



Christmas

IN **VINES**

OLIVIA REIGN

Christmas in Vines

A Small Town Holiday Romance

Olivia Reign



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Chapter One

Cole

Rubbing the condensation from the beer, I glared at it. “You know you’re the reason for my mess, right?”

It was not like I wanted the thing to answer me, but it was true. Three days ago, I’d lost a bet with my dumbass friend, and now, I was taking Tyler’s place as a temp hand at Clarkston’s Ciders brewery for three weeks—all because I lost a game of beer pong. What had made me risk so much for so little?

Loose cannon.

Cocky dumbass.

Egotistical maniac.

And wasn’t it perfect that my brother Ethan’s voice was in my head? I’d brushed his warnings off all these years, but now, I finally understood what he had been saying. At least, with my brother handling the Vega Meadery with the new Texas guys’ contract and having more hands than he could handle, he didn’t need me for the three weeks heading to Christmas.

Plus, with Mia, his new girlfriend, in his life, he had another reason to be distracted. I wasn’t a contracted worker with my brother’s business anyway. I was free to come and go as I pleased because that thing was Ethan’s baby—I was not sure it was mine. I had no problem jumping in when he needed me and digging up dirt, finding contracts, and all that, but again, I was still finding my footing.

At least three weeks would pass by in a flash. I’d go to the place, keep my head down, do my job, and leave without incident. I was sure I wouldn’t leave without breaking out in hives—like the Sullivans, wine snobs, said would be a sure thing. To them, cider was the fourth-class citizen under wine, mead, and, surprisingly, *beer*.

To my shame, in my town, we mocked the Clarkston ciders a lot... well, not the town exactly, more like my family and the Sullivans discounting them as *cider* was as commonplace as beer.

Well, not my buddy Ryan Sullivan; he had no prejudices against anyone, not my family's mead business or even the cider makers.

"...Who knows? It could be a good thing," I shrugged to myself. "Who knows?"

Why, in God's name, do I get myself in these situations?

The reflection over a relatively low-key bar in Crescent Ridge's square showed me my new, temporarily dyed, dark brown hair and tinted brows. Tyler had even set me up with his bunk keys, ID, and whatever else it would take to make me pass for him. It didn't help that we looked scarily alike, except for the dimple in his chin; mine was smooth, but who would be gatekeeping dimples?

My start date was tomorrow, and I needed a drink—or three—to take the edge off. I was a few miles from home, but it didn't matter; no one would be looking for me there. Finishing my beer, I left the bar and began walking to the bunkhouse, where I would crash until reporting the next morning.

In mid-November, snow was already fluttering down and dusting the roadways and housetops in soft fluff. I was not one for the Christmas hoopla; I got the reason for the season, the birth of Christ and all that, but I still didn't get why people went crazy. All this tinsel town, hot chocolate, peppermint, and carol singing BS. Santa Claus made me cringe, and candy canes made me shudder in distaste, but what could you do except wait the madness out and welcome sanity on New Year's?

Heading around the bar to where the car park was, I spotted a woman and a guy arguing under a dull streetlight. I kept my head straight and decided to walk off—their private business was none of mine—but when she slapped his hand away from her face, I stopped.

“Stop, Max, I’m done. I moved on. Get it through your thick skull,” she said tightly.

That didn’t sound so good.

“C’mon, Willow, you can’t be serious,” the guy said arrogantly. “I’m the best thing that happened to you.”

Hell, it sounded dangerous.

I couldn’t see her all that clearly at the angle I was at, but I knew I had to do something. The most I could tell about her was that she was about average height, slender without being skinny, and her hair was in a thick, brunette braid. If this was an abusive boyfriend or risky ex, I could not leave her there all alone against him.

Abruptly changing course, I strode over to them like a mad boyfriend on a mission. “Hey you, fuck off!” I shouted, “Leave my goddamn girlfriend alone.”

The two jerked apart as if I’d shot one of them, and I grabbed Willow’s arm to pull her a little behind me. Then I turned to her. “Is this the douche you were telling me about, baby?”

She swallowed but played along and nodded. I turned to Max, and objectively, I could see why he felt so arrogant and entitled; he was a good-looking guy with a square face, high cheekbones, gray eyes, and thick dark hair. But I didn’t give a shit.

“You’ve got about ten seconds to go before I nail your pretty face,” I snarled. “And if you ever try to come within a mile of Willow again, I won’t be responsible for your broken *spine*.”

Max’s eyes narrowed. “So, you’re the guy she left me for?”

“Damn right,” I replied. “And I can see why. Move off, asshole. She doesn’t need or want you anymore.”

He laughed, then turned to Willow. “You can’t be serious. *Him?*”

“Yes, him.” Willow grabbed my sleeve. “Not everyone is swayed by your money, Maxwell, or your rich country-club partying parents. You seem to think it’s all right to dip your dick in any girl who breathes near you and think I’d go on with it because you can buy me another Mercedes or some shit. You don’t know the first thing about what it takes to care for someone else than who you see in the mirror.”

Well... damn.

My arm tightened around her. “I’m going to tell you one last time, fuck off, asshole.”

He turned to Willow. “You’ll regret this. I’m giving you up to Christmas to realize the mistake you made, and I’ll graciously take you back when you come crawling back to me.”

“She won’t,” I said.

“She will,” he snorted, then turned away and strode off to a few guys who had just walked into the parking lot.

Pivoting a little, I dropped my voice. “Are you okay?”

She looked up, and I realized her eyes were rich, glassy blue, like sapphire gems on white velvet. “Thank you for that. He won’t leave me alone.”

“Do you want me to take you somewhere, home, the police station, a relative’s house?” I asked quietly. “I don’t trust that guy.”

Willow pulled away and shook her head. “Thanks, but I’ll be all right. Max... Max is all bark but no bite. He’s too... cushy to get his manicured hands dirty. I wish he would leave me alone.”

The hairs on the back of my head lifted, and I could feel that doucheface was staring at me. I reached for her again. “I’m sorry about this, but play along, okay?”

Before she could nod, I bent my head and kissed her, lightly at first, until her mouth opened and her tongue sought mine—but the second we touched, my axis spun sideways. I moved a little more, and she wrapped her arms around my

neck; this time, it was her lips seeking mine. Our tongues tangled, and the kisses got hotter and more sensual, all lips and tongue and teeth. It was aggressive, erotic, and sensual.

This wasn't rational. My brain didn't stand a chance because my mouth was all in. Whatever the hell was happening here didn't make sense. I tasted lemon drop shots on her tongue and felt her callused palm gripping the back of my neck. I was transfixed, like I was under a spell, and would do anything the magician commanded.

The steel pipe in my jeans began throbbing in time with my pounding heart, and I was pretty sure I heard her whimper a little bit. When she moaned into my mouth, I drank it in like a parched man.

Gradually, I pulled away and wiped her wet bottom lip. I gave her an apologetic look. "He was staring at us. I had to do something to make our relationship look legit."

She was dazed; I could see it in her eyes. Blinking, Willow shook her head. "And there goes my promise not to kiss strangers."

"Oh ho," I grinned, "What happened? You go around rooms just giving kisses like party favors."

She punched me in the arm. "Shut it."

"Do you have a car or a ride somewhere?" I asked, pivoting a little to keep an eye on the guys at the corner. Maxwell was staring dead at us, but I ignored him. "I could drop you off somewhere if you wanted."

"I'm good." She took out a set of car keys and nodded to a Jeep a few feet away from me. "I'm going home."

It was close, but I still rested my hand on the small of her back and walked her to her door. "Get home safe. Where's your cell?"

She gave me a quizzical look but handed it over, and after she unlocked it, I typed in my number. "Call me when you get home, so I'll be sure that ass hat isn't bothering you."

Her expression cleared, and a flirting smile tugged at her lips. “Were you transported here from the fourteenth century?”

“Despite the contrary, chivalry isn’t as dead as you think it is,” I replied, my gaze flowing over her soft, heart-shaped face, her button nose, and kiss-plumped lips. Standing aside, I watched as she got inside and started the car.

I made to leave when she stopped me and leaned out the window. “You forgot to tell me your name?”

Cole nearly slipped from my lips, but I said, “Tyler, Tyler Burrows.”

She kissed my cheek, “Thanks, Tyler, I’ll never forget it.”

Standing back as she drove off, I gave Maxwell another hard look and went to my SUV parked on the corner, jumped in, and drove to the Clarkston’s bunkhouses, a few streets away from the business itself. I took care when driving, but the taste of Willow’s lips lingered on my tongue and the soft scent of her perfume never left my nose.

God, she was so artlessly gorgeous, with a fresh face, not a stitch of makeup on, but still so stunning. I’d been with women who wore more makeup than the zombie dancers in the Micheal Jackson video, looking like every version of Hollywood elite actresses. However, Willow...man, she was something different.

How exactly? I didn’t know, but I knew I would never get the chance to find out. There was like a zero-point-zero-five percent likelihood I would ever see her again—much less kiss her—and even if I did run into her again, it wouldn’t mean much.

All it would mean was that I helped her out in a difficult situation and that I was happy to have been at the right place at the right time. But God knew I would carry the memory of that kiss for years with me.

I couldn’t kid myself; if I had met Willow at a club or a party and we’d shared that kiss, there was no question that I wouldn’t be taking her home to tear up the sheets.

All I could do now was to be happy that I helped her out, and hopefully, she would keep in contact with me about being safe from that conceited douchebag.

I found the bunkhouse I was supposed to use—number fifteen—parked on the curb and got out. Hauling the duffel bag from the backseat, I stepped and got the keys in hand. The modest duplex was more than I had imagined Clarkston would provide for their people—but then again, what had I expected? Tents and an outhouse?

The house had a single light over the doorway, and I stepped in to see a long corridor down the middle of the house; I saw four doorways in the hallway—I guessed I was bunking with three other guys, none of whom I supposed were there already.

Or maybe they were asleep?

My room was number two, and I opened that one to see a clean bunk, dark linens on the single bed, a dresser, and a table with a lamp on it. It looked like a simple setup for a seasonal worker, and I dropped my bag on the bed and then flicked the light on.

As I did, my phone chimed, and I slid it out of my pocket.

Hi KISA, I'm home and safe with my dad. And he's got a shotgun.

“KISA...what the heck is that?” I asked myself. It was clearly Willow, and I was glad she was safe, but I wanted to know what she meant by that, so I texted her about it.

KISA? Is that some government code name I don't know about?

I kicked off my boots and sprawled on the bed, with a knee up, while watching the three dots dance the tango.

KISA is Knight in Shining Armor. She replied.

I grinned. *Does that make you a Damsel in Distress?*

What would she say to that? I watched and waited while the dots danced...

Chapter Two

Willow

I honestly didn't know what to say to Tyler—what could I say? Every time I decided to reply, I changed my mind, which was why Tyler probably saw the dots dancing a million times. I could not get that kiss out of my head. How was it that I didn't know the man from Adam, and the moment his lips had touched mine, I'd seen supernovas?

I got that he'd done it to make it clear to Maxwell that I'd moved on, but...God, I still couldn't wrap my head around what had happened.

Tonight, yes, I wasn't in the best place.

Dropping the cell, I curled up in my bed and reached for the cup of chamomile tea on the bedside table. Tyler had stepped in right when I hadn't known I needed and defended me from Max.

I'd seen stuff like that on TV and the rare romance novel I read, but I had never expected it to happen to me. It wasn't the kiss alone; Tyler wasn't hard on the eyes either. Even in the darkness, I could make out his features, too—the sharp shape of his nose and the strong lines of his jaw and cheekbones. It helped that he was at least three inches taller than Maxwell, and had been able to look down on my ex with such contempt and scorn.

My phone pinged.

Call me up if you need me to stand in for your BF again. I wouldn't mind punching Mcdouche.

I laughed. *I wouldn't mind seeing it either. Thanks, Tyler.*

No problem, sweetheart.

My heart lurched into my throat at that; how had he just unlocked a part of me without even trying? I loved pet names; they did something warm and mushy to my heart. It was the one thing I could say was girly about me. Sweetheart, love, honey, and baby; were all my kryptonite.

I'll keep that in mind. Good night.

His reply came a second later. *Sweet dreams.*

I dropped my phone and cradled the cup with a chuffed smile on my lips. I'd never been so...unexpectedly thrilled in months.

A knock on my door had me looking up, and Dad walked in, his bifocals pushed up into his still thick, dark hair. "Hey, girlie, can I get a moment?"

"Sure, Dad," I replied. "What's up?"

He came in and perched on the edge of the bed, "Are you sure you want to be a part of the meeting tomorrow? It's not going to be that important, Willow, just some boilerplate stuff with me giving the new seasonal hands the what-for."

I set the cup aside and held his hand, "I want to be there, Dad. It's about time I start to get involved."

His brown eyes still looked apprehensive, but I saw the moment he gave in. "Okay. I know it's important to you."

"I'm going to take over one day," I teased. "And send you to marinate in some chalet in Florida."

"If that's the case, just dig a hole in the backyard and drop me in it," Dad laughed. "I'd evaporate in Florida. But I know you want to be in charge, sweetheart. I would rather you have someone by your side when you did it. You know how I was with your mother? She was the anchor that held me down in the days that I thought I would splinter to the four corners of the earth. It's easier with someone there, Willow."

I leaned back into the tufted headboard. "I know, Dad, and I-I really thought Maxwell would be the one I'd have with me, but he turned out to be a conceited narcissist, and honestly, I... I think I'll be fine footing it on my own until I do find the right guy."

He reached over and hugged me, dropping a kiss on my temple. "I know it'll happen. Good night."

The click of the lock behind him had me reaching for my cell again and hitting Instagram. A picture of Ethan Vega and

Mia Sullivan came up. He was sitting at the base of a fence post, and Mia was on the rung above him, her arms wrapped around his shoulders while she—kissed his cheek.

The iPhone tumbled to my lap.

What the fuck?

Grabbing it, I looked over it again—what was happening? Weren't those two enemies for life? The caption said, *#mending old fences*. Below that, I read *we've found out that our families are closer than we thought*.

What did that mean?

Were the two families... combined? Were they making a super-conglomerate on us?

My jaw clenched.

It was not fair how those two families treated us. They didn't think of us as competition; hell, I would be surprised if they thought of us as a business at all.

When the tourists come to our neck of the woods, they always gravitated to Sullivan wine or Vega meads. Cider was just as important—probably not as popular—but we had our market, too. Dad had had to fight tooth and nail, shed sweat, blood and tears to make Clarkston Cider even a blip on the map, and sadly, that was still what we were—a blip.

The two families were the bane to our existence, and it was not that they didn't recognize us; it was as if sportsmanship didn't even occur to them. I understood protecting your brand, but would it kill them to reach out to us and give us any endorsement or help? I knew for a fact that Dad had tried a few times only to be left on read. I didn't hate them... I just felt insulted.

Dropping the phone, I slumped to the pillows and scrolled through my messages.

My friend Jackie had texted me saying she'd arrived home in Denver two hours ago, and I replied with a *Glad you're home safe*.

That was it for me; I'd had a full night, what with Maxwell and his bullshit, ambushing me and Jackie on our night out with half a crew of guys in his posse. Then, with Tyler and the unexpected desire I felt for a guy I didn't know—it was a lot.

Putting my phone on DND, I set it aside and drew the covers over me. Tomorrow would be a big day for me, and I wanted to go into it, all gun's blazing.

* * *

In the main warehouse, I stood beside Dad in the middle of the room while the seasonal hands came in, chatting and holding travel cups of coffee. I didn't pay much attention to who was who—most of these guys would be gone in three weeks anyway—but I did count them. Seventeen—a good intake to reap the rest of the late-season Cortland apples.

“Welcome,” Dad said merrily. “Thank you all for coming in to help us get ready for this winter season. Your help will be invaluable to us, and I assume your pay would be for you, too.”

The guys laughed while someone said, “Damn right.”

“Our rules are simple,” Dad added, “The day starts at six, lunch time at twelve-thirty, you can take whatever snack or coffee with you, but no liquor of any kind, not on the workday. Being drunk or intoxicated is a hazard when working on ladders, and while we have insurance, it's best to avoid any risk altogether.

“The day ends at six, or when you do finish your daily quota of twenty boxes per day. Of course, we can give you sick days or for any emergency you might have. This is not a Victorian workhouse, and we're not taskmasters over here.

“If you decide to stick around for longer, we hold a Christmas Eve brunch, and if you're not ready to leave the bunkhouse, you may stay, but you'll be responsible for making sure no damages happen, and you'll have to take care of your personal needs as well. Please, no raging parties and absolutely no illegal drugs. If you're found with any, you will

be fired immediately and reported to the police. I run a clean ship here.”

Most of the guys nodded—I assumed they had heard this all before when doing temp farm work—but a few looked impassive. That was when my eyes landed on Tyler—and my heart lodged itself somewhere in my ears.

He was at the back, clad in thick jeans, work boots and a fleece that covered what I assumed was a black tee. He was on the back wall with one boot up, his arms crossed and his head down, as if he was only listening and not caring to look around his surroundings. His head was down, but I could not miss those long-fingered hands or the curve of his jaw—not after they had starred in my dreams last night.

I stared so long it was a miracle he hadn’t felt my gaze, but it was when I tore my eyes away that I saw him look up and right at me. My skin flushed, and a sudden wave of emotion barreled through me. Thankfully, no one realized, and I forced myself to stay in the game.

Dad turned to me. “This is my daughter Willow, and she and her team will be overseeing the intake while I handle the other operations. You’ll respect her as you would do with me.”

“She might look easy-going,” Marcus, my second, came closer with a grin. “But believe me, mess with her, and she’ll put her size eight boot up your ass. I made the mistake once, and I still have the proctologist bill.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for making me look like a gorgon, Marcus. Don’t listen to him about that; follow the rules, do the work, and we’ll get along fine. There will be no foots up asses.”

Marcus covered his mouth from me and whisper-shouted, “Lies, believe me.”

I saw Tyler’s lips twitch, and amusement painted his face. Dad clapped his hands and pointed to a table with log-in sheets, bottles of water and crates of tools. “Willow will take over from here, so thank you again and have a productive day.”

Moving to the table, I greeted the guys as they came forward, jotted their names down and their time, grabbed their tools and headed out to the orchards. Tyler was last in line, and I don't know if it was by design or happenstance.

He smiled. "Boss' daughter, huh."

"Surprise," I replied.

His eyes trailed over me as slow as molasses on a winter day, and I held back my shiver. "A very good surprise." He signed his name on the sheet, got his water and tools, and then headed out.

He was so sexy, his rolling swagger like a puma on the prowl. I couldn't help but feel the ghost of his kiss roam over my lips again and the heat of his hands as he held me tight against him. How would it feel to have them dance over my bare skin?

"Willow?" Marcus asked while signing off on his sheet. "You okay?"

I snapped out of it. "Yeah. I am. Why do you ask?"

"You just went...space cadet awhile ago with that dude," Marcus nodded. "Do you know him from somewhere?"

Looking around at the empty room, I gestured for him to come closer. "Yeah. Last night..." I told him the whole story about going to meet Jackie, and how Maxwell had ambushed me outside the bar. I told him how Tyler had stepped in and pretended to be my boyfriend to get Max to step down.

"And then... he kissed me," I said.

Marcus's head snapped back. "You don't say?"

"And..." I nibbled my bottom lip. "By far one of the best kisses I have ever had in my life. I kid you not, Marcus. I felt it to the tip of my toes and back up again. It was like a fire was racing through my veins or some other cheesy idiom about unexpected arousal."

He wagged his brows. "Would you have jumped into the sack with him?"

I fisted his arm. “What do you take me for? A floozy?”

“Hey, no slut shaming,” he laughed while rubbing his arm. Marcus bench pressed two-twenty a day and looked like a brick shithouse; there was no way my little punch had made any impact on him.

“He’s...” I didn’t know what to say. “He’s a good guy.”

“He’s hot,” Marcus shrugged. “Anyone with eyes can see that.”

I blushed. “Yeah, he is. But nothing can happen, Marc. I mean, he’s going to be gone in a few weeks, and I’m not a summer fling kinda girl.”

“Technically, this would be a *winter* fling,” Marcus grinned.

I narrowed my eyes to him. “Remind me why I like you again?”

He wrapped me up in a big bear hug and lifted me off the ground, and I hugged him back, utterly incapable of being mad at the big goof. He sat back on the floor, then rested his hands on my shoulders, “Seriously, Willow. How bad could it be to have a little fun for a while? Get the old pipes running again.”

“...Old?” I glared. “*Old?*”

“Rusty?” he teased.

I turned away. “I’m walking away now.”

“See you in a few hours,” he called after me.

Before I left, I took my log-in sheet and headed up to the loft where my temp office was, and I read his name, “Tyler Burrows. Right, I’d forgotten he’d told me that.”

My fingers twitched to log on to my computer, and Facebook stalk him, but I then pulled up a blank Excel sheet and began punching in the records. Flings were just that—flings; no one needed the other’s life story of a background check (even though my dad had made sure to run all these guys through a few).

If anything did progress between me and Tyler, it would just be sexual, nothing more. After Maxwell, I was not in a mental state for any sort of relationship beyond knocking boots. I didn't need more than that.

Hours later, I had all the files logged in and went down for lunch, but headed to the main house instead of the mess hall the guys would be chowing down in.

My phone rang as Jackie's name flashed across the screen, and I grabbed it, swiped it open and cocked it to my ear while swallowing my turkey sub. "Hey, Jackie. How are things?"

"Better," Jackie replied. "My dumbass brother got in trouble at university again, but thankfully, it was a misunderstanding, not him setting the chemistry lab on fire again."

"Eddie is a pyromaniac," I laughed.

"He's turning me into a manic," Jackie laughed. "But he is a good kid anyway. Anyhow, how did it go last night when I had to leave so abruptly? Did you deal with Max?"

"Oh, yeah," I replied but refrained from telling her the whole story about Tyler. "It worked out."

A bit of static rumbled over the phone, and when she came back, Jackie said, "I've been telling you this, Willow, you deserve so much more than that rich asshole. He might be able to buy you anything you want, but he can't see past his reflection to see your emotions. You need someone better."

"I know," I replied. "Dad has said it, Marcus has said it, and you've said it... many times. I'll find a good guy one day."

"You will," she replied. "Because I live vicariously through you."

Laughing, I hung up, then finished my sandwich and went back to the warehouse for more work.

* * *

It was past six when Tyler came back to the warehouse, which was odd because he should be getting dinner. I looked up from the checklist I was marking off and asked, “Did you forget something?”

“No,” he leaned over a stack of empty crates and rested his arms on them. His gaze was fixed on me, and again, his unwavering attention tempted me to fidget. “I wanted to get you alone.”

“Why?” I asked, darting my looks from the crates to the sheet.

“I’ve been racking my brain for hours trying to figure out how a sweet girl like you ended up with a douchebag like Maxwell,” he said plainly. “Did he hypnotize you or something?”

Oh.

“You could say that,” I replied. “Maxwell Winslow. I was twenty-two and naïve in college. He was a sophomore and the “it” guy. Believe it or not, he was sweet the first year, attentive and spontaneous while keeping the best grades. I thought I was lucky to find him, a perfect fit, while others waited and searched for years to find theirs.”

“But you were wrong?” Tyler said.

“Dead wrong.” I gave up on the sheet and set it aside. “To be honest, I was stretching it when I said how he was in the first year of our relationship. Yes, he was all those things, to a degree, but I’d started to notice things, things I shoved to the back of my mind and told myself were nothing. You know that meme on the internet that says, *every time the universe sends me a sign, I’m like, OK, but I think I’ll wait for a signier sign.*”

“Yep,” he popped the ‘p’.

“That was me,” I replied. “I saw him looking at other girls, but I wasn’t the type of girlfriend who banned a guy from having girl friends. But looking grew to flirting, and flirting grew to touching. I walked in on him just as he’d finished screwing a girl from my year.”

I wrapped my arms around my middle. “He played it that he was drunk, and I did smell vodka on his breath, but what got to me was that was his... was his so-called affection for me so insignificant that a few shots of vodka could make him tumble into bed with another girl?”

Tyler’s face fell. “I’m sorry.”

Shrugging, I reached for the clipboard again. “We broke up a few times, but he kept coming back. It was only last year I made sure to draw the line, but he keeps crossing it. I hope what you did last night will send the final message.”

Tyler’s eyes followed every minute motion I made, and it made me feel flattered. “You’ve dated after him, right?”

“I—” I paused, “— if you count a string of scattered dates here and there dating, I suppose. They never stuck around.”

“You obviously dated the wrong ones.”

“Obviously,” I gave him a deprecating smile. “I don’t know what it is. Maybe my flirting game is subzero. I don’t even think I know how. I’m just not one of those girls who’s always acting all cutesy, hair twirling, or eyelash fluttering.”

“Good,” he gave me a crooked grin. “You’d look ditzy.”

I gasped. “You don’t dare.”

“I do,” he grinned, “You’re better off smart and cute as you are. Leave that ditzy act to the bimbos.”

“You think I’m cute?”

He chuckled. “I’d bet you’ve heard that more than once in your life.”

“Maybe twice,” I replied.

“And now you’ve heard it for the third time,” Tyler grinned.

“You say that to all the pretty girls,” I teased him.

“And you say your flirting game is weak,” he shot back while coming around the crate. “Yes, I think you’re cute, but it wouldn’t do me any good. You’re basically my boss for the

next few weeks, and I'm sure you've got some *no-fraternization* clause in your company's books, so that wouldn't be cool."

"It's true," I replied while he moved closer; his seagrass eyes made my breath hitch. "We do have the clause."

My back met the wall, and Tyler stopped. It didn't even look like he was breathing. He was just...staring at me, and despite being fully clothed in a fleece-lined jacket and thick jeans, I never felt more exposed.

The look in his eyes burned right through me. How the hell was he doing that? It was exciting and nerve-racking and made my pulse hammer in my head at the same time. Tyler lifted and touched the hair at my temple before slipping it around my nape and moving in and digging one hand into the soft hair there.

"How airtight is that clause?"

"Pretty ironclad," I whispered, even while tilting my head up. "You can sue me for it."

"I'd rather suckle on your pretty lips instead," he whispered.

He lowered his mouth to mine slowly, giving me every opportunity to turn away or say no, but when I didn't, he gently rested his lips on mine, parting my lips with the precision of a surgeon. He ran his tongue over the seam delicately, and when I opened my lips to meet him, he pulled away, drawing the kiss out until he sealed his lips over mine and plundered my mouth.

The pressure of his hand on the back of my neck grew stronger as he held me fast while his other arm slid around my waist, fingers creeping under my sweater, finally touching my skin.

"You play dirty," I gasped.

"Should I play it safe?" he asked, his thumb swiping under my bottom lip. "You get more beautiful every time I look at you."

What was it with this guy? How did he know what to do to hit me square in the chest? My words were shuddery when they came out. “You’re trouble... aren’t you?”

Mercifully, Tyler stepped back and he shrugged. “I’ve been told so a time or two, but I don’t actively search for trouble.”

I got my grounds. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Wife? Ex-wife? Baby mother? I can’t get into...” I waved my hand between us. “...this if you’ve got some other attachment.”

“I am as single as a slice of cheese,” he replied. “Wrapped up like one too.”

Was he trying to tell me he was...clean? Was that it? God, I hated not picking up on subtle clues. I hedged a bet. “You think this will go that far?”

His cocky smirk was back. “If it does, at least you know I’m good for it.”

Rolling my eyes, I swatted at him. “Go back to dinner; if grub is gone, it’s gone.”

Tyler tipped an invisible cowboy hat to me. “Yes, boss lady.”

As he went off, I turned back to finish my work while pretty sure I was still blushing to my ears. Tyler was something else; he was a playboy, that was for sure, but I didn’t get the feeling that he was a sleazy playboy like Maxwell was. He might have gone around the block, but he didn’t take many women around it with him.

Could I take a chance with him? Was it worth it?

Marcus’s words rang in my ear, and as crude as they were... he was right. How could a little casual sex harm anyone?

Chapter Three

Cole

What I was doing with Willow wasn't right. I knew it wasn't... but common sense and emotions don't really see eye-to-eye, do they?

Willow was all shades of sexy, smart and sophisticated, and while I knew this arrangement might go from casual to complicated in the end...why not give it a shot? There was a fifty-fifty chance it might come to something good.

We were both attracted to each other and while the fraternization stuff would be tricky, we could find a way around it. No one had to know about us... if we did become an 'us.'

Back at the bunkhouse, I ran into two of my housemates, Ford and Luke. Both guys were the opposite of each other, with Ford being heavy set and bald and Luke slender with a man bun. From what I knew, Luke was a staple around here, while Ford was a drifter.

"Hey guys," I nodded. "What's up?"

"Wondering if we can get away with hitting the town," Ford grinned.

"For girls or booze?" I asked.

They looked at each other and simultaneously said, "Both."

I laughed and tugged my jacket off to drop it over a hook. "I'd avoid getting shit-faced on my second day, guys; if I were you, I'd wait till the second week."

Luke jabbed an elbow into Ford's side. "I told ya."

Laughing, I headed to my room and got ready for a shower. The day had been long but not that eventful; all I'd done was balance on a ladder and pick apples destined to be turned into hard cider. It was so repetitive that my mind had strayed... right back to Willow.

Seeing her earlier that morning at Mister Clarkston's side had jolted me—what was my luck that I had kissed the boss's daughter without knowing it? For anyone else, I'd say astronomical, but for me, I should have expected such a twist in my life.

“Willow Clarkston,” I murmured while shedding my shirt. “All this time, I had not known you existed, even while, well, making fun of your family. I have been shown the error of my ways.”

Grabbing my things, I headed to the bathroom and hopped into the shower, scrubbing off a long day's worth of sweat and dirt. Who knew that manual labor was so... manual. I suspected by the end of the next three weeks, I would gain a greater appreciation for the guys who worked the Vega orchard.

Tipping my head back, I thought of Willow. My veins simmered with arousal. What would she look like naked? Tilting my head back, I amassed the powers of imagination and began to mentally peel her clothes away.

Her body would be a delightful curve over another. Her tits would be high, round and soft, with pink nipples that distended like they were begging to be sucked. She'd had that lovely, perfect hourglass shape; I know because I'd felt her body in our last kiss.

Grasping my hard cock, and with eyes shut, I summoned the fantasy of my licking those nipples and feeling her body writhe under me.

Pleasure spiked in my brain so fiercely I had to slap a hand on the wall to keep myself upright.

Earlier in the evening, when we'd kissed—very risky doing it in the wide-open warehouse where anyone could walk in on us—I had felt her softness and her sweet, supple body. Now, I wanted to trace every inch of it with my tongue. I planned to explore every inch of her body.

Pressure roiled in my head and my groin. God, I just needed to release some of this pent-up frustration and lust; I

fisted myself harder.

I wanted to watch her orgasm slam through her as I fucked her with my fingers. I wanted to see her pleasure herself, unleash the passion I wanted to see from her before I sunk inside her sweet body.

I gripped my dick and began to stroke, long and slow at first, and then I focused on the rim as the energy built behind my balls. My orgasm detonated, and cum shot out, covering the walls. And yet, I was stroking my cock like a teenager who had just discovered masturbation for the first time. Finally, completely spent, I tipped my head into the spray and let the water cascade over me.

A twinge of shame twisted in my belly. Should I have thought of Willow in that way? Though, in my opinion, wasn't a fantasy a high form of praise?

"Hey!" Harry, my third housemate, banged on the door, and I could practically see his scowl. The man walked around with a permanent resting bitch face and had a huge stick up his ass. "Hurry up, Tyler. You're using up all the hot water."

Rolling my eyes, I did a last rinse and shut the flow off. "I heard ya!" I yelled back, "Don't get your panties in a twist."

Muffled laughter came from behind the door, and I stepped out of the shower and wrapped my towel around my waist. Grabbing my stuff, I headed out the door, brushed past Harry and headed into my room. Dressing in my boxers, I flicked the lamp on instead of the overhead light and got onto my bed with a relieved sigh.

It had been a long time since my muscles felt this used, but I wasn't mad about it—I had to get out and be active more.

My phone pinged, and I slid it off the table. It was my brother, Ethan.

What are you up to, you little gremlin?

I snorted; Ethan was as much of a pain in my ass as I was for him. *Double, double, toil and trouble.*

I checked to see if Willow had reached out to me—her name on my phone was *Damsel*—but the thread hadn't changed from last night.

My brother replied. *I don't know what I'm more scared about, how you remembered Macbeth or what kind of trouble you're out there brewing up.*

Laughing, I replied, *I keep telling you I have a brain.*

Not that I've seen.

If I rolled my eyes any harder, I would go cross-eyed. Ethan had always seen me as the reckless kid, the one who didn't give a damn about responsibility and was always a leaf-in-the-wind. For half of my life—he was right.

Just tell me I won't have to clean up your mess. Ethan texted back.

My emotions took a U-Turn, and, oddly, I felt hurt.

Didn't Ethan realize that I was old enough to cop to my shit and fix any fallouts I made? He didn't have to be Superman, flying in with his cape billowing behind him to save me all the time. Admittedly, he did raise me; our parents were busy with the business, and they left me and Ethan to our devices. He had become my third parent, and now, I was feeling it more than ever.

But if I were honest with myself, I'd given him enough reasons to be that way.

Growing up, the pranks at school—replacing the biology lab's dead frogs with live ones came to mind—or that time I'd nearly exploded our house or even that time I'd gone bungee jumping off the roof or the chancellor building in college.

Each time, Ethan had had a near aneurysm.

If he knew what I was up to this time, I'm sure he'd stroke out.

I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself.

Dropping the cell, I scrubbed my hands over my face; why did I feel so upset, like a five-year-old being sent to time-out?

I was upset for a strange, mind-boggling reason, but I didn't want to analyze it too much—because I was scared of what I'd find.

Instead, I got on the Netflix app on my phone, played some mindless action show and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The next day was a nightmare; the snow came in flash-flurries, but we made it to lunch. While most of the guys had gone off to warm up in the mess hall, I'd gone back to the warehouse to grab another set of crates because I'd overloaded the last one.

As I walked in on a group of suits, I heard Mister Clarkston, dressed right up with the rest on them in a three-piece, say, "Willow will be right down."

I lifted a hand, "Don't mind me. I'll be out of your hair in a sec."

No one gave me a second look—hell, no one gave me a first look at all, and I trotted over to the corner where the spare crates were and snagged one. As I turned, Willow came in, dressed in a snaggy blue pants suit, but the moment she laid eyes on one of the men, she went white as the snowdrift outside.

For a moment, I thought she would faint.

Her lips went bloodless thin, and her spine snapped straight. "Uncle Herman, I've missed you, and Mister Winslow, nice to see you again."

I was heading out when I caught that part. Winslow—why did that sound so familiar? Walking back to the orchard, I tried to place it, but it kept slipping out of my mental grasp like smoke. By the time I'd finished packing up and gone back to the warehouse, the suits were gone, Willow too.

With a shrug, I headed to the mess hall and pulled my beanie off. I got a wrapped sandwich and a cup of coffee, then found a table with Ford, Luke and a brooding Harry. Ignoring the ass, I dropped my gloves and beanie on the fold-out table.

“Where were you?” Ford asked, his thick brow up.

“I had to double back,” I replied. “Had to get another crate.”

“You don’t organize yourself well, do you?” Harry sniped.

Unwrapping the sub, I rolled my eyes. “I wake up with no skittles for brains and tangled strings for plans.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Harry finished while grabbing his tray and moving off. “It’s plain as day.”

Watching him go, I asked Ford, “What is his problem?”

“Massive three-foot pole lodged up his arse,” Luke shrugged. “But he’s got a point. Is this your first time doing seasonal work?”

I gave him a dry smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry,” Ford rubbed his bare head. “We’ve all been there, man. Trust me, it’ll get better in the next few years. I’ll probably be back here next year too, probably when the missy takes over.”

My brows shot up. “Willow is going to take over?”

“Been hearing whispers that her taking over was all the plan, but her dad wants her married first,” Luke replied while tearing into his flatbread. “She was going to marry this asshole whose family basically owns half of Asia.”

Ford elbowed him. “Stop exaggerating, but well—yeah, they’re disgustingly rich.”

“Oh,” I muttered. Why did I feel so sour all of a sudden? “She still going through with it?”

“I don’t think so,” Luke shrugged while finishing his food, “Who cares? Rich people problems.”

My mind ran back to Willow earlier that morning, and I wondered why she’d had that reaction to the suits-and-ties. Were they there to oppose her taking over? It would explain why she’d gone flinty.

But why had she gone white like a ghost?

“Funny,” Ford’s lips twisted. “The little missy isn’t that visible with her relationships. You’d expect any woman dating a rich fucker would be flashing it all around, but she seems to be going the other direction.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I—” Ford shrugged his heavy shoulders. “It’s like she would rather shrink away or hide it or something. I dunno, man, I don’t think money impresses her.”

“Why would it?” Luke reached for a cup of soup. “She was born into it. I get the impression that she’s the kind of gal who prefers emotional connection instead of a physical one. Good looks, flashy cars, money falling like rain... I don’t think those things matter to her. Plus, the few times I’ve seen that guy, the ex, he never seemed to see her or pay attention to her.”

I listened with a riot of feeling twisting in my chest. Hearing this added another layer to who Willow was. It sounded like she leaned more into the emotional attachment—most women made emotional attachment more than purely physical. I began to wonder if this physical thing was something we could do without walking ourselves into some hard shit.

“... Earth to Tyler,” Ford waved his hand before my face, and I swatted at him.

“What?”

“You spaced out on us, man.”

“Just thinking about some stuff,” I mumbled. I felt their eyes on me, and I looked up. “I’m just reminding myself to get some stuff in town.”

“Oh,” Ford nodded, “Can you pick me up a six-pack of boxers, size—”

I balled up my napkin and threw it at him. “Go get your own plus-sized drawers, you big brute. I’m not touching a damn thing for you.”

* * *

I only saw glimpses and flashes of Willow throughout the day. At the end of my shift, I found myself slagging again. I was the last person getting my crates in and signing off on the sheets. Again, it was just Willow and me in the room, and she was very quiet.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I asked quietly.

“I’m not even sure they’re worth that much,” she muttered while ticking off the sheet.

Leaning a hip on the table, I crossed my arms, “Forgive me for, well, not really spying, but what happened this morning? What made you so... want to turn on your heel and run?”

She looked up, and I could see hesitation flickering in her eyes. “You caught that?”

“Yes,” I replied, taking one step closer to her but stopped. “What was it?”

Dropping the clipboard to the table, the clatter rough and jarring in the air, Willow jammed her hands into the pockets of her sweatshirt, “My dad had told me that he would be inviting more investors into the business, but I thought they would be strange people we wouldn’t have to dance around. But—”

I waited for her as she nibbled her lip and turned her head to the window where the snow was trickling down.

“But what, Willow?” I asked.

“My finicky uncle getting into the business, fine,” she turned back to me. “But him pulling Maxwell’s goddamn father into it is too much, and that is knowing we have bad blood between us.”

I felt frozen to my patch of ground.

Winslow, it connected like gongs going off between my ears. Winslow—Maxwell’s *father*. Jesus Christ. No wonder she had gone as white as a sheet.

Chapter Four

Willow

I had not planned to spill those secrets to Tyler—the kiss aside, I didn't know him from Adam, but the words had tumbled out anyway.

“I suppose you can see where this is going,” I said tightly.

“...Yeah,” Tyler scuffed a boot on the concrete floor while his hands were stuck in his back pockets. He looked a little hunched over while giving me a sympathetic smile. “Yeah, I can see where it's going. Without a doubt, he's going to use this to get into your space again and try to lure you back in.”

Scoffing, I turned away. “He can go to hell. There is no way I'm giving him a second look, much less hooking up with him again. I'm surprised his dick hasn't withered away and fell off with how many times he—”

A laugh punched itself out of Tyler, and I turned to see his head thrown back, his face alight with humor. “I don't think that's how anatomy works, Willow.”

“It should,” I grumbled. “Big old cheating asshole.”

He came closer and snagged my hand with one of his, rubbing his thumb over the back while tangling our fingers together. “Are you off tomorrow?”

That was an...odd question.

“Um, yeah. Why?”

“Do you want to go to the town with me?” Tyler asked, “See the erection of the massive tree in the square? Talk a little, get some hot chocolate?”

“My, my,” I came closer, “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Perhaps,” he replied, “Believe me or not, I've been where your headspace is and—and a listening ear eases the burden a lot more than you think it can do. Plus,” he added with a devilish grin, “I can help you build a snowman, and there's a

baseball bat in the back of my car. Do with that information as you will.”

Tempted to smile, I replied, “I take cinnamon with my hot chocolate.”

His nose wrinkled, “*Heresy!* It is and should only be *peppermint.*”

This time, I did laugh but pulled my hand away. “I’ll take you up on that offer, Tyler. Thanks.”

“No problem,” he replied. “Eight?”

“Eight-thirty,” I told him while taking the clipboard and heading to my office. “A girl’s got to be fashionably late.”

* * *

The night air in the town felt crisp and cool against my cheeks, carrying the faint scent of caramel corn and candied chestnuts with the gentle breeze. Food carts were dotted around the two lanes of the main street as Tyler and I headed to the square. My town was so quaint, and the people here had a tender love for each other that I could never see myself living anywhere else.

It wasn’t snowing anymore—thank goodness—but it was nippy. I was bundled up with a thermal under my sweater dress, had a scarf wrapped around my neck, and had a beanie on.

The moment I’d met him at the curb where his car—a nice-looking SUV stood—he’d whistled low. “Is fashionably late slang for dolled up?”

I rolled my eyes but still blushed. “This isn’t dolled up.”

“It is to me,” he’d said while opening my door and bowing with an exaggerated, silly twirl of hands. “Your chariot awaits, my lady.”

“You’re such a goof,” I’d told him and got his crooked grin in response.

Now, we were strolling down the main street, close enough that our hands brushed each other. From the corner of my eye, I saw the shadow of a beard on his sharp jaw and noticed the puckered brow over his hooded eyes—what was drawing his attention?

Looking around me at the normal pre-Christmas set-up, I couldn't fathom what was making him so... upset.

I stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Hey, are you okay?"

His brows were thick and lowered over his blue-green eyes. "It's silly."

"What is?"

We were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and people weaved and bobbed around us, chatting away and looking so lighthearted. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked a bit ashamed. "Its... Christmas. I never really got into this holiday, never truly understood what all the rush and bluster was about."

"Oh." That shocked me. How is it that no one got Christmas? What was there not to get? "Is there something specific that's confusing you or—"

He waved his hand. "Er... all of it. Don't get me wrong, I understand the reason for the season, but all this seems a bit... like overkill, don't you think? Tree ornaments, tinsel town, those damned carriage rides in the snow, what's the point?"

"I think the point is to celebrate love and happiness," I replied. "These few weeks are like... giving families downtime, you know. Busy parents coming home, kids getting pulled into family activities, extended family, if you have them, coming in, getting to slow down and savor being alive and together, you know. Well, that's how I take it."

He still didn't look convinced. "I suppose."

I squinted. "Have you never celebrated Christmas before? Dressing a tree, making a god-awful dinner, going on sleigh rides, kissing under the mistletoe?"

“Nope.” He shrugged. “My family did all the trappings, but we never did anything more than enjoy the decorations and eating dinner.”

“Presents?” I asked.

Again, he shrugged, “They were just... stuff.”

It didn’t sit right with me how Tyler was so jaded. Had he had a bad childhood? Were his parents assholes? What kid, within reason, didn’t get the chance to enjoy the fullness of what Christmas had to give?

“Oh, I know,” I said as an idea popped into my head. “How about we do a Christmas redo?”

“A what?” He looked completely baffled.

“Christmas stuff,” I bounced on my feet. “What if we do it all? Christmas stuff, chopping trees and decorating it, sleigh rides, making cookies—”

“Oh no,” he stepped away with both hands up. “Hell no. You’re not getting me within ten feet of a stove.”

I grinned and came closer, “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.” He sounded panicked while his back met a lamppost.

Trapped, I jabbed a finger into his chest. “Yes, we are doing this, and it starts tonight.”

“With what?” he groaned, “I thought we were just going to get hot chocolate?”

“New deal,” I replied. “From now on, for the next three weeks, we’re going to do everything and anything Christmas. And for New Year’s Night...”

His brows shot up at my trailed-off words, and his face turned wicked. “What’s going to happen New Year’s Night? Are you telling me, teasing me, that we might start with a *bang*?”

The pun was obvious. “You’re going to have to earn that.”

“So, can I use this Christmas-y stuff to earn that?” he asked slyly.

“That’s all you got from that?” I laughed. “Men, I tell you. You all have a one-track mind.”

As I turned away, he grabbed my arm—not too hard—and turned me back to him, his hand sliding up my arms and leaving delicious streaks of heat in its wake. My eyes lifted to his blue ones, which were still holding me in that intense gaze, and a million pornographic images flooded my brain of that beard scratching the insides of my thighs while I moaned and twisted in white sheets, threading my fingers through his silky hair.

He didn’t kiss me, but he didn’t have to; his gaze alone made me shiver to the tips of my toes. I cleared the thickness in my throat, feeling heat everywhere in my body.

A corner of his lips lifted. “Are you cold?”

“No,” I replied. “But I think you know why I’m shivering. Stop looking at me like that. It’s... lethal.”

“Lethal, huh,” his voice was warm and husky, mesmerizing too. His touch, a warm sear on the back of my hand. “But you’re to blame for that too. You do know you’re gorgeous, right.”

I was glad my hair was down because I was sure I was blushing right up to the tips of my ears. “Flattery will not let you slip away. Look around us. It’s not busy now, but soon enough, this large square will be a bustling Christmas bazaar. There will be craft beer and cider stalls, roasted chestnuts, and sticky sweets. People will gather here on Christmas Eve, huddled in their blankets and watching a Nativity Play on a stage they’ll make up over there.”

Tyler nodded, and a tuft of his dark hair escaped his beanie. “So, if I agree to this do-over, where do we start?”

“Over there,” I nodded to a cart of hot chocolate and cocoa. “We have hot chocolate and pretzels, and then we’re going to help the guys set up the tree,” I said.

Tyler eyed me, “You mean *I* will be helping while *you* sit and watch.”

I smiled innocently. “Remember that when we go to the farms and chop our tree for my family’s house.”

We went to the stall, and curiosity gnawed at me while waiting for our hot chocolate. Tyler was so close I could smell his cologne and the body wash. It didn’t help when he dropped a hand to the small of my back—like an afterthought—to keep me close to him.

As we stood side-by-side, I couldn’t concentrate on anything else but him. Not the beauty of the star-lit sky or the strings of Christmas lights that had been stretched across the lines of the stall. The tantalizing scent of rich, dark chocolate and crushed peppermint was a footnote to my senses, just as the constant buzz of merriment was going on all around me.

He had come into my life like a whirlwind, and in the short time we’d been near each other, it never crossed my mind he might have someone. Helping me out that night was one thing, but kissing me after that was another.

I knew he was a playboy, but I didn’t think he would do that to me, especially when I’d told him about Maxwell’s infidelities. Now, that possibility caused my heart to spin in my head.

“Willow?”

My head snapped up. “Hm?”

“Your chocolate?”

I realized we were at the front of the cart and shook my head. “Mocha with cinnamon, please.”

“I’ll take mine with peppermint,” Tyler said slyly. “As it should be. And two pretzels, thank you.”

The lady laughed. “It’s an old age debate. Believe me, sir, if you want to make your girlfriend happy, when it comes along, nod and smile.”

My eyes snapped to him at the girlfriend’s remark, but Tyler didn’t seem interested in correcting her. “I’m afraid I

cannot do that,” he said dryly. “I’m a stubborn ass.”

The lady laughed, and I nudged him. “I’m worse.”

Two cups of hot chocolate and fragrant, aromatic, doughy pretzels were placed before us, and before I could even twitch and grab my wallet, Tyler paid for both with a twenty. “Keep the change.”

The crowd was getting thicker, but we found a spot near the fences, stood under an awning and sipped our chocolate. I felt enchanted.

“My dad told me he met my mom on a night like this,” the words left my mouth before I could stop them. “He’d seen her across this green, her beauty so enrapturing, he felt mesmerized, but she had vanished after that. He left his booth to search for her half the night, and when he found her, she was kissing another guy. He said he had never felt that heartbroken in his life, even worse, over a lady he didn’t know.”

Tyler turned to me, his head canted to the side, “That is... I don’t know what to say to that.”

I bit my pretzel. “He gave up, but when she came around the next year, notably alone, he approached her then, and they got to talking. He told her how he had felt that night, and she kissed him, telling him that she would stay with him if he promised to treat her as an equal. He did, and they married.”

He sat his empty cup on a post and bit his pretzel. “If you don’t mind me asking, where is your mom?”

“She passed three years ago from cervical cancer,” I said quietly. “But she was married to Dad for almost thirty years, and she told me she never regretted a day of it. Even the long days when he prioritized his business over giving her attention. But they always made Christmas their priority, to set work aside and commemorate the moment they had found each other.”

Tyler’s face twisted a little. “My mom and dad weren’t that...active in my life. My brother practically raised me when they were off country hopping, seeing stuff to make their

business stand out and be unique, or Dad was at work slogging through long nights.”

I blinked. That—that made sense as to why he never truly experienced Christmas.

Before I could address that comment, the bleeping of a transport truck drew our attention, and the crowd cleared while the truck backed up. A huge tree was in its bed, its fir needles thick and bushy.

Tyler dusted his hands off, “I guess it’s time.”

“You’ll be all right. Just don’t let it fall on you,” I replied cheekily,

He leaned over and kissed my temple, “If I die, write the words *I told you so* on my tombstone.”

I stood and watched as he grabbed the gloves the handlers were giving out and stuck to other guys who had erected the tree before. When the tree was tipped up, it was a monster fifteen-foot fir and would take a massive tree stand to stabilize it.

Snow began to flutter down in cottonball-sized fluff, and I watched as Tyler got the wood to make the tree stand. It was so simple but so precious at the same time. I knew I had thrown him in the deep end, but what sense was it to only dip a toe in?

Smiling, I watched as he helped them get the tree nailed up and upright before I wandered over to him. He was gazing at the tree with wonder in his eyes when I plucked the beanie off and smiled. “You did good.”

“Do I get a reward?” he asked mischievously while snow landed on his hair.

I tipped on my toes and smacked his cheek. “There, so—” I turned to walk away, but he stopped me, hooked a hand around my arm and reeled me in like a fish on a line.

“You don’t get to run away, missy,” he said dangerously.

I tilted my head up for a proper kiss when he smacked me on the mouth and walked away, leaving me gaping. “Tyler!”

“Two can play that game,” he grinned over his shoulder while snow collected on his hair and shoulders. “But you can bet your pretty little butt, I play to win.”

Chapter Five

Cole

“Hey, Burrows,” another workhand, Rory, I think, called out while wiping a hand over his hat to dislodge the snowflakes. Jerking his head over his shoulder, he asked, “Can you grab those last crates for me?”

“Sure thing,” I said, hurrying past him to grab the green crates. For once, I wasn’t the last person finishing my work, so I didn’t mind giving a hand.

I got the crates into the warehouse and grabbed a bottle of water while the rest of the guys headed out for dinner. I waited a little to see if I could grab ahold of Willow—she had been there all day, and it was her friend Marcus who had handled that morning’s roll-out—but, as I waited, it was her uncle and Maxwell’s father that descended from the office above.

Making myself look busy, I soon found out that no one paid attention to you if you were not decked out in a five-thousand-dollar suit.

“I’ll see if I can get the files tonight,” the uncle said, his tone as conspiratorial as a two-dollar bill General ready to sell the missile codes for a ham sandwich. “Do you still have time with your people?”

I shifted some crates around, crouching to look at the labels, stacking other empty crates—anything I could do to listen more.

“Seventeen days before the investors turn their backs,” Maxwell’s father said. “It’s half-a-million buy-in, then fifteen million the first year. When we get the profits, they’ll triple that amount.”

“Music to my ears,” were the last words the uncle muttered while they headed out the door.

I knew a business deal when I heard it—but I didn’t know what that deal was about. It could be innocent enough; who

was to tell that the two of them didn't have their own separate business dealings going on?

But what if they were talking about this one?

I jerked back at the thought. Incredulity was heavy on my chest. There was no way they could be talking about stealing the business right from under Willow. I knew there were still men out there who thought women were not fit for business or that they didn't have the strength—or smarts—to run one. Hello toxic masculinity.

But would her uncle do such a thing to his own niece?

I shook my head and dislodged the thoughts as well. It could not be that—it could never be that. It had to be something else, something that I didn't know about and what was clearly not any of my business.

Instead, I thought about last night and getting that massive dinosaur tree in place. It had to be one of the biggest firs I had ever seen in my life, but what struck me was the happiness around me while it was going up. I never gave any credence to the thought that someone could feel other people's emotions, but last night, it was impossible not to feel the joy radiating from the crowd.

I still didn't get Christmas, but I was getting a sense of it.

"I wonder what she is going to throw at me today," I murmured while heading out to dinner.

Last night, we'd agreed to go back to the square, and I would be helping to dress the tree—God help on that one.

* * *

While I waited for Willow, I pulled out my cell and texted the real Tyler. *Eight days in, and I haven't broken a sweat. You might have fucked up on this one, buddy.*

The dots began to dance. *13 days to go. You'll crack by Christmas Eve, you rich fucker. Labor isn't in your wheelhouse.*

Snorting, I made to reply when I spotted Willow trudging over the snow-dusted lawns toward me. Dressed in skin-hugging jeans, a large college sweatshirt and tall tan boots, I felt my belly tighten at how simple but beautiful she looked. Her hair was pulled up, and thin wisps framed her face.

A corner of her lips flicked up. “What’s that look for?”

“I’m wondering what fresh hell awaits me.” I lied because I truly wanted to tell her how amazed I was at how artlessly she outclassed so many other women I’d known.

She grasped the lapels of my coat and pulled them together. “Let me say this in caveman speak. You take ornament, you put ornament on tree. You do not fall from ladder and break neck.”

I let out a deep belly laugh, and Willow giggled a little. “Not breaking neck, promise.”

“Good,” she replied.

“Now, get your bubble butt into my car,” I said, slapping such butt. “We’ve got places to be.”

Inside the car, I got it warming up, but then turned to Willow, “Are you all right? I missed you today.”

“I’m fine,” she replied. “Today was my day off, so I went to visit my friend in Denver. She’s having a hard time dealing with her sick mom and her troublesome brother. He never seems to stay out of trouble.”

“Sounds like me,” I snorted, and when she looked at me, I shrugged, “I was a menace in high school and college. You name it, I did it. My shining moment was egging and supergluing a massive dildo to my dean’s car freshman year.”

“You didn’t?”

“It was twelve inches and neon purple,” I sighed in nostalgia. “Good times.”

Willow shook her head. “You’re such a goof.”

I turned to her. “Can a goof get a kiss for luck? You know, the not breaking my neck thing?”

She smiled and reached over, slid her hand into the hair on the back of my head, leaned over the central console and kissed me. It was too soft, too tender and didn't match the heat that suddenly spiked up the back of my neck.

Just as she was about to pull back, I caught the back of her neck and pulled her mouth back to mine for a better kiss. I parted her lips with mine, swept my tongue through her mouth—and tasted whiskey. Our kiss turned hungry, and her mouth matched my pace.

I wanted to get her off the seat and onto my lap so she could feel how turned on I was and give me the bodily connection I craved. Heat flared between my legs, and I was sure I was sporting a semi, but I resisted and released her.

“Whiskey?” I accused her. “Naughty girl.”

She blushed, and her words were breathless. “It’s a cold night. I wanted something to warm me up.”

“Give me a chance, and I’ll warm you up even better than whiskey.” I teased her.

“You’re confident in that?” she replied.

“Get me in bed, and we’ll find out,” I gave her a grin.

Eyeing her while I drove out, I tried to let the air between us simmer instead of smolder. “I saw your uncle and McDouche’s dad today in the warehouse. Are those two friends?”

“Oh, yeah,” she shrugged. “That was my fault. When we met, I mentioned my dad’s business. Max invited his dad to one of our Thanksgiving dinners, and my uncle Herman took a shine to him. They’ve got a few business dealings going on between them.”

Well, that cleared up that silly suspicion.

I felt foolish thinking the two were conspiring to undermine Willow. I asked her about her family’s cider, and she told me about their flavors. “But we do limited flavors for the seasons, Christmas, Summer and Fall. You can probably

guess we go pumpkin for fall, traditional Christmas spices, and fruity for summer.”

That was how Ethan and the Vega Meadery did for the seasons, too. It was a simple, all-around, general idea that most breweries followed.

We got to the town green and saw the long ladders being set up and the many, many boxes of ornaments scattered on the ground. I turned to her, “Are you going to help me with the ornaments?”

“Sure,” she replied.

I eyed the scene again. “Into the Valley of Death rode the six hundred.”

Willow slapped my arm. “Stop it. You’ll be fine.”

Thirty-five minutes later, while I was precariously perched on the ladder, tangled with fairy lights like a trussed up chicken, on the brink of losing my footing, tumbling over and breaking such neck we’d talked about earlier—I realized I was nowhere *close* to fine.

“Mayday!” I shouted down to Willow. “Mayday! If I die —”

She held the ladder. “Calm down, take some breaths and slowly untie that length from your hand, slip it under the knot around your neck and undo the twist on your waist. Don’t panic.”

Easy for her to say; she wasn’t ten feet off the ground and had her life flash across her eyes.

“Do it,” she encouraged me. “You have a lot more of Christmas to experience, remember.”

“Bribery?” I glared down. “That’s your solution to my impending death?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Just do it.”

I summoned the will—somehow—and managed to get the fairy light off me and unto the tree before I climbed down on numb feet. “I am not doing that again.”

She turned to me and reached up. I hoped to pull my head down for a kiss but then she plucked tinsel from my hair. “Silver might be your color.”

“From bribery to flattery,” I mock-scowled. “What’s next?”

She smiled innocently. “Hot chocolate and s’mores?”

* * *

There was a bonfire at the far end of the green, and while I sipped hot chocolate, Willow was toasting marshmallows in the fire. I kept an eye on the rest of the guys decorating the tree before turning to Willow. The firelight cast a golden glow across her face, and I took a mental snapshot of the moment.

“...You’re staring again,” she murmured while inspecting the marshmallow.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?” I asked rhetorically. “How do you take your marshmallows?”

“Goopy,” she replied, twisting the stick. “A blob of thick, white sweetness.”

I wrinkled my nose. “It’s best lightly toasted and *al dente*.”

“Al dente!” she spluttered, shoving me with her shoulder. “When did you turn into an old Italian MasterChef?”

“I have class, if you should know,” I retorted.

Her eyes glimmered in the dual lights. “You are serious, not gatekeeping my s’mores.”

I reached for the stick. “Let me see—”

She jerked it out of my way. “No.”

“Just lemme—” I reached for it again, and she lurched away.

“No!” She giggled-shouted.

Again, I reached for it. “Just let me show you how my way can be better than—”

“Get away!” she laughed. “Get your own marshmallow, dammit!”

As the stubborn ass I was, I tried to get it again, and when she jerked the stick away—a splat of white goop slid down her stick, and a clump landed on her cheek. Willow froze. It then became acutely apparent of our scandalous positions. She had one hand behind her back, the other up, holding the stick, while I was knelt between her legs, reaching for the stick.

I sat back, and with a chuckle, I gestured toward her cheek. “Uh, you have...”

She huffed and swiped the blob away but left some behind. “You! You’re to blame for this.”

Without hesitation, I reached out and swiped the last of the congealed white blob off her cheek to suck it into my mouth. “Ugh.”

Willow slapped my thigh. “You’re a menace.”

“In the scope of things I’ve been called, that is...” I tilted my head. “...almost a compliment.”

She slid another marshmallow on her stick and handed it over to me. “Do your worst, hotshot.”

As I twisted the white fluff at the edge of the fire, someone shouted, and the tree lit up. My jaw dropped at the sight. The tree was decked in white, red and silver ornaments while the fairy light, all speck of white light, turned the thick boughs into something out of a fairytale. Willow rested her head on my arm, and...something twisted in my chest.

Now, as it sparkled in the bright, ethereal glow, I wondered how it would look after a dusting of snow, and I felt myself even more entranced. Who knew something as simple as a tree draped in lights and colorful baubles could evoke such an emotional response from me?

I tugged the marshmallow away and blew on it, glad it was simply caramelized. Turning to her, I smirked, “*This* is how you do a perfect marshmallow.”

“Shut up, smartass,” she replied. “Just take in the magic.”

Reaching for the platter of graham crackers and chocolate, I made the s'more and handed it to her. She bit into it, and like the devil I was, I ducked my head to bite the other end. Time seemed to slow.

This close, I could see tiny, almost indescribable freckles over her nose, and I wanted to trace my tongue all over them, mapping them out like a constellation.

Pulling away with my mouthful, I swallowed and grinned. "Tell me that doesn't taste better than goopy marshmallow."

"You're a smug ass," she teased me after swallowing the mouthful.

"I am," I replied, feeling the crippling urge to kiss her—but I didn't.

Not here, not now. So, I simply looked at her, channeling all the emotions in my chest into my gaze, and when she met my eyes, I knew what she saw, and felt. All the heat and anticipation spiraled in my gut wrapped up in one.

"Not here," Willow whispered.

"I know," I replied while mapping her face with my eyes. "But I want to."

I wanted so much more than a kiss, but that was too much for her—well, us—right now. We had passed the point of a lustful, one-night-hook-up, but we were nowhere near the relationship point. It was an awkward place in our friendship or relationship or...what did they call it online, a situationship?

Nothing seemed to define what we were—and I was okay with it. Could we jump into bed without any feelings getting attached?

We finished the s'mores and headed to the car by nine, and I drove us back to her Clarkston compound in comfortable silence. When I parked, I turned to her, "So now that I have survived dressing the tree, what other trial of Hercules do you have in store for me?"

"Build a snowman," she replied. "Simple, right?"

“I suppose—”

Leaning over the console, she kissed me and the ideas I had about how to turn building a snowman into something more vanished. At first, it was slow and gentle, and my mouth explored hers, but it grew to something more, harder, deeper, sensual, open-mouthed kisses that she returned kiss for kiss. Her hands slid up my arms to thread through my hair and draw me closer. It was desperate, wild, and raw. Lips, tongue, and the occasional scrape of teeth as we kissed, and kissed, and kissed.

I broke it to slide my seat back and unceremoniously hauled Willow up from her seat to straddle my lap. My lips slid their way from hers to trail down her jaw and over her neck, kissing and tasting her soft, fragrant skin. My hands held her waist tight while she did this sensual rocking against me.

She practically purred as I kissed and licked, and my hot breath skimmed on the skin of her neck. Willow rubbed herself against me, and I slid my hands under her sweatshirt. Her skin was so soft and silky, and I slid my hands up to meet the underside of her breast. She shivered.

“Is this all right?” I asked.

Her hand slid around my neck, and she nodded. The thin bra she wore couldn't hide her hard nipples. My thumbs stroked over both at the same time, and she gasped a little.

“What do you want, Willow?” I grunted, raw and honest. “Tell me. Do you want me to touch you, suck you, fuck you? What do you want?”

Sitting so heavily on my cock, I knew Willow had to feel how aroused I was for her. There was no possible way she could escape it. A mischievous look glimmered in her eyes as she ground down on me and whispered, “Somewhere between touching me and fucking me.”

With a growl, I had her shirt up and off, and she lifted to pop the button of her jeans and wiggled them down. Leaning in, I sucked one nipple into my mouth through the cloth of her soft bra and held back a grin at her muffled cry.

Sliding a hand between us, I cupped her pussy and used the heel of my hand to stimulate her. Willow was good and well writhing on top of me before I slid my fingers under her panties and stroked her. She was already slick and drenched with need, and I pushed one finger in, then two, deep inside of her, rubbing the tips against that sweet spot each time I withdrew.

She made a desperate sound and wriggled her hips, pushing back against my hand as much as she could to take more of me with the obstruction of her jeans between us. I pulled off from her breast and found her ear.

“Just imagine what it would be like with my mouth on you,” I whispered. “Do you like your clit sucked or licked?”

“B-both.” She gave a breathless murmur.

“Good,” I replied while gently thrusting. “So, there won’t be a problem when I eat that sweet little pussy of yours until you’re begging for more.”

Willow grabbed the back of my head. “You’ve got a filthy mouth.”

“I know, sweetheart,” I kissed her neck. “And I use it well.”

Her clit throbbed under my touch, but after a few passes, and a hard press, the contact shot an electrical current of pleasure throughout her body, making her jolt. I grazed the slick folds of her labia.

“What are you thinking right now?” I asked, nosing her cheek. “Tell me.”

“I—” she sucked in a breath, and her fingers dug into my shoulders. “I...can’t tell you.”

A gush of wetness inundated my fingers as she rocked on them. “Hm, how about I tell you mine then? We’re all alone somewhere, just came in from a night in a dark club with thumping music and sweat coating our skin. I can’t wait to get you into the bedroom, but we don’t have to.”

“The moment we get inside, I have you bent over the back of the couch so fast it’s like a whirlwind. I won’t bother taking off your panties; I’ll just push them out of the way so I can get inside you. I’ll reach under your bra and touch your breasts, pinch your nipples until your tight little pussy squeezes around my cock.

“Or would you prefer the wall,” I murmured as a hot flush stained her skin. “Your back pressed on the wall, naked, my cock shuttling into your pussy like a jackhammer, your body bouncing on my rigid dick...”

She lurched forward and grabbed me, “I’m going to—”

“Heat under your skin, like a fire that never goes out, doubling back in your veins while I take you deep, your body right on the brink of that sweet bliss, your pussy leaking over me, so wet—”

Willow erupted around me, crying out in pleasure and delicious release as her pussy clamped down on my fingers. Shuddering with her head down, I used my free hand to tilt her head up and, seeing her bottom lip trapped in her teeth, used my thumb to pull the bruised piece of flesh out.

“...One day, baby,” I promised her. “One day, I’ll show you what I mean.”

She swallowed. “... Baby.”

I quirked a brow. “That doesn’t work for you? How about pumpkin, dollface—”

“Stop,” she narrowed her eyes.

“Sweetcheeks, snookums, toots?” I kept on.

“Oh god,” she tried to keep an annoyed look on, but I saw humor dance in her eyes.

“Sugar lips, hot mama, honeybuns—”

“Tyler shut up.” She kissed me.

Chapter Six

Willow

T yler Burrows.

God knew the man's arrogance was as dazzling as his body.

Even now, at home and in my bed, I felt heat spreading through my cheeks and down my neck again. The embarrassment I felt from his dirty talk was nothing compared to the heat building up in my core right now. I felt mortified, knowing that his fingers inside me weren't the only thing that brought me to orgasm but also his filthy mouth.

When I was on his lap, I was helpless to do anything but hold his gaze, his bright, seagrass eyes impossible to look away from.

I was sure that if I allowed him, he would make me come by dirty talk—and that scared me. How was it that I was this turned on by a man I knew little to nothing about?

With Maxwell, I'd been naïve and swept into a fairytale, and I thought I was wiser now to see all the red flags around me, but Tyler didn't strike me as one. He had women, I knew this, but he was not the play boy who ran around with more than one.

That was fine as what we were doing was just a holiday fling, a good romp for fun, and by next year, I'd have the sweet memories to reflect on.

Today, we were going to build a snowman in the park with a dozen other families. After a quick worry about other people seeing us—some of the town folks were really up-your-butt nosy—I didn't think too much of it. I didn't owe anyone any explanation.

Tyler aside, I had something more important to address. I needed to know why the hell Dad was even entertaining having business dealings with Maxwell's dad, much less

actually doing it. I'd been too shocked and dumbfounded to see Maximillian there.

I took a warm shower, dressed and headed down to the kitchen, where I knew Dad would be there with a cup of tea. He'd given up on coffee long ago, but I was not on that train; coffee was my morning fuel.

As I'd expected, Dad was there, paging through the daily newspaper—he hated e-readers—with a cup of heather tea in hand. After getting the coffee going, I turned to Dad and said, “Dad, why is Maxwell’s dad coming around?”

He folded the paper. “That’s Herman’s doing, sweetheart. I had nothing to do with it—”

“Why is he here though?” I cut in. “You know if he is here, Maxwell is eventually going to show up. He’ll try to wheedle his way back, and I don’t want to deal with him.”

Dad sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I know it’s not what you’d like, sweetheart, but Herman invited him in. On a purely business basis, Maximillian can be the biggest investor we would ever have. I knew there is bad blood between you and Maxwell, but this is commerce, sweetheart. If we partner with his shipping line, our cider could be in countries we have not even considered selling in or even have entry into.”

I bit back a grimace, as this was what I’d feared. I knew the man had enough money to compete with a small country’s GDP, and he could buy anything—and anyone—he wanted. Multi-millions would do that to anyone.

Adding cream and sugar, I stirred them in while considering how to reply. “A week ago, Maxwell ambushed me when I went to see Jackie. He tried to tell me he changed his ways and that he was a reformed man, ready to be the boyfriend I always wanted him to be. And now, his dad is trying to buy his way into our business. I don’t like it, Dad.”

“I know it’s uncomfortable,” Dad shifted his cup aside. “But this is a chance to finally get in the league with the Sullivans and the Vegas.”

As much as I hated it—Dad was right. It could be the best way to get into the top tier with those snooty winemakers and the indifferent Vegas. If they decided on taking Maxmillian on, I just had to stay out of their way.

“Just...” I didn’t know what to say and transferred my coffee to a travel cup. “Keep him, both of them, away from me.”

As I left the room, I could feel Dad’s sympathetic gaze on the back of my neck. Heading out to the warehouse, I felt the inexplicable need to see Tyler and talk to him. I didn’t think he would understand my dilemma, but he had offered to give me a listening ear.

I didn’t think we could talk openly with the other hands milling around us, but I could at least hope for a private moment.

There was more snow on the ground between the main house and the warehouse, but I didn’t mind; at least I could trample something representing Maxwell’s face. When I got there, I switched into work mode and got the guys moving out in quick time—but not Tyler. It was when almost all of the guys were gone that he came stumbling in.

Was he drunk?

When he came closer, I dispelled that theory. He looked stone-cold sober to me—just tired.

“Rough night?” I asked quietly.

He shot me a flickering smile. “I get insomnia sometimes. It’s something I carried with me from college. Don’t let it bother you. I’ve done five classes and two games of the most brutal touch football after nights like this. I’ll be fine. Believe me.”

He didn’t look it—not with the bags under his eyes—but I had no other choice but to believe him.

“You don’t look so hot, though,” Tyler said while grabbing a bottle of water and his stack of crates. “Did I... did last night freak you out or something? I won’t—”

“It’s not that,” I shook my head. “I just learned that my dad intends to take up Maxwell’s dad’s offer, arranged through my uncle, to buy shares in the business and, in exchange, let us use his ships to send to other countries.”

His brows lowered, “But that means more business, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I replied. “And it might finally let us get some ground with the Sullivans and the Vegas. Both of those families are like thorns on our side, not for the fact that they’ve got more business than us, but because they refuse to even consider us a fellow beverage maker. It’s like... we’re the gum on their shoe that they make sure to scrape off.”

I heard the bitter note in my voice at the end but swallowed around it. “My dad has been trying to partner with both of them for years to see if we could run a joint campaign to promote all of our business, but they don’t seem interested. And now, I’ve read that the Vegas and Sullivans might be teaming up, which means they are going to leave us in the dust more than ever.”

Something flashed across Tyler’s face, but it vanished in the next moment. I sagged on the wall behind him and afforded him a baleful look. “I’m sorry for dumping this on you. It’s none of your business. Sorry.”

“No,” he shook his head and lifted a hand to grasp my upper arm. From the emotion stamped on his face, I knew he wanted to cup my face or even kiss me, but he thought better of it. “I told you I’d listen when you felt overwhelmed with shit. I’ve been where you’re at. I’ve been there, done it, and bought the t-shirt. It’s best to get it off your chest with someone you can trust.”

“I can trust you,” I replied, teasing.

“Hey, it’s not like you gave me the super-secret recipe to your cider that I can sell for a million bucks and go off to the Bahamas cackling with my suitcases of money or something,” he grinned. “But...if you don’t mind letting such a recipe slip...”

“You’ll never say a word about it?”

His brows shot up. “What? No, I was going to say I’d ask for nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine bucks for it. I’d never sell it for a *million*.”

“You’re incorrigible.” I laughed.

“So I’ve been told,” he replied, then sobered. “I’m serious, though. You can tell me anything, and I won’t judge you.”

“It’s just...I’m apprehensive about the Winslow’s coming around,” I admitted further. “Where his dad goes, Maxwell tends to follow.”

“And you’re scared he might try to get you back?” Tyler asked.

I gave him an eye. “I’m scared I’ll put a foot up his ass and ruin all dealings my dad will have.”

He grinned, hefted his crates, and headed to the door. “If you don’t mind, just give me a signal and I’ll put my foot up his ass instead.”

Shaking my head, I watched him go. “What signal?” I shouted after him.

He lifted his fist and punched it into the air while disappearing around a corner. Laughing, I took the clipboard and headed upstairs.

* * *

“What are the mechanics of making this snowman?” Tyler eyed the mounds of snow as if they had cursed his mother. “Can’t we say we made it and call it a day?”

“No.” I slipped a mitten on. “We’re making a snowman. First, we roll up a ball of snow, then make it five times bigger by packing more snow on it. That’s the base of the snowman.”

Again, Tyler gazed at the snow with offense. “I’d rather buy one off Amazon.”

“They don’t sell them,” I said, “Well, not the snow-based version.”

“Or, I can bribe a few kids with a five buck each to build one for—” I pinched his ear like a recalcitrant kid while marching us up to a patch of high snow.

“No, we’re not doing that either now; let’s get rolling,” I ordered.

Building a snowman with Tyler was more fun than I’d expected. Tyler seemed to have little coordination in rolling the base...or he was being clumsy and squashing all of them on purpose. Even though the evening air was chilly, the exertion from rolling the huge snowballs and laughing at Tyler’s misshaped lumps left me plenty warm beneath the thick sweater and thermal.

“This one should do,” I sat back on my haunches, gazing at the big ball of snow. “If you squash this one, I will slap you silly.”

He lurched toward the ball, but I tackled him football style, and we went down in a pile of legs, arms and snow. We tumbled around, with him trying to fight me off—playfully—while I smushed snow into his face.

“Don’t. Mess. With. My. Snowman,” I warned him.

“Fine, fine, I give up,” Tyler held up his hands. “I will not touch your balls.”

A laugh punched itself out of my belly as I straddled him. “My balls, eh?”

“Your big, snowy, mushy balls,” Tyler replied. His beanie had slipped a little, so his hair was flopping out into his eyes, and I knew the back of his head must be wet.

His eyes came up to meet mine again. The playfulness was gone this time, and the lust was back, making his eyes stormy and fierce. I swallowed. How was it possible for me to be this loopy for someone after only meeting them less than twelve days ago? I felt as if I had cartoon hearts floating out of my eyes.

Clearing my throat, I shimmied away from him but jammed a finger into his face. “My balls, no touching.”

“Aye, aye, cap’n,” he replied.

We managed to get the middle part on, and I trusted Tyler to get the head on while I hunted for sticks and whatever I could use for eyes and a nose. I went back to see Tyler had wrapped a frayed scarf around the snowman’s neck. Where had he gotten that?

I stood aside as he gazed, rather wistfully, at the half-finished snowman before he pivoted and looked at kids running around, stacking balls on top of each other with their parents or a guardian close by.

My heart hurt a little.

Was this what he’d missed as a kid?

I came closer. “Is the head on yet?”

“Yep,” he grinned. “Just waiting for the eyes.”

While he stuck the walnut shells in for eyes and tiny pebbles for a shaky smile, I stuck the arms on. Stepping back, we surveyed our handiwork. “Not bad,” he mentioned.

“It’s missing a nose,” I pointed out.

“We can—” he snapped a part of the left hand off and jammed the stick in the middle of the face. “—do this.”

While he beamed with pride and looked around, I watched with horror as the big, balled head started to slip. “Tyler!”

His head snapped to it while I lurched to it, but he yanked me back, and I stood still as the head tumbled off and became a pile of mush on the ground. We both looked at the headless snowman with a scarf wound on its bare shoulders.

Tyler tilted his head. “There’s something... Nightmare on Elm Street about it.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I replied. “Is that even the right movie?”

He shrugged while his hand slipped down my spine and rested on the small of my back. “I pulled that out of my ass. I’m not a horror film kind of guy. Give me an action flick, and I’m good to go.”

“Me too,” I replied. “I hate romance movies.”

His head craned to me. “What? You...you don’t like romance movies? Are you even a girl?”

I elbowed him. “You touched my lady parts. What do you think?”

“Very tight, shapely, moist—”

“Oh my god.” I turned away from him in horrified mortification.

The fucker was laughing at me. Without a word, I scooped up a handful of snow and flung it at him. It landed square in his face.

Stunned, Tyler lifted a hand to wipe it off, and the mush splattered to the ground. Revenge was bright in his eyes. “Oh, it’s... on.”

Chapter Seven

Cole

Willow won that snowball fight, or well, she thought she did. I'd humbly accepted my defeat, all of my wet hair, snow trailing down my neck and the back of my shirt, numb fingers and damp-clothed defeat—in exchange for another cup of hot chocolate and cuddling at another bonfire in the town square.

I'd won something, though. For all the times I had thought the Clarkston's stayed away from us because of their envy of our success, I hadn't known it was because their invitation to collaborate had gone unanswered.

That could stick something in one's craw for real.

I made a mental note to get Ethan to look into it. I did not doubt that our dad had been so fixated on going toe-to-toe with John Sullivan that nothing else had made a mark on his calendar.

Now, laying on top of my bunk, shame and guilt were starting to curdle under my breastbone. Willow had no idea who I truly was, and now that I knew for sure how she—and her family by extension—felt about the Sullivans and me, I had a sinking feeling that if I told her who I was, she might put a 12-caliber shot right between my eyebrows.

She hated being lied to, deceived and taken for a fool—and I was doing all three of those to her. Turning on my belly, I pressed my face into my pillow and grabbed my hair.

“What the fuck am I going to do? I'm already so far down the rabbit hole,” I ground out.

Reaching for my cell, I got on social media and plugged in her name; her page popped up, and I scrolled through her pictures. There were some pictures of her and that douche Maxwell at parties, looking happy and a few of them in formal situations. She was dressed in a cream gown that hugged her curves so perfectly that my body reacted to it.

Her hair was pulled up and curled, her face—Jesus, no wonder she'd told me a few days ago she wasn't dolled up because this was dolled up. The makeup was subtle but so powerful that Willow looked pulled from the silver screen.

“Why does she look so uncomfortable?” I asked.

When I checked the time, I realized it was during the years when Maxwell was being a dog and running around on her. My gut roiled with sadness, and a yearning to protect her—completely undue because I had strong ties with her—tightened a rope around my heart.

Dropping the cell, I spun again and raked my hands through my hair, and my thoughts circled back to the first ones. What would Willow do when she found out I was a fake?

Does she have to know?

The traitorous thought sprung up from the back of my head, and it spurred more on.

What if we just deal with each other as who we are now? Have fun, have some good hard sex and part ways with no one looking under the curtain or being any the wiser?

Willow had been doing all the work for the last couple of days. Maybe it was time to repay the favor. Grabbing my phone again, I searched for *popular Christmas activities*.

Endless lists popped up, and I scrolled through a few of them when I dropped on one: a carriage ride. It looked fancy and romantic. I thought I'd seen a few guys in the town square offering them. I could look into that tomorrow when it was my break time, run to the town, set it up and then pull Willow in for a ride that evening.

I hope I can pull it off. I still didn't fully get this craze around Christmas, but I was starting to see why this time brought people that much closer.

* * *

My phone vibrated on the table just as I was stepping into my jeans. Ten minutes ago, I had sent Willow a text.

Come outside, 6:30 on the dot.

I wondered what her reply was. Swiping it off the table, I read, *If I see another headless snowman, I am walking right back in.*

Have a little faith.

Fifteen minutes later, she was out on the curb where my car was idling, dressed in a beige pea-coat, knee-high boots, and a cream beanie with her hair down around her shoulders.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

I stepped forward with a sleep mask in hand. “You need to put this on first.”

She looked down, then back to me. “You must be out of your mind.”

“I’ve been told that a few times,” I admitted. “But I won’t be dragging you to an orgy. Trust me.”

Her lips twisted while she took the mask and slipped it over her head, jumped into the car and then pulled it down over her eyes. “If I get so much as a papercut, my dad will hunt you down with shotguns and bloodhounds.”

“I believe you,” I replied as I turned down to the main street. “But you don’t need to be calling in the calvary just yet.”

Her fingers were drumming on her thighs as we crawled through the rush hour traffic, and I got to the park where the carriage drivers were stationed. When I parked, I hopped out and circled the car. The faint jingle of bells from the horse’s blankets made me cringe, and I feared they had tipped my hand.

Opening the door, I gently held her hand and led her down to the ground.

“Can I take this goddamned blindfold off yet?” she asked.

“Soon,” I replied as we approached the carriage I’d set up earlier.

Marty, the driver, came down to open the door, and only then did I slip off the sleep mask from her face. Willow’s eyes widened, and her jaw dropped at the sight of the pair of dappled Clydesdale horses, their four white legs and luxurious mane.

“We’re going on a carriage ride?” I heard her breath stall in her throat.

“Yep,” I replied, “And your carriage awaits, my lady.”

The driver turned and smiled. “My name is Marty, and I’ll be your tour guide this afternoon. The ride is a forty-minute scenic trail through the park and down to the waterside before looping back again. Inside, there is a blanket as per the request of Mister Burrows here, a picnic basket with hot chocolate and tidbits from the bakery. Let me know if you have any questions as we make our way around. I’ll point out some places of interest, but feel free to ask me anything in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Marty,” I said while helping Willow into the open silver and white carriage. We sat on the back seat, and she grabbed my hand.

My gaze traveled from her flushed, beaming face to the hairs curling around her collar, and I didn’t bother to hide my admiration. “You look beautiful.”

Slipping my hand around her waist, I pulled her to my side and bent to kiss her temple softly, stealing her breath for the second time. She twisted a little and kissed me fully as large feathery snowflakes drifted from the sky.

My eyes dropped to the patch of skin under her jaw, just visible above the collar of her coat. I wanted to lick it, I realized abruptly. To press my lips against it and feel her pulse throb under my tongue.

“I should have checked the forecast for tonight,” I murmured. “I didn’t know it was going to snow.”

“It’s winter. What do you expect? Don’t worry, I don’t mind snow.” Willow laughed as she burrowed into my side. “Are you getting into the Christmas Spirit?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” I replied. “But I’m getting to understand it more.”

“I love carriage rides,” Willow said as we entered the park’s trails. “I did them a lot as a kid, but lately, I haven’t had the time,” she craned her head to me, and I saw a pool of emotion in her eyes. “How did you think of this?”

For a second, I feared I’d made a mistake. “Did I fuck up or—”

She kissed me, and the touch of her mouth to mine was everything; her arms reaching up to wrap behind my neck, her fingers carding through the short hair at my nape. Her lips were warm, familiar and oh-so delicious. She could kiss me forever, but she pulled away.

“No. You didn’t.”

I blinked. “Okay then. Good to know.”

“My mom, dad and I would take these rides every Christmastime,” she said. “But not this route.”

“I’m told this is the Lovers Route,” I replied, nodding to the lamps lining the road, highlighting the lazily drifting snow. “I doubt kids would be taken here.”

Ten minutes in, I reached for the blankets and wrapped them around our shoulders, then reached for the spotted thermos filled with hot chocolate. She sipped it and laughed, “Nutmeg.”

“Nutmeg,” I replied. “You can drink it all.”

“How did this all come about?” Willow asked. “A divine intervention?”

“Nah,” I shrugged. “I just thought you were the one arranging all the other Christmassy stuff, so I tried to do something you’d appreciate. I never thought it would be this ridiculously romantic.”

“Says the man who bought the package called the Lovers Route,” she giggle-snorted. “You trapped yourself with that one.”

As we traveled down a quiet one-lane road, the soft jingle of bells on the horses’ blankets and the clop-clop of their hooves complemented the serenity of our surroundings. Moonlight reflected off the fluttering white snowflakes, transforming them into glitter cascading from the sky.

A contented sigh escaped Willow’s lips, her wispy breath disappearing into the stillness of the night as she cuddled closer. I grasped her hand and traced circles on the back of it with my thumb as we rounded a bend in the lane. This deep in the park, the trees were denser, and the branches interlocked overhead at one stretch.

“Tyler?”

“Hm?”

“Have you ever fallen in love?” she asked.

“Can’t say I have,” I replied. “I’ve never...”

“Stayed in one place?” she asked. “Or should I say, with one person? You seem like an emotional drifter.”

“*Excuse me?*” I mock-gasped. “Emotional damage much?”

She smiled at me. “I’m right, though?”

“Sadly, yes,” I agreed reluctantly. “I never thought about relationships as nothing but finding a companion for a couple of months and then parting ways on genial terms. Long-term was never in my wheelhouse.”

“I figured,” Willow’s lips slanted.

“You’re the relationship kind of girl, aren’t you?” I asked.

“To my detriment, yes,” she sipped her drink, “Maxwell has put me off relationships for a while. That’s where you come in.”

I slapped my hand over my heart. “I am your rebound guy? Good God, woman, you could have told me that I am just a tool for sexual satisfaction.”

Her brows lifted. “You didn’t know? Do I need to get a label maker and print TOOL in capital letters for you? I can superglue it to your forehead if you’d like. In... bright pink.”

“Make it black,” I replied dryly. “Pink is not my color.”

I would never tire of hearing Willow’s laugh; it was so heartfelt and genuine that I wanted to keep her happy all the time so I could hear it. The sudden realization made me pause for a moment—what was that about?

“Tyler, what would you like your perfect companion to be like?” she asked.

“Perfectly... imperfect,” I told her. “I don’t need someone stepping off a magazine cover, but it wouldn’t hurt. I suppose, someone who is honest, caring, smart, trustworthy, who probably likes nutmeg in their coffee and doesn’t like pineapple on pizza—”

She elbowed me. “You’re walking on thin ice.”

“You’re a Hawaiian pizza person?” I asked, somewhat rhetorically. “You know what, don’t answer that. I should have known by the way you take your hot chocolate. By the way, pineapple on pizza is gastrointestinal terrorism.”

“Didn’t you just say perfectly imperfect?” She gave me an accusing eye. “What’s with this sudden backtracking?”

“I lost my train of thought,” I shrugged. “I don’t know what exactly makes up my perfect woman, to be honest. I suppose it would all boil down to how much of my shit she can put up with.”

“Ah,” Willow said sagely. “That’s the crux of the matter. You’re that guy, the one who loves his freedom, the rolling stone.”

“I’ve been called worse,” I replied. “Jackass, player, man-whore, gigolo, Casanova, heartbreaker, you name it, I’ve been called it. But the thing is...” I paused. How did I respectfully say that I had never made any promise to these women but still ended up drawing the short end of the stick without sounding like a douche?

“...You told them from the beginning you were not a relationship guy, but they always made you into something you weren’t, and they got made when you pulled away,” Willow murmured.

I damned well near gawped at her. Did she have a crystal ball or something? How was it that she knew exactly what it was that I didn’t know how to say and still managed to put it so elegantly?

“Yeah,” I replied. “I always ended up the bad guy.”

“Well, if you keep doing romantic things like this, I can understand why,” Willow said.

“Actually—” I looked around. “—this is the first time I’ve ever done something like this for anyone.”

She looked at me, and kept looking until I was squirming. “What?”

Willow smiled. “Thank you.”

Now she threw me. “Eh? For what?”

“For being romantic when almost every bone in your body is telling you otherwise,” she replied. “This is magical, so thank you.”

After a serene ride back, stealing kisses along the way, we got back to the square and began meandering around the streets, peering into shop windows and snacking on hot, melty caramel popcorn.

“So, what is my next trial of Hercules?” I asked her.

“We’re chopping down a tree,” she replied. “But that’s going to be the day after tomorrow because I’m going to Denver tomorrow to spend some time with my friend for a day.”

“Ah, I see,” I tossed a handful into my mouth. “The one with the troublesome brother?”

“The very same,” she replied as we headed to my car and hopped in. As the car warmed, she admitted, “And... I’ve been

told that Maxwell and his father are coming to the office tomorrow, and I would rather avoid them.”

“I get it if you want to see your friend, but avoiding that douche is not going to help,” I replied. “Listen, I’m no guru, I don’t have the faintest fucking clue on what it is to deal with a messy ex, but I know it won’t help to avoid it. Just rip the goddamn bandage off and let it get air to heal. Besides, if you want to be the boss lady I know you want to be, you can’t shy away from confrontation. Just let it be made plain and clear that business is business and that your old relationship has no part in it.”

She angled her head. “Sounds guru-ish to me.”

I snorted and started the car. “Remind yourself of that when I mangle the tree we’re going to cut.”

Chapter Eight

Willow

Tyler's words stayed with me during that night. I texted Jackie and told her that I'd come over the weekend. He was right—I couldn't avoid Maxwell forever, and the better the lines of engagement were drawn, the better it would be for me.

It's fine, Willow. No worries. Jackie replied.

After sending back a smiley emoji, I headed to my closet to pick out the best outfit I could wear the next day. I tugged on a white line, double-breasted pants suit and decided it would be best paired with a five-inch heel. I would damn well look the part of CEO in the making.

After I'd taken a shower and dressed in my PJs and a robe, I went to find Dad.

He was in his home office; the square room looked more like an 18th-century Regency study rather than a modern office. Sucking in a breath, I entered the large, high-ceilinged chamber and took in the large mahogany bookshelves lining the wall, each shelf crammed with business and law books. Leather furniture was in a semi-circle away from Dad's matching desk, while there was an honest-to-God marble fireplace in the other half of the room that Dad chucked wood in when he got nostalgic.

Dad's head was bowed over a book when I knocked on the door. "Hey, Dad, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure, sweetheart, just give me a moment," he replied while scribbling something on a notepad.

I took a seat across from him and waited patiently for him to finish. When he did and looked up, he rolled his neck, and it cracked audibly. I winced.

"What's up, Willow?" he asked.

"The meeting tomorrow," I began. "I want to be a part of it."

He frowned, “But I thought you were going to your friend tomorrow, and ever more, I didn’t think you wanted to be anywhere near your ex-boyfriend and his uppity father.”

“You’re right, I don’t, but that is ever more reason to do it,” I replied. “If I want to be a part of this company and take control of it one day, I cannot keep running away from anything that scares me. I can’t be so thin-skinned. All I need to do is make sure that this is business and that our interactions will have to stay that way. I’m not going to be crossing the line with either.”

Dad nodded and sat back in his chair. “I respect that, Willow and you’re right. You are going to take over this company one day, and you’ll have to be around entitled people like the Winslows. Hopefully, before I retire, I will have made most of those connections for you, and all you’ll have to do is maintain them.”

“I know, Dad,” I replied. “But what I need you to do is to outline for me what exactly is going to happen tomorrow so I can follow along.”

He smiled and reached for a folder. “Sure.”

We did a run-down of the management of our family-owned and led business. Our corporation was set up where the majority stake in the firm could only be held by a blood family member and had at least one family member on the board of directors.

Dad used to be on the board, but since the business grew and expanded, he had delegated himself to management only and had given his place to Uncle Herman instead. That way, our family had more influence over the business’s direction, strategies and plans.

For a medium and growing business, we kept things pretty tight and in-house, with four board members, a thousand shareholders, forty-nine percent of them common and the other fifty-one preferred shares and non-voting members.

“So, where does Maximillian come in?” I asked.

“He’s going to be another angel investor,” Dad replied. “With the buckets of money he has and the streams of distribution at his fingertips, it’s only natural he’d buy in. He’s buying the last eleven per cent preferred shares, too, while your uncle has twelve. Don’t worry, I still have the majority with sixteen.”

I looked over the papers and jabbed a finger at the preferred shareholder, referred to as Anon, who held twelve percent as well. “Who’s this person.”

“I don’t know,” Dad replied. “Do you remember that slump we had about three years ago when the profits went to the ground and the costs were tripled? I was contacted by a trading firm that asked if I could allow an anonymous investor into the business for five hundred thousand dollars. I agreed, and that sum got us out of the slump in weeks.”

I was alarmed. “But Dad, what if that was a buy-in to—”

“Create havoc? Our lawyers nearly had conniptions about that, too. However, the agreement this investor has with us specifies that any wrongdoing on his part, insider trading, scrupulous buy-ins, etcetera, would mean the cancellation of his contract, and the fallout will be his liability. Up to date, he has not done a damn thing.”

It was cold comfort, but I had to trust my dad’s instinct on this. I made a mental note to keep an eye on that investor, though.

“I must say, I’m glad you changed your mind, Willow,” Dad replied. “This is the exact sort of meeting you’ll need to experience because when I hand over the reins to you, you’ll be in a lot of them.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But ever better, now that I know Maxmillian and most likely Maxwell will be around for a long time, it’s the best time for me to draw the line of engagements between us.”

“That too,” Dad added. “Let’s hope for the best tomorrow.”

I looked at the folder. “I hope so, too.”

* * *

The moment Maxwell stepped into the boardroom—he was the next in line for his father’s business, so of course he would be there—tension coiled so tightly under my skin I felt like I was about to spontaneously combust. Still, though, I kept my place at Dad’s side and lifted my chin a little to show him that I wasn’t intimidated.

I could not be, not for his perfectly fitted blue Armani suit or his coiffed hair and sharp eyes—eyes that were trailing over me like thick molasses.

“Misters Winslow,” Dad greeted him, his father and their two lawyers with handshakes. “Welcome. Let me introduce those with me. My board of directors, Mister Allen Lowe, Mrs. Geradline Vassal, and you know my brother Herman Clarkston. At the far end, my attorneys, Mrs. Paula White and Dr. Carlile Chamberlin and also, my daughter will be sitting in with us.”

“Right,” Maximillian nodded curtly, “Good to see you again, Willow. Ready to wrench the steering wheel from your dad, are you?”

“I’d say coax,” I replied. “Pleased to see you again as well. Maxwell,” I nodded my greeting to him.

His eyes were narrowing, but his tone was pleasant. “Willow.”

“May I offer you any refreshments?” Dad asked a second later. “Or shall we start?”

“Let’s begin,” Maxmillian replied, pulling his sleeve up and glancing at his Patek Philippe watch. “I have another meeting in four hours.”

Of course he does.

We took our seats, and Dad got the meeting going by outlining the terms of the buy-in while our lawyer’s lobbied terms and conditions back and forth like tennis players. My uncle, who was the instigator of this, jumped in a lot, almost

giddy that his friend was about to become a part of our company.

“The special offer to earn preferred stock and to be slated in as Investor of Record is on the table. You’ll start with ten percent shares which will increase to thirteen,” Dr Carlile Chamberlin said.

“We will only be satisfied with the maximum threshold of thirteen percent as with the Investor on Record,” one of Maximillian’s lawyers said coolly. “Those are our terms.”

“Respectfully, with the funds you’re offering to exchange, by our internal policy bylaws we have, ten percent is the threshold,” I said calmly.

“About that,” Maxwell said, opening a folder and sliding a sheet to my dad. “We’re prepared to increase it by twenty percent to make the sum six hundred thousand. In addition, our freight ships will extend a twenty percent discount on your shipping for the first quarter after the agreement is finalized and the ink is dried.”

My eyes flew to Dad while the lawyers began to whisper between themselves. Silently, he took the slip of paper and read over it before he laid it down. “This diverges from the terms.”

“Yes, but it’s a more profitable divergence, yes?” Maxwell replied.

“It is.” Dad looked to the two lawyers, then back to Maximillian and his smug expression. “I think this might be the best time to take a refreshment break while my lawyer and I go over these new terms.”

“Wonderful,” Maximillian nodded, “I’m craving a coffee.”

“Me too,” Dad added. “Willow, would you show them to the next room?”

It irritated me a little to be denigrated to the rank of hostess, but I agreed and stood. “Please, follow me.”

The table in the smaller conference room down the hall was already transformed into a mini buffet with ready-to-serve

piping hot coffee, tea or finger foods to any palate. As we entered, Maxmillian's phone rang, and he went off to answer it, leaving me and Maxwell alone.

His lips curled. "You look like a maneater in that suit."

I wasn't sure if I should be flattered or offended. "I don't think we ordered human entrails for this buffet," I said calmly.

"Willow—"

"Let me stop you right now, Maxwell," I said stonily. "This is business; we are never getting back together, so whatever idiotic plans you have about using this to slither your slimy way back into my life is not happening. You might be comfortable dipping your pen in every inkpot around the block, but it's not happening here."

His face soured. "You didn't even give me a chance to say what I needed to say."

"If it's not, I'm sorry and or I'm a scumbag. You can save it," I replied while hearing Maximillan's conversation begin to wind down. I wiped all the irritation from my face and chipperly added, "Coffee?"

My sudden shift threw him, and I felt satisfied; at least the lines were drawn now and if he had and goddamn sense of self-preservation or common sense, he would stay behind them.

Maxmillian came over, his gray-blue eyes shifting between us, "Did I miss anything?"

"Maxwell was just telling me about his upcoming trip to Papua New Guinea," I said smartly. "Isn't that right, Maxwell? I applaud you for wanting to integrate with the locals."

He didn't look amused. "Yes, yes, of course. I'd love to get my liver ripped out and eaten."

His father made his coffee and sniffed. "At least Clarkston got the good stuff this time."

I held back from rolling my eyes and sipped my drink. "Sourced directly from Jamaica."

The two chatted about other meetings and more negotiations, and I zoned out; my mind landed on Tyler and the tree-cutting we would be doing that evening.

“...You should come, Willow,” Maxmillian said.

Hearing my name, my attention jerked to the present. “Pardon?”

“Our annual Christmas Party,” he said. “I’d love to see you and your father there.”

“Oh,” I didn’t know what to say—but if he were to be our business partner, it would only be a show of good faith. “Sure. Thank you for the invitation.”

A knock on the door drew our attention, and Dr. Chamberlin was there, “We’ve reached a decision. Please, come back to the conference room.”

Taking our cups back, we took our places, and I glanced at Dad; his face was unreadable, well, mostly. I saw a tick in his jaw and knew that it meant he was not happy about being blindsided and forced into a corner.

I think I already knew the decision he’d made.

“Well, Clarkston?” Maximillian asked, his left brow arched expectedly. “What have you decided?”

“We’re accepting your offer on an interim basis,” Dad replied tightly. “Our lawyers will have to go back and redo the terms in the contract we’d made, though, so I expect, with the holidays so near, about two weeks for the new agreement?”

“Unacceptable,” Maximillian snorted. “A week at most.”

“Twelve days,” Paula said, her gray hair as steely as her eyes. “We cannot afford to miss anything, and as unpalatable as it seems, Mister Winslow, some of us have lives beyond the job.”

I bit my lips to hold back a snort. At seventy-one, Paula had enough life experience and smarts to run circles around anyone at the table; she didn’t give a damn about Maxmillian’s timeline.

“It’s best if you listen, Winslow,” Dad said, “You do not want to get on her bad side.”

The mogul’s lips flattened. “I suppose I can pencil that in.”

“Good,” Paula nodded, closing her folder. “Happy to be doing business with you. Jackson—” she looked toward Dad. “—we’ll be in touch.”

“I appreciate it,” Dad replied.

He stood and shook hands with everyone before I added, “Mister Winslow invited us to his Christmas party, and I accepted, Dad.”

“Oh,” he turned to Maxmillian. “Thank you.”

The older Winslow nodded curtly, then checked his watch again. “I must go. Thank you, Clarkston.”

I stood as Dad did and shook their hands, too; Maxwell held my hand a little longer than I would have liked, but we walked them out anyway. As we got to the door, Maximillian’s driver came around the corner, but from the corner of my eye, I spotted Tyler and two other guys heading to the mess hall.

His hat was off, and his face, cleanly shaved, was plain as day. I went still, hoping Maxwell wouldn’t shift his head to the left and see him—but he kept his head straight. At one point, he even pulled out his cell right as Tyler and his friend ducked into the hall.

As the car came to the steps and Maxmillian headed off, Maxwell turned to me and hugged me tightly. I fought the urge to deck him when he whispered into my ear. “Does your dad know you’re fucking a fruit picker? If not, should I tell him?”

I stood still, nailed to the patch of floor I stood on, as he left for the car, smirking smugly all the way like the asshole he was. God, I wished I could throw him in a mud heap and stomp him into the second layer of the earth.

Dad turned to me. “What was that about? What did he say?”

“Thank you,” I lied, “He said thank you. I don’t know why, but I suppose it was about... heck, I don’t really know

why. That's odd."

"Maxwell is an odd guy," Dad shrugged. "But who knows? At least the meeting went well."

"It did," I replied while trying to keep the bile scorching the back of my throat from spewing out. "I think I need a shower."

Laughing, Dad held my arm. "Beer coolers are in the fridge, too."

I headed to my room, kicked my heels off, grabbed a pillow, pressed it to my face and screamed.

Chapter Nine

Cole

L aughing at the guy's antics, I slipped away from the mess hall into the outside, away from the jesting and joking inside. I plucked my cell out, and with my back resting on the wall, I called Ethan.

When he answered, his tone was dry. "Let me guess, you've screwed up?"

I rolled my eyes. "Ha, ha, you big old buzzkill. No, that is not what I called you for."

"What did you call me for then?" Ethan asked. "Mia and I are about to—"

"I don't want to hear that!" I grated. "I will never want to hear that."

"—about to watch a movie." Ethan snorted. "Get your head out of the gutter. Now, what is it that you want?"

"Don't ask me how I know this because I will not tell you," I said, rubbing my face. "Go look in Dad's old records and see if he had once noted an invitation from Jackson Clarkston about a meeting to collaborate on a marketing project. As a matter of fact, give Mia the message, too. I have it on good authority that Clarkston reached out to both of you."

Ethan was silent for a long moment, then said, "...What?"

"You heard me," I said, "Don't act like you didn't. And don't ask me how I know all this. Just do me a solid and go and check."

"And if I do find that information, what do I do with it?" he asked.

"Do the right thing, call Clarkston back, apologize for Dad's fuck up and try to make some kind of connection with him. I know we all made fun of them, but I think it's time we

passed those prejudices and got all three of us into a decent collaboration.”

Again, Ethan was scarily silent. “Where did you get all this from?”

“Can you do it or not?” I asked, decidedly ignoring his question.

“I can,” he replied. “I just want to know how you came upon these nuggets of information.”

“Just do it,” I told him, thankfully for the win. “I’ll explain someday, but not... not now, okay. Call me or text me on what you find.”

Once again, Ethan paused. “If you’re in trouble—”

“I’m not,” I huffed. “Jesus. I don’t go around fucking shit up, Ethan. Well, not this time, and I don’t need you riding in on your white horse to save me. Just do what I asked and reach out to Clarkston. It’s long overdue.”

We said goodbyes, and I shoved my cell into my pocket, then tilted my head back on the wall behind me and knocked it on the cold wall three times. I heard the crunch of boots on the snow around me and looked to my side as Willow approached. She didn’t look too hot.

“You okay?” I asked.

She gave me a wry smile. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that? I didn’t eavesdrop, but I heard the tail end of your conversation.”

“Yeah,” I raked a hand through my hair. “It’s my brother. He’s got this...knight in shining armor hero complex that prompts him to ask me if I’ve screwed up. If I said yes, he would be charging in, guns blazing.”

Willow rested her hands on my waist. “Seemed like you learned from the best.”

She was talking about that night. “So, why are you upset?”

“My dad and I had a meeting with Maxwell and his father,” she replied. “He switched it up on us and increased the

buy-in amount so he could get thirteen percent managerial shares.”

“Preferred shares,” I echoed.

Willow nodded. “That’s the proper term. How’d you know that?”

“I spun the pages of a business textbook in college,” I shrugged, hoping to play it off with a nonchalant shrug. “Some things stuck, some didn’t.”

She came closer and looped her arms around my neck while my hand dropped to her hips. “Are you sure you’re not just playing dumb?” she teased. “I can see an insidious genius behind those big bright eyes of yours.”

“Insidious,” I parroted. “That’s a lot of praise. Flattery will get you nowhere, missy.”

Rolling her eyes while her lips curved, she sassed, “And you’re not getting out of the tree chopping this afternoon.”

“Afternoon?”

“I got you a pass,” she said, stepping away, brows up. “You do know I’m the boss, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I grinned. “Aren’t you a bit concerned, though? The other guys might see me getting preferential treatment and turn into dickheads on me.”

“Are they naturally dickheads?”

“One of them is,” I replied.

She slapped my arm. “You’ll be fine. You’ve got thick skin. Meet at the back gate, two pm sharp.”

Rubbing said arm, I smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

I didn’t expect to see Willow behind the wheel of a 4x4, impatiently drumming her fingertips on the wheel. I stopped short.

“Are you sure you can handle this big piece of machinery?” I teased.

She slanted a narrow eye at me. “I can run you over with it, and then you’ll tell me.”

Laughing, I circled the truck and hopped into the passenger seat. She started the vehicle and drove off, taking the backroad circumventing the town, and when we were past the township, she headed north.

“We’re going to a pine tree farm,” she explained. “The O’Hara’s have been planting and providing firs for the town since before I was born. Heck, before my dad was born. A lot of people come far and wide to get their fir trees, but that’s not all they do. There are hills for sledding and skiing and a pond for ice skating, too. They have a hot cocoa and ice cream shop, too.”

“Ice cream? In this weather? Are they nuts?” I asked.

“You’d be surprised how many people want ice cream in snowy weather,” she said while we took a hill. “Anyway, we’re going to get the tree for my family living room, and that area is like two stories high with an enormous stone fireplace and feature chimney running straight up to the roofline. We can get a big one.”

“It might be a mangled one,” I told her. “I have never held an ax before.”

“Brace your feet and chop down at an angle,” she instructed. “It’s easier to taper the tree than cut through it at once. At least that’s how I did it.”

As we crested the hill, she took a left and headed west. Trees lined the drive, and snow-capped mountains rose in the distance. We passed under the huge wooden signpost with the name O’Hara Ranch swinging from it in the soft breeze. Fir trees sprawled across the acres of the property, ranging from seedlings to large firs.

“Wow,” I gazed out. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s been in their family for generations. It’s spread out as far as the eye can see. It really is beautiful out here,” she said,

looking around a little. “I’ve been wrapped up in business and boardrooms so long I forgot how lovely it is.”

We drove about two more miles in until we came to a house with, I kid you not, white gables and a freaking white picket fence. It looked like something I would see on *Little House on the Prairie* or something from the *Hansel and Gretel* storybook. It looked so quaint and homey that I wondered if it was real.

“Yes, it’s real,” Willow laughed, and I realized I’d said my thoughts out loud. “I know it looks like something you’d draw up as a kid or make a gingerbread house from. But it works; when kids come here, it looks inviting and a bit magical, to be honest. Plus, Mister O’Hara looks like Santa Clause with his silver hair and beard.”

“Well, hell,” I replied. “When I was a kid, Mom had to bribe me to get on Santa’s lap, you know, at the mall and stuff. He scared the bejesus out of me... well, not him, mostly his elves. At six, elves with beards, piercings and mohawks looked like aberrations to me.”

“You mean to tell me even Santa is strange to you,” Willow groaned. “Is there a reset button on you somewhere for me to press?”

“If only,” I snorted.

There was a parking lot, and after finding a space, Willow plucked out an ax from the bed of the pickup and handed it to me. “Your weapon for this evening, sir.”

“I hope I won’t lose it,” I murmured.

We left to the farm and to a shed not too far off when we came across a man wielding a clipboard and overlooking rows of snowmobiles. Willow signed up, got the keys, and we headed off into the wild, snow kicking up behind us as we roamed the rows of firs.

“How about that one?” I asked, nodding to an 8-foot tree.

“No. Keep going,” Willow replied.

I gunned the bike, and we came to another row where a 9-foot one stood tall and proud. “That one?”

“Nope,” she said in my ear.

We took another row... and another... and four more until I started to lose count. We passed so many firs that I was starting to believe I was some kind of lumberjack in the middle of nowhere. Everywhere smelled like car freshener... only ten times stronger, and the smell of pine was so strong I could *taste* it in the back of my throat. All through it, Willow sat on a padded bench seat behind me with her arms wrapped tightly around my middle and her cheek nestled against my shoulder.

“Baby, you need to make a decision,” I said, feeling uncomfortable as the cold air was seeping into my jeans. “I’m getting the wrong case of blue balls here.”

Another row... another one, and then, finally, Willow exclaimed, “That one!”

Instantly, I stopped the vehicle and looked where she pointed. The pine was... a behemoth, at least thirteen feet high. As I stepped off, I looked at the trunk, thicker than my thigh, and half the other one.

“This... one?”

Ripping fears of me chopping the wrong one and getting crushed under its leafy boughs ran through my mind in concentric circles.

“Yep,” Mia pressed the ax into my hand. “Get to chopping, *baby*.”

I looked at her as she gazed up at the tree, her eyes twinkling happily and cheeks flushed red from the cold. She looked really pretty and sexy and sweet standing there.

Sighing, I grabbed the ax and went to it, laying one blow at an angle and peering at the odd curl of wood. Did that look right? Nevertheless, I threw my back into it, chopping—or chipping—down until something started to sway. Sweat beaded on the back of my neck and cold inched up the legs of my pants, but I kept at it, chopping away—until...

A large crack ripped through the air; the tree swayed and then fell in slow motion away from me, hitting the powdery snow with a big puff and flinging more into the air.

“Timber!” I shouted—a bit belatedly.

I straightened my back and felt a sharp crack—God, was I getting old, or was it the cold? The thick needles were tinged a blue-green; it was a damn fine-looking tree, I had to admit.

Willow laughed, got off the sleigh, headed to the fallen tree... and sank knee-deep in snow. “Oh my gosh! I didn’t know snow got this deep!” she laughed.

Dropping the ax, I went to help her up, grabbed her by the arms and hauled her up—only to slip and fall on my ass with her on top of me. It wasn’t a bad thing—not with Willow giggling like a schoolgirl and her hair falling around us, cutting us off from all that was around us and creating our bubble of privacy. A sliver of serenity.

My hands rested on her hips and slid up to under her parka and undershirt.

“Jesus,” she shrieked. “Your hands are ice cold.”

“Your fault,” I smirked. “Let me warm them up.” I gazed up at her. “You’re so gorgeous.”

She leaned forward and kissed me, her lips roaming over mine before I opened for her and let her in. I let the kiss deepen, and knowing there was nothing—or no one—to stop us was one hell of an aphrodisiac.

Willow must have sensed it, too, as the little moan of pleasure that left her lips when I slipped my tongue past them was positively orgasmic. Every ounce of hesitation left me, and I pulled her closer until she was on my lap.

Her hands dug into my wet hair, the feel of her fingers moving up the back of my neck gave me a full-body shiver, and my jeans felt too tight in all of the wrong places. When Willow ground down on me, I groaned for another reason.

“You’re playing with fire again, Willow,” I warned her, “Do you want me to rip your clothes off, fling your legs over

my shoulder and fuck you right here? Keep grinding down on my hard cock, and it'll happen.”

Chapter Ten

Willow

With my body aligned perfectly over his length, my face was inches from his—but all I felt, all I could feel, was his hard body beneath mine. Tyler’s eyes were a dreamy aquamarine and matched the surrounding pine trees. He had the longest eyelashes I had ever seen on a man.

My breath stuttered in my chest as his eyes darkened. His hands settled on my hips, strong and confident, his palms hot on my skin. He rolled his hips a little and I felt his cock continue to grow beneath me. Before I thought it over, I kissed him again, but he took control right away.

One of his hands slipped around my nape. He pressed his palm against the back of my head, bringing me deeper into the kiss. His tongue forced my lips apart and I slanted my mouth harder against his. My skin was burning, and the woody, dark forest and musk scent turned me on.

His scent made every nerve ending in my body spark to life. As he jabbed his tongue into my mouth in hard thrusts, just like I imagined he would if he was fucking me, a shock of pleasure burst through me. My tongue tangled with his and a sharp pang of need pooled deep inside my pussy.

His kiss became more forceful, and I whimpered as arousal flooded me. His cock jerked and swelled beneath me. The friction of it pushing against my pussy was doing incredible things to my insides. He kissed me harder and desire rocked right through me; trembles rocked up my inner thighs and my legs tightened.

I didn’t know I was rocking on him, but his hands gripped my hips, stopping me. His mouth met my ears. “I want to eat your pussy.”

I knew I was shockingly wet and against all rules of propriety—I wanted his mouth on me. “Wha—where?”

Tyler got to his feet, taking me with him and resting me on the snowmobile, right up against the handlebars. “Right here. I

don't know if you have an exhibition kink, but we'll start it going, *now*. And we're out in the middle of nowhere, Willow. We've left anyone and everyone miles behind us."

There was no stopping Tyler as he got my boots off, and I lifted to let him pop the front button of my jeans. He tugged them down my thighs to my shins, flung my legs over his shoulder, and dipped his head. His head and shoulders were so hot between my legs and when he looked up at me with those devilish eyes, I knew he was going to wreck me.

Beard scruff tickled my sensitive flesh as his mouth closed around my wet pussy. His hot lips sealed over the folds, using the tip of his tongue to tease my clit. He sucked at my clit this time making me cry out at the exquisite pressure and I pressed my heels into his hard back muscles. His hot mouth fused over me and he sucked.

Tyler kept lapping, licking and sucking on me while I shivered and shuddered and succumbed to sensations I had never felt before. I was a feast to him, that was what I was; there could be no other reason why he was devouring me so intensely.

He pulled off to blow on my clit and the cold air jarred something inside me, just before he sealed his lips over me again. He was stoking a fire inside me, igniting something that would be uncontrollable when the fuse took hold.

I writhed beneath his masterful touch, twisting, bucking against his mouth as he worked my swollen nub, burning with need, as I spiraled up the ladder of bliss—then, without warning, I came, crying, swept away in sweet pleasure, the feeling blistering and forceful. My breath was trapped in my lungs and I hung in limbo for a long, agonizing moment before reality came back.

I dimly felt Tyler fix my clothes in place and when I finally opened my eyes, his gaze was still dark but not with lust this time.

"You're a vision when you come," he said. "So fucking beautiful."

What could I say to that—I was boneless. “Tyler...”

“Hm?”

“Take us home...” I said, “... and when we get there, remind me to return the favor.”

* * *

Cutting the damn tree was one thing, getting it inside her house was a whole other production after dragging it in on a tarp, back up to the house and hauling it inside.

“Tell me again why the tree needed to be this size,” Tyler grunted while he and Ford strained to drag the behemoth tree from one of the many backdoors and into the main room.

“Is someone compensating for somethin’?” Ford grunted.

“Hardly,” I laughed. “It’s just the size that would fit our room. Anything smaller would have looked insufficient.”

When we got to the living room, I could see the shock resonate on Tyler’s face. This place was absolutely cavernous. It could easily be used to film one of those medieval Scottish period dramas as it could easily fit five long trestle tables.

“Now the real work starts,” Ford grunted, nodding to the frame we’d made outside while the tree defrosted.

By the time the two of them had lashed it to the frame and stood it up, got the tree to roughly where I wanted, another hour or so had passed; I felt tired for both of them. Gazing at it, the tree wasn’t too big; it was perfect, fresh and sharp with the sweet, refreshing scent of pine.

“I don’t envy you decorating this monster, Miss Clarkston,” Tyler said to me, trying to be respectable with titles. Then, he eyed me. “Are you decorating it or are you calling in...Martha Stewart or something?”

“No,” I smiled up at the tree. “I get on a ladder and do it myself.”

Ford whistled. “My best to you on that.”

Tyler peeled his hat off. “On that note, I need to go rustle up some grub. I feel like I could eat a horse, and a half.”

I felt a bit guilty that I had kept him out so long and worked him so hard when I knew he was new to this labor life. “I’m pretty sure mess hall is wiped clean by now. I’ll have Lenny set you up with something.”

“Lenny?” he arched a brow.

“Our chef, short of Leonardo,” I said then knowingly added, “And before you go on blabbing about how we’ve got a fancy French chef, you should know he is an all American, Louisiana born, guy.”

“Oh. I want gumbo,” Tyler said instantly. “The authentic New Orleans version.”

“Gumbo?” I narrowed my eyes. “You know that takes up to three hours to cook, right?”

“Is it?” Tyle replied, eyes wide and innocent. “I’ll take a sub while waiting.”

I snorted and headed out of the room before Ford edged to Tyler and whisper-squawked, “Are you really flirting with the boss’s daughter?”

The room was big enough that their whispers echoed.

“Probably,” Tyler replied.

“Second question, did you swallow crazy pills?” Ford asked, “Or did a tree hit you on the head or something.”

“No,” he said, turning back to the tree he’d chopped down. “It’s harmless fun.”

“Until you get massacred with a toothpick,” Ford was about to have an episode. “Dude, you cannot be serious. The boss’s daughter? His only kid? Do you have a death wish?”

Tyler turned to him. “You don’t think I’ve got a shot?”

“I think you’re gonna *get* shot,” he said while heading to the door. “I dunno man. When old man Clarkston comes at you with a cleaver, just say I told you so.”

I ducked out of the room and headed to the kitchen, had a quick word with Lenny and when he showed me what was bubbling on the stove, I had to roll my eyes. When I got back to the room, Tyler was alone, slowly circling the tree with awe stamped on his face. Was he thinking about how he had cut it or was he wondering what it would look all covered in ribbons and bows and baubles?

“I don’t know if you’re lucky or sentient, but Lenny has gumbo on the stove now. Admittedly, he made it for himself, but he said you’re free to have some,” I told him.

“Awesome,” I grinned. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

My heart twisted over. “Stop with the pet names.”

I wonder why.

“Where do I get the gumbo...” Tyler asked then sidled up to me and dropped his voice, “And what exactly do you plan on doing to repay my favor?”

Reaching out in the sliver of space between us, I touched his belly, wanting—but not having the bravery to touch his cock. “Let your imagination go wild,” I replied. “Now you’ve got to eat. Come with me.”

We got back to the kitchen where Lenny was plating up the seafood gumbo and we took the small table in a nook away from the rows of stoves and ovens.

“Here you go, cher,” Lenny said, his rumbling Louisiana accent as warm as the food he put before us.

“...*Sha*?” Tyler questioned.

“It’s cher, like the singer but it’s pronounced cha.” I corrected him. “It means something like dear or honey or sweetheart. Overall, it just means that person thinks fondly of you.”

His eyes blazed with jealousy but vanished the next moment. I suppose he realized that thing between us was just a fling, a blazing inferno that would eventually burn itself out after we worked through the lust in our systems.

“Oh,” he shrugged. “I hadn’t expected... that.”

He sounded... not jealous, but... possessive? Was I off on reading his emotions? There were times Tyler was hard to read. When he was not overly flirting or exhausted from work, he kind of had a real strong poker face.

I reached for my spoon, "Pull that inner caveman back, Tyler. Nothing happened between us. It's just southern courtesy."

For once, his lips twitched, "Inner caveman, eh?"

"Yep," I popped a spoonful into my mouth, then as the flavor hit my tastebuds, I clamped a hand over my mouth. "God, this is so good."

Tyler looked to be in gastronomy heaven. He damned well groaned while dunking his spoon into the bowl again. He practically inhaled that bowl and wiped his mouth with a grand groan. "I'd eat that for the rest of my life."

I took a few minutes to finish mine, but when I did, I felt the same as he did, satisfied and savoring the taste lingering in my mouth. Tyler reached over and swiped a spot under my bottom lip. "You missed a spot."

Twisting, I sucked his thumb into my mouth and sucked on it; instantly, his eyes were dark with lust. I pulled away with a pop, "You're not stealing my food."

"It was a droplet," he replied.

"It was still mine," I told him.

Shoving the bowls away, Tyler said, "I want my payment now."

My mood shifted, "We can go to the attic."

"The attic?"

"Privacy," I said, then added, "And you can take down a few boxes of ornaments."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course."

After dropping the bowls in the sink, we headed to the back of the house where the staircase to the attic stood. The moment we stepped into the wide, airy space, I pushed Tyler

to the door and kissed him. One of his hands slipped into my hair and he pressed his wide palm against the back of my head, bringing me deeper into the kiss.

His tongue forced my lips apart and I slanted my mouth harder against his. I pressed my lower belly against his thick arousal and a thousand pleasure vibrations twisted around me. He jabbed his tongue into my mouth, hot, and hard, much as I knew he wanted to be fucking me.

Heat whipped through me, and an intense ache increased inside me. I yearned to feel him. My hips arched a little and a moan left my mouth at the vision of him undressing me. He sucked my bottom lip into his mouth and the groan he let out was viscerally indecent.

I dropped my hands to undo his thick belt and pulled the buckle apart. I popped the button and slid the zipper down. I pulled away and whispered, "My payment."

Sinking to my knees, I tugged the jeans away and took his tight, black boxer-briefs with them and bit my lip at his thickening cock. I looked up a little, just to check, and his gaze was dark with intent and his cock hung heavy and engorged between his thighs.

He looked thick and pulsing, the cock head was flared and wide. Glancing back, I just couldn't take my eyes off it.

Grasping the base of his cock, I slipped my tongue out to slide up from the base of him to the underside of his flared head. He was thick, smooth silk over iron hardness, sending more moisture flooding my mouth.

Tyler hissed through his teeth.

I mouthed the blunt tip and gave it a cautious suck. He tasted salty, not bad at all; pure masculine musk spread over my tongue and aroused me even more. Tonguing his cock, I lubricated its steely length and when I arrived at the bulging crown, I swiped the weeping slit at the tip of the thick head.

Hunger for more roared through me and opening my mouth wide, I sucked his tasty head into my mouth. I could

only take in a few inches of him and it was not nearly enough. I wanted more, all of Tyler. A whimper slipped from me.

“Slow, sweetheart,” Tyler murmured as his hand went into my hair. “I am a big boy.”

Carefully, I licked all around him, lost in discovering every hard, steely, inch. A thrill surged through me, knowing I could give him this pleasure, the same pleasure he gave me hours before. Taking him deep, I swallowed more of him, making sure I ran my tongue under the sensitive frenulum.

His hand coasted through my hair and another groan from Tyler pushed me to do more. His cock surged into my mouth and I tried to take him deeper. He swelled in my mouth and groaned. My pussy clenched in agony, aching and empty.

With a curse, Tyler took control, feeding me another few inches. “Seal your lips around me, sweetheart.”

I did as he commanded, desperate to give him all I could.

“Good girl,” he praised me. “Lick my cock, sweetheart.”

Pleasure surged through me every time he said that...but he didn't know why. Tyler moved faster, fucking my mouth, and loosening my jaw. I let him.

“I'm coming, baby,” he groaned.

I gripped him tight when I realized he was about to pull out. No, fuck now. If I couldn't have him in my pussy, I wanted all of him in my mouth, every last drop. He gripped my hair, and his hips punched up. My throat worked, swallowing every slick drop with satisfaction. Pulling away, I licked the underside of his crown for the last time before tucking him back into his underwear.

Shaking his head, his thumb ran over my mouth. “Your mouth is magical, Willow.”

I stood and smiled, tugging his jeans up. “You've got boxer-briefs on. I love those.”

He dropped his hands to my waist while his eyes romance dove along my face. A strange emotion was in his eye while he looked at me. “What about them?”

“I think they’re the sexiest underwear a man can have,” I replied.

“*What?*” Tyler gasped dramatically. “You don’t like big baggy grandpa drawers.”

“No,” I laughed.

“Speedo?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Not really.”

“A thong?”

“Ew.”

“Banana hammock?” he teased.

“Tyler?”

“Hm?”

“Shut up,” I replied, kissing him.

Tenderly cupping the side of my face, Tyler returned my kiss, an emotion I couldn’t catch slipping through his tender lips.

Chapter Eleven

Cole

We found ourselves at the edge of a pond, participating in a sing-along. There were a few bonfires going on and I took in the idyllic scene of families roasting marshmallows around the crackling fire, while three guys were playing “Silent Night” on their guitars.

My back was to an old tree and Willow was sitting between my legs, resting on my chest with my arms around her. This was surprisingly... mellow for what I had expected.

I kissed her ear. “I thought tonight would be much different.”

Willow twisted to look at me. “What did you think would happen? A survival game where you had to scale a mountain, make weapons out of your shoelace and hunt for your own food with a single match?”

Huffing out a laugh, I replied, “More like you forcing me to go ice skating.”

A wicked grin took her lips. “You spoke too soon.”

“Oh God,” I groaned and dropped my head to her shoulder. “Why do you do this to me? You saw me on that ladder with the tree, you know my balance is shit.”

“You’ll get better,” she said evilly. “Plus, I’ll be right there with you and I’m a great teacher.”

“If I break my butt, I’m blaming you,” I whispered.

“It’s a shame,” she smiled up at me. “It’s a pretty butt too.”

I nosed the soft hairs at her temple. “And where is this going to happen?”

She sunk down a little to tilt her head up and gave me the most innocent smile I’d ever seen. “In about twenty minutes or so.”

Instantly, my eyes flew to the pond. “No...”

“Yes.”

“Fuck no.”

Willow turned in my arms and looped her arms around my neck. “We’re doing this, okay, *sweetie?*”

I winced. “I thought nicknames were off the table, *lovebug.*”

“I’m putting that on the table because I want to sweet-talk you into going skiing too,” Willow smiled.

“No,” I eyed her. “If I’m going to get my ass broken on a flat surface, there is no way in hell I’d do that on a *hill*. Do you want me to break my neck, missy!”

She giggled and began dropping closed-mouth kisses on my face, on my jaw, my nose, above my eyes, my ear, that tiny scar on my temple—snickering between kisses. I wanted to laugh but I forced my face to stay stoic.

Willow pulled away. “Try not to laugh all you want; I can see the humor dancing in your eyes. You’re not fooling anyone.”

“Is that right?” I dug my fingers into her sides and tickled her, loving the feel of her squirming on my lap and her muffled giggles. “So, where are we going to skate, missy? If you dare say that lake with its paper-thin sheet of ice on it, I am leaving.”

“A—a—” she laughed, trying to bat my hands away. “A-a real s-s-skating r-ink in town.”

“A rink?” I narrowed my eyes, pulling my hands away to give her a moment to breathe. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

* * *

I did see it.

It was a decent rink, standard NHL size, I supposed. Large LED lights were on the ceiling, casting a shimmering glow across the ice, while colored pepper lights were taped on the

walls. I looked around the rink at the families with their kids, a few single moms or dads, but the place... it was so suffused with happiness that I could practically breathe it in.

I watched a dad tie off a little girl's skates and gently lift her to the ice; she gripped him in tender fear as she took her first wobbly steps. The dad looked so patient as he taught her to skate—that a lightbulb went off in my head.

If you did set the flashing lights and glitz and glamour of the season aside, it truly was a season for bonding or re-bonding. I spied a young couple, a guy grabbing at his girlfriend as her ankle twisted. There was an older couple gliding around the rink with seasoned practice.

"It's an actual rink," I murmured.

Willow grabbed my hand and squeezed it. Her breath escaped in a filmy cloud. "I told you."

The skaters swirled and spun like dancers on a stage. "Do you know how to skate?" she asked.

"I used to skateboard," I said, "I had a scooter even, but I don't think those qualify."

"No, they don't," Willow pulled me to a booth where the rentals were handled, and we soon got skates.

I looked at the thin blade. "You want me to balance on *this*?"

"Yes," she said, standing on the skates like she was born on them. "C'mon."

Bracing my hands on the edge of the bench, I tried to stand, got up too fast, flailed a little and nearly face planted—but Willow grabbed me. Her lips twitched. "Creep before you walk or run, bronco."

"This is your fault." I felt uneasy standing on a thin blade, an inch off the ground. I grabbed the rails and hobbled toward the edge of the rink, with her skating like a pro at my side.

She even turned and skated backward, and I glared at her. "Show off."

Appearing at my side, she said, “Give me your hands.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she pried my hands from the rails and pulled me forward. “You’ll be fine. Let me teach you—” My balance faltered, I dug my heels in... I soon learned that was the wrong move to make. I plopped—bottom first—onto the cold, hard ice and took Willow with me. She landed on my chest with an “—Oof.”

Winded, I tucked my head up. “You were saying?”

“Okay, fine,” Willow laughed and untangled our octopus legs—while people laughed around us—then stood and brushed her knees off. “So, it’s harder than it looks. But you can learn the basics.”

I let Willow guide me around the rink, and I did my best to keep on my feet, despite the subtle scent of her perfume and her nearness tempting me to say fuck all this and kiss her. She finally coaxed me off the hand holding and let me take my baby steps alone—with windmill arms.

After five minutes of torture, Willow had mercy on me and looped her arms around my neck and we swayed and staggered for several seconds, mostly me struggling to remain upright. My arms were around her waist, and it didn’t matter that so many people skated around us, or that kids were around.

Brushing a loose curl from her cheek, I leaned forward and kissed her. It was gentle at first, a tender kiss; her lips were soft, sweeter and I wanted more. Willow wrapped her arms around my neck and drew me closer.

I deepened the kiss—briefly, I didn’t want to be told to *get a room*—and the rest of the world fell away; as far as I was concerned, we were the only two people that existed, wrapped up in a blanket of warmth, hope, and happiness. When we came up for air, I held her as if she was the most precious

thing in the world. Because—I was honestly starting to feel like it.

“I think that is enough for me tonight,” I said while my eyes roamed over her face. “Nearly broke my neck, probably fractured my back, I am pretty sure I shattered my coccyx.”

“Your coccyx,” her eyes lightened with a tease. “Someone learned a new word. Have you been reading the dictionary behind my back?”

“Oh, that’s it.” I forgot that I was on skates, dipped to haul her over my shoulder, and mid-lift—pitched back and landed flat on my back again.

With her laughing on top of me, I grunted. “That’s it. That’s all for me tonight. I may need a hospital.”

“I’ll kiss your boo-boo’s better,” Willow said while untangling us—*again*—and pulling us up.

I limped to the railings, inched to the front and plopped on the bench while Willow retrieved our shoes. After handing the rented skates over and ducking outside, with my arm around Willow’s shoulders, my eye landed on Harry, my asshole housemate, and I froze. He looked away to make it seem like he had not seen me, but Willow’s face was in plain view, and I knew he had seen us.

“Tyler?” she asked, and I felt her concerned gaze on the side of my neck. “Are you okay?”

Turning back to her, I smiled—or attempted to, at least. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

A knot twisted her brows. “Where did you go off to?”

“I was making a mental list of my boo-boos for you to kiss later,” I teased, twisting my neck to her. “But before that, how about some dinner, or supper, or something hot and spicy?”

“Burritos.” She piped up, grabbing my hand and towing me to the town center. “There is a lovely little cart there that sells the most amazing burritos.”

We got to the cart and while Willow got in line, I didn’t follow immediately, but instead stopped to watch the snow

drift down from the sky in large lazy flakes. Glancing around, I savored the crisp scent of spices, aromas and freshly fallen snow, attempting to capture every exquisite detail of the moment and drill it into my mind.

All those years back home and all those clinical Christmases I'd lived through, in the lap of luxury, were a dark smudge compared to this one. I had missed out—I really had.

“Tyler?” Willow twisted over her shoulder, “Brisket, chicken or pork?”

“Brisket,” I went to her side and looked into the booth and the steaming serving trays. “Please.”

We got our burritos and sauce then headed out to quieter places around the square. The brisket even tasted better than the premium cuts we'd had at Christmas dinner. Spicier, softer, all around more delicious than I had expected. After dumping my trash in a bin, I turned to Willow, “Today was... eventful.”

“It's not over yet,” Willow grinned.

I barely turned and with one quick push to my chest, I tipped over and landed on my back, on a pile of snow with a plop. Powdery snow flew up and the mischievous expression on Willow's face erased the surprise from mine and I began to laugh.

Happiness, joy, and carefree glee bubbled inside and the last vestiges of something cold and hard shell buried deep inside my heart suddenly broke off and melted away. It felt good. Really good.

“What am I doing down here?” I asked.

“You're supposed to be making snow angels,” she replied.

“You took me by surprise. Help me up so I can find a better place. The pile has to be ruined by now,” I held out my gloved hands and Willow reached out and grabbed my hands, but I twisted my hand and with a firm, powerful yank, tugged her down with me.

Her laughter was contagious, and another burst of happiness swept through me in a tremendous wave that I

couldn't help but laugh with her. The stars were glittering gems set on a velvet sky, so clear and crystalized over the shadows of the northern mountains.

"Willow..." I shifted my head to her when the mirth had died down.

"Hm?" she asked, looking back at me.

I chose my words carefully, "Have you ever felt like... the truth of something had been staring you in the face for a long time but no matter how hard you look, you just couldn't see it?"

"Oh, fuck yeah," she breathed out. "That was me with Maxwell. No matter how much he treated me like his back-up plan, I never let myself see it until I was forced to see it. The day I walked in on him having sex with that girl, even though I took him back, there was something in the back of my mind that woke up. Things started to add up and I just had enough."

She swung a leg over and straddled me like a cowgirl on a bronco. "So, what was it that you were too blind to see?"

"Christmas," I replied. "Growing up, our Christmases were... I guess you could say, sterile. We had the big fake white Christmas tree, presents and we had dinner, but that very next night, my parents were back at work. They owned a business, so they had to be on top of what was happening. While my dad worked management, Mom went out and made connections, investors, stuff like that. It was mostly my brother and I and my brother...well, he had his nose stuck into books most of the time."

"So...it was basically you, alone?" she inferred. "That's horrible. That's no way for a kid to celebrate Christmas."

I shrugged. "My folks... they aren't bad people. They just had a lot more on their mind than family time."

Especially when it came to beating the Sullivans at their own game.

She kissed me, soft and long, and I kissed her right back. The kiss, so tender, her mouth so hot and familiar, made me want to kiss her forever. I'd been with other women since I

was nineteen, but this kiss made up for the nine years of kisses that were now clearly inferior to Willow.

She broke the kiss—but only just. Nothing, no kiss, no connection, not even full-blown sex that I'd ever had before felt so electric, so overwhelming so... almost inevitable.

“Baby,” I asked. “Are you okay?”

She met my gaze. “That’s my kryptonite.”

“What is?” My brows twisted in confusion.

“Pet names,” Willow whispered. “Sweetheart, baby, honey, boo, beautiful, angel, baby girl. They turn my insides liquid.”

The way she was looking at me made my inside liquid. And if she wasn't careful—I might fall for her.

Who am I kidding—I already am.

Chapter Twelve

Willow

“Is that right?” Tyler asked.

Something hot flared in his gaze, but as I ignored my own visceral reaction to the pure want in his gaze and pretended my belly wasn't flooded with the same lust, I reminded myself what hadn't changed.

He is not here for good.

He'll be gone in a few days when the job ends.

It's just a fling.

“Yes,” I replied honestly. “I know it's corny but—”

His hands slid up my back, “No, it's not. I just never had any woman tell me she liked those things. It's cute and honest, but you made a tactical error.”

“How?”

His knuckle skimmed my cheek, and his gaze was tenderly wicked. “Now I know, for sure, how to make you blush.”

“With great power comes great responsibility,” I told him. “But... what made your opinion on Christmas shift so suddenly? What was the eureka moment?”

Tyler's hand slipped under my parka, under my shirt and below my thermal to touch my skin and damn if I didn't shiver. “I saw this older couple, possibly in their sixties, skating with their hands clasped. It seemed as if they'd done that for a long time, possibly years to be so in sync. I thought if... I wondered about what they'd have seen in those years, you know, the ups and downs that brought them closer and... I dunno—it just struck me.”

“The holidays tend to bring out those emotions,” I said. “It reminds people of what they've got to be thankful for and if someone is by your side for over thirty years, you can be sure that is something to be grateful for.”

His thumbs were making small circles on my skin. “You ever thought about that? Having someone by your side for ten, twenty years, fifty even?”

“I have,” I replied, finding the thick curls at the base of his head to dig my fingers into. “But not much recently.”

“Are you a dreamer, Willow?” he asked. “You know, for the perfect guy, flying in on his white horse?”

I wrinkled my nose. “If by horse you mean a decent vehicle, has a good job and has morals and virtues, yes. I don’t need some hotshot, rich guy and a castle in Beverly Hills to be happy. I don’t need to be jet around the world or eat at a Michelin place every night of the week. To be honest, I’d rather have a picnic in the back of a truck with greasy pizza and pink wine while having a true, honest, conversation. That’s not to say my standards are low—”

“No,” he stopped me. “I get it. You prefer who a person is instead of what they have.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but... being private isn’t that much of a turn off either.”

He laughed. “So...it’s two days to Christmas Eve. What are my next challenges?”

“Tomorrow night, you and I are serving a homeless shelter,” I said. “It’s a shelter my family funds and they cook meals for the homeless every week, but they do a grand dinner for Christmas. I serve there every year.”

Lips curling, Tyler pulled me in for a kiss. “Sure...baby.”

* * *

When I stepped into my dad’s office later the next morning to get the shelter’s phone number—I had misplaced mine—I found my uncle Herman digging through the file cabinet. I don’t think he heard the door opening because he was mumbling to himself and plucking papers out.

I stood there, wondering what he was doing and watched as he went to the copy machine and got it copying. I stepped in then. “Uncle? What are you—”

He whirled around and dropped the file. “Willow. Oh, my goodness, you startled me.”

“Sorry,” I said while scooping the folder up and looking at the name. “Victoria Hummel—common shareholder. Uncle, why are you looking up our shareholders?”

“Just to renew my files, Willow,” my uncle took the file and gave me a soothing smile. “I’ve asked your dad for a copy of these files over four times, but he keeps forgetting. I decided to come and do it myself. I have businesses with these people too so it’s only right for me to keep on top of it.”

“Oh.” That did sound reasonable...but why did I feel it was not as innocent as he made it look? “I get it.”

Going to Dad’s desk, I flipped through his rolodex and found the number for the charity then plugged it into my cell. “Will you be going to the Winslow’s Christmas party then?”

“Of course,” Uncle Herman nodded, while snatching up the copied file and adding it to the stack on the table. “I would not miss it for the world. Are you coming?”

“I’d rather have four root canals without Novocain and offer my arm to a shark,” I replied. “On the same day. I-I don’t want to be within fifty feet of Maxwell, uncle.”

“Why?” he asked, “Are you afraid he’ll try to woo you again?”

Woo? Who in this century used the word woo?

“No,” I smiled brightly. “It’s because I might very well put my foot up his ass and since I’m at a ball, that shoe would be spiked. At least five inches.”

He laughed. “Oh sweet girl. You always had your mom’s feistiness in you. I am glad it’s still there.”

He took his copied files and left. I called the shelter and checked in again, then after getting the confirmation, hung up. Going to the printer, I accessed the memory and printed copies

of what my uncle had done. Page after page, after page, thirty-five in all—a fraction of what my uncle had copied—were all clones of the assets of our common shareholders who held forty-nine shares between them all.

If what Uncle Herman had said was right about redoing his files, it was not that unremarkable. But—I couldn't understand why I felt this sickening churn in my gut.

These shareholders were the ones with voting rights to nominate board members of their choice and even top-level management. What was Uncle doing with these? Slipping them into a manilla folder, I dropped it off in my room then went to the living room where the tree was nearly fully decorated. The last thing to go on was the star at the top and Dad always wanted that part.

“... Why did I expect you to have gone all *Architectural Digest* on that thing?”

I spun around to see Tyler there, his arms filled with chopped wood for the fireplace. He was squinting at the tree, as if it were a math problem he could only solve by turning it upside down. “It's... pure chaos.”

I rolled my eyes, “Sometimes you need chaos.”

He hefted the stack. “Not this kind of chaos. It's like a Christmas elf... threw up on it.”

I smacked him. “Shut it.”

Laughing, he went to fill the fireplace with wood and stacked the rest on the racks beside it. Dusting his hands off, he asked, “What time are we going off to the shelter again?”

“Six,” I told him. “The shelter opens at six thirty, so we need to be there early to get our assigned positions.”

“Assigned positions?” his head jerked back. “So... I won't be that guy in *Oliver* who hears the kid saying, *Sir, I want some—*”

I smacked his arm again but giggle-snorted, “Jesus, you're incorrigible.”

He wagged his brows. “It's one of my best traits.”

Eyeing him, I asked, “What is your definition of best?”

He glanced around and I saw what he saw: the mistletoe and boughs on the mantles and across the fireplaces. The staircase balustrade wrapped with red and white, the festive red, white and green thrown pillows on the couch with old, knitted quilts on the back of them. The manor smelled of gingerbread, pine, and mistletoe, and I could not be happier.

The expression on Tyler’s face shifted to calm awe. “I don’t know how this is possible but this room—it’s you. It’s you in decorations.”

I frowned, “How do you figure?”

“Over there,” he pointed to a row of bows on the staircase. “Red, white and green bows but in between them, white, silver stars, all an inch and a half apart. Down to the exact centimeter, I guess. That’s your control and attention to detail. And then there’s that—” he nodded to the tree. “Baubles hung anywhere, wooden figures plopped on any branch, tinsel covering half of it in clumps and mere strings on the half. The lights are wrapped with so much red in one place I’m starting to think it’s a homing missile.”

I laughed. “I guess that’s my chaotic side.”

“You said it, not me,” he grinned. “I wonder where that side of you will come out next? Oh—what if when you have kids, you name one something proper like, William Alexander the third and the next kid’s gonna be named... Sparky.”

Grabbing a cushion, I flung it at him. “Oh my god, *shut up.*”

He grabbed the pillow and waved it, “You know I’m right.”

“I know you’re a dumbass,” I snickered and lunged for the pillow.

He held it like a football and shielded it from my attempts to grab it and when I did grab a handful, he held it over my head, forcing me to jump for it—and jerking it away every time. This was the one time I hated guys over six feet.

“Give—” jump “—to—” jump “—me!”

“Nope,” he grinned, ducking away and dangling the pillow two feet over my head. “I like making munchkins jump.”

Munchkins?

Oh hell no. That was it. I would have to climb him like a tree.

Grabbing his shoulder, I leaped up, locked my legs around his waist and reached for the pillow, grabbing it out of his hand with a victorious cry—

“...What is going on here?” Dad said behind me. “What in God’s name are you doing, Willow?”

If the ground opened and swallowed me whole, I’d be thankful. Mortified, I felt my face flame hotter than a thousand suns as I slipped down Tyler’s body and hit the floor, pillow in hand.

“It’s nothing, Dad,” I said, trying to keep a straight face. “Tyler and I were just playing around.”

Nervously, I looked at Tyler as he nodded, “Sorry, sir. We didn’t mean to get carried away.”

My dad shook his head and stuck out a hand and Tyler took it. “No harm done. It’s been a while since I’ve seen my daughter laugh that way. You’re one of the hands around here, right?”

“Dad,” I groaned.

“Yessir.” Tyler nodded. “And she’s recruited me into going with her to the homeless shelter you guys sponsor.”

“Ah, that’s my girl,” Dad grinned, while his cell rang.

He took it out of his pocket. “Excuse me—” he stepped away and listened, “...yes, this is he speaking ... Excuse me? You’re Ethan Vega’s PA and he wants a meeting with me? Is this a joke?”

My head snapped to Dad as his lips fixed tight. Tyler, had turned away, obviously to give Dad some privacy, but my heart was hammering in my ears. A call from the Vega family?

After all the years Dad had tried to get a hold of them? Was this a trick? Why now?

“Um, Willow?” Tyler said quietly. “Do you need anything else? If not, I’ll head out.”

I shot a look at him, then back to Dad. “I’ll catch up with you later. For now, I need to go talk to Dad.”

He smiled, tugged his beanie out from his pocket and jammed it on his head. “See you later.”

With a nod, I turned and dropped the pillow to the couch then hurried to find Dad. He was in his office, but now on his landline and had a notepad in front of him. He looked up at me, just before he pressed the speaker button and rested the phone in its cradle.

“Clarkston here,” Dad said.

A strange voice came on. “Mister Clarkston, it’s Ethan Vega. I know this must seem out of the ordinary, and it truly is. I had no idea that you had asked my father for a collaboration years ago to promote the region’s beverages. Before I go any further, I must apologize. It was not fair, nor was it right, but I think you know, well, half of the state knows how my family and the Sullivans were at war for years. Sadly, your petition got swept under the rug in light of that feud.

“However, Mia Sullivan, who found out that her father had gotten the same request from you, sends her apologies as well. I believe she will go into deeper detail on that when she calls, but you are right. We do need to collaborate on making a joint promotion, your company, mine and Mia’s. And for further clarification, Mia and I are engaged.”

My dad’s mouth dropped, and shock painted his face. Me, not so much, I’d gotten a hint of that from seeing the post on Instagram. Dad recovered quickly though. “Well, I am... taken aback, but my best wishes for you.”

“Thank you,” Vega said, “I appreciate it. Now, are you willing to start on this collaboration, even a decade later than what you had planned?”

Dad nodded, even though the man couldn't see it. "Of course. Better late than never, Vega. How would you like to proceed?"

I left the room, feeling like I was walking in a dream. How was it, that after all these years, this was happening? I'd been so sure that those two families wanted nothing to do with us—but now, I might have to take that back.

I checked my watch; only three more hours until we were needed at the homeless shelter. I couldn't wait to tell Tyler.

Chapter Thirteen

Cole

“A hair net,” I deadpanned, then looked at Willow over the organizer of the shelter. “Seriously?”

“Hygiene standards,” the lady smiled handing me the ball of...what was it, gauze?

Unraveling the thing, I gazed as if it had offended me. With a grumble, I slid it over my head and tucked my hair—it had grown longer than I usually wore it—under it.

Looking down at the apron I had on and the gloves on my hands, I laughed. “I feel like the lunch lady at my high school.”

“Good,” Willow said, while straightening her own get-up. “That’s what we’re going for.”

“She also had an overbite and a lazy eye,” I added.

Willow rolled her eyes, “We’re not going for that though...” As she tucked her ponytail in, she added, “The strangest thing happened today earlier. Do you remember when I said that the Vega and Sullivan family were elitist pricks who shunned us from day one?”

I managed to hide the cringe. “Yes...but I don’t think you used those exact words though.”

“Well, that’s what I meant anyway,” she shrugged. “Earlier, out of the blue, Ethan Vega called Dad, apologized to him about his father’s dismissal, and asked to collaborate with him. He says he is pulling the Sullivans into it because he’s dating one of them, Mia.”

I tried to make it look like this was the first time I had heard all this, while inside, I was beaming with relief and pride that Ethan had done as I had asked him to do.

With a soft smile, I said, “I guess miracles do happen at Christmas.”

“Yeah, I think they do.” Tipping her toes, she kissed my cheek, and her eyes were filled with an emotion I really did not want to examine too closely. “Now, channel your inner lunch lady, we’ve got people to serve.”

* * *

Three hours later—and God only knew how the fuck I could have held my emotions in check for so long—I slipped away when the shift change happened and ducked outside into the twilight.

Resting my head on the cold brick in the back alley, I let out a long breath and saw it form crystals right in front of my eyes. Looking up at the sliver of a silvery moon, I swallowed. Coming from money, I had never even imagined how those lesser fortunate than I had went about life.

I had an inkling now.

“Tyler?” Willow’s wondering voice came as she pushed the creaky service door open. “Are you out here?”

“Yeah—” my voice was so hoarse it felt strange to my ears. Clearing my throat, I tried again, “Yeah, I’m here.”

She took one look at me, smiled and wrapped her arms around my middle. Without thought, I dropped my hand to her hip and pressed my cold nose into her hair. “I know,” she said. “It hit me like a freight train too the first time I came here.”

I bit back a pitiful sound. “I never... I mean, never imagined how one hot meal could make someone’s day that much better. I mean, they only have the clothes on their backs and a few possessions but...but they look like they won the lottery. I even saw a kid playing with a plastic truck with three wheels on it and looked like he’d gotten a whole set. I-I-”

“Shh, baby,” she whispered, “It’s all right.”

Sliding my hand from her hip to the middle of her back, I pressed her tight and buried my face in her hair while my chest burned with shame. I had to get Ethan on something like this right away; or fuck, start one myself. I had the money for it.

We stayed that way until I felt, for sure, that my nose was going to drop off my face and land splat on the ground as a hunk of ice. We hustled back into the warm, toasty shelter to grab our own slices of pecan pie and coffee, only we ate at a tiny table in the kitchen.

“Now, you see why I come here,” Willow said quietly. “It reminds me of what I should be thankful for and why people like me and my family should give back when we can.”

I picked at my pie, mired in my emotions. I hoped Willow would chalk it up to me being thrown for a loop with first being around homeless people. She didn’t know how twisted up I was; I wanted to tell her who I truly was and hoped beyond hope she wouldn’t kill me.

Hey Willow, um, so you might want to know that I am truly Cole Vega in disguise. Surprise!

Bile surged into my mouth. She would hate me for sure.

Her hand rested warm on my forearm and her eyes were heavy with sympathy. “I know you’re shaken right now, but this is the lesser of two devils. Sure, we can’t give them everything they need, but making sure they know where they can find something warm and have a bed for a night or two makes a lot of difference, believe me.”

It didn’t make me feel that much better, but it did ease some tension in my chest. “Thank you.”

She smiled and sat back, taking her coffee with her and a contemplative look slipped over her face. Her expression was totally incongruous with the happiness and as the silence stretched, I got concerned.

Shifting my empty plate away, I placed my forearms on the table and leaned in. “What’s troubling you?”

“I—” she shook her head, “I may be off here but this deal my dad is cutting with Maxwell’s dad feels off to me. And on top of that, I just caught my uncle Herman being really shady.”

I frowned. “How shady?”

“Like photocopying the profiles of the shareholders who have voting rights in the company,” Willow replied, setting her cup down. “I don’t know, he says they are for his private records but I... a part of me calls bullshit on that one.”

“Why?”

“Every April when Dad redoes the shareholder records, they are sent to each shareholder for transparency reasons,” Willow said. “Of course, he could have lost his hard copy... but I don’t want to buy whatever he’s selling me. And paired with Maxwell’s dad suddenly getting involved with the company... I’ve just got this itch under my skin.”

“Do you really think it is shady or are you upset about seeing the father of the man who betrayed you so badly?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed but then she let out a long breath and slumped into herself. “Can it be both? I never expected to see either Winslow again. I mean, that man is known for being... difficult. I know for a fact that he’s been called a bastard, an arrogant son of a bitch, a dictator and that was from the people who like him. I’m worried his cutthroat tactics will wheedle themselves into my dad’s business and make us as soulless as the corporations Winslow runs.”

Wait... is she hinting at something more? Does this man have a history of taking over companies that are not his? Does he do Hostile Takeovers?

“Oh,” I uttered only—because, what could anyone say to that? “Do you trust your gut?”

“Always,” she replied, then grimaced. “Even when I should have listened to it.”

If she felt something was wrong—maybe something was wrong. I had many ways of finding things out and if I could fether out whatever was going on here, innocent or not, it could help ease her worry.

But I couldn’t do it here with my crappy tablet and phone; I needed the setup I had back home, tripe monitors and a fast Ryzen 7 processor.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” I ducked my head. “I need to run out of town tomorrow, but I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

Her brows furrowed. “Is something wrong?”

“Not exactly,” I said, fishing for a believable lie, “I just need to sort out a few things with a storage container I have some stuff in. I need to move the stuff to another unit.”

“Oh,” she shrugged her shoulder. “I don’t envy you. Just make sure you get back in time. It’s Christmas Eve after all.”

Reaching over to grasp her hand, I smiled, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

* * *

The beep from my monitors pinged in the air just before they all came alive. I cracked my knuckles and pulled up a program I’d written to do a deep dive in the dark web where secrets lingered in lines of zeros and ones.

What came up didn’t surprise me as much as it should have. The more I read, the more a hollow feeling carved itself into my stomach. Maximillian Winslow was not only a man who came from old money—the sort that had his own private island in the Bahamas by sixteen—or a man who spearheaded billion-dollar companies across the world from his 45th penthouse office in Manhattan, the man was a secret venture capitalist.

Fifteen years ago, he’d secretly provided seed money for a small start-up company called Vexxon Corp, a prosthetics company that had turned into one of the most lucrative venture capital investments of the past decade.

From there, he moved on to another medical company that paid him back a thousandfold and the list went on. Winslow raked in capital across the world that he could sell and buy the city he worked in three times over.

The man was a secret titan in the venture capitalist world.

Did Willow know this about her ex-boyfriend's Dad? Maybe she did have a reason to be concerned. I dug deeper and deeper, following breadcrumbs like they'd been dropped in a godforsaken forest.

At one point, I began to get disgusted by his actions—how much money did someone reasonably need? When I read how he'd "charitably" donated fertilizer to an Indonesian farm of palm oil—a farm owned by his competitors, mind you—that so happened to kill every plant, I added bio terrorist to the list.

The printer churned with another page I'd printed because there was no way I couldn't give Willow the ammunition she would damn well need to refuse this bastard's buy into the company.

If it hasn't already happened, that is.

Looking back to the many meetings Ethan and I had sat in about shareholder acquisition, lawyers needed days, some times weeks, to draw up the papers because each investor was unique. There wasn't a *pro forma* template to download off the internet, drop your John Hancock on and it would be made law. Maybe I had time.

Shoving from the chair, I went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and looked around my flat. It was not as clinical as Ethan's was, with the stark colors and lateral lines, but it was... empty. Bracing my elbows on the counter, I thought back to the happily ignorant days bringing women here, women who had no expectations of me and me having none of them, to have a hot night and part ways in the morning.

Now—now, I felt different. I was shocked at how twenty days could change a person. Back when I knew I had a comfy office to sit at, could just hop on Amazon and order anything I wanted, and cruise clubs night after night, I didn't have a care in the world.

Not about the working man.

Not about the poor or homeless.

Blithely calling Clarkston ciders pig swill.

I was disappointed by that person.

Possibly disgusted too.

The coffee maker beeped, and I took my cup of hot joe to drop some cream and sugar in before going back to my desk. Gazing at the screen, an odd thought came to me—did Winslow use the corporate communication app X-Sat that me and Ethan used at times?

If he did, did he know about the secret glitch in the system that backed up messages to the cloud but could be accessed by anyone with the same number? Maybe they did know and didn't give a damn. I knew I didn't back then when I only saw through the eyes of a corporate mogul. What peon would have the balls to hack me when I was richer than Midas?

But how do I go about getting Maxmillian's number?

Drumming my fingers on the desk, I thought through my ideas; I could ask Willow for it, but that would look suspicious, and I'd have to answer for that tomorrow. Or—I could take the harder route, make a fake page on Instagram and bait Maxwell, the horny douchebag.

Rolling my neck, I grunted, "Here we go."

It took two hours, a takeout meal from a Chinese place down the lane, a glass of scotch and mobile game of ping-pong until the douche took the bait. He sent his phone number with a text, *hit me up. I'll make it worth your while.*

"Oh, I am going to hit you all right," I snorted while loading the cloning program with his digits.

No, it was not legal, I damned well knew it, but I was ten million miles down the rabbit hole by now and there was a spark of light at the end. If there was nothing there, then, I'd delete it and forget all about it—but if there was something, I would not hide it. This could be the one thing that saved Willow and her father from destruction, if that was where Winslow was heading.

As I waited for the program to load, I made another cup and texted Ethan.

Thank you for doing as I'd asked.

Dropping the phone, I rubbed my face. Even if I did find something nefarious, how could Willow get a hold of it? Could I just walk up to her and hand her a stack of papers about Winslow? What about an anonymous drop on her doorstep?

“That wouldn’t work, idiot.” I huffed. “They could always say it was baseless propaganda and deep fake shit. That wouldn’t fly, but what would though?”

The program loaded and I grinned, accessed the app and started scrolling through the messages until I came to a set of voice notes.

“...*When are you going to start on it?*” that was Maxwell’s incensed voice. “*I gave you all the details you needed, Dad.*”

Details? On what?

“*Calm down, Maxwell,*” Maxmillian said calmly. “*We’re working on it. The offers have been sent, and some of them are taking the money. In due time, we’ll have enough to force our hand.*”

That did not sound good. I clicked on a third voice note.

“*Well hurry the hell up.*” Maxwell snarled. “*They need to know you cannot cross a Winslow and get away with it.*”

Wait...was this something else? Were they talking about some other company or some other moneybag’s family that stepped on the young douche’s toe or something? I clicked another voice note but this was not one I recognized.

“*Your father is right, Maxwell,*” the man said. “*We’ve laid the groundwork, buying out the other shareholders and now we almost have enough. When they take our more than generous offer to buy in, your father’s shares, combined with mine, will be enough to take over Clarkston’s Ciders—*”

My mouth dropped and my blood turned to ice.

“—*Getting revenge on your ex-girlfriend is not the only applicable motif here,*” the man said. “*My brother has been screwing me over for years, shutting me out of managerial decisions and ignoring my ideas. Ideas that would have made*

us take over the Sullivans and the fucking Vegas years ago. Now though, he will have no choice but to take the backseat and watch.”

I felt as if something had stabbed a spear right through my gut.

This was Willow’s uncle, the same man who she had seen copying shareholder files—and now I knew why.

My stomach lurched and I shot up, barely making it to the bathroom before vomiting in the sink. Grabbing the porcelain, I heaved up the remains of my dinner and after that, acidic, frothing spit. A cold sweat was washing my forehead, and trickling down my back but I ducked my hands under the water to splash icy liquid onto my face.

Once, twice, a third time until my hair was dripping with it too.

“Jesus Christ,” I murmured, looking into my sallow reflection. My knuckles were white as I gripped the sink’s rim. “How two-faced can some family members really be? Her fucking uncle teaming up with her traitorous ex and his despicable father. This is...fucking vile.” I swallowed. “Willow’s gut feeling was right on the money.”

But how do I tell her?

I doubt she would listen to anything I had to say if I came clean about who I was before that. And tomorrow—I didn’t know what Willow had planned for that night, but one thing was for sure; we would end up in bed at one point. That was another thing; could I sleep with this woman under such false pretenses?

Goddamnit. I had dug myself a hole so deep I might as well surface in China.

Grabbing a towel, I wiped the dampness away then hunched over the sink again. Looking into the mirror, I saw steely determination enclose my gaze. Whatever happens to me, whatever pain I’d suffer after this, it would be worth it because I was going to let Willow know about the traitor in her family.

One way or another.

Chapter Fourteen

Willow

I woke up that morning with one thing, or truly, person, on my mind—Tyler.

With a silly smile, I turned over in bed, hugged my pillow to my chest and closed my eyes. We'd be taking a trip to Denver tonight to a hotel I'd booked in advance for us to stay the night, away from any interruptions. I knew I'd said New Year's Night...but I was getting overly anxious, and inside, a bubbling kettle of need.

Tyler was nothing but a perfect gentleman; funny, intelligent, spontaneous man with the chemistry I'd never felt before. A pull, a desire, simmered just below the surface whenever I was around him. I felt it, and the more I was around him, the stronger it got. I could tell that Tyler felt it, too, as there were times when he would look at me and I would see something more in his eyes than lust or casual friendship.

It left me confused and unsure how to proceed with him at times, but...we'd agreed to keep this casual, right?

Flopping on my back, I rolled my eyes, huffing. Who the hell was I kidding? This had passed casual and was heading into dangerous territory and would get even worse when we finally had sex.

What I hadn't counted on was liking being around him so much, the companionship that went along with it, and the ease that we had with each other. It seemed strange how close I felt to him even though we had been together for two weeks and a half.

We had been slowly getting to know each other for weeks, but this just took things to a whole new level. Not only in our friendship and how we were around each other, but also how I felt about him as a man. A very sexy man who I had imagined kissing me in more places than I had ever had before.

But what comes after?

Why did I even have to ask that question? Couldn't I just live in the moment and not worry about the ramifications, or the future? A little good sex didn't hurt anyone.

My alarm went off and I rolled over to shut it off, slid out of bed and winced at the cold floor. Shoving my feet into my house slippers, I went to the bathroom to clean up, grabbed a robe and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Dad was already there, sipping a glass of green tea and paging through a file. I winced in sympathy. I didn't know what it was like to start a day off without coffee and hopefully, I wouldn't have to.

"Morning," I smiled, my gaze dropping to the file before I rolled my eyes. "C'mon, Dad, you cannot seriously be working on Christmas Eve. It's a holiday for a reason."

He looked up and his lips twitched. "Sometimes, it's not that easy to shut it off."

I reached over, closed the file and slid it to me. "Take a breather. Let's go play tennis and go to lunch. Oh, I'm going over to Jackie's tonight for her house party. I'll be back tomorrow."

Dad smiled, "I'd love that, and tell Jackie hello for me when you see her."

Returning his smile, I added, "Meet me back here in twenty minutes?"

"Sure, sweetheart," he kissed my cheek. "Loser pays for lunch."

* * *

Two hours later, after showering at the club's locker rooms and redressed, I joined Dad in the dining room, smiling. I'd won, but that was no surprise—Dad always let me win at tennis. I don't think he knew that I knew, but even if he did, I was not going to say a word about it. It made him happy to spoil me sometimes.

Dad was smiling, truly smiling, the ends of his hair curling at the collar of his fresh polo. Choosing a seat by the window, we ordered. Dad got the club breakfast, poached eggs, crispy and cheesy potatoes, roasted Campari tomato and thick cut Beeler's Bacon.

"Really, Dad?" I laughed. "All that grease and cheese?"

"Don't snitch to Dr. Hallow," he said while handing the menu off. "I cheat some days."

I had banana foster pancakes with seasonal fruit and Chantilly cream before we talked about what was going to happen at the compound later on with the Christmas Eve lunch. In the lull between ordering and getting our food, I asked Dad a question I'd wanted to ask for months, well, years, really.

"Dad, do you ever think about dating again?" I asked softly. "You know Mom wouldn't like to know you're living like this. And don't tell me about the business being more important."

He sighed and cut into his bacon. "I've thought about it, Willow, I really have but sometimes it feels so hard. I know you can't empathize with this... but sometimes I feel like I'm tarnishing your mom's memory if I do go and date again."

Internally, I winced.

I could understand his fealty to Mom, but even so, I didn't want him to be constantly trapped in this cycle of regret and loneliness.

"I'm... I just want you to be happy, Dad," I said.

"I'll sort it out eventually," he replied. "Don't worry about your old man, girlie."

"I know you will," I replied, cutting a bite.

"So, is this when you're going to tell me you're dating that guy Tyler?" he asked.

I choked and he chuckled.

Barely managing to swallow, I gulped orange juice to clear the airway. “Dad!”

“Come on,” he snorted. “This is a tiny town, sweetheart. People have seen you two.”

I grumbled, “And here I thought people would keep their noses out of other people’s business.”

“You were wrong,” Dad laughed.

I shook my head. “It’s not a big thing, Dad. We’re just... having fun. He’s not a Christmas guy, and I’m trying to show him what it’s really about.”

“With hot chocolate?” he teased.

“And tree decorating, tacos and ice-skating,” I added. “He’s a klutz by the way.”

“Well, have fun. I am not going to pry—” Dad said while his left brow lifted high with expectations, “—but you know you can come to me if anything.”

“You don’t mind that he’s a... normal guy?” I asked. “Like not sickeningly rich.”

“Why should I?” he asked. “Happiness doesn’t come from money. You should know this.”

The allusion to Maxwell made me grimace, which circled back to the niggling feeling in my gut. “Dad, are you sure about bringing Winslow into the business?”

“I know you have reservations, honey but it will be a good thing.”

“I just—” I closed my utensils and reached for my juice. “It just gives me the Ick.”

“The...ick?” he asked.

“Internet slang,” I said. “But seriously, Dad, Maxmillian is not a good man or an easy one to deal with. He’s a tyrant and he will try to shift your business methods into more cutthroat ones just to milk every cent out of you.”

Dad's face shifted to somber, "I know all about Winslow and how he is a capitalist boardroom shark, but he is not going to bully me into doing things that will rake in money at the detriment of those who are the backbone of the business."

I wanted to believe him, I truly did, but I still had my reservations. "Dad, yesterday, I found Uncle Herman copying files of our common shareholders and he told me it was for his files, but...I don't know, it felt off."

"Herman is absent-minded at times," Dad said with a dismissive wave. "He misplaces things a lot, so I don't see how getting more files is that strange. I'm sure it's nothing, Willow."

I hoped he was right.

I really did.

* * *

After exiting the bathroom in the large house Jackie's friend had rented for the party, I paused, trying to find Tyler. He'd been oddly quiet down the ride to Denver, but I supposed he was thinking—just like I was—about how the time we had together was ticking down to its expiry date.

Techno music was bumping through the speakers, and I wove my way through the partying crowd, looking here and there for Tyler. I found him at the makeshift bar, pressing a cold beer to his temple.

I didn't like that.

Worried, I went to him and touched his shoulder. When he turned, I held his face. "Are you all right? Not having fun?"

He gave me a pale smile. "I know you're here for your friend and everything but...I have a headache and this bass is not making it better."

My heart dropped. "We can leave. Let me just say goodbye to Jackie."

As he nodded and headed to the door, I went to find my friend. She was playing beer pong at the end of the room and I pulled her to the side for a moment.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her brown-hazel eyes instantly worried.

“Tyler’s not feeling well,” I said, thinking back to when we had just arrived and she was all agog about meeting him. “We’re going to leave a bit early.”

“Oh,” Jackie nodded. “It’s fine, Willow. Seriously, if you stay any longer, this is going to turn into a mosh pit.” She hugged me tightly. “I’m glad to see you and your dude seems to be a good guy.”

“He is,” I replied.

I hadn’t told her much about what me and Tyler were; I’d just told her we’d met a few weeks ago and were seeing how this thing would go. Later on, when I had a chance, we’d do one of our two-hour calls and I’d tell her everything, but for now, she knew enough.

We said goodbye again and I headed out to find Tyler leaning on the side of the truck, huddled into his jacket but head tilted up at the cold disk of our winter moon. He looked upset and sad at the same time.

“Hey,” I rested a hand on his chest and peered up at him. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head. “I’m leaving in two days, Willow.”

I circled my hand around his waist. “I know. But we had fun, didn’t we?”

Tyler nodded, but I could see in his eyes that he wanted to say so much more, but he kissed me instead. His arm pulled me to him as his mouth gently descended on mine. My hands slid up his shoulders and to his back as my mouth opened and his tongue slid inside. I clung to him as the kiss intensified rapidly.

It was slow and tender but—it was the most intense kiss I had ever had. He was not chasing anything. There was no rush

to get into the bed or to back me up against a wall. This wasn't the kiss of a man who was sorry to leave. It was more, so much more. It felt like he wanted to make sure that I didn't forget about him.

His kiss said: *I don't want—I don't want to leave you.*

When we pulled apart, I clung to him because I knew my legs had gone out from under me with the intensity of that kiss. He buried his face in my hair and I felt my heartbeat echo in my ears. I felt more loved and cherished in that moment than I had in any other moment in my entire life.

“Where next, baby?” he asked. “Home?”

“No,” I peeled away reluctantly, “Not home. You'll see.”

* * *

Stepping into the five-star hotel suite, I barely had time to close the door before Tyler backed me against it. I could feel the urgency in how he kissed me; in the way his body pressed up against mine and in the soft moan that came out of his mouth. His tongue pressed up against my mouth, demanding entrance and I opened for him.

His hands dipped under my thighs and suddenly I was off the ground as he kissed me hard into the door. He pushed his body toward me, letting me feel—even through two sets of denim—how much he wanted me.

“Willow—” he whispered. “—There's something I need to tell you.”

I grabbed his head. “Tell me later, kiss me now.”

He pulled away, “It's important—”

“I'm sure it is, but not as important as how much I want you,” I replied, before kissing him.

We kissed long enough and hard enough that by the time I came up for air, all I wanted was him in bed. From the look in his eyes, he wanted the same. Tyler moved his mouth down

my neck kissing and licking on the skin there, sealing his lips over my pulse point and sucked—hard. I cried out.

His mouth found my ear. “I don’t want to fuck you tonight, Willow—” my heat plummeted a little because...what was this then? But he added, “You’re worth more than a fuck. I want to make love to you. I want to kiss and lick and worship every part of your body.”

“Jesus,” I whispered. I wanted to add. *You scared me for a bit*, but the words would not come out of my mouth.

He laughed, “Just me, baby.”

Easily, he lifted me off the door and headed to the bedroom where he gently rested me on the edge of the bed before standing and shucking his jacket, shirt and thermal off. The moisture in my mouth turned to dust as the material lifted off; his shoulders and arms were corded with ropey sinew, and blocks of muscle paved his torso.

Light brown, almost blond-ish hair covered his chest, a thin sprinkling narrowed into a line over his abdomen, the trail leading into the waistband of his trousers. My gaze dipped lower, my heart pounding at the sizable bulge of his manhood.

“Like what you see?” he teased.

“More than like,” I replied. “You’re hot.”

He dropped to his knees and slid his hand up my legs. “You’re sexier.”

Slowly, he undid my boots and set them aside, peeled the socks away and leaned in to kiss me again. Each kiss was better than the last. I thought I would burst with how good he felt, how good I knew he was going to make me feel.

His hand slid under my top and pulled it off, taking the thermal with it. He moaned into my mouth and quickly took off my bra. We continued to kiss as his hands cupped my breasts. My nipples went diamond hard, and I wanted him to touch them, suck them—and my secret kink, bite them. He took my right nipple into his mouth, sucked on it and nibbled a little but when I arched into his touch, he bit down a little harder, sending my nerve endings spinning.

I wrapped an arm around him and spun him under me, then straddled him, rubbed my butt on his crotch and ran my hands up and down his chest, loving the feel of his pecs and surprised at how big they were.

His hands went to my sides and gripped me. “I can see what you’re thinking, and my answer is—” my back met the bed again and he held me down “—you can suck my cock later. It’s all about you now.”

Dipping his head, he kissed down my body, moving his way toward my stomach, shifting lower. He took his time as if he could take all night if he wanted to while slowly stripping my clothes off.

I wanted to feel a lick of embarrassment at being bare, but the heat doubling through my veins, searing under my skin, and the lust clawing at my insides, stopped me. Half off the bed, he placed a hand on each of my knees and held my gaze as he spread my legs wide apart.

“God you’re so sexy.” He murmured as he hooked his hands behind my knees and tugged me to the end of the bed.

He leaned down, swiping the flat of his tongue up my slit and the barrage of sensation bombarding my head had me gasping for air. I arched up at the feel of his mouth on me and slid my fingers into his hair, tugging.

Already drunk with lust, I pushed my pussy against his ravenous mouth, and he ate me until I couldn’t do anything but gasp and moan. He parted my folds, stabbing his tongue into my pussy while he rubbed my swollen clit.

Just as I couldn’t take anymore, he pulled away, sealed his lips over my clit and slid two fingers inside me. I came while screaming.

Chapter Fifteen

Cole

Watching Willow shatter apart at my touch made my chest feel so full, I knew with absolute certainty that I would never see anything as beautiful as that again.

The pleasure-daze in her eyes, the flush that spread across her cheeks, made me want to give her the world and everything in between. The mix of lust, love, and admiration had me kissing her lips and softly fingering her pussy.

“You are so goddamn beautiful,” he murmured.

I slid my finger in and out of her, murmuring constant encouragement in her ear, telling her how perfect she was, how hot, how sexy I found her. Willow turned her eyes to me. “Is it my turn yet?”

“No,” I chuckled, slipping off the bed and stripping off my pants and boxer-briefs. “Not yet. I still have about a hundred and one things I want to do you and I haven’t even cracked five of them yet.”

She smiled. “Like what?”

“Every position in the Kama Sutra,” I told her before grabbing something out of my overnight bag and getting back on the bed. “I want you on your hands and knees, I want you riding me, I want so many fucking things, Willow. But—” I slid in between her legs. “—let’s start with the first.”

Dropping the strip of condoms beside a pillow, I made do on my promise to kiss and lick every inch of her, indulging in lapping at her pussy a few times and sucking her breasts. For the most part, though, I teased her in unexpected places until she was shaking.

“I need you, Tyler,” she said, again and again. “Now, *please*.”

I couldn’t deny her—I was crawling out of my skin with lust too. She lay there, legs open for me, her gaze hot and heavy, while I reached for the condoms and put one on.

Willow was breathing as fast as I was, and she reached for me as I flung her legs over my shoulders and guided my cock between her legs.

With my body hot and burning with need, I bent to kiss her while inching in. God, she was tight, a vice grip around my swollen cock, but she was the perfect fit. I felt her arch into me, her velvet channel so hot around me.

Seated, I nuzzled her ear. “Okay, baby?”

“Yes.” She gripped my shoulders, moaning, “So very good.”

Slowly, I began to move—making tender, soulful plunges that I hoped showed her this was more than a fuck for me. Willow ran her hands down my side, over my back to my flexing pelvis. She dug her fingers into my skin. “Don’t stop.”

“Never.” I kissed her collarbone.

I kept the slow, rolling pace for as long as I could until fire was sizzling up my spine and I couldn’t hold back. I let one leg slip and held onto the other one as I took her. “Want it harder, baby?”

“Yes,” she replied breathlessly.

I let loose and pounded into her, slamming my hips into the backs of her thighs, drilling my turgid shaft into her core. Willow was a live wire around me, moving in counterpoint to my thrusts; taking everything I gave her and begging for more.

Dipping a hand between us, I found her clit, circling and pressing it in time with my pistoning cock. I captured a nipple between my lips and sucked—and Willow came like a homing missile had found its target. Back arching off the bed, head thrown back as her nails sunk into my skin, she came, her pussy rippling along my cock, gasping as liquid pleasure burst inside her.

I didn’t stop thrusting, fierce in chasing my own end. Her body pulsed around me and I came with a garbled shout, as pleasure detonated behind my eyes. Together, our breathing slowed, with our gazes still locked to each other. I pulled away

and dealt with the condom. Sated, connected, whole, I drew her into my arms and kissed her again.

I could see that Willow was fighting sleep as she lay on my chest, and I smiled. “It’s all right. Go to sleep, baby. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Except, I wasn’t.

While she slept, guilt ripped up my insides like a ravenous shark, twisting the happy emotions I had just felt into a pit of dark despair and hollow shame. I knew I couldn’t stay with her any longer as Tyler Burrows. I had to become Cole Vega again and do it very soon.

About two a.m., I googled car rental services and found one merely a block away from the hotel. I slipped out of bed, dressed and forced myself not to look at Willow lying so peacefully behind me.

Finally, as I got my boots on, I paused. I needed to do something, something to make her understand my midnight run—but what? Tugging out a drawer, I took out the notepads they always had in here and wrote out a note, ending it with, ‘*One day soon, I’ll explain all of this. X*’.

I felt like a bastard.

Turning to look at her, I sealed the image of her tousled hair and peaceful face into my memories in case I would never see it again. Despite my common sense, I edged up to the bed and tucked a thick lock of hair from her eyes, and she stirred a little. Her eyes fluttered but didn’t open and I leaned in to brush a light kiss over her temple.

“Please don’t hate me.”

Moving away, I grabbed my wallet and overnight bag and left the room, determined to get back to my home. I knew Winslow was up to something nefarious, but I didn’t know exactly what it was. I felt like every moment that passed was a chance to find out—and stop him.

* * *

The first thing I did when I got to my house was to boot up the computer and log into the app, let it load then took the quickest shower known to man. I didn't even remember that it was Christmas Day until Google's merry little banner reminded me.

I shot off a quick text to Ethan, Dad and Mom before plunking myself in front of the screen and got to searching. Instantly, I saw the string of voice notes and accessed them.

Maximillian: *"We're almost there, just need to purchase fifteen more shareholders' shares and we'll have the green light to go on."*

"I have a few other names to call and convince. I know they will take the offer instantly. Sadly, we'll have to get them in January. From now until the new year, they will be on holiday," Herman said.

I did not like where I knew it was going.

"Clarkston won't know what hit him," Maxwell snarled viciously.

"A motherfucking hostile takeover," I muttered. "That is what they're planning... to take over Willow's company and force them to sit to the side. Fucking assholes."

A long time ago, I'd learned to treat a business like it was a country and if hostile forces were coming to our borders, we had to repel them. I knew what to do when my hand was forced and this time—for Willow's sake—I was not holding back.

Grimacing, I logged on to the Clarkston Cider's website and got to the document page. Grabbing a notepad and a pen, I went to work.

As I worked, the calls began to come in, texts followed and even a voice note from Willow, but I couldn't take any of them. Hearing her voice would crack me open harder than if you flung an egg into a wall.

I forced myself to concentrate on my work, but the merest twitch from my cell had me aching in tender and vulnerable places.

Half an hour passed before the last call from Willow ran out to voicemail and I slumped over the keyboard with my hands gripping my hair and pulling. My breath was coming in and whooshing out as if I'd just run a marathon and I knew I was on the verge of a panic attack—or a complete breakdown.

“Stay strong, Cole,” I ground out through grit teeth. “Stay strong. If she ends up hating me... at least I did this for her.”

But that only made my heart split in half. How would I go on knowing the woman I loved more than life... hated me?

* * *

Willow

He still wouldn't answer.

I was staring down at the cell, at the five unanswered calls, the four texts that still had red dots. The voice message was unread as well. The reality of what I was submerged in was getting clearer and clearer—I'd been ditched on Christmas morning by the man I was falling in love with.

What had caused this?

Dropping the cell on the bed, I covered my face and tried to breathe. Maybe this was a big misunderstanding; I had it wrong...but his missing overnight bag told me differently. Tyler had run away from me like I was the plague or something.

Why had he run?

Something tugged at the edge of my mind and as I fought to catch it, I heard Tyler whisper, “Please don't hate me.”

I bit my lip. That was from this morning, early this morning. For some reason, I thought I'd dreamed it—but no, he had said it. Again—why? The questions kept coming but the only person who could answer them was Tyler. Last night, he had made love to me, and my body still felt the aftereffects

of his sweet touches. But this sudden disappearance? It made no sense.

Sighing, I left the bed and headed to the shower. I had to get out of here soon anyway. Stepping into the shower, I felt my heart progressively sink to the soles of my feet. I didn't even feel disappointed or sad.

I felt empty.

Hollow.

Like a void.

To think that I'd gone to sleep wrapped around a man whose tiniest flicker of his lips made my heart play the maraca. I'd thought...I'd thought that somehow, we could make it work, find a way to be together, even if he was a transient worker.

But I woke up alone.

Had Tyler been playing me all this time? Even those moments when I thought there was more to his gaze when he looked at me. I knew three weeks, twenty-one days, was hardly enough time for anyone to fall in love, but a part of me had hoped.

Now, that hope had burned itself out, just like I knew our relationship would have.

I washed slowly, reluctantly, not willing to wash away Tyler's scent or touch—but what could I do? He was gone, which meant he had gotten what he wanted and was never coming back. What else was there for me to do but listen to his actions and forget his words?

I washed off, stepped out and wrapped a towel around me. I swiped a hand over the mirror. My reflection was a horror story—pale skin, blank eyes but kiss swollen lips. I left the room in a silent fury, the only sound was the *pat, pat, pat* of my feet on the tile.

As I reached for my cell, I saw a notepad under it. How had I not noticed that? Plucking it up, I saw a note written in a strong, slashing masculine hand.

Willow,

You have no idea how hard it is for me to leave you here, asleep and so beautiful, but I had to leave. There are some things back home that I need to attend to, and a few of them involve you. I promise, one day soon, I will explain all of this.
X.

What the hell did that mean?

What did he have to attend to that included me?

Dropping the note into my handbag, I dressed quickly, grabbed my bags and headed out to check out. At the desk, I paused, “Can you tell me when Tyler Burrows checked out?”

The lady nodded and tapped on her keys. “I’m sorry, I don’t see any notes here.”

“How about if he rented a car?” I asked.

She checked again. “I am sorry, miss, no records. But there is a rental down the street from here. Maybe he went there?”

“Could be,” I replied. “Thank you.”

I headed out the door and stepped onto the snow-dusted sidewalk. My head twisted to the west where the rental service was—but I shook my head and headed to the car park and my truck. If Tyler had gone there... what was the sense of even finding out? He was gone anyway.

Gripping the steering wheel, I sucked in a breath. “Shake it off, Willow. It’ll be all right.”

Except it wasn’t.

When I got home, it took all my strength to attend brunch with Dad and then escape to my room. I should have known my respite would not be too long—because half an hour later, Dad was at my door with a plate of cherry pie and sweet cider.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asked kindly, toeing off his shoes and joining me on the bed.

“I’d rather not,” I replied, letting my head drop onto his shoulder. Taking the saucer from him, I halfheartedly cut into the pie and ate it. I loved my dad’s attitude toward my

problems; I appreciated how he would let me figure them out on my own, while I knew for a fact that if I called for the calvary, he would come charging.

I finished the slice and sat to the side, gazing into nowhere. “I thought he was different.”

Dad inclined his head. “I think he is. I’ve never seen you that happy in the months since you left Maxwell. I don’t know what he did, or didn’t do, but don’t write the guy off so easily, Willow. Give him a chance to right whatever wrong he did and if he doesn’t... well, that’s your answer.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes, “If only it was that easy.”

Chapter Sixteen

Willow

I didn't hear a thing from Tyler for the next eight days. New Years had passed like a blur, a speck of time. I'd hoped to spend it with Tyler, but he had certainly dropped off the map. New Year's Day, nothing; I'd not texted him or called because I knew I wouldn't get anywhere.

By the eighth, things had gone back to normal, the holiday was over, the air had gone back drab instead of sparkling with winter light—and it was time for me and Dad to meet with Maxmillian, his party of attorneys and finalize his buy-in.

As much as Dad was sure this was a good thing, I was positive it would be walking right into hell's gate and shaking hands with the devil because that was what Winslow was. I couldn't help but go into the meeting room, ready to do whatever I could to get Dad to stop this madness.

Pausing outside the door, I began to wonder if all this acrimony was against Maxwell and not the assets he would be bringing us. Were my emotions truly blinding me to what might be a good thing—or was the niggling in my gut telling me the truth?

I guess I'll see when Maxwell and his father get here.

As the board of directors came in, including my uncle, I realized there was one seat still open. Was that for the anonymous benefactor Dad told me not to worry about? Our attorneys came in next, Mrs. Paula White scowling while clad in an angelic white suit and Dr. Chamberlin tight-lipped in his usual black get-up.

Dad took his seat, and I took mine while we waited for the Winslows to arrive. Paula slid a folder to me and extended one to Dad as we waited. I looked inside and scanned the numbers, trying to see if they were the same ones we had offered to Maxmillian.

As I grabbed a pen and began to dot notes on the margins, Maxmillian and his son walked in with my uncle and their

lawyers behind them. Seated, Winslow and Maxwell greeted Dad and me; well, Maxwell did; Maximillian only greeted Dad.

“Are we ready to get this on the road?” he asked, turning to Dad’s lawyers. “Are the documents ready to sign?”

“They are prepared,” Paula said, her mouth pinching, “But we need to review them collectively first.”

“No need to do so,” Maxmillian said, “I’m sure I’ll get it.”

“As sure as I am in your ability to grasp the terms and conditions,” Dad said sternly. “You don’t get to dictate what happens in my company, Winslow. Now, please, sit down and let us go on with the meeting.”

Maxwell’s mouth twisted, but his father took his seat and gave us a collective stony look. “Go on then.”

Chamberlin began defining the terms of the buy-in and the powers Maximillian would have when he became a partner, and he outlined the offers Winslow had put on the table to expand our business. As the lawyers spoke, Maxwell’s smug smirk grew haughtier and self-assured and when we opted to have coffee at the table instead of going to the break room, he got veritably arrogant.

“Are we clear on these terms?” Paula asked, her sharp eyes flicking from Maxmillian to his son.

“Yes, yes,” Winslow huffed, and gave her a ‘give-me’ motion to the papers in her hand. “Just let me—”

The door pushed open, and I looked up to see—Tyler walking in, only this time, instead of a set of dusty jeans and thick coat, he was in a sleek blue suit and had blond hair. He was not alone. Another man came in with him, an older man in a dark suit and leather briefcase followed him.

Tyler’s eyes—the same shade of blue-green that had haunted my dreams of late—met mine and I held in a breath. His gaze was soft, apologetic, even tender, before his eyes slid away and they grew sharp.

Maxmilian's face turned dark. "Who the devil are you to walk into a private meeting?"

"Has he signed the papers already?" Tyler asked Mr. Carmichael.

Stunned and confused as I was, Mr. Carmichael replied, "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because if he put one strike on that dotted line, Mister Clarkston, your company, the one you built up with your blood, sweat and tears, would become just another cog in the Winslow machinery," Tyler said smoothly. "And I can prove it."

Launching to his feet, Maxmillian slammed his hands on the table and practically roared. "Who the hell are you?"

"Cole Vega," Tyler said, his eyes flickering to me and then to my dad. "Your secret investor who holds twelve percent."

My ears were ringing. What the hell was this? A dream? A nightmare even? Was I hallucinating somewhere?

I mutely watched as the man, a lawyer, I presumed, took out a sheaf of papers and handed them to Dad while Tyler—well, Cole—took his seat with the board. "Those, Mister Carmichael, are the true state of your shareholder's shares at the moment. A sheet Winslow was going to show you after he signed your contract. You'll notice many shareholders have sold their shares to him because in true hostile takeover style, he went to buy them behind your back while waiting for the golden goose to lay its egg."

Splotchy with red spots, Maxmillian growled, "That is a lie."

"No, it is not," Cole said calmly. "Even Herman has handed over his shares because you promised him a partnership in your newly founded, or, well, pardon me, to-be newly founded corporation. Isn't that right?"

"Speculation and lies," Herman spat, "There is no proof of this."

“Oh really,” Cole said while pulling out a flash drive from his pocket and taking out a tablet from his briefcase. “I beg to differ.”

As he plugged the device in, a cold shiver ran down my back; this was not going to be good, I knew it.

Audio filled the air.

“...When are you going to start on it?” that was Maxwell’s incensed voice. *“I gave you all the details you needed, Dad.”*

Details? On what?

“Calm down, Maxwell,” Maxmillian said calmly. *“We’re working on it. The offers have been sent, and some of them are taking the money. In due time, we’ll have enough to force our hand.”*

“Well hurry the hell up.” Maxwell snarled. *“They need to know you cannot cross a Winslow and get away with it.”*

“Your father is right, Maxwell,” Uncle Herman said. *“We’ve laid the groundwork, buying out the other shareholders and now we almost have enough. When they take our more than generous offer to buy in, your father’s shares, combined with mine, will be enough to take over Clarkston’s Ciders when the papers are signed.”*

Cole clicked off—or possibly paused, “Does that sound like someone you know, Mister Clarkston?”

Dad was quiet for a long time before he said, “Herman? Is that you?”

“No, of course not,” Herman snarled. “That is some bullshit he conjured up. Frankly, I cannot see why you believe him.”

“Oh, is it? Maybe this one will make it clearer.” Cole replied then jabbed another button.

“...Getting revenge on your ex-girlfriend is not the only applicable motif here,” the man said. *“My brother has been screwing me over for years, shutting me out of managerial decisions and ignoring my ideas. Ideas that would have made us take over the Sullivans and the fucking Vegas years ago.”*

Now though, he will have no choice but to take the backseat and watch.”

When he clicked that off, the boardroom was silent. Cole cocked his head. “That is not you then?”

Uncle Herman was white while Maxmillian snarled, “How the hell did you get ahold of private conversations—”

“Is a crime, yes,” Cole replied. “Accessing a computer and gaining information is up to a year for the first conviction, I know. However, I did not access your computer or any one of your offices. I only accessed the backdoor of the app you three used to plan your crime and used it against you.

“It is peanuts to what you will serve for security fraud when, by your reasoning to the shareholders who sold out to you, was because you told them the market would take a downturn and the company would fail. That is misinformation, and it is up to ten years in prison if and when a forensic auditor goes through all your files,” Cole said icily.

“Tell me, Winslow, are you willing to change your cushy office for a cushy cell? I mean your lawyer could get finesse some wiggle room and get you out on a technicality, but when word about this gets out, as with the other cemeteries in your closet, you’ll be tanking harder than the Hindenburg.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and when I turned to the lawyers, they didn’t seem to believe it either. Paula, however, was smiling.

Dad turned to Herman who was positively ashen white. “And you? Are you sticking to your story about not knowing what this is?”

Uncle Herman pressed his lips tight and swallowed. “I can explain—”

“You’re fired, effective immediately. And you Winslow—” Dad said quietly while taking the folder from Paula, opening it, and ripping it in half. “—No deal, you can have your money back.”

“What about the shares I bought?” Maxmillian dug in his heels.

“I already enacted the Poison Pill,” Cole said, pinning Winslow with a merciless stare. “You should know what that means.”

Huffing, Maxmillian stood and tugged his jacket down, “I suppose we’re not needed here.”

When they filed out—not without Maxwell giving me a dirty look—Dad turned to Cole and smiled. “You just saved my company.”

Cole swallowed thickly, his gaze skittering to me again. “No offense, Sir, I did it because of Willow. She had told me she’d felt something funny about her uncle and she was right. I —”

I got up from the table, chair screeching and damn well ran out of the boardroom. I couldn’t bear this—I didn’t know what to think about it. I could barely breathe. My feet took me to the women’s restroom and I grabbed on the sink before I collapsed.

What was this? A game? A trick? Who had I fallen in love with? Tyler Burrows or... Or Cole Vega? A man from a family I’d heard were as much dickheads as the Sullivans.

Finding a stool, I sat and hunched over, cradling my face in both hands. My body was flashing hot and cold while my heart was pumping a triple beat. I sucked in a breath and tried to go back to the beginning when Tyler, *Cole Vega*, had walked in.

I’d seen pictures of Cole and his brother before, they were blond—so was his dark hair dyed? Why? Why had he done it? Why had he come to our orchard and picked apples when he was the goddamn angel investor in disguise?

To find a weakness in our business so he would undermine us?

But if that was it... why go through all the pain of finding out about my uncle and Winslow? Why had he done that? I knew I had told him how questionable my uncle was, but digging up the audio of Maxwell and Winslow and exposing

them at the very meeting Dad was about to include them, why?

My mind circled back to why he had posed as a transient worker.

The door opened and I looked up to see Cole walk in but didn't come too close. His hands were fighting a little before he stuck them in his pockets. "I don't suppose I'm sorry will work?"

I stared at him, a dozen questions running through my mind. What came out of my mouth though was, "You're not supposed to be in here."

He nodded, "I know. But I had to find you and try to salvage whatever good grace I may have with you."

Biting my lip, I sorted through the questions in my head. "Why did you pose as a farmhand? Why did you dye your hair? Was this some kind of Henry The Eighth shit where you came to see what weaknesses my dad's company has? What was it?"

He leaned on the wall behind him and gave me a wry look. "Believe it or not, I never expected it either. See, I'm a loose cannon, Willow, in my normal day to day life, I-I really don't give a shit about anything other than having fun and doing some dumb ass shit. I only came to Clarkston Ciders because I'd lost a game of beer pong with my friend, the real Tyler Burrows, and my punishment was to pose as him, picking apples for three weeks."

I didn't know what to think about that.

"So, what happened when you—"

"Stopped Maxwell, that asshole?" he said. "I hadn't planned on that either. That night, I just saw a lady in trouble with a toxic ex and I did what any self-respecting man would do. Granted, I never meant for it to go as it had, but—" he shrugged again. "—loose cannon again."

"What about the Christmas thing?" I swallowed. "Was that a lie?"

“You know it wasn’t,” Cole replied. “I truly never understood the rave and racket about Christmas. Now that you know I’m a Vega, I suppose you might assume that my holidays were more clinical than anything. It was a big tree, big presents, and a bit of dinner but... nothing more. You showed me what it was about, especially when we went to the homeless shelter.”

I knew he was right. I remembered his reactions that night, how he had almost cried in my hair. My heart stuttered a little and the emotions in my chest nearly broke through—but I kept them in check. It was still so much.

“Why—” I paused. “—why did you stop Winslow?”

“Because I didn’t want you to lose your legacy,” Cole replied. “It’s what your father built for you, sweetth—Willow. You deserve to have it and not have it swept out from under you by a jealous uncle and a criminally greedy bastard.”

My breath hitched at his near slip. Sweetheart—my kryptonite.

“I am sorry I ran out on you in the middle of the night,” Cole said. “It was not the right thing to do but my emotions were cutting off my air for one and before that, I had already started to dig into Maximillian’s affairs, and I wanted to finish it.”

“Your emotions.” I deadpanned.

“Guilt, fear, and regret for tricking you,” Cole said, “Affection, delight and warmth for falling in love with you.”

“You just can’t. I’m not...I’m not...” my stomach plummeted. “You just can’t fall in love with me. It’s...in three weeks? I...”

“Loose cannon, remember.” He shrugged, gave me another wry smile then ducked out of the bathroom.

When he left, it felt as if all the air in the room suddenly went with him. I’d gotten a few answers, but those answers gave me more questions. I needed time—and probably a bottle of wine.

* * *

“...What?” Jackie’s mouth dropped as I stared at her Facetime video. “You’re telling me... it was...*what?*”

I gave my friend a dry smile. “He is really Cole Vega. The man from the family that I told you didn’t give a shit about ours, or well, I had thought so. A couple weeks ago, before Christmas Eve, out of the blue, we got a call from Ethan Vega apologizing for his father ignoring us and offering to partner with us. I suppose that was his doing too.”

“I get that,” Jackie replied. “But what about him literally saving your dad’s business from that asswipe Winslow?”

With a tiny smile, I told her how Cole had swept inside the conference room like Superman sweeping in to grab Lois inches from the ground. “He came with guns loaded, Jackie; voice notes from my uncle, Maxwell and his dad discussing how to take over our business was the smoking gun.”

“Sounds like a good guy to me,” Jackie replied. “Yeah, how he got into your life was fucked up but... I don’t think he planned for all this to turn out the way it had. But... it kind of snowballed a bit.”

“I know,” I rubbed my face, “But why not just tell me?”

“Well, he did say he was there to pay up after that bet,” Jackie replied. “And if he had come right out and told you he was a Vega, would you have accepted it? I mean, you didn’t like his family from the start.”

Jackie was right—I wouldn’t have.

“I just don’t know who I fell for,” I said, my stomach squirming at my admission. “Was it Tyler or Cole?”

“I think he was himself, just not in name,” Jackie said, “You didn’t fall in love with a name, Willow, you fell in love with his heart, his wit... you fell in love with him.”

“Stop throwing the L-word around,” I grumbled. “I don’t love him.”

“And the moon is neon purple,” Jackie laughed, “Keep telling yourself that, Willow. It’s clear as day how you feel about him.”

“I suppose what hurt me the most was him just leaving after our first night together,” I admitted. “It hurt waking up alone with a note and a faint memory.”

“Memory?” Jackie asked.

“I remember him saying, don’t hate me, before he left and then he left a note saying he would explain it all, and he did. I just didn’t expect what would happen. I never thought... he would be someone else.”

My best friend was quiet for a moment before she asked, “Did he make you laugh?”

“Yes?” I frowned. Why was she asking me this?

“Did he show you how a gentleman should be?” Jackie asked.

“Yes...”

“Did his kisses shive down to your toes?” she asked.

“Yes. But that’s just lust...” I replied. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It kind of does,” Jackie replied. “Think about it. Does this feel anything like when you were in ‘love’ with Maxwell?”

“No,” I blurted. “Hell no. It’s not even comparable.”

She looked smug. “That’s your answer. Two and two do not make five, Willow.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but she was right. Underneath it all, I felt more for Cole than I ever had for any other boyfriend. Maxwell was a half a point when Cole was a full ten. I did feel a bit betrayed by him pretending to be someone else but—that had preceded me, hadn’t it? It was not as if he had started to pretend after we’d gotten together.

Maybe I needed to give him some slack.

“No, they don’t,” I replied. “They make eight.”

“Oh, shut up.” Jackie laughed, “Now, get some sleep and go find your man.”

As we cut off the call, I sagged back into the bed, wondering if I should do it or not.

Chapter Seventeen

Cole

Why in God's name did I allow Ethan to drag me out of my house and to a bar, to celebrate— Christ, I didn't even remember what we were celebrating.

I was glad that Mix'D was so dark at the karaoke nights and that I had a rolling tab. Keep those classic margaritas coming. It had been two weeks since the meeting at Clarkston Ciders and I had not heard a word from Willow. I couldn't count the times I'd woken up at 3 a.m., fighting back the urge to send her a text message.

I had to let her approach me this time, not go barging into her life.

Ethan slid into the seat across from me in the circle booth and sat his beer down. He gave me a look that I didn't want to meet. "You okay?"

Snorting, I threw back the rest of my drink, "Nope. Hardly."

"You know, when you asked me to call Clarkston, I hadn't fully understood why," Ethan said, "Why had I not expected that you were on the goddamn Clarkston board?"

"It was another harebrained thing," I said, "When my investor adviser had told me to diversify my portfolio, I'd said, fuck it and bought into Clarkston. And when they had that slump a couple years ago, I'd said the same thing and invested more."

"So, all that mocking was what? Just teasing and not truly mockery," Ethan asked.

"Just me being a dumbass again," I said, rubbing my face. Staring into my empty glass, I sighed, "I fucked up, Ethan. This time, I can really say I have. I know I've been a menace half of my life, a loose canon the other half, just caring about the next laugh or vibe. I never truly took in what it means to give a shit."

“And now you do?”

“More than that,” I replied. “I didn’t expect to fall in love with her, Ethan, because I was only there to fulfill a bet. I hadn’t planned on kissing her that first night when she was squaring off with her dickhead ex, but I guess life doesn’t really like me that much.”

“Oh God, I never thought I’d say this, but where are your balls man?” Ethan grunted. “Go strap on a pair and find her, tell her what is going through your head and leave the ball in her court.”

“I did so, the day of the meeting,” I replied. “I am not going to bombard her, Ethan. And the ball has been in her court. I haven’t changed my number or moved across the country. She can find me anytime she wants to.”

My eyes were back down on the empty glass while I considered getting another drink. I didn’t realize how tense the moment was while passing, but it was only when it felt awkward that I looked up. Ethan’s eyes were not on me—they were on the doorway over my shoulder.

The bastard then grinned and turned to me. “I think she has?”

The booze swimming through my head made his meaning a bit blurry at the moment, but when it connected, my back jackknifed. Ethan slid from the seat, taking his beer with him while a slender body came to the edge of the booth.

“Is this seat taken?” Willow asked.

“No,” I replied, “Not anymore. I mean, my brother was there, but he’s gone to his fiancé now.” I blinked—damn, these drinks were loosening my tongue.

She sat and I drank in the sight of her more than I did those damn margaritas. Her hair was up, and she was in a flattering jersey dress with fleece leggings and boots. She rested her hands on the table, and I admired her beige nail color.

Damn, I was drunk if I was admiring nail polish.

“Cole, right,” she said quietly.

I looked up. “Cole Vega, yes.”

She stuck out her hand, “Nice to finally meet you, Cole. I’m Willow Clarkston.”

Was this—was this her way of starting over? I shook her hand, “Same here.”

She smiled. “So, who is Tyler Burrows?”

I took out my cell and found a picture of my best friend. “Here he is. He is kind of a jackass.”

Taking it, she laughed, “You two do look alike.”

Resting my forearms on the table, I leaned in, “We do. We do this shit all the time, Willow, make each other run around town pretending to be each other but this time, this time capped them all. I only thought he’d sent me to the orchard to punish me for being a rich guy who doesn’t know what it’s like to do manual labor.”

“I suppose you got more than you bargained for?” she asked while sliding the phone back to me.

“More than,” I replied, pushing the emotions I felt for her into my voice. “I found more than I had even imagined I ever would.”

The breath Willow took in was audible as she leaned in and took my hand. “I thought about what happened between us and I realized that it was kind of unintentional. Neither of us had gone into this knowing what to expect and neither of us had planned it either. I was thrown for a loop when you came into the boardroom looking like you’d just stepped off the TV screen or...I dunno, from a law office.”

I laughed. “Did I mention I’d picked up a few law classes in college?”

“No,” she giggled. “You mentioned you’d spun the pages of a few textbooks though. Where did you go to college?”

“Columbia,” I admitted.

She shrugged. “Anyway, you did shock me, Cole. I never thought anything like this would happen to me. I mean, you

read about stuff like this in romance books and stuff, but...you would never expect it to happen in real life.”

“You have to know I didn’t go into this trying to be like, what did you say, Henry The Eighth? I didn’t want to deceive you, Willow. Honest to God, I never wanted to hurt you. I just couldn’t break the disguise because, one, it was my deal with Tyler and two, I was fucking afraid you’d hate me knowing that I was a Vega.”

“Considering you saved my family’s business from those tyrants,” she held my hand, “and you took it on yourself to get your brother to make it right with my dad. I think I can absolve you of running out on me that night.”

The hollow space in my chest began to finally warm up. “I didn’t do it for clout, Willow. I did it because it was the right thing to do. By the way, I took a page out of your book and started a charity arm for the Vega Meadery, too. I cannot believe we hadn’t thought about something like that to benefit the community as—*mmp*h.”

Willow had leaned over and kissed me. It was very awkward with the table between us, but the press of her lips on mine made that clumsiness vanish. She pulled away and smiled. “You can make it up to me.”

“Of course, I will,” I replied, blinking. “When I get sober that is.”

A soft voice clearing their throat made me look up and I saw Mia there with Ethan hovering behind her like a possessive bat. “Um, Cole? Any introductions?”

I looked up and smiled. Then gestured to Willow, “Come around.”

When she slid around the table, I gestured to the two. “Willow Clarkston, meet Mia Sullivan and that hulking man beast behind her is my brother Ethan Vega.”

Ethan dug his knuckle into my temple. “Have some manners toward your elders, you little goblin.”

“Shut it, you geezer,” I huffed, keeping the laughter under my tone. “Now, are you going to sit down so we can talk

together or not?”

Mia slid into the seat and Ethan followed her and I sat back in my seat while Willow’s arm brushed mine. God, her mere presence made me feel so much better. Her hand dropped to my thigh, and I dropped my hand to cover hers.

“Willow,” Mia smiled. “So pleased to meet you.”

“Same here,” Willow replied, shifting to look at me and then back to Mia. “So, did you know what Cole here had been up to these last couple of weeks?”

“No,” Mia replied, her gaze shifting. “He just dropped off the map for a while and then he told us he might have fallen in love with the last person he had expected.”

Tilting her head to me with a smug smile, Mia replied, “How much time have you got?”

I groaned. “Jesus.”

“No, baby,” Willow kissed my cheek. “Just me, but you might need him later. Mia, may I call you Mia?”

“Sure.” Mia grinned and leaned in. “Spill.”

“Well, for one, he cannot skate to save his life—” Willow started.

“Nope, we’re not doing this,” I shook my head, sliding out of the booth, suddenly stark cold sober. “C’mon, Willow. We have other places to be.”

She looked up. “We do?”

“Yes,” I leaned in and whispered. “My bed.”

Willow turned to Mia. “Raincheck?”

Laughing, Mia nodded, “See you soon.”

I hustled Willow to the curb, hailed a taxi, and then turned to her, “You forgive me?”

She wrapped her arms around my middle and smiled up at me. “Yes, but I need a little convincing.”

I grinned. “Now, I have to ask, how much time have you got?”

THE END

Bonus Chapter - Deleted Scene

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Sneak Peek - Tangled in Vines

Ethan

“**S**top!” I heard Beji shout. “You can’t go up there!”

“This is important,” a lady’s voice snapped. “And it’s either I go up there, or he comes down to me.”

My head snapped up from the pile of invoices on my table, wholly mystified about who my assistant manager was shouting at—when the answer barges into my office unannounced.

What in god’s name was happening down there?

Moving from my desk, I went to the doorway of my loft office that looked right down to the floor of my family’s Meadery. Mia Sullivan, the daughter of my family’s enemies, was staring down Benji with a tight-lipped glare.

What was she doing here?

When had she come back to town?

She pivoted on her boots and looked at me, her golden gaze simply scalding.

And why was she glaring at me as if I’d killed her cat?

I considered telling her to take a hike for a moment, but my curiosity stopped me. “It’s all right, Benji. Let *Miss Sullivan* come up.”

Everyone knew about our family’s rivalry, so it was not shocking when Benji’s mouth dropped, and so did everyone within ten feet. Mia didn’t seem to care, and she took the stairs up and strode into my office as if she owned the place, her thick caramel hair cascading over her shoulder while her amber eyes zeroed into mine like a heat-seeking missile.

“Give it back,” she said stiffly, her sharp amber eyes as cutting as sapphires. “I won’t let you have it.”

Snapping out of my daze, I sat back in my office chair and gave her a relaxed look. “Please, come inside. Do you want a

drink? I have water, coffee, and, oh right, *mead*.”

Her lips flattened. “Stop playing, Vega.”

This was the first time I was close to the eldest Sullivan child, the family of winemakers, and my family’s sworn enemies, in three years. She was stunningly beautiful—softly rounded cheeks, rosy and full lips, the bottom had an inviting divot at its center, and her voice was like honey. Plus, she was brilliant—a triple threat.

But her eyes got to me, with how razor-sharp they were.

“As flattered as I am that you think I am a genius of unparalleled measure, I must tell you, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I replied calmly. “And I find it very off-putting for you to storm into my office without an invitation.”

Her eyes widened a bit just as her lips parted. “Y-you don’t know?”

“What you’re talking about?” I asked, shaking my head while keeping my gaze locked on hers. “Not a goddamn clue. Will you fill me in? But before that—” my eyes traced over her full lips “—when did you get back in town?”

“Two hours ago,” she replied. “I finished my master’s last week.”

“Good for you.” I nodded, standing and rounding my table to the small fridge in my office, and took out a bottle of flavored water, handing it to her while I refilled my coffee. Instead of sitting again, I leaned on the wall and crossed my legs. “So, care to fill me in on what you were accusing me of doing or *not* doing, as is the case?”

Her gaze trailed down my body, over the gray Henley and the blue jeans, before her eyes met mine. She looked regretful a little before admitting. “A company from Texas that manages beef is looking around for a new partnership, pairing good drinks with their beef products.”

“And you came here to warn me not to meddle with the holy pairing?” I asked, a touch of scorn in my tone. “Wine and steak, the perfect duo?”

Mia's face pinked, but she held her chin high. "That's one way to look at it."

"No, no." I peeled myself from the wall and rested the cup on my desk, away from the paperwork. "That's the only way to look at it, Mia. What? You think my family's humble Meadery cannot match your prolific winemaking pedigree family?"

Red darkened her face. "Stop making me and my family into a...a—"

"A set of arrogant, conceited, narcissistic, vain, smug, proud—" I started ticking adjectives off my fingers "—egoistic, superior, holier-than-thou, self-important, high-and-mighty—"

"All right, all right, please stop," she cut in, embarrassed. "Listen, I might not have been in town for the last couple of years, but I still followed up with the development that went on. I know you have got three huge private accounts for your Meadery. I'm asking you to let us have this one."

"And why should I do that?" I asked. "Last time I checked, Sullivan wines still had a chokehold on the market share this side of the West Coast. Hell, you were the proud sponsor recipient of a company in Spain for figuring out to grow that goddamn weed—"

"The Garnacha grape is a finicky plant, not a *weed*," Mia said hotly.

"—away from its native climate," I added, "And with a four-point two percent market share, or should I say stronghold, and three hundred and eight two million in revenue last year, I don't see why I need to yield my profits to make yours better."

Her jaw stiffened. "But—"

"But nothing," I said calmly, knowing she heard the steel in my tone. "And I don't think you came here to tell me to stay away from the contract, did you?"

"No," she admitted. "I thought you already had the contract, and I wanted to ask you, on a purely business level,

to refuse it.”

“Still doesn’t make a lick of sense to me,” I replied. “Are you sure that business degree you got a couple of years ago is valid?”

I was getting to her; her eyes were starting to shoot bullets. “I apologize for barging in, but I have reason to. Sean Clarkston said that you had intercepted the message and gone and convinced the bigwigs to partner with you instead of letting us all have fair participation.”

“And by fair, you mean the Clarkston cider guys, too?” I asked, knowing full well her family thought cider was pig swill.

“Yes.”

“Liar,” I replied. “You wouldn’t drink cider if you were on a deserted island, and it was all that was available.”

Despite my inexplicable attraction to Mia—going back further than I wanted to admit—I couldn’t ever deny that she represented the double standards I deeply despised. There was no doubt that the Sullivans thought their product was the *crème-de-la-crème*—why wouldn’t they when celebs, fashion designers, and even presidents drank their wine—and the rest of us were uncivilized peons.

Mia, for all her smarts, was headstrong, impulsive, and more than a little hot-blooded by my reckoning. Plus, she was still as biased as the rest of her family. Having pride in your family’s centuries-old endeavor is one thing; looking down on the rest of us is another.

Her blush deepened. “So you never got the memo?”

“Not until now,” I replied. “And why were you talking to Sean at all? Don’t you all get hives by being within three feet of a *cider maker*?”

“Well, he didn’t tell me exactly,” Mia murmured, “I overheard him talking to Greer at Mama Macchiato.”

“And you ran with it?” I bit down on my laughter. “Still same ol’ hotheaded Mia. Have you considered why Sean

would have conveniently let the info slip in your presence?”

“To start something,” she admitted.

“No, starting something would mean something isn’t already there, and as the whole town, possibly half the world, knows about our family rivalry, he was using that to build on the mutual dislike. Once again, are you sure that degree is accredited?”

She huffed, then stood. “Well, seeing as I was mistaken, I apologize. And now that I have made a complete embarrassment of myself—”

“More like a jackass,” I corrected her.

“I shall be going,” she headed to the door to pivot on her high-heeled boots. “Its...erm...I’m sorry I disturbed you. I was wrong for running in like that, and please forget about my screw-up?”

“Not even when there is a snowstorm in hell,” I replied. “And Mia, the next time you want to come and confront me about something I have not done, make an appointment, like the rest of the world, hm?”

When she left the room, I picked up my phone and called Cole, who was somewhere in Palisade. When he answered, I got right down to business, “Tell me anything you know about some big Texas bigwigs coming in for a contract—*now*.”

* * *

“I know that look,” Cole, my younger brother by three years, said as he knocked on my door and came in the following day. “If you keep doing that, you’ll have crow’s feet by thirty and crossed eyes by thirty-one.”

“Jokes on you, *whippersnapper*,” I replied. “I’m already there. You think I’m scared of thirty-two?”

“No,” Cole laughed, raking his hand through his dirty blond hair. “I’m afraid you’ll be a young guy with a grandpa’s

face and won't be my wingman when we got to clubs. They'll take a look at you and run the other way."

"I've got a business to run, not skeeze at clubs," I replied. "If you want a wingman, Jerry Clarkston knows all of them."

Cole's fake-horrified gasp nearly had me laughing.

"A Clarkston?" he gaped. "A *cider* maker? You insult me, sir. You insult me deeply."

"I didn't say you should marry the guy," I snorted. "But whatever. Where is the information I asked you to get for me?"

Cole handed me a folder without another word, and I opened it.

"They're saying the two biggest beef ranches in Texas are looking to make a long partnership with the beverage makers here, and yes, I think Clarkston Ciders is in the running, too."

"As they have a right to be," I grumbled, while a picture of Mia's face from yesterday popped up. "It's a free market around here, last time I checked."

"Unless you're an oligarchy like the Sullivans," Cole's face twisted. "Oh, by the way, Mia is in town."

"I know," I grunted. "She popped by yesterday."

Cole's brows shot up. "Why?"

"To bring me a platter of cookies and borrow a cup of sugar," I deadpanned. "She is a *Sullivan*, Cole, and she came to demand that I not accept the newest contract because a Clarkston had let it slip that we had already secured it."

A soft whistle left Cole's lips. "Damn. I never expected that."

"It's a battle of a multimillion-dollar contract." I closed the file, having read all I needed to know. "And no way will I let them beat me to this deal."

"Ethan..." And something ran up my spine at the tone he used. I tensed—why didn't I like that tone? "...when was the last time you got laid?"

I narrowed my eyes. “*That* is none of your business.”

“It kinda is when you look like you’ve got iron shoved up your butt,” Cole replied. “Listen, I know you are pissed about what Mia did, but come on, man. You need to chill out, man. Forget about getting wrinkles by thirty-two. You might have a stroke by tonight.”

In the back of my mind, I knew some of the things he was saying were right. I had been stressing a lot trying to get our name on more restaurants and tables than before. I had been averaging four hours of sleep per night, and the last time I had sex was probably before the kale-eating trend and dry shampoo, but I would be damned before I admitted any of that to my brother.

Reaching for a scrap paper, I balled it up and threw it at him, clocking him right in the chest. “Get out, you gremlin.”

When he was gone, I sagged into my office chair and rubbed the back of my neck. Holy cannoli, my muscles were so stiff I doubted a jackhammer could loosen them up, much less sex would. I did need some downtime, but the mere mention of relaxing set my nerves on edge.

Why would I be relaxing when I could be doing something productive?

I knew I lived an ironic life, eating vegan, running 4-kilos per day—should be five, but I only have thirty-two free minutes in the morning—drinking eight glasses of water but working sixteen-hour days.

Maybe Cole was right. I should do the horizontal dance soon—

Mia sprung to mind...

“...Massage it is.”

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Cowboy's Secret Twins

The plan was for him to be the best ride of my life, NOT my baby daddy.

Don't hook up with the cowboys.

That's rule #1 at the ranch.

One glance into Todd's sea-blue eyes, and I found myself drowning.

I felt like a bad girl for breaking the rules.

My head is still swirling from that toe-curling night.

But that night came with an unexpected surprise.

I was pregnant... with twins.

Todd shattered my heart when he left the ranch before I could tell him.

I felt like he ran away because he had something to hide.

Seven years later, my family sent out an SOS.

I wasn't expecting Todd "Baby Daddy" Porter to show up.

The ranch has enough fires to put out.

But now we're forced to work together.

Until I know why he disappeared, I have to keep the twins safe.

I guess we **both** have our secrets.

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