

In love

WITH MY
Ex's & Dad
MY

BILLIONAIRE
BOSS

SALLIE STEADMAN

**In love with my ex's dad my billionaire
boss**

Sallie Steadman

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Chapter 1

C hapter One – Willa

I leaned on the stack of old copies of the newspaper and closed my eyes. Okay, I really needed to get some sleep. I was wiped, and the last thing I wanted was to go to work tomorrow, unable to keep my eyes open.

I checked that I hadn't gotten any newsprint on my hands and got to my feet, stretching my arms over my head, hearing a crack in my spine. The new apartment still desperately needed some decoration, but I would get to that when I had the time. After all, I had only arrived yesterday and spent all my time focused on preparing for the first day of my internship at the Winkleman Oracle.

I took a quick shower, then changed into the grungy old tee I used for sleeping and climbed into bed. The mattress still felt a little stiff – it would be a while before I was totally comfortable here, and that was okay. I had a few months to get used to it.

Even if I felt like my hometown should have already been more inviting than this.

I stared at the ceiling, my mind rushing with the thought of everything I might do tomorrow for my first day. I knew it would be intense, but that was exactly why I wanted the job. Everyone else in my Master's program had been talking about how they would relax once they were done, but I was focused on how I could turn this momentum into something unstoppable. I needed to prove to myself – and everyone else – that I was capable of taking on this demanding career now that I was out in the real world and not behind my desk, finishing my thesis.

Six years. Six years of studying journalism and it had brought me here to my first real job. I've had a few internships and placements before, but they had been for a week or so, not months at a time, and this could actually turn into a permanent position.

Not could – *would*. I had been telling myself that ever since I had gotten the offer. When I put in my application, I hadn't actually expected them to get back to me. Not when I was so fresh in the field. And, you know, if I could have avoided coming back to this place, I would have. But when I saw they were looking for an intern, I knew there was no way I could miss out on the chance to apply, even just to say I had.

But Winkleman? There was a reason I had put as much distance between myself and my hometown as I possibly could, and it wasn't because I was desperate to get back. It had

been years since I had even stepped foot in this place, and I had hoped I would never have to return there again.

Not after him. Not after what he did to me.

I knew it pissed off my parents that I was absent most of the time, but how could they expect me to just stay after what had happened? There was no way I could come back to this place without being struck with the harsh reality of what had happened — what he had done, and I didn't want to drag myself through it again.

Anthony. Anthony Marshall. Just thinking about him was enough to send a cold shiver down my spine. I wasn't sure I had ever hated anyone the way I hated him, but at one point in my life, I had been sure I loved him. How the hell did that work?

Because I had been young. Because I had been a teenager in a small town without many other prospects to speak of, and when the rich kid started showing interest in me, I was flattered. I came from a family that had always struggled with cash, but him — no, he didn't even have to think twice about it. He could take me out, he could show me a good time, and I could relax and have fun. I could be a part of his world in a way I had never imagined I would be able to.

I had let it get the better of me. I could see that now. Looking back, there had been warning signs from the start — the way he would tease me about not being able to afford the very best of everything, how he would expect me to treat him a certain way after he had paid for a date. He was just a couple

of years older than me, but it felt like he had dropped in from another planet entirely. I just wanted to stay in his good graces, so I went along with it, fearful of losing out on him if I didn't do exactly what he wanted.

And he knew that. He *knew* it. That was why he'd been able to keep me for so long because he'd played me like a damn fiddle. He'd used me and he'd hurt me and he'd known I would take it because I was too young and too stupid and too inexperienced to know any better. I wished I could go back in time and tell that version of myself that I didn't need to put up with his endless, nasty bullshit, but I had nothing to compare it to. All my friends were jealous that I was with someone so rich and popular. I didn't know that my swiftly-deflating self-worth was anything other than a normal part of a relationship.

By the time that I left high school, we had been together for three years, and I felt like my whole life was built around trying to piss him off as little as possible. All the time I spent trying to manage his emotions left me exhausted, unable to focus on anything else. That was how he wanted me, without the fight to push back against him.

Everything was catered to Anthony. I supposed I should have known it would turn out that way, given his family. His mom indulged every little thing he wanted, and his dad never seemed to care much about the shitty way he treated anyone else. Of course, Anthony thought he should have had the world handed to him on a platter. How could he not? He believed I was just part of that — part of what he deserved because of the life he had been born into.

I snapped when I found out he had been texting other girls behind my back – exchanging nudes, even going so far as to tell one how much hotter she was than me. That really fucking stung. I'd done everything to make him happy, but it hadn't been enough to keep him from looking elsewhere for someone to get him off. I had given him everything, and it suddenly hit me that no matter how much I tried to gift him, he would always want more, more, more.

I had to make my own life. I had to build something that had nothing to do with him at all – and so, I did. I turned my attention to what I actually wanted to do. That whole time, I had kept a diary, enjoying filling it in at the end of the day with the details of what had happened, and it was about the only passion I had left after he'd wrung everything else out of me. Writing? Sure, I could do that. I applied to a few colleges, needing to put as much space between me and that man as fucking possible.

I took the first one I got accepted to. I didn't care where I was going as long as it was as far from here as I could get. My mom helped me pack up my stuff, and she drove me all the way across the state to start over at the new school. She was just glad I was finally done with Anthony. She'd hated him since day one, and she had been forced to deal with my crying jags as things had gotten worse and worse.

“You'll be back to visit soon, won't you?” she asked as she hugged me goodbye at the door to my dorm room.

“Of course, I will,” I replied. I thought I meant it. I really did. I had lived in Winkleman for so long that I couldn’t imagine leaving for more than a few months. But as soon as I was out, I realized I didn’t want to go back.

College was amazing; it felt as though all of my horizons opened up at once, a new start I had craved more than anything in the world. I was suddenly surrounded by people who wanted the same things I did, who were focused on a future and their career instead of managing the emotions of their shithead boyfriends. It felt like a freedom I’d never experienced before in my life, and I was instantly addicted.

That was nearly five years ago now, and I still hadn’t found the time to come back to Winkleman. I was just...nervous about what returning to this place would do to me. I knew it wasn’t fair to leave my family in the lurch. I had done a good job avoiding my mom’s questions about coming home for every holiday, even inviting her to spend a couple with me – but I didn’t want to go back to being the person I had been when I had lived there. I couldn’t risk it.

At least, not till now.

Tomorrow, I was starting my first day of work at the Winkleman Oracle. A prestigious newspaper with a long history of publishing some of the most hard-hitting journalism deep-dives in the country. Getting a foot in the door there would boost my career beyond my wildest dreams, but it required me to return to the one place I had wanted to put behind me for good.

And I didn't know how I was going to survive it.

No, I needed to get that kind of thinking out of my mind. I would be fine. The chances of Anthony still hanging around here after all this time were virtually nil, and I didn't need to worry about running into him. He had tried to contact me a few times over the years, a kid throwing his toys out of the stroller when he lost something he thought he owned, but it had never been anything serious. He would have moved on to another girl by now, and I prayed she was doing at least a little better than I had.

It was only for a few months, and I could use the boost to my resume to go pretty much wherever I wanted in this industry. It'd make my mom happy to have me around again for a little while, and then I could leave this place behind for good and get out once more.

Right now, I was lying in bed in the small apartment I had rented for the duration of my stay. I hadn't bothered unpacking anything yet, because if I started unpacking, I would have to admit to myself that I was actually going to stay, and I wasn't sure I was there yet.

I needed to get my head out of my ass and focus on what I was doing here. Just because I had a history here I didn't exactly like — it didn't mean I had to turn this into some trudge through all the worst parts of my life. I had worked my ass off to get where I was and to undo at least some of the damage Anthony had done to me. I wasn't going to let him get to me. It's what he would have wanted, to get under my skin in

any way he could, to make sure he stayed in my mind, and I wouldn't grant him that.

Not any longer.

I turned over and closed my eyes. Outside, the streets were quiet, far removed from the busy bustle of the city in my place back home.

Home. This place was meant to be my home, but I felt utterly un-fixed here, as though I could spin off into the sky at any moment. I had to find a way to ground myself, at least as long as my tenure lasted at the Oracle.

A few months. It's all I had to get through, and then I would be on my way back out into the real world again with some excellent additions to my resume under my belt. That was what mattered, wasn't it?

At least, that's what I had to keep telling myself if I had any hope of getting to sleep tonight.

Chapter 2

C hapter Two – Don

I poured myself a whisky, finishing up the last of the bottle. I would need to get a new one tomorrow. That was the only way I marked the passage of time these days, aside from recent editions of the Oracle.

The bottle ran down. I got a new one, and I drank a couple of glasses every night until I could fall asleep and forget about how lonely I was.

The apartment felt cavernous, with just me inside it. For so long, I'd been used to living in a family home, a home full of life and noise and conversation, but this place was waiting for me, empty and huge, whenever I stepped back through the door.

I supposed I could have put the effort to fill it with a little more life, but it all felt so...pointless. Ever since the divorce and Anthony's hearing, I had felt like my soul had been

scooped out, leaving nothing more than an empty void in its place.

Maybe because the person I had trusted most in the world had shown me her true colors, and I couldn't cope with what I had seen. How was it that I could have been married to her for so long and yet failed to see what kind of person she was? It was a question I had rolled around and around in my head ever since we'd split, but since the divorce, I supposed it didn't really matter any longer. We were done with, over, and it was better that we remained that way.

Maybe I should have known it was how she would react. After all, he was her son – he was mine, too, but that didn't mean I wanted him to go unpunished for what he had done. I should have been harsher on him when he was younger, but when he was a teenager, I had told myself he would grow out of it and get tired of acting out.

But he didn't. If anything, it only seemed to get worse the older he got. I kept waiting for the moment he would look at the chaos he had created and realize he didn't want to do it any longer, but it never came. Never arrived. He just got worse and worse, and even as I tried to steer him towards a job, towards studying, to anything but the mess he was leaving behind him, Vera did more and more to try and protect him from that.

“He's just a boy!” she argued with me one night.

“Vera, he's twenty,” I shot back. “We can't let him keep doing whatever he wants. Someone is going to get hurt.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she snorted at me, shaking her head. “He wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

I wished I had called her out on it then. I wished I could have shown her how bad things were going to get, but I wanted to believe her so badly that I didn’t.

And look at where it had gotten us.

I could still remember getting the call from him in the middle of the night – waking up to the sound of the phone ringing and stumbling out of bed, assuming it was a contact for a new article I was working on reaching out to let me know they were ready to talk.

When I answered, I was shocked by the sound of his voice. He sounded almost apologetic, as though he knew for the first time in his life that he had done something wrong.

“Dad, I need your help,” he told me, and my stomach dropped. He wouldn’t have asked for anything from me if he could help it. Whatever this was, it was bad.

Really bad.

What came next was a blur. He’d caused a car accident after he’d been driving home drunk from a bar. He’d hit a young woman who ended up in hospital for months, with permanent damage to her spine as a result. I paid all her medical fees, hoping her family could find some way to forgive us for what had happened.

I pushed for him to go to court for it. I just knew he had to pay for what he had done. It was the only way we could

possibly get him to take it seriously, to see that he couldn't just act like a monster and get away with it.

But Vera disagreed.

“It was a childish mistake!” she argued with me. “And he doesn't deserve to have his reputation or the rest of his life ruined over it!”

“What about the woman he hurt?” I demanded, furious. “What about her? Doesn't she deserve justice?”

Vera would have none of it. I did everything I could to try and convince her to let him stand trial, but she must have known he would go to prison or at least be tarnished with the brush of the law. She wouldn't let it happen. She wanted to protect him.

She found some way to use her family's money to twist the people involved, ensuring Anthony got nothing more than a slap on the wrist. He stepped out of the court a free man, and I knew I couldn't stand to be around them any longer. I couldn't stand by it.

We divorced not long after that, Vera and I, neither of us able to understand what on Earth had driven the other one to act the way they had. There was no way we could get over the enormity of what had happened, and I didn't believe there was any hope of moving forward. As for my son – he cut me off when he found out I had wanted him to face charges for his crimes. Maybe it was for the best; I wasn't sure I would have had the strength to do it myself, but being around him pained

me. I could hardly look at him without remembering what he had done to that poor girl and how little he cared about it.

I had moved out after a generous divorce settlement from Vera – she just wanted me to keep from telling anyone the truth and believed bribing me would be enough to keep my mouth shut. I didn't even have the strength to fight anymore, not for what I had been so committed to all this time. I just wanted it to be over.

And then, it was.

Two years. Two years since all of this had gone down, and my life had never been the same since. How could it be? My family was gone, and my trust in them had vanished along with it. I didn't know what was real or if there was anything left that I could cling to now. Everything I had worked so hard for, everything I had tried to build, had been ripped away from me, and now it was done.

Now, all I had left was the Oracle. Nobody there knew the details of what had happened, and I planned to keep it that way. I was humiliated and horrified that I had raised a son capable of doing what Anthony had, and I wanted nothing more than to leave my old life behind and move forward to something else.

But what? I was lonely now, lonelier than I had ever been in my life before. It felt as though everything was crumbling around me. At work, at least I could stay distracted, but then I got back here and was reminded of everything I was lacking, all the ways I was failing. I couldn't do anything to put the

pieces back together. I just had to live in this quiet life, alone, hoping nobody would find out the truth about what my son had done or what his mother had allowed him to get away with.

I thought about that girl, the one he'd hurt, constantly. What was her life like now? How did she feel about him? Was she angry? She must have been. She deserved to be. He deserved to rot in prison for what he had done, or at least have people know the man he truly was, but he had gotten away with it. Not a mark on his reputation. Nobody knew his horrible discretions, and he got to live out his life as though he had never done a damn thing wrong as long.

I sipped on my drink and stared out of the window to the street outside. Vera and Anthony had moved not long after the trial, so they weren't even in this town anymore. I had moved here for Vera after we'd gotten married, taking over the Oracle not long after, and it felt like I was the one who had been sentenced, having to live here without the family I thought I'd had.

But I had never really had that family. I had a family who was willing to commit and then cover up a horrible crime just for the sake of their reputation. I had known Vera was always a little more occupied with that side of things than me, but I would never in a million years have thought she would take it to the lengths she had. How could I? How could I expect anyone I had committed myself to, to act in the way she had? I felt as though I was losing my mind just considering it.

But it had happened, and I had to get used to it. I had to accept that I had never known them the way I thought I did. It was that simple. I just needed to let go of what I had been hanging on to, the certainty I'd had that things would turn out okay.

And move on.

I couldn't imagine dating anyone else, not with the darkness of this secret hanging over my head. How could I ask anyone else to take this on, too? They would find out what had happened, and they wouldn't want a damn thing to do with me, and how could I blame them? Who would want to associate themselves with the kind of person who would do this? They would have to be downright crazy...

I finished up my drink and rose to my feet. I had been drinking more than usual these last few months. It hadn't turned into a problem yet, and I wasn't going to let it – it was just the only thing I had left in my arsenal to keep the loneliness at bay.

Well. Tomorrow was another day at work, and I might feel better when the sunlight hit my skin. A day in the office would give me something to focus on, at least, and I wanted nothing more than to get to it already, to save myself from the monotony of this life.

I went to my bedroom and lay on the sheets, staring at the clock as it ticked closer to midnight.

Chapter 3

C hapter Three – Willa

I sipped on my coffee and noticed my hand shaking slightly. It was going to be okay, right? I just had to get through this first day, meet everyone, and then I could get down to business and focus on actually doing the job I had been hired for.

Walking the streets of Winkleman on my way to the Oracle's office had been a tad surreal. So much had changed, but the bare bones underneath were still the same. The diner I'd gotten breakfast at when I'd been up early for soccer was still open, and I dipped inside to grab myself a decent hit of caffeine before I went to my first day at work.

I had no idea how this was going to go, but I had been trying to keep myself calm as I approached the building. I would probably just be meeting people today — not a big deal — they weren't going to throw me into the deep end and expect me to be on top of everything right away. I would most likely be fetching coffee, maybe doing a little research work, or

interviewing someone as supplemental content for someone's article. I knew I had to travel to help cover a conference in a couple of weeks. That was going to be a chance to prove myself.

I entered the building, and an older woman with a coil of brassy blond hair glanced up from her magazine behind the desk.

"You're the new intern, right?" she asked briskly.

"Uh, yes," I blurted. "Willa. Willa Thompson."

She pulled out a card on a lanyard from below the desk and handed it to me.

"You'll need this to get around in here," she explained. "The editor is waiting for you upstairs."

I nodded, hoping she couldn't see how nervous I was. I didn't want to give myself away. I needed to show that I was confident and capable, and that started right now.

I rolled my shoulders back, thanked her, and then headed for the stairs. The building was small, but as I opened the door to the main newsroom, I couldn't help but grin. It was buzzing with energy already. About fifteen people were on the floor — some of them typing behind computers, a few conversing over coffee, one flicking through a book at her desk. This was what I had come here for — the feeling of actually being around people who knew what they were doing and were committed to making sure they got it.

I peered around until I spotted a door with the word *EDITOR* etched into the brass tag and made my way toward it. Okay. I'd only spoken with the hiring department before. I hadn't had a chance to speak with the editor yet. I knew his name was Don Marshall, and I knew he had a hell of a reputation as an editor, having been doing the job for the better part of two decades, and this was my chance to make a good impression on him.

I knocked on the door.

"Come in," beckoned a gruff voice.

I pushed it open and nearly dropped my damn coffee when I saw who was waiting on the other side.

Anthony's father.

I felt as though I was going to throw up right there on the ground in front of me. There was no way – there was no *way*, was there? Marshall – that hadn't been Anthony's last name. It was a common enough last name. But, as I stared at the man opposite me, I knew it wasn't just my brain throwing me for a loop. It was him. There was no doubt about it.

It was *him*.

I had only ever known him as Mr. Marshall or Anthony's dad. The elder Marshall had sharp gray eyes, and he stared at me as though he wasn't sure what I was doing standing in front of him. There was no way it could be anyone other than him. I shifted from foot to foot on the spot.

“You are?” he asked me, and I quickly gathered myself. I wasn’t going to let Anthony continue to influence how I dealt with things. I could take his father being here. He probably didn’t even remember me.

“I’m Willa,” I explained, plastering a smile on my face and extending my hand to him. “I’m the new intern here. It’s really great to meet you...”

I trailed off as he didn’t reply, looking me up and down. I couldn’t tell if he even recognized me or not. Did I want him to? I had no idea. It would have been easier if he didn’t know exactly what I was doing here or why I had turned up after all this time, and I prayed to God I would be able to get through this meeting without making too much of a fool of myself.

“Take a seat,” he told me, ignoring my extended hand and jerking his head towards the seat in front of him. I did as I was told. He was just as cold as that family had always been to me. I hadn’t seen much of him, probably because he had been too busy with work when I’d been with Anthony, but I could tell from the way he was talking that he didn’t see me as worth his time.

“So, you’re aware that you’ll be taking care of support work for your term here,” he told me. “Working on articles with other writers, copy-editing, things like that?”

“Yes, I read over the requirements again this morning — “

“Obviously, pitching ideas of your own is something you can get to later down the line,” he continued, cutting me off. I bristled. Could he even hear me? Did he even care?

He kept talking, but I could hardly take a word of it in. I felt as though my head was going to explode, everything in me wanted to argue with him and tell him he didn't have a damn clue what he was talking about, but I knew it would have been pointless. He clearly didn't give a damn who I was, what I had been through, or any of it, and I needed to accept it.

I straightened up, nodding along as I listened to him talk. I was still trying to deal with the complete shock of being faced with something like this when I had only just arrived back in town. I had thought I would be afforded a little more of a grace period before I had to be reminded of Anthony so bluntly, but I was going to be working underneath his damn *father*. I couldn't believe it.

I wasn't going to let any of this get to me, I just wasn't. Yes, it was far from ideal, but this was a job I knew would make all the difference to my future. The last thing I needed was to allow it to slip through my fingers when I was sure I could actually use it to get where I needed to go. It would only be a matter of months, and then I would be out of here. I doubted I would even be spending that much time with him at all, not really, given that he was running the show and I was nothing more than a lowly intern.

Anthony's father paused for a moment, his eyes searching mine as he finished talking. Did he realize who I was? Was he about to turn around and kick me out right there on the spot? I held my breath. I didn't know what I wanted to say to him, but a million questions were racing around my mind, a million queries I wished I had the nerve to ask him. Mostly about his

son, about whether or not he was still around, and if there was a chance I was going to have to see him anytime soon. I prayed I wouldn't; I knew I couldn't have handled it if he had told me Anthony was still lurking around town. I had done all I could to push him out of my mind these last few years, and I didn't want to be reminded of the horrible mess he had put me through.

“Does that make sense?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Perfect sense, thank you,” I replied, keeping my voice as bright and breezy as I could. “Can I introduce myself to the rest of the office now?”

He nodded, gesturing for me to head for the door, and I rushed outside. My heart felt like it was going to bust straight out of my chest, but I ignored it. First day, first time meeting the boss, of course, it was going to be something of a shock.

I caught the eye of a woman seated at a nearby desk, and she smiled and waved me over. She was a few decades older than me, with short gray hair and bright blue eyes, covered by a thick pair of glasses.

“You must be the new intern,” she told me, extending her hand. “I'm Julie. Good to meet you. Could you do me a favor...?”

Before I knew it, I was being sent off down the street to pick up their regular coffee order, and I was glad for the chance to get out of the office for a moment. I knew I would have to get used to working with this guy, but God, it just hit a little too hard to think about everything that had happened, to

be confronted by it again so bluntly. I wondered if I was going to have to run into Anthony now, too, at a work event or something – the thought of it, of having to lay eyes on him once more, was enough to stir a profound sickness in my guts, and I swallowed it back down again. I hated this...

But I had come here because I knew the boost it would give my career, and I refused to let anything get in the way. End of story. I was going to see this through, and that would be that.

I picked up the coffee order from the café and carefully balanced the trays on my way back to the office. Handing out the coffees, I got to meet everyone there – Simon, the pictures editor, and Yasmin and Jeff, the on-the-beat journalists, stuck out to me. I did my best to commit everyone's names to memory, but I was sure I would forget a few.

By the time the end of the day rolled around, I was exhausted and just wanted to head back to my place to get some rest, but I had promised my mother I would come around and visit her when I got the chance. I had been avoiding heading home since I'd gotten back because it just brought back too many memories, flooding my mind with all the reminders of what I'd been trying to forget. But I would have to do it sooner or later, and I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

I trudged down the long main street till I reached the turn-off to the road I'd grown up on. My mother had lived there her whole life, adopting the home from her parents when she was old enough and raising me there, even after my father passed

when I was young. I sometimes wondered if she wished she could have gotten out and started over somewhere fresh, but if the thought had even crossed her mind, she had never let me see it. She was committed to making sure she stayed here, and I knew she wanted to pass down that place to me when she got the chance. I tried not to think about that part. I didn't want to live here, not long-term, and the thought of returning to that home was a little suffocating.

I paused outside the white picket fence and peered in through the window. The curtains were drawn, but I could see the warm glow of light from within. I headed up the path and knocked on the door. It sprang open a moment later, and Mom stood there, framed by the soft light inside.

“Willa!” She exclaimed as she tossed her arms around me and pulled me close. I squeezed her right back. Even if I didn't love this town, I still missed her like crazy sometimes. I just wished she wasn't so tied to this place.

“It's so good to see you,” she remarked, pulling back and looking me up and down. “Come in. You must be exhausted. Was it a long journey to get here...?”

She guided me inside and to the kitchen, where a pot of something was bubbling on the stove, filling the air with a rich, savory scent. I sat at the table, glancing around as I took it all in. None of it had changed, and it was honestly a little strange being back here after so much time. How could I have changed so much, but this place remained exactly the same?

She served me some warm soup with crusty bread, and we caught up, with her asking me about my first day on the job, demanding all the details.

“How about the people you work with?” she probed. “How do they seem?”

“Yeah, nice,” I replied, picking at a crumb left on my plate. Did I mention it to her? The fact that *he* was my boss? I wasn’t sure if she would have had any idea, but I didn’t want to remind her of Mr. Marshall if I could help it. She had seen my relationship with Anthony first-hand, and I had no doubt she wanted to leave it behind for good, to forget about it any way possible. I had totally lost myself to it, to how he had treated me and how he had made me feel, and sometimes, it seemed a miracle I had been able to make it out in one piece at all.

“Good,” she replied. “How long does your internship last?”

“A few months,” I replied, keeping it vague. I didn’t want to get too specific or get her hopes up about exactly how long I would be around. I wasn’t sure I wanted to stay for any longer than I had to, after all.

“And is there the opportunity for a more long-term position after that?” she asked hopefully. I hesitated before I responded. Of course, the answer was yes, but I didn’t know if I was going to take it even if I was offered it.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Of course,” she replied, and she smiled at me, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand.

“It’s so good to have you back, honey,” she murmured, shaking her head. “It’s been far too long. You must come for dinner again this week. I want to see as much of you as I can while you’re here.”

“Sure,” I replied. I looked down at my plate, and suddenly, I wasn’t hungry anymore. I knew I should have been honest with her, but the thought of her finding out what was really going on with me was a little bit close to terrifying.

Not least because I thought she might go marching right down to the office and give that man a piece of her mind for what his son had done to me.

Chapter 4

Chapter Four – Don

As I returned to the office, I tried to prepare myself for seeing her again.

Willa. I still couldn't believe it was really her. I hadn't bothered to check up on who the internship had gone to, but if I'd known it was going to be Willa, I would have done a little more research on what had brought her back to our doorstep.

She must have seen the shock on my face when she walked into my office the day before. She hadn't shown any emotion at all, and I had decided to follow her lead, keeping things as professional and focused as possible. The last thing I wanted was to allow our mutual past to get in the way of what she was doing here with this job. She deserved someone willing to be her boss, not to be her ex's father.

I still couldn't believe how much she had changed. I could remember how she was when she had been dating Anthony, so meek and fearful that she could hardly look me in the eye. I

would never have imagined that she would get out of this town, let alone start building a career for herself in an industry as tough and demanding as this one.

But she must have beaten out dozens, if not hundreds, of people to land this position, and I had to admit, I was impressed. I was looking forward to seeing how she coped with the new work and how she would handle her place in the office. It could be insular around these parts, but I guessed she was already pretty well used to it.

I made my way up the stairs and found her leaning over a computer, talking to Nancy, the entertainment editor. She glanced up when she saw me but swiftly averted her gaze as though she didn't want to acknowledge me.

All right. I wasn't going to push for anything more than that. She clearly still had some resentment left from what had happened with Anthony – he had dumped her, after all, and she had been seriously smitten by him. God knows why. Even back then, Anthony wasn't the nicest kid, but I guessed teenage romance, especially in a town as small as this one, didn't have room to discriminate.

I headed to my office to check over the headlines for the day – we had an online portal that updated daily, as well as a physical copy that came out monthly. It was tough to keep on top of both of them sometimes, but it was the only way we could keep up with the rest of the industry. I was glad I had a tech-literate office around me because sometimes, I felt like I

would never have been able to keep pace with the rest of the journalistic world.

Honestly, though, I was having a hard time staying focused when Willa was in the office. It was strange, a reminder of my past coming into my life like that – she was so different, but then, I supposed, so was I. She had been with Anthony before the accident, before the mess he had made of that girl's life, and I wondered if she even knew about what he had done.

She came into my office to drop off some notes that one of our writers had turned in. She barely even made eye contact with me. I didn't want to push my luck, so I just smiled at her and thanked her for her efforts. She nodded briefly in return, and I watched as she walked out once more.

She was a woman now, nothing like the girl I had known before. The wispy brown hair she'd used to wear pulled back into a ponytail had been chopped off to a chin-length bob, and her eyes, once hidden behind glasses, were a clear and sharp green. She dressed smartly and carried herself with the confidence of someone who knew they had earned their place. I respected it. I knew getting yourself off the ground and into this business wasn't easy, and she had managed to do just that.

Did she have a boyfriend now? Someone she had left behind to come here? I hadn't seen her in town since she had broken up with Anthony, and it was hard to avoid anyone in this place. She must have left town to study, chasing down her dreams to find out what lay outside the walls of Winkleman. I had been lucky, getting a leg-up in this place, but she had to

work from the ground up to get where she needed to go. You had to if you wanted to get anywhere. It was the only way to ensure you actually got a good start in life.

She had been given a desk at the other side of the office, pressed against the far window, the one that nobody else ever wanted to take for themselves. It was damp in the winter, and the sunlight was so bright in the mornings that it was hard to see the screen. As the intern, she'd been stuck with it for now.

I headed over to her desk later in the day to see what she was working on. Interning here basically involved doing all the grunt work for anyone who asked for it, researching, organizing interviews, and doing quick copy-edits to make sure everything was clean by the time it got to the site.

She glanced up when she saw me approach, and her mouth hardened into a stiff line as soon as I got close.

“How are you getting on?” I asked her, trying to keep my voice casual.

“Fine, thank you,” she replied. Her tone was terse, and she pulled into herself, trying to put as much distance between us as possible. Was she still that pissed about what had happened between her and Anthony? I almost wanted to bring it up, but I didn't want her to think I was trying to use it as a way to get her to do what I wanted. Just because we had a history didn't mean it had any impact on the work she was doing here for me. I didn't want her to believe that for a second. She had earned this job on her own merits, and whatever had happened between us prior didn't have an impact on it.

I left her to it, not wanting to push my luck. Clearly, she didn't want anything to do with me, and I was sure she would find some way to get away from me if she could. I hoped nobody else around the office had noticed – it would have been just too strange for me to admit that she was my son's ex. God, I was getting old if the people my son had dated were working internships at companies like this one.

I got through the rest of the day without bothering her again, though I wanted to talk to her a little more about what was going through her mind right now. How did she feel, seeing me again? Was the reminder of Anthony what was throwing her off? Maybe she still had feelings for him. Feelings, I was sure, that would go right out the window as soon as she found out what he had done to that girl.

Hell, maybe I was giving her too much credit. Perhaps I wanted to believe that would be enough to put her off, but I didn't know what would have been too much for her to take. I would have thought it would be enough for his mother to admit his wrongdoing, but clearly, I had been wrong about that, too.

By the time I got home, the weight of it all was pressing down harder on me than before. Maybe it was just the reminder, being stirred up again in a way I couldn't deny, but it felt like the pressure of this was getting the better of me. The pressure of being alone, of knowing there was nobody I could turn to to talk about my feelings. The enormity of it sometimes felt like more than I could take – staring down the barrel of

this lonely life and wondering when, if ever, I would see it change.

I hoped she didn't have something similar to go home to. I knew nothing of Willa's life right now, but I hoped she wasn't dealing with anything like what I was. Having been away from this place for so long, I supposed it could have been a possibility – she might have been trying to navigate being back here, making connections again after being absent for so long, but I hoped not. I hoped she had friends and family to rely on, people she could go to who would make her feel valued and cared for in the ways she needed to be.

I wouldn't have wished this life on anyone, not anyone in the world. I had earned it by sticking out my morals and doing what I was sure was right, but honestly, I had no idea what the chances were of me ever getting out of it.

To the outside world, it looked as though I had abandoned my son when he needed me most. But if they knew what he had done, they would see it for what it was. They would see I had done it because Anthony was the kind of monster who would keep getting away with everything if someone didn't put their foot down. I might not have been able to make him pay for what he had done, but at least I could check out and show the world I disagreed with it.

As though it was enough.

I sighed and poured myself my nightly drink. It was still so strange, being so far from my son, my family, and everything I had dedicated my life to for so many years.

But I would have to get used to it. It was just strange, having the past stirred up when she had walked back into my life again – Willa, a reminder of what it had been like before — before it had all fallen to pieces.

Before everything had changed.

Chapter 5

C hapter Five – Willa

“You have to be kidding me, right?” I demanded, planting my hands on my hips as the papers I had tossed onto his desk slid into his eye line. Don Marshall looked up at me, clearly confused.

“What are you talking about?” he asked me, his brow furrowing. I let out an irritated sigh. I shouldn’t have expected anything different from him, not really – not after everything I had seen from him over the years. Of course, he didn’t give a damn about the diner closing down. As far as he was concerned, it didn’t matter. He was probably out at five-star restaurants every single night and didn’t have to think twice about a place like that.

“You’re really not going to cover the closure of the diner?” I asked him.

When I had come in this morning, a couple of the staff members had been chatting about it – Dinah’s diner, the go-to

place for students and commuting adults alike, was going to shut down at the end of the month. It would truly be the end of an era, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness when I thought about how much nostalgia would be lost with it. Not least the best coffee in Winkleman.

Don sighed.

"I've already talked this over with the staff," he told me, lifting his gaze to meet mine. He seemed annoyed, like he couldn't believe I had brought this to him. I jabbed my finger at the document in front of him, shaking my head.

"This place has been open for decades, it's practically an institution," I told him. "I used to go there when I was in high school — so did my mom. We need to cover it. People should have a chance to talk about it, reflect on how much of an impact Dinah's had on the community."

"We have bigger stories to cover right now," he said. "There's a new development across the county that I want to get into, and this diner just isn't important enough to warrant the time to write an article on it."

My shoulders sank. He didn't have a clue, did he? How long had he lived here, and he was *still* totally out of touch with the real world? I wished I could make a better case for this, but if he was the editor, and he had decided it would be this way, what chance did I stand with my opinion?

"I'll do it," I offered. "I'll do it and write a whole article on it — in my free time."

“We need you working with the staff on their other stories,” he told me, clearly not about to change his mind. “Maybe some other time.”

“But this place is closing down *now*,” I pointed out. “How are we going to do it another time? It’s going to be forgotten way too quickly, nobody will care about it...”

“So maybe it’s not the best thing to do an article on.” He sat back, crossing his arms. The motion pulled his white shirt tight across his chest. “We’ve already discussed this and made a call on it. I appreciate your passion, but it’s not big enough to warrant our attention.”

He pushed the papers back across the desk towards me, and I felt angry. He didn’t know what mattered to this town. If he did, he would have jumped at the chance to cover this story. He would have known how that diner had been a base for so many of the most important things this town had to offer – how many first dates, how many proposals, how many break-ups had happened right there in the faux-leather-lined booths, over coffee and waffles from Dinah’s kitchen. Hell, it was where I had broken up with Anthony.

Maybe that was what this was about. Did Don still hold it against me, that I had dumped his son? Surely, he wouldn’t have let me start working here if that was the case. Or maybe he had brought me here as a way to punish me, a way to make it clear that he didn’t appreciate what I had done so he could shoot me down at every turn.

I had no idea what Anthony had told him about me, and I was pretty sure none of it was very flattering. I grabbed the papers and stuffed them into my pocket, turning to storm out of the office and back to my desk at the far corner of the building. It was freezing cold most of the day, and I sat around in my coat to keep myself warm. No wonder nobody else seemed to want the desk.

I tucked the papers into a safe place in my desk drawer, hoping I would be able to come back to them sooner rather than later. Maybe he would realize he was wrong to brush off this story, and I could cover it at some point down the line once I had managed to prove myself to him.

I didn't know why I thought I would be able to change his mind. I mean, how much money did his family have, again? He had probably never eaten in a diner in his life.

He was totally out of touch with this town, with what the experiences of the people actually in it happened to be. I wished I could call him out on it, but I knew it wouldn't have gone well. He had to believe he was a man of the people to run a newspaper like this one – it might have had a national reputation, but it was supposed to be local, first and foremost. He seemed to have forgotten about that part, and it wasn't my job to remind him.

It was my job to do the grunt work around here. I had to keep reminding myself of that, even though I wished I had the nerve to push a little harder for what I thought the Oracle needed to cover.

I felt a pang as I thought about the diner shutting down; for it to happen so soon after I had come back, it seemed like more than a coincidence. As though it had just been hanging on for me to return in time, for me to get coffee one last time and then close down. Another part of my life growing up was gone just like that.

Sometimes, it was hard for me to remember my life before Anthony. He had so completely dominated my final few years in Winkleman that sometimes, I forgot I'd had a life before him.

I wanted to change that. Being back here was a chance for me to chase down what I had lacked all that time, what I had run from. I could build myself up again. I could work on myself and prove I could handle whatever was thrown at me. I didn't have to base my life around him or his damn father. I could do whatever I wanted.

Well, within reason. Much as I wished I had the nerve to cover the diner's closure, I knew it was more trouble than it was worth, and I didn't want to lose this position when I had only just managed to get my hands on it.

This was what it was going to be like working in this industry. I had to keep reminding myself of that. Even though I might have had better ideas than those around me, I needed to remember that they were in charge. Of course, I wouldn't be dealing with someone like Don all the time, someone with a connection to my history I wished I could put behind me, but I would have to accept I couldn't always choose the stories I

followed, even if I was sure they were better than the ones I was saddled with.

I sighed and opened up the laptop so I could get back to emailing out invites for an interview with the newspaper. Julie had something planned, and she told me to go chase down a few people she had in mind to speak with. I knew there was no point trying to strike out on my own, at least not yet. The time would come eventually, but I had been lucky not to get my ass turned right around and out of here the moment I had stormed into Don's office. I didn't want to push my luck any more than I already had.

I silently seethed at my desk as I picked up the work I had promised to take care of. I couldn't believe Don had been so dismissive of such a fundamental part of the fabric of this town, but then, I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew what kind of family he came from, what kind of life they lived, and how far removed it was from the rest of us.

Good. Let it stay that way. Because I didn't want a thing to do with that family. I was done with those assholes, once and for all. I had thought that maybe Don might prove to be a little different from the son I had hated so much, but I could see that was not the case. He didn't have a clue how to deal with the real world, how to handle the reality of everything going on here in Winkleman, and I wasn't going to be the one to educate him. He had lived here for years, longer than I had, and he still didn't realize how important this town's history was.

Let him be that kind of idiot, then. Let him act the fool. I would find a way to make sure that the diner's closure wasn't ignored. I needed to do whatever I could to commemorate it.

I glanced out the window down at Main Street below. It still felt so strange to be back here and even stranger to be so passionate about providing coverage for some part of it I had all but forgotten about while I had been away. Odd to think there was still so much tied up in me, so many memories in Winkleman I would likely never be able to forget.

But Don didn't have the same connection to it, not to a single piece of it. He was just locked up in that big mansion, doing whatever he could to forget about the riff-raff down below, the hoi polloi he didn't seem to give a damn about.

That was why he needed someone like me here. Someone who actually got it. Even if he wouldn't listen to me, I would make it so he didn't have a choice but to take in what I had to say.

No matter what.

Chapter 6

C hapter Six – Don

I lifted the glass of champagne to my lips and took a long sip. Maybe getting a little tipsy would make it easier for me to deal with the stress of trying to work out what I was going to do about this damn gala.

I knew there was no way I would be able to get out of it. I was expected to make a show of it, dress up, put a smile on, and show all the newspaper donors that they had good reason to support me. It might not have been easy, and it might not have been how I wanted to spend my evening, but at least it would be over soon.

It was part of the deal, running a place like the Oracle; especially as things grew tighter financially. I had to step up for the sake of my staff to make sure I did everything I could to keep the support rolling in. Even if I would have done anything not to be stuck with these boring assholes right now.

I finished the champagne and reached for another glass, avoiding the gaze of Robert Shilts, one of our biggest supporters, as he closed the distance between us. I knew I should have been a little more interested in him, showing a little more enthusiasm about his presence, but God, it was hard to give a damn when I knew how boring he really was. He could have used his voice as a sedative before major operations, that was how dull I found him, but I had to show a willingness to make sure he kept supporting the Oracle.

“Don, good to see you,” he greeted me, slapping a hand on my shoulder. He was the one who had thrown this gala, a huge charity event that was made to benefit – wait, was this one for children or dogs? I couldn’t remember. I spent so little time paying attention to this stuff. I just turned up and hoped it would be over soon.

I never got the point of these bashes, paying all that money just for a bunch of rich people to get together in a room and pat themselves on the back about how good they were being. Wouldn’t it have made more sense to give the money to the charity in the first place? I knew there was no point bringing something like that up, not when they had probably all decided about it. I figured it was less about actually doing good and more about showing the world how much they would contribute if the situation were right. I didn’t care enough to fight with them about it. I just wanted to get this over with.

“You too, Robert,” I told him, offering him the biggest smile I could muster.

“How are you doing?” he asked me, leaning in and lowering his voice.

I knew what he was getting at. Everyone had been speaking to me the same way since my divorce, as though they were concerned about my well-being and wanted nothing more than to get me through it in one piece. Maybe I would have found it a little easier to believe them if a single one of them had bothered to reach out to me outside of these events, where people could see just how kind they were.

“Fine, fine,” I replied quickly. “Just keeping things ticking over with the Oracle.”

“Yes, of course, it’s good to keep yourself busy,” Robert replied, furrowing his brow and nodding. “How are things going over there?”

“Well,” I replied. “We have a new intern who’s just started work there.”

“Oh, good stuff,” he replied, smiling, even though I could tell he was already bored. Like most of the other people here, he didn’t really care what actually happened at the Oracle, just that he could get his name listed amongst the donors when it came time to give him credit.

He drifted away after a few more pleasantries, leaving me alone once more, much to my relief. It probably didn’t look great, me hiding out at the far side of the room, but it was better than dealing with the throng.

My intern. I wondered what Willa would have made of all of this. It was clear from the conversation we'd had about the diner earlier today that she didn't have a single issue with speaking her mind, and I almost wished she was here to tell these people just what she thought of them, too.

Would she be as forthright with them as she had been with me? I bet so. She seemed to have that energy about her, that sureness, as though she was certain of what she wanted and unwilling to do anything but see it through. I bet she would have seen straight through everyone here quicker than they could shut her down.

I smirked at the thought. Hell, maybe I should bring her along to one of these in the future. Seeing her let loose on these people and wreak havoc with their carefully-cultivated charitable exteriors would be fun.

But then, I supposed, she saw me as not much different from the rest of them. The notion made my stomach sink slightly. I wished there was some to get her to see that I had nothing in common with these guys, that I saw through their fakeness just as much as she did, but I didn't know if she would believe me.

What difference was there between us, anyway? If I was being honest with myself. Maybe plenty of them came here just to show face, didn't really enjoy it, but knew they had no choice but to go along with it for one reason or another. Just because they were better at hiding it than me didn't mean I was something special for hating it as much as I did. I

surveyed the room, wondering how many other people in here would have done anything to get out if they could. I wished I had the nerve to ask, to break down all of this for good.

But instead, I stood in the corner and drank the free champagne, and tried my best to avoid catching anyone's eye so I could keep to myself. I would stay here a couple of hours and then go; it was the easiest way to make them think I had done my part without burning myself out and exhausting myself for the rest of the week.

God, I was getting old. There was a time when I would have been able to do this party scene without a second thought and make it through this kind of event without giving away for an instant how much I hated it, but I was getting worse and worse at it with every passing year.

I supposed it was because I was worried they knew more about my past than I would have wanted them to. That was what scared me. If they looked at me and thought I agreed with what my son had done, I wouldn't have been able to live with it. I wished I could go to each of them and tell them I had done what I could to get him put away, but I doubted they would have believed me. They'd have thought me as bad as my ex, for protecting him, for not reporting the truth of what he had done.

I headed to the bar to get something a little stronger, and a woman leaning against it looked me up and down as I reached it. I didn't recognize her, but I hoped it went both ways. I

didn't like being around people who knew what had happened in my past. The less they could find out, the better.

"Hi," she greeted me, tossing a mane of honey-blonde hair over one shoulder. She smiled at me, and extended her hand. "I'm Anna."

"Nice to meet you," I told her, taking her hand and just going through the motions. I didn't want to deal with anyone trying to flirt with me. It had been years since I'd been with a woman, and I had no interest in breaking that run now.

"I don't think I've seen you at one of these before," she remarked. "But I'm new in town. Have you lived here a while?"

"In Winkleman," I explained to her. "A few miles away."

"Oh, that's a cute little place," she told me, batting her lashes at me. "Maybe you could give me a tour sometime?"

"Maybe," I replied vaguely as I took my drink from the bartender and downed it in one gulp.

I knew I shouldn't have been drinking so much, but it felt like the only way I could get through all of this without losing my mind. I needed the social lubricant to make sure I didn't do or say anything that would make too much of a stir. I wasn't sure I would have been able to keep my annoyance off my face without it.

"I'd love that," Anna told me. She beamed up at me as though she thought this was going well. I wished I could tell her that I didn't want anything to do with her right now – that

it wasn't her fault, but I couldn't stand to be around anyone in this place. They all seemed so fake to me, so phony, and God only knew I'd had enough of that as it was.

She continued to flirt with me, and I went through the motions. I knew the people here didn't exactly take rejection well, and I didn't want to risk causing a scene. But I just wasn't interested.

The thought of doing all that over again, of being with someone after how horrible the divorce had been, made my stomach churn. I didn't want to think about how awful it would be to confide in someone what had really happened. How would they ever be able to forgive me for what my son had done? Would they think I was somehow responsible? I was sure they would. How could you ever let yourself get close to someone who'd raised a kid who was capable of something like that?

I managed to excuse myself to get outside, sucking in a big lungful of fresh air and closing my eyes. How much longer did I have to stay here? How long till I could just leave?

Another hour. Just one more hour, I could turn around and get out of here. I could go home, and I could forget about these stupid things for another few months until the next one rolled around, and I had to forsake another evening to attend.

It was for the newspaper. And that newspaper was about the only thing left in my life I had managed not to fuck up in these last few years. The last thing I wanted was to screw up the Oracle, too. I knew the staff relied on me to come to these

events, show face and ensure we kept the money trickling in. It was how we kept the doors open.

It was worth it. I had to keep reminding myself of that, no matter how easy it might have been to let that slip from my head. How easy it would have been to become selfish and focused on what I wanted rather than what was suitable for the rest of the newspaper.

I peered back inside the large room, bustling with people, all drinking, talking, laughing, and generally having a better time than I could even imagine. I wished I could go back in time to the moments I had felt the same way they did, that peace and comfort with the world around me. It had been so long since I had even come close to it that I had almost forgotten what it actually felt like.

I sighed and stepped back inside, hoping that Anna would have lost interest in me by now. She had probably spoken to someone about me by now, found out what was really going on in my life, and no doubt had lost interest. She would probably spend the rest of the evening trying to avoid me, cursing herself for even thinking she might have wanted to pass the time with me.

That was how I felt nowadays — as though I was a pariah in this place, even though they kept inviting me. Likely to observe me, like some kind of animal in a zoo – to watch what was going on in my head and work out how best to gossip about me without me noticing.

I headed towards the nearest waiter to pick up another glass of champagne. My head was starting to get a little fuzzy, but if that's what it took to get through the rest of the night, I was all over it.

Just one more hour. One more hour, and I would be out of here.

Chapter 7

C hapter Seven – Willa

I tensed when I saw him come around the corner and forced myself to relax. I was going to spend the next few days with Don — the least I could do was try to get on with him to make it as easy as possible for both of us.

I couldn't believe I would be stuck with him, of all people, but I knew when I took this job, I would have to take a trip to this conference with someone. Of course, the last person I had hoped for was my actual boss, especially after the way we had clashed the week before.

I was currently at the airport, where we had agreed to meet. He had offered for us to take a cab there together from Winkleman, but there was no way in hell I could cope with *that* much time alone with him. At least I could pretend to sleep or something on the plane.

I had told him I was staying with a relative nearby, and though I doubted he believed me, I was happy to just keep up

the pretense for the time being. I doubted he wanted to go through with this either, given how badly we had been getting on so far, but if it was to be part of this internship, then I would take whatever they threw at me. No way was I going to let one difficult editor get in the way of the rest of my career. I was sure I would have to deal with a million people like him throughout my career – better to get my practice in now, right?

“Good morning,” he greeted me, and I managed to smile in return. I had a coffee in front of me, and I clasped my hands around the cardboard sleeve, holding it to give my hands something to do.

“Did you make it here okay?” I asked, feeling stupid as soon as the question had left my mouth – of course, he did. He was standing right in front of me.

“It was all right,” he replied, a little stiffly, as though he didn’t know how to speak to me. This was the first time the two of us had been really alone together since I had started working at the Oracle, and I would have been lying if I had said it wasn’t a little awkward.

The last time we had spoken to each other, after all, was when I had been telling him he was a total idiot for not covering the story of Dinah’s Diner. He seemed to have been avoiding me since then, likely so he didn’t have to deal with my attitude. Not that I could blame him. He wouldn’t have been the first guy who found me way too much to handle.

“But I think I’m going to need a coffee to get through the rest of the day,” he remarked, and he rose to his feet to head

over to the counter and get himself something to drink. Okay, so he wasn't completely inhuman. He needed the caffeine hit as much as I did. I was glad about that — something we had in common.

I still couldn't believe I was forced to deal with him in my first job. My ex's father, for God's sake. I didn't even want to think how much shit Anthony had spoken to him about me. It was a miracle he hadn't turned me around and booted me right out of the office as soon as he had laid eyes on me.

But I was here, and so was he, and I supposed the best thing I could do now was try to make the most of it. I might have hated Anthony, but he wasn't his father. I had to keep reminding myself of that. Just because things had gone so badly with his son didn't mean I would fall out with him, too, right?

I hoped not, anyway. By the time Don came back over to the table, I had almost finished my coffee, and the caffeine was starting to make me a little shaky.

Or maybe that was just his presence — I couldn't really tell. I was still trying to get used to being around him again, given what had been going on the last time I had met with him. How much did he know about me? What did he think of me? I wished I could just ask him outright so I could clear the air, but he hadn't broached the subject of what had happened with Anthony, and there was no way in hell I was going to be the one to do it.

“So, have you traveled to Los Angeles before?” he asked me.

I shook my head.

“No, never,” I replied.

I wasn't sure if I should try and bring up the past, remind him of the connection we shared, or if I should let that remain utterly and completely forgotten. It was so hard to gauge. I felt as though I was playing some intense and confusing game of chess. Should I just mention the elephant in the room, or should I pretend I didn't have a damn clue who he was?

“Traveled much at all?”

“No, not really,” I admitted. “I've been too busy with studying. I never really had the money to travel. Hopefully, now that I'll be working, I can afford to see more.”

“I respect that,” he said with a nod. “Work hard, and the money will follow, but getting your foothold in this industry is hard. You have to be dedicated.”

“You do,” I agreed, and I did my best to try and relax. See? We could have a normal conversation. He was just a colleague. I didn't need to read into this any more than that. No matter how tempting it might have been to imagine all the awful thoughts he might have about me, I had to be more confident in myself than that.

“How did you get started?” I asked him. I figured he had probably been handed this career by his family or something like that – I could imagine him stepping into some significant

position right out of college, knowing he never had to work too much for what he wanted.

“I was an intern like you,” he replied, “for this local betting magazine in Chicago. Crazy place, but it taught me the ropes.”

“Oh.” I was surprised. I hadn’t expected something so... gritty. I was expecting an internship at *The New Yorker*.

“How did you end up as the editor of the Oracle, then?” I replied. “That’s a big jump...”

“I always wanted to run my own paper,” he shrugged. “When I moved to Winkleman, I saw a chance to turn the little local paper into something more solid, something reputable. Nobody else really wanted the job, so it wasn’t difficult for me to make my mark, you know?”

“Right,” I muttered. Honestly, I was kind of shocked to hear he had been willing to put in that kind of effort. I had always imagined he had everything he’d ever wanted handed to him on a plate, but maybe it was unfair of me to think of him like that. Just because Anthony had turned out to be an asshole didn’t mean that his dad was going to be the same way, right?

“Yeah, it took a long time to get noticed, but we got there,” he replied proudly. His full lips hiked up into a grin. I tried not to notice how attractive that smile was, with the chiseled jaw and sharp blue eyes — nothing like Anthony’s round face.

It was clear Don was pleased with where he had managed to take the Oracle. I had only ever known it as this solid example of journalistic integrity, and it was hard to imagine it any other

way. It must have taken a whole lot of vision for him to see what it could be when he had first started working there. I had to give him that.

“When was it you got your first NJA?” I asked him. The number of National Journalism Awards the Oracle had to its name was one of the major reasons I had been drawn to apply there — even though it was in the hometown I had tried putting as much distance from as I could.

“Oh, probably...2000?” He pondered. “Yes, that was it, it was for an article about the turn of the millennium, the Y2K bug everyone thought was going to hit. One of our tech reporters. He went on to work on a Pulitzer-prize-winning article later in his career.”

He spoke with pride as he recounted the tale, with no hint of bitterness that the tech reporter had gone on to bigger things once he was done with the Oracle. I liked that. It would have been easy for him to talk shit about how the man should have stayed, but Don sounded impressed that he had managed to do it in the first place.

“That’s amazing,” I told him, and I meant it. It was hard to imagine that a town as tiny as Winkleman could be home to such a huge publication — something as impressive as the Oracle. I’d left because the town had always felt like it was closing in around me, but with the Oracle in the national spotlight, Winkleman suddenly held possibilities.

“Yes, we really pride ourselves on cultivating young talent,” Don said as he sipped his coffee.

I couldn't help but notice a slight shadow of stubble on that lean jawline, as though he hadn't had time to shave before he'd come out today. It made him look a little younger — a little edgier. For the briefest moment, I wondered what it might have felt like to brush my fingertips along it.

Whoa. What the hell was that? Imagining my boss like that...?

I snapped my attention back to work, turning the conversation toward something I should have been focusing on in the first place.

We chatted a little about our favorite writers, those who had inspired us personally, and I smiled as I listened to him talk. He was really passionate about literature, it was written all over his face as he talked. I had always imagined that he had just taken this job because it was an easy way to get some status and cash in his pocket, but the more I chatted with him, the more I could believe it was actually because he was really passionate about it.

By the time we had finished our coffees, it was time to head to the plane. The sun was beaming through the large glass windows as I watched a jet taxi into the next gate. I could already feel my mood perking up a whole hell of a lot. This might not have been how I had intended to spend the next few days, but I could cope with him, couldn't I? He was just a colleague at the end of the day, and I wanted to make sure I impressed him on this trip, showing him I could take on anything this job threw at me.

We arrived at the terminal, and I felt a little flutter of excitement as I handed over my ticket and ID. I didn't know what the next few days were going to bring, not really, but this was my chance to prove to Don that I was capable of taking on more responsibilities. Maybe he would take my story pitches a little more seriously if I could show him how good I was at this, right...?

We waited in the first-class lounge for the plane to arrive, and I marveled at the sheer luxury of it all. I had never indulged in anything as lavish as this, but I had to admit, I could seriously get used to it.

"You always travel like this?" I asked him curiously, and he nodded.

"Always."

"Wow," I murmured, shaking my head. "It's...really fancy."

He glanced around as though he was only just noticing it himself.

"Yes, I suppose it is," he replied, a small smile spreading over his face as he took it in.

"I could get used to this," I remarked, flashing him a playful smile. "Can I get this kind of treatment when I'm back at the office, too? Maybe you could send a limo to my apartment every morning before work?"

He laughed. He had a nice laugh, full and genuine and slightly husky.

“Yes, we’ll talk to the finance department about it first,” he chuckled.

I turned my attention out the window as the plane taxied onto the runway. I squinted against the sun’s glare.

The conference we were attending was a summit for journalistic standards – something that might not have been fascinating to anyone else, but I could hardly wait to jump into it. There were so many people for me to meet there, so many people who would have been working in this industry their entire lives, and so many opportunities for me to learn.

And, being an intern at a place like the Oracle, I knew they would take me seriously. For the first time in my life, for the first time since I had started with this work, I knew I would be able to prove my worth. I knew I would be given the chance to get my foot in the door, and I intended to do everything I could with that. Make contacts, make friends, and ensure I was now seen as part of this world.

I glanced back over at him, and I couldn’t help but notice how handsome he looked with the sun playing on his face. Not that it mattered, not that I was going to allow it to get under my skin. Just because he happened to be slightly good-looking – in a way that his son had never been – it didn’t mean a thing, not now that I was working for him.

Not now that I was about to fly across the country and spend all this time with him, just the two of us.

Chapter 8

C hapter Eight – Don

“What do you mean there aren’t any more rooms left?”

As soon as I heard her voice cut through the din of the crowd around me, I knew this was bad news. I looked up from where I had been flicking through the conference program and saw her standing over by reception, her hands planted on the desk, and her brow furrowed as though she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. My gaze lingered on the glossy hair dipping down her back.

Willa had offered to get us checked in, and I had decided it was best to defer to her on the administrative matters of this weekend – she seemed like the type of person who wanted to take control as much as possible. I was happy to hand over the responsibilities for a change.

But, from what I could make out from where I was sitting, it didn’t seem like things were exactly going to plan. She

sounded pissed, seriously pissed, and I got to my feet and headed over to see what the trouble was.

“What’s going on?” I asked her. She shook her head, looking over at me. Her dark eyebrows were furrowed.

“They’re saying they only have one room booked for us,” she told me. “Can you believe this? Do you know anything about it?”

“No, of course not,” I replied. “One of the staff members back in Winkleman booked it for us. Are you sure? Have you asked for a manager?”

The woman behind the desk, who already looked stressed, tapped something in her computer again and then shook her head.

“You’re just booked in for one room,” she told us apologetically. “And I am a manager.”

“Well, can you at least get us another room now?” I asked her. She pulled a face.

“I’m sorry, with the conference, we’re all booked up,” she told us. “We might have something else available on Monday, but until then...”

“Oh, my God,” Willa groaned. “Don’t tell me we’ll have to share a room?”

“I can find somewhere else to stay,” I offered. “There must be a hotel around here that has a room available, right?”

The receptionist didn't look hopeful. My shoulders sank. I didn't want to have to get all in Willa's personal space while we were staying here. I didn't want her to think this was some plan I had devised — that I was some kind of perv.

“The nearby hotels have been sold out for months,” the concierge explained with an impatient smile.

“It's fine,” Willa sighed. “We'll make it work. Maybe I could just...sleep on the floor or something? Could you bring up extra covers and stuff?”

Seeing an out to the situation, the concierge seemed willing to do what she could to help with our predicament. “Of course. Of course. Your room has a loveseat. I'm sure with a few pillows —”

“Yes,” Willa quickly shook her head.

Not a great start to the conference — sleeping in the same room as my intern, who had to be at least twenty years younger than me. I sighed and shook my head.

Willa and I made our way up to our room, carrying our bags with us. I apologized as we walked down the corridor, hoping she wouldn't be too mad. I knew there was nothing I could do to fix it, not without booting one of us out of here to another hotel that might not even have a spare room free for the rest of the conference. Besides, we would be so tired from running around at the conference — did it really matter? We'd both pass out.

When we got there, we found that the room was sizeable. It had a sitting area — some space to ensure we weren't on top of each other the entire time, which had to count for something. All I wanted was for her to be comfortable, not to feel like I would get up in her personal space while we were here.

“I'm sorry about this,” I offered again, but she just waved her hand and dumped her suitcase near the short couch.

“It's not like you planned it,” she assured me. “Besides, it's just for a couple of nights, right? It's no big deal. I don't snore — much. And maybe a room will open up in the hotel while we're staying here.”

“Maybe,” I replied, hoping against hope that was the case. I wasn't used to having someone this close to me sleeping in the same room as me, and I would have been lying if I said it didn't freak me out a bit to think about doing it with her. I was sure she felt the same way, given what had happened before she had come to work for me. She had been dating my son, for God's sake — there was no way to avoid the fact that this was strange.

Once we had unpacked, we looked over the program for the next day — the conference wasn't kicking off till tomorrow, but there was a mandatory swanky dinner to attend tonight.

“Is that worth going to?” Willa asked me, pointing at the listing in front of us. “Or is it one of those things where everyone just gets drunk and forgets whoever they've met?”

“Yeah, much more like that,” I chuckled, appreciating that she looked at these things like I did.

“I don’t like that stuff,” she remarked, shaking her head. “Can we just get room service up here? If that’s okay? I’m so tired, and I’d rather get to the conference early tomorrow and start in on the real experience.”

She was sitting on the opposite corner of the king-sized bed, and I was suddenly distinctly aware of how close she was — and that we were together on a bed. I cleared my throat and stood up, averting my eyes from her.

“Sure, if that’s what you’d prefer.” Who was I to argue? I was grateful someone else made the decision not to attend.

“Thank God,” she murmured. “I’m no good at all that fancy stuff. Where’s the room service menu...?”

We looked over it and picked out a few dishes to have for dinner. I was starved. Neither of us really had an opportunity to eat with all the traveling today. She pushed open the sliding door that led to the small balcony attached to our room. The breeze ruffled her hair over her shoulders and she lifted her chin and closed her eyes.

“God, it’s good to be here,” she murmured. “Winkleman is just so...”

A knock at the door interrupted her, and I got to my feet to open it.

A waiter was standing there with our food, along with a free bottle of wine to make up for the confusion with the room. At

first, I considered turning it down and sending him away, but Willa's face lit up and she accepted it before I could say another word. We arranged the food on a table next to the balcony, where the sky was turning dusky rose, and the cool evening wind was rolling in. The setting would have been incredibly intimate — if it wasn't for my intern.

“So, you're glad to be out of Winkleman?” I asked her as she poured herself a glass of wine.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “It's strange being back in my hometown. Especially after everything that —”

She cut herself off before she could go any further, but honestly, it just made me all the more interested in what she was about to say. What was going through her mind right now? What had happened to drive her out? I knew it was none of my business, but I had a sneaking suspicion it might have to do with Anthony, and I needed to know just what kind of impact my son had on her.

“After everything that happened?” I prompted her, and she glanced up at me before taking a sip of her wine and averting her gaze.

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything,” she told me quickly.

I shook my head. “There's nothing to apologize for,” I replied. “You didn't tell me anything.”

“Right.” She let out a small giggle. I liked hearing her laugh; I really did.

“What about you?” she asked. “You glad to get away from that place?”

“Yes,” I said so adamantly that she laughed again.

“You sound pretty sure,” she remarked. “What makes you so happy to be away?”

I hesitated before I answered. Like her, I didn’t want to dump anything on her that she couldn’t handle — that might have been seen as inappropriate. Being this close to her, sitting out on the balcony, drinking the wine — it felt a little dangerous, as though I was on the brink of saying something I shouldn’t.

“Just not much for me there at the moment,” I replied, trying to keep it as vague as possible. She didn’t want to hear about everything that had happened with me and my ex, with Anthony – hell, if she didn’t know some of it already. The news had spread fast around Winkleman. No reason to believe she wouldn’t have heard about it since she had arrived back anyway.

“Really?” She sounded surprised. “What about your wife?”

I froze. Was she being sarcastic or something? Did she seriously not know what had happened?

“You don’t know?” I asked her. She blinked back at me, clearly surprised.

“Know what?” She replied. She sounded genuinely confused like she had no idea what I was getting at. Maybe she

was being honest – maybe I just needed to stop being so paranoid.

“My wife and I split up,” I told her, momentarily dropping my head down to my chest. Her eyes darted to the empty spot on my finger where my ring had been.

“Oh, my God, I had no idea,” she blurted out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to drag it up for you or anything...”

“That’s okay,” I replied. It stung a little less than normal for some reason. Usually, when it came up, I felt that deep pang in my chest, a reminder of how much I had lost and still had left to get over.

“How long since the two of you...I mean, since you broke up?” she asked. Her concern looked genuine, and it put me slightly more at ease.

“A few years,” I replied. “Can’t believe it’s been that long, really.”

“I... I’m really sorry,” she told me, shaking her head. “I thought the two of you were solid. I mean, when I knew you, that’s certainly how it seemed....”

She trailed off again. There was something odd about acknowledging that we had known each other before. Neither of us had brought it up since we started working together, as though we didn’t want to break the taboo we had both been living under, pretending we didn’t see what had happened between us before.

“But I guess that was a long time ago,” she admitted. “I was still in high school. What did I know? I’m sorry you had to go through that. Any kind of break-up is difficult.”

“It is,” I agreed.

She sounded so mature — so worldly. How old was she now? Out of her master’s program for a year. What did her resume say? Twenty-four?

“Tell me about it,” She continued, sipping her wine. She wasn’t even looking at me. It was clear she was thinking about a specific break-up, and I wondered if she had been through something with someone she’d been involved with at college.

“You’ve had some bad break-ups?” I probed.

“Just one,” she said, glancing away from me as though she wasn’t sure she wanted me to hear what came next, which could only mean one thing.

“With Anthony?” I asked hoarsely. I hated saying his name out loud, a reminder of all the ways I had failed to keep him in line. I wished I could go back in time and change what had happened, but I didn’t know how I would have gone about it. He had made his choice. He decided what kind of man he would be, and there was nothing I could do to change it.

She nodded, taking another sip of wine. It didn’t hide the flash of pain I caught in her eyes.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought him up,” she told me. “I know he’s your son. We don’t have to talk about him...”

“It’s okay,” I replied, frowning my brow. “It was a bad breakup?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

“I always thought the two of you seemed happy together.”

She rolled her eyes skyward as though she could barely believe what she was hearing.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what he wanted everyone to think,” she replied, shaking her head. “I...it wasn’t good between us. Let’s just say that. You don’t want to hear the details...”

She trailed off, looking out over the city below us. I could tell she was having a hard time digging all this back up, and I felt bad for touching on this clearly-painful part of her history. Maybe I should have just left well enough alone, but I was curious to see how far back my son’s bad behavior had gone.

“Can you tell me about it?” I asked her quietly. She stared at me.

“Don, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to hear about all of this...”

“I want to,” I told her, my voice firm. “If it’s what he did, then I want to hear about it. You can tell me.”

She sighed.

“I don’t even know where to start,” she confessed. “He was just...awful to me, he really was. I didn’t really see it, not when we were first together, because...well, you know how it is with first love. You don’t see what’s right there in front of

you because you don't have anything to compare it to. You think it's normal, it doesn't even cross your mind that it might be — you know — that you might not deserve something like that.”

I winced. I wished I could say I was totally shocked by the notion, but in truth, I couldn't. I had seen the dark side of Anthony after the accident had happened, and I knew it couldn't have come from just anywhere. It must have always been there and I was just too busy with my career to even notice it — until it was too late.

“Did he...hit you?” I went straight to it. Because if he had —

She shook her head at once.

“No, no,” she replied. “It wasn't like that, it wasn't physical. It was...emotional.”

I could see this was disturbing her. Bringing this up was more than she could handle. I reached out my hand, intending to lay it on hers, but hesitated at the last moment. Touching her right now would have just made everything worse. I needed to hold myself back and show her that I believed and understood what she was saying, even if it was hard for me to wrap my head around.

“He basically convinced me that I always had to be running around after him, doing whatever he wanted,” she continued. “He had to be the focus of my whole world, and if I dared do anything alone —” her voice faded. “He had me worried about every move I made, every little thing I did...”

She trailed off again. It seemed as though she wasn't used to talking about this. I wondered if she had ever come clean with anyone about what had really happened between them or if this was her first time opening up about it. Maybe it was the wine.

"It's why I left Winkleman in the end," she continued. "I just couldn't stand the thought of being anywhere he still had access to me. I needed to put as much space between us as I could. It was the only way I knew I could break free."

"And that's when you went off to college?" I asked. She nodded.

"I thought it would be enough distance to get him to lose interest in me, but he still tried to get me back," she sighed. "I thought he was sick of me. I thought he would move on – he was seeing other girls even when we were dating. I didn't think it would be that big a deal when we split. Hell, I thought he'd be happy he didn't have to keep anything from me anymore, but it was like – it was like he couldn't stand the thought of not having what he thought he was owed. He basically harassed me for months after we broke up. I think it wasn't until I moved out of my dorm room and into my own apartment the second year he lost interest."

I stared at her, trying to take it all in. I'd known none of this. If I'd had even the barest idea, I would have done something to try and stop it, but hearing how much she had suffered and how hard she had gotten him to leave her alone filled me with anger.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” I told her. I hoped she believed me. I knew it might be hard for her to trust that I meant it. I needed her to know that I was clueless about what was happening at the time. She didn’t deserve to be treated like that. She was young. She didn’t know better. And I should have taught my son to treat women better.

“No offense – him being your son and all — but I’m sorry you had to live with him way longer than I did,” she tried to joke.

It was still a tricky subject, thinking about everything that had happened with my son, but I could still manage a short laugh.

“He hasn’t tried to get in touch with you since, though?” I asked her, and she shook her head.

“No, I assume he found someone else to attach himself to,” she replied with a shrug. I didn’t know if the exact dates lined up, but now I thought of it, he’d brought home a new girlfriend, Terri, about a year after he’d split with Willa. I guess that made sense. I wondered if Terri had been through something similar with him.

It made my stomach twist with shame to think of what he had done, and right under my nose, too. I had known Willa, seen her around at least, and I hadn’t been able to tell what had been going on between the two of them. Perhaps if I had paid a little more attention, been a little less distracted by work...

But then, what difference would it have made? He would never have let me within a million miles of his relationship.

He would have done anything he could to keep my nose out of it, especially if he knew he was acting in a way he shouldn't have been.

But his mother, I was sure, would have defended him even if she had seen what he was doing to poor Willa. Maybe she had and had chosen to look the other way to spare her sanity, to spare herself the effort of having to do anything to change it. I felt a surge of anger in my chest when I thought about it, but I knew it wouldn't help to let it out. Willa was through with Anthony, and so was I. That was what mattered.

"I'm glad you got away from him," I told her. "Do you... feel as though you've recovered now —moved on from what he did?"

"I'm getting there," she nodded. "Being back in Winkleman stirred up some of the old paranoidias I used to have, but I'm a different person now. I'm not going to let what happened get under my skin. I've moved on."

I smiled gratefully. I was glad. At least she seemed to be doing better. I never wanted to think anyone in my family was capable of hurting someone like that, but I had seen how far Anthony could take it, and I had seen how easy it was for him to brush off the reality of his deeds. I just hated imagining that Willa was one of his victims. No matter how much I wished I could have kept her from it, at least she was able to move on from it by now. That was what mattered, wasn't it?

"This wine is really good," Willa remarked, breaking the silence as she poured herself another glass. I smiled and

nodded.

“It really is,” I agreed, taking her cue to move on from this particular conversation. She clearly didn’t want to relive it all again, and who could blame her?

She sipped on her wine and turned back to look over the city. I watched her. I couldn’t help but stare at her profile. There was tremendous resilience in this woman. Her pointed chin was raised at the sunset as if she was ready to challenge it. I was glad she had confided in me. I saw Willa in a whole new light now.

And that light had changed...

Chapter 9

C hapter Nine – Willa

The first thing I thought when I woke up the next morning on the hotel room couch was: *what the hell did I say to him?*

I couldn't believe I had been so stupid. It had been the wine, and being alone with him, and – oh, well, all of it. I had told him about what had happened with Anthony, and there was no way for me to pull it back, not now that it was out. I should have known better than to spill my guts to him the way I had, especially about things his own *son* had done, but honestly, he didn't seem to take it too badly.

Or maybe he was just being polite and was silently seething at me for telling him the truth about Anthony and who he really was. I got up quietly and headed to the bathroom before he woke, putting as much space between us as I could. I tried not to notice his sleep-tousled hair on the pillow or listen to his soft breathing as I crept by.

I had to get through the rest of the conference today, and I wasn't about to share anything else about my past. Especially not when it came to Anthony. I had to be smarter than that, no matter how composed Don seemed about all of it.

I turned on the shower and stepped beneath the water, letting it cascade over my face to scrub away the remnants of the wine, couch, and travel. I needed to forget about last night and how comfortable I had been just talking to Don. From this moment out, I would keep things strictly professional — no more talk of our private lives or anything else.

Although...I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious about what he had told me about his marriage and his distance from his son. What had happened to cause all of that? I mean, I knew Anthony was an asshole, but what had he done to push his own father away from him? And whatever Anthony had done — had it gotten in the way of Don's marriage, too? I wished I had the nerve to ask, but I knew it was none of my business. I needed to keep my nose out of it and focus on what I came here for. Work.

I got dressed, put my makeup on, and when I came out, Don was up and waiting for his turn in the shower. That seemed too intimate a thought — that this man would be standing naked under the same cascade of water I had just been under. I kept my head down so he couldn't see the blush on my cheeks. He didn't mention what we'd discussed last night, and I was glad. He just disappeared into the bathroom.

“So, I want you to keep notes throughout the day,” he explained once we arrived at the exhibition hall. “We’ll be doing a couple of interviews. I’ll expect you to handle recording and transcription afterward. Is that something you can handle or want to?”

“Totally,” I replied with a nod. I was confident I could take care of anything he threw at me, sure of it, no matter what.

It would be easier than going over the conversation we’d had last night again, at least.

We entered the giant auditorium, which was already buzzing with people. There was a main vision statement to start everything off, and my hand rushed across the page as I tried to take it all in. Don glanced over with some amusement at my notes when I was done, and a small smile passed over his face.

“I think you’ve pretty much transcribed him word for word,” he remarked with a grin.

“I didn’t want to miss anything,” I shrugged but smiled back at him. “Where are we heading next?”

We headed down to a small room off the main floor, where Don was meeting with a member of the press complaints commission to discuss the future of misinformation in the media. It was fascinating listening to the two of them discuss their views on this, and I was so enthralled that it was almost difficult for me to remember I was meant to be there doing a job.

I transcribed the notes from the interview on the short lunch break we had. Don was instantly surrounded by people who wanted to talk to him, and I couldn't help but wonder when I would be able to command the same level of interest. I knew he'd had years in the industry to get to the stage he was now, but hey, a girl could dream, right?

We did another interview after lunch and attended a couple more of the discussions. I noticed people looking at me, probably wondering who I was, and I rolled my shoulders back with pride at the realization I had earned my place here. It might have been hard to believe, but I was finally where I needed to be when it came to this career. I might have just been getting started, but hey, a foot on the ladder was still one step up, right?

By the time the first day ended, I was exhausted, but we received great news that a room had opened up for me. No sleeping on the couch tonight. No listening to Don breathe in his sleep. No thinking about him in the same shower. I headed up to move all my stuff, grateful for some space to figure out what was going on inside my head.

Finally settled in my new room, I changed into something more comfortable and looked at myself in the mirror. I couldn't believe I had really told him about what had happened with Anthony. Hell, at least I knew he recognized me now. That had to count for something. I was glad he didn't seem to hold it against me, didn't seem to think I was some crazy, lying bitch – the way Anthony had made me feel.

Was his shock about all of this genuine? It felt that way. I wondered how much Anthony had gotten away with over the years, how much his father had no idea about.

And just what had been enough to push Don over the edge and cut off his son once and for all.

I needed a damn drink, that was for sure. It was probably a good idea to take a chance to meet some new people from the conference – people I might be able to use as contacts in the future. It wasn't often I was going to find myself in a hotel filled with others from my industry. I needed to do some serious networking here.

The bar was already busy with people, and I felt a twist of nerves hit me hard. I paused in the doorway, trying to muster up the courage to tackle this group of seasoned vets in journalism. Just as I was about to turn around and chicken out and call the whole night a loss, I caught his eye.

Don. He was standing just a few feet from me at the bar, a drink in his hand. A smile curled up the corner of his lips, and I felt relieved as soon as I saw him. He gestured for me to come over, and I hustled to his side. I was sure I should have been striking out into something bolder, but maybe it was safer to hang out with him for tonight instead.

I ordered a drink and leaned against the bar, and turned to look around the room. There were so many people there, all schmoozing their asses off.

“You can taste the obsequiousness, can't you?” he remarked in a deep voice that carried over the crowd. He shook his head.

“God, it’s crazy.”

I grinned. He had a point. Even though I would probably be amongst them soon enough, I had to admit he was right.

“Would you judge me if I went to join them?” I asked. “I feel like I need to make some contacts here while I have a chance.”

“Have at it,” he replied, waving his hand. He seemed a little more relaxed than last night, likely glad he wouldn’t have to share a room with me again. He had offered to crash on the couch, but I knew there was no way I could let my boss sleep on the short loveseat while I was sprawled out across the king-sized bed.

“Maybe I’ll just have a drink first,” I remarked, sipping my beer. I didn’t really want to deal with anyone else — not after working with them all day — and besides, there were still questions I had for Don — about what happened with Anthony.

We drank together and discussed the day’s meetings. It was good to keep it professional, at least at first. I didn’t want him to think I was prying into his personal life, even though that was exactly what I wanted to do.

Once he ordered us another round — on him, he insisted, to thank me for all the hard work I had put in that day — I took a deep breath and looked at him. The curiosity was getting the better of me, and I knew it was time to come out and ask him what had been bothering me since our conversation last night.

“Something on your mind?” he asked me. I bit my lip.

“Actually, yeah,” I admitted. I didn’t want to intrude, but... I took another swig of beer.

“I’m sorry about everything I told you last night,” I confessed. “I shouldn’t have put all of that on you. I know Anthony is your son, and no matter what kind of relationship the two of you have, you don’t deserve to have to deal with what he did. It’s not your fault. I want you to know I recognize that.”

He nodded slowly as he listened. I scanned his face, trying to read some kind of reaction. I was sure he had to be pissed right now. Pissed that I had brought it up again when the two of us had just left it behind. He probably didn’t want to sit around and listen to me badmouthing his son, not knowing we were going to be working together.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out again, shaking my head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t want to make it awkward between us...”

“You didn’t,” he assured me, and he locked eyes with me – the sincerity in his face caught me off-guard, and I held my breath as the background noise faded away. I didn’t even know what I expected him to say next, but I wanted to hear it.

He picked up his drink and took a long sip before staring down into it for a moment.

“You don’t know what happened with him, do you?” he asked me, his voice dropping slightly.

“With Anthony?” I asked, frowning. “I – I told you what happened with us. After that, the two of us — I mean, it wasn’t like I went out of my way to keep in touch with him.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“He got into some trouble after the two of you split up,” he explained.

My spine stiffened. This sounded like something he hadn’t discussed with anyone else for a long time. I wondered what on Earth was going on inside his head right now — what I didn’t know about Anthony’s life after the two of us had split up.

“He didn’t...hurt anyone, did he?” I whispered. It had always been my deepest fear, that he had gone on to seriously hurt – or even worse – someone he was with. I knew what kind of asshole he was. And I had been scared, ever since the two of us had split, he might do something he might not be able to take back.

“He did,” Don muttered finally. My stomach dropped. I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Someone he was...with?” I asked, swallowing even though my throat felt dry.

He shook his head. “No, no, not like that,” he assured me. “He...he was drunk — behind the wheel. He hit a girl with his car. She was seriously injured – she’ll be dealing with it for the rest of her life, actually. And he...got away with it.”

He spat the words out as though he could hardly believe he was saying them out loud. My eyes widened.

“How do you mean?”

“The girl pressed charges. Of course she did,” he explained. “But Anthony’s mother – she did everything she could to protect him. He barely got a slap on the wrist. All that damage, all that hurt, and he just walked away from it as though it had never happened. And that girl will be paying medical bills for years.”

He tossed back a solid gulp of whiskey.

“I still can’t believe it,” he muttered. “I thought I raised him better than that. Hell, I thought I had married a better woman than that. But she was just – she couldn’t stand the thought of him in prison. Probably couldn’t stand the thought of her son being known as the kind of person who would do what he did, even though he was. Even though he is.”

I stared down at my drink for a moment. I didn’t know what to say. I mean, I wished I could have told him it surprised me, but it didn’t, not really. The kind of guy Anthony was, he had always been entitled, always been demanding, always acted as though he should get everything he wanted and get away with it. I could see him brushing off his responsibility for something like this, too.

“Is he in your life now?” I asked Don. “Do you still talk to him?”

Don shook his head.

“I couldn’t stand to have him around anymore,” he explained. “It’s what pushed me and my ex to divorce, too. I could never look at her the same way, knowing she had covered up for him. It made me wonder just what else she would do to keep him from facing the consequences of his actions, and I didn’t want to stick around to see how far she would go.”

His voice was slightly choked-up, and I could suddenly see the aching loneliness in him. He had lost his wife, he had lost his son, and he had been pushed out of the family because he couldn’t stand to just sit there and watch Anthony get away with such a terrible crime. I had so much respect for him, so much respect for what he had done – standing by his morals in the face of all of that must have taken a Herculean amount of effort, but he had done it.

I reached out to touch his arm. I knew it was probably a little forward, given he was my boss, but I didn’t care. I just wanted him to know I was there for him.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that,” I murmured. The words didn’t feel strong enough to explain how much I sympathized, but it was the best I could do, at least for now. I knew he must have been struggling so much, being apart from his family, being separated from the woman he had married and the boy he had raised with her.

“I’m glad I saw them for who they were, at least,” he replied, shaking his head. “I really thought the two of them were better than that but looks like I got it wrong.”

“You did what you could,” I assured him. “You couldn’t have done more. If your wife wouldn’t work with you, what were you meant to do...?”

“My *ex*,” he corrected me. “My ex-wife.”

“Of course,” I replied. “But you shouldn’t blame yourself. I knew Anthony, I knew the kind of person he was, and there was nothing anyone could have done that would have changed him. Hell, I tried enough times myself while we were together, trying to make him into a better person, but it would never have worked. He was just...he’s just *like* that.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t have been if I had chosen someone better to raise him with,” he sighed.

“You can’t put that on your shoulders,” I assured. “You did what you could. Cutting him off because you couldn’t stand by what he had done, that’s...that’s really powerful. You should be proud of yourself.”

He managed a small smile, even though I could tell he was having a hard time holding himself together. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it was, how much he had struggled, but I had nothing but respect for him now that I knew the truth.

He wasn’t like his son. He wasn’t anything like Anthony. Anthony would never have felt this kind of guilt. He would never have questioned himself. He would have just breezed on without stopping, pushing onward to cause more chaos in the lives of the people around him.

My hand was still on his arm, and I couldn't help but notice how strong it felt beneath his jacket. I reached for my drink and took a sip, and felt the side of my body closest to his start to tingle. Oh, no...

“Thank you,” he said. “It means a lot to me. There are not many people I can speak to this about, not without them judging me, anyway, but sometimes, the weight of it...”

His voice cracked, and I reached over for his hand. I knew I shouldn't be touching him like that, shouldn't be touching him at all, really, but with the look on his face, it was just too difficult for me to hold back and deny him some comfort. He looked over at me. I could see a strange mixture of emotions in his eyes, and I wished I could lift some of the weight from his shoulders.

The world seemed to quiet around us for a moment as I just looked at him, and I felt my breath catch in the back of my throat. I wasn't looking at the asshole father of the jerk I dated as a teenager — not anymore. No, I was looking at a man tormented by the knowledge of what his son had done, what he had caused the world, so much so that he had cut him off because he couldn't stand to be complicit in letting Anthony get away with it any longer.

Don was a man of strength. A man of such force, actually, I couldn't help but see him in an entirely new light. I couldn't take my eyes off him and couldn't help but notice how handsome he was compared to the man I used to know.

And, before I knew it, I had leaned forward and planted my lips against his.

Chapter 10

C hapter Ten – Don

I didn't know what the hell we were doing as we tumbled out of the elevator together, our hands all over each other. I pushed mine into her hair as I backed her into the wall behind us, my tongue tracing the inside of her lips as she moaned against my mouth.

The moment she kissed me down in the bar, I knew I should have pushed her off. I should have shoved her away and told her we couldn't do this because we worked together and I was older. Hell, I was her boss. This was not supposed to be some cheap hotel room hookup, and yet...

... and yet, coming clean with her had been one of the best things I'd done in a while. I didn't talk to anyone about the reality of what had happened with my family, and sometimes, the sheer weight of it was more than I could handle. But she understood. She had been through it with Anthony. And she was patient — just listening, and the words had just started pouring from me, and I didn't want to stop them. I didn't want

to hide it, not from her, not when I was sure she could understand where I was coming from.

And, now, the intimacy had just turned into something else as we made our way down the corridor to my hotel room once more. I knew this was downright fucking crazy – not only was she my employee, she was my son's damn ex – but at the same time, the chemistry between us was way too hot for me to handle. I couldn't stop this. Didn't want to.

We pushed open the door and the two of us practically fell over the threshold together, her hands sliding underneath my shirt and across my stomach. The feel of her fingers on my bare skin was electric, and I could already feel myself growing hard. All the months and years I had denied myself this kind of connection with someone had been building up to this moment, and I wasn't willing to hold back anymore.

I pushed her down onto the bed and moved on top of her. She clasped my face in her hands and pulled me down so she could kiss me, our lips coming together as she slipped her tongue into my mouth. Her body was so small, so soft, so pliable beneath my fingers as I explored her with my hands, pulling at her dress and pushing it up over her hips. She squeezed her thighs against mine, letting out another one of those delicious moans against my mouth.

I couldn't get enough of her, enough of this. I needed her to be naked already. I needed to be able to feel every inch of her as she moved against me. I needed to feel her gorgeous body responding to mine in all the ways I wanted it to. It was as

though I had been waiting for this the whole time she had been back in my life, but I hadn't been able to put it into words until now.

We stripped each other down until both of us were naked on the bed together. I had to admit, I was a little self-conscious about being nude in front of a woman so much younger than me, but the way she grinned and pounced across the bed on top of me told me she wasn't worrying about any age gap.

I wrapped my arms around her as she planted her hands on my chest, kissing me like she could hardly believe it had taken this long for us to get here. How long had she been thinking about us like this? The thought of her wanting me, needing me, for as long as we had worked together was so hot...

I could feel my cock nestled up against her thighs, the warmth of her pussy just a few inches away from me, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to hold back much longer. I wanted to be inside her, I wanted to feel her wrapped around me. It had been so long since I had allowed myself this kind of intimacy with anyone, and now we were doing this. I didn't want it to end.

"I really want you to fuck me," she breathed in my ear as she kissed my neck and down my throat. The feel of her breath against my skin mixed with her husky words, it was all I could do not to come right there on the spot – but, instead, I reached down between my legs, wrapped my hand around my cock, and guided myself against her for the first time.

She let out this long sigh as she felt me slide up inside her, and the feel of her warmth wrapped around me was so good I had to still myself for a moment to keep from finishing way too soon. She kissed me again, and I reached down for her hips and pushed her further onto my cock, feeling her slide down to envelop me completely.

She pushed herself upright on top of me, and I took in her body, the sight of her – but more than anything, the look in her eyes, the passion written all over her face. The pleasure was so obvious, and it turned me on so much to see how much she wanted me, how much she was getting off on the two of us being together this way.

I began to pump inside of her, filling her with my cock, and she slid her hips this way and that to take in every inch of me. I brought my hands to her hips, steadying her, and she squeezed herself around me, massaging my cock from the inside out.

“Mmm,” she moaned. Her body shuddered on top of mine, and she slipped her hand between her legs so she could begin to play with herself as I fucked her.

I wasn't sure I had ever seen anything hotter in my whole life than her on top of me, needing me, taking every inch of me that she could. She rocked herself back and forth, back and forth, and I moved my hands to her waist, feeling the soft inward curve of her beneath my palms. She seemed to fit against me perfectly, as though we had been made to go together like this.

My mind was twisting with a million different emotions. I was sure I shouldn't have been doing this, but when it felt as good as it did, it was impossible to deny myself the pleasure of it. Her eyes locked on mine, and all the doubts inside my head vanished. I couldn't focus on anything but how Willa felt, how she looked, and how it felt to be wanted by her after preventing myself from getting close to anyone for so long.

It didn't take long for her to hover on the edge. I could tell from the tension on her face and how the insides of her thighs began to twitch against me, squeezing me, capturing me even deeper. Her fingers danced across her clit as though she couldn't move fast enough. Her belly was rising and falling, and her eyes were beginning to glaze slightly as the pleasure got the better of her.

When she came, she collapsed forward onto me, pressing her head against my chest and breathing into my neck. I could feel her pussy clenching around my cock, and knowing I had been enough to get her over the edge, knowing she had wanted me enough to come, was all it took to get me there, too.

A few moments later, I reached my own release inside her, pushing into her deep and holding myself there – I didn't want this moment to end. Not just because it felt so damn good but because I wasn't sure what would happen when it was over.

But, as she lifted her head from my chest and smiled at me, I found all that concern slipping away. Maybe it didn't matter what happened next – maybe what mattered was having Willa here, with me, right now, her body wrapped around mine, the

look in her eyes as she gazed at my face as though she was seeing me for the very first time.

I leaned forward and kissed her gently, brushing my nose against hers, and she grinned. Okay – I could get used to this.

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven – Willa

When I woke the next morning, it was to the sound of Don breathing next to me – and the stark reminder of what I had done the night before burned into my mind.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. Had that really happened? It couldn't have, could it? No way could I have – I mean, no *way* could I have actually slept with my damn ex-boyfriend's father, could I?

I lifted my head and peered around, and there he was, next to me, sprawled out in the bed beside me, still naked from the night before. Was that a little love bite I saw on his neck? Did I do that? Holy hell...

I must have been crazy. Even crazier, though, was the fact that it had been so fucking good. I knew I shouldn't have let it happen, but if we'd hooked up and it had been downright awful, at least I would have been able to put it behind me once and for all, push this away as nothing more than a stupid

mistake I had made once and would, in no uncertain terms, ever make again.

But even thinking about how hot it had been to fuck him had me shivering in bed beside him. God, the feel of his hands all over me, the feel of his body against mine – the feel of him finishing inside me like he was making sure I knew who was in charge. All of it was so painfully hot that I had a hard time thinking straight, knowing I should get as far from this room as I could before he woke up, but reluctant to move right now.

I finally managed to coax myself into slipping out of bed and into the shower, running the water hot and steamy enough to match my memories of the night before. I couldn't believe I had been the one to kiss him. There had just been something so hot about the way he told me his truth, the way he was honest, as though he knew he had nothing to hide. I had been so sure I knew what kind of man Don was, but honestly, I hadn't had a damn clue, and finding out there were hidden depths to him excited me in a way I didn't think was possible.

Don. I had fucked *Don*.

We were meant to be on this work trip together, and instead, we'd wound up falling into bed together. I didn't know what the hell I had been thinking, but it was so good I knew I had to do it again. And again, and again...

I hadn't really been with anyone since I had split up with Anthony. There had been a few fumbles here and there, but nothing that had ever amounted to anything. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever get the intensity and pleasure some

of my female friends talked about when they shared their stories of hooking up with guys they liked, but now...now, I totally understood where they were coming from. It was clear to me now. I just had to wait for the right guy to come along to figure it out.

And who would have thought Don would be the right guy? When I had first figured out I would be working with him, I had practically been ready to throw in the towel right then and there, but now...now, the two of us had found something in common. Our amazing chemistry. And I didn't want to let it slip through my fingers.

I had no idea what to expect next. No idea if I would walk back into the room, and he would tell me we needed to pretend this had never happened. It wouldn't have surprised me, and hell, maybe it would have been for the best, too. I didn't know. But right now, I was in that post-orgasmic bliss of an amazing night with an older man who knew exactly what he was doing, and I didn't want to ruin it by thinking about real life.

I knew it was more than just the chemistry between us that had me feeling the way I did, though. It was...it was the conversation we'd had before it, too. After all I had been through with Anthony, to speak with his father and realize he didn't think I was crazy was a relief I didn't even know I needed. I had thought I was over all of it, and maybe I was, but the weight it lifted from my shoulders to hear him speak like that was everything to me.

I finished up my shower and stepped out of the steamy bathroom to find him sitting up in bed and reading the news on his phone. I paused for a moment in the bathroom doorway, just looking at him before he noticed me. He was so damn handsome; his strong chest, peppered with gray hair, was exactly right for me to nestle my head into. He glanced up from his phone and smiled when he saw me standing there.

“Hey,” he greeted me. “How are you? Hope you’re not sore.” He smiled, and all my nerves dissolved.

“I’m good,” I replied, hardly able to keep the grin off of my face. I made my way toward the bed and tossed the towel aside, climbing in and snuggling up against him.

He looked down over my naked body with obvious appreciation and trailed his hand from the nape of my neck all the way down to the small of my back. He left a trail of tingles when he touched me, and I shivered happily against him.

“You’re going to make it very hard for me to get down to the conference on time,” he murmured, his voice low and laced with desire. I groaned.

“Do we really have to go today?” I asked him. “You don’t want to just...skip out on it?”

“God, you have no idea how much I want to do that right now,” he remarked, and I grinned up at him playfully.

“But we can’t miss the interviews we have today,” he pointed out. “And if we’re not down there, people will have

questions. I don't think I'm ready for anyone to start asking about this yet."

I almost asked him myself just what he thought it was, but I knew it would have been a bad idea. Whatever we were doing here, it was a whole lot of fun, and I didn't intend to ruin it by trying to slap a label onto it.

"You're right," I agreed. "Besides, I'm interning for you. Doesn't look so good for me if I'm getting distracted from this conference, huh?"

"I mean, you could just sleep with the guy who's doing your evaluation," he joked, and I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Oh, no, you've figured out my scheme," I teased. "What am I going to do now...?"

He parted his lips in surprise, and I laughed at him.

"I didn't mean it," I assured him. "I'm just kidding. I'm not doing any of this because I want you to give me the job."

"Good," he replied, and he smoothed his hand down my back again. Something about him touching me like that was intoxicating, as though he was taking charge of my whole body at once. I liked it. I liked it a whole hell of a lot, actually.

We ordered room service for breakfast, much to my relief – I wasn't sure I could be around anyone else quite yet, not without giving away my obvious attraction for this man. I craved so much more from him, and I hoped that tonight, the two of us could get down to this again. I had no idea if he thought this was a one-off thing or not, but frankly, from the

way he was looking at me and touching me, I had to assume he saw this as something more than a fling.

We ate together and sipped coffee as we both read through the morning news. I kept sneaking looks at him over the top of my cup, wondering if this was really happening. This man — this man who had seemed so untouchable and so powerful to me just a matter of days ago, had just taken me into his bed and given me the best fuck of my life. How the hell had that happened...?

I was trying my best not to think about the fact that he was my ex's dad. I had never looked at Don back when I had been with Anthony as I looked at him now. It had never even crossed my mind, but now, I felt like cursing the old version of me for not seeing how sexy he was, not seeing how smart and cool he was.

But maybe it just took a little growing up on my part, and now, I could see Don for what he was. I could see how hot he was. And I didn't ever want to forget that again.

I would have to keep my hands off him as long as we were together at the conference. The last thing I wanted was for someone to look at us and think I was trying to sleep my way to the top or something.

I knew it was a possibility. I wouldn't have been the first person to try and use that part of themselves to get where they needed to go, and I hated the thought of someone looking at me, looking at the two of us together, and thinking I had only done this because I wanted to push my career forward a little

further. It was anything but that. The tension and chemistry between us hadn't started when I learned he was my boss. It started when I saw this new side to him, this side I could swiftly tell I was becoming addicted to.

Once we'd had breakfast together, I slipped back to my room to change. I was sure nobody would have noticed the outfit I'd worn down to the bar last night, but I didn't want to risk someone spotting what was really going on here. I was a little paranoid, for sure, and I planned to keep myself as discreet as possible.

We met in the lobby, and he flashed me this secret little smile that actually made me a little weak in the knees. Did he have any idea what he was doing to me...?

I was pretty sure we made it through the rest of the day without giving away what was happening between us, but it was tough. Every time I caught his eye, it was as though I was flashing back to last night, to the incredible feeling of him moving inside me. I knew I needed to stay focused on the task at hand, but with him right there beside me, distracting me the whole time, how on Earth was it fair for him to expect that?

I wanted to pull him into the bathroom so we could make out or something. I felt like I was a teenager again, reliving all those fizzy, excitable feelings that had always been crushed under the weight of what Anthony had demanded from me. I loved being around this man and could already feel myself getting drawn back into our chemistry. Now and then, I would

find myself staring a little too long at him, and I had to snap myself back to reality to keep from getting distracted.

Once, he caught me looking a little too hard and smiled as he leaned over in his seat in the back row of the seminar we were attending.

“Keep staring, and someone’s going to notice,” he teased me. He didn’t seem to mind one little bit. I bit my lip to contain my grin.

I didn’t want this to end. I knew we were going to have to go back to reality in the office soon enough, but after that, I had no idea what would happen. The best I could do was make the most of the time we had together right now, even if it felt like it was fleeting.

And I would have to find out what happened on the other side when the time came.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve – Don

“Are you sure nobody’s going to see us here?” Willa asked as her eyes darted back and forth in the crowded restaurant.

“We’re going to be fine,” I assured her. “Besides, it’s not unusual for us to be at a work meeting, right?”

“In a place like this?” She asked, laughing.

She had a point. The restaurant I had brought her to was far removed from the humdrum standard of the hotel we had been staying in, instead draped with the deep velvets and sparkling gold of an imperial palace. I had wanted to treat her to something a little more impressive than room service, at least for the one night we were out here.

Willa had dithered on it a little but eventually agreed to come with me to this place. I was glad. I wanted nothing more than to indulge her. It had been a long time since I had been

able to treat anyone, since I'd had someone in my life worth treating, and I was looking forward to showing her a fun night.

"I don't think I've ever been in a place as fancy as this," she remarked as the host led us to our table.

"Glad I can indulge you," I grinned when she flashed me a smile.

"That doesn't sound very professional," she teased. God, she was so damn sexy – the way she bantered with me and kept up with everything I said. It was stimulating. She was hot. And I couldn't get enough.

We sat down to our meal, and she looked over the menu, taking it all in.

"Okay, everything sounds good," she told me, shaking her head. "Where do I start? What do you usually get?"

"We can try a little of everything if you'd like," I offered, and she parted her lips in surprise.

"Oh, it's okay. I wasn't angling for that or anything —"

"I know you weren't," I assured, "but I'd like to share it with you. Better than putting it all away myself, right?"

"If you insist," she giggled, and I waved over the waiter and ordered enough food to have our table groaning under the sheer weight of it.

She surveyed the feast in front of her, deciding where to start.

“God, this all looks delicious,” she murmured, reaching for the wine I had ordered to help lubricate the meal. “I don’t even know where to begin...”

“Well, we have to start somewhere,” I remarked. “Don’t want to let any of this go to waste, right?”

“Right,” she agreed and dived into the crispy spring rolls with plum sauce. As she took a bite, a drop of the purple sauce clung to her lower lip for a moment, and I fought the urge to reach out and brush it away with my finger. I knew if I felt the barest hint of her soft mouth beneath my fingertips, it would be impossible for me to do anything to resist her.

I had a hard enough time as it was, with her sitting right there in front of me, looking like the most delicious snack I could possibly imagine. She was wearing a simple black dress that showed off a few inches of cleavage – nothing that would have looked too obvious to anyone passing by, but it was tantalizing, impossible for me to keep my eyes off. I wanted to reach out and trail my fingers down her neck, feel the pulse of her heart in her throat, see the way she reacted to me when I laid hands on her like that...

I forced the thought to the back of my mind and focused on the food. The two of us chatted about the conference, but soon, the conversation turned to journalism at large – our favorite writers, the people who inspired us, and the stories we had most enjoyed reading or hearing in the last year.

“I’ve always wanted to do a podcast,” she confessed, biting her lip and flashing a smile. “I’ve just been waiting for the

right kind of story to come along for me to tell.”

“A podcast, huh?” I remarked, tapping my finger on my chin thoughtfully. “That sounds pretty technical. I’m not sure I could keep up with something like that.”

“Oh, yeah, it would take a lot of work, but I think some stories are just best delivered in that format, you know?” she pointed out. I loved hearing about her passion for this industry. Sometimes, it was easy to get lost in the day-to-day drudgery of everything at work and stop thinking about the bigger picture, but she made it simpler to stay focused on what mattered here — the stories, bringing them to as broad an audience as we could.

We finished our food and lingered over the last of the bottle of wine as the evening darkened outside the doors. I knew we should have been getting back to the hotel, but I was having too much of a good time to even think about leaving here with her. The buzz of the wine was starting to settle in, and the way she looked in the light of the candle flickering between us was so enticing that I couldn’t think straight.

“This place is really beautiful,” she remarked as she glanced around. “I don’t think anyone’s ever taken me somewhere this extravagant before.”

I cocked my head to the side.

“Really? No boyfriends who brought you somewhere fancy to celebrate an anniversary?”

“That suggests I’ve actually had boyfriends,” she pointed out. “And besides, even if I did, most of them would have been college guys — it’s not like they had the money to take me to a place like this.”

“Well, I’m glad I could treat you,” I remarked, and she smiled.

“Be careful. I might start getting used to it,” she shot back.

“Maybe you should.”

“Not like there are many places like this back in Winkleman,” she pointed out, and I laughed.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point there,” I agreed. “That diner, what about that?”

“If it’s still open,” she sighed, shaking her head. “I still can’t believe that place is going to shut down. I don’t know how the town will function without it.”

“Maybe someone could inject some money into it,” I suggested. “That could be enough to keep it open.”

She glanced up at me, clearly trying to determine if I meant what I had just said.

“Let’s not talk about the diner,” she added. “We didn’t exactly end on good terms the last time we talked about it, did we?”

“No, I suppose not,” I agreed and reached for the wine. I was starting to feel a little tipsy, but I wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol or how she was looking at me across the table. I could

feel the soles of my feet prickling with attraction, and I wished I could lean across the table and kiss her right then and there in front of everyone — and not give a damn what anyone saw, what they thought, or what they said.

I knew I had to hold myself back, but damn, when she looked as gorgeous as she did right now, it was hard to force myself to stay on my side of the table. I couldn't stop thinking about last night, her body against mine, the way she had looked on top of me, and the way she had responded when I had touched her. I wanted that again, all of it, every single second, and I wasn't willing to settle for less.

“What are we going to do when we get...when this conference is over, I mean?” she asked me nervously. I figured she had good reason to wonder. I mean, the two of us had hooked up on a work trip, and we would have to go back to reality soon enough.

“I don't know,” I admitted. “Whatever you want. I'm willing to go along with it. You just say the word, and we can play it however you'd like.”

She smiled, cocking her head to the side for a moment and studying me. I could tell something was on her mind, but I wasn't well-acquainted enough with her to know what it was. I quite liked that, actually. She kept me guessing, and it just made me even more intrigued to know what was happening inside her mind.

“What are you thinking?” I asked her, lowering my voice. I could see something glittering in her eyes, as though they were

straying to places they shouldn't have been — places I wanted to go.

“I'm thinking,” she murmured, leaning forward and whispering, “that if we want to play it the way I'd like...I have a few ideas.”

“Oh, yeah?” I replied, feeling the stir of desire in my belly once more. I wanted her badly but didn't want to push for more than she could give.

“And what I'd really like right now,” she continued, her eyes sliding over to the bathroom on the other side of the room, “is for you to meet me in there in a few minutes and for us to take this health code a few notches. How about it?”

I parted my lips in shock. I had never done anything like that in my life. But the way my body had responded to her suggestion, I could tell I wasn't going to be able to turn her down.

She rose to her feet as though she could already see I had made my mind up about it.

“I'll see you in there,” she told me, raising her eyebrows playfully. And with that, she made her way to the bathroom, swaying her hips and showing off her delicious curves under her tight black dress.

Fuck. Was I really going to do this? I looked around, trying to work out if anyone would catch us. It was busy enough that the staff was mostly distracted. And the way I wanted her right now, it couldn't wait.

I counted out sixty seconds and then went to follow her. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, whether I was going to get in trouble for this, whether the two of us were going to be caught in the act – but when my body was crying out for her the way it was, I knew there wasn't a chance in hell I was going to turn her down.

Chapter 13

C hapter Thirteen – Willa

As soon as Don entered the bathroom, I pulled him close and kissed him hard. I knew we might get caught, but it was hard to give a damn when I desired him as much as I did.

I had been thinking about this the whole night, trying to work out the best way to get him somewhere private enough for the two of us to hook up. There was something about the soft lighting, the wine, the conversation, and the way his eyes seemed to linger on my cleavage that turned me on in a way I couldn't deny. I had to have him, even if it was dangerous, even if it was stupid.

I needed him.

His hands slipped beneath the hem of my dress, and his fingers sank into my thighs, gripping me tight and pulling me close. He growled into my mouth, and I could taste the expensive wine on his lips – I pushed my tongue into his mouth, needing more, craving as much as I could take.

I arched my back to press my body into his as he lifted me up onto a railing at the back of the bathroom, so I could hook my legs around him. The pressure of his body against mine was enough to make my head spin. I wanted to feel him inside of me, and I knew the two of us couldn't wait long. If the staff noticed both of us were away from the table, they would figure out where we had gone – and I knew we weren't exactly being discreet right now as it was.

I reached beneath my dress and pushed my panties down around my ankles as he rolled the hem of my skirt up over my hips. I needed his hardness inside of me already. I needed to feel him fill me and take me and make me his in all the ways he wanted to. My system was responding to him, my nerve-endings alight with his touch, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to relax until I'd felt him slide all the way inside of me once more.

“You are so fucking hot,” he murmured in my ear, his voice low and needy. I loved hearing him talk to me like that, knowing I was this sexy young thing he couldn't keep his hands off. I was addicted. There was something so arousing about the age gap between us, about how powerful he was, and how much he seemed to give over to me when we were together. He couldn't resist me, and the intoxicating control that gave me was almost more than I could take.

I reached down and unzipped his pants, pulling his cock into my hand and stroking him a couple of times until he was fully hard. I looked down at his erection, a drop of pre-cum leaking from his tip, and I let out a moan. I couldn't hold it back.

Nothing got me off more than seeing how much this man wanted me, seeing how badly he craved my body.

I guided him towards my entrance. The moment I felt his head slide inside of me, everything else faded – the noise of the restaurant outside, the memory of how close we were to getting caught if we didn't play our cards right — none of it mattered. Just the feeling of him slowly pushing inside of me, hands on my waist to hold me steady, the pressure and the release I needed so badly. That's all that mattered.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he groaned. Hearing him curse was so rare. It was also hot as hell to hear him losing control like that. I reached down to the small of his back, pushing my hands against him to guide him even deeper inside of me. The feeling of his cock spreading me open wiped everything else from my mind, and all I could do was breathe deep as he moved all the way to the hilt inside of me.

I couldn't resist stealing a glance down at him, down at the two of us together. I loved seeing him inside of me. I still couldn't quite believe it was happening, couldn't quite believe a man like him wanted anything to do with someone like me, but here it was – here *he* was, desiring me and showing me just what he wanted from me.

“Fuck me,” I moaned to him, giving him all the encouragement he needed to go harder and faster inside of me. His cock seemed to fit inside of me perfectly like the two of us had been made for this, and I began to roll my hips back to meet him, taking him as deep as he could go.

He moved his hand to my mound, turning it so he could play with my clit as he fucked me – touching me just the way I had touched myself the night before. I couldn't help but grin. He had been paying attention, making sure he knew just what it took to get me off, and I loved it.

I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my head into his shoulder, needing to be closer to him, needing to close the distance between us even more than we already had. Being across the table from him all night had just been far too much distance between us. Now that I had him where I wanted him, I wasn't willing to settle for anything less.

I could already feel my orgasm starting to grow closer and closer as he guided me toward the edge and to the release I needed so badly. When he touched me, it was clear he knew just what he was doing, and I was helpless to resist it, to resist him. I brushed my lips up and over his neck, finding his lips once more, and our tongues met as he massaged my mound and my clit with his hand.

He continued to piston his cock inside of me, and I felt the insides of my thighs starting to twitch, a sure sign I was getting close. I needed to come. I had been holding myself back all evening, playing at being classy and cool in this restaurant that demanded it of me, but underneath, I was consumed by this desire for him – consumed by the desire to roll up my dress and let him fuck me right there in the bathroom stall, with everyone else just a matter of feet away from me.

“Come inside of me,” I begged him, my voice catching at the back of my throat as I tried to speak. He picked up the pace. The pressure was almost unbearable, tipping to the point that I couldn’t hold back.

Finally, I felt my orgasm burst through me. I had to bury my head into his shoulder to avoid making too much noise, but even with my best efforts, I was sure someone must have heard me. The pleasure was so intense I couldn’t hide it, my pussy spasming around his cock as he continued to thrust inside of me, his fingers dancing against my clit as he went.

A few moments later, once he was sure he had made me come, I felt him reach his release inside of me, slamming himself up to the hilt and holding himself there as he finished inside me.

He kissed me again, and when he pulled back, there was a big-ass smile on his face. His cheeks were a little flushed, but I guessed that was to be expected for a guy his age.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a fuck as hot as that in my whole life,” he murmured, and I giggled and kissed him on the corner of his lips.

“Well, get out of here before they notice we’re gone,” I shot back. “Or it’s going to turn into us getting banned from this restaurant for life, too.”

“Worth it,” he replied with a smirk, but he quickly tidied himself up and headed out the door, leaving me to follow him when my legs had become less wobbly.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and I had this big goofy grin on my face – I couldn't hide it, wouldn't have wanted to, even if I could. It had been a long time since I had felt the way I did right now, a long time since I had felt this want from someone close to me, and there was no way in hell I was going to argue with it, not when it felt as good as this.

I smoothed down my hair and wondered how long I should wait before I went out there again – how long to avoid suspicion? Or had they already worked out what was going on in here? I wasn't sure. Maybe it didn't matter. I was certain we weren't the first couple to sneak off in this place and do something like this, even if they didn't like to admit it.

I pulled down my dress, made sure my panties were roughly where they were meant to be, and brushed a smudge of lipstick where it had managed to transfer across my face. I didn't know what the hell would happen next, but as long as I had these hot-as-hell memories to hang on to, I didn't care. I just wanted to make sure I made as many of them as possible before we hit the light of the real world once more.

Chapter 14

C hapter Fourteen – Don

“I should get back to work,” Willa murmured to me as she looped her arms around my shoulders and looked up at me. I double-checked that the blinds were pulled down and nobody could see inside the office right now.

“You sure about that?” I asked her, and she let out a laugh.

“Okay, you’re making it way harder than it has to be,” she protested. “I’m supposed to be helping out Kyle with one of the stories he’s working on...”

“And I’m the boss, and I tell you what your priorities are,” I pointed out, sliding my hands to her hips. I loved the curve of her waist, the way it seemed to fit into my hands as though it had been made for them. I wasn’t sure I would ever tire of feeling her gorgeous body pressed to mine.

Well, I hadn’t yet, anyway. It had been a couple of weeks since the two of us had returned from the conference, and ever

since, we'd been having a great time sneaking around behind the backs of our coworkers with our little fling.

It was the most fun I'd had in longer than I ever cared to remember, the most addictive and intoxicating thrill I could recall in my life. It wasn't that I hadn't been with anyone else before, far from it, but the way Willa made me feel – it was something else entirely.

She was so damn exciting to me. That was the part I couldn't seem to wrap my head around. Maybe it was because of all the taboos we were breaking – she worked for me, after all, and she was young. And she had once dated my son. Most people would have looked at what I was doing and thought me immoral or crazy, but I knew she didn't see me that way.

Or maybe it was having to keep it quiet from the people we worked with. Yes, that could have been it. Perhaps it was those evenings we had spent together, telling everyone we were working late in the office. I wasn't sure if any of them had started to catch on yet, and frankly, I wasn't about to ask. Maybe a few had noticed a couple of lingering looks between us, but I wasn't going to let it get to me. They would likely just brush it off and think they were crazy for even imagining it.

I had never been the guy who went after women he worked with. Hell, I had never been the guy who went after women at all – not in the last few years, at least. And before that, I had been married and utterly faithful to my wife. I hoped the reputation I had made for myself would make it easier for

them to brush off any doubts they might have had about me and the amount of time Willa and I spent in the office together.

I kissed her deeply, and her body softened against mine. But before she could get into it, she pulled away and raised her eyebrows at me.

“Much as I would like to pretend I have nothing better to do today,” she murmured, “I actually should get some work done. If I spend more time in your office, people will start getting suspicious, right?”

“I guess they might,” I agreed, though I was reluctant to let her go. She kissed my cheek and headed for the door, leaving me to slump back behind my desk and try with everything I had not to go after her again.

I could hear her talking to someone just outside the door, and the sound of her voice made me smile. God, I had it bad. It had been so long since I had allowed myself to get so close to anyone, and it made my head spin to think of how near we were to each other – how many boundaries I had broken down to let this happen, even though I should have known better.

Sex, after all this time, felt downright sacred to me. And when it was as good as it was with Willa — well, even more so. She had told me we were having some of the best sex of her life, so I was glad it wasn't just me who was addicted to the chemistry we shared.

We had just kept things at the office so far, and I had never had her back to my place, but I wondered what it would have been like for us to spend that time together. Probably

dangerous. I was already starting to have feelings for her, and seeing her at work was only making it harder to deny them – only making it harder to hide from the way I felt. She was so good at her job, so passionate and dedicated, handling everyone around her with the confidence of someone who had been in this line of work for decades instead of the short time she had been.

I was already thinking about offering her a permanent position here. It wasn't often an intern made such a good impression, but I could tell she was making life easier for everyone else, too.

Or maybe it's just what I needed to believe, given that I wanted to keep her around — what I needed to tell myself to keep from admitting how strongly influenced I was by how much I wanted to keep her close.

Was that so wrong? I liked having her here. She might have been the last person on Earth I expected to fall for the way I had, but sometimes, this stuff just came along in a way you could never predict, right? It didn't have to mean anything. It didn't have to be read into. Sometimes, the chemistry was there, and you just had to take it as it came...

I knew a part of it was what had happened with Anthony, too, if I was being honest. So many people would have looked at the fact that I had cut my son out of my life, and they would have decided I was nothing more than a monster, unable to support my son – they would never have seen the pain I had been through, the agony of choosing not to have him in my

life. How terrible I felt, even now, how awful it was to know I had to cut him off.

But she understood it – she understood it without me having to explain it to her because she had already been through hell with him as it was. She knew he was different. She knew it was more than just me being too cold and too callous to take what my son had done. She understood that Anthony would never change, and that cutting him out was the only choice I had.

That was a relief. I had grappled with the thought of explaining my situation to the next person I was with, and had decided it was just easier to avoid getting close to anyone, period. I didn't want to have to admit what my son had done, or what my wife had covered up — what I had allowed, because I just didn't know how to stop it before it rolled entirely out of hand.

There was so much drawing me to her, and I knew I needed to cut it off before it went any further. Because, as much as there was pulling us closer, there was as much getting in the way of anything happening long-term, too. She didn't want to be with someone like me, not really, not with the age gap between us. She was a young woman at the start of her adult life, and I was closing in on the end of my professional career. She wanted someone who could keep up with her, someone who was able to match her energy at every turn.

I pulled open the blinds and glanced out again, and found her peering over in my direction. As soon as she caught my

eye, she smiled, and I felt my heart twist in my chest. I smiled back, and quickly closed them again.

I was starting to get the damn flutters for this girl, and I was a grown man. I should have known better. But when she smiled at me the way she did – I knew there was no chance to deny it. No chance I could hide from it.

I was falling for her. So hard and so fast I knew that hitting the bottom was bound to hurt.

Chapter 15

C hapter Fifteen – Willa

I closed the supply closet door behind him, wound my arms around Don, and planted my lips against his. I knew we were risking a whole hell of a lot, doing something like this at the Oracle, but it was hard to give a damn about it when I had been craving him all day and wasn't willing to hold off any longer.

I moaned as Don lowered his mouth to my neck, and he slid a hand to my mouth to keep me quiet.

“Don't make too much noise,” he warned me. “Anyone could hear us.”

“You're not doing a good job making this any less hot,” I scolded and kissed him again, slipping my tongue into his mouth so I could taste him properly.

It was the middle of the work day, and right now, I knew I should have been transcribing an interview for someone – but instead, I had slunk off to the supply closet to get my hands on

Don. The two of us had been totally and utterly addicted to each other since we had arrived back from the conference, and it had been a couple of days since I'd had the chance to be alone with him. I was starting to get antsy without his touch on my skin, and I didn't want to wait any longer than I already had to feel it.

He reached down to my leg, pulling it up against him so I could grind against his hard-on. I was already soaked, having been sitting at my desk and thinking about this all day, and I was sure he could tell.

Don sank his hand into my thigh, rubbing up and underneath my skirt as he groaned against my mouth. Nothing turned me on more than knowing I could get this man — this strong, powerful man, giving in so completely to the way I made him feel. I had never felt this kind of heady power before in my life when it came to sex, and I was already finding myself totally and utterly addicted to it.

He rolled up my skirt, reaching between my legs to pull aside my panties and brushing his fingers over my swollen lips. I shivered against him, the sound of our colleagues just a few feet away turning me on even more. I knew we could be busted at any moment, but the thought of it just made it even harder to control myself.

I never thought I was this kind of woman, the kind who would get off on a clandestine affair like this, the kind who would lose herself completely to the feeling of being with a man as powerful and strong as Don. Never thought I would

want someone so much older than me, either – never thought I would be this attracted to someone who had decades on me.

But, as he trailed his fingers lightly around my clit, I wondered how I could have been so wrong about it. How I could have gotten it so wrong? Being with him was the sexiest thing in the world to me, and right now, I intended to make the very most of it.

He moved his fingers to my slit, pushing them inside of me, and kissed me again, letting his teeth catch on my bottom lip. The mess of pleasure and pain came together in my head till I couldn't think of anything else, and I wondered just how he did it, just how he knew where to touch me and what I wanted from him.

He didn't fuck me with his fingers, instead slowly pushing them in deep and twisting them around until he could massage my g-spot with his fingertips. The pleasure was almost unbearable all at once, and I felt my knees start to tremble, start to give in to the way he touched me.

“Mmm,” I moaned against his lips, trying my best to keep my voice down. It was hard to care when it felt as good as this. When the sensation seemed to take control of me the way it did. I wasn't thinking about anything but how good it felt, how sexy it was to be with him. For once, I wasn't worried about the way I looked, the way I sounded, twisting my body in just the right way to ensure I was serving up the best version of myself I could – no, for the first time in my sexual experience, I was with someone who didn't make me worry about any of

that. All I could focus on when it came to him was the way he made me feel, and the relief of that was palpable.

“God, you’re so wet,” he murmured in my ear, letting his teeth graze against my lobe momentarily. I arched my back to grind my hips against his hand as he fingered me. I needed more. I needed to come. I knew we didn’t have much time before someone noticed we were missing and put the pieces together.

I was starting to breathe harder and harder, my belly rising and falling swiftly as my wetness spread down the inside of my thighs. I couldn’t hold back. I didn’t want to. I could feel his lips against my neck, his body pressed to mine, the strength of him, the tension of our closeness, and it was all pushing me to that point of no return.

Finally, I felt my body contract, my pussy clenching around his hand. I buried my head in his shoulder to keep from making too much noise, pressing my lips together to try and contain the cry of pleasure I wanted to let out. He held his fingers still, not moving them, letting my pussy pulse around him as the orgasm ripped through me, shuddering from my scalp to the tips of my toes.

He withdrew his fingers from between my legs, and without thinking, I reached to grab them and pull them up to my lips. I opened my mouth and guided them inside, trailing my tongue around his fingers as I looked him in the eye. His brow furrowed slightly, his lips parting as though there was so much he wanted to say about how good it looked.

“You’re going to make it very hard for me to get back to work,” he murmured, pulling his fingers back and kissing me again.

“That’s the idea,” I teased, and he grinned.

“You should get back to your desk,” he urged in a husky voice. “Don’t want anyone noticing you’ve been away for too long, right?”

“You sure?” I asked. One orgasm was never enough when it came to him. I always wanted more. Even if I knew he was right, and we were pushing our luck spending this much time away from our desks.

“I’m sure,” he replied, and he planted one more kiss on my cheek before he carefully pushed open the door, gesturing for me to go out.

I slipped out and made my way back to my desk, sure everyone could see the look on my face, the flush to my cheeks, and tell I had been up to something I probably shouldn’t have been. I knew it was likely a little more dangerous than we should have been risking, doing something like this at work, but when it was as much fun as this, it didn’t matter. I couldn’t have denied him even if I wanted to. Our chemistry was more than I could bear to resist for more than a few hours at a time.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the supply closet and headed back to his office. He caught my eye for the briefest moment and flashed me a smile, and I felt a little flutter in my chest.

Quickly, I returned my gaze to the screen in front of me. I was supposed to be here doing a job, remember? That was so easy for me to forget that when he was around. There was just something about Don that was impossible to ignore, even when I should have known better, even when I might have been throwing away the best career opportunity I'd ever had to pursue it.

Ugh. I knew I was letting this get the better of me, and I knew I should have been smarter than to allow myself to get distracted, but when he was around, all that good sense just seemed to vanish, and I didn't have a chance to fight it. I loved being with him, loved spending time with him, and I wasn't sure I was doing a good job pushing down my feelings for him right now.

Because...it was more than just sex. Even though I should never have let it get that far. We had a whole lot in common, a whole lot more than I'd been able to share with anyone in my past, and the closeness was a little more than I could make sense of. I loved talking with him about journalism, debating articles with him, and sharing links to our favorite pieces of writing.

The connection was intense, and it was only getting stronger every day. I was beginning to develop real feelings for him, and in so many ways, I knew I should have been shutting them the hell down. It wasn't just the fact that we worked together. It was the age gap. It was the fact that he was my ex's dad. There were so many things that should have been enough to

keep me away from him, but none of them had been enough to stem the desire that was building in me for something more.

When I returned to Winkleman, it wasn't like I'd intended to stay. Hell, I had still hardly unpacked my boxes back in my apartment. I had thought this would just be a one-and-done. I'd get this internship under my belt and be out of there.

But now...now, I was actually thinking about sticking around for a while longer, something I had never in a million years imagined I would consider doing. For what? For him? Because I wanted to see where this thing went? Much as I didn't want to admit that to myself, that was what it was. I wanted to get to know him better, I wanted to see how the two of us could make this work outside the confines of this job.

Would I sacrifice this internship to be with him? I already was, in a way, given that I was allowing myself to get so distracted.

Speaking of which — I blinked and stared at the screen before me. I couldn't let my fluttering over him get in the way of the job that needed doing, people around me were relying on me to take care of their assignments, and I wasn't going to let them down.

Whatever happened between Don and me, I would deal with it when the time came. For now, it was just about focusing on the work that needed to be done — and hoping I could keep myself from sneaking off to the supply closet with him again.

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen – Don

“God, I’m starving,” Willa complained as she leaned back from her desk and stretched her arms above her head. Her shirt rode up a couple of inches, revealing a strip of her gorgeous belly.

“You okay?” I asked, trying to remain focused on the task at hand. The two of us were in late that evening, finishing up an article to go live with the weekend supplement the next day. It had been turned in late and one of the interviews had needed fact-checking and editing, and she had offered to stay late with me to help out.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied, letting out a yawn. “Just looking forward to getting this thing live and going home.”

“Right,” I agreed and hesitated. In truth, there was something else on my mind, something I wanted to ask but was sure she didn’t want to hear right now.

It had been nearly a month since we had arrived back from the conference, and we still hadn't really spent any time together outside of the office. I didn't even know what it would be like, not really. I couldn't stop thinking about the dinner date the two of us had been on together when we had been traveling, how much fun it had been to treat her and show her off to the world. I knew we wouldn't be able to do that here, not in a town as small as this where news traveled the speed of light, but maybe I could convince her to spend a little more time with me somewhere more private.

"I think we just need to do one last copy-edit, and we're finished," I told her. "What are you doing after this? For dinner, I mean."

"No idea," she replied, with a shrug. "Probably going to order some pizza and watch something crappy on my laptop. If the internet in my apartment holds out, that is. It's never been particularly good."

"Do you want to come back to mine?" I asked, as casually as possible.

She stared at me for a moment in surprise. "Like...for dinner?"

"Yes, if you'd like," I replied. "I have a bottle of wine I've been looking for an excuse to open — could be fun?"

I phrased it like a question, annoyed with how insecure I sounded. But I didn't want her to feel as though she couldn't say no to me, not since we were working together. I knew we were toeing some seriously dangerous territory, doing all of

this while we were colleagues, and the last thing I wanted was for her to feel as though she didn't have the opportunity to say no when I suggested something.

She cocked her head to the side as though considering my offer. And then, she grinned.

“Actually, that sounds great,” she replied. “I haven't had a decent home-cooked meal in way too long. Are you a good cook?”

“Guess you'll have to be the judge of that,” I smiled. “Why don't you finish up here, and I'll head back to my place and get cooking?”

“Hmm, you playing househusband? I can get behind it,” she teased lightly. I grinned.

“I'll send a car when you're ready to come over,” I told her. “See you soon?”

“Sounds good,” she replied, and I could see a little pink flush on her cheeks. I wondered if this excited her as much as it did me, this chance for us to step up our connection a little further. I could get used to this.

I headed home and started putting together a simple pasta dish as I waited for her to finish up and an hour or so later, she arrived at my door. Her eyes widened as she looked around my place.

“You didn't tell me you lived in a damn penthouse!” she exclaimed. I laughed.

“I don’t think Winkleman has anything that could reasonably be described as a penthouse,” I remarked.

“Well, either way, this place is huge,” she remarked, shaking her head. “You have this all to yourself?”

“Yeah,” I replied as I made my way back to the kitchen. It must have shown – the place was so empty right now. I still hadn’t bothered to fill it up with much, there just didn’t seem to be much point when I was the only one here.

But now, I supposed, I wasn’t. Willa was here with me, and that had to count for something, didn’t it? I liked having her around. I liked hearing her voice in the other room as I poured us some wine.

“I got the article up,” she called to me from the living room. “I think it’s good to go live tomorrow. I guess we’ll know for sure when we get all those angry comments about spelling mistakes...”

“You won’t have left any of those,” I assured her as I made my way through with a glass of wine. I handed it to her, and our fingers touched, just for a moment. She smiled at me.

“Thanks,” she replied. “Your faith in me means a lot.”

“I wouldn’t have hired you for the internship if I thought you couldn’t catch a grammar mistake a mile away,” I replied. “You want to come see what I’m cooking? Make sure you’re not deathly allergic to any of it?”

“Love to,” she agreed. She followed me into the kitchen, kicking off her shoes as she went, and the sound of her bare

feet on the hardwood floors was soothing to me. There was something intimate about it, even though I knew it really wasn't a big deal.

She tried a little taste of the pasta sauce I made and nodded approvingly.

"Tastes great to me," she told me. "How long till it's ready? I'm starving..."

I served it up as soon as I could, and the two of us sat at the table to eat together. I was a little worried it might be awkward, given that we hadn't spent much time together alone before this, but the conversation flowed as easily as it ever had.

Eating here, in my home with her, was so peaceful. I wasn't sure why it had taken me so long to ask her here in the first place, but I was glad I had finally managed to get the courage up. After so long waiting, it was so much fun to spend time with her the way we were.

"That was delicious, thank you," she told me, sitting back from the table and reaching for her wine. I couldn't help but notice the way her lips skimmed across the glass, and I found myself wishing they were planted against mine right now instead.

"No problem," I replied. There was something on my mind, something I wanted to ask her, but I wasn't sure if it would be a step too far. After all, this in itself was kind of a big deal for the two of us, and I didn't want to rush her into anything she wasn't comfortable with.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked, tipping her head and studying my face as she smiled. She always seemed to know when something was bothering me. I couldn’t hide a thing from her, and honestly, I was glad about it. I had a hard time saying what was going through my head sometimes, but she never left it too long to get it out of me.

“I was wondering if you wanted to stay the night,” I asked her. We hadn’t actually slept in the same bed together since we had left the hotel, and I had missed it. There was something about waking up beside Willa that I found myself missing, even though we had only done it a couple of times.

She blinked at me in surprise. I could tell she was doing her best to catch up with where my head was at. I didn’t want to rush her, but I didn’t want her to walk out that door, either, and leave me alone with my thoughts again.

“I would love to,” she replied and beamed as she rose to her feet and came around my side of the table. She slipped onto my lap, winding her arms around my neck, and gazed at me happily.

“I didn’t realize you were even thinking of kicking me out,” she murmured, and I chuckled, bringing my hands to her waist.

“Well, it depended on how much you liked my cooking,” I joked. “If you were rude about it, you would have been out on your ear already.”

“Good thing you’re a pretty good cook, then,” she remarked, leaning in to plant a kiss against my lips.

I could taste the wine on her tongue, and everything in the world, for a moment, made sense. I knew I had never imagined I would be here with her, be here with anyone, but we had found each other – about the only two people in the world who could really understand what each other had been through, no matter how strange it might have seemed to the rest of the world.

When she pulled back, she had this soft smile on her face that was so beautiful. I found it hard to think straight for a moment. Suddenly, on the tip of my tongue were the words I had been trying to push down for days now – the words I knew would take this to a level we would never be able to back down from.

I love you.

I forced them away quickly. It was just the wine talking. There was nothing more to it than that. Having Willa here, and getting closer to her, had my head going to places it shouldn't have been, and I wasn't about to let them get the better of me.

She kissed me again and jumped off my lap to grab the bottle of wine. I watched her as she went, still a little spooked from the intensity of my feelings. It had been a long, long time since I had let someone get this close to me, and I would have been lying if I had said it didn't scare me. The last time I let someone this near to me, I had wound up shattered, not sure if I would ever be able to put the pieces together again, but with her...

...with her, it wasn't like I could make the choice just to pull back — the choice to step aside and hope for the best. My emotions were pulling me back to her every chance they could, our chemistry and connection more than I could deny — more than I wanted to, anyway. I couldn't stop myself from falling for her or wanting more, even though I was certain I was just going to end up with my heart broken again.

But that was how it had to be. I couldn't cut myself off now, not when this was so much fun, not when it made me feel alive in a way I hadn't for years now. And at least Willa clearly felt something for me, too. I didn't know if it would last beyond the bounds of what we had going on while she worked here, but I could dream, right...?

She came back with the bottle of wine and topped us both up.

“Oh, shit,” she muttered as she poured in a little too much to my glass. “Sorry. There's a reason I was never a waitress...”

“Don't worry about it,” I assured her, smiling. How was it that every little thing she did seemed so damn cute to me? I knew I had it bad for her, but I still couldn't do anything to stop it.

We sat and chatted while we finished off the wine, and when it was done, her eyes were starting to droop. I lent her one of my college shirts to wear to bed and tried not to stare at how good her legs looked in the cut-off tee. She slipped into bed beside me, and I wondered why I had waited so long to get her here. It had been a long-ass time since I'd had someone

sleeping next to me, and the comfort of feeling another person lying beside me was downright perfect.

She snuggled up into me, draping an arm over my chest and laying her head on my shoulder. It was like she just fit there like she had been waiting for the chance to get close to me like this for so long now, and I loved it. I loved the way it made me feel.

“I’m so tired,” she sighed. “You need to speak to my boss. He’s a total asshole, has me working all hours of the day and night...”

I chuckled.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I assured her, and I pressed my face into her hair, closing my eyes to inhale the scent of her. I wasn’t sure exactly what it was she smelled like, but I wanted to commit it to memory, so I would be able to come back to it whenever I was alone and lose myself to the reminder of it.

She drifted off to sleep next to me, her breathing smoothing out as her chest rose and fell against mine. I listened to the little snores she let out, taking them in, taking in every little detail I could.

I didn’t know when I would get a chance to experience this again. I didn’t know if she even had any intention of sticking around after her internship was done. The two of us hadn’t talked about it, and I didn’t want to push her to give me an answer before she was ready.

For now, I supposed, all I could do was enjoy the time I had with her. I didn't have to know what was coming next, even if I wished I had the nerve to just ask her what was going through her head when we were together.

Sometimes, you just had to settle for what was right in front of you, instead of overthinking about the past or the future. I was sure both of us had done enough of that to last us a lifetime as it was.

All that mattered was the here and now, was the feeling of her in my arms and how much I wanted it to stick around for just a little longer. Tomorrow was the weekend, and we didn't have a damn place in the world to be but with each other.

And it was with that thought in my mind that I finally allowed myself to fall asleep, listening to the sound of her breathing beside me as I went.

Chapter 17

C hapter Seventeen – Willa

I kicked at a loose rock in my mom's driveway, and let out a sigh. Was I really going to do this?

I knew I needed to talk to someone about what was going on between Don and me, even if she was the last person I wanted to come clean to.

Ever since we had spent that evening together, I had been unable to get Don out of my head, and there was no chance in hell I could deny the fact I was starting to fall for him now. My attraction had turned into something else entirely, something that ran deeper than I would ever have wanted to admit – hell, especially with a guy whose *son* I used to date.

I needed an outside perspective on it, someone who could cut through the bullshit and tell me what I should do. And, at a loss for who to speak to in this town, there was only one person I could think of – my mother.

I knew she was going to freak out. Of course, she was. She had always hated Anthony, and no doubt she still held a hell of a lot against his family for the way he had treated me. But if I could just find a way to convince her to see past that and understand that Don was nothing like his son, maybe I could make this work...?

I doubted it. She was going to lose it, I was sure, and it was probably a fair indication of how everyone else in the town was going to respond too. There were just too many taboos surrounding our relationship, and I didn't want to even think about the judgment the rest of the world would react to us with. At least my mom would try and be understanding, she always was.

I kind of wanted her to tell me to just break it off right then and there. At least it would have been a decision made for me – at least it would have been a chance for me to close it off without having to make the call myself. Even if I didn't want to be apart from him, even if I hated the thought of not being able to spend time with him.

I made my way up the path to the house, and knocked on the door – I had hardly dropped my hand back to my side before Mom threw the door open and gave me a huge hug.

“Oh, it's so good to see you,” she told me, and I smiled as I hugged her back. I wasn't sure she was still going to be saying that when she heard what I had to say, but hey, it was nice to hear.

“Come on in, I have some coffee brewing for us,” she told me, hustling me inside. The smell of coffee filled the air, and I closed my eyes and took a deep inhale. See? This was going to be fine. This was going to be just fine. I would get her opinion on this, we would talk it out, and I would feel a little saner in the process. I always did, after I’d gotten her take on something important. Even if I was pretty sure she was going to tell me I was crazy for letting any of this happen in the first place. She was probably right. I mean, there was so much going against what we had, so much pushing back against the sense this made, but it didn’t matter.

When I woke up in Don’s arms after the night we spent together, it felt so comfortable, so nice, I couldn’t deny how happy he made me. I didn’t want to. I just loved being close to him, loved keeping him near to me. I could remember smiling as I skimmed my hand over his chest, looking up at him and hardly able to believe it was happening. Hardly able to believe how good it felt, and how much I wanted more.

It was then I realized I had to speak to someone else about it. I had to get someone else’s opinion on all of this, so I could work out what I was going to do next. All of this was just such a mess inside my head, everything pulling me in a million different directions, and I didn’t know how to make sense of it, how to calm the stress in my mind.

Because I hadn’t wanted to come back to this place at all, but now, it was hard for me to imagine leaving Winkleman. I didn’t want to have to go and leave Don behind, not when it felt like I was seeing this place through a whole new set of

eyes. It was as though all the darkness that had been tied to my memories of this town was starting to lift, and I could only think of how much light there seemed to be in the future.

Working at the Oracle was downright perfect – I knew I didn't want to leave, and I could tell from the way everyone was treating me that I had a place there long-term if I wanted it. But how would people react if they knew I had been hooking up with the editor the whole time? I didn't even want to think. The last thing I needed was for that to get out and for the rest of my career to be plagued by the questions people had about our relationship.

I sat down in the kitchen as Mom handed me a cup of coffee. As soon as she saw the look on my face, she frowned.

“Is something bothering you, honey?” she asked. I took a deep breath. This was it, this was my way in. This was how I came clean to her about it.

“Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about,” I admitted, biting my lip. Her eyes widened.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. “Are you all right? It's not Anthony, is it?”

“No, no, it's okay,” I replied quickly. “It's not Anthony. I mean – he's got something to do with it, but...”

“Please tell me the two of you aren't back together,” she demanded, planting a hand on her chest as though trying to keep herself from a heart attack.

“No, you never have to worry about that,” I promised her with a roll of my eyes. “He’s out of the picture, and that’s how I want it to stay, okay?”

“Thank God,” she sighed. “I don’t think I could handle that again. So, what is it? What’s going on?”

“I’m not seeing Anthony again,” I explained, looking down at my coffee. “I’m seeing...”

Here it goes. Now, or never...

“I’m seeing his dad.”

She stared at me for a moment. I could feel her eyes burning into my skin, and I didn’t know what to say, how to even broach the subject beyond what I had already told her. I mean, it wasn’t like she would take it well, right? She would freak. And rightly so. She knew what had happened the last time I had been involved with that family.

“You’re seeing...his *dad*?” she asked, as though making sure she had heard me right. “His...his *father*? How on earth did you even meet him? I...”

“He works at the Oracle,” I explained. “He runs the newspaper, has for years. That’s how we met. I had no idea when I took the job, and I don’t think he had any clue who I was, either, not really. And at first, I thought he was just the same kind of person as Anthony. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t like him and didn’t want anything to do with him. But then, I started getting to know him and found...”

I trailed off. How to put this into words? How to find the statement to tell her I had fallen for him when I had seen the strength and conviction he had shown in the face of his son's actions? I didn't know how to convey it, but I needed to, somehow.

"He's...how much older is he than you?" she asked, shaking her head. She seemed in shock, just speaking to fill the silence, but I was willing to tell her anything she needed to hear, anything she wanted to know to get through this without going to pieces.

"Over twenty years," I hedged. It felt crazy to admit that. I couldn't believe I had fallen for someone who was so much older than me, but when the two of us were together, I knew there was no way I could hide from it. I loved him. Even if I hadn't said it out loud yet, I loved him, and I didn't want to deny it.

"And what about Anthony?" she pressed, furrowing her brow. "He must be...it's his father, after all..."

"Anthony's not in Don's life anymore," I explained. "He... he caused a car accident while he was drunk. It's a long story, but his dad cut him out after that."

Her eyebrows shot up.

"They don't speak anymore?"

"No, it's how he ended up divorced from his wife, too," I continued. "He told me everything when we were traveling together, and I...I couldn't believe it. I thought he was just the

same kind of man his son had been, that he would treat me the same way, but he's so much more than that."

"How do you mean?" Mom asked, eyeing me with clear distrust. I couldn't blame her. I mean, after all we had been through with Anthony, after all the pain she had seen that family cause in my life, it wasn't like she was going to forget it anytime soon.

"He's amazing to me, Mom," I admitted. "I know it's hard to believe that, after everything that happened, but he's nothing like Anthony. When he found out about the way his son treated me, it was like he wanted to make it right. He understands me, he respects me, we have so much in common, working in the same industry —"

"And working at the same job," she added, raising her eyebrows. "Isn't that going to be a problem? What do your co-workers make of that?"

"None of them know yet," I confessed. "I think it's for the best. I don't want to hurry anything, not until we've had a chance to work out what we're going to do about this."

She nodded, slowly lifting the coffee cup to her lips and taking a sip as she pondered what I had just told her.

"Can I ask you something, honey?" she wondered aloud, and I nodded. She was likely going to ask me if I had completely lost my mind, and God, she would have had good reason to. I mean, I was coming to her with the craziest news I could have come up with. No wonder she was confused...

“Why are you coming to me with this?” she asked. “You know I want to help you no matter what you’re going through, but I’d like to know what you want me to say to all of this. How do you think I can help?”

I took a deep breath. It was a damn good question, and one I wasn’t even totally sure I had an answer to. I searched my mind as I tried to make sense of it.

“I guess...” I began. “I guess I need someone to tell me if this is the worst idea I’ve ever had in my life. Because I don’t know if I’m at a point anymore where I can talk myself out of this, even if it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

She sighed and nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” she agreed. “I’m not really sure what to say, honey. I’m sure you can understand how strange it is for me, hearing you talk about a man so much older than you – especially given who his son is — and that you work together.”

“I know,” I murmured, lowering my gaze again. I had let her down. She probably thought I was stupid, falling for someone like this. I didn’t want her to think I was a fool, but how could she see me any other way? How could she look at me like I was anything other than an idiot for getting involved with someone who was so wrong for me on so many levels?

“But if you’re coming to me with this, then I would bet that you really like him,” she told me gently. “Is that...is that true?”

I nodded, looking her in the eye again.

“I really do,” I confessed. “I think I... I think I love him.”

Okay. Now I had said the words out loud. There would be no taking them back, and I wouldn't have wanted to, even if I could. I needed to tell someone what was going on inside my head, even if it might have seemed crazy, even if I was sure it made me look insane.

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand tight. I could see a look in her eyes I wasn't sure I had ever seen before – something kind, something accepting, even though I could tell she was having a hard time with this.

“You think you want to stay?” she asked me. “Here, with him?”

“I think I do,” I admitted. I couldn't believe I was telling her all of this. I couldn't believe we had gotten this far into the conversation – I'd imagined this would turn into a fight or something within a matter of minutes when she worked out what I was trying to tell her.

“Then, darling, you need to follow your heart,” she said. “Love doesn't always find us in the places we expect it to. I can't say I thought you would ever come home to tell me all of this, but if it's what you want – what you *truly* want – I'm not going to stop you from pursuing it.”

Tears pricked my eyes, and I blinked to hold them back. I didn't want to make her feel like she had done anything wrong when it was quite the contrary. Her kindness and sweetness in

the face of this enormous bombshell I had just dropped on her was more than I deserved, and I was more grateful for it than I could put into words.

“Thank you,” the air rushed out of me. There it was. Someone knew now, and they weren’t trying to shut it down. They weren’t trying to push me away from him or cut it off.

“And if it means I get to have you close to me for a little while longer, I’m not going to argue with that,” she explained, her eyes lighting up. “I know you’ve been making a life for yourself, but knowing you’re just around the corner if I need you – it’s made such a difference, honey.”

I nodded. I was glad to hear someone else supported this decision, even if it meant I was more focused on him than her. She was right. I could come back here, and I could be closer to her. As she got older, she would need support.

We finished our coffees and talked, tentatively, about the possibility of me sticking around a little longer. I couldn’t believe I was really doing this. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t telling me I was downright crazy for even thinking about it, though she would have had every right to.

But she seemed to get it. She seemed to be able to tell what I felt about him was real, even if it might have been hard for her to wrap her head around. Was this a sign of what was to come? Would people be this accepting in the future, too...?

We ate dinner together, and afterward, I said goodbye to her at the door. She squeezed me into a tight hug, holding me close.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, don’t you, darling?” she told me, smoothing my hair back from my face and looking into my eyes. “Anything you need to talk about, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I had never been more grateful, and I gave her another hug before I started on the walk home.

In the darkness of the evening and the quiet of the streets, my mind was whirring with questions. Should I have told her about all of this so soon? I mean, I hadn’t even had a chance to tell Don how I felt about it, not really – I got the feeling he could tell I was starting to develop more serious feelings for him, but that was different than explicitly telling him I was thinking about a future with him together.

Ugh. I had thought talking to my mom about all of this would clear some of the questions in my mind, but instead, I just had a million more and no idea where to start picking them all apart. I needed to talk to him, that much I was sure of, but where did I begin? What did I tell him? There was so much I wanted to share, so much I needed to get off my chest, but if I scared him off, I would never have been able to forgive myself, not a chance in hell.

I arrived back at my place and paused outside the door. I could have gone to his apartment and told him right then and there what was going through my mind. Sure, it would have probably been a little much for him to take on right now, but wasn’t it better to just jump into what was right in front of you? Fortune favored the brave, right...?

But I wasn't feeling all too brave right now. No, I just wanted to get some sleep and work out what I would do next. It might not have been easy, but I could find a way to make sense of it. I trusted that.

Even if I wished I could have fallen asleep beside him tonight instead of alone in my bed.

Fuck it. I didn't want to be without him right now. I needed him. I needed his touch, his smile, his kiss, all of it. And I wasn't willing to wait.

I turned around and picked up my pace, jogging down the street with one purpose in mind.

Chapter 18

C hapter Eighteen – Don

When I heard the knock at my door, close to midnight, I knew it could only be one person. Willa might not have told me she was on her way, but nobody else would have disturbed me – nobody else would have had any interest in it.

I grinned. I knew she had been planning to see her mom tonight, but she clearly had other things in mind. And I was sure as hell not going to complain. Ever since I had seen her off at work earlier in the day, I had hoped she would reach out to see me again.

I opened the door, and I hardly had a chance to greet her before she wrapped her arms around me and planted her lips against mine. I drew her over the threshold, letting my tongue trace her lips before dipping it inside her mouth. She pulled back just long enough to smile.

“Hey,” she greeted me, her voice low and seductive.

“Hey,” I murmured right back and kissed her again, this time backing her towards the bedroom so she could take what she had so clearly come here for.

I pushed her down onto the bed and climbed on top of her, taking her face in my hands and kissing her deeply. I loved the way she tasted. I could have gorged myself on her for hours – but I was craving something a little more intimate right now, a taste of her I didn’t always get to indulge in.

I brushed my lips down her throat, over her collarbone, and towards her breasts, pulling down her dress as I went. I unzipped it at the side and tugged it away from her body as I drew her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it lightly and feeling her shudder with delight in response.

She was wearing nothing but panties underneath, just the way I liked her. I gently guided her onto her back on the bed as I moved down, letting my lips graze across her belly as I slowly inched her underwear down her hips and off her feet.

Her pussy was already glistening with wetness, as though she had been waiting for this all night. The thought of her needing me like this was incredibly sexy, and I couldn’t resist planting a kiss at the top of her mound just to hear her reaction.

“Fuck,” she panted, twirling her fingers through my hair, guiding me further between her legs. Like I needed telling twice. I parted her thighs and slid between them, spreading her in front of me so I could admire her perfect pussy just a few inches from my face.

I couldn't resist. I leaned forward and planted a long, slow kiss against her clit, swirling my tongue against it hungrily and feeling her entire body arch up to meet me in response.

She tasted perfect, her sweet muskiness filling my senses at once. I slipped my hands beneath her ass to draw her a little further onto me, allowing myself to move my tongue against her pussy as I felt the curves of her gorgeous body. My cock was rock-hard, and I ached to be inside of her, but I was more than willing to take my time to make sure she got where she needed to go first. I was nothing if not a gentleman, and a gentleman always made sure that his lady was the first to come, right?

"Oh my God," she gasped as she tightened her grip on my hair, arching her back and pushing herself against me like she couldn't get enough of how my mouth felt. Knowing I was getting her off turned me on even more, and I drew her clit between my lips, applying a little more pressure, pushing her to that point I knew she wasn't going to be able to come back from.

She was practically thrusting back at me, her hips rolling to meet my face as she dug her fingers into my scalp. Her pussy was soaked, the wetness covering my mouth and chin, leaking down the inside of her thighs. I loved knowing how horny she was for me, how much she wanted me, and how much she needed this.

We found a pace, her pushing back against me as I went harder against her pussy, applying more pressure with my

tongue as I lapped against her clit. I wanted to feel her come – I loved nothing more than feeling the moment her body gave in to what I was doing to her, what she wanted from me. Her thighs were starting to clench around my head, holding me in place, her muscles twitching slightly as she inched closer and closer to her release...

And then, finally, it hit her. She cried out, the sound ragged as it tore from her lips, and her hands fell to the bed, where she balled the covers into her fists. Her entire body was trembling helplessly as she moaned with pleasure, grinding against my face as the orgasm continued to move through her system.

Eventually, she reached down to pull me away from her pussy, leaning down to plant her lips against mine. She must have been able to taste her wetness on my tongue, and the thought of it turned me on in ways I didn't even know possible.

She lay back down and spread her legs, her eyes wide and written with want.

“I really need you to fuck me right now,” she breathed. “Please?”

Hearing her beg for it like that, I couldn't hold back, and I unzipped my pants and took my hard cock into my hand, planting it at the entrance to her pussy.

I pushed myself inside her, filling her up at once, and wrapped my arms around her to hold her close. I buried my face into her neck, inhaling the scent of her skin, letting myself

get lost in it. God, I would never get tired of this – never get tired of the way it felt to be so close to her, to be inside of her.

I moved into her in long, slow strokes, filling her with my cock like it was the only thing that mattered in the world – because, right now, it felt as though it was. She arched her back and hooked her ankles around me, pulling me in even deeper.

I couldn't get enough of her. It felt like I was starved for her, even though the two of us had basically been doing this at every chance we'd had. Was that normal? I didn't even care. All I cared about was making her come again and losing myself to the pleasure of being with her like this. I didn't know when she would turn up at my doorstep to do it again, and I wouldn't waste a moment of it.

I was already getting close to orgasm and didn't want to hold back. I could feel her body beginning to stiffen beneath me too, and I was sure she was getting near to another release. She turned her head to kiss me again, dipping her tongue into my mouth and making out with me as though it was the only thing she could think of in the world.

I pushed deep into her one last time and held myself there, and felt my cock twitch as the pleasure got the better of me. I let out a deep, guttural groan, and the sound of it seemed to take her over the edge and into her release.

“Fuck,” she moaned in my ear as the two of us finished mere seconds apart from one another. Her chest rose and fell rapidly against mine, her whole body shivering with

goosebumps as the pleasure got the best of her. I loved this. I loved being with her.

I loved her.

And, before I could stop myself or think better of it — before I could so much as pull out, the words fell from my lips.

“I love you.”

She froze as soon as I spoke it out loud, and I knew at once I had managed to make a major mistake. I slowly withdrew from her, looking down at her, her cheeks flushed from where she had just orgasmed twice in quick succession.

“Did you hear me?” I asked, and she nodded, still not saying anything. She reached for her panties and her dress, sitting up on the edge of the bed and started to get dressed.

“I should get going,” she told me quickly.

“What are you talking about?” I replied. “It’s the middle of the night. You can stay here.”

“I should...uh, I should get back,” she blurted out.

I cursed myself. What the hell had I been thinking? I hadn’t — I had just let those words slide out of my mouth before I could think better of them, and look at where it had gotten me.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “I shouldn’t have just hit you with that. We should talk about it —”

“I really need to get back to my place,” she told me, as she zipped up her dress. She still couldn’t even look over at me,

and the way she was acting, it was as though she couldn't get out of there fast enough.

"I'm not going to let you walk home by yourself this late at night."

"It's Winkleman, I'll be fine," she told me. "I'll text you when I'm back, okay? You don't have anything to worry about."

I knew there was no way I was going to be able to convince her to stay. I had just said the one thing she needed time to process. Why couldn't I have kept my fucking mouth shut? I wanted to go back in time, undo everything I had just said, and forget about all of it. To convince her she had nothing to worry about and apologize for the way I had acted.

But it was too late for that now. I could tell I had spooked her, and nothing was going to convince her to come back to me now. I hated myself for the mess I had managed to make, hated myself for how foolish I had been to think I could get away with it. I should have known better. Didn't I have any damn self-control?

She hurried for the door, and I followed her, even though I knew it was fruitless. I wanted to talk to her, I just wanted to tell her she didn't need to say it back to me, but I could tell I had already managed to screw it up beyond repair.

She was out of the door before I could say another word, and I leaned back against the far wall and closed my eyes. How could I have been so stupid? She didn't want to hear me

spilling my guts to her like that. We hadn't even talked about where this relationship was going yet, had we?

I stormed through to the kitchen, wishing I could do anything to get her back by my side again, anything to convince her to be with me. I just needed to talk to her, but I had managed to blow that chance right up. I didn't have a hope in hell of convincing her now. I had just hit her with the one thing she probably didn't want to hear from me.

I poured myself a strong-ass drink. I needed it if I was going to get through the rest of the night without twisting myself inside out for what I had done, for the bullshit I had let slip.

I would see her again when we were back at work in a couple of days' time. Maybe I could speak to her then, with a clear head, convince her she didn't have to worry about me — that I wasn't going to push for more than she was ready for, more than she wanted — even though some part of me wasn't satisfied settling for what we had now.

Because the way I felt about her was real, even if it scared me a little — even if it was more than I could wrap my head around. Everything about her drew me in and made it impossible to think straight. And before I knew it, I was doing and saying things I couldn't take back, blurting out stuff I should have known better than to make her deal with.

I hoped she felt the same way about me. Maybe she did. But would she have fled so quickly if she had returned my love? Maybe. I didn't know her well enough to guess what her

reaction might have been, and I had no idea what this meant to tell me about the way she felt.

I would have to wait and see. No matter how awful it was, no matter how much I longed for an answer, I couldn't rush her into one.

Even if it was killing me not to know her truth.

Chapter 19

C hapter Nineteen – Willa

I toyed with my pen at the desk, staring at the screen in front of me. I knew I needed to stay focused, but my mind was in a million other places right now.

More than anything, it was stuck on those words Don had said to me just a few days ago. *I love you*. Even though I had admitted my feelings for him to my mother earlier that very night, hearing them from him felt like more than I could handle, and I wasn't sure how to make sense of the mess in my mind at that moment.

I should have stayed. I knew walking out on him wasn't fair. But I had no idea what to say to him after he hit me with that, no idea what I was meant to do. I wished I could just find the exact right thing to respond with that would acknowledge how he felt and how I did without committing myself to anything specific, but I had no idea what that response might have been.

I had been so scared when I had come back here, back to Winkleman, because I had been so sure that I was going to get pulled into all the darkness that had consumed me before – all the nightmarish horror it felt as though I had only just survived as it was. But maybe, maybe, I had really left it behind.

I had wanted to believe from the start that Don was different. I had needed to believe he was nothing like his son, nothing like the man who had harmed me the way Anthony had, and the more time went on, the more confident I became that it was true.

And maybe that's what I needed. Someone who was nothing like my ex, someone who was so far removed as to be virtually unrecognizable. I had just been shocked when Don told me what was happening inside his head, but I would undo it all if I could.

And maybe there was still time – still time for me to put this right before my internship was over.

I didn't know if we could work together, not with our relationship developing the way it had, but I had to believe there was some chance for us to balance all these pieces and bring them together.

I couldn't help but reflect on what my mother had said to me, how she had supported me even in the face of something as crazy as all of this. She could tell my feelings were real – hell, no way would I have made a fool of myself in front of her unless I had no way around it. And she was right. She had to be. I couldn't walk away from this, no matter how hard it

might have been, no matter how crazy like might have seemed since the two of us had come together.

I just needed to get to the end of the day, and I could talk to him. I could tell him what was on my mind, explain to him why I had run out the way I had. It had been too much for me, the shock of it more than I could wrap my head around, but I really did feel the same way – and I really wanted to make this work between us.

When I thought about a future here with him, it was as if a warmth bloomed across my chest, taking control of me. I could see us holding hands while we read the morning papers, sipping coffee together while we debated stories, and going over each other's work so we could push each other exactly where we needed to go. There was something so enticing about it, about the thought of it. I had never thought about anything other than my career when it came to my future, not until now, but since I had met Don...since I had met him, all of that fear of what came next just fell away.

I needed him. I needed this. And I had to be brave enough to ask for it. Not to run from what scared me, like I had last time I had left this town, but to stick it out and do everything I could to show him I meant it when I said I really, really cared.

I typed up an email to him and stared at it for what felt like a full ten minutes as I tried to determine if I actually should have sent it. Should I hold off? I didn't want to scare him off...but at the same time, I couldn't just give up on this, could I? I had to get him out of my head, at least till the end of the

work day, and putting this in his hands was the only way I could think of doing that.

I fired off the email, giving him my address and asking him to come to my place that evening. I had no idea what to expect or whether he was too hurt by the way I had acted to give me the time of day, but I would try. It was all I could do.

I glanced over to his office, seeing if I could get a look at him inside, wanting to check if he had received it and what his response was if he had – but I forced myself to pull back and focus on my work again. He would react how he would react, I just had to accept there was no way for me to call the shots, and I shouldn't have been trying to.

And besides – I doubted he would turn down the chance to see me again. If he was anything like me, he couldn't get enough. And any chance to pass an evening together was one he would have taken, no matter how it came at him.

Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty – Don

With the bouquet of roses in one hand, I ran the other through my hair and did my best to steady my breathing. I had no idea what was waiting for me on the other side of that door, but if this was the last chance I got to see her again, I was going to make certain I made the best impression I possibly could.

Ever since I'd received Willa's email, my mind had been racing to try and work out what she was going to ask from me. Maybe to give this up and accept we were never going to work out. It wouldn't have been that much of a shock after what had happened between us before. I knew I had pushed too far, too fast, and if she couldn't handle what I had said to her, she might be done with this.

But maybe...maybe there was a chance she felt the same way. Hope had been flickering in my chest ever since I received her message. Maybe there was a chance she would be willing to give me an opportunity to say it again, to say it

again, and to hear it back from her this time. I loved her, I did, and nothing was going to change that, even if it might have been hard for her to believe.

On the way over, I had picked up the roses, a spontaneous purchase at a gas station. They weren't as beautifully presented as I would have liked, but I figured, right now, it was the thought that counted. And the bottle of wine in my bag – that, too.

I knocked on the door, and a moment later, it opened. There she was, standing on the other side, looking a damn sight close to heaven in my eyes. She was wearing the dress she had put on for the first time the two of us had ever been out together properly, to the restaurant when we had attended the conference. I could still remember pushing it up over her hips to fuck her in the bathroom and the way her body trembled around me as she came. I tried not to let my mind get too hooked on the memory.

“Hi,” she greeted me a little shyly. I wasn't used to hearing her like that. She always oozed such confidence, such charm, such certainty in herself. But, right now, as she stood before me, she seemed to be a little unsure of herself like she didn't know what would happen next.

“Hi,” I replied and handed her the roses. She laughed as she took them, her eyes lighting up.

“I don't think I have anywhere to put these,” she protested with a smile. She nodded for me to come in.

“I’m sorry it’s not nearly as big as your place,” she told me apologetically as I looked around her small apartment.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for,” I promised her, and I meant it. I didn’t care where the hell I was in the world. As long as I had her there with me, it would feel like a damn palace, and I loved it.

She went to find a vase for the flowers, and I headed to the kitchen to pour some of the wine for us. I could feel the soles of my feet tingling with anticipation as I tried to work out what I was going to do next, what I was going to say. Did I bring it up, the unsaid thing between us? Did I dare?

She joined me on the couch, sitting beside me and picking up the glass of wine I had poured for her. She still hadn’t said a thing about what had happened the last time we had seen each other, and I wasn’t sure if she was waiting for me to bring it up or if she had her approach all planned out.

“Thank you for coming here tonight,” she murmured as she slipped her hand toward mine. “I... I know I didn’t exactly respond how I should have when it came to what you told me the other night. Trust me, I’ve been thinking about it ever since, thinking about what I should have said and how I should have reacted, but I want to make it right now.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I told her. “I shouldn’t have dropped that on you out of nowhere. We hadn’t even properly discussed where we wanted this to go yet, and I... I just blurted that out. Gave you no warning. Anyone would have freaked.”

“Maybe,” she reasoned, “but I pride myself on having a little more composure than that. I shouldn’t have left. It was just that...”

She trailed off and paused for a moment to gather herself. I stayed silent, waiting for her to tell me what was on her mind. I didn’t want to rush her. I didn’t want to push her. If she needed to tell me something, I would always be here to listen to it. That was just how this worked. I wanted to know every little thing that was going on inside her head, no matter how strange she might have thought it was, no matter how hard it was for her to get out.

“The last person who said that to me, it was...Anthony,” she confessed, and she drew her gaze away from me momentarily. “And I... for just a second, I was back there — hearing him tell me that. And I was scared because I remembered how that ended up. I remembered how badly it fucked me up, everything he did to me, everything that went down between us. And I couldn’t stand to think of feeling the same way about you.”

I nodded and squeezed her hand, not saying anything. When I thought of how my son had hurt her, it caused anger to rise inside of me, but I knew that wasn’t the point. She wasn’t telling me this to remind me of Anthony. She was telling me this because she wanted to be honest with me after all we had been through, after all the back and forth we had endured together.

“And that’s why I left,” she explained. “Because it brought up all of that for me again, and I couldn’t handle it. But the more I thought about it, the more I... the more I just knew I couldn’t live like that. I couldn’t deny the way I felt about you, no matter how much I might have wanted to. I know it will not be easy doing what we do together, being a couple in this business, but I... I have to be with you, Don. I love you, too.”

It was as though the weight of the world had lifted from my shoulders. All the stress and tension that had been pushing down on me was lifting all at once. I wanted to let out a sigh of relief, but I could hardly breathe, hearing her say the words.

I cupped her face in my hand, gazing into her eyes – unable to let go of them, unable to do anything but look at her and try to silently tell her I felt the same way.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “For making me the happiest man on the planet.”

“You’re talking like I just agreed to marry you,” she teased, but I could tell she felt the same way. She might have been slightly more reticent with her feelings, but it didn’t bother me at all. Just knowing she felt the same way I did, knowing the two of us had found this common ground, this ability to finally be honest with each other about how we felt.

“I love you, Willa,” I murmured to her. “I really do. I didn’t think I would ever feel this way about anyone again. I had totally closed myself off from the thought of it, but when you came along...”

I trailed off. There was so much more I wanted to say, so much more I wanted to tell her, but for now, it all just came down to those three words.

“I love you,” I repeated. It was the only thing that mattered. She closed her eyes, leaned in, and kissed my lips.

“I love you, too,” She replied, brushing her nose against mine and smiling.

I couldn't wait – I scooped her up into my arms, and she pointed me in the direction of the bedroom. I needed to seal this with way more than a kiss. I didn't care what it took. I had to show her how much I worshipped her, every inch of her body, every part of her, and more.

I laid her down carefully on the bed and gazed down at her, at this woman I loved more than I could make sense of. I knew it might not be simple, what came next, what we would share, but I truly didn't care. As long as I had her to help me through it, I could come out the other side in one piece. It was as simple as that.

I slowly unzipped her dress, letting my fingers graze down every inch of her exposed skin, and watched as she arched her back towards me, silently begging me for more. I didn't need to be told twice. Like the last time, I pulled the dress away and leaned down to kiss her, except now, it didn't feel like there was any barrier between us at all – nothing keeping us apart, nothing getting in the way of what we had. I loved it. I loved her.

“I love you,” I murmured as my lips traced against her ear, tasting her.

“I love you too,” she breathed back, and the sound of those words out of her mouth stirred my cock to hardness. This closeness with her, this intimacy, it was what I had craved for so long, and now, I finally had it. Now, I could finally call her mine in all the ways I needed to.

I unzipped my pants as she undid the buttons on my shirt, brushing her fingers through the hair on my chest and down to my hips so she could pull me against her. Naked, our bodies tangled together, my cock nestled against her thigh as I held back just a little longer from the perfect feeling of her pussy wrapped around me.

She parted her legs and hooked her ankles around my back to draw me in deep. The feeling of her pussy tightening around me almost pushed me over the edge right then and there, but I managed to hold back, even though I wanted nothing more than to just lose myself to the pleasure and let myself finish inside of her.

She kissed me slowly and deeply, her tongue dancing against mine as we moved together in unison. It always amazed me how well the two of us seemed to fit together like this, as though we had been made for one another. I would never get tired of it. I would never need anything, anyone else. How could I? When she felt as good as she did, I knew nobody else would even cross my mind.

Slowly, deeply, I fucked her there on her bed, in the intimacy of her bedroom. I had never been here before, and it felt as though she was opening up some new part of herself to me with this moment, some new step she wanted us to take together. I felt her moan against my lips as I rocked my hips against hers, not thrusting, just grinding deep into her, letting her feel the fullness and hardness of me inside of her.

She shifted so that she was grinding against me, her clit massaged with every motion. I could feel the tension beginning to rise in her body, and I knew it wouldn't be long till she reached her release. I could hardly wait – I loved the thought of taking her to the very edge, making it so she couldn't do anything but give in to the pleasure I was gifting her.

“I want to feel you come, Willa,” I told her, brushing my lips across her ear. She groaned with pleasure, moving against me with more urgency, like she was trying to drive me as deep as she possibly could. I knew how she felt — it was as though we couldn't possibly get close enough to one another, as though nothing would ever draw us near enough. I loved it. I loved her.

I closed my eyes and focused solely on the way that it felt, the sheer pleasure of being with her, naked – not just physically, but in all the ways that mattered, finally coming clean about my emotions and knowing she felt the same way.

I listened to her breathing growing faster and faster, more and more ragged with every passing moment. I grinned against

her neck as I felt her come around me. Her body stiffened for a moment, and she reached down to the small of my back to push me deep inside of her, letting me fill her up to the brink as my cock twitched within her.

Feeling the way her pussy massaged me from the inside out, it was impossible to hold back. I finally finished inside of her, thrusting myself in deep and holding myself there for a long moment as the orgasm swept through me.

We wrapped our arms around each other and just held each other there for a long moment, hanging on for dear life as though nothing else in the world mattered. Maybe, for now, it didn't. Maybe the only thing that mattered was being with her, and knowing, at last, she felt the same way about me as I did about her. Maybe it was all we needed.

Slowly, I drew back from her, almost not wanting this moment to be over, not wanting to lose the intensity of what we had. But now, I knew what came next – and what came next was a life with her. A love with her, just as I had dreamed of.

She laid her head against my shoulder, closed her eyes, and smiled. I could have watched her all day when she looked like that – the expression on her face was so relaxed and beatific. I wanted her to feel like that all the time she was around me, no matter what.

“I'm so glad you're here,” she told me softly, planting a kiss against my shoulder.

“You have no idea how glad I am, too,” I replied, and wound my arms around her and pulled her in close. I was exhausted – I hadn’t even realized how stressed I had been, wondering what was going to happen between us, but now I finally knew, it was like I could relax. I wanted to chill. I didn’t need to do anything other than be with her — to let go of everything else that had been bothering me, and hold her in my arms, where she belonged. Where I belonged.

Finally, outwardly, and openly, in love.

Chapter 21

C hapter Twenty-One – Willa

I woke up in my bed the next morning with the sound of his low breathing beside me. I grinned and turned over to face him. God, it was good to have him there.

I traced a hand over his face, feeling the roughness of his stubble beneath my fingers. His eyes opened slowly.

“You need to shave,” I scolded him lightly, and he turned his face to plant a kiss against my palm.

“I just woke up,” he protested. “Don’t I get a minute to pull myself together?”

“Not a chance,” I replied playfully, sitting up and stretching. It was Saturday morning, the weekend before the final week of my internship, and I wanted to make the most of it.

Last night had been perfect. Totally and utterly perfect in a way I could never have predicted. Coming clean to him about how I felt, I thought it would have been scarier, but when he was right in front of me, it was as though that all had just

vanished, and the words spilled from me like the most natural thing in the world.

Having him in my bed was a little odd – I preferred being at his place, for sure, with the luxe duvet and light-blocking shades – but it was fun, too. There was something intimate about having him in my personal space like this, especially now that we had told each other the truth about how we felt.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked him.

“Well, shave first,” he replied, rubbing his hand over his chin and stretching his arms above his head. I stole a glance at the way his muscles moved beneath his skin. God, he was so hot, I was already finding myself a little distracted, and I was thinking of taking advantage of it when my phone buzzed.

“Who’s that?” he asked as I reached over to check. I peered down at the screen – and my eyes nearly bugged out when I saw the message waiting for me.

“It’s from the hiring department at the Oracle,” I told him, holding out the phone to him. “They’re offering me a full-time job after the internship is finished!”

I could hardly take in what I was seeing right now, the shock of it stuttering through my system.

Don raised his eyebrows. “Well, I didn’t think they were going to make a call so soon,” he remarked.

“You knew about this?”

“Of course, I did,” he laughed. “I’m the editor. They came to me to ask if you had been doing a decent job, and I told

them the truth – that you’re going to be an incredible journalist in the near future, and we’d be smart to snap you up while we still have the chance.”

I stared down at the screen, reading and re-reading the message in front of me. It felt impossible, as though it must have been for someone else, not for me. I couldn’t have...I couldn’t have really earned something like this, could I?

“You didn’t say that because we...because of what we’ve been doing, right?” I asked him quickly. Much as I would have appreciated it, I didn’t want anyone thinking I had managed to land this job because I had been hooking up with the editor. I would never have lived it down, and the thought of having to admit it made my stomach curl up into a ball. He shook his head at once.

“No, no, of course not,” he promised me. “You know I would never do something like that. I care about you a whole lot, Willa, but I care about the Oracle, too. I’m not going to let some incompetent work there.”

“Very romantic,” I teased, and I realized my hands were shaking as I stared at the email in front of me. Was I going to take this? Was I going to do it? I couldn’t believe I had actually been offered this position, after all this time working, after all this time dedicated to the craft, and they were actually giving me a chance to work at an amazing paper, full-time.

And a chance to stay with him in Winkleman, too.

“Are you going to take it?” he asked me, and I could tell he was doing all he could to keep his voice casual.

He didn't want to put any pressure on me, or make me feel like I had to do anything I wasn't comfortable with.

But it wasn't even a question. I wanted to stay here. I wanted to be with him, and I wanted to work for the Oracle. I had settled in there well, and, without the shackles of being an intern on my shoulders, I was sure there was so much I could do, so many stories I could pursue.

"Of course, I am," I murmured, looking up at him. "If you're comfortable with it, I mean. I don't want you to feel like you have to go along with it if you're not."

"Of course, I want you there," he told me. "You're an amazing journalist, Willa. You're going to be an asset to the Oracle, I'm sure of it."

"And what about...us?" I asked him, biting my lip slightly. "I mean, the relationship. If we're going to do this, what are we going to do about working together?"

"I guess we keep it quiet for the time being," he replied, with a shrug. "Wait until things are a little more certain. And start to tell them about it when we feel ready."

"You make it sound so simple," I remarked, shaking my head.

"Isn't it?" he replied. "I know they're probably going to raise some eyebrows when they find out, but that's their problem, isn't it? Not ours. We're not breaking any rules by being together as long as we keep it out of the office."

“Oh, yeah, because we’ve been doing such a good job with that lately,” I teased him, and he chuckled.

“Okay, okay, you have a point,” he agreed. “But we can be more professional in the future. Not let anything get in the way of it, right?”

“I guess so,” I replied, and I laid back on the bed. Suddenly, everything seemed to be spreading out in front of me, this future I’d hardly dared to dream of before falling into place. I would have this amazing job, I would be able to stay near my mom back in my hometown. And I would have a relationship with the most amazing guy on top of all of that. I didn’t think it got any better.

“That actually sounds perfect,” I confessed, as I felt a smile spread across my face. I loved the idea of it.

“As long as I get a far less crappy apartment than this one,” I added as I looked around. “I can’t stay here much longer...”

“You could move in with me,” he offered at once. I raised my eyebrows at him.

“You mean that?”

“Why not? You’ve seen how empty my place is,” he pointed out. “You might as well move in there. I’d love the company...”

“Might be harder to let it go under the radar at work if we’re commuting from the same place,” I pointed out.

“Maybe,” he agreed. “But I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

I bit my lip. I knew it was quick, and I knew I probably should have held off at least a little longer. But the way he described it, it just seemed to make so much sense, and I didn't want to let anything get in the way of it. I loved being with him. Why shouldn't I jump at the chance to do it even more than I already had?

"I'll think about it," I replied, even though I had all but made my mind up already. "Maybe we can talk about it later?"

"Sure, whatever you want," he agreed. "You want to go get some breakfast? I'm starving."

"Me too," I agreed. "Let's order in. I don't want to have to get out of bed yet."

"I like where your head is at," he laughed as I reached for my phone to pull up a few takeout places. I felt a warmth blossom over my chest, with the comfort of being with him like this – the peace and quiet of a day at home with the man I loved. Even though I knew we still had a whole lot to work out, for the first time since we had gotten together, it all seemed...attainable, like I could actually see a way through it.

I leaned over to him and planted a kiss on his lips, and felt a little fuzz of excitement tingle between my legs. Maybe we could wait a little while before breakfast, huh...?

Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty-Two – Don

“You’re sure about this?” I asked Willa for what felt like the hundredth time. She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she promised me. “I wouldn’t have invited you here if I didn’t think it was a good idea. Come on – she hates it when I’m late...”

Willa knocked on the door, and I hung back a moment before I followed her. I was going to meet her mom for the first time, and I would have been lying if I said I wasn’t freaking out internally. I had no idea what she would make of me, though Willa had tried to assure me I had nothing to worry about. I didn’t know if I believed her. After all, I was a man in his late forties dating her daughter, in her twenties – it was sure to be something of a shock, no matter how Willa tried to frame it.

But she had insisted, and I knew I would have to do it sooner or later, so I had figured now was as good a time as

any. I wasn't going to hide from our future together, and our future certainly involved her family. I was sure of it.

I followed Willa into the small house, and her mom was already cooking away in the kitchen, singing along to the radio. Willa went up to her and gave her a giant hug from behind. Her mom turned and smiled as soon as she saw her daughter.

"Oh, there you are," she sighed, looking over Willa's shoulder toward me. I offered her a smile, hoping she would be able to understand how awkward I felt right now.

"And this," Willa told her, stepping back to take my hand, "Is Don."

Her mother extended her hand to mine, smiling back.

"I'm Julia," she greeted. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," I replied, taking her hand. "Willa has told me so much about you."

"All bad, no doubt," Julia replied cheerfully, and Willa laughed.

"Come on, Mom, you know I would never get away with talking bad behind your back..."

"Yeah, I would hear it," she replied, shooting a faux-outraged look at her daughter. "The two of you, sit down – I just need to finish up, and I'll serve soon."

I sat at the slightly uneven kitchen table, and Willa held my hand, squeezing it tight and giving me an encouraging smile. I

couldn't believe I was doing this. I had never imagined I would ever meet a girlfriend's parents again. It just didn't seem possible, not after all I had been through.

But here I was, sitting in Willa's mother's kitchen. I had the woman I loved beside me, and a whole future with her opening up before me. I had never been able to imagine it, not after the divorce or what had happened with my son, but I truly felt as though I had hope in hell now. As though I could actually get through to the next part, and the next, and the part after that, and maybe even thrive in it.

Her mother served us up huge portions of lasagna along with some red wine that I had brought along with me and then planted herself opposite me, giving me a long, hard look as she did so.

"So," she began. "What are your intentions for my daughter?"

"Mom!" Willa exclaimed, and her mother laughed.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't resist," she replied, and I planted a hand on my heart in relief.

"Julia, you had me ready to keel over," I warned her.

"Yeah, you've got to be careful with a man of his age," Willa teased.

"A man of what age?" I protested, even though I knew she didn't mean anything by it. With the tension broken, soon, the three of us were joking and chatting together, the subject of my and Willa's relationship hardly an issue at all. It was such a

relief. I had been so ready to defend myself against any accusations this woman might have wanted to throw at me, and God, it wasn't as though she wouldn't have had reason to — I was so much older than her daughter, after all.

But it didn't seem to bother Julia. I assumed she planned to take me aside later and give me a stern talking-to about everything when she got the chance, not in front of Willa, but I appreciated that she was giving me a chance to actually get to know her before she hit me with that.

After dinner, Willa insisted on washing up, and Julia and I took our wine to the front room, where she sat opposite me and eyed me for a long moment in silence.

“Anything you want to say to me,” I told her. “You can say it. I'm not going to take offense. I know this probably isn't how you imagined your daughter's love life going. Trust me, it's not how I thought mine would go, either.”

“You sure about that?” she asked. “I'm sure there are plenty of men out there who would love to be able to call a woman that young theirs.”

“Yes, I'm sure about it,” I told her firmly. “You're right to have questions, I know I would. But I'm not doing this because I'm looking for arm candy or because I'm having some midlife crisis and I want a younger woman to patch it up for me. I'm doing this because I really feel strongly about Willa, and I know I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't do something about it. Trust me, if there was a way I

could get out of this without denying my feelings for her, I would. I know how it looks. But I love her. I really, really do.”

Julia sat back in her seat. I wasn't sure if she was entirely satisfied, but all I could do was tell her the truth. There was no point in anything else. If she were anything like her daughter, she would see straight through me if I tried anything else, and I didn't want to give her reason to distrust me.

“It's okay if you don't take it at face value,” I assured her. “But I'll prove it to you. I'll prove to you and to anyone else who has any doubts that I'm serious about this, no matter how it looks. Trust me, I've learned there's so much harm to be done in keeping up appearances. I don't want to bother with it for a second anymore.”

She nodded. Her eyes scanned mine as though she was looking for any small piece of evidence that I might have been lying about this. I hoped she couldn't find it. It was a miracle she had let me into her house at all instead of turning me around and kicking me straight out when I had shown my face, and I was grateful she was giving me a chance.

“Willa's always been a strong-headed woman,” she explained, shaking her head. “And if I know one thing about her, it's that there's no way to get her to drop what she knows she wants. And she wants you. And I trust I have raised her well enough to make the right kind of choices about the man she wants to be with.”

I smiled at her.

“I think that’s an amazing outlook to have,” I murmured. “And... thank you. Thank you for giving me a chance. I know there are plenty of people out there who wouldn’t have given me even this, and I’m grateful you did.”

“Just don’t give me any reason to second-guess it, okay?” she warned me as she glanced towards the kitchen. I could hear that Willa was almost done, and I was sure her mother didn’t want her to walk in on her telling me how it was going to be.

Drying one hand against her dress, Willa came back into the room, holding her glass of wine.

“What are the two of you talking about?”

“You,” her mother replied without missing a beat. “Sit down – get yourself warmed up. It’s a cold night out there...”

The three of us sat and talked until the wine was finished, and I found myself beginning to let go of the tension I’d had when we had walked in here. I should have trusted Willa. She would never have thrown me into a situation she didn’t think I could handle, and no matter how strange this one might have been, it had gone more smoothly than I ever could have expected.

By the time the wine was done, Willa was a little tipsy, giving her mom a giant hug at the door.

“Thank you,” she mumbled to her, loudly enough for me to hear, though I doubted it was what she intended. Her mother squeezed her tight, and I felt a pang seeing them together.

Sometimes, seeing parents and their children was just too harsh a reminder of what I had lost, but I knew I had made the right choice. After all, if I had kept Anthony around, Willa would never have been able to trust me enough to let me get this close to her, and what we had now was worth everything to me.

She slipped her arm through mine as we walked back to my place. She had moved some of her stuff over – not much, just some clothes and personal items, to see how we got on with living together. Really, though, I was sure it was just a matter of time until she made it full-time. Waking up together every morning was far too much fun for us to deny, and I didn't want to let anything change it. Getting into a routine with her was bliss in a way I hadn't even known I had missed until she had walked into my life and made me rethink everything.

“I think that went pretty well,” she told me.

“I think it went damn perfect,” I shot back. “I thought your mother was going to tear me a new one for dating you at all.”

“She's not like that,” she replied, shaking her head. “Never has been. She's always been focused on what makes me happy, not what she thinks would be best for me.”

“You're lucky to have a mother like that,” I remarked. “And she's lucky to have a daughter like you, as well.”

“Is that what the two of you were talking about while I was washing up?” she asked me, cocking an eyebrow.

“She was just giving me the once-over,” I told her. “That can’t surprise you, can it?”

“Of course, not. I knew she wanted to speak to you,” she said. “And the fact she didn’t kick you out on your ass afterward suggests to me it went pretty well.”

“I think it did,” I agreed. “She seemed to believe me. But I figure I’m going to have to need to keep putting the word in over the next few years to make sure she knows I’m not just saying what she wants to hear.”

“Hmm, well, guess I have to trust that you’re in it for the long haul, then,” Willa replied teasingly as she leaned her head into my shoulder.

“Of course, I am,” I vowed, and I looked over at her – really looked at her. I felt something shift inside of me, and I came to a halt right there on the street.

“What is it?” she asked me, raising her eyebrows.

“I...” I trailed off, as I tried to find a way to put it all into words. I didn’t know how to tell her quite what was going on inside my head but I needed her to hear it. I needed her to know what I was thinking — what I was feeling.

I paused, and took her hands into mine.

“I’m so happy with you, Willa,” I told her. “I never thought I would get to feel this way again, not about anyone, not in my entire life, not after what happened. I didn’t think I deserved it. Some part of me just...rejected it, the thought that I could ever

find someone who would accept me for the person I am and for what's happened in my life.”

She stared at me with moisture pooling in her eyes.

“Of course, I love you,” she said. “This is exactly what I wanted. I didn't know that when I came here, but you've... healed so much for me.”

I could feel the emotions starting to get the better of me, and I didn't know how to hold them back. Maybe I didn't have to. This might have been more than she could take, but I knew I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if I didn't try.

I sank to one knee in front of her. Her jaw dropped as she watched me.

“What are you...?”

“I know this might sound crazy, and maybe it is, but I honestly don't care anymore,” I told her. “I've lived enough of my life worrying what other people think of me. I love you, Willa, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

The stillness of the air around us got the better of me for a moment, and I thought I had overstepped. I thought I had fucked it up, thought I had managed to make a mess of this or something. But then, all at once, a huge smile cracked over her face, like she couldn't have held it back even if she wanted to. She drew me to my feet and slipped her arms around my shoulders.

“Of course I will, Don,” she murmured, leaning up to plant a kiss on my lips. “Of course I will. I... I want to be with you. For good. I know this is it for me. I know I’ll never feel this way about anyone again. Let’s do it – let’s get married.”

I laughed, scooping her up in my arms and spinning her around right there in the street. I wanted to tell the whole town right now, wanted to yell it at the top of my lungs so they could all hear it so that everyone would know. That I loved her, and she loved me, and the two of us would be together forever.

“Put me down!” she laughed, beating her fists against my chest until I planted her back on her feet. I clasped her face in my hands and looked deep into her eyes.

“I’ll get the ring tomorrow,” I told her. “Whatever you want.”

“Hmmm, be careful,” she warned. “I could take you for all you’ve got. Get the most expensive diamond in the country...”

“Anything,” I told her. At that moment, I really meant it. I would have done anything she asked, anything she wanted, as long as I knew it meant the two of us could be together. This woman, in the last few months, had become my world, and I wanted nothing more than to make her happy in any way I was able.

I kissed her again, pulling her against me, and felt her smile against my lips.

“I love you,” I mumbled against her mouth, and she whispered it right back. I knew I would never get tired of hearing her say those precious, perfect words.

And now, I would never have to worry about it, either because she had just agreed to be my wife.

Chapter 23

Epilogue – Willa

“Okay, but do you think vanilla or lemon for the cake?” I asked Don as I pointed to the two different, equally frothy possibilities we had for our wedding cake.

He tapped his finger on his bottom lip, surveying both options with utmost focus.

“Lemon,” he replied with a firm nod. “No, vanilla. Wait —”

“Lemon it is,” I told him. “Always go with your first instinct.”

“You’re right,” he agreed with a sigh.

“I always am,” I replied sweetly, flashing him a grin. “That’s why you’re marrying me, isn’t it?”

“I’m surprised you’ll have time to get married at all, what with this series you’re putting out,” he told me, shaking his head.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I replied, waving a hand. “I just have one more episode to record and then I’m sending it off to the editors. It’s going to be done soon enough.”

“Yes, because I’m sure you’re going to be able to let go of it once they get their hands on it,” he teased me.

“Point taken,” I agreed.

The series he was talking about was a podcast covering an unsolved murder from nearly eighty years ago right here in Winkleman. It would be the first podcast the Oracle had put out, and I had written and narrated the whole thing. I still couldn’t believe it would actually be out there in a couple of months, and I was sure I would be tweaking it right up until the last moment.

I knew it was a risk for them to branch out with something unproven like this, but I had gotten the whole staff behind me. Of course, being engaged to Don was a help, but I needed to make sure I wasn’t just getting this because of him. I had been working with the whole crime department to make sure this was perfect, and the production list was growing longer and longer by the day.

It was going to come out the same month as my one-year anniversary of working at the Oracle, and I could hardly believe it had gone by so quickly. I had thrown myself into my work there, and it felt as though the last few months had just sped by. On top of planning the wedding, well, I hardly had time to check that my ass was still at the top of my legs these days.

But I didn't mind. I had never been that attached to the idea of getting married before I met him, but as soon as he had asked me to be his wife, it just seemed like the most obvious thing in the world. I could still remember the joy in my heart when he had asked me to marry him on that one random night, the day he met my mom. I had been so shocked at first, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Of course, I wanted to be married to him. I couldn't imagine anything better in the world.

He had picked out the most gorgeous ring for me, a glowing emerald against a gold band, though we'd agreed I wouldn't wear it at work for a while. We didn't want people to know what we had going on, not yet, at least, though it turned out most of them had already guessed as it was.

"Oh, come on," Kyle had laughed when we finally came clean about our engagement. "The two of you have been making heart-eyes at each other for months. You think nobody figured it out?"

I had only been able to smile as I held Don's hand. I was so glad we didn't have to hide anymore. Coming out to the people we worked with felt like a huge relief, finally able to be honest about the way we felt for one another, finally able to share it with the world.

My mom had been amazing support from day one – she wanted me to be happy, she told me, and though it wasn't who she had expected me to end up with, it was clear he was crazy about me.

“The way he looks at you – some women wait their whole lives for something like that,” she told me. “You’re lucky to have found it as young as you have.”

“I know,” I murmured, smiling. She had been helping me plan the wedding – I think she was more excited than me, to be honest, and I loved how much she had thrown herself into it. She had told me a million times over how she couldn’t wait to walk me down the aisle – she had insisted, actually, and there was no way I was going to argue with that.

I honestly couldn’t wait to be Don’s wife. Sometimes, when I looked over at him while the two of us were having dinner together, it just hit me so hard, the reality of the way I felt about him. I had never imagined I would find such peace and such comfort in knowing he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me.

But he did. We had moved in together just a couple of weeks after we’d gotten engaged. I had thought about putting it off, but living in my crappy little apartment when I could have been staying in his big, beautiful place just seemed silly to me.

And I was hoping, someday soon, we might be able to fill it with some kids. We had been talking tentatively about starting a family. I wasn’t sure he would be interested after what had happened with his ex, but he was as excited about it as I was.

“I would love to be a parent again,” he told me. “And you’d be the most incredible mother, I’m sure of it.”

I loved how much faith he had in me. Sometimes, even more than I did. He always had my back, no matter what, no matter what I was throwing myself into – whether it was professional or personal — he was always there to cheer me on, and I didn't know what I would have done without that support.

And soon enough, I would have it for the rest of my life. I knew he was already totally committed to me as it was, but when I was his wife, and he was my husband, I knew nothing would keep us apart.

I still couldn't believe it had turned out the way it did. If you had told me, when I had taken this job and come back home, that I would fall in love with my ex's father – that it would turn into one of the most perfect things that had ever happened to me in my life – I would never in a million years have believed you. How could I? After all that had happened, I thought some part of me was irreparably broken, and I wished I could go back in time and tell myself that there was an answer – it just might not have been the one I was expecting.

“How many weeks now?” Don asked, looking up at me as I stood at the corner of the dining room table.

“Ten,” I replied at once. “Not that I'm keeping count or anything.”

He pulled me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me and gazing into my eyes.

“God, I can't wait for you to be my wife,” he told me. I laughed, and wrapped my arms around him.

“Keep talking like that, and I’m going to forget all about the wedding planning,” I warned him, as I lowered my mouth to his lips.

“Is that such a bad thing?” he replied, as he kissed me slowly. I felt a tingle run from the base of my spine down my back and I pressed myself against him a little harder. He stroked down my back, his touch soft and strong and comforting all at once.

“Maybe not,” I agreed, and I kissed him a little deeper. Even after all this time, the excitement I felt being with him made it impossible to think of anything else – I just craved him, on some deep level nothing else could satisfy. I brushed my nose against his, leaning my forehead to his and smiling.

“I love you so much,” I murmured, and he looked up at me, his eyes so full of love for me that it made my heart want to burst right out of my chest.

“You have no idea how much I love you, Willa,” he told me. “But I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to show you.”

And with that, he kissed me again – and suddenly, wedding planning was the very last thing on my mind for the night.

I hope you have enjoyed “*In love with my ex’s dad my billionaire boss*”

Here are some of my other steamy romance books:

“*Secret Romance with my billionaire boss*”

<https://a.co/d/3XaYkZx>



I'm having a secret romance with my billionaire boss.

My billionaire boss is a big-time publisher. I intern at his company.

He refuses to listen to any literary suggestions I have. No, no, no is all I hear.

“Seduce him” my friend all but dares me. He is one fine-looking silver fox. Could one little dare help me get ahead in this business?

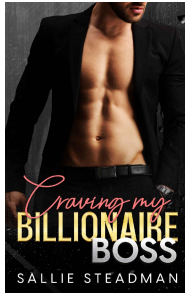
At a weekend conference in Scotland, I decide to go for it. One night won't hurt.

But, our chemistry is mind-blowing and intense. He couldn't get enough of me and I couldn't get enough of him.

And it didn't stop at one night. Now we are having secret rendezvous in the copy room, bathroom, parking lot..... But his ground rules are clear “No one can know about us.”

Until the pregnancy test shows two pink lines.....

“Craving my billionaire boss” <https://a.co/d/b6z3fCF>



My billionaire boss Nathan Flint is rude, insulting, irritating...and beautiful.

I tell myself this can't go any further between us, but I'm falling in love with Nathan. I can't resist him any longer, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

It began when my father, who manages the Royal Concert Hall in New York City, recommended me to his friend Nathan to assist on his European tour.

Everything was going fine until checking into our hotel in Madrid, we were told there was only one room and one bed. We have no choice but to share the room.

After his concert, we celebrate over a few drinks, and when we return to our room, he kisses me. I can't resist him. I am consumed by the sheer burning want inside of me.

Nathan and my father have been friends since before I was born, and he will kill him when he finds out what happened between us....

“Faking it with my billionaire boss”

<https://a.co/d/894RiWw>



Robbie Davis, my Billionaire Boss is a rich playboy with lots of women as trophies.

His father gives him an ultimatum – get married in 3 months, or you’re disowned.

Robbie bribed me with millions into being his fake fiancée and marrying him knowing I was swimming in debt.

His plan is clear, just keep up appearances and give him five years then, we split.

But we talk and get to know each other, we share secrets, and we make love.

Only his father isn’t happy he’s marrying the help. He wants an heiress to be his new daughter-in-law. Someone who brings prestige to the family.

A few days after Robbie’s father fails to buy me off to leave him I start to feel strange.

I take a pregnancy test and it’s positive.

This was definitely not in the plan.

Will Mr. Davis change his mind about me now that he's a grandfather?

You can also join my facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/salliesteadmanbooks/?modal=focused_switcher_dialog