

A romantic couple is shown in profile, about to kiss. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a white lace top. The man has a beard and is wearing a blue denim shirt. They are outdoors in a garden with pink flowers in the background.

# WHISKEY & WILLOW

THE HAMILTONS BOOK EIGHT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**SJ McCoy**

**Whiskey  
and  
Willow**

**Slade and Willow**

**The Hamiltons, Book Eight**

**By SJ McCoy**

**A Sweet n Steamy Romance**

**Published by Xenion, Inc**

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# Dedication

*K,*

*This one is for Uncle Vic.*

*Love ya, lady.*

*J*

*oxo*

# Chapter One

*Sixteen Years Ago. Imperial Beach, California.*

Willow pushed her hair back over her shoulders and looked around the bar. This place was more like what she'd expected. When Gigi had begged her to come to San Diego with her, she'd envisioned a crowded bar by the beach like this – complete with loud music, cold drinks, and wall-to-wall hot, muscular guys.

Of course, since their parents were paying, she and Gigi were staying at the Hotel del Coronado. The iconic Victorian hotel on the beach was gorgeous – but it wasn't what the two girls were looking for. Their parents were happy to send their girls off on a post-graduation trip, where they could get some sun, sand, and relaxation in an upscale, family-friendly environment – but the girls were looking for a different kind of vacation entirely.

Gigi was here for one reason only – because her boyfriend was stationed at the Naval Air Base. Willow was here for two reasons – the first one being to provide a cover story for Gigi. And the second? She smiled and licked the rim of salt from her glass. She hadn't selected her second reason yet, but he was out there. Whether he was one of the guys at the long table near the bar, getting rowdy, or he was with the crowd sitting out on the terrace, she hadn't decided yet. There was no rush – she planned to take her time and select wisely.

There was a stage set up where a band would play later. She could take her time picking out her guy. When the band started to play, she'd ask him to dance. She'd let him know – without saying a word – what she was looking for, and ... A shiver ran down her spine. Whether she took him back to the Hotel del in a cab with her, or whether he had a place here in Imperial Beach didn't matter. She'd take him back to one or the other and ...

“Willow!” Gigi appeared beside her, her eyes wide, and her cheeks flushed. “He’s coming! He’s going to be here any minute. Can we go straight back to the hotel when he arrives? Is that okay with you? I’ll take him up to my room, of course, but you’ll be okay there, won’t you? You can hang out at any of the bars or...” She stopped when Willow shook her head. “What do you mean, no?”

Willow laughed. “Don’t look so panicked. I don’t mean no, you can’t go. I mean, no, I’m not coming back with you. I like this place. I want to hang out here.”

Gigi gave her a doubtful look. “Are you sure? We should stick together.” She looked around. “This place is full of ...”

Willow ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “Exactly.”

“Can’t you find a guy back at the hotel?”

Willow shook her head. “Nope. I told you when I agreed to come with you. This trip is my declaration of independence. I’m tired of always being expected to do what I’m supposed to do. Tired of claustrophobic Napa. Tired of only ever dating nice guys who are too polite to ...”

Gigi laughed. “I know you said all that, but are you really just going to pick up a guy here tonight and bring him back to the hotel to sleep with him?”

“Unless he has a place closer – then I’ll go back there with him.”

“And you’re not worried? You think you’ll be safe?”

Willow nodded. “I will. I know it.”

“How?” Gigi looked worried, but that just annoyed Willow.

“I just know. Don’t worry about me.” She smiled when she saw Dillon come in from the terrace and look around. “I’ll be fine. Your man’s here. Go do what you came to do.”

Gigi whirled around and squealed when she saw him. Willow smiled as she watched her friend run to him. When she



saw Dillon's hands close around Gigi's ass while he kissed her, she knew that he'd thank her for not holding them up.

Gigi didn't even look back when she and Dillon came up for air. He took hold of her hand, and they made their way outside. Willow wished them luck – she had a feeling that this would be the last time they saw each other. Anton Groves had been sniffing around Gigi back at home since Dillon had left town. And Dillon was known to make a move on any girl who'd give him a chance. Willow suspected that he was only so happy to see Gigi here because she was a sure thing – he wouldn't have to work to get some new girl into bed this weekend.

She set her empty glass down on the bar and waved a finger at the bartender to bring her another. She wanted to get herself a nice little buzz going before she picked out her second reason for being here. Of course, there were plenty of guys back at home in Napa who would be happy to scratch her itch. But she couldn't afford to take the risk of anyone finding out.

She nodded at the bartender and picked up the fresh glass he set in front of her. She couldn't risk her parents finding out that she'd slept with a guy. And she couldn't risk sleeping with someone who would tell all her friends that he'd been her first. She didn't know if he'd even be able to tell that he was her first – and she wouldn't tell him – but she couldn't risk it.

She had her reputation to think of. She worked hard to portray the image of a worldly, independent young woman. She'd done it so well for the last couple of years that everyone at school had assumed that she was ... experienced. She took a sip of her drink. After this weekend, she planned to be.

She looked up when a guy sat down on the stool next to her. Ugh. He was big, muscular, but not attractive. She could feel the heat emanating from him – and it brought his smell with it. Definitely not attractive. She made a face and took another sip of drink. Big sweaty guy was not going to be her chosen one.

He turned and smiled at her. “Can I get you another one, gorgeous?”

“No. Thank you.” She looked down her nose at him as she spoke. It was something that her mother did to great effect whenever she felt that a male of the species was overstepping his bounds. Willow was thrilled to see that it had the same effect when she did it.

The guy shrugged and waved at the bartender as he turned away, muttering, “Suit yourself.”

~ ~ ~

“Hawkins! Are you coming?”

Slade looked around the bar. “Yeah,” he called back to his friend who was heading for the exit. “Wait up.”

They’d driven down to San Diego from Camp Pendleton for a night on the town. But so far, they hadn’t found the vibe they were looking for. Three bars down, and Slade wasn’t convinced that the fourth or fifth would prove any better.

“Where next?” asked Aggie as he slid behind the wheel and the rest of them piled into his Tahoe.

Slade shrugged. He’d only been back stateside for a couple of weeks. He didn’t know the best places to go anymore. Although, judging by the way the night was going so far, it didn’t look like the others did either.

“Let’s hit Imperial Beach,” said Tommo, who was sitting in the passenger seat.

Slade muttered his agreement along with the others. Even if the rest of the night didn’t improve, he’d be happy to catch the sunrise on the beach. People might rave about West Coast sunsets, but he enjoyed sunrise just as much. Maybe one day he’d make it to the East Coast and watch the sun rise out of the water.

He turned when Wells punched his arm. “When you find yourself a woman, can you choose one who has friends with her?”

Slade chuckled. “I’ll see what I can do to help you losers out.”

Danny’s Bar was more the kind of speed he’d been hoping for. The music was loud, the beer was cold – and the women were hot. People and music spilled out onto the terrace, and Slade took a moment to breathe in the ocean air. This was more like it.

For once, his buddies had found women before he did. From his spot on the wall at the edge of the terrace where he’d sat to watch the sunset, Slade could see Tommo with his arm draped around a brunette’s shoulders at the far end of the bar. Aggie had disappeared down onto the beach a little while ago, towing a giggling blonde in his wake. He hadn’t seen Wells in a while. He was probably propping up the bar.



When the bar got too crowded, Willow picked up her drink, gave up her stool, and made her way out onto the terrace. The band had just started to play, but no one was up dancing yet. She might as well scope out the crowd outside – make sure that she wasn’t missing the perfect guy by not checking out here.

She stood at the top of the steps and scanned the tables. The terrace was as packed as it was inside. There were a few groups of guys, sitting or standing around talking, laughing, drinking beer. Some of them would fit the bill. One guy looked up and met her gaze. He was hot. He had the short, military haircut that most of them had, and light brown hair and smiling eyes. He could be ...

When he turned and dug his friend in the ribs and nodded in her direction, she looked away. She wasn’t a hundred percent convinced that he was the one. She’d thought that this would

be simple. She just needed to get it over with, but now that the time was almost here, she wasn't quite as sure of herself. She was still determined to surrender her V card to someone tonight, but now that it came down to it, it kind of did matter who the guy was. She didn't need to ever see him again, but she wanted there to be something special about him. She didn't need to get butterflies whenever she thought about him in the future. She just needed to know that she'd chosen well.

She continued to scan the terrace, hoping that last guy wasn't on his way over to talk to her. Looking at all the guys sitting out there was like looking out at the proverbial box of chocolates. Which one would she choose?

Then, she spotted him. Her heart started to pound, and she gripped her glass tighter. He was hot! But that wasn't what caused the butterflies to take to flight in her stomach. Oh no. Her reaction to him was about more than that.

She swallowed, allowing herself to drink in the sight of him – and to imagine taking *him* back to her room and ...

He sat on the wall at the edge of the terrace, looking out at the ocean. His dark hair seemed to glow in the last of the setting sun's rays. His harsh features were relaxed as he took in the sunset.

He was wearing a denim shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders and muscled chest. She bit down on her bottom lip as she took in his tattooed forearms below his rolled-up sleeves. His elbows rested on his knees and his big, capable looking hands – how she would love to find out what those hands were capable of – were wrapped around his beer. He wore leather bands around his wrists, and a thumb ring. How cool was that?

How she wished that he could be the one. She swallowed. She was going to have to move, but she so didn't want to.

For a moment, she let herself fantasize. She could walk out there to him, say hi, and have him smile up at her. He'd get to his feet and slide one of those big, strong arms around her as

he slid his other hand into her hair and leaned in to claim her mouth in a kiss that would make her toes curl.

She gave herself a little shake. Unfortunately, that was not going to happen. No matter how much she might wish that Slade Hawkins could be the first guy she slept with, it wasn't going to happen. Whatever the hell he was doing here – she didn't know, and it didn't matter – she knew him. He wasn't exactly part of her social circle at home. He was a friend of her brother's, but he wasn't from one of the wine families – his father worked for one of the wine families.

Slade was tougher, rougher around the edges than any other guy she knew. There was an edge to him – an edge that set those butterflies swirling again and made her panties damp. She let herself drink in one long, last look at him.

She could see the top of a tattoo, peeking out above the collar of his shirt. It looked like a wing – maybe an angel wing. But Slade Hawkins was no angel. Half the girls in Napa had a crush on him before he left for the military. From what she'd heard, he'd worked his way through his admiring fans at an alarming rate. But he didn't leave a trail of broken hearts and drama in his wake. He was a bad boy with a good heart. She'd had a crush on him herself, but he was a few years older than her – and he was friends with Bentley. So, he'd been off-limits. The few times she'd been around him, he'd treated her with nothing but kindness and respect.

She wondered for a moment whether she should risk it. If she went and said hi to him, would he see that she was all grown up now? Would he want to come back to the hotel with her – or go down to the beach? Or heck – take her against a wall, she didn't care where it happened if it was Slade.

She gathered up all her courage and took one step in his direction. But then he got to his feet, and she panicked. She knew better. He'd turn her down, and she wasn't sure she could handle that. So, she turned and scurried inside instead. She was looking for some random guy, not someone she knew – not someone she'd ever see again. And if it were Slade, she

knew that she'd want to see him again. It'd be too complicated, too messy – most likely, too embarrassing. She headed back toward the dance floor, determined to find a guy who'd want to leave with her before she crumbled and went back to look for Slade.



After the last of the sunset faded, Slade got up to go inside to check on Wells. When he entered the bar, the sight of a pair of long, shapely legs moving through the crowd stopped him in his tracks. He grinned and changed direction to follow them. They went all the way up to what might be the tightest little ass he'd ever seen – and he almost could see it, her black leather skirt was that short. Long black hair swayed across her back, and in that moment, Slade set himself a target of having that hair wrapped around his fist before the sun rose again.

She disappeared into the crowd, and he hurried after her. He wasn't letting that one escape him. He pushed his way through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor. He couldn't see her at first. Then he spotted the back of her head again – he needed her to turn around. Although, with a body like that, he wasn't too worried about her face.

He scowled when a group of guys moved out onto the dance floor from the opposite side. They headed straight for her. Was she with them? No, he could tell by the predatory looks on their faces – they weren't going out to join a friend, they were on the hunt in the same way that he was.

He could turn away, let it go. But something about her, the way her body swayed to the music, made him elbow his way out there. As he got closer, the three guys he'd seen heading in her direction surrounded her.

One of them danced behind her, putting his hands on her waist and laughing with his friends as he let his tongue hang out while he pumped his hips as if he was ...

Slade smiled when she batted his hands away and turned around with a scowl.

She had a set on her that ... but then he looked up at her face and froze. It wasn't? It couldn't be? It damn well was! Shit!

He shoved people out of his way to get to her as the three idiots surrounded her. She didn't look scared – she looked pissed, but not as pissed as he was.

When he reached them, he shoved the first idiot out of the way. The other two glared at him.

“What the fuck, dude?”

Slade glared at him. “She's with me. Willow, come on!” He grabbed her arm, and barely registered the shock on her face as he led her off the dance floor. He didn't stop until they'd made it through the bar and out onto the terrace.

When he stopped, she yanked her arm out of his grip. “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

He swallowed. He needed to catch up. He couldn't believe it. But it was – it was Willow DuPont from back home in Napa. She was ... she was just a little kid the last time he'd seen her. He felt like a perv – he'd been watching her ass, thinking about wrapping her hair around his fist and her lips around his ...

“Well?” She had her hands on her hips and was glaring at him.

He swallowed again, then he got over his guilt at the thoughts he'd been having and straightened his shoulders as he glared back at her. “You're welcome.”

“For what?” she scoffed.

He glanced back over his shoulder and was relieved to see that the three amigos hadn't followed them out here.

“Jesus, Willow. For rescuing you from those idiots who were mauling you.”

Her lips pressed together. “Maybe I was enjoying it.”

Slade’s mouth went dry. “Willow! You’re not old enough to be in here. Do you even know what they were after?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Not for certain, no. You didn’t give me the chance to find out, but I’d guess they were after the same thing I was.” She lifted her chin in defiance and glared at him.

Slade ran his hand over his face. He couldn’t believe this. Little Willow DuPont was out looking to get laid? He shook his head. He so could not let himself go anywhere near that thought.

“What are you even doing here?” He looked around, wondering if her brother might appear and rescue him from this situation.

“I’m on vacation.” The fire in her eyes had died down a little. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m stationed up the road at Camp Pendleton.”

“Oh.” She let her gaze travel over him, making it obvious that she liked what she saw. Against his will, his dick jumped to attention. No, hell no! He couldn’t even ...

She reached out and touched his arm. “It’s good to see you, Slade.”

He pulled back as if she’d scalded him, and her gaze snapped up to meet his. “What’s up? You can’t tell me that you’re not pleased to see me, too.” She eyed the front of his pants with a little smile playing on her lips – a smile that he suddenly wanted to kiss right off her face. No!

“Willow.” His voice cracked, and she smiled.

“Since you got in the way of my plans back there, I think you need to make it up to me.”

He tried to swallow but his throat was too dry. “What do you mean?”



She smiled. “You know what I mean. You didn’t come to a place like this for a quiet drink with your friends. You came here looking for sex. So did I.”

He bit the inside of his cheek when she ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “Since you’re apparently worried about other men wanting to have sex with me ...” She cocked an eyebrow at him, and his dick twitched so hard in his pants that he felt like she must see it.

He pressed his lips together and breathed in through his nose in an attempt to steady himself. He’d never been so tempted in his life. If he didn’t know who she was, there’d be no question. He’d have that skirt up around her waist already but ... She was ... not only was she Napa royalty, she was also the kid sister of a guy he’d been friends with since grade school. He couldn’t.

Could he? His resolve started to dissolve when she stepped into his personal space and ran her hands up his forearms. “Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll go find someone else.”

His hands closed around her waist before he knew what he was doing, and he drew her closer. He looked down into her eyes, it’d be so damn easy to give in and ...

“Hawkins!”

He came back to his senses and turned to see Tommo grinning at him. He still had his arm around the brunette’s shoulders. “There’s a party back at Amy’s place. We’re all invited.”

Slade’s hands balled into fists at his sides when Tommo let his gaze travel over Willow’s body. “You can bring your friend.”

“No!” No way was he going to take Willow back to that kind of party. There was only one way that would turn out.

Willow glared at him before taking a step away from him, toward Tommo and his girl. “Thanks. I’d love to come.” She glanced back over her shoulder at him. “I don’t need him.”

Slade hurried after her and caught hold of her arm again as they followed the others down onto the beach. “Like hell you don’t!”

She smiled up at him sweetly. “Changed your mind now, have you? I did try telling you that I wanted you but ...”

“Willow. You can’t ...”

She looked up into his eyes. “I can, and I will, and if *you* won’t, then I’ll just find someone else.”



# Chapter Two

*Sixteen Years ago. Coronado Beach, California*

Willow's heart was pounding. A few moments ago, she'd been on the dance floor, feeling as though she might have a full-blown panic attack when three big guys had surrounded her.

Then, he was there. Slade had grabbed her – only by the arm, but still ... He might be trying to do the decent thing – telling her that she was too young to be here, acting like he wasn't going to screw her. But he was – she was going to make sure that he did.

He might have some noble ideas in his head about rescuing her from guys who wanted to take advantage of her – but it was her plan to take advantage of him. She might never have had sex yet, but she'd fooled around with guys. She knew what an erection looked like – especially in snug fitting jeans like Slade's. She knew what that meant – it meant that he wanted her. Maybe not as much as she wanted him, but still.

He tried to catch hold of her arm again as she followed his friends along the beach. She had no idea where they were going. Perhaps this Amy had a house, and she'd be able to get Slade alone in a bedroom. She'd much rather he just went along with her plans and came back to the hotel with her – she could maybe even keep him until morning if he did. But even if they had to get down in the sand, she wasn't going to let him get away until he took her V card with him.

“Willow!” She loved the sound of his voice; it was deep and raspy. There was an edge to it – an edge that sounded a little desperate. She'd love to think that he was as desperate to sleep with her as she was with him, but it wasn't that. He was desperate to try to save her from herself – it was endearing, really.

She took pity on him and slowed her pace to fall in beside him. “What?” Looking back over her shoulder, she could see that a couple more of his friends were following them – each bringing a girl with them.

He scrubbed his hand over his face – she loved the way he did that.

“Where are you staying?”

She smiled. “The Hotel del – we can go back there if you’d rather.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I can put you in a cab.”

“No, thank you. I’m not going anywhere unless you come with me.” She laughed at her little joke – maybe she’d had too many margaritas? But Slade got the joke, too. She didn’t miss the way his gaze dropped to her breasts and then slid on down the rest of her body.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Swear to me that you don’t want to have sex with me, and I’ll go. I’ll leave you in peace. And go and find someone else,” she added quickly – just in case he was thinking of lying to her. It might make her a bad person, but she could see that he wanted to do the right thing. He thought that having sex with her would be wrong – but if he considered it to be less wrong than letting her go off with some stranger, then she wasn’t above using that to her advantage.

He caught hold of her hand and brought her to a halt, waiting until his friends had passed them.

She could see a little muscle ticking in his jaw as she waited for him to speak. It didn’t seem like he was going to say anything, so she shrugged. “Okay, then. I’ll go.”

“Willow!” The way he growled her name as he stepped forward to block her path sent shivers racing down her spine.

“Yes?” She stepped into his personal space again. That had been working before, until his friends had interrupted them. She ran her hands up his forearms and leaned her head back so

that she could look up into his eyes. She wasn't short, she was five-seven, but he was way taller – over six feet, she'd guess.

He hadn't pushed her away yet. Hadn't agreed that she should go, so she kept running her hands up his arms until she cupped them around the back of his neck. His hands gripped her hips and pulled her against him. Holy smokes! His whole body was hot and hard, but the hardest part of him pressed into her stomach, making her question herself for the first time. Something that big would have to hurt!

His hazel eyes glimmered as they looked down into hers. "Don't make me fuck you, Willow."

Wow! It felt like his words exploded in her chest. She tried to swallow but her mouth was dry.

"Why not?" she breathed. "Are you saying you don't want to?"

He held her gaze as he shook his head slowly. "I wanted to fuck you the moment I saw you – until I realized who you were."

"Then what's the problem? Why are we standing here talking about it when we could be following your friends and ..." She tilted her head to where his friends were already a long way down the beach.

"Because no matter how much I want to, I can't."

Her heart sank – she'd thought she was finally getting somewhere.

"Why not?"

"Because ... you're Bentley's little sister for one thing. And for another, you're not the kind of girl who ... who ... You're the kind of girl who thinks that sex leads to something more. I'm not the kind of guy who could ever give you anything more. Even if you say you don't want anything, you will, and then you'll be mad at me – think that I let you down." He frowned as he looked down into her eyes. "I like you too much to do that to you. You're a good kid."

“Kid?!” she asked indignantly. She pressed herself closer, rocking her hips against his as her fingers stroked the back of his neck. “Do I feel like a kid?”

He shook his head, as his jaw clenched, his eyes closed, and his fingers tightened on her hips.

“Look at me, Slade.”

He opened his eyes.

“I want you, but I promise you that I won’t ask anything else from you. I might be young but I’m not some starry-eyed little girl who’s going to dream about you coming home to Napa to marry me or something. I just graduated high school.”

He cringed at that – she probably shouldn’t have reminded him, so she pushed on quickly. “I’m going away to college in the fall. I intend to go back to Napa as little as possible over the next few years. After I graduate, I’m going to work my way around the wine world – I’ll be in Argentina and Chile, France and Italy, and Australia. You won’t need to worry about bumping into me. And even if we do ....” She sucked in a deep breath. “It’s not as though we’d ever go out for real or anything, is it? I mean, I’m a DuPont.” She left the rest unsaid – that he wasn’t of the same social standing.

She didn’t see it that way, and she hated to sound like some bitchy little snob, but she was using everything she could think of to shoot down his arguments and persuade him that they could do this.

She felt terrible when he nodded. She should feel great – he was agreeing with her. But only because she’d made him think that she wouldn’t be interested in him for anything more than sex because of who he was.

~ ~ ~

When Willow opened her hotel room door, Slade had the crazy urge to push her inside, pull the door shut behind her, and run while he still could. He’d spent the whole cab ride

back here wrestling with himself. Was he really going to do this?

On the one hand, her long, bare leg resting against his as they sat in the back of the cab had made it a no brainer – hell yes, he was! On the other hand ... Jesus, hot as she was, hard as he was for her, she was still Willow DuPont.

She turned back and caught his hand, pulling him into the room after her, making the decision for him. Who was he kidding? He had no choice. He could no more have walked away from the little vixen than he could have ... he didn't know what. He couldn't think straight. His heart was pounding – sending all his blood to throb in the front of his pants.

She thought she was all grown up now? Then, he'd teach her how grown-ups fucked. He wanted to think that he would have been able to walk away if she was still the sweet little Willow he remembered. But she wasn't. She'd proven that with what she'd said. She was a DuPont – and therefore she wouldn't be one of those girls who wanted something more from him. She wasn't going to be coming around, hoping to snag him as her boyfriend. He wasn't suitable boyfriend material – not for Napa royalty like her.

The Willow he remembered would never have pointed that out. He wouldn't have believed that she even thought that way. Her brother, Bentley, didn't. But then again, her mother did. Perhaps she was her mother's daughter more than he'd realized. And if that were the case – and the little rich girl wanted to go slumming? Then, he'd give her a night to remember.

It'd help if he could rewind in his head – back to the point when she'd just been a set of legs and a great little ass. As if she understood what he was thinking, Willow reached up and started to unbutton her blouse. She pulled it open, and the sight of her long, dark hair against her pale, creamy skin took Slade straight to the place he needed to be – no rewind required.

He unbuttoned his own shirt as he stalked toward her. His hands dropped to his belt as she backed away from him,



toward the bed.

“You get one chance to change your mind, duchess. And if you’re going to, you better do it quick. Because when I get you naked ...”

For a second, he thought he saw a flash of fear in her eyes. He reached for her, ready to reassure her. She didn’t have to go through with it if she didn’t want to. He might be rougher than she was used to, but he wasn’t that kind of asshole.

She evaded his touch, and the defiance was back in her eyes when she laughed and pushed the tiny skirt down over her hips.

“When you get me naked, what? Don’t tell me – show me.” The way she licked her lips erased the last of his doubts. He didn’t need to keep thinking of her as little Willow. The way she got rid of her bra and caressed her breasts told him there was nothing left of the girl he’d known. She was all woman, and she wanted some man. He’d be happy to oblige.

He closed the distance between them and cupped her face between his hands. Her pupils dilated as he looked down into her eyes. He didn’t say a word before he crashed his lips against hers, kissing her deep and hard – showing her what she could expect.

Her hands came up to grip his wrists as his tongue plundered her mouth. She tasted so damned sweet, he felt like he could kiss her this way forever. Her lithe little body molded itself against his. He ran one hand down over the soft smooth skin of her back, slipping his fingers inside her thong. She squeaked into his mouth when he probed a finger between her cheeks, and he crushed her to his chest.

“You want me in here?”

Her gaze snapped up to meet his, her eyes huge. It made him smile.

“What’s up? Have none of your rich-boy boyfriends ever been in here?” She clenched as he stroked her. “Looks like we’re in for a fun night, little Willow.”

He brought his hand around between them and traced through her folds. She was soaking wet. He held her gaze as he slid a finger inside her.

Holy shit! He'd wanted to watch her reaction, instead he was overwhelmed by his own. She pulsated around him, gripping him tight. If she felt that way on his finger ... his cock ached to get its turn.

He stepped back and got rid of the rest of his clothes, snagging the strip of condoms from his jeans before he let them fall to the floor. His cock was hard enough to hammer nails as he watched her slip out of her underwear. Uncertainty clouded her eyes when she met his gaze but faded as she sat down on the bed.

“Are we going to do this?”

He let out a short laugh. “Well, forgive me, duchess. Are you in a hurry? I was thinking I'd take my time – we have all night, right?”

In the cab he'd told himself that if he did this, he could make it quick. Now that he was here, now that he had her naked, and he'd felt that tight little pussy, he figured he could make it a night to remember for both of them.

She swallowed visibly as she nodded. “Do you want to stay?”

“Yeah.” He usually liked to get out afterward. He didn't like to sleep beside a woman. But he had a feeling they wouldn't be doing much sleeping.

“On your feet.” He loved the way she immediately complied.

He ran his hand over her hair before cupping the back of her neck and drawing her close. “Where do you want me first?”

She looked around. “I thought the bed. But ... Against the wall?”

His dick twitched against her, liking that idea. “We’ll get there. But when I asked where ...”

He pressed his finger to her lips before pushing it inside her mouth. He closed his eyes when she swirled her tongue over it.

“Do you want me in here? Or ...” he trailed his now wet finger down between her breasts – he’d be spending some time with those before morning – and kept going until he was back between her legs. She was so hot and wet that he almost called it and pushed her up against the wall – they could figure out the rest later. But the look in her eyes made him keep going. She was a little bit nervous, and about as turned on as he’d ever seen a woman. He dipped his finger inside. “In here?”

Her cheeks flushed, and she bit down on her bottom lip. “Yes.”

He shook his head. “Not finished yet.” He moved his other hand behind her and slid a finger between her cheeks. She made that same little squeaking sound. “What about in here?”

She rested her head against his shoulder as he used both hands, sliding one finger deeper into her pussy, and pushing at her ass with his other hand. Her hands gripped his shoulders desperately, her whole body quivering.

“Pussy,” she breathed.

He lowered his head so he could speak next to her ear. “Pussy first.” He chuckled when it hit him. “It has to be – pussy Willow. But don’t worry; if you want, I’ll be your first here, too.”

He pressed the tip of his finger against her opening, at the same time he started to thrust in and out of her pussy. She rocked her hips in time with him. She was right on the edge already; he could feel it.

He withdrew both hands with a smile and backed her up to the bed. “Pussy first. Right?”

She nodded as she crawled up the bed until her head was on the pillows. Then she lay back and held her arms up to him.

“Are you going to talk all night or are we going to do this?”

~ ~ ~

Willow just needed him to do it. He'd worked some kind of magic over her just touching her. She might still be a virgin, but she'd fooled around with guys, and she'd explored herself. She'd had orgasms, but she'd never before experienced what she'd felt at Slade's hands – if he could do that to her with just his fingers ...

She eyed his huge cock as he knelt over her and rolled on a condom. She'd had some ready in her purse, but she was glad that he came prepared. She expected him to just climb on top of her and get it over with, but he smiled as he wrapped his hand around his cock and looked down at her.

“How do you like it, duchess? Rough?”

She sucked in a deep breath. She'd been kind of hoping for slow and gentle – especially since she'd seen how big he was. “Yes,” she lied.

He seemed to sense the lie. He positioned himself over her, but kept his weight propped on his forearms as he looked down into her eyes. “Let's start slow.”

She nodded as she felt him pushing at her entrance. This was it. She was about to lose her virginity – to Slade freaking Hawkins!

He slid one hand down her thigh and brought her leg up, hooking his elbow behind her knee so that she was spread wide open to him. His hard head pushed inside, and she tensed.

He frowned as he looked down into her eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes!” She pretty much growled the word at him. No way could he back out on her now.

“Relax, then, sweetheart. Let me in.”

She tried to force herself to relax, but as he tried to push inside, she tensed up again. Shoot! He let her leg come back down and slipped his hand between them.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he groaned as he slid two fingers into her, making her gasp.

His gaze flicked up to meet hers. “You okay?”

She nodded, unable to speak. He was about to make her come with just his fingers. She was pulsating around him, gripping him tight.

Then he brushed his thumb over her clit, and she gasped. “Slade!”

“Yeah, give it to me. Come for me,” he breathed.

She had no choice but to obey. She came fast and hard, the sensations rolling over her and through her as his fingers thrust in and out of her, invading her most private place.

He brought her down slowly and wrapped his fist around his cock as he positioned himself over her again.

“Now you’re ready.”

She could only hope that he was right. She spread her legs wider, hoping that might help somehow. All her muscles were more relaxed, and he entered her a little way. Then, just when she felt she might tense up again, he thrust deep and hard, making her scream. It was the most terrible, beautiful thing she’d ever felt. He was invading her body, he was too big, too hard, it hurt. Yet, at the same time every nerve ending in her body tingled. She stretched around him; he filled her so full that it felt like he became a part of her. Her whole world started and ended at the place where his hot, hard cock throbbed inside her.

“You okay?” he rasped.

“I think so.

He pulled back and then slammed back into her before holding deep again. “Fuck!”

She slowly lifted her gaze to meet his.

“Tell me this isn’t your first time?”

She bit down on her bottom lip. She hadn’t planned to tell him, but looking into his eyes, while they were connected so intimately, she didn’t feel like she could lie to him.

“Jesus, Willow!” He started to pull back, but she clasped her hands around his ass. No way was she letting him go before he finished what he started.

“It doesn’t matter, Slade. Fuck me like you said you would. I want it. I want you.” She brought her legs up and wrapped them around his.

She could see the struggle on his face as he looked down into her eyes.

“I want it to be you.” Her words seemed to hit home; he nodded slightly and started to rock his hips ever so gently. The exquisite friction made her whole body quiver.

“You feel so good,” she breathed.

He didn’t say a word, just kept pumping his hips, filling her, stretching her, pulling back, driving in. The rest of the world seemed to dissolve around her. They were the only two people that existed, and there were no words, no thoughts, only sensations, connection.

“I need you to come for me,” he gasped.

She had no choice; he somehow grew bigger and harder and all the tension that had been curling inside her found its release when he cupped his hands under her ass and lifted her as he drove deeper.

“Slade!” she screamed as the world shattered into a thousand pieces around her.

He bit down on her neck as he throbbed deep inside her, and they became one. She hadn’t expected it. She’d thought that coming with a real live cock inside her would be different – better – than anything she’d known before. But she hadn’t

understood that it could be like this – that the physical would be so far beyond, or that the ... connection would run this deep.

As they lay panting, recovering, she tentatively brought her hands up to slide her fingers into his hair.

He lifted his head, his hazel eyes shining as they looked into hers. Their gazes locked for a long few moments, and she wanted to believe that he felt it too – wanted to believe that what passed between them in that look was something special.

But eventually, he looked away and shook his head.

“You should have told me, Willow.”

Her hands fell away as he pushed up and away from her before rolling off the bed and disappearing into the bathroom.

She wanted to cry as she watched him go. Was this it? Was he going to leave now? God, she hoped not. That was how she'd thought the night would go – she'd pick up a guy, have sex with him, and then he'd leave. But Slade ...

She drank in the sight of him when he came back out of the bathroom. Even now that his cock wasn't erect, the rest of him was still hard, muscular – beautiful. It broke her heart to think that she might never get to see him like this again.

“Don't go.”

He stopped in his tracks, and the band of pressure around her chest eased when he smiled. “I'm going nowhere, sweetheart. I could be mad at you for tricking me into this ...”

“I didn't trick you. I ...”

He held his hand up and she stopped talking.

He came to sit on the edge of the bed and ran his hand over her ass. “However it came about, I find myself with a whole weekend ahead of me, empty except for this beautiful young woman who wants to learn about sex.” He winked at her. “It'd be rude of me not to offer to teach her what I know.”

She relaxed and smiled back at him. “You don't mind?”

He chuckled. “Mind that I get your tight little pussy wrapped around me every way you can imagine and few more that you can’t yet? No. I don’t mind.”

His words sent shivers down her spine. “I mean, you’re not mad at me?”

“No.” His expression gentled. “I could be. But, Willow, you were out looking for a stranger to take your virginity. I can’t be mad that it was me and not some random idiot.” He shuddered. “Those guys on the dance floor? Hell no. As long as we don’t ever talk about this weekend again, then I think we’d be crazy not to make the most of it.”

She let out a big breath. “Thank you.”

He ran his hand up her arm. “Half of me wants to say you’re welcome.”

“And the other half?”

He smiled. “The other half wants to say thank *you*. I don’t know if you even realize it, but you gave me a gift. I didn’t ask for it, wouldn’t have taken it if you’d offered it.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “But I’ll never forget it.”

A rush of warmth spread through Willow’s chest. “That’s how I wanted it to be, Slade. Even if we run into each other in the future, we don’t ever need to talk about this. But I want you to know that I’ll never forget it either – and I’ll never regret it.”



# Chapter Three

*Nine Years Ago. Honolulu, Oahu, HI*

Willow ran her hands over her short skirt, tugging at the hem. She loved this outfit, but some guy in the last bar had made a comment about her ass cheeks which had her wondering if the skirt wasn't just a little too short.

Gigi glanced back over her shoulder at her and laughed. "Come on, DP, keep up."

"You haven't changed one bit, have you?"

Gigi laughed. "Oh, I've changed. I mean, sure, seven years ago, I was dragging you on vacation with me as a cover story to see a guy, just like I am now, but come on, that guy was Dillon Walsh."

"You're right. You've upgraded, I'll give you that. But you're just as eager to get to this bar to meet your guy as you were back then."

"Well? You can't tell me that you've changed."

Willow narrowed her eyes at her friend. "Oh, I've changed, too. I'm no longer the desperate little virgin looking for some rando to pop my cherry."

Gigi laughed out loud. "Almost true, but you can't deny that you're still desperate."

Willow laughed with her. She couldn't deny that – not if she were being honest. But she wasn't planning on being honest, not with anyone other than Gigi. She hadn't let her old friend talk her into coming on this vacation just so that she could get some sun, sand, and sex with a stranger. Oh no, she was here on a mission. Her mission was to track down Slade Hawkins.

It had been a long time, but she'd never forgotten that weekend they spent together at the Hotel del Coronado. Even

if she lived to be a hundred, she'd never forget that weekend. She wasn't a fool; she hadn't expected, or even hoped, for anything more from him. She'd just cherished the memory.

She'd made a whole lot more memories in the last seven years. She'd made memories with guys all over the world. She'd completed her degree and spent the last three years traveling the wine world – just as she'd told Slade that she would. She'd known some great guys, had some great sex, but nothing could ever compare to that weekend – or to Slade.

She'd done her best not to keep tabs on him. And that had been fairly easy, considering that she'd gone home to Napa as little as possible. She'd been home for Christmas this year, and even though she hadn't set out to see what she could learn about him, the information had fallen into her lap.

She'd gone into Molly's restaurant one night to hang out with some of her old friends. One of them, Chelsea Hamilton, had caught her up on the news about everyone they knew – and that had included Slade.

It turned out that he was stationed here on Oahu, and ever since she'd learned that information, Willow had had an ever-growing desire to see if she couldn't run into him again.

She'd gotten in touch with Gigi a few weeks ago. They'd only touched base now and then over the last few years, but Gigi had been thrilled to hear from her. They'd reminisced about the old times – they knew so many of each other's secrets that no one else did. Willow had never told another soul about that weekend, but Gigi knew. And, of course, she'd asked about Slade.

When Willow had told her that he was stationed here in Hawaii, Gigi had decided that they should take another vacation together. Apparently, Gigi knew a guy who was stationed here, too. And she'd promised Willow that it would be no hardship for her to come out here and meet up with him.

When they reached the bar, which was down a narrow alley off Kalakaua Avenue, Gigi grabbed Willow's hand as they

went inside.

“Listen, girlfriend. Chasen told me that a whole bunch of the guys he hangs out with will be here tonight. You and I both know that there are no guarantees that Slade will be one of them. You also know that I won’t be sticking around for the whole night. If I know Chasen, we’ll be cutting out early to head back to the hotel. But we’re not kids anymore. And I’m not happy just leaving you to your own devices. Especially not in a dive bar in Honolulu.”

“So, what are you saying?” Willow asked.

“I’m saying that if Slade isn’t here, we need to decide what you’re going to do.”

She nodded slowly. Gigi was right; they weren’t kids anymore. Willow still liked to do her own thing and to assert her independence, but she was a little more mindful of her safety these days.

“Okay. I’ll be good. If he hasn’t shown by the time that you and Chasen want to leave, I’ll come back to the hotel with you.”

Gigi raised her eyebrows. “You’ll give up that easily?”

“Yeah. I will. I don’t even know what he’ll think if he does show up. I’ve never even spoken to him again since. I promised him I wouldn’t be one of those girls who kept coming around – got clingy, you know?”

Gigi laughed. “Seriously, Willow? It’s been seven years. I don’t think running into him after all this time could be described as being clingy.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Maybe not the amount of time that’s elapsed, but the fact that I’m here because I know he might be?”

“No. You’re here because I asked you to come with me. The same as that trip back then.”

“But don’t you think he’ll see it as too much of a coincidence? That I just happened to show up where he is?”

Gigi shrugged. “Did you think it was a coincidence that he showed up where you were? I mean what are the odds? You’re both from Napa, and yet, you were both in the same bar in Imperial Beach on the same night, at the same time.” She shrugged. “It happens. Especially when your friend has a thing for military guys and drags you along with her.”

Willow’s heart thundered in her chest as she and Gigi walked into the bar. She scanned the place as quickly as she could. Gigi hadn’t been joking when she called it a dive. But it was one of those awesome little dive bars – it had a great vibe.

As they made their way to the bar, she surreptitiously checked out the groups of guys standing around. She wasn’t surprised to see that there were plenty of girls here, too. In most places that she’d been around the world, the women were usually the draw. Here, just like Danny’s bar in Imperial Beach, the military guys were the draw.

It was strange to her to see the role reversal. The guys were preening themselves, knowing that they were being observed and that the girls were waiting to make their plays. Though, judging by some of the couples making out in a dark corner, not all the girls were prepared to wait. She knew that there were names for girls like them... Tag chasers was one that she’d heard before. Frog hogs was the less than complementary name given to girls determined to bed a Navy SEAL. She shuddered. Not that she was judging, but she didn’t see the appeal in going after a type. Sure, she could understand that those guys were big and built, muscular, and – in theory – strong, protective, heroes. But she would much rather go after a guy for something about him as an individual.

They were lucky that two seats came free at the bar just as they approached. Once they were settled and had their drinks, Gigi tapped her glass against Willow’s.

“Happy hunting.”

Willow had to laugh. “I’m not hunting. I feel more like I’m fishing. I’m just dangling here on a hook, waiting to see if the fish I want comes along – and if he’ll even bite if he does.”

Warm breath fanned her ear as a voice spoke right next to her. “I’ll bite you, sexy.”

Willow rolled her eyes at Gigi before she turned around. “No thanks.”

The guy was good-looking. He didn’t come across as sleazy or desperate. Under other circumstances, Willow might have entertained him – for a little while. But not tonight. Tonight was about Slade. If he didn’t show, so be it. She really would go back to the hotel when Gigi did – though she didn’t plan to share a cab with her and Chasen.

The guy smiled and gave her a good-natured shrug. “You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Nope. I don’t blame you. In fact, I wish you luck, but you’re shit out of luck here tonight.”

The guy laughed. “He’s a lucky guy.”

“Who is?”

“The guy you’re fishing for.”

“I’m not sure that he’d agree with you there, but thanks.”

“Hey. If he doesn’t agree, I’ll be here all night. I’m just meeting up with some buddies.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. Because this is the place you come to meet up and just hang out with your buds?”

He laughed with her. “Okay. You got me. But seriously, if he doesn’t show or doesn’t bite, you have a contingency plan.”

“Thanks.” Willow had no intention of taking him up on the offer. It was ridiculous, and she knew it, but there was no way that she would hook up with some guy who could possibly know Slade.

She turned back to Gigi, who grinned at her. “Lining up your second string?”

Willow laughed when she felt the guy lean in over her shoulder again. “Hey! Could you have a little care for a guy’s

ego?”

Willow turned back and patted his shoulder. “Sorry, buddy.”

Gigi grinned and raised her glass to him. “Nothing personal. No offense.”

He grinned back. “None taken.”

Gigi looked down at her phone and then grinned up at Willow. “He’s almost here.”

Willow smiled at her friend; she knew how excited she was to see Chasen again. She’d told Willow all about the fabulous summer that they’d spent together before he was posted here.

“I hope you guys are at least going to stick around for a couple of drinks?”

Gigi giggled. “I’ll do my best to convince him to stay for a while. But we haven’t seen each other in months.”

Willow turned when she felt a tap on her shoulder. The guy sitting next to her seemed decent enough, but she wished he’d take a hint – she wasn’t interested. He looked more serious this time. “Not trying to be a pain in the ass here, and not meaning to eavesdrop.” He gave her a shamefaced grin. “Not really. But if your friend is going to head out with her guy, you don’t want to hang around this place by yourself. I’ll make sure you get into a cab safely later if you want to, but then again, you don’t know that I’m safer than anyone else in here.”

She held his gaze for a moment. “Thanks.” There was something about him. “I’m not going to take you up on the offer. When Gigi leaves, I’ll leave. But for what it’s worth, I believe you and I appreciate the offer.”

The guy nodded and held his hand out. “Mitch Martin.”

“Willow DuPont,” she said as she shook hands with him.

She wanted to kick herself when she saw recognition in his eyes. “Willow DuPont?”

Shit! But she nodded – she could hardly deny it now.  
“That’s me.”

Mitch grinned at her. “Stay right there. Do not move a muscle.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Why?”

He already had his phone out and was tapping away at the screen. He looked up and shot her a quick grin. “You can’t go anywhere.” He looked down at his phone again. “Not for the next ten minutes.”

“Why?” she asked again, wondering if it was time for her and Gigi to go and sit at one of the tables out on the little terrace.

“Just humor me. I promise I’m not crazy. Ten minutes and I’ll buy your next drinks.”

Gigi, who had been listening in, laughed. “We might as well, Willow. We were going to be sitting here waiting for Chasen for the next ten minutes anyway.” She grinned at Mitch. “Now, we get another drink out of it.”

Willow nodded, but she still eyed Mitch warily. People didn’t always recognize her name, but DuPont Wineries was a big enough brand that sometimes they did.

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“I think I’m going to call it a night and head back to base,” Slade told Aggie as they came out of the bar. “I’m not feeling it tonight.”

Aggie punched his arm. “Don’t do that. You’re just not warmed up yet. We should go and meet up with the rest of the guys.”

“No. I…” Slade made a face when his phone buzzed in his back pocket. He took it out and shook his head when he saw a text from his friend.

*Mitch: Where are you? You need to get here. Now.*

*Slade: I'm about to call it a night.*

*Mitch: No! You can't do that. Get your ass over here.*

Slade rolled his eyes as he looked up at Aggie. “What is it with you guys? What do you need me around for?”

Aggie laughed. “As if you don't know. Women love you. You're like the honeypot – you attract crowds of them, and we console the ones you leave disappointed. Let me guess – is that Mitch?”

Slade nodded.

“Come on. Just come and have one with us. If you're really not feeling it after that, you can go.”

Slade's phone vibrated in his hand again and he looked down.

*Mitch: Come on! I promise you won't regret it if you come. But if you don't, you'll regret it tomorrow when I tell you what you missed.*

*Slade: OK.*

He shoved his phone back into his pocket with a shrug at Aggie. “Okay, but I'm only staying for one.”

He was already regretting his decision as they pushed their way into Mitch's favorite little dive bar. It was a pick up joint, nothing else. It was a great place when you were in the mood for it – but Slade just wasn't, not tonight. He was starting to think that he was getting too old for this shit.

He closed his eyes as a wave of warm air and music swept over him. More and more lately he kept thinking about going home. Not home to base – but home to Napa. His dad wasn't getting any younger.

That thought played on his mind as he followed Aggie to the bar. Hawaii was great but, in his mind, nowhere on Earth could compare to Napa. He'd always known that he would go home and ...



He lost his train of thought when Aggie reached Mitch who was sitting at the bar. Mitch gave him a shit-eating grin as he tapped the woman sitting next to him on the shoulder. The woman's long dark hair made Slade catch his breath. Seeing a woman with hair like that always caught him that way. It made him think about her. About Willow. It seemed to hit even harder this time; maybe it was because he'd just been thinking about Napa.

No! All his breath caught in his chest as the woman turned around. Except, she wasn't just a woman – it really was Willow. He tried to swallow as he watched her give Mitch a puzzled look. Mitch just grinned and tilted his head toward Slade.

Willow followed his gaze, and when she saw him, her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed. Damn, she was beautiful!

“Willow.” His voice didn't even sound like his own.

“Slade!”

His heart restarted with a thud when she slid down from her seat with a big smile on her face. “It's so good to see you,” she cried as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

He'd often wondered how she'd react when they eventually ran into each other again – it was inevitable that they would at some point – but none of the scenarios he'd imagined had felt as good as this. He wasn't sure that anything in his life had ever felt as good as the way her lithe little body pressed up against his.

His body reacted without conscious effort. His arms closed around her, crushing her to his chest, and he dropped his head to press a kiss into her hair. Damn, she smelled good.

“It's good to see you, too, little Willow.”

She lifted her head and looked up at him; her green eyes seemed to shimmer. She didn't say anything, didn't move away from him, either. They just stood, clinging to each other, looking into each other's eyes. Slade's heart was pounding, and he could feel hers matching its rhythm.

He came back to earth when Mitch cleared his throat loudly. “You’re welcome – both of you.”

Slade turned to scowl at his friend and noticed that Willow did the same thing. He hated that she tensed in his arms, but at least she didn’t let go of him.

He did his best to gather his senses, but he was struggling to figure out what was going on. The only thing he knew – the only thing that mattered – was that Willow was somehow, miraculously, right here in his arms.

He raised an eyebrow at his friend. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

Mitch laughed and winked at Willow. “Maybe you should be the one to tell him.”

Slade didn’t like the way she narrowed her eyes at Mitch. “I will,” she said. Then, she turned to look up at him. “I’ll tell you all about it just as soon as we get out of here.”

Slade had no argument with that. He looked at Mitch and Aggie, who was still grinning at him, then he realized that Willow had a friend with her, too. In fact, it was the same girl who’d been with her in Coronado. Gigi – that was her name. Well, shit. However eager he was for the two of them to get out of here, no way was he going to abandon her friend. No doubt, Mitch and Aggie would volunteer to keep her company but...

He was surprised when she grinned at him. “Hi, Slade. Remember me?”

He nodded.

“I can see what you’re thinking, but don’t worry about it. My guy will be ...” She grinned as she looked over his shoulder. “In fact, my guy is here now. So, you don’t need to worry about me.” She nodded at Willow. “And I don’t need to worry about you. I’ll see you tomorrow, girlfriend.” With that, she slid down from her seat and hurried toward a guy Slade vaguely knew. He’d seen him around base. As he watched,

Gigi and the guy locked lips in a way that left no doubt why she was in such a hurry to go.

Slade turned away, not needing to see that. He realized that he still had his arms wrapped tightly around Willow when she laughed. “She’s not changed.”

He looked down into her eyes. “Have you?”

She swallowed visibly, and her gaze slid away before she looked back into his eyes. “In some ways, yes. In some ways, no. I’ve done some growing up.”

He nodded. He had too.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” He looked at his friends, who were both still grinning at him.

“That’s it? I reunite you guys, and you’re going to leave without so much as a thank you?”

Slade thought that Mitch was speaking to him. So, it surprised him when Willow stiffened and said, “Thank you.” He didn’t understand the weird look she gave Mitch as she said it, but he wasn’t too worried either.

“I owe you one, buddy. Thank you.”

Aggie laughed. “What about me? You would have gone home if it weren’t for me.”

Slade chuckled. “Okay, and thank you, too. I’ll see you guys.”

He reluctantly unwrapped one arm from around Willow but kept the other around her shoulders as they started to walk away.

“It doesn’t have to be catch and release, you know, Willow,” Mitch called after them.

Slade had no idea what he was talking about, but it seemed that Willow understood. He was going to have to ask her what had gone down with Mitch. But for now, all he wanted to do was get her out of here, get her somewhere alone, somewhere they could talk – and see where else the night might take them.

# Chapter Four

*Nine Years Ago. Honolulu, Oahu, HI*

As they walked away from the bar, Willow's mind was reeling. She'd known that Mitch guy was up to something after she'd stupidly told him her name, but she would never have guessed that he was getting in touch with Slade.

It begged the question of what Slade had told his friend about her. She wanted to know. It must have been good for Mitch to have gotten so excited when he heard her name. At the same time, she wasn't thrilled that Mitch had overheard what she told Gigi about fishing. She wished she hadn't used that stupid analogy now.

But then again, what Mitch had called after them as they left only raised further questions. What did he mean about it not having to be catch and release? She'd love to think that he was implying that Slade wouldn't want her to let him go again afterward. But much as she'd love to believe that, she didn't. That wasn't who Slade was. He wasn't looking for any woman to hook him – let alone her.

He kept his arm tight around her shoulders as they made their way out of the alley. When they were back on the street, he hugged her into his side, and she looked up at him.

"I can't believe this," he said. "Can't believe you're here. But since you are, I plan to make the most of it. So, where do you want to go?"

She held his gaze for a long moment. She wouldn't have believed it was possible, but in the seven years since she'd seen him, he'd grown even more good-looking. He wasn't necessarily handsome – not in the conventional sense. He was too ... rugged to be called that.

She let out a little laugh; she couldn't help it. "The honest answer is back to my hotel."

His smile faded a little, but he nodded.

“Hey.” She gripped his forearm, which she noticed was now covered with more tattoos. “I’m not going to say I was only joking because I wasn’t. I guess what I was too scared to say was ...”

He was watching her, his hazel eyes wary as he waited for her to continue. She’d surprised herself, she didn’t usually do scared – she wasn’t that big on being honest with guys, either. It was different with Slade, though. She made herself continue.

“I was too scared to say that we should go and find a quiet bar somewhere, hang out, catch up.” She bit down on her bottom lip when he didn’t reply. “If you want to.”

Eventually he smiled, and relief washed over her. “I’d like that.” Keeping his arm around her shoulders, he steered her along the sidewalk in the direction of the beach.

They didn’t walk far before he turned them off down another alley, making her laugh. “You know that if you were any other guy, there’s no way I’d walk down here with you, right?”

“Can’t say that I knew it, but I’m glad to hear it.”

She made a face at him. “I told you that I’ve grown up a bit. I know I was pretty dumb being at that bar in Imperial Beach, but I’m more cautious about my safety these days.”

Slade nodded and kept on walking.

She was surprised when they reached the end of the alley, and he led her in through a dark doorway. He had to let go of her shoulders, but he grabbed her hand as he led her down a corridor.

If he were any other guy on earth, she would’ve been getting worried right about now. But she trusted Slade without question. That thought made her frown – it was something that she probably should question... But later, not now.

When he pushed open another door at the end of the corridor, she grinned. She couldn’t help it. She would never

have guessed that this place was here, but it was awesome. It was a small bar, not much more than a long, narrow balcony with a bar tucked into an alcove. There were only a few tables, and even fewer were occupied. Each one had a vase of flowers and a flickering candle. It was possibly the most romantic setting she'd ever seen. The tables were set beside the railing, giving patrons a gorgeous view of the ocean.

“Slade!”

Willow watched with interest as he greeted a woman, whom she assumed to be the owner, with a big hug. When the woman finally released him from her embrace, he turned and gestured to Willow.

“Kamalani, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Willow.”

Willow braced herself as Kamalani stepped forward and wrapped her in an embrace no less enthusiastic than the one with which she'd just greeted Slade.

“Beautiful! You are beautiful. I knew you would be. Come child. You're welcome here.”

Willow was surprised at herself; she wasn't normally given to sentimentality, but she had to swallow around the lump that had formed in her throat. It was probably just because she wasn't used to such open affection – it wasn't a thing in her family.

She recovered her composure and smiled. “Thank you. It's lovely to meet you.”

The older woman smiled back at her and nodded. “What is lovely is to meet you. But go.” She gestured toward a table. “You didn't come here to talk to me.” She smiled at Slade. “Go sit with your girl. I'll bring your drinks.”

Willow settled into a loveseat on one side of the table. She was surprised – and thrilled – when Slade came and sat with her rather than taking the matching loveseat on the other side.

He rested his arm along the back of the seat, and when she turned to look up at him, he grinned and pressed a peck to her

lips.

“Are you really here? Am I going to wake up in a minute?”

She laughed and pushed at his arm. “It’s real. I’m here. Although ... I don’t know if I should tell you, but I’ve had a few dreams that started out something like this.”

She loved the way his lips quirked up into a not quite smile as he asked, “Seems like a good start to a dream – are you going to tell me how they ended?”

She smiled through pursed lips. “Nope.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Oh, it was fun – believe me, it was fun. But I’m not going to tell you because I’d rather wait and see what kind of ending we come up with tonight.”

His smile vanished, and she was about to ask him why, when Kamalani came back and set a bottle of champagne and two flutes on the table in front of them.

She smiled at Willow and nodded before giving Slade a meaningful look. “I’ll see you next time.”

Slade just nodded, and she walked away. It left a bad taste in Willow’s mouth. Was this a regular thing for him? She couldn’t blame him if it were. She imagined that in the time he’d been stationed here, he would have brought dozens of girls here. What girl wouldn’t love to meet a guy like him on vacation in Hawaii? And how many of those girls would be able to resist taking him back to their room after he treated them to a romantic evening like this? She pursed her lips. It was none of her damn business, and she knew it. She didn’t care. She really didn’t – she wasn’t the jealous kind; she wasn’t the possessive kind. She was a free spirit – and she knew damn well that Slade was too.

He gave her a puzzled look as he poured a glass of champagne and handed it to her. “What’s up?”

She shook her head. No way was she taking them down that road! She smiled. “Nothing. I guess I’m just blown away to be

sitting here with you like this after all this time.”

He leaned in close, until his forehead rested against hers. Those hazel eyes of his shone in the candlelight that flickered from the table. “I am, too, little Willow.”

Her eyes drifted closed. She loved the way he called her that. She didn’t think anyone else had ever seen her that way. Even as a little kid, she’d been strong-willed and adventurous. She’d never been a sweet little girl – never wanted to. But there was just something about the way that Slade said it that made her insides melt. But she had to rein it in, and she knew it. If he was pleased to see her, it was probably just in the same way that Dillon had been pleased to see Gigi all those years ago. She was a sure thing – and they both knew it. She wasn’t going to complain about it. On the contrary, she was going to make sure that neither of them came away disappointed.



Slade clenched his jaw as they rode the elevator up to her room. It figured that she was staying at the Ritz Carlton. But thinking about it felt like a slap in the face – it was a reminder of what she’d said to him that night all those years ago. She’d told him that she wouldn’t be one of those girls who came around asking for more from him. She wouldn’t because she was out of his league.

As she opened the door and let him into her suite, he gave himself a mental shake. He had to remember that she was still out of his league. They’d had such a great time, sitting in Kamalani’s bar, enjoying the champagne and the view of the ocean. It had felt like he was catching up with an old friend – albeit an old friend who’d had him hot and hard for her since the moment he laid eyes on her again.

He just needed to remember that wasn’t what was going on here. She wasn’t ever going to be a friend – not the kind of friend who was in his life. He might be mellowing as he got older. He might be thinking about going home to Napa and



starting to build a life for himself there. But from what Willow had told him, she had no intention of moving back home in the foreseeable future. And even if she did, even if she someday chose to settle down and build a life for herself there, there'd be no room in it for him, not as a friend, and for sure not as anything more than that.

He could see the irony. There had been enough girls over the years who'd wanted to make him a part of their lives, and he'd made it as clear as possible that he had no interest. Now, the shoe was on the other foot, and it wasn't a great feeling.

Willow went to the bar and smiled at him. "What do you want?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face. They might as well get down to the one thing she wanted from him. "You. I want you, Willow."

He liked seeing the effect his words had on her. Her eyes widened and she visibly shivered.

He chuckled and stalked toward her. "Come on, pussy Willow, don't act surprised."

He reached her and rested his hands at her waist, tugging her toward him. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip as she came willingly.

"I'm not surprised. My reaction? That wasn't surprise, Slade. That was what I think they call shivers of desire running down my spine."

His fingers dug into her hips as he pulled her against him. "Damn! That should sound corny as shit, but I think I just had one of those shivers, too."

She chuckled as she looked up into his eyes. "I'm glad to hear I get to you the same way you get to me."

"Oh, you get to me, little Willow. You get to me in a big way." As he spoke, he tangled his fingers in her hair, wrapping her locks around his hand as he pulled her head back.

She lifted her lips to meet his, and his other arm slid around her waist, holding her to him as he claimed her mouth. He'd never forgotten the way that she kissed him. Back then, she'd been nothing more than a girl, but she still kissed him like no other woman had. She held nothing back. She was wild, untamed, and hungry – hungry for him.

Her hands roved over his shoulders and back as he took the kiss deeper. His cock throbbed uncomfortably when she made a little moan in the back of her throat. She started to rock her hips against his as he kneaded her ass.

He loved that she wore such short skirts. It was easy for his hand to find its way underneath, to stroke its way over her soft, smooth skin. He gentled the kiss and pulled back to smile against her lips as he slid his finger between her cheeks.

Her arms tightened around him; she stiffened and made that little squeaking noise that he'd never forgotten.

“What’s up, duchess? Still not ready to let me in here?”

Her green eyes shone as they looked up into his, and she shook her head. He grinned and stroked her there, loving the desire he saw in her eyes.

“One day, you know, you’re going to let me in.”

She brought her hands up to cup his cheeks and pulled him down into another wild kiss. He'd never known another woman who kissed the way she did. She attacked him, and he loved it! The skirt was easy to push up around her waist. He got it out of the way, and then unfastened his jeans and pushed them and his boxers down over his hips.

He managed to snag a condom from the pocket of his jeans as he walked her back the three steps it took to get her against the wall.

He had to break the kiss to cover himself, but that only took a moment, then he claimed her mouth again, sweeping in, taking her where he wanted to go. At the same time, he ran his hand down the back of her thigh, lifting her leg to wrap around his waist.

When she pulled back and whispered, “Slade,” he had no choice; he filled her with one hard thrust. The sensations threatened to overwhelm him. He held deep, eyes closed, giving her a chance to adjust. She was still so damn tight that he needed a moment himself. He had to get himself under control or he’d lose it; he’d go off like an overexcited kid.

He was struggling so hard to contain the physical feelings that he was caught off guard by the emotions that swept over him when she cupped his face between her hands and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“I told you I’d never forget, and I didn’t.”

He had to close his eyes again. How could he tell her that he’d never forgotten, either? That he never would. If he wasn’t careful, there were so many things that he could tell her. But he wouldn’t. There was no point, and he knew it. He’d honestly believed that that weekend with Willow was the only time they would be together. Fate had somehow handed him a second go; he wasn’t going to screw it up. He especially wasn’t going to screw it up by doing what he’d asked her not to do. He’d told her at first that he couldn’t sleep with her because she might end up wanting more from him. Now, here he was, afraid that he’d end up wanting more from her.

He pulled back and then drove in deep and hard. Looking down into her eyes, he smiled. “That’s good to know, sweetheart.” He winked at her. “Let’s see if I can make sure that you don’t forget this time, either.”

With that, he closed his eyes, clamped her leg to his hip, and let go. When she started to whimper, he leaned in and nibbled her neck.

“What’s up, duchess? Need me to go easier? Is this a bit rough for you?”

Fire sparked from her eyes when he met her gaze. “Those were sounds of appreciation. If anything, I was thinking that you must have mellowed as you got older.”

Slade narrowed his eyes at her. She was fucking with him. He loved it! “Not mellowed, sweetheart.” He leaned back, putting some distance between them so that he could look down and watch as he pulled almost all the way out and then slammed back into her. “I was trying to be mindful that you’re a lady.”

“I’m no lady.”

He chuckled. “Then fuck me.”

She did as he asked. Giving back as good as he gave her. Her fingernails scraped the back of his neck, sending those shivers of desire that she’d been talking about shooting down his spine and straight to his balls. He wasn’t going to last, but he needn’t have worried – he could feel her tighten around him, gripping him tight as she started to moan.

“Slade. Slade! Oh God. Slade!”

She pulsed around him, her inner muscles milking him for everything he had to give. He kept driving into her, driving her higher, until he soared over the edge. He came hard, giving her everything her body demanded of him. He hadn’t had a full body orgasm like that in years – not since Willow.

That thought rolled around in his head as they slowly came back down. She was something else. Sex with her was different. Better – and not just in the physical sense. He let her leg slide back down and kept his arms closed around her as he backed her to the bed. They collapsed onto it, and he wrapped her up in his arms, needing to feel her close. Sex with her was different because they made a connection. He knew it as she smiled up at him. He smiled back but he didn’t feel like smiling anymore when it hit him that it was a connection that he didn’t want to be broken.

~ ~ ~

The plane thundered down the runway and lifted off into the sky. Willow craned her neck to see if she could see the

base at Kaneohe Bay. She hated that she was flying away from him, but it wasn't as though she had any other choice. She was leaving Hawaii with one more amazing weekend tucked inside her heart. Slade had been amazing – and not just the sex. He was just an amazing guy – the most amazing guy she'd ever known. She wished... But there was no point in wishing. She'd known from the start what it was all about. Slade had made it clear. And it wasn't as though *she* was looking for anything more herself.

Now that she'd hit her mid-twenties, many of her friends were finding guys and settling into serious relationships – even marriage in some cases. That wasn't what she wanted for her future, not for many years to come. But as unrealistic as she knew it was, she still felt like she was leaving a piece of her heart behind, here with Slade. She'd love to think that she was taking a piece of his with her, but she knew better. As sweet as he was, especially when he cupped her cheek and looked down into her eyes as he'd said a last goodbye at the airport, it was just a part of who he was. It didn't mean anything. Not in the sense that she wanted it to.

Gigi dug her in the ribs with her elbow. “Was it worth it? Did you get what you came for?”

Willow dragged her gaze away from the window and turned to smile at her friend. “It was well worth it. And I got as much as I can have.”

# Chapter Five

*Two years ago. Napa, California.*

Slade turned up the collar on his coat against the cold. What he wouldn't give right now to be back in Hawaii. Winters here in California weren't exactly harsh, but when a cold front blew through like this, he missed the warm ocean breezes and the sound of the surf.

He turned to go back inside the gatehouse. He was going soft in his old age, he had to be. He'd only been outside for a couple of minutes to talk to some company visitors. He used to think that the MPs on base had a tough job when they were rostered to man the gate. He preferred to be outside, on the move and doing rather than cooped up. Yet, here he was.

He wasn't complaining, not really. His dad had worked this job ever since Slade could remember. He'd sat here in the gatehouse, allowing or denying passage to anyone who wanted access to the Jacobs family. When his dad was nearing retirement, Jacob Jacobs had reached out to Slade, telling him that whenever he was ready to come back to Napa, there would always be a job here waiting for him.

He checked his watch. His shift was almost over. It might not be the most thrilling job in the world, but he was grateful for it. He'd never had any great ambitions. He'd served his country as a Marine. And now, he just wanted to survive – to live a quiet little life. That was all he needed.

He smiled when he spotted a car coming down from the big house. That was John, coming to take over for him. Slade was done for the night, and he had the weekend off. He didn't have any plans, but he felt like going out and letting off some steam.

He wished that Xander was around. Xander Jacobs had been his best friend growing up. It hadn't made any difference

to them that Xander was part of the Jacobs family while Slade's family was simply the help. The two of them had been as thick as thieves from kindergarten all the way through graduation.

They kept in touch whenever they could, but when Slade had signed up for the Marines, Xander had joined the Navy. He was still serving. Slade still had other friends in town, and he planned to look some of them up later. But he missed his buddy.

When John parked his car behind the gatehouse, Slade grabbed his jacket. Sometimes he hung out to chat for a while at the end of his shift. But tonight, he needed to get out.

Two hours later, he was showered, changed, fed, out, and halfway down his first beer. He'd called around, and some of the guys he hung out with had said they were meeting up here tonight.

Slade looked around from his perch at the bar. It wasn't his favorite place, it could get a bit rough on the weekends, but generally it was okay to grab a beer, and shoot the shit with the guys.

It was still early, but the place was already filling up. The bar was a long, low building out by the highway. It was divided into three sections, with the bar in the middle, a restaurant on one end, and a nightclub of sorts on the other end. It was a stretch to call it a nightclub, but it was a place where they had music, sometimes a live band, sometimes just a DJ, and people came to dance.

He decided to take a wander over there while he waited for his buddies – more to check out if there was a band setting up than anything else. He didn't know why, but if there was going to be trouble, it usually happened on a band night. Slade wasn't in the mood for trouble. He didn't know what he was in the mood for. He'd been unsettled lately, though he was damned if he knew why.

He leaned against one of the posts that supported the archway separating the club from the bar. There was a band setting up. That explained why it was busier in here. There were already a few groups sitting at the high-top tables around the edge of the dance floor. He'd guess that there was maybe a bachelorette party, judging by the number of loud, raucous women sitting together.

He checked them out, without any great interest. He didn't have the enthusiasm for the hunt that he used to. In fact, now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember the last time that he'd ...

His heart thudded to a halt, and he gripped his beer tight when he saw her. It wasn't just his imagination – wasn't wishful thinking. That really was Willow. What the hell? He hadn't heard anything about her being home. Not that he would have heard. He didn't keep tabs on her – he did his best to not even think about her most of the time. But there she was. Looking just as damn beautiful as she ever had. He shoved his hands in his pockets to give himself some room as he watched her push her long, dark hair back over her shoulders as she laughed.

His throat went dry as he watched her. He didn't know what that was about, but she'd always had that effect on him. She was still beautiful, but she'd changed. Now, she really was the woman that she'd tried to convince him she was all those years ago. Damn, it'd been a long time.

The years had been kind to her. The thought made him smile. Even if they hadn't been kind, she wouldn't have let them touch her. He'd heard little bits of news about her over the years, and it always made him smile. By all accounts, she'd gone out and taken life by the balls. That didn't surprise him. She'd been feisty as a kid, he imagined that she would be pretty formidable as a woman.

His smile faded. It wasn't as though he was ever going to find out. He counted the two weekends that he'd spent with her as two of the best weekends of his life. But they were an



anomaly. He understood how he would have held some appeal for her back then. That first time, she'd been nothing more than a kid. He'd been older, more experienced, and yeah, he wasn't going to deny that women had always found him attractive. The second time, in Hawaii, he could see that, too. She wasn't the only girl who'd given in to the appeal of an attractive Marine while she enjoyed a break from reality in the sun and the surf of the islands.

But back here? Here in Napa? No. Back here, it was like she'd told him all those years ago – she was a DuPont – nothing more needed to be said.

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“Are you done conquering the world yet, Willow?” Molly asked. “It’s about time you came home. I miss you.”

Willow laughed. “I miss you too, Molly-Moo, but I’m not done conquering the world yet.” She made a face at her friend. “And even when I am, I think I’ll have to establish the center of my empire somewhere else.”

Molly scowled at her. “You promised me, remember? You said that one day you’d come home.”

Willow shrugged. “I did, and I will – one day.” She laughed. “Maybe I’ll come back here when I retire.”

“No. No way am I waiting until we’re old ladies to get you back. And besides, wasn’t the plan for you to come and work at the company at some point?”

“At some point, yes. But you know how it is – can you imagine Mom and me working in the same building? Living in the same house?”

“Err, no. How is your mom, anyway?”

“She’s fine. I think she’s mellowed a little bit. But you know how it is, we just rub each other the wrong way. I always thought that it would get better as I got older, but it hasn’t. She’s just so ... inflexible.”

Molly sighed. “So, you’re telling me that you’re not going to move back home until your mom retires?”

“I’m telling you that I’m only home for a little while. We’re out tonight to have fun with all the girls. So, we should make the most of what is, not worry about what might be.”

“Well, aren’t you all philosophical these days?”

“Nope. Just a bit more diplomatic than I used to be. The old me would’ve just told you to shut the hell up and get drinking, girl.”

Molly laughed and raised her glass to Willow. “I can do that.” She looked around the club, which was filling up rapidly. “Does you making the most of what is include finding yourself a guy to take home?”

Willow shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s not my objective for the evening, but if one happens to fall into my lap...”

“Oh my!” Molly wagged her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t complain if *he* fell into my lap.”

Willow cocked an eyebrow at her friend. Molly didn’t date much. “Who? You should make a move if you’re interested.”

Molly rolled her eyes at her. “You know I would never do that.”

“Not even if you weren’t still hung up on Marcos?”

Molly scowled at her. “I am not. He made his choice. He left. That’s ancient history.”

“Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that you’ve forgotten all about him and moved on?”

“You can believe what you like. It doesn’t matter. He married her, remember?”

Willow blew out a sigh. “Yeah, but he’s not happy. You two are supposed to be together. We all know that.”

“If we were supposed to be, then we would be. If he wasn’t happy, then I doubt he’d still be married to her. But let’s drop

it, can we? I don't want to go down that road. What I was saying..." She tilted her head in the direction of the bar. "Was that Slade Hawkins is one good-looking guy."

Willow inhaled sharply as she scanned the room. The laughter and chatter of all their girlfriends faded to white noise when she found him, and his gaze met hers. Wow.

Molly was right; Slade Hawkins was one hell of a good-looking guy. He leaned in one of the archways that led out from the bar. His arms were folded across his chest. Even now, now that she was a grown woman and not a starstruck girl, he was just so damn cool.

Her heart skittered in her chest when he smiled and gave her the slightest hint of a nod. She smiled back, hoping desperately that she might get to add a third weekend to the collection of memories that she kept tucked safely in her heart.

"Oh my God!"

Willow reluctantly dragged her gaze away from him. "What's wrong?" she asked Molly.

Molly fanned her hand in front of her face. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong. I just ... I didn't know. I had no idea that the two of you ..."

"The two of us what?" Willow asked with a frown.

Molly sputtered out a laugh. "I don't know exactly what; let's just say that the two of you know each other a whole lot better than I would have guessed – judging by the way the air crackled when you laid eyes on each other. I think I got scorched just watching."

Willow glanced back at him. He smiled, and she smiled back.

"See? There it goes again. You should get over there to him before you scorch everyone who gets in the way of the looks you're exchanging."

"You think?"

“Hell yes! The girls won’t mind. Half of them are here looking to find someone to go home with.” Molly laughed. “They might mind if they figure out that you left with Slade, but from the way he’s looking at you, no one else stands a chance with him, anyway. Go on, go! But don’t you dare leave town again without telling me what happened tonight.”

“Okay.”

Molly narrowed her eyes at Willow as she got down from her seat. “And not just tonight. You two have history – and don’t try denying it. I want to hear all about it.”

“Okay.” Willow hadn’t purposely kept it a secret from Molly, it was just that they didn’t see each other all that often, and the subject of Slade had never come up when they did.

“You call me tomorrow, you hear?” Molly called after her as she started to walk away.

Willow turned back and grinned at her. “It might not be tomorrow.” If she got her way, she’d be far too busy for the rest of the weekend.

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All of Slade’s breath got caught in his chest as he watched Willow get down from her seat. He wouldn’t have put money on her coming over to talk to him. Of course, he wanted her to, but things were different now. They were both back on home territory – he didn’t know where he stood. Well, he had a fair idea – he stood a whole lot lower in the social hierarchy than she did.

He wouldn’t have gone over to talk to her, but his heart felt as though it was trying to pound its way out of his chest as she made her way to him.

She didn’t stop until she was almost toe to toe with him, smiling up at him, those green eyes of hers shining.

“Slade.” Her voice was like a caress.

“Little Willow.”

She laughed. “I hate to break it to you, but I’m not so little anymore.”

He shook his head. “You’re no little girl.” He took his time looking her over, loving the way her nipples stood to attention under his gaze. “You’re all woman, now.” He smiled as he lifted his head and looked back into her eyes. “But you’ll always be my little Willow.”

Her expression softened, and her hand came up to cover her heart. “Aww. That... That means a lot.”

He couldn’t get a read on her. He didn’t know if she was as pleased to see him as he was her, or if that sappy smile on her face was just nostalgia for what they’d shared.

“So, how have you been?” he asked, just for something to say since he didn’t know how to respond.

She gave him a puzzled look. “That’s it? How’ve I been? Oh...” She looked around. “Shit. Sorry. I should have thought. Are you here with someone?”

“No. Why?” He narrowed his eyes, not understanding.

She narrowed hers right back at him. “Oh, I don’t know, Slade. Maybe because I was hoping for a different kind of greeting. *How’ve you been?* That sounds like we’re nothing more than acquaintances – acquaintances who aren’t even really interested in catching up – who barely even remember each other.”

There was no mistaking the hurt in her eyes as they looked into his.

“Is that it? Am I just that girl ... Just one of those girls who ...?”

Slade realized his mistake. “No, hell no! You? The two weekends that we shared? They’re the best memories of my life. You’re not just a girl, Willow. You’re *the* girl. *That* girl.” He caught himself and stopped before he said too much.

She was still frowning, but now she looked more puzzled than angry. “What do you mean, *that* girl?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “You know what I mean. You’re that girl who I could never forget. You’re the standard that no other girl ever came close to.” His heart was pounding. He shouldn’t say it, and he knew it, but he’d rather make a fool of himself than let her go thinking that she hadn’t meant anything to him. That hurt look in her eyes had slayed him.

Right now, those big, green eyes were rounded in surprise. “Seriously?”

She looked so stunned that he had to smile. “Yeah, sorry duchess. I don’t want to embarrass you or anything, but you got to me. Okay?”

All his breath caught in his chest once again when she leaned in and gripped his shirt at his sides. He had to close his eyes when she leaned closer still, and her breath fanned his ear when she spoke. “You got to me, too, Slade.”

His arms had slipped around her waist of their own accord. He was holding her close before he knew what he was doing. He knew he shouldn’t – they weren’t in Coronado or Hawaii now. People knew them here – knew both of them. And the Napa gossip grapevine was notorious. Still, he couldn’t find it in him to let go of her. He’d never thought that he’d get to hold her again, and here she was, her thundering heart syncing with his as she pressed herself even closer than his arms demanded of her.

“Let’s get out of here, then.”

He looked down into her eyes. He’d love nothing more than to do that, but he needed to be sure that she understood the implications. “This is Napa.”

“And?”

He chuckled; she knew the implications as well as he did. And if she wasn’t worried about the gossip, he wasn’t. It wasn’t his reputation at stake.

“And I wanted to be sure that you’re okay with it.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the table where her friends were still sitting. “They’ve seen you in my arms, now.”

She rolled her eyes. “And you think I’m worried? Sure, they’ve seen me in your arms. They’ve also seen you in mine.” She smiled up at him, and he couldn’t help smiling back. “Tomorrow, they’re all going to assume that you got between my legs, too.” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “I hope you’re not going to disappoint them.”

That was good enough for him. He brought one hand up, tangling his fingers in her hair, tilting her head back as he looked down at her lips. “I don’t give a shit about them and what they think, pussy Willow. But I can tell you right here and now that I won’t disappoint you.”

He grinned when she shuddered at his words. She grinned right back at him and said, “Shiver of desire,” proving that she hadn’t forgotten any more than he had.

He didn’t get the chance to comment before her hands came up around the back of his neck and pulled him down into one of her deep, sweet, intoxicating kisses.

When they finally came up for air, she took hold of his hand and started heading for the exit. “Rumor mill be damned. I’m not going to let anyone, or anything get in the way of our third weekend.”

When they reached the parking lot, she looked around. “I came with Molly. Do you have your car here?”

He tugged her hand, leading her to where he’d parked. “Are you okay to ride on my bike?”

She looked at his Harley and then back at him. Momentary panic hit him when she threw her head back and laughed. Was she so far above riding on the back of a bike that it was funny?

Relief swept over him when she stopped laughing and shook her head. “You really don’t get it, do you, Slade? I’ll ride anything you want me to. Your bike, your cock, you just say the word, and I’m on it.”

Her smile hit him right in the chest. Damn. She was amazing. He'd never known another woman like her, and he knew that he never would. It was just a damn shame that she was the one woman he could never have – not for anything more than a night or two. He pulled himself together. Since he knew that he'd only get a night or two, he wasn't going to waste any time standing around here in a parking lot.

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By Sunday night, Willow was ready to rethink her whole life. This weekend with Slade had been everything. He was amazing – and not just in bed. He was such a great guy. She'd traveled the world over the last decade or so, she'd known some great guys, but she'd never known anyone like Slade – and she knew that she never would again.

If he asked her to, she'd move back home. In fact, she wouldn't even leave – she'd stay right here with him in his apartment. She could even stand to work with her mom if she got to stay here with him.

Unfortunately, she knew that he wouldn't ask her. He might think of her as *that* girl – and she loved that he'd told her that. But she was that girl from his past. All weekend, for all the great sex, and all the great talks that they'd had, he'd made quite clear that he didn't see her as someone who would be in his future.

She was sitting at the counter that separated his kitchen from the living area while he rinsed the few dishes that they'd used. When he turned around, he gave her a sad smile. “You're getting ready to leave, aren't you?”

“Yeah. I fly back out in the morning, and I should spend the night at the house with Mom and Bentley before I go.”

He came around the counter and rested his hands at her waist. “Thanks for spending so much of your time with me. I loved every minute of it.”



She had to swallow as tears filled her eyes. She blinked rapidly, trying to force them away.

“I loved every minute of it, too, Slade.”

He leaned in to press a quick kiss to her lips. When he straightened, he looked stunned to see two big fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Hey.” He cupped her face in his hands and brushed the tears away with his thumbs. “What is it, little Willow?”

She shook her head. “Sorry.” She couldn’t tell him. What was the point? He’d told her from the beginning that he wasn’t the kind of guy who could offer her anything.

As his thumbs caressed her cheek, and his gorgeous hazel eyes searched her face, she wished with all her heart that things were different. But they weren’t. So, she pulled herself together and forced a smile.

“See you next time?”

The way he smiled back at her told her that if he was still around, and still single, he’d be all about it. That was something. It wasn’t enough, but if it was all she could have of him, then she’d take it.

“Next time,” he said with a nod. Then his smile evaporated. “But I guess that this time ends with another ride on the back of my bike. We need to get you home, right?”

Willow sighed. She had one more night here. No way did she want to spend it explaining to her mom where she’d been all weekend and why she’d rolled up on the back of a motorcycle. “That’s okay. I’ll call a cab.”

He nodded sadly. He understood, and she hated it.

“Let’s not even talk about it, okay? Just kiss me till it’s time to go.”

There was no mistaking the smile on his lips as he moved in for that last kiss – and there was no mistaking the hurt in his eyes, either.

# Chapter Six

*Last Christmas Eve Eve. Napa, California.*

Willow sat on the sofa in the family room, her legs drawn up underneath her, and a glass of Bentley's latest red blend in her hand.

"Do you think she's going to be okay?"

Her brother blew out a sigh. "The doctor said that she will be. I've been telling you for a while that she was stressed ..."

"And I am so sorry! I honestly thought that you were just trying to guilt me into coming back."

"Come on, sis. For one thing, you don't need to be sorry. Mom's fine, she's going to be fine. And, you should know that I'd never try to guilt you into anything. I just wanted to keep you in the loop as to how she was doing. I know you wanted to go out and blaze your own trail in the world, but you've done that now. I also know that you always wanted to come back." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Now might be your time."

Willow stared back at him. She was still trying to catch up with the events of the last few days. At the beginning of the week, she'd still been in Bordeaux, living the life that she'd been living for the last ten months – working for a winery owned by a friend of her grandfather's. When Bentley had called to say that their mom was being rushed into the hospital with a suspected heart attack, she'd been on her way to the airport within minutes.

That suspected heart attack had turned out to be an anxiety attack. Willow and Bentley were thrilled that it hadn't been more serious. Their mom on the other hand, was mortified. Willow honestly believed that her mom would have preferred a heart attack – it was easier to explain to people. And for some – to Willow, completely incomprehensible – reason,

their mom thought that suffering from anxiety was some kind of weakness.

Even though Willow had dashed home from France to be here with her, her mom had taken herself off to recuperate at a friend's lake house.

She looked back at her brother. "I could stay – if you need me?"

Bentley smiled. "We've always needed you, Willow, you know that. And now, with all the experience that you've gained, you'd be a huge asset to the business."

Willow chewed on her bottom lip. "Do you think she'd want me here? I mean, I know she does. But the timing – if I come back now, would it make her feel worse? Will she see it that I'm coming back because we think she can't cope anymore?"

Bentley took a sip of his bourbon and shook his head. "I can't tell you what she'll think. I wish I could. She might be thrilled, she might see it like you say, that we think she's weak."

Willow had to laugh. "Mom is many things; weak is not one of them."

"Tell me something I don't know. But, sis, it's not just about her. Obviously, I don't want to upset her. But she's not the only one to consider here. What about you?"

"What about me?" Willow gripped her glass a little tighter.

"What do you want out of life? Are you happy? I know you've enjoyed living around the world, you've gained some great experience in the wine world, but is that what you want? Do you see yourself living out your days moving from one place to the next?"

She smiled at him. "You always were the smart one, weren't you? I've been asking myself those same questions lately. I'm not getting any younger. My plan was always to go out, see the world, learn some stuff that I could bring back

here. You know, make myself useful when I finally came home and joined the company?”

Bentley nodded. “Is it time?” he asked again.

She nodded slowly. “I think it might be. But first, before I make a commitment, we need to figure out how Mom will feel about it.”

“You’re right. We do. She’s said that she’s going to stay in Summer Lake for a couple of weeks. I know she’s glad that you’re here to help out while she’s not.”

Willow let out a short laugh. “I don’t know why. It’s the holidays. There’s nothing going on in the business. And she’s not even here.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not as though we’d be enjoying a jolly family Christmas even if she were, is it?”

Willow laughed out loud. “No.”

“So, you’ll stay for a while? Wait and see how she feels when she comes back?”

“Yeah. I ...”

They both turned at the sound of chimes. The house was better described as a mansion than a house, it didn’t have a doorbell – there were very few unexpected visitors, there were staff to get the door anyway.

Bentley frowned and checked his watch. “Who the hell do you think that is?” he asked. “It’s ten thirty on Christmas Eve Eve.”

“Damned if I know,” said Willow. “You’re the one who lives here.” She waggled her eyebrows at him. “Do you have some booty call coming over?”

Bentley rolled his eyes at her. “What do you think? You’re not the only one whose life is affected by what Mom wants.”

Willow felt bad. While their mom had always described her as her wayward child, and she’d gone off to explore the world, Bentley was the conscientious one. He’d gone straight into the

business after college, he'd stayed here, living on the estate, and working with their mom. She hadn't given it too much thought before, but now that she did, she could see how he wouldn't have much room for a personal life.

"You should work on that," she told him.

"I'd like to. If I get some room to breathe. And you coming home might just help."

His words sealed her decision for her. She'd been wanting to come back. She'd been thinking that it was almost time for her own sake — now she knew that, for Bentley's sake, it was long overdue.

They both turned when the housekeeper appeared in the doorway to the family room.

"Who was it?" Bentley asked. "Did you get rid of them?"

Willow loved the way Shona smiled. "I did not. But I made them wait in the hallway. I thought I should give you a choice. It's those pesky friends of yours, and I'd say that they've had a few too many. Especially considering that there's still a cab waiting outside for them."

Willow shot a look at Bentley. "Which of your friends would be riding around in a cab, drunk, on Christmas Eve Eve?"

"I have no idea," said Bentley.

They both looked at Shona, and she laughed. "It's Xander Jacobs and his buddy, Slade."

Willow's heart thudded to a halt. She'd expected that she'd run into him while she was home. But she hadn't expected this.

Bentley was grinning as he got to his feet. "It's okay, Shona. I'll go bring them in."

Willow watched them leave the room; her heart was thundering, and her hands were shaking. It had only been two years since she'd seen him this time. But those two years had

dragged. She had to pull herself together. For all she knew, he had a girlfriend – hell, he could even be married. That thought sat like a stone in her stomach.

She smiled when she heard his voice. He and Xander were both speaking at the same time, and Bentley was laughing as he brought them back this way. Momentary panic hit when she looked down at herself and realized that she was sitting here in her pajamas. They hadn't exactly been expecting company. The panic dissipated; these were her favorite pajamas. They covered everything, were decent enough to sit around chatting with her brother in, but she knew she looked damn good in them.

“There she is!” Xander shouted when he saw her. She started to get up from the sofa, but he hurried across the room and tackled her in a hug that had them both falling back onto the cushions.

She laughed as she slapped his arms. “Get off me, you big idiot.”

He kept his arms around her as he sat back up, setting her straight. “You know you love me, really.”

“Yeah, I do. How've you been?”

As soon as the question left her lips, she turned to look at Slade. He'd asked her that the last time they saw each other. At first, she'd thought it was a form of rejection. It hadn't been, though.

Damn him, he got better looking every time she saw him. He didn't look very happy right now. She couldn't figure out why, until she realized that Xander still had his arms around her.

She shrugged him off and got to her feet. What the hell? She didn't know how Slade would feel about her coming home for good. She had an inkling. She didn't like it, but she believed that he'd distance himself once he knew that she was sticking around. He'd made it clear from the beginning that he had nothing to offer her – at least, nothing more than an

amazing weekend once every seven years or so. So, this might be the only chance she got, and she was going to take it. She marched right up to him and wrapped him in a hug. It was a friendly hug, nothing like the embraces that they'd shared in the past. But it was something.

“And you. It's good to see you.”

His hazel eyes looked stormy as they stared back into hers.

Xander laughed from his spot on the sofa. “How about that? She dumps me on my ass on the sofa and goes straight to you.” Slade glanced over her shoulder at Xander, but then his gaze came straight back to hers.

“What do you guys want to drink?” Bentley asked. “I'll go get them.”

Xander jumped up. “I'll come with.”

Willow was barely aware of them leaving as she stood there, staring into Slade's eyes.

He didn't speak. She didn't even want him to. She just wanted to bask in the warmth of that gaze for as long as she could. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, and his hand came up to touch her cheek.

“I was sorry to hear about your mom. How is she?”

She tried to unscramble her brain. His words were asking about her mom, but his expression made it clear that he was only interested in her. And judging by the intensity in his eyes, he was very interested. So was she.

She reached up and touched his arm. He was wearing a heavy coat, but in her mind's eye she could see the tattoos beneath. “Thanks. She's going to be okay.”

“How long are you home for?”

Her eyes drifted closed. What could she say? She didn't want to tell him here and now that she might be home for good. She didn't want this moment to end, and she was ninety

percent certain that when he found out that she might not be leaving, he'd back off.

The silence drew out between them, and eventually, he nodded. She hated that he seemed to shut down and distance himself – emotionally if not physically – even though she hadn't said a word.

“What's that for? That nod?” she asked. “What does that mean?”

He gave her a sad smile. “It means I get it. It's okay, little Willow. I understand. It's none of my business.”

She scowled at him and tightened her grip on his arm. But then, Xander's laugh rang out as he and Bentley came back. She wanted to tell Slade that it was his business. She wanted it to be his business. But he was right, it wasn't. And he wasn't any of her business.

He stepped away from her just before Bentley and Xander entered the room. She couldn't help murmuring, “I wish it were.”

He didn't react. It didn't seem like he'd even heard her. And it was probably better that way.

~ ~ ~

“What are you looking so miserable about?” Xander asked. “You got to see her, and from where I was sitting, it looked like she was pretty damn pleased to see you.”

As the cab exited through the gates of the DuPont estate, Slade turned to look at his friend. “Yeah. I got to see her. But...”

“But what?” Xander raised his eyebrows. “Are you going to tell me that you aren't going to do anything about it? I don't believe that. I know it hasn't happened very often, but I also know that whenever the two of you are in the same town, you spend the weekend together.”



“But that’s only because she knows it can’t be anything more than a weekend.”

Xander leaned back and rested his head against the seat. It made Slade smile. They’d spent the evening at Antonio’s wine bar, Muse, with a whole bunch of their friends. It had been an eventful evening. Xander’s sister, Hannah, and her new man, Grady, had come out with them, and Xander had ended up decking Hannah’s ex, who’d shown up out of nowhere.

Slade could admit that they might both be just a little worse for wear – worse for the whiskey, which the two of them always knocked back when they got together.

“I don’t buy that shit, you know. I never have. Willow’s not like that. None of them are.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it, but she said it herself. She told me, in no uncertain terms, that it wasn’t as though we could ever go out for real since she’s a DuPont.”

“Yeah, but come on, man. How many years ago was that?” Xander waggled his eyebrows. “She was just a young, sweet, innocent kid when you ...”

Slade cut him off with a scowl. “Jesus, don’t say it like that. You make it sound as though I was some kind of predator, and she was my victim.”

Xander laughed out loud. “Relax, would you? I was joking! Willow’s never been sweet and innocent, and I don’t mean that in a bad way. She’s smart, strong, and as independent as they come. I remember even when we were little kids, she was that way. Now Tori...”

Slade smiled through pursed lips. He didn’t see any point in continuing with this line of conversation and he knew that once Xander started talking about Tori, it would be easy enough to distract him.

“... Tori’s a different story.” Xander frowned to himself. “I’m not saying that she’s not smart, strong, and independent, she’s just... different. She’s sweeter than Willow.”

Slade frowned at him. He knew exactly what Xander meant, but he still felt defensive of Willow.

Xander threw his head back and laughed. “You should see your face right now! I’m not saying anything bad about Willow.”

“I know. I don’t know what my problem is.”

“I do.”

“Go on then, genius. Why don’t you tell me what my problem is?”

Xander sat back up to look him in the eye. “She’s your woman. She always has been. She always will be. That means you will defend her against any kind of criticism – at least, perceived criticism. I really wasn’t criticizing her, but in your mind, I was comparing her unfavorably with her sister. Am I right or am I right?”

Slade blew out a sigh. “You’re right that I wanted to defend her. You couldn’t be more wrong that she’s my woman. She never has been and never will be.” A heavy weight settled in his chest as he said those words. Just because it was the truth, didn’t mean he had to like it.

Xander waved a hand at him. “I’m not going to argue with you about it tonight, but I think you’re going to find out just how wrong you are.”

“What makes you think that?” Slade didn’t agree, but he wanted to hang on to any kind of hope Xander might be able to give him.

“When I went to get the drinks with Bentley, he told me that he’s trying to talk her into staying.”

Slade’s heart leaped into his mouth.

Xander raised his eyebrows at him. “You got nothing to say about that?”

“What is there to say? She didn’t mention staying.”

“Yeah, and Bentley asked me not to bring it up because she’s still undecided. But the way she shoved me off and went running to you when we first got there? Looked to me like she sees you as something worth sticking around for.”

Slade turned to look out the window as the cab made its way into town. When he’d asked how long she was home for, she hadn’t answered. At the time, he’d felt like he’d overstepped by even asking. Then, as she’d moved away from him, he thought he heard her say that she wished it was his business. But that was probably just wishful thinking.

“So, if she is home for good, what are you going to do about it?”

Slade shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. I guess all I can do is play it by ear.”

# Chapter Seven

*Present day. Napa, California.*

Willow looked around Hannah's cottage with a big smile on her face. "Girl, I have to tell you, you've got it made."

She didn't need to see Hannah's huge smile to know that her friend agreed. Hannah had moved back home recently, and in the matter of a few short months, she'd met and fallen in love with Grady, become a mom to his adopted niece, Ava, and the three of them lived here in Hannah's magazine-worthy cottage on the Jacobs estate – and they even had a gorgeous Dalmatian puppy, Scooter, to complete their adorable little family.

"Sometimes I pinch myself. I cannot believe it's real."

"You should just settle in and believe it. You deserve it. If anyone deserves it, you do. I'm just so happy for you."

Hannah checked her watch. "Thanks. I'm happy for me, too. And I have to tell you, I'm just as happy for Jacob."

"I don't mind telling you that I'm finding this hard to believe. Your brother – *the* Jacob Jacobs is living with a schoolteacher?"

Hannah laughed. "He's not just living with her, Willow. He's totally, madly, head over heels in love with her – it's so nice to see the change in him. And she's just a sweetheart. You'll love her. I used to worry that whenever Jacob met the woman he was going to settle down with, I'd have to find a way to like her. I didn't think that was going to be easy, considering the type of women he's always gone for before. But Becca? I adore her." She checked her watch again.

Willow laughed. "What's up?"

"Sorry. It's just that Jacob asked us to get up to the big house early if we could. Becca was nervous about meeting

everyone, and he wants her to have a few familiar faces there before everyone else arrives.”

“Seriously? He asked you to do that, or you suggested it?”

Hannah laughed. “You’d think, wouldn’t you? But no, it was his idea. I’m telling you, Willow, he’s changed. Actually, he’s changed back. He’s more like the guy he was when we were growing up. For a while there, I thought we’d lost our Jacob. I thought that he’d been replaced by the cold and distant CEO of Jacobs Estate.”

“I’m glad. Obviously, I haven’t seen him much over the last few years, but whenever I’ve been home, I’ve thought the same thing.”

Hannah jumped to her feet when they heard the front door open. Grady, Ava, and Scooter all came in. While Grady made his way to Hannah’s side to greet her with a kiss, Scooter and Ava came bounding over to where Willow still sat on the sofa.

“Auntie Willow, Auntie Willow! We’re going up to the big house. Are you coming with us? Say you’ll come, too?”

Willow grinned at her. She adored the kid. “I’m coming.”

“That’s good. Because everyone we know is going to be there. Do you know Becca? Becca’s lovely. She’s my teacher. I still have to call her Miss Taylor at school. But she’s with Uncle Jacob now. Did you know that she’s with Uncle Jacob?”

Grady grinned at Willow over the top of Ava’s head. “Hey. It’s good to see you. Sorry we’re late back. You guys could have gone up to the house.”

“We wanted to wait for you,” said Hannah.

“It’s not a problem,” Willow reassured him. “Nobody ever expects me to be on time, anyway.”

“Who all’s going?” Grady asked Hannah.

“Everyone. The usual gang.” Hannah shot Willow a sly smile. “All the aunts and uncles, including Uncle Slade.”

Willow didn't try to hide her reaction. She smiled. She'd been hoping that he would be there, but she hadn't wanted to come right out and ask. She'd caught up with Hannah a few times since she came home. Of course, Hannah had heard the rumors about them, and Willow hadn't minded filling her old friend in on everything that had happened between them over the years. Not that all that much had really happened.

Three weekends in sixteen years wasn't much. In the time that she'd been home, Willow had decided that three weekends was nowhere near enough. She desperately wanted to do something about it. She wanted to spend more time with him. But the words he'd told her when she was still a girl kept echoing in her head. He'd told her that he couldn't have sex with her because she was the kind of girl who'd think that sex would lead to something more. He'd told her that he wasn't the kind of guy who could offer her anything more. At the time, she'd believed that he was wrong about her – in fact, at the time, he *had* been wrong. Even though she would have liked for something more to happen between them, she hadn't *wanted* it. She hadn't wanted it, because she knew that she had a life to go off and live. But all these years later, she couldn't deny that she really did want something more from him – something more *with* him.

She came back to the moment when she realized that Hannah and Grady were both watching her.

“What?” she asked with a grin. “It might be a secret, in theory, but we all know.”

Grady cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Don't tell me that you're going to pretend to not know.”

Grady laughed. “Hell no. I know. What I want to know is what, if anything, you're going to do about it. I haven't known you all that long, but even I know that it's out of character for you not to have done anything about it yet.”

She made a face at him. “It is, isn't it? But... I don't know what to do.”

Hannah met her gaze and held it. “I’ve told you what I think. I think you should go for it.”

Ava looked up at her. “I don’t know your secret, Auntie Willow.”

Willow felt bad. Those big, blue eyes looking up at her were the eyes of a little girl who was used to being left on the outside. Willow wouldn’t do that to her.

She leaned in closer, and Ava leaned in to meet her. “My secret is that I like your Uncle Slade.”

A big smile spread across Ava’s face and her eyes grew wider. “Uncle Slade’s awesome!” She glanced over her shoulder at Hannah and Grady before cupping her hand over her mouth as she whispered in Willow’s ear, “And he’s handsome, too.”

Willow laughed as she and Ava nodded eagerly at each other. “Isn’t he?”

Hannah narrowed her eyes at her. “Do I need to worry?”

“Nope,” said Willow. “Nothing to worry about. We’re just sharing our secrets over here. Although –” she checked her watch, “– you were worrying about the time a minute ago. Should we get going?”

Willow smiled to herself as she watched her friend herd her new little family out the door. Willow hadn’t thought that she would want a family of her own, but watching Hannah, she realized that she wouldn’t be totally against the idea.



Slade looked around the conservatory. He knew everyone in the room, he’d grown up with most of them. Xander wasn’t here, he’d only been home on leave for Christmas, but Slade had always considered the other guys his friends, too.

He smiled as he watched Molly corner Jacob. Molly might be small, but she was mighty. Even Jacob wouldn’t be able to

escape her if she had something to say. And it seemed that everyone had something to say to Jacob today. They were all pleased that he was finally making an effort to join in with them again. It was all down to Becca. Slade liked her a lot. He would never have picked her out as being the girl for Jacob, but she was.

His gaze landed on Willow. They hadn't even spoken. They'd exchanged a few smiles, but he'd thought it best not to approach her. As far as he was concerned, this was her home turf, it was up to her how she wanted to play things. Still, he was disappointed that she appeared to be playing it cool.

She might be playing it cool, but there was heat in her eyes when her gaze met his. She smiled; he smiled back. It wasn't a conscious effort, more of an instinctive reaction. His smile faded when Antonio touched her arm, and she turned away. What did he expect?

He hurried toward Becca when he saw that she was standing alone, looking a little unsure of herself. He hadn't known her for long, but he felt protective toward her. Not only was she a newcomer to the group, but she was also another one who came from a different background. Most of these guys might be Napa royalty, but Becca was a self-described Kansas farm kid.

"You doing okay?" he asked when he reached her.

He loved the way she smiled. He didn't think he'd ever known anyone as open and straightforward as her. She nodded happily. "Everything's wonderful. I love this. Everyone's so nice, too. I don't mind telling you I was nervous."

"You have nothing to be nervous about."

"No, you don't get it. They're all..."

He smiled through pursed lips as he waited for her to catch on.

"Oh!" She slapped his arm. "Sorry. You do get it, don't you?"



“I do. I’m the guy who works on the gate, remember?”

Her smile disappeared. “It’s not really like that, is it? None of them see it that way, do they?”

Slade looked around the room. “No, they don’t. Not all of them.” It was just unfortunate for him that out of the whole group of friends, Willow was the only one who’d ever implied that the wine families were a different breed than mere mortals like him.

Becca looked like she was about to ask what he meant by *not all of them*. He knew he shouldn’t have said it. So, he was relieved when he saw Jacob approaching. Slade winked at him. “I’m going to get another drink.”

“You don’t need to go,” said Becca.

Slade just grinned at her as he walked away. It made him chuckle to hear Jacob tell her, “It’s okay. I didn’t scare him off.”

He didn’t even need another drink, but he made his way to the drinks table anyway. His stride faltered when he saw Willow standing there, pouring herself a fresh one.

What the hell. Even if she didn’t want to talk to him, he wasn’t going to pass up what might be his only chance to get close to her today. And if it wasn’t today, who knew when he’d get another chance?

She surprised the hell out of him when she set down her fresh glass of wine and poured a whiskey without even looking up. When she did, she held the whiskey out to him with a smile.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” He deliberately let his fingers brush hers as he took the glass from her.

He heard her breath catch and saw a hint of pink touch her cheeks. She wasn’t embarrassed; Willow didn’t get embarrassed. It sent a rush of warmth through his chest to

know that it was simply her reaction to him. It made him feel better that he wasn't the only one who was affected.

As the silence drew out between them, he racked his brain for something to say. He couldn't say any of the things that he really wanted to – she wouldn't want to hear them. But he couldn't bring himself to engage in superficial chitchat, either.

He should have known better; Willow didn't do superficial any more than he did.

She was doing that thing with her bottom lip – chewing it from the inside was his guess – it was so damn sexy. It was also one of her little giveaways. She'd done it that first night they were together. And since then, he'd learned that she did it when she was trying to figure out what to say. He was hoping that she wasn't trying to figure out how to tell him to take a hike, but he waited without interrupting; whatever it was, he needed to hear it.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak, little Ava went running across the room shouting, "Uncle Jacob!"

Everyone went quiet as they'd turned to watch her.

"Uncle Jacob! You just did the mistletoe thing with Miss Taylor," Ava cried. "Does that mean you're going to marry her?"

Slade felt bad for Becca as her cheeks turned red, but Jacob soon set her – and everyone else – at ease. He tightened his arm around Becca's shoulders and smiled down at Ava before looking up and smiling around at everyone else.

All the hairs on Slade's arms stood up. There was no mistaking the love that shone on Jacob's face when he looked into Becca's eyes and said, "I hope so, Ava. That's what I'm working toward if Miss Taylor wants me."

"Oh my God!" Willow shook her head in wonder. "Hannah was right. We got Jacob back."

Slade had to laugh. "Yeah, we did."

She caught him completely off guard when she took a step closer and looked up into his eyes. “Tell me something, Slade?”

“Anything,” he breathed.

All the air rushed out of his lungs when she asked, “Do I get you back?”

His throat went dry. They’d just watched Jacob announce to everyone that he was working on getting Becca to marry him. And Willow ... No. What was he thinking? Willow wasn’t asking anything of the sort. At most, she was asking if they’d get another weekend together.

Whatever she was asking, his answer was the same. He nodded rapidly. “You get me back. Any time you want me. Just say the word.”

Then, she said the words that he’d feared he’d never hear from her again. “Let’s get out of here, then.”

She even grabbed his hand as she headed for the side door of the conservatory, which led out into the yard. Slade was shocked, but not so shocked that he didn’t link his fingers through hers as they went. He didn’t dare look back over his shoulder to see if anyone had noticed, though.

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Willow would have loved to ride on the back of Slade’s bike again like she had the last time they were together. However, Slade had walked her out to her car and said that he’d *see her there*.

As she followed him away from the Jacobs estate, she understood his thinking. If she’d left her car there, everyone would know that they’d left together. She didn’t have a problem with that, but she could see how he might. As she followed him through town, it became apparent that when he’d said he’d see her *there*, he’d meant back at his apartment. She

would have taken him back to her place, but she could understand why he might not be comfortable with that, either.

He still lived in the same apartment building, and she found a spot in the parking lot while he parked his bike and then came over to meet her. When she got out of the car, he was there, waiting. She was surprised to see that he looked a little unsure of himself. So, she grabbed his coat at his waist and drew him toward her as she leaned back against the car.

“I’ve missed you, Slade.”

He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again, she could see the truth in them as he said, “I’ve missed you, too, little Willow.”

It made her smile – she loved the way he called her that. She couldn’t help asking, “You have?”

He leaned his weight against her, trapping her between his hard body and the car. “More than you can imagine.”

Her hand came up to touch his cheek as she looked up into his gorgeous, hazel eyes. “I think I might be able to imagine. Like I said, I’ve missed you, too.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “I know I shouldn’t ask. I know it’s none of my business. But are you back to stay?”

She chewed the inside of her bottom lip. It felt like a trap. If she said that yes, she was home to stay, would that mean that tonight was a one-off – that it would be their last time? Tears pricked behind her eyes at the thought. It wasn’t as though they’d had a lot of time together. He hadn’t been a big part of her life if she looked at it in terms of time, but in terms of importance? There was no denying that he was a very important part of her life. He’d helped to shape her as a woman – and not just in the obvious sense that he’d been her first.

Just as he’d told her that she’d been the standard that no other girl had come close to, she felt the same way about him. She wasn’t embarrassed to admit that she’d been with more

than her share of guys since him but no one else had ever made her feel the way that he did – and not just in bed.

She sucked in a deep breath before she answered. She could hardly lie to him; all she could do was hope that he'd be interested in spending some time with her now that they were finally going to be living in the same place.

“I am. After Mom’s little health scare, she’s taking it easier.” Willow had to smile. “In fact, you can’t breathe a word about it, not yet, but she’s met a guy. He lives in Summer Lake, and from what she said, she’s going to be spending most of her time there. Bentley’s stepping up to become CEO, and I’m finally going to stick around and take over as COO.”

She searched his face as she spoke and was thrilled that rather than looking perturbed by that news, as she'd feared that he might, a big smile spread across his face. She relaxed and slid her arms around his waist, drawing him closer.

“Is that okay with you?”

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “It’s more than okay. Well, it is, if the new COO of DuPont Wineries is going to be able to fit me into her schedule here and there.”

Willow leaned in to kiss him again, but she spoke against his lips before she did. “I’ll make sure that she can.”

She knew that she was playing a dangerous game, she shouldn’t let herself get in too deep with a man who’d never made any secret of the fact that he didn’t have room for her in his life. But she knew herself; she was smart enough not to fall for him, and strong enough to be able to take it when he walked away. In the meantime, she planned to make the most of any time that the two of them could get together.

Slade took hold of her hand and started walking them toward his building. “I’ll take as much as you want to give me, but don’t worry, I won’t ask for more than that.”

Willow dropped her head, not wanting him to see the disappointment that she knew must show on her face. She

wished that he wanted more, but she couldn't complain; he'd always been honest with her.

# Chapter Eight

As Slade pulled away from the Jacobs estate on Saturday night, he couldn't help rerunning in his head the conversation that he'd just had with Jacob. That was the first time that he'd admitted to his boss – or to anyone, for that matter – that there was something going on between Willow and him. He was a little surprised at himself, but he wasn't worried.

He'd admitted that he was headed over to Willow's place, that they'd been sleeping together. Jacob had asked if Willow wanted more than that, and Slade had to admit that he was the one who wanted more.

He and Jacob had spent the last couple of days down in San Diego at a funeral. At Elliott's dad's funeral. Elliott was one of the Jacobs Estate company pilots, although he hadn't been at work for most of the last year – he'd been spending time with his parents until the inevitable end had come.

Jacob was a good man as well as a good boss. He'd flown most, if not all, of the company's employees down to San Diego for the funeral. Tomorrow, he was flying out to Kansas – where he'd originally planned to spend the whole weekend with Becca. The plan had been for Jacob and Slade to hang out and have a few drinks together after they got back tonight, but Slade had seen that Jacob just wanted to go to bed after a long, emotional couple of days – and to get to tomorrow, and to Becca, that much sooner.

Slade hadn't minded, considering that he'd told Willow that he'd go over to her place whenever he got finished. He had to smile. Willow didn't care when he went over, as long as he went. Over the last few weeks, he'd been at the DuPont estate more and more. When the two of them had agreed that they should make the most of the time that they could get together, Slade had imagined that Willow would want to come to his place.

He'd been wrong.

Willow kept inviting him over to the estate. He'd been nervous about it at first; the last thing he wanted was to run into her mother. Although, it seemed Alexandria DuPont was spending most of her time in Summer Lake. Even though she wasn't around, Willow's brother, Bentley, was still a factor. He was someone who Slade considered to be a friend. But as much as he disliked the idea of sneaking around behind his friend's back, he didn't dislike it enough to say no to Willow.

As he drove up the long driveway to the house, he could see that Willow's light was still on. He'd also figured out the layout of the house and could see that all the lights in Bentley's wing were off. That made him feel a little better.

As he pulled up at the side of the house, the kitchen door opened, and she came out. All his breath caught in his chest. She seemed to get more gorgeous every time he saw her. Although, he had to acknowledge that was more about the way he felt about her than the way she looked. Not that she wasn't beautiful in her pajamas with her hair piled up in a messy knot on top of her head.

He climbed out of his car – he was driving his car more than riding his bike these days, since he was coming over here to see her every chance he got, and he didn't want the sound of his Harley to wake the whole household.

She waited for him in the doorway, and he jogged up the steps to greet her. As her arms came up around his neck, he slid his arms around her waist and hugged her close.

“Hey, little Willow.”

“Hey, yourself. How was it?”

He loved that about her. He loved that she always asked about him, about what was going on in his life. He was more used to women who chattered on about themselves, and whose only interest in him was in what he could do for them – mostly in bed.



He pressed a kiss to her lips before he answered. “It was... rough. I mean, it went well, to say that it was a funeral. But it was rough on Elliott, and his mom was a wreck.” He shook his head. “It’s not like they didn’t know it was coming. El told me that, in the end, his dad just wanted to go, and when his mom finally reassured him that she would be able to go on without him, he let go.”

Slade had to clear his throat. He didn’t know Elliott’s parents all that well, but from the few times he’d met them over the years, he’d grown to like and respect them.

Willow’s hand came up to touch his cheek. “Come on. Come inside. I’m sorry it was rough.”

He felt bad. He’d just gotten choked up thinking about it, he wasn’t the one who was suffering.

He squeezed her hand as she led him into the kitchen. “Sorry. I’m fine. It just hit me how hard it has to be for them.”

She stopped and went to one of the cabinets, where she grabbed a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

“You’re not fine. I can see it in your eyes. It hit you hard, didn’t it? In fact, don’t answer – you don’t need to. I can see it. You do that a lot, you know? You make out that however you’re feeling isn’t as important as however someone else is feeling. I get it, I do. What you’re feeling isn’t anything like what El and his mom are going through, but I can’t do anything for them. They’re not my people. You are. So, come on.” She took hold of his hand again and led him down the hallway toward her wing of the house. As they went, he couldn’t help smiling at the way she’d called him *her people*.

When they were in her sitting room, she pushed him down onto the sofa before taking a seat beside him and pouring two glasses of whiskey. Slade just watched. There had been several occasions when she’d dragged him into her lair, as he thought of it, and pushed him down on the sofa but those times, she’d been tearing his clothes off as she did. This was different.

He took the glass she handed him, and she tapped hers against it. “Sometimes, you just need a whiskey night. And I think tonight counts as one of those times.”

He held her gaze for a long moment before tipping his glass and drinking the whole thing. She refilled it and handed it back to him. All he could do was watch her. He hadn’t expected this, he didn’t know what to do in the face of this change. Sure, they’d always been able to talk; he loved talking with her. But the talking almost always came during and after sex. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t remember them ever talking before sex when he came over here.

He only realized he was studying her closely when she raised her eyebrows and asked, “What?”

He shook his head with a rueful smile. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

He loved the sound of that. Always with Willow? Yeah. That sounded great. Wasn’t ever going to happen – but it sounded great.

“I was just wondering what brought on the change.”

She dropped her gaze before looking back up into his eyes. “I’m not even going to pretend that I don’t know what you mean. I’ll just tell you. I’m not jumping on you, because it’s not what you need tonight.” She looked away, and he could see her chewing on the inside of her lip before she turned back to him. “It’s not what you need, not after the funeral and everything. And, honestly, it’s not what I want.”

Slade’s blood ran cold, and he set his glass down on the coffee table, not sure that his shaking hands would be able to keep hold of it. Was this it? Was she going to tell him that she couldn’t do this anymore? He’d known that the day would have to come, but he’d been hoping that it wouldn’t come for a long while yet.

She sensed the change in him and frowned. “Should I shut up? Does the look on your face mean that the sex is all that you want? We can go back to that if you want. I... I’d rather

have that than nothing. So, if me talking too much is going to lead to us ending up at nothing, I'll shut my mouth."

Slade's heart pounded in his chest as he stared at her, trying to puzzle out what it was that she meant. He'd been dreading that she was about to tell him that they couldn't do this anymore, but that couldn't be it. She'd just said she'd rather they kept having sex than had nothing.

He took hold of her hand and brought it to rest on his thigh, covering it with his own. "I'm not going to be a coward and make you do all the talking. I don't know what you're about to say, but whatever it is, you should know this first." He tried to swallow but his throat was dry.

"Know what?"

He had to smile. She wasn't known for her patience.

"If it were up to me, I'd be asking you for a whole lot more than just sex."

She inhaled audibly, and her fingers almost crushed his. He waited, not knowing if he'd blown it, but feeling a little relief that at least he'd finally been honest.



Willow could hear the blood rushing in her ears. She wanted to believe that he meant what she hoped he did. She'd had it in her mind all day, that tonight was going to be different. He'd been away for the last couple of days at the funeral, and no matter how much of a tough guy he was, she knew that it would be hard on him.

She'd been looking forward to him coming over tonight, but not for the usual reasons. She just wanted to be there for him. She'd planned to let him drink his favorite whiskey – which she'd gone out and bought herself – and let him talk, or not talk, whichever he wanted.

Of course, it had backfired on her. She'd panicked the moment he'd set his glass down. She'd thought that he was

about to tell her that they were done – that what they had was only about sex.

Now, looking back into his eyes, after what he'd just said... She wanted to know what exactly he would be asking her for. But it didn't seem fair to put him on the spot, since she was too scared to ask him for what she really wanted.

She felt like the dog in the fable – the one who had a steak in its mouth but who dropped it while trying to get what looked like a bigger steak in the river but which, in reality, was only a reflection of the one he already had. She gave herself a mental shake. She hadn't heard that fable since she was a kid, but it seemed so very fitting right now. Right now, there wasn't a week that went by that she and Slade didn't get together at least one night. Did she really want to put that in jeopardy by asking for more?

The lines around his eyes deepened as he looked at her. She'd let the moment go on too long without saying anything. She had to speak. And she wasn't a coward.

“If it were up to me, I'd be asking you for a lot more, too.”

She watched his throat constrict as he swallowed. He was obviously still afraid to ask, so she pushed on.

“I want more of you, Slade. Don't get me wrong,” she said with a smile that she hoped could lighten the moment back up, “I love what you give me. But I want... I want us to be about more than sex.”

His fingers tightened around hers. “I want that, too.”

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she smiled at him. “Well, alrighty then, good to know we're on the same page.”

“Yeah.”

She'd hoped that he might give her more than a *yeah*, but she wasn't going to push too hard. “Okay, well, the first step in my mind was that I wanted to give you something different tonight.”

He looked at the whiskey sitting on the table.

She followed his gaze and laughed. “Yes, a drink and some conversation. I thought you might need that more than you needed to get laid after the last couple of days.”

She loved the way his eyes softened as he smiled. “Come here.”

She snuggled in close to his side and wrapped her arm around his waist. He leaned his head back against the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. When she looked up at him, his face looked more relaxed than before.

She reached for his drink and passed it to him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” He curled his arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

She settled back into her spot, wrapping her arm tightly around him.

They sat that way in silence for a little while. Willow’s mind was racing. He felt relaxed, but she really wasn’t sure. She wanted to ask, but if he was relaxing and she interrupted...

She smiled when he chuckled and the sound of it rumbled up through his chest and into her.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“This. It feels weird.”

She sat up so that she could see his face. “Bad weird?”

“No, little Willow. Good weird. Really, really good.”

She relaxed at that. “Sorry. I guess I’m just a little tense. I’ve never done this before.”

That wiped the smile off his face. Shoot. She should’ve said that differently.

“What I mean is, I’ve never tried to be there for a guy. I’ve never ...” Her heart was pounding as she wondered how she must be making herself sound.

He ran his hand over her hair, that gentle look in his eyes as he smiled at her. “It’s okay, you don’t need to explain. I know what you mean. I’ve never, either.”

“Never what?” Maybe he’d be able to explain it better than she could.

“I’ve never just tried to be there for someone – not someone I was ... seeing.”

She tried to hold in a laugh, but it came out as a very unladylike snort.

Slade gave her a wry smile and rolled his eyes at her. “Okay, someone I was sleeping with. Is that better?”

She laughed openly this time. “I don’t know about better, but it’s definitely more honest. It’s more honest for me, too. I don’t know if it makes me sound shallow, but I’ve never been interested in getting into anything heavy.”

“If it makes you shallow, it makes me shallow, too.”

She held his gaze for a long moment. “Is that it? Are we both just shallow?”

“No. We’re not. I’d say that we’re the kind of people who know what we want – and who aren’t about to get bogged down in something that we don’t really want.”

Willow thought about that before she answered. “I think you’re right. I think that’s it.” What she was thinking was that in the past, her relationships had been about having fun and hanging out. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about people, it was just that she hadn’t really gotten that close to anyone.

“What if I said that it doesn’t feel like getting bogged down with you?” His question took her by surprise, and her breath caught in her chest before she could answer.

She met his gaze, and he didn’t look away, even though he looked apprehensive about what she might say.

“Then I’d have to tell you that it doesn’t feel that way to me, either.” She risked a smile. “And I think that’s because

this is something that I really do want.”

It was easy to see the rush of relief that washed over him. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't been sitting right there in front of him, but it was true. Slade Hawkins was actually relieved that she just told him that she really wanted... Something... She didn't know what, but something with him.

He hugged her close to his chest. “This is something that I want, too. I don't know what it can be, I don't know where it's going, but I want it, Willow. I want you.”

She leaned back so that she could look up into his eyes. “I want you, Slade. I don't know what it can be, I don't know where it can go.” She leaned up and pressed a kiss to his lips. “But we'll figure it out.”

She hoped that he might look as happy as she felt, but a flash of something crossed his face. She didn't know what it was, and she didn't feel like it was the right moment to go digging for an explanation, so she let it go.



Slade didn't allow himself to consider the implication of her words as he slid his fingers into her hair and drew her closer so that he could kiss her. He'd finally been honest, and she'd been receptive. She hadn't laughed or thrown it back in his face, and he'd believed that either of those were possibilities. Then again, she'd been honest, too.

She'd agreed that she didn't know what it could be or where it could go, when he'd been hoping that she might say it could go wherever they wanted to take it. He pushed those thoughts out of his mind as he deepened the kiss. She was the one who'd have to call the shots. He wasn't the one with the family name to consider. He'd take whatever she felt able to give and be grateful for that.

# Chapter Nine

Willow sat at her desk, staring out of the window. It had been a busy week at work. She felt as though she was finally getting into her stride in her new role as COO of the company. Her mom had pretty much abdicated all her responsibilities. She'd moved to Summer Lake – moved in with her new man, Russ. That made Willow smile. She would never have imagined her mom with a guy like Russ, but she couldn't be happier that she'd found him.

Bentley had finally met someone, too. Alyssa. She was awesome. And she was Russ's daughter. Willow chuckled to herself. Bentley and Alyssa still had to come clean with their folks that they were seeing each other. She didn't think that it would be a problem. Her mom already loved Alyssa, and she was such a sweet person. Willow believed that her mom and Russ would be thrilled.

Her smile faded as she looked out the window at the rolling hillsides covered in vines. What she didn't know was how thrilled her mom would be if she found out about Slade. Then again, would she ever find out? Would there ever be any point in telling her?

Willow would love to think that the day would come when she'd get to introduce him to her mom – and to her dad and Gabriel, too. But she had no idea if that was just wishful thinking on her part. Sure, things had been different between them since their little heart-to-heart when they'd both admitted that they wanted something more than sex from each other. At the time, she'd hoped that Slade meant the same thing she did – that he wanted to explore a real relationship. But although they'd spent more time just hanging out together since then, he hadn't been interested in doing anything with her that a real couple might do.



Perhaps she was being overly sensitive. Perhaps it wasn't that he wanted to keep hiding from all their friends – but it certainly felt that way. She was back in the same situation that she'd been in before. She was afraid to ask him for more for fear that it would mean losing what they already had.

“What's up, sis? It's not like you to be sitting around doing nothing.”

She looked up with a frown to see Bentley standing in the doorway to her office. “There's nothing up with me. Sometimes I just need to think.”

Bentley came in and sat down in the chair across the desk from her. “There's a problem. Do you want to talk about it?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. They'd always gotten along well and since she'd been home, she'd discovered that they worked very well together. So, this was new. “About what? Do you have a problem with me?”

“Come on, sis. You know I don't. But I think you *do* have a problem, and I think it might do you good to talk about it.”

She picked up a pen and tapped it on the notepad on her desk. She didn't think Bentley knew. Although, it wouldn't be much of a shock if he'd heard or seen Slade coming to the house – or leaving in the middle of the night. She doubted that the gossip grapevine would have reached him.

“What do you think my problem is?” she hedged.

“Do you really want me to go there? Once I say it, it's out in the open. I know you've been trying to keep it a secret, but I don't understand why.”

He must know. He had to be talking about Slade. “Yeah. I want you to go there.”

Bentley rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. “Slade.”

She nodded slowly.

“Do you want to talk about it? You can tell me to butt out if you like.”

“No. I don’t want you to butt out. I just ... I don’t know what to say.”

“Mind if I ask you something, then?”

“Feel free.”

“Why the secrecy?”

She shrugged. “It’s a long story. And then again ... I suppose that the honest answer is, I don’t know anymore.”

“Well, if you don’t know why you’re keeping it a secret, does that mean that there’s no valid reason to do so?”

“I think it does. At least, I don’t have a valid reason. If you want to know the truth, I don’t even want to keep it a secret anymore.”

Bentley raised his eyebrows. “But you think he does?”

She blew out a sigh. “I don’t know.”

“So, ask him.”

She made a face.

“Why not?”

“Because... Because what if that feels like pressure?”

Bentley scowled. “You’re my sister, and he’s my friend. So, I hate to say this – I hate to even think it. But are you saying that you think he’s only in it for one thing?”

“No!” She didn’t, did she? “I don’t know.”

“It’s been going on long enough for you to know that much, hasn’t it?”

She stared at him, wondering what he’d have to say if he knew just how long it had been going on. No way was she ever going to tell Bentley that Slade had been her first all those years ago.

He smiled. "I don't know when it started, but it was obvious when he and Xander came over before Christmas. I've been waiting, hoping that you'd open up to me when you were ready. Now, it seems like you're ready, but you're still not opening up. As I said before, I'll butt out if you want me to."

"No. I really don't want you to butt out. In fact, I think I need your help."

"Tell me what you need."

"I think I need your opinion. You see, you're right; there has been something going on between the two of us for ... let's just say a long time. Back then, we both assured each other that we wouldn't be asking for anything more than ..."

She stopped herself from saying the word sex. As Bentley had pointed out, he was her big brother, and he was Slade's friend. "Anything more than a weekend together here and there."

The look in Bentley's eyes told her that he knew exactly what she meant but was relieved she hadn't said it.

She hurried on. "Now, after all this time, I do want something more."

"And you think he doesn't?"

"He said that he does, but his words and his actions don't match. To be fair, mine don't either."

"Have either of you elaborated on what something more might actually mean?"

"No. That's what I'm scared to do."

"Scared, why?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because if I want more than he does, it might scare him off. And I don't want to lose what we do have."

"And have you stopped to consider that he might be feeling the exact same way?"

She let out a short laugh. “I have, but when I start thinking that way, I think it’s just wishful thinking on my part.”

“You don’t need my opinion, Willow. You know what to do.”

She made a face at him. “But if you tell me to do it, then I can blame you if it goes wrong.”

Bentley laughed out loud. “We’re not kids anymore, sis. I’ll tell you that you need to talk to him if you want me to. And you can blame me if it doesn’t work out the way that you want it to. But I have to tell you – I believe that instead of blaming me, at some point soon you’ll be thanking me.”

A rush of warmth filled her chest. She’d love to think that he was right. “Go on then.”

Bentley rolled his eyes. “You need to talk to him. You need to have an open and honest conversation about what you want, about what he wants, and about what you’re each prepared to do to get there.”

“Thanks.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “And what about you? What’s happening with Alyssa?”

She loved the way her brother smiled at the mention of Alyssa’s name. “She’s coming this weekend. In fact, if your conversation with Slade goes the way I think it will, you should bring him out with everyone. That’s the plan. I want to take her to Molly’s so that she can meet the gang and start getting to know people here.”

“You’re serious about her, aren’t you?”

“I am. She came out of nowhere. The timing was all wrong – I was thinking that I was finally ready to start sowing my wild oats.”

Willow had to laugh. “You’re not a wild oats kind of guy, Bentley, just admit it. The timing is perfect. She’s perfect for you. And I’m happy for you.”

Bentley’s expression sobered. “I’m looking forward to the day when I can say that I’m happy for you, too.”

She nodded.

“But if I know you, you’ll mull over this conversation but not do anything about it. And I know you love a challenge. So, here’s your challenge – have that conversation with him before the weekend, and then bring him out with everyone.”

Willow chewed on the inside of her lip.

“Are you telling me you’re not up to the challenge?”

She laughed. “You know how to push my buttons, don’t you?”

“I do. But I’m doing it for your own good.”

“Okay. Challenge accepted.”

“Good. Now, can we talk work?”

“Gladly.” They were both more comfortable talking about work than they were about their personal lives. But she was glad that even though they hadn’t seen much of each other over the years, they were still close enough that they could talk when they needed to. “Before we do, though, thank you.”

Bentley just nodded. “I’m not going to go all sentimental on you, but I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. And Tori.”

“We should see if we can get her to come home and visit.”

“We should. Let’s do that.”

~

Despite that conversation with her brother, Willow still hadn’t taken on the challenge that he’d set her by the time the weekend rolled around. Tonight was the night that Bentley was taking Alyssa out to meet the gang at Molly’s, and she still hadn’t talked to Slade about it.

When she got to his place, she found a spot in the parking lot but didn’t get out immediately. She sat there staring up at his window. She knew she had to do it. They needed to talk.

She hated knowing that he might say that he wasn't interested in changing the nature of their relationship. But that wasn't even her biggest worry. If he wanted to keep things as they were – if he didn't want them to come out as a couple to all their friends, she could live with that. What worried her the most was the thought that if she pushed for more, she might lose him altogether.

She climbed out of the car and slammed the door shut. It was time to figure this out once and for all. It was a gamble worth taking. She'd never been the kind of girl who held back about what she wanted. If asking for more meant that they ended up with nothing, then she'd just have to get over it.

She could feel her resolve weakening when he opened the door to her with a smile.

“Hey, little Willow. How was your day?”

“It was okay. How about you?”

“Not bad.” He smiled, and it hit her square in the chest just how much she loved that smile. Was she really going to put everything at risk?

Yes.

She was.

He gave her a puzzled look. “Come on in, take your coat off. Do you want a drink? I thought we could maybe watch a movie and just chill tonight. Does that work for you?”

She took off her jacket and slung it over the back of the sofa as she went to sit down. “I'll take a whiskey.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her but went to pour them both a drink before coming back to sit beside her.

“What's on your mind? Anything you want to tell me about?”

She took the glass he offered and knocked it back in one go.

Slade chuckled. “I'm going to take that as a yes.”

She sucked in a deep breath to steady herself and then launched in. “I want this to be more.”

He gave her a puzzled look.

“This.” She tapped two fingers in the middle of his chest before tapping her own. “You and me – us. You know how we said that we both wanted it to be about more than sex? Well, I didn’t mean that I just wanted us to be able to hang out. Although, don’t get me wrong, I’m enjoying it. But I want us to be a real couple.”

“Define real couple.”

“I mean. I don’t want to hide anymore. I want everyone to know about us. I want to go out with them all – the two of us, as one of the couples. Like... tonight, for example, they’re all going to Molly’s to meet Bentley’s Alyssa. Then, they’re all going to Muse afterward.” She watched his face as she added, “I want us to go.”

She couldn’t read the look on his face as he got to his feet, but she didn’t think it was a good sign that he started pacing. “You want to take me out with all your friends?”

She frowned. “They’re your friends, too.”

“Exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

~ ~ ~

Slade ran his hand through his hair. He didn’t know what to do. Did he want to go out with Willow and the rest of the gang? Hell yeah, he did. But he didn’t know if it was the right move.

“Well?”

He’d been pacing his living room while she sat on the sofa, watching him. He’d thought that this weekend would bring more of the same – the same thing that they’d been doing for the last few weeks. Since the conversation about wanting more

from each other, they'd been spending more time together. When he wasn't on shift, she stopped by his apartment after work.

He still went over to the estate sometimes, but he guessed that she felt more able to be open about their relationship over here at his place. What he hadn't expected – although perhaps he should have – was that she would reach a point when she wanted to jump in with both feet.

“I don't know, Willow.”

“What don't you know? Do you want to go out with everyone – or not? Do you want to finally come out in the open about us – or not? It's simple, really. You either want to or you don't.”

He went back and sat on the coffee table facing her. He rested his elbows on his knees and grasped his hands together between them.

“It's not that simple, though, is it? Once we do that, once everyone knows, there's...” He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to explain without sounding like a complete pussy that he wasn't sure that he'd be able to handle the situation after she was done with him. He often socialized with the rest of them; that wasn't a problem. But now that she was home and she was here to stay, he wasn't sure that he wanted to set himself up as being part of a couple with her when he knew for certain that it wasn't going to last. When the time came, when she was ready to start looking for someone more suitable – someone who would be a lasting part of her life, he didn't want ... Hell, he didn't know what he wanted.

She was scowling at him. “So, you're telling me that you still don't want people to know that we're seeing each other?”

“It's not even that. It's not so much that I don't want them to know. It's more about me. It's about what happens afterward.”

“After what?”



He sucked in a deep breath. He didn't want to say it – didn't even want to think about it – but she'd never hidden it. "After we're done. Those guys are my friends, too. I might not be one of them in the same way that you are, but I still spend time with them. I don't know how it's going to feel after you're done with me."

Whoa! Willow wasn't one to hide her feelings; there was never any guessing whether she was happy, sad, or anywhere in between. But Slade didn't think he'd ever seen her as pissed as she was when she got to her feet.

"Why don't you just be honest with me? Why do you keep blaming me?"

"Blaming you? How did I blame you?" He really didn't understand.

"You said after *I'm* done with *you*. And that's not the first time you've said something like that."

"Because that's how it is, Willow. We both know it. You made it clear from the start."

"*I* made it clear from the start? *I* did?" she sputtered.

He closed his eyes, hating to see her so angry at him. Hating even more that she wanted him to spell out that he understood the way she saw things.

"You did," was all he said.

She drew herself up, as if she was going to launch into him but instead, her shoulders sagged. "You know what? I'm just going to go. I'm angry and I'm hurt right now, and I don't think this conversation is going to go anywhere good. So, I'm going to head over to Muse and meet up with them all. If you don't want to go, that's okay. I can't say I get it. I can't say that I understand – I don't. I just ... I don't want this to end, Slade. But I'm mad at you right now. I wish you wanted more than you do. Don't worry, I'll go back to accepting the fact that you don't soon. But I won't be able to do it tonight."

With that, she turned and grabbed her leather jacket from the back of his sofa and stomped toward the door.

# Chapter Ten

All Slade could do was watch her go. She was right about one thing, there was no point trying to talk to her when she was mad. He'd already learned that. She was wrong about so much else, though. She wished he wanted more than he did? She had no idea how much he wanted.

His heart pounded in his chest when she reached the front door and turned to look back at him over her shoulder. Her anger was gone, replaced by sadness. "Next time I see you, I'll go back to how things were. I'll be able to do that." He could see the sadness in her eyes as her gaze held his. "But since I pushed us this far, I'm going to spell it out for you. Don't worry, I won't ever mention it again, but I wanted this to be real. I'll settle for whatever you want to give me in the future, and I won't bring it up again, but you should know that I wanted us to have a real shot."

Slade froze as his front door slammed shut behind her. What the hell? He was the one who'd wanted them to have a real shot. She was the one who ... His heart pounded. Did he have it wrong? He didn't get it. He'd tried to be respectful of her. Tried not to push because she'd been the one who made it clear that she was a DuPont and therefore ...

His clammy hands grasped together as he sat there on his coffee table, staring at the front door. He thought back to that very first night, the first time that they'd been together.

*It's not as though we'd ever go out for real or anything, is it? I mean, I'm a DuPont.*

Those had been her exact words. He should know, he'd replayed them in his head often enough over the years.

So how... Why? Why in the hell was she making out now that she was the one who wanted them to have a real shot?

He let his mind go back to that first night, standing on the beach with her. Why had she said what she had? And then it hit him. She was only responding to what *he'd* said. He'd been trying to convince himself as much as he'd been trying to convince her that the two of them sleeping together was a bad idea.

He'd told her that it was a bad idea because she was Bentley's little sister for one thing. Then, he'd told her that she was the kind of girl who thinks that sex leads to something more – and that he wasn't the kind of guy who could give her anything more.

He squeezed his eyes tight shut as he remembered for the first time the entirety of that conversation. The only thing that had stuck with him through the years was Willow telling him that they'd never get together for anything real because she was a DuPont.

Now, he remembered why she'd told him that. He'd told her that he wasn't going to have sex with her because even if she said she didn't want anything more from him, she would, and that then she'd be mad at him and think that he'd let her down. Even back then, it had been important to him that she should never think he'd let her down.

A shudder ran down his spine when he remembered how he'd explained it to her. He'd told her that he liked her too much to do that to her – that she was a good kid.

Jesus! He understood it now. He'd known that she was determined to talk him into what he knew was a bad idea. And even then, he'd known her well enough to know that she would use any argument she could find to make her point. He'd told her that she was a kid, and that she'd end up wanting more from him – what kind of an arrogant prick had he been? It made all the sense in the world that she'd hit back with the only thing she had. He'd been arrogant, and she'd proved that they could both play that game.

He scrambled to his feet and grabbed his keys and wallet. He had to go after her. That game was over. His chest burned

when he remembered the look in her eyes before she left.

*I wanted this to be real. I'll settle for whatever you want to give me in the future, and I won't ever bring it up again, but you should know that I wanted us to have a real shot.*

She wanted a real shot, and he was right there with her. He realized what an asshole he'd been as he jogged across the parking lot to his bike. She'd come right out and told him that she was hurt and angry – but even then, she'd told him that she'd go back to the way they'd been. Those weren't the words of a woman who thought she was better than him and was using him to pass the time. Hell no. That was a woman who knew what she wanted and would take the little she could get rather than lose it.

Jesus! He didn't deserve her, but he was going to do his damndest to make it up to her.

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When Willow got to town, she found a spot to park halfway between Molly's and Muse. She rested her arms on the steering wheel and leaned her forehead against them. Her heart felt like it was breaking, but that was stupid. It had to be stupid. Slade had warned her from the start. She couldn't blame him. She was the one who'd gone hoping for more. At least now she knew.

She wanted to be mad at him – she *was* mad at him. Her heart might feel like it was breaking, she didn't want to lose the man she knew him to be – if she was honest, she didn't want to lose the future that she'd been hoping they could have together. But she needed to hang onto the anger. She knew he was a good man even now, but he'd shown her tonight that he wasn't quite as good as she'd thought. She would never have believed that he would try to turn it around on her.

He'd said that he didn't know how he would feel after *she* was done with *him*. She didn't get that. He'd also said that *she'd* made it clear from the start. That just plain wasn't true.

*He* was the one who'd made it clear from the start. He'd come right out and told her that he wasn't the kind of guy who could offer her anything more than a night in his bed. So why? Why...?

She forced herself to sit back up and swiped angrily at the tears that had escaped. It didn't matter why. That was just how it was. Now she knew where she stood. She'd wean herself off him – she'd have to. Nevertheless, she was glad that she'd made it clear to him before she left his place that her storming out of there wasn't the end of them – not for her it wasn't.

Her breath caught in her chest when she wondered if he'd decide that he'd had enough. Perhaps now that he knew how she really felt, he wouldn't want to carry on.

She got out of her car and slammed the door shut. There was no point in dwelling on it now. She'd almost gone home, but she'd changed her mind. If she went home, all she'd do was think about him and what had happened between them tonight. She'd no doubt spend enough time dwelling on it for the rest of the weekend. Tonight, she was better off hanging out with her friends. She'd have a few drinks. She pressed the button on the remote, and her car beeped. Good. It was all locked up and safe. She'd collect it in the morning. No way would she be driving home later.

She looked both ways before checking her watch. The gang might have moved on from Molly's to Muse by now, but she'd go and check Molly's first.

When she got there, she could see through the windows that the gang was still there, but they were all standing around putting their coats on. It looked like she'd timed it well and would be able to walk over to Muse with them. A lump formed in her throat. She'd imagined what it would be like to walk in here with Slade tonight. She knew that the others would be surprised, but she'd had a feeling that they would be pleasantly surprised. She blinked away the tears that threatened to fall. There was no point in getting upset about it.

There was no point even being mad at Slade. He'd never made her any promises.

Still, she was mad at him – mad at him for trying to turn it around on her. On that thought, she pushed the door to Molly's restaurant open a little too aggressively. When everyone turned and looked in her direction, she hurried over to them, feeling self-conscious.

“Hey, guys! I thought you were going to be at Muse by now.” She said the first thing that came into her head, hoping that no one would notice how off kilter she was.

“We were supposed to be,” said Cameron's wife, Piper.

Willow smiled when she spotted Alyssa and Bentley. “Are you guys coming?”

Bentley looked down at Alyssa. “We were just deciding that.”

Alyssa smiled at her, but then her gaze went over Willow's shoulder. Willow turned to look, and her heart thudded to a halt when she saw Slade standing just inside the door. His gaze met hers, and it felt as though an electric current arced through the space between them.

As he stared back at her, she started to tremble. What was he doing here? For one crazy moment she wondered if he'd come to tell the others about them. But that really was crazy, why would he? He was the one who didn't want people to know.

She startled when Jacob called from beside her, “Hey, Slade! I'm glad you made it. Are you coming to Muse?”

Willow could only watch as he nodded and made his way over to Jacob's side. He didn't say a word to her as he passed, but the air around her seemed to crackle with the tension between them.

He shot her a quick glance as he told Jacob, “I was thinking about it. Are you guys going? Are you up for it, Becca?”

Willow narrowed her eyes. She knew that he saw himself as a kind of big brother to Becca, and she loved that. She loved that he was protective of her, that he was the kind of guy who would look out for her. But right now, she didn't love that he was asking Becca whether she was going to Muse while he hadn't even spoken a word to her.

She watched in silence as Jacob and Becca decided that they were going to Muse, and Bentley and Alyssa decided that they weren't.

When all the decisions were made, and the goodbyes to those going home had been said, Willow hung back. Slade still hadn't spoken to her; he hadn't even looked in her direction again. She was going to wait and see how she felt once they got outside. Walking to Muse would mean walking past where she'd parked her car. She was leaving herself the option to jump in it and drive away. She didn't know what kind of game he thought he was playing, but she wasn't sure that she wanted to play along.



As they made their way out of the restaurant, Jacob raised his eyebrows at Slade and jerked his head back toward Willow.

Slade scowled. It was obvious that Jacob wanted to know what was going on, but how was Slade supposed to tell him that he was being an asshole, and he knew it? If Jacob didn't have his arm around Becca, Slade might just have come right out and said it.

Becca didn't miss the unspoken communication between the two men. When she looked back and saw Willow walking by herself, she stopped. "We should wait for ..."

Jacob tightened his arm around her shoulders. "Actually, we need to catch up with Antonio. Slade can wait for Willow."

"Oh." Becca's eyes grew wide, and Slade guessed that she understood what was going on.



He didn't hang around to talk about it, though. He slowed his pace as he watched Jacob hurry Becca to catch up with the others. Grady raised an eyebrow as he and Hannah passed him, but Slade just gave him a slight shake of the head.

If Willow wanted everyone to know about them, then he'd be happy to tell them. But after the way things had gone earlier this evening, he needed to make sure that was still what she wanted.

When all the others had passed, Willow's stride faltered when she saw him standing waiting for her. Damn! Uncertainty didn't look good on her – it didn't suit her.

She stopped and looked down at the keys in her hand. Oh no. Hell no! No way was he going to let her get in her car and drive away. They needed to straighten things out, and they needed to do it right now.

He hated that she wouldn't even look at him. He stalked up to her and without a word, cupped her face between his hands, tucking his thumbs behind her ears.

Her eyes grew wide, her cheeks flushed, and she bit down on her bottom lip. That was her tell; the giveaway that she wasn't sure of herself. That she wasn't sure of him or what was going on.

He tilted her head back so that she had no choice but to look into his eyes. "I'm sorry, little Willow. I was an asshole."

Her breath hitched. But she drew out the silence before eventually shaking her head. "No. Don't do that, Slade. You weren't. You weren't an asshole at all. You were honest. Yes, it hurt, and I got mad about it. But that was just my reaction. Just because I didn't want to hear what you had to say, it doesn't make you an asshole."

He drew her closer so that he could rest his forehead against hers. "I don't deserve you, and I know it. But I'm enough of an asshole that I'm not going to let that stop me. I *wasn't* honest with you. I haven't been honest with you from the beginning. It's time we sorted that out." He pressed a quick

kiss to her lips; he couldn't help it. "I owe you the truth. I have been an asshole, it's just that you don't know it yet."

She tensed, and he hoped like hell that he wasn't going to end up making this worse.

"What do you mean?"

"What I'm trying to tell you is that I've misjudged you all this time."

"How?"

"Remember that first time, in Imperial Beach?"

He loved that her lips turned up with the hint of a smile as she nodded. The memory always made him smile, too.

"Do you remember the conversation that we had before we went back to your hotel?"

There was no trace of a smile when she nodded again. "Of course I do. I've tried to respect what you said all this time. And I'm sorry that tonight ..."

Her words trailed off as he shook his head. "No, Willow. Don't apologize. You have nothing to apologize for. It's all on me. I wasn't lying when I told you that I wanted to fuck you from the moment I saw you. What I didn't tell you was that in that moment, I didn't know you were you. I only saw you from behind. That was enough for me to know that I wanted you. But when I figured out who you were, and this isn't in an excuse, this is just me trying to explain. When I realized that you were little Willow DuPont, I thought I shouldn't go there. That's why I told you what I did."

She was frowning at him now. "What, that I was a good kid?"

He closed his eyes. "Yeah. That and what I said about how I couldn't sleep with you because you'd end up wanting more than that, and I didn't want you to feel like I'd let you down."

She gave him a sad smile. "And you were right."

“No. I was an arrogant prick. But that’s beside the point. It only dawned on me tonight after you walked out on me, that maybe you don’t remember what you said, just like I didn’t remember what I said. Not until now. The only thing I remembered about that conversation was you telling me that you wouldn’t ever want anything more from me, because you were a DuPont.”

She squeezed her eyes shut as she shook her head. “Shit! I did, didn’t I? Oh my God, Slade! I am so sorry! But you have to know that I only said it because I was trying to convince you that it was okay to sleep with me. I knew that was probably the only way I’d be able to reassure you that I wasn’t going to be this brokenhearted little girl who followed you around afterward.”

His thumb was stroking back and forth behind her ear as he nodded. “I can see that now. I goaded you into saying it. But for all this time, I’ve let those words dictate how this thing between us went.”

All the color drained from her face. “You have?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No! Don’t you be sorry. I’ve done exactly the same thing. Do you remember what else you told me?”

“What?” His heart was pounding.

“You told me that you weren’t *the kind of guy* who would ever be able to offer me anything more. Those are the words that I’ve let dictate how this went. That’s why I’ve always tried to make out that I didn’t want any more than we’ve had. But that’s a lie. I do.”

Slade moved one arm lower, curling it around her waist until she was pressed up against his chest. “I guess we both screwed up, huh?”

“I guess we did.” She gave him a tentative smile. “But we didn’t screw up completely. We just delayed ourselves a little – if you want to see it that way?”

He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. "I'd love to see it that way. I really would." He leaned back so that he could look into her eyes. "What do you say, little Willow? Do you want to give this a real shot, like you said earlier?"

Her eyes shone as she nodded. "I'd love to. There's nothing I want more."

Slade slid his hand lower until it closed around her ass, and he held her against him. "I could make you want this."

She laughed as she looked up at him. "It's not as though you need to try very hard. But we already know that we're good at that. Now we get to see if we can figure out the rest."

He ran his hand over her hair. "I give you my word that I'm going to do everything I can to figure the rest out. I know I don't deserve you ..."

She slapped his arm, hard. "Don't start saying stupid stuff like that. We both screwed up. We both hung on to something the other said years ago without ever asking for clarification. We know better now. And if you start talking about deserving me, it'll make me think that you still have that whole *I'm a DuPont* thing in your head. So can we drop that?"

"We can on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you let me prove to you that instead of being the guy who can't offer you anything more than a good time between the sheets, I'm the guy who wants to offer you everything."

# Chapter Eleven

Willow hesitated at the entrance to Muse and looked up at him. “Are you sure about this?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I am. I meant it when I said that I want to offer you everything. In my mind, everything includes letting all our friends know what’s going on between us.” He tightened his arm around her shoulders. “And I should probably warn you – now that I *can* claim you as mine, I intend to claim you.”

A shiver ran down Willow’s spine, and Slade laughed. “Was that a shiver of desire?”

She had to laugh with him. “Yes. It was. I’m not sure I should ever have told you about that. I don’t think it was wise.”

He grinned. “Oh, it was wise. I think it’s worked out well for both of us. You may not have noticed, but I work hard to get those shivers out of you.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I know you do. But so far, that’s only ever been in bed. I’m not sure how I feel about you being able to do that to me in public.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “I think we might find out that it’s fun.”

She had to laugh. She was loving this. Almost all the time that they’d spent together had been in private. The few times that they’d both felt comfortable to go out in public had been years ago. She’d learned back then that he was a lot of fun, and she was thrilled that now they would get to have fun together out in the open.

“I think we probably will. But let’s rewind a bit, can we? You were talking about claiming me.” She couldn’t even say it

without a little thrill running through her, but she managed not to shiver this time. “What does that mean?”

He looked more serious, and his arm tightened around her shoulders. “I don’t know how you’re going to feel about it, but I did already warn you that I’m an asshole.”

She narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t interrupt.

“When I say I want to claim you, what I mean by that is I’m going to want the whole world to know that you’re my woman. I can’t say that I’m the possessive type; I’ve never cared before. But I can already tell that I’m going to be that way with you.”

There was no way she could have stopped the shiver that ran down her spine when he said, “If you want me, I’m yours. I’ve never said that to another woman. By the same token, I want you to understand that if I’m yours...” There was an intensity in his hazel eyes that she hadn’t seen before when he added, “You’re mine.”

When she didn’t reply, he cocked an eyebrow at her. “Are you going to be okay with that?”

She nodded happily and went up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips. “More than okay. I have to tell you, I always thought that a guy being possessive was unattractive...” She held her hand up to stop him when he started to protest. “But with you, it’s different.” She grinned at him. “It’s not just attractive, it’s hot!”

She didn’t even have time to think as he moved in closer and claimed her mouth in one of his undeniably hot kisses. Her arms came up around his shoulders and she pressed herself against him. When they came up for air, she asked, “Want to get out of here?”

He shook his head slowly and took hold of her hand. “I do, but not until later. We know we’ve got no worries when it’s time to take each other to bed. This time, we finally get to move forward. We get to learn what it’s like to take each other out.”

Willow's heart skittered in her chest. He was right. She would have dragged him home if he'd said yes, but this was better. All their friends were inside Muse, and she was looking forward to going in there and hanging out with them – as a couple.

Slade took hold of her hand and linked his fingers through hers as they walked into the wine bar. She was about to ask him again if he was sure about this, but one look at his face told her that he was. He was smiling, holding himself differently – he stood taller, and he looked ... proud.

A rush of emotions hit her hard. She simultaneously loved that he was proud to finally be seen out with her, and hated that, up until tonight, he'd believed that she didn't think he was worthy of being with her. That was a total crock! She hated that he'd honestly thought that she gave a shit about the whole social hierarchy thing. But in her heart, she couldn't blame him – she was the one who'd told him that she felt that way.

She came back to the moment when he squeezed her hand and looked down at her as they walked into the bar area.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked.

She grinned and leaned into his side as she said, “So much more than ready. I've longed for this day to come, even though I never believed it would.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and murmured, “Same,” as he lowered his head to hers.

She closed her eyes, but before their lips met, they both straightened up at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

“Uh. Guys?”

Willow loved that Slade didn't jump away from her. Instead, he kept his arm around her, holding her close as he turned them.

Antonio stood behind them with his hands on his hips and a big grin on his face. “This makes me happy!”

Willow laughed. "It makes me happy, too."

"I can see that." Antonio glanced back over his shoulder. "But does it make you so happy that you become forgetful?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean. It's supposed to be a secret, no?"

"Not anymore," said Slade.

Antonio stepped forward and grasped his shoulder. "That makes me even happier! I thought ... I didn't know ..."

Willow laughed and put him out of his misery. "You thought we were just hooking up. It's okay. We tried to convince ourselves that's all we were doing. But ..." She looked up into Slade's eyes. "It's more than that."

Slade's expression was so gentle as he smiled back at her and said, "So much more than that."

Antonio laughed. "Then, come! Let me be the one to announce your wonderful news."

She raised her eyebrows at Slade as they followed Antonio to the big table where their friends were sitting. She didn't know if he'd want to be the one to tell everyone, but he grinned at her happily.

"Let Antonio share the news. I'm sure they'll have plenty of questions for us to answer."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I'm okay with everything except the fact that Bentley's not here. I would have liked ..."

"Crap!" she cut him off. "I'm sorry. I already told him."

"And?"

"And he's thrilled. In fact, he was the one who told me that I had to stop hiding how I really felt. That we needed to have an open and honest conversation."





Slade wasn't thrilled that he hadn't told Bentley himself, but he was pleased that he knew. He'd have to seek him out and talk to him soon.

When they reached the big table, conversation stopped as everyone turned to look at them. Antonio stood aside and gestured to Slade and Willow. He didn't explain immediately, instead dragging out the moment like the showman he was.

Just as Willow shifted, apparently uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny from all their friends, Antonio spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to announce that Willow and Slade are joining us this evening. Not as two individuals, but as a couple – an official couple!”

Molly squealed. “It's official?”

Slade wasn't surprised that she knew; she'd been with Willow in the club the last time Willow was home visiting. As he looked around at all the smiling faces, no one seemed hugely surprised. Not even Becca. She might have been surprised before tonight, but she'd known something was going on when he'd hung back to wait for Willow earlier.

Jacob grinned at him and nodded. Jacob had been in his corner all along.

Cameron held his glass up in their direction. “Happy for you guys! I had heard the rumors, but I wasn't sure. I wondered ...”

His sister, Chelsea, laughed. “If the grapevine even reached *you*, then then you had to know that there was some weight to the chatter.”

Cameron nodded. “I was hoping so.”

That made Slade smile. Willow tightened her arm around his waist. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted their friends to know what was going on between them. He grinned at Grady when he winked at him. What had bothered him before was that he

hadn't wanted to get used to coming out with them all as a couple when he'd believed that Willow didn't see him as someone she'd ever end up with – when he'd thought that at some point she'd dump him, and he'd have to watch her bring some other guy into their circle of friends.

He swallowed as he listened to her answer the questions the girls shot at her. She could hold her own – he had no worries there. Though he was ready to step in if she needed him. It was only dawning on him now that he was happy – very happy – that she *did* see him as someone she could end up with. Not only that, but he saw her that way, too. He might not have seen himself as the settling down type before, but he'd never known a woman like Willow before, either.

After a few minutes, Willow grinned around at them all. “Okay. Are we good now? Everyone knows. We’ve answered all your questions. Can we get on with the rest of the night?”

Jacob cocked an eyebrow at Slade. “Bentley?”

Slade nodded, and Willow smiled. “He knows, and he’s happy.” She looked up at Slade. “Very happy. And he had more faith in us than I did.”

That made his shoulders relax. He still wanted to talk to Bentley. But he felt better hearing that.

Willow laughed. “Okay. Your window to ask questions is closing. Any last takers?”

“Me!” shouted Chelsea.

“What do you want to know?” Willow asked.

“Not a thing. I’m happy for you guys, and I’m not that nosy. My question is more of a request.”

Slade frowned, wondering what she might want from them.

“Can you guys please not get married before Grant and I do?” she asked with a laugh. “Everyone else has tied the knot. And even these two –” She tilted her head toward Jacob and Becca “– have big wedding plans. We wanted to take our time, but I don’t like being overtaken by everyone.”

Slade chuckled when Grant wrapped his arm around Chelsea's shoulders. "I've told you. Whatever you want. We'll do it – tomorrow, preferably."

He didn't catch what she said in reply; his attention was drawn to the way Willow's fingers were digging painfully into his side.

"What's up?"

"Don't let them freak you out! She's only joking."

He chuckled again. "I'm not freaked out, little Willow."

Her eyes grew wider.

"Looks to me like *you* are, but ..." He leaned in and pressed a peck to her lips. "I'm not." He hadn't thought of himself as the settling down kind, but he hadn't thought that settling down with Willow was a possibility. If it was – he was all about it.

He loved that she laughed. "The only thing that freaked me out was the thought of you freaking out!"

"Then we can relax. Because I'm not."

She searched his face and then smiled. "I'm not, either."

He nodded happily. She wasn't the settling down kind any more than he was. But it wasn't about the kind of people they'd been in the past, what mattered was the people they became when they were together. And it struck him that – together – they might well be the settling down kind.

# Chapter Twelve

After Slade got off work the following Saturday, he drove up to the big house and ran up the steps to the back kitchen door. Willow was supposed to come over to his place later, but he didn't know how late it would be. She'd gone to some wine dinner.

Elena, the cook, greeted him with a smile when he entered the kitchen. "Here he is, Mr. Sunshine."

He grinned at her and went to kiss her cheek. "That's me. What are you still doing here? I thought you would've gone home by now."

"I'm on my way. I didn't come in until later today. Becca took care of breakfast."

Slade nodded but didn't comment. He wasn't sure how much cooking Becca did, but he did know that Jacob didn't go into the office on Saturday mornings anymore. He could see that they might want the house to themselves.

Elena pointed to the warming drawer. "There's some dinner in there for you. There's enough for Willow, too."

That made him smile. Elena had been with the Jacobs family for as long as he could remember. She'd known Willow her whole life. Willow used to come over here to play with Hannah when they were just little girls.

"Thanks."

Elena put her hands on her hips. "I need more than that, Slade."

He laughed. He'd known she wouldn't let him get away with that. "What do you want to know? You grill me every time I see you."

"I want to know that you're treating that girl right – and that she's doing the same with you. I want to know that you're

going to feed her what I've cooked for you." Elena grinned. "And I want to know what your intentions are, young man."

Slade laughed out loud. "I'm treating her like the princess she is. She's treating me way better than I deserve. I honestly don't know if I'll get to feed her what you've made because she's out at some wine dinner with Bentley and Alyssa. She volunteered to run interference with Alyssa's mom. So, she'll probably have eaten, but that would be the only reason that I wouldn't feed her."

"That's all good. What about my last question?"

Slade stared at her. Elena was the closest thing to a mother he'd ever known. She'd worked here on the estate with his dad when he was just a kid.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm waiting."

He had to smile. "You know the way I've always been with women."

She scowled.

"Slow down. I was about to say that everything's different with Willow. With other women, I couldn't wait to get away from them afterward." He cringed, realizing what he'd said, but Elena just laughed. "With Willow, I don't want to get away from her. When I'm not around her, I always want to get back to her. She's ... She's awesome."

"I know she is. That's why I'm asking – what are your intentions?"

"It's still early days."

"It's not as early as you'd like people to believe."

He had no idea how she knew, but Elena was like that – she always seemed to know everything.

"Okay, okay. I can't tell you that I know what my intentions are. All I can tell you is that I haven't been able to get that girl out of my head for the last sixteen years. Whenever she's not

around, I miss her. And whenever she is around, I don't want to let her go.”

Elena's hands came up and she clasped them together against her ample chest. “The way that you know all of that, and the way that you don't mind telling me, gives me my answer. I know what your intentions are, even if you don't yet.”

Slade shoved his hands in his pockets. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know if it was realistic. For one thing, he'd spent his whole life believing that he wasn't the settling down kind. For another, he'd only had a week to get used to the idea that settling down with Willow might even be a possibility.

He and Elena both turned when Becca came into the kitchen. “Hey, guys. What's going on? You both look serious. Oh! Sorry. I didn't think...” She started to back away.

It made Slade chuckle. It wouldn't be long until she was Mrs. Jacobs – until she was the official lady of the house – but Becca still treated all the staff as though they had more right to be here than she did.

“You come on back, Becca,” he said. “There's nothing serious going on here.” He shot a grin at Elena. “As a matter of fact, you're doing me a favor. She was just grilling me.”

Elena laughed and waved a hand at him. “Don't you believe a word he says. I was on my way home when this reprobate held me up.”

Slade leaned in to kiss her cheek again before she left. Then, he made his way to the warming drawer to collect the food that she left for him.

“Is it okay if I'm nosy?” Becca asked.

He turned to her with a smile. “Of course it is. What's up?”

“I'm just hoping that things are going well with you and Willow. I don't mind telling you that I was one of the ones who was shocked when you came into Muse together like that.

But I'm happy for you." She gave him a shamefaced smile. "But like I said, I'm nosy, too."

"It's okay. Things are going great. As we explained to everyone last weekend, we've been seeing each other for a while, but we didn't want to go public with it until we knew what we were doing."

Becca nodded. "I get that. I'm ... what I'm asking – even though I know I shouldn't – is what *are* you doing?"

Slade had to laugh. "Is this what you women do? Elena was just asking me the same thing."

Becca rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. You must be used to it."

His smile faded as he met her gaze. "Honestly? I'm not used to it. I've never been ..." He didn't know how to finish that sentence, so he didn't.

Becca's eyes grew wide. "Oh. I didn't think. But... Yeah." She frowned. "You're a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy, aren't you?" She was so transparent. He knew what she was thinking as her frown grew deeper.

"I used to be." He couldn't say *since he'd met Willow*. Instead, he smiled and went with, "But everything's different with Willow."

Becca clapped her hands together. "Oh my gosh, Slade! That's awesome! I know exactly what you mean. That's how I feel about Jacob. Everything's different with Jacob."

Slade just smiled. He loved Becca's enthusiasm, but he wasn't about to get into a discussion with her. He wasn't sure that he wanted to compare what he and Willow had to what Jacob and Becca had. Those two were getting married soon. Although, the cold fingers of dread hadn't slid down his spine when Elena had asked him about his intentions – and that always used to be his reaction whenever someone brought up the subject of marriage.



It was late by the time Willow got to Slade's apartment, and she was tired. It had been a long day, but it had been worth it. Alyssa's mom had come with her to Napa this weekend, and Willow had offered to run interference. Alyssa had been worried that her mom was going to be difficult. Her mom didn't have a great relationship with her dad, and Alyssa had been concerned that she wasn't going to be happy about her seeing Bentley – given that he was her dad's new fiancée's son.

Willow smiled to herself as she got out of the car. It all sounded so complicated, but relationships were complicated. She of all people knew that. Her mid-twenties had been overshadowed by her own parents' divorce. And that had been far from a straightforward divorce – her dad had come out and admitted that he'd met someone else. That happened, she knew it did, but she had to wonder how many men left their wives for another man.

Despite the way it sounded, it had been a fairly amicable divorce. Willow, along with Bentley and Tori, had always known that both their parents loved them, in their own ways. And both of them had done everything that they could to ease their three children through the transition, even though they weren't kids anymore.

She was glad that those days were a long way behind them all now. Her dad was happy with Gabriel, and her mom had finally relaxed enough that she was learning how to be happy with Russ in Summer Lake.

When she got to Slade's place, she raised her hand to knock, but the door opened before she could. A rush of happiness filled her chest at the sight of him standing there. He was gorgeous. He always had been. A flicker of doubt flashed through her mind. He was gorgeous to her, but she had to wonder what her mom would make of his appearance.



The big smile that he'd greeted her with dimmed. "What's up?"

"Nothing. I'm glad to be here."

He grabbed hold of her hand and pulled her inside. "Not as glad as I am to see you. Do you want a drink? Did you eat?"

She followed him inside. She loved his apartment; it was a warm, cozy space that just somehow felt like him. Perhaps it was because she'd grown up the way that she had, in the mansion on the estate, that made his place feel so much like a home.

"Yes, please, to the drink. And yes, I ate. Although—" she sniffed the air "— I wish I hadn't now. Whatever you're having smells wonderful."

He smiled. "I can't lie. I already had some — I figured you would have eaten. Elena sent dinner for us."

"Aww. Tell her thank you for me, next time you see her? I adore that woman."

"Will do. She's awesome."

He came and slid his arms around her waist. "How was your day, little Willow? Was Alyssa's mom as much of a dragon as everyone expected her to be?"

Willow had to laugh. "She's... she's different. But I don't think she's as bad as anyone expected. Even Alyssa. She wasn't thrilled about the whole deal. Although, I can kind of understand that. If I were divorced, and my child got together with my ex's new fiancé's child..." She shook her head with a laugh. "I cannot believe I even said that. Can you imagine? It's all so freaking complicated."

Slade shrugged. "Families tend to be, don't they?"

"Yeah. I guess they are."

"What's he like? This Russ."

Willow smiled. "He's awesome. I really like him. He's this big, tough guy. He's not the type you could ever imagine Mom

with – not just in the way he looks but the way he is. But they're perfect together. There's no denying it. And they're so much in love it makes my teeth ache."

Slade laughed out loud. "Makes your teeth ache?"

She waved a hand at him. "You know what I mean. It's just so sweet. It's so wonderful to see."

She didn't understand the look on his face as he tightened his arms around her. "I think I'm going to like this guy. In fact, I already do."

She raised her eyebrows, not understanding.

"Think about it. Now that all of our friends know that we're together, the day's coming when you're going to have to tell your mom – right?" His eyebrows pinched together. "You're not just going to let her find out somehow, are you?"

"Of course not. I want to tell her. I just..." She hated that he looked so uncertain. "Don't look like that. I wasn't worried about telling her – I was worried that maybe it would feel like pressure to you."

He relaxed. "Nope. It doesn't feel like pressure. I'm looking forward to it. And as I was saying, knowing that she's with this Russ – and he's a former Marine, right?"

"Oh my God! I didn't even think about it, but yes, you're right. He is." She grinned at him. "Just like you."

He closed his hand around the back of her neck and drew her closer as he pressed a kiss to her lips. "Yeah. Just like me. Although, I doubt he's covered in tats."

"No." She ran her hand down his forearm. "But I don't care what my mom thinks about that. They're sexy as hell." She kept on going until her finger traced over the leather bands he wore around his wrist. "These are sexy, too. I thought that from the first time I saw you." She covered his hand with hers and touched the thumb ring that he wore. "And I don't think I ever told you before, but that first time... At that bar, in Imperial Beach. You were sitting on the wall watching the

sunset, and I just thought you were the coolest thing I'd ever seen."

He laughed. "Cool? Me?"

"The coolest."

He shook his head at her. "Whatever. What do you want to do tonight?"

She ran her hands down over his chest until they rested at his waist. "You."

He leaned in close and traced the seam of her lips with his tongue. When she opened for him, he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth in a sexy as hell move that he knew drove her wild. Without breaking the kiss, she fumbled with his belt buckle as he walked her backward into his bedroom.

~ ~ ~

The next morning Slade lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He had one arm folded behind his head, and the other curled around Willow. She was in her usual spot, her head resting on his chest, her arm around his waist, and her legs tangled with his.

He could get used to this – hell, if he was honest, he already was used to it. Since they'd cleared things up, they'd only spent a couple of nights apart. He'd been trying not to think too hard about where things were going. But it was getting harder and harder not to admit – to himself, at least – that he was all in.

He'd had more than his fair share of women when he was younger. But he hadn't had many real relationships. There had been girls who'd wanted that, but he just hadn't. It had been different over the last few years. He'd settled into life back here in Napa, and he hadn't had the same kind of interest in the hunt that he used to. He hadn't had any interest in developing something more than that with anyone, either.

Well, Willow had always been on his mind. But he couldn't claim that he'd had an interest in developing something more with her – he hadn't believed that it would ever be a possibility.

And yet, here he was, lying in bed on a Sunday morning with her beside him. He didn't know her mom, Alexandria DuPont, all that well. They didn't exactly move in the same circles. Of course, he knew her by reputation – and that wasn't exactly encouraging. At the same time, from the few interactions he'd had with her, he knew there was a lot more to her than her reputation led people to believe.

He closed his eyes again. What was he even thinking about? First, he needed to figure out if he truly was as serious as he wanted to be about Willow. Then, he needed to figure out whether she felt the same way. They still had a lot more steps to take before he'd know if he'd ever have to face Alexandria.

He smiled when it struck him that whether Willow introduced him to her mom or not, he'd love for her to meet his dad. The old fella had moved out of town after he retired. He lived in a cabin on an acre of land, just like he'd always dreamed he would. Slade had worried that he might feel isolated out there, but for the last year or so he'd been seeing a woman who lived in a mobile home park a bit closer in. His dad had started spending a lot of time with her and from what he told Slade, he now had the best of both worlds. He had the solitude of his cabin when he wanted it – and got to share that with Ingrid – and when they were feeling more sociable, they got to hang out with her friends and join in with all kinds of clubs and activities.

It might not be time to introduce Willow to him, yet or maybe it was. Either way, Slade decided that he'd tell him more about her when he called later. He rang him every Sunday and usually managed to see him every other week – maybe next weekend he'd take Willow to meet him.

He smiled when her arm tightened around his waist and she snuggled closer and murmured, “Morning.”

“G’morning, princess.”

She lifted her head and looked up at him with bleary eyes. “Princess? That’s a new one. You used to call me duchess back in the day.”

He laughed. “Back in the day?”

“Yeah, you know. Back in the days when I used to have to wait seven years before I got to see you again.”

His smile faded. “I don’t think I could go seven days without seeing you now.”

“Aww!”

He laughed. “What? I’m not bullshitting you. It’s true. I mean, I could,” he added hurriedly. “It won’t be a problem when you have to go away for work, as I’m sure you will. But I’d miss you like hell. I just ...”

“Ugh. I will have to at some point, but I don’t like the idea of leaving you. Go with me?”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I will if I can, but I have to work.” He’d known the day would come when the differences between them would start to show. He’d just hoped that it wouldn’t come this soon.

She traced her finger over his brow. “Why the deep lines? What’s wrong?”

He shrugged. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s just ... well, I hope you’re going to be okay with dating a peasant.”

She sat up and scowled at him. It might have been more intimidating if her pert breasts didn’t point at him as the sheet fell away. “I thought we’d cleared that up. What’s on your mind? Let’s talk it through till we put it behind us.”

“It’s okay. I shouldn’t have said it that way. It’s just ... I’m not going to be able to take time off work at the drop of a hat like you can.”

She scowled at him. “I can’t do that, either. You might think I’m a princess, but I work my ass off.”

“Hey.” He sat up beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Sorry, little Willow. I’m screwing this up. I didn’t mean to imply that you don’t work hard. I know you do. It’s just ...”

“Just what?”

“I dunno.” He gave her a rueful smile. “Maybe it’s just that I need to work my way past a hangup or two I might have.”

He felt her relax. “Okay. That I can work with. First, I’m sorry – more sorry than you know – that I set up that whole dynamic between us. I wish I could go back in time and change it.”

He shook his head rapidly. “I don’t. I know why you said what you did. And honestly? It was the deciding factor. We probably wouldn’t be here now if you hadn’t. I really didn’t think it’d be right to sleep with you. But when you told me that it wouldn’t go any further because you were a DuPont, you convinced me that it’d be okay – because you weren’t the sweet little Willow I thought I knew.”

She sighed. “I just I wish I’d found some other way to persuade you. It’s created a problem between us, and I need to solve it.”

He ran a hand over her hair as he smiled down at her. “I know you’re a kickass babe and you can take the world by the balls and make it submit to your will, but this one’s on me, not you. I need to get over the hangup I created in my head. It’s not your fault – and it’s not yours to solve, okay?”

She held his gaze for a long moment. “I don’t know. I don’t know that I am okay with that.”

“Well, sorry to break it to you, but I think you have to be.”

“Will you promise me that you’ll work on it? And that you’ll tell me if I do anything that bothers you – that gets you hung up in your hangups?”

He had to laugh at the way she put it. “I promise that I’ll try to. But it really is on me, Willow. It’s my shit to get over.”

She blew out a sigh. “Okay. But just know that I want to help if I can. And will you tell me something? What’s with calling me princess?”

“That’s nothing to worry about. I promise you. I can admit that *back in the day* as you put it, when I used to call you duchess, that was about the differences between us. That was reminding myself that you’re Napa royalty – and I’m not.”

She frowned, but he hurried on.

“But calling you princess, that’s something different. When Elena was asking me about you yesterday, she wanted to know that I was treating you right. I told her that I’m treating you like the princess you are.”

He had to laugh at the expression on her face. “I think you officially just turned your frown upside down.”

She laughed with him. “Well! Why wouldn’t I? That’s a beautiful thing to say.”

“It’s a pretty awesome way to feel as well. To me, a duchess is someone distant, someone you don’t know much about other than the fact that they’re royalty. A princess is a beautiful young woman who’s not only the most important one in all the land, but she’s also the one who everyone loves and admires.”

He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. Even as he’d said *everyone*, it had hit him that not only did he admire her, but somewhere along the line, he’d gone and fallen in love with her. He didn’t need to figure out how he felt – he just knew.

“In all the land?” she asked with a laugh.

Relief washed over him. “Seriously? Out of everything I just said, that’s what you’re going to pick me up on?”

A hint of pink touched her cheeks. “For now, yeah.”

He shook his head at her. “It’s what they say in the fairytales.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand and drew his head down so that she could kiss him. When they came up for air, her eyes were shining bright.

“I don’t believe in fairytales, Slade.”

He didn’t speak, waiting for her to elaborate.

She leaned in close but instead of kissing him again, she spoke against his lips. “But I believe in you and me.”



# Chapter Thirteen

Willow was surprised to find Bentley sitting behind her desk when she walked into her office on Wednesday morning. She stopped in the doorway and gave him a puzzled look.

“Umm, did you forget that this isn’t your office anymore? You’re the CEO now, remember? *I’m* the COO.”

Bentley laughed. “I’m aware, sis. I needed a word and when I came in and discovered that you weren’t here yet, I thought I’d take a seat while I waited.” He looked around the office. “You have to remember that I spent a lot of years of my life sitting behind this desk.”

She went in and sat down opposite him. “Now it’s my turn to say that I’m aware.” She raised her eyebrows at him. “It’s not like you to have a dig at me – to make me feel bad – so I’m going to guess that thinking that you are is just my guilty conscience talking.”

“You feel bad? About what?”

“That you’ve spent pretty much all the years of your life here, working for the company, while I played gypsy, traveling around the world.”

“Yep. You’re right. That’s just your guilty conscience. Although why you feel guilty is beyond me. I did exactly what I wanted to, the same as you did – it’s just that we wanted different things. I wasn’t complaining.” He got up and walked around the desk. “I was just reminiscing. If you want to know the truth, I’m glad that you’re in this office now and that I’m not anymore. I think it’s working out well for both of us.”

Willow got up and went to sit in the chair he’d just vacated – her chair.

Bentley grinned at her. “How about you, do you feel the same way? Are you happy in here – or do I need to watch my

back?”

Willow laughed. “I hope you’re not serious? I don’t think you are, but just in case there’s even a tiny trace of doubt in your mind, I am happy in here. I never wanted and never will want to be CEO of the company.” Her smile faded and she met her brother’s gaze. “You weren’t serious?”

“No. I wasn’t serious about needing to watch my back, anyway. There may have been a tiny trace of doubt, but that was all. To be honest, I’d hate to think that you feel like I’m blocking you.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Well, you can forget that. You’ve got nothing to worry about in any sense. I wouldn’t want your job – not for your sake or for my sake. COO is the position I aspired to. Is that what you came to talk to me about?”

“No. That came out of nowhere. But I’m glad we talked about it.”

“Me too. So, what do you need?”

“Have you heard from Tori?”

“I haven’t spoken to her for a while, no. Why? Have you?”

“No. But remember we talked about getting her to come and visit?”

“Yeah. We really should do that.” She gave her brother a puzzled look. “What are you thinking? Is something going on?”

He dropped his gaze before looking up at her again. “Okay, you got me. Alyssa was asking about her, and I’d love for the two of them to meet.”

“Okay, that makes more sense. Are you saying that you want me to be the one to call her?”

“No. I can do it. I just wondered if you already had. I haven’t spoken to her in a while and when I talked to Mom last night, she said she was worried about her.”

“Mom’s always worried about her. She hates that she’s in Nashville.”

“I know, but this was different. She said that the last time she spoke to Tori, there was some weird stuff going on.”

“What kind of weird stuff?”

“You know Callie, the girl she sings for? Well, it sounds like she has a stalker.”

Willow sat up straighter in her seat. “Crap! What’s going on?”

Bentley shrugged. “I was hoping you might be able to tell me. But since you can’t, maybe we should give her a call.”

Willow checked her watch. “Eight o’clock in the morning here is ten o’clock there. I doubt she’ll be up yet.”

“You’re right. I forget. She lives such a different life.”

Willow smiled. She loved her baby sister. “She’s such a different person, that’s why.”

The way Bentley smiled back at her told her that he felt exactly the same way as she did. They both loved Tori. “How about I come back around noon, and we’ll call her then?”

“Sure. We can do that. I should be wrapped up with the sales guys by noon.”

“Are you going with them up to Seattle next week?”

“No. They don’t need me.”

“I always used to go with them,” said Bentley.

Willow shrugged. “But, brother dearest, I’m not you. This is my gig now, remember?”

Bentley just laughed. “Sorry. I remember.” He got up to leave but turned back when he reached the door. “How are things with Slade?”

She knew she had a goofy grin on her face as she answered, but she couldn’t help it. “Awesome.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Did he tell you that he came to see me?”

“He did.” Willow loved that even though Bentley already knew about them, Slade had wanted to talk to him himself. He hadn’t liked that Bentley wasn’t there when they told all their friends that they were officially seeing each other, and he’d insisted that he should seek him out.

“I know it’s none of my business, but I just wanted to throw it out there; I don’t mind him staying at the house, you know.”

Willow nodded slowly. “Thanks. I didn’t think you did.”

“He used to come over all the time – before you guys made it official – now he doesn’t. What changed? Is he not comfortable here?”

“No. It’s not that. Honestly, I’m more comfortable at his place. He’d come here if I wanted him to. But…” She didn’t know how to explain it.

“You think it makes him uncomfortable?”

“No. Well maybe, but that’s not the reason. It makes *me* uncomfortable, if we’re being honest. The house has never felt like home to me in the way that Slade’s apartment does.”

Bentley grinned at her. “That makes sense. Not only does it make sense, but I like that explanation a whole lot better.”

“Yeah, I do, too.” They’d never discussed it, but she felt happier going to Slade’s place than asking him to come to the estate. It suited both of them better – in his apartment, she’d finally found a place that felt like home. And considering that he worked on another estate, she didn’t know if he’d ever be able to feel at home here.

~ ~ ~

Slade jumped, feeling guilty when the phone in the gatehouse rang. It had been a quiet afternoon – a quiet day –

and he was whiling away the time, playing solitaire on the computer.

“Jacobs Estate. You’ve reached the front gate. How can I help you?”

“It’s me, Jacob. I’m calling to ask you a favor; you can say no if you don’t want to do it.”

“No way would I say no. The last time you called and said that was when we flew out to Oakland to bring Becca home.”

Jacob laughed. “I know. That’s why I want to give you an out this time. Last time, I brought Becca home, but you ended up broken down on the freeway in her piece of shit old car, remember?”

“Yeah, but it was worth it. Anyway, what do you need?”

“Hannah just called. She’s in a panic because she’s not going to be able to get back in time to pick Ava up from school. She asked if I could go and get her, and I’d love to, but I have a conference call scheduled at three. It’s taken Will weeks to set up a time that works for everyone.”

Slade grinned. “Are you asking me to go and get her? I’d love to!”

“I had a feeling you might say that. I know she’ll be thrilled to see you waiting for her. She loves her Uncle Slade.”

“What time do I need to be there? And will they let her go with me?”

“Hannah will figure that out. When she asked me to do it, she told me that she’d need a photo of my drivers’ license.”

Slade was already digging his license out of his wallet. “Who do I send it to?”

Jacob laughed. “Slow down. There’s no big rush. Ava doesn’t get out for another hour yet. There’s time. How about I get Hannah to call you? She can tell you what they’ll need from you, and she’ll be able to tell you where exactly you need to meet Ava and all the rest of it.”

“Awesome. I’ll wait for her call.”

“Would I be wrong if I told you that I’m getting the impression that you’re way more excited about picking up Ava than you are about the job?”

Slade pursed his lips before he answered. “I hate to admit it, but you’re not wrong.”

“I don’t blame you. I’m bummed that I can’t go and get her myself.”

“What time will your call be finished? We could come up to the house?”

“I wish. But that won’t work today. I have a feeling this call is going to run a couple of hours. And besides, Hannah and Ava always go straight home to the cottage to let Scooter out.”

Slade smiled. “Of course, that’s right. Well, I’d better let you go to get ready for your call, and free the line up in case Hannah’s trying to call me.”

Jacob laughed. “She won’t know to call you until I tell her.”

Slade laughed with him. “Right. Sorry. What can I say? I guess I’m excited.”

“I’m glad to hear it. In fact, hearing you sound this happy makes me wonder if we shouldn’t include the school run in your job description in the future.”

“Are you joking? I hope you’re not joking. I would absolutely love to be able to go and collect Ava from school every day.”

“So I gathered. We should talk to Hannah about it. We both know Ava would be thrilled to have Uncle Slade pick her up. For now though, I’ll call Hannah and tell her that you’re happy to go, and she can tell you whatever it is you need to do so that the school will let Ava go with you.”

“What about the gate? Should I call John to come in and cover?”

“No. There’s no need. Just leave a note on the gatehouse door telling people to pull up to the gate and use the intercom. I’m not expecting anyone, but I’ll tell the housekeeper to listen out for the intercom just in case.”

“Okay. Will do.”

Slade couldn’t keep the smile off his face as he sat in the carpool line. He was grateful that it had rained this morning – that had influenced his decision to come to work in the car rather than ride his bike. His smile grew even broader when he saw Ava standing with Becca. He wanted to honk his horn but didn’t think that would go over too well.

He needn’t have worried; Ava was scanning all the cars as they approached. He guessed that Becca would have told her that he was coming. When she spotted him, she bounced up and down on her toes and tugged at Becca’s sleeve.

He waved, a rush of warmth filling his chest as Ava grinned and waved madly back at him. He hadn’t had much to do with kids in his life. He was an only child, so there were no nephews or nieces. He’d fallen in love with little Ava when she and Grady first moved in with Hannah. The way that she was so excited to see him made him wonder what it must feel like to be a parent. For the first time in his life, he imagined what it would be like to have a child of his own.

What if he and Willow...? No. He couldn’t let himself start thinking along those lines. Not yet. He might have admitted to himself that he’d fallen in love with her, but they still had many obstacles to overcome. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face, though.

The car in front of him pulled away, and then Becca was there, opening the passenger door. Ava climbed in and leaned across the console, wrapping her little arms around his neck.

“Uncle Slade! Uncle Slade! This is awesome! Thank you so much for coming to get me.”

He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “You are so much more than welcome, Miss Ava. It really is my

pleasure.”

He looked over at Becca, who was still leaning in through the open door, smiling at him. “I’m supposed to check your drivers’ license to make sure that you are who you say you are.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” He reached for his wallet, which he’d left in the cup holder, knowing that he’d need to show his license.

“It’s okay,” said Becca. “I know who you are.”

He shrugged and flashed his license at her anyway. “I know, but I want to do this right.” He grinned at Ava. “I want to be the one who gets to come for Ava whenever Grady and Hannah need backup. I don’t want to do anything that will mess that up.”

Becca smiled. “Okay, then. I have officially checked your identification, Mr. Hawkins.”

Ava laughed. “I didn’t know you were Mr. Hawkins. Elena calls you Mr. Sunshine.”

“I know, but we have to go with what it says on my license for today.”

“Buckle up, Ava. I’ll see you later,” said Becca.

Slade felt bad that it hadn’t occurred to him to fasten the kid’s seatbelt. He would have made sure that she did it before they pulled away, though.

Ava chattered at him all the way back to the estate, and Slade loved every minute of it.

“Can you come again tomorrow, Uncle Slade? Madison says that I don’t have a real family because I’m an orphan. But that’s not true. If you come to pick me up again, we can show her that you really are my uncle.”

Slade’s knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. He’d heard enough about this Madison girl to know that it was probably better if he didn’t run into her. The kid sounded like a



piece of work. He wanted to tell Ava to steer clear of her, but he knew it wasn't his place.

"I'll come and get you whenever Hannah and Grady ask me to." He smiled at her. "I'd love to."

He didn't know what he'd said wrong, but it must have been something – her little eyebrows drew together, and the corners of her mouth turned down.

"Hey, what's up, kiddo?"

"I know they're not really my mommy and daddy."

Shit! Slade hadn't thought. Hannah and Grady might not be her parents, but over the last few months, Ava had started calling them Mommy and Daddy. He wasn't sure how to approach it; it felt like a minefield, but he knew that with this Madison kid calling her an orphan, he had to say something.

He chose his words carefully, hoping that he wasn't going to mess this up. "I think what matters is how you all feel about each other. I know you had your mom... your mommy."

She turned in her seat to face him, and he glanced over at her before turning his attention back to the road.

"I don't really remember her." The crack in her little voice broke Slade's heart.

Without taking his gaze off the road, he reached across and took hold of her hand. "My mommy died when I was little, too."

Ava squeezed his hand tight. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry. Do you remember her?"

He glanced over at her again before he answered, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "I do. But only as a feeling. I used to feel bad that I didn't remember her like I thought I should. I was small when she died, just like you when your mommy died. I used to get upset when I couldn't picture her face anymore, when I couldn't remember the sound of her voice."

He squeezed Ava's hand again. "But my daddy told me a secret."

Ava's eyes were big and round when he shot another look at her. "What secret?"

"He told me that the people we love don't ever leave us completely, even when they die. Of course, when they die, they can't be with us in the same way anymore. We can't see them and talk to them and be with them like we could when they were alive. And as time goes by, maybe we can't even see them or hear them in our minds anymore. But they always stay with us as a feeling. Even now, I can close my eyes and remember how my mommy felt. How I felt when she used to hug me and when she used to sing to me."

He hoped like hell he wasn't messing this up. He hoped that Ava could still conjure up the feeling of her mom.

She set his mind at rest when she smiled, even though two big fat tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Your daddy's right. I can't see my mommy's face when I close my eyes anymore. But when I go to bed at night, I remember when she used to get in bed with me and cuddle me until I fell asleep. I can't feel her there anymore, not her arms around me or anything, but when I think about it, it still makes me feel the same way that I used to. It makes me feel happy, and warm, and... Good."

Slade smiled. "It makes you feel loved. That's what that good feeling is, Ava. Even though she's not here with you anymore, she still loves you, and you still love her, that will never go away."

They arrived back at the estate, and Slade brought his car to a stop outside the gatehouse and punched the code into the keypad to open the gate.

Before he pulled forward, he turned to Ava and touched his knuckle to her cheek. "If that Madison gives you any more ..."

He managed to stop himself and replace the word he'd been about to say, going instead with, "... trouble, you just tell her

that your mommy might not be here anymore, but Grady and Hannah love you so much that they *asked* to be your parents. And that all your aunties and uncles – especially Uncle Slade –” he added with a wink, “– love you even more than *real* aunties and uncles. We don’t just love you because we’re supposed to – because you were born into the same family – we love you because we *choose* to because you’re awesome. Okay?”

The huge smile that lit up the little girl’s face told him that he might not have messed this up too badly.

“Thank you.” She sat up in her seat and leaned across the console to rest her head against his shoulder. “I love you, Uncle Slade.”

“I love you, too, Ava.” Slade had to swallow around the lump in his throat.

“We’d better get going. Scooter will need to pee by now!”

And just like that, the moment passed. Ava was back to her grinning, chatty self, and Slade felt that, for the first time in weeks, he might have done something worthwhile with his day.

# Chapter Fourteen

Willow narrowed her eyes at her cell phone when it rang. It was sitting on her desk, and she'd been about to put it into her purse with the rest of her things. It was Friday afternoon, and she'd told Slade that she would do her best to finish work early and meet him at his apartment when his shift was over. If she left now she'd probably get there at the same time that he did.

However, when she saw the name that flashed up on the display, she knew that she might be here for a while still.

“Hi, Mom. How are you?”

“Hello, darling. I'm well, thank you. How are you?”

“I'm fine.”

“Fine? Not good, or great? Just fine?”

Willow had to laugh. It was still a novelty to hear humor in her mom's voice when they spoke. Their relationship had changed a lot over the last few months, and it was all down to her mom learning to lighten up.

She took a deep breath. She'd been meaning and meaning to tell her mom about Slade. It wasn't as though she had anything to hide – she'd just been putting off the moment. She'd only been putting it off because she wanted to believe that her mom's transformation was complete. She wanted to believe that she wouldn't have any objections. Willow didn't honestly believe that she would, but when it came down to it, she'd been putting off this conversation because she didn't want to discover that she was wrong.

“Actually, I am great, and good, not just fine.”

“Wonderful. That's what I was hoping to hear. May I ask what's going on with you that's so great?”

Willow had to wonder if she knew. There was only one way to find out. “I’ve been seeing someone.”

“And?”

“And things are going well. I like him. I like him a lot.” Her heart started to pound in her chest. She hadn’t even said it out loud to herself before, but all of a sudden, she wanted to tell her mom. “I more than like him. I love him.”

She heard her mom inhale sharply. “I see.”

Willow’s heart sank. “You see? That’s not exactly the kind of enthusiasm I was hoping for, Mother.”

Her mom let out a little laugh. “Forgive me. I just... You know me, Willow. I need a little more information. If you don’t mind.”

Willow closed her eyes and swallowed. It was a perfectly reasonable request. She’d forgotten that she hadn’t even told her mom *who* she was seeing – that it was Slade. How could she expect her to be enthusiastic?

“Sorry. Are you honestly telling me that you don’t know who I’ve been seeing?” She wanted to get that out of the way first. She didn’t think her mom knew, but she wouldn’t be surprised if she did. She was still tapped into the Napa grapevine, even though she didn’t live here anymore.

“I don’t know. But I’m hoping.”

“Hoping?”

“Yes, Willow. I’m hoping that something a certain little birdie told me might be true.”

“And what did that birdie say?”

She could hear the smile in her mom’s voice when she answered. “That little birdie shall not be named, but he told me that he’d heard a rumor that you were seeing Slade Hawkins.”

Willow sat in silence for a few moments. She was trying to piece it together. Her mom had said that she was hoping that

what she'd heard was true. "And you wouldn't mind if that were the case?"

"Mind? Darling, if it is true, then prepare yourself for a display of the enthusiasm you thought was lacking."

Willow had to laugh. "Okay, then. Display away. Because yes, it is true. Slade and I have been seeing each other for –" she stopped herself. There was no way she would ever tell her mom the entirety of her history with Slade. Instead, she kept it vague, and went with "– for a while, now."

"Oh, Willow! That makes me happy."

"It does?"

Her mom laughed. "Yes, dear, it really does. Why wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. I suppose I just thought that..."

"Willow DuPont." Her mom's tone was stern. "I hope you're not accusing me of being some kind of snob? I'm aware that I haven't been the warmest of people. I admit that I can be harsh, and was even seen as hard in the business, but I've always treated people according to their merit. I don't judge people based on their name or their bank account."

Willow ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "Sorry. I was nervous I suppose. He's important to me, Mom, and I need to know that you're going to be okay with him."

"Oh, Willow. I'm so sorry that the way I've been – the way I used to be – made you believe that silly superficial things like that could ever be more important to me than your happiness."

Willow closed her eyes against the tears that pricked behind them. "Damn, Mom! That sounds awful. I know you care about me. I know you want to see me happy."

"That's all I ever wanted for you, little Willow."

Willow swiped at the tears that escaped from behind her eyelids. "You haven't called me that in years. It's what Slade

calls me, too.”

“He does?” Her mom’s voice wavered.

“He does. I’d forgotten that you used to call me that when I was small. I just knew that when he says it, it feels... Right.”

Her mom sniffed. “Then I’d guess that it probably is right. I’ve always liked him.”

“You have?” Willow couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice.

Her mom laughed. “Yes. You might not have noticed him when you were younger –”

Willow wasn’t going to correct her about that!

“– but you have to remember that he’s always been friends with Bentley. He might have been closer with Xander, but Bentley and Jacob were his friends, too. The four of them were a tight little group when you were all children. Slade might not come from a wine family, but he was always part of our extended family even back then. And although he’s a new person to you – you came home to Napa and met the man he’s grown into – I’ve been aware of him over the years.

“His father is a good man, and he raised him well. He may have a different kind of background, but when it comes to the man I want for my daughter, I see that as a good thing.”

Willow sat back in her chair in surprise. “You do?”

Her mom laughed. “Yes, Willow, I do. Slade is ... Tougher. Of course, I’d trust any of the young men in your group of friends to take care of you. If you’d fallen for say, Cameron Hamilton or Antonio DiGiovanni, I would trust that they’d do their best to look out for you. With Slade, it’s different. With Slade, I *know* without a doubt, that he is more than capable of protecting you from anything. And I don’t just mean physically.”

“Wow! I feel like I need to apologize to you. I had no idea that you’d see it that way.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I understand exactly what you thought and why you thought it. But you have to understand that I’m a changed woman these days.” She let out a little laugh. “I have a very different perspective on life – now that I have a tough, protective, former Marine of my own.”

Willow laughed out loud. “I love that you love Russ so much.”

“I do, too. And that reminds me ...” Her voice was barely a whisper when she asked, “You said that you love him?”

“I do, Mom.”

“And does he feel the same way?”

Willow swallowed. “I think he might.”

“You haven’t told him yet?”

“No.”

“Oh, Willow. Thank you.”

Willow had to swallow around the emotions that clogged her throat. “I know you’re thanking me for telling you, but I want to thank you for the way you’ve moved things along between us. I want to thank you for getting us to the place where you’re the person I wanted to tell first.”

Her mom sniffed, and Willow could imagine her dabbing at her eyes. “Anyway...”

Willow laughed as she dabbed at her own eyes. “Yes. Anyway. Moving swiftly along. We’re DuPonts, we’re stronger than that; we don’t get bogged down in all that emotional stuff right, Mom?”

Her mom laughed with her. “We are strong, and we don’t get bogged down, but I’m grateful that we’ve reached the point where we can talk about it.”

“I am, too. Anyway, I totally hijacked this conversation. You called me, and I don’t think you were going to ask about Slade, were you? Were you just calling to check in?”



“Honestly, I wanted to know if the rumor I’d heard was true, but I would never have asked, no. I wasn’t just calling to check in, though. I was actually calling to see if you’ve spoken to Tori yet?”

“Yes. Bentley and I spoke to her the other day. I don’t like the sound of what’s going on. Have you spoken to her again?”

“I have. I asked her if she might come out to see us on Sunday. I’d love for her to come for longer, but she said that Sunday is the only day that she has free. She said that she’d think about it. So, honestly, I was calling to see if I could persuade you and Bentley to come out for the day as well. I’m worried about her, Willow. I thought if I could tempt her with a family get together, she might be more likely to come.”

“Have you spoken to Bentley?”

“No. I wanted to talk to you, first. I think it will be quite easy to convince Bentley to come, considering that will mean that Alyssa gets to see Russ, too. I expected you to be the tougher nut to crack.”

Willow smiled. “I can see why you’d think that.” She hesitated, wondering if Slade would even want to go.

Her mom read her mind. “Of course, if you wanted to bring Slade, and he were open to it, we’d love for him to come. On the other hand, I understand, and wouldn’t hold it against him, if he chooses not to. This is rather short notice for a young man to prepare himself to face the Dragon DuPont.”

“Mom! You are not the Dragon! Nobody thinks that.”

Her mom laughed. “We both know that there are plenty who see me that way. However, I’m not worried about them. What I’m worried about is that your young man should feel comfortable. I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Okay. How about you talk to Bentley, and I’ll talk to Slade. I’m not going to ask him to come. I’m going to ask him if he wants to. The way I feel, I want to bring him to see you soon, but I’m not going to force the timing just because we want to get together with Tori.”

“No. I understand that. Give me a call and let me know what you decide.”

“I will. Thanks, Mom.”

“Oh no, Willow. Thank you. If it helps, you should tell him about Russ.”

Willow smiled. “I already have.”

“Good. Perhaps that will help to reassure him that I’m not quite as bad as he probably believes.”

“I don’t think he believes you’re bad.”

Her mom laughed. “Let’s just be honest, shall we, Willow? He lives in Napa. He knows my reputation. I’m sure he’s not looking forward to being introduced to me as your boyfriend.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“You do that and let me know. Bye for now, Willow darling. I love you.”

“Love you, Mom.”

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Slade checked his watch as he stood in front of the window watching the parking lot. Willow had said that she would try to get home at the same time that he did, but he wasn’t surprised that she wasn’t here.

It wasn’t the same for her. His hours were fixed, and John came to relieve him at the end of his shift. It wasn’t as though he did anything earth shattering at work. He enjoyed his job, but it was merely a way to fill his days and earn a paycheck. Willow’s job was a different story entirely. In fact, hers wasn’t a job – she had a career. He was proud of her, but he didn’t envy her.

He turned away from the window and went to the counter to get his phone when it rang. His heart sank when he saw her name on the display. She was probably calling to say that

she'd gotten caught up at the office and wouldn't be home for a while yet. That would be fine, they didn't have any big plans or anything. It was just that he'd been looking forward to spending the evening in with her.

"Hey, little Willow."

"Aww. I love it when you call me that."

He smiled. "So do I. Are you stuck at the office?"

"No. I'm on the way home. I just wanted to let you know and to tell you sorry that I'm a bit late. My mom called."

"How is she? Is everything okay? Does she know anything more about what's going on with Tori?" Willow had told him the other day about her conversation with her sister. He didn't like what he'd heard about Calypso Rayne – or Callie, as they called her – having a stalker. He didn't like it for her, and he liked it even less for Tori. He didn't know Tori as well as he knew Willow and Bentley, she was a bit younger, but she was a sweetheart. He couldn't see her being able to defend herself or even knowing what to do with herself if she were confronted with any kind of trouble.

"She's great. I..."

He frowned. "It's not like you to sound hesitant. Is there a problem?"

She laughed. "No. No problem. I was thinking that I should wait till I get home to tell you, but perhaps it's better this way. I'll tell you now, and that way, you'll have time to think about it before I get there."

"Tell me what?"

"Mom's concerned about this whole stalker deal, too. She's asked Tori to come out and see her for the day on Sunday. She's asked if we'd like to go, too."

"We?"

Willow chuckled. "Yes, we. I told her about us."

Slade's heart started to hammer. "How did she take it?"

“She’s thrilled. She told me that she’s really happy. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home. I won’t be long now; I just left the estate. Do you want me to pick anything up on the way?”

Slade gripped his phone tight. It wasn’t because he was nervous about her mom – it was the way that she’d said she was coming home that did it.

“No. I think we’re good. I figured we could get the Thai place to deliver later. There’s beer in the fridge. You’ve got wine and I’ve got whiskey. Unless you can think of anything else, I think we’re good.”

She chuckled. “That sounds good to me. I…”

He frowned. “Are you sure you’re okay? That’s twice now that you haven’t wanted to finish what you were saying. It’s not like you. You usually just come right out with it – whatever it might be.”

“Okay then, I’ll say it. The only reason I hesitated was that I didn’t want to come on too strong. What I was about to say was that if I’m coming home to you and a bottle of wine, there’s nothing else on this earth I need.”

Slade closed his eyes and let the warm feeling wash over him. “I feel the same way.”

She laughed. “You don’t even drink wine.”

He laughed with her. “Way to spoil the moment, lady! What I meant was that as long as I have whiskey and Willow, my world is complete.”

“Damn! You know how to sweet talk a girl, Slade Hawkins. I’ll see you soon.”

“I’ll be here, waiting for you to come home to me.”

“Home.”

He smiled, knowing that it had hit her in the same way it had hit him. “Yeah, little Willow. I know my apartment isn’t

much, but if you decide you want it – that you want me – just say the word and this can be your home.”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Yeah, I am. Whenever you’re ready, but no pressure.”

“I’m ready. It doesn’t feel like pressure, Slade. It feels like ...”

“Go on, say it.”

She laughed. “It feels like it’s about damn time.”

“Glad you feel the same way. Now hang up, so that I can go pour you a glass of wine while I wait.”

“Okay. I’m almost there.”

Slade smiled to himself as he ended the call. It felt like she was right – that they were almost there. It had taken a lot of years, but he finally felt like they were on the right track.

He hadn’t planned to ask her to move in with him. If he’d planned it, he probably would have over thought the whole thing. Who did he think he was, asking her to move in when she was the girl who’d grown up in the mansion on the estate? But all that was just so much bullshit. He knew who he was; he was the man who’d fallen in love with her. And while she had grown up in the mansion on the estate, he knew damn well that she was happier and felt more at home in his apartment with him.

As he made his way into the kitchen to pour her that glass of wine, he nodded to himself. She might have wanted to give him some time to think it over, but he already knew. He didn’t need to think about whether he was ready to face her mother. He already knew it was time for him to start trying to win Alexandria DuPont over – because if he got his way, he was going to be spending the rest of his life with her daughter.

# Chapter Fifteen

Willow kept a tight hold of Slade's hand as they walked across the tarmac to the plane on Sunday morning. She wasn't surprised that he'd decided to come; he'd made it clear on Friday night that he was eager for her mom to get to know him better. He seemed to think that he was going to have his work cut out for him to win her over. Willow didn't blame him. Before her conversation with her mom, she would have agreed with him. Now, she had a feeling that this was going to go much more smoothly than she'd dared to hope.

So, she wasn't sticking so closely to his side because she thought he was nervous about meeting her mom and Russ, but because she didn't know how he felt about flying to Summer Lake with Bentley and Alyssa. The company jet had always been a part of her life. Growing up it had been as normal for her to hop in the plane to go somewhere as it was for other people to hop in the car. But she'd learned over the years that far from being normal, it was out of the ordinary to most people.

He stopped to let Alyssa and Bentley go up the steps ahead of them. While they waited, he squeezed her hand and looked down at her.

"Are you okay?"

"I am, are you?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Yeah. I told you, I'm kind of looking forward to this."

"No. I know that."

"But?"

She blew out a sigh. "I'm just going to come out and say it. Are you okay with flying there?"

"I am. I don't get it. What should I be worried about?"

“I just ... Not everyone is comfortable with it.”

“Ah. The jet?”

She nodded, not wanting to elaborate.

He reached up and ran his hand over her hair. “It’s okay. You have to remember that I work for Jacob. I wouldn’t say that I fly with him all the time, but it’s not out of the ordinary.”

Of course. She should have thought. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean...”

He slid his fingers under her hair and closed them around her nape. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to be sorry for. You’re trying to look out for me. I get it.” He smiled. “I appreciate it.”

“I feel like an asshole.”

He laughed out loud. “Don’t. There’s no need. I promise. Now, are we going?”

She nodded and just as she put her foot on the first step, he put his hand on her shoulder. When she turned to face him, they were eye to eye, and he smiled.

“I love that you were trying to look out for me, but I’m more used to trying to look out for you – for everyone around me.” He chuckled. “In fact, I remember, not so long ago – remember Elliott’s dad’s funeral?”

She nodded.

“I stayed back to wait with Becca. The guys were flying Jacob and the staff down to San Diego, but she was going to Kansas. He’d chartered a jet just for her, and she wasn’t used to it. I wanted to make sure that she was going to be okay.” He smiled. “I love that you’re trying to do the same thing for me now.”

She leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Yeah, but you were doing it because you knew that Becca was nervous – that she was in a situation that was way outside her comfort zone. You’re not nervous; this isn’t anything new to you.” She met

his gaze and held it. “I feel like an asshole because I made an assumption.”

He leaned in and rested his forehead against hers. “Don’t. I love you for it.”

She inhaled sharply, but it was just a turn of phrase. He didn’t mean...

Then he smiled. “That came out wrong. I should have said this before now.” He glanced up the steps. Bentley and Alyssa would be waiting for them, but she didn’t care. She wanted to hear what he had to say. “I love you, little Willow.”

She grasped his shirt at his sides and pulled him closer. “Say it again.”

He chuckled. “I love you. And just in case the third time’s the charm, I love you.”

His hands came up to cup the sides of her neck, and she grasped his wrists as he stared into her eyes.

“I love you, too, Slade.”

Flecks of gold and green sparkled in his eyes. “You do?”

She laughed. “I do. I think I always have.”

He leaned in and claimed her mouth in one of his hot, hard kisses.

His voice was low and gravelly when he spoke again. “I was thinking about that, too. I knew that I’d fallen hard for you, but when I tried to pinpoint it, I couldn’t figure out when.” She loved the smile that played on his lips as he nodded. “The more I thought about it, the more I understood that I fell for you that first weekend. I think I’ve loved you ever since.”

She nodded happily. “I think that’s when I fell for you, too. And you know what? I think it’s perfect. You were right back then. If you hadn’t said anything to put me off, I might well have kept coming around, hoping for something more. But the



way things worked out? They worked out perfectly for us. I've never felt about anyone else the way I feel for you."

"Same. I don't mind admitting that I've had some regrets – when I figured out that I'd fallen for you back then, I started wishing that we hadn't lost all the years in between." He met her gaze and held it. "But it wouldn't have worked. I wouldn't have become the man I am now. You wouldn't have become the woman you are. And even though it feels like it took us way too damn long, I like it better this way. We took our time getting here, getting it right. Now we can have the rest of our lives. If we'd tried to make anything work back then, it might have cost us forever."

Willow's heart felt as though it melted in her chest. "I want forever with you."

"Willow! Are you guys coming?"

Slade winked at her, and they both burst out laughing before she shouted back to Bentley, "Sorry. We're coming now."

Slade gestured for her to turn around and carry on up the steps. She grinned when he swatted her ass just before she entered the cabin.

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Slade had reassured Willow that he wasn't nervous about flying in the jet, and that was the truth – he wasn't. Even when he was a kid, he'd flown in the Jacobs' jet; it wasn't something that was way outside of his experience, like he imagined it would be for a lot of people. What he hadn't admitted to her was that he was a little bit nervous about flying with Bentley and Alyssa.

He considered Bentley a friend, but there was no doubt that this trip would change the dynamic of their friendship. This wasn't about going along somewhere as one of the guys, this was him intruding into his friend's family. No. He had to stop

that. Intruding wasn't the right word – even if it kind of felt that way.

He was relieved when Bentley smiled at him as he sat down. “Are you okay with this?”

He smiled. “I am.”

Alyssa raised her eyebrows at him. “Is this the first time you're meeting them?”

“It's the first time I'm meeting your dad, but I've known Alexandria my whole life.” He smiled first at Bentley, then at Willow. “Although, not in this context.”

“Oh, of course,” said Alyssa. “You grew up here, too. You've all known each other all your lives, right?”

“That's right.”

“Well, if you're at all nervous, I can tell you that my dad likes the sound of you.” Alyssa smiled. “And not just because you were a Marine, like him.”

Slade was thankful that he had that in common with Russ. He was looking forward to getting to know the guy. He was already inclined to like him as a fellow former Marine, and he was curious as hell about the guy who'd won over Alexandria DuPont, and who, by all accounts, had worked wonders in bringing out a new side of her.

“He owns a gym, right?”

“He does. I doubt that we'll have the time today, but you can bet that he'll want to take you and show you around the place as soon as he can. He's proud of it.” Alyssa smiled. “And I'm so proud of him.” Her cheeks flushed and she turned to Bentley. “You should tell me to shut up, you know. I go on about him too much.”

Slade smiled at the way Bentley wrapped his arm around Alyssa's shoulders. “I'm not going to tell you to shut up. I know how much he means to you.”

He turned to look at Slade. “Do you know Alyssa’s story with her dad?”

“You didn’t know him when you were growing up, right?”

She shook her head. “It’s not just that I didn’t know him. I didn’t know that he existed. My mom and stepdad raised me thinking that my stepdad was my dad. I only found out about my real dad after my stepdad died.” She rolled her eyes. “I know that must sound weird.”

Slade turned to look at Willow when she laughed beside him. “Remember who you’re talking to.” She jerked her chin toward Bentley. “You have to remember that we’re the kids of a man who left his wife for the man who he’s now married to.”

Slade chuckled. He knew that both Willow and Bentley loved their dad dearly. The family had been through a rough time when their folks got divorced, but that was behind them now. He knew that Alexandria was still friendly with Matthew, and his new husband, Gabriel.

“I suppose we all think that our family is the weird one,” said Alyssa. “But I’m not sure there’s any such thing as normal anymore, is there?” She turned to Slade. “How about you? Do you have a normal family or are you a child of dysfunction like the rest of us?”

He had to laugh at the way she put it. “I suppose the honest answer is neither. I don’t have a normal family. But it’s not dysfunctional, either. My mom died when I was small, and my dad raised me. It’s always been just the two of us.”

Willow smiled at him. “We need to carve out some time this afternoon so that you can call him.”

That sent a rush of warmth through his chest. He loved that she looked out for him like that. She knew that he called his dad on Sundays, and she was trying to make sure that he didn’t have to miss it just because he was visiting her family.

He didn’t even hesitate to wrap his arm around her shoulders, even though the two of them were sitting facing Bentley and Alyssa. Yes, it was a shift in the dynamics, but

Bentley was just going to have to get used to seeing him being affectionate with her.

“It’s okay. I called him yesterday and told him what we’re doing today.”

She smiled. “Is he spending the day with Ingrid?”

“He is. And he said that since you’re taking me around your family, it’s about time I brought you to see him.”

He loved the way she smiled. “I’d love to! I’ve been waiting.”

Bentley smiled at Slade. “I have to tell you, I’m liking this.”

Slade nodded. He was, too. He tightened his arm around Willow’s shoulders. After he left the Corps, he hadn’t had much of a plan for how he wanted his life to work out, but right now, he had high hopes.

It wasn’t long before Ollie’s voice came through on the intercom. “We’re ten minutes out, folks. If you want to buckle up, we’ll have you on the ground soon. Your mom and Russ are waiting at the FBO building.” His laugh sounded tinny over the intercom. “And I should warn you that Smoke’s there, too.”

Slade grinned at that news. Smoke – or Cole Hamilton, as Slade had known him when they were kids – had moved to Summer Lake years ago. In fact, now that he thought about it, if it weren’t for Smoke, Alexandria wouldn’t be here. She’d met Russ when she was staying at Smoke’s parents’ lake house after her health scare – the lake house that they’d bought for when they came to visit him.

Willow looked up at him. “You guys were good friends, weren’t you?”

“We were.” His smile faded. “Right up until the time he left because of that damn Annabel Groves.”

“Ugh. I always hated her.”

“I don’t know her, but I’ve heard the story,” said Alyssa. “I know it might be a weird thing to say, but as horrible as she sounds – I hate what she did to him – I can’t hate that she did it.” She smiled around at them. “If you think about it, none of us would be here right now if she hadn’t.”

Slade pursed his lips as he mulled that one over. Alyssa had a point. If Annabel hadn’t cheated, she and Smoke would no doubt have gotten married. He would never have met his wife, Laura, and... The more he thought about it, the more he could see that one single event could change the lives of so many people – even people who at the time were strangers.

He looked down at Willow and she met his gaze. She was thinking the same thing that he was, he could tell. It was what they’d been talking about earlier. If they’d done things differently all those years ago, their lives – and who knew who else’s lives – would be so very different now. Knowing that, he wouldn’t change a thing.

He looked out the window as the plane touched down on the runway. When he looked back Willow turned and smiled up at him. “Are you ready for this?”

“Not just ready. I’m looking forward to it.” And that was the truth.

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“He looks nervous,” said Tori. “I hope you’ve told him that he has nothing to worry about. Mom’s absolutely thrilled.” She grinned. “I am, too. But I have to tell you, sis, I’m a little bit envious. I mean... Slade Hawkins!”

Willow laughed. “I know, right? Sometimes I feel like I need to pinch myself.”

“And so you should! I mean, he’s ... dreamy! He always was. Even when I was in middle school, all the girls thought he was gorgeous.”

“I know. I was a few years behind him in high school, and I would never have thought that I would stand a chance.”

“And yet, here you are.” Tori smiled. “And I’m so happy for you. Not only is he sex-on-a-stick, but he’s a really great guy, too. So, is it serious? I mean, I’m guessing it must be since you brought him here.”

Willow looked in through the sliding doors which led from the deck, where she and Tori were standing, into the living room where Bentley and Alyssa were talking to Russ, while Slade chatted with her mom. Tori was right – he did look nervous. But he was relaxing more by the minute. Her mom was going out of her way – going overboard might be a more accurate description – to make him feel at home, and it looked as though she was getting through.

Even as Willow watched, her mom said something that made him chuckle. He nodded and said something back, which made her mom reach out and touch his arm as she laughed with him. Yeah. He was doing okay.

“Hello? Earth calling Willow.”

She grinned at her sister. “Sorry. It is, it’s serious – about as serious as it gets.”

Tori let out a little squeal, then covered her mouth with both hands when everyone looked over at them. Her cheeks flamed red as she rolled her eyes at Willow.

“Sorry. I’m still such a dork.”

“You are not a dork! Don’t go talking about my sister like that. You’re awesome, and if you ever forget it, all you need to do is call me and I’ll remind you.”

“Thanks. It’s so good to see you. I know we’ve both been busy getting on with our lives, but I miss you, sis.”

“I miss you, too. I always have. But it’s like you said – we have lives to get on with. And I need you to tell me about what’s going on in yours.”

Tori's face fell. "It sucks, Willow. It really does. I feel so bad for Callie."

"I do, too, but I have to be honest – I'm more worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about. He's not after me. He's obsessed with Callie."

"Maybe so. But it worries me anyway. I mean, what if he decides to do something to you to get to her? What if you get in the way? I don't like it, Tori."

Tori blew out a sigh. "I know. I like to play dumb, but I'm not stupid. Then again, Callie isn't, either. She's taking it seriously. She's always had security, but her manager has decided that they need to step it up. The guys who've been with us for years used to work as bouncers in the club where she started out. Now, Corbyn – that's her manager – is interviewing professional security teams."

"You should talk to Xander."

Tori's cheeks turned red again, and Willow knew why. "I couldn't."

Willow rolled her eyes. "Yes, you can. There's no reason not to. He'd be thrilled to hear from you. But even aside from that whole deal, his buddy who used to be on his SEAL team with him is working for his brother's security services company now."

Tori frowned. "Which one?"

"You remember. The cowboy. The one from Montana. He came home with Xander when they were on leave, not last year, but the year before."

"Oh! You mean Kolby?"

"Yes. That's him. Kolby. When I saw Xander at Christmas, he was telling me that Kolby's brother had offered him a job."

"You mean he's thinking about getting out of the Navy?"

"Yeah. He is."

“Wow!”

Willow laughed. “I swear to God if I could get the two of you in the same place for longer than five minutes ...”

Tori shook her head rapidly. “No. I mean, sure, I’ve always had this huge crush on him but, be real Willow. He’s ... He’s Xander! And I’m just me!”

“For crying out loud, Tori. You are awesome! You’re beautiful, you’re talented, you’re an absolute sweetheart. Everyone who meets you falls in love with you. I just wish that I could somehow make you see your own worth.”

Tori made a face. “You’re my sister. You have to say that.”

Willow shook her head. They’d had this conversation a million times. Tori was a sweet soul. She was kind and gentle, Willow just wished that she could learn to see herself the way everyone else saw her.

“You know me better than that. I say it like I see it. If I didn’t think you were awesome, I wouldn’t tell you that you were. You *are*. You’re amazing, and the only one who doesn’t know it is you. But I’m not getting into that old argument with you right now. All I’m saying is that you should call Xander. He might be able to put Callie in touch with a real, professional, former military, security team. From what he was telling me, those guys don’t mess around. They’re expensive, but Callie can afford it.”

Tori nodded slowly. “Maybe you can call him for me?”

Willow narrowed her eyes at her. “I’d rather you did it yourself, but I’ll get the ball rolling if you want me to.”

Tori nodded again.

Willow gave her an evil grin. “I’ll just tell him to call you, though. I don’t know enough about the situation to explain it to him.”

Tori laughed. “Okay. But enough about me, we should get back in there and see how Slade is doing.”



Willow looked in through the doors again. She wasn't worried about him. He was perfectly capable of fending for himself. In fact, coming out here to chat with Tori had been about killing two birds with one stone. Of course, she wanted to catch up with her sister, but she'd also wanted to let Slade do his thing without her hanging on his arm, listening in.

As if he felt her gaze on him, he turned and smiled at her.

"Holy smokes! The way he looks at you!" Tori breathed beside her. "Jealous, sis. Totally jealous."

Willow laughed. "If you'd just get over yourself, you'd realize that Xander looks at you the exact same way. He has for years."

Tori shrugged. "Whatever. Let's go back in there."

## Chapter Sixteen

Slade was grateful that Willow was letting him fend for himself. When they'd landed, she'd whispered in his ear while her mom and Russ were greeting Bentley and Alyssa. She'd asked him if he wanted her to stick close. He'd told her no. It wasn't that he didn't want her by his side, it was just that he fully expected that both Alexandria and Russ would want to give him a bit of a grilling, and he knew that she would want to defend him. It'd be better to let them have their say.

They'd greeted him warmly, but he'd been waiting for each of them to pull him aside – and he hadn't had to wait long. The moment that Willow and Tori had gone out on the balcony for a sisterly catch up, Alexandria had appeared at his side.

“I'm so glad that you wanted to come.”

He smiled. “Thank you for inviting me, ma'am.”

She wagged her finger at him, but there was humor in her eyes. “No. I'm not going to let you get away with that. Nobody calls me ma'am anymore. And there's no way I want to hear it from you. Please, call me Ria.”

“Ria?” Slade clamped his mouth shut as soon as he said it, but it was too late. He knew that his shock must be written all over his face, but thankfully, she laughed.

“I know, I know. I'm supposed to be the formidable *Alexandria* DuPont.” She reached out and touched his arm. “And honestly, that's exactly who I was. I really was the dragon lady.” She shrugged her shoulders. “But people can change. I have.” She glanced over to where Russ was talking to Bentley and Alyssa. “He's changed me.”

“I'm happy for you.” What was he supposed to say?

She shook her head with a smile. “Thank you, but that wasn't my point. What I'm trying to tell you is that I'm

thrilled that you and Willow are together. I'll tell you the same thing that I told her – I've always liked you.”

Slade raised his eyebrows. He was surprised that she could even claim to have *always* known who he was.

She laughed. “I know I was bad, but I must have been a terrible person for you all to see me the way that you do. I know I was caught up in the business, but you've always been friends with my son. You've always been a part of my children's social circle. I know your father, I like your father – not just like, I respect and admire him.”

That sent a rush of warmth through Slade's chest. “Thank you.”

She shook her head. “I'm not saying it for your thanks. I'm trying to explain to you. I want – no, I need – you to understand that I am absolutely thrilled that you and Willow are together. I couldn't have hoped for a better man for her – and I'll be keeping my fingers crossed that the two of you might build a future together.” She met his gaze and held it. “I'm not even going to apologize for saying that – not going to caveat it by saying that there's no pressure or anything. She's told me how she feels about you, and you don't need to say it – I can see that you feel the same way about her.”

Slade nodded. He hadn't expected this, but he was grateful for it. “I love your daughter, Alexan ... Ria.”

“I know. And ... I won't say too much, I'll just say that I hope this is the first of many times that you'll come here with her.”

“Thank you.”

“Don't thank me, dear. There's no need. I'm thanking you. As I said, I really couldn't have hoped for a better man for her.” She smiled. “I don't know if she's ever told you, but I call her my wayward child. Bentley is the conscientious one, and Tori is a little lost soul. But Willow...” She smiled again. “You must never repeat this, but Willow is the strong, independent woman I wish I could have been.”

Slade just stared at her. He didn't know what to say to that. He absolutely agreed that Willow was a strong, independent woman, but he couldn't imagine how Alexandria – Ria – didn't see herself the same way.

She let out a short laugh. "I'm sorry. It's not fair of me to put you on the spot like that. What I mean is that she knows what she wants and isn't afraid to go for it. She's never been afraid to say what she thinks. I know that I may have appeared the same way, but I was always trying to live up to what I believed was expected of me. Willow was so much stronger than that. She lives up to what she expects of herself."

That made him smile. "She does."

"Anyway. I don't mean to make this an ordeal for you – sharing my deepest secrets with you like that. So, let's leave that behind us, shall we? How's your father?"

Slade held her gaze for a moment before he answered. "He's doing well, thanks. But before we move on, I'd just like you to know that I see Willow the same way that you do. She's amazing. She's strong, and she's smart, and I know that she doesn't need me." He frowned. "That sounds wrong. What I'm trying to say is that I know that I need to earn my place at her side and that I'll work hard to always be the man she wants standing next to her."

Ria's hand came up to cover her heart. "That's lovely. Although, I don't think you'll need to work very hard. I used to worry about her and – not to put too fine a point on it – about the choices that she made with boyfriends. The only consolation I had was that she never wanted to get too deeply involved. I know that's different with you – and I know why. I also know that when it comes down to it, what I think doesn't matter. But for what it's worth, I believe that she has once again proved just how intelligent she is."

That made him smile.

Ria smiled back at him. "But you were telling me about your father. I probably shouldn't admit that the Napa

grapevine still reaches me even here. I heard that there's a new lady in his life. I hope he's happy?"

Slade grinned. "He is. Ingrid – the woman he's seeing – is good for him. You might know that he's a bit of a loner. I worried about him when he moved out to the cabin after he retired. I was scared that he might become a hermit, but I'm very happy that I was wrong. He met Ingrid and she lives in one of the mobile home parks. There's a real sociable vibe there. They have a clubhouse, and a pool, there's always something going on. He spends maybe half his time there with her, and from the way he tells it, he's having a lot of fun. I don't think he'd be able to live there full-time, but he has the cabin to retreat to. And even though Ingrid is that much more sociable, she enjoys the peace and quiet at the cabin, too."

"That sounds wonderful. I'm so happy for him. Please give him my best when you speak to him again."

"I will."

"Perhaps he and Ingrid would like to come over the next time Russ and I are back in Napa."

Slade chuckled; he couldn't help it. "I think that they'd like that, although you should be prepared – I told you that Ingrid's sociable? If you invite them over to your place, she'll no doubt want to reciprocate and ask you to go and play bingo with her or something."

She surprised the hell out of him when her eyes lit up. "Oh! That might be fun." She looked around, as if checking to make sure that no one would overhear what she said next. "I've never played bingo before!"

"Then we should set something up."

She nodded eagerly as she reached out to touch his arm again. He loved the way she kept doing that. He didn't know if she was trying to reassure him, or whether she was trying to physically demonstrate for herself that she was building a connection with him. Either way, he liked it. He couldn't say

that she wasn't the woman he'd thought her to be, but she was so much more than that as well.

"I'd very much like that. Thank you, Slade. There's been so much change in my life since I met Russ. I've realized how much I missed out on in the past – how many experiences it never even occurred to me to try. Now, I'm trying to make up for lost time."

"Well, I think we can safely say that knowing me will open you up to a whole range of new experiences – I've lived a very different life than the one you've been used to. I'll be happy to help you broaden your horizons."

She laughed and tapped her finger on his forearm. He'd worn long sleeves, thinking it best to cover as many of his tattoos as he could, but he must have rolled them up without even thinking about it. "One day, when we know each other better, and you're more comfortable, perhaps you'll tell me the story about these."

He laughed. "I'll be happy to, although it might take a while, each one has its own story. You had me worried for a moment there, I thought you were going to say that you wanted to get a tattoo of your own."

She laughed with him. "I don't think so. Opening my mind enough to be curious about yours is going a long way for me. In the past, I would have dismissed them because they were something I didn't understand. I won't say never, but I can't see it."

Willow appeared at his side and slid her arm around his waist. "What's so funny?"

Slade had to bite back a laugh when Ria winked at him. "I was just asking Slade where I can get a tattoo."

Willow's eyes grew wide as she looked up from her mom to him and back again. "Seriously?" she asked incredulously.

He and Ria both burst out laughing. "No, dear. I'm pulling your leg. But you should see your face."

Willow shook her head. “Now I’ve gone from worrying about the two of you getting along to worrying about the two of you ganging up on me.”

Slade tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Never. We might tease you.” He shot a glance at Ria. “I think if we gang up, we’ll be a formidable team. But we’ll be joining forces for you, not against you.”

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Willow set her fork down and leaned back in her chair. She was loving this. She’d thought that they’d all go out for lunch. Her mom wasn’t much of a cook, and one of Russ’s friends owned an awesome Italian restaurant, so she’d assumed that they would go there. She’d been wrong; it turned out that Russ was a great cook.

She loved seeing him out on the deck, manning the grill, with Slade and Bentley assisting – or at least, drinking beer and talking to him while he did his thing. His house wasn’t huge, the living area was all open plan. They must have added an extra leaf to the dining table because it took up more space than she remembered. They were all comfortably seated around it, and the meal had been amazing.

She raised her glass to Russ, who was sitting at the head of the table. “Here’s to the chef. That was wonderful, thank you.”

Everyone else raised their glasses to him, and he just gave them a bashful smile. “I wouldn’t exactly call myself a chef. But I’m glad that you all enjoyed it.” He checked his watch. “How are we fixed for time?”

“I told Ollie and Reaves that we’d be back at the airport around six,” said Bentley.

Her mom nodded as she looked at Tori. “The charter is expecting you back there at six, as well. Although it’ll be late for you by the time you land, with the time difference.”

Tori smiled and shrugged. “It won’t be that late. You have to remember that I live a night owl kind of life, Mom. I’ll call for a ride when I land.”

Willow wanted to laugh at the way Russ, Bentley, and Slade all scowled.

“Do you mean a rideshare?” Bentley asked.

Tori stuck her tongue out at him. “I mean an Uber, but I didn’t know if any of you would know what I’m talking about.”

Willow hadn’t noticed before just how intimidating Russ looked when he frowned. “Isn’t there some kind of car service? I mean, a private one. I don’t like the idea of you getting in a car with a stranger like that.”

“Yeah,” added Slade. “I know that you’re used to life in the city, Tori, but I think you need to start being a bit more careful.”

Tori gave him a puzzled look. “I’m fine. I’ve been riding around in Ubers since I moved there – for years.”

“Maybe so, but Callie hasn’t had a stalker for all those years, has she? She does now.”

Tori shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I keep telling you guys, Callie’s the one with the stalker. He’s not after me.”

Willow loved the way that Slade looked at her sister. Maybe it was Bentley’s place, maybe even Russ should have more of a say than Slade did, but Willow was glad that he was the one who was speaking up and acting like a big brother.

“I don’t want to scare you, but from what you’ve said, this guy – whoever he is – has been making himself known for a long time now. It sounds as though he’s escalated over the last few months. At some point, he’s going to start looking for other ways to get to her.” He held Tori’s gaze and raised his eyebrows. “If you make yourself an easy target, he might think that he can get to her through you.”

Tori shuddered. “You think he’d kidnap me or something?”



“I have no idea what he might do. All I’m saying is that you will be safer, and we’ll all be much happier, if you do everything that you can to make sure he can’t get to you.”

Tori blew out a sigh and looked at Willow. “Okay, you’re the smart one. If you were in my situation – tonight – what would you do?”

“I’d have the charter company arrange to have a car waiting for me when we landed.” She turned and winked at Slade. “I may be a bit of a princess like that, but having traveled around the world the way I did, I always put my own safety first.”

“You just ask them to set it up for you?” Tori asked.

Willow turned to look at her mom when she spoke. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll call them after we’re done here.”

Willow didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, but she knew her sister and she knew her mom. She knew that, left to their own devices, they would both fall into their familiar roles too easily.

“I think you should make the call, Tori.”

Tori rolled her eyes. She knew damn well what Willow was getting at.

Willow wasn’t surprised when all the guys backed her up. They all spoke at the same time.

“Willow’s right,” said Bentley.

“I think that’s a good idea,” said Russ.

“She’s right, Tori. You should do it yourself.” That was Slade.

Tori laughed as she looked around the table. She stopped when her gaze landed on Alyssa. “Do you have anything to add? You’re the only one who hasn’t weighed in yet.”

Alyssa smiled back at her. “Far be it from me to tell you what to do. All I will say is that I want you to be safe. I think if I were in your shoes, I’d be nervous to call the charter company and ask them to arrange a car for me, too. But I think

what I would do is tell myself that it's good to practice doing that kind of thing. I mean, no matter what these guys say, I'm sure you'll be fine in getting home tonight. So, it's good to get into the habit of being vigilant about your safety while it just feels like a hassle rather than a necessity."

"Hmm. I knew there was a reason I liked you," said Tori. She looked around the table at the rest of them. "If you'll excuse me, since we're done here, I have a phone call to make."

Willow wasn't surprised that she went outside to make the call. She loved her sister dearly, but they were very different people. She knew that Tori would feel self-conscious not only about calling to ask for a car, but perhaps even more so about doing it in front of them all.

She went out of the front door, and when it closed behind her, Bentley shook his head. "Do you think I need to hire someone to keep an eye on her?"

Their mom raised her eyebrows. "I didn't, I thought I was being paranoid. But..." She turned to look at Russ, and Willow was thrilled when she also looked at Slade, seeking his opinion too. "What do the two of you think? You're the ones who have experience with this kind of thing."

Russ and Slade exchanged a glance. Russ lifted his chin, indicating that Slade should go first.

"I don't know enough about the situation to say whether or not it's necessary. But I do know that we'd all feel a lot better if Tori had someone keeping an eye on her."

Russ nodded along as he spoke. "I agree."

Slade glanced at Willow, and she nodded. Then, he looked at Bentley and her mom.

"I think the world of Tori, she's a sweetheart. But she's not the most ... worldly."

Bentley laughed out loud at that. "I'm impressed. You hit the nail on the head in the nicest possible way. I couldn't think

how to say it without sounding like I was putting her down. I wondered what word you were going to use to describe her. We all know what she's like."

"He's not criticizing her." Willow felt like she needed to defend Slade *and* Tori. "She's awesome, but Slade knows as well as the rest of us that she more often has her head in the clouds than here in the real world."

Russ grinned at her. "No one thought he was criticizing, sweetheart. I think we all get it, don't we?" He looked around the table, his gaze finally landing on her mom. Willow's heart felt like it melted in her chest when she saw the look that they exchanged. It was full of love, full of understanding.

She turned to Slade, and all her breath caught in her chest when he looked at her in that same way.

"I vote that you should tell her that we all want her to have her own security until this blows over."

Willow looked up when she realized that Bentley was speaking to her. "Me?"

"Yes, you. She'll feel better about it if you're the one who suggests it. She respects your opinion."

"She respects all of you, too."

"I know. I didn't mean that she doesn't. It's just that she knows that you can relate. You've been out in the world all by yourself, and she knows you have a better handle on what it takes to keep yourself safe."

Willow nodded. He was right. If he or Russ or even Slade were to suggest it, she might think that they were just being over the top protective.

She turned to her mom, who nodded. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind." She smiled. "I just wish that the guy I have in mind was free to come and work as her bodyguard."

She was shocked to see a small smile playing on her mom's lips.

“Do you know who I’m talking about?”

One perfectly groomed eyebrow arched momentarily, but then her mom shook her head. “I may have an idea, but that’s irrelevant. You should do whatever you see fit.”

Willow didn’t miss the look that Slade and Bentley exchanged. “Jeez! You guys know, too?”

Slade chuckled beside her. “Hey, I’m a newcomer to the family table. If no one else is going to say it, I’m not going to.”

Bentley laughed. “I’m not, either. I’ll just echo Mom. You do as you see fit.”

He turned to Alyssa. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’ll explain it to you later.”

Russ had followed the conversation around the table with his eyes, and now he was frowning. He pushed his chair back and gave Slade a chin lift. “Want to fill me in?”

Willow smiled to herself as she watched Slade follow him out onto the deck over the water. She’d been expecting Russ to pull him aside at some point. Now, they would no doubt bond over their protective instincts toward her sister.

# Chapter Seventeen

When John came to relieve him at the end of his shift on Monday, Slade was in no hurry to get home. Willow was going to be late because she had some big meeting with the sales team. Instead of leaving the Jacobs estate straight away, he pointed his car up the driveway to the big house.

He had no reason to go up there, other than the fact that he wasn't looking forward to going home to an empty apartment. He was disappointed to see Elena's car heading down the driveway toward him. He'd hoped that she might hang out in the kitchen with him for a while. She waved as she passed him, and he waved back, wondering if he should turn his car around and leave.

The decision was made for him when he pulled around the back of the house into the parking area behind the kitchen. Jacob was standing beside his Range Rover, talking on the phone, but he beckoned Slade over when he saw him.

By the time he'd parked and got out, Jacob had ended his call.

"Hey. I wanted to catch up with you today, but it's been crazy. How did the weekend go?"

Slade grinned. "It was great – way better than I could have hoped."

"I knew you'd have nothing to worry about. Alexandria is a changed woman these days. And there's never been anything more important to her than her kids."

Slade laughed. "That's what worried me. I couldn't see how she'd approve of me – not if she only wants the best for her daughter."

Jacob made a face at him. "You are the best."

“Thanks. I know you appreciate me – but would you want me dating your daughter?” he asked with a laugh.

He was joking, but Jacob looked deadly serious when he answered. “Hell, yes. I would.” A big smile spread across his face, transforming his features – making him look more like a happy kid than a formidable CEO. “Apart from the fact that she’d be far too young for you, considering that she’s nothing more than a gleam in her father’s eye yet, I couldn’t ask for a better man for my daughter.”

That hit Slade square in the chest. “That means more than you know. And you know what? It’s exactly what Ria said.”

Jacob raised his eyebrows. “Ria?”

“Yes, Ria – that’s what she told me I should call her. It felt wrong at first – she’s the mighty Alexandria DuPont. But after spending the day with her like that, seeing who she is now. It feels right. It suits her – and it suits me to call her that. I’m not dealing with the mighty Alexandria – who I don’t mind admitting scared me shitless – instead, I’m dealing with Ria, this awesome lady who’s my girlfriend’s mom.”

Jacob nodded happily. “I like it. I think you know that I’ve always liked her. She’s been good to me. She was kind of a mentor after our folks ...”

Slade nodded. He didn’t want to make Jacob go there. He didn’t like to talk about his parents’ deaths even now.

“And Russ? How was he? I don’t know him all that well yet. I’ve only met him a couple of times. Did you like him?”

“Yeah. He’s my kind of guy.”

“Of course, he’s another former Marine, isn’t he?”

“He is.” The two of them had only spent a brief while together out on the deck after lunch yesterday, but it had been enough time for Slade to know that he was going to enjoy spending more time with Russ in the future. “He’s a good guy.”

“Good. And what about Tori? I feel like I don’t know her as well as the others – with her being a few years younger. Is she okay?”

“It’s funny; she is only a couple of years younger than Willow, but I don’t know her as well either. After yesterday, I can tell you that I really like her, but she’s nothing like the rest of the family. She’s ...” He didn’t know how to describe her, but he needn’t have worried.

Jacob laughed. “She’s definitely not like the rest of her family. They’re all driven and practical. She’s more ... creative. She’s ...” He gave Slade an inquiring look. “You know about Xander, don’t you?”

Slade was relieved to admit that he did. “I do. I’ve never understood it. She couldn’t be more different from him if she tried, but he’s always had a thing for her.”

Jacob chuckled. “Perhaps they’ll both move back home someday and figure out a way to be together. Have you spoken to him lately? The last time we talked, he told me that he’s leaving the Navy when his contract’s up – as in, soon.”

Slade grinned. “As a matter of fact. I talked to him last night.”

“Oh, how is he?”

“He’s great. He won’t be moving back here any time soon, though. If he can figure out the details, he’ll be working in Nashville.”

Jacob grinned. “For the singer – the one Tori works with? Hannah said that she’s been having trouble with a stalker.”

“Kind of. Callie’s getting set up with a personal protection company – a group Xander knows. And he’s volunteered his services to watch Tori.”

Jacob laughed out loud. “Volunteered? That’s great. I’ll have to give him a call tonight. Anyway, I’m sorry to keep you out here talking – did you need something from the house? Did Elena leave you dinner?”

He shrugged. “No. I just came up to see what was going on. See if I could be useful or if anyone wanted to hang out for a while.”

Jacob cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Willow’s working late.”

“Ah, I see. I should have thought to ask before. Now that the two of you are together, do you want to make any changes to your schedule?”

“No.”

Jacob’s smile faded. “Are you planning on leaving us?”

“No! Why?”

“I don’t know. I just wondered if ...”

Slade knew what he was getting at. “We created a whole set of issues for ourselves when we got hung up on the differences between us. I know I’ve referred to myself as *just the help* before, but it’s not like that. We’re not a wine country heiress and a guy who works on the gate at one of the estates. We’re just two people who love each other. I’m not going to feel weird about working for the Jacobs family even when I’m married into the DuPont family.”

Jacob was grinning at him when he stopped.

“What? I know I’ve worked for you for a long time – and my dad did before me, but there’s no need to look so happy that I don’t plan on leaving – you could replace me in a heartbeat and we both know it.”

“It’s not that! You don’t even realize what you just said, do you? You said that you love her – and talked about being married to her like it’s a foregone conclusion.”

“Ah.” Slade lifted a shoulder and grinned. “It’s no secret that I love her. Now that I’ve opened the floodgates – since I told her – it seems that I’m going around telling anyone who’ll listen. I told Ria and Russ yesterday. I told Bentley when we got back. I even told Xander on the phone last night.”



“And you want to marry her?”

“If she’ll have me. And all I mean by that is if she wants to get married. We haven’t talked about it.” His smile faded, and a heavy weight settled in his chest. “I don’t know if she even believes in marriage. But if it’s up to me, then yeah, I do. I already asked her to move in with me; she’s been staying at my apartment for a while now.”

Jacob smiled. “I like that. I like that she moved in with you and not the other way around. She’s too much of a free spirit to live on the estate – and I can’t see you being comfortable living there.”

“No. I’ve gotten used to being there – spending time there with her – but I couldn’t relax enough to feel at home. And besides, it feels like it’s Bentley’s place – Bentley and Alyssa. Is it weird that I can’t even think of it as Ria’s home anymore? She’s just so obviously and completely at home at Russ’s house. And Summer Lake is a great place.”

“I don’t think it’s weird; it’s just how things go. Times change. People change. Life moves on.”

Slade had to wonder if he was thinking about his parents again.

“Anyway. Do you want to come in? Eat with me? Have a drink? Becca’s staying late at school tonight so I’m home alone.”

“In that case. Yeah, I’ll eat with you.”

Jacob laughed as Slade followed him up the steps to the kitchen door. “It doesn’t seem that long ago that both you and I were out chasing women and working hard to never get pinned down. Now, we’re staying home, keeping each other company to fill the time while our ladies are at work.”

“It’s like you said, I guess – times change. People change. Life moves on. And I have to tell you that I’m happy with all my changes, and I’m looking forward to where my life is going.”

“Me too, old friend. Me too.”

~ ~ ~

By Wednesday night, Willow was ready for the week to be over. She'd had to stay late in meetings with the sales team every night. Well, it wasn't all that late tonight, but it was already dark when she parked in her usual spot outside Slade's apartment. She cut the engine and let out a big sigh. She was glad to be here, but she wished she'd gotten here sooner.

She climbed out of the car, and just as she reached back in for her briefcase, she heard voices behind her.

“Nice Beemer, lady!”

She straightened up quickly. The apartment complex wasn't exactly upscale, but it was a decent neighborhood. She'd never felt uncomfortable, or nervous about her safety – until now.

She saw three young guys leering at her.

“The Beemer's nice but that ass was nicer. Want to bend back over so we get another look?”

She scowled at them. She wanted to tell them where they could stick their dirty grins, but she wasn't a fool. There were three of them and one of her. Instead of engaging with them, she got back in the car and clicked the locks. She'd much rather go and kick them in the nuts and tell them what she thought of them, but her survival instincts were even stronger than her tendency to speak her mind.

She scowled through the windshield at them when they came closer. She'd been hoping that she could just sit here until they left. But if she needed to, she could drive away.

She jumped in her seat when one of them kicked the front fender. Shit! She'd assumed that they were mostly harmless.

“Come on back out here.” The one who'd kicked her car grabbed his crotch and grinned at her. “I've got something for you.”

She jumped again when another of them tapped on her window. When she turned her head, she was eye to eye with him. She shuddered when he licked his tongue all the way up the window before looking in at her again. “Let me in. Let me eat you.”

Jeez! She didn’t know if they were high or what, but she wasn’t going to stick around to find out. She turned the key in the ignition. She could drive away and call Slade, ask him if he’d come out to meet her when she got back. She didn’t need to tell him why.

As she started to pull forward, the other two guys stood in front of the hood and the third one started banging on her window. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She was tempted to call their bluff. She revved the engine, hoping that would make them move but even as she pulled farther forward, the two guys in front of her put their hands on the hood – she’d have to literally run over them. She revved the engine again, but they wouldn’t budge. This was crazy! She blasted her horn in frustration.

It didn’t do anything to make them move, but she saw the door to Slade’s building fly open and he came striding out, whacking a baseball bat into his hand as he came. Shit! She hadn’t called him for help because she didn’t want him going up against three guys all by himself. She let her window down a little, figuring that she’d need to shout to him – tell him that she was okay.

All three of them turned when he yelled, “Get the fuck away from my woman!”

Two of them started backing away immediately, their hands held up defensively in front of them.

Slade met her gaze through the windshield, and she nodded. She needed him to know that she was fine. He nodded back before returning his attention to the third guy – the one who’d been kicking her car.

“If you’re still here by the time I count to three ...”

“Yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

“Dude! He’s Slade Hawkins. Come on. Let’s go.”

The guy shot a look at her and then turned back to Slade. “That’s a fine piece of ass. You want to be more careful with it.”

Slade swung the bat back, and Willow didn’t know if he intended to use it. She was grateful that the guy didn’t stick around to find out. He backed away, following his friends. Slade followed them to the edge of the parking lot, bat still held high.

When she couldn’t see him anymore, she scrambled out of the car, afraid that they might turn on him.

“You’d best keep your rich bitch on a tight leash. If she’s looking for some rough, I can give her rougher than you.”

Willow’s heart thudded to a halt when Slade swung the bat, but the three of them were already running.

He stood there watching them go with a thunderous look on his face and waves of anger rolling off him.

When she reached him, he wrapped his arm around her and held her tight against him as he walked her back to her car. When they reached it, he stood close while she grabbed her purse and briefcase. She locked up and he hurried her into the building, all without a word.

He didn’t say a thing until they were inside the apartment, and he’d locked the door behind them.

Then he wrapped both arms around her and crushed her to his chest. She could feel his heart pounding.

“I am so damn sorry, Willow. We’re moving.”

She leaned back so that she could look up into his eyes. “We’re what?”

“Moving. No way can I ask you to keep living here after that.”

She laughed – she couldn't help it. "You're not serious?"

His expression made his answer clear before he spoke. His brow was deeply furrowed, eyebrows pinched together, and his lips were pressed into a thin, straight line. Anger sparked in his beautiful hazel eyes as he said, "I'm deadly serious, little Willow. That cannot happen ever again. I will not have you in any kind of danger because of me. And if something like that ever does happen again ..." he blew out a shaky sigh "... I'll probably end up serving life in prison for killing them."

He reached up and ran his hand over her hair, his gaze never leaving hers as he said, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I can't let anything happen to you. And I can't get myself locked up trying to keep you safe. I like to think that I'm a reasonable man, but there was nothing reasonable about the way I felt out there. We need to do what we can to make sure that you're never in that kind of situation again. Okay?"

"Okay." His heart was still hammering against her chest. His arms were wrapped tightly around her. There was no mistaking that he was absolutely serious.

He raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

She nodded. "Honestly; your reaction could seem a little over the top, but I get it. It's part of who you are."

He relaxed a little against her. "Yep. Thank you. I told you that I've never felt this way about someone before. You're mine, Willow. Mine to protect, mine to love, just ... mine."

She reached up to touch the scruff on his cheek. "I am. And you're mine, too. I'll let you protect me in the ways that you need to – the ways that come naturally to you." She sucked in a deep breath; this might be the wrong time to go there, but ... "Can you do the same for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let me look after you in the ways that come naturally to me."

He frowned.

“If we’re going to move out of your apartment – and personally, I’m not sure it’s necessary ...” The look on his face stopped her. “Slow down! I’m not saying that I won’t move. I get that you believe that it’s necessary. I’m just pointing out that I don’t necessarily agree. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“But if we’re going to move, will you let me take care of us?”

The lines around his eyes deepened. He understood what she meant; she could see that he did. He didn’t like it; she hadn’t expected him to. But if they were going to be together for the long term – for the rest of their lives like he’d just said – then they were each going to need to make some compromises.

“Where do you want to move to?” he asked.

She rolled up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to her lips. “I don’t even know yet. I just don’t want to be restricted in where we look. I want us to find a place that we both like and are both comfortable with. I’m not trying to railroad you into anything. I want us both to have an equal say in everything.”

“Everything except the budget, right?”

She held his gaze as she nodded. “Right. I know you don’t like it, but please think about it. If you can’t live with it, then we’ll find some kind of compromise, but before you answer, think about this – how would you feel if I said that I didn’t want you protecting me? That if you want to be with me, you can only use one arm to fight on my behalf.”

He let out a short laugh. “I can’t ... I can’t even imagine. And I know you wouldn’t ask me to do that.”

She nodded slowly. “Exactly. Because I wouldn’t ask you not to be yourself.” She gave him a rueful smile. “And as much as you are the strong, protective guy, who can take care of himself and of the people he cares about, I’m the rich chick,

who can also take care of herself and of the people I care about, albeit in a different way. I've made my own money over the years, Slade. I don't live off the family. I'm wealthy in my own right."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, and she laughed.

"Don't look so surprised. That's why I had to go out in the world. I had to prove that I could do it for myself."

"I should have known."

She winked at him. "Yes, you should, but you can make it up to me later. For now, just try to understand that asking me not to take care of us financially is the same as asking you to fight for us with one arm tied behind you." She pursed her lips. "I know you love me; I just hope you really understand me."

He nodded as he lowered his lips to hers. "I do."

# Chapter Eighteen

Slade tried to make himself relax while he warmed the meal that Elena had sent home with him for Willow. She'd gone to take a shower, saying that she needed to wash off the feel of that encounter in the parking lot.

She wasn't as shaken up as he thought she should be. If he was honest, he was probably more affected than she was. She was tough and she knew how to take care of herself. He knew that, but he hated that she'd needed to. He'd gone to look out the window for her coming home and had wondered what was going on when he saw her get back into her car.

His blood had run cold when he'd seen those three stupid fuckers surrounding her car like that. He'd grabbed his baseball bat and run out of the apartment with only one thought in his head – to protect her.

When he'd burst out the front door of the building, he'd been ready to beat the crap out of all three of them. But the look in her eyes when she'd met his gaze through the windshield had changed everything. Yes, she'd been afraid, but she was afraid of what he might do. And it had hit him – he had to control himself. If he'd done what he wanted to, he'd probably be on his way to the police station right now. He'd be facing a night in jail – and more importantly, Willow would be facing a night here alone. She'd be worried sick about what kind of trouble he'd gotten himself into – about what would happen to him; what the future would hold.

Angry as he was, the one thing that he wasn't prepared to risk was their future. They had their whole lives ahead of them – together. He wasn't going to do anything to put that precious gift in jeopardy.

When the microwave beeped, he came back to the moment, realizing that he was standing there, gripping the edge of the counter tight. He'd put her in harm's way by asking her to live



here with him. They needed to find a place where random idiots couldn't get anywhere near her. He closed his eyes. He didn't want to live on the estate – and he knew that she didn't – but if it meant that she'd never have to face anything like tonight again, then it'd be a small price to pay.

He took the dish out of the microwave and set it on the counter before turning and heading for the bathroom.

She pulled the curtain back and peeked around it at him. Even that bolstered his determination to find a way to be comfortable wherever she wanted to live. When he stayed at her place with her, they'd had some good times in her shower – her walk in shower with its six spray heads, two benches – and plenty of room to get creative. Here, at his place, she had to climb into the tub and draw the plain, white, cheap plastic curtain.

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you here to join me?”

“There's no room in there.”

She held his gaze. She knew what he was thinking – he could see it in her eyes. “Get over yourself and get in here, Hawkins. This place is awesome. It's all that we need. If we move, it'll only be to stop you from worrying, okay? I don't need anything more than this. All I need is you.” She pulled the curtain back and held her hand out to him. “Come on. Don't let those bastards ruin our evening. And don't let them bring you down.”

He pulled his shirt off over his head and quickly got rid of his pants. When he climbed in with her, she slid her arms up around his neck and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you, Slade. I always have and I always will. It doesn't matter where we live. All that matters is that we're together.”

He lowered his head and claimed her mouth in a deep, hard kiss. Her wet, slippery body sliding against his almost made him forget – almost, but not completely. He turned her to face the wall and covered her body with his, running his hands up over her ribcage until he cupped her breasts.

He lowered his lips to her ear and loved the way she shivered when he spoke. “All that matters is that we’re together – and we are. From here, we build. We build our life, we build our home, and ...”

She turned to look back over her shoulder at him. “And ...?”

What the hell. He had to say it. “And if you want one, we build our family. So, yeah, all that really matters is that we’re together. But we have that. We know it, and we trust it, right?”

“We do.”

“So then, the rest does matter. Where we live matters. The kind of place we live in matters. I want you to be happy. I can’t provide the kind of home and material shit that you can.” He sucked in a deep breath. He couldn’t say that he liked it, but she’d done a good job of making him understand earlier. “But I get it. I won’t ask you not to be yourself – just like you won’t ask me not to be myself. I’ll go along with what you want on the material side.”

She pressed a kiss to his lips. “Thank you.”

He ran his hands down her back and squeezed her ass. She let out a needy little moan and pressed back against him. He was rock hard and eager to lose himself inside her, but she looked back over her shoulder at him again.

“You said a family. Do you want a family?” She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “You want us to have kids?”

“I do. Not straightaway, and never if you don’t want them, but ...” He leaned in and nipped the back of her neck. “I want us to have kids. I want to be a dad, and I want to see you be a mom.” A low growl rumbled up from his chest, and he gripped her ass cheeks tighter, holding her open so that he could slide between them. “I’m going to sound like an animal right now, but I want to fuck you – not just for everything it usually means, but because I want us to make a new life together – a whole new person – our child.”

She shivered again and pressed her ass back against him. “Damn, Slade. I think my ovaries just exploded. I want it, I want it so badly.”

He wasn't sure if she meant she wanted a child so badly, or she wanted what he was about to give her. It didn't matter – she was going to get both. He curled one arm around her waist, bending her as he thrust his hips and filled her. They'd had a lot of sex since they'd gotten together, but every time still felt like the first. Her body welcomed him inside, and the connection was undeniable.

They always gave each other pleasure, but tonight there was an added edge. He hadn't been sure that she'd ever want kids, but it seemed that just the thought of it turned her on in a big way. She pushed back against him as he drove deep, meeting every thrust. He wasn't going to last long. He was turned the hell on himself. The sight of the water running down over her skin always got him that way, and the added thought of filling her with his seed – of planting his child inside her heightened his desire. He was overtaken by a deep seated male need that he hadn't been aware he possessed.

He braced one hand on the wall above her head, keeping the other around her waist – both to keep her steady and to hold her in place to receive him as he drove deep and hard. His heart swelled in his chest when she started to gasp out her pleasure. She was close, and so was he.

He dropped his hand between her legs. He planned to tease her clit to take her over the edge, but when he touched the place where they joined and felt himself disappearing inside her, they both moaned.

“Oh God. Slade!”

She pushed back hard, and her inner muscles pulsed around him. “Yes!”

He closed his eyes and let go, her release triggering his. Electric currents shot up his spine as he held deep, giving her everything her body demanded of him. As he soared away,

coming hard, he gripped her tight, holding her to him. She was everything.

When they'd both recovered, he hauled her around so that she was facing him. She buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist as the, now cooling, water continued to spray them both.

"I love you," she murmured.

"I love you more, little Willow."

She looked up at him and smiled. "We're going to have it all, you and me."

He nodded. "We already do."

"Aww. You're right. We do. I don't need anything more, but if I get to be greedy, I want two boys and two girls."

He had to laugh. "You want four kids?"

She nodded happily. "You've said before that being an only child wasn't that great. I know from friends that two siblings almost always fight. I know for myself that when there are three of you, someone often gets left out – and it sucks when it's you. So, yeah. I want four kids. Think you can handle that?"

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to her lips. "I can. I love the idea. But you know, we might need to start soon; I'm not getting any younger."

She reached behind her and turned the water off. "I'm ready whenever you are."

His heart pounded in his chest. "You are?"

"Yep."

"Wow!" He swallowed. "Okay, then."

She laughed. "I'm not rushing you or anything but ..."

He shook his head. "No. I ... I ..." He grinned at her. "We're on our way, aren't we?"

"We are."

He climbed out of the tub and wrapped a towel around her before grabbing one for himself. He tied it around his waist. He should let her get dried and dressed. He should feed her, let her relax, but he needed to know, and he couldn't wait.

“How do you feel about marriage?”

She cocked her head to the side. “In general – as an institution?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “No. Not in general. In our case in particular.”

She chuckled. “Oh. Right. Sometimes I can be too literal, huh?” Her smile faded. “I want to be married before we start making babies, if that's what you mean.”

A rush of warmth filled his chest.

She ran a towel over her hair, as she gave him a puzzled look. “Wait, are you saying that you don't believe in marriage?”

“Hell no! I was worried that you didn't.”

She laughed. “I do. I think it's important. I don't know why. I guess I just grew up believing that, even though my folks are divorced now ...” She shrugged. “But if that – you asking how I feel about marriage – was supposed to be a proposal, then you're going to have to up your game.”

He laughed. “No. That was only an attempt to find out where you stand.” He went and closed his arms around her, swaying her from side to side as he looked down into her eyes. “I wouldn't have had you down as the kind of girl who needed some big proposal.”

“I don't.” She hugged him tight. “It doesn't need to be big, but it does need to be heartfelt.”

He dropped a kiss on her lips. “It will be. My heart feels every little thing since you taught me what love is.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but her stomach let out a loud rumble, and they both laughed.

“I’d say that officially killed the moment. Sorry.”

“No need. I’ll go fix your dinner while you get dressed.”

~ ~ ~

Much later that night, Willow lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. She couldn’t wipe the smile off her face. There had been a time when she used to think that she wouldn’t want kids. She’d never really known any. Seeing her old friend, Hannah, suddenly become a mom to eight-year-old Ava, had made her start to see things differently.

Having children wasn’t just about getting to cuddle a cute infant – or about getting to change dirty diapers and lose a couple of years’ worth of sleep. Getting to know Ava and seeing her relationship with Hannah and Grady had given Willow a very different perspective. Being a parent was about making a whole new person, and then helping guide them to become the best person that they could be, and to find their way in the world.

She wasn’t even sure that she’d want to think about having kids if she were with someone else, but she just knew that Slade would be an amazing dad, and that together ... she felt the goosebumps ripple over her arms. Together they really could build not just a life, but a family.

“What’s wrong?”

She turned to see Slade propping himself up on his elbow, giving her a puzzled look.

“Nothing. I was just thinking, why?”

“I don’t know, I guess you were thinking really loud.”

She laughed. “Sorry, I’ll try to keep it down, shall I?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “There’s no need. I’d rather you tell me what you were thinking about.”

She curled her arm around his waist and drew him closer. “Nothing to worry about. If you really want to know, I was

thinking about us starting a family.” She smiled at the way his eyes shone. “And thinking what an amazing dad you’re going to be.”

“I want to be. I had a great example. My dad’s awesome.”

“I know. Are you going to take me to see him soon?”

“Sure, I’ll give him a call tomorrow. Do you want to go this weekend?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

“I might check with him first – if he’s going to be at Ingrid’s ...”

Willow laughed. “That’d be fun, too. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve never played bingo.”

Slade chuckled. “Maybe we should wait until your mom comes for that – I’m not sure I can survive two bingo nights.”

She slapped his arm. “Have you ever gone with them? You might enjoy it, you never know.”

“I have. And I said never again, but I’ll do it for you and your mom. I’ll warn you though; it’s crazy. And some of those old ladies!”

She laughed. “What? Were the cougars trying to pounce on you? I can’t say I blame them if they were.”

He smiled through pursed lips. “I don’t need you to blame them, but I do need you to protect me from them. They’re wild! One of them even slapped my ass when we were leaving.”

“Aww, and poor little Slade couldn’t defend himself?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Tell me how I’m supposed to, and I will next time. They’re Ingrid’s friends. I can’t exactly tell them to keep their hands to themselves. I don’t want to upset anyone, but damn.”

He shuddered, making her laugh. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you from them.”

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her lips. “We’ll look out for each other from now on, right?”

She nodded happily. “We will.”

“I was serious about moving.”

“I know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “When you said that I have to let you be you, did you have somewhere in particular in mind?”

“No. I don’t want to live on the estate any more than you do. Even apart from how it feels – and I have to tell you it’s always felt more like an institution than a home to me, and I imagine that it’d feel worse to you – but even apart from that, it’s Bentley’s place now. Now that Mom’s moved out, and Alyssa’s moved in. I want him to have that, you know?”

Slade nodded, but she wasn’t sure that he understood – wasn’t sure that he could, but she wanted to try to explain.

“Bentley’s always been the good child.”

“Your mom said that he’s the conscientious one.”

“Yeah. That’s what she calls him. And I don’t know if she told you, but she calls me the wayward one.”

Slade leaned in and kissed the tip of her nose. “I have to agree.” His smile evaporated and was quickly replaced with a deep frown.

“What? What’s wrong?”

He ran his hand over her hair. “Don’t take this the wrong way – I am very grateful that you were so *wayward* when you were younger. We more than likely wouldn’t be together now if you hadn’t been that way.” He gave her a stern look. “But, I’ll tell you now that I do not want our daughters taking after you in that respect.”

She laughed. “Hmm. You may have a point.”

He nodded vigorously. “I do, and you know it. As well as it worked out for us in the long run, I hate that you were out in a



place like Danny's bar, looking to get laid at the age of eighteen."

"Not just looking to get laid, I was looking to surrender my V card, remember?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I will never forget. And while I couldn't be happier that I was your first, I couldn't be more horrified to think that our daughters might ..."

She laughed at the expression on his face. "Okay! I know! I was a bit wild. But like you said, it worked out well for us."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, are you going to let me finish?"

He looked lost, and she laughed.

"You wanted to know what I was thinking about where we can live."

"Oh, yeah, right. Sorry. And you were telling me that you don't want to live on the estate – which I admit, I'm relieved to hear."

"I know you are. I wouldn't put you through that even if I wanted to live there myself, but my point was that I don't. I lived my wild youth all over the world. Bentley stayed home, did the right thing, lived in Mom's shadow all those years. It's his turn now. He's the CEO of the company. He's got Alyssa. And I want him to have the estate. I want him to feel like he's finally the king of his whole domain. He doesn't need his sister living there with him."

"Yeah. I can see that. I thought you might just be saying you didn't want to live there for my sake. But I know you don't want to for your own sake. And now that you've explained it like that about Bentley, I get it. He deserves that."

"He does."

"So, what are you thinking?"

She blew out a sigh. "Honestly? I don't know. I don't want some huge, big place, and I don't think you'd like that anyway,

would you?”

“Nope. I’m not the most domesticated.” He winked at her. “And you aren’t either. So, I wouldn’t mind paying someone to come in and clean every now and then. But I wouldn’t be comfortable in the kind of place where you need a housekeeper and a cook.”

“Oh, hell no! I don’t want anyone in our space but us.” She made a face at him. “And a cleaner once a week. I want to feel offended, but I can’t. I’m never going to be a domestic goddess.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t want you to be. That’s not you, and I love you just the way you are.”

“Aww. I love you, too.” She blew out a sigh. “I think we should start out just looking for a place to rent. If you don’t want to live in an apartment ...?” She raised an eyebrow at him. She didn’t know if tonight’s encounter had turned him against any kind of apartment living, or just against this complex.

He shook his head. “I don’t. It’s not right. There’s too much access for unknowns and undesirables. I want to be some place where we’re on our own property – and I can defend it if I need too.”

“So, a house?”

He nodded.

“But I don’t want to live in a neighborhood.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I just don’t. I think we’d be better moving out of town a little way and getting a place with a bit of land around us.”

He sighed. “And that’s going to take us into silly money territory.”

“Yep. Are you going to be okay with that?”

He shrugged. “Let’s see what’s available. I’m not thrilled about it, but I want to get us out of here. And until we can

move, you call me when you're on your way home. I'll come out and meet you. And I'll walk you out to your car in the morning when you leave, too."

"I can live with that when you're here. But you have to go to work, too."

He scowled. "We'll figure something out. I'm serious, Willow. Even if we go and stay on the estate until we find a place – or you go up to the house after work and wait for me to come get you. Whatever it takes, I'm not having you alone in that parking lot again."

"Okay." She wasn't thrilled. It was probably overkill. But she didn't know that for certain. She didn't know that those guys from earlier wouldn't hang around looking for revenge. She highly doubted it, but since she couldn't guarantee it, she wasn't going to argue with him.

"Okay?"

She laughed. "Yes. I'm not saying that I like it, but I do understand. I might have been wild when I was a kid, but I've grown up. I can't promise you that nothing will happen to me out there. So, I'm not prepared to take the risk that it might. I would if it were just about me, but I know how you would feel if I ignored you and something happened to me. I won't do that to you."

"Thank you."

She drew him closer and nuzzled her face into his neck. "You're welcome."

His arm tightened around her, and his erection pressed into her stomach. "I could show you just how grateful I am if you like."

She laughed as he rolled her onto her back and smiled down at her.

"I would like – I'd like that a lot."

# Chapter Nineteen

Slade smiled to himself as he sat in the carpool line at the school on Friday afternoon. Hannah had called him a little while ago in a panic. Grady was supposed to be picking Ava up when he got off work at Molly's restaurant, but he'd cut his hand in the kitchen, and Molly had insisted on taking him straight to the hospital. Hannah was delayed on her way back from San Francisco so she wouldn't be able to make it to school in time, and she'd called Slade to see if he would mind helping out again.

Not only did he not mind, he was thrilled. He knew that he'd have to be careful about how he explained to Ava where Grady was. Grady had been the one constant in the kid's life, and Slade didn't want to scare her. He planned to give Grady a call so that Ava could speak to him when they got home to the cottage.

He shifted impatiently in his seat. He would never have guessed that the carpool line would be so long. When he was in grade school – and he'd come to this same school – most kids rode the bus. He smiled to himself; Jacob, Xander, and Hannah's mom used to come to pick them up. His smile faded as he realized that Willow's mom never used to come to pick her and Bentley and Tori up. He remembered that their dad came sometimes, but now that he thought about it, the housekeeper used to come for them most of the time.

He leaned his head to the side, trying to see if could spot Ava, but the line was still too long. He'd just have to be patient. He figured that when he got her home to the cottage, they could take Scooter out for a walk. He should probably call Molly, rather than Grady. Molly would be able to talk, even if Grady was having his cut treated. After that ... Slade thought about it. He might not be a great cook, but he'd fended

for himself all his life. If Ava got hungry before anyone came home, he could always make her a grilled cheese sandwich.

The sound of his cell phone ringing interrupted his musings. He smiled when he saw Willow's name on the display.

"Hey, little Willow. Everything okay?"

"Everything's great. We finally got wrapped up with all the meetings. So, I decided that, since it's Friday, I'm done for the day. I know you've got a few hours until your shift is over. And I know you don't want me going back to the apartment by myself. So, I was thinking that I might give Molly a call and go and hang out at the restaurant with her until you're done. If you want, you could meet me there for dinner."

He chuckled. "That's not going to work."

"What do you mean?"

"For starters, Molly's not at the restaurant. Grady cut his hand, so she's gone with him to the hospital. And even if she were there, I don't know what time I'd be able to come and meet you. I'm not at work anymore, either."

"You're not? Where are you?"

"I'm in the carpool line waiting to pick up Ava."

"Aww, man! That's not fair. If I'd known, I would have gone to get her."

Slade couldn't help laughing. "You wouldn't have been able to. You're not on the list of people who are approved to pick her up. I am."

She laughed with him. "Rub it in, why don't you? I'm going to have to talk to Hannah about that. I mean, Ava should never have to worry that there will be someone there to meet her."

"You're right. She shouldn't. But if ever she needs someone, I can go. You know that Jacob would go himself if

he could. But it's more difficult for you guys with important jobs. Jacob's happy to send me."

"I guess. But I don't mind telling you that I'm jealous."

"There's no need. How about you meet us at the cottage?"  
He edged the car forward when the line started to move slowly.

"I will. I should have asked – I take it Grady's okay – he hasn't cut himself badly?"

"No. He called Hannah himself, and she didn't sound too worried about him when she called me."

"Okay. Well, that's good. I'll leave work now, and I'll meet you at their cottage. Is John on the gate?"

"No. He's not scheduled to be in for another couple of hours yet. You know the code for the gate, don't you?"

"I do."

"I'll see you there then. I'm going to have to go, I can see Ava." A rush of warmth filled his chest when she spotted him and started to wave madly.

"Okay. See you there. Love you."

"Love you, too, little Willow."

Slade grinned as he ended the call. He'd been thrilled that he was going to get a couple of hours with Ava. It was even better that Willow was able to join them. Ava adored Willow. She was a cautious kid, not that Slade blamed her given the way that life had treated her so far, and it was easy to tell that she admired Willow – even if she was a little awed by her.

~ ~ ~

Willow was the first to arrive at the cottage. She felt bad, listening to Scooter barking like crazy inside, but she didn't have a key. She couldn't open the door and let him out.

Instead, she leaned against her car and took her phone out to call Hannah.

“Hi, Willow.”

“Hey. Are you okay?”

Hannah blew out a sigh. “I’m fine. I just wish that I was home already. Grady hurt his hand at work...”

“I know. I’m at your place now. Slade told me what’s going on.”

“Shoot! I’m sorry. Have I messed up your Friday afternoon by asking him to go and collect Ava for me?”

Willow had to laugh. “No! Far from it. I finished work early and I thought that he’d still have a couple more hours to do. I know this isn’t ideal for you, and I hope that Grady’s okay, but selfishly, it’s worked out great for me. Now, instead of hanging out at Molly’s waiting for him to get off work, I get to hang out here at your place with him and Ava and Scooter.”

Hannah laughed. “Because I’m sure that’s your idea of a good time – sharing your man with an eight-year-old and a puppy.”

Willow stood a little straighter. “I can see why you wouldn’t believe it, but it’s true. You know that I adore Ava. And Slade does, too. And he’s so good with her. In fact, I’m looking forward to this so much that I want to tell you not to rush home. You should stop by the hospital and check on Grady.”

“No. I couldn’t. I’ll come straight back to the cottage so that you guys can go and get on with your evening.”

“I wasn’t joking, Hannah. I’m seriously looking forward to this. I mean, I get that you’ll want to come back and get her. Grady probably won’t be at the hospital for long anyway. But I wasn’t joking about looking forward to spending time with her.”

“You mean with her and Slade?”

“Yeah.”

“Mind if I ask you something?”

“Ask away.”

“Are you getting broody? And if you are, do you think that’s wise? Slade’s a great guy, but by the sounds of it, you’re looking forward to playing families with him. Don’t get me wrong, I like him a lot. I always have. But even if you’ve worked a miracle and turned him into the settling down kind – and for what it’s worth, I think you have – do you really think that he’d want kids?”

Willow laughed out loud. “Oh, girlfriend. We need a catch up. I know it hasn’t been that long, but I have a lot to tell you about. Not only does Slade want kids, he wants them soon.”

“He does? Wow! Sorry. I didn’t mean anything bad about him. It’s just that he’s always been... Well, he’s always been, Slade, you know?”

Willow laughed. “Don’t worry. I know exactly what you mean. But by the same token, I’ve always been me, too. Did you ever expect me to tell you that I’m getting broody?”

Hannah laughed with her. “No. Now that you mention it, I should be just as surprised at you as I am at him.”

“Exactly. We just work together. I don’t know how else to put it. By himself, and with women he’s been with in the past, he wasn’t interested in settling down. And the same went for me. With other guys, it never occurred to me to want to get married and raise a family. With him, I can’t wait.”

“Aww. Well, as surprised as I am, I couldn’t be happier for you. You’re right – you guys do just work together.”

Willow looked up when she heard a car approaching. “Here he comes. Do you want me to give the phone to Ava?”

“Please. That’d be great. I know that she’ll worry about Grady, but he’s fine. At least, I’m fairly sure that he is. According to him, Molly was overreacting making him go to



the hospital. According to Molly, it really needed to be looked at. Either way, I'd like to reassure Ava myself."

"Hang on a minute, then."

Willow watched as Ava and Slade got out of his car. She smiled when Ava ran around the hood to him and took hold of his hand.

"You know where the key is, don't you, Uncle Slade?" She stopped abruptly when she spotted Willow standing there. "Hi, Auntie Willow."

"Hi, Ava. I was just talking to Hannah. She'd like to have a word with you."

Ava took the phone from her. "Hello, Mommy. Is Daddy okay?"

Willow's heart melted in her chest. Ava had called him Uncle Grady all her life, until a few months ago. She hadn't even known Hannah until a few months ago. And yet, she'd decided all by herself that she wanted to call them Mommy and Daddy. Her mom, Grady's sister, had died when she was five, and she'd never known her biological father. Willow had no idea how that would feel. All she knew was that she was happy that Ava was adapting so well.

Slade came to her and pressed a kiss to her lips while Ava talked with Hannah.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I gave Hannah a quick call while I was waiting for you guys to arrive. Poor old Scooter's going nuts in there, but we probably shouldn't let him out until they're done on the phone."

Ava came to them and held Willow's phone up. "She wants to say goodbye to you."

Willow watched with a smile as Ava took hold of Slade's hand and led him toward the kitchen door. "We need to let Scooter out. He'll need to pee."

“I’ll let you go,” said Hannah. “I’ll call Molly now, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Like I said, there’s no hurry as far as we’re concerned. We’re quite happy hanging out here with her.”

“Thanks. And if you need anything, anything at all, just give me a call, okay?”

“If we do, we will. But I doubt it. You just relax and drive safe.”

“I will. See you later.”

~ ~ ~

“I can take photographs of your grapes for you if you like, Auntie Willow. Mommy took photographs of all the vineyards here for Uncle Jacob.”

Slade smiled to himself as he watched Ava and Willow. They were sitting on the sofa, looking at Willow’s laptop. Willow had been showing the kid something – he wasn’t sure what, he’d been too busy in the kitchen making grilled cheese sandwiches.

They didn’t even notice him approach, so he leaned in the doorway from the kitchen. Watching the two of them like that, their heads together bent over the laptop as Ava pointed at the screen and explained something to Willow, Slade had a sense of déjà vu. He smiled to himself. That wasn’t it; it was more like déjà vu in advance. Watching Willow with Ava felt like he was getting a glimpse into his future, and damn, he loved it.

Willow looked up at him with a smile. “Are you coming to join us?”

“No. I was coming to tell you that the sandwiches are ready. Do you guys want to come and sit at the table?”

Ava slid down from the sofa and trotted to the table. Scooter followed and sat down beside her. Slade went back into the kitchen and when he brought everything out and sat

down with them, that feeling swept over him again. He wanted this – he wanted a life where he and Willow got to sit at the table in the evenings to eat dinner with their kids.

Willow reached out and put her hand over his. The way her eyes were shining made him guess that she was feeling the same way. She looked at Ava, who was sneaking Scooter a piece of bread, and then looked back at him with a smile.

“I could get used to this,” she said.

Slade chuckled. “Me too.”

Ava looked up. “I could, too,” she said with a smile. “I like hanging out with you guys, and Scooter does, too.” She looked at Slade. “You throw the ball really far, and he likes that. I hope you guys can pick me up from school again soon.”

Willow waggled her eyebrows at her. “When your mom and dad get home, we should ask them.”

Ava nodded eagerly and took another big bite of her sandwich.

Slade just sat there, enjoying the moment. He wanted to tell them what Jacob had said about including getting Ava from school in his job description. But he kept quiet. At the end of the day, it was up to Grady and Hannah. And apart from that, he didn’t want to make any promises to Ava if it wasn’t going to work out. And he didn’t want to go making Willow even more jealous than she’d been earlier.

Hannah had called Willow straight back after she’d spoken to Molly. Willow had reassured her that they really were happy to hang out with Ava, and Ava had spoken to her again and said the same. Slade was relieved that the kid didn’t seem to be too worried about him. From everything she said, it sounded as though Grady had taught her well – or perhaps it was just that she’d experienced so much worse already, but either way, she wasn’t panicking about what had happened to him.

When they’d finished eating, Slade went to sit on the sofa, and Ava crawled up onto his lap. He had to laugh when

Scooter jumped up beside them, and Willow stood there with her hands on her hips.

“Is there any room for me?” she asked.

Ava pushed Scooter over a little, leaving a gap for Willow to sit. As soon as she did, Scooter climbed onto her lap and rested his head against her shoulder.

Slade turned to her and as their gazes met, his heart felt like it might overflow.

“This is how we do it with Mommy and Daddy,” Ava said. “This is family snuggle time.”

“I like it,” said Slade.

“I love it.” Willow grinned.

“Are you guys going to have a family? I hope so. Auntie Molly and Uncle Marcus have baby Luca. Uncle Jacob and Auntie Becca are going to have lots of children. I’ll be the oldest of the cousins, but I want to have lots and lots of them.”

Willow grinned at Slade over the top of Ava’s head. “We want to have lots of children, too.” She touched the tip of Ava’s nose, making her giggle. “We’ll do the best we can to provide you with lots of cousins, okay?”

Ava nodded happily as she turned to look at Slade. “When are you going to ask Auntie Willow to marry you? You haven’t yet, have you?”

Slade chuckled. “No. I haven’t yet. I just have to find the right time.”

“That’s right.” Ava nodded wisely. “I don’t know what to tell you. My daddy asked my mommy to marry him for Christmas. You don’t want to wait that long. Christmas is forever away.”

“You’re right.” He raised an eyebrow at Willow as he spoke. “I don’t want to wait for long, but we need to find a new place to live first.”

Ava looked up at them with wide eyes. “You guys are moving?” Her little eyebrows knit together. “You live on the DuPont estate,” she told Willow. Then she turned to Slade. She gave him a puzzled look for a few moments before she laughed. “At first, I thought you lived in the little house at the gate.”

Slade and Willow both laughed with her. Slade remembered that well. The first few times that Ava had come to the Jacobs estate with Hannah – who’d been watching her while Grady worked – she’d been a very different kid. She was nervous back then, unsure of herself and of pretty much everyone around her.

She looked up at him. “I know you don’t live there, but I don’t know where you do live.”

“I live in an apartment in town.”

“So, are you going to move to the DuPont estate with Auntie Willow?”

“No. We’re looking for somewhere different – a place all of our own.”

“I wish you could live here.”

Slade smiled. “I kind of wish that we could, too. You know that my dad worked for Jacob and Hannah’s dad when I was your age. This place has been more of a home to me than anywhere else.”

Scooter let out a low woof and jumped down from the sofa. Ava scrambled after him, and Slade and Willow got to their feet.

“They’re back!” Ava shouted as she looked out the window. “We have to wait inside so that Scooter doesn’t go running around getting in the way,” she explained.

Slade could just imagine Grady and Hannah explaining that to the kid whenever she wanted to go running out to greet visitors.

They all watched through the window as Grady and Hannah got out of the car. Just as they were closing the doors, Molly pulled up behind them.

Ava squealed when she saw Molly getting baby Luca out of his car seat.

“Auntie Molly brought Luca! I love him! He’s so cute.” She was bouncing up and down on her toes in excitement. She turned and gave Slade a stern look. “You should hold him. You’re probably not used to babies, are you?”

Willow stifled a laugh beside him.

“I’m not, but I’d be happy to get used to them.”

Ava nodded wisely. “You need to if you’re going to have lots of cousins for me.”

She was right, and for the first time Slade was looking forward to Molly bringing Luca in. Usually, he hung out on the periphery and let the girls fuss over the baby. Now, he was eager to hold the little guy. If he was honest, this was the first time that it had occurred to him that Luca was a little guy. He was no longer thinking of him as a wet and noisy little bundle. Now, he understood that babies were little people – little people with their own personalities, and their own lives ahead of them. Slade shook his head. He didn’t know what had come over him, but it felt pretty damn good.

~ ~ ~

Willow’s Friday evening couldn’t have turned out more differently than she expected. When she realized that she was going to be able to get out of work early, she’d thought that she’d go to Molly’s restaurant and hang out with her friend for a while until Slade could come. She’d even wondered about calling around to see if the rest of the gang wanted to come out for dinner. Instead, she and Slade had had a wonderful few hours with Ava after school and now, Hannah and Grady were home, Molly was here with baby Luca, Molly’s husband

Marcos had come to bring Grady's car back, and a little while ago, Becca had stopped into the cottage when she saw all the cars parked outside.

She couldn't even feel bad that they'd all descended on Hannah and Grady's place unexpectedly. This was turning out to be one of those impromptu get-togethers, and it was a lot of fun. She was sitting in the kitchen catching up with Molly and Hannah, but she couldn't stop peeking through to the living room where Slade was hanging out with the guys.

Molly nudged her with her elbow. "I don't know what you've done to that man, but I like it."

Willow laughed; she couldn't even pretend to not know what Molly was talking about. Slade was holding Luca, he had been for a while now, and he looked completely at home.

Hannah laughed. "I know we women are supposed to glow when we're pregnant, but Slade's glowing right now."

"He's a natural," said Molly with a laugh. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes but damn, girl. I hope you want babies, because it would be a crying shame not to make that man a dad."

Willow was surprised to feel the heat in her cheeks – she didn't embarrass easily. But then, she wasn't embarrassed now, more like she was surprised at herself and knew that her friends were surprised, too.

"I told Hannah earlier, and I'll tell you the same thing; I do want babies, I want to have a family with him."

Molly clapped her hands together. "That's awesome! I love it. If you'd have told me that a couple of years back, I wouldn't have believed it. That night when the two of you left Penny's bachelorette party together, I would never have thought that you'd end up here, but I'm so glad that you have."

Willow nodded; she was only half listening – she was more interested in watching Slade, who now had little Luca sat on the sofa and was making him giggle.

Hannah spoke beside her. “And don’t ever tell Grady I said this, but there’s something about seeing Slade like that. It’s just so ... Unexpected, I guess. I mean, you see the tattoos, the big tough guy and ...” She shrugged and let out a little laugh. “You know what I mean.”

“Oh hell, yes! I know exactly what you mean,” said Molly.

Willow shook her head at them. “Don’t worry, Molly, I won’t tell Marcos that you said that, either.”

“What won’t you tell Uncle Marcos?” asked Ava as she came into the kitchen, bringing Becca by the hand.

Willow smiled at her, wondering what to say. She never wanted to lie to the girl, but she certainly didn’t want to tell her the truth about what she’d just been saying.

Luckily, Ava didn’t wait for her to answer. Instead, she looked up at Becca. “Auntie Willow and Uncle Slade are going to get married and have lots of cousins for me,” she declared.

All the girls looked at Willow, and she just shrugged and laughed. “Apparently.”

She turned to look when Jacob spoke from behind her. “I’m very happy to hear it. And where are you going to raise this family of yours? Have you figured that out yet?”

She frowned at him, and his smile faded.

“Sorry. I didn’t think. It’s just that Slade mentioned that you guys want to leave the apartment as soon as possible.”

She nodded. “We do, but we don’t want to live on the estate, and... I don’t know. We’ll figure something out.”

“You absolutely will.”

As he wandered off to join the guys, Molly gave her a puzzled look. “Is it me, or is he being weird?”

Hannah laughed. “He’s my brother, so I’m allowed to say it – he’s being weird.”



Willow just smiled at them; it seemed to her that Jacob was just expressing his support. Either way, she wasn't too worried. Her attention had already strayed back to Slade and baby Luca.

# Chapter Twenty

Slade glanced over at Willow as he turned the car into the entrance of the mobile home park. He was looking forward to the afternoon ahead of them. He wasn't nervous about introducing her to his dad – he wasn't exactly introducing them; his dad had known Willow since she was a kid. He'd only known her as one of the wine family kids, though. This was different; now, he was introducing her to his dad as his girlfriend.

She turned and smiled at him. "I'm looking forward to this."

"I am, too. My dad thinks the world of you. He probably thinks that you're too good for me..."

"Then I need to set him straight about that," she interrupted.

He laughed. "No worries. I was about to say that even if he does think you're too good for me, he's happy for me."

She nodded. "And I need to let him know how happy I am for me, too." She looked out the window as they passed the clubhouse and pool area. "This place is awesome."

"I know it's different from what you're used to. It's different for Dad, as well. But Ingrid loves it here. I think you'll love her; she's a hoot. She's not the kind of woman I would ever have imagined him with, but she's perfect for him."

"That seems to be the way it goes, doesn't it? Look at Mom and Russ."

"Yeah. What about us? We're not that different, are we?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, I'd say that we're alike in most respects."

He turned to look at her, wondering what she meant, and she scowled at him. "I'm not talking about what you think."

He had to laugh. “I wasn’t thinking what you think I was thinking.”

She laughed with him. “Well, since you explained it so clearly, I’ll just say that I’m glad that we put all the social standing – or whatever you want to call it – stuff behind us. I never saw it that way, you know.”

He reached across and took hold of her hand to give it a squeeze. “I do know that now, and I should’ve known all along.”

She shook her head. “It was my fault, and we both know it, but I can’t regret it.” She gave him a sexy smile. “If I hadn’t said that, you might never have been my first.” Her smile faded. “And I know that I was far from your first, but I hope that I’ll be your last.”

He brought the car to a stop outside Ingrid’s place and turned to look at her. “I want you to be my last everything. You’re it for me, Willow. I’ve told you before, and I’ll say it again, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” He smiled as a thought hit him. “And I know it’s not the same, but you are the first girl I’ve ever brought home to meet my dad.”

A big smile spread across her face. “I like it. I like it a lot. In fact, I think I might like it more than being the first girl you ever slept with.” She laughed. “I got the benefit of years of experience, and I shall be forever grateful.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad, although I have to tell you that since we’ve been living together, you’ve expanded my experience.”

She waggled her eyebrows at him. “And I hope that we will continue to grow together.”

“I think we should work on that when we get home tonight.”

“Yes, please.”

He started to lean across the console to kiss her but stopped when he saw Ingrid’s front door open. He sat back with a

rueful smile. “Are you ready for this?”

“I told you; I’m looking forward to it.”

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Willow’s cheeks were aching, she’d been smiling so much. Slade’s dad, Vic, was awesome; she hadn’t exactly known him well when she was a kid. He’d worked on the gatehouse at the Jacobs estate, just as Slade did now. He’d always had a wave and a friendly smile for her when she went over there to visit Hannah. He’d always been around setting things up whenever they had parties over there, but she couldn’t remember having sat and had a conversation with him before.

She’d been a little nervous when they first arrived; she wanted to get to know him and Ingrid properly. She loved the idea that they were all going to become family, so the last thing she wanted was for them to think of her as one of the wine family kids. She needn’t have worried. If Ingrid even knew that kind of social hierarchy existed, she didn’t care. Slade was right, she was a hoot. And his dad had greeted Willow with a warm hug, as if she’d been a child he’d known well and was fond of – perhaps that was how it really was.

They were sitting in the living area of Ingrid’s home – and it was a beautiful home; Willow hadn’t known what to expect. She didn’t think that she’d ever been to a mobile home park before, but she loved it. Ingrid had great taste and her home was cozy, yet elegant in its own way.

Slade’s dad cocked an eyebrow at him. “Have you done anything about finding a new place to live, yet?”

Slade curled his arm around Willow’s shoulders as he shook his head. “Not yet, but we need to get on it. I want out of the apartment as soon as possible.”

“I was thinking about that,” said his dad. “If you like, you guys can have the cabin until you find something that suits you

better.” He smiled at Willow. “The cabin’s a little ways out of town, but you can pretend you’re on vacation.”

Slade shook his head. “Appreciate it, Dad. I do. But that wouldn’t work. It’s too far out. Willow works late some nights, and I don’t want her driving up there in the dark.”

Ingrid raised an eyebrow at Willow, and she laughed, knowing what the older woman was thinking. “Yes, I let him get away with talking for me sometimes.” She turned and smiled at him. “I wouldn’t normally let anyone get away with that, but I know where Slade’s coming from. We understand each other.”

Ingrid smiled. “Okay then, I was just a bit worried that he was walking over you.” She winked at Slade. “You know I love you, honey, but I don’t know if you know how to treat a lady – I’ve never seen you with one before.”

His dad shook his head. “You should have a little more faith, Ingrid. He’s my boy.”

Slade laughed. “I promise I know how to treat Willow, and she knows how to keep me in line if I overstep. She’s right, though, we understand each other. We know each other pretty damn well – and we’re able to respect each other’s strengths.”

Willow sat up a little straighter when his dad fixed her with a serious look. “Are you going to be okay with him looking out for you as much as he wants to? He’s a protector. Always has been. He means well, and I’m sure you know he does, but you young ladies these days know how to take care of yourselves.”

Willow nodded. “I do know how to take care of myself, but I’m realistic, too. I know I can’t take care of myself as well as he can.” She turned to smile at Slade. “And I know that accepting his help is good for both of us. If I wasn’t okay with it, I wouldn’t be with him. It’s part of who he is, and I love him.”

His hazel eyes shone as he nodded. “I appreciate you sticking your nose in, Dad. But Willow’s right. We already

talked about this. Willow's okay with me being too protective – or at least, she's figuring out how to be okay with it. And I'm okay ...”

Willow held her breath, wondering what he was about to say. Well, she had an idea where he was going, but she was eager to learn how he really saw it.

He let out a short laugh. “I guess it would be fair to say that I'm figuring out how to be okay with how wealthy she is.” He held her gaze as he added, “It helps knowing that she's a self-made woman. I think I'd find it harder to accept that she's so much wealthier than I am if it were all family money. It's not, though.” He surprised her when he leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “She's not just my beautiful lady, she's also my smart and successful lady. How could I not respect the hell out of that?”

Willow knew that his dad and Ingrid were smiling and nodding approvingly, but she couldn't tear her gaze away from his. When they'd talked about it – about her wanting to live in the kind of home that he wouldn't be able to afford – he'd said that he was going to try to get his head around it. He'd said that he understood where she was coming from, but she hadn't been a hundred percent certain how he felt about it all. She knew that it could be a big deal for guys to be with a woman who made much more than they did.

She reached out and ran her fingers over the scruff on his cheek. He couldn't have made it any clearer than he just did.

“Thank you.”

He nodded. “I thought about it, like you told me to. And that's how I feel.”

They were both smiling, staring into each other's eyes when Ingrid cleared her throat. “Well, I was already glad that you came to see us, and now I'm even happier.” She chuckled. “And I know your dad's happy, too – and not just because your answer saved him from the butt-kicking I was going to give him later for putting you on the spot.”

They all laughed, and Slade nodded at his dad. “You’re welcome.”

His dad’s eyes twinkled as he winked at Willow. “You need any tips on how to keep him in line, you just talk to Ingrid. I’m whipped I tell you, whipped!”

Ingrid slapped the back of his head, but he caught her arm and pulled her into a hug.

Willow grinned at Slade. She was loving this. She was starting to see what the future could look like, and she was already excited about the kind of family life she and Slade would be able to give their kids.

When he let go of Ingrid, Slade’s dad turned to her, looking more serious.

“I told myself I wasn’t going to ask this, but I have to. How does your mom feel about the two of you?”

Slade frowned at him. “I told you that she’s good with it – that she asked me to give you her best, and even suggested that the two of you might want to go with us to Summer Lake some time.”

His dad nodded without dropping Willow’s gaze. “I know what you told me, son. But Alexandria is a good woman – she’ll say and do all the right things to support her daughter. I know she will. What I’m asking Willow is how she really feels. I’m not expecting problems, I’m hoping for the best.”

Willow was happy to reassure him. “I know what you mean. I felt the same way. I knew that she would support me in whatever made me happy. She always has. Even though she mostly hasn’t approved of my choices. But honestly, she’s thrilled. I don’t mind telling you that I was surprised myself at just how enthusiastic she is about the two of us. This is one choice she definitely approves of.”

Slade’s dad cocked an eyebrow, and Willow could understand why. He was probably thinking that she was going overboard in trying to reassure him, but he needed to understand that wasn’t the case.

She let out a short laugh. “I’m not blowing smoke, I promise you. I didn’t know what to expect when I first told her about us. But she reminded me that she’s known Slade all his life. She told me that you’re a good man and that you raised him well. She even said that she couldn’t have chosen anyone better for me. She said if I’d fallen for one of the other guys in our group of friends, she would have known that they would do their best to look out for me, but that with Slade, she knows without a doubt that he can and will look out for me and protect me – not just from harm but emotionally, too.” She turned to smile at Slade. “And she’s right.”

Slade nodded.

She turned back to his dad and was surprised to see his eyes shining. He cleared his throat but didn’t speak. Instead, Ingrid patted his hand and spoke for him.

“He might not find his voice for a minute or two, but I can tell you that everything you just said means the world to him. To you, Slade’s your man, but to Vic, he’s his boy. To hear that your mom holds him in high regard is one thing, to hear that she recognizes what a great job he’s done with his son is something that you might not fully understand until you have kids of your own.”

A lump formed in Willow’s throat as she smiled at Vic. He nodded, but still didn’t say anything.

“Anyway,” Slade spoke into the silence that fell. “I hope you guys are going to be on board with it, but not only did Ria say that she’d like to get you guys out to Summer Lake, but she also told me that she’s never played bingo.”

Vic laughed out loud as Ingrid clapped her hands together.

“Well, hell! When can we get her here?”

“I’ll ask her,” said Willow.

“And what about that brother of yours?” Vic asked.

“Bentley was always a good kid. A bit quieter than the rest of them, but a good kid. I heard he’s got himself a nice young lady these days. We should make a plan to get them all over



here.” He winked at Willow. “Ingrid will make damned sure that everyone has a good time.”

Willow nodded happily. “We’ll make it happen. That’ll be so much fun.”

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It was late by the time they got back to the apartment. Slade was on high alert as he scanned the parking lot. The assholes who had harassed Willow the other night hadn’t shown their faces again, but he wasn’t about to let his guard down.

After he pulled into his spot and cut the engine, he leaned across the console and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Wait there a minute. I’ll come around for you.”

Amusement shone in her eyes as she chuckled.

He gave her a wry smile. “I know you think I’m going overboard, but better safe than sorry.”

“I know. I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing at myself. I’m sure that most people wouldn’t believe that I am meekly doing as I’m told. But I am.”

He blew out a sigh as he reached for her hand. “I don’t want you to see it that way. I don’t want you to be meek. That’s not who you are. And I don’t want you to feel like I’m telling you what to do. I mean, I am. But…” He closed his eyes. “Am I being a domineering asshole?”

“No! That’s not what I meant at all. That’s not how you’re being, and it’s sure as hell not how I see it. I know you’re looking out for me. You’re being sensible. I get it. I’m not complaining. I promise. I’m not saying that you’re doing anything wrong at all. What amused me was that in the past… And even now, with anyone else, I wouldn’t go along with it. But it’s okay. In fact, it’s good, and I like it.”

She leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. “But go on, do your thing. Make sure they’re not out there waiting for us, and then let’s go home.”

He opened his mouth, about to tell her that the apartment wouldn't be home for much longer. But he thought better of it, instead getting out of the car and scanning the entire parking lot. When he was sure that there was no one lurking, waiting for them, he went around to open her door. He kept his arm around her shoulders until they were inside, not letting go of her until they were in the apartment, and he had locked the door behind them.

He took hold of her hand and led her through to the bedroom. "You know how you said let's go home?"

She nodded.

"I was about to say that this place won't be home for much longer. I know that Dad said we could have the cabin, but I don't like that idea. We'll figure something out as soon as we can, okay?"

She gripped his shirt at his sides. "Of course it's okay. I think you already know by now that as far as I'm concerned, wherever you are is home."

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "That's how I feel, too. You're my home."

She chuckled against his chest, and he leaned back so that he could see her face.

"What's so funny?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Just that even though we both mean it – that what makes home is being together – there's so much more to it than that. I mean, we need to find a good place. A place where we'll both be happy." She gave him a sassy smile. "A place where our four kids will be happy."

A rush of heat washed over him at the thought. "I thought women were the ones who got broody, but I have to tell you, every time we talk about kids, all I can think about is making babies with you."

She grinned at him as he pulled his shirt off over his head. "You won't hear me complaining about that." Her T-shirt

joined his on the floor, and in a few moments, they were lying naked on the bed, facing each other.

Slade ran his hand down her arm and over her hip. “You’re beautiful, little Willow.”

She rested her hand on his chest. “Right back at you, Mr. Hawkins.”

He smiled. “How would you feel about being called Mrs. Hawkins?”

She wriggled closer, pressing herself against him. It had been a lot of years since he’d first felt her naked body against his. She felt so familiar, so right. His heart melted in his chest when she answered.

“I thought you’d never ask. I’d marry you and take your name tomorrow.”

All he’d meant to do was gauge how she felt about taking his name, but the way she was looking at him told him that she was serious.

“Tomorrow?”

She nodded happily. “Like you said, you’re not getting any younger. If we’re going to have four kids, I want to get started sooner rather than later.”

His heart pounded in his chest. “You’re ready?”

“I’m ready, Slade. I love you. I’ve loved you for so many years that I can’t even remember how many it’s been. I don’t want to waste any more time. I don’t think we need to – do you?”

It hit him square in the chest. She was right. There was nothing for them to wait for. His throat was dry as he nodded. “No. I don’t.”

She put a hand to his shoulder, turning him onto his back as she straddled him.

“I’m so tempted to ask you right now.” She looked down into his eyes as she curled her fingers around him. “I want to

ask you, but more than that, I want you to ask me.”

He ran his tongue over his lips. He could ask her right this second, part of him wanted to, but it wouldn't be right. He didn't have a ring. He hadn't spoken to her parents. It just wouldn't feel right.

Her gaze locked with his as she guided him inside her, slowly lowering herself onto him. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes as her wet heat welcomed him inside her body – this was home.

“I'll ask you, Willow. Soon.”

As soon as the words were out, she started to move over him. She rode him hard; his fingers dug into her hips as she took him closer and closer to the edge.

She dropped forward, her dark hair swinging around them, closing the rest of the world out like a curtain until it was just the two of them. Their bodies moved together in a rhythm that had become so familiar. Her eyes shone as they looked down into his. His hand came up to tangle in her hair as he kissed her deeply. His tongue mirroring the movements of his body; thrusting deep inside her, filling her, claiming her, making her his.

His other hand cupped her ass, and even through the kiss, he couldn't help chuckling when she made that little squeaking noise she'd always made when he pressed his finger between her cheeks.

She might squeak, but he knew that she loved it. This time was no different – her whole body trembled over him, and he felt her tighten around him as she lifted her head, breaking the kiss.

“Slade!”

“Come for me, little Willow.”

As her inner muscles gripped him, electric currents tingled up and down his spine. Everything inside him felt as though it coiled tight before breaking free. Her orgasm triggered his,

and he hung on tight as he spilled himself inside her. He felt as though he was soaring away, soaring to a place where nothing but the two of them existed. His whole body shuddered as he held deep and came hard.

“Wow!” She breathed into his neck as she collapsed onto him.

He wrapped one arm around her, holding her close to his chest as his other hand came up to brush her hair away from her face. Tucking a strand behind her ear, he pressed a kiss to her lips.

“How long does it take for your pills to wear off?”

She gave him a puzzled look.

He chuckled. “Sorry. Getting ahead of myself here. Every time I’m inside you, I think about our kids.”

Realization dawned on her face, and she smiled. “I’ll book an appointment with my doctor next week. I think that as soon as I stop taking them, it can happen, but I’ll find out everything we need to know.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. “Are you sure?”

A big smile spread across her face. “I’m sure, Slade. You can’t say that we haven’t known each other for long enough. We know each other pretty damn well. We’re old enough and smart enough. We’ve both explored our options. And we both know what we want.”

“We do.” He smiled as a thought struck him. “You know how they say that an overnight success is usually ten years in the making?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckled. “Well, it’s been about fifteen years in the making, but how would you feel about a whirlwind romance?”

“I’d love it.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips as she rolled off him. He kept his arm around her, loving the feel of her against him. “Let me

see what I can do about that then.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

Willow checked her watch when she got back to her office at lunchtime on Monday. She enjoyed her Monday morning meetings with Bentley. It was a new routine that they had established after their mom had left, and it worked really well for them.

This morning, Alyssa had sat in with them for the first hour. She'd spent the last several weeks auditing the production side of the business and, this morning, she'd presented them with her report. After that, Willow and Bentley had spent another couple of hours going over her findings and using them to shape the changes they wanted to make.

Their mom was coming on Friday, and they wanted to be able to present her with a plan of how they intended to move the company forward. It was strange; not so long ago, she would have dreaded that kind of meeting with her mom. Now, she was seeing it as just a formality. Her mom had already said that she would be happy with whatever they decided. The meeting was more of an excuse to come and visit.

Willow smiled as she took a seat at her desk. She loved that the family was growing closer again. Another look at her watch convinced her that Tori would probably be awake by now, even if she wasn't up and going about her day.

She dialed her sister's number and looked at the notes on her desk while it rang. Two words stared back up at her from a neon pink Post-it note – Call Dad. She really should call him after she'd spoken to Tori.

“Hey, sis. What's up?”

“Nothing's up. I just haven't heard from you in a while, so I wanted to check in.”

“Yeah, I'm good. Everything's fine.”

Willow chuckled. “Did I wake you?”

“No. I’m awake. Or at least, what passes for awake until I have a couple of cups of coffee inside me.”

“What’s going on with you? How’s Callie? Is there anything new on the stalker?”

“She’s fine. We’ve been working hard. Corbyn is still in negotiations; he wants her to go out on tour starting in the summer.”

“I thought that was all set up?”

“No. It was never a certainty. And now... With the stalker and everything...”

“Has anything new happened?”

“No. It’s been all quiet. But I don’t know if that’s because she has this new security team. And Willow? Wow! You want to see these guys!”

Willow laughed. “What does that mean?”

“It means... I mean... They’re real professionals. I think I told you that the guys who were working security for her before were just the guys who used to work as bouncers at the club. These new guys are something else. The one in charge – Kolby, remember him?”

“He’s Xander’s friend, right? The one from Montana?”

“Yep. That’s him. He’s... He’s intense. And holy smokes! He’s hot!”

Willow frowned. “And Xander?”

Tori laughed. “Don’t worry. I didn’t mean anything about Kolby for me. I meant him and Callie. You can practically see the sparks flying any time they’re in the same room.”

“They hit it off?”

“Far from it! To say that they rub each other the wrong way would be an understatement. It’s kind of fun to watch. You can’t miss the attraction between them, but it’s like they both



want to have the upper hand. I've never seen Callie like this before. You know what she's like – she's such a sweetheart. But whenever Kolby's around, she goes into this diva mode. I think it's because he was kind of high-handed when he came in, and they just got off on the wrong foot. But she won't let him push her around, and he's determined to do whatever it takes to keep her safe – no matter what she thinks.”

Willow laughed. “Sounds like fun.”

“Something like that.”

“And Xander? You avoided that question.”

Tori blew out a sigh. “What? What do you want me to tell you?”

“How about what's going on with the two of you?”

“Nothing. Nothing apart from me making a fool of myself.”

“Oh no! How?”

Tori laughed. “Nothing too desperate. I just, you know what I'm like, I'm not the most practical person. I know he's only here to keep an eye on me because you all think that I'm not capable of doing it myself.”

“It's not like that, sis. He's there because he wants to take care of you.”

Tori sighed. “I know. Because he's such a good, upstanding guy. He doesn't want anything to happen to the pathetic, floaty little girl from back home, who's not capable of looking out for herself.”

“Nope. Don't go twisting it into that. That's not what it is and if you don't know it, you should. It's true that he doesn't want anything to happen to you, but it's not because of some sense of duty to some girl from back home. It's because it's you. You, *Tori*. He cares about you.”

“Maybe so. But I just feel so stupid. I want him to see me as a woman, I always have. But he's only ever seen me as the air-headed little sister.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think you should give him a chance.”

Tori laughed. “I’d love to. But I’m telling you, Willow. He’s not interested.”

“When’s the next time you can come home?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because I want to get the two of you back here so that I can bang your heads together.”

“I don’t think that’d do any good.”

Willow closed her eyes. She loved her sister dearly, but Tori didn’t always see the world as it was – she only saw it from her own point of view. Unfortunately, she tended to paint herself as someone who other people didn’t notice or think much of.

“Well, I think you’re wrong. And we won’t know until we get you back here, will we?”

“I guess. Anyway, that’s enough about me. What about you? How are things going with you and Slade?”

“Do you think I’m going to let you change the subject that easily?”

Tori chuckled. “I was kind of hoping. I thought that when I mentioned his name, your eyes would go all starry and little cartoon hearts would start bursting above your head.”

Willow had to laugh. “If you really want me to drop it, I will. But we’ll talk again soon, and one way or another, I’m either going to get the two of you back here, or I’ll have to come out there to visit.”

“Whatever you say, sis. But tell me about Slade?”

“He’s awesome!”

Tori laughed. “I know that. What’s going on with the two of you?”

“Well, if you can believe this, we’re already talking marriage and babies.”

“Already? What do you mean already? It’s taken forever. You two have known each other all these years. I thought that you would have given me nephews and nieces long ago.”

Willow sat back in her seat. “You aren’t surprised?”

“Not even the teeniest bit. It’s always been obvious to me. The two of you are supposed to be together. And even though neither of you might seem like baby people, you are. I know it. The two of you are going to have a big family with lots of children and live happily-ever-after.”

Willow laughed out loud.

“What? It’s true! I know it. Some things are just meant to be. You and Slade are one of those things.”

“I’m not going to argue with that. All I’m going to say is, what about you and Xander?”

“Ugh! It might have been written in the stars somewhere. But things got screwed up somehow. You and Slade are both strong, determined people. Xander’s like that, too, but I’m not. He needs someone more like you.”

“Don’t you believe it. I’ll give you that he and Slade are similar in many respects, but Xander...” Willow paused as she thought about it. “Xander’s even more of a protector than Slade is.”

“Maybe so. But I don’t see that it matters. And... Shoot! I have to go. I promise I’m not just trying to wriggle out of it. We’ll talk again soon, okay?”

“Okay. Call me.”

“I will. Promise. Love you, sis.”

“Love you, too.”

~ ~ ~

Slade was surprised to see Jacob's Range Rover still parked out back by the kitchen door when he got to work on Wednesday morning. He was here early, but Jacob was usually long gone by the time he arrived.

He trotted up the steps and let himself into the kitchen. Jacob raised a mug to him with a smile. "Good morning. Want one?"

"I'll get it, thanks. I'm here early, and Elena usually keeps me caffeinated."

Jacob grinned. "She told me to expect you. That's why I'm still here."

Slade poured himself a mug of coffee and raised an eyebrow. "What do you need?"

"Not a thing. It's just that I know you want to move out of your apartment, and when we were all at Hannah's cottage on Friday, Willow mentioned that you guys don't want to move to her place."

"Yeah. That's not an option. She doesn't want to live there any more than I do."

Jacob nodded. "And have you come up with any other options?"

"No, but we need to get serious about looking. I haven't seen those guys that harassed her again, but even if they don't come back around, I want out of that complex. Anyone could get to her there if they wanted to. I don't like it. She wants to find a nice house, and I get that – she deserves nothing less - but I don't want to hang around, I want to move soon."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Slade raised his eyebrows.

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but I am now. You know the cottage by the back gate?"

"The one you used to use as a tasting room?"

“Yes.” Jacob smiled. “You know we closed it when we wanted to close the back gate. I was considering reopening it as a tasting room – but that was before Becca moved in with me. When she did, I wanted to leave it vacant. She was worried that we moved in together so quickly, and I promised her that even if things didn’t work out between us, she’d still have a place to stay. I even brought a contractor in, and he drew up plans for me – plans to convert the place back into a home. At the moment, there’s an apartment upstairs but the downstairs is just open space, set up as the tasting room.”

Jacob took a drink of his coffee before looking up to meet Slade’s gaze. “You know what things were like around here before Hannah came home. The estate felt empty and cold – and I admit that I was the same way – I was empty and cold for too many years after our folks died. Everything started to change when Hannah came home. I love having her and Grady and little Ava living in the cottage. I’ve got Becca here with me now – we’ll be getting married soon. This place finally feels like home again, and it feels like home because there’s family here again.”

He cleared his throat and gave Slade a rueful smile. “I know there were a few years there when you wouldn’t have guessed it from the way I acted, but I’ve always considered you to be family. Christ! I’m making a mess of this. What I’m trying to say is that if you and Willow want the cottage, you can have it.”

Slade stared at him. He loved that Jacob was offering to rent them the cottage, but what had him swallowing around the lump in his throat was that Jacob saw him as family. His voice was gruff when he spoke. “Thanks. That means more than you know.”

Jacob chuckled. “I think I do know. It means that much to me, too.”

Slade cleared his throat. “I can’t say yes until I’ve talked to Willow, but I think she’ll love the idea, too.” It felt weird, but he had to ask. “What kind of rent do you want?”

Jacob's eyebrows drew together. "The honest answer to that, is that I don't."

Slade started to protest, but Jacob held his hand up to stop him.

"I know I won't get away with that. So, how about you tell me what the rent is on your apartment."

"Why?"

"Because that's how much I want for the cottage."

Slade shook his head slowly. "You can't do that. You could get way more money for that place than what I pay for my apartment."

"Nope. Because if it's not you and Willow, I wouldn't rent it out at all. It'd just sit there, doing nothing – like it has for the last couple of years. You'd be doing me a favor. I don't want a tasting room back there. I don't want to reopen the back gate – especially not to the public. I'd love to have you guys living there. Even if it's just a short term move for you, it'd get you out of your apartment. You could move in there tomorrow if you wanted to." He smiled. "Although, I'd love it if you wanted it to be a permanent move."

Slade just stared at him. It did sound like the perfect opportunity. He didn't know for sure, but he had a feeling that Willow would love it. She and Hannah were close; he imagined that she'd be happy to live near her friend. And little Ava, too.

Jacob shrugged. "Think about it. Talk to Willow." He picked up a set of keys off the counter and handed them over. "Go take a look. There are three bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs. The downstairs could be converted back to a big kitchen, great room, den, and primary bedroom suite. If you did want to make it permanent, and wanted to have the work done, I have all the plans already."

Slade looked down at the keys in his hand. "Obviously, it'll be up to Willow. But I have to tell you, if it were purely my call, I'd move us in there tomorrow. And ..." he met Jacob's

gaze and held it "... I'd be thinking of it as a permanent move. What you said about family. I ...". He didn't know how to end that sentence.

Jacob grasped his shoulder. "I know. Me too. Anyway, I need to get over to the office before we go getting all sentimental on each other."

Slade chuckled. "Right. And I'd better take my coffee and get to work, boss."

Jacob shook his head. "Brother." With that, he turned on his heel and hurried out of the kitchen, leaving Slade to wipe his sleeve across his eyes as he watched him go.

~ ~ ~

Later that evening, Willow stood in the middle of the large open space that had served as the tasting room in the old gatehouse cottage. She absolutely loved the place! The apartment upstairs was perfect for what they needed. Slade had told her that Jacob had plans they could use if they wanted to convert this downstairs area, but she loved it as it was. She could just imagine having everyone over here to hang out. She twirled around, holding her arms out at her sides.

"I have to be honest – I've never felt that close to Jacob. I've always liked him, respected him, but out of all our friends, he and I are probably the least alike. Although, right now, I think I love him!"

Slade closed the distance between them in two long strides, with a scowl on his face. Laughter bubbled up in Willow's chest as he wrapped his arms around her none too gently and crushed her to him as he looked down into her eyes. She slapped at his arm, but he just held her tighter.

"Oh, come on! You know what I mean."

He smiled through pursed lips. "Of course I do. I feel the same way – I think I love him, too!"

Willow had to laugh. “Well then, don’t look at me like that.” She traced her finger over his furrowed brow.

He narrowed his eyes and leaned in to nip at her lips. “I don’t mean anything by it, you know that, right?”

She nodded.

“I did warn you that I could be a jealous asshole. And no, I’m not really jealous. It just took me by surprise hearing you say you love him – even though I know that you’re joking, and I know exactly what you mean...” He shuddered and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You get it, right?”

She rolled up on her tiptoes and kissed the tip of his nose. “I do. I’m just teasing.”

“So, what do you think?” He turned her around without letting go of her. When her back was to his chest, he tightened his arms around her waist and leaned in to speak close to her ear. “Can you see us making a home here?”

Her shoulders relaxed, and she smiled. But just as she was about to tell him that yes, she could, his next question made her lips press together.

“Raising our kids here?”

She turned to look up at him over her shoulder. “Making a home here? Yes.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Are you having second thoughts about all these kids we keep talking about?”

“No. I love this place. I think it’ll be awesome to live here. I love the house, I love the yard, I love the idea of being right here – of being neighbors with Hannah and Grady, and Jacob and Becca. But I have to be honest, Slade; I want us to have a real family home of our own. I wouldn’t mind renting this place from Jacob for a few years, but when it comes to what you said – to raising our family – I want us to do that in a place that we can call ours.”

She searched his face. She was absolutely thrilled that Jacob had offered them this place. She knew that Slade felt



good about it. Not only did he love the idea of living here on the Jacobs estate, but in a way, he was the one who, through his connection with Jacob, was providing a place that suited them both. She'd hate for him to feel like she was throwing it back in his face. She wasn't.

His arms tightened around her, and he kissed the top of her head. "It's okay, little Willow, relax. I get it. I really do. I feel the same way – I'd love for us to have our own real family home." He rested his chin on top of her head, and she waited, knowing that he had something else to say.

"It's just that this is the only way that I'll ever be able to give you the kind of home that you deserve."

She spun around in his arms. "I don't want to make light of it, Slade, but remember what we talked about? You. This..." She tapped her finger in the middle of his chest. "You're my home."

He smiled and nodded. "I know. You're right. It's all good."

"Okay, then." She could tell that he was a little bit disappointed, but they could work on it – they'd be able to figure out something that made them both feel good, she knew they would.

"What do you think? Should we tell Jacob that we want to move in this weekend?"

"This weekend?"

He laughed. "Why not? If we're going to turn this into a whirlwind romance, I need to get my ass into gear." She loved the way his hazel eyes sparkled as he held her gaze. "I got the girl. Now, I need to persuade her to shack up with me."

She had to laugh at the way he put it. "Well, since you put it like that, how could I say no?"

He leaned in and rested his forehead against hers. "I was hoping that you wouldn't."

"Let's do it. Let's move in this weekend."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Slade chuckled to himself as he drove Jacob's Range Rover up the long driveway at the DuPont estate on Friday. It had been a while now since he used to drive out here like this. When he used to come to see Willow at night, he was hoping that no one else would spot him. Now, he was here for a different reason, and hoping that *she* wouldn't spot him.

He was hoping that Willow would still be busy at work and that she wouldn't have any idea that he was here. That was why Jacob had told him to bring the Range Rover. Even if she saw it, Willow wouldn't suspect that Slade was the one driving – Jacob didn't let anyone drive it.

He was hoping that she wouldn't spot him because he wasn't here to see her, he was here to see her mom. Ria and Russ had arrived last night. Ria had a meeting with Bentley and Willow this morning, and she'd told him that she should be finished by noon and that she would be free to talk to him by twelve thirty.

He checked the clock on the dash as he parked behind the house. He was right on time. Just as he was getting out of the car, he looked up when he saw the kitchen door open. Russ stood there, grinning at him.

“Slade! It's good to see you. How're you doing?”

Slade grinned back at him. “It's good to see you, too. I'm doing great – only a little bit nervous.”

Russ grasped his shoulder. “You've got nothing to be nervous about. I think that Ria's probably more nervous than you are.”

“Why! What's she nervous about?”

Russ laughed. “She thinks she knows what you want to talk to her about, but she's nervous that she might be wrong – that

she's getting carried away, and that you might not be ready for that yet."

Slade met the older man's gaze. "And you haven't reassured her?"

Russ chuckled as he shook his head. "Nope. It wasn't my place."

"Thanks. I didn't mean to put you in a difficult position."

Russ put his hand in his pocket and took out a small, velvet box. "You didn't. All you did was ask me to collect something from a mutual friend before we came, right?"

Slade's heart pounded in his chest as he took the box. "I guess. But you know, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. And I have to tell you, I couldn't be happier, and you've got no worries about Ria. She's going to be over the moon."

Slade looked down at the box. "Did you look at it?"

Russ shook his head. "I didn't. I don't mind telling you that I was tempted, but it didn't seem right. Smoke asked me to tell you that Laura said you have exquisite taste - that it's one of her favorite pieces she's ever made."

Slade couldn't help smiling. "I'm glad. I don't even know Laura, but I was close with Cole when we were kids - I mean, Smoke, I forget that everyone calls him that these days. I've heard how you and some of the guys here went to Laura when you were ready to buy rings."

He looked down at the box again. "I just never thought that I'd be doing the same thing." He smiled. "But now that the thing I want most in the world is to marry Willow, it just seemed right that I should get the ring from Laura."

"I like it." Russ jerked his chin at the box. "Are you gonna open it and take a look?" He chuckled. "I don't think it's going to bite."

Slade smiled as he slowly lifted the lid. His breath caught in his chest at the sight of the ring. It was beautiful. It was more than beautiful, it was perfect. It was worthy of Willow. He'd been worried about that. Willow was his woman, but she was also a classy lady. He'd wanted to get her a ring that she would be proud to wear for the rest of her life. The classic diamond solitaire sparkled in the sunlight, as if wanting to reassure him that it was up to the job.

Russ let out a low whistle. "Damn! That's beautiful."

"Isn't it? I spent hours looking at Laura's website. There are so many different kinds of rings. Different stones, different carats, yellow gold, white gold, rose gold." He huffed out a short laugh. "I thought it was going to take me forever to choose, and then I saw this one."

He traced his finger over the wide, yellow-gold band. It was engraved with curling vines and leaves. It was perfect.

"Not that it matters what I think, but I think you done good."

Slade smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Ria called a little while ago to say that she's still busy in the offices. She'll be back up here soon. Do you want to head inside?"

Slade followed him into the house, and Russ stopped in the kitchen. He gave Slade a rueful smile. "I don't mind telling you that I don't really feel at home here."

Slade cocked an eyebrow.

"I mean, I'm at home with Ria and the kids. They already feel like family to me. But this place?" He looked around. "All I can say is that I'm glad Ria wanted to move to Summer Lake with me. I'm not sure I could've found a way to be comfortable here."

Slade smiled at him. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Mind if I ask you something?"

“What’s that?”

“Are you going to feel any more at home in this cottage that you guys are moving into? That’s on the estate where you work, right?”

Slade nodded slowly. “It is, but it’s different. I’ve known those guys since I was a kid. My dad worked for Jacob’s dad. I grew up around those guys.” He smiled as it dawned on him. “Back then, I don’t think any of us noticed that there were any differences between us. I don’t know if you’ll be able to understand this, but that cottage feels like the best of all worlds. Willow gets to live in the kind of place where she’ll feel at home, and I get to live around people I consider to be family.”

Russ raised his eyebrows, and Slade understood what he was asking without him needing to say a word.

“Yeah. They see me as family, too.”

“That’s good. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“And what about Matthew and Gabriel?”

Slade grinned. “They’re going to be here on Sunday.”

“You’ve spoken to them?”

“I have. Willow called her dad last night. She hadn’t spoken to him in a while and she wanted to tell him about us, and about the cottage. Of course, I couldn’t say anything to him then, but I called him this morning.” He frowned. “Is that going to be okay with you?”

Russ laughed. “It is. You’ve got no worries there. I wasn’t inclined to like Matthew much at first, just because he’s Ria’s ex. But from the first time I met him and Gabriel, I knew that we’d get along just fine, and we do.”

“That’s a relief. I hadn’t even thought about getting all you guys together in the same place.”

“Like I said, there’s nothing to worry about. In fact, it’ll be good to see them.”

They both turned when the kitchen door opened, and Ria came breezing in with a big smile on her face. Slade had never known her all that well, but he always thought of her as an uptight businesswoman in a suit. It was strange to see her wearing jeans and a flowery top – strange, but good. She looked happy, and that made her look like a different person than the Alexandria who Slade remembered.

She went to Russ and kissed his cheek before turning to Slade. Her light blue eyes sparkled. “So, are you going to tell us now?”

He couldn’t help laughing. “I’m going to ask you.”

She grasped her hands together in front of her. “Go on then, so that I can say yes.”

Russ laughed beside her and wrapped his arm around her waist. “Give him a chance.”

“Sorry.”

Slade sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “We all know why I asked to talk to you. It might just be a formality at this point, but I wanted to ask anyway. I intend to marry Willow, and I’d love it if you would give me your blessing. I promise you that I’ll always love her, and I’ll always take care of her.”

His heart leaped into his mouth when Ria laughed out loud. For one horrible moment he was scared that she was going to tell him how stupid he was being – that there was no way she would want him marrying her daughter. That Willow was way too good for him. One hand curled into a fist at his side and the other curled tightly around the ring box.

“Oh, my goodness, Slade! Don’t look like that, please! I’m so sorry. I’m not laughing at you ... I’m laughing that you don’t know just how much I’ve wanted this for the two of you.” She came to him and rested her hand on his arm. “I’m laughing because this couldn’t be more perfect. The two of

you couldn't be more perfect for each other. And even though you're not aware of it, the way you asked was perfect, too."

He frowned, trying to remember the exact words he'd used.

Ria smiled at him. "You told me that you *intend* to marry her. There's no timidity or hesitation about you. You're *going* to marry her. You didn't even say that you're going to ask her." She held her hand up. "And I'm not criticizing; I'm telling you just how perfect it is. You have no hesitation. You already know, and so does she. And I think the part that made me laugh most of all is that you would love it if I gave you my blessing, but you didn't ask for that either, and you could live without it, couldn't you?"

He smiled as he met her gaze. It wasn't a trick question, and he knew it. "I could. I wouldn't want to, but I could."

She squeezed his arm, making him realize that her hand still rested there. "And that's just one of a thousand reasons that you're perfect for my little Willow."

For some reason, it brought a lump to his throat to hear Ria call Willow the same thing that he did.

She nodded as if she understood what he was thinking. "We call her that because we see what most don't. Most people only see the strong, capable young woman that she has become. You and I? We may be the only two people who are lucky enough to see and know the sweet girl we call little Willow."

His throat was so dry, he didn't think he'd be able to say anything, so he just nodded.

Ria gripped his arm tighter. "I know this is none of my business, but do you think that you're going to want children?"

Slade's breath caught in his chest. Was she worried that he might hold her daughter back? He was about to reassure her that if either of them were going to give up their career to stay home with their kids, it would be him. But then he noticed that the expression on Ria's face was almost pleading.

“I would love to be a grandma – and I don’t mind telling you that I’d started to think I never would be.”

“That’s good to know because we’re hoping to make you a grandma many times over.”

He had to laugh when she clapped her hands together, and tears shone in her eyes.

“That makes me happier than you realize, Slade. Thank you. And I don’t just mean because I get to be a grandma.” She met his gaze and held it. “What I mean is that I know my grandchildren will have a wonderful father.” She dabbed at her eyes. “Anyway, moving swiftly along. What’s the plan for the weekend? We’re here to help with whatever you need.”

Russ nodded. “I don’t know how much stuff you guys have to move, but I’m at your service.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the offer, but we really don’t have that much to move. The cottage is furnished.” He shot Ria a rueful smile. “And Willow is happier to make do with the furniture that’s there rather than move my stuff. So, all we really have are boxes of clothes and personal bits and pieces.”

“Well, we’re here to help.”

Slade only hesitated for a moment before he made the offer that his dad had insisted that he should. “I think between everyone who’s coming to help, the move won’t take long. After that, though, my dad and Ingrid suggested that we might all want to go over to their place – and go to the bingo night.”

Ria reminded him of an excited little kid when she nodded eagerly. “Oh, can we? I think that’ll be fun.” She turned to Russ. “Don’t you?”

Russ laughed as he caught Slade’s gaze. “I have a feeling it will be.”

Slade had to laugh with him. “Let’s hope so.” He wasn’t sure how it would work out, but he did like the idea of getting their two families together.





On Saturday afternoon, Willow stood in the same spot in what used to be the tasting room in the cottage that she'd stood in just a few days ago when moving in here was just an idea. She couldn't believe how quickly they'd made it happen. Then again, she couldn't believe how many people had turned out to help. She'd been surprised when her mom and Russ had said that they were going to stick around for the weekend and help. She'd been even more surprised when Tori and Xander had shown up this morning. She was thrilled that they were all here, but she couldn't help thinking that it was kind of overkill. It wasn't as though she and Slade had much to move.

Hannah came to stand beside her. Grady had just taken Ava and Scooter back to their place for a while.

"I'm so happy that you're going to be living here."

Willow turned to her oldest friend with a smile. "Me too. I can't quite believe it yet, but I'm so happy."

"I hope you stay."

Willow gave her a puzzled look. "We're just moving in; I'm not even going to think about moving out for a long while yet."

"No," said Hannah. "I mean I hope you stay forever. I know you don't want to live at your mom's place. But you guys should have a forever home."

Willow laughed. "You make us sound like rescue puppies."

Hannah laughed with her. "No! Not like that. I mean a place where you guys can put down roots and raise all these babies you were talking about having."

Willow sighed. "I know what you mean. But I don't know that I could put down roots in a house that we're only renting."

Hannah pursed her lips. She looked like she was about to say something, but at that moment Xander and Jacob came in with the last couple of boxes.

“Do you want these upstairs?” Xander asked.

“Please.”

“Where’s your mom gone?” Hannah asked.

Willow grinned. “They’ve gone back over to the estate. Mom’s done her bit helping out, and Russ thought it’d be best to give her some time to chill out before she experiences playing bingo for the first time tonight.”

Hannah laughed out loud. “Forgive me, but I so cannot imagine your mom playing bingo.”

“I forgive you. You know damn well that not so long ago I would have been right there with you. But she’s changed. I honestly think that she’s going to enjoy herself.”

“I think you’re right. It’s so good to see all of you guys together, and to see how much your mom’s relaxed since she got together with Russ.”

Willow nodded happily. “Yeah. It amazes me that we’ve all seen so much of each other since she met Russ. It used to be that we could go years without all being in the same room at the same time. Now, it’s different.” She felt bad saying it, but she had to. “It feels like we’ve got our family back.”

“What are you looking at me like that for?” asked Hannah. “Oh! You’re feeling sorry for me, aren’t you?” She smiled. “There’s no need, I promise you. Our folks have been gone a long time. Of course, I still miss them, but I guess I’m just used to the fact that we won’t ever have them back. But look around. I came home. I live here now, and life is good. Jacob has Becca now. And Xander ...” She jerked her chin to where Xander was trotting back down the stairs. “He’s been around more these last few months than he has in years, too. Where’s Tori, anyway? I’m hoping that at some point soon the two of them will figure it out. Maybe then they’ll both move back as well.”

“Maybe. I’m keeping my fingers crossed that he’ll finally get through to her, and that the two of them will give it a go. But I won’t hold my breath on them moving back here. Think

about it; neither of them ever wanted to be a part of the wine world. And they both have the kind of jobs that they couldn't do back here anyway."

Hannah nodded sadly. "I know. You're probably right. But I can hope. I just like the idea of everyone coming home, and us all being together again."

Willow smiled. "I'm with you. I'm not saying that I don't want it. I'm just saying that, for some of us, Napa isn't necessarily the place where we can be happy. Look at Mom. We've got her back in a way that we never had her before – and that's only because she lives in Summer Lake and not here."

"I guess." Hannah smiled when she saw Slade coming toward them. "I should probably get going unless there's anything else I can do?"

"No. You get back to Grady and Ava. Thanks for helping."

Hannah laughed. "It wasn't like there was much to do."

Willow laughed with her as Slade reached them and slipped his arms around her waist. "I told you that we could get moved in quick and easy – and that we didn't have to stay in the apartment much longer."

She reached up to peck his cheek. "You did, and you were right. And I'm glad that you were."

He grinned at Hannah. "Can you make note of that and be my witness? I have a feeling that, in the years to come, the times when she tells me that I was right will be few and far between."

Willow gave him an indignant look as she slapped his arm. "Are you trying to say that I'm going to turn into a mean old ball and chain?"

Slade laughed. "No. I'm just saying that the longer we're married, the more apparent it will become how much smarter than me you are."

She rolled her eyes at him, and Hannah laughed. “Look at you guys, talking about being married already.”

Willow gave Slade a puzzled look when she felt him tense beside her. She didn’t know why he would have a problem with that. It seemed that Hannah did though; her eyes grew wide, and she shot Slade an apologetic look.

Willow didn’t know what was going on, but she didn’t want him to feel bad. “That’s because we can’t wait, right?” She looked up at him with a smile, and all the tension left his face as he nodded back.

“Yep, that’s right. We can’t wait to be married and start our family.”

Hannah laughed. “Okay, I’m going to take that as my cue to leave. While the two of you are looking at each other like that and talking about making babies, I’m out of here.”

Willow laughed as she watched her friend go.

“That’s everyone, now,” said Slade.

“Jacob and Xander left?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Becca called to say that she was back from school, and Xander wanted her and Tori to get to know each other, so he took Tori up to the house. Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah. Of course. I just...” She gave him a rueful smile. “For a second, I was disappointed not to get more time with my sister while she’s here. But if she’s getting time with Xander and getting to know Becca, how can I complain?”

Slade curled both arms around her and started walking her backward toward the stairs. “I don’t know what to tell you. I wouldn’t mind catching up with Xander, either, but I’m glad that he’s getting time with Tori and Becca.” He leaned in and nuzzled his face into her neck. “And if you really want to complain, I can give you something to moan about.”

A shiver ran down her spine. “You want to christen the place already?”

He chuckled as he took hold of her hand to lead her up the stairs. “It wouldn’t be like us to waste any time, would it?”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Slade's knuckles were white, he was gripping the steering wheel so hard as he turned his car into the entrance of the mobile home park. Willow reached across and patted his thigh, giving him a reassuring smile. She thought this was a great idea; he wasn't so sure.

Bringing her mom and Russ over here for bingo night was one thing. Slade had thought that they would all meet up at the clubhouse, but Ingrid had other ideas. She'd called a little while ago to invite them all over to her place for a drink first. Slade regretted that he'd put his phone on speaker; if it'd been up to him, he would've made some excuse as to why they couldn't go. But Willow had been all about it. It was bad enough that they'd already said they'd pick Russ and Ria up from the estate – since, not surprisingly, Ria didn't know where they were going. Now, they were in the back of the car, and in just a few minutes Ria would get what Slade expected was her first ever look inside a trailer house.

Willow squeezed his leg and shot him a look that he knew was meant to reassure him. It didn't. The only thing that he was hanging onto right now, was the fact that he was at least driving Willow's car and not his own. No way could he imagine Ria sitting in the back of his Honda.

He glanced in the rearview mirror when he pulled up outside Ingrid's place. Russ caught his eye and smiled. Ria was smiling too, but she was looking at the house.

"Isn't it lovely!" she exclaimed.

"Mom!" Willow turned around to scowl at her.

Ria gave Slade a shamefaced look in the rearview mirror. "I'm sorry. I just didn't know what to expect." She looked out at Ingrid's house again. "But it really is lovely."

At that moment, the front door opened, and Ingrid appeared, with his dad just behind her. Slade relaxed a little when Ingrid grinned and beckoned for to them to come in.

When they all had drinks and were sitting around the living room, an awkward silence descended. This was what Slade had feared. Then again, he realized how dumb he was being when Ingrid grinned around at everyone.

“Isn’t this great? I’m so glad that you guys wanted to come.” She nodded at Ria and Russ. “I didn’t know if you’d like the idea.”

Ria grinned right back at her. “Like the idea? I’ve been so excited.” She dropped her gaze for a moment before looking straight into Ingrid’s eyes. “I led a very ... narrow life until recently. I didn’t know what you’d think when you heard that I’d never played bingo before. I feel ...”

As Slade watched the woman he used to think of as *the mighty* Alexandria DuPont struggle for words, understanding dawned. She was out of her element. And just as he’d feared that she would look down on him and his family because of their differences, she had feared that they would look down on her for the same reason.

Ingrid reached across and patted Ria’s hand. “You want to know what I thought when I heard that?”

Ria nodded.

Ingrid laughed. “I thought, *Well, damn! That girl’s been missing out on life.* But it’s okay. I can help. The way I look at it, these two getting together...” she jerked her chin to where Slade and Willow were sitting on the loveseat “... is bringing a whole bunch of blessings into all of our lives. Not only do we get to expand our families, but we get to make new friends, too. You’ve never played bingo before? Come into my world, girlfriend, and we’ll have a whole bunch of fun. I don’t know the first thing about your fancy wines – but I bet you can teach me, and we’ll have a laugh doing it.”

The last of the tension left Slade's shoulders as he watched Ingrid and Ria laugh together. Willow dug her elbow into his side; she knew that he'd been worried, and she'd tried to reassure him.

His dad caught his eye and gave him a slight nod. He knew, too. As Ingrid and Ria chatted up a storm, Russ smiled at him. When the two women finally paused for breath, Russ leaned forward in his seat.

"I can hear everyone thinking it, so I'll just go ahead and be the one to say it. We might come from different places in life, but there are no real differences between us. We're all just trying to make the best of life." He smiled over at Slade and Willow. "The two of you are bringing us all together. It's like Ingrid said – not only do we get to make new friends, but we also get to expand our family."

"Hear, hear!" Ingrid raised her glass. "Bottoms up, everyone. It's about time we get our asses over to the clubhouse – as a family."

Slade chuckled before downing the last of his drink. His dad caught his eye and smiled.

On the walk over to the clubhouse, Ingrid linked her arm through Ria's, and the two of them walked ahead, chatting as if they'd been friends forever. Russ fell in beside Willow, and Slade's dad hung back to walk with him.

"Are you over it now?"

"Over what?" Slade asked, even though he didn't really need to.

"I tried to instill it into you as a kid without ever saying it out loud. What Russ said back there? He was dead on the money. It's like you with Xander, Jacob, and Hannah. I might have worked for their folks back then, but you kids all grew up together without feeling like you were different."

"Yeah. You did teach me that, Dad. I knew it back then; I think I just forgot for a while."



His dad grasped his shoulder as they walked. “If you ask me, son, you’ll do best if you forget that whole deal going forward. It doesn’t mean anything. It never did. And if you’re lucky enough that Willow says yes when you ask her tomorrow, that kind of bullshit thinking is the last thing you need to bring into your marriage.”

“I know.” Slade couldn’t help wondering how many years he and Willow had lost; how many years earlier they might have gotten together if he hadn’t believed that she saw herself as being above him.

She stopped and looked back over her shoulder at him with a smile, and all thoughts of what might have been left his head as he smiled back. She’d been right when she told him that it didn’t matter – that they might’ve screwed things up if they’d gotten together earlier. They were together now, and they had a whole bright future ahead of them.



Willow’s sides were aching from laughing. She set her pencil down and met Ingrid’s gaze across the table. The woman was hilarious, and she was an absolute saint, the way she’d taken Willow’s mom under her wing.

At first, her mom had been baffled by the whole experience, but after a bit of time – and a few more drinks – she’d gotten into the spirit of things. Perhaps even a little too into it. A few minutes ago, she’d called out, *bingo!* But when the guy had come over to check her card, she’d missed a number. Her mom had been mortified, but Ingrid soon had her laughing again.

Willow glanced over at the bar where Slade was standing with his dad and Russ. He winked at her, and she laughed – even though there was nothing to laugh about. Perhaps it wasn’t just her mom who’d had a few too many.

“Vic said that your son’s getting married soon,” said Ingrid.

Willow loved the way her mom smiled as she nodded. “That’s right. I hope you and Vic will come – you know, since we’re family now.”

“We’d love to, thank you. And your other daughter’s home this weekend, too?”

“She is.” Her mom turned to Willow. “Have you had the chance to talk to her? I feel as though she’s avoiding me. Is everything okay?”

“I didn’t get much time with her today. I think she’s okay. Well, as okay as she can be with everything that’s going on.”

Her mom turned to Ingrid, who was looking puzzled. “Tori works as a backup singer for a big country music star in Nashville. Callie – she’s the singer – has had some problems with a stalker. We’ve all been worried about Tori.”

“Can’t she come home?” Ingrid asked.

Willow’s mom rolled her eyes. “I wish she would, but she won’t. I do feel a little better lately though – Xander’s been out there keeping an eye on her.”

“Slade’s buddy, Xander? He’s a good kid. I don’t think you’ve got too much to worry about if he’s her man.”

Willow watched with interest as her mom’s expression changed. “Oh, I wish he were.” She waggled her eyebrows as she met Willow’s gaze. “I’m hoping that she might take a page out of her big sister’s book, and finally see what’s been in front of her since she was just a girl.”

Willow’s breath caught in her chest. “What happened when she was just a girl?”

Her mom laughed. “Are you asking what I know about Tori and Xander, or what I know about you and Slade?”

Willow sat up a little straighter in her chair. There was no way that her mom could know what had happened between her and Slade when she was just a girl – was there?

Ingrid broke the silence when she burst out laughing. “You’re guilty as charged, if the look on your face is anything to go by, girly. If I were you, I’d deflect and say that it’s about your sister.”

Her mom held her gaze and gave her a slight nod. “I know that Xander has always had a special interest in Tori. Let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

Willow nodded. She’d be more than happy to leave that conversation behind. She was relieved when the caller announced a new game. She feigned great interest in the card in front of her, but she could feel her mom’s gaze on her. When she dared to sneak a look, her mom surprised the hell out of her by winking before looking back down at her own card.

Slade, Vic, and Russ came over halfway through the game and slid into the empty spaces in the booth. Slade wrapped his arm around Willow’s shoulders, but she just gave him a slight nod – she had to concentrate; she had a feeling that she was going to win this time.

“Do you ladies –?” Russ began.

“Shhh!”

Willow had to laugh when her mom silenced him with *the look*. She, Tori, and Bentley, all knew that look only too well. They’d all been on the receiving end of it too many times as kids – and over the years since then.

“I’m guessing this isn’t the first time you’ve been subjected to the icy disapproval?” she asked.

Russ chuckled. “Nope. I’m already familiar.”

Her mom gave him an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I only have a couple of numbers left to get.”

Russ shook his head at her with a smile. “Not a problem. I’ll just be over here. Keeping quiet. Don’t mind me.”

The rest of them laughed with him, but her mom had already turned her attention back to the caller.

Slade rested his chin on Willow's shoulder and spoke next to her ear. "How are you doing?"

She chuckled. "About the same as my mom. I won't shush you, but I'm concentrating here, okay?"

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Fair enough. I'll zip it."

Willow started to feel excited when she crossed off number twenty-two and realized that she only needed one more number.

"Do you really think that the number two looks like a duck?"

Everyone laughed at the puzzled look on her mom's face. But Willow kept most of her attention on her card.

"Three and seven, thirty-seven."

Willow didn't have thirty-seven. The next thing she knew, she jumped in her seat when her mom scrambled to her feet, waving her card in the air and shouting, "Bingo! Bingo! Over here! I got it!"

Russ covered his face with his hand as he shook his head, but he couldn't hide his laughter.

Ingrid got to her feet with Ria, partly to congratulate her, and Willow could tell that it was also partly to check her card to make sure that she was right this time.

Slade tightened his arm around Willow's shoulders. "Why do I get the feeling that your mom's going to be coming back here more often now?"

Willow chuckled. "Because you're probably right. We've created a monster."

Slade's dad grinned at them. "She's enjoying herself; leave her to it."

After her win had been confirmed, Willow's mom sat down and grinned around at them. "This is so much fun!"

"I knew you'd enjoy yourself," said Ingrid.

Her mom's smile faded. "I love it. The only thing is, I feel bad about winning the money."

It was only two hundred dollars, but Willow knew what her mom was thinking. She was thinking that just about anyone else in the room tonight could find a better use for that money than she could.

Russ put his hand on her arm, and Willow was glad to see that he understood her so well. "Put it into one of the charities," he suggested.

For as long as Willow could remember, her mom had served on the boards of several different charities.

"That's what I do when I win," said Ingrid. "I give mine to the animal shelter up the road. I help out there whenever I can. I walk the dogs, play with the puppies, clean out the kennels, whatever they need me to do. And when I win at bingo ..."

She glanced at Slade's dad "... or on the horses, I give them my winnings, too."

Willow was glad to see her mom smiling again. "Then that's what I'll do. I'll give them my winnings."

"Don't feel like you have to," said Ingrid. "Give it to one of your charities that you like better. It was just a suggestion."

"No, I like that idea. It's something different."

Willow had to smile; she had a feeling that the animal shelter was about to receive the biggest donation in its history. Two hundred dollars from a bingo night was one thing, but it wasn't like the kinds of donations her mom usually made.



Slade leaned back against the bar next to his dad. Now that the bingo had ended, Ingrid had insisted on taking Ria around to introduce her to all her friends. Willow and Russ had both excused themselves to go to the bathroom, giving Slade a few minutes alone with his dad.

“She’s a good woman.”

“Which one?” asked Slade.

His dad chuckled. “All three of them. Your Willow is a good woman. She’s real. She’s not some little rich chick who’s going to have to adapt to real life – she already knows what it’s all about. And her mom?” He chuckled again. “I’ve told you before that I’ve always respected her, but after tonight, I can honestly say that I like her, and I look forward to the day when we’re officially family. But I was talking about Ingrid.”

Slade nodded. “She is. She’s good for you.”

His dad turned to look him in the eye. “She’s good for you, too, son.”

Slade cocked an eyebrow, not understanding.

“You think about what tonight would’ve been like if she weren’t around.” He laughed. “I mean, we sure as hell wouldn’t have been playing bingo. But seriously, without Ingrid’s *don’t give a shit, don’t know, don’t care* attitude, how do you think that we would’ve gotten through our first social outing with Willow’s family?”

He was right. Without Ingrid there to steamroller over any awkwardness and to go for the laughs at every chance she got, he knew that this evening wouldn’t have gone nearly as well. In fact, it wouldn’t have happened.

“I know you think that she’s a bit loud for me, a bit outgoing. I know you think that I endure this place because of her – and I’ll give you that it’s not my natural habitat – but she makes it all worthwhile.”

“Thanks, Dad. Thanks for pointing that out.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad, son. I’m just hoping that now that you’re planning to start a family of your own, you’ll see her as part of it – not just as this woman who your dad spends time with.”

“Yeah, I will. I do.”

His dad smiled at him as Russ and Willow approached. “I’m not saying it for my sake. I’m saying it for yours – and hers. You never knew your mother, but there’s an opportunity here for you if you want to take it. You can get a mom out of this deal – and don’t ever think that you’re too old for that. You can get a mom, and Ingrid can get a family – not just grandbabies, but a son, a daughter-in-law, and the rest of Willow’s family, too.”

Slade nodded happily. “We’ll make it happen. I like that idea; I like it a lot.”

“What will we make happen?” Willow asked as she reached them.

“Seeing more of these guys,” said Slade as he jerked his chin toward Russ, and then smiled at Ingrid and Ria, who were making their way back to them. “All hanging out together, like a real family.”

“I’m on board with that,” said Willow.

“I am, too,” said Russ. He looked serious as he met Slade’s gaze. “The only blood family I have left is a brother on the East Coast. We don’t see each other from one Christmas card to the next. I’m with you in wanting to make it happen.”

“Make what happen?” Ria asked when she reached them. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair wasn’t exactly messy, but it didn’t look as perfect as it usually did. Slade had to hide a smile – she was tipsy, if not drunk.

Russ shook his head with a smile. “I think what I need to make happen right now is getting you home.” He turned to Ingrid. “If you two ladies are going to start hanging out, then you should probably learn that she’s a lightweight.”

Slade tried to hide another smile at the indignant look on Ria’s face. “I am not!”

Russ wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I hate to break it to you, my love, but you are.” He turned back to Ingrid. “She can last longer if you keep her on wine.”

Ingrid laughed. “We’ll be testing that theory in a couple of weeks.”

“Why’s that?” Slade’s dad asked with a wary look.

Ingrid and Ria exchanged a look and giggled before Ingrid explained. “My new friend, Ria, is coming back to do a talk for our Thursday afternoon group. She’s going to teach us all about wine.”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘*all* about’ wine,” Ria protested. “But I can explain the varietals and ...”

Russ cut her off with a laugh. “Yes, you can. But for now, we need to get you home.” He shot a look at Slade.

“Yeah. This has been a whole lot of fun, and I have no doubt that we’ll do it again soon enough. But it’s time to call it a night.”

As Russ led Ria outside, Willow linked her arm through his dad’s, and Slade hung back to walk with Ingrid on the way home.

“It was a good night, right?” she asked.

“It was great. And thank you. Thanks for making it happen, and for pulling it together.”

She smiled up at him and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they walked.

“I didn’t do anything. I’m just glad you let me join in.”

He stopped walking. “Hey.”

She looked hesitant as she met his gaze.

“What about all that stuff about family?”

She shrugged. “I meant it. You guys can make that happen.”

“And what about you?”

She shrugged again. “I’ve never had one. I played it up tonight, because you guys were all so uptight that it was



obvious that someone needed to. But I know I'm not really part of it."

He gave her a stern look. "Don't give me that crap, Ingrid."

Her eyes grew wide. "I'm not! I..."

"Sorry. I should've said that a different way. I'm telling you that you saying that you're not part of it? That's a load of crap. You're as much a part of it as anyone. You're family, you hear me?"

Her eyes shone with tears as she nodded. "Thanks, Slade. I'd love to be."

"And you are."

He looked up when he realized that Willow and his dad had stopped and had come back to join them. He didn't need to wonder if they'd overheard the conversation. Willow walked straight up to Ingrid and wrapped her in a hug.

"Never mind him, he can get a bit bossy sometimes. He means well when he tells you that *you are*, but he could probably say it in a different way. What he means is that we really want you to be part of our family – please?"

Slade's heart melted in his chest as his dad came to stand beside him, and the two of them looked on as the women they loved hugged each other tight.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The next morning, Willow groaned and struggled to open her eyes when she felt Slade sit down on the bed beside her.

“Come on, sleepyhead. Get up. I brought you coffee.”

She rolled onto her back to look up at him. “How about instead of me getting up, you get back into bed with me. I’ll make it worth your while.”

He leaned in and dropped a kiss on her lips. “You know that I wouldn’t normally say no to that, but we need to get a move on. Xander and Tori will be here soon.”

She closed her eyes again and let her head fall back onto the pillow. “Shoot! I forgot about that. Who else is coming – and what time?”

“We’ve got about an hour. Xander and Tori have to fly back to Nashville this afternoon, and your mom and Russ are headed back to Summer Lake.”

Willow made herself sit up and piled the pillows behind her so that she could lean back on them.

Slade handed her a mug of coffee. “I let you sleep as long as I could. But I knew that you’d probably need some time to get yourself together.” He smirked. “How’s your head?”

“It’ll be fine. I’m not sure how Mom will feel this morning, though.”

Slade chuckled. “A little worse for wear, I’d imagine. She enjoyed herself.”

A rush of warmth filled Willow’s chest. “She did. We all did. It was awesome. I can’t wait for them to come back so that we can do it again.”

“I’m looking forward to that, too, but they haven’t left yet. I’m hoping that we can enjoy the time before they go.”

“Yeah. Who else is coming?”

He shifted on the bed; there was something wrong with him, but she couldn't imagine what it might be.

“What's up?” she asked.

“I didn't want to tell you, but I won't lie to you. Dad and Ingrid are coming, and I invited the rest of the guys over as well.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Everyone?”

He nodded. “Yeah, everyone.”

There was something that he wasn't telling her; she knew there was. But it was obvious that he didn't want to say, so she let it go.

She took a sip of her coffee and waited for the caffeine to hit her system. “I'd better get my ass into gear then, hadn't I?”

He took the mug from her and set it down on the nightstand. Then, he wrapped both arms around her and hugged her to his chest.

“I love you, little Willow.”

She leaned back to look up into his eyes. “I love you, too. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I'm good. I just...” He smiled. “Ask me again this afternoon – after everyone's gone – then I'll tell you. Okay?”

“Sure.” She cupped her hands behind his head and drew him closer until his forehead was resting against hers. “As long as you're okay, that's all I care about.”

His hazel eyes shone as they looked into hers. “I'm okay. I promise.” He nipped at her lips. “It's just that I don't want to say too much right now. I'm supposed to wait until later.”

“Wait for what?”

He closed his eyes, and his jaw clenched. The sound he made was like a low growl.

“What is it?”

He put his hand in his pocket and took something out. When he looked back up at her, he was wearing the biggest smile she'd ever seen on his face.

“Dammit! I really wanted to wait. I wanted to do it when everyone was here. But I can't. I can't wait.”

“What are you talking about?” Her heart was pounding in her chest. He looked so happy that she didn't think it could be anything bad, but the tension was rolling off him in waves, even as he smiled.

“I'm talking about this.” He slid down from the bed and held up a small velvet box.

Her heart thudded to a halt when she realized that he was on one knee.

He reached for her hand and gripped it tight. “You know I asked how you felt about a whirlwind romance? Well, in the space of a week since then, we've found a place, moved into it, and now, now I want to ask ... Will you marry me, little Willow?”

She grasped his hand so tightly that she knew that she must be crushing his fingers, but she didn't care. “Yes! Yes, finally! Yes!”

He took the ring out of the box and as he slid it onto her finger he said, “It took us a long time. We took a long and winding road to get here. But I wouldn't change a damn thing. You're it for me. We might not have been together for all the years in between, but my heart has loved you since that very first time. Even though we didn't see each other for years at a time, you were like a thread that ran through the whole story of my life. Now, the time's right ...” He chuckled. “This sounded better in my head, but I hope you know what I mean. It's like you said – it's finally time for us – time to get on with the rest of our life. I want you to be my wife, I want to be your husband. I can't wait for us to start our family, but I need you to know that even if we never have kids, it won't matter.

You're all I want – all I need. I love you, and I'll love you till the day I die.”

She flung her arms around his neck and pulled him in close. He climbed up on the bed beside her and kissed her. Right from the very first time, she'd always loved the way that he kissed her. He cupped her face between his hands hooking his thumbs behind her ears, holding her where he wanted her as he claimed her mouth. It was the way that he'd claimed her heart all those years ago.

When they came up for air, she pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. “I love you more than you know. I feel so lucky that I can say that you were my first, and I promise you right here and now, you will be my last. We're going to make it, you and me. We're going to have our family, raise our kids, and grow old together.”

She rested her head against his shoulder as he hugged her close.

“I'm banking on it.”

They sat that way for a long few moments until Willow remembered. “Shit! I was just thinking that I'd definitely be able to get you back into bed now – but everyone's coming.”

He nodded happily. “Yeah. We'll have to wait until this afternoon before we seal the deal.”

She laughed and slapped his shoulder.

“What! That's the way it works, isn't it?”

“It is for us.”

“But, yeah, everyone's going to be here soon.” He smiled as he looked at the ring on her finger. “And they're expecting to see me ask you and put that on you. But I just couldn't wait.”

Willow looked down at the ring. “It's perfect,” she said as she traced her fingertip over the vines engraved in the band. “I love it.”

“I’m glad. It just felt so right that I knew you’d love it, too. But come on, wifey, you need to drag your ass out of bed. If we’re quick, we can maybe seal the deal in the shower before anyone arrives.”

“Ooh!” Willow scrambled out of bed. “Since you put it like that, how could I say no?”

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Slade stood with his dad next to the bar in the tasting room. He’d thought that he wanted to convert this downstairs area back into a living space as soon as possible, but they’d only been in here for a day, and he was already hoping that it would become a gathering place for all their family and friends.

His dad nodded to where Willow was showing off her ring to the girls. “I’m glad you asked her before everyone arrived.”

Slade nodded. “Me too. I wanted to wait. Wanted to make a big deal out of it, make it this big occasion that she could look back on and remember. But when it came down to it, I couldn’t do that.”

“That’s never what it’s been about for the two of you. You went with what felt right. That’s how it should be. You stick with that, and you won’t go far wrong.”

They both looked up when Xander appeared beside Slade and slung his arm around his shoulders. “Happy for you, man.”

“Thanks.”

Xander smiled at his dad. “And happy for you, too; Ingrid’s awesome!”

His dad laughed. “I noticed that she’d cornered you over there. I hope it was okay.”

Xander grinned. “It was more than okay. Like I said – she’s awesome.”

The three of them looked over to where Ingrid was now chatting with Tori. Slade's dad shook his head. "If I'm right, it won't be too long before we can officially call you family, too."

Slade gave his dad a puzzled look, but Xander seemed to know what he was talking about.

"Give me a clue?" Slade asked.

Xander wagged his eyebrows at him. "I don't know how long it'll take me, but if I get my way, your dad's right."

Slade still didn't get it.

Xander rolled his eyes at him. "If I get together with your wife's sister..."

"Oh!" Slade laughed. "Sorry, I get it now. It took me a little while, but I got there in the end."

Xander laughed. "Exactly. That's what I'm hoping that I'll be able to say at some point down the line. Tori's either clueless or acting like she is because she's too sweet to tell me to go take a hike."

They all turned at the sound of metal tapping on glass. Slade smiled when he saw Ria beckoning everyone to gather around. Willow was standing beside her, and she beckoned for him to join them.

"I promise that I'm not trying to take over. It's just that we have to leave shortly, and I have a little surprise that I'd like to give to our happy couple before we go."

Willow cocked an eyebrow at him, but he shook his head. He had no clue. He hadn't been expecting this.

Ria beckoned to his dad and Ingrid, and they came to join them, standing in front of the bar. Everyone else stood around in a semicircle. It felt amazing to Slade to see the smiling faces of all their friends. Jacob had his arm around Becca and nodded at him when he met his gaze. Xander had somehow found his way back to Tori and stood protectively beside her. Bentley and Alyssa were next to them. Even Scooter had

come, little Ava was sitting on the floor with him, at Hannah and Grady's feet.

Molly gave him a knowing smile when his gaze landed on baby Luca, and Marcos nodded. Antonio stood with his arm around his wife, MaryEllen, looking as he always did – as if he owned the place and the whole thing had been his idea. Cameron and his wife, Piper, had only arrived a little while ago and they stood just inside the doorway with their arms around each other, both smiling at him.

He had to laugh when Chelsea gave him a dirty look before she burst out laughing and called, “Happy for you guys – but take your time with the wedding planning, will you?”

Grant held his hands up in a helpless gesture as he grinned. Slade knew damn well that he'd marry Chelsea tomorrow if she'd just make up her mind about what she wanted.

He hadn't had much time to chat with Willow's dad, Matthew, and his husband, Gabriel, but he could feel the warmth in their smiles as they looked on. He was looking forward to getting to know them better.

He came back to the moment when Willow tightened her arm around his waist. Her mom was looking at them expectantly, but he didn't know what she expected.

He had to laugh when she waggled her eyebrows at them. “I've been waiting and hoping for a while that this day would come. And when it did, I wanted to give you a special engagement gift.”

She paused and glanced over at Slade's dad. He didn't understand the look that passed between them, but he was going to be asking his dad about it later.

“I couldn't pull off the first gift that I thought of.” Her mischievous smile was back. “So, I had to come up with something else. And I came up with this...”

She held out an envelope, and Willow took it with a puzzled smile. “Thanks, Mom.”



Slade nodded. “Thank you.”

Ria laughed. “You are most welcome. Please, go ahead and open it.”

Willow tore open the envelope and the confusion on her face turned to a bright red flush. She held the paper inside up for him to read, and when he saw what it was, he understood. He could feel the heat in his own cheeks as he looked up at Ria.

She smiled warmly. “I didn’t disapprove, even back then.”

Slade had to swallow around the lump in his throat.

“Come on, guys! What is it?” called Xander.

Willow’s eyes shone with tears as she looked up at Slade and nodded. Her voice sounded strangled as she laughed and said, “Mom’s sending us on vacation.”

“Where to?” asked Tori.

Willow laughed. “The Hotel del Coronado in San Diego.”

Slade wrapped his arms around her and hid his face in her hair. He didn’t know whether she was laughing or crying as she shook against him. When she looked up into his eyes, he could see that it was both. He could see it, and he understood it – he was doing the same thing.

When he trusted himself to speak, he kept his arm around Willow’s shoulders as he met Ria’s gaze. “Thank you.”

“No, Slade. Thank you.”

He took a step away, hoping that he and Willow could get a moment alone to recover, but his dad put his hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

“Hang on a minute, son. We have a gift for you guys, too.”

Slade tensed. He didn’t want his dad to feel that he had to come up with some big gift, just because Ria had.

He relaxed a little when his dad smiled at Willow. “I don’t think it happens very often that anyone beats your mom to

anything. But I couldn't be happier to tell you that I beat her to this one."

Ria laughed. "It's true. He did. Vic was quicker off the mark than I was on this one. And I couldn't be happier."

Willow leaned into Slade's side, and he kept his arm tight around her, as they waited for his dad to continue.

His dad looked a little embarrassed to stand up and talk in front of everyone, but he straightened his shoulders and smiled around at them.

"I know I'm not the only one who's been hoping for a long time now that these two would figure it out and make a start on their life together. The Jacobs estate has been part of our lives since I was younger than Slade is now. It makes me happier than you know, son, that you're going to be living here." He turned his gaze to Willow. "And I understand how good this place is for you, sweetheart. But I also know how much you need to be in a place of your own."

Slade frowned, wondering where this was going. It was true that the only dark cloud on his horizon was that he knew Willow didn't want to live in the cottage long term, but it wasn't something that they needed to figure out yet.

The two of them clung to each other as his dad smiled at them. "Don't look at me like that! I'm not putting my foot in it, I promise."

Nervous laughter rippled around the room, and Slade knew that he wasn't the only one wondering whether his dad really was putting his foot in it.

"Just do it, Vic," called Jacob with a laugh. "They're not going to stop worrying until you do."

"Okay. Well, here you go then." His dad held out an envelope to Willow.

She let out a nervous laugh. "Don't tell me this is a vacation to Hawaii?"

Slade had to laugh, especially when he saw Ria's puzzled look. His laughter faded when he saw the serious expression on his dad's face.

“Go ahead. Open it.”

Willow took out the contents of the envelope and gasped out loud as she read it. Slade's heart thudded to a stop when he understood what it was.

He looked up at his dad, but he had no clue what to say. He couldn't process it.

Willow just shook her head. It seemed that she couldn't either.

His dad met his gaze and held it. “It's the deed for this cottage. Jacob knew you wouldn't accept this place from him. So, he gave it to me a long while back. It was part of my retirement package. I've been waiting for the day when I could pass it on to you, but we agreed back then that we'd know when the time was right.”

Slade blinked rapidly, trying to hold back the tears that pricked behind his eyes. Willow let go of him and went straight to his dad. “Thank you. Thank you so much!”

His dad hugged her, then held his arm out to Slade. The three of them stood there with their arms around each other for a long few moments, until Slade trusted himself to speak.

“Thanks, Dad,” he whispered.

His dad grasped his shoulder. “You're welcome, son.”

Willow kept her arms around both of them. “This is so freaking awesome!”

His dad laughed. “I told you I liked her. She's real.”

~ ~ ~

It was late afternoon by the time everyone had gone. Willow was surprised by how many of them had brought gifts.

One of her favorites – apart from the cottage itself and the vacation, which she was trying not to think too hard about – was a swing for the back porch. She'd been shocked when she read the card that came with it – it was from Smoke Hamilton and his wife Laura, though how they even knew about their engagement was beyond her. She was looking forward to catching up with them the next time she and Slade went to the lake to visit her mom and Russ.

Bentley and Xander had set the swing up before they left, and she and Slade had come out to finally relax after what had turned out to be a big day. As they sat on the back porch, watching the sun go down over the vines, Willow took a sip of her wine before snuggling into Slade's side.

"Today was the best day of my life. Just tell me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Am I going to wake up soon and figure out that this was all a dream?"

"No. It's real. As hard as it is to believe right now, it's real."

"I love you."

"I love you, too, little Willow."

She reached up and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I can't wait to marry you."

Slade chuckled. "Just say when."

She grinned at him. "When!"

"I'll get on it first thing in the morning."

"Deal. We'll figure out what we need and make it happen as soon as we can."

"We *will* make it happen as soon as we can, but I've got everything I need right here." He tightened his arm around her shoulders as he took a sip of his drink. When he smirked and cocked an eyebrow at her, she knew exactly what he meant even before he said it ...

“Whiskey and Willow.”;

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I hope you enjoyed Slade and Willow’s story. The next Hamiltons book will be Xander and Tori’s story. You can get more details as they become available on my website at [Vodka and Violets](#). I can’t wait to share that one with you!

# A Note from SJ

I'm still rotating through the series so the next book to be published will be [Meet Me Where the Stars Fall](#). Summer Lake Silver, Book 10. It's Lucky and Dee's story. I thought that Davin and Zoe were up next, but after showing up in Dalton and Taryn's story with his dog, Echo, Lucky has elbowed his way to the front. Davin says he's fine to wait a while longer – he's a bit more laid back.

Dee is a new character who you haven't met before. I hope you'll love her – she's already become a favourite of mine – and Lucky and Echo stole my heart a while back.

If you're missing the MacFarlands, Kolby and Callie's book will be the next one up there. I'm sure you noticed that they kept trying to get a mention anywhere they could in Slade and Willow's story. I've never been able to stop my characters from wandering – around my head, or across series. The Hamiltons and MacFarlands aren't the most obvious combination, but Kolby and Callie will not be denied!

You can get more details as they become available on my website at [The Cowboy's Undeniable Love](#). I can't wait to share that one with you!

And when we come back to the Hamiltons, it will be Xander and Tori's turn. You've already seen a little of them, and there's so much more to come. You can get more details as they become available on my website at [Vodka and Violets](#). I can't wait to share them with you!

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](https://www.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](http://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](mailto: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

# 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

## Summer Lake Silver

This series features couples in their fifties and older. Just because a few decades—or more—have skipped by since you were in your twenties it doesn't mean you can't find love, does it? Summer Lake Silver stories find happily-ever-afters for those who remember being thirty-something—vaguely.

Marianne and Clay in [Like Some Old Country Song](#)

Seymour and Chris in [A Dream Too Far](#)

Ted and Audrey in [A Little Rain Must Fall](#)

Diego and Izzy in [Where the Rainbow Ends](#)

Manny and Nina in [Silhouettes Shadows and Sunsets](#)

Teresa and Cal in [More Than Sometimes](#)

Russ and Ria in [Like a Soft Sweet Breeze](#)

Adam and Evelyn in [When Words Are Not Enough](#)

Dalton and Taryn in [Can't Fight The Moonlight](#)

## Coming Next

Lucky and Dee in [Meet Me Where the Stars Fall](#)

Davin and Zoe

## Summer Lake Seasons

Angel and Luke in [Take These Broken Wings](#)

Zack and Maria in [Too Much Love to Hide](#)

Logan and Roxy in [Sunshine Over Snow](#)

Ivan and Abbie in [Chase the Blues Away](#)

Colt and Cassie in [Forever Takes a While](#)

Austin and Amber in [Tell the Stars to Shine](#)

Donovan and Elle in [Please Don't Say Goodbye](#)

### **Coming Next**

Tiffany and Brayden in What's A Guy To Do?

### **Summer Lake Series**

Emma and Jack in [Love Like You've Never Been Hurt](#)

Holly and Pete in [Work Like You Don't Need the Money](#)

Missy and Dan in [Dance Like Nobody's Watching](#)

Smoke and Laura in [Fly Like You've Never Been Grounded](#)

Michael and Megan in [Laugh Like You've Never Cried](#)

Kenzie and Chase in [Sing Like Nobody's Listening](#)

Gabe and Renée in [Smile Like You Mean It](#)

Missy and Dan's wedding in [The Wedding Dance](#)

Ben's backstory in [Chasing Tomorrow](#)

April and Eddie in [Dream Like Nothing's Impossible](#)

Nate and Lily in [Ride Like You've Never Fallen](#)

Ben's Story in [Live Like There's No Tomorrow](#)

Smoke and Laura's wedding in [The Wedding Flight](#)

Leanne and Ryan in [Fight Like You've Never Lost](#)

### **The Hamiltons**

Cameron and Piper in [Red Wine and Roses](#)

Chelsea and Grant in [Champagne and Daisies](#)

Mary Ellen and Antonio in [Marsala and Magnolias](#)

Marcos and Molly in [Prosecco and Peonies](#)

Grady and Hannah in [Milkshakes and Mistletoe](#)

Jacob and Becca in [Cognac and Cornflowers](#)

Bentley and Alyssa in [Bourbon and Bluebells](#)

Slade and Willow in [Whiskey and Willow](#)

### **Coming Next**

Xander and Tori in [Vodka and Violets](#)

### **Remington Ranch Series**

[Mason](#)

[Shane](#)

[Carter](#)

[Beau](#)

[Four Weddings and a Vendetta](#)

### **A Chance and a Hope Series**

[Chance Encounter](#)

[Finding Hope](#)

[Give Hope a Chance](#)

### **MacFarland Ranch Series**

Wade and Sierra in [The Cowboy's Unexpected Love](#)

Janey and Rocket in [The Cowgirl's Unmistakable Love](#)

Deacon and Candy in [The Sheriff's Irresistible Love](#)

Laney and Luke in [The Cowgirl's Inevitable Love](#)

### **Coming Next**

Kolby and Callie in [The Cowboy's Undeniable Love](#)

Ace and Ari in The Rancher's Inescapable Love

## **The Davenports**

[Oscar](#)

[TJ](#)

[Reid](#)

[Spider](#)

## **Love in Nashville**

Autumn and Matt in [Bring on the Night](#)

## **Standalone Novella**

Sully and Jess in [If I Fall](#)