m sure we can list at five seventy-five but I wouldn’t be surprised if the offers were higher.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Amanda smiled and signed the agreement. “Thank you for everything you’re doing for me.”

“You’re welcome.” Max took the files and put them in his desk drawer. He took off his glasses and set them on the desk. Amanda picked the black framed glasses up and looked through them.

“How long have you been wearing these?”

“About twenty years. I can’t read squat without them.”

“I think you look very dashing in them.”

“It’s the cost of being an old man.”

Amanda smiled and reached toward her ear. She pulled out a small conical shape device, then pulled one from her other ear. “My hearing aids. I can’t hear squat without them.” She returned them to her ears and set her hair back in place. “The price of being an old woman.”

“You’re not an old woman.”

She laughed. “I’m the same age as you.”

Max smiled. “You’re even more beautiful than you were in high school.”

She tried to hide her blush. “You look so much better than you did then.”

“Oh, please. My hair’s gone grey, my knees are shot, and I can’t eat pizza after nine o’clock.”

Amanda’s voice softened. “My business is how people look. You’ve grown into yourself. You aren’t a lanky kid anymore.”

“I guess that’s a compliment. Thank you.” He knew he was about to make a mistake but it didn’t stop him. “Would you like to get some lunch?”

Max held the door open for Amanda as they walked into Paulie's. The last time they were there, Amanda bolted. Now they were there together and the first person to notice was the font of all knowledge in Boyertown, Dorothy. She'd been in the same class with them.

"Well, hello you two," said Dorothy.

"Hi, Dorothy," said Max.

She waved a dismissive hand at Max. "You I see all the time. Amanda! It's been too long." She gave her a tight hug. "You've done well for yourself, girl."

"Thanks, Dorothy. It's good to see you again."

"Can we get a booth?" asked Max

"Of course." They sat down at a booth and Dorothy handed them menus. "Paulie still makes the best cheeseburgers in town."

"That sounds great," said Amanda.

"Make it two," said Max. He tried to get their conversation back on track. "We're on schedule."

"Even with the snow?"

"I've checked the long-term forecasts. This snow should be gone in a day or two. We should be clear to put up the new siding in a few days. Then we'll tackle the deck."

"That's great news. I have an idea."

Max tried not to groan. It was never good when a client said that. "What would that be?"

"I saw the line item for photography for the listing. You should let me do it. Besides, my fee normally is at least what you're saving me in labor cost."

As much as he hated to admit it, that was a good idea. "An Amanda Miller original in the house will be great for marketing."

“Great! I just have one condition. You have to let me photograph you.”

This just went from great idea to driving ninety through town. Blindfolded.

Amanda gathered her equipment, making sure she had a variety of lenses and extra power packs. For big shoots she'd go old school with film. For something like this she went digital. It allowed her the freedom to shoot hundreds of shots without having to change film. As she drove to her house, she felt excitement like she hadn't felt in years. Most jobs had become mundane. Fashion shoots, portraits for vain people who could afford her rates. When she first started out, she shot what appealed to her. Landscapes, architecture, it didn't matter. She was always thrilled by what her eye caught. Fortunately, some publishers and art galleries were equally thrilled by her work. That started a career that made her a lot of money but her passion had become a job.

She pulled up to the house and there were already half a dozen trucks. She grabbed her camera and started taking pictures. She took shots of the old siding and moved to the back of the house. When she looked at her childhood home through her lens, she saw it in a whole new way. The willow tree she used to climb was nothing but fine branches. It made for beautiful, ethereal shots. She took a walk to the creek in the back of the property. Some of the snow still rested on the rocks. She clicked off a few shots, remembering playing in the water and her mother getting mad at her wet shoes.

"Amanda?"

She turned and saw Max standing at the back door. "Hi."

He met her on the porch. "I didn't expect you today. We're no where near done."

"I want to shoot the process."

"The men will get distracted."

"They might for the first few minutes but they'll get used to me. They'll forget I'm there."

"Impossible."

Amanda smiled. "Trust me. Introduce me and I'll stay out of the way."

Max led her into the house and let out a sharp whistle. “Guys, this is the homeowner, Amanda Miller. She’s also a photographer. She’ll be taking some pictures as we work.”

“Aren’t you the photographer who does the Swimsuit Issue?” asked a young man.

Amanda smiled. “Yes, I shot the last issue.”

“Wow.”

“That’s Casey,” said Max. “His priorities are women and beer.”

Casey raised his fist. “Yeah, baby.”

Amanda laughed and shot a picture of him. “Ignore me. You’ll forget I’m here.”

Casey looked her up and down. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Hey! Watch it,” said Max.

“Sorry boss,” Casey said, but still smiled.

“Get back to work.” Max pulled Amanda aside. “I told you. You’re very distracting.”

“Max, I could be that kid’s grandmother. He was just being nice.” She looked at him and whispered. “Are you jealous?”

He could feel his face get red. “Of course not.”

“Sure,” she smiled. “I’ll take pictures and then I’ll take you to lunch.”

Max watched Amanda moving around and looking at the men. She didn’t watch them the way they watched her. She was analyzing, looking at angles. He could tell when she thought she got a good shot. She was right. After a few minutes, everyone ignored her presence and got to work. Everyone but him. He grabbed a box of tile and began working on the backsplash. He walked into the kitchen and opened the box.

Frank walked up to him and helped him with the tiles. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine. How are we coming with the bathrooms?”

“They’re gutted and being prepped for the new shower. Now, answer my question. What is she doing here?”

“It’s her house. She can be here if she wants.”

“Try again.”

“She had the idea to take the pictures for marketing. It’s a great idea. Having pictures from a world-famous photographer will help with the marketing. We’re also going to hang a picture of the house in the living room.”

“The house isn’t finished.”

“She wants to photograph the process.”

“Which means she may be around a lot.”

“Possibly.”

Frank put his hand on Max’s shoulder. “This is a bad idea. I remember what you were like the last time she left.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Max, I see how you are together. It’s just like when we were in high school.”

“Frank, buddy, I appreciate it but I’m fine.”

“Okay. I’m going back upstairs. We’ve got to hustle if we’re going to get this done on time.”

Max nodded at Frank as he went back upstairs. Frank was his best friend. He knew what was coming for Max, just as well as he did.



Max looked at his watch, realizing it was near dinner time. He'd worked late at the house, trying to avoid Amanda. This was ridiculous. He was a senior citizen, not a senior in high school. He picked up his phone and called her. "Hi."

"Hi."

"I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. We we're having a productive day and I lost track of time."

"That's okay."

He heard the tone of her voice. It wasn't okay. "I really am sorry. Why don't I pick up some dinner and you come by my house? I'll text you the address. I need to wash off the day."

"That sounds fine."

"See you at seven." Max disconnected the call and tried to think of how to make it up to her.

Amanda pulled up to the two-story colonial in a very nice section of town. She could see some of the differences in Max's house from his neighbor's. The shutters were a rich cedar and there was a lovely front porch. The grounds were neatly groomed, with a tightly trimmed hedge. She'd been surprised when he called. She was sure he was blowing her off. She knocked and smiled when he opened the door. "Hi."

"Hi. Come in."

She touched her messenger bag. "I brought my equipment. I thought you might like to see the shots from today."

"That would be great. Shall we eat first?"

"Sure." She followed him to the dining room. "Your house is beautiful."

"Thank you," he said as he set two plates on the table. "Scampi from Aldo's."

"Yum."

"Wine?"

"Yes, please." Amanda took a sip. "This is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it." He took a sip and took a breath. "I'm really sorry about today."

"That's okay. I get lost in my work too."

"It wasn't that. I was avoiding you."

Amanda set down her wine before her shaking hand spilled it. "Why?"

"Whenever I'm near you, I'm reminded of how I was after you left."

"Max, I'm so sorry for what I put you through."

"You had a life to live."

"It's true. I was determined to make a life for myself outside of a small town. I worked hard to the exclusion of everything else. I didn't party and I didn't date. Do you know why? I couldn't get past you."

"What?"

“I felt so guilty about leaving you. I loved you with all my heart, but I knew I’d never be happy if I didn’t go. I knew I’d make you miserable. What I never realized was leaving you would wreck me. I missed you so much. There were so many nights I wanted to call you but I didn’t dare. I met Malcolm eight years later. He was a good man, very kind. He came from a wealthy family so we didn’t have to struggle. I’d started to make a name for myself as a photographer and he was supportive. As nice as our life was, I never forgot.” She took a sip of wine. “Being back, seeing you, I feel the same way you do. It reminds me of all those years of missing you.” She looked at him, wiping a tear from her cheek. “What do we do now?”

Max gave her that lopsided smile she loved. “I guess we remember we were always friends. Maybe we still are.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Now that they’d gotten the giant elephant out of the room, they were able to enjoy the rest of their meal.

“What’s the job you’ve got coming up?” asked Max.

“The Oscars,” she said, taking the last sip of wine from her glass.

“Excuse me?” he asked as he refilled her glass.

“I’m shooting the nominees before the ceremony and the winners after.”

“Wow.”

“It’s not as cool as it sounds. They’re always nervous wrecks before the ceremony and some are hammered after. No matter what, they want to look perfect. Some of them are real dicks.”

“Why do you do it?”

“They’re not all awful. George Clooney is really nice.” Amanda grinned. “Very easy to photograph.”

“You know George Clooney?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “I also know his wife, the world-famous human rights lawyer. Actually, I’m doing the shoot for my best friend, Julie. She’s editor-in-chief for *Mystique*.”

“Even I’ve heard of that one.”

“She and I started out together. She gave me jobs when I needed them. Speaking of my work, how about I show you the work from today.”

“Sure. Let me get rid of the dishes and I’ll meet you in the living room.”

Max came into the living room and sat down next to her. She pulled up the file and started flipping through the pictures. “See what I mean?” she said.

He was amazed at the shots she’d gotten. She’d captured the work but it was something more. She’d captured the craft. He saw the faces of the men intent on their jobs. She even had a few pictures of him, one laughing with Frank. “I don’t remember you taking that.”

“I told you I’d disappear.”

“These are really great, but you might want to get rid of those pictures of me,” he chuckled. “We don’t want to frighten the clients.”

“Oh, please. The camera loves you.” As to prove her point she picked up her camera and began firing off shots. The shots uploaded wirelessly to her laptop and she started flipping through them. “The camera loves you.” She flipped through the pictures and gasped at the last one.

“What is it? Did I break the lens?”

“This picture,” she said as she touched the screen. He was staring at the camera. His hand was in front of his mouth.

“What?” he asked again.

“This is you,” she whispered.

“Yes, I recognize me,” he smiled.

“No, it’s you. It’s your eyes. It’s your energy. It’s everything you are. My God,” she whispered. “Once in a very rare while, I capture more than just a picture. I capture a soul.”

Max ran a finger over her cheek. “You captured that a very long time ago.”

Maybe if she hadn’t leaned in to kiss him, he would have been able to resist. Who was he kidding? If she hadn’t kissed him, he would have kissed her. They lost themselves in each other. It was if the years had melted away and they were the two kids who were crazy about each other.

“Mandy,” he whispered.

“Hum?” she whispered as she was nipping at his neck.

“We don’t have any parents about to catch us,” he smiled.

She pulled backed and grinned. “I believe you’re right.” He stood and reached for her hand. “You know you’re the only one on the planet who gets to call me Mandy.”

“Not even George?” he smiled as he led her to his bedroom.

“Not even George.”

Max set the coffee mugs down and started on the eggs. He smiled as he thought about last night. He pushed thoughts of what would happen when the house was finished and focused on right now. There was a beautiful woman in his bed. A woman he loved.

“I thought I smelled coffee.”

He turned and saw Amanda standing in the doorway, wearing one of his t shirts and he guessed, not much else. “Good morning.” She walked toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He leaned down and gave her a kiss. “Grab your coffee and your eggs will be ready soon.” He rubbed his hands down her waist and rested his hands on her ass.

“Coffee’s not the only thing you’re grabbing.”

He gave her a kiss and a squeeze. "Coffee's ready."

She sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window. "It's really pretty here."

"Thanks. I've worked on it in between jobs." He set a plate of eggs and toast in front of her. "Sorry, no bacon. Doctor put it on my no-go list."

"That's fine. You seem like your in great shape. Actually, I can attest to that," she chuckled.

"Why thank you, Ma'am," he smiled. "I try to keep fit. My job can be tough."

"But you have the younger guys do stuff."

"Yeah, I'm not stupid," he chuckled. "I know my limitations." He took a bite of his eggs. "The roofers will be at the house today if you want to shoot them."

"That's a turnaround," she said.

"After you showed me your work last night, I finally understood."

She reached for his hand. "Thank you." She took a bite of her toast. "I have to go back to my hotel so I can shower and change."

He threaded his fingers through hers. "I have a shower."

"Won't that make you late?" she smiled.

He pulled her to her feet and gave her a kiss. "The boss is never late."

Max was working on a built in for the living room when Frank found him. "There you are."

"Here I am," he said as set in a shelf.

"The roofers are here."

"Good. Amanda is going to shoot them today."

"Yeah, she's out there setting up."

“Good,” he smiled. He turned toward the built in when Frank grabbed his arm.

“I need to talk to you.”

“Can’t it wait? I’m almost done here.”

“No, it can’t. Outside.” Frank pulled him out on what was left of the deck.

“Isn’t the deck scheduled for tomorrow?”

“Yes, it is. Enough about the deck. What is going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re an hour and a half late. Normally, you’d be bitching about whatever made you late. And...you’re smiling.”

“Maybe I’m in a good mood.”

“Or maybe it’s Amanda. When I said good morning to her, she was grinning from ear to ear.”

Max thought for a moment but it was pointless to deny it. Frank had known him most of his life. “Yeah. It’s Amanda.”

“Christ, Max. You know she’s leaving as soon as we sell this.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Frank, I’m sixty-three years old. How much good stuff is left for me? You have Bonnie and the kids. I may only get these few weeks with her, but it will have to be enough.

Frank put his arm around Max’s shoulder. “After all these years, it’s always been her.”

Max nodded and gave his best friend a hug.

Amanda took shots of men on the roof. The early morning sun gave her beautiful shots. Even in the cool weather of early March, the men were sweating. She understood why Max had such a successful business. The men were focused and moved quickly. The men had the roof stripped and ready for the new shingles in under an hour. She smiled when she saw Max coming around the corner. "Hey there."

"Hey there," he smiled. "Are you getting some good shots?"

"Yes. Great."

He smiled as he rubbed his hand down her arm. "I'd let you inside but I have a every crew on the payroll in there."

"That's okay. I have some other work to do. I'll call you later." She started to gather up her equipment as he reached for her hand.

"Mandy, I've been thinking. There's no point staying in a hotel. You could move in with me for the duration. There'd be more room for you to work. You could use my home office."

"And you'd be there."

"Yes, I'd be there." He moved in closer. "Mandy, look. I know you're leaving as soon as the house is sold. I get that and I won't try to convince you to stay. I do think we should make the most time we do have. Just think about it. If you don't want to, I'll understand." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. "Here's the spare key to my house. Let yourself in. Either way, I'll bring dinner."

"How about if I make dinner?" she smiled.

"That would be great."

"I'll see you tonight." She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss.

Max carried her equipment to her car and put it in her trunk. He gave her another quick kiss. He watched as she got into her car. Damn, she still had the great ass she did in high school. She waved as she pulled away and he waved back. He couldn't be sure



she'd want to stay with him, but she was making him dinner tonight. He would live in this moment and not worry about the next few weeks. He turned and saw Casey staring at him and smiling. He tried to ignore him and walk by.

"Dude! You and the babe? My man!"

"Get back to work," he said, trying not to smile, and failing.

Max did a good job pushing Amanda out of his mind while he finished working on the kitchen pantry. He'd found an antique door in his warehouse and installed it.

Frank came in the kitchen. "Hey, Max. The roofers have finished and the painters will be here tomorrow."

"That's great."

"Dang, you knocked this out pretty fast. It looks good."

"Thanks." He looked at his watch and realized how late it had gotten. "I'm going to head out."

"Dinner plans?"

Max looked at him and nodded. "Yeah."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I."

Max pulled up to his house and smiled at Amanda's car in the driveway. He walked in the house to the sound of music and a slight smell of garlic. He walked into the kitchen and smiled at the sight of his Mandy, wearing a long t shirt, shorts and moving to the music. "Well, hello there."

She turned and smiled. "Hi." She walked to him and gave him a quick kiss. "I hope you like lasagna."

“Love it.”

“Great. This is fun. I haven’t made a real meal in longer than I can remember.”

“I’m going to grab a quick shower.” He turned to leave and she reached for his hand.

“You’ll find my stuff in your bedroom. You’ll have to show me later where I can put my things.”

Max gave her a broad smile and pulled her into a tight hug.

“I thought about what you said. We have a chance, at least for now, to be together. We shouldn’t waste it.”

He couldn’t say anything that wouldn’t scare her into grabbing her bags and running. He wanted to tell her he loved her, that he’d always loved her. He wanted her to stay with him forever. Instead, he smiled and gave her a kiss. “That’s great.”

Amanda had gotten used to working at Max's. He'd moved most of his stuff aside in his home office so she could work. She'd put together a collection of photos from the ongoing construction at her house. She was waiting for the construction to be complete before she got the final shots of house. She would do the marketing shots of each room. Those would go in the advertisement. Max wanted one final shot of the house, framed in the living room. He said it would be a huge add on for the sale, whatever that meant.

Her FaceTime rang and she answered. "Hey, Julie."

"How are you?"

"I'm good. What did you think of the shots?"

"That's why I'm calling. They're great. I think they'd make a great showing."

"Really?"

"How can you even question? They're gorgeous and you know it."

"I haven't done anything like this in a very long time."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe I should."

"Are you ready for LA?"

"Yes. Is Sandy set up?"

"Yes, she has everything you requested. I'll have a room set up with your equipment. They will clear the atrium so you can set it up for shots."

"Good, thanks."

"How are you doing?" asked Julie.

"You already asked me that."

"You know what I mean."

"I know. I'm leaving in ten days."

“Has he said anything?”

“No. He promised he wouldn’t push and he hasn’t. We’re just enjoying our time together.”

“You’re getting on the plane?”

“Yes, Julie. I’m getting on the plane.”

Max parked his car and tried to put on a smile. Amanda’s house was done. All that was left were her pictures for the marketing. Their time was coming to an end. He felt it everyday. But he gave her his word.

“Mandy, I’m home.”

She came down the stairs smiling. “Hi, handsome.” She gave him a quick kiss.

“How about we go out to dinner tonight? Le Jardien?”

“Sure. What’s the occasion?”

“The house is finished.”

Amanda’s smile faltered. “Wow. That’s great. You weren’t kidding. You finished quick.”

“My men are the best. All that’s left are your pictures for the listing.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That would be good. I’d like to have it listed before the weekend.”

“Sure, okay. I’m going to go change.” She turned to go up the stairs and he reached for her hand. “Mandy, we knew this day was coming.”

She tried to smile. “I’m not leaving for LA for ten days.”

He pulled her into a hug. “We’ll make the most of them.”

Amanda took pictures of the rooms that no longer held her childhood memories. Max had done a beautiful job in remaking her home. It was modern showpiece. The stagers had filled the home with beautiful furniture and décor. Max followed her outside as she took pictures of the beautiful new deck. She moved to the front of the house and got some great angles. She looked through lens and saw the sun shining over the roof. She took the picture. This was the shot. She let the camera drop from her face and she realized she was crying.

“Mandy, honey, are you okay?”

“It’s not my house anymore.”

He pulled her into a hug. “It’s going to be a great house for a new family.”

She wiped her cheeks. “Of course. You’re right.”

“It’s okay to be upset. This is the last part of a transition.”

She smiled up at him. “You always did understand me.” She touched his cheek. “No matter what has happened or will happen, I love you, Max. I always have.” Amanda could see Max’s eyes glisten.

He held her close and whispered. “I’ve never stopped loving you. I never will.”

Max got ready for the showing. Normally he'd let one of his associates take care of the showings by themselves but this was too important. He straightened his tie when he heard a whistle.

"Well, hey there, handsome," said Amanda. She walked over and gave him a kiss. "I don't remember the last time I saw you in a suit."

"Prom."

"You look much better now," she smiled.

"Thanks, sweetheart. Are you ready for today?"

"I have several pictures for you. I thought I'd leave the decision up to you." They walked into the office and Amanda had three framed pictures set out on the couch. One was a shot of the bare willow tree. One was a shot of the back of the house, showing the new deck and fire pit. The pit was lit, casting a glow. You could imagine sitting in the Adirondack chairs that surrounded it. The final picture was of the front of the house with just enough light coming over the roof. The house looked like heaven was shining down.

"Wow," he whispered. "These aren't pictures. They're art."

"Thank you."

"I can't pick."

"You can use them all, if you want."

"If I want? Of course, I want. Three Amanda Miller originals? The clients will go nuts." He looked at them and smiled. "I have a question. If you were selling them in the gallery, what would you charge? I know what I paid for the print I bought ten years ago."

"They're digital prints, not film, like yours. The two smaller ones would be three thousand and the big one five thousand."

"Wow. I got a bargain," he smiled. Max leaned in and gave her a kiss. "I'm very proud of you."

"That means a lot to me. Thank you."

“Do you want to come to the opening?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I could watch other people in my house.”

“That’s fine.”

She reached for an envelope on the desk and handed it to him. “This is for the new owners.”

“May I?” he asked. She nodded and he opened the envelope.

*May you have as many years of happiness in your new home*

*As my family did.*

*Best Wishes,*

*Amanda Miller*

“Is it okay?”

Max gave her another kiss. “It’s perfect.” He gave her a tight hug. “As much as I’d like to stay here with you, I have to go.”

Max hung the pictures together over the living room couch. It created a focal wall with very expensive art. The stagers had gotten the house ready. He’d put the best face possible on Amanda’s house. He’d listed it at five hundred and fifty thousand and he had no doubt it would sell right away. He’d called in his associate broker, Linda, to help with the open house. He figured that the combination of a house available in such a desirable neighborhood and its being the former home of a world-famous photographer and he’d be busy. He had no idea.

He pulled into his house, exhausted but with celebratory cheesesteaks. “Mandy, I’m back.”

Amanda came downstairs and stopped. “Babe, you look beat.”

“I am. I’ve never had such a busy first day.” He walked into the kitchen and set down the food. “I didn’t get a chance to eat.” He sat down and unwrapped the sandwiches. Amanda poured them both colas. He took a bite of his sandwich and sighed. His stomach was screaming ‘it’s about time’. He took a sip of his drink. “I have news.”

“Okay. Is it good news?”

“I hope you think so. We have five offers.”

“What? Already? It’s only been seven hours.”

“Yes, it’s unusual to get this many offers this fast, but I told you the house had so much going for it. The house and the large lot were big but your artwork was the cherry on top.”

Amanda smiled. “Aww, that’s nice.”

“The very expensive cherry. There is one couple that don’t want to wait for the weekend showings to be over. They made a cash offer and waived inspections so we’d take it off the market.”

“Wow. That’s nice.”

“No, that’s freaking amazing. The offer is six hundred and fifty thousand.”

“What?” she gasped. “That is amazing. You really are that good.”

“I am but that wasn’t the only reason. The fact that it’s your house and your artwork made a big difference.”

“I don’t know what to say. What do you think?”

“This isn’t my decision to make but I can tell you the deal is legit. I don’t think waiting would get a better offer.”



“Then I guess I’ve sold my house.”

Max leaned in and gave her a kiss. “Congratulations. Now, I really need to eat the rest of my sandwich.”

Amanda went into the office and pretended to work. They had the house closing today. Since it was a cash offer, there were no banks involved. She'd paid back Max's investment for materials but he wouldn't take any more than he'd agreed. She knew Max well enough to know one no, was it. Now, she was sitting there, staring at a check for hundreds of thousand dollars. She looked at the calendar and was reminded she was flying out in five days. It was too soon.

Her Face Time app rang and she didn't have to look to know who it was. "Hey, Julie."

"Hey, girl. I haven't heard from you in a few days. How goes the house sale?"

She held up the check to the monitor. "We closed today."

"What? That was fast."

"Max sold it the first day for one hundred thousand over list."

"Holy crap. That's amazing."

"Yeah, it is."

"So why don't you sound happy."

"I am."

"Why don't you fly out early? We'll have some girl time before the Oscars. Do some clubs, maybe book a spa."

"That's sounds great," said Amanda, despite the fact that it sounded awful. "I think I'm going to stay in Boyertown until Friday."

"You mean you're going to stay with Max."

"I'm not going to lose what time we have left."

"Okay. I understand. I'll meet you at the hotel Friday night with a big bottle of wine."

"I'll need it. See you then." She disconnected the call and looked down at the check. She'd tried to deposit it remotely but it was too big for the app. She'd have to go

to the bank and she should probably do it right now. Having that cashiers check in her possession wasn't safe. She grabbed her keys and started the trek to the bank.

Amanda finished transferring funds into different accounts. She also disappointed former classmate, Ben Miller, that she would not be a local customer after this week. She turned onto Clinton Street and saw Max's office. She turned into the driveway and parked. She had an idea and she hoped Max would like it. She waved at his receptionist. "Is he free?"

"He's alone. Go right in."

She knocked on the door. "Max?" she said as she opened the door.

"Mandy, honey, what a nice surprise." He stood and gave her a big kiss, bigger than should happen in his office. He felt the time running out too.

"I want to talk to you about something."

"Sure, have a seat." They both sat down on his couch. He put his arm around her shoulders. "What's up?"

"You know I have a flight on Friday."

"Are you leaving early?"

"No," she smiled. "I have an idea but it depends on whether you can take a few days off."

"I'm the boss."

"I'll take that as a yes. What do you think about spending the next three days at Inn at the Pointe? It's got luxury suites with hot tubs on secluded balconies."

"Yes!"

"That was fast," she smiled. "I thought I'd need to sell it more."

"You had me at hot tub." He got up and picked up his office phone. "Stephanie, cancel everything I've got for the next four days. Tell Frank he's in charge."

“Where can we reach you if needed?”

“You can’t. I will be unavailable.” He smiled and hung up the phone. “Let’s go.”

Max pulled up to the resort and found a close parking spot. Being mid-week, the lot wasn't too full. The Inn at the Pointe was more a weekend getaway for locals. Situated on a quiet lake, it had a great view of the Pocono mountains. He'd never been here before but he'd never had someone in his life like Amanda. He grabbed their bags and followed her to the front desk.

"Hello. Welcome to Inn at the Pointe," said the young woman.

"Thank you. Miller checking in," said Amanda.

Max checked his ego. Amanda had made the reservations and it's not like she couldn't afford it. He grabbed their bags and followed her to their room. Their suite was bigger than his first apartment. There was a full kitchen and the living room was arranged around a big screen TV. The bedroom had a king size bed with lots of overstuffed bedding. The bathroom was something he would have installed in a high-end home. "This is really great."

Amanda slid open the patio door and pointed. "This is really great."

He followed her outside and saw the large hot tub. Surrounding the patio was a tall cedar privacy fence. "This blocks the view of the river."

She smiled and slipped off her jacket. "It blocks the view out," she smiled as she unbuttoned her blouse. "It also blocks the view in." He stood transfixed as she stripped off the rest of her clothes. She hit a button next to the tub and the jets turned the still water to a bubbling pond. She walked into the tub and sat down. She looked at him and smiled. "What are you waiting for?"

Max snapped out of his daze and stripped off his clothes. He got in the tub and pulled Amanda in his arms. "When did you get so bold?"

"Are you complaining?" she smiled.

"Hell, no," he laughed as he pulled her into a passionate kiss.

Amanda stirred next to Max. They'd moved their fun from the hot tub to the bed. She kept trying to push the thoughts of Friday and flying away from Max out of her mind. She'd resolved to enjoy the time they had left together. He rolled over and slipped his arm around her waist.

"Mmmm, hi," he whispered as he gave her a kiss.

"Hi. I think it's time we go to the restaurant."

He pulled her closed and kissed her. "What time is it?"

"Going on seven."

"What? We slept for hours."

She rolled over top of him. "Well, we have been busy."

"Yes, we were." He laughed and grabbed her ass.

"Oh, no you don't, horn dog. You need to feed me."

They finally got dressed went down to the restaurant. They were seated next to the picture window with a view of the lake. Amanda looked at the moon shining on the water. "This is beautiful."

"Yes, it certainly is."

She realized he was staring at her. "Max, you're not even looking. The view is amazing."

"Yes, it is." He reached for her hand. "You are still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

She tried to hide her blush by reaching for her menu. "Max, I photographed the most beautiful people in the world. Trust me, I'm not one of them."

"You're wrong."

"What?"

“You’re wrong. Flat out wrong.”

She chuckled. “If you’d been drinking, I’d swear you had beer goggles.”

“Amanda Miller, you need to listen to me. I’ve known you most of my life. You’ve been a head turning beauty since you were a kid. But you’re so much more than that. You’ve always had a special something, a glow. I always knew you were so much more. I can see it when you photograph something that catches your eye. I can see it when you look out at that lake. You see things differently than the rest of us. You see the beauty in everything. I see the beauty in you. You should see it too.

“Oh, Max,” she whispered. She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“It’s the reason I wasn’t surprised when you left.”

“What?”

“I knew you were meant for more than our town. As much as I wanted you to stay, I knew you had to go.”

“I did, Max. I had so much to learn.”

“You did what you had to do. We both did.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

After a nice dinner, they grabbed their coats and had a walk down to the lake. Max held her hand as they sat on a bench. He didn't want to talk about what was coming. She would leave on Friday and their time together would be over. As much as he wanted her to stay, he'd promised not to pressure her. "So, tell me about this assignment? It sounds really like a pretty big deal."

Amanda sighed. "Well, it's a good paycheck."

"Is that all?"

"If it were just me and the subject it would fine. There are always publicists, managers, stylists. They can make things very difficult."

"Stylists?"

"People who design the look. The outfit, makeup, hair." She chuckled. "It takes an army to make people look like stars."

"When will they be published?"

"They'll probably have a few available on line a day or two after the awards. It depends on how fast I develop them. For this assignment I use film, not digital media." She sighed and looked out of at the lake. "I don't want to talk about that. What's your next project?"

"We have to finish the house we were working on before your house."

"What? You stopped a job to help me? Was your client mad?"

"Not really. The client is in Florida for the winter and it gave the designer a chance to make more freaking changes to the plan."

Amanda leaned her head on his shoulder. "Thank you for helping me."

He kissed the top of her head. "You're welcome."



Amanda and Max had an early breakfast then went for a walk. She carried her camera with her, as always. She took pictures of the trees and the rock formations. She also snuck a few shots of Max. She got one of him leaning against a tall rock formation, looking out to the water. She looked at the shot in her viewer. If this was LA, she'd send it to an agency. Max was made to wear jeans. With his thick, salt and pepper hair, he would be a perfect model for an older demographic. Smart manufacturers knew that people in their age group grew up in jeans and still lived in them. He caught her staring.

"What?" he smiled.

"I'm just gawking at a good-looking fella."

He walked toward her and took her free hand. "Oh yeah?"

She gave him a quick kiss. "Definitely." She touched his cheek and whispered, "What am I going to do without you?"

"You are going to be brilliant, making beautiful photographs. I'm going to restore houses, hopefully without strangling too many designers."

"Yes, well, that wouldn't be good for marketing."

He gave her a tight hug. "Are you ready to go back?"

"Yes, I am. Last one to the hot tub buys lunch," she grinned as she took off down the path.

Max tried to focus on the highway as he drove them back to his house. He smiled at the memory of three days of love and lust. He didn't blame Mandy for falling asleep in the passenger seat. They'd taken long walks around the lake, laughing about the old days and filling each other in on the last forty-five years. Max's life hadn't been that exciting compared to Mandy's. He spent most of his time working, building his business. He hadn't had any long-term relationships, despite his friends fix ups. Eventually, his friends gave up trying. Mandy had photographed presidents and movie stars. She'd had showing in the finest art galleries. Her photography books were best sellers. She hadn't spotted his collection of her books in his office. She had a glamorous life waiting for her. He couldn't ask her to give it up for him. No matter how much he wanted her to stay.

They spent their last night together having cheesesteaks and wine. He'd offered to take her out but Mandy said no. She wanted to spend the time just the two of them. They didn't talk much. They knew what was coming.

"Are you sure I can't take you to the airport?"

"No, I have to return my rental. Besides, goodbyes at the airport are..."

"I know," he said. He was trying to hold it together. "Are you all packed?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty expert at packing after years of travel."

"More wine?" he asked.

"No thanks. Anymore and I'll be sound asleep."

They picked up their dishes and put them in the dishwasher. He washed the wine glasses and Mandy dried and put them away. She handed Max the towel and he set it down on the counter. He couldn't hold himself back any longer. He took her in his arms. "I'm going to miss you," he whispered.

"I'm going to miss you too." Tears glistened on her lashes.

Max held her tight and felt the racing of her heart. He took her hand and led her upstairs. They would have one more night.

Amanda's assistant met her at the luggage rack. Sandy had been with her for years. "Tell me you have a cart and a driver."

She pointed to the man standing just behind her. "How long have I been doing this?"

"Sorry."

"Didn't you get any sleep?"

"No."

"I thought Julie sprung for first class."

"She did. I just didn't sleep."

"Okay. Emergency caffeine it is." Stacy pulled her cases off the rack and indicated to the driver. He grabbed the bags and loaded them on the cart.

Amanda followed them out to the limo. She climbed into the back and laid her head back on the seat. She should be powering up for the assignment. She done this kind of assignment dozens of times. She knew the problem. She'd left Max, again. No one should feel this kind of pain twice in a lifetime.

Amanda finished unpacking and took a long shower. She'd confirmed that Sandy had all the equipment she needed for the shoot. They would shoot in the actor's rooms and in the atrium. There was a grand staircase that had a very old Hollywood feel. She would get the job done but she had zero interest in the assignment. She was combing through her wet hair when she heard a knock at the door. She looked through the peep hole and saw Julie holding a bottle of wine.

"Come on in."

"I talked to Sandy. She said I should bring this ASAP."

"You pour," she said as she flopped down on the couch.

"What's going on?" asked Julie as she handed her a glass.

"What do you mean?"

"This is me. I know it's not Sandy. She's got everything ready. She did tell me you were in a mood from the moment you got off the plane."

"I am not in a mood."

"You're in a mood."

"I'm in a mood," she sighed as she took a deep sip of the excellent Merlot.

Julie sat next to her on the couch. "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to really talk about."

"It's the construction guy."

"He's not just some construction guy. He owns a very big company."

"I stand corrected," said Julie with a slight smile. "Tell me about him."

"Max is everything he was when I knew him and more."

"You're in love with him."

"I never stopped. Not after all these years."

“What about Malcolm?”

“Malcolm was a good man and we had a good life.”

“But he wasn’t Max.”

Amanda started crying. “No, he wasn’t Max.”

Julie put her arm around Amanda’s shoulder. “I say we get hammered and call room service for nachos.”

Amanda smiled through her tears and nodded. “Great idea.”

Amanda loaded up on aspirin and antacid before going to the staging area. All they'd had was the one bottle of wine and a giant platter of nachos. Back in the day that would have been the preliminaries before they went clubbing. Now, in their sixties, it was a headache and heartburn. Of course, pouring her heart out about Max had something to do her crashing headache.

Stacy helped her carry her equipment to the first nominee's suite. Al Brown was an actor who'd been around forever. He was "That guy who was in that thing". He'd finally gotten the part in the movie everyone was talking about. She was pulling for him. She was also glad that when he opened the door that he was not only ready but not surrounded by a team.

"Hi, Al Brown," he smiled as he shook her hand.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Amanda Miller and this is Sandy Davis."

A younger woman with dark, upswept hair and a long back gown, stood and extended her hand. "Hello, Ms. Miller. I'm Leslie Jeffers, Al's manager."

"It's nice to meet you and it's Amanda."

"Leslie is the reason I'm here," Al smiled. "She believed in me."

Amanda smiled. "I saw your movie. You deserve to be here."

"Thank you."

"Okay, let's get started." Amanda took some shots of him on the balcony. They did a few more in the room. She got a reverse shot of him looking into his mirror. That was the money shot. His past was looking into his future. "Alright, that's good. I hope I see you later."

"Thanks," he smiled. "So do I." If he won, she was scheduled to photograph him again in the atrium immediately after the ceremony.

Amanda and Sandy hustled between rooms. They had the male nominees scheduled first, because they usually went quicker than the women. A couple of the

younger men thought they were better looking than they were. Their 'people' always wanted just one more shot. She loved their reasoning. "It's for you. You're going to want to say you photographed him before he was a superstar." She'd seen these types for years. Here today, gone tomorrow.

She made her way through the nominees, saving who she knew would be toughest for the last. Laura Kane was a mediocre actress at best but she had a very powerful agent behind her. Her nomination was a product of well placed phone calls, not her work. If any actor wanted to work again or a producer use one of the agent's stable of talent, they nominated her.

They walked into a frenzy in her suite. People were on their phones. Some were picking through an appetizer tray. In the middle of the hub bub was her agent, a man who'd lived a life of over indulgence. It showed in every line of his face. He looked at Amanda and yelled from his seat on the couch, "The photographer's here."

"Geez," Sandy said under her breath.

Amanda was trying to set up when Laura came through the door. She was wearing a long black gown made of mostly netting and completely sheer from the waist up. Her eyes were surrounded by black eyeliner. She looked like a porn version of Morticia Addams.

"You look great, sweetheart," said the agent.

"A dream," said a man who fluffed out the skirt.

"Okay, I've had enough," said Amanda. "Alright, listen up, people," she shouted. She pointed at Laura. "I'm not photographing that dress. You have at least two more gowns. Pick one."

"Hey," yelled the agent. "Who do you think you are?"

"I am Amanda Miller, the most sought after portrait photographer in the country. If you want your client to be in Mystique's Oscar issue she's going to change."

"Nobody tells me what to do."

“Fine.” Amanda started bagging up her equipment.

Sandy grabbed her arm and whispered, “What are you doing?”

“Stanley said the dress was great,” said Laura.

“Yeah, that’s a shocker. He told you to expose yourself to prove you had talent. Have more respect for yourself.”

“I’ll change,” she said and ran back into the bedroom.

“Now that’s done, everyone out,” said Amanda.

Stanley stood and grabbed Amanda’s arm. “I say what happens with her. She’s mine.” She looked at him with disgust. “Get your hand off me.”

Amanda looked up to see Laura standing in the doorway holding a pink gown. “Is this one okay?”

“Perfect. I’ll set up while you get changed.” She turned to the agent. “Now get out.”

He got close enough to smell his cigar breath. “I’ll be calling Julie Hill. You’ll never work again.”

Amanda chuckled. “Give it your best shot.”

With the room finally cleared, Amanda and Sandy started setting up the equipment. “Amanda, what is with you? Why are you pissing off someone like Stanley Fisher? He’s a very big deal.”

“What he is, is lecherous creep who treats his clients like show dogs. I’ve had enough of him and people like him.”

“What if he calls Julie?”

“Let him.”

Laura came back into the room wearing a pink gown that made her look like a Disney princess. Her hair was pulled back in a simple bun. Her makeup was subtle and a perfect match for her new outfit. “You look lovely,” said Amanda.



“Thank you. Where is Stanley?”

“I threw him out. We can work much better without him.” Amanda saw a look of relief on Laura’s face. She set her for a shot on the balcony and she saw a different look. Amanda wouldn’t be surprised if Stanley had lost his most famous client.

Amanda and Sandy sat in her hotel room with the ceremony on in the background. Sandy answered a knock at the door. Julie walked in carrying two bottles of wine.

“What were you thinking?” she demanded. “You do not piss off Stanley Fisher.”

Amanda was leaning against the back of the couch with her eyes half closed. “So, I’ve been told.”

“He’s very angry.”

“It would be impossible to describe how little I care.” She looked at Julie. “Sandy and I will have to pass on the wine until tonight. We still have the winners to shoot in four hours. I’m going to take a nap.”

“Aren’t you going to watch the ceremony?” asked Sandy.

“I’ll know who wins by who shows up with a statue for the shoot tonight.” Amanda went to her bedroom and laid down. She looked up at the ceiling and wondered what the hell she was doing.

Max routed through the papers on his desk. He couldn't find the schedule for the new project. Frank was always bugging him to put everything on the computer but he was old school. He'd always done it this way. He always would. He'd been working more from home the past few weeks. He'd been, to quote Frank, a miserable old cuss for weeks. Frank was right. He was snapping at people who didn't deserve it.

He knew the reason. Mandy. She'd been gone for weeks. Just when he thought he was feeling better, he'd see some of her work and he'd be right back where he started. He'd bought the Oscar copy of *Mystique*. Her work was amazing. She elevated the work from just taking pictures to creating art. He couldn't stand in the way of her work.

He pushed more papers around his desk and wondered where the hell was the pizza guy. He was cranky and hungry. The doorbell rang. "Finally! You better not have forgotten the extra cheese!" He opened his front door and Mandy blew past him.

"Here's the thing. I can't work and it's your fault."

"How is it my fault?" he asked as she paced back and forth in his living room.

"Because I can't focus on anything. I'm pissing people off. Stanley Fisher tried to get me blacklisted."

"Who?"

"Creepy agent. I pissed him off and he tried to get Julie to fire me."

"And?"

"Even if she would fire her best friend, which she wouldn't, I'm an independent contractor. I work for myself," she said rapid fire and still pacing. "But the truth is I can't go back to that life." She finally stopped pacing and looked at him. "And it's your fault."

"Again," he smiled. "How is it my fault?"

"Because I can't think about anything but you. I can't bear the idea that I left you again. I love you so much. I always have. So, I came back."

"You came back," he smiled and he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I could get a place here and fly out for jobs.”

“You could, or you could work out of my office here, like you did before.”

“I could,” she smiled.

“Or I could build you a studio. I have enough room.”

“That would work,” she smiled. “Of course, I’m assuming you want me back. I have been a selfish bitch, leaving you twice.”

“The truth is I promised I wouldn’t pressure you to stay, but I’ve been miserable since you left. I’ve been working from home because Frank and the crew say I’m too ornery to be around.” His voice became hoarse. “Mandy, I have loved you for as long as I can remember. There’s never been anyone for me but you. I’ve been waiting forty-five years for you to come back to me. You finally did.”

Tears ran down her cheeks. “I promise from now on, no matter where I go, I will always come home to you.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted,” he said as he gave her a kiss.

“Now what do we do?” she asked as the doorbell rang.

Max opened the door and paid the delivery kid. “We eat pizza.”

“Did you remember the extra cheese?”

“Have you just met me?” he laughed as he opened the box and showed her the pie swimming in cheese.

“I’ll get the wine,” she smiled.

“Sounds like a plan.”

Amanda set the glasses on the table and smiled. “A very good plan.”