
LOVE VS. GOLIATH

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Bowman Xavier Getty put the file down on the desk in front of the small, delicate looking woman who was sitting across from him. "There's all of the paperwork in regards to the situation. I suggest that you look it over carefully and seriously consider the offer I've made. I think you'll find that it is more than generous. You might be giving up your house and land, but you'd become a millionaire many times over. You could buy yourself another farm. Hell, you could buy another twenty farms of that size or bigger and still have a lot of money left over."

As he sat there, he knew that she wasn't going to accept his offer, but he was bound by his own—somewhat flexible—code of honor that required he make every possible effort to get her to do what he knew was best for her, overall. If she didn't take this offer, she was going to end up on the short end of the stick financially and still have to leave. Having moved as a child, and then as he rose through the ranks as a businessman, he'd never felt any kind of tie to a piece of land or dwelling.

But she certainly did, and he had to admit—to himself—that despite how crazy the idea sounded to him in a lot of ways, he

admired her, too, and had to wonder if he'd been missing something big in his life, something he hadn't considered before. Granted, he was filthy rich and had everything money could buy, but he didn't have any kind of sense of community or heritage, either.

That was apt to happen when your father splits when you're a child and your mother has to do everything she can possibly do to keep herself and her son together.

She didn't make a move towards the file, as he'd known she wouldn't, and in that moment, as he considered her, he was struck by just how young and innocent she looked. Despite the fact that he knew that she was thirty-four—almost thirty five—but she had one of those ageless faces that meant that she would always look twenty-two or so, no matter how much she aged.

And he had to admit that he found her incredibly attractive. Why couldn't the last holdout that was keeping him from building the housing development he wanted to—that would make him money hand over fist—be a large, matronly woman with a perpetual scowl, who was just holding out for more money?

Instead, across from him, sat a woman he could tell was entirely unaware of how pretty she was. She wasn't stunning in any way, but she didn't need to be. Classic beauty had no need to be flashy.

Jayne Melissa Love Keller was wearing what was obviously her best outfit—although he would judge, even though he was no arbiter of such things—that it was at least ten years old and very likely wasn't in fashion even when she bought it.

No, her type of woman didn't care what was in fashion. She cared about what would be classic and proper and would last as long as possible. And a non-descript, navy blue skirt with a matching blazer and a white blouse fit the bill perfectly.

But the plainness of her dress only served to accentuate the subtlety of her good looks. She was lightly tanned—likely from

hard work done in the sun, without the aid of spray tans or tanning booths—and she was wearing little, if any, makeup. But then, she really didn't need it. Her cheeks had a natural, rosy glow that didn't call for artificial enhancement, and although her lips probably could have benefited from a bit of gloss, they were very full and sensual, enough so that he found he had to look away from her, or end up having to hide his erection behind his desk for a while.

"Mr. Getty—" she began.

"Bow," he interrupted with a soft smile.

The one she gave him in return was so small, he couldn't be sure it had even really ever been there, yet real or not, she managed to convey an air of derisiveness that was unmistakable.

"*Mr. Getty*," she repeated, emphasizing the *Mr.*, "I know it might be hard for you to believe, but not everyone in the world is desperate to get rich. Some things—like family history and legacy—are much more important than money. So I'm afraid that both Clara Sommes—for whom I am speaking, along with myself—and I are both of that belief."

Bow shifted once in his seat, betraying how uncomfortable he was at having to reveal the following information to her. "You don't know, then?" he asked softly.

The blankness of her expression told him all he need to know. "Know what?"

His words were as gentle as he could make them. "Mrs. Keller, Mrs. Sommes made a deal with us late yesterday."

Her face blanched white for a moment, and—uncharacteristically—he would have given just about anything not to have been the cause of such a look of betrayal that washed over her face. And he wasn't the primary cause; Clara was. But he accepted that—however indirectly—he was also a cause of her obvious distress. Then he literally watched her collect herself, straighten her back, and bring her eyes to his while folding her hands neatly in her lap. "No, I was unaware that Mrs. Sommes

had done that." Not surprisingly, Clara hadn't been eager to give her that information.

"Yes, she got nearly as sweet a deal as the one I'm offering you. She saw the wisdom in being able to start again somewhere else, somewhere warm—I think she mentioned a sister in Florida—with plenty of money to live in style for the rest of her life, and then leave a wonderful, rich estate to her children and grandchildren." He cleared his throat. "You're not even using the farm for its intended purpose, I'll remind you, Mrs. Keller."

It was a devastating blow. She'd know Clara all her life, and they—she thought, anyway—had become steadfast partners in the fight to keep their land from being overrun by ugly, garish, overblown McMansions. That news was very hard to recover from, especially in front of the very man who was the cause of nearly all of her problems. What had begun as a large group of property owners who had banded together to fight the enemy together, had now dwindled down to just her. And as that had happened, families her parents and grandparents had known for generations and had lived on their land even longer than her family had, so the money to fight him had dwindled, too. And now, she was looking at having to take him on all by herself, which really wasn't possible.

She didn't know exactly how much he was offering her, but she knew what the others had gotten. Once they'd abandoned the cause, they'd been only too eager to tell her, not realizing, or caring, that each call to let her know that they were no longer going to try to fight for their land carved a bloody strip of flesh off her heart. They had accepted the enormous amounts of money he had dangled in front of them that had only gone up with each successive defection from their little community, their little band of brave Davids who were trying—and failing badly—to fight an evil Goliath.

He would definitely qualify as a giant to most folks. Oh, he was a much more civilized one, no doubt. He was wearing an

exquisitely cut suit that was probably worth more than her car—not that that was saying much, but she didn't own very much of any value, beyond the house and the land he wanted to take from her. His ebony hair was cut short, he had a larger nose than an artist might have given him, but it seemed to work with his high cheekbones and bronzed skin. He was wearing one of those immaculately groomed, stubbly beards that she didn't want to like, but it both softened his look and made him even sexier than he would have been without it. His lashes were as thick and black as his hair, and most women would have given their eye teeth to have them. His lips were not too full and not too thin, but too prone to grin sardonically for her taste.

When he stood, he towered over her. Years ago, she wouldn't have found their difference in sizes to be intimidating, but she definitely did now, although she also did her best to ignore the fact that her first impulse—even without the threat of him taking her land—was to cringe away from him.

He also had a presence that most men didn't have. There was an air of command about him, as if he were always in control of everything—and everyone—around him, and liked it that way. She had no doubt that the most used phrase by the subordinates in his company was, "How high?"

If she'd seen his picture online, or on TV, she might have been attracted to him, despite her misgivings about his size. With that alarming thought, Jayne forced herself not to think about him, in favor of concentrating on the problem at hand. And immediately, the thoughts that she had been holding deliberately at bay by scrutinizing him flooded into her, making her stomach clench to the point of nausea.

The stark realization that she was now alone in the fight—and that she knew she was going to lose; it was really only a matter of how badly—was chilling. They had been minnows trying to kill a shark. Now, she was the only one still in the ocean, with the blood and chum her neighbors had thrown into the

water with each defection making him just that much more frenzied. No, not frenzied, in this case. Worse than that. She'd dealt with frenzied before and had come out on top—although not without some scars, physical and emotional.

No, what he was showing her now—what she'd seen in him when he'd first come to town and blithely dropped his outrageous offers in front of them—was worse. He was quietly, smugly confident, which made her want to slap that look right off of his face, even more so since he'd been able to turn Clara, who had been her staunchest ally.

She hadn't been using the land 'as it was intended' because she couldn't make enough money doing so. But every year, most of what little money she earned went to pay the taxes on it. She'd been drowning in debt before he'd appeared, waving money around that she desperately needed but didn't feel she could accept. It seemed that things just kept getting worse and worse, and she was very worried that it was going to end up with her and her daughter in a shelter somewhere, or worse, on the streets.

She'd gone very still, and if it was even possible, became paler.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Keller?" he asked, keeping his voice quiet and surprisingly kind sounding.

Jayne was staring at a spot to the left of his shoulder, at nothing in particular, but she couldn't seem to move her eyes, either. It was a sign of just how exhausted she was.

He was up in a second, turning to the bar that was hidden in the credenza behind him, then handing her a glass of something.

Without thought, she took a big swallow, then coughed loudly as she frowned down at the remaining amber liquid. That was more than enough to get her to send him a withering look. "I thought it was water."

Bow came to lean against the edge of his desk, closer to her than he'd ever been. He caught no scent of expensive perfume or

powders. Instead, she smelled of sunshine, soft breezes and untouched nature. He shook himself mentally at those thoughts. He wasn't usually prone to such flights of fancy. "Well, you've had a bit of a blow, and I thought you might like a shot of liquid courage."

Jayne put the glass down on his desk. "I don't need liquid courage, Mr. Getty. I have the real stuff. I'll see you in court."

Bow sighed and raised his voice just the slightest bit for emphasis. "I hope it won't come to that, Mrs. Keller, but if it does, I suggest you hire an attorney—a very good attorney."

He must've known that she didn't have the money to hire even a mediocre lawyer, the bastard. As much as she wanted to slam the door behind herself, she didn't. It was her pocketbook that experienced the death grip she wished was around his neck, instead. She knew he thought that she was crazy, and perhaps she was. It wasn't as if the house was a great mansion or anything. But it was the house where generations of her ancestors had grown up and farmed the land.

It was one of the few things in the world that was hers, and she intended to keep it.

A few days later, there was a knock at the door, and although she had been fine literally seconds earlier, she now found herself bent over the toilet, retching up food she was quite sure she'd never eaten in her life.

But what was markedly worse was that she could hear her daughter asking, "Who dis?" and knew she was standing in front of the—hopefully closed—front door.

"Hannah, stay away—" That was all she could get out before the next round began, and she found herself praying to the porcelain god once again. "From the door!" she finished weakly

as soon as she could, but there was no way the little girl had heard her. Or was going to obey her, either, she'd bet.

Usually, Jayne loved living in a rural area. She'd grown up on the farm and knew everyone for miles around, and they knew her. There weren't too many of them in the community, so they helped each other—like boats on the water that never refused someone who asked for help, so they always did whatever they could in aid of their neighbors. More than that, though, they went to church suppers, attended everyone's weddings and funerals, and when she walked into the little diner in the closest town, she knew pretty much everyone who was there, including the owner—who was the mayor—and the waitresses, who were all his kids or grandkids. The things around her—the things she'd grown up with—were generational. Many farms in the area had small family plots set aside, so that when you left the Earth, you didn't have to leave your family.

She could have sold off some of her land to fight him, she supposed, but then, why didn't she just sell it all to him and get it over with? She didn't want to leave her daughter a postage stamp sized half-acre lot. She wanted to give her what her parents had given her—a substantial, working farm.

There was absolutely no crime to speak of. The worst thing that had happened around there in decades was that Leonard—the town drunk everyone tried to look out for as best they could—got into a car that he thought was his, the nicest one in town, of course, and drove it into a ditch.

It had turned out to be Mr. Hess's car—the owner of the only bank in town—and although he wasn't any too happy to have been awakened by the local constabulary to come down and deal with the situation, he didn't press charges.

As a result of the fact that they were a pretty insular group and didn't have their guards up much, as one would in a city, everyone in the town and the surrounding farms left their doors open—Jayne, too.

Thanks to the debacle that had been her marriage to Darryl Keller—her erstwhile husband—she had tried to jettison that habit, but it was long ingrained. And, to her horror, she could hear that the other reason why she had to do much better at remembering to do that had just entered her house. She'd not caught all of the conversation between the two of them, but she had a pretty good idea how it had unfolded, anyway.

She'd missed the deep chuckle that had come from behind the front door at her daughter's question but heard him say, "Hi, honey," in a much friendlier voice than he'd ever used with her. "Is your mother home?"

To her horror, she knew exactly what her precocious toddler daughter was going to do. They were working on front door etiquette, but she didn't get a lot of visitors, and it was catch as catch can, at best.

She heard the front door squeak open, knowing that her little girl was gazing up at him. She hoped he didn't eat children. No, he just took their homes away from them, she smirked, only to be racked with another round of sickness.

Jayne hugged the toilet, pressing her feverish forehead against the tank, trying to remember the last time she'd cleaned it, but what the hell. Whatever she'd get from putting her face on that cold porcelain couldn't be any worse than whatever it was that she already had.

She fervently wished she could just flush herself down the toilet. She did not want to deal with that man when she felt like death warmed over, and all she was wearing was sweats and a t-shirt. That man demanded a suit—not of cloth, but friggin' armor! What the hell was he doing there, anyway? Why the hell had she practically sold a kidney to get to New York if he was just going to come here anyway a few days later?

The tone he was using with Hanny was much softer than the one he subjected her to, and she had to strain to hear what he said. "Well, hello, little one."

"Hi!" she said cheerfully, despite her stuffed up nose that was runny at the same time. "I'm Banana Keller." She stuck her hand out to him to shake it, in a gesture that was more polite than most adults were nowadays.

"Well, Miss Banana, I am delighted to meet you." Bow crouched down, to make himself smaller and less intimidating, he hoped, taking her tiny hand and turning it over, so that he could bring the back of it to his mouth and plant a zerbert on the back of it, instead.

That got a giggly squeal from her. "Mumma's in the baffroom, frowning up," she said matter of factly. "Wanna see?"

In her mind, Jayne could see her daughter taking his hand, which would be wet because she liked to suck on the first three fingers of her right hand, palm up, of course. And, in doing so, the little germ factory that she was, likely infected him, too, with the delightful combination of stomach upset and cold that was making the rounds at Jayne's friend's house, where she'd stayed while her mother was gone.

Hoping against hope, she prayed that he would decline her offer. "Please don't come in here. Please don't come in here. Please don't come in here," she prayed silently.

Of course, when he appeared in the bathroom doorway, she was just beginning yet another bout of uncontrollable sickness. And instead of standing there watching her, like ninety-nine percent of men would do—some while covering their mouths trying not to get sick themselves—in her experience, he insinuated his enormous self into her miniscule bathroom that seemed like it dated to the turn of the twentieth century, appropriated a washcloth from where one was hanging from a rod behind him, wet it with cool water, folded it into thirds, and pressed it to her forehead while rubbing her back.

"There, there," he said in a deep, rumbly voice that she wanted to refuse to be soothed by, but she was incapable of resisting it.

Of all the things for him to watch her doing, this was one of the last she would ever want him to see. How utterly humiliating! How could she possibly face him in court now, knowing he'd seen her bent over a toilet, helplessly upchucking everything she'd eaten for the past year.

When she was finished, for the moment, anyway, she forced herself to unbend, her hand coming up to take the washcloth away from him, saying weakly, "M-Mr. G-Getty. I wasn't—wasn't expecting you."

That was all she got out before she ended up in the same position again.

"See? Mumma's sick," Hannah pronounced wisely from the doorway.

"I see that, lovely." Bow looked from the little girl—who had snot running from her nose—to the big girl, whose back he was still rubbing while she was being sick, as he decided what would be the best course of action. And once he did, he moved away from Jayne, as much as he didn't want to, and reached down to pick up the little girl, whom he brought into what he thought of as a farmhouse kitchen, with a small eat-in area that was missing a table. Still, it was immaculately kept. He spotted a box of Kleenex on the counter, wiping her nose and upper lip before holding it there and saying, "Blow for me."

Like most toddlers, she did more blowing through her mouth, which didn't accomplish much, if anything.

Bow adjusted his instructions. "Close your mouth, and blow through your nose, darlin'." He tried again, with not a lot of change, so he just resigned himself to wiping her nose for her.

Then he filled the tea kettle that was on the stove and put it on the back burner to boil, all while gymnastically avoiding stepping on the little one, who was determinedly underfoot.

When it began to whistle, her mother came charging out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. Well, wandering weakly was probably a better description, but she was fixated on something.

"Don't put the tea kettle... on the front... burner." Jayne would have sworn that she was screaming, but it barely came out above a whisper, because of how all of that being sick had ruined her throat.

"I didn't," he said softly, giving her a small smile.

She looked like she very much wanted to say something else, but then she put her hand over her mouth and headed quickly back to the bathroom.

When he'd made himself comfortable enough in her kitchen to make her a weak cup of tea and some dry toast, all while keeping an eye on her daughter, he left those things on the counter and went into the living room, where Banana was flipping through a book while creating a story all her own.

He downloaded a color matching game for toddlers onto his iPad for her, showed her how to play it—basically and quickly—then returned to the bathroom.

Jayne was lying on the floor, looking as if she'd passed out. He'd heard the horrible sounds she was making while he was doing those other things, and he wouldn't have been in the least surprised if she had passed out, poor thing.

"Mrs. Keller? Are you all right?"

"No," Jayne barely breathed with tremendous effort. "I'm nearly dead. Please just leave me alone so that I can finish dying without a hostile audience."

He frowned at the idea that she thought him hostile, but he guessed, from her viewpoint, that was exactly what he was.

The powder room was so small that even she nearly covered the entire floor, so he picked his way cautiously into it, without stepping on her, to lean down and lift her off the floor and into his arms. "Which bedroom is yours?" he asked. They were in a small hallway, and there were three other doors from which to choose, which he assumed—from the placement of the windows—were two bedrooms. The third door was at the end of the hall, and he would bet that led to an upstairs that

was closed off because they didn't need it and didn't want to heat it.

"The one on the right. But you don't have to—"

"Save your strength for getting better."

Before she knew what was happening, he'd tucked her into her own bed, produced a bowl in case she couldn't make it the three steps to the bathroom, put the cool washcloth back on her forehead, and brought her lukewarm tea and toast.

"Mr. Getty, I'm sure you have more important things... " she began, sitting up a bit in bed, knowing she must look like something a dead cat would drag in. Not that she cared, she told herself.

She didn't like the tone he took with her, in that she liked it all too much. It was calm and comforting—both the tone and the words, frankly—but it also made it clear to her that he would brook no argument from her about whatever it was that he'd said. "Actually, I don't. I came down here to try, again, to talk some sense into you. I assume you have no family to take care of you?"

Jayne shook her head slowly but stopped when even that small movement made her dizzy. "All gone."

"And your ex-husband?"

The fear that passed over her face at the mention of him was unsettlingly stark and unmistakable, but he admired how quickly she controlled it, even when she was sick. She shut it down completely, her usually expressive face becoming a blank. "He's not in the picture, and I made sure that he never will be."

The sudden urge to find Mr. Keller and teach him what happens to a man who doesn't treat his woman—or, dear God, he didn't want to think about it—or his daughter right surprised him. He wasn't a violent man, or, at least, he wasn't anymore. And he never had been towards any female or child, ever. But, when he was a rowdy young man, he had certainly gotten into his share of fights. He never started one—well, rarely anyway—

but by the time he was twelve or so, he was big enough that he was always the last man standing.

His mother had not been a fan of him fighting at all, and it was in deference to her that he didn't get into more than he had. She'd warned him repeatedly to be aware of his own strength, obviously worried that he might accidentally kill someone while fighting, but he had taken her warning to heart and was always cognizant of just how strong he was. He rarely beat a man more than was absolutely necessary for him to yield.

And afterwards, when it was over, it was over. He never bore grudges, and he always offered his opponent his hand after a bout. As a result, some of the men he'd fought had become his best friends.

But this—her reaction and what it conveyed—was something else, and it stirred within him something he'd never encountered before. It shook him to his core to realize that he would do just about anything to keep from seeing that kind of stark terror on her face again—not that he thought he was ever going to get the chance to do anything like that.

"Well, then. It's good that I happened to drop by."

"No, it's not," she replied firmly.

He smiled at her. "Take a couple sips of tea and a couple bites of the toast. The tea'll help settle your stomach, and if nothing else, they'll both give you something to throw up."

She did neither of those things. "You don't want or need to stay here and take care of me."

Bow stood. "I think that you could do with some help while you're feeling so poorly. And my mother would have my head on a platter if I left a woman and a child when they so obviously need looking after."

"We don't need looking after."

She already hated that all-knowing grin of his. "You just keep telling yourself that."

As if she'd forgotten entirely about her daughter, she sat up

and threw the covers off, as if she was going to get out of bed. "Where's Hanny?"

"Hanny?" He did nothing more than come stand in front of her, positioning himself such that she couldn't get out of bed without spreading her legs around his two tree trunk-sized thighs, which would render herself much more vulnerable to him than she ever wanted to be.

"Hannah-Banana."

"She's in the living room, probably sneezing on my iPad."

She looked horrified at that prospect. "You gave a toddler your iPad? Are you crazy? I can't afford to replace that thing when she takes a bite out of it, or puts it in the bathtub to see if it floats." Jayne brought her legs up and tried to put them back down again to one side of his, but he moved casually to block her.

"I want you to stay in bed, please. I'm not worried about the condition of my iPad, and since I was the one who gave it to her, I could hardly expect you to replace it, anyway. You need rest. I'll see to Hannah." He paused, then edited, "I'll see to both of you until you're feeling better."

"But you don't have to do that!" She was feeling so bad, so utterly unable to fight with him about this, which was something she definitely should have been fighting him about, at least as hard as she was about her house. But she literally couldn't. She could only manage to move her legs away from his once before she knew that she wouldn't be able to do it again.

"I know I don't, honey. I want to." He held the covers up, and they looked terribly warm and inviting to her. "Snuggle back under, please," he said, in more of that particular tone that she knew would melt her utterly, dangerously so if she were healthy. And, since she was sick, it was even harder to resist, although she stubbornly persevered, sitting there looking up at him.

"You don't mean 'please' when you say it. You're just tacking it on to cover up an order you expect to be obeyed."

His grin was broad and unrepentant, and it made him look even more handsome than he already did. "Good for you for realizing that. You got me dead to rights." The grin dimmed considerably, and his tone dropped several octaves, it seemed, when he continued. "I do expect you to obey me, and there will be consequences you probably won't like if you don't."

That fear was there, in the back of her eyes, again, and he hated seeing it in conjunction with himself. He might not have been perfect, but he was definitely a better man than her husband in that respect, anyway—not that she would know that.

"But just so you know, I have never raised my fist to any woman. I've spanked my share of them for not doing as I've asked them to do, but my momma, and my gram, raised me to be a gentleman, however much of an anachronism that is in this day and age. I respect women enormously; they were both single mothers. They're both saints and I adore them both pretty equally. I would cut off my arm before I ever raised my fist to either of them or any woman, even one who's beating on me."

Her eyes grew wide, as if she couldn't imagine any woman actually attacking and punching him and expecting to live through it, and the fear receded, although it was not entirely gone. In hindsight, it probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, to tell a woman with whom he already had an adversarial relationship that made her hate his guts and who had obviously endured some kind of abuse from her husband, that he might spank her. But he liked to be up front with women he was attracted to.

And, God help him—it certainly was a complication he didn't need—but he was definitely attracted to her pluckiness and determination, and even her stubbornness. Although he thought that particular trait was likely to get her into trouble with him sooner, rather than later, so she was going to come to know relatively quickly to what consequences he was referring.