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# Pravda



## **Crush Synopsis**

Josie Sanchez is the head winemaker at Cadieux Vineyards, and all her dreams ride on the upcoming crush. If she can produce a gold medal pinot noir, the owner will give Josie her own wine label. *Finally*. She's worked years for this opportunity, and nothing will stand in her way. Not even Mac, the owner's annoyingly beautiful niece who doesn't know anything about wine, but whom Josie's forced to hire as her only harvest intern. Josie can't imagine a more ill-suited partner for the most important harvest of her life.

After a lackluster start in her marketing career, Mackenzie Layton is eager to jump headfirst into the illustrious Willamette Valley wine industry. Thanks to her uncle, her first harvest job is with one of the most prestigious wineries in town. But when she meets Josie, it's clear her presence is a nuisance, even if she does occasionally catch Josie's gaze lingering on her. Mac has a proclivity for misadventure, and she is unable to resist the one person who is off limits.

This crush will be a messy one, indeed.

# Crush

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# CRUSH

*by*

Ana Hartnett Reichardt



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## **Crush**

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## **By the Author**

Changing Majors

Catching Feelings

Chasing Cypress

Crush

## Acknowledgments

I can remember the first time I drove up the long gravel drive of Amity Vineyards in Oregon. The view of the estate vineyard took my breath away just like Cadieux's did to Mac. It was in this winery and vineyard where I fell in love with wine and made my first vintage. I made mistakes. Oh dear, so many mistakes. Added yeast nutrient to a white ferment without hydrating it, turned a keg of topping wine into a volcano, left the Riesling too exposed after some aggressive leaf thinning. *Crush* was messy, exhausting, and left me feeling like maybe I should pick a different career. That was until I tasted the wine I'd made. Reminiscing on all of my work experiences made writing *Crush* so much fun, and I hope the ups and downs and magic of harvest are felt through Mac and Josie. Wine will always be my passion. So cheers to love, mischief, and the vines.

There are countless people in my writing journey who I'm beyond grateful for. A huge thanks to Barbara Ann Wright, my editor, for being my partner in every book I write. You've taught me so much, have helped me develop my skills, and always make me laugh with your comments. As always, thank you to Rad, Sandy, and the entire BSB crew for making our dreams possible and continuing to support my writing.

My career in wine was completely inspired by my parents. *Crush* was possible because they shared their love of friends, community, and wine with me from early on. I think anyone who knows me can see I've carried on the tradition.

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As always, the biggest thanks to my readers. It is a joy to share these books with you.

## **Dedication**

Mom, you drove with me across the country to my first  
winemaking gig.

I was twenty-one and terrified.

But you make any dream seem possible.

Cheers to you.

## CHAPTER ONE

Josie Sanchez could feel it creep, the tension headache that had been flirting with her all week. She sighed and took a sip of pilsner while waiting for cheese and olives at Lou's, the old-school Italian restaurant in Elmwood. It was the kind of place where dusty mandolins and black-and-white photos of the family estate in Italy peppered the walls. Where guests started with antipasti and a cocktail, ordered a nice bottle of Barolo for dinner, and finished with a *digestivo* or *caffè corretto*.

The front of the restaurant was for the world, but Lou's back room was claimed by the wine industry. If a tourist walked down the few steps into the dimly lit maroon and black room behind the regular bar, they quickly got the sense they didn't belong and fled. And if they didn't leave on their own, the bartender would escort them to the front. It rarely got handsy.

The back room hummed with its standard Friday night crowd. There were a lot of things Josie hated about being in a roomful of industry people, but she enjoyed the respite from the tourists of Elmwood. She dealt with them quite enough at work and looked forward to the escape. There was no middle ground in this town. You were either a tourist or industry or ran a place on Main Street.

She took a sip and scanned the dark hollow over her shoulder, trying to dodge the eyes of eager elbow rubbers, but she was sitting next to the most popular industry person of all, Hank Layton, aka King of Pinot, aka wine legend, aka her boss. And Hank had an appetite for attention.

She smirked as he fisted the bowl of his Riedel, the delicate glass looking out of place in his thick fingers, his knuckles tattooed with stars. "How is it the King of Pinot has

the most disgusting wineglass in all Oregon? I mean, really? How hard is it to drink from the same spot and hold it by the stem like a civilized human?” It was a joke, of course, but the white gunk on the lip of his fingerprint-covered glass repulsed her.

“Anthony here served the damn thing too cold. Again. Had to warm it with my hands.” As if he wouldn’t hold it by the bowl anyway. *He would.*

Anthony, the older bartender with a manicured gray goatee and perfectly pressed black vest, raised a brow as he polished stemware. “You’re going senile, you old son of a bitch. I told you a million times, the cellar is set to fifty-seven degrees, and I—”

“Don’t have control over the temperature,” Hank finished, cutting Anthony off with a whiney impersonation.

He nodded and slid the stemware into an oak shelf, the lighting under the wood bringing each glass to a bright sparkle like hundreds of fireflies in a cave. In a world where everyone kissed Hank’s ass, he seemed to value Anthony’s sharp temper, however put-on. Liked to be roughed up a bit.

Josie laughed at the ribbing her boss so often deserved. Being the winemaker at Cadieux left her with little room to jab him when he was obnoxious. She had the best job in town, making the best wine in town, and that was always her priority. But she knew Hank like she knew the molecular makeup of wine, and she knew how much she could push. Once he had finished his olives and cheese, she decided to go for it: “About that conversation we started last week, I really believe—”

He cleared his throat and wiped his hands on the black serviette. She waited as he took another swig of the 2001 Brunello. She’d have a glass after her beer. There was no way she wasn’t trying *that* wine. “Earn me a gold in the Cru Wine Awards for this vintage’s estate pinot, and you can make your own label at Cadieux. I know it’s a couple years down the road until it’s judged, but you can make your wine this year, and if we don’t get gold, I’ll buy what you made and put it under the

Cadieux label.”

She set down her beer and rubbed the condensation between her fingers until it evaporated. Her own wine label had been her dream since she'd started in the industry when she was only twenty-one. Before that, if she counted her degree in microbiology as industry experience. And she did. Yes, the opportunity was tantalizing, but she had already given everything to Cadieux: years of missed weddings and family holidays—not that she ever looked forward to those—and countless vintages of superior wines. She'd already earned the privilege to make her own label at Cadieux.

Hank had that smug look on his face. The look that agitated her no end.

“Hank, come on. Gold medal or not, you know I've earned this. I've exceeded all your expectations for fifteen years.” *Shit.* Had she really been at Cadieux for that long?

“Anthony, can we please get another glass for Josie?” he asked. Anthony slid a fresh glass in front of her, and Hank held up the bottle of Brunello. “May I?”

She nodded, but she knew his tactics. He was about to butter her up only to deliver a blow of condescension.

In terms of the wine industry standard in Oregon, Hank broke the mold. Sure, he was an old white man, but his arms were covered in tattoos, and his whole attitude screamed rock 'n' roll. At least, it *had*. His tattoos looked a bit tired on his thin skin now. More of a whisper than a scream. He was a laid-back guy until it came to his wine. Then he was as serious as acetobacter, the bacteria that turned wine to vinegar, not to be messed with. And he trusted her—only her—to make his wine. She was the sole winemaker to take over for him, and they had developed a deep bond over the years. So deep, she thought of him as family. She certainly favored him over the one she'd been born into.

As frustrating as he could be, she also adored him. He was everything she wasn't: gregarious, boisterous, and charming. But what they shared was a natural aptitude for wine. He'd started Cadieux Vineyards in the seventies when he was just

twenty-three, and it was one of the first five wineries established in the Willamette Valley. He consistently produced some of the best wines in the region. Hell, in the world, if all those medals and awards had anything to say about it. He'd earned his stripes.

He poured her enough to give it a swirl and a good sniff, though an older wine like this didn't need a lot of swirling. It had been aging for over twenty years, beautifully micro-oxidizing to this gorgeous expression of Sangiovese. She took in the distinguished bouquet and put her lips to the crystal to taste. The Brunello was exquisite. Her eyes fluttered shut as she dragged air over the sip in her mouth, let the wine coat her tongue, and relished the taste of dried fig and leather. And was that a hint of hazelnut? "This is glorious."

"I know." He grinned and poured her a full glass. "Look. I get it, Jos. I really do. Every winemaker in town wants to make their own label, but they don't want to quit their cushy jobs to do it. That's the problem with millennials. You all lack the guts to go do the damn thing." She bit her tongue as she accepted his generational bashing. This was nothing new. He loved to get in a good one. "They don't want to jump headfirst into the deep end to do it. It's easy to look around the winery and think, 'Hey, look. Everything I need to make wine is right here.'"

She winced as he spoke. He wasn't wrong about winemakers wanting to use the space they already worked in, but it stung regardless. Nothing this delicious wine couldn't ease a bit. She took another sip as he put her in her place.

"I know you want to make your own label and put all that creative genius to work on something that's yours, but I run a business, and if there's extra fermentor and tank space, you'd better believe I want it filled with Cadieux wine. I think you're the bee's knees, kid. But there's nothing in it for me."

Hank always griped about the differences between millennials and boomers, proclaiming her generation was entitled and allergic to hard work. Which was the opposite of who she was, *thank you very much*. Also, the constant reference to her being a *kid* just annoyed the ever-living shit

out of her. She was forty-years-old, for the love of God, barely a millennial.

She crossed her legs and angled her body toward him. “Nothing in it for you except production space rental fees and partial ownership of my brand. You know I’ll be successful. I was named winemaker of the year before I turned thirty, for Christ’s sake. I’ve earned countless accolades and have been distinguished as one of the top winemakers in the country. People will buy what I make no matter what label it’s under.”

He listened intently, his signature blue eyes sparkling. When she finished, he laughed his bellowing laugh, and as if it were a mating call, three eager winemakers swarmed them. “Hi, Josie. Hank, how do you think this harvest will shake out?”

She sighed and leaned away, allowing Mike, Randy, and Chris access to *the* Hank Layton. It bored her. The men were nice enough, but they wanted to be *seen*. To be seen with Hank. She shook her head and dove into her Brunello. The popularity contest was her least favorite part of the industry, and if Hank wasn’t here to field the climbers, they’d be after her instead.

Once he had successfully shooed them away, he looked at her and smiled softly. Almost winced. “You know I’d make more money just making Cadieux wine instead of lending you the space. Not to mention, you’d be splitting your focus between two labels. It just doesn’t make sense for me.” She stayed quiet as his words pelleted her dreams. “I value you, and I want you to stay at Cadieux. Shit, where would I be without you? But I also value that damned elusive gold medal. So that’s my offer. Bring me the gold, and you get your label.”

She couldn’t argue with him. He was right. It didn’t make financial sense for him to let her use valuable winery space for her own label. It would be to keep her happy. A favor. And she got to start making her wine *this crush*. She grinned. If it took flipping the earth’s magnetic poles, she would win that gold medal. Nothing would stand in her way. “Deal.” She shook his meaty paw.

“I’ve been thinking about the other thing you asked for,” he said. Her shoulders rose, and she nodded, excited for him to continue. She’d been desperate for a density meter, a little handheld device that measured Brix, or sugar content, without having to manually set up a hydrometer for each individual fermentor. It sounded like a small purchase, but the density meter cost thousands of dollars. In her desperation, she offered to hire one fewer intern this crush to help offset the cost. “You can buy yourself a density meter.”

She pumped her fist in victory. “Yes.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You’re a nerd and need to get out more.”

“Oh, shut up. You know how much I need it. And quite frankly, it’s absurd a winery like Cadieux doesn’t already have one.” Deep down, she loved Hank, and she knew he loved her. More importantly, he respected her as a winemaker; something she had to constantly fight for in this industry, no matter how many awards she won. She was always one of the best *female* winemakers. But according to *Cork & Cellar*, the most respected wine magazine in the industry, she was the best *winemaker* in the whole damn country.

She couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you.”

He swirled his wine absentmindedly. “You’re sure you can get through crush with one intern?”

“Positive. Plus, I’ll have Teddy helping out and might steal Erin from Folstrum for pressing. You know they pick early and press early.”

He smirked. “Damn cowards.”

“Hey. She makes good wine for them.”

Hank wiped the gunk off the rim of his glass with the serviette and chuckled. “I can taste the fear in it. Roger never did have a pair of—”

“I can taste the fear in it, too.”

He wrapped an arm over her shoulders and pulled her into his thick chest. It was true. Folstrum’s owner, Roger Getson,



never had the guts to let his grapes hang through the rains, sacrificing the invaluable last couple of days of accumulation of phenolic compounds that gave wine its entire personality. Leaving them with thinner, more acidic wines. It was a sore topic for Erin.

“It’s not her fault. She’s a good winemaker,” Josie said.

He shrugged.

The density meter was going to save her countless hours. If she could find an experienced harvest veteran to help shoulder the work and be a leader in the cellar, she’d not only make it through crush, but she’d make Hank’s gold medal estate pinot. She just needed to hire the perfect person.

“I already have an intern lined up for you, so you can cross that off your giant preharvest to-do list,” he said.

She did not like the sound of this. She wanted to handpick her intern, especially for the most important and understaffed crush of her life.

“My niece, Mackenzie. She doesn’t have much experience, but she’s a good kid. Got a good spark in her. I think she’ll do well for you.”

Josie almost knocked over her glass reaching for her serviette to smother her surprised cough. *What the hell?* Any other harvest, she wouldn’t mind coaching a newbie. She would have one experienced intern and one inexperienced. But this crush, she only had one. And hiring someone with zero wine background was the opposite of what she needed.

Hank scanned the menu, making it clear he was finished with this conversation. This seemed a hard line for him. He’d always had a soft spot for the girl in the photo on his desk. His only niece. He had a nephew, too, but he only ever talked about her.

So she was stuck with Mackenzie Layton for better or worse.

## CHAPTER TWO

Mac was not afraid of heights. Growing up, if her parents or little brother couldn't find her, it was because she was tucked in the limbs of an oak tree, reading away the afternoon. She had always been sure-footed and eager to climb a tree, the monkey bars, or the rope in gym class. What she did not like, however, was soaring through the sky in a giant metal tube that definitely defied gravity. To make things worse, she'd accidentally booked a window seat. Normally, she'd go for the aisle, the safest place to sit, but at least it wasn't the middle seat.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the seat back in front of her, trying to avoid the fragments of conversation the guy to her right kept lobbing at her. Not even her headphones had been a deterrent. He was nice enough, but as happened far too often, she could tell he'd assumed she was straight, and he was after something, his words charged with a flirtatious energy. It agitated the crap out of her. She hated that just because she liked to dress on the more feminine end of the spectrum, the world made assumptions about her. The wrong assumptions.

They took her femininity and labeled her straight, her blond hair and big smile and labeled her a ditz, and her kindness and labeled it weakness. It was why she'd chosen to go by "Mac" after she came out. It suited her. The real her.

She took a small sip of ginger ale in an effort to untangle the knot twisted in her gut. Not only were her nerves shot from being terrified for the last three hours, but she was on her way to Oregon. To the Willamette Valley. To Elmwood, where she would begin her new career. She might be just a harvest intern, but everyone started somewhere, and Cadieux was quite the place to start. Her dad's older brother, Uncle Hank, had done her a huge favor and scored her the position at his winery. She

was anxious to prove herself worthy of the job and to prove herself useful and professional and knowledgeable. To prove to herself that she'd made the right decision to leave her father's marketing firm and chase her dreams of making wine.

And there was Heather.

She bit her lip and shook her head, trying to will away the thought of her ex-girlfriend of three years. It had been over a year since the breakup, but damn, she was still so raw from it. They'd been happy. *Right?* She found herself reliving every moment because there had to be something she was missing. But she wasn't missing anything. Heather had said exactly why she'd left:

*I'm just looking for something more serious. It's time for me to settle down.*

At face value, it sounded like a perfectly normal reason to break up with someone. But when that someone begged to move in together and take concrete steps toward marriage, then that excuse fell flat on its ass and majorly sucked.

Heather hadn't taken her seriously. And Mac had let her leave.

It wasn't just her ex. There was something about her that made people not trust her with the heavy stuff. Getting clients to trust her with their marketing needs was like pulling teeth, and her father was no help, happily chauffeuring them to the more "serious" agents. Bitchy Patricia or the guy with the thick black wayfarers. Okay, his name was Brad. It was truly flabbergasting, especially since her campaigns performed the best on average out of the three. But again, she'd *let* those clients transfer.

A fresh start. That was what she was after. And of course, she wanted to grow her budding passion for wine. It had always fascinated her, especially knowing her uncle was a prolific winemaker. But beyond Uncle Hank, there was something ancient and magical about wine. It excited her. She'd thought she was happy working for her father's marketing firm, so she had never explored the wine industry deeper than reading wine history books and volunteering for

bottling days at local wineries. She'd also tried to attend the tastings at her local wine shop. But this would be her first *real* experience in the industry, and she was determined to succeed.

She took a deep breath. Uncle Hank had always thought the world of her. Didn't see her as fragile or weak. He knew she was strong. No matter what happened, Mac would make him proud. Definitely wouldn't make him regret hiring her. She held the cup to her mouth, and the fizz of carbonation tickled her lips. *Definitely would not.*

*Ohs* and *ahs* filled the cabin. She had kept her window shut for the entire flight, not needing the constant reminder that she was thirty-five-thousand feet above where humans should reasonably be.

The captain's voice chopped through the intercom. "It's a gorgeous evening in Oregon, and we've been cleared to fly extra close to Mt. Hood. It's on the left side of the aircraft. Enjoy," she said.

The intercom went quiet, and Mac stared at the taupe window shade, a sliver of golden light peeking from the bottom. *This is what I'm here to do. To be an active participant in my own life. To not let things pass me by.* She pushed the plastic up and gasped. Mt. Hood looked like a mountain from a fairy tale, its peak pointed and sharp but curved like the top of a soft-serve ice cream cone or a mountain from Whoville. The setting sun drenched it in orange and turned the snow into melting sorbet. They were so close to its beauty, something shook deep in her chest.

Complete awe.

The guy next to her cleared his throat. "Beautiful, huh?"

She nodded, her eyes going dry from the lack of blinking as she adored the mountain, so far away in that moment, she might as well have been on the summit. That was, until she felt a thigh flex in her grip, and she gasped again, tearing her hand from the man's leg. "Oh my God," she sputtered, looking at him in horror. "I am so sorry. I had no idea what I was doing."

The man, who couldn't have been older than forty, broke into a smug grin. "You know, I didn't mind all that much."

She tried to laugh him off and pointed out the window. "I really didn't mean to encroach. I was just so entranced by the view, I forgot where I was."

He grazed her knee with his knuckles. "Like I said, I didn't \_\_\_"

"Lesbian," she almost shouted. A few heads turned to see whose teenager was misbehaving, and Mac's cheeks warmed under their skeptical gazes when they found she, a thirty-year-old woman, was the owner of the blurt. The man raised his brows and piled his hands in his lap.

*That's right, sir. Don't touch me.* She'd inadvertently started it, the kind of silly mistake that often found her, but she wanted it to stop. "Sorry. It's just, I'm a lesbian, so I'm not interested in..." *You.* "This."

The look of surprise on his face morphed into a sly grin, and he bobbed his head. "Nice."

*Okay.* She'd had enough of this flight.

\* \* \*

Josie inched her car through the long line in the arrivals section of PDX. She groaned for the millionth time since she'd locked up the winery that afternoon. As if she didn't have enough on her plate with finalizing grape contracts and supply orders for crush, Hank had to task her with retrieving her intern from the airport. Normally, she'd hire people who were self-sufficient enough to find their own way to her place in Elmwood. But not Mackenzie Layton, apparently.

Hank had wanted to pick her up himself but was called up to Seattle for a board meeting of a real estate investment firm he was involved in and had left her with the menial task. Now she'd be stuck in a car with the woman for an hour on the way back to her house, where Mackenzie would be staying through harvest. The basement apartment was normally an ideal setup for interns, but she wasn't looking forward to hosting Hank's inexperienced niece for almost six months.

She slapped the steering wheel. “It had to be this harvest,” she grumbled to the empty car. This harvest. The one her dream of having her own label rode on. The one she’d be short-staffed for.

Her phone buzzed in the cupholder as she squeezed into an empty space along the curb. “Hello?”

“Josie, hi. This is Mac.” The woman’s voice was bright and chipper. Josie could practically hear the overeager inexperience in it. Just from the greeting, she had Mackenzie pegged as the sort who always got what she wanted. Airy and not serious enough to handle harvest. “Well, you probably know me as Mackenzie, but everyone calls me Mac. And you can call—”

“I’m in section five. In the black RAV4. Where are you?”

It took a second for Mackenzie to respond. “Oh, right. Um.” The line went quiet again, and she rubbed her temple, a hint of the familiar stress headache prickling under her skin. “I’m in section three, I think. How about I walk to you? I know things can be wild out here. The arrivals section is basically *The Hunger Games*, am I right?”

“Great. I’ll wait.” She hung up and turned the radio to Oregon Public Broadcasting. She liked to have it on low. Like a nice white noise. She scanned the different passengers waiting for their rides, looking for the face she’d only seen in a photo while the sound of chitchat on OPB eased the rumbling in her head.

Then her eyes fell on Mackenzie Layton.

There wasn’t a single doubt in her mind that the woman frantically weaving through people with her blond hair falling out of its messy bun and giant suitcase dragging behind her was her new intern. She had Hank’s eyes. Specifically, she had the same twinkle in them. Even though it was late August, the night held a chill, and Mackenzie had on shorts and a T-shirt, her slender limbs looking exposed and cold. Josie sized her up for one more second before she hopped out and helped her load her luggage. *There’s no way this woman can lift a barrel.*

“Josie?” Mackenzie asked, her hand extended.

She nodded and shook her hand, noticing the softness of it, how it screamed that Mackenzie wasn’t familiar with hard work. “Yes. You must be—”

“Mac. Your harvest intern.” Her smile was wide and showed off rows of perfectly white teeth. Perfectly straight, too, except for one crooked tooth sandwiched between its partners on the bottom row. It was kind of...cute.

“Right. Welcome.” She cleared her throat and reached for the suitcase, loading it into the trunk and gesturing for Mac to get in. They buckled their seat belts and drove into the night toward Elmwood.

The first few minutes of the ride were quiet except for OPB. When they merged onto the highway, Mac finally spoke. “Thank you.” Josie peeked at her but couldn’t make out her expression in the dark, only that she seemed to be looking at her lap. “For the ride. I told Uncle Hank that I could handle it, but he insisted that you’d pick me up, and I didn’t want to argue.”

Josie tried to exhale a bit of her frustration with the entire situation and show her new intern some warmth. The reality was that she needed Mac to succeed in her position, and Mac needed Josie to show her how. “It’s fine,” she said. A few more awkward minutes passed before she decided to try to maintain a conversation. “Have you ever been here?”

“Twice. But I was nine the first time, and we stayed in Newport on the coast. And the second time, we all met in Bend. So I’ve never actually been to Elmwood. Or Cadieux.”

She shook her head. Red flag. “How is it that you love wine so much and have never visited your uncle’s winery? It’s one of the best in the States.”

Mac gave a low, gentle chuckle. It was softer than OPB. “I know. It’s criminal. But I only recently decided to switch to the wine industry. My degree is in marketing, and I was focused on that, working for my father’s firm and trying to make it in that world. But I hated it. And since we’re Hank’s

only family, he would travel to us for holidays.”

“You didn’t like working for your father, so you tried to get a job from your uncle?” She could feel Mac staring, and she kept her eyes glued to the road as she waited for a response.

“I didn’t like *marketing*, not working for my father. Well, I guess working for my father wasn’t always the best. But when I decided I wanted to be in the wine industry, I volunteered for bottling days at wineries near home in Virginia to learn more about wine.” She paused for a moment, seemingly considering something. Her next words maybe. “I didn’t ask Uncle Hank for a job at Cadieux, just for advice on where I should start. But he offered me this position, and of course, I accepted.”

She nodded. “Of course.” The words sounded harsh, and she tried to amend them. Having her one harvest intern hate her wasn’t going to help her produce gold medal winning wine. Wasn’t going to help her earn her own label. “I mean, who would pass up the opportunity to work for the *King of Pinot*?”

“Oh no.” Mac laughed and slapped her knee. “Please don’t tell me people actually call him that. It’s horrible.”

Josie grinned. She couldn’t help it. “You have no idea.”

“His ego is big enough,” Mac said.

Chuckles overflowed Josie’s chest, her throat, her nose. Something she wasn’t expecting to happen on this ride. There was a warmth and magnetism to Hank’s niece, as if she existed on a different magnitude, commanding gravity and pulling others easily toward her. A quality that wouldn’t be of much help when it was pushing midnight, and someone still had to do punch-downs. Regardless, it was *nice*.

“He eats it up,” Josie said. Once their laughter stilled, she added, “He really is something. I’m so grateful to be the winemaker at Cadieux, and it’s because your uncle built the best vineyard and the best winery in town.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

The last leg of the drive drifted by in comfortable quiet



until they pulled off 99 onto her street. “We live on Holston. I’ll text you our address when we get in. I know Hank has probably explained everything, but your housing is free.” She parked in front of the old, faded-red craftsman, and Mac turned to her.

“You don’t make any money from renting out your home?”

“Oh no, I do. The winery covers intern housing, and my basement happens to be said housing. So the winery pays me rent, basically.”

“Gotcha.”

They stared at each other over the center console for a moment longer than was necessary in the dark of her car. Josie noticed a curiosity in Mac’s expression. In her slightly arched brow and the quirk in her lips. This was her new partner. Josie had a lot of apprehension about that, about the complete lack of experience and knowledge, but the crooked tooth and the laugh that warmed her like cognac eased some of the frustration.

She jangled her keys. “I hope you like dogs.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“Oh my gosh. I am in heaven,” Mac said. Two dog butts wiggled against her legs, tails slapping her and each other. “Which one is Bone?”

Josie sliced the foil off a bottle of wine in one quick swoop. “Bone is the younger black lab, and Tinkerbelle is the older shepherd.” She pulled two glasses from the hutch and poured red wine in each.

Mac couldn’t help but notice how Josie moved through space. Efficient and confident, yet quiet like a tiger. She handled the wine key like she’d won an Olympic gold in the task. But the wiggling butts demanded pets. Mac only came up for air to accept a glass from her new boss.

“Tinkerbelle, huh?” She grinned over the rim. Josie didn’t seem like the type to have a dog named Tinkerbelle. She had a serious vibe formed of rough hands, leather boots, and what Mac guessed was probably a heart so guarded, not even Mac’s girl-next-door charm would be able to win her over. In a work relationship kind of way, of course.

Josie laughed and gave the graying shepherd a rub behind her ear. “Yeah. I bought this house two years ago from a gentleman who was transitioning to an assisted living facility. The market was tight for buyers, so he had some power, but he didn’t gouge me.” She looked at Tinkerbelle, and Mac looked at her. Josie tucked her dark brown hair with a few striking strands of silver behind her ear and continued to pet her pup. “His one stipulation was that I adopt his dog, Tinkerbelle, because he couldn’t bring her with him. I love dogs, so getting to keep her was the cherry on top.”

Bone seemed to grow jealous of all the attention on her sibling and swooped in on Josie’s pets. “And Bone?” Mac asked.

“Bone was just a puppy when I got her from the shelter. She’s three now. I think they named her that because her favorite toy was this nasty little rubber bone with a dead squeaker. The perfect name for one of the goodest girls.” Josie petted them both with such affection, it made Mac reconsider the initial coldness of her. “B-O-N-E, for clarification. Every wine jerk who meets her thinks I named her Beaune for Burgundy.” She shook her head and mumbled, “People annoy the hell out of me. You’ll see what I mean soon.” She straightened. “Now that we have wine, how about a tour?”

Though she hadn’t seen her apartment yet, Mac was in love with Josie’s home. It was exactly the style she adored: classic, simple, and earthy, with just a splash of funky. The kitchen opened into the dining room, which U-turned into the living room. The living room walls were a deep navy and carried three pieces of art, all of them stunning and feminine. The mocha couch and gold-rimmed coffee table were a subtle pop of style. A record player and vast collection of music sat in the corner next to the TV.

“You have a kitchen and living area downstairs, and you’re welcome to stay separate. There’s a private entrance through the backyard. Normally, interns like to hang out up here and cook meals together. This space is yours, too.”

Mac nodded, amused by the hint of hesitation in Josie’s otherwise confident words. “I like to maintain tradition.” She tilted her head and considered her own words. “Sometimes. But definitely, this time,” she blurted.

Josie stared at her for what felt like eons. Was she really blowing this gig on night one? She worried her lip. She’d always had a hyper mouth that refused to stop producing meaningless words in situations with beautiful women. *With bosses. Get it together, Mac.* Josie’s eyes tagged her boots before meeting Mac’s gaze again, and she smiled. A surprisingly soft smile. From what she could tell, Josie was an intoxicating blend of hard and soft. From her attitude down to her soft-looking lips and calloused hands.

“Right. Um, there’s a bathroom here, and my room and office are upstairs. Nothing you’d need up there.” She waved a

dismissive hand at the stairwell, and Mac was hit with disappointment. She was curious to see Josie's space. She was such a stoic character, and Mac was trying to build every bit of personal connection she could with her. She needed to. Being on Josie's good side was priority number one. She needed this crush to be perfect in order for her to launch her career and hopefully find a full-time job, so she wouldn't have to move home to Virginia after harvest. And full-time jobs were hard to find in this industry.

“Your home is gorgeous.”

Josie sipped her wine, then edged around Mac in the small hallway, leaving her in the wake of a subtle pine sap scent. “Thank you,” Josie said over her shoulder. “It's kind of my sanctuary when work gets crazy. Which is pretty much always.” They crossed through the living room, dining room, and kitchen to the two doors by the pantry. One led to the backyard, which Mac hoped had a garden, and one led to the basement. Josie reached for that one. “Okay. Now for your space. Hope you like it.” Something told her that Josie took a lot of care in creating a nice home for her interns.

The stairs spit them out into a wide space of concrete and wine. “This isn't it, don't worry.”

The mountain of wine pulled Mac like water to the moon. There had to be thousands of bottles. Some displayed on wall-mounted wooden racks and some tucked away in neatly labeled cases underneath, while wine region maps clung to the concrete walls. So much concrete. But the wood of the racks warmed the rock and transformed the corner of Josie's basement into what felt like a real Burgundian cellar. She fingered the old cigar box holding five very fancy and distinct wine keys that sat on the head of an oak barrel.

Josie stepped next to her. “You found my wine.”

Mac met her gaze and smiled. “You don't do a very good job at hiding it. May I suggest fifty blankets or an invisibility spell of some kind?”

Josie's brown—almost black—eyes crinkled in the corners. Looking into her eyes was like peering down a well.

Mac could get lost in them. “I actually did cast an invisibility spell so losers can’t see it.”

Mac could feel her cheeks warm from the familiarity of her words, from her joke, from the wine, maybe. “Hmm. I guess I passed the test.”

“For now.” Josie grinned, cleared her throat, and took a step back as if retreating from something. “You can drink most anything down here. I’d just like to know what you pull to keep my inventory accurate.” She scanned her kingdom of wine and swallowed. “And in case it’s a special bottle.”

Mac laughed and pressed a hand to her chest, horrified by the thought of snatching wine from Josie’s collection. “You’re mistaken if you think I’m just going to help myself to random bottles from my boss’s cellar. No way.”

Josie shrugged. “Well, regardless. We’ll drink a lot of fun wines while you’re here.”

“Speaking of, what are we drinking now?” She dipped her nose into the glass and took a deep breath of the vibrant red. It was a fun and funky wine with bright red fruit and a dank, earthy spice.

Josie closed the space between them. Her gaze warmed Mac’s skin. “Open your mouth a bit,” Josie said.

She pulled her nose out of the glass and raised a brow. “What?”

“Sorry.” Josie shook her head. “I hate being a snob, but you’re here to learn about wine, so I feel like it’s my responsibility to tell you this stuff.” Her words ended on a high note, like she was asking for permission. Not something Mac expected from her. She nodded for Josie to continue. She *was* here to learn this stuff, and she could probably listen to Josie Sanchez talk about wine forever without getting bored. “Open your mouth when you smell. Just a little. Like this.” She swirled her wine and held it to her nose, closing her eyes.

Josie smelled her wine and pushed another loose wave behind her ear, showing off a gold cuff hugging her cartilage. *Damn, she definitely pulls that off.* Her brows narrowed in

concentration, and her lips plucked apart as she dragged in a deep breath. Mac couldn't stop staring. A vertical scar about an inch long cut through the right side of her bottom lip. It looked as if someone had bitten through it, or maybe a wineglass had shattered while she was drinking.

Mac averted her gaze when she found it had wandered to the thick of Josie's lips, and she wondered if hers would fit perfectly in the space between them.

*Stop. You stop it right now.*

Josie opened her eyes and smiled. "Scent and taste are so intimately connected, you can actually decipher more aromas if you open your mouth while you take a breath."

Mac copied her method and took a small sip. Though her eyes were closed, she could feel Josie's gaze on her. She took an extra second to enjoy the wine on her tongue and Josie's attention before she opened her eyes to confirm exactly what she'd felt.

Josie stared at her. Eyes poring over her lips, her hands, her face, until she swallowed and straightened. "So what do you think it is?"

She laughed and made a show of looking at her glass. "I think it's...red wine."

Josie chuckled. "Don't be nervous. This is just part of the job. You have to learn to identify different aromas and flavors because you'll be my eyes and nose in the cellar. If a ferment smells a little different one day, I need you to catch it and make note of it. If a barrel sample smells anything like vinegar, I need to know. That'd be bad." She shuddered at the thought. "Anyway, what do you think?"

Mac tried to focus on the flavors playing on her tongue. The cherry and dried tomato made her feel like maybe it was Sangiovese. "I want to say Sangio."

Josie grinned. "That is a very good guess. It's rioja. A little less dried herbs and more tobacco and dirt. Good job." She held up her glass, and Mac knocked hers against it, the pretty *ping* echoing against the concrete walls. "Washer and dryer are

in the far corner, and your apartment is through that door.” She nodded past her shoulder. “Why don’t you go check it out while I grab your suitcase?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

Josie was already walking up the stairs. “All good,” she called.

Mac opened the door and found her bedroom. A queen-size bed with white sheets and a white comforter topped with blue accent pillows sat along the far wall, shouldered by two wooden nightstands that matched the dresser by the closet. She traced the large map of the Willamette Valley AVAs hanging on the pale yellow wall until she found Cadieux’s, the Eola-Amity Hills AVA.

The bedroom led into a small living area with a gray couch and matching armchair and that opened into the kitchenette. Everything she would need to cook most meals was in one drawer or another. A door that led to the backyard stood next to the fridge. She reached for the handle and startled when she heard knocking from her bedroom.

“Hey, Mac. Just dropping your bag,” Josie called from the entrance of her apartment.

She walked through the living room to her bedroom to find Josie leaning in the doorway, seemingly avoiding stepping foot in her room. “Thank you. You can come in, you know.”

“Oh no. No, no. This is *your* space.”

She nodded and grabbed her luggage, plopping it on the bed. She tried to ignore the disappointment she felt from the hard boundaries. It was inappropriate, misplaced...dangerous. Josie was her boss, for God’s sake. Her wildly attractive boss, but her boss nonetheless. Tomorrow was her first day, and she’d have something else to pour her energy into other than inexplicably wanting to inch closer and closer to someone who was very off-limits and *very* enticing. “Okay. Thanks for bringing this down.” She grabbed the glass from her dresser and walked back to Josie. “And thanks for the apartment. It’s perfect.”

Josie's eyes flitted about the small bedroom, and she sucked on a piece of her wine-stained lip. "I know it's not much. But it helps to be in the same place during crush for carpooling and all that." She waved around her head like she was trying to encompass *all that*.

She smiled. "Yeah. Sounds good to me."

Josie watched her for a moment, sighed, then reached for the empty glass in her hand. "I'll take this back up with me. We'll leave for work at 7:30 tomorrow morning. We start at eight, unless it's harvest. Then we start at seven."

"I'll be ready."

They lingered in the threshold for a moment longer than was necessary, just like in the car. Maybe Josie didn't want to say good night. Mac certainly didn't. Josie nodded once. "Right. Okay. Night, Mac."

"Good night."

Once Josie disappeared, Mac grabbed her toiletry bag and a fresh towel from the closet and took a hot, fortifying shower. Something told her she'd need a lot of strength in the coming months. She had a lot to prove. As she rinsed shampoo from her hair, she tried to visualize herself succeeding on her first day, but an image of Josie kept popping into her head. "Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered. Why did this have to happen to her? It was literally the most inconvenient of crushes.

\* \* \*

Josie ghosted through her night chores in a fog of...of *what?* Why was she so keyed up and fluttery? Like Red Bull was pumping through her veins instead of blood. She sat on her front steps and rubbed her forehead as Bone and Tinkerbelle took their time finding the perfect spot to relieve themselves. The night was cool and fresh, a pleasant escape from the almost unbearable summer heat. Autumn was shouldering its way in, and soon, harvest would be here.

She shook her head as she replayed the scene of Mac trying to guess what wine they were drinking. Mac was stomach-achingly beautiful with her gorgeous, honey blond



hair and signature Layton sparkle in her eyes. Yes, she was all sunshine and warm sugar, but when she closed her eyes to taste, there was something stormy and strong pulling Josie in. A squall building under the pale sunlight of her skin. And Josie was dying to see more.

“No,” she whispered to herself, as if she could manifest apathy. It wasn’t like she’d dated much. Especially not after the Carly fiasco. She shuddered in the breeze at the thought. She was perfectly content being single. There was no big hole in her life she needed to fill. Not with her intern, at least. It was making her own label that would make her whole. She was mature enough—complete enough—to resist this one woman.

Mac Layton was everything she’d expected. A spoiled girl with a cute, crooked smile that could make the men in her life bend to her every will and give her any job she wanted. But Josie was a woman—a strong woman—and she wouldn’t bend so easily. She had a job to do, and whatever charm had her knees buckling would expire by morning. She was the goddamn winemaker of Cadieux Vineyards. A professional. Whatever little inkling or pull toward her intern was irrelevant and stupid and most importantly, *over*.

She whistled to the dogs. “Come on, girls. Time to get to business.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Everything is so beautiful here. There really are vineyards everywhere,” Mac said. She hadn’t torn her gaze from the window since they’d left for work that morning. Maybe once to give Bone and Tinker some pets in the back seat.

Josie stayed quiet. She was tired from a fitful night of sleep—one of many since harvest prep had begun—and had a busy day ahead of her. Not only did she have to run final sulfurs for the wines being bottled next week and finalize grape contracts and the harvest order from Tank and Chem, but she had a new intern to train. Normally, Teddy, her vineyard manager and sometimes cellar helper, would help on a day like today, but he had it marked off on the schedule for months; it took some serious planning to get two kids to the dentist before the school year started. Unfortunately, it’d be just her and Mac today. At least Shelby, the tasting room manager, could show Mac around the rest of Cadieux beyond the cellar. The tasting room was closed today, but Shelby’d be in for inventory.

“Will we be able to see Mt. Hood?” Mac asked.

Josie glanced out the window. It was a bright clear day with minimal haze or cloud cover. “Yeah. Once we turn at this light and pass the Christmas tree and alpaca farm, it’ll be on the left,” she said. She could hear the monotony in her voice. Sometimes, her stress manifested as annoyance. She wasn’t annoyed with Mac, just at herself for giving in to such juvenile and risky thoughts last night. And she was beyond stressed about her inexperience.

“Okay. Cool.”

They drove a couple more minutes, her mind flitting through her to-do list over and over. Crush was stressful, but the weeks leading up to the first pick were a different kind of

hectic. A smooth harvest depended on watertight preparation, and this was the time to put in the work on the front end that would hopefully save some headache, backache, and heartache on the back end. Even though she was already exhausted, she'd thank herself in a month when she was wet and tired and still working at midnight.

“Oh. My. God. It's...” In her excitement, Mac squeezed Josie's shoulder. “It's mesmerizing. Like, somehow, it's just as beautiful as when I saw it on my flight in. Wow. Just, wow.” Josie couldn't focus on anything except Mac's grip on her shoulder. She *had* to focus on anything besides Mac grip on her shoulder. And it needed to stop. As if reading her mind, Mac pulled away. “Sorry. That mountain has some kind of spell on me.”

Josie nodded and stared at the road ahead, completely ignoring the last minute. The speed limit dropped to thirty as they entered the town of Amity, and a smattering of small homes and trailers lined the roads. They turned left and began up a long gravel drive shrouded in dense trees, golden light cutting through the green and zebra-stripping the gray gravel.

“Cadieux is in the town of Amity,” Josie said as her tires crunched through the freshly graded drive. “We're in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA. Our soil is volcanic basalt: well-drained, shallow, rocky.” She counted off the qualities on her fingers. “Perfect for making good pinot. We have a twenty-acre estate vineyard and source from other top-notch vineyards in our AVA for non-estate wines. The tasting room is open Wednesday through Sunday, so today, we don't have to deal with tours or customers pressing their faces to the glass, watching us. Shelby will be in for inventory. You'll like her.” *Wine*. She could talk about wine.

Mac nodded. “Sounds great to me.”

She stopped outside the gate next to the sign that read, “Cadieux Vineyards.” It made her proud every time she came to work. The lettering was clean and simple, not overstated and gaudy like so many other wineries. She hit the button on the small clicker she kept in her car, and the gate creaked to life, sliding open for them. Once they had cleared the entrance,

she hit the button again to close it.

Coming to work never got old. She drove up the small road cutting through the vineyard, leading to the parking lot. *Véraison*, the darkening of the berries, had already ensued, so the pinot grapes were a pop of purple against the forest green of the vegetation, and all the magic was happening in each of those little berries. Sugar was accumulating, the fruit was growing and softening, flavor compounds were amassing.

When they summited the vineyard, Mac gasped. Josie could hear the air rush through her lips and saw her chest inflate at the view from Cadieux. She seemed speechless. Her lips parted as she fumbled for the door handle and nearly tumbled out of her seat. Josie followed with Bone and Tinker as Mac walked to the picnic tables by the gnarly old fig tree and took in the view. The dogs did their habitual smelling and marking of the periphery.

It really never got old. From Cadieux, the entire valley was visible, held in the bosom of their estate vineyard. The sun bathed different plots of farmland and vineyards among the rolling hills of the Willamette. When there were no customers—and she was alone up here—it was so quiet, there was a sort of electric hum to the silence.

A soft breeze rustled Mac's long hair as she turned to Josie, her face a mix of awe and mischief. "You didn't tell me the view sucked so badly." Josie couldn't help but crack half a smile. It just slipped out. "It must make coming to work every day just a little harder." She pinched two fingers in front of her squinted eyes.

Josie shrugged. "Guess I'm used to it by now. I've been here for fifteen years. Kind of loses its sparkle after a while." *Lies*. She bit her lip and looked over the valley. She could drive up to Cadieux her entire life, and it would never lose its shine. This place was special. It was *everything* to her. She didn't just want to make her wine here because it was convenient to use the equipment. She wanted to make her wine here because there was magic to this place. From the view to the vineyard to the house yeast that lived in the winery and on the grapes and produced the most stunning and distinguished

wines in this this country.

Mac watched her with narrowed brows. “Really?”

She nodded. “Come on. I need to show you around and get you started on sampling. We have a busy day.”

The actual structure of Cadieux was almost as gorgeous as its vineyard and view. The building was a mix of earthy, modern, and humble and complemented the natural beauty it stood among like a snug dress on a beautiful woman. She fished her keys from her pocket and unlocked the front door. An alarm beeped in the empty tasting room, echoing through the high ceilings.

Large windows engulfed the front of the building, flooding the tasting room with natural light and warming the live edge hemlock bar. The deep hazel of the wood and tables helped to mute the pops of gold throughout the space. The barstools, table legs, end tables, and most of the trim and appliances behind the bar were a calm bronze that was mostly tame and elegant that occasionally burst to life under the sunlight. She loved the tasting room and often enjoyed a glass of wine after work with Teddy at the bar. If Shelby happened to be agitated with her, she'd out Josie as the winemaker to the guests and chase her out.

“Well, this is the tasting room. Employees get a fifty-percent discount and basically free wine by the glass whenever.”

Mac spun in a slow circle. “I love it. Did Uncle Hank design this? I just can't believe that he'd have this is in him. It's...” She pressed a finger to her lips and looked at the ceiling. “Graceful.”

Josie nodded. “Follow me.” She walked behind the bar and through a dark hallway covered in black-and-white portraits of old wine legends and the original Cadieux winery, just a little shack with a couple trailers for the lab and offices. She opened a door on her right and flipped on a handful of lights, waking the sleeping winery. Mac stood quietly next to her. No words. No gasp.

\* \* \*

*A swallow.* That was all Mac could produce. Everything until now had been gorgeous, breathtaking, a quintessential wine country dream come true. But when Josie flipped on the lights to the winery and illuminated all the bright stainless tanks, the forklift, and winery equipment, she also illuminated massive anxiety. The tanks were bigger and nicer than the ones in Virginia, there were huge pieces of equipment that she'd never seen before, and the giant oak beams running across the ceiling made her feel tiny.

“Okay,” Josie said. “This is obviously the winery. You’ll get to know it very intimately, but for now, I’ll show you the break room where you can store your things.”

She followed closely as Josie led her to the right side of the winery, Bone and Tinker padding alongside them, and opened the door farthest to the right. Mac walked past her into the room, being sure to give her a wide berth. The break room was big enough to house a long table that could fit ten people, a blue fabric couch, a washer and dryer, and a small kitchen. The walls were painted a soothing sage green, and a string of lights hung from corner to corner.

“This is the best break room I’ve ever seen,” she said, skimming the rack of wineglasses with her fingers and taking in all the impressive empty bottles displayed on the shelves. The room screamed comradery. She could see the harvest crew eating together, bonding, drinking good wine. Something she was looking forward to in the coming months.

“We’re lucky to have it. It’s our place of respite during harvest.” Josie opened the cabinet. After some rummaging, she pulled out a mug with a peanut in a wineglass that read, “peanut noir.” Mac didn’t miss the grin that slipped over her lips as Josie admired the mug.

“Coffee? First person in makes it every day. If I know I’m going to beat Teddy, I set it to automatic the night before.” She poured a cup and waited.

“Coffee sounds like a dream. Do you have cream?”

“Of course.” Josie nodded to the fridge, then fished out another mug. She blew the steam over the top of her coffee as Mac poured herself a cup. “You can put your stuff over here.” Josie walked her to a small area behind the laundry with a row of lockers and a bathroom. “Snag whichever empty locker you want,” she said, then opened the door to the bathroom and nodded for Mac to check it out. “Okay. Now for the best part.”

Mac flipped on the light. The shower wasn’t anything to write home about. It was small and very normal-looking, with a glass door and some shoddy-looking tile work. But at least there wasn’t a tub. Not that she didn’t *love* a hot bath, but in a semi-public shower like this, no thanks. “Yep. That’s a shower,” she said, unimpressed.

Josie scoffed, and honestly, Mac would take it over the blank-faced stranger she’d been dealing with all morning. Well, sure, Josie was *technically* a stranger, but last night had felt easy. Familiar. As if they’d know each other before. Unlike this morning. This morning was pure shit, and it was really starting to bother her. Hurt her feelings.

“Your lack of enthusiasm is completely misplaced,” Josie said.

She let out a snort. “Oh yeah?”

“One day soon during harvest, you’ll be completely covered in wine and grape skins from digging out a fermentor or drenched and cold from cleaning the press, and you’re going to see that shower for what it really is: heaven.”

She shrugged, biting down a grin she didn’t want to escape. Josie didn’t deserve a smile today. “Okay. I’m sure it’s great.”

Josie shook her head in—hopefully—feigned frustration, her languid locks jumping about her shoulders. “Come on.”

Mac followed Josie into the lab, and all the pipettes and flasks and graduated cylinders solidified it: she was intimidated as hell.

“And this is the lab, obviously. Since it’s your first harvest, you won’t be doing much in here besides dropping off samples

and recording data. Maybe a few titrations.”

She vaguely remembered something about titrations from a long-forgotten chemistry class. Marketing was her major, after all. “What do you do titrations for?”

Josie stared at her. “I know you’ve never done this kind of thing before, and that’s okay, but not knowing what a titration is tells me you don’t know what titratable acidity is. And if you’ve never heard of TA, then I would guess you haven’t read anything about winemaking.”

Okay. It might have been true that she’d never read any *winemaking* books to prepare for this job, but she did read a lot about the history of wine. Specifically, Oregon wine. She figured she’d arm herself with the intangibles and learn the rest from Josie. She had always learned kinetically, anyway. She knew better than to sputter this explanation to her underwhelmed boss, though. She knew how many hours of preparation she’d put in, and that’d have to be enough for her. “I have not,” she said, looking Josie dead in the eye.

“You got a job at a world-class winery and didn’t even bother to attempt to prepare yourself?”

Mac stayed silent.

“That’s very disappointing.” Josie walked by, not even trying to avoid bumping her shoulder.

Not only was Mac intimidated to dive into a job she’d never done before, but it was clear Josie didn’t want her there. *Obviously*. Last night was nice. Comfortable, even. But in the morning, everything went back to how it was when Josie had picked her up from the airport. It made her feel alone and nervous and already like a failure who couldn’t handle her new job, exactly what everyone assumed she was.

*I can handle it.*

Josie opened a door in the lab and flipped on a light inside the small room. “This is our office.” There was a desk with a computer and two whiteboards and chairs. “We’ll start our mornings here and go over the game plan for the day. You need Muck Boots and work boots. Your sneakers are fine for



today, but we'll be using harsh chemicals, and your feet need to be protected. Also, you'll learn that wet feet suck."

"Okay." She didn't want to further agitate Josie with unnecessary words. Her tone was already so prickly.

Josie leaned against her desk and scanned her work orders for the day on the whiteboard. She wore brown Blundstones, dark jeans, and a red flannel button-down with the sleeves rolled to her elbows, unbuttoned just enough for sharp collarbones to make an appearance. She'd whipped her hair into a loose bun that left her neck exposed. The fine lines of her eyes deepened as she concentrated on the list, her lips slightly parted like last night.

*Ugh.* Why did Josie Sanchez have to be so damn hot?

"Okay. I need you to take barrel samples so I can run sulfurs." Josie nodded with finality, then pushed off the desk and bumped Mac's shoulder *again*.

And so damn *frustrating*?

"Like I said, busy day. Let's get to work."

After Josie showed her the barrel rooms behind the production space, she started pulling samples. Once she was alone in the cold, shadowy room full of endless barrels, Mac took a deep breath. It smelled good. Like wine, oak, and yeast. It was her favorite spot yet. Josie could have the lab. The barrel rooms were hers.

Josie had showed her how to climb among the racks and use the plastic pipette to collect samples. She'd only laughed once when Josie had told her to reach into the *bunghole* of the barrel. That was until Josie had rolled her eyes and told her to focus.

Mac noticed another thing about Josie. When she climbed up to the fourth rack, her face shifted, and her limbs got shaky as if she was scared. Was Mac's invincible, untouchable boss afraid of heights? Well, Mac wasn't. She pulled on her headlamp, gathered her collection tubes in her vest, and monkeyed her way straight to the top of the barrels.

\* \* \*

“Greg, how many times do we have to go through this? Cadieux produces the best wine from your grapes, and that only helps you. I will not be toyed around with while you toss us in a bidding war with Mike Griswold. I want the southeast plot of pinot gris. Just like last harvest. And I will pay you a *fair* price.” Josie rubbed her temple and sighed as Greg continued to be a petulant child.

Cadieux made Copper Peak Vineyards one of the most sought-after grape contracts in town. Where Cadieux sourced from could set vineyard trends in the Willamette for years. So the fact that Greg fucking Johnson was trying to use the notoriety that she gave him against her was enraging. She didn't want to be the bad guy, but she wanted that pinot gris, and she was not going to pay an inflated price for it because Cadieux made it a hot plot of grapes.

“I can't help the natural market, Jos. People want the southeast plot, and they want it bad.”

She jabbed the butt of her pen against the desk. “The southeast plot—”

“What do you want me to do next?” Mac popped in the doorway of the office with an annoyingly bright smile.

Josie let out a big sigh and tossed her pen on the desk. “One second, Greg.” She turned to Mac, and that face dropped, her bright smile dimming.

“Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't see you were on the phone, and I finished the—”

Josie held up a hand to cut her off. “Just go do whatever. Walk around, call a friend, water the concrete. Find something to busy yourself with, okay? I really don't care what.”

Mac's jaw fell, and it felt like it went straight through Josie's stomach. She felt instant guilt for the harsh dismissal, but she wasn't used to interns who lacked experience and initiative. After she'd finished sampling, Mac had popped in every twenty minutes, ready for a new task, and Josie didn't have time to hold her hand and walk her through everything.

Not today. She opened her mouth to try to ease the sting of her words, but Mac disappeared before she could produce any. What could she even say?

*Shit.* The truth was, she liked Mac. As a person. As an employee...Mac was eager to please and hardworking, but her inexperience bugged the shit out of Josie. Because all she'd wanted this harvest was a worker she could depend on. A worker who knew what TA was. She shook her head when she realized she almost *wanted* Mac to be a bad employee. Then it'd make more sense to feel so negatively about her.

It was just her first day. A barrage of Josie's mistakes from her green days swarmed her brain until she heard Greg's mouth breathing.

She cleared her throat. "Listen to me, Greg. Give the contract to Mike if you want, but if you had a little foresight, you'd realize that once the valley winemakers notice Cadieux pulled out of our legacy contract with you, they'll start asking questions. They'll be suspicious. They'll wonder if your vineyard practices are slacking, if you've lost your touch, or maybe your fruit just isn't as good anymore. Who knows?" The sputtering on the other side of the phone told her he was right where she wanted him. "Busy day, Greg. Call me by the end of Wednesday, or I'll grace some other vineyard with Hank Layton's money. Cheers."

She hung up and blew out a frustrated breath. Not many people realized how many different layers there were to being a winemaker. Making wine was hard enough a job, but she also had to be a businesswoman and proficient at sales. She was at once a scientist, a CEO, and a project manager. It was a lot to juggle. She grabbed her pen and chomped on the hard plastic. She didn't like having to be a shark, and she hated how she'd just treated Mac. How she had treated Mac all day, really.

She prided herself on being a good boss, and it wasn't Mac's fault she didn't have any experience. It wasn't Mac's fault Greg Johnson was such a complete dickhead. But it bothered her to the core and made her nervous as hell that Mac hadn't even tried to prepare herself for this job. Josie already

felt like she was drowning in work, and crush hadn't even begun. She had never failed, but she was scared this might be the harvest she lost it. Lost everything.

She groaned and tried not to think about Justin from Drettson Vineyards, the winemaker who couldn't handle the stress anymore and was found by a couple of customers wandering naked in the vineyard last year. His guitar had been conveniently covering his package. Until he'd unstrapped it from his neck and smashed it against an end post.

They were all under an incredible amount of pressure. And at this point, Mac was a burden. An added stress. "A nice and capable person," Josie whispered to herself.

While she truly felt like she didn't have a minute to spare, she would call Oliver at Tank and Chem *after* she talked to Mac. She stood with a sigh and tugged on her gray canvas Ermitage vest, her favorite thing any barrel salesman had ever given her. It was warm outside, but the winery was strictly climate-controlled to be nice and cool, and the barrel rooms were *cold*, fifty-four degrees on the nose.

Mac wandered between the big concrete tanks with a rag and a bottle of Windex, wiping a tank door to a nice shine. Josie was oddly proud of her for filling time with what some would think was a meaningless task, but keeping things looking good was important. The guests in the tasting room had a clear view into the winery, and it was essential that it was always presentable and clean. She was also showing initiative by finding her own task, the thing Josie needed from her most.

"Hey."

Mac looked over her shoulder, never stopping wiping. "Hey."

"Sorry to be short in the office. This vineyard manager was being extremely difficult about our contract. Trying to sell off our pinot gris to the highest bidder, as if Cadieux isn't the reason the plot is hot in the first place."

Mac rolled in her lips and bobbed her head, her sparkling

eyes trained on anything but Josie. It was clear she wasn't happy, but she probably wasn't willing to tell her new boss that, either.

“Um.” Josie checked her watch. “Shelby should be in by now. Let me introduce you. She may need some help with inventory now that you're finished with barrel samples.”

Mac followed her into the tasting room where Shelby was drinking an iced coffee behind the bar and checking her email. Shelby was a glimmer of badassery in a place that was so often filled with catty tourists and hard-to-please wine “experts.” She was a pro at handling all of it and keeping the things that happened on this side of the building from overflowing onto Josie's plate. And she was a lesbian, which always earned extra credit in Josie's book. Shelby scratched at her buzzed head, her sleeve of tattoos catching attention still, even though they'd worked together for seven years.

Shelby turned when she heard them approaching. “No way. Is this the famous Mackenzie Layton?”

Mac grinned, a soft pink coloring her cheeks. Shelby could charm anyone. And in that moment, Josie wondered if Mac was queer and if Shelby had a shot with her. She swallowed and shook herself out of her idiotic thoughts. Why did she feel so possessive all of a sudden?

“She prefers Mac,” Josie said.

Mac gave her an indiscernible look, one that was laced with disapproval, and shook Shelby's hand. “Most people call me Mac, but you can call me whatever you want.”

Shelby's gaze flitted between them. “Well, Mac, welcome to Cadieux. You couldn't have landed at a better spot or with a better winemaker.”

Mac nodded, the slightest arch in her brows. “I'm excited to learn everything I can.” She glanced at Josie, then reached for Shelby's forearm. “These are gorgeous, by the way. Beautiful shade work.”

Josie cleared her throat, something bitter and inappropriate clawing up her trachea. Something that tasted a lot like

jealousy. She wasn't, like, a *curse all love, I only do hookups*, kind of woman, but she *was* a reasonable woman. An analytical woman. She cringed. "Anyway, Mac is done on our side for the day. She's yours if you want help with inventory."

Shelby shrugged. "Yeah. If you don't want her, I'll take her."

Josie nodded and left them to it, hating just about every emotion that swirled in her chest. She was disappointed in herself on so many levels. Stressed on so many more levels. She needed to lock herself in the lab, finish her sulfurs, call Tank and Chem, and finish organizing her schedule for the rest of the week. It was only Monday, and she already felt like her to-do list was running away from her.

And there was Mac. She'd been so sweet with Bone and Tinkerbell this morning. The light she emitted was addictive. Her enthusiasm was contagious. And she sent shivers down Josie's spine when she grabbed her shoul—

*Argh.*

In her absentmindedness, she smashed her arm into an open tank valve. *Son of a bitch*. She rubbed her throbbing bicep and accepted the fresh bruise as the universe's warning to get her shit together. And fast. Because this crush was going to be intense, and it was just around the corner.

## CHAPTER FIVE

After Mac got home from work, she showered and changed into her favorite sundress, the dusty purple one with the latticed back that made her feel sexy and powerful. She needed all the confidence she could get. Not because she thought she'd done a bad job on her first day, but because Josie had shaken her off center. She was so stoic and irritable and seemingly not a huge fan of Mac's at this point. But there wasn't anything Mac could do about that except take some space and walk to Main Street.

She slipped out the door of the basement without saying good-bye and without allowing herself to take in the backyard. The only things she could decipher as she rushed out were a long picnic table, strung lights, and a lot of dark green vegetation with a few strokes of yellow, purple, and red. She latched the gate behind her and walked the few blocks to town.

The main street of Elmwood, fittingly called "Main Street," was the quintessential small-town drag but even more charming. Wine bars and tchotchke shops lined the street, old wine barrels with dry, loose staves standing sentry at every other door. She passed an eclectic looking record shop called Spun Sugar and wondered what Josie would pick out to add to her collection. Wondered what was already in her collection.

*Ugh.* What was there even to say about today? Mac had done everything asked of her and had succeeded in every task. Was she missing something? Had she done something to offend Josie? Okay. Beside the whole, not having memorized an entire textbook on winemaking, thing. The most frustrating part was thinking about last night and feeling so seen and hopeful, then to have those feelings evaporate in this—she wiped the hint of sweat from her brow—disgusting summer heat. *What changed?*

The sun sank lower, and she decided to pop into a wine bar near the end of the drag called Jack's. Peeking in from the window, it looked pre-prohibition fabulous with a jazz piano tucked in the corner and comfy looking armchairs and couches in its audience. She walked in and felt an instant sense of belonging, a feeling she needed after today.

"Well, aren't you just lovely. Come have a seat, dear," the gentleman behind the bar said. He looked to be around fifty and in impeccable shape, with gorgeous sandy blond and gray curls that skimmed his shoulders.

"Thank you." She pulled out a stool and scanned the dark oak shelves of the bar.

He tossed the polishing cloth behind him and held out his hand. "I'm Jack."

She grinned and shook it. "*The Jack?*"

His smile was a warm comfort, a source of peace. "One and only. This is my place. What do you think?"

She made a point to take in the entire lounge again, focusing on all the little details like the burgundy rug under the wooden table, the ceramic wine jugs on the shelves next to the decanters, the old books that lined most of the walls with their delicate, fraying spines. "I think I want to stay in here forever." She turned her gaze to him, and he frowned. Was *she* frowning? Or was Jack incredibly good at reading people?

"Rough day?" he asked.

She felt under the bar for a hook and hung her purse. "Not too bad, just trying to figure out where I fit in here."

He reached for a glass and set it in front of her. "I take it you're not on vacation?"

She shook her head. "I actually just had my first day of work."

"Oh, you're industry. Welcome to Elmwood. What's your name?"

"Mackenzie Layton, but I go by Mac."



His gaze fell hard on her. Instant recognition flashed across his face. “You wouldn’t happen to be related to Hank Layton, would you?”

She pushed her hair behind her ear and considered if she wanted to claim the familial connection to one of the most famous people in the valley. Better to be honest. Hopefully, her uncle had never wronged this guy. “I’m his niece. Just started at Cadieux.”

He leaned back as if the force of what she had said blew him off balance. “Oh wow. Well, you’re in good hands over there. You’ll learn winemaking from the best. Here.” He poured her a half glass of white. “A beautiful pinot gris from Thornton Family Cellars.”

She swirled the glass, keeping the butt of it flush with the bar, and stuck her nose in for a sniff. As she considered the bouquet, an image of Josie in the basement popped in her head. Of her open mouth as she showed her how to properly assess a wine’s nose. Of the scar on her bottom lip. How it had felt like she’d drunk the sight of Mac like wine.

*What a ridiculous fucking crush.* She shuddered and cracked her own lips, a rush of new aromas hitting her. *Stone fruit. Lemon curd.* She shook her head, trying to shake Josie’s lips out of her brain, and took a sip.

“*Mm.* That’s delicious.”

Jack grinned and poured himself a half glass. “Yes. It is.” He took a sip and swished it through his mouth before swallowing. “So you said you’re struggling to find where you belong here? Sounds to me like winemaking is in your blood, and you’re right where you’re supposed to be. You’re a Layton.” His smile was warm and genuine. He must have read something in her expression again because he asked, “Was it a hard first day or something?”

She considered the pretty pale yellow of her wine. Jack was sweet, but she knew the industry was tight-knit, and she didn’t want to talk negatively about Josie to someone who might know her. “It was okay.”

“*Okay* doesn’t furrow folk’s brows like that.” He nodded to her.

Josie knocking her shoulder *twice* had really bothered Mac. Fine, maybe she didn’t have the most experience, but she was still a person who deserved some semblance of respect. “I think she might hate me,” she whispered.

“Ah, so this is less of an existential crisis thing and more of a, Josie Sanchez is rough around the edges, thing?” He leaned on his elbows and bowed his head. “Having a hard time with the new boss?”

She considered him, a twinge of guilt prickling her chest—some semblance of loyalty—but she needed someone in this town to talk to. She had loved spending time with Shelby today, doing inventory and chatting—didn’t hurt that she was cute, too—but she worked at Cadieux and was Josie’s friend. *Mac* needed a friend. “Is she so hard on all her interns? Or just the ones related to her boss?”

The door opened, and another man walked in. “Hold that thought.” Jack walked around the bar and embraced the newcomer. He squeezed his shoulder and presented the man to Mac. “This is Reuben. My dear friend and community staple of Elmwood. Reuben organizes most of the incredible town events. And this is Mac Layton, Hank’s niece.”

His thinning black hair was cut close to his scalp, and his big, lanky body towered over her as she sat. He looked to be the same age as Jack but less kempt.

She shook his hand. “That sounds like quite the job. Nice to meet you, Reuben.”

“You, too. So you’re Hank’s niece, huh?” She nodded. “That’s cool.” He pointed at her wine. “I’ll take a glass of whatever she’s drinking, please.” He pulled out the stool next to her. “What’d I miss?”

Jack poured the pinot gris. “I was just about to enlighten Mac, here, about her new boss, Josie Sanchez.”

“Ah. Josie. You got lucky, love. She’s the best there is.” He ruffled his hair and left the thin strands strewn about his scalp,

the milky white of it visible in the gaps. “When she was just starting off, they called her the wine wiz. She just has *it*. You know? Doesn’t matter where you went to school or how many crushes you have under your belt, she’s got that something... else.” He rubbed his chest in a circle, his eyes dreamy. “You know?”

She stared, unsure if she actually understood what he was trying to say. She swirled her wine in slow circles and considered Josie’s aptitude for winemaking. Reuben’s praise only added to the strange pull she already felt. Josie was mysterious and gifted and allergic to other people, apparently.

“No one’s arguing her talent, Reuben. Mac was wondering about her...” He looked to the ceiling.

“Chilly demeanor,” she supplied. “I feel like she has zero patience for me, and I’ve only worked for her for one day. And I did fine, by the way. I did fine.” Her cheeks heated at the petulant sound of her words. Defensive and immature. It made her spine tingle.

Reuben gulped his wine like it was water. “Ah. Yeah, she doesn’t like the noise.” He waved around his head in an imitation of chaos. “She’s in it for one thing, and that’s wine. All the other rubbing elbows bullshit—all the things your uncle is good at—she hates. She’s notoriously awkward when she has to work festivals or winemaking dinners. But that’s what makes her so great. She’s kind of fabled around here for being the brilliant wine recluse.”

She watched him with amusement. It was already clear to her why the wine community saw Josie that way. She *was* brilliant, but even living in the same house as her, Mac felt a million miles away. She took another sip. It *had* only been one day.

Jack patted her hand. “He’s right. Try not to take it personally. She’s like an ice cube in hell the moment she has to talk to a customer or be among the masses of tourists. She begins to melt. It’s not you. It’s everyone.”

She bit her lip and considered his words. “Okay. Sounds like I need to be a freezer, someone who doesn’t tax her. Got

it.” If Josie wanted cold, Mac could give her cold. Well, she could at least try. Her natural warmth always attracted people to her by accident. But clearly, that wasn’t going to work here, so why not try being a little cold?

“Okay, let’s pivot.” Jack scanned the army of wine bottles on the back bar. “Mac, you need a quick lesson on Willamette Valley wine and its players. Lucky for you, your uncle is the biggest one. But let’s taste through some wine and talk about it.” He grabbed one of the more well-known bottles, one she knew the price of. Knew she couldn’t afford to drink it. Not that she was broke. She had made a good salary in marketing and was diligent with her money. Meaning she didn’t typically buy bottles that cost more than a tank of gas. Especially not at this marked-up price.

“Oh, um, I’m kind of on a budget. I’ll stick with this. Thanks, Jack.” She held up her glass and winked.

“No, no. Your money’s no good here.” He sliced through the capsule with almost as much prowess as Josie.

“I can’t accept that just because my uncle is—”

His laughter bellowed over her words. “Hank has nothing to do with it. It’s the Mac discount.” He nodded to his friend. “Reuben gets one, too.”

Reuben dropped a hand on her shoulder and smiled. “We’re a tight community. Just accept it. One day, you’ll be opening your best bottles for us, I’m sure.”

She grinned. “Okay. Thank you. Here’s to drinking my future wine.”

“Cheers to that.”

Jack poured a few more wines, and Mac decided it was time to feed herself before her walk home turned into a wobble. She hugged them both and promised to be back that weekend to update them on her relationship with Josie. Her head was all over the place when she thought about Josie. What was it about Mac that people didn’t take seriously? She was a whole, complete woman, *thank you very much*. And she had a lot to offer.

Her father allowed clients to pass on her mid-project because they'd lost their faith in her capability to deliver, even though she was surpassing the agreed upon goals of market engagement and visibility. Her ex had ditched her because she'd been ready to get serious, as if Mac *hadn't* been a faithful and serious partner to her for three years. And now, Josie was treating her like a splinter in her palm. Like an annoyingly dull ache that didn't hurt enough to fuss with, so she tolerated it.

*Seriously, screw all of them.*

Her chest tightened as she walked into the pizza shop next door, and she took a deep breath of roasted garlic, scanning the different toppings. There was nothing she could do about all that right now, so she might as well enjoy a slice and go home.

\* \* \*

“He’s so annoying. I highly recommend never hiring your little brother,” Erin said between sips of bubbles. Erin and Georgie were Josie’s best friends and fellow winemakers, about the only two in town she could stomach, apart from her crew at Cadieux. She loved them. They were a source of strength and revitalization in her life. Hank would always be her ride-or-die, but it was different with Georgie and Erin. She could let it all go and be...silly. Okay, maybe not *silly* but definitely not uptight. She topped the three glasses with crémant and served herself some of the charcuterie she’d prepared.

It was a beautiful night to enjoy the backyard. The temperature was perfectly warm but not hot, the sun was beginning to set over the tops of her small trees, and the strung lights popped a beautiful golden glow in the growing dark. She kept her eyes glued to the basement door, hoping the jovial sounds of her friends would lure Mac outside to join them, but she was beginning to think that wasn’t going to happen. Why would Mac want to hang out with her old boss who was a complete asshole to her?

“Josie, can you please come back down to earth? I’m trying to bitch about Carson, and I need you to focus,” Erin

said, snapping her fingers. Georgie chuckled into his glass as Josie wiped her mouth and swallowed the delicious bite of lomo Ibérico and Taleggio. Two of her favorites.

She cleared her throat. “Yeah. Sorry. Carson. He’s giving you trouble?”

Georgie sighed and pulled the bottle of bubbles in front of him. “He’s in party-boy mode with all the interns and can’t understand why Erin is pissed when she gets woken up at two in the morning because they’re still up drinking.” He poured himself more wine.

“Exactly, Georgie. Thank you.” Erin crossed her arms and shook her head. “I get wanting to cut loose and enjoy harvest, but all he has to do is drag hoses around and do pump-overs. I actually have to use my brain, and if I don’t sleep, there is no brain to use.” She tapped her temple in frustration.

Josie watched them and took a sip of crémant, enjoying the zip of hundreds of little bubbles that exploded flavors of brioche and pear and soft cheese onto her palate. “Why do you let him live with you?”

Erin groaned and threw her head back. “Because I love the little shithead. It’s the worst.”

Josie thought about her own brother in Connecticut. Had it really been over a year since they’d talked? An instant pang of guilt pierced her gut. Nausea. It was usually a constant low simmer of stress, but sometimes, it demanded that she give it her full attention. Why should sharing DNA make someone more valuable than others? Her brother was just an average guy struggling to live an average life. He hadn’t asked for money the last time they’d spoke, so she hoped that meant he’d found a new job. The likelihood was low, though.

He struggled to hold down even a merchandiser job, which her father would proclaim was a top-notch “sales” job. Way more legitimate than her job, *of course*. She sighed. There wasn’t much she could do to help him. Drew wasn’t someone who cared very much about her, anyway. Only cared about how she could help him. The golden boy who wasn’t very golden at all, with a drug habit that her entire family ignored.

Including her. Another pang of guilt, but what could she do?

None of them understood her decision to go into wine. Her father found it frivolous and silly. Not *real* work like Drew's job in sales. He likened her to a bartender, as if being a bartender wasn't real work either. He should tell that to Naomie, the bartender at the Cane, after a Friday night and try not to get slapped. She knew for a fact that Naomie worked harder in a single night than Drew had in his entire life.

Josie had been bad about coming home for holidays in recent years, using the winery as an excuse. But at some point, the disappointment just became too much. Sometimes, she felt like her father actively rooted against her. Like there was something he saw in her that he hated.

Georgie squeezed her knee and brought her back into focus, nodding to the basement door. "How's Ms. Layton doing?" he asked in a low voice.

She swallowed as she thought about her day at work. Mac did fine. *She did fine*. "She's doing fine."

He winced and shot Erin a concerned look. She pushed her glass out of the way and leaned on her elbows. "Is she that bad?"

A ladybug meandered across the picnic table, and Josie brushed it off the edge. "She's fine, but since I'm down an intern this year, it's hard. She has zero experience except for volunteering for bottling days at some shitty Virginia wineries, and I just don't have the time to babysit her." She sighed and twirled the stem of her glass between her fingers. "Hank said he'd give me my label if I win gold in the Cru Wine Awards."

"Oh my God. Really?" Erin asked.

Josie nodded, biting down her smile.

"For this vintage?" Georgie asked.

"Yeah. But I can't help but think he wants me to fail. Why else would he force me to hire his niece, who has no business working at a winery like Cadieux, for the one crush that I'm short-staffed and the one crush that matters?" She blew out a deep sigh, the frustration mounting. "He knows she's not good

enough. She can't handle this. And now I have to babysit her through a terrible harvest.”

The gate latch creaked, and the three of them whipped around to watch Mackenzie Layton walk into the backyard, a small to-go box in her hands and the most beautiful sundress Josie had ever seen draped over her body. Her blond waves cascaded over her shoulders, and her cheeks were kissed pink. Her eyes bounced from Josie to Georgie to Erin as Bone and Tinkerbelle smacked her legs with their happy tails.

“Mac,” Josie started, fumbling to her feet. “I thought you were in your apartment.” The terrible thought that she might have overheard everything hit her square in the chest. The horror of it. She could be gruff, sure. But mean? No. At least, she never meant to be.

Mac took a moment before she responded, a swallow moving down the column of her throat. “I was out.” Her eyes tagged the pizza box in her hands.

Josie approached, her eyes tripping down Mac's body. “Right. Where'd—”

“Jesus, Josie. Are you going to introduce us or what?” Erin asked.

Was she losing her mind, or did Mac sway away from her? Josie tried to catch her eye, but she kept her gaze anywhere but on her. She held up a hand to present Mac to her friends. “This is Mac Layton. Hank's niece and my new intern.”

Mac gave a small wave, and Georgie and Erin said their welcomes. “Come join us,” Georgie suggested. “We're drinking through as much of your boss's wine as we can.”

Mac half-smiled and took a step away, toward the apartment door. “Next time. I have some things to catch up on and want to be fresh for tomorrow.” She left them with a full smile, crooked tooth and all, and disappeared into the basement.

Josie turned back to her friends, both of their eyes wide with amusement, and mouthed, “Fuck.”



\* \* \*

Mac locked the door, dropped her purse on the kitchen counter, and threw her leftover pizza in the fridge. She stormed into her room, ripped off her dress, and fell into bed without brushing her teeth. Couldn't be bothered with the menial task right now. Right now, she was exploding with fury. No, not fury. *Hurt*. She had stopped outside the back gate when she'd heard her name and had listened to every damn thing Josie had to say about her. Tears prickled her eyes as she wondered what the hell she was doing in Elmwood at this point. She didn't belong here. She didn't belong *anywhere*.

Hearing Josie say those things about her made her feel worthless and incapable, all the things everyone always assumed she was. It had taken months to prove to her accounts at Layton Marketing Solutions that she would work just as hard for them and be just as successful for them as her father would. She couldn't tell if it was sexism that made them question her proposals and not so subtly ask for another agent's services or if it was just *her*. The vibe she gave. She had the creeping suspicion it was the latter, given they often ended up with another female-identifying associate. It wasn't like her ex was sexist, either. Heather had underestimated her the way everyone else did.

But other times, it felt like she had superpowers. Her ability to win people over and bring warmth to situations was one of her favorite things about herself. Hell, even her little brother loved her. But all that worked until a point. Until it was time to get serious, then everyone, for some reason, lost all faith in her. It happened with professors, clients, her ex, and now with Josie. It was all warmth last night when they'd gotten home and at work, all ice.

The world mistook her kindness for weakness, and that was their problem. Their fault. But it was seriously starting to fuck with her life. She was more than what they saw, and she was determined to prove it to Josie, Hank, the Elmwood wine industry, and the whole damn world.

## CHAPTER SIX

Mac had been quiet since the night Erin and Georgie had come over last week. Work was tense. Though she was hardworking, Mac didn't seem comfortable in the winery. And at home, she gave Josie space. They cooked quietly together, and Mac retired early or went to Jack's. Strictly professional niceties between them. That was fine, but Josie felt guilty. Couldn't help but feel she was the reason Mac didn't seem comfortable working in the winery. And she *knew* she was the reason Mac wasn't comfortable at home.

Mac hadn't said a single word on the way to work this morning. Bone and Tinkerbelle had stayed home because Josie just didn't have the mental capacity to keep track of them today, and she was hoping to take Mac to Folstrum to barrel taste with Erin, so there were no puppy kisses or wagging tails to cut the tension. And there was *tension*. It hung thick and sticky between them. Every time Josie lobbed an innocuous conversation starter, Mac ever so politely slammed it into the ground.

They turned left on the road with the Christmas tree lot and alpaca farm. If Mt. Hood couldn't save her, Josie reckoned she was screwed. There were a few wisps of clouds, but they only made the mountain more beautiful, adding a whimsical playfulness to the already magical peak. She tapped the steering wheel, harvesting the confidence to speak again. "Mt. Hood is looking extra beautiful this morning, don't you think?"

Mac looked out the driver's side window. Josie wished she could see her eyes—they wouldn't be able to hide Mac's enthrallment—but she only turned away. "Yeah. It's nice." Her voice coasted in the valleys, making Josie miss the already familiar sky-high notes of her excitement.

Okay. She couldn't take this anymore. She was relieved that they had a strictly professional relationship and that Mac was taking this experience seriously, but working harvest was also supposed to be fun. At least for the interns. And, yeah, she had been an ass on Mac's first day, but she'd gone out of her way to be nice and accommodating since. At least, she thought she was being nice and accommodating. She could sometimes miss the mark without realizing it.

There was only one real reason Mac was still acting so distant. She'd definitely overheard her with Georgie and Erin. One-hundred percent. And the tone of Mac's voice broke her heart. Solemnity just didn't fit her. It was a baggy jumpsuit, hiding all the fun ridges and curves of her personality. And Josie was the cause. She worried her lip. She missed the Mac from their first night together. Wanted her back.

Most importantly, employees worked harder and were more effective when they were happy. *That* must have been why she wanted Mac to be happy. She pulled into the parking lot, ready to show her cards and apologize with sincerity. It was the only way to move forward. This last week had been hard on both of them. Mac had struggled to find her footing in the winery, and Josie was trying very hard to be patient.

She turned in her seat as Mac unclipped her seat belt, adorable in her winery getup: shiny new work boots that still needed to be scuffed up, black jeans with a rip along the bottom of her left thigh, and a long-sleeve green shirt that proclaimed, "I'd rather be fishing," across the chest. One thing hadn't changed between them. Josie still felt this uncontrollable pull toward her. Her eyes lingered on the rip, the smooth pale skin that peeked out from the fabric, before she opened her mouth.

"Mac?" She startled when Mac's gaze fell on her. Her eyes were penetrating, as if she could see straight through Josie's bullshit to her core, and the look on her face said she didn't like what she saw. Mac's brows rose as Josie continued to stare, the icy blue in her eyes freezing the words in her throat.

When she failed to say anything else, Mac nodded to the winery. "We should go in."

*Speak, damnit.*

“Mac, I’m sorry.” Josie forced a swallow down her dry throat and pushed forward, hoping Mac would be able to sense the sincerity in her voice. “I’m sorry for how this first week has gone. I can be...intense about work, and you didn’t deserve me being such a jerk on your first day.” Silence. “That’s really all I have to say.”

Mac continued to stare. “I feel like you have a lot of bias against me.”

“I don’t—”

Mac held up a hand. “Please, Josie. You’ve made that quite clear. You know I’ve never done any of this before. It’s my first time, and correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m a hard worker, I care about the wine, and I complete every task you give me. I’m doing my best as I continue to learn.” She was taking this seriously, and she deserved respect.

“You’re right. Again, I’m sorry.”

Mac’s eyes flitted out of their concentrated stare at the sound of a car pulling into the gravel spot next to them. Josie could see the black Range Rover over Mac’s shoulder. It was Hank. He slid to his feet and locked his car.

“Okay,” Mac said with finality, a hint of a spark returning to her voice. “Thank you.” She tucked a lock of hair into place. “Ready?”

Josie grinned. She couldn’t put her finger on why she cared so much about Mac’s feelings, especially her feelings about Josie, but it didn’t matter right now. Hank was finally back in town and was about to see Mac for the first time. “I’ve worked with the guy for fifteen years. Are *you* ready?”

Mac bit her lip and chuckled. “No. Not at all.” She winked and popped open her door.

“There she is.” Hank scooped Mac into his thick arms, and Josie wasn’t sure if her feet were still on the ground. He was strong for his age. She’d give him that.

“Hi, Uncle Hank.” Her words were muffled by his bear

hug. She finger combed her hair and smoothed her shirt when he released her.

“She’s not as scary as they say, right?” He held up a hand to Josie.

Mac’s eyes fell on her again, and Josie straightened, her fingers twitching with the urge to fix her hair. Her stomach tightened as Mac’s gaze fell down her body, then back up to her eyes, her brow quirked and face unreadable. “Oh no. Not even a bit.”

Josie pulled Hank into one of their standard hugs. “Well, unless I pour myself a coffee soon, things will get very scary, very fast,” she said.

“She’s not lying,” Hank said. “Let’s head inside.”

She was only mildly annoyed when Hank delayed Mac’s work by setting up a tasting of every single Cadieux wine on the bar, plus a few select library wines. The guilt from this last week suffocated her, so she let him get away with it, even though this should have really been an after-work activity, and they had *so much* to do before bottling next week. She leaned against the bar for as long as she could stand the giant waste of time.

Hank spewed the entire history of Cadieux and the Oregon wine industry in a geyser of non sequiturs and flailing hand gestures, narrowly missing knocking over his glass multiple times.

Josie cleared her throat, wiggling into one of the small pauses of his monologue. “I really need to get to work, Hank. Gotta prepare for bottling next week. And you know, harvest.”

A lopsided grin was plastered on his face as if the small amount of wine had already hit him. He looked at Mac, and she could feel how much he loved having his niece in his winery. In his home. Hell, maybe Mac would end up taking over this place one day to keep it in the family. Josie swallowed the small hope that she herself might take it over.

“She’s always so serious, that one,” Hank said.

Mac held her gaze over the rim of her glass as she pressed

it to her lips, as if she was daring Josie to look away. She couldn't. Hank continued to ramble about the shortcomings of Josie's personality as Mac's mouth quirked up in the corner, and she tasted the sauvignon blanc, her eyes still trained on Josie's. It was...*hot*.

"Little does she know, it's what keeps her from world domination," Hank said somewhere in the white noise of the world that wasn't Mac.

Her gaze was doing something to Josie. Where Hank's sparkle was all gasoline and leather jackets, Mac's was like a lighthouse, pulling her in and keeping her safe.

*Fucking enough.*

"I'm the best winemaker in the States. Don't forget it, old man." She pushed off the bar and threw a cork at him that he bobbed about his chest until it dropped to the floor by Mac's feet. Mac picked it up and placed it on the bar. "Well, someone has to work around here. If Teddy comes in from sampling, tell him to come find me. And don't keep my intern to yourself all day. She's valuable, and I need her."

She walked to the breakroom to pour a cup of coffee and orient herself with the day's tasks. If she was honest, today wasn't too bad. She needed to pull down the barrels they would be racking and bottling next week, process samples of sauvignon blanc, gamay, and Riesling—she hoped Mac could help with that—and continue to prep for harvest, which was lurking just around the bend. Her phone rang, and she answered when she saw it was Greg from Copper Peak.

After a brief back and forth, she hung up and let out a deep breath. She tapped the pencil against the wood of her desk and smiled. Greg Johnson had caved like a California mudslide, and she'd be signing Cadieux's grape contract with Copper Peak. Not only that, but Mac had finished sulfuring more than Josie had expected last week, and that put them ahead of schedule for today.

Climbing barrels was clearly a strong suit for Mac, which Josie was relieved about because she was not a fan of heights. Flying was fine but climbing? Nope. No, thank you. Not at all.

She knew what it was like to fall, and she couldn't stop the tremble that invaded her limbs at the top of the barrels. She ran her tongue over the scar on her bottom lip. Such a stupid thing. It had been thirty-two years ago when she'd tried to walk across the top of the monkey bars on a dare from her brother. She'd almost made it when she'd slipped and fallen off the side, biting clean through her lip and breaking her arm.

She could still remember exactly how it felt. She shook her head and walked into the winery, shuddering at the memory. They'd be done by four today, plenty of time to take Mac to Folstrum for a barrel tasting, one of the activities she did with all her interns. Folstrum produced great wines of a very different style than Cadieux's, making for a nice dichotomy of tasting experiences.

She hopped on the forklift, took a sip of coffee—became human again—and zipped into the back barrel rooms to pluck barrels from the stacks and stage them in the production area in front of the tanks. If Mac could run the Brix, pH, and titrations on the samples, they'd be in good shape to get out early. She tugged her beanie down as the chill of the barrel rooms nipped at the rims of her ears. Maybe today would be a good day.

After laying out all the pinot, she jumped off the forklift and walked to the lab where Mac and Teddy, her vineyard manager, were chatting. Teddy was acting out his morning with the kids. Mac was her usual warm and jovial self, and he was his usual sweet and eager self. So why was she trying to decipher every single vibe between the two of them?

Teddy was a sweet guy who'd moved here from New Zealand with two kids and had been the vineyard manager at Cadieux for almost as long as Josie had been here. He was about seven years older than her but still boyishly handsome with a cute accent. And single.

“Ah, to have kids,” she interjected, taking pleasure in breaking the two of them up. Not wanting to think about why. “You heading out, Teddy?”

He ran a hand through his short salt-and-pepper hair.

“Yeah, just finished those samples for you. They’re in the fridge. I’ll be back in about an hour. Gotta run by Albertsons and grab more Ziplocs.”

“Great. And I’d like the block of Pommard sampled this week as well.”

Teddy smiled. “Yeah. Sure thing. It’s looking good out there, Jos. I can feel it. It’s going to be a good vintage.”

She appreciated his positivity. “Let’s hope.”

He looked at Mac. “Sweet as. See you two soon.”

Josie grinned at his Kiwi sayings as he disappeared into the tasting room, but Mac’s mouth hung open, her eyes wide. “What was that?” she asked, her voice carrying a tone of anger and shock.

Josie narrowed her brows in confusion. “What? What’s wrong?”

Mac crossed her arms and stared hard at her. “You just stood there and let him objectify me right in front of you. I mean, I know you don’t like me, but you’re our boss, and that was really inappropriate.” She pushed an errant piece of hair out of her face.

Josie took a step toward her. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What are you talking about?” She’d known Teddy for a long time, and it shocked her to hear he might have erred. “Did he do something to you before I walked in?” A fire rose in her chest at the mere thought of—

“You were standing right there.” Mac shook her head, rage burning in her eyes. “He looked me in the eye and told me I had a sweet ass.”

“Oh.” She overflowed with laughter, her hands on her knees. “Oh my gosh. No.” She wiped the corner of her eye and continued to laugh harder than she had in a long time.

“What? Why are you laughing?”

“Sweet *as*, not sweet *ass*. It’s a Kiwi phrase. Like ‘sweet as pie.’” A few final chuckles rumbled in her throat. “It means cool. Or right on.” She squeezed her arm. “Teddy wasn’t



coming on to you. I promise.”

Mac rolled her eyes as Josie righted herself and tried to wipe the grin from her lips. “Wow. I am an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. But you are my intern, and I do have some work for you to do. Hank didn’t get you drunk at eight in the morning, did he?” She pulled the samples from the fridge.

“I insisted on spitting, even though I swear he loves me a little less now.” Mac sat on a stool as Josie lined up the Ziploc bags of grapes on the counter.

Josie could feel her eyes on her, and she kind of liked it. “Yeah. Hank hates spitting. Good thing you’re already his favorite.”

Mac laughed. “His favorite?”

“Oh yeah. He outright said he loves you more than your brother. Classic Hank.” She pulled out beakers, labeling tape, and a sieve while Mac chuckled and shook her head. “Okay, I’m going to teach you how to process these samples so you can knock this out while I finish laying out barrels for bottling. It’s simple, don’t worry. If we can get out at a decent time, we’ll head over to Folstrum to barrel taste with Erin.”

Mac slid off the stool and hovered next to her as she grabbed the sauvignon blanc sample. Josie showed her how to squish all the individual grapes in the sample, sieve the juice into a beaker, take the Brix and pH, and set up for a titration to determine the titratable acidity.

“I assume you’ve run titrations in school?”

Mac chewed her lip and shook her head. “Well, technically, yes. But that was so long ago, I wouldn’t remember the first thing about them.”

“It’s pretty simple. Measure out a five-milliliter sample into the Erlenmeyer, add two mls of water, three drops of the reagent, drop in a magnetic stirrer, and drip the sodium hydroxide until you hit a pH of 8.2.” She tapped the pH meter. “Don’t overshoot it because I need to know exactly how many milliliters of sodium hydroxide you used so I can calculate the titratable acidity. Got it?”

Mac swallowed as she stared. “Um. Maybe you could repeat that so I can jot down the instructions and show me how to do the first one?”

She sighed. Normally, her interns showed up with basic laboratory skills, and running titrations was a basic skill. But Mac had zero winery experience. Of course she needed more support than a verbal rundown. “Sure. Good idea.” She set up the first sample and began the titration. “See? It’s getting close now, so I’m going to slow my drops of sodium hydroxide as we creep up to eight. Easy does it. And…” She could run titrations in her sleep. She knew she was just two drops away from a pH of 8.2. “Boom. 8.2. Perfect.” She wrote down the numbers and smiled. “Your turn.”

Mac was diligent, taking care that every grape was properly squished before straining the sample. Her long pale fingers hosted a slight tremble as they prepared the flask with the reagent and water. She let out a shaky breath as she dropped in the magnetic stirrer and prepared the burette of sodium hydroxide.

Josie leaned on the counter beside her, watching her every move. “You set up perfectly. Good job. Now, nice and easy on the titration,” she said, leaning close enough to catch the scent of warm gardenia on Mac’s reddening skin.

She was clearly nervous. She opened the valve to slowly drip sodium hydroxide into the sample. As the pH crept up and up, Mac’s fingers trembled more and more.

“Easy now,” Josie said. She knew Mac would overshoot her first attempt. Most folks did. “It’s coming up. Just a few more drops.”

The solution’s color bloomed an electric pink, and the pH shot well above its mark.

“Shoot.” Mac pulled up and took a deep breath, as if she’d been giving someone lifesaving surgery, and they’d just flatlined.

“It’s okay. Just try again until you get it.” Josie’s eyes flitted from the clock on the wall to Mac. Specifically, to the

delicate curve of her back as she leaned over the lab table. To her hair falling into her eyes as she huffed and pushed it back. To the skin she exposed there, just below her ear. Josie swallowed. The urge to run her lips over that soft warm skin was freaking her the fuck out.

Mac groaned in frustration and snapped her back into reality. “I’m sorry,” she said and dumped her overshot titration in the sink.

Josie stayed quiet as Mac mixed her third attempt that turned out to be her third *failed* attempt. “Mac, can you do this?” She wasn’t trying to be mean, but Mac should have been able to complete a titration. Their day depended on it. Three failed attempts in a row was...bad.

Mac stayed focused on the lab equipment as her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red. “Yes.”

Josie held in her growing annoyance as the reality of her situation was becoming clearer and clearer. They probably wouldn’t get out of work early to go tasting, but there was something more concerning than that. If Josie needed to run samples today, she could stay late and run them herself, a luxury they wouldn’t have during crush, when they’d both be exhausted and drowning in work. She was terrified that if Mac couldn’t handle a simple titration, they were both fucked. Utterly screwed. The wine gods would show no mercy this harvest.

Josie always had an image in her head of what her own label would look like. It’d be clean and simple, with her grandmother’s name displayed proudly: Anita. Her grandmother was the only person in her family who’d understood her. Who took the time to know her. To love—

The solution burst bright pink again, and Josie pushed off the counter. “Mac—”

“Josie.” Mac’s head whipped around in frustration, her eyes narrowed and trained on hers. “You’re not helping. You’re clearly making me nervous.”

“You’re making *me* nervous.”

A flash of hurt crossed Mac's face like a slap. She took a moment to gather herself and focused on setting up a new sample. Without looking at Josie, she said, "Go lay out the barrels. I have this under control."

Josie wasn't sure she believed that. But she needed to lay out the barrels regardless, and if it turned out Mac couldn't run the samples, then Josie had better get to work so she'd be able to step in later. "Okay."

As she climbed into the forklift and drove into the dark barrel rooms, Josie rubbed her temple where that stress headache was knocking on her door. She had been so looking forward to taking a breath today. To doing something relaxing and fun. Instead, she felt like she was drowning *again*, and it was because of Mac. Because Mac had no idea what she was doing pretty much ever.

Anita was never going to happen.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Awkward car rides were becoming a thing, apparently. They didn't speak as Josie drove them through the winding Dundee Hills roads to Folstrum. Mac tried to focus on the beauty of all the vineyards growing on the hillsides like moss. Endless vineyards. But she couldn't focus on anything except Josie next to her. If she wasn't staring at Josie and drooling over her, she was frustrated and hurt by her.

It was pretty clear to Mac that all she needed in order to do a proper titration was for Josie to stop breathing down her neck. It was kinda hot for the first one—Josie's intensity, her concern, her breath on Mac's skin—but it had become overwhelming and annoying and inhibited her from doing a good job. Josie had looked shocked when Mac had proposed she continue to lay out barrels while Mac worked on the samples. But once she wasn't being stared down, she hadn't overshot a single titration.

Sure, she didn't have a lot of experience, but she still expected Josie to trust her on a base level. People had been underestimating Mac her entire life, and that first night with Josie had given her hope. Something about Josie had given her the vibe that she saw deeper into Mac than anyone else had. That she saw her as a force.

*I am a force.*

But if she was wrong about how Josie saw her, then this would be a very difficult harvest. She knew Josie hadn't wanted to hire her, but here they were, stuck together in a mess of hot and cold. All Josie's fault, *thank you very much*.

They climbed up a similar drive to Cadieux's, dirt instead of gravel. Brown plumes overtook the car as they parked in the far corner of the lot. Folstrum was as big as Cadieux but less regal-looking with a stunning view that was *almost* as good as

theirs. She loved the feeling that she got from these wineries. The feeling that they were in a world apart. Apart from the ordinary. A place with a bit of magic.

Josie stepped next to her as she took in the view. Mac could feel her presence. Could see the tip of a brown boot next to hers. “Thank you for running those samples. You did a good job.”

Mac nodded without taking her eyes off the valley. Josie’s apology this morning should have been enough, but it wasn’t. Not after Josie had lost her patience in the lab. It wasn’t enough because Mac had already invested in Josie, and it hurt that she hadn’t done the same. They had a connection. She *knew* they did. An energy pulled them together. She could tell in the way Josie looked at her and in the way she always stood just a bit closer than necessary.

“I’m down a harvest intern this year,” Josie said.

Mac turned and raised a brow in anticipation. She stayed quiet, waiting.

“I struck a deal with Hank to let me buy a density meter if I hired one less worker this year.”

Mac tilted her head. “What’s a density meter?”

Josie chuckled, black eyes staring into her. “It’s what you were using today. It measures Brix and temp. It’ll be your best friend during harvest.”

She nodded.

Josie took a deep breath and seemed to force it out her nose. “You’re right. I didn’t want to hire you.” She tore her eyes away and scanned the tables beside her. “My dream is to make my own label, and I’ve been going back and forth with Hank about it for years. He’s always shot me down until now. But it all depends on this vintage.” Josie’s eyebrows huddled together. There was something vulnerable in her expression, as if she was pleading. “I wanted to hire someone with a lot of experience, but Hank made me hire you.”

Mac nodded slowly and twisted her shiny boot in the dirt, the dust shading the leather to a matte brown.

“I underestimated you.”

Those were the magic words. *I underestimated you.* Mac reached for her shoulder and let her hand rest there. She could feel Josie twitch, then relax under her touch. It made her smile. “What’s it called?”

Josie tilted her head. “What?”

“Your label.” Josie blinked and took a moment. Mac slid her hand just a bit higher up and squeezed the tight shoulder muscle. “Tell me. I want to know what I’m working for.”

Josie grinned and took a deep breath. “Anita.”

Mac let her hand slip off Josie’s shoulder and down her arm, tugging her sleeve and letting her fingers brush against the warm skin of Josie’s wrist. “Thank you. Now, come on. We’ve got wine to taste, boss.”

“*Ugh.* Don’t call me that.”

Mac pulled her to the tasting room, fingers still pressed against Josie’s skin.

\* \* \*

“Careful,” Josie murmured as Carson zoomed by on a forklift. He hit a dip in the cellar floor, and she cringed as the double stack of barrels he was moving leaned dangerously close to tipping over. She held Mac’s elbow until he was far enough away to no longer be an immediate hazard. “That kid’s ego is going to cause an accident one day.”

Mac looked at where Josie’s fingers had just been, making Josie wonder what she felt there.

Erin walked out of the lab with three glasses and a small siphon. “Hey. Ready to taste some wines?”

Josie took two glasses and handed one to Mac. “We’re ready.”

Mac grinned as she looked between them, rolling the stem of her glass between her fingers. “I’m so excited to do a barrel tasting.”

“Any excuse to have this one give me advice on what we

have going on here,” Erin said, a hand on Josie’s arm.

Josie chuckled. “What you have going on is an unsafe forklift driver. You have to tell Carson to slow down. Safety is cool. Unbroken barrels are cool. Not whipping around the winery like he just turned sixteen.”

Mac nodded along. “Very uncool,” she whispered.

“Oh, honey, he’s just trying to impress you. He’s a little girl crazy, and have you seen yourself?” Erin asked.

Rose pink pooled in Mac’s cheeks, and Josie tried to pivot the conversation. She didn’t know if Mac played on their team or not, but she had a feeling she didn’t enjoy attention like this from strangers. “Should I grab a spit bucket?” Josie asked as they followed Erin into the dark barrel room. Folstrum had a more traditional method of keeping their barrels with zero racks, just wooden chocks holding the barrels in place on top of one another.

“Since when do you need a spit bucket? Your aim is impeccable.”

Josie glanced at Mac, who looked as though she had no idea what they were talking about. “Aim?” Mac asked.

“If you want to spit, just spit in the drain,” Erin said as she toed the skinny metal grate that ran the length of the barrel room. Mac eyed the drain, no doubt considering if she could spit into such a small target. “Or just drink the damn wine.” Erin shrugged and pulled the bung of the nearest barrique.

Josie ran a hand along the head of the barrel. “I’ve been dying to try this one. How do you think the partial whole-cluster turned out?”

Erin fished the siphon into the barrel and sucked the tube until red wine began to flow through the clear plastic. She thumbed the end of the line before liquid could escape and took Mac’s glass first, splashing a generous taste into it. “I’m obsessed with it. Wish I’d made more, honestly.” She filled the other two. “I feel like the added earthiness from the stems makes up a bit for Roger shitting the bed on his pick dates.”

They raised their glasses. “Smoke ’em if you got ’em,”



Josie said.

Erin nodded, red curls bobbing around her face. “Harvest is coming.”

They clinked their glasses and sipped the young pinot. Mac swirled and sniffed, raised her brow in consideration, and sipped again. “This is so good, Erin.”

Erin grinned and extended her glass, tilting it as if judging the color against the pale gray of the concrete floor. “Thank you. I’m proud of this one.” She squinted and bit her lip. “It’s a bit dark. What do you think, Jos?”

Josie tipped her glass to get a better look. Erin was right. It was quite dark for a pinot, an impressive feat given how early Folstrum tended to pick. “It’s dark. But it will lighten up nicely.” The blood red barely faded at the edges and the deep center of—

Wine splattered the tips of Josie’s boots, drenching the nice clean ground around the drain in red.

Almost as red as Mac’s cheeks. She pressed a hand to her chest and broke out into giggles. “I am so sorry. I knew I was going to miss. I can’t believe anyone can aim that well.”

Josie couldn’t help but smile. Mac was adorable in every way, spitting that wine with such confidence and blushing at how badly she’d missed the mark. She took a sip, swished it, and spit the wine in a tight stream straight into the drain. She winked at Mac, who gave her a sexy smirk in return.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Erin said. “I’ve been looking for some ego-breaking jobs for Carson, so spit wherever you want. The messier, the better.”

After several more barrel samples, Erin and Mac stopped spitting, and Josie drank every other one. They leaned into the evening and enjoyed their remaining free time before harvest started in just a week or two. Mac’s laugh became more and more musical after every sip. Her cheeks a shade closer to the wine.

“I’m stealing her, Jos.” A twinkle shone in Erin’s eyes at the glorious sight that was Mac Layton getting a little tipsy in

a barrel room, looking just a bit silly in her gruff winery clothes. Like a construction worker in four-inch heels. She'd like to see Mac in heels.

“Sorry. You can't have me. I'm all Josie's,” Mac said. She said it with such pride and such innuendo that the three of them doubled over laughing. “Not like that. Not like that.” They wiped their eyes and righted themselves, focusing on the new wine in their glasses. “I'm sure Josie would trade me for Carson in a heartbeat, anyway.” Mac nudged her ribs.

Erin turned away to seal the barrel they were tasting and clean the drips of wine around the bung hole. Josie draped an arm over Mac's shoulders and gave her a quick hug, relishing the second of having her flush against her side. “I wouldn't trade you for anyone. Least of all Carson.”

Mac snuck her arm around her waist, just under the hem of her vest, and squeezed. “Really?”

Josie rubbed Mac's shoulder before releasing her and taking a small step away, feeling she'd already been too greedy. “One-hundred percent. You're mine.” Mac bit her lip, and Josie blamed the wine for how this entire interaction was making her feel so...syrupy. Warm and sweet and heavy. “I mean, unless you want to trade me for Erin.” Josie smiled as Erin joined their conversation again.

Mac touched Erin's arm and grinned. “Don't tempt me. Erin gives me lots of delicious wine and isn't as frustrating as you.”

Erin smiled. “Should we move this party to the tasting room? We have some fun library wines open.”

Mac was already feeling the wine and probably couldn't handle much more. At least, not in public. Of course they could have fun, but when Josie was at other wineries or wine events, she represented Cadieux and her future brand, Anita. Being intoxicated was not how she wanted to portray herself. Plus, it would only give people what they wanted to see from her. Cracks in the armor. Some kind of failure. Something to gasp at, like her short relationship with Carly. She shook that woman's name out of her head.

Mac nodded enthusiastically, and Josie had to oblige her. She was too cute. “Okay. Just a couple, though. We have a big day of racking tomorrow.”

Erin nudged Mac. “She’s so strict. Come on.”

They followed her into the moderately full tasting room and posted up at the end of the bar. A few of the patrons sent curious looks their way, and Josie did everything in her power to avoid eye contact with them as Erin swept behind the bar and grabbed a couple of open bottles.

“Don’t drink ’em all,” Allen, the tasting room associate, said.

“No guarantees,” Erin called back. “All right. We have a 2011 Falls River Pinot Noir.”

Josie slid Mac’s glass in front of Erin. “Oh. The good stuff.”

“This is probably Mac’s birth-year wine,” Erin teased.

“Oh please. More like the year I graduated high school.”

Josie leaned on her elbows, shoulder to shoulder with Mac. “*Ugh*. She’s just a baby. What are you? Thirty?”

Mac pushed into her. “Exactly. Not a baby at all. There’s no way you’re that much older than I am.” She pressed the rim of her glass to her bottom lip.

And all of the syrupy feelings in her chest began to drip lower and lower the longer Mac stared at her like that. The longer Mac leaned against her like that. But Mac was way too young for her. And she was Mac’s *boss*, for Christ’s sake. “I have a decade on you.”

“That’s nothing.”

Josie took a sip, trying to focus on anything other than the way Mac semi-flirted with her and the way it made her want to clench her thighs. “This is lovely, Erin. Dried cranberry and mushrooms.” She swirled the wine again and sipped. “Sage.”

“You’re making us hungry, Jos,” Erin said.

“*Mm*. Yeah. I may need to eat soon,” Mac said.

They drained their glasses, and Erin loaded them into the dishwasher.

“We should probably get some dinner and call it a night. Thanks for the delicious wine,” Josie said. She zipped her vest and followed Mac and Erin into the parking lot, cursing herself when she reached for Mac’s lower back. She dropped her hand midway and shook her head. What the actual fuck was she thinking? Was she under a literal spell?

Erin stood by the car as they got in. “Get home safe. Thanks for coming.”

“Thank *you*,” Mac shouted from the shotgun seat.

Josie chuckled and buckled her seat belt. “Thanks, Erin. I’ll catch you at the Cane soon.”

They waved good-bye and drove down the dark dirt path back to society. Mac scanned through the radio stations until she found a Taylor Swift song and turned it up. “Ah. Perfection.”

“What sounds good for dinner? I don’t really feel like cooking tonight. Pizza? Or we can get burritos from Happy’s and eat at the little park at the end of Main.”

“Yes. Please. Oh my God, a burrito sounds like heaven.” Mac grabbed her knee, and it took every ounce of Josie’s control to keep the car on the road. Especially when she didn’t move it after a few seconds. She tried to ignore the instant chills and the terrifying pulsing between her thighs. Mac was probably just drunk and had forgotten it was there. She wasn’t thinking clearly, and it wasn’t a big deal. Regardless, it was inappropriate. When she turned onto 99, she shifted her leg, letting Mac’s hand slide off.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

They passed Tank and Chem on the right as they continued down 99 to Main Street. Mac smiled to herself in the dark, enjoying her delicious buzz from the barrel tasting. Enjoying every second with Josie and not wanting this night to end. It was only quarter to eight. “Hey, you.”

Josie smirked the sexiest smirk she’d ever seen. Mac wanted to touch her leg again but had gotten the hint after Josie had not-so-subtly shifted away from her. It didn’t bother her. She already knew how Josie saw her. It was written all over her face. All over that sexy smirk. “Yes, Mac?”

Hearing Josie say her name like that had her buzzing in a whole other way, as if her entire core was reverberating from the sound waves of that voice. She squeezed her thighs together for a bit of relief, but it only exasperated the warm pressure building there. “Let’s ditch the car, give the girls a potty break, and walk to Main.”

Josie turned down the radio and rubbed her leg where Mac’s hand had been. “Okay. We can do that. But aren’t you hungry? We’ll get there way faster if we drive.”

Mac turned in her seat and put a hand on Josie’s shoulder. She was rewarded with a mischievous glance and a cute grin. “You need to get on my level. What I’ve gathered from all you winemaking folk is that our time off is precious, right?”

“Right.”

“Then we should enjoy tonight to the fullest. Let’s ditch the car so you don’t have to worry about driving anymore, walk to Jack’s so I can say hi to my buddies, pick a bottle of wine to go with our burritos, grab said burritos, and have a night picnic in the park. Then walk home.” She rubbed a tense muscle behind Josie’s shoulder as Josie considered the

proposition. She hoped Josie would say yes. This evening was everything Mac had wanted from her. Maybe a little more.

Josie tapped the steering wheel and cleared her throat. “Okay. But don’t forget, we have a big day tomorrow, and whatever fun we have tonight may not be so fun in the morning.”

Mac pumped her fist in victory. “You’re going to love Jack. Oh, and Reuben if he’s there.”

After they let the girls out and ditched the car, they walked to Main Street, enjoying the cool breeze and commenting on the different shops and tasting rooms. By the time they reached Jack’s, Mac felt completely at home. A feeling she’d been grasping for since she’d arrived and one that she was scared she wouldn’t find. It had everything to do with the woman walking next to her. Josie held the door for her, the sweetest smile on her lips as she nodded for Mac to go in. She followed, and Mac would’ve killed to feel her hand at the small of her back. But Josie walked a couple feet behind her to the bar.

“Reuben, look who’s just arrived,” Jack said as he walked out from behind the bar. Reuben turned and raised his glass, a goofy grin spreading over his face as Jack pulled her into a giant hug. “How are you, dear?” he asked, just loud enough for Mac to hear.

“Good. Really good.”

He pulled back to examine her face as if to confirm that she was, in fact, good. Reuben stood and gave her another big hug. She wasn’t sure she deserved the love these guys so willingly gave her, but she wasn’t going to argue.

“Hi, Josie. I’m Jack, and this is Reuben. You probably don’t remember—”

“Jack. Yes. Wow, it must be almost ten years since we did that winemaker’s night here.” Josie spun as if to take in the cozy wine bar. “When Mac was telling me about your place, it didn’t ring a bell, but being here and seeing you again, I remember it so clearly.” She smiled softly. “You were very

kind to me, even though I was losing my patience with all the guests.”

Jack guided her to the bar. “Even I was feeling tested by that couple from Florida. I’ll never forget them.” He slipped behind the bar. “This is Reuben, my dear friend. He puts together most of the Elmwood community events.”

“Impressive. It’s nice to meet you, Reuben,” Josie said.

As Reuben shook her hand, flattery oozing from him, Mac couldn’t help but be proud to be associated with Josie, who didn’t seem grumpy to be in a Main Street wine bar. She wasn’t cold or rude. She was warm and kind and inviting. She cared about making a good impression on Mac’s friends.

“What do we feel like drinking?” Jack asked. He scanned his lineup for the evening and snagged a bottle of red.

Josie unzipped her vest and sat next to Mac. When she didn’t respond, Mac realized she was waiting for Mac to speak. Letting her decide. “Oh. This is more of a grab-and-go situation. We’ve been barrel tasting and need to eat burritos. Like, now.” As she said it, her stomach growled. “But I wanted to get a bottle to have with them at the park.” Jack raised his brows and looked between them. “So whatever goes with burritos.”

Jack sighed and pushed off the bar. “Burritos. Burritos. What to drink with burritos?” He bent to search through the wine fridge under the bar and after a minute or two, pulled out a long, torpedo-shaped bottle of white. “What do you think? Might be nice.” He showed the bottle to Josie as if telling a secret, his shoulder blocking Mac’s view.

She grinned. “I think this is an excellent choice.”

He nodded and bagged the wine. “What is it?” Mac asked.

“You’ll see soon, dear. You’re going to love it.” Jack handed the bottle to Josie, and she gave him her credit card.

“I can get it,” Mac protested.

“I’m getting this one, okay? You can get the burritos.” Josie signed the receipt and pushed it back to Jack, giving him

an indiscernible look. *What was that look?* “Thanks for the discount, Jack. And for the bottle.”

He winked. What the hell was going on?

Once they had gotten their giant burritos from Happy’s, they walked to the little park at the end of Main. The trees rustled softly in the breeze, and they sat next to each other at one of the deserted picnic tables by the playground. They were alone, given it was past most kids’ bedtime on a school night. Mac handed her a burrito, and Josie pulled a wine key from her pocket.

“How do you have a wine key? Do you carry one wherever you go?”

Josie chuckled and pulled the bottle out the bag. “Jack gave it to me as we were leaving. He knew I’d need it.” She held it in her hand as if weighing it. “It’s a good one, too.”

“What are we drinking anyway? Y’all were so weird about it.” She unwrapped her burrito as Josie carefully turned the corkscrew into the delicate looking cork.

“It’s a dry gewürztraminer from Cadieux. Should go nicely with the burritos. And if we’re lucky, I believe it’s your birth-year wine.” She coaxed out the fragile cork and presented the bottle.

Mac scanned the familiar, yet older and slightly less elegant, label to find the vintage. She nodded, a little in awe. She’d never drank her birth-year wine before. She felt warmth pool in her chest. Having this wine—being alone in a dark park with Josie—felt special.

“Cups?”

Mac handed over the paper cups they’d requested from Happy’s, and Josie poured two glasses.

“When’s your birthday?” Every word Josie spoke felt like a little gift just for her.

“June twenty-eighth.”

Josie nodded and handed her a cup. “These grapes were harvested thirty years ago, just about three months after you



were born, from the same vines that you're going to make your first wine from this vintage. Your uncle Hank was working all hours of the day on this very wine while your folks were probably up all night with you. And now, you get to drink it, and you're the same age."

Mac was a little tipsy from the barrel tasting, but she felt sobered by Josie's words. By the care she used to pick each of them out. By the way she was trying to make this moment as special as possible. Jack had picked the wine, but it was Josie who'd made Mac shiver.

Mac held the cup to her lips. "Thank you," she said and took a sip. She closed her eyes and let the moment wash over her every sense. The subtle pine scent of Josie sitting next to her was replaced by dried flowers, white pepper, and a touch of wild honey. But it didn't hold a candle to the sensation she got when Josie placed a gentle hand between her shoulder blades and rubbed a small circle on her back.

"Do you like it?" Josie whispered.

*Yes.* She adored every plane of contact, from her hand on her back, the breath of whisper on her ear, the length of their legs welded together down to their work boots pressed under the table. It took two people to crave each other's touch to meld like this. "It's the best glass of wine I've ever had."

Josie rubbed her back one more time and took a sip of her own. "It's spectacular. The company's not too shabby either." She knocked Mac's knee and took a big bite of burrito. "Yes." She groaned and rolled her eyes in a dramatic display of pleasure. "I'm starving, and this fat burrito is everything."

Mac grinned. "Okay. I want to know more about the famed Josie Sanchez."

Josie cringed as she swallowed and took a swig of wine. "Ew. Famed? It's a little much, don't you think?"

"It's the absolute truth. Your reputation precedes you wherever you go. Whether that's good or bad, who knows? But I get to actually *know* you, and it turns out, you're not half-bad. So I want to know more."

Josie shrugged and angled toward her. “Fair enough. What do you want to know?”

“I want—”

Josie dropped a hand on her shoulder, her teeth scraping over her scar and stealing her words. “Before you ask me anything, you should know that I will be asking you questions of equal or greater rigor.”

“Seems fair.” She nodded, and Josie dropped her hand. “Okay. Why are you scared of heights?”

Josie leaned away. “What? I’m not...how did you know I was afraid of heights?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s the total body tremors you get when you hit the fourth row of barrels.” She winked. “Kinda tipped me off.”

“Ah, how the body betrays us.” She chuckled into her cup. “You’re right. I hate heights. But so do a ton of people, and I don’t think there has to be a specific reason besides a strong survival instinct.”

Mac raised a brow and stayed quiet as she waited for Josie to continue.

“There’s no big story here.” She shrugged. “My brother dared me to walk across the top of the monkey bars when I was eight, and I fell off. I guess I was biting my lip when I fell because I bit clean through it.”

“So that knocks out my second question, the scar.” She shocked herself by reaching for Josie and ghosting a thumb over the thin line on her lip. Not that she could clearly make it out in the dark. But she knew exactly where it was from staring at it so often. Josie closed her eyes for the briefest of seconds until Mac pulled back, her fingers tingling.

Josie swallowed and tagged the scar with her tongue. “It’s my turn to ask a question anyway.”

“Let’s hear it.” Mac cleared her throat and snuck in a quick bite.

“Do you, uh, think I’m standoffish?”

She was taken aback by the vulnerability in the words. Did Josie care more about the community's perception of her than she let on or just Mac's? Josie seemed to brace for her answer. "No. Maybe you were a bit gruff when you picked me up from the airport, but no. You're kind and thoughtful and warm." She quirked her head and grinned. "Mostly."

"Phew. I'll take it." Josie sighed and took a bite.

"What a waste of a question, silly. Okay, here's a good one. What was your last relationship?"

"Oh." Josie dropped the rest of her burrito in the wrapper and wiped her hands. She drained the wine in her cup and poured another glass. "Do I have to?"

Mac grinned, knowing she'd asked the right question. "You must. It's the rules."

"As decreed by whom?"

Mac slapped her own chest. "Me."

Josie shook her head, taking a gulp of gewürztraminer. "Damn. There's no arguing with that, is there?"

"Nope. Let's hear it, love."

Josie sighed and took one more sip. "Carly. Her name was Carly." She cringed as if the name alone caused her visceral pain. And though Mac didn't want her to hurt, she couldn't help but be pleased there wasn't some woman Josie was still hooked on.

"I'm going to need a little more than that to satisfy the requirements of my question."

She groaned. "She was Erin's cellar hand, and we dated awhile. Until she got really persistent about wanting to work at Cadieux and pressured me about an assistant winemaker position. But she wasn't that skilled, and working with someone you're involved with is probably the worst idea in the entire world. Especially if you're their boss."

Mac leaned away and studied the remnants of her burrito. Josie was right, surely. But she and Josie weren't *involved*; they were just getting close as friends did. They were just

*casually* eating burritos and drinking Mac's super-special-birth-year wine alone in a park at night. It was fine. It was *fine*. She cleared her throat. "Okay. So you broke up?"

Josie scoffed and shook her head. "I wish it was so simple. I mean, yes. I broke up with her when it became evident that she didn't like me, she just wanted an in at Cadieux. But she didn't take it well. She told everyone around town that I had offered her the assistant winemaker position because we were sleeping together, and she had to turn it down because, and I quote, she couldn't be bought."

Mac almost choked on her wine. "No."

"Yes."

"I mean, no one believed her, right?"

Josie rolled her eyes. "Most people wanted it to be true. They wanted me to be this weirdo they could scoff at. Wanted me to fail."

"Because they're threatened and jealous. Aren't you supposedly the best?"

"It doesn't matter. It still hurts to be this person in the community that people actively root against."

Screw it. Mac wasn't Carly. And they were just friends, so she wrapped an arm around Josie's shoulders and pulled her close. She was shocked when Josie caved, melting into her with the same vulnerability that was in her voice. Her head rested on the tops of Mac's breasts. On her collarbone. "I'm rooting for you," Mac whispered into her hair. Josie wrapped her arms around her waist, and they held each other, taking exactly what they needed from one another in this private moment.

Josie pulled back, creating enough distance for her gaze to drop to Mac's lips before she pulled away completely. "We should probably walk back, or the girls will never forgive us."

They walked home in a comfortable quiet. Mac wondered if Josie would replay the entire evening in her head as she lay in bed tonight. Mac certainly would. She was content. Got exactly what she wanted: to be closer to Josie and to know that

Josie cared for her in some way. Because she was beginning to care for Josie in a very big way.

## CHAPTER NINE

Mac fumbled with the nitrogen line, trying to get the little metal connector to stay in the pump hose. She had just finished cleaning the lines and was trying to evacuate all the oxygen and replace it with nitrogen, just like Josie had trained her to do. But the damn connection wasn't holding, and she was starting to stress. This was her first real task at Cadieux, and it involved moving hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of wine. *What could possibly go wrong?*

"Need help, Mac?"

Hearing her name made her jump. The anxiety of doing her first racking had her on edge. Josie leaned against the clean tank she was supposed to pump into and smirked. She fumbled some more until she accidentally dropped both hoses. "Sorry. I just can't figure—"

"It's a quick connect." Josie picked up the hose. "It's simple. Push the collar down and push the nipple in. Done." She handed her the hose and turned on the nitrogen and pump.

Mac knew what to do next. She walked the length of the pump lines, holding them over her head to help any remaining water drain out. At the end, she shut the valve, and Josie turned off the pump.

"If you don't shut off the gas, you're going to explode these nice new lines. Then you'd be in real trouble." Josie winked, but Mac hopped over the twisted mess of hoses and shut off the gas in a panic. *Ugh*. She was so nervous, so in her head—*Josie* was so in her head—that she couldn't focus on what she was doing. The only thing she could focus on was Josie's sexy smirk and the memory of last night.

Josie put a hand on her back. "Don't be nervous. You nailed titrations yesterday, and you're going to nail this, too."

I'll be in the lab if you need me."

Mac nodded. "Thanks."

Once she finally finished setting up and was pumping wine out of the first barrel, Josie walked from the lab through the rows of pinot and straight to her. Mac tried to focus on the little sight glass where she could see the wine rushing through the hose. It was bright red and smelled incredible. Like tobacco and dirt and truffle. She couldn't wait to taste this one. *Focus.*

"How's it going?" Josie asked.

Mac jerked the hose back when a heavy chunk of lees flowed through the sight glass. *Shit.* She was only supposed to be pumping clean wine into the tank, leaving behind the lees, all the dead yeast, and sludge that had settled to the bottom of the barrel. "Good. Fine," she said.

Another chunk flowed past, and Josie's hands covered hers. "Easy with it, yeah? Where's your torch?"

"Back right."

Mac felt the slightest brush of Josie's knuckles as she tugged the flashlight out of her pocket and shone it through the back of the sight glass. It sent warmth straight to her core. "Now we're cooking," Josie said, her hands still covering Mac's. "Ease it back in just until"—a thin snake of lees swam past—"there. Now just leave it until it sucks air and turn it off, then move to the next."

Josie walked back to the lab, and Mac wondered if she knew how she had affected Mac just by pulling the Maglite from her pocket and touching her hands. Instead of thinking about Josie, who was increasingly distracting her, looking damn fine in her tight tan canvas pants and boots, she focused on the wine. Focused on what she was here to do. As it rushed from the barrel, she could smell how good it was.

She took a deep breath. She had this.

\* \* \*

Josie pulled back the covers and slipped into bed. It was

one of her favorite places, a sacred place, much like the winery when no one was there. When she could sit by the old fig tree and look over the valley and immerse herself in the blaring quiet, knowing she was the only one. Her bedroom felt like that. She had complete control over her space. Nothing would be done to a subpar standard, and everything would be exactly where it was supposed to be. It brought her peace. Recharged her. Especially now when at the winery, she had no choice but to trust the new intern.

When everything felt like chaos.

She liked to keep her room simple. Things could become very hectic very fast at work, and she wanted to come home to a place that didn't make demands on her. That meant ocean walls, sand blankets, and two coral pillows. One pothos lived in the far corner, dripping its languid leaves almost to the floor. It was one of the few plants she hadn't killed, and she'd grown rather fond of the thing. Its tenacity was admirable. As for the ocean walls, they remained almost naked, floating only two things: an old portrait of her grandmother, Anita, and two shelves of fiction. There was nothing wine-related in her room. Her whole life was wine; she didn't need it following her to bed unless a beautiful woman was holding it.

*Not that that's happened recently.*

It had been a while since Josie had put herself out there by letting Erin pressure her into online dating or try to set her up with someone. She absolutely refused to date another winemaker—thanks to the particularly messy Carly experience—and that made her pool of options in Elmwood relatively small. That, paired with her social anxiety, made her dating life a little slow. And now, going into harvest, the issue of her empty bed would have to remain on the back burner.

She dipped her fingers into the tub of Working Hands on her nightstand and rubbed the cream into her sore skin. Her hands took a beating. From the chemicals, to the wood of the barrels sucking them dry, to being constantly wet, this time of year was extra rough on them, and she wanted to get ahead of the worst of it, but she knew in a month, her hands would look like those of a zombie: purple and angry, with split skin.



Bone and Tinker curled up at the foot of her bed. They'd stay for a half hour or so—until right before she nodded off—then they'd jump to the floor, preferring the coolness of the hardwood against their bellies. “Good night, my loves,” she said and gave them each a pat before switching off her lamp.

She lay in bed, her mind racing through the last week of racking and bottling. Of Mac. She did fine. *She did fine*. So why did Josie want to fire her and shove her against a wall and kiss her at the same time? The picnic in the park had scared her. How intimate it had felt to share a bottle of wine in the quiet night. The little touches...

Mac was distracting and smelled too good and was frustratingly chipper, especially when she had no clue what she was doing. The next day at work, her racking was sloppy and slowed down the filter with all the lees that got pumped into the tank with the wine. Josie had tried to maintain a positive attitude and be supportive, but Mac had dropped two cases of their estate pinot during bottling, and even after she'd been trained on the forklift, she didn't have enough confidence to move a pallet of empty glass across the winery.

Josie sighed. Mackenzie Layton was always on her mind. She had no discerning feelings about her. Her thoughts of Mac were like boiling soup in a pot, all mushed together in hot turmoil. But always cooking. Always tormenting her. It would be so much easier if she hated Mac. Or if Mac was actually a terrible cellar hand. But she wasn't terrible at all. For all her little mistakes and faults, she had more potential in her than Josie had seen in anyone else in a long time.

And as for hating her...well, that wasn't going to happen. She was having the opposite problem in a big way. She rolled onto her stomach and whisper-yelled a long, “Fuck,” into her pillow, knowing she would lie awake for hours, trying to think of anything other than Mac.

\* \* \*

The next morning hit Josie the way most mornings did recently. In the fucking teeth. Why, when she would trade her soul to the devil to be able to fall asleep at night, was it the

hardest thing humanly possible to wake in the morning? Tinkerbelle's soft snoring still filled her ears, but Bone stood next to the bed, wagging her tail and squeaking.

“Does someone need to go potty?” She rubbed the sweet girl's head and pulled on her slippers, her threadbare slippers. She really needed a new pair. A hole was nearly worn through the old navy moccasins at the ball of her foot.

She scrubbed her face, cursing herself for not making coffee the night before, and walked downstairs with the girls. They had the day off today, and she had a list of personal chores she wanted to complete before the winery became even more chaotic. Mostly, she was looking forward to toying with her label for Anita. An image had popped in her head the other day while she was on the forklift, and she was eager to put together a draft. To have something concrete.

The aroma of fresh coffee enveloped her when she reached the bottom of the staircase. Coffee and...*what is that? Cinnamon?*

Mac sat on the couch in a gray sweatshirt, blue flannel pajama pants, her hair spilling out of the messiest of buns, and *glasses*. The glasses. Well, the whole effect of her lounging with one leg tucked under herself, a cup of coffee balancing against her thigh, and a wine history book spread over her lap, was beyond cozy. She looked like a snow day. Like a, lock yourself inside and light all the candles, kind of day. Like it was negative five outside, and Mac was a furnace.

Okay, fine. The glasses were just plain sexy.

Mac moved her coffee to the side table when it became obvious the girls were about to jump on the couch and shower her with morning kisses. She giggled and gave them scratches, closing the book right before their paws destroyed the pages. “Good morning to the *goodest* girls in the whole world.”

“I wouldn't call myself the *goodest* girl,” Josie said, surprised she made a joke for how terrible she felt this morning.

Mac got the dogs off the couch and situated herself.

“Neither would I. Good morning, Josie.” Her tone was light, almost airy. As if not much could keep her down, just like the pothos in Josie’s room.

Josie took a step closer to the couch and pointed at the book. “*Hmm*. This feels staged.”

Mac closed the book again and stood. “I said I hadn’t read any *winemaking* books. History of wine books, on the other hand, I’ve been reading nonstop. It’s fascinating.” Okay, she’d gotten that bit wrong about Mac. So sue her. “You didn’t sleep well again.”

Was it that obvious? She hadn’t looked in the mirror before she came downstairs, assuming that even if Mac was awake, she’d be in the basement. Underneath her eyes felt thick and heavy, surely shaded a dark gray.

“I’ll get you coffee,” Mac finally said, giving her a quick pat on the back.

“Thanks.”

Josie took the girls to do their business in the front yard. The weather had quickly cooled, and the crisp air felt good against her tired face. Brought a bit of energy to her sluggish body. And the caffeine would wake her slow blood. The girls hurried back to the house, neither of them very fond of the cold. The puff of coffee-soaked air welcomed them inside as she peeled off her coat. She sat on the opposite side of the couch, and Mac returned with a steaming cup for her.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Drink up.”

She took a sip, and if the coziness of Mac and this quiet Saturday morning wasn’t enough, the coffee was the tipping point. “*Mm*. What did you do to it?” she asked, holding up her cup in question.

“Oh. Do you not like it?” Mac curled back into the couch, twisting her legs into a pretzel.

“No. I love it. It’s the coziest cup of coffee I’ve ever had.”

Mac’s face lit up at the compliment, her smile etching deep

lines into her skin, as if she'd already spent a lifetime smiling. "I added cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove to the grounds. So it tastes like fall."

"It's perfect, thank you." She had laundry to do, some shopping, and planned to meet Georgie and Erin at the Cane for drinks tonight, but she tried to take the pressure of being productive off her plate for now. She had good company, good coffee, and good vibes. She would enjoy them.

They spent the morning in comfortable companionship, Mac reading her wine history book and Josie reading the news and reworking her never-ending to-do list with the girls curled tightly between them, snoozing peacefully. It felt strangely *complete*.

\* \* \*

The morning was *nice*. Like, really nice. It felt like the soft innards of a hot cinnamon roll. Kind of gooey. Very sweet. *Mm. Cinnamon rolls*. She could go for one right now. Mac considered walking to the café on Main to satisfy her sweet tooth, but she wanted to finish her laundry and tidy her room before she met Jack and Reuben later. She wrangled her wet clothes from the washer and was about to throw them in the dryer when she noticed a pile of clothes already there.

She pulled Josie's clothing into her own hamper, trying not to focus on how they smelled or how the staticky fabric caught on her new callouses. Once her clothes were drying, she considered her hamper. Should she fold Josie's clothes? *Definitely not*. But it felt rude not to, and they would get wrinkled if she didn't. Especially if Josie had gone out on an errand or something.

She dumped the clothes on her bed and began to fold them slowly, with care. Each piece felt intimate, as if they had a story to tell, their own history. After the second pair of pants, it felt like a mistake, but she didn't stop. She folded most of the shirts, pants, and socks, leaving the panties and bras for last. At that point, why wouldn't she fold them? She'd folded everything else.

The cheeky lace panties taunted her. The kind of sexy

underwear she wasn't expecting to find under wine-stained Carhartts. She fingered the frill of the black pair, and they clung to her as if magnetized to her fingers. It was just her dry hands and static, but *fuck*. An image of Josie in nothing but this lace, with all her dark skin and sinewy muscle on display, cemented itself in Mac's brain. She felt a throb between her legs and warm wetness in her own panties. *Shit*.

She folded the rest of Josie's intimates in a sloppy mess and buried them under the other clothes before walking upstairs in a march of shame. She hoped she wasn't bright red in the face. No doubt a blush bloomed on her cheeks after getting wet from folding her boss's underwear.

This was the first time she'd been upstairs. As she took the last step, it dawned on her that wandering into a space that wasn't hers with clothes she shouldn't have touched was probably also a mistake. She peeked into the bedroom, but Josie wasn't there. The room seemed minimalistic but warm from the little she saw. The door to what she assumed was the office was cracked an inch, and she knocked softly before pushing it wider.

"Mac, what? Shit." Josie slammed her laptop shut as if she'd just been caught watching porn. Except, Mac was pretty sure all she'd seen was a Word document with an extremely horrible mock-up of a wine label.

Mac stood in the doorway with her laundry basket on her hip, speechless.

"What are you doing up here?" A deep blush flooded Josie's cheeks.

She swallowed. "Sorry. I was just doing laundry, and yours was in the dryer, so I thought I'd bring it up for you." She lifted the basket as evidence.

Josie stood, her hand clamping the chair. She didn't seem mad, just shocked. A little exposed, maybe. She touched a pair of her work pants on the top of the pile. Mac's favorite pair of hers. The way they hugged her ass—"You folded them," she said in almost a whisper. When she looked up, her face seemed impossibly close.

Mac cleared her throat. “Yeah. Of course.” She brushed Josie off as if the answer was obvious. “Can’t let them get wrinkly. Now, where do you want them?”

Josie’s expression wasn’t full of anger, it was full of something...tender. It was arresting. Made her feel like if she leaned in, Josie might, too. “Right,” Josie finally said. “Um. Thank you. I’ll dump, I mean, neatly place these on my bed. One second.”

She took the hamper and left Mac alone in her office. A piece of paper crunched into a ball next to the small trash can caught her eye. From the small alcohol percentage marker visible on the corner, she could tell it was the mock-up of a wine label. She shoved it in her pocket right before Josie walked back in.

“Well, thanks again.” Josie rocked on the balls of her feet, clearly asking her to leave.

Mac winced. “It’s really bad, Jos.”

Josie cocked her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Was that your mock-up for Anita?” From what she caught on Josie’s screen, the label was clumsy and tacky. A fifth-grader could have designed something better.

Josie rubbed the back of her neck and let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m going to hire a professional, obviously, I just...wanted to try. Wanted to see a physical *something* for how long this dream has haunted me. You know?”

The red coloring her cheeks was adorable. “Yeah. I know,” Mac said. She sucked in her lip, indulging in one more second of Josie being flustered. “Welp. I think I’ve overstayed my welcome in the restricted area.” She made an imaginary box in the air with her pointer finger. “See you later?”

Josie crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame. “Yeah. I’m off to knock out some errands. But I’ll see you after.”

“Cool.” Mac made to leave, but Josie didn’t move out of her way. Instead, she smirked as Mac brushed past her, their

forearms and shoulders pressed into each other. She paused, sandwiched between the door frame and Josie. The proximity, her scent and warmth, and the mischievous look in her eye stirred something deep in Mac. She winked and bent to grab her laundry basket, then walked away.

“I know you’re up to something,” Josie called after her.

Mac grinned as she reached the bottom of the stairs. “Me? Up to something? Never,” she called back.

Once she got back to her room, she smoothed the crumpled paper. Just as she thought, it was Josie’s mock-up for Anita. The spacing was wonky, the font was horrendous, and Josie had typed “insert foxglove flowers” under “Anita.” She pulled up her text conversation with one of her favorite graphic designers from her dad’s firm. Leslie owed her a favor—a Mac-got-her-a-promotion-sized favor—and it was time to call it in. She asked for a rustic sketch of foxglove flowers that was roughly two-by-one inches. *Nothing too fancy. This is just for a mock-up. But, you know, a sketch that makes you look for a second longer than necessary, then makes you want to pour a glass of wine. A sketch like that.*

Leslie got back to her in an instant. *You got it, babe. Give me an hour, and you’ll have it.*

Mac was already knee-deep in the world of design, formatting the basics of the label. It was a world she missed. Being artistically creative was one of her favorite parts of marketing. Maybe she’d be able to use it in the future.

Just from knowing Josie and the bare label she had already, Mac had a good idea of what she wanted. The vibe would be chill yet elegant. Not gaudy. The wine would speak for itself, but the label should reflect the product. Clean and beautiful. Sophisticated and simple. Josie was always waxing poetic about how there was so much beauty in the simplicity of wine, and producers nowadays manhandled it too much.

“Just let it be,” she’d said. “Just let it be beautiful.”

*That* was what Josie deserved out of this label. And that would be the tagline of Anita. *It’s perfect: Let it be beautiful.*

Leslie sent the sketch of foxglove within the hour. It was exactly what Mac was hoping for. The flowers were simple but engaging. Almost haunting. A direct reflection of the wine. She placed the graphic so the tips of the flowers curled into the letters of Anita. Gorgeous. It just needed one more little tweak. She added the slightest bit of shading behind the lettering, giving it depth and the standard accoutrements: a random alcohol percentage, 750 ml, and of course, the new tagline of the brand.

It *was* beautiful. She emailed herself the file so she could open it on Josie's laptop to show her later. She couldn't wait to see Josie's face when she saw Anita for the first time.



## CHAPTER TEN

The Cane was the pub equivalent of Lou's back room, an Elmwood wine industry favorite. Like Lou's, the ambiance was immersive, filled with dark oak and cozy booths. The kind of bar a person could spend hours in shooting pool or catching up with friends.

"I've always found that the interns who care the most take a longer time to settle into the job," Georgie said, smoothing his shaggy black hair and tucking it behind his ears. His style had drifted more European after he'd visited his mom's birthplace in Spain last year, and Josie had seen quite enough of his chest hair in last few months.

Erin wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and set down her IPA. "Can you please utilize one more button?" she asked, nodding to his dark curls. "That's gotta be a health code violation. I better not find any little Georgie hairs in our nachos."

Josie smothered her laugh by taking a sip of beer, a Deschutes Black Butte Porter. One of her favorites. That was until they released their Jubelale for the season. Nothing screamed the coziness of fall and the holidays quite like Jubelale, a winter ale that had a unique winter-themed label every year.

Josie snagged a chip loaded with chicken and cheese as she watched her friends bicker. She loved the familial friendship they had. Especially Erin and Georgie. They might as well have been siblings. "But to your point, I totally agree. The more they care, the more nervous they are, and the slower the uptake. Sounds like Mac is right on schedule. It's still her first month here," Erin said.

She knew they were right. There was something about Mac that said she would grow into one of Josie's better cellar

hands, but it was taking time to get there. And that didn't help her current situation. She had run numbers on the sauvignon blanc, and it was close. Like, *close* close. Maybe even scheduling a pick in the next week kind of close. "Yeah, I know. I just...need a little more from her." She felt guilty saying it, but it was true. Mac was doing just fine, but given she was short-staffed, Josie needed her to be exceeding expectations. "The sauv blanc's gotta come off the vine at the end of next week. Especially if that rain hits. And she has all this potential, but she just needs to find the confidence."

It was rumored that it was going to be a wet crush. Josie never put too much stock in the pre-harvest rumblings about town, but she knew this wouldn't be the only time they'd be rushing to pick grapes before the weather turned.

Georgie dropped a half-eaten nacho on his plate. "*Ugh*. I've lost my appetite. How does harvest keep coming *every year*? Can we please take a year off?"

"Not feeling ready?" she asked.

He took a final ice-clunking sip of his margarita and grimaced. "You know how it is, Jos. Always ready, always tired. Exhausted before we even start."

She fingered the condensation on her pint glass as Georgie tried to describe the universal feeling of the industry. "And yet, crush is the best part of the year," she said. It was true. Crush was *hard*. Crush stole every minute of her life. But crush was when the magic happened. Unlike brewers or most distillers, they had one shot to make their wine, and every vintage was different. Some were exceptional, and this vintage was shaping up to be one of those banner years. At least one thing was going well in her journey for gold. In her journey for Anita.

They both sighed in surrender. "It really is the best," Erin said.

"Are we in an unhealthy relationship with wine?" Georgie asked, chuckling into his empty margarita. He scanned the pub for their server.

Josie laughed. “Oh, one-hundred percent. Yes.”

“Speaking of unhealthy relationships, how’s Amanda?” Erin asked.

Georgie blew out a long breath and pushed himself out of the booth. “Nope. Not doing this right now. I’m going to order another at the bar.” He shook his empty glass. “Anyone need anything?”

Erin and Josie declined, and Georgie walked away. “So, uh, is she single?” Erin asked.

Josie cocked her head. “Is *who* single?”

Erin laughed. “Oh, come on. Your wildly attractive intern.” She smacked the table with an open palm. “I mean, she’s fair game, right? She was so adorable during our barrel tasting.”

“Wrong.” Josie’s answer was clipped and fast. She fisted her pint glass and began to think she was friends with too many lesbians. She knew Shelby was also eyeing Mac, and she didn’t even want to think about all the men who had an interest in her. Or why it bothered her so deeply. She shook herself out of her possessive thoughts. “She’s my intern. Don’t mess it up for me, okay? She’s, like, super straight-looking anyway.”

Erin shrugged. “Doesn’t mean shit.”

She knew damn well it didn’t mean shit, and that there was no such thing as “straight-looking.” In fact, she got the sense Mac was queer. And maybe even attracted to Josie. *Maybe*. She did squeeze her arm a lot, and Josie often caught her gaze lingering on her. Guess she’d find out one day. She threw two twenties on the table and stood. “I don’t care. She’s off-limits until after crush.”

“Josie Sanchez, everybody.” Erin held up an open hand to display her. “Fun-deficient and strict.”

“Tell Georgie I’ll catch him later. I’m going home to eat a real meal. You know, one with veggies.” She threw a napkin at Erin and left.

Her feelings about Mac tormented her on the walk home.

Even the fresh zip of cold air didn't help to calm her. Why did she feel this way? If any of her past interns wanted to go date Erin or Shelby, Josie would be okay with it as long as they kept it professional. Then why did she want to keep everyone at arm's length when it came to Mac?

*Mac.* She wouldn't miss those flowing blond waves anywhere. Mac waited at the crosswalk ahead with a brown paper bag in her arms, her dress dancing in the breeze. Josie was glad she at least had on a jean jacket, but her legs must have been freezing.

Josie waited to get closer before she called out, trying to banish all her weird feelings from before. But when Mac turned with a grin on her face, as if hearing Josie call her name made her the happiest woman on earth, it was like her insides liquified into mulled wine. Her energy was contagious. Always so warm.

"Josie, hi." Her voiced skipped along high notes.

"Thought that was you," Josie said, reaching for the bag in Mac's hands.

"Oh, that's okay—"

"Let me take this for you," she insisted. She knew what was in the bag by the feel of it. Two bottles of wine and some veggies, she guessed.

The light changed, and they walked across the street side by side. "Thank you. I, uh, thought you'd be back a little later tonight. I was going to whip up some dinner for us. Kind of as a surprise."

Josie smiled to herself in the growing dark. Being around Mac felt like slipping. Into what? She'd figure that out later because making dinner with her was just another usual night. Nothing to second guess about that. Not to mention, she had a suspicion that tomorrow would be their last day off in a very long time, so why not loosen up and enjoy the evening? "But now we get to cook together." The pep in her own voice surprised her, but she was feeling exceptionally good all of a sudden. Completely at ease, as if Erin had slipped her one of

the special gummies. “What’s on the menu?”

Mac tapped the bag as they turned onto Holston. “Veggie pie and a big salad. Sound okay?”

“*Mm*. How did you know about my weakness for savory pie?”

Mac bumped her shoulder and grinned. “Caught a vibe.”

“You are very intuitive.” They walked the path to the door and could see the girls wiggling with excitement just inside. “Now, let’s hope you can cook better than you can rack wine.” Josie couldn’t keep a straight face. She burst into chuckles as Mac swatted her arm and held up a finger.

“That is so not fair. It was just my first—” She was cut off by Bone’s loud whine.

“We should probably get inside. Do you mind?” Josie asked, nodding to the door.

“Of course.” Mac searched her purse for a solid minute before it became obvious she didn’t have her key. “I swear, I put it in here.”

On a different day, this would have rubbed Josie the wrong way. She’d use it to solidify the idea that Mac was out of her league when it came to working at Cadieux. But nothing could burst her happy little bubble tonight. Mac was just a beautiful woman who’d left her keys at home. It happened. “No worries. Mine’s in my front pocket.”

Mac hesitated, then reached—

“Oh,” Josie said, shocked when Mac’s fingers dipped into the pocket of her slim-fit jeans. She wasn’t prepared to feel her hand so close. Mac jingled her keys and smiled. “I kinda thought I’d pass the bag to you and get them myself.” A nervous chuckle filled the space between them as Mac’s face heated.

“Oh. My. God.” She covered her mouth and burst into laughter, her cheeks a deep scarlet. “I can’t believe I just shoved my hand down your pants.”

Josie shifted the bag in her arms and felt her own face

warm. “I wouldn’t necessarily say *that*.”

“I totally just took that as an invitation. I’m so sorry.” Mac shook her head, the porch light making that signature Layton sparkle pop in her eyes.

Josie swallowed and tried to look into the grocery bag, but her gaze jumped right back to Mac’s. “It’s really okay.” They stood on her porch for a moment longer before Bone let out another disgruntled whine, and Mac unlocked the door.

Mac bowed to lavish the girls with pets and rubs and kisses. It was one of Josie’s favorite things: the love Mac had for Bone and Tinker and the fact that she greeted them with the same fervor she’d had on night one. Josie slid the bag of groceries onto the dining room table as Mac straightened, a giant smile on her face.

“I have something for you,” Mac said.

“Oh yeah?” Josie’s stomach tightened around Mac’s words. The way they sounded like a promise. Even if what she really wanted was as impossible as dividing by zero. *Undefined*, technically.

“Yeah. Can we”—Mac nodded toward the stairs—“have a little meeting in your office?”

Josie tried to will away the weird bubbling in her chest that was threatening to geyser through her ribs. But it stayed. All effervescent and hopeful. And terrifying. Truly terrifying because she couldn’t control it. It only grew at the thought of being in her tiny office with Mac again. She would flood the small space with her energy, her warm gardenia skin, and her laughter, and Josie would bathe in it all. She rubbed her chest. “Um. Sure. I’ll meet you up there after I let the girls out.”

A deep smile formed on Mac’s lips and stretched into her cheeks. “Perfect,” she said and walked up the stairs.

The girls were mercifully fast at doing their business. Almost as fast as Josie speed walking up the stairs. She knocked once before pushing the door wide open, just like Mac had done to her earlier that day. Mac sat in her chair, laptop on her thighs, facing the door. The pale glow of the

screen played along her features in the dark room. She smirked. "I don't know if you're ready for this," she said.

Josie took another step into the small space, relishing how Mac had already altered it somehow. Made it hers. That damn simmering in Josie's chest heated to a boil. "I'm feeling pretty ready."

Mac stood, offering the chair. "Come sit." Josie lowered herself as Mac walked behind her, bending close to her ear, and whispered, "Close your eyes."

Josie wordlessly did as she was told, letting the darkness take everything except for the feeling of Mac's breasts against the back of her shoulders and the warmth of her arms as she reached over Josie and set the computer on her lap.

"Okay," she said, staying close enough for her words to tickle. She curled her fingers softly around Josie's bicep before speaking again. "Before you open your eyes, I want you to know that this is just the first draft. And you won't offend me in the slightest if you scrap it for something else. Okay?"

Josie nodded. She could feel Mac bend even closer, her breath skimming the shell of her ear, and her hair falling onto the tops of her shoulders.

"But I have a feeling I know what you want."

She couldn't help herself. If a person didn't leave a vent for CO<sub>2</sub> to escape, the fermentation vessel would explode. She knew this from personal experience. Had a scar on her collarbone to prove it. Exploding wasn't an option, so she needed to vent a little. She squeezed Mac's hand that gripped her arm. "Do you?"

"You tell me." Her fingers twitched under Josie's hand. "Open your eyes."

Her vision took a second to adjust to the bright glow of her laptop. Then, the image appeared. It was the exact image she'd held in her heart for over a decade and yet had somehow never seen before now. But here it was. Anita. Foxglove. Elegance and grace. Perfect in every way. She would have never come close to this on her own. Would've never been able to make it

so whole. Her entire dream made beautiful and real by the woman she...by the woman she thought about more than anything. By the woman she wanted. She *wanted* Mac.

*Fuck.* Were her eyes watering?

“Do you like it?”

“Mac...” She dropped her hand to grip her laptop, worried it was going to fall to the ground and shatter, and she’d lose this image forever. Mac had probably backed it up, but it felt precious to her. Mac ran a hand up and down her arm, lifting her palm so just her fingers skated over the sleeve of Josie’s button-down. The label, Mac’s touch. Her warm breath on Josie’s sensitive skin and her breasts against her back. It was overwhelming in the sweetest, hottest way, but it stuck any words she had in her throat.

“Jos?”

“This...is saved right? Backed up? On, like, a cloud or something?”

Soft chuckles filled her ear. “Of course. It won’t disappear, I promise.”

Josie closed the laptop, placed it on her desk, and stood, dragging the chair out of the way so there was nothing between the two of them. Nothing except the intense pull she felt toward Mac, who stood smiling as if she knew exactly how Josie was feeling right down to her core. She had no words, just the severe urge to close the space between them. She took a step closer. “Can I hug you?”

Mac blinked, her mouth falling open just a centimeter, and nodded. “Get in here.”

Josie took two quick strides and was in her arms in a second. A little *oof* escaped Mac’s lips. She didn’t mean to collide with such force; she just had a lot of feelings and apparently, not many ways to express them. Mac didn’t seem to mind. She tightened Josie into her, and they stayed in the warm embrace for what felt like a lifetime.

Josie’s chin sat in the crook of Mac’s neck, and she never wanted to leave. But as Mac began to rub her back, an ounce



of clarity settled on her shoulders. Just enough to gently wake her from this dream. She turned her lips to Mac's ear and whispered, "It's everything I could never dream of. Thank you, Mac."

She pulled away and smoothed her shirt.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Okay.* There was definitely something different about Josie tonight. *Markedly* different. Mac knew they had natural chemistry. She could sense it in the way they moved around each other, in the way Josie looked at her sometimes when her guard slipped a bit, and in the way she could barely go five minutes without thinking about how vexing—and alluring—Josie was. But all those things just hinted at chemistry. There might as well be flasks and beakers in this kitchen because she could *feel* the chemistry.

Josie shot her a crooked grin as she handed over a glass of the Chablis Mac had bought from Jack on his recommendation.

Mac pressed a hand to her hot cheek. Should she be wearing safety goggles? *Jesus.* She took the wine and nodded a thanks, not trusting her ability to speak. At face value, this was a completely normal evening. They made dinner together almost every night. They drank wine together almost every night. But this night, it was as if they'd both taken a step toward each other, closing some of the distance they had started with. It could be about how much Josie loved the mock-up of the Anita label, but this energy—Josie's energy—had been radiating before Mac had even showed her the label.

And though Mac knew she should be careful around Josie because of her attraction, she also knew she'd take every inch she was given. Until...well, she'd figure that out later. Closeness could only help her going into harvest. Then it would be all about wine. And all about her career.

"*Mm.* This wine." Josie groaned as she pressed the glass to her scar. "Great pick." She leaned against the kitchen counter and sipped, looking too good in her gray jeans and rumped blue button-down. She kept running her fingers through her

hair, turning it into a tousled mess. A sexy tousled mess.

Mac looked away and heated a sauté pan with olive oil. “It’s good, huh? I got it at Jack’s.” She reached behind Josie for the cutting board of fresh veggies they’d just chopped. Even though Mac didn’t so much as graze her, she could feel Josie, as if their beings expanded past their skin.

“You know, I really like that place. Even if it is a wine bar on Main.”

Mac tossed the veggies into the hot pan. That sizzling sound never got old. “What do you mean?”

“I tend to avoid the wine bars around town.”

Mac stirred, grateful for the old apron she’d found in the back of the pantry when a pop of oil rocketed out of the pan right onto her chest. “Why?”

Josie pushed off the counter and reached in front of her, turning the burner to low. “Because those places are crawling with—”

“Excuse me.” Mac planted a hand on Josie’s chest. Her own shock and the warmth of Josie’s skin between her collarbones froze her. Her palm felt like a goddamn defibrillator. So charged. She cleared her throat and pushed Josie away. “I’m in charge of dinner tonight.” Her words were a throaty whisper as she turned the burner back up, thankful her voice didn’t crack.

When Mac got the nerve to peek over her shoulder, Josie smiled and said, “Bossy.”

That snapped her right back into the levity of the evening. She laughed as she gave the pan one more toss, then shut off the stove. “Says the woman who can’t even give up control over one meal.” She poured the veggies into the dough-lined pie pan.

Josie scoffed and crossed her legs, relaxing against the counter again. “You were torching them.”

Mac dropped the pan in the sink and stepped in front of Josie, who straightened, allowing her to land even closer. The

fabric of her dress caught against the front of Josie's jeans. "The veggies cook in the oven with the crust. But they need to get a good sear on them beforehand. Hence the high heat."

Josie tongued the scar on her bottom lip, and Mac's hand burned with urge to touch her again.

Instead, she nodded to the living room. "Now, can you please be useful and play me a record?"

Josie stayed glued to the counter, her eyes just a shade darker than usual. A bit charred, like the veggies. Mac had the odd sensation that *something* was happening. That was until Tinker sauntered in, looked at both of them pointedly, and whacked her tail into the cupboard. Josie let out a deep breath. "It'd be my pleasure."

When Josie left, Mac ran a hand through her hair. Josie's breath smelled like cocoa and Chablis, and Mac's stomach dropped at the thought that she knew exactly how Josie would taste if she just leaned in and—

"Hope you like Brandi Carlile." Josie leaned against the wall and smiled as the music flowed into the kitchen.

Mac grabbed the pie and slid it into the oven. "Is there a lesbian on earth who doesn't?"

"Oh." Josie cleared her throat and fidgeted with her glass.

*Oh?* Was she shocked? Had Mac misread all of the chemistry and vibes tonight? "Is that...an issue or something?" Mac hated how the question sounded. It wasn't an issue. It couldn't be. She knew damn well Josie Sanchez was interested in women, too. There wasn't a straight bone in that woman's body. She could tell.

"What? An issue?" Josie sputtered. "No. Not at all. I'm just surprised."

Mac would have been disappointed if she didn't think Josie was lying. Disappointed if Josie had lumped her into the "straight" category because that would mean she didn't quite *see* Mac the way Mac had hoped. The way the rest of the world was blind to. She wanted Josie to see her for *her*. A strong, independent, lesbian woman. "Are you really?" she

asked.

Josie straightened. “Am I what?”

“Surprised?”

Josie scraped her scar between her teeth. “No. I’m not.”

Mac nodded. “Because it takes one to know one?” She could feel the blood pooling in her cheeks from being so bold. She didn’t even know she was going to say those words until they hung fat in the air between them.

Josie erupted into contagious laughter. Mac laughed, too. She took off her apron and wiped her eyes. “You got me there,” Josie said, a few final chuckles hiccupping her words.

And there it was: the very unsettling and very scary fact that they were both interested in women sat like a bomb between them. They could either defuse it or blow it up. “Well, this should be done in thirty minutes,” Mac said, trying to pivot. Tonight felt like a safe zone of casual flirting, but on Monday, she knew they’d be back to the strict roles of winemaker and intern. They had to be. Neither would jeopardize what they truly wanted. Mac would *not* throw away this opportunity. “Where should we eat?”

“How about the backyard?” Josie must have caught her grimace because she added, “I’ll start a fire.”

“Deal.”

Josie used half a Duraflame to get the fire roaring quickly while Mac ferried out the roasted beet and goat cheese salad, veggie pie, and the Côtes du Rhône she’d also bought from Jack. Josie sat next to her and poured herself some of the red. “Thank you for dinner. It smells so good.” She held up her glass. “And for the wine.”

“It’s my pleasure. Really.” Mac took a bite of pie. She’d nailed it. The mix of onion, peas, carrots, and chanterelles was the perfect savory combination against the buttery crust. And everything about Josie’s backyard at night was enchanting. Unlike back home, there were no mosquitoes feasting on her legs, the strung lights were a magical glow against the night, and the fire warmed her more than the wine. Almost as much

as the company.

“Tell me, is your father anything like Hank?” Josie asked as she cut into the pie.

Mac grinned as she thought about her father and the sweet goofiness he emitted. “You know, I think there’s only space for one Hank Layton in every family.” They laughed together, and Josie took a bite, the steam pouring from her lips into the cool air as she made owl noises and fanned her mouth. “Careful. It’s still hot.”

Josie finally swallowed. “Though your heat advisory was a little late, that pie is incredible.” She smiled and knocked Mac’s shoulder. “Totally worth the burned mouth.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“So your dad is nothing like Hank?” she asked, reaching for her wine.

Mac shook her head. “Not at all. Hank has this ego.” She stopped and turned to Josie, worried she might offend her. He was her longtime boss after all. More than her boss, it seemed.

Josie stopped forking her salad as if she’d realized Mac had gone quiet. “What?”

“I just don’t want to offend you,” she said.

“Offend me? Hank’s giant ego is as inherent to him as your ridiculous blue eyes.” Josie’s eyes widened as if she’d heard what she’d just said. Her words trickled down the back of Mac’s neck, zapping the tiny hairs to attention. Josie cleared her throat and tried again. “*His* blue eyes, I mean.”

But that was not what she’d meant at all. Mac harvested some confidence and tugged on Josie’s sleeve. “Oh, come on. Give it back.”

Josie grinned. “Give what back?”

“That lovely compliment you accidentally paid me.” As Josie took a moment, Mac poured a glass of the Côtes du Rhône and swirled it. “I get the sense they’re a rarity. And I want it back.”

Josie stayed quiet for a moment longer, and Mac wondered if she was gathering something. Courage, maybe. Because Josie had accidentally complimented her looks, and Mac was asking her to double down on it. This was a gray area, but how were they supposed to spend every damn hour together and not become friends? Or friendly? Or even a touch flirty? It was fine. It was normal. It was—

“Not even Hank has eyes like yours.” Josie’s voice startled her. It held no hint of banter. It coasted into her like a warm breeze. Josie’s teeth scraped over her scar, and Mac swore she could draw the exact curve of it to the degree, she’d stared at it so much. “They’re not the ocean, they’re the lighthouse burning in the night.”

Mac was speechless. She’d been complimented on her eyes by complete strangers her entire life, but not one of them had ever hit like this. Josie continued her meal, leaving Mac alone to digest the words. She was putting too much stock in them, surely. It was just a simple compliment, right? *Wrong*. Simple compliments didn’t make her hot and achy.

“Your dad isn’t a wannabe rock star. That’s nice. And he runs his own marketing firm, also nice. And is he, indeed, *nice*?”

Mac blinked and tried to stop fixating on the physical effect Josie was having on her body. “Yes. He’s nice. They all are.” It was like Josie had yanked a stick out of her gears, and she could resume all normal functions. “My mom’s a teacher, and my brother is starting a master’s program in econ. I honestly couldn’t imagine having a more loving, *nice* family.” Josie nodded. “That’s actually why I chose marketing. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I thought I’d like spending time with my dad. So I did that until I wanted to rip my hair out and torch every one of my clients’ portfolios.”

Josie chuckled into her wineglass. “Wow. Loved it that much, huh?”

“You know, I actually really enjoyed the data analysis and getting to be creative. I think it was the clients that I hated the most.” She swallowed. “I know you think I’m just hopping on

the next familial train that can help me, but I'm really trying to build something for myself. I want this. I adore wine, and I want to learn everything I can while I'm here."

Josie's black brows had the prettiest arch, and Mac's skin tingled under her stare. "I know," Josie finally said.

Mac nodded and took a sip of wine. It would probably be for the best to keep this conversation moving. Strange things were happening to her body when words slowed and lingered. Strange, warm things. She cleared her throat. "What about your family?"

Josie shifted in her chair and chuckled. A meager little chuckle that was more sardonic than jovial. "I don't like them all that much. They're in Connecticut, and that's close enough for me."

Mac tried not to gasp. "Truly?"

"Truly. I don't go home often, and the winery is the perfect excuse. I see them about every three years."

"Josie, I...I'm sorry."

Josie pushed her last bite of pie around, her lips pulling into a tight smile over her teeth. "It's okay. I just refuse to bend over backward for folks I don't want in my life just because we share some DNA. They don't care about me. They just drain me."

Mac stayed quiet, not wanting to push for information that wasn't hers or that Josie didn't want to share.

Josie shook her head. "My dad is a metal fabricator by day and an entire flat of Bud Light by night. My mom was also a teacher, but she quit to be a stay-at-home mom and never went back to work. Now she's just sad and refuses to find a hobby or new passion."

Mac's heart broke for her. She couldn't imagine not having a family who was a foundation. A source of strength and security. *How lonely it must feel.*

"I'll hand it to them, though. They never took money out of the college fund our grandparents had set up for us. Not a



penny. In fact, my father even added to it a few times. They were always good with money. But they gave it all to my brother, Drew. Said he was preparing for a real job, not some silly wine nonsense.”

Mac pushed her plate away. “A real job?”

Josie dropped her head back and laughed. “Sales.” Her laughter was biting and...sad. “I didn’t need the money. But yeah, it kind of gutted me. And Drew’s job is being a merchandiser for Red Bull. Which is fine. But it didn’t require my folks sinking thousands of dollars into his education. Actually, I think he might have been fired, given how many times I’ve had to bail him out. Next time, I’m letting him get evicted.” She took a deep breath and turned to Mac, that tight smile on her lips. “And I’m the black sheep. I guess being gay was just another point against me in their eyes. They took my, albeit few, relationships about as seriously as they take my job.”

She shook her head. “Anyway, enough about them. Honestly, your uncle is my family. Erin and Georgie are close too but not like Hank. He cares for me like no one else has.” A true smile spread across her lips. “He *sees* me. And loves me for who I am and believes in me. Invests in me. That’s why this job is everything to me. Everything.”

Mac sat with Josie’s words. She could relate. Not to the pain of having an unsupportive family but to the pain of being judged and underestimated. Of not being seen or appreciated. She took a deep breath. “I’ve known you all of one month. Just a handful of weeks, really. But I see you, Josie. Clear as day.”

The small lines at the corners of Josie’s eyes deepened as she seemingly tried to bite down a smile. She squeezed Mac’s wrist. It was too brief. “I see you, Mac.”

“Must be my lighthouse eyes.” She winked.

“Oh, come off it. That’s the last time I ever compliment you,” Josie said between chuckles. She tossed her napkin on the table and bumped Mac’s shoulder. “Brutal.”

“Your eyes are like a well.”

Josie raised a brow, leaning away from her. “A well? As in, a creepy dark place where the girl from *The Ring* lives?”

“Only when you’re angry.” Mac squeezed her shoulder. “No, silly. A well, like a wishing well. Still dark, yes. But with a bit of magic.”

Josie stayed quiet for a moment, seemingly absorbing Mac’s compliment. She shook her head as if waking. “Go hiking with me and the girls tomorrow.”

“What?” Mac was taken off guard.

“Hiking with me and the girls. We’ve officially scheduled picks through the weekend, starting with the sauv blanc on Friday, and I have a feeling this crush is going to get pretty intense pretty quickly. I thought maybe you’d want to get out in nature before we’re trapped in the winery together for three months.”

It sounded suspiciously like a date. Though hesitation quickly followed, Mac’s gut reaction was *fuck yes*. And she liked to consider herself a go-with-your-gut kind of girl. She could consider why she hesitated later. “You won’t get us lost in the Oregon wilderness, will you?”

Josie’s shoulders shook with laughter. “Only if you want me to.” She took a swig of wine. “Sounds kind of nice actually, to run away and totally ditch harvest. I bet we could survive in the wild.”

Mac tilted her head in consideration. “Maybe. But I don’t know about Tinkerbell. She’s kind of a diva.”

Josie grimaced. “And old.”

“And old,” Mac said. “Plus, I should probably work a harvest before I start ditching them.”

“Fair point.”

They sat quietly for a moment before Mac piled her utensils on her plate. “I’m cold. Ready to move this party inside?”

“Yes. Thank you for indulging me.”

After putting out the fire and cleaning the kitchen, they spent the rest of the evening lounging on the couch with the girls, watching *Unsolved Mysteries* and drinking wine. Mac reveled in the comfort and familiarity of it. Even though there were two big dogs between them, Mac felt close to Josie. Maybe too close. But definitely not close enough.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Come on, girls. Let’s go on a hike before Mom turns into a ghost tomorrow.” Josie slipped on their harnesses and packed their collapsible water bowl in her bag.

She loaded Bone and Tinker into the car while their excited tails whacked everything in sight. Once she got the girls situated in the back seat, she shut their door and rounded the back of the car as Mac locked the house.

She was in the cutest hiking getup Josie had ever seen. Like she was wearing the hiking outfit from an American Girl doll catalogue. She wore her winery boots—that she would have to sanitize before tomorrow—high wool socks, olive green shorts, a white T-shirt under a long-sleeve denim shirt, and an honest-to-God red bandana. Josie couldn’t help but snigger.

Mac opened the door and poked her head inside. “Are you laughing at me?”

Josie tried to smother the rest of her chuckles, but it was hopeless. She had been caught, and she truly could not stop.

Mac swung into her seat and swatted her shoulder. “Oh my gosh, you totally are.” She swatted her again, and Josie cowered behind her upheld arms.

“Stop, stop,” she begged through her laughter. Bone and Tinkerbelle thought it necessary to take control of the situation and bathed them in kisses in an attempt to subdue them. “Now look what you’ve done,” Josie cried as she tried to push Bone into the back seat.

Mac’s laughter was beautiful and breathless. “Oh my gosh, Tinker. Thank you. Thank you.” Once Bone had retreated, Mac was able to get Tinker over the center console and back to safety with Bone. She wiped her face in her sleeve, both of

them still chuckling from the kiss attack. “Don’t you think for one second that you’re off the hook, Josie Sanchez.” Josie’s entire stomach swarmed at the sound of Mac saying her full name. In that tone. “I know you were laughing at my outfit.”

Josie shook her head and grinned. “Which one are you? Samantha, Molly, Felicity—”

Mac gave her one last swat. “I’m surprised you even know what an American Girl doll is, *Josephina*. Now drive.”

\* \* \*

The south was green, sure. But the Oregon forest was *green*. Bone sprinted by Mac as Tinker trotted slowly next to them, her tongue hanging long and low. Mac could hear the waterfall ahead. She wanted to google what it looked like on their way there, but Josie had convinced her to wait. Said it was a small one, but it’d be better as a surprise, and Mac wondered if it’d be as magical as the picture she had painted in her head. The hike had already blown that picture right out of the water in the best way. Different mosses, ferns, and plants layered the forest in every shade of green possible, the bright pop of the moss being her favorite.

There were a lot of folks on the trail today, it being a beautiful Sunday. The sun had gone into hiding on the ride in, and the signature gray of the Northwest had taken over the sky, but the gray only added to the forest’s enchantment. Two hikers brushed by them. They climbed another switchback, and the crowd seemed to thin, as if the majority of hikers had arrived before them and were now on their way back to the trailhead.

The path flattened, and the trees became denser as the sound of rushing water amplified. She almost expected to look up and see the moss slithering off the rocks and tree trunks into a roaring St. Patrick’s Day river.

Mac had already lost her breath from Oregon’s stunning beauty multiple times since she’d arrived only a few weeks ago, and when she joined Josie on the wooden lookout, she lost it once more. She’d never seen a more regal sight in her entire life. The towering waterfall was as elegant as an

Olympic high diver, its constant slender stream of silver water pouring like wax into the lake below. The other group on the lookout packed away their camera and water bottle and shuffled by them to the trail, leaving Mac and Josie and the girls.

Josie slid the pack off her shoulders and leaned against the railing. “So?”

Mac couldn’t find words to match this kind of beauty. Just like with Mt. Hood, she was stunned into awe. She leaned against the railing next to Josie, her arm feeling warm against hers. She didn’t mean to land so close, but Josie didn’t move away, so neither did she. “It’s...hideous.”

Mac was hoping for a laugh, a chuckle, anything. She adored the fact that she could reach behind Josie’s walls and tickle her with a silly joke, but Josie stayed quiet next to her. “Utterly disgusting,” she finally said.

Mac leaned against her, demanding attention. “Thank you for taking me here. It’s...” Again lost for words, Mac waved over the expansive view as the dogs began to play fight behind them.

Josie sighed. “I know,” she said and leaned into Mac, too.

Mac’s entire being hummed at the added pressure and warmth that seemed to slip down and build deep in her belly.

Josie cleared her throat. “It’s almost painful.” Her words were low and soft, as if she was confessing something.

The tone of her voice tugged at Mac. Everything about her tugged at Mac, and it seemed to never stop but only become more persistent. With their arms crossed over the railing and their proximity, Josie’s hand was only an inch from hers. So close, she swore she could feel energy radiating from it.

Bone collided with the side of Mac’s leg, trying to dodge an annoyed snap from her sister, forcing Mac to lose her balance and reach for Josie as support. “*Oof*,” she groaned, as she tightened her grip on Josie’s arm to steady herself.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry about that. Bone can be—”

“Just a sweet girl getting some playtime in,” Mac supplied, her fingers still resting atop Josie’s hand. It felt just like when she had planted a hand on Josie’s chest in the kitchen to push her away. Combustible.

Josie smirked. “I’m lucky she didn’t injure my one and only intern right before crush.”

“Is that all you care about?” Something about the loud roar of the waterfall felt like a blanket over the two of them, holding them in this moment, undercover and separate from the real world.

“Oh, come off it. You know that’s not true,” Josie said, never removing her hand from Mac’s touch.

Mac chuckled. “Oh really? What do you care about besides wine?”

Josie shook her head. “I’ll have you know I care about a lot of things that aren’t wine.”

*Did she?* Mac was curious. And she was so damn drawn to Josie, it didn’t even feel like she had a choice but to graze the back of Josie’s hand. Softly. Okay, *fine*. She was stroking.

Josie took a moment, her gaze stuck on their hands, then answered, “Well, that’s easy. I care about Bone and Tinkerbell.”

“That’s a given and does not count.” As if on cue, Tinker groaned and threw herself on the wet planks for a rest.

“Look what you’ve done, Mac. You’ve offended the old girl.”

She laughed. “You’re not off the hook.”

Josie sighed. “I care about my family.” She looked out over the vista as if gathering her thoughts. “I don’t have to want to be around them or see them to care. But I want the best for them. Just don’t feel the need to buy plane tickets and take time off to see them.” Mac stayed quiet while she spoke, but something inside her ached for Josie. “They just...they hurt me, you know?”

“I don’t know how it feels to be hurt by family. I’m sorry

they do that to you.”

Josie shrugged. “Yeah. Well, um, I also care about the environment. And the Portland Thorns. Um, I care about the wine classes I help put together at the community college.” She tilted her head. “Oh damn, that’s wine-related.”

“It counts.”

“Okay, good. Because in my mind, it’s more about growing our community, which I also care about, even though they annoy me sometimes.”

Mac laughed. “Often.”

Josie knocked her shoulder. “Okay, often.”

“What else?” Mac asked. She could stand by this waterfall listening to Josie detail the things that were important to her forever.

“I also care about my friends. Hank.” She took a brief pause. “And you.”

Mac looked at her, every nerve at attention. “Me?”

“Shoot. I guess that’s wine-related, huh?”

Mac took a deep breath and slipped a hand under Josie’s. Was she possessed? Maybe. “I think only you know the answer to that.” She could feel Josie’s fingers twitch in her hand. Mac swore she could see excitement in Josie’s eyes but also insecurity and worry.

Josie pulled her hand away and grimaced. “Mac.” She dropped her gaze to her boots before meeting her eye again. “Mac, we can’t do this. It’s too—”

They both jumped away at the sound of a twig snapping at the mouth of the trail, and all the comfort between them vanished like a puddle in the southern summer. “We should go. I’ve got a lot to finish today,” Josie said. And just like that, they were hiking in silence back to the car. Mac wondered what Josie was thinking, what she was feeling, and if Josie was pushing that moment between them as deep as she could. And if Mac should do the same.



\* \* \*

Josie didn't play a record while she cooked dinner. She chopped in a hurry and layered the ricotta, lasagna noodles, and meat and veggies in under five minutes. Mac padded around the house in bare feet, her chipped, hot pink nail polish exposed and her hair wet from the shower. Every time she walked into the kitchen to offer a hand, Josie could smell the gardenia on her skin and see more than she could handle of her *too young* and *off-limits* intern. Mac wore short boxers and a Bass Pro Shop T-shirt with an armpit hole so large, her white bra peeked out from underneath.

"No. Thank you." Josie opened the oven door and slid the lasagna onto the middle rack. "This should be ready in twenty-five minutes."

Mac leaned against the counter, making her want to squirm. Mac had been tentative after the trail, trying to start gentle chatter and thread Josie's one-word responses into a conversation. She moved around Josie delicately, probably unaware of the effect she was having on her. "I think I'm ready for tomorrow," Mac finally said. "And for nonstop work."

Josie let out a chuckle. "No one's ever ready. But we'll be fine."

Mac smiled and tapped her toes against the floor. "Right. Well, I've done laundry, bought snacks, and tried my best to emotionally prepare for a month with no days off."

Josie nodded. The feelings she had about heading into crush with Mac swarmed her brain in such chaos that it was hard to discern each individual thought. "That's good." She patted the stovetop. "I think the lasagna will last us a couple days, then we'll have a chef preparing food for us at the winery."

Mac finger-combed her wet hair, tugging at a stubborn tangle. "Oh, yeah? That sounds fancy. Is Gordon Ramsay going to be preparing our meals?"

Josie swallowed the urge to get her own fingers stuck in

Mac's hair. "Even better. Lou's caters for us. Sometimes, Vinny brings prepped food, and sometimes, he cooks at Cadieux, depending on how busy they are."

"I haven't been to Lou's yet."

Josie was shocked. "You're telling me Hank didn't take you there when he took you on his drinking tour of Elmwood? I thought for sure that's where he'd want to get you wasted."

Mac pulled a hand from her hair and popped a hip. "Hey. I wasn't wasted that night." About a week earlier, Hank had whisked Mac away right after they'd finished working to take her out in Elmwood. Josie had politely declined in order to give the two of them some quality time. She was swamped with work anyway. Mac had come home that night red-cheeked and goofy.

"Mac."

She shook her head. "I was pleasantly intoxicated." She sighed. "Anyway, he didn't want to go because he was avoiding some guy. Greg, I think."

Ah. This made sense. "Greg Johnson. He runs Copper Peak Vineyard. We get pinot gris from him and a couple tons of pinot." She despised the man. Didn't trust him. Didn't like him. And she was just about done working with him. "Careful around that one."

Mac cocked her head. "When would I be around him?"

"This is Elmwood. We're around everyone. All the time. Winemaking dinners, festivals, Lou's, the Cane." She sighed. "He's not a good guy, and he has a giant ego, which is a problematic combination."

Mac nodded. "Okay. Avoid Greg Johnson. Got it."

"When we get the chance, I'll take you to the back room, okay?"

Mac pushed a hand to her chest and gasped. "I get to go to Lou's with Josie Sanchez, head winemaker of *the* Cadieux Vineyards? Be still, my heart."

Josie laughed and threw a dish towel at her. "The illusion

shatters pretty quickly when you live with someone, huh?”

“Are you kidding? You’re more mysterious to me now than you ever have been.” She shrugged. “I think most people are wrong about you because they can’t put aside their own jealousy, but even the ones who are on the right path fall tragically short in their perceptions.”

Josie couldn’t respond. Didn’t know how. Most of her interns felt like sheep who she herded through the winery and around town, but Mac felt like a lion. Like she’d rip apart Greg Johnson just to defend her. Josie had never felt that way about any of her interns. The fact that Mac could give her something so intangibly valuable shook her off-center. The fact that Josie was worth defending in Mac’s eyes. The fact that Mac wanted to hold her hand and didn’t seem offended by her rejection.

The Anita label.

She cleared her throat. “Well, people will think what they think. Anyway. Let’s pick a bottle of wine.”

After dinner, Josie excused herself early. She lay in bed and groaned. Tossed, turned, gave the girls belly rubs, but sleep eluded her. The truth was, Mac terrified her. Josie terrified herself, really. Even though in her clearest consciousness, she valued her job and the opportunity to make her own wine more than literally anything else, her feelings betrayed her. When she had space from Mac, like now, she resolved to halt their growing intimacy. It was a clear choice. An *easy* choice. Why, then, did she have to have the same conversation with herself every night?

And she was about to lose any and all space from her. She flopped onto her belly and buried her face in the pillow. She couldn’t help but slide into Mac as it was. How was she supposed to hold her footing when she’d be next to the woman thirteen hours a day? *Every day.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mac's shirt clung to her body as water dripped down her arms, and her jeans were soaked through. She was drenched and uncomfortable. And tired from cleaning pick bins and fermentors *all day*. Every time she tried to pressure wash the corner of a bin, the water would hit the wrong angle and backfire, leaving her a grumpy, soaking mess. The call she received from her father during her lunch break hadn't helped her mood.

He was aiming for kindness, she knew, but the call had amounted to him assuring her that she could come back to the firm if things didn't work out in Oregon. But he'd offered it as if he *knew* things wouldn't work out in Oregon. It made her nauseous. Now that she'd had this opportunity and had tasted what it would be like to *do this*—to do wine—the thought of returning to her old life made her shudder.

She would do everything in her power to make the most out of this opportunity. And to hopefully secure a full-time job in Elmwood.

Her closeness with Josie felt a bit riskier.

"I told you to wear the wet-weather gear," Josie said.

Mac sighed. "Yeah, well, it's a bit late for that." She pulled her wet shirt from her stomach, and it slapped right back against her.

Josie made a note on her legal pad and grimaced. "Did you bring an extra pair of clothes?"

This was Mac's fourth day of working eleven-hour shifts, her feet hurt, and she was tired of being wet all the time. She was already over harvest before it had even begun. She'd worked a lot of overtime in marketing, but typing out client proposals and making phone calls didn't tax her body the way

this work did. This was physical and draining. She wiped her wet hand on her wet face and shook her head.

Josie winced, and Mac wondered if she was already letting her down. Disappointing Josie was the last thing in the world she wanted to do, but she could tell by Josie's stress that she wasn't working fast enough. She wasn't cleaning the bins thoroughly enough. And she got the sense that they were preparing for a war they couldn't win.

"Look," Josie said, her eyes softening just a touch. "I know this is a big change for you. Harvest is a lot for everyone, no matter how much experience they have. I want to have enough bins and fermentors clean to get us through Monday. Then we can catch up on cleaning after we process the weekend's grapes." She looked at her notepad. "I just need you to clean the thousand-gallon tank and ten more bins. Then we're done for the day, and I'll take you out to dinner."

Mac was too tired and cranky to even enjoy how it sounded like Josie was asking her out on a date. Not that she could go on a date with Josie anyway.

"Last dinner before grapes come tomorrow. Deal?"

Mac nodded. "Deal."

"I have a change of clothes you can borrow for the ride home."

"That's okay. I don't think—"

"You're not getting in my car like that," Josie said, her brows raised.

Bone and Tinkerbelle circled them, and Mac bent to receive a kiss from Tinker. It brought her some needed joy. "That's fair," she said.

Josie checked her watch. "Can you be done in an hour?"

Mac laughed. "I honestly have no idea."

Josie seemingly considered every inch of her with an unflinching seriousness. "I need you to clean ten bins and one tank in an hour. It's more than doable."

Mac's jaw tensed, and she nodded. Josie gave her a task, and she would complete it. She didn't want to be scrubbing bins her whole life, so she needed to focus and take this experience seriously. When Josie talked to Uncle Hank about her progress, she wanted her to sing her praises.

She sighed as Josie walked to the lab. They hadn't even picked grapes yet, and Mac was already exhausted. And even though she was soaking wet, tired, and cold, she knew she wanted this. She refilled her bucket of PerCarb for cleaning and climbed into the tank.

After she finished cleaning the necessary bins and fermentors, within the hour, *thank you very much*, they stood in the office and discussed what their first day of crush would look like and what Mac's responsibilities would be. Josie's phone rang, interrupting her description of fermentation tracking and cap management.

Josie slipped her phone in her pocket when she was done. "Hank wants me to find him a bottle of the 1996 Cadieux Estate Pinot Noir. Why don't you enjoy a glass in the tasting room while I search through the library?"

Mac couldn't quite read her tone. She knew Josie was pleased that she'd finished cleaning in her allotted time, but she still seemed frustrated. Stressed, probably. "Do you need a hand?"

Josie waved her off. "No. That's okay. You'd think it'd be easy since we keep an inventory, but your uncle loves to come in and pull bottles without updating it." She rolled her eyes. "He'll be after a single bottle and somehow leave the entire place a wreck." She tapped her pen against the blank weigh tags. "Anyway, I have a good sense of the disarray, so hopefully, it won't take too long."

Mac nodded. "Okay. Well, you know where to find me if you change your mind."

Josie had already moved on to her file cabinet, looking for something. Mac shrugged to herself, knowing it was time to leave her alone, and turned to go.

\* \* \*

“Have you tasted through our wines yet?” Shelby asked.

There were only three small groups in the tasting room besides Mac, and she enjoyed the peacefulness of it. She needed it after her long day of work. The bronze waves of color and the setting sun settled her, and that was impressive because she was currently wearing Josie’s clothes: a navy waffle-knit sweater and a pair of jeans that hung loose on her narrow frame, but they smelled like Josie. And feeling the exact space that her strong body would fill, the space that Mac’s couldn’t, was putting her on edge. *Okay, it was hot.* She decided to channel all of this energy into Shelby. Someone who was not off-limits...she was pretty sure.

She leaned on her elbows, the cool wood of the bar penetrating Josie’s thin sweater. “Hank tasted me through them a couple weeks ago.”

Shelby smirked, and yeah, it was sexy. “Ah, drinking with Hank. Always a good time.” She reached for a bottle of chardonnay and popped the cork.

The tattoos that snaked down Shelby’s bicep and onto her forearms caught her attention. So did the muscle underneath. Shelby poured a couple ounces of the straw-colored chardonnay. Mac swirled her glass and inspected the wine. “It’s quite pale, yeah?”

Shelby tilted her head back and forth. “Maybe. But I would suggest thinking about California chardonnay as quite dark or golden and using the old-world style as the mark we judge other styles by.”

Mac smelled the wine. “Ours is really different than the chardonnay I’ve had before.”

Shelby nodded. “That’s because the market is flooded with these giant butter and oak bombs, but that’s really not the best expression of chardonnay. White burgundy is a beautiful wine, with a fresher, zippier expression than new-world takes on the grape. Most have minimal oak influence, but some of the Côte de Beaune chardonnays are aged in oak, and they’re beautiful

wines, not overripe, over-oaked, or over-buttered.” She nodded to the glass. “Give it a try.”

Mac smelled the wine one more time and tasted it. She sighed. It was so good; minerally, with notes of pear and just a hint of earthiness. She dragged the wine over her tongue a few times before swallowing. “Yeah. I get it now,” she finally said.

Shelby’s face lit up, and she chuckled. “Tasting your first good chardonnay is a life-changing experience, I know.”

Mac liked how her lips moved around her words when she spoke, and she felt like they had nice chemistry. She was interested, maybe only a quarter as interested as she was in Josie, but Shelby *wasn’t her boss*. And that earned her major points. “What makes the new-world expressions so buttery?”

“Secondary fermentation.”

Mac tilted her head. She found other people’s knowledge of wine quite a turn-on. She took a sip. “Please elaborate.”

Shelby grinned, and there was attraction in the way her eyes narrowed when she smiled. “Trust me, I would love to. But that question is better suited to Josie.”

“What question is that?”

Mac turned at the sound of Josie’s voice—she knew the gravelly notes of it so well—and became very aware of every inch of Josie’s clothing on her body. Josie scanned the length of her, an amused look on her face. Mac swallowed when her eyes narrowed just like Shelby’s. *Shit*.

Shelby reached for a fresh glass and poured Josie the chardonnay. “Mac was asking about secondary fermentation.” She looked over their shoulders at the group of four at one of the back tables. “I’ll be back,” she said as she slipped out from behind the bar.

Josie quickly assessed the wine’s color, then held it to her nose and...there it was. Her favorite part of drinking wine with Josie. Her lips plucked apart, and she closed her eyes as she focused on the nose of the chardonnay. And, *goddamn it*. Mac took a sip and waited for Josie to speak.



Josie took a sip and nodded. “What do you think?”

Mac quickly swallowed. “About the wine? It’s so good. Though I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Josie grinned. “You were asking about secondary fermentation?”

“Mm-hmm.” Mac peeked over her shoulder, looking for Shelby. For some reason, this exchange was feeling intimate again. It could be because she was currently wearing Josie’s clothes, and the fabric had finally warmed against her skin, and she was practically buzzing in—

“Well, first of all, we just call it ‘secondary’ or ‘ML’ or ‘malo,’ which is short for malolactic fermentation. All our reds and our chardonnay go through malo. In its simplest terms, malo is when lactic bacteria converts malic acid into lactic acid, which is less acidic. For reds, going through malo gives them a roundness, and for whites, it can give them a buttery flavor.”

Mac wanted to learn every single thing Josie was willing to explain, but she didn’t even think it was fair with Josie twirling the stem of her glass between her long fingers and running her hands through her loose waves, something Mac noticed she did a lot when she was tired. And then there was her typical work outfit. The winemaker’s uniform: brown leather boots, jeans or Carharts, a long-sleeve flannel, and a vest. No other winemaker looked as good as she did, though. And she didn’t want to learn about wine from anyone else.

Trying to focus on the learning bit instead of the swooning bit, Mac asked, “What makes it buttery?” She wanted to know the answer, but really, she just wanted Josie to keep talking. She wanted both.

“Shelby knows that one.”

Shelby appeared behind the bar again and packaged a bottle of gamay. “Diacetyl, right?”

Josie’s and Shelby’s self-expression was so different, and she was attracted to both of them for different reasons. Shelby’s tattoos and—

“Exactly.” Josie grinned.

Shelby’s tattoos and Josie’s everything.

Mac shook her head. “Wait, why isn’t ours buttery if it goes through malo?”

Shelby shrugged, and Josie put her glass on the bar. “That’s a great question. It’s all dependent on when you inoculate with the lactic bacteria, if you inoculate at all. We add it while the yeast is still alive during fermentation, producing carbon dioxide, and in those anaerobic conditions, the diacetyl is reduced to acetoin, which doesn’t affect the taste or aroma of the wine.”

“There you have it,” Shelby said and printed a receipt to deliver with the bottle of gamay. She produced two fresh glasses and poured them both a half glass of the estate pinot before she left. “Be back in a minute.”

Why was it every time Shelby left, Mac felt like she and Josie were on an awkward first date? *I mean, come on. We live together.* They made dinner together. They laughed at bad TV together. They did everything together.

Josie dragged the glasses of pinot in front of them. She watched as Mac took a sip, her eyes seeming to focus on where her mouth met the glass. “The clothes are just a little big,” Josie said, pinching the loose fabric of the arm of her sweater. “You pull it off, though.”

Josie was definitely doing things to her. Things that Mac shouldn’t—couldn’t—feel for her boss. This was her big opportunity to get her shit together. Not that it wasn’t together, but she was here to build a foundation for her new career. Whatever this was should stop. She had to rein it in. “Thank you,” a response that in no way reflected the effect Josie’s words had on her body.

When Shelby appeared again, Mac tried to rope her into the conversation, wanting to focus on anyone besides Josie. “So, Shelby, what’s there to do around here for fun besides the wine scene?”

Shelby polished glassware and tilted her head. “The drive-

in theater is always a hit. There's the vintage car festival in a couple weeks. Mini-golf at Harold's." She smiled. "They have the best custard in the Northwest."

Mac perked up at the sound of that. "The best, huh?" Shelby nodded, and Mac took a sip of pinot while she gathered the strength to ask her next question. One that would probably change her relationship with Josie for good, and she needed to change it before Mac accidentally kissed her. "Would you want to go together some time?"

It was as if her question poured a layer of thick concrete on the moment. Everything stopped. Shelby stopped polishing. Josie set down her wine and slowly pushed it a couple inches away. Mac was desperate to know what was being silently communicated here. Regardless, it was clear they were both shocked.

Shelby picked up the glass and began polishing again. "Um. I would love to, Mac. But..." She looked at Josie one more time before answering. "Hank specifically told me you were off-limits."

Mac could feel her cheeks heat, surely matching Shelby's. *Well, fuck.* Not only had she been rejected in her attempt to focus all her romantic energy on someone else, but she'd just embarrassed the hell out of herself for nothing. "Yep. Totally understand. No worries."

Shelby cleared her throat. "Yeah. Um, okay. I'll be back."

Josie was silent as Mac sat in her discomfort. Maybe it wasn't for nothing. As much as it hurt her to see the disappointment on Josie's face, she was almost positive they wouldn't be accidentally holding hands again any time soon. It was the best for both of them.

"We should get going," Josie finally said. She emphasized her point by draining the last of the pinot.

Mac followed suit and pushed her empty glass next to Josie's across the bar. "Sounds good. Where were you thinking for dinner?"

"I'm just going to eat something at home. You should go

out, though. Enjoy it while you can.”

Mac followed her to the door, both of them waving at Shelby as they left. It was a quiet car ride home, their usual banter and conversation notably absent. But Mac kept telling herself it was for the best. *This was for the best.*

\* \* \*

“What’s up?” Josie huffed into her phone. She slid the book, a cozy mystery series that took place in Alaska, onto her nightstand and focused on Shelby’s call. She sunk into her bed, and Bone and Tinker curled against her feet.

“What the hell was that?” Shelby sounded annoyed and a bit like she was chastising Josie for something.

Josie adjusted her pillow behind her back and straightened. Even though Mac was two stories below her, she dropped her voice. “What are you talking about? Be clear.” She didn’t mean to be short, but this time of night was her only respite, and she didn’t like giving up any number of minutes for someone else.

“I’m talking about how Mac asked me out right in front of you today. What’s going on between you two, Jos?”

“Nothing.” This conversation was beginning to annoy her. She answered because she thought maybe she’d accidentally left something at work. Or maybe Shelby had a question about a specific library wine. But what Josie didn’t want to talk about was Mackenzie Layton, the woman who tormented her in literally every aspect of her life. Mac made work hard with her lack of experience, and she made Josie’s personal life hard by giving her all these...feelings.

“Okay. Well, your intern just asked me out right in front of you, and it’s clear as fucking day that it wasn’t because she actually wants to go out with me. You know damn well Hank doesn’t care if I date someone from work. I used an excuse because from what I can tell, *you’re* the person she’s interested in.”

Now the headache was full force, like a screw slowly winding into her skull right behind her eyes. “Shit.”

“Yeah. And you know who *actually* can’t date the harvest intern?”

Josie stayed quiet, focusing on the pain that was pulsing in her right temple. This was bad. Nothing—okay, *almost* nothing—was going on between her and Mac, and a third party worrying about their situation really kind of freaked her out. She groaned as the throbbing hit a particularly painful beat.

“The winemaker, that’s who,” Shelby said in exasperation.

Josie switched off her lamp, hoping the dark would help to dull the pain, and slid farther into bed. “Nothing is going on, Shelby. I would never cross that line with an intern, and you know that. Especially not with Hank’s niece.”

“Listen.” Shelby’s voice was softer now, less scary teacher and more concerned friend. “I can tell by the way Mac looks at you that she feels something for you. And regardless of if it’s a mutual feeling, you need to squash it. Now.”

Josie blindly fished through her nightstand drawer for the bottle of aspirin and fumbled to pop the cap.

“You finally have what you’ve always wanted in reach. Your own label. Not to mention, if people thought you were getting with your interns, well...your reputation in Elmwood would change, to say the least. And do you really want a repeat of Carly?”

Josie washed down her pills with a small sip of water and rolled onto her side. It felt as though the pain in her head was moving to her limbs, and every one of Shelby’s words stoked the spread. She knew Shelby was right. She didn’t want to ever find out if Hank would fire her for having a *personal* relationship with Mac. And she didn’t want to ruin her good name in this close-knit wine community. She wasn’t adored, per se, but she was looked up to, she had some power and respect, and she worked hard for it.

And Shelby just had to bring up Carly. Some mistakes haunted a person for life, she guessed. Josie was pretty sure everyone had seen through Carly’s bullshit, but still, industry

relationships could be messy. Especially when someone accidentally dated a Carly. And Carlys were good at seeming normal until they weren't.

“Shelby, listen to me. I'm going to say it once and hang up because my head is pounding, and this call isn't helping. I would *never* cross that line with Mac. Ever. It's not worth it, and I don't have feelings for her anyway. Take her out. I don't care.”

The line remained quiet for a moment, and Josie wondered if she should just hang up.

“You, Josie Sanchez, are an obstinate ass. Maybe I will take her out.”

The line went dead, and Josie groaned.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Josie knew the start of crush would be intense, but she didn't anticipate it to be quite so grueling. Mac was getting into the swing of things, but every day was long because Josie still had to show her how to do literally everything, from taking Brix and temp to setting up for pump-overs. They were both already exhausted, and they were only a week into harvest. The weather had not cooperated, and they were on their sixth straight day of processing grapes. That meant they were out of clean fermentors, and they'd worked until eleven last night to finish prepping for more fruit today.

She tugged her beanie over her ears as she used the forklift to dump gamay into the hopper and watched it slide onto the sorting table where Mac, Teddy, and Shelby sorted, pulling out leaves, stems, and clusters that had rot or were underripe. She watched Mac as she waited for the hopper to empty enough for her to dump the rest of the bin. Mac focused on the fruit, picking and pushing and plucking.

Josie would never admit it to her—could barely admit it to herself—how hurt she was when Mac had asked out Shelby. She had been utterly shocked. Below, the three of them smiled and laughed at something Shelby said. Josie wondered if it was something charming, but she couldn't make out the words over the whirring of all the equipment.

Yes, she knew the connection she and Mac shared was inappropriate, and she would never act on it. The few times that had been a little too intimate were all sparked by Mac. But damn. Josie didn't want to have to witness her ask somebody else out right in front of her. If it was a message, she'd gotten it loud and clear.

As the beginning of crush swelled into a massive wave of work, the temperature continued to drop, and everyone was

freezing while they processed grapes outside on the crush pad. All the harvest equipment was stationed on a big, covered, cement pad outside overlooking the vineyards. It made cleanup easier, and they needed the extra space.

Mac dipped her hands in a bucket of warm water and continued to sort. Josie checked the time again and cursed under her breath. It always seemed that stupid waste-of-time events happened during crush. Hank wanted Josie to participate in a harvest-kickoff winemakers' dinner with Mike Griswold at the Tail and Tendril tonight. She had made sure today would be short enough that she and Mac could finish in time to make it. Teddy would have to do the few punch-downs and finish cleaning for them.

She dumped the last bin of gamay and cringed when Mac bellowed that beautiful laugh in response to Shelby. *Again*. At least Shelby hadn't actually made good on her threat. Yet.

Josie hopped off the forklift and sidled up next to Mac on the sorting table, watching the clusters shake and scurry down the metal. "How's the fruit look today? Better than yesterday?" She raised her voice over the humming of the sorting table and destemmer.

Mac nodded. "Definitely. Way less underripe seconds and debris. The pick crew listened to your feedback."

Moments like these made Josie proud of her. She trusted Mac to take this seriously. To make sure only ripe, clean fruit made it into the fermentor. To care about the quality of the wine they produced. Josie could teach an intern literally everything else, but she couldn't teach them to care. They either did or they didn't, and caring could be the difference between a clean tank and an almost clean tank. And an *almost* clean tank could ruin an entire lot of wine.

Josie squeezed her shoulder. "That was the last bin. When it's finished, I'll do the additions on the gamay, and you hop on cleaning the destemmer. We have to be fast if we're going to make the winemakers' dinner on time. Teddy will do punch-downs and lock up."

"Sounds good."



Maybe Mac asking out Shelby was a blessing. She could never act on this silly crush anyway. She had to be professional and friendly and move on. She could do professional and friendly.

\* \* \*

Mac sprayed the last grape skins down the drain. Everything looked clean and ready for tomorrow. Time to shower and change into some nice clothes for tonight. It was only a week into crush, but she was already looking forward to anytime she got to dress up and do something outside the winery or the house. Not that she minded being cooped up with Josie. Their nights together were cozy. At least they were before the “Mac asked out Shelby” incident. Josie would fix them a warm snack and open a nice bottle of wine as they shook off the day and cuddled with Bone and Tinker on the couch. They’d watch *Unsolved Mysteries* while they either read or scrolled their phones.

It was lovely. *Was* lovely. Mac really hoped to get back to that level of ease. Not because of her crush, because she wanted to live in comfort with Josie.

Mac coiled the hose and walked to the break room where Teddy was fixing a cup of tea. He looked adorable in his hand-knitted purple beanie and chunky green fisherman’s sweater. “Thanks for finishing up tonight, Teddy.”

“Not a problem.” He tossed a cookie in his mouth and wiped a crumb from his dense beard. “Keep Jos in line tonight, yeah?” He tilted his head toward the bathroom where she was showering. “It’s not her strong suit.”

It was her priority tonight: be the best support system she could be. She was there to help things go smoothly. Since her complete fail in asking out Shelby, she’d done her best to focus all her energy into work and being the best intern possible. “I’ll do my best.”

He winked and left to do punch-downs in the winery. Mac had been preparing for this dinner all week. She’d asked Shelby for the tech sheets of the wines they’d be pouring and had memorized every single detail about each: the elevation of

the vines, the residual sugar, the alcohol per volume, the number of months spent in barrel. Everything. And that was on top of her knowledge of the Oregon wine industry and Cadieux.

She hung her vest in her locker and rubbed her hands together. They were already starting to crack and hurt.

“Hey.” Josie walked behind her to her locker.

Mac held her breath as she felt the warmth radiating off Josie’s skin from her shower.

Josie clutched a towel to her chest as she grabbed a duffel and garment bag. “Shower’s free. I’m going to get ready in the office. Leave in forty-five minutes?”

Mac nodded. Josie’s strong shoulders were perfectly displayed, damp and glistening, her hair was down and wet, and her legs...*don’t look at her legs*. As she was leaving, Mac was desperate for just one more second of having her in view.

“Are we stopping at home to let the girls out?” she asked. A silly question she already knew the answer to, but it was worth it to have Josie stop in the doorway, look over her shoulder, and smirk.

“I have the sitter until eight. I thought I told you that.” Her eyes narrowed.

Mac shrugged. “Must have slipped my mind.” She grabbed a fresh towel from the shelf and walked past Josie to the bathroom. “Go on. Don’t want to be late.”

As she showered—and yes, having a shower at work was indeed incredible—she thought about Josie’s skin, how it smelled like pine on a crisp fall day, how it glowed golden in the dimmest of lights, and how it felt so rough and weathered on her hands but soft and delicate everywhere else. She relished the image of Josie half-naked and the feeling of the hot water washing away the sticky grape juice splattered all over her body.

When she finished, she blow-dried her hair and slipped into the maroon dress she’d picked out. It was perfect. Sexy but classy and professional enough for tonight. She had asked

Josie a million times what the attire was, and Josie had told her a million times not to overthink it. “You always look nice. Just look nice,” she’d said.

She touched up her manicured beach waves and added a pop of dusty red lipstick. She looked damn good and was feeling powerful. She clasped her heels’ skinny black leather strap around her ankles and packed her things, slinging her bag over her shoulder. *Perfect.*

“You look beautiful,” Teddy called across the winery as Mac dodged slick spots of water on the concrete.

“Thank you. Where’s Josie?”

“Having a glass in the tasting room while she waits for you.”

She said good night and slipped into the mostly dark tasting room. The only illumination in the space was from the golden accent lights behind the stemware and the light from the winery. Mac was beginning to see why Josie preferred the days the tasting room was closed.

“Got a glass for me?” she asked as she walked behind the bar next to Josie. She almost choked on her words as she took in the sight of Josie in a black cocktail dress that left so much of her delicious skin on display. Her hair was perfectly smooth and down to her shoulders, and *damnit*, Mac really shouldn’t have looked at her legs. She’d be thinking about those long, toned legs nonstop. And those heels. *Fuck.* Mac was fucked.

Josie’s gaze fell down the length of her body, only turning Mac into more of a bumbling schoolgirl. “Mac.” Josie’s eyes met hers, a clouded haze in them. It made Mac feel powerful and sexy. And like maybe they could move past the Shelby blunder. “You look...great. Really great.”

Mac snagged a glass from the shelf and poured herself a splash of pinot gris. She took a sip, emboldened. “You look pretty great yourself.” She didn’t try to hide as she took her time looking Josie up and down. Josie had started it, after all, and Mac was getting a little agitated with all the lust she was having to deal with from being so close to Josie all day, every

day. Would it really be so bad to kiss her? They could still work together and get through harvest.

*Focus.*

There was just too much on the line for both of them. Working at Cadieux. Working in the Elmwood wine industry at all. Mac wanted it so badly, but ending up like Carly—the talk of the town and not in a good way—wasn't going to make her hireable. She didn't want to be seen as sleeping her way to a job, but more so, she didn't want Josie to have to suffer the gossip mill. It'd be worse for her, especially after the Carly situation.

And there was Hank. A total wild card.

“We should go when you're finished. No rush, though,” Josie said. Her voice was gentle.

Mac drained the last sip of her wine and loaded both their glasses into the dishwasher. “Ready.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Tail and Tendril was one of the nicer restaurants on Main Street, comprised of a farm-to-table menu, one of the best craft cocktail lists in town, and a highly trained and professional staff. It was always a treat to eat there, especially on Hank's dime. The mahogany tables were accentuated by small centerpieces of varying-sized candles; the wine cellar glowed in the corner of the dining room behind a door encased by metal vines; and the staff dressed in all black outfits, each with their own personal flare.

"How many bottles of the pinot gris are chilled?" Josie asked.

Becca, the general manager, checked her notepad. "We have three chilled and two more as backup."

She did some quick math as Mac meandered through the gorgeous restaurant, running her hand over the long banquet table and fingering the menu for the event.

"Should be good," Mike Griswold said, standing uncomfortably close to both Josie and Becca.

She took a half step away from him. "Actually, do you have space to chill one more? People are excited to get drinking, so they tend to drink more of the first wine than any other."

Mike scoffed. "I'm sure it's plenty. Four would be—"

"Micah," Becca called to one of her staff. "I need one more chilled pinot gris."

The skinny young man with dollops of red curls nodded. "Four all day?" he asked.

"Four all day."

Mike cleared his throat, visibly annoyed to be ignored in

favor of Josie's opinion. She couldn't help but take a bit of pleasure in his disappointment. He'd never wronged her, but she could sense he didn't care for her. She got the vibe that he only respected Hank and thought of Josie as merely lucky to have gotten the job at Cadieux, as if Hank hadn't handpicked her and invested years of training in her. As if she wasn't the best candidate for the job. The wines she made, the awards she won, were all insult to injury for the guys like him. She hoped they were, at least. There was really no denying the superiority —

“Hey.” Mac's soft voice took the edge off. Had she really been standing there stewing over Mike Griswold? He wasn't worth a second of her thoughts. “You're scowling,” Mac whispered, her hand grazing the small of Josie's back as if she was scared to fully touch her.

Something about Mac's touch, her tone of voice, her dress...made Josie feel closer to her tonight than she had since Mac had asked out Shelby. Josie leaned into her touch. “Sorry,” she whispered back, enjoying the proximity to Mac's neck. She smelled like gardenia lotion or bodywash or whatever it was she used every day. “I'll try to be on my best behavior from now on.”

Mac rubbed a thumb against her lower back. “Doubtful.” She winked. And damn, it was sexy as hell. “But you have me. It'll be great.”

She nodded, but her stewing quickly morphed to dread. She chewed her lip. Couldn't help it. Guests would be arriving soon, and the discomfort she always felt at these events bubbled in the pit of her stomach. Made her nauseated. Knowing she'd have to host and entertain complete strangers and parade around like a stuck-up winemaker made her want to literally cry. Social anxiety was a bitch.

“Jos,” Mac said, her voice bringing much needed comfort. “We'll get through it together. I promise.” She eyed Josie with concern but also with strength, as if she would lead them to victory.

“Yeah. Yes, of course.” She forced a smile, and it almost

started to feel natural until the universe conspired against her, and Greg fucking Johnson walked through the front door.

She groaned a low, long, “Fuck.” It might have been a growl.

“What? Is everything okay?”

Guests started arriving behind Greg, and Becca checked them in and showed them their seats. Greg made a beeline for the bar and downed a shot of bourbon, of course, before zeroing in on Josie, then very quickly, Mac.

“That,” Josie said through a fake smile while he was still out of earshot, “is Greg Johnson. Runs Copper Peak Vineyards. Douchiest douche of them all. Didn’t know he’d be here.” She finished speaking in a whisper just as he approached.

“Josie.” He nodded, letting his eyes briefly take in her entirety before turning to Mac. “And who do we have here?” His cheeks burned red, telling Josie that bourbon wasn’t his first drink of the evening. The only thing that made her want to punch him in the face more than his shirt being egregiously unbuttoned—*no one wants to see your chest hair, Greg*—was how he looked at Mac. Like a fucking wolf. He might as well have been drooling. He wasn’t subtle as he checked her out, as if he thought his “male gaze” would be a turn-on for her. Like he wanted her to notice.

Mac gave her a slightly horrified side-eye. Dinner hadn’t even begun, and she already hated every second of this evening, except for the seconds when it had been just the two of them. Josie tried to give her a quick fortifying nod before returning her attention to Greg. “This is Mac Layton, my harvest intern.”

If Mac’s looks didn’t already have him salivating, her last name was like dangling a juicy steak in front of his face. “Oh.” He chuckled and grazed a hand over his belly. “Layton, eh?”

A groan rumbled in Josie’s chest, but she held it in. “She also happens to be Hank’s niece, yes.”

A slimy grin slithered over his lips as he held out a hand.

Mac shook it. "Pleasure."

She tried to drop his hand, but he held on. Josie gave him five seconds to let her go before she went ballistic on his ass. He was no doubt trying to bait her by winking at Mac. "Pleasure's all mine, Ms. Layton." He let her go just in time.

"Wasn't expecting you tonight, Greg," Josie said, the irritation peppering her words.

He grinned and scratched his golden beard. "Copper Peak is represented in both Cadieux and Fog Valley wines. So Mike asked me to join him and say a few words about the vineyard."

She bit her scar and nodded. "So glad you made it." She cuffed his shoulder. "We should get to it. Let's not forget this is a work event."

By the second course and wine pairing, Josie was over it. Over everyone except for Mac and the Tail and Tendril staff. The banquet table was full of tourists who didn't know the first thing about wine but who had deep enough pockets to attend the dinner. They fawned over Greg and his tales of growing the perfect grapes that were destined to become wine.

"Exceptional vineyard practices are the single most important thing when it comes to making good wine. It's all about the vineyard," he said, then drained half a glass of the Cadieux gamay that didn't have a single Copper Peak grape in it.

Josie scoffed. "His father was a terrible vineyard manager," she whispered to Mac. They were grabbing more bottles of gamay from the cellar as Greg ranted on. She could hear his annoying voice through the cracked door. "Everything was in disarray, but Hank knew the potential of Copper Peak. So he made an agreement to consult with Jerry, Greg's father, to get the vineyard back in shape if he gave Hank a deal on grapes. Jerry died pretty quickly after that, so Hank had to coach Greg instead. Taught that bastard every damn thing he knows." She shook her head and pulled a bottle off the rack. "The ego on that man makes we want to vomit."

Mac placed her bottles on the head of the barrel table and



sighed. “When he had my hand, I’m pretty sure I did throw up in my mouth a little.”

“If you don’t want me to walk out there and strangle him right now, then we can’t talk about that anymore.” Her words crawled through her gritted teeth, and her grip on a bottle threatened to shatter it.

Mac walked around the barrel, landing right next to her. She shuddered from how Mac’s body felt against her, how she could feel the swell of her breasts. Alone in the cellar with Mac, she was completely intoxicated. She looked away, feeling for the millionth time betrayed by her body’s reactions.

“Look at me,” Mac whispered.

Josie slowly turned to Mac. And yep, just as she suspected, Mac was still breathtakingly gorgeous.

“We got this. It will be over soon, then you’re taking me out to Lou’s for a drink, then I’m taking you home.” She pulled away, grabbed the bottles from the barrel, and left Josie alone in the cellar.

She took the moment of privacy to gather herself, tugging on her dress, the tight fabric suddenly irritating and uncomfortable. “Fuck,” she groaned and followed Mac.

After another agonizing hour, they were finally on the last course and pairing of the evening. “This is our most distinguished red,” Josie said. The whole table raised their glasses and smelled the wine, mimicking Josie. “Our estate pinot noir.” She took a sip alongside Mac and nodded to her, silently telling her to describe the wine for the table.

Mac stepped in front and instantly commanded the attention of the room. “When you taste our estate pinot noir, you are tasting a beautiful expression of our vineyard at Cadieux. Being one of the first vineyards to be established in the Willamette Valley in the seventies, our mature vines produce some of the most exceptional wines in the world. Our eastern-facing slopes capture the morning sun and help along the photosynthesis of the vines. Our volcanic basalt soil is well-drained, keeping disease pressure to a minimum. And our

winemaking practices are as hands-off as possible, allowing the wine to become the purist expression of itself. The goal is to *let it be beautiful*.” She raised her glass and took a small sip. “This pinot in particular has flavors of mushrooms, dried fig, cranberry, and tobacco. A beautiful compliment to the lamb.”

Josie closed her mouth when she realized it had been ajar for the entire time Mac was speaking. She blinked, completely in awe of how amazing she had done. The guests were beyond lucky to be in her presence and to learn about their wine from someone so knowledgeable and lovely.

One of the ladies raised her hand and said, “Excuse me, Miss. I like my reds to be bolder.” She eyed her glass with distaste. “Do you have a cab I could drink? I want more oak.” A few of the other guests nodded along.

A fast, hot rage engulfed Josie as she tried to step in front of Mac to tell this woman just where she could shove her ignorant opinion of the pinot. But Mac sidestepped to block her and cleared her throat.

She chuckled like the gracious host she was. “I do love a cab, myself. But this region of winemaking is not suited to making cabernet sauvignon. The Willamette Valley has the same latitude and maritime weather as Burgundy. And we all know Burgundy creates some of the best pinots in the world, am I right?” A couple of murmurs of approval and raised glasses met her words. “As opposed to Bordeaux, which makes great cab, merlot, petit verdot, malbec...I could go on. Unfortunately, you’ll have to book your next winemakers’ dinner in California or Washington to enjoy a cabernet sauvignon. But I do hope you’ll find something special in our wines as well.”

The woman’s mouth hung open in a crescent moon, stuck between a frown and a smile, her eyes unblinking. She looked as though she didn’t know if she’d just been insulted and if she should be angry or not. She apparently decided to give up on figuring out her feelings and shrugged, finishing her lamb and pinot without another complaint. The others followed suit.

Josie couldn’t keep the stupid grin off her face. “Holy shit,

Mac,” she whispered. “That, no, *you* were incredible.”

“Thank you. Now, let’s wrap up and get that drink.”

Josie worked as quickly as possible to help finish the inventory of bottles, gather guest information for wine club memberships, and bid farewell to Becca and the rest of the Tail and Tendril staff. When they stepped outside, the cold air was a rush of relief. Mac had helped Josie get out of there without killing Greg and without losing her patience with a guest. A wild success. They walked together, their coat arms swishing against each other, the two blocks to Lou’s. Josie might have imagined it—a case of wishful thinking, maybe—but she swore she felt Mac’s fingers brush hers as she reached for the door.

Mac stepped inside the dark restaurant and slipped off her coat, her back exposed by a giant cutout in her dress. Her skin was gorgeous and so damn soft. She had gotten to touch what Mac’s dress failed to cover at the Tail and Tendril, and she hoped she would get the opportunity to touch her again because Mac was like a well of energy and peace. And Josie desperately wanted to drink from her.

“This way.” Josie took a deep breath and reached for her, guiding her to the back room as she willed her hand to stay and not slip to her hip, to that tantalizing curve. To act on these feelings was wrong, and she did her best to squash them when they threatened to grow into holding hands or a kiss. Like when they went hiking. She was able to pump the brakes and remain in control, but she was feeling a little reckless tonight. Like she wanted to push to that point again with Mac. Wanted to be forced into that moment when her entire body was screaming to kiss her already, but she couldn’t.

She just wanted to be as close to Mac Layton as possible. Who wouldn’t?

“Bar or table?” Josie asked.

Mac looked around the bustling back room, taking in the scene that was Lou’s standard crowd during harvest. Anyone who had already finished processing grapes was here shaking off the day with a drink and a hot meal. The volume was

higher than usual from the interns and winemakers getting a little rowdy, trying to escape their stress. “Bar.”

They found two empty stools at the end of the L-shaped bar, and Anthony dropped two waters and a menu in front of them. “What are we drinking tonight, ladies?”

Josie turned to Mac. “What do you feel like? Wine, beer, a cocktail?”

Mac scanned the menu and seemingly tried to read all the beers listed on the chalkboard behind the other side of the bar. She leaned against Josie as she continued to crane her neck and try to see. She gave up and straightened. “I want you to pick a cocktail for me.”

Josie raised a brow. “Anything?”

A mischievous look passed over Mac’s features as she nodded. “Anything.”

It was best to order two different cocktails in case Mac didn’t like hers, and they could switch. She ordered Mac the “Brush off Crush,” an autumn-inspired old-fashioned with fig and cinnamon, and a “Punch-Down” for herself, a cozy cocktail riff on mulled wine. “We’ll also get a couple of flatbreads.” She glanced at the menu. “The caprese and the prosciutto and greens.”

Anthony was back in a minute with their drinks. Mac groaned as she sipped hers. “Brush off crush, indeed.” She caught a single drop of whiskey on her lip with her tongue, and Josie almost combusted at the sight. “How’s yours? Can I try it?”

Josie pushed the drink in front of her. “It’s really good, too.”

Mac pressed the rim of the glass mug to her lips and sipped, emanating the same long moan as before. “Wow.” She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “Way better than an actual punch-down.”

Josie chuckled. “They’re not so bad. It’s fun to see the fermentations foam up and progress every day.”

Mac bumped her shoulder and grinned, her adorably crooked tooth proudly on display. “I’m just kidding.”

Josie took a sip and soaked in everything about this evening: how Mac looked radiant in that burgundy dress and those heels, how the merriment in Lou’s was contagious, and how proud she was of Mac’s performance tonight. She rolled the delicious spiced brandy cocktail over her tongue and leaned into Mac, her lips an inch from her ear. “Mac, I just want to reiterate that you were so impressive tonight, and I am so—”

“Thought I’d find you two here. Care for company?” Greg Johnson sidled up to Mac’s left and leaned on the bar, staring at Josie before letting his gaze drop to Mac’s chest.

Mac pulled away from Josie, her brows furrowed and lips pursed, to consider him.

“Actually, we were just discussing some work stuff for tomorrow. Would probably bore you,” Josie said.

A sickening smile curled his lips as he leaned closer. Josie could smell his sour aroma from the other side of Mac. “Then let me save you from the boring conversation, Mac.” He leaned even closer to stage whisper, “Josie can be a bit... serious.”

Mac leaned away, looking affronted, her shoulder pressing into Josie’s. “Thank you for your generous offer, Greg, but I like things a bit *serious*.”

He looked between them, suspicion knitting his brows together. “What’s actually going—”

“My girls,” Hank bellowed and pushed Greg aside like the undeserving creep he was. He should have counted his lucky stars that he didn’t have the opportunity to finish his sentence. Hank wiggled between them and fished an arm over each of their shoulders.

“Hank. What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were out of town.” Josie was grateful for his interruption but annoyed that he could’ve done the winemakers’ dinner instead of her. Though, honestly, the night had been perfect. Working

the dinner with Mac had been perfect.

“Got back early,” was all he gave. “Give me a glass of something good, Anthony. Something red and good.”

Anthony slid a fat wineglass of red in front of him. “2016 Côtes de Brouilly. It’s delicious. Drink it.”

Greg wandered around the pool table, his eyes finding Hank every minute or so. It was a pleasure seeing him squirm in Hank’s presence, as if he’d lost all of his dumb confidence by remembering his entire vineyard operation wasn’t *actually* his. He didn’t have some innate talent for growing grapes. Hank had set up every damn thing for him. All Greg had to do was not screw it up.

Hank slurped his wine, egregiously aerating it in his mouth as only Hank Layton would. Wine bubbled at the crease of his lips, and Josie had to look away. He finally swallowed and wiped his mouth in his hand. “*Ah*. Shit’s good, Anthony.”

Anthony rolled his eyes and nodded, reaching for another glass to polish.

“How was tonight?” Hank asked between gulps. It seemed he was shaking something off, too.

Though Josie had been looking forward to having a drink alone with Mac, Hank was almost always a welcome presence. After Anthony delivered their flatbreads, they gave him the rundown of the evening: the wines that were popular, the food, and Mike and Greg’s performances.

“Mac was incredible.”

Hank swallowed a bite of flatbread and dusted crumbs from his belly. “Of course she was.” He squeezed Mac’s shoulder and beamed.

The cocktail had already taken off the edge of harvest and the winemakers’ dinner. She felt softened and warm, like a block of cheese that had been out for an hour or two. It was best that way. “You should have seen her. There was a difficult guest, and she handled it with such grace and power.” She shook her head, then spoke to Mac. “And I know you must have spent a lot of time studying. You knew every single detail

about every single wine.”

Mac smiled as she pulled another slice of the prosciutto and greens onto her plate. “Thank you. I study every night, you know.”

She didn’t know. But Hank stole the conversation and regaled them with tales of his recent travels. As always, winemakers swarmed at the sound of his flamboyant storytelling. He was in a social mood and turned into the captain of the back room, his hands flailing in exaggerated stories, his voice booming from wall to wall, and his back turned to Mac and Josie.

Mac pushed the empty plates to the edge of the bar and took the final sip of her drink. “I don’t think we’re getting him back tonight.” She nodded over her shoulder at Hank.

Josie chuckled. “Not a chance in hell.”

Anthony cleared their dishes and wiped the bar. “Another round?”

Josie nudged Mac’s knee under the bar. “Do you want to have the next one at home? I kind of miss the girls.”

Mac smiled wide, and that damn crooked tooth made Josie want to let everything go and kiss her. “That sounds great.”

Josie couldn’t wait.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The swishing of coats was the loudest sound as they walked the couple of blocks back to the Tail and Tendril parking lot. Something between them was different, bigger, more important. Josie tried not to think about what it was because if she did, she'd pass out or run away. She didn't trust herself to uphold her own boundaries tonight. Or most nights, if she was honest.

When they turned onto the side road, the street darkened, and the busy noises of Main faded. It wasn't uncomfortable, it just held...a lot. It was the kind of quiet that hummed like the quiet of the vineyards. A saturated kind of quiet.

"Thank you for tonight," Mac said. Her voice was the only sound Josie wanted to hear other than the breeze.

"Thank *you*." Josie let her hand hang, and Mac grabbed it like it was the normal thing to do and interlaced their fingers, and they strolled the last block slowly, hand in hand, letting this new intimacy simmer. When they got to the car, they broke their connection without acknowledging it and drove home in the same quiet.

Bone and Tinker had only been home alone for an hour, but when Josie opened the front door, the girls spilled out in a jumbled mess of whipping tails, wiggling butts, and barks of excitement. They demanded at least a hundred pets on the front porch before they allowed them entrance.

"Do we have any dessert? I'm dying for something sweet," Mac said as she rummaged through the pantry.

Josie hung her coat and joined her in the kitchen. "There's that hazelnut chocolate bar we got at the market last week, and I think you have strawberry Pop-Tarts left."

Mac emerged with the Pop-Tarts and chocolate bar, a



devilish grin on her lips. “Okay. I clearly have dessert covered. Go change and meet me back here for a nightcap and the best damn dessert board you’ve ever had.”

Josie shook her head. “You are not to be argued with.”

Mac narrowed her eyes and gave such an intense, sexy look, Josie wondered if she should stay upstairs where it was safe. “And no sneaking to bed. We got off work early, and we’re going to enjoy the rest of the evening together.”

Josie glanced at the clock. “Okay, but it’s nine thirty. So I’m only promising an hour.”

Mac shrugged. “Fine.”

“Fine.”

Josie let the girls out and tried to calm herself. She took one more deep breath of the cold night air, then went upstairs to change into her flannel pajama pants and worn Cornell sweatshirt. She washed off her makeup and tied her hair into a messy bun.

When she walked downstairs to the living room, Mac had lit the candles, put on a record, and made a board of silly sweets posing as gourmet desserts. The Pop-Tarts were cut into perfect, bite-sized squares, and the chocolate bar was artistically broken into jagged pieces and placed in a floral serving bowl.

Mac sat on the couch, one leg tucked underneath herself. She looked adorably cozy in her gray sweatpants and baby blue thermal that clung to her skin. Skin that would be so warm. Her hair was still down, but she was fresh-faced like Josie. “Is this bottle all right?” Mac presented the Washington cabernet sauvignon from the cellar. It was an elegant wine with flavors of black currant and chocolate and baking spices from the oak.

“It’s perfect.” She sat next to Mac and poured them each a glass. “So...how are you enjoying your first crush?”

Mac broke into a grin, the candlelight highlighting her signature sparkle. “I am exhausted all the time, my feet hurt—but not as much as my hands—and I feel like it will never end.

But I love it.” She raised her glass to her mouth.

Her hands were in bad shape. They were stained purple, which was harmless, but the cracks along her knuckles were deepening. One even had a pale red line of blood. Her fingers, once slender and nimble, curled around the stem like ancient rock formations, now swollen and stiff.

“I’ll be right back.” Josie ran upstairs to grab the tub of Working Hands she kept on her nightstand. When she returned, she sat even closer, extending one leg behind Mac so she could easily pull Mac’s hand into her lap. “I know harvest can be brutal on hands, but this stuff is like magic. May I?” She nodded to Mac’s hand.

“Oh my God. Yes, please.” She scooted closer.

Josie dipped her fingers into the tub and scooped a generous amount of cream; half would end up soaking into her skin and not Mac’s. She held Mac’s hand and tried to map the sensitive areas where a deep rub might agitate the angry cracks, then began to slowly knead the lotion into her skin.

“*Mm*. Wow. This feels better than any massage I’ve ever gotten. Swedish, hot stones, deep tissue, they can all go to hell. This is simply the best.” Mac finished her exultation with another long groan into her wineglass.

The feeling of taking care of her in some small way, of having her hand in Josie’s lap and her body so close, filled Josie with the sweetest longing. She wanted to keep Mac’s hands in hers for as long as possible. She tugged each of her fingers to stretch the tight muscles and knuckles and worked her thumb over the calloused pad of her palm. “I know,” Josie said through a smile. “Hand massages are my favorite. I think a lot of industry people would agree.” She considered her own statement and shrugged. “I guess it’d be a toss-up with foot massages.”

Mac sank into the couch, her back pinning Josie’s leg to the cushion. “Okay. Time to switch.” She pulled that hand away and offered the other, stretching across her body. “That’s not going to work.” She pulled herself out of the mouth of the couch and turned.

Josie worked on her other hand, grateful for the task. Without it, they might both be in big trouble. The more gardenia skin she could smell, the more she craved to taste it. “Okay, I told you about my last relationship. What was yours?” Josie asked. She really needed other things to focus on beside the slight part in Mac’s pale pink lips and the way her eyelids looked heavy with pleasure.

“*Ugh*. Why spoil such a lovely experience?” Mac bit her lip and reached for her wine. After a couple sips, she sighed. “I don’t know what to say, really. Her name was Heather. She was an actuary, loved taking long runs through Waverly Park, and had the biggest obsession with iced, green tea lattes that I have ever seen.”

Josie stopped massaging and just held her hand, softly stroking here and there. “And what? You hated green tea lattes and therefore were mortal enemies in the end?”

Mac laughed that gorgeously bright laugh. “I mean, basically.”

“Wait.” Josie shook her head. “What?”

Mac put her wine on the table and let her other hand join Josie’s. “What I mean is, nothing actually happened. The reason we broke up was as dumb as me not liking green tea lattes, you know?”

Josie shook her head. “I think I need a bit more explanation.”

“We were together for three years, and in the end, all she said was that she was ready to settle down and was looking for something ‘more serious.’” She slipped her hands away to use air quotes, then bit her lip and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were vulnerable, her brows pulled tight. “I wanted to marry her. I begged her to move in with me.” Josie startled when she laid her hands atop Josie’s thighs. “Everyone. *Everyone* bails on me when things get real. They take my light, they bathe in my warmth, they laugh with me, and adore me until it’s time to be serious. To get the job done. To get married.” She scoffs. “What is it about me that screams, I don’t have what it takes? That I don’t contain the depth or

the heart or the stomach to go into battle? I didn't love marketing, it's true. But the real reason I left the firm was because my dad apparently felt the same way as Heather."

Josie felt instant guilt for her initial assessment of Mac, for the lack of faith she'd had. Ninety percent of it was solely based off her looks and the warmth she emanated, as if those were clearly weaknesses. But they were superpowers. Josie would've been wary of any new intern who lacked experience, but over time, Mac had become the one Josie would want in battle. Her number one. She trusted Mac. With everything.

"The clients always lacked faith in me, but it was because they were mirroring him. He never gave me a shot with the bigger accounts, and when I was trying to get a contract signed for one of mine, if they even hinted at being unsure of me, he'd pass them along to a different agent. Not an agent with more experience. Not an agent with a better track record or more market savvy. A guy with a beard and nerdy glasses or Patricia." She followed her coworker's name with such a groan of disdain, Josie couldn't help but chuckle.

"Fucking Patricia," Josie said.

"Fucking Patricia. Seriously, though. Like, just because she's bitchy and mean doesn't make her good at her job."

Josie took a bite of chocolate and washed it down with the cab. She was never a fan of pairing red wine and dark chocolate—thought the acid in each tended to clash—but something about this specific combination was exquisite. "Excellent dessert, by the way."

"Chef's special." Mac snagged a Pop-Tart bit and smiled.

"You know how I felt about Hank making me hire you. To be honest, I feel like you should include me in your list of nonbelievers. But I—" She stopped herself. Didn't know what words were about to fly out of her mouth, and she had a feeling they would be too...much.

"Go on," Mac whispered. "You're always taking back compliments. Is it a ploy to make me want them even more?"

"Mac, I think you're the fiercest person I know. And

everything about you that Heather or your dad or those clients saw as weaknesses, those things are superpowers. Your warmth and magnetism. But also, your straight-up badassery. When you basically told me to fuck off in the lab during your first titrations, I listened. You were commanding in a way that got through to me, and you were commanding with that woman at dinner tonight in a way that was graceful and professional.”

Mac slipped her hands an inch up Josie’s legs and squeezed before she all but piled into Josie’s lap for a hug.

Josie managed to set her glass on the table and wrapped her arms around Mac, holding her and breathing her in. The tickle of Mac’s hair on her lips sent a slippery warmth down her body. She wanted her. Had wanted her for a long time. “When things get serious, you’re the only one I look for,” she whispered against Mac’s ear.

Mac pulled back, still gripping Josie’s sweatshirt above her hips. “It’s the funniest thing.”

“What is?”

A long slinky wave tumbled in front of Mac’s face. “You and me.”

Those three words released a storm of emotions. They made Josie ache for her touch, for her lips, for her tongue. Made her heart stutter with panic and desire. Made her fingers twitch with the need to know what she would find if she slipped them down the front of Mac’s sweatpants. She caught sight of the photo that sat on the end table behind Mac of her and Hank smiling together in the vineyard. *Fear.*

Hank, Cadieux, Anita. Those three words were what mattered most. *Right?* Josie tagged her scar with her tongue, a habit she just could not shake.

“What is it?” Mac asked. “You only do that when you’re anxious, or when...” She shook her head. “Never mind.” Her eyes flitted to Josie’s lips.

Josie blew out a breath and reached for the escaped wave, tucking it delicately behind Mac’s ear. Why did it all feel less

important now that she knew Mac existed? Why, when she knew it put everything she held dear at risk, could she not will herself to stop? To walk upstairs. To go to bed without slipping even deeper into Mac. She relished the softness of her skin as she grazed the back of her ear and down her neck. Mac's grip tightened in her sweatshirt. "You're right," Josie admitted.

Mac's golden brows furrowed. "You're anxious?"

"Scared."

Mac watched her, the moment stretching throughout Bon Iver's molasses chorus. It was as if admitting she was scared gave Mac what she needed. She released Josie's sweatshirt and reached for her face, brushing her lip with a thumb. Josie shivered under her touch. Not a gentle shiver. There was nothing delicate about the spine-shaking jolt that rattled her bones. Mac grinned, her thumb resting at the corner of Josie's mouth. "So it *is* like that."

Josie froze as Mac leaned closer, and she could feel her warm, red wine breath on her cheek. She touched her forehead to Mac's, completely absorbed by her. "Been like that," Josie said softly.

When Mac pressed her lips to Josie's, it was gentle. She didn't crush her mouth or force entry; she brushed her lips in the sweetest kiss. Josie was wet and achy and swollen, but she remained still, frozen as Mac kissed her softly, driving her mad. If she didn't move, it wasn't her fault.

Mac nipped her ear. "When I dreamt of this, you kissed me back," she whispered.

Josie chuckled and regained control of her body. She tightened her arms around Mac's waist until she groaned. "When I dreamt of this, I got fired." It wasn't technically kissing if her lips happened to drag down Mac's jaw as she pulled away, right? It could've been an accident. There was no pressure applied by her mouth. Nope.

She pulled away and stood, a little hazy. Bone and Tinker stood with her, ready for bed.

"Josie Sanchez, don't you dare leave me here like this."

Hearing her full name in that tone forced her to take a second and steady herself. She was beyond turned on and needed to leave before she did anything stupid like push Mac down on the couch and do more than just kiss her back. She patted Tinkerbelle and sighed. It wasn't fair to Mac, but she didn't want to do anything she'd regret in the morning. Harvest was far from over, and as hard as it was, they had to prioritize work. It was in the best interest of both of them. This was Mac's first crush, and Josie refused to ruin it for her. The wine industry could be cruel.

"Mac, you're all I think of. It's killing me, it is. But this... this can't happen. You know it. I know it. It'd be inappropriate and distracting, Hank would kill me, and most of all, I care about you and refuse to put you in that position."

Mac walked around the coffee table, and Josie held her breath as Mac grazed her cheek with the back of her hand. "I can be patient."

"It's not gonna—"

Mac pressed her lips against the words. Just like before, Josie froze as Mac's soft mouth tasted hers. Mac pulled back and pecked her on the cheek. "Some things are more important than wine." She picked up the dessert board and her glass and walked to the kitchen.

"Mac," Josie called. She stopped halfway through the dining room and turned. "Don't go out with Shelby."

She broke into a grin and nodded. "Night, Jos."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The steam curled around Mac's spoon, warming her with the savory aroma of hearty chili. It had already been a long day—they all were, really—but there were still ten tons of pinot to process after lunch and a lot of prep work for tomorrow. On top of all the processing equipment, she had two tanks to clean, new barrels to pull down and hydrate for the chardonnay, and yeast nutrient additions to make on seven ferments.

It had been a week since she'd kissed Josie. A long, agonizing week. Not because Josie was being cold or weird, but because damn, Mac was dying to know what it'd be like to *actually* kiss her. Kissing women and not having them kiss her back wasn't a habit she wanted to form, but even if Josie's lips didn't reciprocate, she'd still wrapped her arms around Mac and pulled her closer. Not to mention the part where Josie had admitted to feelings for her.

This crush was mutual. And honestly, way more than a crush. Josie was right; they both had a lot to lose, but most of all, they had each other to lose. How could she get that through Josie's head? After the half kiss, their nightly routine was to shower, cuddle on the couch with a glass of wine, usually with Mac's head on Josie's shoulder, and if she was lucky, Josie would hold her hand for a minute or two.

Mac could wait her out.

Josie looked around the table, seemingly assessing the crew's mood. Teddy was quiet as he poured himself more gamay, Shelby seemed cheerful since she wasn't as exhausted as everyone else, and Mac was happy. Tired to the bone but happy. "How's everyone feeling?"

"Great," Mac said. It was the truth. She felt competent and efficient around the winery lately, and Josie had been trusting



her with more and more responsibility. She was mastering the forklift, could do titrations in her sleep, and was, as Josie put it, “a very competent cellar worker.” Josie’s cheeks turned the cutest shade of red, and she tugged her green knit beanie over her ears. It wasn’t fair how adorable she was. Or how sexy.

“Good, good,” Josie stammered. “Teddy, you hanging in there?” He nodded, staring at his chili. “Why don’t you take off after lunch? We can handle the rest.”

A small smile peeked out from his bushy beard. “You sure?”

“As long as these two are cool with it.” She nodded to Mac and Shelby.

Shelby shrugged. “I don’t care. I get to work in the tasting room tomorrow while you all have another fourteen-hour day.”

“You should definitely get out of here, Teddy. We’ve got this,” Mac said.

“Thanks, guys. My kids have been bugging me to take them to Dr. Hogart’s Pumpkin Fest. Opened last weekend.” He stood and brought his mostly empty bowl to the sink.

“I love that place,” Josie said.

“Um. Excuse me. What is Dr. Hogart’s Pumpkin Fest, and why am I just now hearing about it?” Mac asked.

Shelby considered them, her brows raised.

“It’s magical,” Josie said. “This retired surgeon started it for fun. He’s super rich. It’s basically a giant pumpkin patch with a huge corn maze, all the festival snacks, bands, and a pumpkin launching contest. It runs until Halloween and—”

“I’ll take you,” Shelby interjected. “I’ve been meaning to get over there, and it looks like you have a light day next week, according to the pick schedule.”

Josie stilled, her grip tightening around her spoon until her knuckles whitened. Mac took her time swallowing a bite, trying to buy herself every second possible before responding. Was Shelby incredibly attractive and nice? Yes. Could Mac keep her eyes off that sleeve of tattoos? Hardly. Did she come

*anywhere* close to how she felt about Josie? No. But what was she supposed to say? No one could know that she was falling for Josie. Or that Josie was falling for her. She cleared her throat. “Um. Do we really have a short enough day?”

Josie looked unamused, but she nodded. “There are no picks scheduled for Sunday and Monday. We’ll have some nice break time.”

“Great. It’s a date,” Shelby said.

Wait. She hadn’t agreed. *Shit.*

After they cleaned up lunch, they walked back to the crush pad in awkward silence. It was miserable out: gray with a cold, thick drizzle. Though the crush pad was covered, Mac was already wet from spraying out bins, sorting, and generally being a harvest worker. Her feet were beginning to blister in her damp boots, and she couldn’t even recognize her swollen purple hands as they worked through the pinot on the sorting table. The clusters were ice-cold, numbing her fingers within an inch of uselessness.

She pulled leaves, shoulders, seconds, rot, twigs, and anything else that shouldn’t end up in a fermentor.

“I’m excited—”

Shelby’s words were garbled by the thudding of more pinot into the hopper and the continual clattering of the sorting table and destemmer. Mac peeked around the hopper to get a glimpse of her favorite view at Cadieux: Josie freezing her ass off on the forklift with her adorable beanie that she was always tugging over her ears, her black work pants that tapered at her ankle, leaving a swath of either her colorful wool socks or one of her fun pairs—today she wore her bunches of grapes socks—and a Patagonia pullover with her signature Ermitage vest.

“So loud,” Shelby yelled. “Anyway, I’m excited to go to Pumpkin Fest with you. Just three days away.”

Mac nodded, trying to keep her hands busy sorting. Would it be rude to suggest making it a group activity? She felt guilty for asking Shelby out weeks ago. She wasn’t in the same place now. Far from it, actually. And she didn’t want to lead her on.

“Yeah, maybe—”

Josie grabbed her shoulder, making her gasp in surprise.

“Jesus.” Mac pressed a sticky hand to her chest. “You scared me.”

“Sorry. I just wanted to tell you...” Her dark eyes brightened as the clusters bounced along the table. Her lips twitched into a grin, and Mac’s heart squeezed. Josie nodded to the table. “This is Anita pinot noir. Sourced from Fellows Cross Vineyards. Hundred-percent Pommard. How’s it looking?”

Mac squeezed her arm in excitement before she remembered how sticky her fingers were. Josie’s eyes flitted to where her fingers curled around her bicep, then back up to her. “Sorry,” Mac said a little sheepishly, but Josie’s giant grin put her at ease. She didn’t want Shelby here for this moment, so she stood on her tiptoes and whisper-yelled into Josie’s ear. “I am so wildly proud of you.” She would’ve sealed it with a kiss on the cheek if they were home, but instead, she said, “It will be Anita, not Cadieux. I just know it.”

Josie winked, and it went straight to Mac’s core. Could this day end already so she could shower; put on her clean, dry sweats; and curl up with Josie and watch an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*? Josie walked back to the forklift and picked up another bin of Anita.

“Hey,” Shelby half yelled across the table. “Bring whoever you want, okay? It doesn’t have to be just us.”

Oh, thank God. She knew she liked Shelby for a reason.

\* \* \*

Josie parked in the sea of gravel and cars. “I just don’t understand why I have to accompany you on your date.”

Mac unbuckled her seat belt and sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you, this isn’t a date? She said bring anyone. Plus, Jack and Reuben are here, too.”

Josie stared out the windshield, seemingly stuck between what she was thinking and what she should say. It was mildly

enraging. How clearer could Mac be? She'd kissed her, for crying out loud, and if Josie didn't already know that Mac wanted her above anyone and *anything*, well, that was her problem. At this point, the ball was in her court.

"In case you stay out, we're starting at eight tomorrow instead of seven. Figure we can sneak in an extra hour of sleep. You'll be in the barrel rooms most of the day putting together blending trials. Cool?" Josie pushed her brown sunglasses over her eyes.

This was just ridiculous. Mac squeezed Josie's wrist. "I'm not going home with anyone." She could barely make out Josie's eyes behind the dark lenses. "Except for you." The corner of Josie's mouth twitched in an involuntary grin. "Now come on, you're buying me a funnel cake to get me back for the coffee I bought last time."

They walked through the parking lot to the entrance of the festival. An awning made of corn stalks and twinkling orange lights that matched the clouds around the setting sun welcomed them into the most electrically fun pumpkin patch Mac had ever seen. Kids with painted faces chased each other, and booths selling beer and wine, funnel cake, fried pies, and other bites lined the path from the patch to the tots' train ride and to the observation deck overlooking a grassy area the size of two football fields. Exactly two. Distance markers all the way to two-hundred yards marked the mowed grass.

They found a less busy drink booth and waited in line as they waited for Jack, Reuben, and Shelby. Mac was feeling good tonight. Confident and sexy. As if, for the first time in her life, she knew exactly what she wanted, and she was dangerously close to getting it.

Josie gave her a curious look as if trying to read her mind. She was looking sexy as ever in her sunglasses with her almost-black waves flowing about her shoulders. She wore light brown boots with dark jeans and black coat over a very cozy fisherman's sweater. Mac wanted to tuck her hands under the hem of that sweater and feel how warm and soft the skin was underneath.

But it wasn't just Josie she wanted. It was the feeling of confidence and competence, the feeling of belonging to the wine industry—the wine community—and to turn this passion into a career. She wanted it all.

Josie smiled. “What are you thinking about that’s making you so happy?”

“Just thinking of how badly I’m going to beat you when we race through the corn maze later.”

Josie chuckled and tucked her sunglasses into her pocket as the sun continued its descent. “I didn’t know we were racing.”

Mac nodded. “Yep. All of us. To the death.” She tucked her hands into her pockets and shrugged. “Or to the end of the maze. Whichever comes first.”

Josie’s grin stretched into a wide smile, pulling her scarf taut and turning it white. “I have to tell you, before everyone shows up, you look—”

“There they are. I told you they’d be getting drinks first,” Jack said as he and Reuben joined them in line.

As they were hugging each other, Shelby appeared. “Sorry I’m a bit late,” she said. “Julie was late for her shift, so I had to stay a little longer than I wanted.” She blew into her hands and smiled at everyone, her gaze stopping on Mac. “Wow. You look incredible. Like a true ice princess.”

She could feel her cheeks heat from the compliment, one she was pretty sure she was about to receive from Josie before everyone had showed at once. She’d take it from anyone, though. “Ice princess” was totally the vibe she was going for with her white puffer, cream waffle-knit sweater, and silver scarf. It was cold tonight. “Thanks.” She grabbed hold of the boys and presented them to Shelby. “Have you met my friends Jack and Reuben?”

As Shelby made acquaintances, Josie nodded to Mac. “I owe this one a funnel cake. I’ll get a few to share.” She looked at Mac. “Grab me a mulled wine?”

“Oh. They make the best mulled wine here,” Jack

interjected.

“Of course. Don’t be long.”

The four of them chatted about Reuben’s part in planning Pumpkin Fest this year, but she could only focus on the confident bounce in Josie’s step as she walked away.

\* \* \*

Josie was having a fine time. It was hard to stay grumpy when she was not only surrounded by laughing kids, exploding pumpkins, and the best Halloween decorations in town, but also by some of her favorite people, Shelby included. She’d talk to her later about asking Mac out, though she was confident she already knew why Shelby had done it. Specifically in front of her. Because Shelby knew something was growing between them. She’d threatened to—then did—ask out Mac because she thought Josie was making a mistake by letting things develop between them. She was trying to protect her from the consequences ahead.

And no one was immune to Mac’s charm.

So from Shelby’s perspective, she was helping a friend move on from a woman she shouldn’t date while giving herself an opportunity to woo said woman. Josie sipped her mulled wine as the different tanks shot pumpkins across the field in a contest of distance. She knew she was being unfair about this situation to Mac. She *knew* it. But kissing her was a line she just wasn’t willing to cross. It’d be a mistake. A point of no return.

Mac laughed under the golden glow of the Halloween lights and lit up everyone around her. She was special. She deserved her dream job. She deserved her dream relationship. And she deserved *way* more than Josie could give. More than to be flirted with throughout harvest just to be disappointed in the end. Josie needed to stop this now. She needed to be resolute for both of them.

The final pumpkin smashed into the grass across the field, and the crowd cheered. “Come on, y’all. We have an hour until close. It’s maze time.” Mac rallied the troops and led them to

the mouth of the maze. “No cheating.”

“How would we cheat?” Josie asked.

“I don’t know. Just don’t.” Mac smacked her in the arm. “Okay. Every person for themselves. Winner lives in eternal glory, and losers suffer unimaginable shame. Got it?”

Everyone agreed through their shivering laughter.

“Meet at the mulled wine tent when you finish,” Shelby added.

“Go,” Mac yelled, and everyone jogged into the maze except Josie.

No way in hell she was running. She was forty and exhausted from harvest and not sleeping. She strolled to the right only because everyone else turned left, and all the noise from the festival disappeared as she was absorbed in the thick of the corn. At least she could enjoy some peace and quiet.

She’d been wandering through the stalks for fifteen minutes before she got annoyed. How was one supposed to even go about getting out of a corn maze? Was there a technique she was unaware of? Vibes she was supposed to be sensing? Was she supposed to be tracing her steps?

Rapid footsteps and rustling leaves made her stop in the dark row and wait. Hiding wasn’t part of the game, but for some reason, she wanted to stay out of sight. A burst of white appeared at the intersection ahead. Mac and Shelby ran past, only twenty feet away, hand in hand. It was dark, but she could make them out by the moonlight reflecting off Mac’s coat. Jealousy flashed through her like a goddamn grease fire, and disgust amassed like alcohol in a ferment.

Disgust with herself. For being so...immature. So childish and smitten and jealous. “And fucking risky,” she murmured. How could she have been so reckless? She’d been all over the place lately, when the only place she should have been focusing on was this crush and on winning gold in the Cru Awards. And mostly, she needed to get out of this goddamn maze before she lost her goddamn mind.

Another ten minutes of dead ends and paths that she swore

she'd already been down, and she was beginning to get panicky. Her breath shortened, her palms began to sweat despite the frigid air, and she'd just had another heart palpitation, the millionth since harvest had started. This was it. This was the moment that her thin grip on sanity would slip, and the stress of this crush would pummel her to the point of dropping to her knees in this corn maze made for children and giving up. They'd find her here confused, lost, and in tears.

She shuddered at the thought. At how fast the story would travel through Elmwood. "Did you hear?" they'd whisper. "They found her in fetal position in a corn maze. Couldn't handle the pressure and ended up the same as poor Justin from Drettson Vineyards. Shame. She was so talented."

They would eat it up like candy.

She stopped walking and tried to slow her breathing. "Fuck. Get it together." But she was beginning to realize she didn't have it together *at all*. Not even close. She pressed a hand to her chest and took a deep breath that hiccupped into a gasp. Normally, she could control her panic attacks, but this one was heading in the opposite direction. She sunk to one knee, closed her eyes, and tried to focus on slow, deep breaths, a gasp only slipping out occasionally.

She thought she heard her name, but the breeze had picked up and with it, the rustling of the corn.

"Oh my God, Josie." Mac sank to her knees in front of her and pulled her close. She was warm. Probably from running. "What happened? Did you twist something? They need to fill in these divots before someone breaks an ankle."

Josie pulled away and held up a hand, silently asking for help up. Mac stood and lifted her off the ground. She followed with one hand on Josie's back as they paced in a small circle, Josie trying to catch her breath. "I didn't fall," she said in between gulps of air. "I have a small panic attack"—one more gulp of air—"once or twice a year. During harvest." Mac continued to stroll with her, never dropping her hand. "Fine. I'm fine. Just"—she waved over the thousands of stalks of corn—"this damn maze is suffocating me."



Mac gently tugged Josie's hand to stop her circling. "We've all been finished for a while. I got worried about you, so I came back. I know the way out. Three more minutes of walking and you'll be in the open again. Okay?" She nodded, and Mac slipped her hands into Josie's coat and around her waist, pulling her close. "You totally got this," she whispered. "It's almost over. Then, I'm taking you home."

Josie followed Mac by the hand to the exit. As the sounds of the festival began to reach her ears again, the panic racing through her blood mellowed. Finally, they emerged into the lights and festivities.

"Congratulations on surviving the maze," a man dressed in a giant pumpkin costume said.

"Smile," Mac said.

Josie tilted her head, still a little disoriented from the maze and the panic attack. "What?" The pumpkin man flashed an old-school Polaroid in their faces. "Shit." She wiped her eyes.

Mac took the photo from the pumpkin and thanked him. "Here. You earned it." She slipped it in Josie's chest pocket. "You ready to say good-bye and get out of here?"

"Please."

Shelby, Reuben, and Jack were all laughing, drinking mulled wine, and having a grand old time at their table. Seemed like Josie was the only one to have a panic attack in the maze tonight.

"There she is. What took you so long, Jos?" Shelby asked, a smile on her face.

Shelby was lucky Josie liked her, or she'd probably hate her at this point. What was she supposed to say? That she was busy having a crippling panic attack while everyone else was sitting here drinking?

Mac dropped a hand on her shoulder. "This one may be a genius when it comes to winemaking, but finding the way out of a corn maze is not one of her specialties."

Josie waved in front of her eyes. "I don't have the best

night vision.”

“Good thing Mac saved ya. You might have had to sleep in the corn.” Reuben laughed. “Come on and have another drink with us.”

“I—”

“*Shockingly*,” Mac interrupted, “the funnel cake isn’t sitting well with me. I’m gonna call it a night, and Josie is my ride.” She looked at her. “Do you mind taking me home?”

Josie swallowed. “Sure.”

“Thanks for getting us all out tonight, Shelby. This place is magic. I’m so sorry to have to bail.”

Shelby smiled. “All good. Feel better, Mac.”

They said their good-byes and found Josie’s car in the now half-empty lot. Mac slid into the driver’s seat, and though she wanted to, Josie didn’t argue. She trusted her. Mac turned onto the dark farm road and turned down the radio. “Have you ever seen someone for your anxiety?”

She’d be lying if she said she hadn’t considered it a million times, but she’d never pulled the trigger. “It’s just harvest.”

Mac thrummed her fingers on the wheel. “That’s pretty irrelevant. You’re clearly overstressed and could benefit from some support.”

The dark forms of trees blurred past Josie’s window. “I don’t think this is an appropriate conversation to be having with your boss.”

“Are you fucking serious right now?”

Josie had to draw the line. The line they should’ve drawn a long time ago. It was best for both of them. “My mental health is a private matter and not a suitable topic to discuss with my intern.” She bit painfully on her scar, hating every word that slipped through her lips.

“Your *intern*? Please, Josie, you’re not fooling a soul with that bullshit. I think a lot about you, you know? I think you’re stubborn. I think you’re lucky your talent matches your ego. I

think you're cold when you're uncomfortable. But I never thought you were a coward." She slapped the steering wheel. "Until now."

Josie scratched at her pants, dying from Mac's anger. "You are entitled to your opinions."

Mac turned onto Holston, and Josie thanked God they lived so close to Pumpkin Fest. Mac parked and waited. *Damnit.* "Tell me you don't want me, then."

Josie shook her head. "Mac, don't. Come on."

"No, you come on. I'm tired of your bullshit. If this is how you really feel—if this is what you really want—tell me. Then we can go on with our strictly professional relationship. Easy." The blue in her eyes seemed to freeze and splinter along the rim of her pupil. The sparkle more of a white flame of rage.

Josie swallowed the remaining moisture in her dry mouth. "I don't want you."

Mac opened her door. "Great. Cleared that right up. See you tomorrow, boss." She slammed the car door and let herself in, only breaking character to show Bone and Tinkerbelle some love, then stormed into the house.

\* \* \*

After her nighttime chores, Josie lay awake—as she so often did these days—and thought about how colossal of a fuckup she was. How she'd treated Mac tonight made her want to vomit, but after having that panic attack, it had hit her. Mac was right, she couldn't handle everything that was on her plate right now. It was making her unsteady, and it was only a matter of time before that bled into her work. And if her work suffered, it would leave her without her own wine label and Mac without a full-time job offer. Josie wouldn't be able to stop the rumors that Mac was the only factor that could have caused such a poor vintage.

She groaned and tossed onto her other side. The lack of sleep would kill her at some point, and she wouldn't have to worry about Cadieux, Anita, or Mac anymore.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One week and two days had passed since the night Josie had had a panic attack and turned into the biggest spineless asshole Mac had ever met. One week and two days, and she had *hated* every minute. They were in the last leg of harvest, and work was grueling. She couldn't remember her last day off, and they hadn't had a break from processing fruit since the day after Dr. Hogart's Pumpkin Fest.

She walked up the basement stairs and grabbed a banana from the fruit basket on the counter. Needed a little pick-me-up before she had to suffer through another silent car ride with Josie. She turned the corner into the living room and found her sitting in the armchair with her eyes closed, rubbing her temples.

"Jos?" Mac flipped on the light.

"*Argh*. Please." She held up her hands in desperation. "Please. Turn it off."

Mac turned off the light and knelt in front of her, not that she deserved sympathy. But Mac couldn't help it. She cared deeply for Josie, and it broke her heart to see her in pain. "What's going on? Do you have a headache?"

She nodded and winced. "I got dizzy brushing my teeth, and I knew it was coming." She pointed to nothing in the air. "The aura, I've been seeing the aura for a half hour. It's just now beginning to fade."

Mac grabbed her knees. "An aura? What do you mean?"

"It's an ocular migraine. I get them sometimes. Not often, but..." She groaned and doubled over.

"Josie." Mac rubbed her knees. "We need to get you back in bed."

She shook her head. “Can’t. Hank’s prized estate pinot is coming in today, and I have to be there. It means everything to me.” Tears welled in her eyes, and Mac’s heart split right in half. “I’m spiraling,” she whispered. “I can’t focus on anything anymore, I haven’t been able to sleep for weeks, and I’m about to lose everything that’s ever mattered to me.”

Mac stood. “Come on. We’re going upstairs.”

“I can’t. I have to go to work. I have to be there.”

“Damnit, Josie, you can hardly see. You’re not going to work.” She slid her hands down Josie’s legs and pulled off her left work boot as gently as she could. To her surprise, Josie let her. “This is what’s going to happen,” she said as she worked on the right boot. “I’m going to fetch you a blanket, a quick breakfast, and some Tylenol. I’m going to get you nice and reclined on this chair and pull down all the blinds. Then, I’m going to take your car and go to work.” Josie groaned as Mac pulled off the boot. “I will manage the processing of the estate pinot and add twenty-five parts per million of sulfur, just like you would have asked me to, and make sure everything is done perfectly.” She stood and pointed at Josie. “Stay.”

She whipped up some buttered toast and put two pills on the plate next to it, grabbed a glass of water, and slid it on the side table next to Josie. “When you start to feel better, you’re allowed to call to check in. After that, you need to call a therapist.” Josie gathered the pills and threw them in her mouth, then chased them with a sip of water. “Do you understand?” Josie nodded, her eyes closed again. Mac dipped her head and planted a soft kiss to Josie’s temple. “Call a therapist,” she repeated and turned to leave.

“Wait, Mac.” Josie caught her hand. Mac turned and waited, trying to maintain her cool demeanor. “Thank you.”

She nodded and left.

\* \* \*

“Where’s Josie?” Hank asked when he arrived at the winery as processing was beginning.

Mac dropped the empty bin by the hose and slid off the

forklift, blowing her hands to warm them. “Be right back,” she called to Shelby, Teddy, and the two volunteers who helped sort today. “Morning, Uncle Hank.”

He pulled her in for a quick hug. “Morning, Mac. Sorry. Just anxious for today, and where the hell is Josie?”

Josie’s mental health was her own business, and she probably didn’t want Mac sharing her current state with the boss. “She’s sick.”

He scratched his beard. “Sick?”

“Yeah. Sick.” She shrugged.

“People don’t get sick during harvest. I’ve been in this industry for fifty years, and not once have I or anyone I’ve known ever gotten sick during harvest. Your body knows to save it until after.” He shook his head in disbelief.

“Uncle Hank.” She squeezed his shoulder. “She’s taking a sick day. Period.”

“She didn’t even tell me, and you...well, no offense, but it’s your first crush, and she trusts you to just run things today? *Today?* When we’re processing the estate pinot, and everything is on the line for her?”

Mac’s chest swelled. *When things get serious, I look to you.* “Yes. She trusts me. And you should, too. There’s nothing going on here that I can’t handle. Been doing this every day for over a month now.”

“But...” He paused and finally nodded. “Okay. I’ll be here most of the day if you have any questions.”

“Thanks.”

He pulled her in for another hug. “You must be doing great. I can’t imagine Josie trusting a soul with a day like today. Wouldn’t even allow me to take over for her, I bet.”

Mac straightened and smoothed her canvas work coat. She wasn’t nervous or stressed about today. She felt totally competent. Was this how it felt to have someone trust her and believe in her? To feel unstoppable?

“Is she okay?” Hank asked.

Mac didn’t know the answer to that. She honestly tried not to think about why this crush was the one pushing Josie over the edge. It had to be that her label was finally a possibility. But Mac’s stomach knotted at the possibility that it was her. Not her lack of ability—any more—but their *inappropriate* relationship could be the stress that had broken the winemaker’s back. “Yeah. She’ll be okay.”

He patted her shoulder and walked toward the tasting room. “Call me for anything,” he shouted as he disappeared.

Thanks to the wine gods, the day went as smoothly as Mac could have hoped for. It was a long day, especially being down the most important team member, but Teddy was in good spirits and worked efficiently, and Shelby stayed late to help clean up. Mac hadn’t heard from Josie all day, but she figured if Josie had needed anything, she would’ve called. And Mac wanted to give her some space. For obvious reasons.

They opened beers on the crush pad and watched the moonlight bathe the dark valley as they coiled the hoses and put the winery to bed. It was freezing, but the cold beer was perfect after a long day, and the view was unbeatable. Mac felt energized and like she finally had purpose. Finally belonged.

“Well, looks good to me. Can I get going, boss?” Teddy asked.

Mac choked on her beer. Once she thumped the liquid out of her lungs, she replied, “Don’t call me that. Come on, what do you have, like, ten years of seniority on me?”

He shook his head and took a sip, the mouth of the bottle disappearing into his beard. “The vineyard is where I’m the boss. Here”—he tapped the crush pad with his boot—“and there”—he nodded to the winery—“that’s you and Josie.” He finished his beer and sighed. “Good work today. See you tomorrow.”

She forgot to speak momentarily. “Good night,” she called.

“You did so well today,” Shelby said when it was just the two of them.

Mac sat next to her on an empty barrel. “Thank you. It felt really good to be able to handle everything. Like I turned a corner.”

They sat in a peaceful quiet as they enjoyed the beer. Shelby cleared her throat. “I never wanted to make you uncomfortable by asking you to Pumpkin Fest. I can just see it, you know? And thought maybe you wanted the distraction.”

Mac shook her head. “You can see what?”

“That you and Josie have something going on.”

“What?” Her blood pressure instantly rose. “What do you mean? There’s nothing going on between us. That’d be, like... super inappropriate.” She hoped her words didn’t sound as desperate as she felt. She wanted to cross all the lines with Josie *in private*. If people found out, it’d be Mac who wouldn’t be employable. Well, maybe Josie, too.

“Look, I get it. She’s, like, the most amazing person, and I think every queer woman, maybe aside from Erin, in this town would kill to date her. I wanted her, too. For a long while. But can I offer you some advice?” Mac stayed silent, her ears thrumming with her heartbeat. “People like her will never prioritize someone over herself or her career. She just won’t. Never has. But the thing is, every queer woman in this town is also dying to date you. It doesn’t have to be me, but pick someone else. Josie may be single, but she’s definitely not available.”

Mac took a sip and stalled. She liked Shelby, but she could fuck all the way off. Mac wanted to tell her politely to mind her own business. Instead, she sighed and stretched her back. “Yeah. I don’t know about all that, but it doesn’t matter because nothing is going on.” She stood and flipped off the light. “Let’s shut her down.”

\* \* \*

When Mac got home, she opened the door quietly in case Josie was asleep. She was greeted by the standard tail slaps and kisses from the girls. The TV was on in the living room, and something smelled heavenly, like roast chicken and sage.



“Hey,” Josie called from the kitchen.

Mac kicked off her boots and hung her coat on the hook behind the door. She walked into the kitchen with Bone and Tinker, who sat at Josie’s feet, begging for a bite of chicken. She looked fresh and radiant for having just suffered a migraine, wearing jeans and a cozy gray sweater. Her hair was down, and she smelled like fresh pine, the rosy glow of a recent shower on her cheeks.

“Hi,” Mac finally said. “That smells incredible.”

“Go shower and get some dry clothes on. I’ll fix you a plate.”

Mac walked past Josie to the basement door, trying not to touch her. As much as she wanted to throw her arms around her and kiss her and dote on her, she wanted to respect her boundaries even more. Plus, she was still half-angry with her. “Sounds good,” she said.

In the shower, she thought only of Josie and their interaction in the kitchen. What a one-eighty from this morning and the last week and three days. Maybe they could just...move forward. Past all this and into a working friendship. She groaned into the hot water. She didn’t want to be Josie’s friend. She wanted to be so much more. She wanted to be her partner.

After her shower, she walked upstairs and took the plate and cup of tea set out for her to the living room. “Thanks for dinner,” she said as she sat on the couch next to Josie.

“No problem. Thanks for covering for me today. I’ll be back tomorrow.” She seemed almost cheery.

“You look like you’re feeling a lot better.”

“I am.”

Mac took a sip of the oolong tea and placed it on the table. “You didn’t call once.”

“I didn’t.”

“Why?”

Josie crossed her legs. “Because I wasn’t worried. I trust you, and you would’ve called if something had happened.”

Mac nodded and took a bite of chicken. “*Mm.*” The moan slipped from her throat on accident. She was still agitated with Josie and didn’t want to give her the satisfaction.

“Good, huh? I’ll give you the recipe.”

She wiped her mouth in the napkin. “What happened while I was gone?”

Josie raised a brow.

“Not to be rude, but you seem like a completely different person than the one crumbled in that chair this morning.”

Josie smiled. “Yeah. I know. Well, after I took the Tylenol, the migraine faded pretty quickly. Got lucky. Then, I did what you told me to. I found a therapist. I’m on the schedule for next week. After that, I walked the girls down to the market and bought a chicken. I’ve just been relaxing and cooking. Got out of the bath right before you came home.”

The image of Josie’s sinewy body soaking in hot water infiltrated Mac’s every thought before she batted it away and focused on their conversation again. “You were feeling better in the morning, and you still didn’t come to work?”

Josie nodded. “I thought it was best for me to take the day and re-center. And again, I trust you. I wasn’t worried.” She shrugged. “Too much.”

“Okay, then.” Mac took a sip of tea. “Glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me, too. Let’s hope I sleep tonight.”

“Tomorrow is only five tons, right?” Mac asked.

“Correct. Then finishing those blend trials.”

“That will be a nice way to ease back into things.”

Josie watched her with an indiscernible look on her face. It was a happy look, though. Mac was sure of it. “Yeah,” Josie said. “I think so.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

They finished processing the five tons of pinot an hour before lunch. Josie wasn't all rainbows and butterflies, but she seemed solid and steady and mostly bright. She treated Mac the same way she treated Teddy and the same way she would be treating Shelby if she weren't in the tasting room today: professionally and kindly. Mac hated it. She almost believed she'd made the whole thing up. That Josie had never felt anything for her. At least when Josie was acting like an ass, Mac knew it was because she wanted what Mac wanted.

But now...

"Awesome work. Teddy, you're done for the day. Mac, are you ready to pull the blend trials?"

"Yeah."

Josie handed her a paper with barrel numbers and corresponding milliliters. "Sorry. It's a bit tedious. Might take you a while."

Mac scanned the list. She needed to build six seven-hundred-and-fifty milliliter samples of different combinations of thirty barrels. "All good. I got it."

It would take her most of the day to finish, so she strolled to the barrel rooms and got to work. She took a deep breath of the wine and oak-soaked air and climbed the racks to the first barrel. It was easy to lose herself among the racks. Her mind wandered from dream to dream as the cool air centered her, and she monkeyed around the barrels with confidence. The top of the stacks was probably fifteen feet from the ground, a height she felt completely comfortable with.

She deposited the third bottle and began her fourth. She dropped five mls into the bottle and tightened the bung, her mind racing through images of Josie: cooking, humming along

to whatever record was playing. Josie on the forklift. Josie in that sexy black dress at the winemakers' dinner. *Three mils in the bottle*. The way Josie's lips had felt under hers. She wished she could've swiped her tongue over that scar. *Four more mils*. She climbed to the top of the racks for her next barrel. *Two mils*. She imagined running a hand under Josie's black dress in the cellar of the Tail and Tendril. How her ass would feel in—

Her foot slipped, and she fell from the top row to the barrels underneath before the sample bottle shattered, and she caught herself on a rack, the ring on her middle finger making a loud ping against the metal.

“Mac! Oh my God. Mac, get down here right now,” Josie yelled from the ground.

Was she dead? She quickly assessed herself, her entire body thrumming with adrenaline. Could've broken her neck. Could've died. She was fine, minus her racing heart. Not even a cut on her hand from shattering the sample. Hopefully, Josie wasn't too mad. She'd let her mind wander a little too far. She took her time climbing down the dark, narrow column of barrels, then landed on her feet an inch from a very perturbed-looking Josie.

They stood face-to-face in a silent standoff for what felt like hours. Finally, Mac broke. “I'm fine. I just slipped, but I caught myself.” Josie's eyes were full of such rage, she began to worry she might be fired. “I swear, I—”

Josie pushed her into the barrels, her head hitting the back of Josie's hand instead of hard oak and metal. Lips crashed into hers, and Mac groaned, opening her mouth. She knocked over the tray of samples trying to steady herself, glass shattering around their boots and wine soaking their ankles. Josie pushed into her hips, pinning her against the stack and running a hand up her hip in a frenzied race, the shattered samples seemingly not fazing her for a second. They breathed in heavy spurts, capturing air through their noses.

Josie's tongue was hot and wet and brushed over Mac's with such eagerness and want, it made Mac wet. She was *so* wet. Josie moaned into her mouth, and she swore she could

feel it reverberate down her throat, all the way to her aching core. She gripped the back of Josie's neck and pulled her deeper, desperate for every bit of pressure and every bit of their bodies to be in contact. She slipped her other hand up the back of Josie's shirt and shivered from the feel of her soft, warm skin.

After what felt like hours of the hottest make-out session Mac had ever had, their kissing slowed to nips and pecks as they both tried to gain control of their breathing. Josie cupped her cheek and kissed her tenderly. "Mac. Never do that again. Do you understand me? Never again."

Mac couldn't help but grin as she ran her hands up Josie's strong back. "Or what? You'll throw me against the pinot barrels and kiss me senseless? You know the difference between reinforcement and punishment, right?" Emboldened, she slid her hands to Josie's front, caressing her stomach before roaming north to the base of her bra. "Because if this is my punishment..." She spread her hands over Josie's small breasts and squeezed, relishing the feeling of her nipples tightening through the thin cotton of her bra.

Josie shuddered, her hips grinding into Mac's. She growled. "If you so much as stumble in those racks, I will never touch you or kiss you again."

Mac pulled Josie flush against her and nipped at the soft skin under her ear. Josie whimpered in her arms, and Mac was so turned on, she couldn't see straight. "Josie. You need to leave this barrel room right now," she whispered against her neck.

"Or else?"

"Or else, I will sink to my knees right here, in row seven, on all this broken glass, and make you show me just how I've affected you."

She could feel a labored swallow sink down the column of Josie's throat. Josie took a step away, holding her at arm's length, and looked down at all the shattered glass. "Shit. The samples." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry for ruining all your hard work. Take a moment to gather yourself, then clean

up. We should probably get out of here early today.”

Mac bit her lip and nodded. “Yeah. Probably should.”

Cleaning was a blur. Mac worked slowly and carefully, not feeling so steady after being kissed thoroughly. She picked the bigger pieces of glass, then grabbed the broom from the utility closet. She was desperate to get out of there. She didn’t know what would happen or if Josie had already talked herself out of heating things up, but she had to find out because the throbbing between her thighs was hitting a critical point. Plus, it had to be a good sign that they were leaving before lunch.

They’d have to come back later for punch-downs, but still. It would be a much needed break.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Fuck. Fucking fuck.* Josie scorched herself under the scalding water in the shower. She'd almost lay Mac down *in a barrel room*. She shook her head and wiped soap from her eyes. What the hell was she thinking? And she couldn't keep her hands to herself in the damn car on the way home, keeping one hand firmly planted on Mac's thigh. She was still high from kissing her, still so desperately wet and wanting and frustrated.

She'd completely lost control, and she was scared there'd be no crossing back to safety. None. She was on the raging seas now, praying her ship wouldn't capsize. Yesterday, after her migraine had passed and she'd scheduled a therapy appointment, she was filled with so much hope for a positive end to harvest and a good, normal working relationship with Mac. But now what?

Mac was in her basement, in her home, probably just as hungry as she was. Josie had killed as much time as she could in her office, but she was getting hyper as it neared dinner time. She toweled off and decided they needed to get out of the house *now*. Maybe to the Cane for a beer. Literally anywhere but alone in this house. They'd have to go back to the winery tonight for punch-downs, but that was just another excuse to not be home alone together tonight. Perfect.

After fixing her hair and getting dressed, she knocked on Mac's door.

"One sec," Mac yelled from the other side. She opened the door a second later, her hair a darker shade of gold from being wet, and her white T-shirt clinging to her definitely braless breasts.

Josie stepped backward and looked anywhere but at her. "Get dressed, please."

“Excuse me?” Mac asked, clearly confused by the demand.

Josie cleared her throat and tried again, her gaze on Mac’s hot-pink toes. That were also turning her on. She turned to the wall. “We should get out of here. Shoot some pool and have a beer at the Cane. What do you say? Then we can go back to the winery for p.m. punch-downs.” Josie caught the smirk that passed over her lips.

“Okay. I could go for a beer. I’ll need to eat, though.”

“They have food,” she stammered.

Mac began closing the door. “Meet you upstairs in five.”

\* \* \*

Josie considered texting Erin and Georgie as they ordered beers and nachos from the bar. But they’d catch on to the fact that she couldn’t keep her eyes off Mac, and they would get all weird and probably have big opinions that she couldn’t handle hearing right now. “What beer do you want?” she asked.

“Um, I think I want a Session to start, please.”

Josie carried their beers to a high-top next to the pool table.

“I’m going to take you for all you’re worth,” Mac said. She grabbed a cue stick from the rack and rubbed the tip with the blue square of chalk.

Josie laughed and grabbed her own stick. “Oh, I don’t doubt that for a second.” She really didn’t doubt that. Deep down, she knew she wanted Mac, and she knew she’d take it all the way with her. Josie could play at keeping it safe by not being alone in the house together, but how long could that last? They lived together.

Mac leaned over the table, lining up her shot to break, looking gorgeous as ever in her casual outfit of a chunky sweater and yoga pants. The yoga pants were Josie’s favorite, especially when Mac bent over the table for a shot. Maybe pool wasn’t such a good idea. Then again, maybe it was a great idea.



The balls scattered with a *pop*, and a solid rolled into the left corner pocket. Mac took a swig of beer and walked to the opposite side of the table. “Are you scared, yet?”

“Been scared.”

“Good.” She zeroed in on her next shot and sunk two more solids in succession. “I forgot to tell you, I’m *very* good at pool.”

“I can see that. I’m beginning to think I won’t even have a chance to take a shot.” Josie chuckled and balanced a loaded nacho to her mouth.

“You’ll get a shot.” Her ball ricocheted off the bumper, and she gestured for Josie to step in. “Just don’t blow it.”

Josie was pretty sure she’d blown it already. The fact that she had no idea what the rest of the night held, much less the rest of the week, scared the shit out of her. But she’d also never felt more alive. No woman in her entire life had made her feel the way Mac did. She could try to explain it away anyway she liked: it was just the result of working together through a tough harvest; they’d been through a lot together; what else was supposed to happen when they spent every waking hour together?

But the truth was that she’d had interns live in her home and work through tough harvests every year, and she hadn’t wanted to kiss—hadn’t wanted to be with—any of them, except Mac.

And what she wanted from Mac...

Well, it was more than a kiss. Way more than a date.

Josie lined up a shot, and Mac pinched her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes wide with anticipation. “You better stop looking at me unless you want me to miss the cue ball completely,” Josie said. She focused on the ball and took a steadying breath, then shot. She sunk her stripe in the side pocket and looked Mac dead in the eye. “I forfeit.”

“What? What do you mean you forfeit? You just made a ball.” She shook her head, mouth half-open and eyes blinking. “I want the pleasure of beating you thoroughly.”

Josie put her cue stick on the rack and took her last sip of beer. “You win.” She checked her watch. “It’s 7:30 now. We should go knock out punch-downs so we don’t have to worry about them anymore.”

Mac sighed. “I was going to crush you.”

“I know.”

\* \* \*

Josie hit her clicker, and the gate to Cadieux creaked open.

“I still can’t believe you made us quit in the middle of a game,” Mac said. She folded her arms and looked out the window as Josie drove up the gravel drive to the winery, closing the gate behind them.

She had an excitement brewing in her gut. She’d forfeited that game all right, but she’d also forfeited in another way. Gave up on trying to control everything and be perfect all the time. Gave up on not trusting that Mac knew exactly what she wanted. And what she wanted was Josie. The damage had already been done, so why worry about it anymore? Okay, she’d definitely continue to worry about it but not tonight. She’d kissed Mac, and now she wanted more.

“How about you pick out a library wine, and we’ll call it even?” She closed the car door, and Mac joined her to take in the view at night. A view they were both very familiar with at this point, but it felt a little different tonight knowing they were the only two people here, locked inside by the gate, and they weren’t disgusting from a day of crush.

“That’d be a good start,” Mac said, gently bumping her shoulder.

Josie watched her in the moonlight, enjoying how the silver light highlighted her features. “Mac.”

“Hmm?”

Josie reached for her hand. “I’m sorry for the times I was rude. I was just trying to put some distance between us.” She squeezed her hand and gathered more words, filling her lungs with the cold night air. “I was scared because you’re my

employee and, like, way younger than I am.” She chuckled nervously.

Mac dropped her hand. “Damn it, Josie, just let it go. I’m a grown-ass woman and can make my own decisions. Work is one thing, but at home when it comes to this”—she bounced a pointer finger between the them—“unless you have the strength and desire to completely walk away and stick to that decision, you don’t get to control every little thing.”

She smiled. “I know. And I’m sorry.”

Mac sucked in her lower lip, trapping it between her teeth, and shook her head. “I swear, you’re the most frustrating woman in the entire world. You stood there like a statue while I kissed you. *Twice*. Then, all of a sudden, you make out with me until I almost crumble in the barrel room. And the thing about it—about all of it—is that you wanted me from night one. And I wanted you, too. And…” She trailed off and scrunched her face, seemingly looking for all the words that had just escaped her.

“And?” Josie asked through a grin. Mac was cute as hell all agitated and annoyed. Josie really had no clue what she was trying to say, but she very much liked watching her try.

“And…” She blinked a couple times, then slapped Josie in the shoulder with the back of her hand. “Whatever. I don’t know what I’m trying to say. Just stop being dumb, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mac smiled and slipped her warm, now rougher, hand into Josie’s. It felt like perfection. Like tasting a wine she’d made for the first time and falling in love with it. She was happy and terrified and excited, and had she mentioned terrified? At no point before, during, or after pushing Mac against a stack of barrels and, well, *macking*, did Josie consider if a good turnout was even possible. If there was a world where neither Mac nor she got hurt personally or professionally.

That was a problem for tomorrow.

She squeezed Mac’s hand. “I’ll start punch-downs. You grab that wine?”

“Deal.”

Josie followed Mac into the sleeping winery and picked out her favorite punch-down tool while Mac continued walking to the cold room where they stored their library wine and extra inventory for the tasting room. She slipped out her phone and connected to the winery speaker system, then played her playlist called “Chill.” Music filled the production space, and Josie began slipping the lids and nets off the fermentors in need of a punch-down.

She pulled off the last net from a bin of pinot. The warm gust of CO<sub>2</sub> tickled her nostrils, and the scent of yeast and dried cherries filled her lungs. It was a happy fermentation, and when she pushed into the cap, soaking all the dry skins, foamy bright purple wine bubbled to the top. It would never get old. She pushed the remainder of the cap into the wine and slid the net back on.

She had finished five punch-downs by the time Mac appeared with a bottle and two glasses. “Need a hand?” she called from the corner of the production space, setting the wine on a table.

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

Mac grabbed a punch-down tool and started from the opposite side. They worked in comfortable quiet, commenting here and there on particular ferments and their progress or aromas. Josie loved working with Mac. It felt as right as holding her hand. And though she might have had a slow start, Mac had grown into a fantastic cellar hand. She was attentive to the wine, worked with urgency, and Josie’s favorite, she showed initiative and had foresight of what needed to be done instead of relying on Josie to tell her.

Josie would hire her full-time in a heartbeat. There wasn’t *exactly* a full-time position available, but if Anita took off, she’d need an extra hand in the off-season.

They covered all the ferments and cleaned their punch-down tools. Josie tucked the bottle of wine under her arm and hung the two glasses between her fingers, switching off the lights with her other hand. “I know it’s cold, but let’s enjoy

this outside.”

Josie led the way to the crush pad and jumped onto the stainless table they used for weighing out chemicals and stashing coats during processing. The view was still fantastic, but the table stood against a wall, blocking some of the cold breeze. She cut the foil and pulled the cork, pouring a splash in both glasses.

Mac stood in front of her, a hand on her knee, and took a glass. She gave it a single swirl and smelled, a lock of hair spilling in front of her face. She tucked it behind her ear before her lips plucked apart, and her eyes closed in concentration. Mac was undeniably beautiful. Undeniably sexy.

Her eyes fluttered opened, and she held Josie’s gaze as she took a sip.

“And how is the old pinot?” Josie asked.

Mac took a moment with the wine in her mouth and swallowed. “It’s quite tasty. Wanna try?” Josie reached for her glass, but Mac blocked her hand. “Not like that.” She pushed Josie’s knees apart and stepped between her thighs, snaking a hand behind her neck and pulling Josie’s mouth to hers.

*Taking initiative.* Her favorite thing about Mac. Her lips tasted like vintage pinot noir and white flowers, and the small space between them was as warm as a roaring fermentation. Mac’s fingers firmed around the back of her neck as she pulled Josie deeper into the red-wine kiss.

“You know,” Mac mumbled against her mouth.

“Hmm?”

She thumbed Josie’s bottom lip, tugging it away from its partner. “If you open your mouth a little, you’ll be able to decipher more tastes and aromas,” Mac whispered before pulling it into her mouth and dragging her tongue over Josie’s lip.

She whimpered. “Mac.” She was shocked to hear her own voice sound so...desperate. But that was exactly how she felt. Desperate. Aching. She was thrumming with the desire to touch Mac’s skin, to taste more than her mouth. “Fuck.” She

groaned and pushed Mac away, creating just enough space to slide off the table and turn them so Mac's ass pressed against the rounded edge.

Josie grabbed her hips and lifted her the inch or so needed for her to sit, then spread her knees, and stood flush against her. Mac dropped her head back and groaned as Josie kissed her neck, nipping a trail from the sensitive skin behind her ear to the collar of her sweater.

All she felt was warmth. Literal heat from both their heart rates ratcheting up. From the chemical reactions cascading in their bodies as they pushed and pulled at each other. She could feel the heat between Mac's legs, humid against her hip bone. She slid her to the edge of the table, closing the space between them and pressing firmly against her.

Mac gasped. "Touch me." She brought Josie's hands to the hem of her sweater and tucked them under. "Everywhere."

Her stomach was flower-petal soft. Just as Josie had imagined. She stroked Mac's rib cage, eager for more. When it came to Mac, she always wanted more. Their tongues brushed over each other as she fingered the base of Mac's bra. She broke their connection, a little breathless.

"What? No," Mac whined. "Don't stop."

Josie took another step away, the cold air rushing between them. It prickled her skin. "Let's take a breather."

"Are you joking right now?" Mac laughed a sardonic chuckle. "Josie, I'm on a table with my legs spread for you. And I'm *so* wet."

Josie stood frozen. Every atom of her screamed to take Mac in her arms and touch her and make love to her, but there was something stopping her. "If we do this—"

"We've already done it. Can't you see that the line never even existed? Flirting and having reciprocated feelings for someone is just as high stakes as kissing them. And kissing them is just as high stakes as sleeping together. Now, come here."

Josie stepped into her space again and relished the instant

warmth she gained. She nuzzled into Mac's neck.

"If this blows up in our faces, it blows up in our faces. But we've already dropped the bomb," Mac said, guiding Josie's hand to the tight fabric of her waistband. "What we do tonight"—she tucked Josie's hand down the front of her pants—"doesn't change that."

Josie groaned, relishing the feel of Mac's damp underwear against her palm. She pushed against her, not able to do much else, constricted in the tight fabric. As if reading her mind, Mac pushed them over her hips, peeling the black material down her thighs and exposing creamy, pale skin.

"Mac." The name caught in her throat, restrained by all the emotions connected to the one syllable. Everything Josie felt for her bubbled in her chest, jumbling her thoughts and allowing only her name to escape. An image of her, all shaking limbs and soft hands at the airport, flooded Josie's mind. Then of her swimming in Josie's clothes in the tasting room. Of her leaning in for a kiss while Josie stilled in panic. There was never a time when she'd looked at Mac and *hadn't* wanted her. Desperately, even. She ran her hands up Mac's smooth thighs and brushed her mouth against the hollow of her throat, enjoying the racing pulse against her lips. "I want you."

Mac cupped her face. "I told you that everyone bails on me when things get heavy. But I know now that I was always complicit in that. Just let it happen. Let my clients switch portfolio managers, let my father guide them away, let my ex walk all over me as she broke my heart. I let and let and let things occur in my life. But wine and you..." She trailed a finger down Josie's shirt and hooked it through her belt loop, giving it a tug. "I'm not letting go. In fact, I will fight extremely hard for both of you." She shimmied her yoga pants back over her hips, and Josie instantly missed her skin. Missed her heat. "It's cold. Take me home?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mac rubbed Josie's shoulders as she drove them home from punch-downs. Her muscles were tight, probably from the stress of harvest. There was nothing she wanted to do more than lay Josie down and melt away every tight muscle and every inch of stress. From the silence, she could tell Josie was nervous. Going home to have sex with her intern was probably something she never thought she'd do. But Mac had never thought she'd fall so hard for any boss, either. That was until she'd laid eyes on Josie and shared a glass of wine with her.

There was never any hope for Mac to get out of this one alive. How could she resist this woman? This woman who was passionate, hardworking, and loyal. This woman who saw her as a strong force instead of a nuisance. This woman who was so wildly attractive, Mac consistently had dreams about slipping a hand under her flannel or sliding her belt from her pants in one tug.

And now, she'd get to. She'd get to spend all night touching Josie Sanchez, unraveling her and watching her lose control underneath her. That was, if Josie didn't lose her nerve during the last ten minutes of the car ride. Mac squeezed her shoulder again.

"*Mm*. That feels incredible," Josie said, trying to keep her eyes on the road as she dropped her head back in pleasure.

"You're very tight." She reached for the other shoulder and gave it the same squeeze.

Josie groaned again. "Yeah. Been stressed, you know?"

"Crush?"

"Definitely. But harvest, too." She shot Mac a grin.

Mac was hit with a pang of guilt. She had been so focused



on her own wants and her own desire to take charge of her life that she had pushed aside what Josie wanted. And what Josie wanted was to not get fired. To turn Anita into reality. To do her job and not fall for an employee. “I hope I didn’t...”

Josie squeezed her knee, no doubt sensing the shift in her tone. “You hope you didn’t what?”

“I’ve been trying nonstop to convince you to let go and let this happen, but you’re right. There could be real consequences for both of us.” She sighed and pulled Josie’s hand from her knee and held it in her lap. “Anita is your dream, and you’re so close to attaining it. But you and I getting together could—”

“The estate pinot is already a star. We’ll press and barrel it down next week. And after it’s in barrel, it’s going to shine even more. It’s going to win gold. And even if it doesn’t, it won’t be because of this.” Josie rubbed her hand.

“Sure. But you could get fired.” Her voice cracked. Not like a fault line but like a hairline fracture. Like a thin fissure along delicate eggshell. Her feelings for Josie had grown exponentially every day given the stress of crush. And it was just hitting her that more than she wanted to ride Josie Sanchez into next Tuesday, she wanted her to have the world. To have Anita and Hank and the job that she truly loved.

Josie pulled into the driveway and turned in her seat as if to give Mac her full attention. “What was that movie? Well, it was a book first.”

Mac couldn’t help but chuckle at the vagueness of her question. “I’m going to need just a bit more to go off of than a book turned into a movie.”

“Come on.” Josie patted Mac’s thigh. “The one with the guy—”

“Oh,” Mac interjected. “The one with *the* guy. Why didn’t you say so?”

Josie laughed a beautiful, lighthearted laugh that sounded like ease and comfort. It sounded like a warm cup of coffee on a cold morning. “I wasn’t finished, you goof.” She snapped

her fingers as if the name of the movie was on the tip of her tongue. “*Into the Wild*. You know it, right?”

Mac nodded. “Yes...”

“So the guy finally escapes society and attains his dream, right?”

“Right. But how does this—”

She held up a hand to cut Mac off. “That’s like Anita for me. But the guy writes in his journal at some point something along the lines of, happiness is shared with other people.”

Mac shook her head. Josie was ridiculously cute, fumbling around this explanation like an excited teen who’d just watched *Fight Club* for the first time, but she had no idea what she was getting at with all this. She cocked her head. “Meaning...what, exactly?”

“What I’m trying to say is that guy thought he had all he ever wanted: to live outside society, to live off the land, and to be alone. But he couldn’t be truly happy because he had no one to share that joy with. It was the most important puzzle piece.” She shook her head, seemingly frustrated with her own explanation. “Not a puzzle piece. It’s more important. It’s the sheet of carboard the pieces are cut from.”

Mac couldn’t stop the chuckle that rumbled up her throat. Josie was making no sense and—

“Are you laughing at me?” Josie pressed a hand to her chest in what Mac hoped was feigned offense. “I cannot believe you are laughing at my beautiful, well-thought-out analogy of my feelings.”

Mac smothered her laughter with her hand. “I’m sorry. Have we arrived at the point yet?”

Josie shook her head, her eyes narrowed in disapproval. “I was just getting there when you interrupted with your rude giggles.”

She waved. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You have my full attention. Go on, please.”

Josie cleared her throat. “As I was saying, his dreams

alone couldn't fulfill him. And the whole point of this very interrupted story"—she shot Mac a sharp look—"is that, sure, the thing I want most is my own label. But what good is that, what joy does that bring my life, if I don't have someone to share that joy with?"

Mac heard the words. She understood the meaning of them. And she had a million feelings about Josie and what she'd just said, but her own words escaped her.

Josie stroked her cheek, her features soft under the shadows of the night. "Why would I sacrifice the cardboard for one puzzle piece? Don't lose the forest for the trees, right?"

Josie was gorgeous even in the dark, as if she existed in these hues. Black and gray. Dramatic and mysterious.

"Between my label and you, I pick you. You're the forest."

No way. Nope. Not a chance in hell. Mac understood what Josie was saying, and, yes, it completely set her afire. But as long as she breathed on this earth, there was no way Josie wouldn't bring Anita to fruition. Mac would make sure of it.

Mac leaned over the console and kissed her. "You can have it all. And you will." She opened the door and got out before Josie could respond. There was no arguing this. Together, they'd be a force. Anita would be created. It was the other thing—the thing that rhymed with Uncle Pank—that she couldn't guarantee. It broke her heart that she couldn't look Josie in the eye and promise he wouldn't care. Promise that she wouldn't lose her job. She might. So could Mac. But they both knew this. And they'd both made their decision. The same way Josie trusted Mac to know what she wanted, she had to trust Josie.

\* \* \*

They were quiet as they entered the house, the dogs and the thick energy reverberating between them took up all the space. Josie took the girls out. She couldn't help but grin as she waited for Bone and Tinker to do their business. There was a woman in her house who was more beautiful than she could even put into words, who was fierce and steadfast, and who

wanted her.

She wanted *Josie*. No one wanted Josie. Well, women wanted her, but no one who she wanted back. Carly, sure—she shivered at the thought—but that was more of a hookup that had accidentally turned into more. She'd never felt for Carly even an ounce of what she felt for Mac. No one really took the time to get to know her beyond her reputation of being cold and disinterested. She wasn't cold. And she was only disinterested in tourists and the Greg Johnsons of the world. *Reasonable*.

Bone and Tinker sauntered inside, and Josie followed, hanging up her coat. Mac clamored in the kitchen, and Josie peeked around the corner to see what she was up to.

“Hey,” Mac said, mid-pour. She handed Josie a glass.

“What's this?”

“You didn't think I was just going to leave that library wine at Cadieux, did you? If I recall correctly, we only shared one sip.”

Josie smelled the pinot and smiled. “I didn't even notice you bringing the bottle.”

Mac shrugged and grabbed her hand. “You were a little distracted.” She tugged Josie to the basement door.

“Oh. I can't.”

Mac's features fell, and a look of hurt flashed across her face. “I don't understand. You just gave me that whole speech about—”

“No, no. I can. I'm dying for you. But I can't down there...where the interns stay.” She eyed the basement door like there was a dungeon of lava down there. There might as well have been. She'd sooner sleep with Mac on a bed of nails than in the bed she provided for her employees. Something about it felt incredibly wrong. That was Mac's haven, and she refused to take that from her. Not during crush.

Mac nodded. “I understand.”

“Come with me.” Josie led her through the living room to

the other stairwell, the one Mac had only been up twice when she'd walked in on Josie working on the Anita label and then to present it to her. Even more than finally kissing Mac, having her in her room felt intimate. Their personal spaces in the house had been so separate and private. Mac stepping through her threshold felt weighty. Immense. Like the last defense crumbling away.

Mac fingered the spines of her books and stopped in front of the portrait of her grandmother. "Is this?"

"Anita. The one and only."

She shot Josie a grin and leaned closer to the portrait. "You look just like her. You have the same eyes. The same arch in your brow and curve of your mouth."

Josie came behind her and pushed her hair over one shoulder, brushing her lips over the bare skin of her neck. One of her favorite tasting notes in wine was white flowers. There was something very specific about that scent and flavor that hooked her, and tasting Mac's skin was all gardenia and brown sugar. Sweet and earthy and fresh. Mac sighed and leaned into her, her hips fitting perfectly in Josie's.

She slipped a hand under the front of Mac's sweater as she kept a grip on her waist, keeping their bodies pressed tightly together. They just *fit*. As Mac pushed harder against her, her heart beat faster. And faster. She could literally feel desire take control over her entire body as she scraped her teeth down Mac's soft skin.

Mac gasped and reached behind, finding the back of Josie's neck and pulling down, forcing her teeth into the skin again. She sucked Mac's flesh, greedy for her, as she continued up her sweater to her bra. She could unhook it, but that would require putting space between them, and that just wasn't an option. She tugged down the bra and freed a breast. It spilled over the cup, the elastic and bunched fabric offering Mac's breast as if on a platter. Josie thought she might come just from the feeling of it in her hand.

Mac's nipple tightened when Josie brushed her calloused palm over its softness, and she could feel the small bumps of it

catch briefly against the roughness of her hands. Mac thrust her ass into Josie's groin, her breath choppy.

Josie wanted every inch of her. Every breath, every kiss, every gasp. She would take whatever Mac was willing to give. She fingered the elastic waistband of her yoga pants, and Mac nodded against her shoulder. It was the consent she needed. She peeled the pants over her hips, and Mac widened her stance in response. The lace of her panties was saturated.

As much as Josie wanted Mac's wetness on her tongue, she wasn't ready to move from this position, from this moment. She pushed Mac's panties down to join the yoga pants around her knees and ran her fingers through her damp, trimmed curls. Mac spread as much as she could with the pants bunched around her legs, and Josie slid her fingers into the wet heat of her, exploring her folds, mapping where she wanted her tongue.

"Josie," Mac said in a gasp and braced herself against the wall with one hand, the other still gripping the back of Josie's neck.

A surge hit between Josie's thighs, hard and fast. She slowly pushed inside. The groan that poured from Mac's throat was low and primal. She pushed deeper. And deeper. Then slid out, applying pressure at just the right angle with every thrust in and every pull out.

She fucked Mac against the wall like it was her one chance. Her one shot. She fucked her until her fingers ached inside the tight muscles. Until Mac's moans hiccupped into cries, and the walls shook with their rhythm. Until Mac gushed for her, the hot fluid soaking Josie's fist, and her fingers stilled. They both caught their breath.

"I..." Josie started but had zero idea what she wanted to say. Not a single word was in her throat, much less her brain. But shit, a million things swarmed her chest. No, not a million. One big thing. Mac. She might have fallen for her. She might love—

Mac turned, pulling off her own sweater and unhooking her bra in a flash. She kicked off her pants and stood in front

of Josie completely naked, an invitation. Josie drank in the sight of her before Mac took a step closer and began unbuttoning her shirt. Slowly, deliberately. Until she pushed the fabric off Josie's shoulders and unhooked her bra with a flick of her wrist. Mac stepped back then, eyes roaming every inch of bare skin, pausing on each breast then landing on the scar at the edge of Josie's collarbone. She tried not to flinch. She'd never felt so exposed, so vulnerable. But she wanted to be vulnerable with Mac.

Mac fingered the scar. "Is it from your fall?"

Josie shook her head. "You're going to love this story."

"I doubt very much that I'll love anything that did this to you." She flattened her hand over the mark.

"We'll see. It was my first harvest," she started, and Mac's hands fell to her belt buckle. She worked it free and pulled the zipper down. "I was young and dumb and had no idea what I was doing."

"Okay, you're right. I love this story already." Mac pushed down her jeans and underwear, and Josie stepped out of them.

"We did a saignée on the pinot and—"

"What's that mean?" Mac asked, a little breathy as she pushed Josie gently toward the bed.

When they hit the mattress, Mac gave her a light shove. A puff of air escaped her mouth when she hit the bed, and Mac lay along her side, stroking down her body. "It literally means, 'to bleed.'" She gasped when Mac's hand covered her breast and squeezed.

She nibbled under Josie's ear. "Keep going."

Josie swallowed, trying to focus on the story but getting distracted by all the delicious sensations. "Um. Okay. Saignée in wine just means to drain off some juice in the fermentor to achieve a higher ratio of skins to juice. Oftentimes, people make rosé with the juice from the saignée."

Mac ran her hands down the length of Josie, stroking and teasing. Josie instinctively spread her legs, but Mac stopped.

“What? Don’t stop. Please,” Josie almost whined.

“I want to hear the rest of the story.”

“Okay. Okay. Um. The story...right. I was going to make a keg of rosé with the juice from the saignée. I filled a keg, inoculated it with yeast, and—my fatal mistake—sealed it with a cap instead of a ferm bung.”

Mac’s face contorted. “You did not.”

Josie covered her face in her hands. “I know. I know.” She groaned.

“Not even *I* would have ever done something like that.” She laughed and pulled Josie’s hands from her face. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“Well, as you know, the carbon dioxide built from the fermentation, and when I went to open it, the pressure shot the stainless cap like a rocket, right into my collarbone. It split the skin pretty good.” She shook her head. “So, yeah. Even I was an inexperienced newbie once. And I have the scar to prove it.”

“Wow.” Mac chuckled. “That’s bad.”

“I know.” Josie carried out the one syllable in a groan.

“Kinda shatters the whole sexy winemaker badass illusion.”

“Oh shut up.” Josie swatted at her, but Mac grabbed her wrist.

And just like that, the moment saturated with want and ache again. Mac lowered her body onto Josie’s. The warm weight consumed her in a sweet pressure. Blond waves spilled over her eyes, and Mac’s lips found hers in a sensual kiss. Josie gripped her hips and pulled her harder against her, trying to find relief for her aching. Anything. Mac sucked gently on her bottom lip where her scar was before slinking down her body, pausing to taste her nipples. She pulled one into her mouth and rolled her tongue over her tightened flesh. It was an exquisite burst of sensations, only making her ache more. The insides of her thighs were slippery. So ready.



Mac sucked, tugging her nipple with her teeth and teasing the other with her fingers before running her hand down Josie's body and exploring her wetness. She dipped into her, and Josie almost exploded on the spot, but Mac brought her fingers back to her breast, circling her nipple with her own wetness, then lapping it up with her tongue.

Josie threw her head back and moaned. She couldn't take much more of this before—

Mac's mouth was on her, her tongue making long, slow strokes, gently brushing over her clit every time. When Mac's fingers filled her, Josie cried her name, grabbing the sheets and raising her hips. Mac fucked her deeply with her fingers and licked in perfect rhythm with her thrusts. Josie tightened around her, every thrust bringing her closer and closer. Mac's long laps became shorter and faster, licking her clit over and over until—

Josie's orgasm surged through her, pulling a cry from deep within her as the wave of pleasure pulsed from her core and through her limbs. She shuddered through the aftershocks as Mac slipped her fingers free. Warmth trickled down Josie's thighs, and she felt the coolness of wet sheets underneath.

She rolled to the dry side of the bed and pulled Mac with her. Mac curled into her side, and Josie covered them with her quilt. Mac kissed her, the scent of Josie still on her lips. It was beautiful...sexy...loving. "Never in my life," Josie whispered.

"Never in *my* life." Mac squeezed her waist, cuddling into her as much as she possibly could. "Has someone made me fall so hard...or fucked me so well."

Josie held her, letting those words fill her to the brim. She felt the same way, of course, but it was a little different. As she stroked Mac's back, Josie wondered if she had ever fallen for someone, *period*. There had been plenty of flings. Even some moderately serious relationships. But they'd all felt forced, like she knew she should want to find a partner, so she'd better test-drive some relationships. And she'd even really liked a couple of them, though not enough to prioritize them over her job.

But Mac...

Even when Josie had actively tried to avoid falling for her, she couldn't stop it. It was always going to happen. Supposed to happen. Right as rain.

"You're my first," Josie said before she considered all the things it could mean and scrambled to clarify. "I mean—"

"What? You've never..." Mac pointed at the bed and at herself. "Like, you're saying I was your first time?" Confusion tried to break all the planes of control on her face. The straight line of her mouth quivered, her brows rose like a conductor's baton, and she fiddled with the corner of the sheet.

She was handling it well enough, though it wasn't true. Josie chuckled. "No. Poor wording." *God*. She was not smooth. "Um. What I meant to say..." She swallowed hard. Maybe Mac believing this was her first sexual encounter was better than the truth. "I think you're the first woman I've truly fallen for."

"Not even—"

"No one." They sank back into the comfort of her bed. "I've really liked a few women, but nothing has felt like this."

Mac cupped her cheek and kissed her. "I *loved* Heather. Loved her. Was ready to marry and share my life with her. Probably would've been very happy, too." Her fingers ghosted down Josie's neck. "But how I feel about you—how I've felt about you this entire time—never in my life, Josie."

She took Mac's hands, tattered from her first harvest, and pressed them to her lips. Kissed the pads of her fingers, her palms, her wrists. "Would you like to spend the night?"

Mac frowned. "I don't know. We have a big day tomorrow."

*Oof*. Rejection sliced through her like a razor. "Totally. Yeah, you're right. We should—"

"I'm just joking." Mac pushed her body into Josie and wrapped her arms around her waist. "You would've broken my heart if you didn't offer."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mac slipped out of Josie's bed in the early morning to avoid... the morning. It wasn't a big deal. It was a courtesy, allowing Josie the privacy and space to digest what had happened the night before. She went to her own room, whipped her hair into a topknot, and smoothed some tinted moisturizer over her face. *Okay, fine.*

She was scared. Scared that Josie was going to wake up with her intern naked in her bed and have a complete meltdown and fire Mac and kick her out and tell her they couldn't be together. Things hit differently in the light of day, and she couldn't handle knowing if Josie regretted her. Because for her, last night had hit just the same. The burning in her chest hadn't faded, and she could still feel Josie on the tip of her tongue. She felt like a human Jell-O mold, shaky and spent from the night in her boss's bed. *Her boss's bed.*

She stared at herself in the mirror, that damn crooked tooth annoying the hell out of her. If she was honest, she hardly recognized herself. Her features were the same, but there was something behind her eyes. Something that looked powerful. She leaned closer to the mirror, trying to unearth any hard evidence of this new feeling, and shrugged.

She waited until the last possible minute to walk upstairs because she knew what would be waiting at the top: Josie and the giant question between them. *What now?*

One more deep breath. And open.

Josie stood at the kitchen counter looking gorgeous as ever in a long-sleeve navy Henley and forest green work pants with her hair down. It wouldn't be long before she pulled her knit beanie over her head. Josie watched from the corner of her eye as she poured coffee in a travel mug, as if she was trying not to startle Mac. As if she was just as unsure of what was waiting

for her this morning as Mac was.

Hadn't Mac just decided she was a powerful badass? She swallowed and took the couple of steps to Josie, landing behind her. She ran her hands over Josie's toned biceps and rested her forehead between her shoulder blades. Josie stilled at her touch, setting down the coffee mug. They stood quietly for a solid minute, and Mac hoped the contact put Josie's mind at ease. Because she didn't have the words to describe her feelings in a clear way. Especially for Josie.

The only words that were clear to her were: *yes* and *don't*. The first a proclamation and the last a warning.

Josie spun in her arms, an indiscernible look on her face, but her dark eyes were soft. Indulged. Hopeful. "You okay?" Josie whispered as if afraid to stir up a no.

Mac nodded. Even better than okay. "Yes. I only slipped downstairs to give you some space in case..." She shook her head, not wanting to say the words lest she make them true.

Josie took her hand and pressed her fingers to her lips, just like last night. "I'm okay, too."

Mac needed those lips on hers. "Kiss me." The command felt hot on her mouth, and she relished knowing Josie would, in fact, kiss her.

Josie grinned and pulled her in by her hips until their chests gently thumped together, the smallest gasp puffing from Mac's mouth. "Careful," Josie whispered.

But Mac didn't want to be careful. She was finished with merely *letting* life happen to her. With *letting* people determine things for her. Done with all that. "I don't want to be careful with you."

Josie's brow raised at that, but her grip remained firm on Mac's hips. "Care to elaborate?"

Mac fumbled with the top button on Josie's Henley until it popped open, and an inch more of her golden skin was revealed. "Careful is so passive, don't you think?" She worked on the second button and freed it, letting the triangle of fabric fall open and rewarding Mac with a collarbone. A quick breath

ghosted from Josie's lips, brushing Mac's cheek. "I don't want to be careful. When it comes to you, I want to be courageous." She snaked a hand behind Josie's neck and pulled her down, their mouths a mere inch from each other. "I want to be fearless."

Mac pulled Josie's bottom lip into her mouth and sucked gently as Josie stood frozen in front of her. Maybe still taking in Mac's words, finding meaning in them or something. Mac didn't care, she just hoped that Josie would—

"Fuck," Josie groaned into her mouth. And in an instant, Mac was against the opposite counter, the edge pressing into her lower back. Josie swiped the avocados off, and they tumbled into the sink, surely bruised and battered. But who could care about that when Josie lifted her onto the counter and kissed her as if she was going to have her way with Mac until she made a mess all over the nice butcher block? No one.

She gasped when Josie undid her belt, the metal buckle clanging against her gold ring. Those fingers had driven her mad last night, and she shuddered at the thought of them, long and strong and rough, taking her against the bedroom wall. Her panties were wet. She could feel the heat between her legs as she lifted her butt, and Josie pulled her underwear down with her pants in one quick move.

She stared, her hands inside either knee, gently spreading Mac's legs. All of her was on display. It was still dark, but the kitchen was aglow from streetlamp outside the window and the light from the living room. Josie could no doubt see everything as Mac sat there dripping on her countertop, hoping to be devoured. But Josie continued to stand between her thighs, looking her up and down.

"Mac."

Nope. She couldn't take it anymore, grabbing Josie's hand and pushing it higher up her thigh until their fingers met in her hot want. Josie's chest heaved as her breath became loud and fast.

"You are the most beautiful person I've ever met," Josie said, her words breathy and clipped.

Mac abandoned Josie's hand and laced her fingers behind Josie's neck as she pushed into her. She dropped her head back and moaned, lifting her hips to meet each of Josie's thrusts.

Josie crashed into her mouth, all soft tongue and sharp teeth. So much pleasure in the small nips of pain. But Josie broke away, her mouth against Mac's ear now. Hot breath against her neck as Mac rode those fingers with all her wetness. "It makes my chest ache."

Mac's breathing was loud and broken, interrupted by gasps and moans and the rocking motion of being fucked. "W...what does?" It was impressive that she could even form words when she was so close to the edge. She wanted Josie's response to make her come.

Josie groaned and continued the perfect rhythm as Mac tightened around her fingers, pulling them deeper. So close. "Knowing I have you"—a gasp for air—"by my side"—another—"it makes my chest ache in the sweetest way."

Mac's cries flooded the kitchen as her entire body went rigid, Josie deep within her as she rode out the waves of her orgasm. It felt impossibly good to come in Josie's arms. Strong arms. She melted as Josie slipped her fingers from her. It was pure bliss. Pure—"Oh shit. We're late, Jos." Of course they were late. According to the coffeepot, it was fifteen minutes past when they were supposed to leave.

"Shit." Josie helped her off the counter, and she yanked up her pants.

"Do you have something I can clean this with?" She nodded to the wet spot.

Josie grabbed a dish towel and wetted it under the sink, then wiped it once. "It's fine. The wood is sealed." She tossed the towel on the floor and grabbed her travel mug. "Coffee?"

Mac shook her head. "I'm suddenly wide awake."

Josie's grin widened, stretching her scar white. "Let's get to it, then."

\* \* \*

*Well, damn.*

Mac, Shelby, Teddy, and one volunteer sorted some of the last fruit of the season. Josie guessed they'd be done processing within the week. This crush had come fast and hard, as she had anticipated. *As fast and hard as Mac.* She shifted in the forklift and adjusted her Carhartts, the seam too tight against her, exacerbating an already losing battle of comfort in her pants.

Mac tossed her head back and laughed at something Teddy said. It was like watching a silent movie, all the sound drowned out by the rattling stainless of the production line. But Mac was the star. Gorgeous. Bundled up against the cold, wearing one of Josie's old beanies. Warmth seemed to spill from Mac like carbon dioxide, a natural product of her just *being*.

She emptied the rest of the pinot from the pick bin and drove around to drop it at the cleaning station.

"Hey, Jos," Hank called from the door to the winery.

She zipped over to him. "What's up?"

"Can we chat for a minute?"

Her stomach sank. Sank through the forklift, through the giant battery, and dissolved in all the acid. He could not possibly know, and yet, she was fucking terrified. She nodded more enthusiastically than was appropriate. "For sure. Meet you in the office?"

He gave her a thumbs-up, which helped to ease some of her anxiety as she pulled up to the sorting table and asked Mac to take over. "Just for a minute. Hank wants to have a word with me," she said.

Mac's brows rose, her hands suspended in front of her and dripping grape juice down her pants. "What?" She shook her head. "I mean, um, what about?"

Josie hopped down from the forklift and leaned close enough that only Mac could hear through the raucousness of the machinery. "Unless, for some reason, you wanted to tell him about us, this chat is about wine. Don't worry."

“Oh.” Mac dipped her hands in the bucket of warm water and dried them on the rag she kept tucked in her back pocket. Sexy as hell. “I didn’t tell anyone. Of course not,” she whisper-yelled.

Josie was hit with guilt. She squeezed Mac’s elbow and tugged her inside the winery, the warm air rushing to greet them. They both took a breath of relief. No one was in earshot. “Though I’d really rather not find out the consequences of this”—she touched her chest and pointed at Mac’s—“it’s only a secret if you want it to be. It’s your prerogative to tell whoever you want. Be that Hank, Jack, Shelby.”

Mac squeezed her wrist. “Stop. Stop, Jos. I know. And I have no desire to. Let’s just get through crush, and we’ll figure it out after, okay? But until then, it’d be nice to keep it between us.”

“Yeah. Agreed.” Mac’s cheeks were adorably pink from the cold, and Josie wanted to slip her hand under the front of her coat to the warm skin underneath. “God. I want to kiss you so badly,” she whispered.

Mac’s blush deepened as she searched over Josie’s shoulders. Josie thought she might lean in and plant a quick one on her. The thought made her nervous. Instead, Mac gave her a playful shove in the chest and a teasing grin, showing off that adorably crooked tooth between those lips she so desperately wanted on hers. “Get out of here. I’ve got a production line to manage,” Mac said.

Josie backpedaled. “Don’t screw it up.” She winked, and Mac shook her head, her arms crossed. She turned and walked to the office.

Hank sat in her desk chair, fiddling with her pens and looking over their calendar. Josie sat in Mac’s chair and swiveled to face him; the Layton features he shared with Mac stoked a bit of guilt in her. But why should she feel guilty? She swallowed that question because, surely, there was a reason.

“What’s up, Hank?”

He clicked the pen in rapid-fire, then leaned on his elbows



on her desk. “How’s she doing?”

“Mac?” He nodded, and she scooted the chair a foot closer. “Fantastic. She’s a quick learner, a diligent worker, and is extremely passionate.” She blushed when she heard her last compliment out loud. “Why do you ask?”

He smiled and dropped the pen. “I hadn’t checked on her progress in a while and wanted to make sure everything was going okay. I have a couple ideas I want to pitch to you soon.”

She raised her brows, nervous for these unknown ideas. “What ideas?”

He scoffed. “I said I wanted to talk to you about them soon, not right now. I still have some details to iron out but needed to make sure it’s the right move.”

“Okay.” The word was elongated by her hesitancy. What was he up to? He was getting older; there was no denying that. Maybe he was beginning to seriously think about what would happen to Cadieux when he was gone or was ready to sell or hand it off to somebody.

“Do we have the last pick on the schedule?” He nodded toward the calendar on the wall.

She walked behind his chair. “If nothing wild happens with the weather, we should be bringing in the last seven tons on Thursday.” She pointed to the square on the calendar that Mac had graffitied with celebratory stars and fireworks.

“Perfect. Lou’s harvest party is Saturday, and I’ll arrange a dinner for the Cadieux staff on Friday.” He swiveled to face her. “All the ferments smell beautiful. Another banner vintage. Congrats, Josie. Maybe you’ll be making your wine here, after all.” He winked.

Something shifted in her gut, a knowledge settling within her. She had the grapes. And thanks to Mac, she had the label. There was no world in which she wasn’t making Anita. “It was a good one. Can’t believe it’s almost over.”

Hank shrugged. “These things fly by.”

“I guess you’re right.” The possibility of having to say

good-bye to Mac hit her in the chest, followed by guilt. Guilt for having sex with Hank's beloved niece. Multiple times. It wasn't because Mac was her employee. It was because she was his family, and that made her feel weird about it. She chewed her lip. Discomfort was never a thing she'd felt in Hank's presence, and she abhorred the fact that she felt it now. It wasn't his fault. "Anything else you need?" She looked at the clock on the wall. "It's about time to break for lunch. I should get back out there."

He held up his fist for her to bump. "Nope. That's it, kid."

She thumped his knuckles and escaped to the winery, anxiety brewing in the pit of her stomach. After last night, she was trying her best to not think about what happened after crush. They still had a month of pressing off fermentations and barreling down the new wine before the season ended, but Hank was right: these things flew by. And then what? Would Mac go back to Virginia? There wasn't a full-time position available here. Not quite.

And even if there was, and even if Mac got the job, then what? They'd put themselves in a position where maintaining a healthy manager-employee relationship was nearly impossible. They couldn't both work here. But she had Anita here. Living and breathing and fermenting, and she wasn't about to give that up. It was the culmination of over a decade of hard work and dedication to Hank.

She took a deep breath and walked out to the crush pad.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The end of harvest was tomorrow, and Josie had gotten the crew out of the winery early. The next day would be long. After processing the last grapes of the season, they would have to press their first lot of wine. Pressing was the most exciting part of the year. The fresh wine would be drained into a tank, and the remaining skins pressed to extract just the right amount of wine before the pressure turned it bitter from the seeds and stems. Tasting off the fresh wine from the press was like getting to meet a new niece or nephew, learning their name, their personality, their unique flare.

Josie geeked out at the thought. She walked to the Cane to meet Georgie and Erin. They had both been done bringing in fruit for a few days now and were able to meet for a beer. She had invited Mac, but she'd declined, saying she wanted Josie to enjoy her friend time. Josie didn't know if she would tell them about Mac or not. Wasn't planning on it. But it was always on her mind, and if it slipped out, then so be it. She needed someone to talk to about this.

She hoped Mac would confide in someone, too. Maybe Jack.

"Over here, Jos," Georgie called from their favorite booth. What made the booth the best, they'd decided, was its vantage point. While being able to observe most of the Cane, they were still tucked away in their own little alcove.

Georgie and Erin already looked renewed and more alive since finishing harvest. A fresh pink colored their cheeks, and the skin under their eyes didn't look like that of a waterlogged corpse. They'd made it.

She slid in next to Georgie, and his cologne overwhelmed every sense. She rubbed her tongue over the roof of her mouth and the back of her teeth. *Bleck*. She could taste it. "I'm sorry,

we need to take Georgie out back and hose him down. What is that? And why are you wearing so much of it?”

“Is it all gross and in your mouth, too?” Erin asked, sliding a pint across the table to her. “Figured you’d want a Jubelale. It’ll help with the Georgie stink.”

“It’s not a *stink*,” he said. He swirled the remnants of his negroni, giving his best evil eye to Erin. He had zero evil, though. Georgie had mega baby-boy energy. “It’s my small way of enjoying being off work to the max. You know, doing something I can’t do in the winery, like wearing a fragrance.”

“I think that fragrance is wearing you,” Erin said through a grimace.

“I totally know what you’re talking about,” Josie said. She sipped the winter ale and took a moment to enjoy the spiced maltiness on her tongue. So close to the end of harvest. Both she and Mac were exhausted, yes. But for as grueling as it had been, and for how excited she was to be done tomorrow, she’d miss it. She missed it every year when it was over, but that wasn’t normally until after the holidays. There was something about this harvest, though. Someone about it.

Georgie grabbed a fistful of fries and plopped them on his plate. For someone with such little grace, he made some of the most graceful wines in the valley. She’d be hard-pressed to pick her favorite winemaker between the two. “See? Jos does the same thing.”

She chuckled. “Well, yeah, but my way of sticking it to the winery when I don’t have to work doesn’t smell terrible and make people wanna gag.”

“Wait.” Erin looked to the dark wood ceiling. “I don’t think I know yours. What do you do on your days off?”

Josie washed down a fry with a sip of beer and grinned. “I don’t wear underwear when I get a day off harvest. I mean, let’s be real, that amounts to what? Going commando once or twice?”

“Oh, that’s a good one. I’m stealing that,” Erin said.

Georgie scoffed. “And I’m the gross one?”

They responded in unison: “Yes.” And, “Always.”

“Well, whatever. It makes me happy. I feel like, when I wear cologne, I’m a model for Armani or something. In my tighty-whities, posing on the glossy pages of a magazine, being a diva about what color M&M’s I eat.”

Erin and Josie broke out into laughter, Erin dropping her forehead against the table. It cracked them up that Georgie was the straight one when he fell into way more gay stereotypes than she or Erin did.

Josie straightened and raised her glass. “Well, congratulations on making it through another vintage.” They raised their drinks to hers. “And to our day-off deviances. Cologne, commando, and...”

“I smoke a cigarette on my days off,” Erin supplied.

Josie gasped. “*Ugh*. What?”

“Oh my God. What the fuck, Erin?” Georgie pressed a hand to his chest in disgust.

She recoiled. “Whoa. Whoa. The judgment is *intense*. Calm down.” She took a sip of porter. “Just like Jos was saying, that’s, like, what? Two cigs? Relax. I don’t even finish a pack.”

They stared each other down for a moment. “Okay. Whatever. I love and accept you,” Josie finally said. “To cologne, commando, and cigs for seeing us through.”

They clinked their glasses and took long pulls to commemorate another successful crush. Josie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stared into the caramel brown abyss of her Jubelale. “I need to tell you guys something.” The words fell out of her mouth before she had the chance to reconsider. Okay, she shoved them out. She wanted to tell someone so it felt less like a dirty secret because it wasn’t just sex with Mac. It was sex and a metric shit-ton of feelings that she’d never felt before. It was overwhelming.

“Um. Okay.”

“Let’s hear it,” Georgie said.

She took a deep breath, terrified to say it out loud, as if she was admitting a crime. But she'd been through it with herself a million times, and she trusted Mac. "Okay. I'm going to tell you, but please keep it cool, all right? It's delicate."

"So react the opposite of the way you two did about my *two* cigarettes a year." Erin bobbed her head. "Cool, cool. Got it."

Georgie leaned closer.

"Mac and I—"

"I knew it!" Erin slammed a hand on the table, making all the drinks wobble.

Georgie gasped. "Jesus, Erin. You scared the shit out of me." He looked back to Josie. "I have no idea what is going on. You and Mac what?"

Josie kicked Erin under the table, and she let out a yelp. "Way to keep your cool, you little snothead."

She smirked. "Snothead? Nice one."

"Thank you." She gave her an exaggerated smile. "Okay. Can we get serious here?" They both nodded, and Josie continued. "Mac and I are sleeping together."

Georgie gasped. *Again*. "I don't even know who you two are anymore. Smoking and sleeping with interns. Isn't Mac, like, twenty-three or something?"

"She's thirty."

He shrugged. "Okay. That's not too bad, I guess."

"I mean, we've hooked up, but it's not just that. We've actually been sleeping together, in the same bed, for the last week. Since our first time. We can't get enough of each other, and I think I may be in deep shit. Like, first of all, what happens after harvest? And second of all"—she rubbed her chest in small circles—"what happens when Hank finds out?"

"Hey. Relax." Georgie pulled her hand into his. "Why does Hank have to find out at all?"

"He has a point. Unless you two are planning to stay

together, there's no need for the boss to know. Just keep it tight."

She dropped her chin to her chest and groaned. "How is this happening to me?"

"You're lucky it is. I'd kill to have a shot with Mac." Erin leaned on her elbows and whispered, "That woman is golden, Josie. Beautiful and bright and full of goddamn magic. Enjoy it while you have her."

*While she had her?* The thought of Mac being a transient thing made her nauseated. How was she supposed to let someone like her just up and walk out of Josie's life? Whether that was Mac going back to Virginia or Mac leaving to work harvest in New Zealand or France or Mac leaving *her*.

Or her getting fired.

These all felt more possible than a fairy-tale ending. All felt easier to envision. She couldn't even dream up an ideal outcome for her and Mac. "Yeah," was all she could say.

\* \* \*

Mac had wanted Josie to go to the Cane without her. Not because she didn't want to spend time with Josie. Quite the opposite, really. She hoped that if Josie went alone, she'd have the space and intimacy to confide in her friends if she wanted to. And Mac wanted her to. If Josie told her friends they were sleeping together, that meant she probably felt how Mac felt: there was *way* more to it than the sex.

They hadn't even had sex last night. Josie had held her, and she'd fallen asleep with her head on Josie's bare chest. They'd woken before the alarm and shared a cup of coffee in bed. Just gentle kisses and sweet touches and everything that screamed, *this is way more than sex*. And once Josie told her friends, that would be even more confirmation.

She filled her lungs with the cold air and swung open the door to Jack's. The warmth of the heater and all the mahogany absorbed her instantly. It was the kind of place that was always great but really shined in the colder months. So welcoming and cozy.

“Hello, beautiful,” Jack called to her.

Reuben spun and smiled, his black plastic glasses sliding down his long, ski-slope nose. “Hi, Mac.”

“Hello, hello.” She hung her coat on the back of a stool and hooked her purse beneath the bar. “What have I missed?”

Jack poured her a glass of red, and Reuben pulled her into a quick hug. “We’re going over final details for the harvest party on Saturday,” Reuben said.

She raised the glass to her nose, then stopped. “Harvest party? I thought Lou’s was hosting that. Did they hire you to help?”

They chuckled. “Lou’s hosts the winemakers’ toast. Basically, the most popular winemakers and vineyard owners get invited to an exclusive little cocktail hour to get wined and dined and celebrated,” Jack explained.

“It’s not just the back room, either. It’s the whole restaurant.”

“Oh, wow.” Mac took a sip. “*Mm*. This is so perfect. Nice spice to it.” Jack shot her a wink. “Wait. And it’s all free?”

Reuben nodded. “Of course. Do you know how much money wine industry people spend at Lou’s?” She shook her head. “Not to mention, Lou’s is an Elmwood establishment, thanks to the wine industry making Elmwood what it is, a wine mecca.” He took a quick swig, draining half his glass in one fell swoop. “I’m just saying, drink and eat as much as you want while you’re there. It’s no sweat off the restaurant’s back.”

She swirled her wine, envisioning the classiest of parties. And Josie in another dress. She clenched her thighs at the thought. As delicious as the Mourvèdre. Suddenly, she couldn’t wait to get home. She shook her head. “Okay. So that’s the winemakers’ toast. And what are you helping with, Reuben?”

“We shut down Main Street Saturday night, and all the shops set up a table along the road, either giving away freebies or selling cheap glasses of wine and finger food. There’s a



band, and the Commissioner of Agriculture and the mayor of Elmwood give speeches. It's basically a festival."

She rubbed his back. "And why am I just hearing about this giant, epic event that you've been working on?"

He gave a shy grin and polished off his glass. "Haven't seen you in a while, Mac Attack."

"He's right," Jack said, polishing a glass. "How are you? One more day of fruit." He high-fived her and poured Reuben another.

"I'm good. Really good, actually."

Reuben took his glass and nodded. "Because the end is in sight."

She shook her head. "No. It isn't that." He raised a brow. "Don't get me wrong. I'm exhausted, and my hands—"

"Are gross."

She looked at her purple-stained and swollen fingers gripping the delicate crystal stem of her glass, her once slender and clean-looking hands like an ogre's. "Yes. Gross. Thank you, Reuben." He blushed. "Anyway. Harvest was brutal, but I don't want my time at Cadieux to end. Or my time in Elmwood. And I'm not sure what's going to happen once the season is over."

Jack leaned on his elbows and grinned. "Things finally warmed up between you and the boss, huh?"

"Jack. I..." She twirled the stem of her glass between the fingers she'd made Josie come with countless times at this point. "I think I may—"

He pulled her hand into his. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone look at another person the way Josie Sanchez looks at you."

"Love her," she finished. And her chest expanded beyond her ribs, filling her with a vast feeling of wanting and belonging and belonging to whom she wanted. It felt very big. And very scary.

He rubbed her hand. “Yeah? Well, I think she may love you, too, sweets.”

Reuben stared, his gaze bouncing between them like an echo. “Wait. What?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Hey, you.” Mac said when she got home.

Josie lounged in the oversize armchair with a cup of tea and the girls lying by her feet. She threw Mac a smile over one shoulder and beckoned her over. “Just the person I was missing.”

Mac crossed the living room and stopped short of lowering herself into Josie’s lap. Instead, she took a moment to take her in. Josie wore her navy joggers, wool socks, a gray sweater, and a knit beanie that Mac hadn’t seen before but that looked strangely familiar.

Josie set her tea down and tugged her hand. Mac fell into her lap. And just like that, she was home. Josie nuzzled into her and tightened her arms. It was warm, and she had been cold on her walk back from Main. She let herself melt.

“That beanie looks weirdly familiar. Did you just get it?” she mumbled into Josie’s neck, peppering little kisses down her throat and enjoying the tightening grip on her waist.

“Does it look like a beanie you can just buy from a store?”

She considered Josie’s question, reaching for the clearly hand-knitted cap and fingering the soft yarn. Then, it hit her. “Wait. How did you get this?”

“Your mom made it for me. Four years ago, I think.” Mac stilled, and Josie ran her fingers up her thigh, the most adorable grin on her lips. “I’d forgotten about it until tonight, when I realized I left my green one at the winery, and I dug this one out of my closet. Forgot how much I loved it, too.”

Mac ran a finger along Josie’s jaw. “And how did you end up with a beanie my mom knitted?”

“I told you, she knitted it for me. I forget exactly which

harvest it was, but she sent me and Hank matching beanies for Christmas. To keep us warm. So sweet.”

Mac’s fingers stopped under Josie’s chin, and she tilted her head back to reach her lips. Lips that were growing familiar by the day but ones that she would give anything to be able to kiss forever. What was it about them? She brushed her mouth over Josie’s, enjoying the shiver from the body underneath hers. Just from the skimming of lips, she was wet. Josie slipped her hand under the hem of Mac’s shirt and ran fingertips over the small of her back.

“Last day of harvest tomorrow,” Mac whispered into Josie’s ear. Josie nodded, continuing to hold her tight with one arm and stroke her back with the other. Mac cupped her cheek and made Josie meet her gaze. Her eyes were almost black, with only a whisper of brown, and her brows were drawn in worry. “Promise me you’ll talk to me before anything happens.”

Josie tilted her head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Mac worried her lip. “Something is going to happen. It’s inevitable. No winery is hiring after harvest unless it’s their own interns. So I’ll either go home jobless or—”

“Don’t.” Josie squeezed her. “Don’t go back to Virginia. We’ll figure something out.”

She winced. “This is probably a pretty inappropriate time to talk about this, given I’m sitting in my boss’s lap and planning on dragging her up to bed and touching her body all night long.” She bit her lip and shook her head. “Sorry. Got a bit distracted there. My point is, Jos, don’t you already know what will happen? You know, being the boss and all.” She dragged her fingers over Josie’s sweater, trying to distract herself with the knit of it. Her pointer finger barely fit between the rows of cables.

“I’ve thought a lot about it, even before I met you, and I may need an assistant winemaker. But I don’t know if there will be a full-time job available at Cadieux after harvest.” Josie dropped her voice as if other people might have been listening. “Of course, I hope you get the job, but there’s a lot

to consider, and Hank has a say in if we hire and who we hire, too. And I love you, Mac, but you've only worked one harvest and don't really have—"

"Sorry, what'd you say?" She shook her head as she sorted through the last words to come out Josie's mouth. Not the ones telling her she was too inexperienced but the ones that sounded a lot like, "I love you."

A deep blush pooled in Josie's cheeks and spilled down her jaw. "Um. I didn't mean it like that. It's a colloquialism. You know, like, 'I love you, but...' insert anything after." She swallowed. "It's a thing."

Mac grinned, enjoying Josie's squirming. "I'm teasing." She wanted those words in earnest one day. "Look, I know I'm not qualified to be the assistant winemaker. And the last thing I want is for you to think I expect to be treated differently than any other candidate. Just continue to be real with me, okay?"

Josie nodded, the flame in her cheeks subsiding. "Of course."

"And no matter what happens, don't disappear on me. I've grown fond of you, and I don't want to lose you."

"Mac, you mean everything to me. I won't disappear. I promise."

She planted a quick kiss on Josie's cheek and shimmied off her lap. "You had dinner at the Cane, right?"

She patted her stomach. "A healthy meal of a fried chicken sandwich and fries." She stood and smoothed her sweater. "Oh, and copious amounts of beer."

"Good. Do you want to go to bed? I know we have quite the day tomorrow." She'd been sleeping in Josie's bed every night since the first time they'd had sex. It felt natural. Before Mac would go downstairs to brush her teeth and change, Josie would invite her up, and she obviously said yes every time. There was no point in trying to play it cool after sex in their situation. She couldn't just roll out of bed and sneak home before Josie woke up.

Okay, she had that first time, but they'd ended up having

sex on the counter in the morning anyway. They lived in the same house. It'd be extra weird to not sleep together. Right? Regardless, all she wanted was to curl into Josie under the warm covers and sleep in her arms. They didn't even have to have sex. In fact, Mac was exhausted with a capital E. Harvest had worn her down, and they probably wouldn't finish work until ten p.m. tomorrow.

Josie walked behind the couch and took her hand. "Yeah. I'm exhausted."

She nodded, not wanting to assume she was invited up. If anything, it sounded like the beginning of a letdown. "Me, too." She stroked Josie's cheek, mirroring all the tender things she felt. "We're almost there."

Josie captured her hand and pressed her lips to her palm. "Mac, the rest of the time you're here—however long that may be—I want you in my bed. Every night. Sleeping naked in my arms." A delicious shudder ran from Mac's head to the tips of her toes, and a heavy ache took residence between her thighs. "You won't offend me if you want to sleep downstairs or if you need space. I just wanted you to know that there's an open invitation, so you don't have to question it."

Mac grinned and took a step back. "Actually, I was thinking of maybe hitting Shelby up later, and I—"

Josie closed the space between them in one leap and threw Mac over her shoulder like she was a bag of PerCarb. She squealed and batted Josie's shoulder as she made her way to the stairwell. "Tell me one more time that you're calling up Shelby and see what happens."

Okay. That did it. Josie's commanding voice and the fact that she was literally carrying Mac up the stairs on her shoulder had her soaked. They would not be going to sleep after all. She was breathless with laughter by the time they got to bed, Mac still swatting and play fighting. Until Josie threw her on the mattress and stared at her. She was waiting for something. Waiting for a signal. Permission.

"I know you didn't throw me over your shoulder and drag me up here just to put me to bed. Especially once you find out

how wet I am for you.”

Any hint of brown in Josie’s eyes vanished. They were the black of a midnight ocean. Her tongue brushed over her scar as she looked up and down Mac’s body. Mac’s jeans felt constrictive and tight, and her sweater was unusually scratchy and warm. Too warm. She tugged at the collar, searching for a bit of relief.

“Hot?” Josie asked, unblinking. Her tone was low and throaty.

Mac nodded and shifted her legs, trying to find a better position for the seam of her pants. It was sensitive and damp in there, and she really just wished Josie would come rip them off.

“Uncomfortable?” Josie raised an eyebrow as Mac squirmed in her desire.

She tried not to fidget, even though the itching of her collar was about to drive her mad, and if she didn’t get this seam off her, she’d come right there on the bed just from Josie watching her.

“It’s warm all of a sudden. I think I’ll just”—Josie grabbed the hem of her sweater and pulled it off, throwing it in the corner and revealing her bare chest—“take that off.” She sighed. “Much better. And these joggers are just a little rough on my skin.” She dipped her thumbs down her waistband, never dropping Mac’s gaze.

Mac squeezed her thighs together as Josie continued to tease her. She could rip off her own clothes and if needed, take care of herself, but she wanted *Josie*. And right now, she was under her command. Wouldn’t take off her clothes until she was told or until Josie came over there and did it for her. For now, she’d squirm and clench and rock until it was time.

Josie’s nipples hardened, and a smattering of little goose bumps peppered her small breasts. Mac’s eyes followed the V of her groin into her sweats as Josie pushed them down to her ankles, kicking them off to join her sweater. *Fuck*. She was devastating. From the sharp angle of her collarbone, to the

breasts that fit perfectly in Mac's palms, to the sweet wetness Mac knew was waiting for her, and the adorable wool socks still on her feet, until Josie reached down and peeled those off, too.

She stood completely naked, and Mac trembled with want. Her own nipples were hard and sensitive to the lace that held them. Josie shuddered as she ran a hand over her own chest, grazing over a nipple and squeezing. She groaned at her own touch, and Mac couldn't take it anymore.

"Josie." The name came out in almost a whimper as she moved to the edge of the mattress. Josie met her and tore the sweater over her head in one quick tug. *Relief*. Then, she worked on Mac's jeans, freeing the buckle and pulling down the zipper. Mac lifted her hips for her to tug them off, too.

Josie stared at her underwear. The rose-pink pair, her favorite. So light in color that what Josie was probably staring at was darkened fabric from her wetness. She looked at Mac as she ran her fingers over the wet spot on her panties. "What should we do about this?"

Mac bit her lip and reached for her, stroking down Josie's breast just like she'd done to herself, her thumb brushing a nipple. Josie groaned, and the playing field was even again. "I can think of a few things."

Josie reached to unclasp Mac's bra, freeing her breasts and massaging them in her warm hands. It sent a pounding desire through her body, like a swollen river flooded from storms. "Oh yeah?" Josie whispered before lowering her mouth and brushing her teeth over Mac's taut nipple.

"Yeah," Mac almost cried. "Do you—" Josie pulled the nipple into her mouth and sucked, gently rolling the other between her fingers. Mac let out a long groan. "Fuck me, Jos. Please. Do you have a strap-on?"

Everything grinded to a stop. Josie pushed up to her elbows, excitement flaring in her eyes. "One second." She opened the closet and pulled a black box from one of her drawers, removing the lid and walking the box back to Mac.



Normally, the women who had used a strap-on on Mac had changed in the bathroom for a big reveal. But it was fucking hot looking at Josie's dildos and picking one. She ran her fingers over each, getting a feel for the shape and material. Josie's gaze stayed glued to her the entire time, and she could tell that watching her touch the silicone cocks was turning her on.

"This one." Her fingers paused on the blue and purple one that looked big but not giant and had a nice soft feel to it. Plus, Josie looked hot in purple.

Josie nodded. "I haven't used any of these, but I think you made a great choice." She washed it quickly in the bathroom, put the others back, and pulled a black harness from the drawer. Standing right in front of Mac, she pushed the dildo through the O-ring and stepped into the straps. Mac's mouth watered, and she felt robbed of all the times she'd missed getting to watch a sexy woman strap up. Josie positioned the harness, the blue and purple cock jiggling as she adjusted and tightened it down.

"Can I?" Mac fingered the last strap. Josie scraped her scar between her teeth and nodded. She kept her lip pinned as she stepped between Mac's thighs. Mac wrapped an arm around Josie's waist, the head of the cock pressing between her breasts, and pulled on the strap until it was taut. "Good?"

"Perfect." She took a step back. Her in that black dress from the winemaker's dinner had made Mac's jaw drop, Josie naked had melted her, but Josie in a black harness with a purple cock between her thighs?

"Now, fuck me."

\* \* \*

Mac leaned back on her elbows and spread her legs, giving Josie the perfect view of her drenched pretty-in-pink panties. The underwear would look almost innocent if not for being soaked through. Josie wasn't expecting Mac to ask to be fucked with a strap-on, but she was more than willing to please. Yes, it had turned her out of her mind to watch Mac trail her fingers over the dildos and pick one out. Yes, it had

made her want to explode thinking about what she was about to do to Mac. But more so, they were about to experience something new together. A first. And the more firsts they had, the more likely it might be that Mac would stay. With or without a job.

What was the difference between being jobless in Virginia and jobless in Elmwood? Mac wanted to work in wine, and even if it wasn't with Cadieux, Josie could try to find her something. She was sure of it. Anything to keep her. Her blond waves spilled down her back, and her tight nipples matched the rose-pink of her panties. Her chest was red with blush. Blush that would spread over almost her entire body once Josie touched her. She knew that from experience.

“Josie.” She woke from her trance at the sound of Mac’s voice. “I think I’ve been patient. Now will you please come here and—”

She pushed Mac on her back and covered her mouth with hers. Mac was eager, her tongue finding Josie’s, and her hands grabbing the cock between her thighs. “Not yet.” Josie crawled down Mac’s body and swiped her tongue over the sweet wet spot on her panties before peeling them down her long legs. Mac glistened under the glow of the lamp, and Josie’s mouth watered when she realized she knew the exact taste of her. Sweet, earthy, and sharp. Tamarind on the tip of her tongue and rose on the mid pallet.

She ran her tongue up and down Mac’s hot pussy, gripping her hips as Mac tried to push firmer against her mouth. She dipped her tongue inside and groaned when she felt Mac instantly tighten around her, trying to pull her tongue deeper. A few more strokes, and she pulled up, her hands resting on Mac’s knees.

“You’re so wet. But I have lube in that drawer if you want me to use it.”

Mac flung open the nightstand, feeling through the contents until she groaned in frustration and sat up to look. She grabbed the small container and instead of handing it to Josie, squirted a generous amount in her hand and scooted

toward her, rubbing it slowly all over the cock. Josie leaned into her hand, the pressure feeling good.

When Mac was done, she reached for her bra to wipe her hands.

“Use the sheets,” Josie said. “It’ll come out in the wash.”

Mac wiped her hands in the sheets, then pulled Josie on top of her. They made out like teenagers in the back of a car. Hot tongues and ass grabbing. Mac made her feel alive. More alive than she’d ever felt in her entire life. Things tasted better, were more beautiful, and less scary with her.

“If you don’t fuck me right now, I swear to God, Josie Sanchez.” Mac panted in her ear, and she was right. Josie had made her wait long enough, and all she really wanted was to make her happy. To make her come harder than she ever had before.

Josie knelt between Mac’s thighs and gripped her hips, pulling her down the bed until the cock rested on her trimmed curls. She rubbed the lubed-up head against her swollen clit and relished the moans of pleasure Mac emitted as she dropped her head back and grabbed a fistful of sheets. It was a bigger dildo, and she wanted to go slow, giving Mac a chance to get used to it. She eased the tip of the cock into her, and Mac gasped. Most likely in pleasure, but...

“Feel okay?”

“Oh my God. Yes.”

She remained still as Mac ground her hips and rocked, the cock disappearing farther into her. Josie began to pump slow and shallow, building up to deeper thrusts, the pressure against her own clit threatening to undo her.

“More.” Mac’s command was breathy and low.

Josie pushed deeper, quickening her pace. With each thrust, Mac’s breasts bounced, and the sight made Josie want to come in her harness. The moans became heavier as Josie fucked her. Deeper. She bridged over Mac and buried her face in her neck, sucking a bit of flesh into her mouth. Mac gripped her ass and pulled Josie into her until the entire cock was

inside.

“I want to make you come,” Mac said. Her words were hot on Josie’s ear. “I want to be on top.”

Josie pulled out, and Mac rolled them over and straddled her hips, slowly lowering herself. Josie watched the cock disappear into her pussy, and Mac began to rock against her. And, *fuck*, it felt amazing. She rubbed Mac’s breasts as she found a rhythm on her. The faster Mac rocked her hips and the deeper she sank onto Josie, the closer Josie came to falling over the edge.

She brushed her thumb over Mac’s clit and was rewarded with a cry of pleasure. A visible jolt shot through Mac as she shuddered, sinking even more onto the cock. The added pressure and watching her have a bone-shaking orgasm made Josie lose control. Her entire body went rigid, and her toes curled as the delicious orgasm rolled through her.

Mac planted a hand on Josie’s chest and caught her breath, then carefully rolled to the side. She loosened the straps, and Josie lifted her hips, allowing Mac to pull it off. She dropped the strap next to the bed, and they cuddled into each other, the scent of their love on each other’s lips and fingers and in their hair. Mac was all-consuming. She was the only thing Josie saw, the only thing she tasted, smelled, or felt. Slowing breath was the only thing she heard.

Well, until Tinkerbelle scratched at the door, demanding to be let in. “At least the old girl has excellent timing,” Mac said, planting a kiss on Josie’s cheek, then opening the door for the dogs.

“Mac.”

She turned, looking stunning, naked in the low light. She smiled a soft smile. “What is it, love?”

“I just...” *Love you*. Were the words she wanted to use in sincerity. And Mac had just called Josie *love*. So why was she so terrified to say them? She would let Mac lead the way. “Can’t believe I found you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mac was tired. Not the kind of tired from one night of bad sleep or staying up late—they were asleep by eleven last night, not too bad—but the kind of tired that grew. Day to day, amalgamating into the sort of tired that she wore like a heavy sweater. Exhaustion was a companion at this point.

The last of the fruit had been processed, and they had just finished cleaning the hopper, sorting table, and destemmer for the final time this year. Mac and Teddy rolled the equipment to the corner of the winery where it would sleep until it was time to wake them for maintenance. When they were finished, Teddy said his good-byes and clocked out.

But that was only half the work for the day. Josie and Mac were about to drain their first ferment of the season, the gamay.

Mac tightened the clamp connecting the hose to the sump and made sure that when she opened the tank valve that the wine would flow into the stainless basin and not spray the ground. She wiped her eyes and tried to open them wide to wake up. This was important work and required a lot of attention to detail.

Josie appeared by her side and squeezed her shoulder. “You okay? You can take a minute if you need to.”

Mac shook her head. “I’m good, I promise.” It was getting late, was all. Shelby had run to the store on her break to buy them sandwiches as a quick dinner. At least she had some food in her stomach, but she was getting hungry again from nonstop work.

“Okay. I’m hooked up and vented on the receiving tank. I see you have your dry ice. Ready to rock ‘n’ roll?” Mac nodded. “And you vented the tank?”

“Yep and yep.”

“Okay. Now for the fun part. Crack her open,” Josie said.

Mac tossed a scoop of dry ice into the sump and opened the valve. Wine gushed from the tank, filling the sump with a bright purple red, the dry ice bubbling a ghostly blanket of CO<sub>2</sub> over the top. It smelled heavenly. A warmth grew in her chest. This was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. She'd *made* this wine.

“It never gets old,” Josie said, rubbing Mac's back.

“It's beautiful.” And being able to share this with Josie made it even more special. She cleared her throat. “Valve is open at the receiving tank?”

“Yes.”

Mac grabbed the potentiometer and turned on the pump, keeping the level of wine in the sump low to protect it from oxygen.

“Perfect. I'm going to go ice the other tank and give Hank a call. When this turns into a trickle, come get me. We'll do your first dig out.”

\* \* \*

Josie buried her hands in her pockets to keep from pushing Mac against a wall and kissing her. She looked absolutely adorable in the wet-weather gear that was way too big for her. She'd order a smaller set tomorrow. The GOR-TEX practically swallowed Mac whole.

“The fan has been running for fifteen minutes,” Mac said.

“Okay. Remember, if you begin to feel light-headed, dizzy, or short of breath, tap out. It's encouraged to take breaks for fresh air. Doesn't make you less tough.” Mac raised a brow, and Josie chuckled. “You'd be surprised how many men have passed out in a fermentor because their egos were too fragile to take a breather.”

“Ah. Yeah. I don't want to die of CO<sub>2</sub> poisoning, so don't worry about that.”

“I’ll be right here,” Josie said.

Mac climbed into the fermentor and shoveled grape skins into the big bin at the mouth of the tank. Josie evened out the bin of skins as the small mound grew into a mountain. She loved watching Mac develop into an exceptional cellar worker, and watching her dig out her first tank felt special. It was a rite of passage.

Shelby appeared next to Josie and peeked in the tank. “Well, isn’t she just adorable?”

Mac *was* adorable. All hot and sweaty and covered in wine and grapes. Josie had no issue with Shelby. She knew Mac was hers, and she knew Shelby was only ever a good friend to her. Still, Josie didn’t want to talk about her employee like that to a coworker right in front of her. “She’s a great worker.” Josie grinned. And it was true.

Shelby squeezed her shoulder. “I’m going to close up the tasting room in about an hour, then head out. But I wanted to tell you I left a celebratory bottle of Champagne in the wine fridge. Congrats on another successful vintage.”

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

She smiled. “You deserve it. Cute look, by the way.” She eyed the cold High Life jammed in Josie’s chest pocket. It was tradition for the new intern to shotgun a beer after digging out their first tank. Josie didn’t make the rules; she just followed them. The wine gods could be fickle. Shelby turned to leave and called over her shoulder, “I’ll close the gate after myself. Work safe.”

Josie checked her phone. It was eight. Mac was almost done digging out the tank, and pressing would take an hour and a half. Cleanup would be another hour. They were looking at finishing at around ten thirty, maybe eleven. Could be worse for the last day of harvest.

Mac emerged from the mouth of the tank covered in red pomace, her hair falling out of its bun and plastered on her bicep. Her hands were completely purple, and drops of wine splattered over her face. She looked like the fermentor had just

given birth to her.

“Oh my gosh.” Josie chuckled as Mac tried to push the sticky hair out of her face.

“I look that good, huh?” A proud grin formed on her lips.

After Josie dumped the last bin into the press, she hit the start button and returned to the tank to find Mac spraying it clean. She pulled the cold beer from her pocket and tapped Mac on the shoulder. “Last step to your first dig out.” Josie dug the winery keys from her pocket and pierced a hole in the bottom of the can, handing it to Mac. “Cheers.”

She held it up to her lips, her finger on the tab. “You’re making me do it alone?”

“It has been decreed by the wine gods that you must go it alone.” They laughed, tears forming in their eyes, exhaustion making the silliest things hilarious.

After her last chuckle, Mac straightened, pulled the tab, and pressed the can to her mouth. Frothy beer spilled down her throat as she chugged the High Life and slammed the empty can to the ground, fists stretched above her head in victory.

Josie raised a brow as she watched. “Well, that was hot,” she whispered.

Mac grinned and took a step closer, brushing her fingers over Josie’s wrist. “Which part? Me chugging a beer or me being all sticky and wine-soaked?”

She grinned. “It’s the total effect.”

Mac stayed in her dirty gear while they sipped Champagne and waited for the press cycle to finish. No reason to take a shower before cleaning the press. Josie checked the progress, then drained the last sip of her bubbles. She held her glass under the flowing wine, capturing the young gamay off the press. “My favorite part of the whole process. Here, you try first.”

Mac took the glass and held it to her nose. “*Mm*. Fresh but still peppery, with bright red fruit.” She gave it a taste, and a smile spread over her entire face, stretching from the corners



of her mouth, to her eyes, all the way to her hairline.

“I know,” Josie whispered. And for some reason, she felt like crying because she’d just witnessed someone falling in love. With the same thing she loved. “It’s magic.”

\* \* \*

“I got you something,” Josie said. They walked into the breakroom side by side, the half-empty bottle of Champagne in Josie’s hand. She set it on the table and watched Mac pull off her Muck boots. Everything was clean and put away, and they were finally finished for the day at nearly eleven. Shelby was long gone, the gate was shut, and it was just the two of them. Alone again.

Mac stepped into Josie’s arms and rubbed her biceps. “Oh yeah? I get more than a High Life?”

Josie could practically taste the Champagne on Mac’s lips, and images of last night took over her every thought. She lowered her mouth to Mac’s, her tongue still lemon curd and cold from the bubbles. “You deserve the world, Mac. That’s why I got you this.” Josie pulled a blue and silver pin from her pocket and pierced it through Mac’s wet-weather overalls.

She craned her neck to look at it and fingered the graduation cap on top of the G. “Congrats, Grad?”

Josie smothered her laughter with the back of her hand and pulled Mac into a tight hug, not caring about her clothes getting dirty. “You made it through the hard part. And you were amazing.”

Mac tightened her arms around her waist, burying her face in her neck. “I don’t want it to be over,” she mumbled.

“It’s not. We have at least another month. Maybe a month and a half.”

She pulled out of Josie’s arms. “I just don’t want the other shoe to drop. I have this gut feeling that you’re going to disappear. And I really”—she hit Josie gently in the shoulder as if she was already mad at her—“*really* don’t want to lose you.”

Josie captured her hand and pulled her in. She was also scared of what lingered around the corner, but she tried to push it away. She couldn't predict the future. Had no idea what kind of plans Hank was cooking up. But she had right now with Mac. A very dirty, sticky Mac. "I promise, I will be one-hundred-percent here and honest with you every day. No matter what happens."

Mac closed her eyes and nodded against her chest.

Josie rubbed her back, then tugged her toward the bathroom. "Come on. Let's get clean."

She unbuckled Mac's stained overalls and pushed them around her ankles. Josie threw them in the wash, then returned for the rest of her clothes. Mac's skin was cold under her knuckles, so she turned on the shower to get it nice and hot. Steam filled the small bathroom as she continued to peel dirty clothes off Mac, who stayed mostly still, her gaze never leaving Josie.

"All right," Josie said when she was finished, and Mac stood in front of her completely naked with an unreadable look on her face. "It's all yours." She nodded to the hot shower.

Mac brushed her fingers over Josie's jaw. "Get in with me."

Josie looked around, finding no one, of course. The gate was locked. Everyone was gone. But it still felt wrong to shower together at work. She chewed her lip as she hesitated.

Mac slid the door of the shower open and shrugged. "You had me on the crush pad with my pants around my ankles not too long ago. Just saying." She closed the door and made a show of rubbing her hands down her torso. She had a point. Josie closed the bathroom door and stripped, her clothes puddling around her feet.

She joined Mac, relishing how the hot water made her skin glow a soft red and the slick soapy feel of it. "Hi." Josie grinned.

The water splashed against her shoulders as Mac stroked her ribs. "Hi. I'm glad you decided to join me."

“Me, too.”

Josie spun them so Mac was under the stream of water and crushed her lips with a kiss. Mac palmed Josie’s breasts, nipping at her bottom lip. She curled her hand around one leg and lifted so Josie’s foot was propped where metal rail connected to the tile.

Josie groaned when Mac’s fingers slid over her. She was wet and not just from the shower. Mac wasn’t messing around. She slipped her fingers inside and whispered hot words into Josie’s ear as she held her. She’d never felt something so good as being filled by Mac.

“That’s it, baby. I’ve got you.” Mac’s words made Josie tighten around her fingers. Mac leaned back, her stormy eyes blazing into Josie, drops of water falling from her lashes and beading down her face.

Josie stared into her eyes as the strokes got faster and deeper. Bit her scar because she knew it drove Mac wild. Had known from night one. Had known from night one that her life would never be the same. She dropped her head against the tiled wall, but Mac squeezed behind her neck and lifted. “Look at me.” Josie looked at her. Held Mac’s eyes as she made love to her against the shower wall, and as she neared orgasm, some things went hazy while others became startling clear. And urgent.

She laced her fingers behind Mac’s neck and pressed their foreheads together, their lips brushing into each other with every thrust. Water splashing everywhere. “I love you,” Josie said.

Mac’s only reaction was to wrap an arm around her waist and continue to hit all the right spots until Josie erupted and crumbled in her arms. Strong arms. That had lifted many a barrel. Mac held her, stroking her hair as she came down from her pleasure. “I love you, too.”

“Josie?” Hank’s voice boomed through the bathroom door.

They jumped away from each other. “Don’t come in, Hank. I’m naked,” she yelled.

Mac almost slipped to the ground before Josie steadied her, pressing one finger against her lips as if she didn't know to be quiet.

He chuckled. "Well, I'd assume so since you're in the shower. Where's Mac? Can't find her anywhere and wanted to commemorate your last day with Champagne and grilled cheeses."

Mac's eyes went wide.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit.* "Um...Did you check the barrel rooms?"

"Why'd she be in there?"

Mac brushed her lips against Josie's ear. "Tell him we've already had Champagne and to pick us out a special library wine from the tasting room," she whispered.

Josie nodded. "Hank?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm in the shower and clearly have no idea where Mac is. But we've already had Champagne. Can you pick us out a library wine instead?"

It was quiet for a moment and then, "Oh. I know the perfect one."

They waited to make sure he was gone, then Josie rinsed the remaining soap from her body in a rush. "I'm going to get out first," she said. "Then, you come out in about ten minutes. I'll say you slipped in while he was picking out wine." She nodded at her own plan and slid the door open.

"Jos." Mac grabbed her wrist. "I meant it. I love you."

Josie pressed a kiss to her lips and smiled. "I meant it, too. Loved you since that damned hike in the woods."

A grin that reminded Josie of summertime and childhood bike rides spread over Mac's lips, and yeah, it set her on fire, but an ache of dread began to settle in her stomach, too.

She winked. "See you out there."

She found Hank seemingly deciding between two bottles of wine, in the tasting room. It was dark, the only lights shining were the emergency exit and the accent lights behind the bar. He looked young in this light. Like he was still full of unknowns and what-ifs, all his firsts yet to come. But as she approached, the years began to show themselves in the deep grooves of his face, the thinness of his white hair, and the slightest fade to that signature sparkle.

She wondered how he felt about aging. If he'd accomplished everything he set out to. And if he did, was it enough? When he slept alone at night, did he feel complete? Or did he feel empty like she had for so many years? Forty years. From scarecrow girlfriends, to one-night stands, to whatever Carly was. It was all the same to Josie, and it was all nothing. A void. But a void so familiar, it was unrecognizable.

Until she'd discovered the shape of it. And how to fill it. Until Mac.

"I think she deserves both," Josie said. For just having almost been caught in the shower with his niece, her voice sounded airy and light. Like, not even being caught naked with Mac could affect her. It could, of course. But she felt *good* right now.

"Oh yeah?" The dim light from the exit flashed in his eyes. "You didn't even want to hire her."

She pulled three glasses from the rack and slid two in front of him. He pulled the cork from the first bottle and poured it. "I never said—"

"You didn't have to." He slid the wine to Josie. "Cheers." They knocked each other's glasses and took a sip, taking a moment to enjoy the flavors on their tongues. "I knew you'd be angry about it. Even after Mac got here, I could tell you took differently to her than the other interns."

"Hank, I don't think—"

He held up a hand. "No. I know you didn't care for her. But I've known Mac since she was born, and that woman is a force. Calm as the peaceful ocean but just as powerful. I knew,

without a doubt, that she would rise to the occasion.” He lifted the glass to his nose and took a deep breath of the wine. Dropped his head back and sighed. “Beautiful vintage, this one. Finicky. The rains, oh, it would have driven you mad, Josie, the hysterics of this season. But as always, it was unexpected.” He lifted his eyes from the brownish, brick red of the wine to hers. “Much like you.”

He held his glass carefully from the stem, as if his adoration made him forget his barbaric wine-drinking habits. “What is it?” Josie asked. She took a small sip and wondered on the taste. Pinot. *Old* pinot. But not in a horrid, stewed fruit way. In a spellbinding way. Good acid, still. Dried cranberry, fig, and dank mushroom. The faintest hint of baking spices. It tasted like elegance. Whatever age, it had held up beautifully.

“People were pulling their hair out worrying about this specific harvest, and everyone was wrong about it. To this day, it remains one of the most gorgeous vintages we’ve ever seen in the Willamette.” He looked at her with such warmth. “I’ve been making wine here for forty-seven years, and I’ve only seen three vintages that had the magic like this one. All of them forecasted to be some of the worst.” He held the bottle under the light so Josie could read the label. “Your birth year.” He set the bottle aside and picked up the second. “Mackenzie’s birth year.”

He pulled a sample jar from his coat pocket. She cocked her head, confused. “I told Mac to save a sample off the press today and leave it in the lab for me,” he explained. He held up the little container. “Anyway. As I was saying, your vintage, Mac’s vintage, and *this* vintage. The best I’ve ever seen. They have the same magic.”

She swirled her birth wine gently, not trying to over oxygenate the forty-year-old pinot, but she needed something to do with her hands. Hank’s little speech had her on the edge of tears, and crying made no sense in this moment. At least from his perspective. But to Josie, hearing that her birth wine, Mac’s birth wine, and the wine they’d made together were Cadieux’s best vintages made her heart ache in the sweetest way.

“You’re right. I didn’t want to hire her. Thought she’d be more effort than she was worth. But I couldn’t have been more wrong.” She swallowed, wishing she could tell him everything, but the time wasn’t right. Everyone was tired and emotional, and she had no plan in place for the off-season, so what would she even tell him? “She was so careful and anxious in the beginning. A slow start, but only because she cared so much about doing a good job. And once I got out of her way, and she found her confidence, she became one of my best cellar hands to date.”

He smiled, his head bobbing slowly. “She’s the one, Jos.”

She shook her head, his words stoking a bonfire in her chest. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you need a hand around here, and Teddy can’t always help in the cellar. We need an assistant winemaker, and Mac is a perfect fit for the job. You two get along well, she’s family, and most importantly, she’s a great worker.” Josie continued to shake her head but was speechless. “She’ll grow into the role nicely.”

A swarm of emotion overtook her. She wasn’t expecting this. Mac as the assistant winemaker? She wasn’t qualified. Didn’t have the experience. And they couldn’t continue to work together in this capacity.

*Guilt.* Guilt like the fattest cat sleeping on her chest, making it difficult to breathe. If she’d never given in, none of this would be an issue. They’d be able to continue working together in an employer-employee relationship, but now that they had crossed *all the lines*, it was no longer possible. She’d figure it out. She had to. “Um. Okay. That’s very exciting news,” she forced herself to say. “When are you going to let her know?”

“Tomorrow night after our Cadieux dinner. It’ll be perfect. We’ll have another thing to celebrate together.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Perfect...”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Mac waited for Josie in the living room, eager to see her all dressed up for dinner with Hank and the crew at the Tail and Tendril. She sat and crossed her ankles. Her dress hovered along the line of being inappropriately short, but who cared? Harvest was over, and it was time to celebrate. Plus, she loved dressing a little scandalous once or twice a year. Let her femme flag fly proudly.

She could hear Josie's footsteps on the stairwell and leaned forward in anticipation, hoping Josie had picked a dress Mac had never seen before. "Wow." It was a new dress, all right. One that rivaled hers in length. A caramel-colored, long-sleeve sweater dress that hugged her body and hit mid-thigh, with gold-strapped high heels. Mac stood to meet her at the bottom of the stairs and ran her hands down Josie's arms. "Screw being the best winemaker. You, my love, are the *sexiest* winemaker to ever walk this earth."

Josie grinned. Not her usual grin. The broadness of this one seemed to hide something. Something Mac couldn't quite put her finger on. Josie had been slightly off since Hank had surprised them last night. It wasn't as if Mac felt Josie was actually going to leave her high and dry, but she was anxious. Josie was holding something back.

"You," Josie said, holding out Mac's arm. "Are you trying to kill me tonight?"

"Just trying to take you home."

"We are home." She winked, but it fell flat for Mac.

She nudged Josie's shoulder. "You know what I mean," she said softly.

Josie pulled her in, wrapping her arms around her waist. She smelled like her usual fresh rain and pine, and the anxiety



continued to bubble in Mac's chest. Why did she all of a sudden have that sinking feeling? Josie kissed her cheek and wiped, careful to not leave a lipstick mark for everyone to see. "Tonight is going to be lovely. We have a lot to celebrate. And when we're done, we'll walk home together, let out the dogs, and fall into bed together. My favorite part of the day."

Mac flattened a hand over Josie's chest. "Mine, too."

Josie took a deep breath, her chest rising under Mac's hand. "Shall we?"

\* \* \*

"There they are," Hank called as they walked into the back dining area of the Tail and Tendril. It was a cozy room with orange walls that reflected the candle glow from the rusty iron chandelier beautifully. The long table was a dark mahogany, giving Mac the sense that she was in a bonfire. The scent of roasted garlic filled the air, and she truly could not imagine a more beautiful place to enjoy a company dinner.

They both greeted Hank and the rest of their coworkers before taking the seats that were clearly saved for them on either side of Hank, who sat at the head of the table. The server poured everyone a glass of Champagne, and Mac raised her glass to her mouth to taste it. Josie watched, and the slight arch in her brow almost made Mac wet. Regardless of whatever else was going on, at least she could still make Josie want her simply by holding her gaze as she sipped wine.

"Here, here." Hank stood and raised his glass. "Thank you all for joining me to celebrate another successful crush and one of the best vintages to date." He smiled and looked between Josie and her. "To our fearless winemaker, Josie Sanchez. I truly don't know where I'd be without you." She winked at him. "And to my magnificent niece, Mac, and I'm excited to say, our new assistant winemaker. Welcome to the family. That is, if you choose to accept. We'll talk details later."

She stilled as everyone clapped for her. She had just been offered the assistant winemaker position at one of the best wineries in the entire country. Pride swelled her chest but

crashed when she caught Josie's gaze. She clapped along with everyone, but there wasn't happiness in her eyes; there was anxiety.

Josie seemed to notice her confusion because she knocked Mac's foot under the table and winked. "Congratulations, Mac. You deserve it."

Mac smiled, but she could feel it die before it reached her eyes. What was wrong with Josie? Was she not happy? Did she wish someone better had been offered the job? Her stomach roiled with the feeling of inadequacy and not belonging that she'd felt when she'd first arrived here.

After the commotion of her job offer, the wine continued to flow, and appetizers filled the long table. Bread and butter, steak tartare, braised lamb, and pan-fried salmon skin. Shelby was telling an animated story about one of her regulars when Josie stood. "Got to run to the restroom. Be right back."

Mac stood, too. "Same. I'll go with you."

They excused themselves and wordlessly walked into the small hallway. There was no hiding Josie's emotions, no matter how big her smile or how many times she congratulated Mac. Something was *off*. Mac pulled open the door to the two-stall women's room and turned when it closed behind them.

She was angry at this point, refusing to let Josie make her feel how she had when she'd first started. "What's your problem?" The question sounded harsher than intended, but she doubled down and crossed her arms.

Josie shook her head, eyes narrowed. "Problem? I don't have a problem."

Okay, Mac's patience didn't seem to exist tonight. "Bullshit. You've been acting weird since Hank showed up last night. And I get offered an incredible job just now and get to stay in Elmwood, but you don't seem to care."

Josie wrapped her fingers around her wrist, but she pulled out of her grip. "Mac—"

"But you do care, don't you? You care a lot, actually. Because you don't want me to take the job. You don't want to

work with me just like before.” She couldn’t control the anger building in her chest, and tears began to well.

Josie took a quick step, closing the space between them. “That’s not it *at all*. You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she whispered. A harsh whisper. “What am I supposed to do now? We can’t work together in that way. It’s inappropriate, and I wasn’t expecting it to be our reality. I thought—”

Mac scoffed. “What’d you think? That there was no possible way anyone would want me, and I’d be off to Virginia after harvest, out of your hair forever? Just get laid by the intern and be done with it? Huh?”

Josie looked as if she’d been slapped, her cheeks red, and her mouth hanging slightly open. “You know that’s not true, Mac.” Her words sounded strained, as if she was close to losing control of her whisper.

“No? Because you seem to have no problem with our current working relationship. And you *really* seem to have no problem having sex with me, so what’s changed?” Josie shook her head, seemingly not able to produce words. “The only difference is, before, you thought I’d be leaving. And now, I may not be.” Josie fiddled with her gold watch as Mac laid into her. “All I wanted from you was honesty.” She shook her head, trying to keep the tears from falling. “I thought you loved me. But you were hoping I’d leave.”

Josie bit her lip and glanced at the door, clearly worried about being walked in on during this conversation. “Mac, please listen to me. That is not true at all. I had no idea Hank was going to offer you the job before yesterday. I want you to take it. Our relationship shouldn’t affect your career, but it will affect mine.” She glanced to the door again. “Don’t you get it?” she asked, her voice a little higher. A bit desperate. “If I get fired from Cadieux, *everyone* will know why, and I’ll be un-hirable. Hank can’t find out. So what am I supposed to do?” She jabbed two fingers into her own chest.

Mac understood the stakes. They’d talked about them a million times, and there were consequences for both of them.

If people found out, they'd assume the worst: that she'd only gotten the job because she was sleeping with the boss. The thought was nauseating. She was basically Carly. She waved in front of her face, shaking her head. "I can't do this right now." She left Josie alone in the bathroom and sat back at the table.

The dinner dragged on and on, and it agitated her that she couldn't enjoy the wine, the food, the company, or the fact that she'd just been offered her dream job. It all fell flat. She wasn't being fair to Josie, she knew that. There were consequences to engaging in an intimate relationship together, and this was one of them. Things were tricky now, and it felt easier to blame Josie for "not wanting her" than it was to accept the fact that she might have ruined the best thing to ever happen to her. Josie and the job. She was sure she'd lose at least one. Most likely, both.

But Josie had a parachute. She had Anita waiting for her.

\* \* \*

Mac was pissed. Or maybe just overwhelmed. She walked a foot ahead of Josie the entire way home, and Josie couldn't blame her, really. It was all very confusing. She should have come up with a plan at this point, with contingencies and fail-safes. It was something she was normally so good at. But now, she was drawing blanks.

Of course she was stoked for Mac. She would be an excellent assistant winemaker, and since Hank had never consulted Josie about giving Mac the position, that meant it was impossible for Josie to have shown favoritism during the process. So that was a positive. And she *wanted* to work with Mac, she did. But how was she supposed to make that work? Mac turned onto Josie's street, and they continued walking silently to the front door.

Josie was shocked, was all. She thought the best-case scenario was to try to find Mac a good job with a different winery. She had enough connections, hopefully, and they could establish their different lives and tell Hank everything and live happily ever after. Not anymore. If she were Hank,

she'd fire herself for sleeping with an intern. A metallic taste filled her mouth. How had she fucked everything up so badly? Her chest was tight, like she was about to have another panic attack. She stopped at the bottom of the driveway as Mac unlocked the door.

*Deep breath. Hold it. And out.*

She repeated the slow breaths until Tinker and Bone swarmed her legs. The presence of her dogs put her at ease. Mostly. Mac leaned against the door frame, arms crossed, then met her at the bottom of the drive.

"Are you okay?" Mac asked, concern beating out her annoyance.

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Mac. I just need to sort some things out in my head." Mac worried her lip, crossing her arms over her stomach as if protecting her vital organs from prey. "I've always been honest with you." Josie took a step closer and laid a hand on Mac's shoulder. "I love you. But I need to figure out if we can be together without either of us losing our jobs."

Mac stepped away from Josie's touch. "If we can be together?" Josie stayed quiet. What was there to say? Mac nodded, her teeth scraping over her bottom lip. "Right. Well, I'm not trying to be with someone who just sees me as an 'if.' So let me clear it up for you, Jos. There's nothing going on between us. We're done." She walked toward the house and called over her shoulder, "Now you don't have to worry about Hank finding out. It's all sorted."

The door shut behind her, and Josie knew she wouldn't be seeing Mac again tonight. Her heart ached, and her temples pulsed. She had to protect herself. And Mac. She loved her. She *loved* Mac.

"Shit," she whispered into the night air. And all of the confusion—all the panic—dissipated. She knew exactly what to do.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mac avoided Josie all Saturday morning. Josie texted that she would take care of fermentation management that morning and to not worry about it. So she didn't. Instead, she lay in bed with a mimosa—because why not—and began looking for a place to live that wasn't in her current and future boss's basement. Her ex-girlfriend's basement? Connecting the word *ex* to Josie just felt wrong. Made her want to cry. *Again*.

She had a good lead for a shared house with another wine industry worker, the cellar master for a small, family-owned winery that produced delicious wines. The woman sounded like she'd be easy to live with, and rent wasn't too high. Plus, the room was available now. No matter how this all panned out with Josie, for better or worse, Mac needed to move out. She took the last sip of her mimosa and closed her laptop, hoping to hear back from the woman soon.

Josie was still at the winery doing punch-downs, so Mac grabbed her coat and headed to Jack's. She was going to help him set up his table for the festival tonight, and she brought a bag with a change of clothes for the party at Lou's. That way, she wouldn't have to go home to change, and she wouldn't have to see Josie until then. She couldn't bear to look at her. Her heart was so raw.

\* \* \*

Josie flew through punch-downs, eager to lock herself in the office with no distractions. Mac had broken up with her. *Kind of*. When she'd said those words, a searing pain had flashed through Josie, but she knew it wasn't actually over. It couldn't be. She and Mac would be together. She just hadn't solved the puzzle yet. She hadn't solved the puzzle yet because deep down, she was avoiding the only real solution. There was one thing that could make this all go away and

result in Mac being the assistant winemaker and Josie still being an Elmwood winemaker. And most importantly, Josie and Mac being together.

She had to resign.

She took a deep breath and held it in her lungs for five seconds. Blew it out and opened her email. The label Mac had made for Anita filled the computer screen. It was truly perfect. She stared at it until her eyes watered from the bright screen. It was time. She would always have a home in Hank, but it was time for her to move on from Cadieux. She shot a quick email to the best custom crush facility in town, knowing they would do anything in their power to make room for her. She'd rent out winemaking space from them until she had enough capital to secure her own winery.

It'd be okay. Hank and Mac would still work here, and she could visit every day if she wanted. Her head spun from trying to absorb this new reality. Maybe she could convince Hank to hire Erin as the new winemaker. That'd be perfect. Even if she wouldn't be part of Cadieux anymore, all of her favorite people would be. And they'd be happy. And she would have the things she wanted most: Mac and Anita.

She locked the office and strolled through the sleeping winery, the warm yeasty smell of fermenting wine filling her nostrils. Every inch of this place was a part of her. She knew every nick and scratch on its walls, every wonky gasket that didn't quite seal, every barrel and drip of wine that she'd made. She paused at the first concrete tank and braced herself.

*Deep breath.* She needed to move on. Even if ripping herself from this place might kill her. It'd be worth it in the end.

\* \* \*

Josie walked into Lou's that night with confidence. Though she was also terribly anxious, she now had a solution and control over what happened to her next. Getting fired was no longer a fear. But she was anxious to see Mac and had no idea what she would tell her. Mac was so mad, she probably wouldn't even want to talk.

Every high-status winemaker and vineyard manager in Elmwood packed the restaurant. The sounds of merriment filled the space, and everyone looked elegant and jubilant in their post-harvest celebration. Josie snagged a glass of Champagne from the bar and scanned the crowd.

*There.* Mac stood in the far corner talking to Mike Griswold and Hank. She was breathtaking. Absolutely stunning in her shimmery black dress and hair pulled up in a classy twist. Josie took a sip and made her way to the three of them.

“Ah, Josie. There you are.” Hank grabbed her shoulder and pulled her into their small circle. “I was just sharing the exciting news about our new assistant winemaker with Mike here.”

Mac plastered on a fake smile that completely gutted Josie.

“We are beyond lucky to have to her,” Josie said and raised her glass to Mac. “Actually, Mac, do you mind if I steal you for a moment? Just have a couple questions for you about a few of the ferments.”

Everyone else looked between them, surely confused about what questions Josie had that were so pressing that she needed to ask them in the middle of the party. She could’ve been smoother, but whatever. Finally, she shrugged. “Sure.” She turned to Hank and Mike. “I’ll be right back.”

Josie led them through the mass of people, trying to avoid being pulled into random conversations as they weaved their way to the back door. Just as someone was calling her name, she pushed it open. The door closed behind them, shutting all the chaos and partying away, leaving them alone in the back alley with a bit of quiet. Mac crossed her arms, clearly freezing. So was Josie, but she shrugged off her suit jacket and held it up for Mac.

She waved her off. “I’m fine.”

Feeling weird about putting it back on, she draped it over a discarded pallet and stood freezing together with Mac. “I’ll try to be brief.” She shivered. “Fuck, it’s cold.” Mac stood with



her lip trapped under her teeth as if trying not to shiver. “Mac, I love you. I love you so fucking much it hurts all the time. Holding you in my arms is so sweet, it literally makes me ache, and I refuse to give that up for anything. For anything.” She hugged herself in the cold. “I would love nothing more than to work side by side with you. There’s no one else I would choose to be assistant winemaker over you. You earned it.”

Mac groaned and released her lip, her teeth instantly chattering. “Well, damn, Jos. Why didn’t you say that last night? That’s all I want from you.”

“Because I didn’t have a plan last night. And I couldn’t look at you and tell you everything would be fine, and we’d be able to be together and work together.” She shook her head. “That would be a dream come true.”

Mac shivered again. “I know. I know, baby. Now, can you hurry it up? I’m about to freeze to death.”

Josie wasn’t cold at all, then. Hearing Mac call her baby set fire to every doubt and anxiety in her mind. Made saying the next part easier. She grabbed her coat and draped it over Macs shoulders, then stepped away. “I’m resigning.”

“What?” Mac got in her face. “No. You can’t resign. It’s not—”

She held up her hands. “It’s okay. It’s time for me to focus on the next step. On Anita. I’ll be fine, and that way, there’s no conflict between us.” Mac was speechless. Confused. “Everyone is safe and gets what they want most. It will be okay, I promise.”

“But—”

“Mac. We can talk more about this later, but tonight is the best night of the year. Can we go back in together and celebrate? We earned it.” She stepped back and made a show of looking Mac up and down. “And, wow.” She waved a hand over Mac. “Just wow.”

Mac closed the space between them again, circling her hands around Josie’s waist. “You’re telling me. This suit...”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Can’t wait to take it off you later.”

Everything was right in her world again. Even though she’d lose Cadieux, Mac was still in her arms, and that was what mattered most. She loved this woman. Loved her more than anything. “I love you, Mac.”

Mac pressed a kiss to her lips and—

Greg fucking Johnson opened the back door of Lou’s and stumbled into the alley where they were mid-kiss. “Oh shit,” he said, his words fat and slow. “I had a suspicion you were fucking the pretty little intern.”

Josie stepped in front of Mac. Just the thought of Greg seeing her shivering in her dress enraged her. Made her sick. “Greg, you’re drunk. You should go home.” Probably not the best thing she could say in the moment, but it was the only thing that came to mind.

“Hank is going to be so pissed when he finds out you’ve been giving it to his niece. So pissed,” he slurred. “She’s hot, though. I’ll give you that, Jos.”

“Greg, listen to me. If you say another goddamn word about Mac, I’ll lay you on your ass.” She cringed. “Won’t be hard at this rate. I’m pretty sure half your blood content is bourbon. Oh, and by the way, Cadieux will never source a single grape from Copper Peak again. Ever.”

That signature sickening smile slipped over his chapped lips. “I don’t think you’ll have a say in that matter. Not after tonight.” He wiped his mouth in his sleeve and took a step away to the door. “Never liked you, Jos. Never.” He disappeared back into the restaurant.

She stood frozen, her entire reputation about to be shattered by the man she despised. There was no stopping him. He was drunk and out of control.

Mac came up behind her. “We have to do something,” she said. But her voice sounded defeated, as if she was thinking the exact same thing as Josie.

Josie did her best to smile. “I don’t know what we’re about

to walk into, but it will be okay. I promise.” She held out her hand, and Mac took it. “Ready?”

Worry clouded her stormy eyes, but she nodded, as if willing it away. “I’m ready.”

Josie opened the door and immediately noticed the quiet of the restaurant and then the very loud shouting from the front. Everyone craned their necks trying to listen to the commotion coming from the front of Lou’s. Josie pushed their way through until they were right in front of the scene as it unfolded.

Hank’s voice boomed through the room. “You get out right now, or I swear to God, I will throw you out,” he shouted.

Greg laughed. He laughed so hard, spittle crawled from the corner of his mouth. “You? Look at yourself.” He pointed at Hank. “King of Pinot? Yeah right. You’re ancient and irrelevant. And your winemaker fucks your interns.”

She stiffened, a bolt of hot fear striking down her spine.

“Josie would never do that. You’re a drunk and a liar.”

Teddy and Anthony pushed by them. They each took an arm of Greg’s and pulled him toward the door, literally throwing him into the street. The restaurant remained quiet, everybody looking to one another in confusion, not knowing what just happened or who to believe.

Until Hank spoke again, Teddy and Anthony flanking him. “He’s right. I’m an old son of a bitch, but I love this community, and we deserve to celebrate ourselves tonight. Drink up,” he yelled. Just like that, the party began again.

Once the noise level returned to normal, and everyone was happily distracted with booze and conversation, Hank turned to them, his eyes falling on their hands. He walked over, and Josie braced herself. He’d just defended her in front of everyone, and here she stood, making a fool of him. His eyes were sharp with anger. “Josie, come with me. Now.”

She took a deep breath and squeezed Mac’s hand before following him. They brushed by Anthony, and Hank asked to use the back office.

“All yours,” he said.

They walked through the door that read *employees only*, and Hank closed it behind them. It was just the two of them in the tiny room. Just the two of them and enough tension to suffocate them both. Hank’s shoulders went slack, and he closed his eyes. He shook his head as if giving up. “How could you do this to me?” The disappointment on his face completely gutted her. “And with my niece?” He looked as if he had just bitten into a rotten apple. Disgusted. “It is wildly inappropriate on so many levels.”

“Hank, I know how it seems.”

“When did this start?”

She took a small step toward him. “It’s more complicated than that. What we have, it’s been growing since day one.”

“What? What are you talking about?” He leaned away. It was utterly excruciating.

“I would never risk our relationship, much less my job, for a hookup. You know me, Hank. You *know* me.”

He huffed. “Be clear, Josie. I’m out of patience.”

“I love her. We’re in love.”

He shook his head again as if struggling to solve a math problem. “I don’t understand. She’s just a kid and—”

“Oh, come off it. You were never one to sell Mac short. She’s a thirty-year-old woman who can make her own choices. You said it yourself, she’s a force. Don’t whittle her down to a helpless child. You of all people should know better.”

He stood speechless for what felt like forever. “I just... what the fuck happened? You’re not supposed to fuck the fucking interns, Josie. I mean, I feel like that rule was implicit. Like, I didn’t know I had to say it.” A chuckle escaped his lips. “My fucking niece, too? Are you fucking trying to kill me?”

She didn’t know if she’d driven him mad and that was why he chuckled, or if maybe he didn’t hate her all that much deep down. “That was a lot of fucks,” she said gently, testing the

waters.

“You deserve every fucking one.” He fell into the chair and sighed. “This is a mess. I don’t know what we’re going to do here. Greg torched everything out there.”

“I think I know what will make it better.” She sat in the chair opposite of the man she loved most in this world. The man she loved like a father. “I’m resigning as head winemaker of Cadieux.”

“Like hell you are,” he yelled. He looked around, like he was horrified he’d raised his voice at her. “Sorry,” he whispered. “What I meant to say was, no. No, I don’t accept your fucking resignation.”

“It’s time, Hank. You said yourself that millennials have to toughen up and take risks. Well, it’s time for me to take a risk.”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” he whined. “You know what else is wrong with millennials?”

“What?”

“They never stay in their same jobs until retirement.”

She laughed. Uncontrollable laughter. Hiccupping laughter that overflowed her body, expelling every stress and fear and worry with it. Until she felt cleansed and strong again. Once she calmed, he stood and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Listen, Jos. I love you and trust you, but I need to take a second with all this. Wrap my head around it, you know?”

She nodded. “I know.” He pulled her into a hug. “For what it’s worth, I meant what I said. I love her, Hank. Love her more than anything in this world.”

“Okay.” He patted her back. “Okay, then.”

\* \* \*

Mac draped a blanket over Josie as the girls cuddled by their feet. Neither of them felt like staying out for the festivities and had decided to come home early to escape the questioning stares that people kept tossing their way. Instead,

Mac had suggested curling up on the couch with homemade popcorn and a Halloween movie to distract themselves with some seasonal fun.

She clicked on *Hocus Pocus* and wiggled her toes in the soft blanket. Nothing could be cozier than this movie, a bowl of popcorn, a glass of wine, and the woman she loved curled against her side.

“Nothing too scary. Promise?” Josie asked, popping a handful of the salted, olive oil popcorn into her mouth.

Mac whipped her head around. “Um. Have you never seen *Hocus Pocus*? It’s, like, not scary at all.”

Josie straightened, trying to brush her off. “I mean, I haven’t not...not seen it.”

Mac scoffed as she continued to stare with what she hoped was a horrified expression. “So you *haven’t* seen it?”

“Yeah,” Josie admitted. “Haven’t seen it.”

“Oh my gosh. You are in for such a treat.”

As the movie started, she lay her head on Josie’s shoulder, reveling in the feeling of belonging. Of belonging to Josie and belonging to this community. She knew people at the festival were gossiping about their relationship, but it would fade. Josie and Hank were wildly respected in the Elmwood wine industry, and Mac had Jack and Reuben behind her always. And Greg fucking Johnson had absolutely no one in his corner. It would settle down. She knew it would.

But one thing just didn’t sit quite right.

“Don’t resign,” she whispered.

Josie paused the movie. “What?”

“Don’t resign, Jos.” She worried her lip. “I think Cadieux might mean as much to you as Anita, and you shouldn’t have to sacrifice that for me. There has to be another way.”

Josie swallowed, taking a second before she responded. “Cadieux is special to me, you’re right. But, Mac, I want to be with you, and this is the only way. You deserve your position

with us, and I refuse to be the reason why you don't take it. So it's on me."

"But..."

"We still have the rest of the season together at Cadieux. Pressing won't be done until the week before Thanksgiving. And Hank wants to get a drink with me tomorrow after work, so let's just see what he has to say and go from there, okay?"

Mac hated this. Everything about this plan felt wrong. She knew they shouldn't work together as manager and employee, especially in such an intimate environment. It would be hard on their relationship and hard on them professionally. And they both wanted desperately to work at Cadieux. It was unfair that Josie had to leave. Sure, she had her own wine label to look forward to, but losing Cadieux would be a blow. But Mac didn't have a solution. "Okay."

She tried to focus on the good. On watching *Hocus Pocus* and Josie's laughter. And her hand never leaving Mac's.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“I’ll be at Jack’s if you need anything, okay?” Mac said as she dropped Josie off at Lou’s.

Josie didn’t want to be there. The party last night had left a bad taste in her mouth, and walking into Lou’s gave her a visceral reaction. Her heart rate quickened, and her palms turned clammy, impressive in this cold weather. “I’ll be okay. I’m confident he won’t try to kill me. We left things in a good spot last night.”

“Okay.” Mac gave her a quick peck. “Good luck.”

She walked down the street, and Josie took one more moment to steady herself before finding Hank in the back room. Lou’s was quiet today. Surely, most of the town was still recovering from yesterday’s festivities. There were only two other people in the back room, and Hank sat at the bar chatting with Anthony. When she caught his eye, a warm ease filled her chest. That twinkle.

“Josie.” He wrapped her in a tight hug. A familial hug. And she squeezed back, letting herself melt into him. Letting herself hope. For what? She didn’t know.

“Thanks for inviting me.” She let him go and smiled at Anthony. “Hey, Anthony. Hope we didn’t cause too much of a scene last night.”

He finished polishing a glass and leaned on his elbows. “Please. The only person causing a scene was Greg. He is no longer welcome in this establishment.”

She was speechless for a moment. Lou’s—Anthony—had her back. The people who were the actual problem tended to make themselves obvious, she figured. “Thank you. I, uh, can’t say I’ll miss him.”



They all chuckled together. “What can I get you to drink, Jos?”

She eyed Hank’s glass as he sipped on a light beer. “I’ll do the same as Hank, please.” He slid a pilsner in front of her. “Thank you.”

“So,” Hank started.

She took a sip, the nerves beginning to swarm in her stomach again. “So...”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about last night. Well, not last night. About what you told me. You and Mac.” She nodded. “Call me foolish, but it shocked the hell out of me,” he said.

She squeezed his shoulder. “I know. I’m so sorry, Hank. I wish I could’ve told you earlier, but I was terrified. And obviously thought I’d be fired. I just...” She shook her head. “Mac is one of a kind. Of course I fell in love with her.” Falling in love with Mac felt as inevitable as crush. It was always going to happen, no matter if Josie was prepared or not.

“She is spectacular.” A mist fogged his eyes. “And so are you.”

Her chest swelled with pride and that sweet, familial love she felt for this man. “I love you, Hank. I hope this doesn’t come between us.”

He squeezed her knee. “Nothing is coming between us. I’m happy for you two. You’re the only one good enough for her. And she’s the only one good enough for you.” He cleared his throat, and she wondered if he was about to cry. “Well.” He straightened and wrapped both hands around his beer. “Now that that’s sorted, onto the next matter of business. I’m old.”

A chuckle popped from her mouth. “And I have brown hair. What’s your point?”

“My point is that I’m ready to sell Cadieux.”

She choked on her beer, sputtering and thumping her chest. “What?” He couldn’t sell Cadieux. He...he just *couldn’t*.

He patted her back like it would help with her choking or

with the dagger he just lodged in her heart. He seemed weirdly calm. At peace with this devastating news. “I’m selling it to you, Josie.”

She couldn’t stop coughing. *To her?* How would that be possible? “What?” she asked again, completely failing to wrap her head around what he was saying.

“Listen kid. This wine, Cadieux wine, has always been yours. Make your label, gold or no gold, I don’t care. It’s all yours. I just hope you realize that you’ve been making *your* wine this entire time. Cadieux is a part of you as much as it’s a part of me, and I don’t want it in the hands of anyone but you. I need it to stay in my family, and you, my dear, are the closest family I have.”

She stared at him. Silent.

“I’ll hold the note, and you’ll buy me out little by little every year until I die. But operations and everything that comes with running a winery, that will be on you. And the role you want to play within that ownership is up to you. But as you consider that, you should know that I’ve obtained Copper Peak Vineyards from the Johnson family and am also selling that to you.”

She widened her eyes, completely lost at this point. “How did you get Copper Peak? I thought—”

“When Greg’s father and I struck that deal back in the day, he didn’t have the capital to make the changes needed in the vineyard. So I put down some cash—well, quite a bit of cash—and became an investor. This morning, I took a little trip to visit a very hungover Greg and notified him that, not only would I be pulling my investment, but that no winemaker with a lick of sense would get involved with him or his grapes after his poor showing last night.” He took a swig of the pilsner and grinned. “Being the generous guy I am, I offered to buy him out. He fought me on it for a while until it became clear that his only other option would be to default on his bank loan, and the business would go to me regardless.”

She swallowed, finally able to breathe normally again. “Holy shit.”

“I know. I’m quite pleased with myself.”

Her head spun with all the information that he had just dumped on her. It was hers. All of it. Fuck the Cru Wine Awards. Fuck Greg Johnson. Fuck everyone who ever doubted her. It was *all* hers. And it was all thanks to Hank. Her eyes watered as her emotions threatened to gallop out of control.

She got to keep Mac. She got to keep Hank. She got to keep Anita. And she got to keep *Cadieux*. She had everything.

“So what do you say, Jos?”

“Yes.” She almost knocked him off his stool with the force of her hug, barley registering the pop of a Champagne cork.

Anthony poured them each a glass of bubbles. “Congratulations you two,” he said and lifted his own glass.

“To Josie,” Hank said.

A tear escaped, then, splashing against the bar top. She wiped it but didn’t care that she was crying in public. It was the only accurate depiction of what she was feeling: overwhelming joy. “Thank you, Hank. From the bottom of my heart. Thank you.”

“You earned it.”

They clinked glasses and drank to *Cadieux*. To Anita. To Mac and to Josie.

\* \* \*

Mac startled at the raucous entrance by Josie and Hank. They both beelined to her and simultaneously hugged her, leaving her helplessly squished between them. They were jubilant. All smiles and breathy hellos. It melted her. She felt like warm butter between them.

“Hi, everyone,” Josie bellowed. “Jack. Reuben. How’s it going?”

“Good,” Jack said, eyes wide.

“Jack? Hank Layton. Pleasure,” Hank said and shook his hand. Then, he turned to Reuben. “Nice to finally meet you, Reuben.”

Reuben shook his hand, seeming thoroughly confused. “Um. You, too.”

“Okay,” Mac finally said. “What did I miss?”

Josie and Hank glanced at each other, a grin plastered to each of their faces. “Jack, how much to buy your place out for the rest of the evening?”

\* \* \*

It was a bone-cold night as Mac and Josie sat on the crush pad table and took in the view that never got old. Mac sipped her Jubelale, a beer that she now associated with harvest, with Josie, and with all things fall and winter, and grinned. It would make no sense to an onlooker: two women bundled up alone, at the top of a vineyard at night, freezing their asses off and drinking *cold* beer. But they’d probably never worked a harvest before.

She swore she could feel Josie smile next to her. Knew she was, at least. A grin of pure contentment had been pulling on Josie’s lips since she and Hank had met them at Jack’s earlier. The thought made her realize her own cheeks were sore from smiling. They were burning embers of joy together.

Josie bumped her shoulder, stoking her until a flame leapt from her chest. “I lied. On your first day of work. I said this view loses its sparkle after a while.” She shook her head. “It only gets more beautiful. Like, every single time I look out over the vineyard and valley, there’s a new stroke added to the painting I keep of it in my head.”

Mac nodded, buzzing with happiness and adrenaline. A feeling she hadn’t had since she’d still believed in Santa Claus, and everything she could conceptualize wanting in her life appeared magically one morning. But here she was at the top of the most beautiful vineyard in the world—at the winery she worked at—with the most beautiful woman in the world, and she wanted for nothing.

Josie had worked here for fifteen years, taking the reputation Hank had already built and polishing it until Cadieux was regarded as one of the top wineries in the States.

Even the world. No one was more suited to take over for Hank than Josie Sanchez. She would steward this land, this wine, and Copper Peak and Anita in excellence. And Mac got to be a part of it. She was a part of Cadieux and a part of Josie. To their core.

“It’s more beautiful to me now,” she said and turned to capture Josie’s gaze. “Because it’s yours.”

Josie scraped her scar between her teeth, and just like this view never lost its shine, that mannerism only got sexier. “It’s funny,” she started, shaking her head and chuckling. “I don’t think this would have happened—Hank selling me Cadieux—if we didn’t fall in love this crush and get outed in front of the entire community. I think the shake-up from the status quo and Hank seeing us together, Hank having more family here, made him realize it was time.”

How could this be real? How could she possibly be lucky enough to call Josie hers? She lay her head on her shoulder and squeezed her forearm. “He’s going to be such a pain in the ass now.”

Josie laughed and kissed her head. “Oh yeah? More than usual, you think?”

Mac straightened and sipped her beer. “For sure. Now that he has zero responsibility—not that he did much at the winery anymore anyway—he’s going to be at the tasting room twenty-four-seven, drinking with the guests and sneaking into the cellar to give us shit. Something about millennials being the worst, I’m sure.”

They laughed together at the very accurate future.

“I think you’re right. He’s earned it though. For as long as he’s around, Hank’s welcome to make a fool of himself in my winery.”

Mac took a moment, dreaming of the life ahead of them, of all of them. “What will you do?”

Josie scanned the vineyard and nodded. “I think I know. But is it okay if tonight we just enjoy the now?” She took a swig and shrugged. “I want to make sure it’s the right decision

before I share it with my assistant winemaker.”

Mac’s chest swelled at the sound of her new title being said out loud by Josie. It had a ring to it. “Of course, boss.”

Josie groaned. “*Ugh*. Come on. None of that.”

“Okay, okay.”

Josie was right. All the big changes were so exciting and beautiful, but all Mac wanted to do tonight was enjoy this. Enjoy Josie and the fact that she, herself, had made it. She’d gotten the title she couldn’t have even dreamed of receiving when she’d started. She’d found family in Hank, Jack, and Reuben. People who saw her and thought the world of her. People who helped her achieve. And she got the best thing of all.

Josie.

She turned her gaze to Mac. “That was a wild crush.” She winked, and Mac knew exactly what she was talking about.

“It was so much more than a crush,” Mac whispered.

Josie nodded and snaked an arm around her waist. “So much more. Now, come on. Let’s go home. I’m freezing my ass off up here.”

Mac leaned in and kissed her cold lips. She tasted like spiced malt from the beer. Then, she hopped off the table and tossed her bottle in the recycling. “Come on, girls. Time to roll.”

Bone and Tinkerbelle piled into the back seat, and Josie drove them down the vineyard, closing the gate behind them. And together, they went home.

## EPILOGUE

“I still don’t see why you can’t just stay,” Josie whined.

Mac had told her a million times—a trillion times—why she had to move out. Not only had they just begun their relationship, but Josie was still her boss. And she wanted to give them some space. Just to have. That didn’t mean that she probably wouldn’t sleep over every other night. Or every night. But she wanted to move in with Josie because it was the right thing for their relationship, not because she already happened to live there.

Plus, her new house was super cute: a blue bungalow with a red door and a garden in the backyard. She couldn’t wait to grow peppers, tomatoes, zucchini, and anything else she could get her hands on and had space for. Plus, her roommate, Lucy, was super chill and always at her boyfriend’s place. And the best part...

It was a ten-minute walk from Josie’s.

She took Josie’s hand and kissed her harvest callouses. “One more box. It can just go on the floor in my closet.”

Josie dropped her head back and whined. “*Ugh*. Okay. One more box and then—”

“And then we get to break in my new bed. But quickly. Hank wants us over at eleven.” She pulled out her phone. “And it’s already nine.”

“Why do we have to be there so early?” Josie sulked and toed the box by her feet.

Mac wrapped her arms around her waist and tugged Josie into her. “Because Thanksgiving is Hank’s all-time favorite holiday, and he wants to enjoy every minute possible with his family and friends.” She dragged a finger down Josie’s jaw,

stopping under her chin and gently pushing it up. “And I refuse to be late. If we don’t finish soon, we won’t be able to —”

Josie made a show of sprinting out of Mac’s room to grab the last box from her car. Mac chuckled in her wake. What she didn’t tell Josie was that there was no way she wasn’t making love to her before they left. Even if they were a little—or a lot—late.

\* \* \*

Hank’s house was gorgeous. Okay, not just gorgeous; it was magnificent. The enormous cabin sat atop dense green woods fifteen miles outside town. About a thousand acres worth of woods but not all belonging to Hank. If Josie remembered correctly, he owned about fifty of them, and his home seemed to rise out of the trees as if they’d built that cabin themselves. As if it was made of their very trunks and limbs.

The giant A-frame glowed an inviting orange through the cold gray rain of the forest. Josie balanced the mashed potatoes and a bottle of wine while Mac had her hands full with two pies and a bottle of Champagne as they raced to the front door to escape the rain, Bone and Tinker trotting behind them.

“My girls,” Hank bellowed and ushered them in, grabbing the Champagne from Mac. “You know you don’t have to bring wine to my house.”

“We bring wine everywhere,” Josie said.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek and then one to Mac. “You’re officially done with the season?”

Mac nodded. “Barreled down our last lot of wine four days ago.”

“And finished the winery deep clean two days ago. We’re officially free,” Josie added.

He wrapped an arm around each of them and tugged them close. “I’m so proud of you two. Congratulations.”



They joined everyone in the huge kitchen, a giant island opening into the living room with brown leather sofas, plush navy throws, and a giant, fresh-cut Christmas tree from the lot by Cadieux. Hank always bought his tree early. It was a true cabin: all dark, golden wood and decor to match.

“You’re late,” Erin heckled from the other side of the kitchen as Hank poured them bubbles.

“Yeah. Sorry, everybody. Got caught up moving.” Josie shot a glance to Mac, whose blush crept out of her thick burgundy sweater and up her neck, blending the line between cotton and skin. She looked gorgeous. It was still unreal, the fact that she was Josie’s.

“Gross,” Georgie shouted.

Jack and Reuben walked over and hugged them both tightly. “They’re just jealous,” Jack whispered.

“All right. Does everybody have Champagne? Yes, yes?” Everyone nodded and raised their glasses as proof. “Good. First of all, happy Thanksgiving. You are all here for my favorite holiday because you are dear to me in one way or another.” Hank cleared his throat as if willing the emotion to stay out of his voice. “My priorities shifted over this last year, and having you all in my home together has only solidified those changes to me. I’ve had my turn, made my mark and my money. I don’t need to own this or that or be involved for the sake of my ego.”

Josie smothered a chuckle in her sleeve, and Hank shot her a sharp grin. He couldn’t even keep his ego out of this emotional toast.

“And I sure as hell don’t need to travel to Seattle twice a month to sit on a board with other old farts whom I hate just to make some extra bucks. Fuck all that. I just want to drink good wine, eat good food, and be with the ones I love. That’s what I want. Cheers to us.”

Everyone clinked glasses and toasted one another. Josie was proud of Hank. Wasn’t sure he’d be able to get to this point in his life on his own. Didn’t know if slowing down was

in his blood. But she was so happy it was because she wanted to spend as much time with that man as possible. Things were better with him around.

“Josie, do you wanna...” Hank nodded to the room, and Mac squeezed her hand.

It was time for the announcement. It wasn't exactly shocking news to everyone since she had talked to them all individually to secure their future positions, but it still felt momentous. Mac and Hank were the only ones with whom she'd shared the entirety of her vision. There were a few surprises left up her sleeve. But she needed their feedback and emotional support before making her plans official.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I believe you all have a pretty good idea of what I'm about to say, but this is the first time I've had the entire team together, so I'm just going to go ahead and make a few announcements.”

She looked to Mac for a quick hit of confidence, not that she had anything to worry about. This was all good news. *Really good* news. “First of all, construction on the new winery at Copper Peak will start in April.” Everyone clapped, eager smiles on their faces. “Once the winery is up and running—hoping for harvest after next—Georgie will be the head winemaker at that facility. Copper Peak will make the Anita label, which will remain a small production at around a thousand cases per year, and the rest of the space will be used as a custom crush facility for the community college wine program.”

Georgie was the perfect fit for this role. Being the oldest of four gave him a well of patience for students. Though their professor would be there to help, he'd be in charge of operations. She figured she'd let him and Erin make their own wine there, too, one day.

“Hell, yeah, Georgie,” Erin said, giving him a slap on the back.

“And you”—she pointed at Erin—“will be the new head winemaker at Cadieux Vineyards, effective January first. Mac will be the assistant winemaker and design our new labels.”

Another round of clapping for the new Cadieux hires. “Wait,” Reuben interjected. “Where does that leave you?”

She twirled the stem of her flute between her fingers. “That leaves me as CEO and Director of Winemaking of the Sanchez Layton Wine Group. I will oversee all the operations at both facilities.” She loved the name. Even though Hank was no longer active in decision-making, it was still all his money that made this possible. Plus, she had a feeling the name would remain useful long into the future with Mac Layton by her side.

She raised her glass. “That’s the grand plan. We’ll have many, many meetings in the near future. But for now, I just want to say thanks to all of you for your friendship and support. It is invaluable and means everything to me. Happy Thanksgiving.”

The kitchen erupted into excited chatter and clinking glasses. Mac wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek, her lips lingering by her ear. “Congratulations, baby. I’m so proud of you.”

Dreams that were too big to dream before were coming true, and yet somehow, Mac whispering those words in her ear...that was what felt the best. Her lips against Josie’s skin set her heart on fire more than any wine, any title, any label. She pulled Mac close, a surprised gasp popping from her mouth. “I’ll love you till I’m as old as Hank.”

“Slacker.” She grinned. “I’ll love you till I die.”

## **About the Author**

Ana is an award-winning author of sapphic romance. She worked in the Pacific Northwest wine industry for eight years and now lives in her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, with her wife, their fluffy German shepherd, and a mildly evil cat. She loves all things fermented or distilled, walking the local trails, and eating pastries. So many pastries. She is currently working on her next book and dreaming of a beach trip.

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