



VODKA & VIOLETS

THE HAMILTONS BOOK NINE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SJ McCoy

**Vodka
and
Violets**

**Xander and Tori
The Hamiltons, Book Nine**

By SJ McCoy

A Sweet n Steamy Romance

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DEDICATION

For Sam. Sometimes, life really is too short. Few.

oxo

CHAPTER ONE

Tori edged quietly toward the kitchen door and peeked cautiously around it. When she saw that the coast was clear she hurried inside, headed straight for the fridge. She had nothing to feel guilty about, but that didn't stop her. She might have every right to be here in her family home, but that didn't make any difference; she felt like a sneak thief, stealing goodies. It didn't help that Simon, the chef, would treat her as no better than a thief if he caught her.

It wasn't as though she was swiping any of his ingredients – she only wanted the chocolates that she'd put in here earlier. As she grabbed the bag and scurried for the door, she decided that she'd be better off getting herself a cooler and some ice so that she could keep her own things in her own room.

She let out a sigh of relief as she stepped out of the back door and into the sunshine. The formal garden wasn't any more welcoming than the rest of the house, but all she had to do was cross it without being seen. After that, she could sneak through the gate and be free.

Once she was on the other side of the hedge, she finally felt able to relax. It was crazy really; she loved that Bentley had asked her to come home so that she'd be able to spend some time relaxing while she figured out her next moves. She just didn't feel able to tell him that she'd never been able to relax here or that she doubted that she ever would.

She followed the hedge all the way to the end. From there she jogged past the vines until she reached the stand of trees by the creek bed. There was no water; the creek was dry. But this was still one of her favorite spots on the whole estate. The trees provided shade and more importantly, they shielded her from view.

It wasn't that she thought anyone was watching her or that they would have a problem with anything she did if they were. It was just that being here made her feel ... inadequate somehow. She'd always felt that way as a kid and she knew that she did it to herself.

As the youngest of three siblings, she'd lucked out. Bentley and Willow were both awesome – she loved them to pieces and always had. The trouble was that they were both so ... competent. Competent and confident – not words that she would use to describe herself.

Ever since she could remember, it had been a given that Bentley would grow up to run the company. He was the oldest. Willow had always had her own ideas. She'd gone off to work her way around the wine world so that she'd be able to come home and do her part. It was as though their futures had been mapped out from the moment they were born. They were destined to take over the company some day and to take it to new heights. Since their mom had stepped down, they were doing exactly that – Bentley as CEO and Willow as COO.

Tori felt as though the stork had dropped her with the wrong family. She'd heard her mom once admit that she hadn't

planned to have three children – she'd expected that she would stop at two – and those words had stuck with Tori.

Now that she was old enough to have kids of her own, Tori knew that it had been no more than a throwaway comment. She didn't even think those words had made her feel like the odd one out – that she didn't quite belong in her own family. It was more like they had confirmed what she already knew.

She followed the creek bed a little way until she found her favorite spot, then plonked herself down on the ground and took her phone out. She loved to sit outside and feel the breeze as she listened to her music, and this was the only place she felt comfortable to do that here.

Back in her place in Nashville, she had an awesome backyard where she spent a lot of her time on the swing shaded by the huge bur oak tree. She turned to look up at the red willow she was leaning against then patted its bark, feeling disloyal to it that it wasn't able to comfort her in the way that big old oak tree did.

Her phone buzzed in her hand, making her jump. She peered at it warily, hoping that it wasn't anyone wanting to ask how she was, or where she was – or worse still, what her plans were. She didn't have any!

A big smile spread across her face when she saw the name on the display.

Xander: Whatcha doing?

Tori: Not much. You?

Xander: Thinking about you.

Tori: I'm safe. Promise.

He was so sweet. Even now that they were back here in Napa – and there was no danger to her whatsoever, he still checked in with her almost every day.

Xander: Not as safe as you would be if you were with me.

She stared at the words. If only he knew! Of course, he was right – if he was talking about being safe from physical danger. But being around Xander presented a whole different set of dangers for her. When she was with him, she didn't feel safe from the risk of embarrassing herself – or of putting their friendship at risk.

It was getting harder and harder to keep her feelings to herself. She didn't want to tell him, but every time she was around him, she found herself on the verge of throwing caution to the wind and confessing that she was crazy about him!

That was why she'd been trying to avoid him since they'd come home to Napa. She hated it. She missed him. After spending all their time together for the last few months, it felt like torture not to see him. But there was no reason for it here. She had to wean herself off him and somehow find a way back to just being friends.

Sure, he'd hinted at wanting them to become more than friends, but that was probably just while they'd lived in such close quarters for so long – it would have been convenient.

For all intents and purposes, he'd been her own personal bodyguard for a few months, but that was behind them now.

He didn't need to stay at her place with her anymore, didn't need to escort her everywhere she went – and he most certainly didn't need to share her bed.

She closed her eyes and let the memories wash over her. She missed how close they'd been – and wished that she'd been brave enough to get closer while she could. He might have shared her bed every night for weeks, but they hadn't done anything more than sleep next to each other.

She looked down at her phone when another message came in.

Xander: Sorry. I know you're safe at home – you don't need me anymore.

How about you come out with me later? Make me feel a bit less useless?

Tori: You could never be useless!

Xander: Come out with me then?

Tori: Where?

Xander: Anywhere!!! Let's get out of here for a while?

She stared at her phone again. Of all the things he could have said, that was the one guaranteed to get her to agree. She longed to get out of here – off the estate, leave Napa behind for a little while. Well, she'd love to leave Napa for good, but it'd hurt too many people's feelings when she admitted that – and left – so she was biding her time.

Tori: Okay.

Xander: I'll be there in fifteen.

Tori: Make it half an hour?

Xander: K. What are you doing?

Tori: Hiding down by the creek. I need to get changed.

Xander: No you don't, you look gorgeous just as you are.

She looked down at her cutoff jeans and shabby old T-shirt and laughed.

Tori: You haven't seen me. You don't know what you're saying.

Xander: I have and I do! Get moving, see you in 25.

Tori: Ok.

~ ~ ~

Xander shoved his phone back in his pocket and headed for the stairs. Tori didn't need to change out of whatever she was wearing – no matter what she said. He didn't need to see her to know that.

But since she'd no doubt attempt to make herself look *presentable* as she saw it, he should probably at least check the mirror. He loved the way she looked when she was just being herself. She wore jean shorts and faded old T-shirts and when she paired them with the little cowboy boots that she generally favored, she drove him out of his mind.

Since they'd been back here in Napa, she'd taken to dressing more conventionally. She was still hot – she'd be hot in whatever she wore, as far as he was concerned – but she wasn't as comfortable, and that dimmed her light.

He stood in front of the mirror in his bathroom and ran his hand over his cheek. He should probably shave, but the memory of her running her fingers over his stubble with a little smile on her face as she told him that it suited him made him think better of it.

He changed his T-shirt and swiped on some more deodorant before running back down the stairs. He skidded to a halt in the hallway when Jacob stuck his head out of his study.

“Do you want ... oh, are you on your way out?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just for a drive.”

Jacob stepped out into the hallway and cocked an eyebrow. “A drive?”

“Yeah.” Xander had a feeling that his brother knew exactly how he felt about Tori, but he hadn’t brought the subject up yet – and now wasn’t the time to get into it.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come out for dinner later. Becca just talked to Piper. Apparently, she and Cam and some of the others are meeting up at Molly’s to eat.”

“I’m good.” He’d love to go and have dinner with them all – he’d love even more to be able to take Tori. But if they went, they’d be there as friends. She’d give him a wide berth. He wanted to hang out with her, be alone with her. He wanted things to be like they were in Nashville. He wanted more than that if he was honest – but he sure as hell didn’t want less.

“Are you doing okay?” Jacob asked. “You’ve been unsettled since you came home.”

“I’m fine.” He did his best to resist checking his watch, but he’d told Tori twenty-five minutes and time was ticking by.

“Are you going for a drive by yourself?”

That was the question he’d been hoping to avoid. He didn’t want to lie. Instead, he shrugged.

A small smile played on Jacob’s lips. “I should get Becca to invite Tori to join us. No one’s seen much of her since you guys came back.”

Xander blew out a sigh. “Okay! I’m taking her out for a drive. What do you want me to tell you?”

Jacob chuckled. “The whole story would be good, but I know I’m not going to get that any time soon. Go on. It’s obvious you’re in a hurry. But you know you guys should just come out and tell everyone that you’re together. They’ll be happy about it; I don’t know why you think it’d be a problem.”

“I would love to tell everyone that – and I will, just as soon as it’s true. But it isn’t yet.”

“It’s not like you to take your time with a woman.”

Xander gave him a rueful smile. “True. But Tori’s ... different.”

Jacob grinned. “I was hoping that was the case. Go on. Don’t let me hold you up. But remember – I’m in your corner, and you can bet that everyone else will be too.”

“Thanks.”

As he hurried out to his SUV, Xander wished that he could get Tori in his corner – or at least, on the same page with him. As he pulled away from the house, he turned on the radio – country music! It was all Tori’s fault. He’d grown to love it, just as he’d grown to love her. He could only hope that one day she’d love him back.

As he approached the gates to the DuPont Estate, he grinned when he spotted her. She was walking down the long driveway and had almost made it to the gates. She waved when she saw him and jogged the rest of the way to meet him, letting herself out of the little side gate.

His heart hammered in his chest when she climbed up into the passenger seat and gave him a shy smile.

“Thanks.”

“What for? I’m the one who should be thanking you; I didn’t think you’d say yes.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Like I said, I was hiding out down by the creek. I need to get out of here for a while.”

Damn. And he’d been hoping that she might be as eager to see him as he was to see her. He gave her a mock pout. “So, I’m just your excuse to escape?”

“No! I mean, well, yes, kind of. But not just that. I . . . I’m glad to see you, too.”

He wanted to believe that her cheeks turned pink because she was embarrassed to admit that she was happy to see him. But it probably wasn’t that. Even so, he couldn’t resist

reaching across and landing a peck on her cheek. “Not as glad as I am to see you.”

He turned the SUV around and headed out of town. He hadn't even planned where he was going. He'd texted her because he was sick of thinking about her and not being able to talk to her. He hadn't expected that she'd agree to come out with him.

“What have you been doing with yourself?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Not much. Just trying to stay out of the way, mostly.”

He glanced over at her. “Whose way are you in?”

She made a face. “That's the trouble. I don't really know. I just ... that's how it feels when I'm at the house. It always has. You know that.”

He did. He'd learned a lot about her in the months that he'd stayed with her in Nashville. He'd be forever grateful that he'd had that time with her. He'd gotten to know her better than maybe anyone else did.

He'd gone there because Calypso Rayne – a big country music star, who Tori sang backup for – had a stalker. There hadn't been any direct threat to Tori, but Xander and her family had wanted to do everything they could to make sure that she was safe. He'd recently gotten out of the Navy and so he'd volunteered his services to work as her personal protection guy.

He'd loved staying in her quirky little house in East Nashville with her – loved getting to know the woman she'd

grown into, and seeing how she lived her life. They hadn't spent much time together since he'd left for the Navy when he was eighteen, but he'd always had a soft spot for her.

They'd spent a lot of time talking when he stayed with her. She'd opened up to him about feeling like the odd one out in her family – she'd opened up about a lot of things. The more he learned about her, the harder he fell.

It might look from the outside like they couldn't be more different. In truth, they had a lot in common, having grown up here in Napa the way they had – as part of the circle that many referred to as 'wine country royalty.' He'd been surprised to discover that she felt like just as much of an outsider as he did. Granted, it was for very different reasons.

He felt her gaze on him as he drove and turned to smile at her. Why waste time caught up in his thoughts when she was sitting right there beside him?

"How about you? Have you decided whether you're going to accept the job with Kolby's brother?"

He shook his head rapidly, knowing damn well that she would take that to mean that he hadn't decided yet. He had – he'd known from the moment Cash MacFarland had called to ask if he wanted to join their team that he wasn't going to take the job. He just didn't want to admit it yet.

While everyone thought that he was simply taking a break, they wouldn't question his motives for staying here in Napa. When they knew that he didn't plan to go and work for Cash, they'd want to know what he was going to do next. He didn't want to have to explain to anyone that he was just biding his

time until Tori made her mind up. If she stayed here, he would, too. If she went back to Nashville, he was going to find a way to go with her. Even if she didn't want him *with* her, he'd go anyway. He'd get some kind of job there, even if it were working as a bouncer in one of the bars – there was always a demand for them.

~ ~ ~

Tori turned to look out the window as they headed north out of town. She was happy that he'd asked her to come along, but she couldn't help wondering why he had. She had a nasty feeling that maybe he'd just gotten used to looking out for her.

She was dreading the day when he would announce that he was leaving town again. The only thing she could think of that would be worse than that would be if he were to meet someone here. If he started dating, she'd be on the jet back to Nashville just as soon as she could – even though there was nothing there for her to go back to.

She was going to have to figure out what to do with her life. She couldn't carry on the way she was. She was living on the family estate when she didn't want to be there. She didn't have a job or even any prospects. And glancing over at Xander again, she realized that the most depressing thing about her situation was that she got to hang out with him but didn't have the guts to even ask if he wanted to take their friendship to another level.

“I don't think I can I live in limbo like this for much longer.”

She turned back to look at him. His gaze was fixed on the road ahead. He looked serious, maybe even irritated – a little pulse ticked at his temple. She held her breath, dreading what he might say next. If he weren't going to take the job with Cash, perhaps he'd already decided what else he was going to do. Her heart thudded to a halt – perhaps he'd asked her to come for a drive with him so that he could tell her that he was leaving.

“What ... what do you mean?”

He shot a quick glance at her, and she braced herself for bad news. Then he turned his attention back to the road, and chuckled. “I can't live with not knowing if I'm doing the right thing. Jacob said that everyone's meeting at Molly's for dinner. I decided for you that you'd rather come for a drive with me, but now I don't know if I did wrong.”

She gave him a wry smile. “You didn't do wrong.”

“No?”

“No. I wouldn't have wanted to go but I wouldn't have had an excuse. Thank you.”

He nodded slowly. “No need. You're my excuse, too.”

CHAPTER TWO

Xander gripped the steering wheel tighter as they left Yountville and headed toward Lake Hennessey. He hadn't known where he was going when he picked Tori up, but there were trails around the lake that they could walk. It wasn't too far out – although now that he had her in his SUV, he was tempted to just keep driving and see where the road took them.

He was mad at himself. When he'd told her that he couldn't take living in limbo any longer, he hadn't really been talking about giving her the option to go to dinner with everyone. He'd been about to tell her how he felt. He needed her to know, needed her to understand that he hadn't spent all that time with her just because she was Bentley's little sister, or even because they were friends themselves. He needed to get it through to her that he wasn't just looking out for her – that he was crazy about her.

With any other woman, he wouldn't have let it drag out this long. In fact, he couldn't remember having taken his time in any respect with women in the past. But this was different. Like he'd told Jacob, Tori was different. For one thing, she wouldn't appreciate him moving as swiftly as he usually did. For another, this mattered. In the past, it wouldn't have made much difference to him if a woman turned him down. Granted, it might dent his ego a little, but nothing more than that. He'd pick himself up and move on – there were plenty more fish in the sea.

But this wasn't the sea. He was no longer a SEAL out with his buddies looking to get laid. This was Napa – his hometown. And Tori wasn't just some fish. She was ... she was special, different. He kept holding back because he didn't want to mess this up. If she turned him down, he didn't know what he'd do.

He blew out a sigh when he found a spot in the parking lot and cut the engine. She turned to him with a puzzled look on her face.

“Are you okay? That was a big sigh.”

“I'm good. I just have a lot on my mind, that's all.” He climbed out and she trotted around to meet him.

“Anything you want to talk about? You know I'm a good listener.”

She was. Just as she'd opened up to him in all the hours they'd spent together while he was protecting her, he'd done the same. He'd told her more about his time in the Navy than he had anyone else and more about how he'd felt growing up in Napa, too.

But since he wasn't sure that she'd want to hear what he had to say right now, he just winked and grabbed hold of her hand. “Nah. It's all good. We came out here to get away from it all, let's just enjoy it, huh?”

She nodded and trotted along at his side, making him slow down when he remembered that, physically, she was only a little thing. She felt like such a big presence to him that he

forgot that she had to take two strides for each one of his, just to keep up.

They walked in silence for a while; it felt good to just enjoy the late afternoon sunshine. It was weird – he'd probably talked more with her than with anyone else – but he also felt comfortable sharing silence with her. He hadn't known many women who could keep quiet for long. Tori seemed to match him perfectly; they could talk about anything and everything or absolutely nothing – and he enjoyed all of it.

~ ~ ~

Tori tried to hide her smile as she clung to his hand. She hadn't missed the way he slowed his stride for her. He was always doing things like that, and she loved it – it felt like not only did he pay attention to her – but he cared!

She knew that her family cared about her – they all loved her and looked out for her the best they could. But they tended to look out for her by telling her what they thought she should do. As much as she appreciated the intention, they didn't think the same way that she did and so their suggestions didn't really help.

Xander was different. He certainly didn't think the same way that she did. He couldn't be more different from her in the way he approached life. Perhaps it was because they were so different that he didn't try to impose his solutions on her. Instead, he tried to make sure that she got what she needed – even when it meant putting himself out.

She forced herself to come back to the moment. There was no point getting lost in her head thinking about how amazing

he was when he was right here with her in reality. The afternoon sun seeped into her skin, making her feel relaxed and ... happy.

She looked up at him when he squeezed her hand. “You’re quiet. You okay?”

She nodded happily. “I am. As a matter of fact ...” Was she really going to tell him? She was. He’d scared her earlier when she’d thought that he was about to announce that he was leaving. She might be scared about telling him, but she knew that she’d always regret it if he left town without knowing how she felt about him.

“As a matter of fact, I’m better than okay.” She tugged his hand and led him off the path toward a bench down by the bank, overlooking the water. “I was quiet because I was thinking how lucky I am. How lucky and how happy.”

When they reached the bench, she sat down. Xander didn’t sit beside her like she’d hoped. Instead, he put his foot up on the seat and rested his arms on his knee as he leant down toward her.

“Happy, huh?”

Her tummy flipped over as she looked up into his eyes. He was so incredibly sexy! He was wearing one of what she liked to think of as his spray-on T-shirts. That was how it looked. It clung to every contour of his shoulders, chest, and arms – and given how muscular he was, there were a lot of contours to cling to! She’d seen him wear them often enough – she’d been lucky enough to see him naked from the waist up on numerous

occasions, too – that even though she couldn't see his back right now, she knew all the well-defined muscles there as well.

His gray eyes seemed to sparkle as he looked down at her, waiting for her to explain. She'd felt so sure of herself a moment ago, but taking in just how gorgeous he was made her hesitate. She knew she wasn't bad looking – but he was way out of her league. She swallowed, tempted to make something up – to tell him that she was happy about something else.

His smile faded. “It's okay, you know, sprite. You can tell me anything.”

She gave him a puzzled look. What did he think she was about to say that would make him look so sad?

He lifted a shoulder. “Did you meet someone? Is that what's making you so happy? Is that why you don't want to tell me?”

She sat back in surprise. That was the last thing she'd expected him to say.

He blew out a sigh and sat down on the bench beside her. “You can tell me.” He nudged her with his elbow. “I can't say you won't break my heart, but I'll still be happy for you, if you're happy.”

She just stared at him, trying to puzzle out what he was saying. She'd break his heart if she'd met someone else? That couldn't be right. He ... She looked into his eyes, and it hit her. That was exactly what he was saying! Callie had tried to tell her dozens of times that he was into her. Willow had told her that she should just go for it. Xander himself had hinted at it often enough, but she'd always refused to believe it. Her

heart started to pound. This was it – it was make or break time
...

She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly as she tried to find the right words.

He rested his hand on her thigh, and slick heat trickled through her veins. She closed her eyes. This was really happening! And she was not going to play dumb any more. She was well aware that it might not go anywhere, that she might be nothing more than a passing interest for him. But even if that were the case, she wanted to explore whatever little she could have.

When she opened her eyes again, she met his gaze and held it. “I have met someone. He’s the reason I’m happy.”

That little pulse started to tick in his temple again, and she was awed that she could do that to him. His hand tightened on her thigh before he pulled back and nodded.

“How’d you meet him?”

“I’ve known him for years.”

“In Nashville?”

She gave him a half smile. “No. I met him right here.”

His brows drew together. “Do I know him?”

“Better than anyone.”

His scowl grew deeper as he obviously tried to puzzle it out. “One of the pilots?”

His expression was a cross between misery and anger. She hadn’t meant to upset him. She’d wanted to try to tell him

lightly, but nothing about this felt light or fun.

“It’s you! Don’t look so mad, or sad or whatever that expression on your face means. And please don’t be embarrassed or feel bad if you don’t feel the same way. But Xander, I’m happy because I’m here with you.”

He sat up straight, seeming to tower over her. “You mean because I got you out of the house – off the estate for a while? Because?”

She put a finger to his lips as she shook her head. “I mean that I ... I can’t keep trying to hide it from you, Xander. I mean ...”

A small smile tugged the corners of his mouth upwards. “You mean ...?”

She nodded again.

He edged closer and set his hands on the bench on either side of her hips. She felt as though she was surrounded by him as she leaned back to look up into his eyes. His smile lit up his face as he asked, “You mean I finally wore you down? Finally got you to accept that I might be worth taking a chance on?”

“No.”

His smile disappeared.

“I’ve always known that you were worth it. What I didn’t know was what on earth you might see in me – I still don’t. But ...” She bit down on her bottom lip as she ran her hand up his arm. “But I finally reached the conclusion that that’s your problem. If you want to take a chance on me, then I’m up for it. I only have one request.”

“What’s that?”

“Let me down gently when you’re done with me?”

He moved faster than a guy his size should be able to. His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her to him. The next thing she knew, she was sitting on his lap with both of his arms wrapped around her. She let out a surprised little laugh, but he gave her a stern look.

“What?” she asked. “Are you saying that you won’t be my friend anymore when you’re done with me? I don’t think I could take that.”

His arms tightened around her. “I’m saying nothing of the kind. In fact – I’m saying the opposite of that.”

“I don’t get it. What’s the opposite of not being gentle with me when you’re done with me?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Think about it.”

“I am. I still don’t get it.”

He gave her a weird little smile. “You will. You can tell me when you figure it out. In the meantime, you don’t need to worry about it. All I’ll say is that I’ll always be gentle with you – in everything.”

That sent a shiver down her spine. She hoped he didn’t mean in *everything*. She kind of liked the idea of him being less than gentle in some things.

~ ~ ~

Xander didn’t know what the hell had changed – didn’t know what had prompted her after all this time to say that she

was interested in him as maybe something more than a friend. But he wasn't going to waste any time trying to figure out the why – he was just going to run with it.

He ran his hand up and down her back and had to shift his position when she shivered under his touch. She had the same effect on him. Her light blue eyes fixed on his and he could see a whole bunch of questions in them.

He slipped his hand under her hair and cupped her nape. “Don't look so worried, it's just taking me a minute to catch up. I've been working on this since the day I arrived in Nashville. I've gotten used to you shutting me down.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I shut you down?”

He chuckled. “Don't try to look innocent. Yes, Tori, you shut me down. Like five times a day – every day.”

“You mean when you were joking around?”

He gave her another stern look. “I was never joking. You, little sprite, drive me out of my mind. I've tried being jokey, I've tried being subtle, I tried telling you in no uncertain terms, and every single time, you shut me down.”

She dropped her gaze. “I didn't think you were serious – didn't see how you could be.”

He tangled his fingers in her hair and tugged her head back so that she had to look into his eyes. “I was serious. I am serious.” He brought his other hand up to cup her cheek and dropped his gaze to her lips – her full, soft-looking lips that had haunted his dreams for months.

When he looked back up into her eyes, her cheeks flushed.
“So, what do we do about it?”

He wanted to suggest that they seal it with a kiss – he’d love to suggest that he could take her home and seal it in bed, but now that the moment was here – the moment that he’d feared would never come – none of that felt right. He wasn’t just making his move on a woman he was attracted to – she was still Tori.

That made him smile. “Wanna start with a hug?”

She chuckled and threw her arms around his neck. “I think we can manage that. We’ve done it before.”

He closed his eyes as he closed his arms around her warm, soft body and crushed her to his chest. She was right, they had done this before – but never like this. Every time he’d hugged her, he’d forced himself to focus on being there for whatever she needed him to be – because he couldn’t afford to think about her being there for what he wanted her to be. Now ... now, as he let his hands wander up and down her back and enjoyed the feel of her full, soft breasts pressed against his chest, he couldn’t think about anything else.

She shifted on his lap, and he let out a low groan.

“Oops. Sorry.”

He held her closer, and for the first time he wasn’t worried about what she’d think when she noticed how hard he was for her.

He chuckled. “That’s okay. You can do it again if you like.”

He'd only said it for the laugh, but she surprised the hell out of him when she rocked her ass against his aching cock. "Like that?"

He caught her chin in his hand and looked into her eyes. "Yeah. Just like that."

The gleam in her eyes made him grow even harder.

"I wish we weren't in a public place."

He groaned his agreement as she continued to press herself against him. His fingers dug into her hips when she cupped his face between her hands and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

"I didn't think this was something that I should tell you before, but now"

He raised his eyebrows and tried to make his brain focus on her words. His body was completely occupied by the way hers made him feel.

"Now what?" he asked, hoping that she wasn't about to tell him anything too complicated.

Her cheeks flamed bright red, but she still had that same gleam in her eye. "I like sex."

He swallowed. It wasn't what he'd been expecting, but he sure as hell wasn't complaining!

"So, you've been holding out on me?"

"No! I just ... It's not something that friends talk about really – is it?"

He chuckled. "I guess we have different friends." All the guys he'd served with talked openly about their sex lives.

“Hm. Or maybe we don’t. You’re right. I do talk about it with my girlfriends. It’s just ... you’re not a girlfriend.”

He had to smile. “Are you finally figuring out that I might be more than just a friend?”

She rested her hands on his shoulders and lowered her mouth to his. She came so close that her lips brushed his when she spoke. “I’ve wanted you to be more than just a friend for *years*.”

He crushed her to him and slammed his mouth against hers. It was far from the first kiss he’d imagined they might share. There was nothing tentative or tender about it. It was hungry, demanding, all consuming – and that was just Tori! Xander felt as though he was plundering her mouth, finally claiming what was rightfully his.

“You should get a room!” They broke apart when a group of kids yelled and whistled at them from the path up above the bench.

Xander scowled at them, and they hurried away. He turned back to Tori, hoping that the interruption hadn’t brought her back to her senses – that she wasn’t about to withdraw from him again.

He needn’t have worried; she still had that gleam in her eye. She took his breath away when she ran her tongue over her bottom lip and said, “I think they’re right – we should.”

CHAPTER THREE

Dusk was settling in as they walked back to the SUV. They'd walked the trails and watched the sunset over the water, but Xander was right that they should leave before it got dark. Tori wanted to pinch herself; part of her couldn't believe this was finally happening. Another part of her couldn't believe that she hadn't gotten over all the fear and doubt and made it happen much sooner.

Xander was holding her hand again; it felt different than when they arrived here. That had been a friendly thing – at least, in her mind.

He grinned at her. “What?”

She squeezed his hand. “I like this.”

He squeezed back. “I do, too. I've always liked it, but I like it even better now that you get it.”

She chuckled. “I thought you were just being friendly before.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “When have you ever seen me hold hands with one of my friends?”

She had to laugh. “Yeah, I can't see Slade being happy about that – or Kolby, for that matter.”

“They'd probably break my fingers if I tried. But think it about, sprite. I'm friends with Callie, too. You never saw me hold hands with her. And back here, I'm friends with Willow –

and with Molly and Chelsea – we’ve been friends all our lives, but I’ve never held their hands.”

She gave him a guilty little smile. “I suppose it was just one more thing I told myself because I didn’t believe that you were into me.”

All her breath caught in her chest when he winked at her. “I’m into you.”

She was surprised at herself that she’d admitted to him that she liked sex. It wasn’t something she normally shared with a guy – not in words anyway. It kind of became obvious once the relationship progressed to that point.

When they reached the SUV, he backed her against it and caged her in with one arm around her middle and the other resting on the doorframe above her head. She loved the way he did that. It made her feel safe – as though he was creating their own little cocoon, and inside it nothing could touch her – nothing except him.

He dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers. “Where do you want to go?”

Her heart pounded. She’d been hoping that he might just take her where she wanted to go – to bed.

“I’m trying to be a gentleman here. I don’t want to rush us into anything.”

She gripped a fistful of his shirt. “I am *soo* ready!”

He kissed her again. “Glad to hear it, but ...” He frowned.

That wasn’t the reaction she’d been hoping for. “But what?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “It’s not so much *but what* as *but where*.”

“Oh!” He had a point. She could hardly take him back to the estate with her. Well, she could. There was absolutely no reason not to. No one would mind. No one would say anything. But it just wouldn’t feel right. She wouldn’t be able to relax. And it would be the same for him.

He confirmed her thoughts when he said, “I wouldn’t have a problem taking you home with me. Jacob wouldn’t mind – he probably wouldn’t even notice. But I can’t see you being comfortable with it – and to be honest, I don’t think I would be either. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t have a problem with everyone knowing that we’re seeing each other – I want to tell them all. But I don’t think either of us is comfortable with them knowing about – and being under the same roof for – our first night together.”

She made a face. “No. You’re right. It just wouldn’t be ...” She shuddered. “I feel so dumb now!”

“Why?”

“Because we had all that time in Nashville, and then on the road, and in Montana, too.” She ran her hand up his arm. “All those nights that we spent together already, and we didn’t make the most of them.”

She loved the way he smiled as he ran his hand over her hair. “Those nights were perfect.” He chuckled. “I won’t lie. They were frustrating as hell for me. But I wouldn’t give them back. And you were not dumb. You did what was right for you at the time.”

He was so sweet! “Maybe. But I want to do what’s right for me now – I just don’t know where we can.” She gave him a shamefaced smile. “I feel a bit brazen but maybe we should do what those kids said.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“Get a room!”

He chuckled, but he didn’t look comfortable with it, and she was kind of relieved.

“I ... don’t get me wrong ... I want to. But ...” He shook his head.

“No. I know. You’re right. That would feel more like we were just sneaking off to screw.”

He laughed. “That sounds so strange coming from you, but I know what you mean. And that’s not what I want this to be.”

Her heart felt as though it melted in her chest when he added. “Yes, I want you. Yes. I’ve wanted you for months and there have been times when I thought I’d give anything to get you into bed. But now that we have the chance, it’s about more than that.”

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I hate to say it, but I’d rather wait than screw it up by sneaking around.”

She nodded sadly. “Me too.”

~ ~ ~

When they got back to the DuPont Estate, Xander brought his SUV to a halt around the back of the house by the kitchen door.

Tori reached across and touched his arm. “Do you want to come in and hang out for a while? I think Bentley and Alyssa must have gone to Molly’s with everyone – his car’s not here.”

“I want to, but I’m not going to.” He gave her a rueful smile. “If I come in, I don’t trust myself not to stay until morning.”

She gave him a sassy little smile. “That’s kind of what I was hoping. We’re both trying to be good – but if it just happens, it happens.”

He cupped his hand around the back of her head and drew her closer so that he could kiss her. He kept it brief; it’d be too easy to get carried away.

“We’ll figure something out and do it right.”

“Okay.” She blew out a sigh. “I know you’re right, but if this is goodnight, I’m going to go now. It’d be even worse if we were caught going at it in your car.”

He had to laugh. “And I thought you were such a lady.”

She giggled. “I am a lady. I just ... you know.”

“I know.” He adjusted his pants, convinced that his dick must bear the imprint of his zipper by now. “I promise you we’ll work something out soon.”

“Okay.”

He drew her closer again. “Thanks for finally deciding to give me a chance.”

“Thanks for waiting so long.”

“I’d wait forever for you.”

Her eyes widened, and he realized that he should probably tone it down. He shrugged. “Go on. Get your ass in the house before I change my mind and follow you. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Xander.”

He gave her one last kiss. “Goodnight, sprite.”

When he got back home, he tapped in the code and waited for the gates to swing open. He was glad that Jacob had installed the keypad so that no one worked night shifts on the gate anymore. As far as Xander was concerned, there was no need for the gatehouse or the guys who worked there during the day either – but he was glad that Jacob hadn’t gotten rid of them.

For one thing, he liked them – Slade was his best friend, and John was a good guy, too. For another, the fact that Jacob had kept them on all these years when there was no real need for them anymore, had given Xander hope for his brother. In the years since their folks had died, the Jacob of old had withdrawn, and all that seemed to be left of him was a businessman whose only concern was growing the company. There had been few chinks in the armor that he’d worn over the last decade, but not firing the gate guys was one of the most significant.

Jacob had changed again over the last year or so – since he’d met Becca. He was back to being the kind of person he’d been when they were kids, and Xander was grateful for that – he’d missed his brother.

He frowned when he spotted a figure walking up the driveway ahead of him. He switched his lights to high beams to get a better look – there was no reason for anyone to be wandering the estate after dark. He relaxed when the man turned around, and he recognized that it was Slade. As he drew closer, he could see that Slade had Hannah’s dog, Scooter, on a leash. That made sense; Hannah and Grady had taken little Ava to LA, and Slade and Willow were watching the dog for them.

He switched his lights back down when Slade held his hand up to shield his eyes. When he pulled alongside him, he let the window down.

“Sorry about that, I didn’t recognize you at first.”

Slade laughed. “Not a problem. I’m not sure that I recognize myself.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, look at me. I’m out walking the dog after taking my lady out to dinner with our friends. Willow was tired when we got back, and she has to be at work early in the morning, so I’m the one doing the honors with this guy.”

As he bent down to scratch Scooter’s ears, Xander could tell that he wasn’t upset about his newfound domesticity.

“It suits you.”

Slade gave him a rueful smile. “I know. I’m not saying I’m not happy about it – just that sometimes it hits me how much my life has changed since Willow and I got together, and especially since we moved in here.”

Xander nodded. He loved that his old friend had moved into the cottage that used to house the tasting room up by the back entrance to the estate. Slade had always felt like part of the family to him, so it made sense that he should live here. Hannah had moved into the other cottage, Becca had moved into the big house with Jacob, and everyone seemed to have settled happily into their new lives.

Everyone except him. He'd expected to embark on a new life of his own when he retired from the Navy. And he would. He just needed to figure out what that life would look like.

Slade gave him a puzzled look. "Where were you tonight?"

Xander grinned; he didn't have anything to hide from Slade.

"I noticed that the third DuPont sibling was also conspicuous by her absence. Please tell me that the two of you were together?"

"We were."

Slade cocked an eyebrow. "And? I like the look of that smile."

Xander chuckled. "I'm happy to tell you that Tori finally put a smile on my face. She wants to give things a go between us."

Slade held up his fist, and Xander bumped his against it. "Happy for you, man."

"Thanks. It's taken me long enough to win her over."

"It took years for Willow and me, too. I can tell you that it's worth the wait."

Xander chuckled. “Yeah, but the two of you were ... together from the very beginning – and kept meeting up and hooking up over the years.”

Slade laughed with him. “True, but although they’re sisters, Willow and Tori are very different people. I don’t think Tori’s the kind to hook up with anyone, is she?”

Before today, Xander would have said with absolute certainty that no, she wasn’t. But after her little confession about how she liked sex – and the way she’d crawled all over him on that bench, he wasn’t so sure.

Slade picked up on his hesitation and gave him a puzzled look. “I mean, she’s not even with you now – and you’re here, not over there with her.”

Xander made a face. “Not because she wants to take our time about it, though.”

“What then? Don’t tell me that you do?”

“No but think about it; if I stayed there with her, I’d have to face Bentley in the morning, and if she came over here, she’d have to face Jacob and Becca – and probably you and Willow, too.”

“And that bothers her?”

“It kind of bothers both of us.”

“Why?”

Xander shrugged. “Because ... I dunno. Because it’s new? Because after all this time I only want to think about her and how she feels – not have to worry about what anyone else

might have to say. And for her, she feels like everyone here is watching her and judging her no matter what she does. Like you said, she and Willow are totally different – Willow does what she wants no matter what. Tori ...” He frowned. She still did what she wanted, but she did it elsewhere so that she wouldn’t have to deal with whatever people thought or said.

“Tori would rather leave town than have to deal with facing people,” said Slade.

Xander met his gaze. “Right.”

“What?”

He chuckled. “You just gave me an idea.”

Slade grinned back at him. “I bet I know what you’re thinking. She still has her place in Nashville, right? She must need to go and check on it at some point soon.”

“Exactly. And since she hasn’t been back there since the whole stalker deal, it would make sense for me to go with her – to keep an eye on her.”

“Sounds like you know your next move, then.”

“Yep.” He planned to call Tori as soon as he got back to the house to see if she liked the idea.

“Just for a visit though, right? You can come back and announce that you guys are together. Then you’ll be comfortable with each other, and no one will have anything to say about where you spend your nights. They’ll expect you to spend them together.”

Xander nodded slowly. “I think just for a visit. But she doesn’t love being here – and you know I never have.”

Slade scowled. “I know you didn’t used to, but everything’s different now. Everyone’s coming home and ...”

Xander leaned out through the window and punched his shoulder. “Don’t look like that. I told you I didn’t plan to come back to stay.”

“I know, but I was kind of hoping.”

Xander shrugged. “It’s not a definite no. But Tori’s more comfortable in Nashville than she is here. If she decides to stay, I will, too.”

He met his old friend’s gaze. “And to be honest, even if she doesn’t want to stay there, I think we’d both be happier starting fresh somewhere else. I know you said that everyone’s coming home but ... some of us need to go out in the world and find a new home.”

“I know. Sorry. I just ... I liked the idea of having you back for good.”

Xander grinned when a thought struck him. “It’s not like I’m going to disappear never to be heard from again. When you think about it – if I get my way, you might be stuck with me for life.”

“How, if you don’t live here?”

“They’re sisters. Willow’s already wearing your ring.”

Slade grinned. “You’re that serious about her?”

“I sure am.”

They both turned when the beam of a flashlight illuminated the driveway.

“Are you okay?” Willow shouted.

“I’m fine. Sorry I took so long.”

Xander leaned out the window and called to her, “Sorry. It’s me. I held him up.”

“No problem.” Willow jogged to meet them, and Scooter jumped around excitedly when she reached them. “I was getting worried,” she told Slade. “I didn’t think you’d be long, and you don’t have your phone.” She chuckled and rolled her eyes at Xander. “I’m not out here keeping tabs on him – I’m here to put my overactive imagination to rest. I had all these horrible ideas about you have having fallen or had a heart attack or ... I don’t know.”

Slade wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I’m fine. I just got to talking.”

She laughed. “And I can leave you to it.” She reached for the leash. “I’ll take Scooter home and you guys can hang out if you like.”

Slade kept hold of the leash and shook his head. “Nope. We’re done here.” He glanced back at Xander. “For now. Xander’s on his way home and I’m coming back with you.”

Willow met Xander’s gaze. “Have you gotten anywhere with Tori yet?”

He let out a short laugh. She’d never been one to mince words.

He nodded slowly.

“Yes!” He had to laugh when she punched the air. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to interrogate you – or her. I should warn you that she might run scared if she thinks that everyone knows about the two of you and that they’ll have an opinion on the matter.”

He nodded – she knew her sister well. “Yeah. I’m going to see if she wants to go check on her house in Nashville for a few days.”

“That’s a good plan.” Willow grinned. “If you like, I’ll tell her that there’s something going on at the estate – something that she wouldn’t want to be around for – something peopley.”

Xander had to laugh. “I appreciate it, but I’m hoping that she’ll want to go – I don’t want to make her feel any more uncomfortable here than she already does.”

“Yeah. You’re right. But whatever it takes. Just give me a shout if I can help.”

“Thanks. Do you guys want a ride back?”

“No, thanks,” said Slade. “We’ll walk, and get Scooter his wander, sniff, and squat.”

Xander laughed, and Slade didn’t even look embarrassed. “That’s what Ava calls it!”

“Right.”

As he carried on to the house, Xander couldn’t help thinking that Slade was right, everyone had come home – and they were moving on to the next stage of their lives. As much as he

loved them all, he couldn't see himself settling into this kind of life with them. He couldn't see Tori enjoying it much either.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Tori woke the next morning, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, smiling as she thought about what had happened with Xander. She'd finally taken the risk – and it had paid off big time!

She wasn't going to waste any time wishing that she'd been braver sooner. She was just going to bask in the wonderful feeling that he really did like her. That they were going to see where things might go between them. She wasn't going to get carried away – she knew it probably wouldn't last for long, but she was going to make the most of it.

She rolled onto her side and hugged her pillow. She wished that they'd been able to make the most of last night, but she just wasn't comfortable having him stay over with her. And she wouldn't have felt any better about having to face Jacob and Becca this morning if she'd stayed at the Jacobs Estate with him, either.

They were going to have to do something about that. He'd said that they would figure something out – but she didn't see what they could do. Wherever they went in this town, there was always going to be someone looking over their shoulders.

She made a face when she checked her watch. Bentley and Alyssa would have gone out to work a while ago. They wouldn't be any the wiser if Xander had stayed here with her. But that wasn't the whole point – part of the problem was how

she felt about it. She rolled out of bed. She just didn't feel comfortable in this house – she never had.

Once she was showered and dressed, she managed to sneak in and out of the kitchen for a cup of coffee and a muffin without Simon catching her. She was tempted to go back up to her room and hide out there, but she needed to do better. This was her family home; she had every right to be here. She knew that most of the issues she had with the place only existed in her own head – and that they wouldn't get any better until she faced them. So, she went to the family room and sat in there.

She wanted to call Xander and see what he was doing today. Of course, she wanted to see him – to be with him – but even apart from that she'd like to hang out with him. The two of them were the only ones who didn't have work or lives here. Everyone else would be busy.

She took her phone out eagerly when it rang, hoping it was him. It wasn't. It was her mom.

“Hi, Mom. Is everything okay?”

“Good morning, darling. Everything is wonderful in my world. I hope one day you'll get used to the idea that I call just to talk to you – not because anything's wrong.”

“Sorry.”

“It wasn't a complaint.”

Tori pursed her lips. She wished that she could just relax with her mom. Both Bentley and Willow had gotten used to this new, more mellow version of the woman who'd raised

them. They got along great with her these days – and even said that she was fun.

Tori could see it. She *was* different; she was relaxed and happier than Tori had ever known her. But that didn't mean that Tori was able to relax with her – even though she'd like to.

“I know. Sorry. Shoot!”

Her mom laughed. “It's all right. Really. I just wanted to check in with you. See how you're settling back in.”

“I'm not settling here – I'm not back to stay!” The words were out before she even thought about it. She wished she didn't feel so defensive.

“I know. I didn't think you were. I didn't mean it that way. I just meant settling back into normal life after the tour and everything that happened with Callie. That's how you usually say it when you get back after a tour – that you're settling back into regular life.”

“I know. Sorry.”

Her mom didn't say anything.

Tori let out a short laugh. “I'm doing my best to not apologize for apologizing again.”

Her mom chuckled. “I'm doing my best to not remind you that you don't need to. You do know that, don't you?”

“I do. It's just force of habit, I guess. Anyway, moving swiftly on – as we do – I'm doing okay. I'm ...” She hesitated, but if their relationship was ever going to improve, Tori knew

that she should open up more. “I don’t know if you know this, but I’m not really comfortable on the estate.”

Her mom chuckled again. “I do know, darling. I wish you didn’t feel that way, but you’ve felt like an outsider your whole life, haven’t you?”

Tori swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Now I’m the one apologizing.”

“No! It’s not your fault. It’s nothing you did. Nothing anyone ever did. I love you; I really do. And Dad. And Bentley and Willow are awesome. It’s just ... it’s me. I feel like I was never given the handbook on what it takes to be a DuPont, and so I just bumble around getting it wrong.”

“Oh, darling. We are so much more alike than you realize.”

“What do you mean?”

“I used to feel that way with my father. I knew he expected so much of me, but as a child, I never quite knew what. Although, I suppose in a way, I was better off than you. My father wrote the rule book and made me study it and live by it. I never wanted to do that to you – never wanted to make you conform. I think perhaps I did you a disservice that way. I didn’t want to give you a set of rules to conform to – but I should have given you more guidance in figuring out your own rules to live by.”

Tori sat up straighter. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re a great mom. Bentley and Willow turned out just fine.”

“And so did you! I just wish that I’d understood you better. The two of them thrived with my style of parenting – and your

father's, of course. You needed something different, and I didn't give it to you."

"I do okay, you know. It's just that I don't feel comfortable here."

"You do more than okay. You've made a wonderful life for yourself, and I don't tell you enough, but I'm proud of you."

Tori swallowed. "Thank you."

"Anyway." Her mom sniffed. "I had the feeling that you'd be feeling out of sorts there in Napa. I wanted to see how you are. Are you planning to go back to Nashville?"

"I don't know. I want to. But at the same time, there isn't anything I need to go back for right now. Callie's taking some time off. She wants to get settled in Montana with Kolby, and I don't blame her. It's just that when you're a backup singer, there's not much to do when you don't have a singer to back."

"Would you not want to work with anyone else?"

"I might. Autumn – she's the head of the label – said that I should give her a call when I get back to town. She'll set me up with something if I want it. It's just that I've worked with Callie for so long that I can't imagine working with anyone else – I'm not sure that I'd want to, you know?"

"I can understand that. Although, anyone you work with will be lucky to have you. You're very talented."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I mean it. You are. And you know, if you wanted to go out on your own, I'm sure you'd do wonderfully."

Tori pursed her lips. “Please tell me that you haven’t been talking to Clay MacAdam?”

Her mom chuckled. “I promise you that I have not. I know how you feel about that. I’d really like for us to be closer, Tori – I wouldn’t do anything that would put our relationship in jeopardy. And I know full well that going against your wishes and interfering in your career would do exactly that.”

Tori blew out a sigh. “Thanks for understanding.”

“I do, you know. I understand that you want to make it on your own, you don’t want any favors, and you certainly don’t want to trade on the family name – or any strings I can pull.”

“Yeah.” Her mom had been friends with Clay MacAdam – the granddaddy of country music himself, who just happened to own the label she worked for – long before Tori had moved to Nashville. She knew that a lot of people would love to have a connection like that – and to be able to make the most of it. But Tori had moved there to get away from feeling like the odd one out in her family; the last thing she wanted was to feel as though she couldn’t make it without her mom’s help even from half a continent away.

“You know I never wanted a big music career, don’t you?”

“I do. You just wanted to strike out on your own and do something you enjoy.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you still enjoy it?”

She made a face.

“It’s not as though you have to decide right away, is it?”

“I guess not.”

“Well, whenever you decide you want to go back to Nashville – even if it’s just a quick visit for now – make sure that Bentley gets your flight on the schedule.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She’d never once asked if she could use the family jet – that would feel far too hypocritical while she rejected any other kind of help – but she did love to fly in it, and her mom somehow knew that and did her best to set it up for her whenever possible.

“And ...”

“What?” It wasn’t like her mom to sound hesitant – maybe even cautious.

“Well, I’m not trying to hijack you or anything, but it would be nice – if you want to – if ... Either on the way to Nashville or on the way back We’d love to see you if want to make a quick stop in Summer Lake.”

Tori had to smile. “Okay. I don’t even know when I’ll go yet, but yeah. I’d love to see you, Mom.”

“I’d love to see you, too. And no pressure, but I hope it’s soon.”

“Okay. I’ll make some plans and let you know.”

~ ~ ~

Xander grinned to himself as he drove up the long driveway on the DuPont estate. He’d woken up with a smile on his face this morning. That smile would have been even bigger if he’d

woken up beside Tori, but just knowing that he was going to see her today was enough – and knowing that it wouldn't be long before he'd get to wake up with her made his smile even bigger.

Just as he climbed out and started toward the kitchen steps, his phone rang, and he pulled it out of his back pocket. He was tempted to let it go to voicemail; Tori was expecting him, and there wasn't anyone he wanted to talk to more than he wanted to see her.

He frowned when he saw Brock's name on the display. Brock was on Kolby MacFarland's security team. Xander had gotten close with those guys while they were all working together protecting Tori and Callie.

He glanced up at the house and swiped to answer. Brock wasn't a big talker; this shouldn't take long.

“What's up, dude? How's it going?”

“Hey! Doing good. How about you?”

“Yeah, I'm good. What can I do for you?”

“Can you give me Tori's number?”

“What? Why?”

Brock laughed. “Cool it! Not like that! I value my life too much to ask her out. She's your girl; we all know that. I just want to talk to her.”

Xander ran his hand through his hair, feeling a little dumb. All those guys knew how he felt about Tori – he didn't need to react the way he had.

“Sorry. I can do better than give you her number – I just arrived at her place; I can hand you over to her if you want to wait a minute?”

“Hey, does that mean you guys finally got together? That’s great!”

Xander smiled; he’d been about to say that he was working on it, but after yesterday, he could actually say that yes, they were together. It was only the beginning, and they hadn’t figured anything out yet, but still. “Thanks. I think so.”

He looked up when the kitchen door opened, and a rush of warmth filled his chest when he saw her. She was gorgeous. She took his breath away. She waved and he waved back and started up the steps to meet her.

“Hang on a minute, Brock. She’s just here.”

“Thanks.” Brock chuckled. “Put me on speaker if you like.”

“I’m not that bad. I trust you not to make a move on my girl.”

Tori raised her eyebrows, and he winked at her – he’d said that mostly for her benefit. He needed her to know how he saw her.

“I know,” said Brock, “It’s just that you might have some input, too.”

“Okay.” He smiled at Tori. “It’s Brock. He wants to ask you about something.”

She smiled and nodded, and although she looked happy to hear from Brock, Xander loved that she didn’t light up in the

same way that she had when she first opened the door and saw him.

“Okay, you’re on speaker,” he told Brock. “What can we do for you?”

“Hey, Tori.”

“Hi Brock. How are you? What are you up to? Are you still in Montana?”

Brock laughed. “No. Kolby and Callie are settling into their new place. The rest of us shipped out. Tony and Vaughn went back to Nashville, and Ward and I came back to home base. But I just had an offer, and I wanted to pick your brain.”

Tori raised her eyebrows at him, and Xander shrugged.

“What kind of offer?” she asked.

“Corbyn got in touch with me and asked if I wanted to go and work for him.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

Tori looked so worried that Xander went and put his arm around her. After everything that had happened with Callie’s stalker, it was understandable that she might freak out at the thought of another of her friends needing security.

“Don’t worry,” Brock reassured her quickly. “There’s nothing going on. But after what happened, Corbyn likes the idea of having one of us on staff – someone to go with his singers whenever there’s a potential for trouble.”

Tori was still frowning. “Which artists?”

“You probably know better than I do who he manages; the only name that stuck with me was Carson because he was on the tour with Callie. He seemed like a good guy.”

Xander watched Tori’s face – she was smiling again now. “Oh, he is. And I can see why Corbyn might want you to keep an eye out for him.”

“Is he trouble?”

She chuckled. “Not in the way you’re probably thinking. He’s ...” She glanced at Xander, and he gave her a puzzled look. “Girls go crazy over him. I imagine that if you’re going to work with him, it’ll be more a case of fighting off screaming women than protecting him from a crazy man.”

“I see.”

Xander chuckled. “Sounds to me as though you might have some fun – you could take a few for the team.”

Tori rolled her eyes at him, and Brock laughed. “Yeah. That’s not exactly my style, and you know it.”

It was true. While they’d been working together, the other guys had all happily managed to divert the attentions of some of the women who flocked around Carson and Matt and their bands, but Xander hadn’t seen Brock with a woman even once.

“If Corbyn called you, then my guess is that he probably noticed that about you on the tour,” said Tori. “They’ve had a few problems with Carson’s security guys in the past – one of them got into a whole heap of trouble when a woman went to the tabloids claiming that she’d had his baby.”

Xander shook his head. He'd known that groupies existed, but the behavior of some of those women had shocked him – and that took some doing. It wasn't like he was a celebrity but during his time as a Navy SEAL, there had been plenty of women who'd tried to bed him and his teammates just because of what they did. He could only imagine that it was a hundred times worse for a country music star.

“What do you think? Is that enough to put you off?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Brock said. “Corbyn's asked me to go visit and I might just do that and see. I wish you guys were going to be there.”

Xander met Tori's gaze, thinking about the conversation he'd had with Slade about getting her back to Nashville, but not wanting to broach the subject while Brock was listening. To his surprise, she grinned at him and nodded eagerly.

“It's funny you should say that, Brock. We haven't had the chance to talk about it yet, but I was telling my mom this morning that I really should get back and check on my house soon.”

Xander grinned back at her. “How soon are you thinking about going?” he asked Brock.

“Early next week.”

“Awesome!” said Tori.

“We'll see what we can do at this end and let you know,” Xander told him.

“Thanks, guys. I hope we can work something out.”

“Me too. Talk to you soon.”

He ended the call and turned toward Tori, wrapping both arms around her, and loving the way she melted against him.

“So, you want to go to Nashville?”

She smiled at him. “I do. Mom called this morning, and she offered the plane if I want to go.” Her smile dimmed a little. “The only thing is, she asked if I’d stop in Summer Lake to see her and Russ on the way there – or the way back. How would you feel about that?”

He chuckled. “I don’t have a problem with it. I feel guilty admitting it – knowing that you guys had kind of strained relationships with her – but I’ve always gotten along well with your mom.”

“Oh, that’s right! Of course! She loves you to pieces!”

He chuckled. He wouldn’t put it that way; he knew that she liked him, but he couldn’t imagine Alexandria DuPont loving anything *to pieces*. Although he hoped that one day her daughter might feel that way about him.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What do you think, do you want to go to Muse later?”

Tori blew out a sigh. “I don’t know. What do you think?” They were sitting in his SUV in the parking lot at the park – hiding out like this was getting old already.

Xander shrugged. “I’d like to go, but I don’t like the idea of pretending that we’re just friends if we do.”

“There’s no reason that we should, is there?”

He turned in his seat to face her. “None that I can see, but it’s up to you.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. They’d spent the day driving around the countryside. It was crazy, really. There was no one at her place if they wanted to hang out there, and no one at home at his place, either. But they’d agreed that it didn’t feel right. To her, what didn’t feel right was that neither of them felt like they had a place they could call their own.

Well, she had a place, but it was in Nashville. Xander had given up his place in San Diego when he’d come to Nashville to stay with her.

It felt like they were in some weird kind of limbo. They were both grown adults. Yet, back here in Napa, it felt as though they were still kids in a way. They’d both left town as soon as they could when they were teenagers – and neither of them had been back for any extended time since.

She wouldn't say it was the same for Xander, but she'd only learned how to be her own person in Nashville – she didn't know how to not fall back into her old role here.

She'd talked to Bentley, and he'd said that the pilots had the weekend off because they'd been flying a busy schedule for the last few weeks. But he'd said that they'd be free to take her on Monday morning.

In the meantime, they were stuck here. If they went out with everyone tonight, that would be the first step in getting them all used to the idea that she and Xander were seeing each other – although to be fair, she was probably the one who needed to get used to the idea of everyone knowing. She doubted that anyone would have a problem.

He reached across the console and touched her cheek and made her realize that she was overthinking it when he said, “It's up to you.”

She made a face at him. “I want to but what do we do afterward?”

He winked at her. “Once they see us out together, I don't imagine that anyone will be too surprised if we go home together. And if they are, that's their problem, not ours.”

Little bubbles of excitement fizzed in her chest. “Are you saying that if I'm brave enough to go, I'll get my reward?”

“I wouldn't have put it like that but ...” He gave her a sexy smile. “Yeah. I'll make it worth your while.”

“Okay then. I'll make it worth your while, too. But ...”

He caught hold of her chin and made her look at him. “We don’t have to ... we don’t have to go out and we don’t have to go home together – whatever you’re comfortable with.”

She laughed. “You misread me on that one. If I looked uncertain, it’s only because I don’t know what going home together means. Do we go to your place or mine?”

“That’s up to you.”

She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I think your place.”

“Okay.”

“Is it?”

He chuckled. “It’s fine, sprite. I don’t know if Jacob and Becca are going tonight. If they do, we don’t need to go home when they do. I can sneak you up to my room if you’re more comfortable with that.”

She nodded eagerly, and he chuckled.

“And tomorrow’s Saturday. So, there won’t be anyone around. The staff have the day off and Jacob and Becca don’t usually surface until lunch time.”

“So, you can sneak me back out again?”

He smiled through pursed lips. “If that’s what you want, then yeah. Or you could stick around. I’ll make you breakfast, and we can hang out. It’s only the first time that might feel a bit awkward. The sooner we get it out of the way, the better.”

“I suppose.”

“Hey. I’m not saying that I want to get our first time out of the way. You know that, don’t you?”

She laughed. “Of course I do! And you’re right. I should try to be more like Willow and just brazen it out.”

He leaned in and claimed her mouth in a deep, slow kiss that left her dizzy.

“I don’t want you to be like anyone but yourself, okay? If you’re going to be more like anyone, just be more you.”

She nodded happily; if his kiss had left her dizzy, his words touched her heart. She didn’t think anyone had ever wanted her to be more of herself before.

~ ~ ~

Xander took a slug of his beer as he watched Tori chat with Chelsea and Molly. So far, tonight wasn’t working out in the way that he’d hoped. They’d agreed that they had nothing to hide – that there was no reason not to let everyone know that they were together, but Tori still seemed wary. To be fair, she wasn’t the only one.

He’d thought that arriving together would give their friends and family a clue, but everyone was so used to them hanging out together that no one seemed to have even noticed. As soon as they’d come inside Muse, the girls had all crowded together. He didn’t know what that was all about, some piece of juicy gossip probably. Tori had shot him an apologetic look as Molly dragged her off to join them.

He’d come to the bar to get them a drink, and when Bentley had come to join him, he’d thought that this was his chance to

come clean with her brother. He and Bentley had been friends their whole lives; he wasn't expecting any opposition from him – but he did feel like he should talk to him man to man about his little sister.

However, Jacob had appeared on Bentley's other side and started talking business. Xander knew better than to try to distract either of them when they started with that. He blew out a sigh and took another slug of his beer.

Slade cocked an eyebrow at him as he approached the bar. "Are you guys together?" he asked in a low voice.

Xander let out a short laugh. "We are. We were expecting to have to face everyone and explain ourselves tonight – but so far, no one seems to have noticed."

Slade chuckled. "It's not as though you came in with your arms around each other or anything, is it? And Chelsea corralled all the girls the minute they arrived – Grant said that she's finally decided about their wedding."

"Right." It had taken those two so long to figure out their wedding plans that Xander wasn't surprised that any announcement that Chelsea wanted to make would be big news.

"I'm sure they'll be up for celebrating your good news as well."

"I hope so. Although at this rate, it wouldn't surprise me if we still haven't come clean by the time we leave."

"Leave?"

"Yeah. We're headed for Nashville on Monday morning."

Slade grinned. “You didn’t waste any time setting that up.”

At the same time that Slade spoke, Bentley stepped closer on Xander’s other side.

“Hey. Thanks for going with her. I didn’t realize you were going, too.”

Xander’s heart pounded in his chest.

“When she asked about the plane, I assumed that she was going by herself.” Bentley frowned. “You don’t think she’ll need you, do you? I mean, the whole stalker deal is over.”

Xander glanced over at Tori, but she was still chatting away with the girls. He’d thought that they would tell everyone together, but he wasn’t going to lie to Bentley – not even by omission.

He smiled. “She doesn’t need me for security.”

Bentley gave him a puzzled look. “What then? What’s she up to?”

He had to laugh. “She’s not up to anything. I’m going with her because I want to be with her – because ...”

Bentley still looked confused, but Jacob chuckled beside him. “I think what my little brother is trying to say is that he’s sticking close to your little sister for reasons other than her safety.”

Xander scowled at him. He wanted to tell Bentley himself.

It was almost comical to see the moment the penny dropped. Bentley’s expression went from confused to surprised. Then,

much to Xander's relief, it turned into a big grin. "You and Tori?"

Xander nodded. "Yeah."

"Well ... damn! That's awesome!"

"It is?"

Bentley laughed. "It is! It couldn't be more perfect if you ask me. I mean, I would never have guessed." His smile disappeared. "Tell me that this isn't like Willow and him." He jerked his chin toward Slade.

"What do you mean?"

Bentley gave Slade a rueful smile. "I suppose I'm asking how long it's been going on," he told Xander. "Those two had a whole lot more history than I ever suspected."

Xander had to laugh. "Ah, right. No. I will admit that I have always had a soft spot for her, but I've only managed to get her to see me that way in the last few days."

"That's good." Bentley chuckled. "No offense, but ..."

"None taken. I don't mind telling you that I've been working on winning her over for a while, but ..."

Bentley laughed. "Let me guess, she didn't even have a clue that you were interested?"

Xander nodded. That wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough. He was hardly going to explain that he'd kept trying to make her understand, but that she hadn't believed that he could be interested in her.

Bentley grasped his shoulder. “This is great. I hope it works out.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

“And nobody knows yet?”

“Slade figured me out, but as far as I know, no one else has.”

Jacob smiled at him. “I’ve been waiting and hoping.”

“Thanks.”

Bentley looked at Xander’s now empty beer bottle. “I feel like this calls for a celebration. I know you’re not big on wine, but how about champagne?”

He laughed. “Not for me, thanks.”

“When this guy celebrates, we drink vodka,” said Slade.

Bentley shrugged. “Okay then. Vodka it is. Shots all around?”

Everyone nodded, and a few moments later, they all knocked them back. When Xander set his glass back down on the bar, Bentley slapped his back. “I like this, bud. I really like it.”

Xander grinned happily; he did, too.

~ ~ ~

“What do you think’s going on at the bar?” Willow tilted her head toward where the guys were standing.

Tori and the others followed her gaze.

“Slade and Xander doing shots doesn’t surprise me, but Jacob and Bentley joining them does. They must be celebrating something.” Willow looked at Becca and Alyssa. “Anything either of you ladies want to tell us?”

Tori loved that they both looked slightly disappointed as they shook their heads. She didn’t know either of them that well yet, but she loved them. Alyssa was perfect for Bentley, and she couldn’t wait until they got married and Alyssa became her sister-in-law. And Becca was an absolute sweetheart. She knew that they were both looking forward to getting married and starting their families.

“Are you sure?” Chelsea asked. “They all keep looking over here, as though whatever they’re celebrating has something to do with one of us.”

“Don’t look at me,” said Willow. “I would’ve told you already if I had any good news to share.”

Chelsea narrowed her eyes at her. “What about news that you *don’t* want to share? You’re too good at keeping secrets, lady.”

Willow laughed. “You can bet your ass that if I were keeping something secret, there’s no way that Slade would be celebrating it with the guys.”

Chelsea made a face. “True. So, what then – see, they’re all looking this way again.”

Tori looked over to where the guys were standing at the bar. Xander met her gaze and smiled. She felt a little self-conscious as she smiled back. They hadn’t had the chance to say

anything when they first arrived, and that was probably just going to make it more awkward now that they'd been here for a while.

She froze when her sister spoke beside her. "I know what it is!"

Tori turned to look at her, and Willow grinned. "It's you, isn't it?"

"It's me, what?" She tried to sound innocent, but she could feel the heat in her cheeks.

Chelsea raised her eyebrows at her. "You? What have you been up to?" She looked back over at the guys, and her eyes grew wide. "Oh my God! It is! Xander! Look at his face!" She turned back to Tori. "You guys finally ...?"

Tori's heart was pounding – what did she mean, *finally*? What did she know?

Willow grinned. "That's awesome, sis. Why didn't you say anything?"

Tori swallowed as Chelsea and Willow stared at her expectantly while Becca and Alyssa looked confused.

"Come on," Chelsea urged. "This is huge! It's so huge that I don't even mind sharing the limelight with you. I was hoping that our wedding was going to be the big news of the night." She chuckled. "It's taken us a couple of years to finally figure out what we're doing. But damn, it's taken Xander a couple of decades!"

All Tori's breath caught in her chest. "Decades? What do you mean?"

Chelsea laughed. “I’ve known about Xander’s crush on you since we were teenagers. I mean, all right, that’s only really, like, a decade and a half but you know what I mean. This is awesome. But what are you doing over here with us? If this is your first official night out with everyone, we should get you over there with him. Hell, this calls for shots all around!”

Willow linked her arm through Tori’s and swept her along with the other girls as they headed for the bar. Xander met her gaze as they got closer. He was smiling broadly – so were the other guys. If he had told them all, then it seemed that they’d received the news well.

She relaxed when she looked at Bentley, and he nodded. He knew – and he was happy! That was awesome.

When they reached the bar, Xander held his arm out to her, and she went to him. He held her close at his side and looked down into her eyes. “I hope it’s okay that I shared our news.” He grinned at the girls. “I’m guessing that you did, too?”

“Not exactly,” she said with a laugh. “Willow and Chelsea figured it out when we saw you guys doing shots.”

Chelsea held her hand up and Xander high-fived her. “I’m happy for you. And I’m also happy for me,” she said.

“Why?” Tori asked.

Chelsea laughed. “Because Xander swore me to secrecy years ago when I figured out that he had a thing for you. There have been so many times that I wanted to tell you. So many times that I told him to just go for it.”

Tori looked up at him. His eyes shone as he nodded. “It’s true. But back then it felt like I was too old for you. And then ... then you were off living your life.”

Her heart raced at the thought of him having liked her that way all this time. It’d taken her long enough to get her head around the idea that he found her attractive when he came to Nashville – she’d thought that it was because she’d grown up since they’d last spent any time together.

She curled her arm around his waist, not knowing what to say – especially not with everyone standing around watching them.

Slade put his hand on her shoulder and nodded. “It’s true. I couldn’t tell you the number of times I’ve heard him talk about you over the years.”

Xander shrugged. “I’m not going to deny it. And besides, I had to listen to you talk about Willow the same way.”

Tori watched her sister roll up onto her tiptoes and kiss Slade. She snuggled closer into Xander’s side and tightened her arm around his waist. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head, sending a rush of warmth through her. He understood her. Willow might not think twice about kissing her man in front of everyone – and maybe Tori would feel the same after a while – but for now, she was much more comfortable with the way he showed his affection.

He kept his arm tight around her as the conversation flowed on. She listened, but didn’t feel the need to join in. There were so many big personalities in their group – and most of them

had a lot to say. She didn't think of herself as shy, but she was more of a listener than a talker.

~ ~ ~

Xander rested his chin on top of Tori's head as he swayed with her to the music. The evening had turned out to be a big success. Some of their friends had been surprised – others, not so much. But they'd all been happy for them. Tori had seemed a little nervous at first, but she'd gotten over it quickly.

It had been a good time. He enjoyed hanging out with these guys. Life here in Napa was very different from what he'd been used to in the Navy. He liked it. But ...

Tori's arms tightened around his waist, and she looked up into his eyes. "Are you okay?"

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips. He'd been careful all night not to go overboard, he knew she wasn't comfortable with it. "I'm good." He winked at her. "How could I not be? I've got my girl out on the dance floor at the end of the night. We shared our news, and everyone's happy for us."

"I know, but you went all tense just then – like you thought of something."

He spun her around, loving the way she clung to him as she laughed. "You're far too perceptive, sprite. I did think of something, but it wasn't anything bad."

"What then?"

He knew that she'd worry if he didn't explain – and it was something they were going to need to talk about anyway.

“I was thinking that life’s different here.”

“In Napa?”

“Yeah.”

She blew out a sigh. “I know. It’s lovely to see everyone but ...” She tensed in his arms. “Are you glad to be back?”

“I am but ...”

She watched him closely and he knew what she was thinking. “You’re not comfortable here, are you?”

She shook her head slowly. “I’m not.”

“What do you see as your options?”

She gave him a puzzled look and he knew that he should just come out and tell her what he was thinking.

“You’ve talked about having nothing to go back to Nashville for, other than your house. If there’s nothing for you there, and you’re not comfortable here, what are you thinking?”

She shrugged. “That’s the trouble. I don’t know. I mean ...” She looked away before turning back to him with a determined look on her face. “If you’re going to stay here, then I’ll stick around for a while.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I mean ... While we’re seeing each other.”

He dropped another kiss on her lips when he understood what she meant. “I don’t think you’d be happy to stay here for that long.”

She met his gaze.

“You, my little sprite, seem to have it in your head that I’m with you for something short-term – like this is some fling.”

She shrugged, and he held her closer.

“I’m seeing this as long-term. I’m seeing this ...” He probably shouldn’t tell her just how long-term he hoped their relationship would turn out to be – he didn’t want to scare her off by getting too serious too fast.

“Put it this way, whatever you decide your next move is, I want to come along for the ride if you’ll have me.”

That put the smile back on her face. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“What about the job with Cash?”

“I need to call him and tell him thanks, but no thanks. If you want to stay in Nashville, it’ll be easy enough for me to find work there. And that’s true wherever we decide to go. It’s not as though I desperately need a job anyway – I have my Navy pension.” He didn’t even need his pension. Both he and Tori were fortunate that they came from family money – although he knew that she supported herself, just as he did.

Happiness bubbled in his chest when she went up onto her toes and gave him a quick kiss. “How about we go to Nashville on Monday, and then see what happens from there?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

She gave him a sexy little smile. “Me too, but I have other plans for tonight.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded eagerly. “I’m done with overthinking it all. I think you should take me home now.”

“You sure?”

She caught his hand and led him off the dance floor.
“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER SIX

When the taxi stopped in front of the house, Tori climbed out while Xander paid. She looked up at the huge oak front door. She'd been coming to this house for as long as she could remember.

Even when she was a little girl, she'd adored Xander. He was so different from her. Where she felt as though she flitted around the edges of their group, he was always in the middle of things. He was outgoing and popular – everyone loved him, while most of them didn't even notice her.

She smiled when he came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist as the taxi pulled away.

“You good with this?”

She turned within the circle of his arms. “I am. I feel like I've waited a lifetime for this.”

He chuckled. “That's my line. You don't need to go trying to make me feel better just because you now know that I've carried a torch for you since we were kids.”

She laughed. “Carried a torch? Who even says that?”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I do. You know what I mean.”

“I do. And I feel as though I should confess that I've carried a torch for you, too.”

The way he raised his eyebrows said that he obviously didn't believe her. She smacked his arm.

"Don't look at me like that; I have!"

He chuckled. "Okay."

"Seriously, Xander!" She sucked in a deep breath. "I can't believe that I'm going to tell you this, but I fell in love with you when I was five years old."

He tilted his head to one side and waited.

"You, Jacob, and Hannah had all come over to the estate. Everyone was playing tag in the garden, and I snuck out the gate to be by myself because you guys were all so much bigger than me, and no one was taking any notice of me."

Her heart felt as though it melted in her chest when he smiled and asked, "You remember that day?"

She had to blink a few times against the tears that pricked her eyes. "*You do?*" she asked in wonder.

"Of course I do. But you were so small. I didn't think you would. We were all playing tag, and then they called us in to eat, and you weren't there. Everyone was racing each other back up to the house, but I couldn't see you. I knew you used to sneak out that gate all the time." He chuckled. "You still do."

She laughed with him.

"When I went out there, you were sitting singing to yourself. You looked so ... I dunno. But you were so ... self-

contained. You didn't need any of us. You didn't need to join in the game of tag, or anything else. You fascinated me."

She put her hand over her heart. "I was fine by myself, but then you came out to get me – and you *cared*. I could tell that you cared. And you held my hand on the way back in and you asked about the song and – you *saw* me, you were interested in me, in who I was, and it felt so good."

He took her hand and squeezed it. "I did care – I still do. And I'm still interested in who you are, more than interested, I'm fascinated by you, Tori."

She met his gaze. She was half sad and half relieved that he hadn't picked up on what she'd said – that she'd fallen in love with him that day. It was true, but it was probably too much to share with him. She'd believed that he would be the unrequited love of her life – the guy she'd always wanted from afar but thought she could never have.

It might turn out to be even harder to let him go when the time came than it would have been to never be with him at all. But that was a price she was willing to pay. She was all in for however long this lasted – she'd worry about trying to put herself back together afterward. She squeezed his hand back, and said, "Take me to bed."

~ ~ ~

Xander cast a wary eye in the direction of Jacob's study as he led Tori down the hallway toward the stairs. It shouldn't matter if Jacob and Becca were in there, or even if they saw them and wanted to chat for a while. The irony wasn't lost on him that in the past Jacob had given him a hard time for

making a racket, partying with girls he'd brought back here. But this was different.

Tori looked nervous, so he tugged on her hand and ran for the stairs. By the time they reached the top, they were both laughing. He hustled her all the way to the end of the hall to his bedroom and pulled her inside.

“Oh my God!” she panted. “I guess any worries I might have had about trying to be sexy have gone out the window!”

“How do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “I mean, I've blown any chance I had with that. I'm more like a giggly girl who came racing up here with you.”

He reached past her to lock the door behind them. “You couldn't be anything but sexy, Tori.” The truth hit him as he spoke. “Being able to run and laugh together like we just did? That's way sexier than putting on a front for each other.” He clamped his mouth shut just in time, before he explained that he'd been with plenty of women who tried to be seductive and all it had done was put even more distance between them.

He rested his hands on her hips. “I like this better. I love that I already know the giggly girl you can be. I'm crazy about the person you've grown into ...” He hesitated, but he had to say it, “And I'm really hoping that you'll want to keep me around to see you grow into the confident woman you're becoming.”

She looped her arms up around his neck and pressed a kiss to his lips. “If it were up to me, I'd keep you around forever.”

His heart pounded and all his breath caught in his chest. Looking into her eyes, he knew that he didn't need to ask – the truth was written all over her face. She really did mean it.

“It is up to you. If you want me, you've got me.”

She pressed the whole length of her body against his until they were touching from their knees to their chests, and Xander couldn't contain the low growl that rumbled up from his chest.

“I want you.” She looked up at him from under her lashes. “I've been afraid to tell you – afraid that ... I don't know what, but Xander, it goes both ways. If you want me, I'm yours.”

A rush of heat coursed through his veins. “I want you. I want to make love to you. And when we do ... I'm not going to want to let you go – ever.”

She inhaled sharply. “Ever?”

He probably shouldn't have said it yet, but he had, and there was no taking it back. “Not ever.” He watched her face, and the tension left his shoulders when she smiled.

“I'd like that.”

He brought his hand up to cup her cheek. “Want to seal the deal, then?”

She laughed. “I do.”

His cock throbbed behind his zipper when he looked down to watch her little hands unfastening the buttons of his shirt. He couldn't wait that long, he pulled it off over his head, and

had to close his eyes when she traced her fingers over his chest.

“You have no idea how many times I wanted to touch your bare chest,” she breathed. “All those nights when you stayed with me and ...”

He couldn't hold in a laugh. “I think I have an idea. All those nights, I wanted to touch your bare chest ...”

He didn't get to finish his sentence. His throat went dry as he watched her tug her top off and throw it before unfastening her bra and letting it slide to the floor. Her eyes shone as they looked up into his.

“For two people who have so much lost time to make up for, we're doing an awful lot of talking.”

He reached out to touch her, but she stepped back with a mischievous gleam in her eye. “I've dreamed about this since ...” She gave him a naughty little smile. “I'm not even going to tell you how long I've wanted this. Let's not waste any more time?”

With that, she started to unfasten her jeans. Xander wasn't about to argue with that! He managed to get naked faster than she did. As soon as her panties were gone, he picked her up and strode to his bed, throwing them both down on it as she laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He closed his eyes when her hand came up to stroke his cheek. “Whatever happens after this – after tonight – just know that right now, I think I'm happier than I've ever been.”

“Me too. And what’s going to happen after tonight is that we’re going to start making up for lost time – and we have the rest of our lives to do it.”

She held his gaze, and he could tell that she didn’t believe him, even though she wanted to. He rested his forehead against hers and nodded. “We can make this work, Tori.”

She held her arms up to him, and he struggled to focus on words when he felt her warm, soft breasts press against his chest. “I told you we were doing too much talking. All that I need to say for now is that I’m clean – I got tested a couple of months ago at my annual checkup.” Her cheeks turned pink, but she held his gaze. “And you don’t need to worry about contraception; I get my shot every three months.”

He swallowed. He’d already been thinking about grabbing a condom from his nightstand. The thought of not needing one ... He closed his eyes. “I’m clean, too. And ... If you’re good ... with ...”

She winked at him. “I’m more than good with it. I’ve never done it before, but I trust you, Xander. I want to feel you inside me – bare.”

“Jesus, sprite, you’re killing me here! I want to take my time, take you there ...” He was surprised at her strength when she turned onto her back, pulling him with her so that he was looking down into her eyes.

“We can take our time later, we can get into all the exploring and teasing and playing we want. But I want you *now*.” She spread her legs, and he settled between them.

His cock sought her heat of its own accord, and when her little hand curled around him and guided him to her, there was no way he could resist.

He propped himself up on one elbow as she curled her leg around his waist.

“Please!”

The longing in her voice broke the last little shred of self-control he'd been hanging onto. He entered her in one hard thrust, all his breath coming out in a grunt as he held deep. She was so wet for him already, and so damn tight that he had to clench his jaw.

“Oh God, Xander!”

Her blue eyes met his gaze and held it as they started to move together. He straightened his arms and pushed up so that he could go deeper and harder, loving the feel of her yielding to him as he thrust faster and faster. The sight of her fingers digging into his forearms as she clung to him and moved with him sent shivers through his whole body. She wrapped her legs around his back and urged him on, faster and faster, in a rhythm that grew to a crescendo.

He wanted to spend forever moving in and out of her slick heat, melding his body to hers. The whole world fell away; all that existed was the two of them. He closed his eyes when her muscles fluttered around him. Her fingernails dug into his forearms, and she gasped his name over and over.

“Xander! Yes! Oh God! Yesss!”

The ball of tension that had been building at the base of his spine exploded, sending what felt like bolts of lightning shooting through his veins. Tori threw her head back and writhed from side to side as she pulsed around him, gripping him tight, demanding his release.

He saw stars when he let go, hurtling away as pleasure surged through him and into her. He felt as though their bodies synced and became one as waves of pleasure swept them away to where nothing else mattered, nothing else existed. When he finally came back down to earth, he slumped over her, breathing hard.

Her arms came up around his back and he nuzzled his face into her neck. “I love you, Tori.” There was no way he could have stopped himself from saying it.

Her hands came up to cup his cheeks, and his heart felt like it exploded in his chest when she murmured, “I love you, too.”

~ ~ ~

Tori’s eyes flew open as she woke with a start. It only took a moment for her to remember where she was and when she did, she relaxed immediately. She was with Xander. At least ... she was at his place, in his bed, but ... She was hanging off the edge of the bed. She turned over and was relieved to see him, for one horrible moment she thought that he might have got up and left her here alone.

It was just light enough for her to see a slow smile spread across his face. He reached his hand out to her, and she scooted closer. A rush of warmth filled her chest as he

wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her closer until she was snuggled against him, looking up into his eyes.

“You okay?”

She pressed a kiss to his lips. “I am now.”

Three little lines furrowed his brow. “What was wrong?”

“I ... when I woke up, I thought you were gone.”

He kissed her forehead. “With you in my bed? I’m going nowhere, sprite.”

She gave him a half shrug. “I haven’t spent the night with many guys, but ...” She gave him a sheepish smile. “In the movies and in books, couples always seem to sleep in each other’s arms. I ...”

He chuckled. “I don’t think it works that way for everyone. Not that I’m saying I wouldn’t want to,” he added hastily. “But you were thrashing around like a floppy fish when I tried to hold you, so I gave you your space and you kept scooting all the way over till I worried that you might fall out of bed.”

“Oh.”

He tightened his arm around her. “I figured you were the one who isn’t a snuggly sleeper.”

She shrugged. “I don’t really know. I haven’t been in a situation to find out.” Ugh. That probably sounded like she was some naïve girl. “I mean. I have slept with guys ...” She trailed off when she saw the pained expression on his face. “What? What did I say wrong?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Nothing. Not a damn thing. Of course you’ve slept with other guys, it’s just ... it kills me to think about it.”

She grinned – she couldn’t help it – and he narrowed his eyes at her. “It’s not funny.”

She had to laugh. “It is! I mean, think about it – you getting jealous over my past? I bet you have a much more colorful history than I do.”

“I’m not getting jealous.” She’d meant to make him laugh with her, but he looked deadly serious. “Honestly, I’m not. I know you have a past, and that’s only right and normal. It’s just that I don’t want to think about it, because when I do, all I can think is that it could have been me – it should have been me.”

“Aww.” She ran her hand over his cheek. “I know what you mean. We could have had years and years of this if we’d figured it out sooner. But I believe that everything happens when it’s supposed to. If you think about it, we might have gotten together sooner, but that might have meant that we got tired of each other sooner – that one or both of us wanted to explore and ...”

She wriggled as he pressed his face into her neck. “I know you’re right. I know I’m being an idiot, but whatever the past was or wasn’t, you’re mine now.”

Her whole body felt as though it melted. “I am?”

He lifted his head, his expression serious now. “I want you to be.”

“I want that too.”

“And just so we’re clear, that means I’m yours, too. Okay?”

“More than okay by me.” She reached around to stroke his ass – he had the best ass she’d ever seen! “In fact, it’s so okay with me that I think we should seal the deal.” She loved the feeling of him growing harder against her as she spoke.

Before she knew what was happening, he’d closed his arms around her and rolled onto his back, taking her with him so that she straddled him.

“I think you’re right. We should.” He chuckled as he rocked his hips and his hot, hard length slid between her legs. “Do as you will with me, I’m all yours.”

She chuckled, loving the sound of that. “Anything I like?”

He nodded, his eyes shining with amusement – or maybe that was lust.

“Okay then,” she breathed as she lowered her head to kiss his chest and started to crawl down over his body. When she looked up again, his jaw was clenched, and he was gripping the sheet beneath him. It made her laugh. “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you – I just want a taste of things to come.”

“Sprite,” he breathed on a low moan as she closed her lips around him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When he and Tori arrived at the hangar on Monday morning, Xander shook hands with Trick. The older man slapped his shoulder. “It’s good to see you – and even better to know that when we drop you off this time, it won’t be long till we can come back to collect you.”

Xander just smiled. Trick was always the one who seemed to feel it more than anyone else whenever Xander had returned to base after coming home on leave.

He gave him a shrug. “My days on deployment are over.” He knew that was what Trick was talking about – and it meant that he didn’t have to explain that, if it were up to him, he and Tori would stay in Nashville rather than come back.

Fortunately, Trick wasn’t too focused on his answer – he was too busy laughing as Elliott picked Tori up and swung her around.

Xander had to laugh as well – although partly it was at himself and his own reaction. Elliott was one of his closest friends, they’d known each other since they were kids, but that didn’t stop a surge of protectiveness from washing over him.

“It’s good to know that we get *you* back soon, too,” Elliott told Tori as he set her back on her feet.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked over at him. If Xander had to guess, he’d say that she was feeling the same way that he was – that she wasn’t looking forward to coming back but

didn't want to say so. Then again, maybe that was just wishful thinking on his part.

“Are you guys all set?” Trick asked. “No more bags?”

“I don't need much,” said Tori. “I have most of my things at home.”

“And I travel light,” said Xander, slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder and grabbing Tori's small case before Elliott could get to it.

By the knowing smirk that El gave him, it looked like he'd figured out that they were together – or perhaps he'd heard it already and didn't need to figure it out. The Napa grapevine worked that way.

Once they were on board, he gestured for Tori to take the window seat and slid in beside her. “I appreciate you guys fitting us in,” he told them.

Trick grinned. “We're glad to, and we have a quiet week; it's all good.”

Elliott nodded beside him. “To tell you the truth, I was glad when you called. We've been doing a lot of sitting around lately. I prefer to be in the air.”

Xander nodded. Elliott's dad had passed a few months ago, and it seemed that he'd been trying to keep himself constantly busy ever since.

“Glad to help, then,” he said with a smile.

After the pilots had disappeared into the cockpit, Tori took his hand and squeezed it. “I want to get them a gift or

something for stepping up like this for us. I was so disappointed when Bentley told me that Ollie and Reaves couldn't bring us today after all."

He was about to say that they didn't need a gift, but he stopped himself. The guys would love that, and Tori would feel good about doing it – so why stop her?

"I was disappointed, too. But it all worked out – and like El said, they're glad to get up in the air as well."

"Not as glad as I am to be headed back to Nashville."

He nodded. "Is it that you're looking forward to getting back there or is it more about getting away from here?"

She made a face. "A bit of both."

"I'm the same." He leaned across and pressed a kiss to her temple. "I enjoyed the time that we spent together in Nashville before, but I have to tell you that it was a little bit frustrating."

She laughed and crossed her eyes at him. "I'm sorry. I just didn't believe that I could get that lucky. How about I'll do my best to make it up to you this time?"

He chuckled. "I spent a couple of months with you. That's at least sixty nights. Are you saying that you can make up for all of those missed opportunities?"

She ran her hand up his thigh. "I won't make any promises because I don't know how long we're going to be there, but I will say that we can have a lot of fun trying."

He covered her hand with his own and brought it up to his lips to kiss it. She'd surprised him in the best way with how

physically affectionate she was – and just how much he'd underestimated her honesty when she admitted that she enjoyed sex.

She pouted at him and shot a glance at the cockpit door. "They're not going to come out."

He chuckled. "They might, sprite. We're not even up in the air yet."

"Oh!" She shot a look out the window and turned back to him with a shamefaced smile. "I'm blaming you. It's your fault for being so sexy; I get all distracted."

He slid his hand under her hair and curled his fingers around the back of her neck, drawing her closer so that he could kiss her. Then, he rested his forehead against hers and smiled. "I'll take the blame if you like. And you should know, now that you've told me that, I'm going to be doing my best to distract you all the time."

She laughed. "Except when there's a chance that someone might catch me with my hand inside your pants?"

He laughed with her. "Yeah, maybe not then."

~ ~ ~

As the plane descended through the clouds on their approach to Nashville, Tori watched out the window. She loved this town. It didn't exactly feel like home – she wasn't sure that she would ever find a place that did – but she had lived here for a few years now, and it did feel like an old friend.

Xander took his phone out once they landed, and tapped out a text while they were taxiing off the runway.

“I’m just making sure that we have a car waiting for us.”

She chuckled. “We could have called a rideshare, you know.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You know how I feel about that whole deal. Last time, I was here in your life, on your terms...”

She raised her eyebrows as she waited for him to continue.

“I mean, I still am, it’s just...”

She touched his arm, wanting to let him off the hook. “It’s okay, I know what you mean. You’re more comfortable driving than being driven. I get it. For me, it was never worth the hassle of having a car here, but for you, it’s more hassle not to.”

“That’s right. I didn’t mean that I want to come in and take over...”

“It’s okay. I didn’t think you did.”

Trick and Elliott came with them into the building, and Tori hugged them both as she thanked them. It was weird to see Xander watching El closely as she hugged him – but it was kind of nice, too. The guys she’d dated in the past hadn’t been ... territorial if that was the word for it. She didn’t think of Xander as possessive – that just wasn’t who he was – but it was obvious that he’d meant it when he said that he saw her as his.

After they'd said their goodbyes, it only took Xander a few minutes to sign the paperwork for their rental car, and soon they were on the road.

Tori leaned back in her seat and let the window down, breathing in the warm, humid air. She'd never gotten completely used to it, but it always struck her with its familiarity when she arrived back here.

“Are you okay over there?”

She nodded happily. “I am. I feel like I can relax for the first time in weeks.”

“Glad to be home?”

She sat up and leaned across the console to press a kiss to his cheek. “I'm glad to be here with you.”

He grinned. “Me too. What do you want to do tonight?”

She waggled her eyebrows at him. “I think we need to start making up for all that lost time, don't we?”

He chuckled. “I'm not going to argue with that. Brock asked if we wanted to meet him for breakfast in the morning. Apparently, he's going into the office to meet with Corbyn at eleven.”

“Oh, did you mean that you want to meet up with him tonight instead?”

“Nope. I'm just letting you know that you maybe shouldn't wear me out completely since we have to be up early in the morning.”

She let out a laugh. “I don’t think I could wear you out if I tried.”

He shot her a quick look. “*If* you tried? I thought that was what you’d been doing all weekend. And I don’t mind telling you that you pretty much succeeded.”

“What can I say? When we were at your place, Jacob and Becca were there, so I felt more comfortable hanging out in your room with you. It’s not like there’s much else to do in your room, is there?”

She loved the way he threw his head back and laughed. “I guess not. So, are you telling me that you weren’t trying to wear me out last night at your place, either?”

She shrugged. “It was really just the same situation when you think about it. I didn’t much feel like hanging out with Bentley and Alyssa, so my bedroom was the only option and...”

“And there wasn’t much else to do there either, right?”

“Are you saying that I need to take it easier on you? Are you struggling to keep up? I would have thought that a big, tough Navy SEAL guy like you would have the stamina to keep up with someone like me – I’m only a small person.”

He laughed again. “You want to watch yourself, sprite, you’re playing with fire there. You should know that if you question a guy’s stamina, he’s going to try to prove himself to you.”

“Ooh! I like the sound of that!”

He laughed as he took the exit ramp off the highway. “Why do I get the impression that I just walked into your trap? Is that what you were doing all along – trying to goad me into stepping it up?”

“Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because I know you.” She loved the look in his eyes when he turned and winked at her. “I thought that I knew you pretty well before. Now, I’m getting to know you even better; I’m learning fast and falling even harder.”

All her breath caught in her chest. “Do you really mean that?”

He nodded solemnly. “I knew I had it bad before, but this last week?” He shot her a smile before turning his attention back to the road as he said, “You’ve got me. I’m a goner, sprite. I’m at your mercy.”

Her hand came up to cover her heart. It seemed kind of unbelievable that someone like him – no, not just someone like him but that *he*, Xander Jacobs, could feel that way about her. But as unbelievable as it seemed, she didn’t doubt his sincerity in the least.

“You know how you asked me to be gentle with you when I was done with you?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you should know what I meant when I said I wouldn’t do that – I meant I don’t ever want to be done with you.”

All her breath caught in her chest. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I know I’m probably shooting myself in the foot laying that on you so quickly, but I can’t help it, Tori. I don’t want to scare you off, I just need you to know.”

She shook her head rapidly. “I’m not scared.”

“What then?” he asked when she didn’t continue.

“I’m ... I...” She sucked in a deep breath before she continued. There was no point in trying to hide it from him. She might have thought that she needed to protect herself and her heart from him, but since he was laying it all on the line she wasn’t going to hang back. “I feel the same way.”

A big smile spread across his face as he grabbed for her hand. “You do?”

She laughed. “I do. I don’t think that means we need to rush things, but I’m not going to lie to you and I’m not going to try to hide it. I meant it when I said that I fell in love with you when I was five years old, Xander.”

He squeezed her hand so tight that he almost crushed her fingers. “I don’t want to say that I fell in love with you when you were five.” He chuckled. “I love that you said it, but it sounds different – creepier – coming from a guy.”

She laughed with him; he was right.

“I will tell you that you’ve always been in my heart, though.”

“Aww. I like that. I don’t think I’d believe you if you told me that you’d loved me all those years. And that’s a good thing,” she added hurriedly. “I’m not trying to be bitchy; I’m just being honest.”

“I don’t think you could be bitchy if you tried.”

“I don’t know, I’ve never really tried.”

“And that’s just one of the many things that I love about you – you don’t have it in you.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “That doesn’t make me weak, you know.”

“I sure as hell don’t think so – I think you’re stronger than any woman I know. You’re so self-contained. You don’t need anyone – that’s why it makes me feel special that you’re choosing me. You don’t need me, but you want me anyway.”

She nodded happily. “I do.”

~ ~ ~

Xander stopped in the doorway on his way back out from the kitchen to the back yard where Tori was sitting. She really did remind him of some mythical creature. Sitting leaning against the big old oak tree with her eyes closed as she was now, he could almost believe that she was a sprite – or a fairy, or elf, he wasn’t sure which was which, he just knew that she reminded him of the magical people he’d read about when he was a kid, and she’d been so elusive in his life so far that he’d come to think of her as one of them.

She turned a contented smile on him and raised her eyebrows. “Did you change your mind about having another drink out here?”

He chuckled; he knew what she was thinking – she was about to suggest that they should go upstairs instead. He hurried out and handed her a drink. “I was just taking a

moment to enjoy the fact that I'm here with you again – and that this time, we're together. We've got all night to start making up for lost time, but I want to enjoy this kind of time together, too.”

“I know what you mean. You have no idea how many times I sat here wondering if I should just be brave and tell you how I felt.”

He sat back down next to her and slipped his arm around her waist. “Probably not as many times as I wished that you believed me when I tried to tell you how I felt.”

“I'm sorry.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “There's no need. We got here in the end – everything works out in its own time.”

She nodded happily and took a swig of the vodka he'd brought her. “True. Although, if you keep plying me with this stuff, I may fall asleep on you – and it's not the right time for that. We spent enough nights sleeping next to each other – now we can do so much more than sleep.”

He ran his hand over her hair. “We can. And I'm glad, but I have to tell you that I'm also looking forward to sleeping with you – not just sharing your bed, but sharing space. We might not be snuggly sleepers, but I think we should test the theory to see.”

She laughed and looked down into her glass. “This stuff is going straight to my head. Is it going to yours, too?”

“No. Why?”

She shrugged. “I just never expected to hear you talk like that.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “I know, right? Who would have guessed that you’d be the horny one and I’d be the romantic?”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t exactly put it that way.”

“No?”

She knocked back the rest of her drink and crawled up onto his lap. He closed his eyes, and heat coursed through his veins when she wrapped her arms around his neck and rocked against his already eager dick.

“Are you telling me that you’re not horny?”

He shook his head slowly. “I’m not saying that I’m not, just that I’m more focused on getting close to you emotionally than physically.”

“Is that so?”

His hands came up to grip her hips when she pressed her full breasts against his chest and nuzzled her lips just under his ear. “It is,” he breathed.

“Hm.” She swung one leg over so that she was straddling him.

With her breasts now in his face, and his dick pressing into the heat between her legs, he had to admit defeat.

“How about now?” She started to rock her hips, but she didn’t get the chance to torment him before he closed his arms around her and got to his feet.

With her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs around his waist, she laughed as he strode back to the house. He kicked the kitchen door closed behind them and grunted, “Lock it.”

Tori did as he asked, laughing the whole time. The feel of her body shaking with laughter in his arms as he made his way upstairs only made him harder for her.

He closed the bedroom door behind them with his foot, and she leaned back to look into his eyes.

“And you don’t think it’s romantic to carry your girl off to bed?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Horny.”

She laughed. “I am, and you’re still taking too much time.”

He had to laugh with her, even as he turned to hold her up against the wall, while he unfastened his pants with one hand.

Her eyes grew wide when he slipped his hand between them and tugged her panties to one side, grateful for the skirt she was wearing.

“Wha ... oh!” Her eyes closed and her head fell back against the wall, when he slid a finger inside her while teasing her clit with his thumb.

“I didn’t want to waste any more time.”

He loved her even more when she ground down on his hand at the same time that she said, “It’s not your fingers I’m after.”

He withdrew his hand and guided himself to her entrance, pinning her hard to the wall before lowering her onto him as

he thrust deep and hard.

“Xander!”

“Horny,” he breathed as he bit her neck, loving the way her fingers dug into his shoulders as she clung tight to him.

“Harder! Faster! More, Xander, more!”

He gave her what she asked for, driving harder and faster than he’d dared with her before. She kept surprising him with just how much she demanded of him. She was so wet, so tight, he wasn’t going to last.

“Oh god, Xander! Yes!”

She clamped down on him, pulsating around him, demanding his release. He closed his eyes and threw his head back, seeing stars as he gave her all that he had. He came so hard that he had to let her slide to the floor as his knees went weak.

She brought her hand up to cup his cheek. She was so goddamn beautiful. He claimed her mouth in a deep kiss that he hoped could tell her everything that he didn’t have words for in that moment.

When they came up for air, her eyes twinkled as she nodded at him. “Romantic as hell!”

He shook his head at her. “If this is your idea of romance, I’ll be as romantic as you like.”

“I hope so.”

He nuzzled his face into her neck and picked her up again, carrying her to the bed where he dumped her

unceremoniously.

She laughed and held her arms up to him. “Want to try the snuggly sleeping thing now?”

“Yeah, sprite. I do.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Romantic,” Tori murmured when she looked down at the way Xander was holding her hand.

He rolled his eyes at her but didn’t let go as he led her toward the café where they were meeting Brock.

“Call it whatever you like, sprite. I’m not worried. You can say I’m romantic, you can say I’m horny, but I know what I am.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you?”

He tugged her hand, pulling her closer until she was standing toe to toe with him. There was an intensity in his gray eyes as they looked down into hers. “I’m in love, that’s what I am.”

Her heart felt as though it exploded in her chest. She rolled up onto her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Oh, Xander! I love you, too.”

He slid his arms around her waist and crushed her to his chest as he kissed her forehead. “We finally made it. We’re there, aren’t we?”

She nodded happily. “I don’t want to tempt fate by saying it, but yes, I believe we are.”

“Hey, guys!” They both turned to see Brock hurrying down the sidewalk grinning at them. “It makes me happy to see

this.” He nodded at them. “I always knew it was just a matter of time.”

Tori smiled at him. “Thanks. I guess it just took me a while.”

Xander squeezed her hand.

Brock laughed. “I wasn’t making any comment about you – it was more a matter of how long it was going to take this guy to finally get what we all knew he wanted.”

Tori looked up at him, but Xander just shrugged. “I may have talked about you – just a little.”

She had to laugh when Brock rolled his eyes. “If that was a little, I’d hate to see your definition of a lot. Anyway, are we going inside? I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving.”

Xander winked at her as they followed Brock into the café. “Me too. I don’t know what it is, but I have a huge appetite these days.”

Tori tried to hide a smile. He’d told her, when she finally let him out of bed this morning, that he was going to have steak and eggs for breakfast – because he needed to keep his energy up if he wanted to keep up with her.

When they were seated, and the server had taken their order, Brock grinned at them. “So, are you guys here to stay? I have to be honest and tell you that will play a part in whether or not I take this job. I’m fine staying where I am – working for Cash is great, but it’s not the same now that Kolby’s not there. The other guys are great, but Vaughn and I have been assigned to different teams and…” He shrugged. “When we were all

working together, I enjoyed it. I want to find a situation like that again. You know, being around friends?”

Xander nodded. “I know exactly what you mean. I enjoyed working with you guys. That was something I was concerned about when I rejoined civilian life. I spent my whole career as part of a team.” He smiled at Tori. “I don’t know how long we’re going to be here, though.”

Tori gave Brock an apologetic smile. “I wish I could tell you that we’ll be here long-term, but I have no idea.” She glanced at Xander – they hadn’t even discussed it in any detail yet. “Ever since I came to Nashville, I’ve worked with Callie. In theory, I could sing backup for anyone, but I’m not sure that I want to.”

Xander cocked an eyebrow, but it was Brock who asked, “If you don’t do that, what else will you do?”

She shrugged. “That’s the million-dollar question, I guess.”

Xander squeezed her hand. “It’s not one that you need to answer quickly, though. I guess we’re both fortunate in that we can take our time to figure it out.”

Brock nodded. “Yeah. I forget that the two of you don’t have the same money worries as the rest of us mere mortals.”

Tori gave him an apologetic smile. She knew that even though she’d always been determined to make it on her own – to pay her own way in life – she was still privileged. She came from money. Her family was wealthy. She was wealthy in her own right. She didn’t have to worry and stress in the same way that so many of her friends did. She knew that she always had

a backup plan – if things were to go wrong for her, she could go home – home to the family estate. She knew that so many people didn't have that luxury. If things went wrong for them – if they were to lose their jobs, they'd run out of money very quickly, and have nowhere to turn.

“Sorry,” said Brock. “I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I guess I'm just worried about making the right decision for myself.”

“That's okay, we get it,” said Xander. “I'd love to tell you that we'll be around, but we can't say for definite yet. I think what you really need to do is figure out if Carson and his band are the kind of guys you'd enjoy spending time with. If you take the job, they're the people who'll become part of your everyday life.”

Brock made a face. “I know. I'm not sure that I should take it. Carson seemed like a good enough guy; I just couldn't see myself hanging out with him and the band. Nothing against them, just that we're ... different kinds of people, I guess.”

“How well did you get to know Carson?” Tori asked.

“Not that well. All I could see was that he was constantly surrounded by screaming women. The few times I talked with him, I liked him well enough.”

“I think you should spend some time with him before you decide whether you want to take the job or not.”

Xander and Brock both raised their eyebrows.

She smiled. “I've known him since before he got his big break. Do you guys even know that he's Lawrence Fuller's

nephew?”

“He is?” Brock looked shocked.

Xander looked blank, and that didn’t surprise Tori – he hadn’t known the first thing about country music before he came to Nashville. Lawrence Fuller was one of the biggest names out there – and he’d been around for decades.

“He is. Apparently, Lawrence didn’t want Carson trading on the family name. He made him earn his break. Honestly, I think Carson worked harder than he ever would have had to if he’d just come to this town as an unknown. He’s so talented that someone would have signed him straightaway. Instead, he worked as an odd job man and a chauffeur and a roadie – every entry-level job you can think of for Lawrence and Shawnee and even Clay MacAdam – before he ever got to set foot in a studio.”

Brock smiled. “And you like him because you can relate?”

She nodded. “Yeah. When I found out who he was – and he found out who I am – we had a few chats.” She gave Brock a sassy smile. “You know, about the kind of stuff mere mortals wouldn’t understand.”

Brock laughed out loud at that. “Sorry! I knew I should’ve put that differently.”

“It’s okay. I’m only joking with you. I suppose all I’m saying is that since you seem to think that Xander and I are okay, you might like Carson after all. Just give it some time – give him a chance.”

The server reappeared and set their food on the table. Tori had to hide a smile as she watched Xander tuck into his plate of steak and eggs.

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After they'd eaten, and Brock had left them to go meet with Corbyn, Xander took Tori's hand as they left the café.

"Where to from here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I was thinking that we should probably stop at the grocery store and stock up."

That made him smile. "Does that mean you want to stay a while?"

She shrugged again. "I do. I like the idea of staying here, of getting to hang out like this, just the two of us. And you know that I'm in no hurry to go back to Napa."

"But what?" She was saying all the right things, but she wasn't as enthusiastic about it as he'd hoped.

"I don't know, I feel like I should be doing something. I like the idea of staying here and hanging out, but I'm not used to being here and not working. And once I get into that, my mind goes to all the questions about what I'm going to do for work now."

"Yeah."

She looked up at him. "And if we stay and I go back to work, then I imagine you'll want to figure out what you're going to do for work."

“I will.” He made a face at her. “I think I know how you feel. I like the idea of being here, but when it comes to making it a reality, there aren’t any appealing options.”

“That’s it. If you ask me if I want to be here, to have you living with me at my house, then my answer is a big fat yes. But when you take it beyond that – if you ask me what that would look like, I’m not so sure. I don’t really want to sing for anyone but Callie. But then if I’m not going to sing, I’m not sure what the point of living in Nashville is. And if we do stay here, you talked about working as a bouncer. I don’t like that idea.”

“Why not?” He winked at her. “You don’t need to worry – I promise I can take care of myself.”

She pushed at his arm as they walked. “I know you can. It’s not that. It’s just that it’s not exactly a great career move for you, is it?”

He blew out a sigh. “No. But then, I’m not thinking of it as a career. It’s just a job, and like you said, if we are staying here and you’re working then I’m going to want to do something.”

“Exactly. It brings us back full circle. Yes, I like the idea of being here with you. But the only reason to be here – here, as in Nashville, as opposed to anywhere else – is because of my work. And since the only person I want to work with is currently living in Montana...”

“Okay, so I guess we need to make some decisions. First of all, you need to decide if you want to work with anyone else. Then, if you don’t, we can decide if there’s any point in us staying here. Then, if there isn’t ...” He grinned. “If there’s no

reason for us to stay here in Nashville then all options are open – we can go wherever the hell we want, right?”

She nodded happily. “I guess we can.” Her smile faded. “Only, I have no idea where the hell that might be.”

He chuckled. “Me neither, but we’ll figure something out. We can –” The sound of her cell phone ringing cut him off.

“Sorry, it’s Autumn. I should probably take it.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

As she took the call, he guided her into the park, and found a bench where they could sit. From Tori’s end of the conversation, it sounded as though she might need to make up her mind about what she wanted to do for work sooner rather than later.

“Okay, thanks Autumn, I’ll let you know.” She ended the call and turned to him with a little frown on her face.

“Problem?” he asked.

“No. Not a problem. It’s just...” She stared up at the clouds, and he waited.

It struck him that he remembered her doing that as a little girl – looking up at the sky as if she might find the answers she needed written there. He thought it was cute as hell back then – he still did. He didn’t push her. He understood her well enough to know that she needed to take her time to think things through.

After a couple of minutes, she shot him an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I didn’t zone out on you, it’s just that I was thinking.”

He rested his hand on her thigh. “It’s okay, sprite. I get it. You don’t need to explain. You take your time. I’ll be here.”

She covered his hand with her own. “Thank you. I love that you get it.”

“I get you – and I love you.”

She leaned in and pressed a quick peck to his lips. “Thank you.”

As patient and understanding as he might be, he couldn’t deny that he was curious as hell as the next few minutes rolled by while she pondered whatever she and Autumn had talked about.

Eventually, she turned and smiled at him. “She asked if I want a contract of my own.”

Xander wasn’t sure that he understood. He cocked an eyebrow and asked, “You mean, like, a recording contract of your own?”

“Yep.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

She knocked the breath out of him when she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I love you so much! I forgot that you really do understand me.”

He leaned back so that he could look into her eyes. “Of course I do.” He chuckled. “At least, I usually do. I’m not sure I understand your reaction right now.”

“You asked how I feel about it. That wouldn’t occur to most people. Even people who love me. Most of them would ask

what the contract would entail – what it would mean for my career and for my life. Lots of people would immediately jump to congratulations because a recording contract is a big deal. But you get me. You know that I don't necessarily see things the way that other people do – and most of all, you care. You care about how I feel.”

“I do.”

“Okay, so, I think the thing is ... I ... I feel kind of ungrateful saying it. I know a lot of people would give anything for an opportunity like this, but I don't want it.”

“It doesn't matter what anyone else would do, and certainly not what anyone else might think or say. This is your life, Tori, the only thing you need to focus on is what you want.”

She grinned at him. “All I really want right now is to see how you'd feel about going out with everyone tomorrow night.”

He gave her a puzzled smile. “Sure. Who is everyone?”

She laughed. “Autumn and Matt, and Matt's band; they're good guys, I think you'll like them. And Carson and his crew. Apparently, Corbyn talked to Autumn about bringing Brock on board. She liked the idea of bringing him out with everyone to see how he fits in. Matt's never been big on having security, but she likes the idea of having Brock work for the label rather than just with Carson.”

“Sounds good to me. And I guess Brock must be giving the idea serious consideration if he hasn't left town already.”

“Yeah. I think that’s partly why she asked us to go. We’ll be familiar faces for him while he gets to know everyone.”

“And is Autumn going to use this as an opportunity to try to talk you into taking a contract?”

“No. I don’t think so. If anything, I think it might be a case of letting me see what it would be like to be around everyone in my own right – as you know, I’ve only ever been the backup.”

He closed his hand around the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss. When they finally broke apart, he smiled. “You’ve always been a star in my eyes.”

She let out a short laugh. “Okay, I think maybe I prefer horny. There’s a fine line between romantic and cheesy, and you may have just crossed it.”

He tried to look hurt, but he couldn’t pull it off. So, he stood, keeping an arm around her as her feet slid to the ground. “In that case, I should take you home.” He caught her hand and towed her along, back to where they parked.

She laughed as she trotted beside him. “Oh yeah? And why’s that?”

“You said you prefer me horny, right? Well, I am. And there’s not a lot I can do about that here.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Are you okay?” Xander asked as he came around to take Tori’s hand when she climbed out of the cab.

She looked up at the sign over the bar where they were meeting Autumn and Matt and the others. “I think so.” She gave him a small smile. “It’s weird, but I feel nervous. I’m not used to that.”

“I think it’s understandable.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “I know you, sprite. You prefer to play a supporting role than to be the center of attention.”

“True, but it’s not as though I’m going to take the contract. I’m only going to say thanks but no thanks.”

Xander drew her closer and slid his arms around her waist. “Can I ask you something?”

She nodded.

“I think I know the answer, but I want to be sure. You’re going to turn it down because it’s not what you want, right? Not because you’re nervous about taking it – about becoming the center of attention?”

She nodded rapidly. “I enjoy singing and I’m quite good. I don’t even mind saying that I’m good enough – I am as worthy of my own contract as a lot of people who are already big stars.” She smiled. “I know I can come across as being unsure of myself, but I’m not some weak and weedy little

thing who doesn't know her own worth. I'm not saying that I'm better than anyone but I'm damned if I'm not just as good. I don't want my own recording contract because that's not the life I want to live. That's all. I know lots of people aspire to that, but I know what makes me happy – and being in the limelight isn't it.”

His eyes shone as he looked down into hers. “That’s what I thought, but I wanted to check.”

“But you asked if I was nervous about being the center of attention.”

“I only meant tonight. You have to remember that I’ve seen you out with all of these people before – the music people. You made sure that you stayed in Callie’s shadow. You won’t be able to do that tonight.”

“You’re right. I won’t. And I guess that is what I’m nervous about. Usually, everyone wants to know what’s going on in Callie’s life. When they talk to me, it’s easy enough to deflect them and talk about her. I know that tonight they’re going to want to talk about me.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

She went up on her tiptoes to kiss him. “You’re already doing it; you’re here with me. I’ll be fine. I’m looking forward to seeing them all – it’s been a while. It’s really not a big deal – I just had a touch of nerves.” She met his gaze. “If I were with anyone else it wouldn’t have been an issue – they wouldn’t have noticed.”

He smiled. “Yeah, but I know you inside out.”

She nodded happily. It felt like he did, and she loved it. “I guess the only thing I’d ask you to do to help is to let me handle it my way.”

“Absolutely. I know you can handle anything.”

A rush of warmth filled her chest. He wasn’t just saying it – he really meant it – and that meant the world to her. She wasn’t the most assertive person, and sometimes people tried to take over for her – and it drove her nuts.

When they went inside, she spotted Autumn and Matt at the bar. Autumn waved, beckoning them over. When they got there, she slid down from her stool and greeted Tori with a hug while Matt shook hands with Xander.

When Autumn let go of Tori, she grinned at her. “It’s good to see you, girly. I wasn’t sure if you’d ever come back to town.”

“I’ll be honest, I wasn’t sure myself.”

Autumn gave her an appraising look. “And as much as you appreciate my offer, you’re not going to take it, are you?”

Tori gave her a sheepish smile. She’d thought that she would need to work her way up to saying thanks but no thanks.

Autumn laughed. “It’s okay. I knew it was a long shot. I’ve wanted to sign you for a long time, but you always said that you were happiest backing Callie. I decided I had to make my move while Callie’s on sabbatical, but you’re still not interested, are you?”

“I’m sorry. I ...”

Autumn held up a hand to stop her. “Don’t apologize; there’s no need. Am I disappointed? Of course I am. But I appreciate your honesty. You’d be surprised how many people think they want the opportunity and then cause me all kinds of headaches when they can’t handle the reality. Not that I’m saying you couldn’t handle it,” she added hurriedly.

“I know. I *could* handle it. But I wouldn’t enjoy it. It’s not what I want for my life.”

“And I respect that. So, what do you want? There are a few artists who would be glad to have you.” She jerked her head toward Matt, who was chatting with Xander. “He’s one of them. How would you feel about that?”

Tori thought about it. She liked Matt. He was a good guy. She knew his band quite well. Callie had toured with them in the past. They had their own dynamic. “What about the girls he’s been working with?”

“Elle left a couple of weeks ago. Tasha’s still with him, but if you were to join them ...”

Tori shook her head slowly. “Nothing against Matt – I think he’s awesome. But ... I don’t really see me fitting in. The kinds of harmonies that he has Elle and Tasha sing ...” She shook her head again. “I don’t think so. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’ve told you – no sorries. It’s fine. He’ll be able to work something out. You’re right that it probably wouldn’t be a great fit. I just don’t want to see you go. We do have a couple other options. Lawrence and Shawnee are working on setting up a tour, but that won’t be until next year now.”

“Wow.” Lawrence and Shawnee were two of the biggest names in the game. Touring with them would be quite something.

“But what about in the meantime?” Autumn asked. “I mean, I know you don’t *have* to work, but what else are you going to do?” She lowered her voice before she continued. “I have to say congratulations, and you go girl; there’s no missing the fact that you’re finally doing *him*.” She inclined her head toward Xander.

Tori giggled. “Thanks. He’s awesome.”

“And so are you! It was obvious that he had his sights set on you, I just wasn’t sure if he’d be a good fit.”

“Oh, he is. We’ve known each other all our lives. I know it might seem that we’re complete opposites, but he gets me – maybe better than anyone else ever has.”

Autumn grinned. “So, you’re okay to just enjoy life for a while?”

Tori nodded slowly as she mulled that over. “You know what? I think I am. As you said, I don’t have to work, and neither does Xander. We’re both lucky in that respect.”

“So, do you have anything on the horizon?”

“We don’t. The first thing I wanted to do was talk to you – to make the decision about whether I’m going to keep singing.”

“And since you’re not – and just remember that if you change your mind at any time, I want you to call me – what are your other options?”

“That’s what we need to figure out. Neither of us is eager to go back to Napa. The only commitment I have in the foreseeable future is that I said I’d go visit my mom.”

Autumn frowned. “She lives in Summer Lake now, right?”

Tori couldn’t help but smile. “She does. She moved there to be with Russ. Do you know him?”

“I think I’ve met him when we’ve been out there to visit Clay. Oh! Hold on.”

Tori laughed. “What does that smile mean? You’ve got me worried now.”

Autumn laughed. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m just having a thought.”

“You have to remember that I’ve worked for you long enough to know that your thoughts can lead to things that I need to worry about.”

“No. It’s nothing like that. It’s just ... Clay wants to shoot the video for his next single at the lake. I can see why. The setting is just perfect. The only trouble is, he wants to use this damn old pickup truck in the video.”

Tori gave her a puzzled look. “That sounds kinda cool. Why is it a problem?”

Autumn made a face. “Because the truck is here in Nashville. I’ve been trying to figure out how to ship it out there to him – which is a pain in my ass. But...” She raised her eyebrows.

Tori stared back at her. “What? I don’t get it. What does that have to do with me?”

“Well, you’re the only person I know with time on her hands, a reason to go to Summer Lake, and her own personal bodyguard to accompany her.”

“Oh! You want us to drive it out there?”

Autumn shrugged. “I know it’s a lot to ask. But maybe it’s not. They say that a road trip is the best way to get to know someone. You guys might have a blast on the road. What do you think?”

Tori glanced over at Xander, who was now talking to Brock and Carson. “I’ll have to talk to him first.”

“I know. And if he hates the idea – if you hate it – just say so. It’s only an idea, and probably not a very good one but there’s no harm in asking, right?”

“Right,” said Tori. The more she thought about the idea, the more she was starting to like it.

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By the end of the night, Xander was almost wishing that Tori wanted to stay in Nashville. Brock and Carson had hit it off. Matt and his band were people Xander enjoyed spending time with. He could see himself sticking around and working security alongside Brock.

However, Tori had made it clear to Autumn, and to the others, that she was done singing – for now, at least. She was open to coming back if and when Callie returned, but Xander didn’t expect that to happen anytime soon.

He leaned back against the bar, smiling to himself as he watched her chatting with Tasha, who sang backup for Matt.

“Has she asked you about the truck yet?” Autumn had appeared at his side, and he gave her a puzzled look. She laughed. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“I hate to ask, but what truck?”

“I don’t feel like I should interfere.”

He glanced over at Tori again. “She wants to buy a truck?”

Autumn laughed again. “No. I might as well tell you. I asked her if the two of you might want to drive one out to Summer Lake for me. Clay wants to use it to shoot a music video.”

“Hmm.”

“What does that mean? You like the idea? Or you hate it?”

“What did Tori say?”

“That she’d have to talk to you first.”

Xander thought about it. “Well, we don’t have any commitments here – or anywhere, for that matter.”

Autumn grinned. “And she mentioned that her mom’s hoping that you guys will visit.”

Xander nodded.

“Oh! How do you feel about that? From what I’ve heard, Alexandria DuPont is a strong woman – feared by many.” She met his gaze. “How do you think she’s gonna feel about you?”

Xander chuckled. “I’m happy to say that I have no worries there. Your description of her was spot on – she’s an impressive woman. But I’m fortunate; I’ve known her all my life, and I’ve always gotten along with her. You could even say that she has a soft spot for me.”

Autumn smiled.

“What?” he asked. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry, nothing bad. If you must know, I like your choice of words. I like that you called her impressive – I’ve heard her called much worse. And I love that she has a soft spot for you. I wouldn’t like your chances with Tori if Alexandria thought you were just some schmuck off the street.”

He had to laugh at that. “And you would have a point. Like I said, I’m fortunate. So, going back to your original question, if anything, I’m looking forward to seeing her and letting her know that Tori and I are together.”

“And what do you think about the truck? How do you think you guys would fare on a road trip?”

He smiled at the thought. “You know what? If Tori likes the idea, I’d love it. And if it’s doing you a favor...”

“You’d be doing me a huge favor, and I’ll tell you for nothing that Clay would feel like he owes you one, too. It’ll stop me bitching at him about this whole deal.”

Xander’s smile faded. “I’m guessing you know how Tori feels about Clay?”

Autumn chuckled. “I do, I wasn’t sure if you knew, too.”

“Yeah. I know that she’s never wanted to trade on her family name. She sure as hell didn’t want Clay doing her any favors just because she’s Alexandria’s daughter.”

“It’s actually been the opposite of that. Clay wanted to sign her when he first heard her demo when she was new in town, but he spoke to her mom first – he wanted to know that she’d be okay with it. She talked to Tori – without telling her about Clay’s interest, and Tori insisted that she wasn’t looking to become a big name in her own right.”

“I never knew that.”

Autumn gave him a pointed look. “Tori still doesn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because for all the years I’ve known her, she’s insisted that she only wants to sing backup. I had to take my shot while Callie’s out of the picture, but I’m sure you know that Tori gave me the same answer that she always has.”

“She knows her own mind.”

Autumn grinned at him. “I say again – I know, I just wasn’t sure if you knew that, too.”

“I know it might look as though I’d be the one calling the shots in our relationship, but that’s not the case. Yeah, I’m a big guy, and I’m used to managing people and situations so that things turn out the way I want them to. And Tori’s... Tori’s Tori. She might seem like she doesn’t have a handle on things, but she knows what’s right for her and what isn’t. I

don't mind telling you that she is the one calling the shots, and I know how lucky I am."

Autumn slapped his arm. "It seems to me that you're exactly what she needs – and there's no missing the fact that she's the one you want. I'll be keeping my fingers crossed for you guys."

Matt came and slid his arm around Autumn's shoulders, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Are you ready to call it a night, baby girl?"

There was no mistaking the love in the look that they exchanged as Autumn said, "I am. I have an early start in the morning to get one of my pain in the ass artists to a radio interview at the crack of sparrow fart."

Matt grinned at Xander. "In case you haven't guessed, she means me."

Xander laughed. "I figured."

"Are you guys going to be in town for a while? Will I get another chance to try and persuade Tori to sing with me?"

Autumn made a face at him. "I told you, she said no. She was my first choice, too. But we'll figure something else out."

"And she said no to you, too?"

Autumn blew out a sigh. "She did. I'd love to sign her, but this isn't her path."

Xander met her gaze and nodded. He hadn't been sure about Autumn when he first met her – she was one tough cookie. But

the way that she so obviously understood and respected Tori made him like her.

“We’ll talk about the truck and get back to you,” he told her.

Matt gave them a puzzled look. “The truck? Shit! Have you asked these guys to drive it to Summer Lake? You know I want to go.”

Autumn laughed. “I do know. But *you* know that there’s no way we could fit it into your schedule in the next few months.” She grinned at Xander before adding, “And you also know that you probably wouldn’t make it to California alive.”

Matt blew out a sigh. “It’s true,” he told Xander. “If you and Tori get along well enough to take a road trip together, you’re doing great.”

Autumn shrugged. “Some of us just aren’t cut out for that kind of thing.”

Xander walked with them as they made their way out of the bar. They found Tori still chatting with Tasha. After she said goodnight to them, she came and slipped her arm around his waist.

“Are you ready to call it a night?” he asked.

“I am. These guys are all going back to West’s place. I hope you don’t mind, but I said no.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I don’t mind one bit. I’m ready to head home.”

She looked up at him. “I like the sound of that – home, with you – but I have to tell you my house here has never felt like

home.”

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “I like the sound of it, too. Perhaps on this road trip, we can figure out where we want to set up home.”

Her eyes widened. “Autumn asked you about it?”

He chuckled. “She did.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think I love the idea, if you do?”

She let out a little squeal and bounced up and down on her toes. “I wanted to give it some thought before I brought it up to you, but the more I think about it, the more I like the idea. Do you think we should do it?”

“I do. I think it’ll be fun.”

He had to laugh when she let out another little squeal. “Okay, let’s do it! I’ll call Autumn in the morning and see when she wants us to go.”

CHAPTER TEN

“But you promise that I can drive once we’re out of the city?”

“I promise. You can drive now if you really want to. You’re the one who said that you don’t like driving in traffic – and you said that you were going to call your mom to let her know that we’re on the way.”

Tori blew out a sigh. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s just that now that we’re actually doing this, I’m excited.”

He patted the bench seat beside him, and Tori happily slid over and rested her hand on his thigh as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for, sprite. It’s all good. I’m happy that you’re excited about this. And believe me, there’ll be plenty of time for us each to drive before we get there.”

“I know.” She looked over at the cooler in the back. “Do you want anything yet? A drink, snacks?”

He laughed. “I’m good for now, thanks.”

“I’ll calm down soon, I promise.”

“There’s no need. I love seeing you like this.”

“You do? I’m not annoying?”

He shot her a quick glance. “No, you’re not,” he said firmly.

She pressed her lips together, thinking it was probably best not to tell him that with guys she'd dated in the past she'd learned to hide her excitement.

He covered her hand with his own. "I love you for who you are, Tori. Please don't start trying to hide the real you." He shot her a quick smile before turning his attention back to the road. "And besides, there's no point in trying to hide anything – I already know how goofy you are."

She laughed and pinched his thigh. "There's no need to be mean about it."

"I wasn't being mean; I was being honest – just like I'm asking you to stay honest with me."

"I know. I will. I just forget that I don't need to hide anything about who I am from you."

"You don't. And are you sure that you don't want to hide anything about me – about us – from your mom?"

She shook her head rapidly. "I don't. Why? Do you?"

"No. I don't. It's just that you keep putting off calling her. You said that you were going to call to let her know that we're coming when we first set this up. It's taken a week to get all the details sorted, and you still haven't called her." He squeezed her hand. "I've told you, there's nothing to worry about – she likes me."

"I know she does. I'm not worried. I just ..." She hadn't deliberately put off calling her mom. She knew that she wouldn't be upset to hear that she and Xander were together.

"What is it then, sprite?"

She blew out a sigh. “Honestly? I feel like I’ve disappointed her again. Not because of you,” she added quickly when she felt him tense. “I think she will be pleased that we’re together. I don’t mean that. I’m talking about having turned down the contract. I’m talking about being out of work. You know what she’s like. She worked her ass off her whole life to build the company. She’s so damn proud of Bentley and Willow because they’re following in her footsteps. I know it was a disappointment to her when I moved to Nashville, but she kind of got used to it over the years. Now, I’m not even a backup singer anymore. I’m not anything.”

“Yeah, you are. You’re still you. Still Tori. Still the amazing, kindhearted, wonderful you that you’ve always been.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re biased.”

He chuckled. “I am, but I’m also right. And I don’t believe for one second that your mom will be disappointed in you. I think she’ll admire the fact that you didn’t sign on with the label – that you know yourself well enough and are strong and smart enough to be true to yourself. Not a lot of people would have been able to resist an offer like Autumn was making you.”

She shrugged. “Thanks, I know you get it. But I just kind of feel like Mom will see it as having passed up an opportunity to be successful.”

“I don’t think so. Maybe a few years ago she would have seen it that way. Although, even then, I think all she’s ever wanted for you is that you should be happy. Yes, she’s driven,

but she only ever put that kind of pressure on herself – I never saw her being that demanding of you guys. Or am I wrong?”

“No. You’re not. I suppose I’m making it about her, when really, it’s me – I’m the one who feels as though I should do more, as though I should know what I want and pursue it ruthlessly.”

“Sprite, I don’t think you have a ruthless bone in your body, and as far as I’m concerned that’s a good thing – a wonderful thing; I mean it as a compliment.”

“Thanks. But enough of all that. It’ll only be six o’clock in the morning there right now. I’ll call her later. For now, we should plan our first stop.”

Xander chuckled. “We should get down the road a way first, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, but it’s still fun to look at all the places we can stop. I’m glad that you didn’t want to plan it all out in advance, that’d be no fun.”

“I agree. Having a schedule and fixed stops takes all the enjoyment out of a road trip as far as I’m concerned. We can see how far we get, where we want to stop ...”

“And where we can make detours,” Tori added with a grin as she pulled the huge book of maps out of the bag at her feet.

“Maybe we should hold off on calling your mom – if we stop at all the places you’ve been checking out, it’ll be weeks before we get there.”

She grinned at him. “Maybe you’re right. Did I tell you about those little cabins by the lake in Oklahoma?”

“You did. And you told me that it’s only an hour’s detour from I-40 to see Santa Fe, and then there’s the Grand Canyon.” He shook his head with a rueful smile. “I’m serious, we probably should wait a day or two before you call your mom.”

She shot him a quick smile as she traced her finger over the blue line that marked the interstate. “There’s no big hurry, is there? Autumn said that Clay wouldn’t be needing the truck for another couple of weeks.”

“Nope, there’s no big hurry at all. We should make the most of this.”

She nodded. “We can call it our first adventure.”

“I like the sound of that. The first of many.”

A comfortable silence descended as Xander focused on the road, and Tori studied the map.

“What is that tune?” he asked after a while.

It took her a moment to realize that she’d been humming ‘Amarillo by Morning.’ She laughed as she told him.

“I like the sentiment,” he told her, “But I don’t think we want to be driving through the night.”

She shook her head happily. “Nope. I want to stop every night. I don’t care whether it’s hotels or motels, as long as we have a bed, and I have you, I’m happy.”

~ ~ ~

Two days later, Xander couldn’t help smiling to himself as he stood on the dock outside the cabin that they’d rented. They’d only covered about a quarter of the distance they

needed to, but he wasn't worried. They didn't have a timeframe – Tori still hadn't called her mom.

She'd been so excited about the cabins that she'd found on the map that he hadn't been able to resist calling ahead and booking one. He'd never been to Oklahoma before, but Tenkiller Ferry Lake was beautiful, and he was more than happy to turn this road trip into whatever kind of vacation Tori wanted. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a vacation.

Whenever it might have been, he knew that it was nothing like this. Nothing in his life to this point had been anything like spending time with Tori. He enjoyed seeing the world through her eyes. She had a different perspective. He could admit that he was somewhat jaded after his years serving in the Navy. He'd seen the worst of humanity. It was refreshing to look through Tori's eyes and only ever see the best.

Last night, they'd eaten at a little mom-and-pop restaurant. He'd enjoyed every minute of it, and especially seeing her befriending tourists and locals alike. People were drawn to her; he didn't want to think about people taking advantage of her, but then that wasn't a concern while he was around.

They'd agreed that they would continue on their way in the morning, but they were going back to the same restaurant tonight. He took a seat in one of the Adirondack chairs on the dock, hoping that she'd be out of the shower and ready to come outside in time to see the sunset. He really did like it here; it wasn't spectacular scenery, there were no majestic mountains, or ocean, but the lake was beautiful in its own way,

and as the sun began its descent toward the horizon, the changing colors in the sky promised a sunset to remember.

He frowned when his cell phone rang in his back pocket, but smiled when he took it out and checked the display.

“Slade!” he answered. “What’s up? How’s everything going there?”

“Everything’s just fine here. I was calling to ask you the same thing. How’s Tori? How’s Nashville treating you?”

He chuckled. “Nashville was just fine.”

“*Was?* What happened? Shit! Are you guys not together?”

“We’re together but we left Nashville. Tori doesn’t want to sing anymore, so there wasn’t much point in staying there.”

“Where are you then?”

“Right now, if you can believe it, in a cabin by a lake in Oklahoma.”

Slade laughed. “When you said in a cabin by a lake, I thought you were going to say Summer Lake.”

“You’re not completely wrong. That’s where we’re headed.”

“And you’re in Oklahoma? You couldn’t find a more direct route?”

“We could, but we didn’t want to. It’s a long story, but we’re bringing a truck for Clay MacAdam, and we’re making a road trip out of it.”

“Nice! And I’m guessing that you’re also going to Summer Lake to see Ria?”

Xander still hadn't gotten used to the way that people now called Alexandria DuPont 'Ria'. He liked the idea of it, but he'd grown up knowing the woman as the mighty Alexandria, he wasn't sure that he'd ever be able to think of her as simply Ria.

"Yep. When we thought that we were just visiting Nashville, she asked Tori if we'd stop and see her on the way back to Napa. It turns out that we're killing two birds with one stone this way."

"So, you're coming home to Napa?"

Xander stared out at the lake as he considered that question.

"Or not?"

"The honest answer is that I don't know the answer yet."

"Fair enough. And as much as I'd like to have you here, I hope you figure out a place where you'll be happy."

"Thanks."

"But you have to put me out of my misery; have you figured out if Tori's the woman you're going to be happy with?"

"I have. The where might still be in question, but the who..." He smiled. "The who for me is Tori."

"Good. I'm glad."

"Thanks." He looked up when the door to the cabin opened and smiled when Tori appeared, her hair still wet, and a towel wrapped around her. "Listen, I have to go. I'll call you soon, okay?"

“Okay. Make sure you do. I want to know how things are going. Say hi to Tori for me.”

“Will do. Later.”

“Later.”

He got to his feet and hurried up the dock. When he reached the door he tugged at the towel, but Tori clung to it as she kissed him. “I only came out to say sorry I’m taking so long. I don’t want to make us take any longer.”

He chuckled. “I do. But if you throw some clothes on quick, we can watch the sunset. After that, we can decide how much of a hurry we’re in to go out for dinner.”

A few minutes later, he was sitting back down in the chair on the dock, and Tori sat on his lap. He closed his arms around her and jerked his chin toward the horizon, where the sun was just starting to disappear.

“I wanted you to see this.”

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It is, and it feels important, too.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Important?”

“Yeah, call me sentimental, but when I was sitting out here before, I was thinking that the sun is setting on the last part of our lives. I mean, I’ve been out of the Navy for a while now, but I’ve been in a kind of limbo since then. As for you, you’ve made your decision about singing and about Nashville. I think it’s fitting that there’s a beautiful sunset to mark the end of all of that for both of us.”

She smiled up at him. “I like it. I like that we’re each stepping out of our old lives.” Her smile faded. “But what comes next?”

He tightened his arms around her and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Whatever we want. We get to make it up.”

She sighed and rested her cheek against his as they watched the sun slowly dip beneath the horizon. “I think I’d be happy to stay on our road trip for a while. I like this. We can drive for as long as we want to, then find a nice place and stay for as long as we want.”

He nodded slowly. “It does have its appeal.”

“But?”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying anything against it. It’s just that I know myself, and I think I know you well enough to say that you’re the same. We will enjoy this for a while, but it won’t be too long before we want something more. You talked about wanting to find a home. I want that too.”

“Maybe we’ll find it along the way.”

“Maybe so.”

She laughed. “If we find it before we get to Summer Lake, we can always drop the truck off and then turn around and come back.”

“True. Or if we haven’t found it by the time we get there, we can drop the truck off, visit with your mom, and then carry on.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’d do that? You like the idea?”

“Sure. It’s like we’ve said before. We don’t have a timeframe. We’re not tied to any place in particular. Neither of us is enthused about going back to Napa, and I don’t know about you, but I can’t see us staying in Summer Lake.”

She laughed out loud at that. “I do like it there, it’s a really nice place. But no, I can hardly see myself wanting to settle down in the same small town where my mom lives.”

He laughed with her. “You know I’ve got nothing against your mom, I think she’s an awesome lady. But I have to tell you that I am relieved to hear you say that.”

She leaned in to kiss him, and for a while, all thoughts of the sunset, Summer Lake, and everything else faded away.

When they finally came up for air, her eyes shone as she smiled at him. “I don’t think it matters so much whatever place we choose. I feel as though I’ve already found my home – with you.”

His heart felt as though it exploded in his chest. “I want to be that for you, Tori.”

He closed his eyes when she brought her hand up to caress his cheek. “I want to be that for you, too.”

He didn’t open his eyes as he nodded – he didn’t want to go into all the explanations of everything he felt. It turned out that he didn’t need to say a word; she already understood.

“I know that you don’t like to talk about it, but I know from Hannah how it was for you guys after your folks died. I can’t

imagine how that felt – how it feels. What I can do is tell you that I want to be someone you can turn to – I want to be a safe place for you.”

He crushed her to his chest and buried his face in her hair. “You already are, sprite. I would have told you that I didn’t need that – didn’t want it. But I would have been wrong. I want you to be my home – my family.”

Her eyes were wide when she met his gaze, but he could tell that she was more pleased than shocked. She understood what he meant – when he said make her his family, he was talking about making her his wife. He hadn’t given much consideration to the idea of marriage before. To be fair, he wasn’t giving it much consideration now – it felt like a foregone conclusion.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tori leaned against the railing and stared out across the canyon; it felt impossible to take in the vast beauty of the landscape before her.

Xander came to stand behind her, resting his hands on the railing on either side of her as he leaned over her shoulder.

“Isn’t it amazing?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“It is.”

“Doesn’t it make you feel small?”

He turned his head so that he could look into her eyes.

“Does it make you feel small?”

She let out a short laugh. “It does, but not in a bad way. It’s just that it’s so... so vast. And when you think how many hundreds of years it took to form ...” She shook her head. “I don’t mean that it makes *me* in particular feel small. It’s more that it reminds me that, as humans, we’re just like little ants scurrying around this planet. We feel like we’re so important. But in the grand scheme of things – compared to the Grand Canyon – we don’t really matter.”

He curled one arm around her waist, pulling her back against him. “We may not matter much in the grand scheme of things, but I’m not too worried about the grand scheme. I feel like I did my part to contribute what I could there while I was in the Navy. These days, I’m more concerned with my own

life – our life. And to me, you’re not small – you’re the biggest part of my life, the most important part.”

“Aww. I want to tease you and tell you that you’re such a sweet talker, but you mean it, don’t you?”

“Every word. I’m deadly serious, sprite.”

She chuckled. “I know.”

“That’s just one of the many things that I love about you. You believe me. You’re not into playing games or being insecure.”

“I don’t think I can take too much credit for that. If you think about it, I wasted a lot of time being insecure before we got together.”

He shrugged. “Whatever the reason, I’m glad that we got that out of the way.”

“Me too. And besides, it’d be impossible for me to doubt just how serious you are. I mean, no guy would put up with being dragged around all those crystal stores and galleries in Santa Fe if he were just looking to get laid, would he?”

She could feel the laughter rumble up through his chest. “No. You’ve got a point there.”

She had to laugh with him. He’d been such a good sport, following her around for hours while she visited all those little stores and chatted with the owners about the different crystals and admired paintings that he had no interest in. He thought the whole crystal thing was hokey as hell, but he hadn’t criticized even once. He teased her, but in a good way.

She looked down at the new ring on her pointer finger. He'd even bought her that. She'd fallen in love with the turquoise stone set in a silver band and been so disappointed when it didn't fit her ring finger and was too small for the middle one. Xander had slipped it on to her pointer finger, and asked why she couldn't wear it there.

She'd been so busy admiring it and wondering why it hadn't occurred to her to think outside of that particular box, that he'd managed to pay for the ring before she had the chance to argue.

As if he could read her mind, he touched the ring and smiled. "I didn't put up with all the shopping so that I could get laid." He winked at her. "I didn't need to, you're a sure thing."

She pushed at his arm with a laugh.

"I didn't mind any of it because I got to see you happy, got to learn more about you and the way that weird and wonderful little mind of yours works."

"I think that's mostly why I believe you, that I'm not insecure about you or us – it's because you already know me, and what you don't know you're eager to learn." Her smile faded. "I already know you, too. And I hope it doesn't seem like I don't want to learn more."

"It doesn't; why would you say that?"

She turned within the circle of his arms so that she was facing him. "Because sometimes there are things that I'd like to ask you, but I don't."

He cocked an eyebrow.

“I don’t want to make you talk about things that make you uncomfortable. I mean...” She’d come this far, but she didn’t want to bring up subjects that might spoil his enjoyment of this amazing day at the Grand Canyon.

“You mean about my folks?”

She nodded slowly.

“And about my deployments?”

She nodded again.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll tell you anything that you want to know. But for the most part, I don’t really think about any of that.” He shrugged. “It’s not that I avoid it, it’s just that I don’t see the point spending my time and energy on things that I can’t do anything about.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around his middle and hugged him as fiercely as she could. “I just want you to know that I see you – I see how brave you are, and I know sometimes it must still hurt, all of it. I know I’m not as strong as you, but I’m strong enough to carry the weight if ever you want to unload on me.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“Anyway. What’s next?”

He chuckled. “It’s up to you. If we get on the road now, we can hit Vegas late tonight.”

She turned to look out at the amazing view of the endless landscape laid out before them. “I think I’d like to stay here

again tonight. Maybe we can get up early and watch the sunrise – we can call that the dawning of our new day.”

“I like it.” He took her hand and started walking back toward the lodge. “But if you want to see the sunrise, we should probably get an early dinner and then an early night.”

“Mind reader. We need to get to bed early because I don’t plan on letting you sleep anytime soon.”

~ ~ ~

It was late afternoon by the time they reached Vegas. Xander looked over at Tori, who was still studying the leaflets they’d picked up when they stopped at the visitor center earlier.

“Have you decided where you want to stay?”

She crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him. “I have no freaking idea! I think I’m overloaded on tourist info. What about you? Have you been here before? Do you have any ideas?”

He smiled to himself as he turned the old truck onto The Strip. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this. In fact, give me a minute while I decide if I really am going to suggest it.”

He had to laugh when she tugged on his sleeve. “Now you have to tell me! Even if you decide you don’t want to do whatever it is, you have to tell me. I might die of curiosity if you don’t.”

He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Don’t even joke about dying on me, you hear me?”

He regretted his tone as soon as he'd said it, but he couldn't take the words back.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean anything by it. I just..."

He squeezed her hand again. "Sorry, sprite. I didn't mean to snap at you. I guess I don't have much of a sense of humor about that. You know, with my parents, and with teammates who didn't make it..." He shrugged. "But anyway, I'll put you out of your misery – even now, I can't believe I'm doing this to myself. What I was thinking is that we should stay at The Venetian, and I'll take you on a gondola ride."

The way she squealed moved them right past the awkward moment and put the smile back on his face.

"They have gondola rides?"

"I may live to regret telling you about it, but yes, they do. I think you'll love it."

"I know I will! This is awesome! Thanks, Xander." She gave him an apologetic smile. "I need to do more for you. You've been so awesome putting up with all my stupid stuff..."

"Hey, it's not stupid. None of it's stupid. And you need to remember that it's all my choice. If I didn't want to do any of it, I wouldn't. I do it because I enjoy seeing you happy."

She scooted closer to him on the bench seat and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Well, thank you, I love it. But I enjoy seeing you happy, too. So, I'm going to think about what I can do more of for you."

He chuckled. "It's all good." He caught hold of her hand and brought it over to cover the front of his pants. "You already do plenty to keep me happy."

When they arrived at The Venetian, Xander was impressed that the valet who took the keys for the truck didn't bat an eyelid. He'd had far too many experiences where people looked down their noses at him and his teammates, seeming to think that they couldn't afford to be in higher end places.

He took Tori's hand as they made their way to the front desk. She was just as curious and enthusiastic as ever. She looked all around, taking everything in as they walked.

"It's way nicer than I expected; I've never been to Vegas before."

He was glad that there was no line at the desk. He'd been to Vegas often enough, though he didn't have many stories he'd want to share with her about his previous visits.

"Do you want me to get it?" she asked, wide-eyed when the girl behind the desk told them the price for a suite for the night.

"That's okay. I've got it," he told her as he handed over his card. It was a new one on him to be with a woman who he knew could cover any costs they might incur just as easily as he could. He liked it.

When they checked into the suite, he leaned against the wall as he watched her wander around with a big smile on her face.

"This is awesome! I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. I guess I only ever thought of Vegas as being big

and busy and ...” She shook her head. “Nothing like this.”

“I think the thing with Vegas is that it can be whatever you want it to be. You can come on a budget or spend a fortune.”

She came back to him and rested her hands on his hips. “You mean, like you just did?”

He leaned down to kiss her. “It’s not a big deal, is it? We both know how fortunate we are in that respect. I don’t get stupid with it – I wouldn’t normally splurge like this just for the hell of it. But this is different. This is you and me.” He smiled. “If you want to look at it that way, it’s kind of like our honeymoon.”

A hint of pink touched her cheeks. “Kind of.”

He closed his arms around her waist and started walking her backward to the bedroom. “I mean, I know that the wedding’s supposed to come before the honeymoon, but we’re not exactly conventional people, are we? We can do the honeymoon first. In fact, while we’re here ...” He jerked his chin toward the bed. “We can do the whole thing in reverse order if you like. Honeymoon first, consummate now, and do the wedding whenever you’re ready.”

She let go of him and fell back onto the bed. “That sounds good to me.”

“Are you sure? You just got a weird look on your face.”

She chuckled. “If I did, it was because I was a little bit worried that you might suggest that we should get married while we’re here – you know, since it’s Vegas?”

“Worried?”

She held her arms up to him, and he lay down beside her. She turned onto her side so that she could look into his eyes.

“Not about marrying you. Not even about doing it so quickly – if that’s what you want. Just... Here? In Vegas?” She shook her head. “I’m not the kind of girl who dreams about a big wedding, but if I’ve ever given it any thought...”

She dropped her gaze, and he caught hold of her chin, gently making her look back up at him.

“You can tell me. You already know what you want. I should’ve known that you would. And whatever it is ...” He chuckled. “I know you; I’m not going to say I’ll love it before I hear what it is, but I’ll be open to it. And you should know by now that I’d never tease you about it.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. I just feel silly. You know, with everyone getting engaged, and talking about the kinds of weddings that they want? I haven’t dared to say anything about what I would like. Not that I even thought of it as something that I’d need to worry about until you.”

“It’s not something that’s been on my radar, either. But go on, tell me, how do you want our wedding to be?”

Her eyes sparkled as she looked into his. “First, I have to say, I’m so happy that we’re talking about our wedding, but part of me thinks that I’m going to wake up from a dream soon.”

“It’s not a dream, sprite. This is as real as it gets. Now, are you going to tell me? Or are you going to keep dodging the question?” he asked with a chuckle.

“I’m not dodging it! I’ll tell you. Listening to everyone else’s wedding plans – you know, Jacob and Becca are going to get married at Jacobs Estate, Bentley and Alyssa will have their wedding at our place, Willow hasn’t decided yet, but you can bet that she’ll do something glitzy and extravagant – all I could think about was some quaint little chapel. Not that I’m religious or anything,” she reassured him quickly. “Just that chapels are usually small and rustic and ... I don’t know, out in the country.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“It does?”

“Yep. I’m not religious either, and I think you know that the where doesn’t really matter to me – only insofar as it makes you happy. Small sounds good to me. Out in the country? I like the sound of that.” He leaned in to kiss her and let his hands rove over her.

When he lifted his head, they were both breathing hard. “What do you think, after we drop the truck off in Summer Lake, should we buy a car and just keep on driving till we find our chapel?”

She nodded at him eagerly as she unzipped his pants and slid her hand inside. “That sounds perfect to me.” She giggled. “Now, if we’re done talking, can we get on with the consummating?”

He had to laugh as he pulled his shirt up and off over his head. There was so much to love about his Tori. She might be ditzy at times, she definitely wasn’t the most practical person in the world, and he just couldn’t get enough of her. As she

tugged his pants down his legs, he loved knowing that she couldn't get enough of him, either.

~ ~ ~

Tori quickly undressed and climbed on top of him. Her mind was spinning, but it was only because she was so happy. It was hard for her to believe that he was talking about their wedding! He was right that she believed him – believed the way he felt about her. There was no way that she could doubt after the way he treated her. He showed her with everything he said and everything he did that he loved her – that he knew her and cared about her in a way no one else ever had.

But this was so fast! And there was a part of her that wanted a proposal as much as she wanted a quaint, quiet little wedding. But she knew that was crazy. How could she care about the details of how he asked when Xander Jacobs wanted to marry her? She wanted to go back in time and tell her five-year-old self to hang in there – that one day, all her dreams would come true.

She braced her hands in the middle of his chest and smiled down at him. “I love you, Xander.”

His fingers dug into her hips as she took hold of his hot, hard cock and guided him inside her.

“I love you more,” he breathed.

She shook her head as she began to move over him, slowly at first, then picking up the pace as she rode him hard.

“Impossible!”

He held her tighter as he took over, holding her where he wanted her as he thrust deeper and harder. She lost the ability to form words as he carried her higher and higher until the world seemed to dissolve around her as her orgasm crashed over her. When he let himself go, she felt as though their bodies melded into one as they soared away together.

When she finally slumped down onto his chest, his hand came up to stroke her hair. “Nothing’s impossible for you and me, Tori. Nothing. And of course I love you more, I’m bigger than you are.”

She lifted her head to see him giving her a teasing smile.

“That’s got nothing to do with it. You already said I have a huge heart, and it’s full of love for you.”

“Yeah, but I still love you more.”

She tickled his side. “Nope. I love you more. I win.”

Before she knew what was happening, he’d rolled them over and had her pinned to the bed underneath him.

“I win, no question about it. I get you.”

“I get you.”

He nuzzled his face into her neck. “We get each other.”

She nodded happily. “We do.” She pulled her hand free and tickled him again. “And we get a gondola ride too. Although, we should probably shower first.”

He blew out a sigh as he slid an arm underneath her. “We will, but I’m not finished here yet.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, loving the feel of his hard body against hers. “There’s no rush. We have all the time in the world.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Are you sure you want to drive?” Xander asked. “It’s not that long of a haul to Summer Lake from here. I can do it in one go.”

“I want to, even if it’s just for the first couple of hours,” Tori told him.

“Okay. How about you call your mom while I get us out of Vegas? We can switch once we’re out on the open road – unless you want to drive now?”

She chuckled. “That works. I do want to drive, but you’re probably best getting us out of here.”

The traffic wasn’t bad getting out of town – it was midmorning, so it wasn’t too busy. Once they were on the open road, he glanced over at her. She was staring out the window at the barren landscape.

She turned to him with a smile. “I know, I know. I’ll call her now.”

He had to laugh. “I didn’t say a word.”

“I know, but I could hear you thinking it – and you’re right. I need to call Mom and let her know that we’ll be there by tonight.”

“We don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

“I know, and I kind of don’t want to. I don’t want our little road trip to end.”

Xander knew how she felt. He'd enjoyed every minute of the time that they'd spent on the road together. They were living in their own little world, and he loved it.

"We can make another detour if you prefer. We could go through Death Valley?"

"I'd love to. Maybe after we drop this truck off. I'm feeling a little bit guilty that it's taken so long. I had a text from Autumn this morning. She wasn't pushing or anything, but I know she has to be wondering by now what's taking us so long."

"Yeah. What do you think, shall we do what we said? We can drop the truck off for Clay, visit with your mom and Russ for a day or two, and then take off again."

"I do like that idea. To tell you the truth, I'm worried that Mom's going to ask when we're headed back to Napa."

"Does she expect you to go back?"

"No. She even told me that she knows how I feel about being there. I think it's just me – you know, because I don't know what the hell I am going to do with my life."

"We'll figure it out. If I had to guess, I'd say that your mom will be supportive of whatever you do – even if that means taking some time doing nothing while you figure out what you want your next move to be."

She reached across to take his hand. "I do know that whatever comes next, I want to share it with you."

"Good, because whatever I do next will be about building our life."

“I’m not holding you back from anything, am I?”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Hell no! You’re not holding me back; the way I see it, being with you opens everything up. I’ve already lived the career I wanted; I’ll find something that I enjoy doing wherever we end up.”

Tori sucked in a deep breath then blew it out slowly. “Okay, I’ll call Mom now and tell her that we’ll see them tomorrow.”

“We can get to the lake by tonight.”

She made a face at him. “I know, but if I tell her that she’ll invite us to stay with them. I don’t want that – do you?”

He chuckled. “I’d rather not, no.”

He smiled to himself as he listened to Tori talk with Alexandria. From what he could gather from this end of the conversation, Alexandria was just happy to see them. He was hoping that by spending a bit of time with her mom, Tori might loosen up and come to see that nobody expected anything of her. He hated that she was so hard on herself – especially when she compared herself to Bentley and Willow. He knew without a doubt that her mom loved her just as much as she did her brother and sister, even though she was nothing like them.

~ ~ ~

Tori felt a lot more relaxed as she drove. Her mom had been so thrilled to hear that they were almost there. She hadn’t pressured for them to stay with her and hadn’t asked about their plans. Tori wasn’t sure whether her mom had changed – loosened up – way more than she’d realized, or whether *she*

was the one who'd loosened up and was actually listening to what her mom was saying rather than dreading what she might be expecting of her.

She glanced over at Xander, who was fiddling with his phone. "Are you okay over there?"

"I'm good. How about you? Have you had enough, want me to drive?"

"No! I'm enjoying myself. I think, if you don't mind, I'll swap back with you when we hit Route 20 – that road winds through the mountains before you get to the lake. I'll let you drive that bit. I'm fine until then."

"Okay. I –" He frowned when the sound of his phone ringing cut him off, but his smile was back when he checked the screen. "Mind if I take this? It's Cameron."

"I don't mind. Say hi to him for me?"

"Hey, Cam! How's it going, man?"

Tori didn't want to listen in on his conversation, but she couldn't exactly avoid doing so.

"Yes, that's right. It's been awesome." He glanced over at her. "We'll get to Summer Lake this evening, and we've said we'll go to see Alexandria tomorrow."

Tori tried to keep her attention on the road, but she couldn't help wondering what Cameron – and the others – would think about her and Xander driving across the country like this. Not that it mattered. Everyone was happy for them when they found out that they were together.

“Thanks, man! That’d be great.”

She gave Xander a puzzled look as he grinned at her.

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll call you when we get there. I appreciate it.” He ended the call with a big smile on his face.

“What’s going on?” Tori asked.

“Cam just offered us his house to stay in while we’re there.”

“Oh! He did? That’s good of him. Is Piper okay with it?”

She knew that Cameron had bought the house in Summer Lake where Piper was living when he met her. Piper had fallen in love with the place, and Cam hadn’t wanted her to have to give it up so that she could be with him.

“It was her idea, apparently. The girls were all out for drinks at Molly’s, and Willow was telling them that we were headed to Summer Lake to see your mom. Of course, that had them all joking about how Bentley and Alyssa met. Piper said that we should stay at their house rather than at the resort or the Lodge.”

Tori nodded happily. “I’ll have to give her a call; that’s so kind of her.”

“Will you be comfortable there?”

“I will. Will you?”

“Yep. I’ll be way more comfortable staying at their place than I would at the resort.” He grinned at her. “After all the different places we’ve stayed in since we left Nashville, I’m looking forward to being able to relax in a regular house – a home.”

“I like that idea, too.” She glanced over at him. “I hope we’ll find one of our own in the not-too-distant future.”

“Yeah, me too. Although, I don’t mind how long it takes us to find the place that we’ll call home. I’m enjoying life on the road with you.”

“Me too. I have to tell you, though, I’m looking forward to staying at Cam and Piper’s place, now. We know we do well together on the road; I want to see how we do in a more domestic setting.”

He laughed out loud at that. “I’m not sure that domestic is a word that would apply to either of us.”

She had to laugh with him. “I guess not, but you know what I mean.”

~ ~ ~

Tori had been right about the road winding through the mountains. Xander was glad that he was driving this last stretch. When he spotted a pullout that offered the first real view of the lake, he turned off and brought the truck to a stop.

“Wow!” Tori stared out through the windshield. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

He nodded as he took in the view. “It is. In fact, of all the places that we’ve stopped on this road trip, I’d say that this is the best view I’ve seen.”

“It is, isn’t it? And Summer Lake’s a great little town. In fact, it’s a pity that Mom found it first.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

She chuckled. “Of all the places that we’ve seen, Summer Lake is the one where I could see myself living ... If my mom didn’t already live there.”

He let out a short laugh. “Yeah. I really do like your mom, and I get along with her, but...” He let the words trail off without completing the sentence – Tori knew what he meant. “It’s a pity, though. I don’t know the place, but I know it must have a lot going for it. I mean, Smoke moved here, and no one thought that he would settle down in a small town. Then, Cam bought a house here, too. I’m looking forward to getting to know the place.”

Tori made a face at him. “Just don’t get too attached to it, no matter how cool it might turn out to be.”

He laughed. “Who knows, maybe you’ll find that you get along so well with your mom these days that you don’t want to leave her.”

“That’s a lovely idea, but I can’t see it, can you?”

“I can’t, but never say never.”

It was just starting to get dark by the time Xander turned into the driveway of Cam and Piper’s house. He frowned as he pulled up next to a truck that was already sitting outside the garage.

“Who do you think that is?” Tori asked.

He didn’t get the chance to say that he had no idea before the front door opened, and a big smile spread across his face.

“Smoke!”

Tori followed his gaze and grinned. “Oh! I didn’t think. Of course, he and Laura live here. They’re awesome. I got to know Laura when she used to come to Nashville for work.”

They got out of the truck and Smoke and Laura hurried to greet them. As Xander shook hands with Smoke, he was happy to see the way that Tori and Laura hugged. It looked like they knew each other well and were close.

“It’s good to see you,” said Smoke. “We can get out of your hair and let you get settled in – you must be tired. Cam called to let me know that you guys were going to be staying here, and we wanted to air the place out for you and get you some basic supplies in.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. It’s good to see you, too. There’s no need to rush off.” He jerked his chin toward where Tori and Laura were chatting eagerly.

Smoke chuckled. “From what Cam said, you guys are going to be here for a little while, is that right?”

“It is.”

“In that case, we will clear out since I only got back from a trip this afternoon. But give me a call, let me know when you’re free, and we can catch up. We can go out for dinner or you guys can come up to the house – you haven’t seen it yet, have you?”

“I haven’t.” Smoke had left Napa before Xander had joined the Navy. They kept in touch over the years but hadn’t had many chances to actually see each other.

Smoke grinned at him. “You should come up and see the place. I think you’ll like it. Summer Lake’s a good place to settle.”

Xander gave him a puzzled look, but Smoke just shrugged. “I’m just putting two and two together and maybe I’m coming up with seven, but the way I see it, you’re in no hurry to go back to Napa. From what I know of her, Tori won’t be either, and you guys are going to be looking for a place to settle, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

Smoke chuckled. “Give Alexandria some time before you write this place off, huh?”

Xander had to laugh with him. He glanced over at Tori. “I’d be prepared to do that, but it’ll be up to Tori.”

Smoke looked more serious. “Yeah, I get that. And I know it’s none of my business, but I might just have a chat with her.”

Xander didn’t say anything; he didn’t need to. If anyone knew about coming back from a strained relationship with their parents, Smoke did.

~ ~ ~

After Smoke and Laura had left, Tori wandered over to stand in front of the huge windows in the great room.

“I can see why Piper fell in love with this house,” she said. “I bet the view of the lake from here is amazing in the daylight.”

Xander came to stand behind her, slipping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on top of her head.

“It seems that everyone who comes here ends up falling in love with the place.”

She looked up at him over her shoulder. “It does, doesn’t it? I hope we’ll find somewhere as cool as this.”

“There’s no way that you’d want to stay here?”

She tensed. “Why?”

“I dunno. I was just wondering.”

She turned around to face him. “Would you like that? I know you and Smoke used to be close. I can see how it’d be nice for you to live in the same town he does.”

He shrugged. “I don’t even know the place. I couldn’t say. I guess all I was really doing was checking how you feel. There’s no point in me even considering it if you hate the idea.”

She bit down on her bottom lip. “I don’t know, Xander. I just can’t imagine it, you know? This is where my mom lives. I ...” She shook her head slowly.

“Hey, come on. I didn’t mean to put a downer on things,” said Xander. “I was just wondering.” He pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “There’s no point even thinking about it yet. Let’s just treat this as another stop on our road trip. This is the stop where we get to visit your mom, deliver the truck to Clay – we should really call him in the morning – and we can explore, just like we have in the other places that we’ve been. We’ll

probably find that we're ready to move on in a couple of days."

"Yeah. And we're going to need to do something about getting a vehicle. We can call Clay about the truck tomorrow, but when we drop it off to him, we're going to need to have something else to drive away in."

"True. I said that I'd call Smoke tomorrow; I'll ask him if we can rent a car from the airport until we find something to buy."

She leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Do you think that you might like to stay here?"

He tightened his arms around her. "I told you, sprite. There's no way I could know that yet, and it's only a secondary consideration. There's no point in me thinking about it if you can't see yourself living in the same small town as your mom."

She blew out a sigh. "Sorry. I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? All we can do is take things one step at a time like you said. The first step is meeting up with Mom and Russ tomorrow."

"Are you looking forward to seeing her?"

She smiled. "I am. The last couple of times that I've spoken with her things have been different – she's different. I mean, I knew that. At least, I'd heard it – everyone else says how much she's changed. I've seen glimpses of it myself when we've been out here to visit her, but... I don't know. She's different. I'm different. I *am* looking forward to seeing her. I

should keep an open mind. Maybe things will be different.” She let out a short laugh. “I’ve always felt like the odd one out – it always seemed like Bentley and Willow were closer to her because of the company, because their lives are all caught up in the wine world just like hers used to be. It’d be kind of funny if I ended up being the one who’s closest to her in the physical sense.”

“I think it’d be kind of cool. Not because I care about staying here in Summer Lake,” he added quickly. “I think it’d be cool for you if you felt that close to her that you wanted to live in the same place.”

“Yeah.” She couldn’t quite wrap her mind around that one. She’d always loved her mom but... She shook her head to clear it. “Like I said, I’ll keep an open mind. Right now, I’m starving. Let’s go and see what Smoke and Laura brought for us.”

After they’d eaten, they settled on the sofa, and Xander found a movie for them to watch. He wrapped his arm around her, and she snuggled against him with a happy sigh.

“I have to tell you – this makes me want a place of our own. I like this. I like the thought of us each finding jobs that we enjoy and chilling out together at the end of the day like this.”

“I like that idea, sprite. I like it a lot.” He met her gaze. “And I don’t care if it’s here or wherever it is. As long as we’re together, we can figure out a great life for ourselves.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning, Xander turned into the driveway at Russ's place and brought the truck to a stop.

Tori turned to him with a puzzled smile. "What are you doing? Are you planning for us to get out and walk the rest of the way or are you about to offer me the chance to change my mind?" She turned and looked over her shoulder. "That's not a bad idea, you know. We could turn around and leave and come up with some excuse later about why we couldn't make it."

"That's a terrible idea, and you know it," he said with a smile. "You're going to be fine. That's why I stopped – to tell you that, to remind you that your mom loves you. She's going to be so happy to see you."

She gave him a sheepish smile. "I know. Thanks. I don't mean to be such a wuss."

"You're not being – you haven't said a word. It's just that I know you and I know what you're thinking." He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. "You've been quiet the whole drive over here. I just want you to relax. This is meant to be a nice visit with your mom – not something to stress about."

She blew out a big sigh. "I know. You're right. I'm sorry."

He chuckled. "I'm not trying to give you a hard time."

"Sorry."

“There’s no need. If you like, I’ll do what you said – turn this thing around and we can leave.”

“No. I appreciate the offer, but we can’t do that. And besides, you’re right – it is meant to be a nice visit and it can be if I just relax a bit.”

He smiled through pursed lips, and she slapped his arm.

“I know, I know! That’s what you just said.”

“What do you think, then? Do you want to do this?”

“Yeah, I do. It’ll be fun – if I let it be.”

Xander nodded. “It will. Ready then?”

“Yep.”

He put the truck back in drive and carried on toward the house. As soon as he cut the engine, the front door opened, and Alexandria appeared with a man at her side. Xander hadn’t met Russ before, but he’d heard a lot about him. He was looking forward to getting to know the guy. A former Marine who owned a gym sounded like someone who Xander would get along with.

Alexandria waved, and Tori waved back.

“She looks so different. She looks happy and...”

Xander chuckled. “Relaxed is I think the word that you’re looking for – you should try it.”

Tori shot him a quick smile before turning to get out of the truck. “Thanks. I think that might turn out to be easier than I expected.”

Xander followed her out of the truck and hung back as she scampered up the steps to greet her mom. He held his breath when she reached the top and stopped short. He knew enough about their family to understand they weren't big on expressing physical affection. That was another reason Tori felt like an outsider – lucky for him, she was the touchy-feely kind.

As he watched, both Tori and Alexandria seemed to freeze for a moment, unsure how to proceed. All his breath came out in a rush when Alexandria smiled and stepped forward with her arms extended. Tori flung herself at her and seemed to melt against her. Xander was happy for them both – he loved to hold Tori in his arms; he could only imagine how good that would feel to Alexandria.

Russ gave him a knowing smile and came down the steps toward him.

“Xander, it's good to meet you. I'm Russ.”

Xander grinned as he shook hands with the older man. “It's good to meet you as well –” he lowered his voice as he added “– and it's great to see that.” He jerked his chin to where Tori and Alexandria were still hugging.

Russ grinned at him. “I'm glad to hear you say that.”

Xander cocked an eyebrow.

“If you're happy to see them hugging, it must mean that it's something that Tori wants. In case you don't know, I can tell you – it's something that Ria wants with all her heart.”

Xander got the impression that Russ felt a little defensive of Alexandria – or ‘Ria’, as he called her.

“I never doubted that Alexandria felt that way.”

“And Tori?” Russ asked.

Xander gave him a reassuring smile. “Having seen the way they just greeted each other, do you really need to ask?”

Russ chuckled. “No, I don’t, do I?” He grasped Xander’s shoulder. “My plan was to offer to show you the gym later but maybe we should just go now and leave them to it?”

Xander grinned. “That works for me. I need to check in with Tori first, though. I don’t want her to feel like I’m abandoning her the second we arrive.”

When Tori and her mom finally let go of each other, he could see that they both had tears shining in their eyes. He jogged up the steps and greeted Alexandria with a kiss on her cheek.

“It’s good to see you.”

She really did look like a different person, especially when she smiled. “It’s so lovely to see you.” She shocked him when she waggled her eyebrows at him. “And I hope it’s okay to say it, but I’m thrilled to see the two of you together.”

Tori looked a little stunned, but Xander just nodded happily. He rested his hand on Tori’s shoulder. “I’m more than thrilled about it myself.”

Tori looked up at him with a smile, and he couldn’t help it, he leaned in to kiss her cheek, too. He wanted to reassure her,

but it didn't feel right to kiss more than her cheek while standing in front of her mom.

“Can I just steal you away for a second, sprite?”

Tori looked puzzled but followed him back down the steps to the truck. When they reached it, he opened the door and reached inside to get her phone from where she'd left it on the seat.

“It looks to me like you and your mom might want some time alone together. Russ has asked if I want to go see his gym. I was about to say yes but I wanted to give you the option first. Do you want me to stick around instead?”

“Aww! You're so good to me.” She glanced back over her shoulder. “And you even brought me out of earshot to ask me. You're awesome.”

“I do my best. I just know you; I know how you work, and I know you're used to thinking that you have to face everything alone. I'm going to do my best to make you see that you're not on your own anymore. You've got me now.”

She pressed her forehead into his chest and slid her arms around his waist. “I love you.”

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to him – if she wasn't worried about her mom seeing, then he wasn't. “I love you more, sprite.”

She looked up into his eyes. “And I think that...” she glanced over to where her mom and Russ were standing at the top of the steps “... Yeah. If you're okay with it, I think it might be nice to have some time with Mom.”

He hugged her a little tighter before letting her go. “Then I’ll go with Russ.” He handed her the phone. “I wanted to make sure that you had this first. If you want me to come back, just shoot me a quick text.”

“Thanks. Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Russ seems like a good guy. I’m looking forward to getting to know him. And you know me; I’m always happy in the gym.”

~ ~ ~

Tori stared out at the lake from her seat on the deck over the water. She absolutely loved Russ’s place. She’d been here before, of course. At first, she hadn’t been able to imagine that her mom would be able to settle here, but she was more than happy to have been proved wrong.

“Here you are,” her mom said as she set a glass of lemonade on the table in front of her before sitting down to join her.

“Thanks.” Tori took a long drink, more to give herself a moment to think than because she was thirsty. When they first arrived, the way her mom had hugged her was wonderful, but Tori was starting to question herself now. Perhaps she’d just gotten carried away?

When she set her glass down, she realized that her mom was watching her closely. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“What? Is something wrong?”

How mom’s expression was so gentle that a rush of warmth filled Tori’s chest.

“Nothing’s wrong, darling. In fact, everything is wonderful. I’m so happy that you’re here.”

“We’re not staying.”

Her mom chuckled. “I didn’t think that you were.”

Tori blew out a sigh. “Sorry. I think I’m a bit nervous.”

How mom reached across and touched her hand. “I can see that and I’m so sorry.”

“No! It’s not your fault! It’s me. It’s...”

Her mom met her gaze and held it. “It’s all my fault, Tori, and I really am sorry. I can’t change the past, but I truly hope that we can set a different course for the future.”

Tori’s eyes filled with tears even though she wasn’t sure why. “Nothing’s your fault, Mom. There’s nothing even wrong. There never has been. There’s no need to change the past.”

“Oh, Tori! I wish that there were a way for me to go back in time; I’d change so many things.” Her mom gave her a sad smile. “But since I can’t do that, there’s no point in dwelling on it. All I can do is tell you that I’m sorry and ask for your forgiveness.” She held her hand up when Tori tried to interrupt. “I’m sorry that I didn’t understand you better, I’m sorry that as a child, you didn’t feel like you fit in. I hope that you can forgive me for not being a better mother to you.”

Tears streamed down Tori’s face as she got up from her chair and went to wrap her arms around her. She didn’t even try to resist when her mom pulled her down onto her lap and held her close.

There was so much that she wanted to say, but it took a long few minutes before she could compose herself enough to speak. Until then, she just clung to her mom. She kept her eyes closed and enjoyed every second of the way she stroked her hair and made soothing noises.

When she finally lifted her head, she lifted the hem of her T-shirt to wipe her face. It was only when her cheeks were dry that she realized what she'd done. She bit down on her bottom lip. "Sorry. I..."

Her mom laughed. "Please, don't be, sweet girl. You're just being you, and ... who you are? Who you are is absolutely perfect. I know that I've never told you this before, but I adore you."

Tori's eyes filled with fresh tears. "I love you, too."

"I hope you've always known that I love you."

Tori nodded.

"I need you to know that I adore you as well. I'm sorry that I haven't always understood you and what you needed, but I really do hope that things can be different between us now – better."

"I'd love that, I really would." Tori swiped the hem of her T-shirt over her face again, then tightened her arm around her mom's shoulders. "It looks like we're already doing things differently."

"We are and I like it."

"But am I squashing you, should I move?"

She loved the way her mom's arms tightened around her waist. "You can if you want to, but I'd rather you didn't."

Tori relaxed. "In that case, I'm kinda comfy here; I think I'll stay."

Her mom chuckled. "Good. So, how are you?" Tori had to laugh when she waggled her eyebrows as she asked, "Want to tell me about you and Xander?"

"I do, but I think I need you to tell me more about you and Russ first. You're so happy, it's wonderful to see. And you're so ... different." She bit down on her bottom lip. "I don't mean... I didn't..."

"It's all right, sweetheart. I'm not going to get offended. I understand what you mean. I am happy. And I am different. And it's all down to Russ. He's helped me so much – helped me to see that I was living my life according to a set of rules that didn't work for me."

"Grandfather's rules?"

"Yes. You know how things were. You know that your grandfather shaped me into the person he needed me to be. I didn't have much choice while he was alive – but he's been dead for a long time. Until I met Russ, I was still enforcing and living by those same old rules even though I didn't have to anymore."

Tori thought about that. "He was a horrible man," she said eventually.

Her mom chuckled. "You have no idea."

"It must've been really hard for you."

“It was. But I don’t think I realized it until I met Russ. Your grandfather set a course for my life, I accepted it and lived it without question. Russ helped me to see that this is my life, and I can live it any way I please.”

Tori smiled back. “It looks to me like you’re living it pretty damn well now.”

She didn’t think she’d ever seen her mom look so happy as she said, “I’m doing my best.”

“I’m happy for you, Mom.”

“Thank you. That’s enough about me, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“It seems to me that you’ve reached a crossroads in your life. Do you have any idea what might make you happy?” Her mom hesitated.

“Go on, say it – ask whatever you like. I think this is the first heart-to-heart that we’ve ever had; we might as well make the most of it.”

Her mom gave her a rueful smile. “Okay. You don’t have to answer, but does Xander make you happy?”

“He does. He’s amazing, Mom. Are you okay with that?”

“I’m so much more than okay! I’ve always had a soft spot for that boy. Do you even know that he’s named after me?”

Tori sat up straighter. “He is? Seriously?”

Her mom chuckled. “He seriously is. I’m not sure that I should tell you the story behind it – I don’t know if Xander knows it himself. Let him tell you if he does, it wouldn’t be

right for me to share if he doesn't. But yes, your father and I were close to his parents, and they named him after me."

"I never even thought about it before," said Tori. "Does that mean his name is really Alexander? Is Xander just the short version?"

"No. Xander is his given name, but now you know its origins."

Tori smiled. "I like it. Is it weird that it makes me feel even closer to him?"

"Not at all."

"And you don't have a problem with it – with us?"

"A problem? I couldn't be more thrilled. Tori, that boy has been in love with you since you were five years old. And I have to tell you that I have loved him since the day he was born."

"How do you know – about when I was five?"

"I know because I used to worry about you. I'm not proud of it, but I used to worry that you were so different. At the time, the company seemed like the most important thing in my life – it was the center of our world. I knew that Bentley and Willow would do very well in that world. But you... You never wanted to be a part of it. You spent so much time in your own little world. Xander was always the one who could draw you out and bring you back to us. At first, I thought it was just Xander being Xander. You know – he's outgoing, he brings everyone together, makes sure everyone's okay. He's always been like that. But the more attention I paid, the more obvious

it became that he had a particular soft spot for you. Of course, I didn't dare to hope that what started out as a small boy's concern for a playmate might blossom into something real in adulthood – but I couldn't be happier that it has.”

“I couldn't be happier either, Mom. He's wonderful. We get along so well. He understands me. He knows me better than anyone.” Tori's smile faded. “I guess my only worry is that it seems so one-sided.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that he goes out of his way for me. He gets me, and so he does what he can to make things good for me – to make sure that I enjoy life.”

“And you're saying that you don't do the same for him?”

“I don't think so. I mean, I do know him, and I do try, but it's not like he needs anything.”

Her mom smiled. “He does, and you give it to him. It's just that you're so close to it that you don't see it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Xander is a protector, Tori. He always has been. Think about it, when we used to get all of you children together, Xander was always the one who looked out for you all even though Jacob and Bentley are older. Then, as you all grew up, it didn't surprise me in the least that Xander teamed up with Slade. The two of them are similar in many respects. They're tougher, perhaps somehow a little rougher, than the others.”

Tori nodded slowly; her mom had a point. “And you don't mind that your daughters have gone for the rougher, tougher

guys?” she asked with a smile.

Her mom waggled her eyebrows. “There was a time when part of me wouldn’t have been thrilled about it, but now I understand – I more than understand, I truly hope that you and your sister will find the kind of happiness that I have with Russ.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The moment Xander stepped inside the gym, he felt at home. He'd already taken a liking to Russ on the short drive over from the house. Seeing the gym – Russ's gym, his place of business – only confirmed Xander's impression of the guy. The place was well-equipped, clean, bright, and had a good feel to it.

Russ grasped his shoulder as he followed him inside. "Shit, I forgot that the guys are all coming in today. Are you okay to meet a whole bunch of people?"

Xander grinned. "Sounds good to me. If you haven't noticed already, Tori and I are more a case of opposites attract than peas in a pod."

Russ laughed. "Yeah, I already figured that out. It's just that these guys can be kind of loud and in your face. I didn't know if you'd be up for that or if you'd prefer a quiet chat."

"I'm good with it. It'll be good to get to know people. Although, if you want to have the chat – question my intentions and all that...?"

Russ shook his head. "I don't think I need to, do I? From what I understand, the two of you have known each other all your lives. It's not as though you're just some Joe off the street who's making a move on her." He looked more serious as he

added, “I will tell you, though, that I do feel protective toward her. So...”

Xander met his gaze. “I hear you. You’ve got no worries. In case you haven’t noticed, I feel the same way myself. As far as I’m concerned, the more people she has looking out for her, the better.”

“Agreed.” Russ glanced out through the window. “Shit! How do you feel about dogs?”

“Love them, why?”

“Because you’re about to meet a couple of them. Wait, you were a SEAL, right?”

“I was.”

“Then maybe I’ll just stand back and let you guys get on with it.”

Xander didn’t have time to ask what he meant before the front door opened and two older guys came in, accompanied by two Belgian Malinois. As soon as he saw the dogs, he understood.

“Hey, Dalton, Lucky,” Russ called. “Do you guys have a minute?”

Even without the dogs, Xander would have had these two pegged as fellow team guys just from the look of them.

“Dalton, Lucky, this is Xander. He’s with Ria’s daughter, Tori; they’re here visiting.”

Dalton, who was slightly taller with mostly gray hair, stepped forward with his hand extended. “Nice to meet you.”

“Thanks. You too.”

Lucky nodded and also shook hands.

Xander looked down when a heavy weight leaned against his leg. He grinned at a pair of big, brown eyes looking up at him.

“I’m guessing that you were a team guy, too?” he asked the dog.

“*She* was,” said Lucky. “Her name’s Echo.”

“Forgive me, ma’am. Is it okay if I pet her?”

“Looks to me like she’s waiting for it,” said Lucky.

Xander looked back down at the dog, who seemed to be smiling at him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Echo.” She pressed her nose into his hand, and he patted her head. He loved dogs. He’d always been a little envious of the guys who got to be handlers.

“You were a team guy yourself?” Dalton asked.

“I was until late last year.” He laughed as the smaller dog came to sit beside Echo, watching eagerly as if it was waiting to be petted, too.

“That’s Star,” Dalton told him. “She didn’t make it through basic.”

Xander squatted down so that he could pet both dogs at once.

“What are you doing now that you’re out?” Dalton asked.

“Not much at the moment,” said Xander. “Like Russ said, I’m here with Tori visiting her mom, but where we go from here...”

Russ gave him a look that he didn’t understand. “There’s no rush, is there?” he asked.

“It’s up to Tori,” he said.

Lucky was watching him closely. “Any reason that you’ve taken so much time off since you got out?”

Xander knew what he was really asking – a lot of the guys needed to take their time in transitioning back into civilian life. PTSD is real.

“I didn’t really take any time. I was working security for a while.”

Dalton cocked an eyebrow. “Wait, Tori was a backup singer for Calypso Rayne, right? Were you on her security team?”

“Not exactly.” Xander didn’t particularly want to explain that although Calypso – Callie – had hired a professional security outfit, he hadn’t been a part of it. He’d volunteered his services to protect Tori.

Russ grinned at him. “The team was there to look out for Callie, Xander was there for Tori.”

“Who was the contractor?” Lucky asked.

“It’s an outfit run by another couple of team guys – in fact, you may know them. The MacFarlands. Cash and Maverick.”

From the way Dalton and Lucky grinned at each other, Xander had to assume that they did know them.

“Damn!” said Dalton. “Do you still have a way to get in touch with them?”

“I do. As a matter of fact, I need to talk to Cash soon. He offered me a job.”

Russ gave him an inquiring look.

“I need to tell him that I’m not going to take it.”

“You could do worse than working for those MacFarland boys,” said Lucky.

“Oh, I know. It’s a great opportunity, it’s just that...”

Dalton smirked at him. “There’s Tori, right?”

He smiled. “Right.”

“So, does that mean whatever you do next you’ll be doing it in Napa?”

Xander made a face. He wasn’t sure how much he should give away; he didn’t know how well these guys would know Alexandria – or more importantly what Russ would make of his answer. “We’re playing it by ear for now.”

Russ winked at him. “Nicely dodged.”

Xander shrugged.

“You should stick around here,” said Dalton. “Dan’s always on the lookout for good guys.”

“Like I said, it’s up to Tori, but I appreciate the thought.”

Lucky checked his watch. “It is good to meet you. Always good to meet a team guy.” He smiled. “Even better to meet

one who Echo vouches for. You need anything while you're here you let us know, okay?"

"Thanks." He reached down to make a fuss over both dogs before they followed Lucky and Dalton over to a pile of mats. He smiled as the dogs settled down together to watch their men work out.

~ ~ ~

Tori couldn't resist giving her mom another hug before she and Xander left. Her eyes pricked with tears yet again when her mom squeezed her tightly and whispered, "Thank you, darling. This afternoon was wonderful."

"It really was, Mom. I love you." Tori's voice came out as a croak.

Xander held the door of the truck open for her, and she pecked Russ's cheek before climbing in.

"I forgot to ask," said Russ, "Have you guys spoken with Clay yet about delivering this thing to him?"

"I called him this morning," said Tori. "We're supposed to take it over to him this weekend."

"I'm going to talk to Smoke before then about renting a car from the airport until we can buy one," said Xander.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help," said Russ. "There are a couple of dealerships down Route 20; we can drive you guys out there anytime you like."

"Thanks," said Xander.

Tori met her mom's gaze and laughed. Her mom gave her a rueful smile in return. When Tori first moved to Nashville, they'd had a long running battle over her mom wanting to buy her a car.

"I'm staying out of this one, I've learned my lesson."

Tori smiled at her. "Thanks, Mom. I'm going to stay out of it, too. Xander's the one who does most of the driving, so I'll leave it up to him."

Xander came around and climbed into the driver's seat, and they both waved as they pulled away.

"I take it things went well between you and your mom?" Xander asked as he turned out of the driveway.

She nodded happily. "I can honestly say that was the best afternoon that I've ever spent with her."

"That's awesome, sprite. I'm happy for you – I'm happy for your mom, too."

Tori slid to the middle of the bench seat and rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm happy all around. I was all tense about this and now I feel silly. There was no need. And you don't mind having dinner with them tomorrow?"

"I don't just not mind; I'm looking forward to it. I like Russ, he's a good guy. And you already know that I like your mom, and I didn't get much of a chance to talk to her today."

Tori laughed. "I'm not even going to say sorry about that. You didn't get the chance to spend much time with her because I was hogging her, and I never thought I'd see the day that would happen."

He shot her a quick smile. “You know that I was hoping it would.”

She made a face at him. “Xander Jacobs, are you saying *I told you so?*”

He laughed. “Nope. I’m not. I’m saying that I’m happy for you. What do you want to do now? Are you ready to head back to the house?”

Tori glanced out the window at the lake. “We can, if you like, but maybe we should explore a bit first?”

“Sounds good to me, where do you want to start?”

“Let’s go and have a look at the resort. When we came before, Bentley, Willow, and I stayed over at the Lodge at Four Mile Creek. I liked it over there – it’s really nice, but I want to see the resort.” She smiled. “That’s where Bentley and Alyssa were both staying when they met.”

Xander grinned. “And things have worked out pretty well for them. We should definitely go take a look.”

~ ~ ~

Xander parked the truck in the square, and as soon as they reached the restaurant, Tori headed for the ladies’ room.

He made his way to the bar with a smile on his face. She hadn’t even told him what she wanted to drink – she’d just said that she would meet him there. They’d spent so much time on the road together now that they had their own routine. He knew that she would want an apple juice and a menu. He didn’t think that they were here for dinner, but Tori loved to

study the menu wherever they stopped. She wasn't a big eater, she just liked to see what was on offer wherever they were.

“Well, hello, handsome! What can I do for you?”

He grinned at the bartender, who was looking him over and making no secret of the fact that she liked what she saw. She was a good-looking woman, no question about it, but she wasn't his type – and even if she were, he wouldn't be interested. That thought hit him like a gut punch in the best possible way. He'd always been the kind of guy who was interested in the ladies – they tended to like him, and he was happy to oblige. Not anymore, though.

“I'll take a beer, whatever you have on tap, and an apple juice for my lady, she'll be right here.”

The bartender threw her head back and laughed – it was such a raucous laugh that Xander couldn't help joining her.

She shook her head at him with a big smile. “And when she gets here, I'll tell her just what a lucky lady she is.”

Xander wasn't sure what to think about that. Tori had gone from being unsure about him to professing that she understood how much he cared about her. He might not know much about women in terms of relationships, but from what he'd observed over the years, they tended to get territorial.

The bartender shook her head. “Sorry, that must have sounded wrong. I didn't mean that she's lucky to have such a fine ass hottie as yourself. I meant that a lot of guys try to hit on the bartender – they don't immediately make it clear that they're not interested because they have a girlfriend.”

Xander smiled. “Thanks.” He wasn’t sure what else to say.

Tori arrived a few moments later and climbed up onto the bar stool beside him. The bartender came back and set an apple juice in front of her and a beer in front of Xander. He didn’t like the weird look she was giving Tori. Just as he was thinking that it might be best to go and sit at one of the high-top tables rather than here at the bar, Tori smiled.

“You’re Kenzie, aren’t you?”

The bartender grinned. “That’s me, sugar. And you... I couldn’t place you for a minute, but your Ria’s daughter, right?”

“I am. I’m Tori.”

“That’s right. You were here when Russ and Ria got engaged. I met your sister, Willow, a little while back.” She laughed. “And I’m proud to say that I was instrumental in getting your brother, Bentley, together with Alyssa.”

“Of course, Alyssa told me about it! All I can say about that is thank you! I love Alyssa. She’s so good for Bentley – did you know that they got engaged?”

“I did, Ria told me. I’m happy for them – you can just tell that they’re made for each other.”

“Aren’t they?” Tori shot a glance at him. “Sorry, I should introduce you, this is Xander. Xander meet Kenzie.”

Xander nodded and muttered, “Nice to meet you.”

Tori shot him a puzzled look, as if she thought he was being rude.

Kenzie laughed out loud as she reached across the bar to touch Tori's arm. "Don't worry, sweetie. He's just a bit uncomfortable. He thought I was hitting on him while you were in the bathroom. I wasn't."

She raised her left hand and waggled her fingers to show off a wedding ring. "There's only one man in my life, and he's the only one I want. I can't say that he's the only one I have eyes for, though." She looked Xander up and down again. "I like looking, and there's no harm in it."

She turned back to Tori. "I was going to tell you that you've got yourself a good-looking guy there, but more importantly you've got yourself a good guy. When he thought I was hitting on him, he cut me straight off and told me that he was waiting for his girlfriend."

"Aww!" Tori turned to him with a big smile on her face. "Thank you!"

"Thank you? There's nothing to thank me for."

Kenzie laughed. "Oh, he just gets better and better. He's such a good guy and he doesn't even know it. You've got yourself a keeper there, Tori." With that, she moved away down the bar to serve other customers.

Tori rested her hand on his knee. "Oh my gosh, this is so cool!"

"What is?" Xander was feeling a little thrown by the whole exchange.

She giggled. "It's so freaking cool to see you looking unsure of yourself – I'm not sure it's something I've ever seen

before.”

He shifted in his seat. “I’m glad you think it’s cool, I’m not sure that I like it.”

“Aww!” She patted his cheek. “Don’t you worry about it. You’re still the big, tough guy. I love that you’re never out of your depth when it matters. This really is kind of cool, though.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Fair enough. I don’t know what to say, but if you’re happy then I’m happy.”

“Oh my God!” Kenzie had appeared across the bar from them again. “He’s adorable! He’s all, like, golden retriever energy.”

While she and Tori laughed, Xander rolled his eyes. As he’d just told Tori – if she was happy, he was happy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On Saturday morning, Tori sat out on the deck enjoying her coffee in the sun. It was still early, but she was discovering that she enjoyed mornings more than she'd realized. In Nashville, her life dictated that she was a night owl, but since she and Xander had been on the road she'd adapted to going to bed earlier and waking up earlier.

This morning, she'd woken before Xander and, as tempted as she had been to wake him up in a way that she knew would put a smile on his face, she'd slipped out of bed instead and come out here to enjoy the beautiful view of the lake and the mountains.

They'd been here for a couple of days already. She hadn't thought that she would want to stay even this long but as it was, she was in no hurry to leave. And besides, even if they wanted to go, they didn't have a vehicle yet.

Smoke had called Xander last night and apologized that there were no rental cars available at the airport over the weekend. He'd offered to follow them over to Clay's place this morning while they delivered the truck so that he could give them a ride back. That was good of him, but Tori wasn't looking forward to being without transport of their own. It shouldn't be for long – Russ had already offered to give them a ride out to the dealership, so she was hoping that he wouldn't mind taking them out there this afternoon.

She sipped her coffee and smiled at the way the early morning sun sparkled on the ripples of the lake. It really was beautiful here. She could see why her mom had fallen in love with the place. If she were honest, she could see herself falling in love with it, too, but that was... She shook her head. Yes, seeing her mom had been wonderful; they'd grown closer than ever during the last couple of days, but...

She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Could she really see herself living in the same place her mom lived? The same small town! It definitely wasn't such a terrible idea as she'd previously thought but

It wasn't as though she needed to decide right now. She had time. Xander wasn't in any hurry to get back on the road. If anything, he seemed to feel right at home here. She loved seeing the way he got along with her mom at dinner the other night. He'd already bonded with Russ, and that wasn't just because of the whole military brotherhood thing. That was a part of it, but Xander was just that kind of guy – he got along with everyone; everyone liked him. She chuckled when she remembered what Kenzie had said – that he was like a golden retriever – it was true. Some girls might go for bad boys or dark and broody types, but Tori knew herself and she couldn't do better than her sunny, outgoing, confident Xander.

She turned when she heard the door open, and smiled when he came out and greeted her with a sleepy smile. Maybe the golden retriever thing didn't do him justice – he was far too sexy for that. His hair was still sleep tousled. The stubble on his cheeks made her press her thighs together – she knew exactly how it felt when his bristles rubbed against her skin

there. His bare chest was smooth and muscled, and as her gaze traveled lower, she couldn't help but lick her lips at the way his sweatpants hung low on his hips. Even his bare feet were sexy – how could that be?

He padded across the deck toward her with a smile on his face. “Good morning, sprite. Sorry I slept so long. I was going to ask if you want breakfast yet, but the look on your face makes me think that you might want me for breakfast.”

She laughed. “You can read me like a book.”

“You weren't exactly hiding it.”

“Nope. And as much as I'd like to take you straight back to bed, do you think we have time?”

He checked his watch. “There's always time for that, but maybe we should save it for later?”

“That's what I was thinking. Do you want me to get you some coffee?”

He leaned down to kiss her forehead. “That's okay. I came out to see if you want a refill.”

“Thanks, I'd love one. And I'm not even going to insist that I should go and get them because this way I get to watch your ass as you walk back inside.”

He took her mug and then turned around and shook his ass at her, making her laugh.

“I'll be right back.”

She couldn't stop smiling as she watched him go. He turned to look back over his shoulder when he reached the door.

“You’re awesome, sprite. I love you,” he said with a wink before he disappeared inside.

She closed her eyes and hugged herself, reveling in the feeling. This was the best her life had ever been. She was in this beautiful place, with the man she’d always wanted but never believed she’d be with, and as the icing on the cake, her relationship with her mom was the best it had ever been – and *she* was right here in town, too.

The sound of her phone ringing shook her out of her reverie. When she reached for it, she frowned when she saw Clay’s name on the display. She doubted that he would be expecting them this early, but she still managed to feel guilty that she might be late or have done something wrong.

“Good morning, Mr. MacAdam.”

“Good morning, Tori, darlin’. Do me a favor would you – call me Clay?”

“Sorry, yes. We haven’t left yet, but we can get there soon.”

His laugh was a low, deep rumble. There was a reason that women all over the world had been falling in love with his voice for decades.

“Listen, darlin’. That’s what I was calling to say. There’s no big hurry to get the truck over here. I won’t get around to doing anything with it for a couple of weeks. I didn’t realize that you’d need to rent a car after you give me the truck. Hang on to it. You might as well use it until you figure out what you’re going to do next.”

“Oh! Thank you.” Tori had to wonder but wasn’t sure that she should ask how he knew what their plans were.

“Not a problem. It just makes sense. And I should probably explain myself so that you don’t go thinking that your mom’s interfering.”

She pressed her lips together, wondering how he knew that was exactly the conclusion that she’d jumped to.

“I ran into Smoke last night, and he said that he’d see me today since he was coming to pick you guys up after you drop the truck off. There really is no need. You two should figure out what you’re doing and then let me know when’s a good time for you.”

“That’s so kind of you, thank you. It won’t take as long – I think we can get out to the dealerships this afternoon.”

“Well, like I said, take your time. Don’t just buy something this afternoon because you think you need to. In fact, I don’t want the truck back before next weekend – how about that? That’ll give you time to test drive a few different vehicles so that you get what you want.”

“Are you sure?”

He chuckled. “I am, darlin’. But forgive me, I have to go. Give me a call next Friday, how about that?”

“Okay, thanks so much.”

“No problem. Talk to you then. Bye.”

~ ~ ~

Xander was pleased that they'd ended up having the day to themselves. He didn't know Clay MacAdam, but he sounded like a great guy – and his offer to let them keep the truck for a week only confirmed that impression of him.

As it turned out, Russ and Ria wouldn't have been able to take them to look for a new vehicle this afternoon anyway, so everything had worked out for the best. Tori had been a little anxious about it at first, but she had soon brightened up when Xander had suggested that they should make the most of the day and go out exploring the area.

When they'd checked the map, she'd pointed out another small town that was close by – Stanton Falls. It was a little way farther up in the mountains. From what Tori had read to him off her phone, it had a cute, quaint downtown area. Apparently, the whole town went all out for the Christmas season – not that it made much difference to them right now. But the idea had caught Tori's imagination, and so he was happy to drive her up there.

He wasn't too worried about where they went or what they did, as long as they did it together and she was happy and relaxed. She was already more relaxed in Summer Lake than he'd expected her to be. Part of him hoped that she might relax enough to want to stay – he'd taken a liking to the place.

“What do you think? Do you want to stop at Four Mile Creek since we have to go past there?”

Her question brought him back to the moment, and he smiled. He really didn't care. “Do you want to?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t mind. I told you that Bentley, Willow, and I stayed over there. It’s nice. I’d like to show you around. It’s funny, I don’t exactly think of it as *my* place but at the same time, I like the idea of being able to show you somewhere that I know, and you don’t.”

“Then we’ll stop. You said that there’s a lodge and a shopping center, right?”

“Yes, but there’s so much more. It’s like a whole new community. There’s a small subdivision with some big, lovely houses down by the water and more houses scattered over the hillside. The lodge is really nice – it’s more upscale and modern than the resort – and the shopping area, they call it the Plaza, is themed like a Mediterranean village. It has cobblestone walkways that all lead down to a central square – there’s even a café and a clock tower in the square.”

Xander grinned. “It sounds as though you like it over there.”

“I do. I don’t know if you will, though.”

Xander wasn’t sure that he would either. He preferred the down-home feel of Summer Lake itself over *modern and upscale*, but he was happy to check the place out. “Well, let’s go and find out.”

When they got there, he was pleasantly surprised. The place really did have the feel of a Mediterranean village. After they parked the truck, he took Tori’s hand, and they wandered up one of the cobbled walkways. The stores were all high-end boutiques – he didn’t see this as being a place where people actually lived, just where they vacationed.

Tori tugged on his hand. “I can’t believe that I forgot about this place. Come on, let’s go see the wine bar.”

“There’s a wine bar?”

She nodded eagerly. “We went in there one night when we all came to visit. The couple who run the place are really nice.” Her smile faded. “I hope they’re still open. They were struggling. They’ve never run a business before.”

When they got there, he held the door open for her. The place was open, but they only had a handful of patrons. Xander could see why; the place had no character and no atmosphere.

Tori took his hand again and towed him toward the bar. There was a young woman standing behind it, polishing glasses, looking miserable. Xander could see why the wine bar was struggling – the woman’s demeanor seemed to sum up the whole air of the place.

“Hey, Rachel!” Tori exclaimed with a bright smile. “It’s good to see you again. Remember me?”

Rachel looked lost for a moment, but then a smile transformed her features.

“Oh my gosh! Tori DuPont! I didn’t expect to see you again. How are you?”

Tori grinned happily. “I’m just great, thanks.” She turned toward Xander. “And that’s mostly down to this guy. Meet my boyfriend, Xander Jacobs. Xander, this is Rachel; she and her boyfriend, Ian, own and run the wine bar.”

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. At the mention of the name Ian, Rachel's expression turned sour again.

"It's nice to meet you, Xander."

"You too." He'd like to be able to order a drink if only to move them all past the awkward moment, but Rachel didn't seem to have any interest in serving them.

"Oh, sweetie! What's wrong?" Tori asked.

Rachel gave her a sad shrug. "Ian's gone. He couldn't handle it – couldn't handle the stress. You already know that we were struggling when you were last here – things have only gotten worse. I'm going to have to admit defeat soon and close the place down."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Do you really have to close down, though? Couldn't you sell?"

Rachel let out a short, bitter sounding laugh. "There's nothing to sell. Well, there's the inventory but that's about it. We don't own the building – everything in the Plaza is leased. I'll maybe get something for the fixtures and fittings, but there's no actual business to sell. I'm not breaking even anymore – in fact, I haven't the last couple of months."

"I'm so sorry. You're really going to just shut down?"

Rachel nodded. "I don't have any choice."

Tori shook her head sadly. "I honestly thought that you'd be able to turn it around."

“I know you did. And I really appreciated all your advice – you and your sister were so kind and helpful. But things were already bad – maybe someone else could have salvaged the business, but we didn’t know enough in the first place, and I guess we ended up being so busy fighting that we didn’t even try.”

Xander felt bad for the woman, but he couldn’t relate.

“Anyway, sorry. You didn’t come in here to listen to my troubles. You came in for a drink – what can I get you?”

Tori climbed up onto one of the bar stools. “Do you have a bottle of Jacobs Estate X Blend?”

Rachel gave her a wry smile. “I appreciate it, Tori, but you don’t need to go buying one of our most expensive bottles of wine just to help me out.”

“It’s not just to help you out.” She turned and smiled at Xander. “It’s to honor my lovely boyfriend here.”

Rachel gave her a puzzled look, then her eyes grew wide. “Oh my God! You’re *Xander Jacobs*?”

“That’s me,” he told her with a smile. “And if you have it, I’ll buy a case of the stuff from you.”

“No! You don’t need to do that! That’s one of the most expensive wines we sell. You don’t need to buy a whole case just to help me out – especially not when you no doubt have a cellar full of it at home.”

“That’s the thing, you see, we haven’t been home in a long while, and I’d like to have some in stock.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

When Rachel disappeared into the back, Tori turned to him and said, “I feel terrible for her.”

“Yeah, me too. But it happens. Most small businesses don’t make it.”

“I know. I know all the statistics, but it still makes me sad. She’s really nice – and Ian seemed nice too. I guess it was just the pressure that made him crack – not that he was an asshole who abandoned her for the hell of it.”

Xander just nodded. In his mind, leaving your woman to face the repercussions of failure alone made any man an asshole.

Rachel reappeared after a few moments. “Sorry, I should have asked, do you want this case delivered to wherever you’re staying? And do you want me to uncork the first bottle that you asked for – are you here for a drink?”

“How about you give me the case and the bottle, and I’ll go and load them in the truck.” He turned to Tori. “That way you ladies can catch up over a glass of whatever you’d like.”

Tori shot him a grateful smile. “That sounds good to me. Thanks, Xander.”

Xander was glad to get out of there – the whole atmosphere of the place was a downer. He adjusted his grip on the box, grateful that he’d decide to leave the single bottle behind with Tori. The case wasn’t exactly heavy, but it was unwieldy, and

after paying retail price for a case of his namesake wine he really didn't want to drop the damn thing.

He almost did exactly that when he spun around at the sound of someone calling his name.

“Smoke! For fuck’s sake! You startled me.”

Smoke grinned. “What the hell are you doing walking around here carrying a case of wine?”

Xander made a face. “Long story. Tori’s taken pity on the girl who runs the wine bar. Do you know the deal there?”

“Yeah. So do you. It’s the same old story that happens all the time. A young couple had a great idea but didn’t have the business savvy to back it up. The business went to shit, the relationship went to shit, and I’m guessing that if Tori’s taken pity on Rachel, you know the rest yourself.”

“Yeah. It sucks. I feel bad for her.”

Smoke shrugged. “It’s the way it goes, you know that.”

“What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“This is where Laura’s store is, didn’t you know that?”

“Nope. I’ve never been here before, remember? Tori has, but I haven’t.”

“Right. Where is she?”

“Hanging out with Rachel. I said I’d give them a minute and take the case out to the truck.”

Smoke chuckled. “You mean you used the wine as an excuse to get the fuck out of there while they talk.”

Xander chuckled with him. “You make it sound a whole lot worse than it is.”

Smoke grasped his shoulder. “Come with me. I’m on my way to pick up Laura. She’ll be pleased to see you both. Then again, maybe she’ll want to go and hang out with Tori and Rachel. If she does, I’m sure we can find a way to keep ourselves busy until they’re done.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tori gave Xander a puzzled look when they arrived at her mom's place.

"It doesn't look like they're here, does it? I know she's expecting us, though."

"Maybe they had to run out," said Xander. "It's not a big deal. If they're not around, we can stop by on the way back from Smoke and Laura's later."

"I'll go knock and see," said Tori.

When she was halfway up the steps, the front door opened, and Russ appeared with a smile on his face.

"Hey, come on in. Your mom should be back any minute. She went out for breakfast with the girls this morning. She called a little while ago to say that she's on her way."

Tori shook her head in wonder. "Out for breakfast with the girls?"

Russ chuckled. "Yeah. It's a thing around here. Usually, a whole bunch of us get together for breakfast on the weekends, but once a month or so the women leave us guys at home." He grinned at Xander. "You know, so that they can talk about us while we're not there."

Xander laughed, and Tori slapped Russ's arm. "I bet it's more like so they can talk about whatever they want without you there."

Russ shrugged. “Whatever the reason, your mom seems to enjoy it.”

Tori loved hearing that. Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember her mom doing much with her friends before – or even having friends. She was close with Madeleine Hamilton – who was Smoke, Cameron, and Chelsea’s mom, but Tori could only ever remember them doing things together that had something to do with the wine business. Well, they were involved in a lot of the same charities, too, but that wasn’t the same as just getting together to hang out as friends.

Just as Russ started to show them inside, he stopped and jerked his chin toward the end of the driveway where his truck had just appeared.

Tori did a double take, looking first at Russ, then back at the truck.

“She’s...?”

Russ chuckled as he nodded. “She sure is.”

Xander gave them both a puzzled look.

Tori couldn’t wipe the smile off her face as she explained. “The first time we came to visit Mom here, it was so freaking strange to see her sitting in the passenger seat of Russ’s truck. You know what she’s like. Most of the time at home in Napa, she had a driver, and when she drove herself, it was her Lexus. Never in a million years did I think that I would see my mom driving a pickup truck.”

Xander grinned at her. “I know what you mean. But...” He inclined his head toward her mom as she brought the truck to a

stop and climbed out. “But things change, people change – and can you honestly tell me that you’ve ever seen her look this happy before?”

Tori grinned back at him. “I can’t. This is so freaking awesome!”

Her mom came toward them with a puzzled smile on her face. “Sorry I’m a bit late.” Russ held his arm out to her, and Tori loved seeing the way that she went to him and nestled into his side as he pecked her cheek.

“Why do I get the feeling that you were all talking about me – and possibly laughing at me?”

“No! Oh my gosh, no. We weren’t laughing, Mom. We were talking about you, but only because I was fascinated – and thrilled – to see you driving Russ’s truck.”

Tori just couldn’t get over how different her mom seemed as she wagged her eyebrows and said, “I’m having fun. Since I came here, I’ve been trying out all sorts of things – new experiences – and I’ve discovered that there’s so much more to life than I used to believe.” Her expression grew more serious as she continued. “I hope you’ll do the same while you’re here, darling. Up until now you’ve seen the world in a certain way, and you’ve seen your place in it in a certain way, too. At the risk of overstepping, I’d like to suggest that you try something different. Perhaps while you’re here, you could experiment with the thought that life can be whatever you’d like it to be – and you can experience it however you choose.”

Tori met her mom’s gaze and held it.

Her mom's smile faded, and she waved a hand. "As I said, I don't mean to overstep. I simply..."

As her mom's words trailed off, Tori hurried to her and wrapped her in a hug. "You're not, Mom. I think that's wonderful advice."

Xander grinned at them. "So do I. I think it's a great idea. I'm going to give it a try as well."

Tori smiled at him. She had the feeling that he was trying to encourage her and reassure her mom at the same time. She was pretty sure that he already believed that life could be whatever he wanted it to – and that he experienced it exactly as he chose to.

~ ~ ~

As they drove away a little while later, Tori slid across the bench seat and rested her head against Xander's shoulder.

"You okay, sprite?"

"I am. I'm really glad that we stopped to see them."

He shot her a quick wink before turning his attention back to the road. "You mean that we stopped to bring her the wine this morning or that we stopped in Summer Lake to deliver the truck?"

She made a face at him. "I meant this morning, but you're right – I'm glad we decided to come here."

He was tempted to ask if looking at the world in a different way might mean that she would want to stay, but he didn't want to push. With each day that passed, he liked Summer

Lake more and could see himself living here. But he had a feeling that might feel like pressure to Tori if he told her.

He could feel her gaze on him but kept his focus on the road.

When he couldn't take it anymore, he chuckled and asked, "What? What are you looking at me like that for? I can hear the wheels turning in your head."

"Are you glad we came here?"

"I am. For one thing, we wouldn't have had our road trip otherwise. For another, I think it's doing you good to spend this time with your mom. And last but not least, I like this place, it's a great little town."

She was quiet for a long few minutes. Just when he thought that she'd said all she was going to, she sucked in a deep breath then blew it out slowly before asking, "Could you see yourself staying here?"

He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We already talked about this. I can see myself staying anywhere as long as you're there."

"I know, but I mean for you – just for you. Can you see yourself living here?"

"I can't separate the two, sprite. Most important for me is that I want to be wherever you are. So, if you can't see yourself here then I can't see myself here, either."

After another long silence, she asked, "What if I could?"

“Then so could I. But you’re tying yourself up in knots. How about we let it go for now? Let’s go hang out with Smoke and Laura – let’s just enjoy being here for a while, huh? We don’t need to make any decisions yet.”

“Yeah, sorry. It’s just... I didn’t think that I’d even want to consider it. But now... Now it feels like a possibility.”

“Then like we do with all our possibilities, we keep it in mind, and we see how it develops.”

She grinned at him. “How did you get to be so smart?”

He chuckled. “It just comes naturally.”

She laughed with him. “And being modest does, too, apparently!”

~ ~ ~

As they passed the lodge at Four Mile Creek, Tori dragged her eyes away from the lake and turned her attention to the map on her knee.

“I know we drove all the way here from Nashville without GPS, but I feel like we need it now.”

“It’s okay,” said Xander. “Smoke told me how to find their place. Once we’re past the last of the houses down on the waterfront, we need to look for the second driveway on the right.”

“I know, but it’s hard to tell what’s a driveway and what’s just an entrance to a field up here. Like that...” she pointed as they passed an open gate “... Is that the first driveway, or not?”

Xander frowned. "I would say not."

She nodded. "You're probably right."

Xander slowed the truck as they approached another turnoff.

"I guess that's the first driveway," she said.

"Me too. And it's no biggie – if we're wrong, we can always turn around and come back."

After maybe half a mile, Tori was starting to question herself. "Do you think...?"

Xander smiled when they both spotted a gate standing open. "I think it might be. Let's take it and see."

Tori looked around the wooded hillside as the truck followed the driveway up into the hills. "Isn't it beautiful up here?"

"It is." Xander looked in the rearview mirror. "Damn, sprite, look behind us. This must be the right place – Smoke told me that they have one hell of a view from their place."

Tori turned in her seat to look out through the back window. The view took her breath away. The lake shimmered in the sun, and the mountains seemed to huddle around it, keeping it safe.

"Wow! I love it!" She turned back around.

"I don't think this is right," said Xander. "Smoke said that we would come out of the trees and then follow the driveway around to the right."

As he spoke, they reached a T in the driveway, and he brought the truck to a stop. "He didn't say anything about the

driveway splitting.”

“Do you want me to call Laura?” Tori asked.

Xander grinned. “Nah. Let’s see where this goes. Left or right?”

Tori laughed. “What the heck? Left.”

He turned the truck and continued on. They climbed higher, and the trees grew thicker. Just as Tori was thinking that they should probably turn around, they emerged from the trees, and Xander turned and grinned at her.

“I bet the view’s even better from up here.”

“I bet it is. Oh my gosh, Xander, look!” She hadn’t spotted it at first, but there was a house way up in the clearing. As they got closer, she started to wonder if she was imagining things. It looked as though someone had built their idea of a castle. It was a two-story, white stucco building with a three-story turret on one end.

Xander laughed out loud. “Am I seeing things, or have I brought my magical little sprite to a fairytale castle in the woods?”

She laughed with him. “If you’re seeing things, then I am, too.”

Xander’s smile faded. “Let’s just hope that the keeper of the castle doesn’t mind trespassers.”

“What do you mean?”

Xander jerked his chin. “There’s someone out there watching us.”

Tori spotted a man standing in the front yard holding something – it looked like a big square, but beyond that she had no idea what it might be. “Whatever he’s got there, he looks more ready to defend himself than to attack us.”

Xander chuckled. “You’ve got a point. He looks like he’s putting a sign in his yard – which is way better than pointing a shotgun at us – although who will see a sign up here, I have no idea.”

Tori was relieved when the man smiled and waved as they got closer.

“Hi,” the man said when Xander pulled up alongside him and let his window down. “Who told you about the place? You must be keen; I haven’t even listed it yet.”

Xander gave him a puzzled look, but Tori thought she understood what he meant.

“It’s for sale?” she asked.

“It’s not yet, but it will be soon.” The man chuckled and looked down at the sign, which Tori could now see was a for sale sign – she recognized the Summer Lake Realty logo. “Although, I have to tell you, I didn’t expect the sign to do much good up here.”

“Yeah,” said Xander. “It doesn’t seem like the most effective marketing move.”

“Well, if you’re not here to see the house, I’m guessing you’re lost?”

“We seem to be,” said Xander. “We’re looking for Smoke Hamilton’s place.”

“Ah. If you’re coming from Four Mile Creek, you missed it. If you’re coming from North Cove, you turned off too early.”

“Thanks. We’ll head back down.”

Tori was staring out the window, fascinated by the house.

She felt guilty when she heard the man laugh. “It’s an unusual place, isn’t it?” he asked.

“It is,” she said. “I love it.”

Xander swung his head to look at her. “You do?”

She laughed. “Sorry, but yes, I do.”

“You’re welcome to take a look around if you like. And sorry, let me introduce myself. I’m Dallas.” He took a card out of his wallet and handed it to Xander.

Xander looked at the card and then over at Tori. She felt guilty; they were going to be late to Smoke and Laura’s place, and Xander probably thought she was crazy wanting to look around.

“It’s okay...” she began. “I...”

Xander rested his hand on her knee and shot her a quick smile before turning back to Dallas. “That’d be great, thanks. We’d love to take a look.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Tori added quickly. “I can only imagine what the view is like from up there.” She pointed at the turret.

Dallas grinned. “Go ahead and park in front of the garage. You don’t need to imagine; we can go on up and you can see.”

~ ~ ~

Xander couldn't help smiling to himself while Dallas showed them around the house. The inside was nothing like he'd expected from the outside. Although to be fair, he didn't know what he'd expected, just that it wasn't this bright, open modern layout. That ridiculous turret made him think of the place as a castle – but as far as he knew, castles didn't have walls of windows that looked out on spectacular views like this.

After he'd shown them around the main area of the house with its modern bathrooms and high-tech kitchen, Dallas grinned at them. "Isn't it awesome?"

Xander nodded and waited for Tori to speak; he knew exactly what she'd be thinking.

"It is a lovely house," she said. "But..."

Dallas chuckled. "I know. I was wondering how long it'd take you to ask; you want to see the turret, right?"

She nodded eagerly.

He led them back into the kitchen and then into the pantry. Xander watched curiously when he took hold of the shelves that lined the back wall. Then, he pushed, and they slid to the side.

"Oh my gosh!" Tori exclaimed. "It's a secret entrance?! I love it!"

Xander had to laugh as he followed her up the spiral staircase. There was a landing on each of the first two floors. Tori was wide-eyed as she exclaimed over them.

“The first floor one could be a reading nook. For that matter, so could the second – although, with that view, I don’t know how much reading anyone would be able to do.”

“Just wait until you see the third floor,” said Dallas.

When they got up there, Xander was seriously impressed. Not only was there a window looking out in every direction, giving amazing views of the lake and the surrounding mountains but there was a huge circular skylight, too.

Tori grinned at him. “This place is awesome!”

He nodded his agreement. The house was weird and undeniably wonderful. All his breath caught in his chest when it hit him that, if they wanted it to be, this could be their home. He stole a quick glance at Tori. She was totally engrossed in the view. Seeing her so happy only strengthened his hope that she might decide that she wanted to be happy here – in Summer Lake, with him, in this house.

~ ~ ~

“Are you okay?”

Tori jumped when Laura elbowed her. They were standing in Laura’s workshop. Xander and Smoke had turned the TV on because there was some football game on. Tori didn’t know the first thing about football – but she did know that Xander loved it. He always had. Even back when they were growing up in Napa. Everyone said that he could have gone to college on a football scholarship – if he hadn’t joined the Navy.

Apparently, Smoke enjoyed watching it, too. So, she and Laura had come out to the workshop and left them in the

living room – though how they could stare at the TV when that room had such a fantastic view, Tori had no idea.

“Sorry.” She gave Laura a rueful smile. “I was just thinking.”

“About how amazing things are between you and Xander?”

She laughed. “No. Not that they’re not. He’s awesome, Laura.”

“I can see that. And he’s so into you it’s almost cute – but I learned from Smoke that guys like them don’t appreciate being called cute!”

Tori had to laugh. “No. They do not.” She glanced over her shoulder. “He is awesome, and things are amazing but ...”

Laura frowned and stepped closer. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Nothing’s wrong. It’s just ... I don’t know. Never mind.”

“No. Come on. If there’s something wrong, you’ll feel better if you talk about it.”

“I suppose. It’s just ... when we came to the lake, I was determined that I wouldn’t want to stay here – now I think I might.”

“And that’s a problem? Xander doesn’t want to?”

“It’s not that. I think he likes it here.”

“I’m not following. What’s the problem then – I have to tell you that I’d love it if you decided to stay, and I know that Smoke would love to have Xander here too.”

Tori blew out a sigh. “I think I might want to stay, but what if I change my mind?”

“Then you move on and find somewhere else.”

“But ...”

Laura smiled. “You don’t need to decide right this minute – or even this week or this month. You can just take it day by day. Stay for as long as it feels good – then leave when it doesn’t anymore.”

“But if we stay for a while, we’re going to need to find somewhere else to stay. It was good of Cam and Piper to let us use their place, but we can’t stay there indefinitely.”

“So rent somewhere.”

Tori nodded.

Laura cocked her head to the side, and then a slow smile spread across her face. “Oh! I get it. You’ve gone and fallen in love with the Flanagan’s house, haven’t you?”

“I feel so stupid!”

“Why?”

“Because it’s such a weird house. Because I’ve said that I don’t even want to live here. And most of all because it wouldn’t be fair to ask Xander to live in a house like that!”

Laura laughed. “None of that matters. You’re allowed to change your mind and want to stay here. Yes, that house is weird, but it’s kind of cool too, and it’s never unfair to ask a question – Xander’s a big boy, he’ll tell you what he wants. If he hates the idea of that house, he’ll say so.”

“But he keeps saying that all that matters is us being together.”

Laura chuckled. “Then you need to take him at his word. I have to tell you, Tori, from what I’ve seen, that man would be happy to live in an igloo at the North Pole if that’s where you wanted to be. You have to remember that guys don’t necessarily care about the house they live in the same way that we do.”

“But even apart from the house, I have no idea what we could do here.”

Laura shrugged. “You’ll figure something out – and so will Xander. And it’s not as though either of you have a career that’s pulling you elsewhere, is it?”

“No.”

“So, take your time, think about it – talk about it. Take it all day by day.”

She was right. Tori wrapped her arms around her middle. She had some thinking to do.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Xander got back to the house, he showered quickly, then wandered downstairs, wondering why he'd been in such a hurry. Well, he knew why – he wanted to be done before Tori got back, but she would be a while yet.

While he'd been at the gym, she'd gone with her mom to get her hair done. He loved that the two of them were getting along so well. She'd even told him that she'd never in her life set foot inside a salon with her mom before. She hadn't been nervous about it, either. When he dropped her off at Russ and Ria's place, she'd been looking forward to spending the afternoon with her mom.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took it out onto the front deck. As soon as he sat down, he got back to his feet and started to pace. He wasn't the kind who could sit and do nothing. He drank half the bottle before setting it back down on the table. As happy as he was for Tori that she was rebuilding her relationship with her mom, it hit him every now and then that he would never have that chance.

He stared out at the lake with a small smile on his face. He'd loved his mom and dad. His dad was an awesome guy. His mom... Well, his mom had had her flaws, but she'd loved him. He knew that his sister, Hannah, hadn't had it easy with her. But he'd been his mom's favorite.

He pulled himself together. If he wasn't one for doing nothing, he certainly wasn't one to sit around feeling sorry for

himself. Sometimes, he wished that he could talk to his brother and sister about their parents, but he just didn't feel able to. Jacob had taken their deaths hard. He'd thrown himself into running the business – preserving their legacy. Hannah on the other hand, would probably welcome the chance to talk about them, but she tended to get emotional, and Xander wasn't good at dealing with that.

He smiled as he took out his phone. There was one person who he'd always been able to talk to – Slade had always felt like his third sibling. Xander's dad might have thought of Slade's dad as an employee, but Xander had always thought of Slade as a brother.

“Hey, Xander! What's up, bro?”

“Nothing much. Just wanted to check in – see how you're doing.”

“I'm doing great. I just finished work for the day. Just got home and...” The line was muffled for a moment and Xander could hear Willow speaking in the background.

“Sorry, man. I didn't mean to disturb you. I'll let you go. Call me some other time.”

“No way. You're not disturbing me. Like I said, I just got home. I was just saying hello to my lady. Hang on.”

Xander could hear him talking to Willow in the background.

Slade came back on. “She says hi and to tell Tori that she should call her.”

“Say hi back and I'll pass the message on. Seriously though, I'll let you go.”

“No. It’s okay. Don’t go. I want to hear how you’re doing.”

The next thing Xander knew, Willow came on the line.

“Don’t you dare hang up on him, Xander Jacobs. I want to know how you’re both doing, too. If Slade can’t get you to spill, then I’ll have to call Tori and try – and that’ll be tougher. In fact, why don’t I just put you on speaker so that I can be nosy, and you don’t have to feel as though you’re taking Slade’s time away from me.”

Xander had to laugh. “Okay.”

“Sorry about that,” said Slade. “I guess we both just have to do what the boss lady says.”

“Oh, stop it!” Willow said with a laugh. “You two can have your little boy time catch up afterward. I just want to know how everything’s going. How’s Tori doing with Mom?”

“They’re doing great. I’m sure she’ll tell you more about it herself, but I can tell you that the two of them are off getting their hair done together this afternoon.”

“Holy shit!”

Xander and Slade both laughed at that.

“Yeah, Tori said that this is the first time that’s ever happened.”

“I can believe that,” said Willow. “And I would’ve put money on hell freezing over before it did happen.”

Xander smiled. “They’re doing really well. Tori’s happy about it.”

“I bet Mom is, too.”

“She seems to be. She seems pretty happy with life in general these days.”

“I know, isn’t it awesome?” Willow asked.

“It is. I like Russ. He’s a good guy.”

“Not only is he a good guy – he’s a freaking miracle worker.”

That had Xander and Slade laughing again.

“What about you?” Slade asked. “How are you doing? How much longer do you think you’ll be in Summer Lake? And do you have any idea where’s next?”

Xander blew out a sigh.

“Oh shit!” said Willow. “What does that mean, Xander? Have you had enough? Is Tori...”

“No! Tori’s awesome. I don’t even mind admitting to you guys that I’m in love with her. She’s it for me. You asked where’s next; all I can tell you is that it’ll be wherever Tori wants it to be.”

“Happy for you, man,” said Slade.

“Yeah, me too,” said Willow. “Except, what was the big sigh for?”

“Honestly? It was because I’m waiting to see. For me, I’d love to stay right here. I like it. The people are great. I could find work – there’s a security services company right here in town. I really like the gym, and there’s a great group of guys who hang out there.”

“Isn’t Russ great?” Willow asked. “I adore that man. I’m so happy that Mom met him.”

“He is. He’s a good guy.”

“But Tori doesn’t want to stay there?” Slade asked.

“She didn’t. At first, she was adamant that we should just drop the truck and get out of here. But now... Now, she’s more open to the idea, but what could she even do here? I can see all kinds of options for myself – but...”

“But that’s going to be the same anywhere,” said Slade. “She spent all of her working life as a backup singer. Unless you guys go back to Nashville, she’s going to have to reinvent herself. It’s not that she can’t do her thing if you guys stay in Summer Lake – it’s more that she doesn’t know what her thing is anymore.”

“Exactly,” said Xander. “She needs to find something that she wants to do with her life. Summer Lake doesn’t exactly have a wide array of options, does it?”

He knew that what he said was true, but he was still disappointed when Slade and Willow both agreed with him.

“I guess all you can do is play it by ear,” said Slade.

“And what are you doing while you’re there?” Willow asked. “You’re right that there aren’t many career opportunities, and there’s not exactly much else going on either, is there?”

“We’ve been happy just taking it easy. It’s been nice to stay put in one place after our trip. We hung out with your mom and Russ. We went up to have lunch with Smoke and Laura on

Sunday. We've hung out at the resort on this side of the lake, and Tori showed me around Four Mile Creek on the other side of the lake."

"Oh! Wait a minute!" said Willow. "Did she drag you into the wine bar?"

Xander chuckled. "She did. I ended up buying a case of wine."

"Why the hell would you do that?" asked Slade.

Willow laughed. "I bet I know. She had you feeling sorry for the couple who run the place, right?"

"Kind of. They're not a couple anymore. The guy bailed, and the girl, Rachel, is just hanging in while the place goes through its death throes. I did feel sorry for her, but the outcome's inevitable."

"Is she selling or shutting down?" asked Willow.

"From what I could gather, she's looking to liquidate what's left and walk away without too much debt hanging around her neck."

"Is Tori interested?"

Xander frowned. "What do you mean? Yeah, she cares about Rachel."

Willow laughed. "That goes without saying. I mean is she interested in taking the place on."

"Huh?"

"You know that was always her dream when we were kids, right?"

“It was?”

“Yeah. Even when we were small, Tori had no interest whatsoever in the company. Bentley and I both wanted to know everything about the business and how we could be a part of it. Tori didn’t want to be a part of it, but she didn’t want to feel like she was on the outside. She came up with the idea that she could run a wine bar. Then, she wanted me to be her partner. That was our thing for years and years.”

Xander ran his hand over the stubble on his chin – he hadn’t shaved when he showered, because Tori liked his scruff. “Has she ever talked about it recently?”

Willow laughed. “She was full of ideas for Rachel and Ian when we went in there. She was so enthusiastic, I even suggested that she should stay and help them turn the place around. But of course, she had to get back to work – she was still singing with Callie then. And apart from that, there was no way at the time that she would have considered staying in Summer Lake while Mom’s there.”

Xander stared out at the lake. He couldn’t imagine Tori running a wine bar. He shuddered at the thought of the dark and dreary space. But then again, the space was only a reflection of its owner. How would that place be if Tori were in charge?

“What are you thinking, bro?” Slade asked.

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Talk to her,” said Willow. “I might be wrong; she might tell you that she outgrew that and it’s not something that interests

her anymore. But I think that you know Tori as well as I do; she might not have considered it because she doesn't believe it's a possibility."

"Tell me what you're not saying."

Willow blew out a sigh. "She wanted us to run wine bars together because there's so much that she would never feel comfortable doing. She's smarter than most people give her credit for, she could run the business – no problem. But she needs to feel as though she has someone at her back."

Xander smiled. "I've got her back."

"Then you should talk to her. How would you feel about running a wine bar?"

He chuckled. "I'm not big on wine either."

"How about just a bar that also serves wine?" asked Slade.

Xander stared out at the lake. "Thanks, guys. I need to have a think, and Tori and I need to have a chat."

"Keep us posted," said Willow.

"And I'll call you again soon," said Slade.

~ ~ ~

Tori took Xander's hand as they walked up the cobbled walkway toward the wine bar.

"Are you sure that you want to go in here?" she asked. "It's not exactly a great atmosphere. I know you only offered because you know I like Rachel and I'm worried about her."

She couldn't figure out what the expression on his face meant when he stopped and put his hand on her shoulder. "I should have told you before now. I wanted to bring you back here to see how you feel about the place."

She leaned her cheek against his arm. "I don't understand."

"Wasn't it your dream once upon a time – to own a wine bar?"

Her heart started to hammer in her chest. "It was. Once upon a time. For a long time. But that was me and Willow. I couldn't do it by myself. And besides..." she looked around "... This is Summer Lake."

His smile melted her insides – it always did.

"Then forget it," he said. "It's just that I talked to Slade the other day. Willow joined in, and she was talking about you having a dream of running a wine bar." He shrugged and gave her a rueful smile.

She shrugged back, not knowing what to say.

He took her hand again and tugged. "Sorry. This was a dumb idea. Come on, where do you want to go? We can eat at the café before it closes. If you prefer, we can have dinner at the restaurant in the lodge; whatever you like."

Instead of following, she tugged back on his hand, making him stop.

"How would you feel if I did want to run a wine bar?"

She was surprised at the way his lips quirked up into a small smile. "I'd be happy to see you do anything you want to do,

sprite. I just want you to be happy.”

She blew out a sigh. “Okay! I admit it. Running a wine bar is still something...” She met his gaze. “But I can’t.”

He came to her and slid his arms around her waist. She melted against him as she looked up into his eyes.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not practical enough. I can create a place, an atmosphere, that people enjoy. But that’s all about the intangibles. I can create my own little world and invite people to share it. I could probably even do a better job of running a real-world business than Rachel and Ian did – I’m not entirely inept. But I couldn’t do it all on my own.”

She couldn’t figure out what was going on behind those intense gray eyes of his as he studied her.

“What?” she asked when she couldn’t take it any longer.

“Do you think that you could do it with me?”

She just stared at him. So many questions crowded her mind that not a single one of them could make it out of her mouth.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I wasn’t trying to put any pressure on you, sprite. Forget I said anything.”

He tried to step away from her, but she tightened her arms around his waist. “Slow down. Just because I didn’t answer doesn’t mean that I don’t like the idea. I love it, Xander. I really do. You just shocked me into silence. I have so many questions. The first and most important of them is you. Could *you* see yourself doing that? Would you want to? And if you

did, could you see yourself enjoying it? You're no more into wine than I am."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that was the first thing that occurred to me. Since neither of us are big wine people, would it have to be a *wine* bar?"

She stared at him. "What then? Just a *bar* bar?"

He laughed. "Now you sound like a sheep. But yeah, why not? Just a bar. The restaurant in the lodge has a great selection of wines. It's not as though people can't find what they want in that respect. From what everyone's told us, it doesn't sound as though the wine bar concept was a huge hit here from the beginning."

"That's true. In fact, Rachel told me the other day, that she did feel kind of guilty. The wine bar was her idea. Ian wanted it to be just a bar bar. She thinks that they might have done better – that the business might have survived – if she'd listened to him."

"What do you think, then? Should we go in there and see how the place feels? I can tell you that as a customer, it didn't have a great vibe. Do you want to go and see how it feels to you as a prospective owner?"

Her heart thundered in her chest. "You're serious about this?"

"I am. I like the idea. If you do. I will ask you one thing, though. If you don't want to – if you don't like the idea. If you have any doubts at all, please, Tori, will you tell me? Don't go along with it because you think it's something I want."

She met his gaze. She didn't think she'd ever seen him look so earnest. She rolled up onto her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I promise. I do have one condition, though."

"What's that?"

"That *you* promise to do the same with me. I'll bet you've never in your life imagined owning a bar. You're only doing this for me. I want you to think seriously about whether it's something you would enjoy for yourself."

His hand came up to cup the back of her neck, and he claimed her mouth in a slow, sweet kiss. "I promise," he said when he lifted his head.

Tori smiled up at him. "You're not allowed to kiss me like that if we go into business together. I have no idea what we were just talking about."

He chuckled. "You do realize that you just told me how I can get my own way when I want to?"

She reached up to touch his cheek. "I do. And I'm okay with that. I trust you completely."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Xander opened the door to the wine bar and stood back to let Tori go in ahead of him. He hadn't planned to say anything to her until he'd seen the place again. But he was glad that they'd talked about it before they came in. He still wasn't sure if running a wine bar – or just a bar bar – was something that she would enjoy. He wasn't sure if it was something that he would enjoy either, but they'd each promised to be honest about how they felt.

Looking around as he followed Tori to the bar, his reaction surprised him. Instead of seeing the gloomy interior with a few scattered tables of bored-looking customers, he saw something else entirely. In his mind's eye, the scene before him transformed into a bright, buzzing sports bar.

He frowned as he hurried to catch up with Tori. A sports bar? He could see himself feeling at home with that concept, but it was hardly Tori's cup of tea – or glass of wine. He watched Tori greet Rachel before giving her a quick nod.

“Thanks for coming in again,” said Rachel. “What can I get you?”

“I'd like a glass of Jacobs Estate H Blend,” said Tori. She turned to him. “What do you think – will you drink that? Should we have a bottle?”

He shook his head slowly. “Let's get the bottle.” He knew that Tori was more interested in paying for it than that they

should drink the whole thing. “But I’m in the mood for a beer.” He turned to Rachel. “What do you have on tap?”

It didn’t bode well when she turned to look and check.

“I’ll tell you what, give me the pale ale.” He pointed at the taps, pleasantly surprised to see that one of them bore the logo of a local microbrewery. Kenzie had given him the pale ale when they were at the resort – it was good.

Tori gave him a puzzled look while Rachel got their drinks. He just smiled – he’d explain it to her later. When Rachel set the beer in front of him, his questions were already answered. She might be set up to serve beer, but she had no knowledge or understanding. His first sip confirmed that assessment, and he did his best not to make a face.

“So, how are you doing?” Tori asked Rachel.

Rachel shook her head sadly. “I actually feel a bit better – I’ve made my decision.”

“And what have you decided?”

“I’m closing down at the end of the week. I talked to the guy who manages the Plaza. They’re going to let me break the lease.”

“That’s something,” said Tori.

“I suppose. Although, it’s just good business sense on their part. I’m already behind on the rent as well as everything else. The longer I try to stay open, the deeper hole I dig for myself.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m going back to San Francisco just as soon as I can. I really should stay here to see if I can sell off the inventory or any of the fixtures and fittings.” She blew out a sigh. “But I just don’t have the energy or the motivation.”

Tori shot a glance at Xander, and he hoped that she wouldn’t offer to buy everything right there on the spot just to help Rachel out.

“How much are you hoping to get for it all?” he asked.

Rachel shrugged. “At this point, I’ll take whatever someone is willing to give me. The rent on my apartment is month-to-month. I’d rather accept less money on everything I’m trying to sell here than have to pay another month’s rent.”

Xander nodded. It made sense. He almost suggested having a closing down night. She could probably get rid of at least some of her inventory that way, but it was obvious that she was just too beaten-down. She wanted out, and he couldn’t blame her.

“Anyway, that’s enough about me and my misery, how are you guys doing? Are you planning to stick around?”

When Tori met his gaze, he knew exactly what she was thinking. She was tempted to tell Rachel that they were considering staying – and considering buying the wine bar. He shook his head slightly. It wouldn’t be fair on any of them to broach the subject just yet.

“Things are still up in the air,” he said.

Rachel smiled. “That’s smart. You guys have the world at your feet. You should take your time to see what you really

want before you commit to anything.”

Tori surprised him when she said, “You’re right, and we have been taking our time, but we’ve narrowed our options down now.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her, and she gave him a slight nod. It seemed that she had made her decision – now, he had to make his.

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As soon as they stepped back outside, Tori reached for Xander’s hand. “I feel bad for her,” she told him, “but I’m so glad to be out of there.”

He chuckled. “Me too. That place is such a downer.”

Her heart sank. “Do you think so?”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they made their way back down toward the square. “At the moment it is, yes. But don’t look so worried – I don’t mean the place itself. I mean the atmosphere in there. The whole vibe reflects how Rachel’s feeling – and it’s not good.”

“No. It isn’t. But like you said, that’s because of Rachel – it wouldn’t be that way if the place were to have a new beginning.”

“What are you saying? Are you telling me that you want a wine bar?”

She shook her head happily. “No. Not a wine bar.”

He chuckled. “A bar bar?”

She laughed with him. “Not exactly. I was thinking about it while we were talking to her. A wine bar isn’t a great idea. Rachel and Ian already proved that – and I think I only wanted a wine bar so that I could feel like I was part of the family. If we stay here, I’ll feel like part of the family in an even better way – I’ll be close to Mom.”

Xander tightened his arm around her. “And you sound happy about that.”

“I am. I really like the idea. But I’m not enthralled with the idea of just a bar bar. While we were sitting there, I was looking around, wondering if we could maybe make it into a music bar.”

“You’d want to do that? Would you sing yourself?”

“Maybe sometimes, but I was thinking more along the lines of having bands come in – I mean, I have the contacts.”

He smiled. “You definitely have an advantage in that respect.”

“I do, but that still didn’t feel quite right. We could have the occasional band no matter what kind of bar it is, and I don’t think I want it to be a music bar.”

“What then? I can tell that you’re leading me somewhere – what are you thinking?”

She stopped walking and turned to face him, resting her hands on his hips. Her heart was pounding, this felt really important. She liked the idea, but if he hated it...

He leaned down and rested his forehead against hers. She loved the way his eyes shone as he smiled.

“You know you can tell me anything, sprite. Even if you think it’s weird and wonderful, I’m open to it. I might tell you that it’s not for me, but you know I’d never laugh at you.”

“Oh no! I know that. That wasn’t what I was thinking. I just... Oh, what the heck! A sports bar, Xander! What would you think of a sports bar?”

He looked shocked, but she could tell that he liked the idea. “Why a sports bar? What made you think of that?”

“It just hit me. Right now, that place is dark and dreary. It’d feel so much better if it were bright and modern. And when I thought about bright and modern, I could see TV screens. And you know me, I’m not big on watching TV. In fact, the only time I’ve seen a TV lately was when you and Smoke were watching football.

“It all just fell into place in my head. One of the things I was considering was that whatever we do should be different from what’s already here. I think part of the reason that the wine bar didn’t work was because there’s the restaurant in the lodge – it’s too similar. A sports bar wouldn’t exactly be direct competition for the restaurant or for the café – or even for the resort over in town. It would have its own unique appeal.”

Xander rested his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs stroking the side of her neck. “But does it appeal to you – honestly?”

“It does. I wouldn’t have come up with it otherwise. I was even thinking that we could have it in like two sections. We could have one side with all the TV screens and everything where guys can watch the games, and the other side could be

TV free. I mean, think about it – when you and Smoke wanted to watch football, Laura and I took ourselves off somewhere quieter to talk. Mom goes out with her friends so that they can chat away from the guys. We could make sure that we cater to both sides.”

She looked up into his eyes, waiting for him to say no – to tell her why it was a terrible idea. Instead, a big smile spread across his face.

“You really like the idea, don’t you? Just for you.”

“I do. But what do you think, Xander?”

He chuckled. “I love it. I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but I was thinking about a sports bar while we were in there. Although, I was just coming from the guy perspective – it didn’t occur to me that we could also have a sports-free section. That makes all the sense in the world; you’re so smart.”

She made a face at him.

“Seriously, sprite. I mean, sure, in a larger market – in a larger town – it makes sense for sports bars to go all out on appealing to their ideal customers. In a town like Summer Lake, it’s better to have a broader appeal.”

“Yeah but, do you like the idea – for you?”

“I do. I can see myself running a place like that with you.” He smiled. “I can see myself enjoying it.” He took her hand and carried on walking. “Come on, do you want to have dinner at the restaurant in the lodge and we can talk about it?”

“Yes. Mom said that a friend of hers bought the restaurant since I was here last. I can’t wait to see the new menu.”

~ ~ ~

When they got to the restaurant in the lodge, Xander raised his hand in greeting when he saw Dalton standing at the bar.

“Someone you know?” Tori asked.

“Yeah. That’s Dalton, he’s a friend of Russ’s. I met him at the gym the other day.”

“Oh, Mom told me about him. He’s with Taryn – the lady who now owns the restaurant.”

Dalton greeted them with a smile when they reached the bar. “Hey, Xander. I’m glad to see that you’re still here. And you must be Tori; nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“Are you here for a drink or to eat?” Dalton asked. “Taryn will be right out if you want a table.”

“We’re here to eat, but we’ll have a drink with you first if you want one?”

“I’m good, thanks,” said Dalton. “I’ll hang out with you, though.” He gave the bartender a nod, and he came to take their order.

From the look of him, Xander guessed that the bartender might be another former SEAL. He was a big guy, and he obviously kept himself in shape.

Dalton proved him wrong when he introduced him. “This is Damon. If you haven’t already, I’m sure you’ll see him in the

gym. These days, he's a bartender by night and a physical trainer by day. He's one of the guys ...” He shot a smirk at Damon. “He wasn't on the teams, but he was a Marine. Damon, this is Xander Jacobs, and this little lady is Tori DuPont, Ria's daughter.”

Damon grinned at Xander and gave him a chin lift. “Good to meet you.”

Before Xander could answer, a woman came out from the back and joined Damon, greeting them with a big smile. “Xander and Tori! Your mom told me that you guys might come in.” She looked at Tori. “She's so thrilled that you're here. Oh, and I'm Taryn by the way.”

“It's good to be here,” said Tori.

“I know I shouldn't ask, but do you think you might stay?”

Tori looked up at Xander. He could understand why she was hesitant – if they did decide to stay – and it seemed like they had – Tori would no doubt want to tell her mom about it before she told anyone else.

Taryn waved a hand at them. “Sorry. Ignore me. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Sometimes my mouth runs away with me before my brain catches up.”

“Ain't that the truth,” said Dalton with a smirk.

Taryn narrowed her eyes at him. “Watch yourself, mister.”

Dalton laughed. “She loves me, really,” he told them.

“It's true; she does,” said Taryn. “Although what she sees in him, I have no idea. Anyway, you didn't come in here to listen

to us pick at each other. Are you here to eat?”

“We are, but we wanted to have a drink with you guys first.”

Taryn grinned. “In that case, I’m going to tell you something while I’ve got you.”

“What’s that?” Xander asked.

“If you guys are considering sticking around, there’s an opportunity coming up that I think you might be interested in.”

“What opportunity?” Tori asked.

“Have you been to the wine bar?”

Tori shot Xander a quick smile before she said, “We have – that’s where we just came from.”

“Then you’ve already seen that it’s not doing very well. Rachel’s a sweetheart but she has no business trying to run that place. Ian was no better – if anything, he had less of a clue than she does. But that’s beside the point, I’ve been racking my brain trying to think of someone who would be a good fit to take it over. There’s no one here in town, but when your mom said that you were here... Maybe I’m getting my wires crossed, but she said the two of you are looking for a fresh start. I know from what she told me about you that you’re both smart and savvy enough to run your own business... And who better to run a wine bar than a DuPont and a Jacobs?”

When she finished, she folded her arms and tilted her head to the side.

Tori looked at Xander, and they both burst out laughing.

“Okay, what’s the joke?” Taryn asked.

Xander looked at Tori and asked, “What do you think?” He was relieved when she nodded.

“We’ll tell you, as long as you ...” he glanced at Damon, who’d come back to join them after serving customers. “As long as the three of you swear not to say a word until we tell you that you can.”

They all nodded.

If Xander had any doubts about how enthusiastic Tori was, she blew them away when she leaned forward eagerly.

“We want the wine bar. Please don’t say anything because I haven’t had the chance to tell my mom yet. I really wanted to tell her first, but...”

“We won’t say a word, promise,” said Dalton.

Taryn pretended to zip up her lips and then crossed her heart.

Damon nodded. “You have my word.”

“Thanks, guys,” said Tori. “I’m so glad to be able to talk to you about it. Obviously, we haven’t made any real decisions yet, but we think we’re going to do it.”

She looked at Xander and he nodded. He didn’t take over, though. He liked seeing her so eager to talk about it and was keen to hear what she had to say.

She looked at Taryn. “If we do this, we’ll be your neighbors. So, I think it’s only right to pick your brain from the beginning.” Her smile faded. “And to ask if you’d have any objections.”

Taryn frowned. “Objections? Why would I?”

“Because we wouldn’t keep it as a wine bar.”

“You’re thinking of a restaurant?” Taryn asked.

“No. A sports bar! There’s only a tiny food prep area – and I wouldn’t want to run a full-blown restaurant anyway. We’d stick with bar snack type food – it makes sense to feed the customers to keep them around longer, but we’re not talking about anything that would be competition for you.”

Xander hoped that Taryn wouldn’t have a problem with that. She struck him as the type who would be a formidable foe.

She took her time to think it over for a few moments, and he was relieved when she smiled again.

“That makes sense. We can probably complement each other. There’s definitely room for the both of us.”

“Phew! For a minute there I was worried that we were done before we even started,” said Tori.

Taryn reached across the bar and touched her arm. “That right there tells me all I need to know. The fact that you’d talk to me so openly means that we’ll do just fine.” She looked up when a big group came in. “Sorry, but I need to go and take care of them. How about you give me a call after you’ve talked to your mom? It’s probably best that you do that first, anyway.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Dalton, would you give her my number?”

“Sure thing, darlin’.”

Damon produced a notepad and pen, and Dalton scribbled a number on it and gave it to Tori. Then, he took a second page and wrote another number, which he handed to Xander.

“Now you can get ahold of either of us whenever you want.”

“Thanks,” said Xander.

Damon slid another number across the bar to him. “Here’s mine, too. Happy to help if you want me.”

Dalton scowled at him. “*This* is your bar.”

Damon laughed. “I know! I’m not going anywhere. I’m just offering my help if these guys want it while they find their feet.”

“Thanks again,” said Xander.

Dalton jerked his chin toward a couple who were sitting at the other end of the bar. “That’s a guy you might want to talk to. Nate: I don’t know if he’s the one who deals with the leases, but he’s on the management team for the Plaza. I obviously don’t know the details of Rachel’s lease, but I’m guessing that you’ll need to talk to them about that.”

“Thanks,” said Xander. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to approach the guy right now – not while he was out for a drink with his woman.

He watched as Damon went to serve them another drink. Nate looked over and met his gaze with a smile. Xander nodded in return. A moment later, Damon came back and handed him a card.

“Nate said to give him a call when you’re ready.”

Xander grinned. “Thanks guys – for everything. Would you do me a favor, Damon, and put their drinks on my tab?”

Dalton chuckled. “I think you guys are going to fit in around here just fine.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Are you sure you don’t want me to hang around?” Xander asked.

“No. I’m fine – honestly. You go to the gym.” Tori smiled. “I appreciate the offer, and even a week ago I would have wanted you to stay with me while I talked to her. But everything’s different now.”

He held his arm out to her, and she slid across the bench seat toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck as he hugged her to him.

“I’m glad that things have changed so much between you and your mom. I know you’re happy about that, but are you sure that you want everything else to change, too?”

She knew what he meant. “I’ve never been this sure about anything, Xander. I know that when we first arrived here, I couldn’t wait to get back on the road to find our place where we could settle. But now...”

She looked out the truck window. They were parked in Russ’s driveway next to his lovely house with its beautiful backdrop of the lake and mountains.

“... Now I really believe that we’ve found it.” Her smile faded. “Do you? Are *you* sure?”

He rested his forehead against hers and smiled as he looked into her eyes. “I am. I know I’ve kept saying that I’d be happy with anything as long as you’re happy. And that’s the truth. I

think part of that was because I wasn't expecting to find anything for myself... What I mean is having lived the life I have, having my whole career behind me, I guess I was looking at the rest of my life as just kind of... filling time. I didn't want to push my luck. I mean, I got you. I hit the jackpot. You're all I want – it wouldn't seem right to ask for anything more.”

“Aww!”

He chuckled. “I mean it, Tori. But now, all of this has landed in my lap, too. Not only do I get you, but we get to live in this cool little town, surrounded by a bunch of great people, and we get to run our own bar. I'm more than sure. Things are turning out way better than I ever would have expected.”

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Me too.” She glanced up at the house. “I'd better get in there and talk to her. I'm not even worried. I know she'll be thrilled that we want to stay.” She checked her watch. “Do we want to set a time for anything?”

“I don't. I'm good. I'll go to the gym, get my workout, and then come back to collect you. Then, we can drive out to the dealerships and see what kind of car we're going to get. Does that work for you?”

“It does.” Tori couldn't help smiling. “And it makes me happy. Not so long ago I would have wanted you to tell me what time you'd be back, and I would have been counting down the minutes.” She looked up at the house again. “Now, I'm happy to spend as much time with her as we can get.”

“I'm happy for you, sprite.”

She squeezed him as tightly as she could. "I'm sorry."

He gave her a puzzled look.

"I've been such a brat about my mom, haven't I? I was so caught up in my whining about how she doesn't understand me, that I didn't stop to think. She's still here."

Xander nodded. She didn't want to come out and say the words, but she felt bad for him. His parents had been dead for over ten years. She promised herself that in the future, she wouldn't take hers for granted.

He smiled. "It's okay. I know what you mean. But go on, you should get in there and see her, and I should get to the gym. We'll want to leave ourselves plenty of time for car shopping this afternoon."

"I don't mind buying, but I think you should decide." She reached out and patted the dashboard of the truck. "I haven't had a car for years. I've kind of grown attached to this old thing. We should get whatever you want first, and then at some point when we're settled, we can get a second car for me to tootle around in."

"Sounds like a plan to me. And the thought of you tootling around..." He chuckled. "That describes it perfectly. We should take some time figuring out what'll work best for you."

She pressed a kiss to his lips before sliding back across the seat to get out. "I'll see you later, then."

"A couple of hours? Does that sound about right?"

She nodded. "Sounds perfect."

“I love you, sprite.”

She got out of the truck and walked around to the driver’s side. He let the window down, and she leaned in to kiss him. “I love you.”

~ ~ ~

“Hey, it’s good to see you,” said Russ when Xander walked into the gym. “How are things going?” He looked out through the windows. “I see you’re still driving the truck; have you done anything about getting yourselves another ride?”

“We’re going out to look around the dealerships this afternoon.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“No, thanks. Tori’s hanging out with Ria this morning, then we’ll head out there this afternoon. Hopefully we’ll find something we’re happy with and one of us can drive it back while the other drives the truck.”

Russ nodded. “Ria was looking forward to seeing Tori this morning.”

“Tori was looking forward to spending time with her, too.”

“I know I shouldn’t ask, but since the two of them are getting along so well, do you think there’s any chance... Shit. Sorry. Forget I asked.”

Xander chuckled. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you for wanting to know, and I’m happy to be able to tell you that yes, we are planning on staying.”

Russ grinned. “You are? That’s great!” His smile faded. “What are you going to do for work, though? Do you want me to have a word with Dan? I don’t know exactly what it is that those guys do; they don’t talk too much about it. But the company is called Prometheus Security, and you were working security, right?”

“I was, but no thanks.” He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “We’ve already figured out what we’re going to do.”

Russ raised his eyebrows. “The two of you? As in, you’re going to do something together?”

“That’s right. You know the wine bar over at Four Mile Creek?”

Russ frowned. “Don’t tell me that you guys want to take that place over? It’s not exactly a thriving business. I hate to say it, but I thought a wine bar was a bad idea from the beginning.”

“I agree with you. We do want to take it over, but not as a wine bar.”

“What then?”

Xander grinned. “A sports bar.”

“Really? A sports bar?”

“Yep. What do you think?”

Russ’s smile was back. “I think that’s a great idea.” He nodded as he spoke. “I can see that working really well. At least... I can see you enjoying a place like that. What about Tori? What does she think?”

Xander chuckled. “It was her idea. I can see why you’d question it – I did, too, at first. But she’s talking about having music sometimes and dividing the place up so that there’s a sports free section too. She says – and she has a point – that while the guys are watching the games, the women can hang out and chat. Everybody wins.”

Russ chuckled. “That does sound like a win-win. I like it.”

They both looked up when the front door opened. Damon, the bartender from the restaurant at Four Mile Creek, greeted them with a smile.

“Hey, it’s good to see you again,” he told Xander.

“You too. And you work here as well as at the restaurant?”

Damon nodded. “Yeah. I only work with a couple of physical training clients, but I enjoy it.”

Russ grinned. “I’m sure you know the drill,” he told Xander. “This guy could live on his retirement if he chose to, but he likes to keep busy.”

Damon shrugged. “I’d go out of my mind if I didn’t have anything to do. At the same time, I didn’t want to tie myself into a full-time job.”

Xander nodded. “So, you’re a part-time bartender and part-time personal trainer. That makes sense to me.”

“Did you talk to Nate yet?” As soon as the question was out, Damon shot Xander an apologetic look.

“It’s okay, I was just telling Russ about it. Tori’s talking to her mom as we speak.”

“Sorry. I should’ve thought before I opened my mouth.”

“It’s okay. Not a problem.”

Russ was giving Damon a puzzled look. “How do you know?”

Xander chuckled. “We were over at the restaurant last night. We weren’t planning to say anything until we talked to you guys, but Taryn…”

He realized that no further explanation was necessary when Damon and Russ exchanged a look, and both laughed.

“Yeah, Taryn’s like that,” said Russ. “She’s awesome.”

“I’m just glad that she likes the idea of a sports bar – I wasn’t sure if she’d see it as competition.”

“You’d have heard about it if she did,” said Damon. “But back to the original question, have you had the chance to talk to Nate yet?”

“Not yet. Tori wanted to talk to her mom first. She didn’t want to take the risk of her hearing about it from someone else.”

“So, you’re in the clear now,” said Russ.

“I guess so.”

Damon chuckled. “The reason I was asking is that Nate will be here shortly. He usually comes in to work out with me on his lunch hour, but he wanted to come earlier today.”

“Here he is now,” said Russ.

Xander looked out the window and spotted the guy who'd been sitting at the bar last night crossing the road, headed for the gym.

“Hey guys,” Nate said as he walked through the door. Then, he stopped. “What?” He gave them a puzzled smile. “What did I do? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Xander laughed. “Sorry. It’s my fault. I want to talk to you, but I don’t want to interrupt your time with Damon.”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t mind talking while I work out if Damon doesn’t mind. It might help – might distract me from the pain this guy inflicts.”

Damon chuckled. “Quit whining, pussy.”

Nate rolled his eyes at Xander. “The guy’s a hard ass, I tell you.”

Xander shook his head when he offered it and said, “Sorry, I didn’t even introduce myself last night.”

“That’s okay. If you don’t know how things work around here yet, you’ll learn fast. I already know that you’re Xander Jacobs, you know who I am – since these guys filled you in. The only part I haven’t figured out is what you want to talk to me about. I’d love to think that you wanted to take over the lease on the wine bar – that’d makes sense since you’re a wine guy – but I reckon that you’re smarter than that, and I’m not that lucky.”

Xander had to laugh. “You guessed right.”

Nate’s smile faded. “You’re serious?”

“Not in the way you might think. We don’t want to take over the wine bar, just the lease.”

Nate frowned. “What for?”

“A sports bar.”

Nate pursed his lips, and Xander held his breath.

After a long few moments, Nate grinned. “I like it.”

“That’s a relief.”

“It’ll be a relief for me to get a business in there that works. Don’t get me wrong, I feel bad for Rachel, but that wine bar...” Nate shook his head “... It’s the only failing unit in the Plaza. It brings down the whole feel of the place.” He studied Xander closely. “Who do you see as your clientele?”

It wasn’t hard for Xander to guess the question behind the question. “Don’t worry, I’m not thinking rowdy sports bar where I invite all my old military buddies. Tori and I, she’s my... girlfriend.”

He hesitated because he didn’t want to use the word girlfriend. It didn’t seem like a big enough word to describe all that she was to him. His heart felt like it exploded in his chest when he realized that he wanted to be able to call her his wife sooner rather than later.

“We’ll run the place together,” he continued.

“Tori.” Nate glanced at Russ. “Ria’s daughter, right?”

“That’s right. We’ll run the place together. She’s talking about dividing it into two sections – one section with all the

TVs, and the other a quieter space for those who aren't interested in the games to be able to talk."

Damon punched Nate's arm, and Xander was glad that it wasn't him. Damon seemed like a great guy, but he was huge – like maybe six four, and all muscle.

"Come on, you can talk while we work," he told Nate.

Nate rubbed his arm and gave Xander a rueful smile. "Tell me more? Keep my mind off the torture he's about to put me through – please?"

~ ~ ~

Tori looked at her mom when they heard a car door slam outside.

"That must be Xander. I thought he'd take longer than this."

Her mom smiled. "He's probably in a hurry to go car shopping." She chuckled. "And to make sure that you're okay."

Tori tilted her head to the side. "That I'm okay? What do you mean?"

"You know, sweetheart. He left you here all alone with Alexandria the Dragon."

Tori got up from the chair where she'd been sitting and went and plunked herself down on her mom's lap. She wrapped her arms around her neck and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"It's not like that, Mom!"

Her mom just smiled.

“It’s not!” She met her mom’s gaze and held it. “At least, not anymore.” Her heart sank. “Does it still seem that way to you?”

Her mom wrapped her arms around her waist and held her tight. “No, darling, it doesn’t. I’d understand if it did to you, though.”

“It really doesn’t. If I’m honest, I’m surprised at how quickly things have changed for us – I’m surprised, but I couldn’t be happier about it.”

“Nor could I.” Her mom’s eyes shone with tears as she asked, “And you’re sure about this? You truly feel comfortable enough to stay?” She dropped her gaze. “To live here – to live where I do?”

“I’m absolutely sure. I love it.” She grinned. “In fact, I already said to Xander that I love the idea of me being the one who’s closest to you – because I live here.”

Her mom nodded. “That was the only downside to moving here for me – leaving Napa meant leaving Bentley and Willow. I never dreamed...” She met Tori’s gaze and smiled. “It turned out that what I thought was a downside was just one more benefit of moving here. And see, we have more in common than you thought – we both fell in love with the same place.”

Tori nodded happily. “I totally get why you love it here so much. Hopefully, you’ll love it even more when you have a new place to go out.”

Her mom chuckled. “I can assure you that I’ll be doing my best to drum up business for you. But you have to know,

darling, that the reason that I love Summer Lake even more now is because you're here."

They both turned again when the front door opened, and Russ came in, followed by Xander.

Both men smiled when they saw Tori sitting on her mom's lap.

"I take it that you're happy with our news?" Xander asked her mom.

"I'm thrilled. I'm happy for myself that the two of you will be living here, and I have to say that I'm happy for both of you." She met Xander's gaze. "I know that Napa didn't feel like home to you any more than it did to Tori. I hope that we'll all be able to create a sense of home and family here."

Tori got up and went to Xander, slipping her arm around his waist. She was worried – his family could never be what she wished it were. He curled his arm around her waist and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"I know that we will," he told her mom.

Half an hour later, they were on their way out Route 20 toward the dealerships. Xander reached across and took her hand.

"I hope Mom didn't upset you," Tori said.

"Not a bit, sprite. You don't ever need to worry about that. I know that you feel for me about... about my parents' whole deal, but you don't need to worry. I'm not going to say that I'm fine because I'm not. It still hurts. Sometimes, I do feel a little envious." He squeezed her hand. "But I'm a realist. I

know I can't have what I really want – I can't have them back – and I'm grateful for what I do have. You can't feel bad for me that your mom wants to create a sense of family and include me in it – it'd be way worse if she didn't want to include me, look at it that way.”

“I guess.”

“You don't need to guess.” He shot her a quick smile. “That's how I see it, you've got nothing to worry about. And besides, we shouldn't be worrying about anything right now. We have a whole bright future ahead of us. For today, we get to choose our new vehicle, then we can go and talk to Rachel.”

Tori sat up a little straighter at that. “I think she knows what's coming. When I talked to her on the phone earlier, she sounded really hopeful.” She bit down on her bottom lip. “And we're going to be fair with her about the money, right?”

Xander chuckled. “Yes, sprite, we are. We're going to be fair.” He glanced over at her. “More than fair. I want to see her back on her feet as much as you do. But don't go crazy, okay? We'll make her a fair offer – we'll pay her for all the inventory, and for everything that's inside the place. She'll be able to close down and walk away just like she wanted to, and she'll have more money in the bank than she expected.”

“I know. I'll be good. I'll let you do the talking.”

He grinned at her. “You're good with that?”

She nodded. Even when it came to money, she trusted him. She knew that her own tendency was to be overly generous.

Xander was generous, but he was also realistic – much more than she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Thanks again for bringing this thing out here,” said Clay. He slapped his hand on the hood of the truck. “To tell you the truth, I’m not convinced about the whole idea for this video, but Autumn’s dead set on it.”

“I think it’ll be awesome,” said Tori. “Autumn told me all about it when she asked if we’d bring you the truck.”

Clay chuckled. “Oh, I know it’ll all work out – just because I can’t see the vision in the beginning doesn’t mean a thing. You’ve worked with Autumn long enough to know how well her ideas pan out.”

“I have, she’s amazing. I guess I just didn’t realize that even you have to go along with her ideas.”

“I don’t *have* to; I’ve just learned that it works out best when I do.” Clay turned to Xander. “And how do you feel about settling here? Running a bar in a small town is going to be very different from what you’re used to, isn’t it?”

Xander grinned. “It is, and I’m looking forward to it.” He wrapped his arm around Tori’s shoulders. “We’re the ones who should be thanking you for letting us bring the truck. That road trip was good for us on many levels. Being on the road like that gave us the chance to think about where we might like to settle, and coming here gave Tori the chance to spend some time with her mom.”

“I know your mom’s thrilled that you’re going to be living here.” Clay cocked an eyebrow. “I have to say that I’m surprised.”

“I’m surprised myself at the way things have worked out,” said Tori. “Surprised, but grateful.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And do you know when you plan to open your new bar?”

“It’ll be a few weeks yet,” said Xander. “There’s a lot of work to do inside the place.”

Tori nodded. “Have you been in there?”

Clay frowned. “Only once, back when it first opened. It didn’t have a great atmosphere, even then. I could see what they were trying to do – they were trying to make it feel like a winery, but the end result was just kind of dull and drab.”

“That’s how it felt to us,” said Tori. “We’re going with bright and modern.” She looked up at Xander, and he smiled.

“And your mom said that you plan to have live music sometimes – will you sing yourself?” Clay asked.

“Sometimes. Although, to me, it’s more about bringing other people in to play – you know, friends and people I’ve worked with over the years.”

Clay chuckled. “Well, you have the contacts for it – and I hope that you consider me a friend. Anytime you want me, you just let me know, I’ll come and play.”

“Wow! Thanks!”

“In fact, are you doing a grand opening?”

Tori looked up at Xander again, and he nodded. They'd talked about doing a big opening night – although they'd decided that they should have a soft opening first. Then, once they'd ironed out the kinks, they'd invite everyone and make a big deal of it.

“We will,” he told Clay. “We just don't know when yet. First, we need to get all the renovations done. Then, we want to get up and running. We want to have all our systems figured out and be sure that we can handle a big crowd efficiently before we do the grand opening.”

“That's a smart way to do it,” said Clay. “The only reason I asked is that I want to offer myself – if you want me. I owe you guys, and if you want me to play, I'd be happy to.” He gave them a rueful smile. “I've been around long enough that my name seems to be a bit of a draw.”

“Thank you so much!” said Tori.

“Yeah, thanks!” Clay MacAdam claiming that his name was *a bit of a draw* had to be the understatement of the year. Xander grinned at him. “That's good of you. That'll put us on the map.”

Clay shrugged. “It's the least I can do.” He smiled at Tori. “If I can't have you on my label, I'm glad to at least have you as a neighbor – and neighbors help each other out.” He patted the hood of the truck again. “You've helped me out with this, I'm happy to return the favor. Just give me a bit of notice – let me know when you decide the date.”

“We will, and thank you again,” said Tori.

After they'd said their goodbyes, Xander climbed into the driver's seat of the new truck that they'd bought. Tori hauled herself up into the passenger seat and made a face at him as she fastened her seatbelt.

"Don't get me wrong, I like this thing." She patted the dashboard. "But I am going to miss that bench seat."

Xander chuckled. "Me too." He'd enjoyed having her sit right beside him in the old truck, especially since they'd arrived here at the lake. Driving the quiet back roads with his arm around her had made him feel as though they'd stepped back in time somehow.

"Anyway," said Tori. "We're making good progress on our to-do list. Clay has his truck. We have our new truck. Everything's set up with Rachel. We have the meeting with Nate on Monday. What else is there?"

He grinned at her. "Well, there is one thing I was thinking about."

"What's that?" she asked him as they headed away from Clay's place.

Xander didn't say anything as he drove the short distance into town and parked in the square at the resort.

When he cut the engine, she gave him a puzzled look. "What? Are you going to tell me?"

"Want to do some window shopping?" he asked.

"Sure. We can. You know I enjoy it. But will you? And is it the best use of our time?"

He smiled. "I think so." He looked at the truck and took her hand as they headed toward Main Street.

"Come on, tell me!"

He shook his head. "Let's walk up and down Main Street. I have an idea, and if you feel the way that I think you do, you'll know what I'm talking about before we get back here."

"Okay. I have no idea what you mean, but I trust you."

That was all he needed. As long as she trusted him, he was happy. He had a feeling that as soon as they walked past the storefront he was thinking of, she'd know exactly what he had in mind. He didn't want to bring it up though; he wanted to see if she would.

They walked slowly along the sidewalk, with Tori peeking in the windows, pointing out trinkets that Xander never would have noticed.

She gave him a puzzled look as they passed the bakery. "Were you thinking that I might want cookies? You know I'll never say no to cookies."

He chuckled and held the door open for her. "It's not what I was thinking, but you know I won't turn cookies down either."

As they made their way back outside with a dozen assorted cookies in a bag, she looked up at him again.

"I'm glad we got them, but if the cookies aren't it, then what?"

"Let's keep walking."

She peered in through the windows of the gym as they passed. “I know we’re not here to see Russ – he told us that he doesn’t work weekends.”

“Nope. I wasn’t thinking of coming to see him.” They walked a little farther until there were no more stores. Then, they crossed the road and started back toward the resort.

Just as he’d expected, Tori stopped outside the realtor’s office.

“Oh, look! There’s the listing for the Flanagan place.”

Xander didn’t say anything, he just waited.

“Who would ever have thought that there’s a house with a turret up in those hills?”

He smiled. “Not me.”

“Oh wow, Xander! Look at the price!”

He did his best not to laugh; he already knew the asking price.

“I know Mom said that property is way cheaper here, but I can’t believe...” Her words trailed off and she looked up at him. “Oh you!” She slapped his arm.

“What?” he asked, feigning innocence.

Her smile faded. “Oh. I thought. I mean ...”

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down into her eyes. “You thought right, sprite. This is what I wanted you to see.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously? You think...?”

He nodded. “We can’t stay at Cameron and Piper’s place forever. If we are opening a business here, we need a home here, too, don’t you think?”

She nodded eagerly, looking at the photo in the window, then back at him. “But that place? Can you really see yourself...”

“How about we ask if we can go and see it? I know we looked around once, but that was out of curiosity. If we’re really going to consider buying it, we need to see it again.”

Tori bounced up and down on her toes. “Yes! Let’s go and see it.”

As he held the door open for her to go in ahead of him, she looked up at him. “But seriously, Xander. If you don’t like it, if you wouldn’t feel comfortable there, you have to say so, okay?”

“I promise I will. You know I want to see you happy, but I need to be comfortable in our home.”

The way she smiled made him think that he’d be comfortable anywhere she wanted to be.

“Our home,” she breathed. “I love the sound of that. It’s my turn to say that I’ll be happy as long as you’re happy – and I mean that.”

~ ~ ~

The next morning, Tori smiled when she opened her eyes. They might not have started out as snuggly sleepers, but that seemed to have changed. For the last few mornings, she’d woken up lying on her side, with Xander’s arm around her

waist. She loved it! She loved the feel of his bare chest against her back, and the feel of his... Oh! He was awake – or at least, one part of him was.

She pressed her ass back against him and smiled when his arm tightened around her. Shivers chased each other down her spine when he spoke, and his warm breath fanned the back of her neck.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

She turned over and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Good morning, handsome.”

He really was the most handsome guy she’d ever known. Even half awake, with messy hair and sleepy eyes, he was sexy-as-sin.

He drew her closer until she was pressed up against his chest, and his hard length twitched against her stomach. She brought her hand up to tangle her fingers in his hair, loving the way he shivered – she loved knowing that she affected him just as much as he affected her.

One hand came down to close around her ass. “We can make it a great morning if you want.”

“I want.” She put a hand to his shoulder, and he rolled onto his back. “I want you, Xander,” she told him as she crawled up over him.

His hands gripped her hips as she straddled him. “You’ve got me. What are you going to do with me?”

She sat up and reached down between them, curling her fingers around him. “You really don’t know?”

He closed his eyes and a smile spread across his face as she stroked herself with him. “I could guess, but I think you should show me.”

“Be happy to.”

She continued to tease them both, dipping him inside just a little way before lifting herself off him again. She knew that he was about to take over when his fingers dug into her hips.

“Take me, Tori.”

When he opened his eyes, she met his gaze and shook her head. “Not like this.” He was about to pull her down onto him, and when he did, she’d be lost – not that she was against that, but she wanted ...

He reached up to touch her breasts, but she dodged his fingers and climbed off him.

“Where are you going, sprite?”

She turned around and straddled him again, this time facing his feet. “Nowhere,” She smiled back at him over her shoulder as she took him in her hand again and stroked herself with the tip of him.

“Take me, Tori.”

She guided him to her entrance and then lowered herself onto him, cupping his balls in her hand.

“Fuck!” he breathed.

She couldn’t hold in a giggle. “I plan to,” she said as she began to ride him hard. She wasn’t going to last long. At this angle he hit her just right with every thrust of his hips.

“Tori!” His fingers dug into her hips as he moved her faster and faster.

Her orgasm hit hard, and she ground down on him. She could feel herself pulsating around him as he held deep.

As she came back down, he sat up. Biting on her neck, he cupped her breasts and teased her nipples, taking her straight back to the edge – and over it again, as fresh waves of pleasure swept through her.

“Xander!”

“More, give me more.”

She leaned forward, feeling the loss of him as she tilted her ass up in the air. “Your turn to do the giving.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. He was up on his knees, holding her hips again as he positioned himself behind her.

“You good?”

She pressed her cheek into the mattress as she turned to look up over her shoulder at him. “I will be when you stop talking and ... oh!”

He winked at her as he did what she didn’t get the chance to ask. He drove hard and held deep.

“Oh god, Xander! Yes!”

He ran his hand up her back as he gave her his all. She loved this, loved knowing that as considerate a lover as he might be, he could still get lost in her. Still take what he needed from her.

“Hold on, sprite.”

She gripped two fistfuls of duvet as he pulled back and slammed hard over and over. He reached one hand around and the moment he touched her clit, she let go. Wave after wave of pleasure zinged through her veins, making her gasp and clutch harder at the duvet.

She felt him tense, and then he found his release deep inside her, carrying her higher and higher as their bodies melded into one.

When she finally slumped down, he rolled to the side and pulled her into his arms.

“Fuck, Tori!”

She giggled. “You just did.”

He laughed. “I always knew you were special, but I had no idea just how amazing you really are. I love you.”

She nuzzled her face into his neck. “I love you, too.”

He tightened his arms around her. “Enough to marry me?”

Her heart thudded to a halt.

“Sprite?” he asked after a few moments of silence.

She nodded into his neck, but he caught hold of her chin and made her look up at him. “Are you sure? What’s with the hiding?”

She hated the concern in his eyes. “Of course, I’m sure. There’s nothing I want more in the world.”

“But ...?”

She shrugged.

“Come on. You have to tell me. I might do well most of the time, but I’m still a guy. I don’t immediately and automatically understand everything that you’re thinking.”

She smiled. “No, and it’s unfair of me to expect you to.”

“So?”

She held his gaze for a moment. Of course she wanted to marry him – the sooner the better, as far as she was concerned. But she wanted a proposal. Maybe she was being silly – being a brat and wanting it *all*. She had the man of her dreams. They were opening a business together. They were going to buy a house together. But she wanted him to propose – and if she told him that, it wouldn’t be the same. It would be something that he did to make her happy – not because he wanted to.

She smiled when it hit her. “You know how you wanted to see if I would stop and look at the house in the realtor’s window?”

He nodded.

“Well, this is kind of like that. There’s something that I hope you want – I think you want it – but I don’t want to influence you by telling you what it is.”

He smiled and held her closer. “So, you’re going to let me figure it out for myself?”

“If that’s okay?”

“Of course it’s okay.” She didn’t miss the little frown that crossed his handsome features. “I just don’t want to let you down. If there’s something you want, I want you to tell me.”

She gave him a wry smile. “Ditto. I want you to want it for yourself.”

He pecked her lips. “Okay.”

She hoped that she wasn’t shooting herself in the foot by not just coming out and telling him.

“Anyway, now that we’ve started the day off with a bang, what do you want to do?”

He laughed, and she was glad to see him relax. “Well, since we’re meeting with Nate tomorrow, and I have a feeling that things are going to get crazy busy after that, how about we do something fun?”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Again?”

“You, my little sprite, are insatiable.”

She nodded happily. “I am when it comes to you.”

“I was thinking we could rent a boat from the resort and go over to the other side of the lake – see if we can see the house from the water.”

“Oh! Yes, let’s do that. I love that idea. You must be able to see it because you can see the lake from the house.”

He slapped her ass and pressed another kiss to her lips.
“Okay then. Let’s get up and get going.”

She rolled out of bed and offered him her hand with a smile.
“Shower first?”

He chuckled as he looked down at himself. “Yeah, I’m up for that, apparently.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

By Friday morning, Xander was glad to get to the gym. He hadn't made it in here all week – things had been hectic. Rachel had been happy to walk away from the wine bar. Nate had moved quickly and presented them with a lease that seemed more than fair to Xander. They'd signed it, and Nate had recommended a contractor who would be able to do the interior work in the bar.

Xander was surprised – very pleasantly so – that they'd been available and had already started work. What he had assumed would be a lengthy process now looked as though it would take a month at the most.

Tori had dropped him off at the gym and she was meeting with one of her mom's friends who was an interior designer. She'd asked if he wanted to sit in on the meeting, but he was happy to let her do her own thing.

When he came out of the locker room, he was surprised to see Ria on one of the treadmills. It made him smile that in the short time they'd been here, he'd come to think of her as Ria rather than Alexandria, just as everyone else did these days.

She smiled when she spotted him and slowed the machine before getting off and coming over to him.

“Hello. I'm surprised to see you in here. From what Tori tells me, you've both been very busy.”

“We have, and we still are. She’s meeting with the designer lady this morning.”

Ria smiled. “Oh, that’s right. Evie’s wonderful. And in case you’re worried, I don’t think you need to be.”

Xander cocked an eyebrow, not understanding.

“When I told Russ that Evie had volunteered her services to help with interior design, let’s just say he was ... Skeptical. He seemed to think that she might want to put up flowery curtains and lampshades with tassels.”

Xander had to laugh. “I’m not worried. Even if she wanted to do something like that, we both know that Tori wouldn’t go for it.”

Ria laughed with him. “We do. But Evie has experience in the commercial sector. Her husband owned a chain of gyms in the Chicago area, and she designed those spaces for him. And Taryn, who owns the restaurant over at Four Mile Creek, is her best friend. She designed Taryn’s old restaurant in Chicago, too.”

“That’s good to know,” said Xander. “I wasn’t worried; I trust Tori. But I like that she has someone with experience to guide her.”

Ria studied him for a moment.

He held her gaze; he knew that she intimidated a lot of people, but she’d never had that effect on him. After a few moments, he smiled and asked, “What is it? You’re making me feel like a bug under a microscope.”

She laughed and touched his arm. “Only you, Xander! You’re the only one who would ever talk to me like that.”

He shrugged. “I guess I just never understood why everyone else was afraid of you. Although, I also know that you go easy on me. I’ve always been your favorite, haven’t I?” he asked with a wink. “Go on, you can admit it.”

“It’s no big admission. I think it’s always been obvious. And part of the reason for that is precisely because you’ve never been afraid of me. And as for what I was thinking – I was wondering why you’re letting Tori take on the design aspect alone.”

She wasn’t criticizing, and he knew it. “It was something that she wanted to do. Obviously, it’s something that’s more important to her than it is to me. Of course, I care how the place will look, but only insofar as it contributes to the atmosphere. We’re of the same mind about how we want it to look – we spent hours looking online and got a pretty clear picture of what we want.”

Ria nodded. “I’m glad that the two of you are finding a balance with this project. Do you think that’s something you’ll be able to maintain once you open the doors?”

“I do. I’m sure you’ve seen for yourself how enthusiastic she is. She’s not just doing this for me.”

“Oh, no, no. I didn’t think for one moment that was the case. You know her better than I do. However, in my mind, there are still some concerns about my airy-fairy little pixie having to deal with the public on a daily basis – and not just

the general public, but the male of the species in an environment full of alcohol and sports fueled testosterone.”

“Wow! I didn’t realize you saw it that way.”

She let out a short laugh. “I don’t. Not really. Only in my moments of worry. And as I said, you know Tori better than I do. You also know more about the environment that you’ll both be working in. One thing I do know is how protective you are; there’s no way you’d put her in a situation that she couldn’t handle. That’s why I asked if you think the two of you will be able to maintain a balance once you open the doors.”

“I do. For one thing, this is Summer Lake; we wouldn’t be opening a sports bar if we weren’t in a small town like this. Yes, there are tourists, but the kind of people who come to the lake aren’t generally troublemakers.”

“True,” said Ria.

“We’ve talked about it, and we’ve decided that we want to work together. We’re fortunate in that we can afford to invest in the business. We can hire a staff. It’s not as though we’re going to be stretched thin and working opposite shifts. I wouldn’t do this if that were the case. I’m not saying that Tori couldn’t do it by herself, I’m saying that I wouldn’t want her to.”

“Okay.” Ria still looked as though she had questions. “When she was small, she wanted to run a wine bar.”

“It was her idea not to keep it as a wine bar.”

Ria smiled. “I know. That wasn’t where I was going. What I was going to say is that she wanted to do it, but she only wanted to do it with her sister. I understood that. You know how different they are.”

“I do. And I hope you understand that I can back her up in the same way that Willow would have.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You can do so much more than that. You already do. Since the two of you have been together, she’s come into her own. It’s not that you do things *for* her, it’s not that she needs you to. It’s just...” She smiled. “I think I finally understand it. She never felt as though she belonged. Now, with you, she does. And now that she’s found her place in the world, she’s starting to blossom.”

Xander couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. “That’s pretty much how she described it herself. And I hope you know that I feel the same way. Although we may seem like opposites, we have more in common than you might think. I never felt as though I belonged in the same way that the others did in Napa. Jacob was always the one who was going to manage the estate.” He gave Ria a rueful smile. “I guess it’s second son syndrome, but I felt like I had to go out and find my place in the world. I knew I’d found my place with Tori, I’m just glad that we found such a great location here – where you are.”

He looked down when she squeezed his arm. “I am, too, Xander. More than you can imagine.”

~ ~ ~

Tori couldn’t wait to get back over to the other side of the lake. Xander had called a little while ago to let her know that

he was done at the gym, and he would meet her in the restaurant at the resort. She'd had a great morning with Evie – Evie was awesome! She'd come up with some great ideas for the bar, and Tori couldn't wait to show Xander the design book she'd put together for them online.

She climbed into the truck and threw her purse onto the passenger seat. She was getting used to driving this thing, but she did miss that little old truck.

Just as she was about to pull out, she jumped in her seat when her phone rang. Xander had paired it so that she could talk in the car. She frowned. As long as she could remember how to do it.

She stared at the steering wheel until she spotted the right button and pressed it. Her sister's voice rang out at the same time that Tori saw her name on the screen.

“Hey, Sis! How's it going?” Willow asked.

“Everything's wonderful! How about you? How are things there?”

Willow laughed. “Everything's great. It's business as usual. Bentley and I are kicking ass and taking names at work – taking the company from strength to strength. Slade and I are doing great. If I haven't told you lately, I love that man!”

Tori laughed. “You haven't told me, but you don't need to. I know. I know you always have.”

“That's right. But come on, tell me about you and what's going on there. I just gave you the short version of

everything's wonderful here so that you can tell me all your news.”

“Everything’s great here, too. It’s all happening so fast, Willow. It’s amazing. The renovations are going full steam ahead. I met with the designer this morning, she’s amazing – the place is going to look perfect.”

“That’s awesome. I’m happy for you, Sis.”

“But?”

Willow blew out a sigh. “Am I that obvious?”

“No, but you have to remember that I know you well. And I’m kind of sensitive. You know what I mean, sensitive to your moods.”

Willow laughed. “I’m not in a mood. You make me sound awful.”

Tori laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it!”

“Yeah, I do. I was just trying to deflect while I figure out what to say.”

“Uh-oh, that sounds ominous. I have a better idea; why don’t you just come out and say it?”

“Okay, I will. Why a sports bar? Is that what Xander wants? Are you just going along with it?”

Tori laughed. “Relax. I know I’m not as strong-willed as you are, but I wouldn’t just go along with something that I didn’t want – not even for him.”

“Good. I wasn’t trying to make out that you’re weak-willed or anything.”

“I know. But have a little faith, would you?”

“I do! I have faith in you, and I also have faith in Xander. But I just couldn’t help wondering. When we were kids, we used to talk about a wine bar – you and me, remember?”

“Of course I do. How could I forget?”

“Wait a minute,” said Willow. “Don’t tell me that the wine bar thing was you going along with what *I* wanted?”

Tori laughed. “No! It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t about what I thought you wanted. It was what I thought *I* wanted. I thought a wine bar was a way that I could be involved. I had no interest in the business or the winery; I was more interested in bringing people together – and a wine bar seemed like a way to do that without breaking away from the family completely.”

“Right. I can see that. At least, I can see why a wine bar. Do you honestly mean to tell me that bringing people together motivates you? It’s something that you enjoy?”

Tori laughed. “It is. I know it might not seem that way. But that’s only because I don’t need to be directly involved.”

“Nope, you lost me,” said Willow. “You’re going to have to spell it out for me because I’m not understanding this.”

“That’s why the singing was important to me. It wasn’t that I wanted to be the center of attention. I wouldn’t have enjoyed that. But singing backup, I got to have the best of all worlds. I was part of the show – part of what people came together for. And no one was particularly interested in me. They weren’t watching me, but I got to see them – I got to see them enjoy themselves and know that I was part of creating that.”

“Damn! I had no idea.”

Tori chuckled. “That’s okay. I’m not sure that I understood it myself for the longest time. It’s only since Callie moved to Montana and I’ve had to think about what I want that I’ve had to examine what I enjoy. And hopefully, now that you know that, you can understand why a sports bar.”

“Enlighten me. Because that has me baffled. The only thing I could come up with was that it’s for Xander.”

“No. He’d do anything that I wanted to.” She couldn’t help smiling as she said that. “If I wanted to open a tea room, he’d go along with it.”

Willow laughed out loud. “True. But go on, I’m still not convinced – I don’t get it.”

“Okay, I admit that it’s not something that had ever occurred to me before I moved here. But it wasn’t Xander who put the idea in my head. Strange as it may seem, it was actually Mom. Well, Mom and Smoke and Laura.”

“Explain.”

“I will but let me get on the road first. We just bought this big new truck, and I had to figure out how to answer the phone. I’m supposed to be meeting Xander for lunch on the other side of the lake.”

“Sure. Do you want to call me back?”

She laughed. “No. Stay with me. Calling you back would defeat the whole purpose. I’d have to stop again to figure out how to do it.”

Willow laughed. “Okay, I’ll just wait. Talk to me again when you’re comfortable.”

Tori backed out of the parking spot and out onto East Shore Drive before she spoke again.

“Hi. Are you still there?”

“I am. And you were about to tell me how on earth Mom, Smoke, and Laura inspired you to want a sports bar.”

“Oh yeah, right. Well, there was one morning when we first arrived, we went over to Russ’s place to see them, and Mom wasn’t there. She’d gone out for breakfast with the girls. And just as an aside, I have to tell you, Willow, she was driving his truck – it was awesome!”

Willow laughed. “I know, right? She drove it last time we were there, too. Isn’t it great? It’s like we stepped into this parallel universe – one where Mom drives a truck and laughs a lot.”

Tori laughed with her. “I absolutely love it. But anyway, I guess my little brain stored away the fact that she likes to go out with the girls sometimes – and they all leave the guys at home. Then, we were over at Smoke and Laura’s, and there was a football game on TV. Of course, Xander and Smoke wanted to watch it, so Laura and I went out to her workshop to hang out there. They wanted to watch the game without interruption, and we wanted to be able to catch up.

“I knew that if we took it over, we couldn’t keep the place as a wine bar – nor did I want to – and I guess all those little

snippets of information had just rolled around in my brain until they combined together and popped out as a sports bar.”

“I love it!” said Willow. “Now that you’ve explained it like that, it makes perfect sense.”

“I think so.”

“And how long do you think it will be before you open the doors?”

“Maybe a month. Everything seems to be coming together way faster than we expected. I thought it would take months and months, but the crew has already started work on the renovations.”

“I’m excited for you, Sis.”

“Thanks, and you’d better be here for our grand opening.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Neither would Slade – he and Xander are just as close as you and I are.”

“I know, I love that. When we were kids, I wouldn’t have believed that the two of us would end up with the two of them. It’s like it’s too good to be true.”

“It’s freaking awesome, that’s what it is. I love that even though you guys are going to be living there in Summer Lake, we’re all going to be closer than we’ve been before. Shit, sorry. I have another call; I have to go. Let’s talk again soon.”

“Give me a call anytime. I don’t like to call you because I know you’re always so busy.”

“That’s a load of crap, and I wish you knew it. You need to stop talking like that. That’s you putting yourself on the

outside like you used to. I want to talk to you. Yeah, I'm busy, but whenever you call, I'll make time for you, okay?"

Tori smiled. "Okay. I'll call you soon, then. Love you."

"Love you, too."

When she reached the resort, she was glad that the restaurant seemed to be quiet – there were plenty of parking spaces in the square, and she was glad that she didn't have to try to squeeze the big truck into a tight spot.

Xander was waiting for her at the bar and greeted her with a smile. He got down from his stool and kissed her cheek when she reached him.

"Aww, you guys are just the cutest!"

She laughed when Kenzie winked at her from behind the bar. "Hi, how are you?"

Kenzie nodded. "Doing great, thanks. I've been looking forward to seeing you. I was just telling your man here that I want a word with you."

"Why's that?" Tori instinctively moved a little closer to Xander.

Kenzie laughed out loud. "Don't look so worried, sweetie. I heard that you guys are taking over the wine bar – turning it into a sports bar."

Tori's heart raced; she hoped that Kenzie wasn't going to be mad at them – surely she wouldn't see them as competition for this place?

Kenzie shook her head. “I reckon I might be able to help you out.”

“You want a job?” The question popped out before Tori could stop herself.

“No. I’m more than happy right here. What I want to do – if you want me to – is to show you the ropes.”

Tori gave her a puzzled look.

“Have you ever worked behind a bar before?”

“Oh, yes. I did, for a while in college.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

Tori knew what she was getting at. She wasn’t the most assertive person in the world – and if Kenzie wanted to give her some tips, she’d love to hear them.

“I did, but I know I have a lot to learn. If you are inviting me to study at The Kenzie School of Bartending, then I’m all in.”

Kenzie laughed. “I wouldn’t have put it that way, but yeah. I reckon I can give you a few pointers if you want them.” She looked more serious as she added, “Only if you want my help.”

“I would absolutely love your help, thank you. I’m not worried – I know I can handle it – but I believe that I’ll be much better at it and enjoy it more after I learn from you.”

“Awesome. Before you leave, let’s set up a time when we can get together.”

After she'd fixed their drinks and moved away to serve other customers, Tori looked up at Xander.

“Are you okay with that?” he asked.

She nodded happily. “I am. It's so kind of her to offer – I'm really not worried, but hell, who wouldn't want bartending lessons from Kenzie?”

Xander laughed. “That's what I thought. I'm tempted to ask if I can join the class, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Xander stood in the middle of the bar and looked around in wonder. The crew were making great progress. When they'd started demo, he'd been concerned that it would take months rather than weeks before the renovations were complete. Now, he could totally see them coming in ahead of schedule.

He'd come in this morning with the intention of offering to help, but it was obvious that he would be more of a hindrance. Logan's guys had worked together for years, apparently, and it showed. That level of teamwork made him think of the men he'd served with. He knew that Kolby was now settled happily back home in Montana with Callie, but he should give the others a call – see how they were doing.

“Anything you need, boss?” Logan asked.

Xander gave him a rueful smile. “Not a damn thing. I was planning to ask you if there's anything that you need from me – thinking I might be able to help.” He laughed at the look on Logan's face. “Don't worry, I've figured it out for myself that you don't just not need me, but you don't want me. It's best for everyone if I get out of the way, right?”

Logan grinned. “I wouldn't have put it exactly like that.”

“That's okay. You don't need to. I get it. I can see that I'd only be in the way if I tried to help. Is there anything else you need from me – any questions?”

Logan shook his head. “We’re all good for now. That’s why the original questionnaire I had you fill out was so detailed. Of course, you can change your mind about anything at any point, but in doing this for as long as I have, I’ve learned that it’s best to make sure that I understand your vision as well as your requirements before we even start.”

“Nate was right when he told me that you were the guy for the job.”

“I worked for him for a few years. I still do, but they’ve slowed their schedule on new builds in the development. The housing market has been quieter for a while, you know?”

Xander nodded.

“Hey, have you guys thought about where you’re going to live?” Logan grinned. “Any chance you’ll be looking for a custom build?”

Xander laughed. “Sorry. But no. Tori’s seen the place she has her heart set on.”

“Oh yeah, where’s that?”

“It’s just up the road from here, up in the hills on the way to North Cove.”

Logan frowned. “Do you mean Smoke and Laura’s place?”

“No. Just past them.”

“Oh, the Flanagan house?”

Xander nodded.

Logan laughed. “Okay. I wouldn’t have thought that place would ever sell, but I can see why Tori would like it.” He

looked as though he was about to say more but he didn't.

Xander gave him a wry smile. "The rest of the house is great. Have you been inside? It's nothing like you'd expect."

"I haven't, and I don't mind telling you that I'm curious as hell to see it."

"Well, it looks like we're moving ahead on buying it. Once we're settled in, and once this place is finished, you and your fiancée should come over – Roxy, isn't it?"

"Thanks. I'll look forward to it. And I know Roxy would love to see the place, too. In fact, she's been asking me about getting you guys to come out with us all. Would you be interested?"

"Thanks. We would." He liked the idea of getting to know more people in town. Of course, they knew Russ and Ria and the older guys at the gym, and Smoke and Laura, but he knew that there was a whole gang of couples their age who hung out.

"Great. I'll let you know the next time we all plan to get together."

"Thanks." Xander frowned when his phone rang. "Sorry, I need to get this."

"No problem. I need to get back to it."

"Hey, Smoke. What's up?" Xander made his way out of the bar as he answered.

"Hey. I was about to ask you the same thing. I came over to Laura's store to see her and thought you might be over here – wondered if you want to catch up."

“I am and I do. I’ll be right there.”

“I was going to say I’ll meet you at the café if you want.”

Xander smiled to himself. “No. Hang tight. I’ll come to you. I have to pass her store to get there.”

It only took a few minutes to walk from the wine bar down to Laura’s store. When he stepped inside, Laura greeted him with a smile.

“Hey. Is Tori with you?”

“No. She’s over at the resort, hanging out with Kenzie.”

Laura’s eyebrows shot up. “Tori and Kenzie? Since when are they friends?”

He had to laugh. “I know they don’t exactly strike you as kindred spirits, do they? But Kenzie took a shine to Tori as soon as they met. She also offered to give her some pointers for when we open the bar. Tori’s calling it The Kenzie School of Bartending.”

Laura laughed out loud. “Oh my God! I love it! It’s perfect. I mean, don’t get me wrong, Tori’s awesome, and I don’t think she’ll have any problems working the bar at your new place.” She frowned. “Do you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t. It’s like she says herself, she might not be the most assertive person in the world, but she has her own way with people.”

“That’s how I see her,” said Laura. “Although, I’d love to be a fly on the wall for some of Kenzie’s tips.”

They both turned when the door from the back opened, and Smoke stuck his head around it. “What’s going on?” he asked with a puzzled smile as he came out to join them.

“Get this,” said Laura. “Tori’s not here because she’s taking classes at The Kenzie School of Bartending.”

Smoke smirked. “Now that I would love to see.”

“That’s what I was just saying,” said Laura.

“From what she tells me, she’s loving it, and she and Kenzie are getting along like a house on fire.”

“I can see that,” said Smoke. “Kenzie’s... Kenzie’s just Kenzie, and Tori’s...”

Xander was curious to hear how he would describe her.

“Tori’s smarter than the rest of us put together in her own quiet little way. She’s been like that since she was a kid. She was smaller than the rest of us – younger – but she was so self-contained, always happy to do her own thing.”

Xander grinned, and Smoke slapped his shoulder. “What – you thought you were the only one who could see that?”

“I guess I did. Everyone seems to treat her – think of her – as if she’s ... I don’t know, delicate?”

Smoke laughed. “If they do, then they’re fools. And Tori’s the one fooling them. You guys should come over for dinner one of these nights.”

“We will. It’s just figuring out when. With all the work on the bar, and getting the business side of things set up, it’s been hectic.”

“And have you done anything about finding a place to stay yet?” asked Laura.

Smoke gave her a puzzled look. “Cam and Piper have said that they can use their place for as long as they like.”

“I know. I just wondered.”

Xander cocked an eyebrow at her. “Has Tori talked to you about the Flanagan house?”

Laura chuckled. “Guilty as charged. I didn’t like to say anything, though. I didn’t know what you’d make of the place.”

“I like it – and not just for Tori’s sake. The turret is a bit ... out of the ordinary.”

Smoke laughed. “That’s a polite way to put it.”

Xander shrugged. “What do you want me to tell you? It’s quirky. So’s Tori. I love her, why wouldn’t I love the house?”

Smoke grinned at him. “I’m just yanking your chain. But at least I got you admitting it.”

“Admitting what?”

“That you love her, dipshit.”

Xander laughed. “If hearing me say that I love her is news to you, then you’re the dipshit. I thought it was blatantly obvious and didn’t need stating.”

Laura winked at him before turning to Smoke. “He’s right, you know. There’s no missing the fact that he’s in love with her – or that she’s in love with him – at least, not to those of us with eyes in our heads.”

Smoke narrowed his eyes at her. “I could see it; I just didn’t know if he was ready to admit it.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “It’s not as difficult for most people as it was for you.”

Xander chuckled as he watched them. He didn’t know the story of how they’d gotten together but knowing Smoke, he couldn’t imagine that it had been easy for the big guy to admit that he’d fallen in love.

Smoke made a face at him. “Is that why you wanted to meet me here? Are you ready to buy the ring?”

All his breath caught in his chest. A ring! That hadn’t even occurred to him. They’d talked about getting married – at least, he’d talked about it. He’d asked Tori if it was something that she wanted, but then he’d carried on as if it were a foregone conclusion.

He exhaled sharply when he realized that Smoke and Laura were both watching him closely.

Smoke smirked. “What’s up? You don’t mind admitting that you’re in love with her, but you turned pale when I talked about buying a ring. Is marriage too big of a commitment for you just yet?”

He let out a short laugh. “Hey, I’m not the one who has commitment issues. I want to marry her – the sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned.” He turned to Laura. “I don’t want to admit this to him.” He inclined his head toward Smoke. “But now I really do feel like a dipshit. We’ve talked about getting married – about being married – about how

that's what we both want." He blew out a sigh. "But I didn't even think about the whole ring thing – about a proposal or anything like that." He shook his head and said, more to himself than to them, "What a damned fool! She *so* deserves that."

Smoke's laughter brought him back to the moment. "Don't be too hard on yourself."

Laura rolled her eyes. "He's one to talk. He asked me to make a ring for him – for me."

"Hey! I followed you all the way to London so that I could ask you."

Laura reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Okay. You made it all right in the end. But this isn't about you." She looked back at Xander. "He's right, though; you don't need to be hard on yourself. You guys haven't been together all that long. There's still plenty of time for you to ask her in a way that you think will be special to her."

"Yeah." He started to look around the store frantically. "You have engagement rings, right?"

Smoke laughed. "She sure does. You know that she's world-famous for them?"

Xander had to laugh with him. "I do. Sorry. I'll get my shit together now. It's just... I feel pretty stupid."

"That's because you are," said Smoke.

Laura slapped his arm. Hard. "Would you stop it?"

Smoke snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. “I’m trying to drum you up a sale here, lady. The more guilty he feels, the bigger diamond he’ll buy.”

“He’s right,” said Xander. “You might as well make the most of it.” He looked around again, searching for the engagement rings. “But please, will you help me? I have no freaking idea what kind of ring she might like.” He shrugged. “And even though it probably doesn’t need saying, I don’t care how much it costs, I just need it to be perfect for her.”

Smoke laughed. “Ding, ding, ding. We have a sale.”

Laura rolled her eyes at him. “If you can’t behave yourself, I might have to send you to the café to pick up lunch for us all while Xander chooses.”

“Nope. No way am I missing this.” He grasped Xander’s shoulder. “I’m glad that I get to be a part of it.”

~ ~ ~

Xander held the door open for her as Tori made her way out onto the deck, carrying the pizza. She set it down on the table, and he brought the plates.

She sank down into a chair with a sigh of relief. “It’s only been a couple of weeks that we’ve been going so hard to get everything ready, but I am pooped. I hope I’m not going to be totally exhausted by the time we finally open the doors.”

“If you are, we’ll hold off a while – delay the opening. It’s going to be a lot of work at first to get the place up and running smoothly; I don’t want you going into it exhausted.”

She smiled at him. “I’ll be fine. It’s all good. I’m just feeling it a bit tonight.”

“You’ve been working hard.”

“We both have.”

Xander nodded as he looked at the table. “Shit! I didn’t get our drinks. What do you want – a glass of wine?”

“I think just a soda while we eat. I want to save myself.”

He gave her a puzzled smile. “Save yourself? What for?”

“It hit me the other night that whenever we have a drink, you have wine with me. You haven’t even opened that special vodka that we bought in Vegas.”

“I don’t need it.”

“I know, but you enjoy it. And besides...” She wagged her eyebrows. “That stuff makes me horny.”

He laughed out loud. “In that case, how could I say no? Although, it’s not as though you need any help.”

She shrugged. “No. You make me horny without the need for anything else. But you enjoy it, so we should have some.”

“Okay. So, just a soda for now?”

“Please.”

When he returned with their drinks, they ate in companionable silence for a while. The pizza was amazing.

Tori wiped her fingers on her napkin and then sat back in her chair. “I think that’s the best pizza I’ve ever had. Tino’s an absolute genius.”

Xander nodded. “He is and he’s a really great guy. I can see why he and Russ have been friends all their lives.”

“Oh my gosh, Xander! I was just thinking that I wish his restaurant, Giuseppe’s, was over on the other side of the lake – where we’re going to be. At first, I was just thinking that it’ll be a pain to have to come all the way over here for takeout, but I can live with that. But then it hit me; wouldn’t it be awesome if we could serve his pizza in the bar?”

Xander frowned. “It would. Pizza would be perfect, but... No. I’m not going to come up with any of the reasons why I think it might not work. It’s a great idea. We should talk to him – see if we can make it work.”

Tori nodded eagerly. “We should. Let’s go and see him tomorrow. I mean, even if we place an order with him for so many each day or each week... I don’t know how it would work. I’m thinking that he could make them, like those places where you buy them and take them home to cook them. We could do that.”

Xander laughed. “Tino’s Take and Bake!”

“Exactly! We could brand them that way. I love it. Let’s talk to him.”

“We will. Tomorrow’s Friday, isn’t it?”

She laughed. “It is, but I know how you feel. We’ve been so busy that all the days have started to run into each other.”

“It’ll get better soon, sprite. It won’t be long until this stage is behind us, and we’ll be opening the doors and figuring out our new routine.”

“I’m not complaining! I love being busy. I’m enjoying all of it – are you?”

“I am.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “It might be hard work at the moment, but we’re laying the foundation for our life.”

She squeezed his hand. “Talking about foundations... Houses have foundations.”

He chuckled. “Sorry, I forgot to tell you that I talked to Dallas today. He checked with the sellers, and they’re thrilled at the prospect of a quick, cash sale. They even said that they’d leave the furniture with an acceptable offer.”

Tori frowned. “Did you like the furniture?”

“Not particularly. But I kind of thought that it’d be handy to have it. That way we won’t have to take on another whole project of furnishing our new home along with everything else that we’ve got going on.”

“Oh! Of course. You’re right. There’s nothing wrong with what’s in there. It’s just that I’d like to have new things – our things. You know?”

“I do. I’d like that, too.”

They sat and watched the sunset before they cleared the dishes away. It was dark by the time they’d finished tidying the kitchen. When Tori straightened up from closing the dishwasher, Xander was standing beside her with the bottle of vodka and two glasses. “Want to take this outside?”

“It’s dark.”

He chuckled. “I know. And while it was still light, the sky was clear, there were no clouds, so I bet we’ll be able to see the stars.”

“Aww. That’s a lovely idea. Just hang on a minute, I’ll meet you out there.”

She ran upstairs to grab the little speaker that she used to play the music she had stored on her phone.

When she joined Xander on the deck, she set it to play one of her favorite playlists – most of the songs were Callie’s.

Xander raised his eyebrows as he slid her drink toward her. “Do you miss it?”

“What?”

“The music. Singing. That whole life. You’d worked with Callie for years before everything happened.”

“I had, and I loved it. But I haven’t given it a thought until you brought it up – so I guess that answers the question; no, I don’t miss it.” She smiled when the opening notes to one of Callie’s big ballads drifted out of the speaker on the air. “I love this one. It’s one of my favorites.”

Xander winked and held his hand out to her. “In that case, I’ll shut up.”

She went to him, and he wrapped his arms around her. As they swayed to the music, she rested her cheek against his chest and sang softly to herself.

Xander rested his chin on top of her head.

“Are you okay?” she asked when the song ended.

“Never been better, sprite.”

“You were thinking about something; I could tell.”

He laughed and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “What I was thinking was that I can’t wait until we’re doing this on the deck at our new house – in our own home.”

“Oh my gosh, Xander! That will be so awesome.” She looked up into his eyes. “I feel like we’re growing. At first there was just this tiny little seed of you and me. It was a seed that had lain dormant since we were kids. But since we’ve watered it and put it in the sunshine, it’s sprouted into something real. At first, while you were protecting me, we were both putting out little shoots toward each other. Then, on our road trip, we really started to grow. Now, with the bar and the house and everything, I’d say we’re about ready to bloom.”

He rested his forehead against hers, and his eyes shone as he smiled. “I have no idea how you come up with this stuff, but I love it. I know exactly what you mean. Although, if you don’t mind, I’m going to think of it – of us, and what we’re building together – as a big old oak tree. Nothing against flowers or anything but...”

She laughed and tightened her arms around his waist. “No. You’re right. I like the oak tree thing better, too. They’re big and strong and keep growing for years and years – that’s better than flowers that bloom and then die.”

He lowered his lips to meet hers, and she got lost in his kiss. When he finally lifted his head, he said, “The love I feel for you is never going to die, sprite.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Xander was pleased to see Damon and Lucky in the gym when he walked in. He liked both of them, and he was hoping that one of them would be able to spot him when he was ready.

Damon gave him a chin lift, and Lucky smiled and set down the weights he'd been using. Xander spotted Echo lying on the mats, watching her human. He started toward her, giving Lucky a questioning glance as he went.

“Is it okay if I...?”

Lucky grinned and nodded. “Look at the way her tail’s wagging, I think you’ve got your answer right there.”

Xander went and sat on the pile of mats beside Echo. She leaned all her weight against him and licked his ear, making him laugh.

“It’s good to see you again, too, lady.”

Lucky came to join them. “How are you doing? I’m surprised to see you in here. From what I’ve heard, you’ve been working your ass off over at the bar.”

Xander nodded. “I feel kind of guilty that I haven’t been doing the actual work. Logan and his crew are taking care of that. I’ve been busy with paperwork and planning.”

Lucky chuckled. “If you ask me, paperwork is much harder than real work.”

“Tell me about it,” said Xander with a rueful smile.

“How are things going? When do you think you’ll be ready to open?”

“We have the inspector coming in at the end of next week. Provided that we pass everything, we plan to open the doors on Tuesday of the following week.”

“Tuesday?”

“Yeah. We want to do a grand opening on the Saturday night. So, we figured we’d be better off doing a soft opening at the beginning of the week. You know, test out all our systems, and hopefully iron out the kinks.”

“Sounds like a good idea. I’ll come over on Wednesday or Thursday.”

“Thanks.”

Damon swiped a towel over his face as he came to join them. “Do you have your staffing figured out yet? Have you hired everyone you’ll need?”

Xander made a face. “Mostly. We’re still looking for one more person to cover the bar.”

Lucky raised his eyebrows at Damon. “If you’re thinking about leaving Taryn and going to work for these guys instead, I’m out of here. I don’t want to know; I don’t want to hear about it.” He let out a short laugh. “And I wouldn’t want to be you when Taryn gets ahold of you.”

Damon laughed. “It’s nothing like that. I’m happy where I am. I enjoy working for Taryn.” He turned back to Xander. “It’s just that someone I know is looking for more work. She’s covered some shifts with me in the restaurant – and she’s good – but since we’re going into the quieter season, Taryn’s not going to have many shifts for her anymore.”

“Who is it?” Xander asked.

“Her name’s Jade.”

“I don’t know her,” said Xander. “Although that’s not surprising; I don’t know many people here yet.”

“I only know her from seeing her out at the resort. She hangs out with Logan and that whole group. There’s Austin, the realtor, and ... in fact, her sister, Amber, is Austin’s girl.”

Xander was still none the wiser. He knew that Austin was the broker, but he and Tori had only worked with Austin’s brother, Dallas.

Damon smiled. “To give you some context, Jade’s a good bartender. She’s the kind of girl who won’t take any shit – and there have been a couple of occasions when I was worried that she might give people some. She hasn’t. In my experience, she’s only ever been professional. I guess what I’m trying to say is that she’s...”

Lucky chuckled. “From what I’ve seen of her – from the customer’s perspective – she’s like Kenzie but dialed down just a tiny bit.”

Damon laughed with him. “Yeah. That’s the perfect description.”

“I’ll have to talk to Tori, but I have a feeling that she’ll like the idea. She’s been hanging out with Kenzie, picking up tips on bartending. Having a Kenzie clone working behind the bar with us might be a good thing. Do you have her number?”

“Sorry, I don’t,” said Damon. “I’d bet that Logan will be able to give it to you.”

“Or Dallas,” added Lucky.

“Thanks. We’re meeting with Dallas about the house this afternoon. I’ll see what Tori thinks, and if she likes the idea, we can ask him for Jade’s number.”

~ ~ ~

Tori checked her watch and gave Tino an apologetic smile. “This has been awesome, thanks so much, but I have to go.”

“That’s okay, I need to get back to it as well. Thanks for coming to see me. Like we said, we can give things a trial run for the first couple of weeks.”

“Thanks.” Tori got to her feet, and when Tino joined her, she couldn’t resist giving him a hug. When she let go of him, he stepped back with a bashful smile.

“I’m glad you’re here, Tori. I know that your mom’s thrilled to have you living close by. If there’s ever any way that I can help you guys out, you just let me know.”

She gave him another hug. He was awesome! “Thank you so much. I’m really looking forward to working with you. It’s going to be great; I know it.”

“Have you named the place yet?”

She made a face. “We haven’t. It’s crazy. At first, it felt like we had all the time in the world to come up with the right name, but now it’s coming down to the wire.”

“It’ll come,” said Tino.

Tori looked around. “How did you name this place?”

“I didn’t. It’s named after my father – it was his restaurant for years.”

Tori nodded. “My friend has a restaurant back in Napa. It was her father’s restaurant, too, but he named it after her.” She thought about it for a moment. “Do you think Xander’s is a good name for a sports bar?”

Tino shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what I think. The two of you will come up with the right name; I know you will.”

She checked her watch again. “We will. And I need to run. We’re meeting with our realtor this afternoon.”

“Good luck and get going. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Thanks, Tino. See you soon.”

She felt bad as she climbed into the truck. She’d told Xander that if she was done in time, she’d pick him up from the gym. If not, he’d have to meet her at the realtor’s office. They needed to get a second vehicle already. They’d thought they’d be fine to get by with one, but with all the running around they were both doing, it wasn’t working too well.

When she pulled up in front of the realtor’s office, she decided that their second vehicle needed to be something

smaller. She liked this truck, but she sucked at parallel parking.

She got as close to the curb as she could and then gave up. She could see Xander inside, talking to Dallas.

“Hi,” said Crystal, who manned the front desk. “Xander’s already here with Dallas. Would you like a drink or anything?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.” She followed Crystal over to Dallas’s desk, where Xander greeted her with a peck on the cheek.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“You’re not,” said Xander. “I was here a few minutes early.”

Dallas smiled. “You’re right on time, and I’m happy to tell you that the inspection came back fine, and the sellers are eager to move forward.”

She grinned at Xander. “Are we?”

He nodded happily. “I believe we are, unless you’ve changed your mind?”

She laughed. “You know better than that.”

“There’s just one thing I wanted to talk to you guys about,” said Dallas. “If you’re okay with it, I want to ask Austin, my brother, to handle things for you from now on.”

Tori exchanged a look with Xander before asking, “Why?”

“Because the sellers are friends of mine – that’s why I was helping them to list it. I just think it’s better for you if he represents you.” He smiled. “And besides, he is the broker. He has years of experience over me.”

Tori nodded. "I'm okay with that, if you are?" she asked Xander.

"It's fine by me." He looked at Dallas. "I don't want you missing out, though."

"It's fine. It's all good."

By the time they were finished going over all of the paperwork, Tori was glad to get out of there. Xander slung his arm around her shoulders once they were back out on the street.

"What do you want to do? Are you ready to go home, or do you want to have an early dinner at the resort?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

It was still nice enough that they were able to sit outside on the deck overlooking the water. Tori sat back in her seat and lifted her face to the sun.

"Are you okay?" Xander asked.

"I'm fine. I'm just enjoying the sunshine. How are you? How did your day go?"

"I'm good. I feel better for hitting the gym. Oh, Damon suggested someone to work behind the bar."

She opened her eyes and leaned forward. "Who? Anyone we know?"

"Not exactly. Jade. She's Austin's girlfriend's sister."

"The name sounds familiar, but I don't know if I've met her. Austin's girlfriend is Amber, isn't she?"

Xander nodded. “Apparently. I don’t know her, either.”

“I’ve met her – she works at the post office. She’s lovely. She’s a bit quiet, though. If her sister’s anything like her, then I’m not sure that we’ll want her for the bar.” She gave him a rueful smile.

“It doesn’t sound as though she is like her sister.” Xander chuckled. “In fact, putting two and two together, I’d say that Amber and Jade might be like you and Willow. From what Damon told me, Jade’s like Kenzie.”

Tori laughed at that. “In that case, yes! That’s the kind of energy we want behind the bar. I mean, you’re outgoing, I’m the calm and soothing one, we want someone with a bit of ... spunk.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

Xander shook his head. “I didn’t want to until I ran it by you first.”

“Well, I think it’s a great idea – if she’s even interested.”

“Damon said that she’s looking for work. She’s been helping out behind the bar in Taryn’s restaurant, but they don’t need her going into the quiet season.”

“Well, we need her – at least, we need someone. Do you have her number?”

“I don’t. I was going to get it from Dallas.” He gave her a rueful smile. “But like I said, I wanted to talk to you about it

first, and without doing that, I didn't want you wondering why I was asking him for some girl's number."

Tori laughed. "I wouldn't have wondered – I would have asked."

He reached across the table and took her hand. "I don't want you to need to ask."

"Thank you. You don't need to worry, though. I've told you before, and I mean it – I don't feel insecure with you or about you, not in any way."

"Good, because you have no reason to." He frowned. "I don't feel insecure about you, either. That doesn't mean I'm taking anything for granted. I ..."

She laughed. "I know. It's all good. We love each other, we trust each other, there's nothing for either of us to worry about."

Just as they were finishing eating, Kenzie came walking across the deck with a big smile on her face. "Hey, you two! It's good to see you taking a break. How are things coming at the bar?"

"It's all coming together," said Tori. "And Xander now has a lead on someone to help out behind the bar. I know I told you that we were going to wait and see if we needed more help, but I think it's a good idea to start out strong."

Kenzie frowned. "You're probably right, but just make sure that you let whoever it is know that you might not have a lot of work for them over the winter. You might need the help while

you're first getting started but remember that things do die off around here during the quiet season."

"Yeah, I was thinking about that," said Xander. He looked at Tori. "We should definitely let her know that we aren't going to be able to guarantee a set number of hours or anything – at least to start with."

"Right," said Tori. "Although, I do like the idea of having someone to take some of the load off us."

"Mind if I ask who it is?" Kenzie asked.

"Her name's Jade. We don't even know her," said Tori.

"Damon said that she's been helping out in Taryn's restaurant," Xander added.

Kenzie grinned. "Yeah. Jade might well be just what you need. She's good people. She works hard, she knows what she's doing, and I don't think she's necessarily looking for anything full-time or permanent."

Tori tilted her head to the side. "What's her story?"

Kenzie laughed. "Damned if I know. I guess you'd call her a free spirit. She and her sister, Amber, moved here to look after their grandma, Lenny, who owns the post office. Amber ended up running the post office, and Jade's been working all kinds of different jobs. Like I said, she's good behind the bar, I'd vouch for her any day. But I doubt she'll be looking for anything full-time or permanent. She's a jack of all trades."

Xander nodded. "That sounds like it should work well for all of us."

“Do you have her number?” Tori asked Kenzie.

“I do. I’ll text it to you.” She jerked her head toward the bar. “I’d better get in there. Are you guys sticking around?”

“No,” said Tori. “We came for an early dinner so that we can go home and crash.”

“I don’t blame you. You’ve been working your asses off; you deserve a break. Oh, and speaking of... When’s your big grand opening night? I deserve a break, too. I want to make sure that I get a night off so that I can be there.”

Tori grinned. “It’s Saturday the twenty-sixth. It’ll be awesome if you can come.”

Kenzie nodded. “I’ll be there.”

~ ~ ~

It turned out that Jade was out of town for the weekend, but they managed to set up a meeting with her on Monday. From what Tori said, she was excited about the prospect of coming to work for them. Xander was a little apprehensive. He was hoping that she’d turn out to be a good fit. From everything he’d heard, it sounded as though Jade was a strong personality – he was hoping that she wouldn’t come across too strong. It didn’t bother him – he was more concerned about Tori.

They’d arranged to meet her at the bar at lunchtime. He’d spent the morning doing a walk-through with Logan. All the work was complete – well, everything except the name outside. They’d talked about all kinds of options, but neither he nor Tori had been able to come up with anything that they loved. She’d even joked this morning that since they kept

referring to the place as simply *the bar*, perhaps that was what they should name it.

Xander wasn't completely against that idea, but he was hoping that they would come up with something better. So far, they'd been able to work around the absence of a name in all the paperwork, but the day was coming when they would have to commit to something.

He smiled when the door opened, and Tori came rushing in. "Hey, I'm not late, am I?"

"You're right on time. She isn't here yet." He greeted her with a kiss. "How did it go with your mom?"

"It was great. I'm loving hanging out with her."

Xander smiled. "I love it for you. What's going on with her?"

Tori laughed. "She's kind of mad that we're moving ahead with buying the house."

He frowned. "She doesn't like the idea? Why not?"

Tori laughed again. "It's not that she doesn't like it, she's mad that she didn't get to buy it for us."

"She doesn't need to do anything like that."

"I know! But she wanted to. You know how Slade's dad gave Slade and Willow the cottage?"

Xander grinned. "I do, I love that."

"So do I, but Mom felt kind of outdone. Apparently, she always planned to buy a home for Willow when she was ready, and to buy one for me. Of course, Bentley is the one who gets

the estate – since he’s the oldest, and neither of us would want it anyway.”

Xander shrugged. “I can see why your mom would want to do that, but...”

“I know. I never wanted her to do it, either. I bought the house in Nashville myself, and this house is ours – I love that we’re buying it between us.”

“Me too.”

They both looked up when the front door opened, and a woman around their age walked in.

“Hi. I’m guessing that you’re Tori and Xander. I’m Jade.”

“You guessed right,” said Tori. “Come on in, it’s lovely to meet you.”

“You too,” said Jade.

Xander led them to one of the high-top tables and gestured for them to sit.

“What’s the place going to be called?” Jade asked. “You still don’t have a sign outside.”

Tori laughed. “We’re still working on that. If you have any suggestions, we’d love to hear them.”

“Not off the top of my head, but if inspiration strikes, I’ll let you know.”

Xander pulled one of the stools closer to Tori and sat beside her so that they were facing Jade. “So, Damon said that you’ve been helping him out behind the bar in Taryn’s restaurant?”

“That’s right. I asked Taryn, and she’s happy to give me a reference if you want one.” Jade looked around. “I can’t believe how much of a difference you guys have made in here in such a short time. I think this place is going to be awesome. Everyone was so excited when the wine bar opened, but it was a flop pretty much from the beginning.”

“Well, we don’t intend for it to flop again,” said Tori. “Are you used to working a busy bar?”

“I am. I mean, Taryn’s place isn’t usually that busy, although there have been times over the summer when it was manic. I used to work at a bar back home in Bakersfield,” she frowned. “I can probably get them to give me a reference if you want one, too.”

Tori shrugged. “If you’re still in touch with them, that’d be good. But you’ve had enough recommendations from people we know around here that I think we’re happy to give things a trial run, right?” She looked at Xander.

“Yeah, that’s probably the best way to go.”

Jade turned toward him, but Tori continued, “We’re thinking that we’d like to have you work four nights a week to start with. We’re opening next Tuesday, and then the big grand opening is on Saturday. So, that first week would be five nights. After that, we can see how things are working out, and then sit down and discuss where we go from there. How does that sound?”

Jade grinned. “That sounds perfect to me. I’m happy to work as much as you need me while you’re getting established. I don’t expect that you’ll need me as much over

the winter, and that's fine by me." She frowned. "I should probably warn you that I'm not a great long-term prospect."

Tori chuckled. "That probably works out well. We know that we'll need you more in the beginning, and less over the winter. And who knows by spring?"

"Well, that suits me just fine." Xander didn't like the way she looked at Tori. He tensed, wondering what she was about to say.

"Do you mind if I'm honest?" she asked.

"Go ahead. I prefer it," said Tori.

Xander nodded his agreement, but he wasn't sure that he wanted to hear what she might have to say.

He was surprised when Jade turned to him with a smile. "Don't worry; it's obvious that you want to protect your woman, but there's nothing to protect her from – not from me, anyway." She turned back to Tori. "All I wanted to say is that having met you, I'm really looking forward to working with you."

Tori gave her a puzzled smile. "And you weren't looking forward to it before you met me?"

Jade chuckled. "That'll teach me, won't it? The only thing I had to go on was that Dallas and Logan said that you're more like my sister, Amber, than like me."

Tori gave her an inquiring look, but Xander knew what she meant.

Jade shrugged. “I’m a bit more in your face, and Amber’s more of a shrinking violet.”

Tori laughed. “Oh, I see! Yeah, I’m never going to be described as in your face; I’m not the world’s most assertive person.” She glanced at Xander, and he rested his hand on her thigh, giving it a squeeze. “But I do life my own way – and I’m no shrinking violet.”

“I can see that.”

A wave of relief washed over Xander. Jade was right; his protective streak was a mile wide when it came to Tori, but he had nothing to worry about here.

“So, what do you think, do you want to give this a try?”

“Hell yeah!” Jade said with a grin.

“Can you be here at noon on Monday?” Xander asked. “We’re making that our training day, and we can sort out all the paperwork then.”

“I’ll be here with bells on,” said Jade.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

Tori leaned her head back against the headrest and looked up through the sunroof at the clear blue sky. “This was such a good idea, thank you.”

Xander reached across and took her hand. “We needed this, sprite. It’s been a crazy few weeks, and things are only going to get crazier when we open.”

“Do you think so? I’ve been looking at it that things will settle down when we open. I mean, I know we’ll be busy with work, but we won’t have all the crazy running around to do with getting things set up. And once we close on the house, we won’t have to keep driving back and forth around the lake.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m just thinking of this first week while we figure out our routines and of course, next weekend’s going to be craziest of all. Our big opening is going to be busy – at least, I hope it will be – and everyone’s going to be here for it, too.”

Tori smiled. “I’m so glad that they’re all coming. It’s funny, I lived in Nashville all that time and I didn’t miss them. That sounds bad, and I don’t mean it like that. It’s just that I was living my life, and I knew that they were living theirs. Now, maybe it’s just since I’ve seen them all recently, or maybe it’s because I feel closer to them now...” She shrugged. “Either way, I’m glad they’re coming.”

“Me too.” Xander laughed. “I’m even more glad that they are all sorting themselves out.”

She gave him a puzzled look.

“I mean, that no one’s expecting to stay with us. They’re all finding their own places to stay. Half of them already know people here anyway.”

“True. Most of them know Smoke, and he’s helping with accommodations from what Laura said.”

“And Antonio and Marcos have friends here as well.”

“Oh, they do, don’t they? Jack and Pete, who own the development, right?”

“That’s right. They all went to school together – Antonio and Marcos, Jack, Pete, Smoke, and I don’t know if I told you this, but Nate did, too.”

“Wow! What a small world!”

Xander laughed. “Kind of. It’s more that they all kept in touch. Pete grew up here. He and Jack own Phoenix Corporation. Nate’s worked for them since college, and Smoke worked as their chief pilot and leases them his plane.”

Tori shook her head. “I haven’t kept in touch with a single person who I went to college with.”

Xander shot her a quick grin. “I didn’t even go. I went straight into the Navy.”

She nodded. “Have you been in touch with any of your old teammates?”

“No, but I keep thinking that I should give them a shout.”

Tori stared out of the window as Xander drove them up West Shore Road. She'd been wanting to take a drive around the lake, and they hadn't been out this way yet. It was just as beautiful on this side of the lake, and the farther they drove up out of town, the fewer houses there were.

"It is lovely out here," she said.

Xander shot her a quick glance. "You're not having second thoughts, are you? Do you like it better over here?"

She laughed. "No! I love the house. I love that side of the lake. For one thing, we'll be so much closer to the bar there. It'll take us less than five minutes to drive home. I'm looking forward to that. And besides, Smoke and Laura will be our closest neighbors. I love that. Oh, Xander, look!"

Her heart pounded in her chest when she spotted it. It was beautiful. It was a quaint little chapel, standing all alone down by the water's edge. It was absolutely perfect. She could already see wedding photographs with the chapel and the lake as the beautiful backdrop.

Xander didn't say a word as he turned the truck off the road and onto the driveway. She couldn't figure out what the look on his face might mean – he didn't exactly look happy.

As soon as he brought the truck to a stop, she got out, and he met her in front of the hood.

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"I do. It's great."

Her heart sank. That wasn't exactly the kind of enthusiasm she'd been hoping for.

~ ~ ~

Xander wrapped his arm around her shoulders and shoved his other hand in his pocket. The ring box was right there. He'd transferred it into the pocket of whatever he was wearing every day since he'd bought it. It was the perfect ring; it was just that he was waiting for the perfect moment.

Was this it? He didn't know. He might not be sure about the moment, but he knew from the look on Tori's face that this was the place. She'd told him that while the other girls had dreamed big dreams about big weddings, she wanted to get married in a little chapel. Even he could tell that this was the kind of chapel that little girls would dream about. It was small, had an authentic looking stone façade, and even a bell tower. The setting was perfect with the lake and the mountains in the background.

He let her lead him through the grounds toward the lake. In his mind's eye, he could see their friends and family milling around the place. He ran his finger over the ring box again. Maybe he should just go ahead and ask her now? Then it hit him – he was a damned fool. He couldn't ask her yet. He hadn't spoken to her parents. He didn't doubt for a moment that Ria would give him her blessing. He hadn't seen her dad, Matthew, for a few years, but he'd always gotten along with the guy – he didn't think that he would have any objections, either. But it wouldn't be right to ask Tori to marry him without speaking to them first.

Tori stopped a few feet short of the bluff that overlooked the water.

“Oh, look! There are even steps down to that little beach.”

“It’s a great little place.” He was aware how hollow the words sounded, but he didn’t know what to say. He wanted to join in her enthusiasm, but if he did, he didn’t want her to think that he was more excited about the location than he was about marrying her. Then again, seeing the disappointment on her face, he had to say something.

“Is this the kind of place where you’d want to get married?”

She met his gaze and held it for a moment before looking away. “Yeah,” she said quietly.

He felt like the biggest asshole on the face of the earth. He drew her closer until he could wrap his arms around her.

“Me, too. Can I ask you a favor, sprite?”

It killed him when she looked up at him, and he saw the doubt in her eyes. “Of course.”

“Just give me a little bit of time?”

He knew that he’d said the wrong thing when her chin dropped. “Of course. There’s no rush. I’m not even...”

He caught her chin in his hand and made her look back up at him. “I want to do this right, Tori. Do you trust me?”

A rush of warmth filled his chest when she nodded without hesitation. “I do.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “I’m going to be the happiest man in the world when you say those two words to me here. All I’m asking for is a little bit of time to get it right, okay?”

She gave him a small smile. “Okay.”

~ ~ ~

By the time they'd completed their circuit of the lake, Tori was ready to go home, have some dinner, and curl up to watch a movie. The coming week was probably going to be the busiest one they'd had yet.

She was surprised when Xander didn't take the turnoff back to Cam and Piper's house. "Where are we going?"

"I thought we could stop in to see your mom and Russ."

She made a face. "We'll see them during the week."

"I know, we don't need to stop for long. It's just that ... We're going to be so busy next week."

He was right. It wasn't as though she didn't want to see them, it was just that she hadn't been expecting it.

"Unless you don't want to?"

"No, you're right – we should go. But not for long, okay?"

"Yeah, not for long."

Her mom came out onto the porch steps with a big smile on her face when they pulled up.

"Well, this is a lovely surprise. I wasn't expecting you."

Tori smiled as she ran up the steps to greet her with a hug. "We just thought we'd drop in." She pulled back and looked into her mom's eyes. "And you know what? I love this – I love that we get to just drop in, and I love that I didn't feel like I needed to call and ask first, and I don't feel bad that we surprised you."

Her mom reached out and touched her arm. “I love it too, sweetheart – all of it.” She turned to Xander, who’d joined them at the top of the steps. “I hope this isn’t too fleeting a visit? You are going to come in?”

“If that’s okay,” he said.

Tori was glad that they’d come when her mom linked one arm through hers and the other through Xander’s, and then they all had to huddle together to squeeze through the front door.

“I deliberately didn’t call you today,” said her mom. “I thought that you’d be making the most of what will no doubt be your last free day for a while.”

“We were ... We are,” said Tori. “We’ve been for a drive around the lake. We’re just headed home now.”

“Well, I’m glad you came. Can I get you a drink?”

Xander looked at Tori. He was the one who’d sprung this idea on her – she had no idea how long he wanted to stay.

“Not for me, thanks,” he said.

“Or me,” Tori added.

“Oh, that’ll be Russ now,” said her mom. “I thought that you were him when you arrived. He went to collect dinner from the resort.”

“We don’t want to hold you up,” said Tori. “It really was just a flying visit.”

Her mom gave her a puzzled look. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine,” Xander spoke before Tori had the chance. “We’ll get out of your hair and let you have dinner.” Her mom gave them both a puzzled look. “Why do I feel like there’s something going on?”

Tori laughed. “Probably because this is really weird.” She shot an inquiring look at Xander. It felt weird, too. She went to her mom and gave her another hug. “But maybe it shouldn’t be weird – hopefully one day soon we’ll both be used to the fact that I can just pop in and hug my mom because I want to.”

Her mom’s eyes shone with tears. “I’d love to get used to that, but I’ll never take it for granted.”

They all turned when the door opened, and Russ came in carrying a takeout bag. “Hey, guys! Sorry, I didn’t know that you were coming.”

Tori laughed. “None of us did. And don’t worry, we’re leaving now.”

Russ laughed. “You don’t need to. Have you eaten?”

“Seriously,” said Xander. “You guys have your dinner. We’re fine. We just stopped in to say hi.”

Tori gave him a puzzled look as they walked back out to the truck. “Are you okay?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “I’m fine. I should just come clean. All I wanted was a quick word with Russ. Do you mind if I just run back in?”

She laughed. “I don’t, but I’m going to wait in the truck for you. And thanks for explaining. I didn’t know what the hell was going on there.”

He opened the passenger door for her, and gave her a quick kiss before she climbed in. “Sorry, sprite. Sometimes, I think I shouldn’t say anything, and it turns out that we’d all be better off if I did.”

She laughed. “It’s fine. Go on; go and talk to Russ, then we can leave them to have dinner and we can go home and have ours.”

~ ~ ~

Later that evening, while Tori soaked in the tub with a glass of wine, Xander took his phone and his vodka out onto the deck. He’d made a mess of things earlier, but at least he’d done it; his conversation with Ria about asking Tori to marry him had been much more rushed than he would have liked, but it didn’t matter. He couldn’t help smiling when he remembered the way that Ria had hugged him. She was thrilled; there was no doubt about it.

He leaned on the railing of the deck and looked out into the darkness. There was no moon, he could barely make out the lake, but he could hear the waves lapping the shore. It occurred to him that he might miss that sound when they moved into their new house, but that was a small price to pay.

He took a slug of his vodka and dialed Bentley’s number.

His old friend answered on the second ring. “Hey, bud. It’s good to hear from you. How are things going?”

“Things are going great. I just wanted to check in with you – you and Alyssa are coming with the others next weekend, aren’t you?”

“You bet we are! We wouldn’t miss it. I have to tell you that I’m kind of surprised...” Xander’s heart sank. He didn’t want to hear Bentley say that he hadn’t expected him to end up with Tori. He needn’t have worried.

“... Of all the things I might have imagined you doing when you got out of the Navy, opening a sports bar wasn’t one of them. And as for Tori...” He laughed. “Then again, when it comes to Tori, nothing surprises me. Are things going well with the two of you?”

“They’re going great.”

“I’m glad. I can’t say that I saw it coming, but the two of you getting together... It makes me happy.”

“Thanks. It makes me happy, too. In fact, that’s the real reason I’m calling you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... I’m going to ask her to marry me. I wanted to run it...”

“That’s awesome! Happy for you, man! Oh, and if you mean that you’re asking for my blessing, then you have it – in spades.”

Xander chuckled. “Thanks.”

“It’s funny,” said Bentley. “Growing up the way we did – all of us hanging out together right from being small, you guys have always felt like family to me. Now, with the way things are going, we’re actually becoming family.”

Xander nodded to himself. “You’re right. We are.”

“Between Willow and Tori, I get Slade and you as brothers-in-law. And if you’re my brother-in-law, then Jacob and Hannah will be family to me, too. Although, I don’t know how any of that works – just that they’ll be my in-laws of some description.”

Xander laughed. “Yeah, I have no idea what the names are for the brother and sister of your brother-in-law, but I know what you mean.”

“Wait, are you asking me first?” Bentley asked.

“What do you mean?”

He laughed. “I mean, have you spoken to Mom yet?”

Xander laughed. “I have. She’s good with it.”

“I’ll bet she’s more than good with it. She’s always thought that the sun shone out of you.”

“I know. I’m just lucky, I guess.”

Bentley laughed. “I believe we make our own luck in his life. And what about Dad? Have you talked to him?”

“No. I wanted to ask you for his number.”

After Bentley gave him the number, they chatted for a little while before they hung up.

Xander was looking forward to talking to Matthew; he’d always liked Tori’s dad. He dialed the number and waited.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Matthew?”

“It is, who’s this?”

“It’s Xander; Xander Jacobs.”

“Well, hello, Xander! It’s good to hear from you. How are you? Wait, is everything all right? Why are you calling?”

“Everything’s fine, sir. I just…” He wiped his hand on his jeans, surprised that for the first time, he felt a touch of nerves. “You know that Tori and I have been seeing each other?”

Matthew laughed. “Not just seeing each other, from what I hear. Alexandria tells me that the two of you have been on quite the road trip, and now you’re planning to open a bar together.”

“That’s right. Except, it’s about more than just opening a bar.”

“I was hoping so.”

Xander smiled. “The reason I’m calling you tonight, sir, is because I want to marry her. I wanted to ask for your blessing first.”

“You don’t need to ask, Xander – you have it. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve worried about that girl over the years. I wondered where life might take her. Don’t get me wrong, I admire her for who she is, but sometimes the world can be unkind to a soul like her.”

Xander nodded to himself. He knew what Matthew meant, but he didn’t know what to say.

“Thank you. Now, I know I don’t have to worry anymore.”

“I give you my word that I’ll do everything I can to take care of her.”

“I know that. But what’s more important to me is that you’ll take care of her in a way that still gives her the space to be herself. You understand her in a way that most people never will.” He heard Matthew suck in a deep breath and blow it out slowly. “Even when you were all children, it was obvious that the rest of you were well-equipped to face that world that we lived in. You were better equipped than I was. It worried me that Tori was more like me than her mother.” Matthew cleared his throat. “Anyway, thank you. Thank you for calling me, thank you for asking me, but most of all thank you for loving my little girl.”

Xander had to swallow before he could reply. “Thank *you*, sir. And I promise you...”

“That’s okay, Xander. I know. Please, have her call me, and keep in touch. But for now, I’m going to go before I embarrass us both. Bye.”

Xander smiled when the call ended. Matthew was a good guy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

By the time their grand opening day rolled around, Tori was more than ready for it. She checked herself over in the mirror before heading downstairs. They'd only moved into the house a couple of days ago, but she'd already fallen in love with it.

When she reached the kitchen, Xander greeted her with a smile and a cup of coffee. "Do you want some breakfast?"

She checked her watch.

"We have time," he reassured her. "It was definitely the right call to skip lunch today and only open at four."

"I know, but I still feel like we should get over there and make sure that everything's ready."

He came to her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "And we will, but I think everything will go a lot smoother if we just relax and ease into the day."

She gave him a rueful smile. "I know, you're right." She took a sip of her coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. "I know that I said I didn't like any of the furniture that came with the house, but I don't see us getting rid of this table, do you?"

Xander chuckled. "I don't. I didn't think that I was a hang-out-in-the-kitchen kind of guy, but having this table..."

She smiled up at him. "It's awesome, isn't it?"

"So, what can I get you?"

She waggled her eyebrows. “I want to say that I’ll take you, naked, on the table.”

He laughed. “I want to say the same thing to you, but we should probably introduce a little variety, don’t you think?”

“Hmm. True. Although, my version would be a variation, at least. Last night, I believe that it was you who took me on the table.”

He waggled his eyebrows back at her. “Then you should definitely get a turn, but I was thinking more about breakfast for now. We might not be in too much of a hurry, but it wouldn’t surprise me if some of the guys show up here this morning.”

“Oh!” Tori could feel the heat in her cheeks. “You’re right. I didn’t think about that. We should definitely keep our clothes on and just eat breakfast.”

Xander fixed scrambled eggs and toast for her, just the way she liked them. When he sat down to join her, she smiled when she saw that he’d made one of those small steaks to go with his.

“I see you’re still doing what you can to keep your strength up?”

“I am. Between the bar and keeping you happy, I’m working hard.”

“If it’s any consolation, you’re doing a great job at both.”

He nodded. “Are you happy?”

“Oh, Xander! I’ve never been this happy before in my life.” Her smile faded. “Are you?”

His smile answered her before his words could. “Same, sprite. Not only have I never been this happy, but I didn’t even know it was possible.”

“Aww. You say the sweetest things.”

“I’m just telling you the truth.” He blew out a sigh. “And as much as I’d like to stay here in our little bubble, loving on each other, we should probably figure out what all we need to do.”

Tori set her fork down. “You mean who we need to see – who we need to catch up with?”

He nodded.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I made it easy on myself. I’ve told everyone that I’m thrilled that they’re here, but I’m going to be crazy busy. So, if they want to see me, they’ll need to come into the bar.”

He gave her a knowing smile. “You really are smarter than the rest of us put together, aren’t you?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Why do you say that?”

He chuckled. “Because you play on the fact that everyone sees you as ditzy little Tori. You know that they won’t want to put too much pressure on you – so you let them believe that you can’t handle it all.”

She tried to feign an innocent smile but couldn’t quite manage it and instead, dissolved into giggles. “You make it

sound bad. I don't mean to manipulate people; it's not like that. It's just that I know how they see me, so I let them believe it." She shrugged. "They're happy because they think they're right, and I'm happy because no one expects too much of me."

Xander nodded. "Like I said – smarter than the rest of us put together."

"I'd say it's more a case of knowing how to manage myself."

"Whatever you say, sprite. But to answer your question, I obviously wasn't as smart as you. I said that I'd do my best to catch up with Slade, and with Jacob. I mean, of course, I've chatted with most of them, and said that I'm looking forward to seeing them, but they mostly understand that we're going to be busy. But Slade and I always manage to carve some time out, and Jacob's been after me for a while now."

Tori gave him a puzzled look.

"Not in a bad way, it's just that I haven't really spoken to him since we left Napa. We've texted here and there, but I know he'll want to check in properly."

"Well, if you want to do that this morning, you can drop me off at the bar and I can get on with things there. The staff are all coming in – and Tino said he'd drop the pizzas off. If you drop me off, you can take the truck and do all the catching up that you want to."

He frowned at her. "We really do need to get a second vehicle, don't we?"

She shrugged. “I reckon that’s a problem for next week; we have enough to deal with for now.”

“I won’t need the truck to see Slade; he and Willow are staying over here at the Lodge at Four Mile Creek.”

Tori grinned. “Well, if you want some boy time with him, you guys can go to the café or wherever you like and maybe Willow will want to hang out at the bar with me.”

“I don’t think there’s any maybe about that, do you? From what Slade told me, Willow can’t wait to see you – and to see what you’ve done with the place.”

“What *we*’ve done with it.”

Xander laughed. “You, sprite – it was all you. Do you think we need to get out of the habit of calling it just the bar?”

She frowned. “Probably. But do you think that the name’s right?”

He grinned. “I do. I think it’s perfect.”

“You don’t think it’s too girly?”

He shook his head adamantly. “No. When you think about traditional sports bar names, they usually convey something different than what we are.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Think about it, they usually have names that end in Spot or Lounge or...” He laughed. “Okay, so maybe not. But to my mind, usually the name of a sports bar sounds a lot like the name of a dive bar. That’s not what we want to convey because that’s not what we are. The way it is, I think the men

will find all the appeal they need in the fact that they can come and watch the games there, and the women will be reassured that it's somewhere where they won't feel out of place."

"Okay. I know you're right. It's just..."

He gave her a stern look. "I think you're unsure of it because you chose it, and you need to get over that, sprite, you really do."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Okay, okay! I'll try. Now, should we get going?" She got up from the table and took their dishes to the sink. A shiver ran down her spine when he came to stand behind her, resting his hands on the counter on either side of her hips.

He kissed the back of her neck, and she pressed her ass back against him. "I thought you said we didn't have time for this?"

She turned around to face him, and he curled his arm around her waist, crushing her against him as he claimed her lips in a slow, deep kiss. When they came up for air, he winked and gave her a wicked smile. "We don't. I just wanted to remind you of what'll be waiting for you when we finally get home tonight."

She cupped his face between her hands and pulled him down so that she could peck his lips. "You're a cruel, cruel man, Xander Jacobs. You know that I'm not going to be able to get that out of my mind all day now."

He smiled. "I do, and I also know that while your dirty little mind is thinking about what we'll be doing later, you won't have the time to worry about anything else. You'll be too

focused on getting through the day and getting me home to bed to worry about anything.”

She kissed him again. “And you tell me that I’m the smart one?”

He chuckled. “I’d say that we’re a pair together.”

She nodded happily. “We are, and I love you.”

“Love you more, sprite.”

~ ~ ~

Xander couldn’t help feeling guilty after he left Tori at the bar and made his way to the café where he was meeting Slade. He smiled when he saw Jade coming up the cobbled walkway toward him. She wasn’t due in to work until later, but she’d said that she’d get here as early as she could.

She gave him a puzzled smile as she approached. “Where are you off to? I thought we were all hands on deck this afternoon to get ready for the big night.”

“We are, Tori’s there already. I won’t be too long, it’s just that everyone’s in town and I’m going to catch up with a buddy.”

She pursed her lips. “So, you’re leaving the little lady to do all the work?”

He laughed. In the week that she’d been working with them, he’d figured Jade out. She definitely didn’t pull any punches, and she had a big heart. She picked at him for looking out for Tori, but if anything, she was just as protective of her as he was.

“It’s not like that, and you know it. Tori has friends in town, too. They all wanted to catch up with her, but she’s using being busy as an excuse to get out of it.”

Jade laughed. “She’s a smart cookie, that little lady of yours, isn’t she?”

Xander grinned. “She sure is. She’s amazing.”

Jade shook her head. “Well, since you’re slacking off and hanging out with your buddies, I’d better get my ass in there to give her a hand.”

He rolled his eyes. “Make me feel guilty, why don’t you?”

“I’m only playing with you. I get it. We have plenty of time to get everything ready for tonight. To tell you the truth, I told her that we didn’t really need to come in this early – and not because I don’t want to work – just because you guys have everything so well organized that there’s not going to be all that much extra to do.”

“I know, that’s the only reason that I feel comfortable going off to meet Slade.”

Jade raised her eyebrows. “Slade? What’s he like?”

Xander laughed. “Don’t even think about it. He’s a great guy – and from what I understand, he’s a good-looking guy, too – but he is well and truly taken. He’s with Tori’s sister, Willow.”

“Oh! I knew that. Tori’s told me about them. I’m looking forward to meeting Willow, it sounds like she and Tori are kind of like me and Amber.”

“I’d say so.”

“Well, I’ll let you go, but if you have any good-looking, single friends in town, I’ll expect you to introduce me to them later.”

Xander laughed. “I would, but I think everyone who’s coming is already taken. Oh…”

“What?”

“All our friends from Napa are couples, but there’s a bunch of Tori’s friends from Nashville coming. Autumn and Matt will be here.” He grinned. “You’ve lived here for a while now, haven’t you?”

“I have, why?”

“Well, I was going to say Carson, but you must have met him already. Maybe Brock? He’s coming with Carson; you won’t have met him yet.”

Jade’s eyes grew wide. “You mean Carson, as in the country singer?”

“Yep. And Brock’s his new security guy. He was on Callie’s security team.”

Jade grinned and rubbed her hands together. “You can definitely introduce me to Carson – it seems like everyone except me has met him. And my friend, Ally, is coming in with the rest of the gang. I’ll bet that she wouldn’t mind an introduction to this Brock. Is he another former military guy? She seems to have a thing for them, but most of the military guys around here are much older, you know?”

Xander had to laugh. “Yeah, I know. I think I’ll stay out of the whole matchmaking thing if you don’t mind. I’ll leave that up to Tori. And for now, I really need to get going.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

By the time he made it to the café, Slade was already sitting at a table outside, waiting for him.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem,” said Slade. “I’m just glad you’re here. I kind of figured that you’d be too busy to hang out today.”

Xander had to laugh. “You’d think, right? But Tori’s happy to oversee everything at the bar for a while. She wanted to make sure that I had the time to catch up with you.” He checked his watch. “And I said that I’d see Jacob later, too.”

“I know,” said Slade. “He and Bentley are hanging out at the lodge. The girls have all gone over to the resort in town. Willow said that she’s going to come back over and drop in to the bar to see Tori later – no matter what Tori says about being too busy.”

“Good. I know Tori wants to see her; she just doesn’t like being the center of attention when everyone gets together.”

“I was wondering about that; how’s she doing with the bar?”

“She loves it.” Xander smiled as he thought about her. “I don’t mind admitting that I wasn’t sure myself how she’d handle it, but she’s an absolute star. The customers love her, and she’s thoroughly enjoying herself.”

“I’m glad. Even Willow was a little bit concerned about her.”

“I think we all were. But you guys – and everyone else – will see for yourselves tonight. She’s got it handled.”

After the server came out to take their order, Xander leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Are you okay?” Slade asked.

“Yeah, I’m great.”

“And you think that life here is going to suit you?”

Xander grinned. “It does; I already know it.”

“Happy for you, man. I have to tell you that I like this for you. I know how long you’ve carried a torch for Tori, but I could never come up with a scenario where I could see the two of you finding a life that would suit you both. I’m glad I was wrong.”

“So am I. I would never have dreamed up this scenario,” he said with a chuckle, “but I’m glad that things have worked out this way.”

“Mind if I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything you like – you should know that.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing probing. I can see that you’re happy, I don’t need to dig too deep. I’m just curious about the name of the bar.”

Xander laughed. “What about it.”

“*Violet’s?*” Slade made a face. “Who the fuck is Violet?”

Xander laughed even harder. “It’s not Violet’s with an apostrophe. It’s not the bar that belongs to Violet. It’s Violets without an apostrophe, as in the plural of the flowers.”

Slade shook his head. “Okay. But same question... Why? I don’t get it. I’m guessing that it’s something to do with Tori?”

“It is. We struggled and struggled and still couldn’t come up with the name. The whole time that we’ve been getting things set up and doing the renovations, we simply referred to the place as *the bar*. As the clock ticked down, and we were getting closer to opening, we were tempted to just call it that.”

“I can see that; that’d work,” said Slade.

“I know, but it wouldn’t work as well as Violets.”

“You’re going to have to explain it to me. I hate to say it, but to me it *doesn’t* work – not for a sports bar.”

Xander laughed. “That’s kind of the point. Yes, it’s a sports bar, but it’s not your standard, run-of-the-mill sports bar. Tori’s vision from the beginning was that it should have a quieter section. You know, a place where people who aren’t interested in watching the games can still sit and chat.”

Slade didn’t look convinced.

Xander laughed again. “Think about it, do you really give a shit about what the name of a bar is? If there’s a game you want to watch, and you know that there’s a sports bar where you can watch it, the name doesn’t register with you, does it?”

“Nope.”

“Exactly. For people like us, the draw is the fact that we can watch the games. But for people who aren’t interested in that, the name tells them that they’re still welcome. It’s a hint that it’s not a regular sports bar, right?”

Slade laughed. “You can say that again.”

“And here, in this market, that’s what we need. We need all the customers we can get. And especially with it being a tourist town, we don’t want to turn anyone off.”

Slade nodded slowly. “I can see that. It makes sense. But why Violets?”

“It was something someone said to Tori – that she’s not exactly a shrinking violet.”

Slade laughed. “Oh, hell no. She might be quieter than the others, she might do life in her own little way, but she’s no shrinking violet.”

“She isn’t. But after Jade – she’s our bartender – said that to her, the idea stuck in Tori’s head. She even went out and got some of those plastic flowers. Since we were down to the wire on time, and we hadn’t added anything into the decor that reflected the name – since we hadn’t had the name – she reckoned it was easy enough to just add a few actual plastic violets here and there.”

Slade raised his eyebrows.

“Only in the section that has no TVs.”

Slade laughed. “Okay, good. I’m glad that I understand now. That was the only question I had about this whole deal.”

Xander met his gaze and held it. “Glad I could settle that for you. I do have a question of my own for you.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

Xander ran his finger over the ring box that he’d transferred into his jeans pocket this morning. “I’m going to ask her to marry me. Will you be my best man?”

A big grin broke out on Slade’s face. “Yeah.” His voice came out as a croak.

Xander had to swallow around the emotions that clogged his own throat. “Thanks.”

Slade cleared his throat. “Jesus, would you look at us? We’re like a pair of girls.”

Xander shrugged. “I’m not going to make any excuses. I’m not afraid to admit that this has gotten me a little bit emotional. I love Tori with all my heart. You’ve been my best friend my whole life. I’m not ashamed to say that this means a lot to me.”

Slade nodded. “And I’m not afraid to admit that I’m all choked up here. It’ll be an honor. Thank you for asking me.”

Xander sat up a little straighter in his chair. “Anyway. Do you want to come back up to the lodge with me? I should go and find Jacob.”

Slade frowned. “You don’t want *him* to be your best man?”

“No. I love him. He’s my brother. But I never even considered asking him, and I know that he wouldn’t expect me to. You’re it for me.”

“Aww, honey! I love you, too.”

Xander screwed his napkin up and threw it at his friend.

“Fuck you. Come on, let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tori stood at the servers' station, wringing a bar towel in her hands as she looked around. The place was packed already. Of course, all their friends from Napa were here, but there were so many more people, too – people she didn't even know. That shouldn't surprise her – they'd been busy all week since the day that they opened. They'd had plenty of locals coming to check the place out already, and there'd been a steady stream of tourists as well. But for some reason, she had it in her mind that tonight would be mostly friends and family. Perhaps that was just because she was seeing it as more of a celebration.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jade came to stand beside her.
“You've not got stage fright, have you?”

Tori laughed. “No. Nothing like that. I'm not nervous; I'm just taking it all in.” She turned to smile at her new friend.
“Isn't it awesome?”

Jade laughed. “I'll say it is. I'll be honest, when I first took this job, I didn't know if it would be short-lived because the bar would be. No offense or anything...”

“None taken,” said Tori.

“Did you feel the same way?”

Tori shook her head. “No. I've never had a moment of doubt about this place becoming a success. I mean, how could it fail? Xander and I are both capable people; we want this, we want it to work. We're prepared to work hard and do whatever it takes

to make that happen.” She stuck her tongue out at Jade. “And once we hired you, it was a sure thing.”

Jade shimmied her hips. “I’m glad that you know what you’ve got here.”

“Oh, I do. And I’m grateful to you.”

Jade shrugged and started to move away. “Yeah well, I’m grateful to you for the job as well. But we’re not going to make this place a roaring success by standing around here talking about it, are we?”

Tori laughed. “No, you have a point there.”

“Looks like you need to do some schmoozing before you get to serving again,” said Jade. She jerked her chin toward the entrance where Clay and his lady, Marianne, had just come in.

Tori hurried out from behind the bar to go and greet them.

“We’re not late, are we?” asked Clay. “I didn’t think that things would get going until later.”

“Neither did we, and no, you’re not late at all. I’m just so grateful that you’re doing this for us. I’m sure you’re the reason that we’re this busy.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Marianne. “Everyone I’ve spoken to for the last couple of weeks has talked about your grand opening and asked if we were coming.”

“Well, we appreciate you doing this.” Tori looked over to the small stage area. “Everything’s set up for you; your guys were over here earlier.”

Clay nodded. “Thanks. What time do you want me to get up there?”

She checked her watch. “Not for a while yet, if that’s okay with you?”

Clay grinned. “That’s just fine by me, darlin’. I was hoping that we’d have time for a drink and to catch up with everyone first.”

“Of course, Autumn and Matt are in a booth over there with Brock and Carson.”

Clay laughed. “Thanks, but I didn’t mean with them. I get to talk to them all the time – and that’s work.” He jerked his chin toward another booth where two older couples were sitting. “I meant them. But before that, before everything gets too crazy and I forget, I have a little something for you.”

Tori gave him a puzzled look, but before she got the chance to say anything, Xander appeared at her side. “Hi, thanks so much for coming.”

Clay chuckled. “You’re welcome; we don’t need to go through that again, Tori here just did all the thanking I need. But I was just telling her that I do have a little something for you guys.”

Xander exchanged a look with Tori, but she was no wiser than he was. They both watched as Clay stuck his hand in the pocket of his jeans and took out a key.

He nodded at Tori as he held it out to her. “Go on, take it.”

She reached out for it, but hesitated when she recognized it. “That’s…”

“It sure is,” said Clay.

She looked up at him in confusion.

“I was talking to your mom – don’t go getting mad at her, she didn’t ask me or anything – and when she told me about how the two of you managed to get this place renovated and up and running while sharing one truck, it hit me that there was something I could do for you. Go on, take it,” he insisted.

Tori took the key and looked down at it. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say a damn thing.” Clay winked at her. “You can come and get it any time. I was going to bring it tonight, but then I thought you probably don’t need to worry about finding someone else fit to drive when you get done later. I will have to borrow it back from you whenever Autumn gets around to placing this damn video shoot, but that will only take a few days.”

Tori looked from him to Xander and back again; she really didn’t know what to say.

“Thank you so much,” said Xander. He smiled at her. “We really did grow attached to that old truck.”

“I thought as much.” Clay smiled. “The only reason that I picked that one out for this damn video is that it reminds me of the truck I drove to Nashville when I first moved there.”

“Oh! Then you should keep it yourself,” said Tori.

Clay shook his head. “No. I’ll never drive the damn thing. It would only sit and gather dust at my place. When I heard that you guys could actually use it, I loved the idea of you having

it. And besides, if you're driving it, I'll see it around town. I like that idea."

"What's going on here?" They all turned to see Tori's mom giving them a puzzled look. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," said Clay.

"Mr. Mac... Clay is giving us the truck."

Her mom's eyebrows shot up. "He is?" She looked at Clay and then back at them.

For the first time since they'd arrived here, Tori felt nervous about what her mom might say next. She held her breath for a moment.

"Clayton MacAdam!"

All Tori's breath came out as a laugh when she saw the expression on Clay's face. She hadn't thought of him as being the kind of guy who anyone dared to castigate, but then again, this was her mom.

"Why, Alexandria, do you have a problem with me, darlin'?"

Tori exchanged a glance with Marianne and couldn't suppress a giggle at the way Clay laid on a deep Southern drawl that she'd only ever heard him use on stage.

Her mom narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes, I do." She glanced at Tori, who was relieved to see that she was smiling. "It's bad enough that I didn't get to buy my daughter and her fiancé the home that they've just moved into. When I realized that I'd been foiled in my attempts to do so, my next best plan was to buy them a car."

Tori's heart thudded to a halt. Her mom had just referred to Xander as her fiancé. When she turned to him, Xander looked tense, and she could see a little pulse ticking in his jaw. Oh no, he must think that her mom was having a dig at him. She'd have to try to make things right between them later. Although, from the apologetic look her mom had just given him, it didn't appear that she had too much of a problem with him.

Clay winked at Tori before he shrugged at her mom. "Well, sorry to beat you to it, I'm sure you'll think of something else. Let's just say that old truck has sentimental value to all of us."

Tori nodded. "It does and thank you." She met her mom's gaze. "Sorry, but he's right." She moved closer to Xander and slipped her arm around his waist. "I feel as though our life together began in that truck."

Xander leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "It did."

~ ~ ~

Tori made big eyes at Xander as they left her mom and Clay to talk with Marianne and her sister, Chris, who had just arrived with her man, Seymour Davenport.

"I didn't see that one coming, did you?" he asked.

"I didn't. That's so kind of him." Tori looked back over her shoulder. "Although, I can't imagine what Mom's going to come up with now."

He laughed. "She'll come up with something, and we'll thank her, no matter what it is."

“I think Jade will thank us for getting back behind the bar with her,” said Tori.

“She’s good. Damon arrived a little while ago, and he offered to help out since we’re even busier than we expected. That’s why I was able to come over to join you guys.”

“Yeah, but still. I want to get back there and help. You should probably do the rounds and say hello to people as well. I’ve done my bit of socializing for now.”

Xander couldn’t help watching her as she made her way back behind the bar. He might have been worried about her working there when they first came up with this idea, but he had no concerns anymore. She held her own just as well as Jade and Damon, she just did it in a quieter way. The customers all responded well to her; she made people happy without even trying.

As he watched, he noticed that Jade was chatting to a girl sitting at the end of the bar near her station. He grinned when he figured out that she must be Ally. He might have claimed that he didn’t want to get involved in the matchmaking business, but how much harm could there be in introducing Carson and Brock to the two of them?

When he reached the table where the two guys were sitting with Autumn and Matt, he grinned at them. He didn’t get a chance to greet them though before Autumn asked, “What was Clay up to?”

He grinned. “I’ll let him tell you about that.” He didn’t know them all that well yet, but he’d already figured out the dynamic of that group. No way did he want to be the one who

got in the middle of it all by telling Autumn that Clay had given the truck away.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What’s he up to?”

He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I’m staying out of it.” He turned to Carson and Brock. “Do you guys want to come over to the bar?”

He thought he might have to explain his reasoning, but they got straight to their feet.

Autumn laughed. “That’s right, run while you can. But I’m warning you, we’re leaving at noon tomorrow. If you’re not at the airport when the plane’s ready to take off, we will go without you, and you can find your own way home.”

Carson grinned at Xander. “She loves us, really.”

“I do,” said Autumn, “but that doesn’t mean I’ll put up with your shit.”

Matt laughed. “Believe me, guys, she speaks the truth.”

~ ~ ~

Jade raised her eyebrows at Xander when he approached the bar with Carson and Brock in his wake. She said something to her friend, who turned around and seemed to freeze when she spotted Brock. When Xander looked at him, it seemed that Brock was having the same reaction to her – his stride faltered when he met her gaze – interesting!

Xander didn’t get the chance to make an introduction – Jade beat him to it. He should have known that she wouldn’t need any help.

“Hey. I was wondering how long it’d take you guys to make it to the bar; what can I get you?”

Carson grinned and went to lean on the bar right in front of her. “What would you recommend?”

Brock rolled his eyes at Xander, but Jade just laughed and said, “I’d have to know you better before I could recommend something that might suit you. The first step would be telling you that I’m Jade, and this is Ally.”

She stuck her hand out, but instead of shaking it, Carson brought it up to his lips and kissed the back of it. “It’s a pleasure.”

Brock nodded at Ally. “Carson here doesn’t need any introduction; everyone knows who he is. I’m Brock.”

From the way her eyes lit up as she smiled and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Ally.” Xander figured that he’d done his part – they didn’t need him for anything more. And since Jade would be otherwise occupied for a while, he should get back behind the bar and help Tori and Damon out.

~ ~ ~

“Can you take a break yet, Sis?” Willow asked. “Everyone’s dying to talk to you.”

Tori looked around; it was much quieter at the bar now. Damon came and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Go on and take Xander with you. I can handle things back here, and if we have another rush, I’ll pry Jade away from that singer guy.”

Tori had to laugh; Jade and Ally had been chatting with Carson and Brock for the last fifteen minutes. She wasn't mad about it – Jade had worked her ass off for them all week – if she wanted to flirt with Carson, she'd earned it.

“Thanks. We won't be long.”

“Take your time,” said Damon. “Those guys have come all the way from Napa to be here for you. Hang out with them a while. I'm good, I promise.”

She went to him and rolled up onto her tiptoes, but he still had to bend down a long way so that she could kiss his cheek, he was so tall. “Thank you so much. We wouldn't have made it through tonight without you.” She chuckled. “And don't tell Taryn that I said this, but if ever you're looking for a change...”

He laughed with her. “Yeah, thanks, but let's keep that one quiet, can we? If ever you need extra help, I'll do what I can. But I'm happy working for her – even apart from the fact that we know she'd skin us both alive if she knew that we were having this conversation.”

Tori giggled. “You're right, we should pretend that I never even mentioned it.”

Damon winked and pretended to zip up his lips before moving away down the bar to serve customers.

She went and caught hold of Xander's hand. “Damon said he can manage things back here while we go and catch up with everyone.”

“Okay, we should probably do that now. I reckon it’s time to get Clay up to sing soon.”

As soon as they came out from behind the bar, Willow took Tori’s other hand and towed her over to where their friends were gathered around a group of high-top tables that they’d pulled together.

When they reached them, Xander slung his arm around her shoulders, and grinned at them all.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.”

Tori nodded. “Yes, it means the world to us.”

Willow grinned at her. “We wouldn’t have missed this for anything. This is awesome, Sis. And I hate to admit it, but it’s way better than some old wine bar.”

Tori had to laugh. “Thanks. I think so.” She sought out Cam and Piper. “And I can’t thank the two of you enough. If you hadn’t offered us your house, none of this would have happened. We probably would have just stayed here for a couple of days to visit with Mom and then we would have moved on.”

Piper grinned at her. “You are so much more than welcome. I love that we were able to be a tiny part of this.”

Chelsea smiled. “I love this for you, Tori. I always hoped that you might come home, but at least this is a damn sight closer than Nashville.”

“It is,” said Tori. “You can come and see us anytime here, can’t you?”

Chelsea laughed. “We can. And I take it that means you don’t plan to visit Napa too often?”

She shook her head, and Xander tightened his arm around her as he said, “You know better than that, Chels. Tori and I were never really Napa people.”

Chelsea made a face at him. “I know, but I was hoping ...” Tori wondered what she was about to say when she gave Xander an evil grin. “Since I don’t get my wish for the two of you to move home, tell me that I get my other wish?”

Tori gave Xander a puzzled look when she felt him tense beside her.

Chelsea laughed. “Don’t look at me like that, tough guy! You don’t scare me. And anyway, I might be the only one brave enough to say it, but you know that everyone’s wondering – when are you guys going to get married? Just do me a favor and don’t be in too much of a hurry, okay? You need to wait until after our wedding.”

“Give it a rest, Chelsea, would you?” Smoke scowled at her, but Chelsea just laughed. Although, her laughter faded when she realized that everyone else was giving her disapproving looks, too.

Tori felt bad. Chelsea was just like that; she was always the one to wade in and say what no one else dared to. She might feel bad for her friend, but she didn’t know what she could say to help her out.

It didn’t seem like Xander was ready to let her off the hook, either. He was still tense as he stood silently beside her.

Although, he and Slade seemed to be having an unspoken conversation with their eyes.

She was grateful to her sister when Willow broke the awkward silence that had descended. “When’s Clay going to sing?” she asked.

Tori looked around for him; this was probably the time to get him up on stage and introduce him.

“In just a few minutes, as soon we’re done here.”

Hannah smiled at her. “Oh good, I really wanted to hear him, but we’re going to have to leave soon.”

Grady smiled at her. “We don’t need to; Ava’s fine with the sitter.”

“Oh my gosh! Ava’s here?”

Hannah nodded happily. “We knew that we wouldn’t be able to bring her tonight, but we still wanted to make a weekend out of it – and she’s fallen in love with the lake.”

“So have we,” Grady added.

“If you have time tomorrow, can we get together?” Xander asked. “I’d love to see her.”

Tori’s heart melted at that. Of the many things that she loved about him, his relationship with his niece was close to the top of the list. He adored that little girl, and there was no doubt that she adored him right back.

Grady laughed. “She’d love to see you. She misses her Uncle Xander.”

Xander chuckled. “That’s because I’m her favorite.”

Slade scowled at him. “I think you’ll find that Uncle Slade’s her favorite.”

Tori loved the way that the two of them pretended to compete for the little girl’s attention. She’d seen them do it before when Ava was around – then, she’d put it down to it being a game for Ava, making sure that she knew just how much everyone loved her. Now, Tori wasn’t so sure that it was just a game.

Everyone laughed when Jacob got to his feet and put his hands on his hips. “You are aware that you guys are only squabbling over second place, aren’t you? Everyone knows that Uncle Jacob is Ava’s favorite.”

Tori laughed even harder at the disgruntled look that Xander and Slade exchanged.

~ ~ ~

While everyone was still laughing, Xander caught Clay’s eye. It looked like he was ready to get up and do his thing. Xander pressed a kiss to Tori’s temple and murmured, “Do you want me to get up and introduce him, or do you want to do it?”

She took his hand and smiled. “I think we should do it together, don’t you?”

He nodded happily. It made sense; it wasn’t just about introducing Clay. This was their moment to officially mark the opening of their bar. He ran his finger over the box in his pocket. There had been a time when he’d thought that he might propose to her on stage tonight. He’d decided against it,

though. Their friends and family might have enjoyed that – in fact, he knew that they would – but it wasn't about them. Tori wouldn't enjoy it, and that was all that mattered.

When they reached the small stage, Tori went straight to the microphone. That made him smile. He'd been thinking that he would need to do it, but she was perfectly comfortable on stage. She might have been a backup singer rather than the main star, but she was no stranger to performing.

“Hey, everyone!”

The hum of conversation died down, and the whole bar went quiet as people all turned to look at them.

“In just a moment the amazing Clay MacAdam is going to sing for us all.” She turned and shot a smile at him. “I know you'll all enjoy that. Before he does, we just wanted to thank him for being here tonight. And we want to thank all of you for coming as well. Xander and I have poured our hearts and souls into this place; we're determined to make it work, and we hope to see all of you become regulars.”

She held her hand out to him, and Xander went to stand by her side. He slung his arm around her shoulders and smiled out at the crowd when she handed him the microphone.

“I don't have much to add, except to say thank you to you all.” He smiled at Tori. “This little lady is the powerhouse behind this place. She's the brains and the inspiration.”

Tori took the microphone back. “Don't believe a word of it.”

He held his breath, hoping that she wasn't about to put herself down and give him all the glory. He relaxed as a rush of warmth filled his chest when she continued.

“Violets is a team effort.” She smiled up at him. “We each have our strengths and our weaknesses, we're just lucky that we complement each other.” She turned back to the crowd.

“I may have planted the seed of the idea, but it wouldn't have grown without Xander.” She smiled. “And it won't bloom without all of you. Anyway, I think I've talked enough.” She turned to Clay. “All that remains is to introduce this man, the man you've all been waiting for, Mr. Clay MacAdam.”

Xander kept his arm around her as everyone applauded, and they made their way down from the stage.

Clay waited for the applause to die down before he spoke. “Thank you all for coming tonight.” He nodded to Xander and Tori. “It's an honor and a pleasure for me to be a part of it. I'm wishing you guys every success with this place – you deserve it.”

As he launched into one of his songs, Xander turned to Tori and wrapped both arms around her. Her eyes sparkled.

“Do you recognize the song?”

He nodded happily. He knew that it was one of her favorites. It was called The Moments; it was all about living every moment. He'd never heard it before he met Tori, but now, he was able to quietly sing every word to her as they swayed to the music.

He didn't care who was watching as he lowered his head to kiss her. This was a moment that he wasn't going to let pass him by.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

It was two o'clock in the morning by the time they locked up the bar. Tori was almost asleep on her feet. Xander wrapped his arm around her as they walked back to the truck.

“Wasn't it a great night?” she asked.

He nodded happily. “It couldn't have gone better. I think Violets is off to a great start, don't you?”

“I do, and I love that so many of our friends were here to celebrate with us.”

She couldn't figure out the look he gave her as he opened the truck door for her.

“What's up?” she asked.

“Not a damn thing, sprite. It's all good.”

As he drove the short distance up the east shore of the lake to their new home, Tori tried to keep her eyes open, but she couldn't quite manage it. She startled, realizing that she'd been drifting off to sleep, when her cell phone buzzed in her pocket.

“What's that? Is everything okay?” Xander asked as she pulled it out to check it.

She smiled. “It's okay. Nothing's wrong. It's a text from Callie.”

Callie: Hey, girl! Sorry we couldn't be there with you tonight. I hope it all went well. I can't wait to see this new bar of yours. We'll come visit just as soon as we can. I'm so happy for you that you and Xander finally got together – and I'm not above saying that I told you so! Love you, girly. Let's talk soon, okay?

Tori smiled as she read it.

“Are they okay? I haven't spoken to Kolby in a while.” Just as he said that, his phone beeped with an incoming text.

Tori looked down at her phone again. “Callie says that Kolby's texting you, too. So, I guess that's him.”

When they got back to the house, Xander led her by the hand to the kitchen.

“Are you tired?” he asked. “Do you want to go straight to bed?”

“I am tired but I'm too wired to go to sleep, yet, I think.”

“Me, too. Do you want a drink?”

She grinned at him. “How about some of that special vodka of yours?”

He chuckled. “That's what I was thinking.”

He poured them each a glass and brought hers to her. “Don't think that me giving you this means that I expect you to take advantage of me later – I know you're beat; it's been a big day. It's been a long week, for that matter.”

She waggled her eyebrows at him. “Don’t you go thinking that claiming you’re tired is going to stop me.”

He laughed and ran his hand over her hair. “Have I told you today how much I love you?”

She nodded happily. “You have. And I believe that I’ve told you, too.”

“You’ve told me, and you’ve shown me, and...” It seemed that he had something important on his mind as he dropped his gaze and shoved one hand in his pocket.

“You can tell me to stop bugging you if I’m wrong, but you seem to have developed a nervous habit lately.”

His gaze flicked up to meet hers. “What do you mean?”

She jerked her chin toward his hand, which was still in his pocket.

“You used to put both hands in your pockets when we first got together as though you thought you could hide the fact that you were hard for me.”

He chuckled. “Damn, and I thought I hid it so well.”

She laughed with him. “You didn’t, and I’m glad. Why would you want to hide it anyway?”

“I only tried to hide it until I got to know you better. At first, I mistakenly thought that I might have to take things slowly around you when it came to sex.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “But now you know better.”

“I sure do.”

“But what’s that about? The one-handed thing that you’ve been doing for the last couple of weeks.”

He surprised her when he knocked back the last of his vodka and poured himself another. Then he came and topped off her glass before taking her hand and leading her to the pantry.

She smiled at him when he slid the shelves back to reveal the staircase hidden behind them. “Are you taking me up to the tower to tell me?”

He smiled. “I am. In fact, before we go, let’s grab your speaker.” He went back and collected it from where it was sitting on the counter in the kitchen. “I think I want music for this.”

They climbed the stairs to the third floor of the turret. When they got there, he came to her and rested his hands on her shoulders as he looked down into her eyes. “I thought that when I did this, I wanted to dance with you out in the moonlight, but this is better.” He looked out through the window, and she followed his gaze to take in the amazing view of the lake, which sparkled in the light of the moon.

“This is way better, Xander. It’s too cold out there tonight.”

She sipped her vodka and watched as he fiddled with his phone, trying to pair it with her speaker. “What do you want to play?” she asked. “Will I have it?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “Just give me a minute?”

“Take as long as you like.” She wandered over to the window and stood there, taking in the view. “We have all the

time in the world.”

She smiled when his hands came down on her shoulders and he rested his chin on the top of her head. “That’s what I want, sprite. I want to spend all the time I have left in this world with you – all the moments.”

She turned to face him, and he slid his arms around her waist, drawing her closer until she was crushed against his chest. “That’s what I want, too, Xander.” Her breath caught in her chest when the first chords of a familiar song drifted out of the speaker.

She lifted her head to look up at him, and her heart felt as though it might overflow with happiness when she saw all the love shining in his eyes.

“The Moments?”

He nodded happily and started to sway with her to the music. “When Clay sang this song earlier, it hit me hard. I know you like this one, but I don’t think I’d ever really understood it – I sure as hell hadn’t ever felt it in the same way that I did tonight.”

She clung to him as they swayed back and forth, and the sound of Clay’s voice filled the room. Then, Xander started to sing along, and she couldn’t hear Clay anymore, only Xander; only the man she’d loved her whole life.

When I look back, on the day I die,

I want to say, I lived the moments,

That I never let the moments pass me by.

*When I look back, on the day I die,
I want to say, I truly lived every moment
with you by my side.*

She buried her face in his chest and clung to him. She could feel his heart thundering under her cheek. When the song finally ended, she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Thank you. That was beautiful.”

“I’m not great with fancy words, you know that. I figured that song could tell you so much better than I could put it myself.”

She reached up to touch his cheek. “I don’t need fancy words; I just want you.”

He grinned, and her heart leapt into her mouth as he got down on one knee in front of her. “Good, because I don’t really have any. All I can do is echo what Clay already said; when I die, I want to be able to look back on my life and be able to say that I truly lived every moment with you by my side.” He gave her a rueful smile. “What I’m trying to say is, will you marry me? Will you be my wife? I love you, sprite. I want to spend the rest of my days loving you. I want to share all the moments with you – the good ones and the bad. I know that we can face anything together. What do you say?”

She sank down to her knees before him and cupped his face between her hands. “Yes! I say yes, Xander. I want to marry you. I want you to be my husband and me to be your wife. I want to share it all with you.”

He shoved his hand into his pocket and smiled. “It wasn’t a nervous mannerism that I’d developed. I’ve been carrying this thing around for a while now, waiting for the right moment.” He pulled out a small velvet box and flipped it open.

Her hands flew up to cover her mouth. “Oh my gosh, Xander! It’s beautiful!”

“You like it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t just like it, I love it.”

She held her hand out, and he slid the ring on. It was the most beautiful ring that she’d ever seen. It was a huge, oval cut diamond, surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds, set in a simple, yellow gold band.

She looked down at it and then up at him. “I love it! I love you!”

He chuckled. “I love you, too, sprite. Remember when we saw the chapel and I asked you to give me a little bit of time?”

She nodded.

“I wanted to ask you right then and there, but I’d been such a dumbass. At first, it didn’t even occur to me that asking you – actually proposing to you – was a huge part of the whole deal. Then, when it finally hit me, I needed to get the ring, and then I needed to ask your folks for their blessing. That’s the only reason that I didn’t ask you then.”

She leaned in to kiss him. When they finally broke apart, she rested her hand over his heart. “It’s okay. None of it matters. For a little while, when we first talked about being married, I was disappointed because I thought that you weren’t

going to propose; like it was just something that we'd agreed on – and that would have been fine.”

He shook his head. “No. It wouldn't have been fine. You wanted the whole deal – and you deserve to have it. I'm just sorry that it took me a while to catch on.”

She shook her head happily. “I'm glad that you didn't figure it out sooner.” She looked around. “This way, I didn't just get my handsome prince, I got my castle and my fairytale turret.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you did.”

“Most important of all, is that we made it. I finally found the place I belong – with you.”

He wrapped his arms around her and sat back on his butt, pulling her onto his lap. He reached for their drinks, handing her a glass before getting his own.

“Here's to us, sprite. To you and me and the life that we're going to build here.”

She clinked her glass against his. “To us.” She laughed. “Here's to us living a long and happy life together in our lovely new home. Here's to being surrounded by our friends and family, and living in this awesome little town and ...” She ran out of steam but still felt like there was more to say. “And to ... What else?”

Xander clinked his glass against hers. “And to vodka and Violets.”

I hope you enjoyed Xander and Tori's story. I'm surprised to say that I think this will be the last Hamiltons book for a while. I know that I still owe you a whole bunch of weddings. I'm not going to make any promises yet – but I will say that if Jacob gets his way, you won't have to wait for too long! The next book out will be Damon and Jo's story, which is Summer Lake Silver Book 11, [Walking on Sunshine](#). I'm sure you noticed that he showed up at every opportunity in Vodka and Violets – he's impatient!

A NOTE FROM SJ

I hope you enjoyed Xander and Tori's story, I love them. When I started this book, I didn't know if this would be the last in The Hamiltons series. I think it will be the last one for a while, but I've learned to never say never – this series came back strong after a couple of years. I thought it would be complete when I wrote Milkshakes and Mistletoe, but Hannah and Grady managed to introduce a whole new group of friends.

I didn't know if the pilots would want their stories told – Trick, Elliott, Ollie, and Reaves have all been around for a while – they do want their own books, but they're not in a hurry. I thought that Tori might be the link back to finally writing the rest of the Nashville series – that might happen at some point soon. I also had a feeling that the gang in the Seasons series was getting impatient for me to revisit them – Jade and Ally have proved me right about that.

For the time being, all I know is that Damon and Jo are up next in Summer Lake Silver, Book 11, [Walking on Sunshine](#). I'll be lucky if they let me wait until tomorrow before I start writing their story! Keep turning the pages for a sneak peek at them.

After that, we're heading back to Montana for Ace and Ari in what will be book six of the MacFarland Ranch series, [The Rancher's Inescapable Love](#). You can find a sneak peek at their story if you keep turning the pages. I say it that way

because some of the reading apps kick you out of the book and back into their store after you reach the end of a story – so if you made it this far – well done!

At this point, I'm not going to commit to what will happen after that – I will keep rotating through Summer Lake Silver and MacFarland Ranch, but I'll have to see what else the voices dictate.

With the Silvers, Tino is still waiting for his turn, but he hasn't told me who his lady is yet. Davin is still waiting, too – and he wants to be with mystery woman, Zoe, who's visited the lake a couple of times already, but we know next to nothing about her.

With the MacFarlands, I *think* that Tanner will be after Ace. I'm so excited about his book – he's the player in the family, and he's about to fall for a single mom with an adorable little boy. However, Ty recently told me who his lady is – took me totally by surprise – and he might even elbow his way in front of Tanner, we'll just have to see.

The other possibilities are continuing the Love in Nashville series and / or Summer Lake Seasons. I've even considered writing a series of wedding novellas – I've left so many couples locked in long engagements for years!

But as I said, it's the voices who will decide – I'll let you know more when I do.

Check out the “Also By” page to see if any of my other series appeal to you – You'll find a list of all my books – complete with reading order [here](#).

If you'd like to keep in touch, there are a few options to keep up with me and my imaginary friends:

The best way is to [Sign up for my Newsletter](#). Don't worry, I won't bombard you! I'll let you know about upcoming releases, share a sneak peek or two and keep you in the loop for a couple of fun giveaways I have coming up :0)

You can join me on Facebook at facebook.com/authorsjmccoy, or come and join the [reader group here](#).

And I'm always in the process of updating my website at www.SJMcCoy.com with new book updates and even some videos. Plus, you'll find the latest news on new releases and giveaways on my blog.

I love to hear from readers, so feel free to email me at SJ@sjmccoy.com. I'm better at that! :0)

I hope our paths will cross again soon. Until then, take care, and thanks for your support—you are the reason I write!

Love,

SJ

WALKING ON SUNSHINE

SNEAK PEEK

When Jo got back to her room in the lodge, she closed her eyes and threw her phone down on the bed. She really didn't need this. She was supposed to be here to enjoy a break. Okay, so, retirement was way more than a break – but retirement felt like way too big of a deal to face it all in one go. So, she kept telling herself that this trip to Summer Lake was just a break.

She scowled at her phone when it beeped with another text. What she really needed was a break from her daughter. Why she'd thought that bringing Mallory out here for the weekend was a good idea was beyond her. She knew better.

She snatched her phone up. It was Sunday afternoon, and Mallory would have to leave in a little while. As much as she wanted to, she really shouldn't just ignore her until she left.

Mallory: Meet me in the bar? We should talk before I leave.

Jo: I'll be down there in a few minutes.

Of course, when she got down there, there was no sign of Mallory. Jo pulled up a seat at the bar. All she needed to do was get through the next hour or so. Then, her daughter would go back to her life in Orange County, and tomorrow, Jo would be able to make a start on settling into her new life here in Summer Lake.

“Hello again. What can I get you? Is it one for the road before you leave us?”

She felt a touch of heat in her cheeks when the bartender, Damon, came to her with a big smile on his face. He’d been so friendly every time she came into the bar. She needed to get over it. It was just that he was good at his job – and she’d been starved of attention for so long, that a flirty bartender made her feel special.

“I’ll take a G&T, heavy on the G.” She smiled. “Don’t worry. It isn’t for the road.”

He braced his hands on the edge of the bar and cocked his head to the side. He was a big man – huge. Even with the bar between them, he towered over her.

His eyes twinkled as he said, “Are you about to make my day and tell me that you’re not leaving us? You’re sticking around? That’s the best news I’ve had all weekend.”

She smiled through pursed lips. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Nope. Just you.” He looked all around as if checking to see if anyone was listening before he leaned closer.

Jo automatically leaned in to hear what he had to say.

“Truth be told, I’m glad to see the back of some of them.”

She laughed. She wasn’t about to tell him – she felt awful even admitting it to herself – but she knew how he felt, she’d be glad to see the back of Mallory when she left.

He glanced over her shoulder and his smile disappeared. “I’ll get you that G&T – and if you want to come back to see me tonight, after the crowds have departed, it’d be my pleasure to get you another.”

She nodded happily. If he wanted to drum up some business – and fill his tip jar on a quiet night, she’d be happy to oblige. It’d beat sitting stewing in her hotel room over whatever parting shots Mallory left her with.

“Mom.”

“Mallory.” She plastered a smile on her face as she turned to greet her daughter.

“I’ll need to get on the road shortly, but I wanted to see you before I go.”

“I’m glad. I know you’re not thrilled about me staying here, but I don’t want to leave things on a sour note between us. Let’s just enjoy half an hour together before you leave, can we?”

Mallory’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I can’t enjoy anything about this place. It’s ...” she looked around “... it’s ridiculous to think that you might move here.”

As Jo sucked in a deep breath to steady herself, she noticed Damon slide her G&T across the bar. She shot him a grateful smile and took a drink before facing her daughter.

“I already have moved here, sweetheart. I’m going to look at the house tomorrow.”

“But you can still back out! You haven’t signed anything yet! Please, don’t do it! Come home!”

Jo took another slug of her drink – grateful that Damon had done as she'd asked and gone heavy on the gin.

“Where exactly are you calling home?”

“You know damn well where I mean! I mean our home! The home where I grew up! The home that Dad's hoping that you'll return to. And I'll tell you something, you should take this chance – he's not going to wait forever!”

Jo closed her eyes. “You mean the house that I moved out of more than a year ago? The house that he moved his secretary into two days after I left? I don't know how many ways I can say this, sweetheart. I really don't. I have no intention of going back to your father – *ever*. I'm not going to say anything else on the subject. I'm glad for you that you have a good relationship with him still – but I don't, and I have no desire to.”

“Why won't you get it through your head? He's sorry. It's over with Juliette. He wants you home. Coming out here to a little town in the boonies like this is ridiculous!”

“I don't care if he's sorry! I don't care if his affair is over. All that matters to me is that the marriage is over. That's what you need to get through *your* head – and your father does, too.”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn, Mom? This is no place for you! You should come home.” Mallory wasn't exactly shouting, but her voice was raised.

Jo managed to rein herself in. This was pointless. She wasn't going to convince Mallory of anything, and she had no

desire to get into a screaming match with her – especially not here.

She glanced around, feeling embarrassed. Damon was chatting with two men sitting farther down the bar – they were the only ones who'd been disturbed by Mallory's outburst. He gave her a reassuring smile, which she appreciated.

Even if all he was doing was earning his tips, she didn't care. He was the most supportive presence she'd had in her life for a long time.

He and the two guys he was with turned when a woman called from the entrance, "Hey guys, we'll meet you out on the terrace."

The woman had a friend with her, and they each had a dog on a leash. Jo had always wanted a dog. Just as she was wondering if getting a dog was finally going to be possible for her, Mallory interrupted her thoughts.

"You're not even listening to me, are you? I can see why Dad –"

No. That was too much. Jo had taken as much as she was going to. "Why he what, Mallory?" she snapped. "Why he started sleeping with his secretary? Why he threw away thirty years of marriage? Tell me what exactly it is that you can see – and then, maybe you can explain it to me."

Mallory opened her mouth to reply, but she didn't get the chance. One of the dogs barked and then, it was running through the restaurant – coming straight for them. Mallory screamed and fled. Jo watched in disbelief as Damon vaulted

over the bar – just ... vaulted, as if it was nothing. At the same time, the dog skidded to a halt in front of her. Jo somehow knew that it meant her no harm.

She felt even more assured of that when Damon positioned himself between her and the dog and said, “Sorry about that. I promise you, she’s safe. She won’t harm you.”

He said it with such absolute confidence that she believed him. Still, she was a little stunned as she watched one of his friends lead the dog away.

“Hey.”

She turned back to him when she realized that he was still standing beside her – in fact, he’d taken a step closer. She had to tip her head back to look up at him. This was the first time that they’d been on the same side of the bar, and he was even taller than she’d realized.

“Are you okay?”

“I am. Thanks. I’m fine. I will be.” She looked around, wondering where Mallory had gotten to. “I need to check on my daughter.”

He met her gaze and held it. “Can I still get you that drink later? Say, seven thirty?”

She nodded. It seemed strange to make an appointment to come down to the bar, but she owed him even more after he’d leapt in to protect her just now. And she already knew that she’d want another drink later. Her gaze landed on Mallory, who was complaining loudly about the dog to the woman who, Jo believed, owned the place.

“I’ll be back later. I need to go and sort that out.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” She blew out a sigh – she was going to need it!

~ ~ ~

“What are you doing back here on your night off?”

Damon smiled at Taryn through pursed lips. “Just here for a drink.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and Dalton laughed beside her. “You mean that you’re here to follow up on what Echo tried to help you with earlier?”

He grinned. “I guess I do.”

Taryn gave them both a puzzled look, but Dalton wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against him. He ducked his head as if to kiss her but swerved away at the last moment and grinned at Damon.

“Make a break for it while I distract her.”

Damon laughed at the way Taryn batted at Dalton to get off her, but he did as he’d told him and walked out to the front of the restaurant. It’d be better to meet Jo out there and avoid Taryn subjecting them to twenty questions.

He was still surprised at himself for asking Jo to meet him for a drink like this. He hadn’t been on a date in years. He’d been joking with Lucky and Dalton earlier – asking if they’d ask Echo to do some matchmaking for him – and not five minutes later, Echo had come flying into the bar and stopped

at Jo's feet. Damon didn't know what to make of that – but he did know that he wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

Jo had caught his attention the first time she came into the bar on Friday afternoon. There was just something about her. She was warm and funny and ... he didn't know how to describe it, but he felt drawn to her.

After he'd met her daughter, he felt protective of her, too. He'd assumed that Jo would be leaving tonight, as most of the guests did, but when he discovered that she wasn't, he'd decided to take a chance and ask her out.

He smiled when he saw her hurrying down the hallway from the hotel lobby. Her stride faltered when she spotted him.

“Oh! I ... is this right? Are you leaving?” She checked her watch, looking flustered.

He strode to meet her. “No. I'm not going anywhere – not without you, anyway.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Are you just starting your shift? Am I making you late? We'd better get in there.”

He cocked his head to the side, not understanding. “My shift?”

“Yes.” Now, she looked confused. “I'm sorry. I think I have this wrong. You look like you're ready to leave. I thought you were working.”

“I'm not working. Sunday is my night off. And I am ready to leave – I thought we could go over to the wine bar – have you been there?”

Her cheeks turned bright red. “I don’t understand.”

He chuckled. “Help me out – what don’t you understand?”

“I thought I was coming to see you while you were working.”

He stared at her. Shit. She thought he’d invited her back for a drink as a customer?

“Is that only reason that you said yes?”

She met his gaze and held it. “I ... uh ...”

She looked so uncomfortable that he let her off the hook. “Okay. So, we had a bit of a misunderstanding. But here we are, so ... would you like to go for a drink with me? It’s my night off, you see.”

She still looked confused, but after a few moments, she smiled. “I would, thank you. I’d like that a lot.”

He chuckled and offered her his arm. “Then come, let me introduce you to life in Summer Lake.”

A sense of ease crept over him when she slipped her arm through his and smiled up at him.

“I haven’t been here for long myself, but I can tell you that it’s way more than just some small town in the boonies.”

Her cheeks flushed. “You heard what Mallory said?”

“I did.” He squeezed her arm. “Yeah, sorry about that but it was hard not to. I just want to say one thing, then I’ll let it go.”

“What’s that?”

He smiled. “I’m proud of you. I don’t really know you, and it’s none of my business, but from what I heard, you’re standing your ground, and starting a new life – that takes guts.” He gave her a rueful smile. “I know because I’ve been there, too. I admire your strength.”

“Thanks.”

He couldn’t read the look on her face, so he let it go. They were through the lobby and out in the plaza now.

“Anyway, let’s go get that drink.”

When she smiled at him, he felt something settle inside him. He didn’t know what it was about her that made him feel so ... at ease, but he was hoping that he might get the chance to find out;

;

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THE RANCHER'S INESCAPABLE LOVE - SNEAK PEEK

Ari looked around in confusion when she reached the bottom of the exit ramp. It was the right exit; she knew it was. But this wasn't what she'd been hoping for. There were two gas stations, one on either side of the highway. A grocery store with a parking lot half full of muddy pickup trucks, and a rundown motel.

“Move it, would you?” she grumbled at the driver in front of her when the light changed. “It's not going to get any greener!”

She turned left onto Highway 89, following the signs for Yellowstone National Park. Stella had warned her that this part of Montana wasn't anything like what she was used to, but she'd also reassured her that the natural beauty of Paradise Valley would make up for the lack of amenities – and the remoteness.

Ari had taken all of it with a pinch of salt. She might be a ‘big-city lawyer’ in Stella's eyes, but she'd grown up in a small town in southwestern Colorado; she figured that she was more familiar with both natural beauty and remoteness than her friend understood.

She cursed under her breath at the dirty pickup in front of her, which was rolling along at twenty-five, even though the signs said thirty-five – and Ari could see fifty-five not too far ahead.

At the last second, she hung a quick right into the parking lot of the grocery store. She couldn't see a sign, but surely every grocery store had a Starbucks inside these days, didn't they?

If not, she'd probably be able to find those little bottled Vanilla Frappuccinos – and that would have to do. Even if she could only get bottled water, it would give old Slowpoke McDirty Truck the chance to get out of her way before she got back on the road.

After the day she'd had – the week she'd had – she didn't think her blood pressure would be able to stand traveling the next forty-five miles down a two-lane highway following some old boy who insisted on driving ten under the speed limit.

She climbed out of the SUV she'd rented when she landed at the airport in Bozeman. She still hadn't decided whether she would actually need the four-wheel drive and other bells and whistles – or whether the man at the desk had upsold her as hard as he could as soon as the Black Card came out of her purse. It didn't matter. The thing was comfortable, and reassuringly large, rugged, and luxurious.

She slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder and hurried toward the entrance. The wind was howling, and it

whipped her hair around her face despite her having tied it up in what she'd believed to be a very practical-looking bun.

The automatic door slid open, and she put her head down and hurried inside. She was disappointed but not surprised to see that there was no Starbucks. Oh, well. Frappuccino it would have to be.

She hurried to the end of an aisle, hoping to get in and out as quickly as possible. It was easy to forget about it while she was behind the wheel of the mammoth SUV, but now that she was out in public, she felt suddenly vulnerable.

When she was faced with a whole refrigerated section full of cheese and yogurt, with no chilled drinks in sight, she changed her mind. She didn't need coffee. She was jittery enough.

She turned to head back the way she'd come and stepped straight into the path of a shopping cart that was traveling way too fast.

The man pushing it did his best to avoid hitting her – he swerved as he brought it to a halt, but it still caught her hip with enough force that she staggered.

The next thing she knew, strong hands caught her arms and set her back on her feet.

“Whoa! Are you okay?”

It took her a moment to gather her senses. When she did, she looked up to see a pair of icy blue eyes, the lines around them etched with concern. Wow! He was a good-looking guy! She was so mesmerized by those eyes, and by his rugged,

handsome face, that instead of shrugging him off and hurrying away as she'd intended to, she simply stood and stared.

His eyebrows came together in a deep V. "Are you okay?" he asked more slowly.

She laughed when she realized that he thought she'd been stunned by the collision when in fact, she was simply bowled over by his good looks.

"I'm perfectly fine. Thanks for checking. And ... my apologies."

He gave her a puzzled smile and lowered his hands from her arms. "No need. I was going too fast, I always do. Don't like to be here, so I get in and out as quick as I can."

She could relate to that. Grocery shopping was one of her least favorite domestic chores – not that she had any favorites.

"And here I am delaying you." She stepped back. She wanted to say something else, but there was nothing to say.

He gave her a puzzled look; perhaps he wanted to prolong the encounter, too. "Are you here on vacation or just passing through?"

Her pulse quickened. How could she be so stupid? She had no idea who he was. He could be one of Ansari's men, tailing her.

She studied his face, highly doubting that was the case – this man was a genuine rugged cowboy, from the toes of his cowboy boots to the brim of his cowboy hat – probably all the way to the top of it, but he was a good few inches taller than

her five-eight, so she couldn't vouch for anything beyond the brim.

As good-looking as he might be, as tempted as she might be to strike up a conversation with him, she couldn't risk it, she had to go. "Just passing through. Sorry again." She nodded at his cart before hurrying away. When she reached the end of the aisle, she couldn't resist looking back before she turned. He was still standing there, watching her go.

A shiver ran down her spine and it wasn't because she was afraid. It was because, after longer than she cared to remember, she found herself attracted to a man.

She hurried back to the SUV empty handed but feeling that she'd taken something away from her visit to the grocery store.

~ ~ ~

Ace was still thinking about his close encounter with the raven-haired beauty when he got home. He realized that he was smiling as he put his groceries away. He was a little disappointed that she hadn't stayed to chat – he wasn't used to women running away from him. He usually had the opposite problem – too often, they tried to hunt him down.

He blew out a sigh as he put the milk in the fridge. Oh well, if he wanted some female company, there were plenty of women who'd be happy to hear from him. The trouble was, he was still intrigued by the tall slender one who hadn't been able to hide her interest when she turned back for one last look at him before she hurried out of the store.

He checked his watch. He didn't have time to waste thinking about her. He needed to get down to the cabin by the river and make sure everything was ready for Stella's friend. He'd been glad to hear from Stella again, and happy to rent the cabin to her friend, but he had the feeling that there was more going on than she wanted to tell him. In fact, he knew there was. She'd told him that she didn't feel comfortable telling him why her friend – Ari – wanted to come and stay in the middle of winter.

Plenty of folks vacationed here in the winter, but not folks like Stella – not city folks who weren't the least bit outdoorsy.

As he climbed back into his truck and headed down the hill, he was curious about this Ari woman. If she needed peace and quiet, she'd have plenty of it. But Ace decided that if she had problems, like Stella did when she came to stay, he'd do his best to help her out.

He was surprised to see a Lincoln Navigator sitting outside the riverside cabin. For one thing, he didn't think that Ari would have arrived yet. And for another, he'd been expecting something smaller – although, there was no reason a woman alone shouldn't drive one of the biggest seven-seater SUVs out there if she chose.

He knocked on the door and waited, but she didn't appear. He knocked again and after a while went to peer in through the window. There was no sign of her. Maybe she was exhausted after her travels and was taking a nap.

He turned to leave, thinking that he'd try again later, and stopped dead when he came face to face with the woman from

the grocery store. She had a can of bear spray aimed at him.

“Who are you?” she asked. “What do you want?”

He smiled and held his hands up, hoping to put her at ease – and also because he couldn’t believe his luck. “Are you Ari?”

She advanced a couple of steps, raising the can higher. “I ask the questions! Why are you following me?”

“I’m not, darlin’. Or at least, if I did, it’s because I live here.”

She eyed him warily, obviously not trusting him.

“What’s your name?”

“Ace Zielinski. And yours is Ari – Arianna Knightly, right?”

She started to look uncertain.

“How about we call Stella? She can tell you who I am.”

She frowned as she considered it. “Okay, but you when call her, put her on video.”

Ace took his phone out with a half-smile on his face. He was impressed that she was so proactive about her safety, but he had a feeling she’d be embarrassed when Stella confirmed his identity for her. Maybe he should offer to take her out to dinner to show there were no hard feelings on his part.

He held his phone up and called Stella.

He smiled when her face appeared on the screen. “Hi, Ace. Is everything okay? Is Ari there yet?”

“She is. I was hoping you could reassure her that I am who I say I am.”

He turned the phone to Ari, who quickly lowered her bear spray.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Ari nodded curtly. “I’m fine. Sorry to bother you. I just ... well, I can’t be too careful.”

“Of course! I understand. I’m sorry. I should have shown you a photo so that you would recognize Ace.”

“That’s okay. Problem solved. I’ll call you soon.”

“Okay.”

Ace turned the phone back around. “Thanks, Stella.”

She gave him an apologetic smile. “I’ll call you soon, too.”

“Any time. I’ll look forward to it.”

He ended the call and gave Ari a rueful smile.

She blew out a long sigh. “I apologize again.”

“Not a problem. Like you said, you can’t be too careful.” He gave her an inquiring look. “Any particular reason for that?”

She held his gaze for a moment, and he could tell that there was – but she wasn’t going to tell him about it.

“Nothing that I need to burden you with, thanks.”

He was impressed that she told him straight rather than being evasive or outright lying.

“Well, if you change your mind about that, I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Thanks.”

“I just came down to welcome you – see that you’re settling in okay.” He smiled. “Offer to take you to dinner if you’re up to it.”

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows raised slightly. She was interested, no doubt about it. But then she shook her head.

“Thank you, but no.”

“Okay. Perhaps another time?”

“Perhaps.”

Damn. He must be losing his touch. That *perhaps* sounded like a definite no to him.

Maybe she just needed some time to get settled in. Even though he’d been hoping that hers would be a brief stay, he now found himself hoping that she’d be here for a while.

She walked past him and put her hand on the door handle. “Thanks for stopping by.”

Wow. He was being dismissed. He touched the brim of his hat. “I’m around if you need anything – around the ranch, I mean.”

“Okay.”

She was making it obvious that she was waiting for him to leave so that she could go inside.

He headed back to his truck. Before he climbed in, he looked back over his shoulder. She was still at the door, watching him go.

“Stella has my number if you need me.”

“Thank you.”

As he drove away, he checked the rearview mirror before he turned the corner. Ari was still outside watching – and Ace was already thinking up reasons he might need to stop by in the morning.

Preorder your copy of [The Rancher's Inescapable Love](#) now.

PS - PROJECT SEMICOLON

You may have noticed that the final sentence of the story closed with a semicolon. It isn't a typo. [Project Semicolon](#) is a non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and love to those who are struggling with depression, suicide, addiction, and self-injury. Project Semicolon exists to encourage, love, and inspire. It's a movement I support with all my heart.

“A semicolon represents a sentence the author could have ended, but chose not to. The sentence is your life and the author is you.” - Project Semicolon

This author started writing after her son was killed in a car crash. At the time, I wanted my own story to be over. Instead, I chose to honour a promise to my son to write my ‘silly stories’ someday. I chose to escape into my fictional world. I know for many who struggle with depression, suicide can appear to be the only escape. The semicolon has become a symbol of support, and hopefully a reminder – Your story isn't over yet

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ALSO BY SJ MCCOY

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