



Tangled
VINES

IN

OLIVIA REIGN

Tangled in Vines

A Small Town Enemies to Lovers Romance

Olivia Reign



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Chapter One

Ethan

“**S**top!” I heard Beji shout. “You can’t go up there!”

“This is important,” a lady’s voice snapped. “And it’s either I go up there, or he comes down to me.”

My head snapped up from the pile of invoices on my table, wholly mystified about who my assistant manager was shouting at—when the answer barges into my office unannounced.

What in god’s name was happening down there?

Moving from my desk, I went to the doorway of my loft office that looked right down to the floor of my family’s Meadery. Mia Sullivan, the daughter of my family’s enemies, was staring down Benji with a tight-lipped glare.

What was she doing here?

When had she come back to town?

She pivoted on her boots and looked at me, her golden gaze simply scalding.

And why was she glaring at me as if I’d killed her cat?

I considered telling her to take a hike for a moment, but my curiosity stopped me. “It’s all right, Benji. Let *Miss Sullivan* come up.”

Everyone knew about our family’s rivalry, so it was not shocking when Benji’s mouth dropped, and so did everyone within ten feet. Mia didn’t seem to care, and she took the stairs up and strode into my office as if she owned the place, her thick caramel hair cascading over her shoulder while her amber eyes zeroed into mine like a heat-seeking missile.

“Give it back,” she said stiffly, her sharp amber eyes as cutting as sapphires. “I won’t let you have it.”

Snapping out of my daze, I sat back in my office chair and gave her a relaxed look. “Please, come inside. Do you want a drink? I have water, coffee, and, oh right, *mead*.”

Her lips flattened. “Stop playing, Vega.”

This was the first time I was close to the eldest Sullivan child, the family of winemakers, and my family’s sworn enemies, in three years. She was stunningly beautiful—softly rounded cheeks, rosy and full lips, the bottom had an inviting divot at its center, and her voice was like honey. Plus, she was brilliant—a triple threat.

But her eyes got to me, with how razor-sharp they were.

“As flattered as I am that you think I am a genius of unparalleled measure, I must tell you, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I replied calmly. “And I find it very off-putting for you to storm into my office without an invitation.”

Her eyes widened a bit just as her lips parted. “Y-you don’t know?”

“What you’re talking about?” I asked, shaking my head while keeping my gaze locked on hers. “Not a goddamn clue. Will you fill me in? But before that—” my eyes traced over her full lips “—when did you get back in town?”

“Two hours ago,” she replied. “I finished my master’s last week.”

“Good for you.” I nodded, standing and rounding my table to the small fridge in my office, and took out a bottle of flavored water, handing it to her while I refilled my coffee. Instead of sitting again, I leaned on the wall and crossed my legs. “So, care to fill me in on what you were accusing me of doing or *not* doing, as is the case?”

Her gaze trailed down my body, over the gray Henley and the blue jeans, before her eyes met mine. She looked regretful a little before admitting. “A company from Texas that manages beef is looking around for a new partnership, pairing good drinks with their beef products.”

“And you came here to warn me not to meddle with the holy pairing?” I asked, a touch of scorn in my tone. “Wine and steak, the perfect duo?”

Mia’s face pinked, but she held her chin high. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“No, no.” I peeled myself from the wall and rested the cup on my desk, away from the paperwork. “That’s the only way to look at it, Mia. What? You think my family’s humble Meadery cannot match your prolific winemaking pedigree family?”

Red darkened her face. “Stop making me and my family into a...a—”

“A set of arrogant, conceited, narcissistic, vain, smug, proud—” I started ticking adjectives off my fingers “—egoistic, superior, holier-than-thou, self-important, high-and-mighty—”

“All right, all right, please stop,” she cut in, embarrassed. “Listen, I might not have been in town for the last couple of years, but I still followed up with the development that went on. I know you have got three huge private accounts for your Meadery. I’m asking you to let us have this one.”

“And why should I do that?” I asked. “Last time I checked, Sullivan wines still had a chokehold on the market share this side of the West Coast. Hell, you were the proud sponsor recipient of a company in Spain for figuring out to grow that goddamn weed—”

“The Garnacha grape is a finicky plant, not a *weed*,” Mia said hotly.

“—away from its native climate,” I added, “And with a four-point two percent market share, or should I say stronghold, and three hundred and eight two million in revenue last year, I don’t see why I need to yield my profits to make yours better.”

Her jaw stiffened. “But—”

“But nothing,” I said calmly, knowing she heard the steel in my tone. “And I don’t think you came here to tell me to stay

away from the contract, did you?”

“No,” she admitted. “I thought you already had the contract, and I wanted to ask you, on a purely business level, to refuse it.”

“Still doesn’t make a lick of sense to me,” I replied. “Are you sure that business degree you got a couple of years ago is valid?”

I was getting to her; her eyes were starting to shoot bullets. “I apologize for barging in, but I have reason to. Sean Clarkston said that you had intercepted the message and gone and convinced the bigwigs to partner with you instead of letting us all have fair participation.”

“And by fair, you mean the Clarkston cider guys, too?” I asked, knowing full well her family thought cider was pig swill.

“Yes.”

“Liar,” I replied. “You wouldn’t drink cider if you were on a deserted island, and it was all that was available.”

Despite my inexplicable attraction to Mia—going back further than I wanted to admit—I couldn’t ever deny that she represented the double standards I deeply despised. There was no doubt that the Sullivans thought their product was the *crème-de-la-crème*—why wouldn’t they when celebs, fashion designers, and even presidents drank their wine—and the rest of us were uncivilized peons.

Mia, for all her smarts, was headstrong, impulsive, and more than a little hot-blooded by my reckoning. Plus, she was still as biased as the rest of her family. Having pride in your family’s centuries-old endeavor is one thing; looking down on the rest of us is another.

Her blush deepened. “So you never got the memo?”

“Not until now,” I replied. “And why were you talking to Sean at all? Don’t you all get hives by being within three feet of a *cider maker*?”

“Well, he didn’t tell me exactly,” Mia murmured, “I overheard him talking to Greer at Mama Macchiato.”

“And you ran with it?” I bit down on my laughter. “Still same ol’ hotheaded Mia. Have you considered why Sean would have conveniently let the info slip in your presence?”

“To start something,” she admitted.

“No, starting something would mean something isn’t already there, and as the whole town, possibly half the world, knows about our family rivalry, he was using that to build on the mutual dislike. Once again, are you sure that degree is accredited?”

She huffed, then stood. “Well, seeing as I was mistaken, I apologize. And now that I have made a complete embarrassment of myself—”

“More like a jackass,” I corrected her.

“I shall be going,” she headed to the door to pivot on her high-heeled boots. “Its...erm...I’m sorry I disturbed you. I was wrong for running in like that, and please forget about my screw-up?”

“Not even when there is a snowstorm in hell,” I replied. “And Mia, the next time you want to come and confront me about something I have not done, make an appointment, like the rest of the world, hm?”

When she left the room, I picked up my phone and called Cole, who was somewhere in Palisade. When he answered, I got right down to business, “Tell me anything you know about some big Texas bigwigs coming in for a contract—*now*.”

* * *

“I know that look,” Cole, my younger brother by three years, said as he knocked on my door and came in the following day. “If you keep doing that, you’ll have crow’s feet by thirty and crossed eyes by thirty-one.”

“Jokes on you, *whippersnapper*,” I replied. “I’m already there. You think I’m scared of thirty-two?”

“No,” Cole laughed, raking his hand through his dirty blond hair. “I’m afraid you’ll be a young guy with a grandpa’s face and won’t be my wingman when we got to clubs. They’ll take a look at you and run the other way.”

“I’ve got a business to run, not skeeze at clubs,” I replied. “If you want a wingman, Jerry Clarkston knows all of them.”

Cole’s fake-horrified gasp nearly had me laughing.

“A Clarkston?” he gaped. “A *cider* maker? You insult me, sir. You insult me deeply.”

“I didn’t say you should marry the guy,” I snorted. “But whatever. Where is the information I asked you to get for me?”

Cole handed me a folder without another word, and I opened it.

“They’re saying the two biggest beef ranches in Texas are looking to make a long partnership with the beverage makers here, and yes, I think Clarkston Ciders is in the running, too.”

“As they have a right to be,” I grumbled, while a picture of Mia’s face from yesterday popped up. “It’s a free market around here, last time I checked.”

“Unless you’re an oligarchy like the Sullivans,” Cole’s face twisted. “Oh, by the way, Mia is in town.”

“I know,” I grunted. “She popped by yesterday.”

Cole’s brows shot up. “Why?”

“To bring me a platter of cookies and borrow a cup of sugar,” I deadpanned. “She is a *Sullivan*, Cole, and she came to demand that I not accept the newest contract because a Clarkston had let it slip that we had already secured it.”

A soft whistle left Cole’s lips. “Damn. I never expected that.”

“It’s a battle of a multimillion-dollar contract.” I closed the file, having read all I needed to know. “And no way will I let

them beat me to this deal.”

“Ethan....” And something ran up my spine at the tone he used. I tensed—why didn’t I like that tone? “...when was the last time you got laid?”

I narrowed my eyes. “*That* is none of your business.”

“It kinda is when you look like you’ve got iron shoved up your butt,” Cole replied. “Listen, I know you are pissed about what Mia did, but come on, man. You need to chill out, man. Forget about getting wrinkles by thirty-two. You might have a stroke by tonight.”

In the back of my mind, I knew some of the things he was saying were right. I had been stressing a lot trying to get our name on more restaurants and tables than before. I had been averaging four hours of sleep per night, and the last time I had sex was probably before the kale-eating trend and dry shampoo, but I would be damned before I admitted any of that to my brother.

Reaching for a scrap paper, I balled it up and threw it at him, clocking him right in the chest. “Get out, you gremlin.”

When he was gone, I sagged into my office chair and rubbed the back of my neck. Holy cannoli, my muscles were so stiff I doubted a jackhammer could loosen them up, much less sex would. I did need some downtime, but the mere mention of relaxing set my nerves on edge.

Why would I be relaxing when I could be doing something productive?

I knew I lived an ironic life, eating vegan, running 4-kilos per day—should be five, but I only have thirty-two free minutes in the morning—drinking eight glasses of water but working sixteen-hour days.

Maybe Cole was right. I should do the horizontal dance soon—

Mia sprung to mind...

“...Massage it is.”

Chapter Two

Mia

Ethan Vega.

The man was like a walking, talking thunderstorm.

I swear, the air went staticky around him. He had that sort of presence, and I knew he damn well knew it. When I had overheard that rumor, I'd felt incensed. How dare Ethan take what was given to my family?

Even though I'd felt like I was walking into enemy territory, I'd gone to confront Ethan—only, the Ethan I saw there was not the Ethan I had left five years ago. And it wasn't just because he was a millionaire; we had grown up as neighbors, went to school together, and even attended the same church—but even there, we had the Iron Curtain between us, a DMZ, the goddamn Gulf of Mexico.

Our parents would have mutual conniptions if we had even shared a look, much less shook hands. Back then, Ethan had been a beanpole with eyes. Now, he was impossibly tall, broad-shouldered, and lean.

His thin Henley had not hidden the definition of muscles, and his jeans clung to his long, muscular legs. There was stubble on his square jaw, clenched tightly as he silently assessed me. Or... honestly, stared right *through* me.

I'd found myself staring into the most arresting and determined set of eyes I had ever seen. They were turbulent, intense, and vibrating with energy, and—to my shame—I had felt my traitorous body respond.

I'd told him I'd researched his family business activities; what I should have done was to look him up, too. But I hadn't, and now I was paying for it.

Thinking of how his eyes had scorched over my body—rendering me hot—I still felt my middle quiver at how coldly

he'd thrown my verbal assault back at me, dumping a proverbial bucket of ice over my head.

"God," I pressed my hands to my eyes. "I had made a jackass of myself, going off half-cocked like some B-rated movies ready to revenge for...for someone spilling his coffee. *Ugh.*"

Appalled at my actions, I shot out of bed and grabbed the robe I'd thrown over a chair before I'd gone to bed. I'd thought I'd be firmly asleep until I started tossing and turning while playing the interaction with Ethan a hundred times.

I could have come at the issue a different way...

I could have looked into what Sean had said before taking it as gospel truth...

I could have tried to make peace...

Why was twenty-twenty vision always in hindsight?

Padding downstairs, I headed to the kitchen, hoping to get a sweet treat or something. Aside from the low-burning lamp in the front hall, the house was mostly dark. Surprisingly though, further down, the light in the kitchen was on, and when I stepped in, I found my younger brother, Ryan, shirtless and bent over a succulent-looking slice of key lime pie. I hadn't seen him when I'd arrived. I supposed he had been out with his friends.

"Hey you, why are you up?" I asked.

He snorted. "So I could get the last slice of pie before you showed up. I kinda felt you would be coming by today."

I smacked him over the head, knowing he was lying about the pie. "Asshat." I went to check the fridge, pulled out the pie plate, cut a slice, and went to join him at the counter. "So, how is college, my genius brother?"

"Molecular biology is not genius material," he replied. "Astrophysics and building rocket ships are genius material."

"It is when you are studying genetics, too," I replied, digging the fork into the pie. I stopped and went back to the fridge for whipped cream and dolloped it over the slice. "I

could never get into the science stuff. I was asking for dolls at six, but at four, you went for the magnifying glass and plastic test tubes instead of the plastic trucks and cars.”

Ryan gave a wry grin, shooting the amber eyes that stared back at me in the mirror every day. “So, let me guess, you’re back home from your master’s degree to what? Talk Mom and Dad into allowing you to get a doctoral?”

“Actually—” I said, pausing at the grim realization that both our parents were still at the University of Colorado Hospital in Aurora, and they didn’t know I was here, “—I came to tell them I’m taking over.”

He paused with his loaded fork to his mouth, one eyebrow inching higher and higher until it nearly vanished in his hairline. “You’re going to take over...from Dad. I’d love to see you wrench the steering wheel from his hands. I doubt you can do that until he’s over the bridge.”

“Dad just had a heart attack,” I said. “Granted, it was a minor one, but it still counts. Besides, he’s sixty-five, and despite the army of assistants he’s got, he still makes sure he does it himself. It’s time he...I dunno, take a cruise, go to a beach somewhere and lay in the sun, roam the markets in Ibiza, something.”

“You know if you force Dad to retire, that might kill him more than the heart attack could have?” Ryan said matter-of-factly. “He loves to work. It’s his life.”

“It’s also his death if he doesn’t take it easy,” I replied. “Look, I’m not going to boot him out of his place. I’m just going to ask him to step down and let me do all the heavy lifting. Mom does what she can, but you know she is never business-minded. She’s more of a homemaker, always was.”

His lips twitched. “Something you never took to. We still have the scorch marks on the wall from that time you tried to cook Thanksgiving dinner.”

I groaned. “For God’s sake, let that go. It was five years ago.”

“Why would we?” Ryan laughed, “Do you know we still get Thanksgiving cards from the fire department every year.”

Huffing, I dumped my plate in the sink and grabbed my bag. “I’ll see you in the morning, pipsqueak. It has been a long drive from Denver.”

He shot me a salute while I headed to the curved staircase in the room behind us, then headed to the last room at the end of the hall.

Moonlight illuminated the ruffled Queen bed, the mahogany furniture, and the assorted pictures on the walls. Shucking off the robe, I slid back into bed and tried to relax.

No dice.

I had to think about business...but my mind kept straying back to Ethan. The way he’d held my face and looked at me with more fire than I had thought him capable of having. For most of my life, the few interactions I had with Ethan had given me the sense he was an aloof sort of guy, very... removed from his feelings.

It was kind of like that sitcom I’d watched the other day when this nerd guy had said his body and mind have a relationship that works best when they maintain a cool, wary distance from each other.

Ethan, though...he’d looked like he wanted to eat me alive.

And not in a good way.

In a, *wrap me in a blanket and throw me into a raging forest-fire* kind of way.

“I guess there is more to him than I thought I knew...” I murmured while tugging the sheets up.

While plump and new, the duvet looked like a faded antique quilt with a pattern of patches forming interlocking squares—very rustic and nothing like the steel blue back in my old apartment in Denver. Still, I slid sideways on the cool sheets, closed my eyes, and...could not sleep for the life of me.

Again.

Goddamnit, Ethan kept jumping behind my lids. No matter how I tossed and turned, he would never get away for more than a minute. Exhaustion finally took over, and I slipped off to sleep sometime before the witching hour and woke up at nearly midday.

Strong midday sunlight was beaming into the room through the windows, so I knew I had slept through the morning even before I woke fully. Something strange for me because my body was programmed to get up at dawn.

I guess an uneasy night and a jarring meeting with the Montague to my Capulet would do that to me.

Sitting up, I rubbed my eyes with one hand while searching for my phone with the other. With my vision clear, I checked my messages and my calendar—by habit, even though I didn't have class or a dissertation to hand in—and realized, with shock, that I had the whole day free.

It felt...strange.

Slipping from bed, I went to the bathroom and washed up, got my robe on, and padded downstairs, craving coffee like a fiend. Ryan wasn't there, and chances were, he had already gone to the town to meet up with his friends, or he was at the library with a pile of books higher than his six-foot-one.

Luckily for me, though, he had the coffee pot already filled.

After pouring a cup, I reached for my cell and called Brodie, my roommate from Denver. I'd promised to let him know when I'd gotten home, but it had been too late to call last night.

"Please tell me your car broke down, and a handsome lumberjack came to your rescue," he said instead of being normal with a *hello*. He was a lit major and a romance author, so I gave him a pass.

"Sorry to break your heart, Brodie," I laughed. "No dice on the lumberjacks coming to my rescue."

“Bummer,” he grunted, and I heard the muted clickity-clack of his keyboard in the background. He was probably working on his next bestseller. “So, how’s wine country?”

“Same as it always was,” I replied. “Good people in the town, aggravating neighbors a mile away from you. But...” I sighed, “...to be fair, I may be the aggravating neighbor this time.”

“Oh, pray tell,” Brodie said. “But wait a second. I need to refill my coffee.”

“And your half-ton of sugar and crème,” I laughed. “Have some coffee with your sugar, why don’t you?”

He grunted something in French that I knew to be a curse word. But soon, he came back, “So, what did you do?”

Dropping a cube of sugar into my drink, I told him the whole story, from my screw-up with the eavesdropping to the righteous indignation and then to having my bluster flung right back into my face.

“*Oi vey*,” Brodie grunted. “You jammed your foot into your mouth on that one.”

“I know,” I replied. “And I tipped my hand too. Now he knows about the contract, and if I know Vega, he is going to double down on getting his hands on that one. The only good thing in this scenario is that he doesn’t know my dad is sick. If he did, that would be two weak points, and I might as well roll over and give him every weak point to our machinery.”

“Huh,” Brodie sounded contemplative. “Remind me. How did this rivalry start again?”

“No one knows for sure,” I replied. “Some people say it started on the Mayflower when my great, great, great, and a couple more great grands before we got to my grandfather, who bought his prized grape seedlings, and one of the Vega men dropped one of the two into the ocean. He then waited until the Vega were settled and dumped cattle dung on their orange blossoms, stopping the bees from collecting honey. From there, the long-lasting hatred began.”

“Really,” this time, I heard the scratch of a pencil in the background. “Tell me more.”

I grew suspicious. “Brodie, are you using my family’s history for one of your tawdry plots?”

“There is nothing tawdry about my plots, and yes, I am, without a lick of shame, using your family history to make an updated Romeo and Juliet,” he replied. “So, again, tell me more.”

I rolled my eyes. “Another rumor says my great-great-grandfather tried to make amends and asked a Vega lady to marry him, but on the eve of the wedding, he found her *in flagrante delicto* with another man. He vowed to hate her and her family to the day he died. Oddly, the Vega said it’s the other way around. My grandfather had knocked someone up and was trying to hide it by marrying the Vega lady, but she found out and, in today’s terms, kicked him to the curb. I doubt that happened, though.”

“Uh huh, uh huh,” Brodie replied. “Keep going.”

“There is nothing to keep going on about,” I replied. “Aside from church, my family and his have not been in the same room together since 1899, and I just broke it.”

“Can you describe Ethan Vega for me?” Brodie asked.

“Why?” I asked.

“My author brain needs a visual,” he replied. “So come on, tell me.”

“Ugh,” I huffed, “He’s tall, about six-two or so, dark brown hair, green eyes. His face is somewhere between Ian Somerhalder and Zachary Quinto, and he’s got big hands with slender fingers and neatly cut nails—” my lips clamped shut because when the hell had I noticed *that* “—and he’s toned, like YMCA swimmer tones, or a runner’s body. I don’t know. I can’t tell you.”

“Sounds good,” he replied. “And what is his voice like? Rough, gruff, deep, or—”

“Jesus,” I laughed. “What is it with you authors? His voice is, I dunno, somewhere between baritone and tenor. You figure that out.”

“Okay, last question,” Brodie asked. “Step away from your hatred of him and think objectively, like that time Sunny asked you if she thought she could sing, and tell me if you think he’s handsome and hot.”

My stomach twisted, “For some, sure,” I said.

“You’re dodging the question,” Brodie called out. “Do you think he is roll-in-the-sack worthy?”

I felt my blush start from somewhere around my toes. “I—yeah, he’s hot. But if you ask me to repeat that, I will deny it to the day I die.”

“No promises.” Brodie laughed. “Sounds like you had a crush on the guy but never wanted to admit it.”

“Okay, I’m hanging up now,” I said firmly. “This conversation never happened.”

All I heard was laughter before he added, “If you’re coming back this way anytime soon, remember my bottle of wine.”

“Goodbye,” I replied, hanging up.

I pressed the heel of my hand to my eyes. As irritating as Brodie was.... he was right. I’d had a crush on Ethan years ago, but now, anything more than being business acquaintances was off the table.

Heading upstairs, I had to get a shower, get dressed, and then find out when Mom and Dad would be home. I had a lot more critical things to consider than a misplaced crush that would never go anywhere.

Ever.

Chapter Three

Ethan

As interesting as it was knowing these Texas guys were coming, it was hell trying to find out who they were when they would be in town and who they would be meeting with first.

Benji and Sarah were tied up cold calling every big beef producer in Texas, trying to fether out any scrap of knowledge to give me a heads up. At the same time, I was busy getting my portfolios together, estimates, and projections into on-hand files if these guys decided to drop in unannounced.

That is, if Mia hasn't gotten ahead of me already.

It had been twelve hours since she had dropped in—how far could she have gone at all? The sad—and scary—truth was that with her family's connections, she could be light years ahead of me right now.

I felt a headache coming on, but the work still had to be done even more when the town's festival was tonight, and all hands were on deck preparing for it. Rubbing the back of my neck, I didn't know if I should take a break or push on—after a strong drink of Scotch.

The Vega Meadery had an eclectic sense of style that balanced modern and traditional. When I had gotten to the helm of my family's business, I'd made sure to change it.

No more 19th-century hand presses and wooden buckets, but we made it look that way. My Meadery was split in half. The front room had a tavern with wooden tables and seats made from old casks for guests' tastings, and behind it, shelves made from iron spigots where full casks of mead rested on display.

Customers came here to get a drink and some munchies while they watched the automated tanks and fermenter barrels in action through a vast glass wall. I was manning the bar

while every one of my twenty-one staff was fixing the bottles and the small tasting cups, plus the mason jars for the people to buy drinks later.

With the town getting flooded with tourists, my hands were flying trying to make drinks until I had to call Indie over to help me. I grabbed a fresh towel from behind the bar and wiped a condensation mark off before grabbing another glass and going to the taps.

“Man,” Indigo served a mock-mead—just apple juice, honey, and water, no yeast or fermentation—to a fourteen-year-old teen. It was our version of butterbeer. “I keep forgetting how busy this time of year gets.”

He was right; Harvest was a week-and-a-half-long version of the Macy’s Parade. It was a business boom that started us off on the right foot when we started our new batch of production. As eager as I was to start a new round of production, I was never going to let this new steak contract pass me by. This contract could be my only chance to turn Vega Meadery into a worldwide phenomenon.

If there was a chance to rake in more money and get our names out worldwide, I was going to take it.

And trump the stuck-up Sullivans.

Oh, yeah—that too.

Well, trump the Sullivans *first* and then get worldwide recognition.

We served another set of seven tourists while Jenna gathered those who wanted the tour and gestured for them to follow her down the corridor so they could see the history of where our mead came from.

Dan and Greg came in for their shift, and I handed the mantle to them while I headed upstairs to my office to play detective. I slid behind my table and flipped the file open—we’d narrowed the prospective contract givers to the Tender T Steaks guy, the owner of Twisted Twines Ranch, and the man from Rocking H- Ranch, both ex-military men.

But until this rumor was proven true, we wouldn't know for sure.

I turned my attention to the other files, the mockups, and ad campaigns to get my mead at the next Superbowl or the beer fests in Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, Colorado Springs, and throughout the Rocky Mountains. The Mile High City hosted a slew of craft breweries and one of the most prominent beer festivals in the world, and we were slated to have booths there.

With or without—but hopefully *with* the Texas contract—I was bound to have Vega's name everywhere.

"Nana used to tell me there are a hundred ways to sweeten the pot," I mumbled.

"...I thought she said to skin a cat," Cole said as he strode into the room.

"This is the age of political correctness. I've got enough enemies, and I do not need PETA as another one," I looked up. "Do you have anything useful for me, or are you here to waste my time?"

"I want to know if you're going to the festival tonight?" Cole asked. "It's the full moon, and you know what that means..."

"Yes," I spun a page and dotted a note there. "That it is utter bullcrap and malarky. I don't know who was the idiot that made the rumor that—"

"Not a rumor," Cole jumped in.

"—that whoever kisses under the full moon will fall in love with the person they locked lips with." I rolled my eyes. "It is the same unsupported tripe as sleeping with a mirror under your pillow, counting nine stars each night for nine nights, or standing in front of a mirror and brushing your hair three times. You have to be *asinine* to believe *that*."

"Soooo," Cole drew out the word. "Does that mean you want to test that theory out tonight?"

I looked up. "No."

“You should,” he added.

“You need to get out,” I jabbed a pen to the door.

“You are a grump,” Cole laughed. “No, seriously, you can afford to rest for one night.”

I ground my teeth. “No, I cannot.”

Cole didn’t buy it. “What do you have to do tonight?”

“Pay roll,” I lied.

“Indie took care of that,” Cole said.

“I meant inventory,” I added, stone-faced.

He leaned in. “You shared the updated, *sharable* Excel file two days ago.”

“I’m looking into other partnerships, shareholders, investors, Ad campaigns, debt to equity ratio, ROI’s—”

“That won’t go up in flames for one night,” Cole stressed. “Come on, man, let yourself live for one night. Stop being Cinderfella, work, work, work, and be the beau of the ball for one night. You can do *that*. It’s like five hours.”

He was right.

But it felt wrong.

I pressed my lips tight. “If—*if*—I do this, will you get off my case about it?”

“I’ll zip my lips for a month,” Cole grinned.

Sagging into my ergonomic office chair, I grunted, “Three months.”

“One month, fifteen days, and three hours.”

On the basis of that logic, I reminded myself to get my brother drug tested.

“Two months or no dice,” I replied.

Cole flung his hands up. “Fine, two months.”

“I’ll do it,” I replied. “Now, can you go and do something useful, like help the rest of the guys make the finishing

touches at the booth in the town square? Bonus points if you could find the Texas bigwigs if they are in the square tonight and bring them to me.”

“Deal,” Cole spat on his hand and stuck it out.

I looked at his hand and then back to him. “I am not touching that.”

Rolling his eyes, Cole wiped his hand on his jeans. “Buzzkill.”

“Braindead,” I muttered while going back to my books, but I couldn’t hide the smile tugging at my lips. Cole knew there was nothing behind my teasing—even while he still acted like a numbskull nineteen-year-old—and that I still appreciated his help.

Cole was a people person, a concept that made me break out in hives. Interacting with too many people was too much for me; if I went to a club or a concert, I would have my fill of people for a month. Books, numbers, routines, solace...those things were my happy places. Cole filled in for me where I fell short; he had that schoolboy charm that placed people at ease and let them be open with him.

Me—I was the crotchety principal ready with the rulebook.

The grin Cole shot over his shoulder at me reminded me that he knew it, too.

When he was gone, I made myself a strong shot of a mead variety we called Shitkicker—Cole had named that one—and it was named that for a good reason. Made of honey, malt, hops, ginger, and black currants, it was 16% alcoholic and delivered a punch. It was a party favorite and a rave staple, but thank God there were no deaths from it. Knock on wood, they never would.

I was going to a party tonight.

And why did I feel as if I had made a deal with the devil?

* * *

My strategy for surviving that night—stay out of sight, keep away from the rowdy crowd, and by ten o'clock, count myself as having 'enjoyed' the night before booking myself back home. I probably would have made it, too...if I hadn't drunk away half a bar and found it challenging to keep my vision from splitting in two.

It was why I found myself at the fire pit, my back pressed on the cold stone while I watched a circle of mead-drunk, mask-wearing hippies swaying to the beat of a bongo drum. I swayed and tilted my head to the sky—and how it is that I could be dizzy sitting down, I don't know—but the stars swayed.

Someone was grilling something because I smelled hot dogs in the air and butter.

"Umph," someone slumped to my side and groaned before she burst into drunken giggles. "It's so pretty out there."

I was sauced enough to agree with her.

Twisted my head, I saw a white beaded harlequin mask covering half her face, long, light brown hair out, a curved jaw, and full lips stained by wine. The bonfire was flickering behind her, making a halo around her head. To my addled brain, she looked like a goddess.

"Are you from around here?" I asked.

In the recesses of my brain, I cringed. Outdated, cliché pick-up line much?

She twisted and looked at me. Her eyes felt familiar—but damned if I could place them. "You could say that. I have been around for a long while, though."

"So, you know the rumor about kissing at midnight?" I asked.

She pressed a hand to her neck and rolled it. "I...may have forgotten a few parts of it."

"The story is basically a rip-off from Romeo and Juliet. Two families were feuding about a patch of land that both families said was legally theirs. It had gotten so bad that half

the town was siding with one family or the other, and everything was on edge. This is where the story gets fuzzy—” or was it my brain? “—some say there was this meteor shower or comic dust or a dropping buckets of fairy dust, but then on a harvest night, the son and daughter of the two families, kissed at midnight, the same time when that cosmic thing was happening and two families—”

“Lived in peace for happily ever after?” she asked.

I threw my head back and laughed. “I wish. But the two got married, and because they had children, the two families had to make a truce there—” I lifted a hand to a post in the center of the town green. “They say whoever kisses on that spot of land, at midnight, will fall in love forever. Pretty cheesy, right?”

She turned to me—and god, why couldn’t I place those eyes? “You wanna test it out?”

“Test what, o—” she grabbed my hand, and I lurched to my feet. I stumbled on my feet as she tugged me to the post. A countdown cry rose from the crowd, *ten...nine... eight...*

“I don’t kiss strangers—” she giggled. “—but I’ve got enough wine to try. If anything, we can say it never happened?”

...seven... six... five...

The crazy thing—I was drunk enough to try, too.

I probably wouldn’t see her again; what was the harm?

...four...three....two...

I crowded against her, invading her space, and I could tell from the widening of her eyes behind her mask and the shortening of her breath that I caught her off guard. I leaned down until our lips were almost touching.

...One

Unable to resist the lure of kissing her a second longer, I claimed her mouth.

Her lips parted on a shaky exhale, and I took full advantage. Rather than slide my tongue inside, I played the tip of my tongue over the edges of her lips, teasing for deeper access. After the tiniest hesitation, her mouth opened, and her tongue met mine in a slow, lush exploration. I felt it, and I was pretty damn sure she did too. Sifting my fingers through the silkiness of her hair, I tilted her head to the side, and we kissed deeper.

Her lips were warm, full, teasing, and sexy...and a delicious, thrilling desire that I almost never felt before thrummed through me. My brain was telling me to end this now before things spiraled out of control...but my body wasn't listening to my brain.

One kiss turned to turn two, then three. As we angled our heads one way, then another, my world narrowed, and I wanted the kisses to go on forever, to explore her mouth, run my hands down her body, breathe in when she breathed out.

For once, I wanted to bring a lady to my bed. I wanted to feel utterly connected to her in every way, and that scared me to hell. I had to know who she was.

Pulling away, I reached up and pulled her mask away—and then my body went into rigor mortis. The shock made my limbs heavy and my ears pounding in my ears.

Mia.

Mia Sullivan.

I had just kissed the one woman on the planet I should never have even touched.

...and the fucked-up thing about it; I wanted to do even more.

Chapter Four

Mia

As I went to get another kiss, he was gone.

Confused, I pulled away to look at the guy, the one man I had dared to be foolish with in five years of college bar crawls and late-night almost-hookups. I'd never been foolish enough to kiss a man I never knew, but here I was, on the town green, in the very spot where a kiss would make you fall in love.

The problem is, I had no goddamn idea who I had kissed.

Pulling away, I stared at the man who pulled the ground from under me, who had kissed me like he wanted to devour me, but now he was looking at me as if I had grown two heads.

Why?

We stared at each other in the midnight shadows, our breaths swirling in the cooling air. The fire that had once been in his eyes was gone and replaced with cold detachment. Confused, I yanked his mask down and stopped dead.

That was why his eyes were familiar...

That was why I knew his voice...

Or why his hands were so recognizable...

Ethan Vega had kissed me. With passion, with desire, with fiery want...and now he was a block of ice. My lips were still tingling as I stepped away, and my back met the old iron post. "... It's you."

His lips thinned. "This was a mistake."

I didn't know if I should be offended or disgusted.

A second ago, he had held me as if I were a precious treasure he didn't want to let slip away... now, I was sure he wanted nothing more than to put a few miles between us.

Seeing Ethan had made the woozy feeling in my head vanish like a lousy booty call would do the morning after the deed was done.

“Yeah, it was,” I replied. “But not because of what you think.”

Before he could say something, I turned around and wound my way through the crowd, hell-bent on getting away from him, even while, in the back of my head, I knew he would never follow me.

I knew his family and mine didn't get along, but somehow, I didn't share the same level of animosity and aversion he had towards me. The only thing I had towards him was professional rivalry. To be fair, when I was younger, I had stolen looks across the various rooms at Ethan, from the days he'd been a beanpole to when he'd shot up; his shoulders had gotten broader, and his jaw had gotten squarer. The honey blond in his hair had vanished, and it was utterly bleached-blond from the sun.

I'd had a crush on him that was bound to go nowhere.

But I still didn't hate him,

“He hates me, though,” I mumbled while slipping in line for a food truck. “More than he should. More than is reasonable. It's like he thinks my family is a fungus that won't go away, and it's getting under his skin.”

“Mia?” Ryan called over, his tall form visible over the heads of five people while he lifted a bottle of cider in the air. “C'mere.”

I paid for my kabab and then went to join him and his friends, all of whom were at least four inches to a foot taller than me. “Caleb, Josh, Ian,” I nodded to the guys. “Are you having fun?”

“Depends on what you mean by fun,” Ryan snorted, then gestured with his bottle to the two near him. “These geniuses —”

“*Genii*,” Caleb said.

“—decided to try and finally find out what is in Old Man Mitchell’s shed,” Ryan replied. “They had a plan too: strip to their underwear, slather themselves in lard and slip through the fence, throw corn to distract his guard rooster, and jimmy the lock on the shed.”

My brows shot up. “How far did you get before he came out with his shotgun?”

“Five feet from the barn,” Caleb grinned. “He grabbed my ear, forced me to wash up and get dressed, scolded me like I was two, and sent me back here.”

“I got a bit further,” Ian laughed, “But he got me too.”

“I don’t know why you even want to try,” I shrugged. “We all know not to mess with the old man. He’s got a reputation for a reason.”

“But everyone wants to know what’s in that shed,” Josh replied, fixing his glasses. “And I mean everyone, from when we were kids. Is it moonshine, is it tools, is it a dead body? We want to know.”

“It’s probably feed for his chickens and a deep freezer for when he hunts deer,” I replied. “You’re risking your necks for nothing.”

“No, no,” Caleb shook his head, “There is street cred to be won. Everyone wants to know what’s in that shed, and the person who finds it is *King*.”

I snorted—kids.

“What’s on the cider label, Ryan?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s Half-Pint, the original, *non-alcoholic* version they sell. Cool your jets, sis. I’m not ready to start breaking laws.”

“You’d better,” I said, punching his arm. “Look, I’m going to turn in. Try not to make noise when you come in.”

“I hardly think you’ll care about the noise,” Ryan’s grin put me on edge. “The way you were slamming back wine glasses at the booth, you’ll have a cabaret in your head by

morning. As a matter of fact, how are you standing so steady anyway?”

“I’m immune to wine,” I lied. “How many times have you seen me get shitfaced?”

Ryan laughed. “Not once.”

“See,” I grinned, “See you tomorrow.”

“Hey, Mia,” Caleb came running after me and I stopped. He blushed a bit. “You’ve got anything going on this Friday? We could grab a drink or bite to eat. A movie?”

My jaw dropped; Caleb was like five years younger than me. Not to say anything was wrong with him trying to date me—I certainly was not age-shaming—but he was my brother’s age. It felt...weird.

“Are you asking me out?”

“And trying not to lose my collective shit while doing it, yeah,” he replied.

“I’m impressed, Caleb,” I grinned. “I’d love to date you... if you were five years older and can drink.”

He laughed and raked a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I guess you’re used to guys who are a bit older and have their stuff together, right?”

I gave him a warm smile. “Yep. Don’t sweat it, though. I’m pretty sure you’ll find a nice girl around here. Besides, I’m not here for vacation. I’m back home for business.”

“Gotcha,” he grinned. “Go take over the world, Superwoman. I’ll see you around.”

I headed off to my car, a silver Ranger Rover, and headed home, trying—and failing—to forget Ethan and his goddamn kiss. A thousand thoughts ran through my head; I shouldn’t have let the kiss happen. It meant nothing.

Nothing.

We were both tipsy on liquor.

He clearly thought I was someone else.

I thought it was someone else.

Beer goggles made you do some stupid stuff.

The excuses ran through my head in an itemized list with subsections and sub-subsections underneath all the headlines. It didn't matter that Ethan's kiss had rocked my world better than anyone before him. It didn't matter that I'd have thought of going to bed with the mysterious kisser who seemed to understand my body better than my last two boyfriends.

It didn't matter because he hated me, and nothing I could do or say would change that. It was best that I shoved what had happened tonight to the deepest, darkest corner of my brain and forgot about it.

It didn't take me long to start on the road heading home; rows and unending rows of grave vines bookended the lane as I approached the house and then parked under the extended pagoda where my brother's truck was parked as well. As he was still at the festival, he'd probably had Caleb pick him up.

I pulled up to my home, a beautifully restored Victorian home built in 1898 that sat on 70 beautifully maintained acres of Swenson Red, Catawba, Sultana, and the finicky Garnacha grape, a native of Spain—the same one Ethan had called a *weed*—for our bottles.

Sighing, I shut the car off and slumped over the wheel, trying to sift through my emotions and find a speck of solace within. I didn't find it. The thing with Ethan sprung up again—which bothered me ever more. I was the queen of compartmentalizing; when I decided to ignore something or someone, it disappeared.

So, why is Ethan Vega the exception to the rule?

Huffing, I entered the house and bypassed the kitchen and the ground floor room. I was planning to ask Mom to convert to a master, so she and Dad could have an easier time of it. Well, before I told them that I was here to take over the business.

In my room, I took a quick shower, slid into bed, and then checked my messages, emails, and whatnot before setting my

phone to the side and plopping my head on the pillow. Hopefully, Ethan wouldn't turn up in my dreams.

My back was on the post with Ethan's eyes lust-blown, gazing down at me. His hand fixed around the back of my neck, and he pulled me in for another kiss, his tongue sweeping through my mouth like a hurricane.

Sensation overrode everything around me, and a tide of pleasure washed through me so strong that my knees gave out, but he caught me and held me against the post. My lips clung desperately to his, and his kiss grew harder, lustier, deeper, and I shivered when his tongue swept against my bottom lip.

"Do you want me?" he hissed.

"W-what?"

"Do you fucking want me?" he demanded.

"...Yes." I gasped.

He pulled me from the post, spun me, and—my back was on the wall of his office.

"Open for me," he whispered, framing my face with his large, long-fingered hand. "Let me in."

Senses spinning, I obeyed, and his tongue plunged boldly inside. His hands slid from my face, and he braced my body on the wall while his hands slid under my thighs, and he hitched my legs higher around his waist. His hands pulled my blouse out and slid up to my bra.

With my mouth on his, he undid the front clasp and thrummed my pebbling nipple. He kissed my neck right up to my ear while he rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, making me arch into him.

"How long, Mia?" he demanded. "How long have you wanted this?"

"What?" I could barely concentrate, with all the sensations swirling around my body.

"Stop playing dumb, Mia," he growled, and damn if that didn't make my body flush hot. "How long have you wanted to

be with me?"

"N—never," I lied.

His lips smashed against mine, and I whimpered into his mouth. Both my hands went to his face, one threading into his hair while his tongue twisted with mine. Hiking me up the wall, he pulled me into him and sucked one of my nipples in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hardened bud. His teeth imprisoned the tender nub, holding it hostage to the hunger of his agile tongue.

I stiffened, feeling my pussy grow wet. It was like there was a flow of energy going from my nipple down between my legs, and the connection was slowly growing stronger. Every time his tongue moved against my skin, rubbing it the slightest bit, I grew more restless.

Moaning, I dragged my nails down his chest, and my hips ground against him without me even realizing I'd begun doing it—but it wasn't enough. I wrapped my legs around his back, and his groan caused gooseflesh to break out all over my body. He cupped my other breast, kissing down into my cleavage, and I was getting wet. I could feel it dampening my core.

Then one of his hands slipped from my outer thigh up to my inner knee, caressing its way up toward my pussy, and I gasped at the sensation, wriggling against him. My arms tightened around his neck, my fingers running through the thickness of his sunshine hair.

I was so lightheaded I barely realized he'd been stripping me bare. It was only when cold air ghosted over my skin that I realized I was down to my underwear. I blinked—then my back was on his desk, and with one swipe, everything clattered to the floor.

The unfurling of his zipper made my belly tremble. His eyes pinned me to the table more than his hands. His button-down was open, showing his bare chest with a strip of hair over his pecs and a line bisecting his torso down to his waistline.

“Last chance,” he said, pupils fully extended that only a rim of his green irises was left. “Do you want me or not?”

My body moved before I did, and I pulled him down for a hard kiss. I heard a rip and a grunt before he entered me without the slightest hesitation. My back bowed up, and my lips parted into a wide ‘O’ and his roughness and how...and how I liked it.

My muscles spasmed around Ethan’s cock as my body was desperate to adjust, but he didn’t give me much time. His hands gripped my waist and hips set a harsh, punishing rhythm, but for me, it was absolute nirvana.

“Take me, Ethan,” I panted as he ripped me from the desk and braced my back on a wall. My legs wrapped around him, and I found his mouth for a hot kiss as he fucked me against the wall. Everything felt good.

I was in a daze.

Everything felt wrong...but so right.

I was able to forget everything except Ethan, except us. Right here. Right now. I came violently, the air bursting from my lungs in a scream and my core quaking, and he exploded with a roar, pumping into me a few more times before his body stilled and his warmth flooded into me.

I felt his hot breath on my skin, his sweat dipping on the crook of my neck.

“I fuckin’ love you,” Ethan murmured in my ear.

I shot up in bed with a gasp. With my heart thumping, everything around me was swimming with my disorientation. Slipping back to the bedhead, I drew my legs up and pressed my face into my hands.

“Jesus Christ...” I whispered. “What the hell is happening to me?”

Chapter Five

Ethan

The pounding of my feet on the pavement drowned out the pounding in my head...or the twist in my chest. Last night had been beyond insane, and not only because of what had happened with Mia. I couldn't remember the last time I had allowed myself to get tipsy, much less drunk enough that I had left rational city behind and walked right into crazy town.

Mile One....

How could I have done that? How could I have kissed her? Even if I hadn't known it was her—and god knows I should have—what sense did it make to kiss a complete stranger?

Mile One and a Half...

When I had pulled her mask, it hadn't taken long for the surprise on her face to turn to disgust. Of course, it had; why would she want a Vega near her, much less desecrating the sanctity of her body?

Mile Two...

And the worst thing was...I had wanted to do more than kiss her. Old teenage crushes and desires aside, the adult me had wanted her in my bed, moaning and gasping under me as I sent her mind and body to places she might have never been.

Mile Two and a Half...

We weren't kids anymore. There was no excuse to be wearing rose-tinted glasses when the reality of who we were and the mandates our family had put us under would ever stand between us. She was bound to be my opponent.

Mile Three...

I rounded a corner on Second Street and slowed my hard run to a jog. Sweat was pouring off my forehead, blinding me with salty stings before I wiped them away with my arm.

Stopping, I tapped the button on my wristwatch to stop the music pounding from my earbuds.

Across the street was the local coffee shop slash bakery, Hot Joe. Thank God the guy who ran it, Harvey Richards, my friend from high school days, had refrained from letting his inner Star Wars nerd come out; he'd been a cup of Vodka away from naming the shop Brew Baccas, like Chewbacca.

He was a strange guy, but he made my post-workout tropical green smoothie.

It was about five thirty, still early enough that the morning mist hadn't evaporated from the ground, so the shop was pretty empty. I stepped in and breathed in coffee, burned sugar, pineapple glaze for their donuts, and pecans for their specialty bread.

I got to the counter and called out, "Harvey!"

The swinging doors spun and bright red hair sticking in a faux hawk came out. I didn't want to know how much he spent on hair gel per month. He set my cup of smoothie on the table with a grin. "Morning, Ethan. You look like you ran ten kilos instead of five."

Taking the cup, I saluted him, "It's been a long night."

"How long?" Harvey grinned, folded his arms on the table, and waggled his brows. "Got some last night?"

"Hardly," I grunted while plopping a straw into the cup and taking a sip. "I only got tipsy. That's all."

"No chicks?" he snorted. "I'm disappointed."

"You say that as if I were a ladies' man," I rolled my eyes. "I've got a business to run, Harv, not going cruising for chicks. I have responsibilities, man."

"Yeah, yeah," Harvey waved his hand. "I get it. It's all about the numbers."

I turned and pressed the cold cup to my temple, hoping it would calm the thump in my temple. I wish I could go back in time and stop myself from drinking that much. Even worse, I never got a wink of sleep last night.

I'd tossed and turned for almost an hour before deciding sleep was a no-show and went to my home office to look over some files to draw up a proposal for lavender mead and another one for dragon fruit. By the time I looked up, it was predawn, and my body went into autopilot. I grabbed my running suit, jammed my feet into my sneakers, and hit the pavement.

"Where were you last night?" I asked.

"Out by the water," he nodded west where the manmade dam and lake were. "Maggie and I had our bonfire out there... if you get my drift."

"I always get your *drift*," I replied while facing the front windows. "Speaking of Mags, are you ever going to make an honest woman out of her? You've been dating for like six years."

"Believe it or not, Mags is the one who is dragging her feet," Harvey shrugged. "Said something about the moment we start using the pronoun 'we' and getting *His and Hers* towels will make her lose her shit."

"Well, she was a tomboy," I shrugged.

He lobbed a napkin to me. "She more of a woman than you can handle."

I quirked a brow. "She's five inches taller than you and could jump shot the last dunk to win the championship."

"Shut it," he grunted. "Why are we friends anyway?"

"I saved your ass at calculus," I replied, finishing the shake. "It was the only way you got into business school." Jiggling the empty cup, I grinned, "See you tomorrow."

Tapping my watch again, I had my earbuds back in place before jogging home. I had to put last night behind me, get showered, eat something—god knows what that could be—then deep dive into business.

My house, a two-story cottage ripped from the front page of *Architectural Digest*, was a modern design: straight lines, open floor concepts, minimalist, gray, white, and a splash of

turquoise here and there. Cole had called it soulless; I called it efficient.

I peeled my clothes off while heading to my steel and glass shower, big enough to hold three—but not for the reason Cole thought. I wasn't in the business of holding threesomes. I had a secret issue with tight spaces.

Stepping in, I had the rain-showerheads on full blast, lukewarm, scrubbing while gradually lowering the temp to cold. My head was on the pile of work resting on my desk at the Meadery and the proposals I had ready to send to purveyors. I still hadn't heard a damn thing about the Texas meat guys, and I was wondering if it was all a hoax.

Stepping out, I toweled my hair dry, wrapped another around my waist, and then went to dress. My thoughts roamed over everything—my expense accounts, a dad who was vacationing in Tahiti, or the haircut I'd been putting off for two weeks—anything but Mia.

Why would I let her live rent-free in my head when she wanted nothing to do with me?

I had my jeans on before my cell rang, and when Indie's name flashed on the screen, I grabbed it and answered. "Indie? What's up?"

"We need you on deck, boss," he sounded giddy. "There are three guys here from a ranch in Texas who said he tried your mead last night and wants to talk business."

I froze.

Had I heard that right? The Texas guys were indeed there—when I had just given up hope that they were coming altogether.

"Tell them I will be there in ten minutes," I replied, squishing the lurch in my gut. While grabbing a pressed button down and debating on a tie, I tried to wrack my brain and remember who I had sold mead to—before Indie had booted me off the stall and I'd gotten hammered on my stuff—but no significant face came to mind.

“I guess I’ll have to see who it is when I get to the meeting,” I murmured while I finger-combed my hair into place.

Grabbing my iPad and phone, I left for my car, a hybrid Prius, and got to my office. Indigo was bouncing on the balls of his feet as he rushed to the door and grinned. “I’ve put them in your office. The older gentleman is Benjamin Hills or Ben, and the other fellow is Ewan Hollister, and the third guy is Trevor Dorsten.”

“Thanks, Indie,” I nodded.

Heading into the office, my gaze landed on two men, one with silver streaking through his dark hair, dressed in dark Wranglers, tan boots, and plain button-down; the other was snazzy in gray trousers matching suspenders and a paisley shirt. His dark hair was coiffed under a fedora. The third guy was in a plain dark suit and held a stack of folders.

“Welcome,” I nodded. “Mister Hills, Mr. Hollister, and Mr. Dorsten. How may I help you?”

“We’re here on behalf of Mister John Maxwell of Rocking H Ranch and Mister Portman, who owns Tender T’ Steaks,” Mister Dorsten greeted me, reaching for a handshake. I shook all three hands. “The two are in a partnership on this venture and are seeking the best beverage to accompany the campaign.”

That shocked me. I had expected one company, not two. “I see. First, let me thank you for considering us. We all know wine and beef is the so-called marriage made in gastric heaven, but I assure you, our mead is just as good.”

“Oh, I know,” the older man replied, and his deep accent jolted something inside my head. He was the one I’d sold the mason jar of Firestarter Mead, a mix of redberries, ginger, and honey. It had enough alcoholic content to trace the line of warm burn and downright boozy. “I had a glass last night, and it nearly knocked my socks off.”

I grinned. “Just nearly? Remind me to let you try the Shitkicker.”

The guy in the fedora snickered. “I had the Sullivan’s Sloane wine, and I felt my head leave my body.”

I knew that wine—all prejudice aside, he was right.

“I do understand, but we have four variations that I am sure will be on the same level as their wine,” I replied, “We have from light to dark mead, sweet and dry as well. We even have dessert mead and spicy ones. Would you like to have samples?”

“Please,” Mr. Dorsten replied.

“And may I have a bottle of the one I had last night to go,” Mr. Mills lifted his hand.

“My pleasure,” I replied, then rang Indie and Jenna. “Can you please tell me more about this venture?”

While the two executive assistants explained the new venture, I took notes and made annotations to my original proposal. When Indie and Jenna came in with the tray of glasses and bottles, they sat them down, made small talk, and then left.

I rounded the table and explained, “From left to right, we have Mist; it is made with hops, French saison yeast, and orange blossom honey with a four percent alcoholic fermentation. It’s good for light food, fish, and salads...things you would typically use white wine for.”

They took the glass and sipped. I made mental notes of their facial expressions, and they were all flavorful.

“This one here is RedRun.” I handed the glasses over. “It’s made with wildflower honey, oak infusion spirals, yeast, maple syrup, and hops. I am told it pairs very well with venison and rabbit.”

“Oh, I like this one,” Hollister remarked. “It’s smooth.”

“It’s also versatile,” I added, “It can be used as ice tea if you choose for a light lunch or even by itself.”

“It can go with duck, too,” Mills replied, his gruff tone held deep appraisal.

“This third is DoubleBerry,” I replied, “Blackberry, raspberry and rich honey, cloves and vanilla. It is carefully monitored not to surpass the fourteen-point five alcoholic content.”

They took the third glass, and all three looked delighted and surprised. “I’ve had people say it’s even richer when they have their porterhouse or T-bones. Those cuts are cross-sections of marbled, textured strip steak and the lean tenderloin. They say it pairs perfectly.”

“Hot damn,” Mr. Mills grinned, “I may need a bottle of this too.”

I held back my grin. “See, some *producers*—” I made the air quotes, “— have mixed fermented white wine with a blend of honey and other sugars, such as white refined sugar, saying it was mead when it’s just spiced wine. We have five hundred beehives, most of them are in our orange blossom orchard, but we have contracts with other suppliers who source the berries and other ingredients we use for our mead.”

“What’s that last one?” Dorsten asked.

I looked. “That is our dessert variations,” I replied. “Something of an alternative for hot chocolate. Our mead is caramelized before adding the water and the flavoring. We add caramel, chocolate, and even toasted s’mores flavors. This one is the peppermint mocha.”

They took the glasses and drank, and Hollister grinned, “I may have found my topping for my chocolate chip ice-cream.”

“I do believe the variety you have here will make a powerful mark,” Mills said, “I don’t want to trouble you, but would you have any samples we can take back to have the final word?”

“Certainly,” I replied, glad that I had planned for this. “It will be ready for you when you leave, but can you please tell me more about this proposal? How long would this tentative partnership be for both of us.”

Dorsten cleared his throat and handed over a folder. “Inside, we have all the prospective terms, the lifespan of our

partnership, the supply amount, and all the bones of a contract, but until it is approved, we'll hammer out the fine details. See, Mister Maxwell's operation is not beef selling; he is the one who provides healthy bull sperm to facilitate beef production. However, the corporation is the same and will benefit both."

I spun the folder open and glanced at the crucial parts: the starting supply, the potential for growth parallel to the sales of beef, the long-term commitments, and privacy clauses. It all looked fairly up and up.

"I see," I replied. "Fairly boilerplate stuff. I do hope that when you do decide to choose, we'll have these finer terms worked on."

"You're so confident about that?" Hollister asked, one brow high.

"Very," I replied. "Wine is so blasé—red for meat, white for fish and vegetables. Our mead has a wider spectrum that will please anyone, and I mean *anyone*. From those who drink alcohol to those who don't. We even have children's friendly versions as well."

They all shared a look. "That is a very...smart move," Dorsten replied, heavily impressed. "I don't think I have seen any beverage provider with such foresight."

"That is what we do here," I grinned.

Mills cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, we hear whispers about the rivalry between you and the Sullivans. Is there one, and why is that?"

I sighed. "Yes, there is one, and to be honest...no one truly knows the reasons. It's all convoluted; some say it started on the Mayflower when our great-great, great, possibly three more greats, grandfathers came here, and my ancestor mistook their grape seeds for something else and dropped a sack into the ocean.

"It could be that when medicine was scarce in the settling days, one of the Sullivan family members got sick, and the medicine my family gave them made the situation worse than better," I shrugged. "No one knows the full extent of the

quarrel, but we do avoid each other, mainly because it was better to be civilly peaceful than interact and rake up the animosity.”

“I see,” Hollister grinned. “Could it be a Romeo and Juliet situation?”

I burst out laughing, “Oh please, wouldn’t that be a plot twist. I assure you, nothing like that happened. Now, please, let’s get back to the facts about this partnership. Please contact me when you decide—” fishing my card out, I handed it to all three. “—and I will be ready to go forward when you are. I suppose this folder is mine?”

“It is,” Dorsten replied.

“Wonderful. Is there anything we need to discuss,” I asked. “I have time.”

Hollister shook his head. “Not at this time, no.”

“Okay then,” I stood. “Please, let me walk you out.”

When we came to the end of the staircase and were in the lobby, Jenna came with their packages, the bottle Mills requested, and little odds and ends that we gave in our care packages.

“I’ll be looking forward to seeing you again,” I replied. “And Mister Mills, the bottles are on the house. Please enjoy.”

“Thank you, kindly,” he grinned. “I appreciate it.”

When they left, I turned to Indie, who was hovering in the background and grinned, “Don’t quote me, but I think we have this in the bag.”

Chapter Six

Mia

For the first time since I'd arrived in town, I stepped foot into the winery. Internally, I was cringing in shame because I should have done this the first day. I went to my dad's office to get some files copied so I could examine them later. I needed to be fully prepared when I told Mom—who would be coming home in a few days—what I planned.

While I was rifling through Dad's desk—his computer had three films of dust on it, which told me the man had not used it since it was bought—Mister Jackson Crane, the general manager of the winery, came in.

“Mia,” he greeted kindly. “I don't want to disturb you, but there are a few people here to see you.”

“Who?” I asked, nose deep in my dad's ledgers.

Would it kill the man to use a spreadsheet or QuickBooks?

“Some people from Texas,” he said, and my neck snapped up so quickly it was a miracle that I hadn't sprained something.

Were they here?

Was it true?

Reeling in my shock, I nodded. “Where are they now?”

“My daughter has them in the barrel room,” he replied. “They just arrived.”

“I'll go speak to them.” I added, “Thank you for telling me.”

The barrel room and warehouse were annexed rooms from the main factory, where we offered tastings and hosted corporate parties. There were a few times we held wedding receptions and even bachelor parties. Fifteen feet high and five times that wide, the roof was made of latticed wood, while

stacks of barrels surrounded the room in built-in brick cubbies made especially for them.

A constant woodsy, smoky, and notes of the rich red wines leaked from the barrels. The wide window made sure the cool river breeze circulated through the room, and the skylights made sure the room had swathes of natural light.

When I entered the room, I saw the three men gazing at the montage of my family's journey from the day photography came about. There were drawings of the old factory, the manual wine press, and the older equipment that merged into black and white photos of my great-granddaddy installing the first mechanical winepress and others of my granddad making extensions to the factory.

"Good morning, gentlemen," I greeted them as they turned to face me.

One of the men had on Givenchy from head to toe, and I made a mental note to ask him about his skin care. "Welcome to Sullivan Winery. I am Mia Sullivan, John Sullivan's daughter. How may I assist you today?"

"You're the owner's daughter?" A man in a brilliant blue suit and striped tie stepped forward and held out a hand. "I am Trevor Dalston. With me are Ben Mills and Ewan Hollister. We're from the newly merged Portman and Maxwell estate under the Tender T's beef brand. We're looking to pair the new campaign of certain cuts of beef with perfectly paired beverages."

"I've heard the rumors that you would be along," I said after shaking all their hands. "I'm glad to finally see you. Would you like a tour and some tastings?"

"Sure," the older man grinned. "Be warned, Ewan is a lightweight."

"Hey," the guy in Givenchy gawped. "I am not."

"You smelled moonshine and collapsed," Ben deadpanned. "Twice."

"For the last time, I hadn't eaten that day," Ewan scowled. "I'm sorry I wasn't born sipping Texas whiskey from the baby

bottle.”

Laughing softly, I gestured to them to follow me to the bar, and pulled a few bottles from the shelves. Scattered around the room were old, oversized barrels fashioned into the height of a bar stool to mimic the smaller bucket seat, also made from old barrels but padded.

“I’m sorry, my dad is not one to give our cutesy names. Most of our drinks are simply named Sullivan Cabernet 37 or Sullivan Cabernet 41,” I said while taking a few bottles from the shelves.

“Interesting,” Ben mumbled. “We met with Mister Vega yesterday, and the names of his mead match the taste to a T. I sipped his Shitkicker last night, and it goddamn delivered.”

My stomach swooped to my feet, and I barely held back a grumble. “Course he did.”

Hollister heard it, though, and smirked. “Do I hear some... rivalry?”

Damn it.

Turning back to them, I pasted on a smile. “What I mean is that, despite our differences, Vega is a brilliant man. He is a hundred and ten percent dedicated to his family’s business, and he eats, sleeps, and dreams mead. I am sure he would put that energy into branding as well.”

“Sounds like you don’t have as much... differences with him as he has with you,” Ben said.

“There was a time when we could have been friends. Sadly, it never happened,” I replied while opening the bottle and pouring our three glasses. “But bygones are bygones. I have for you a blend of Mars Grapes and Concord, with flavors of raspberry, red currant, sassafras, and a hint of mint, aged for five years in oak barrels. Please.”

We went on to check the wine’s appearance first, and then after that, I explained how to assess the taste of wine; they took a sip and discussed complexity and character, describing the notes, aftertaste, acidity, and smoothness.

“That’s good,” Trevor mentioned. “A rump steak would go wonderful with this.”

“Filet Mignon, too,” Evan added.

I poured out glasses of a palate cleanser, and they took it. “I am glad to hear that. This one is Syrah grape, with cranberry and lingonberry flavors, black pepper, and a twist of jalapeño. This is Sullivan Cabernet 12.”

“Whoo, doggy-dog,” Ben murmured. “That gets the motor running quickly.”

Trevor blinked. “I never knew wine would be sweet and spicy at the same time.”

I held back a grin. “There was a time my father decided to add unconventional spices to our wines; spices from India, Australia, Japan, you name it, Dad tried it.”

After another round of cleanser, I poured out the last red. “This is our Garnacha Grape, blended with black cherry, raspberry and bramble fruit, cinnamon, and is aged for seven years.”

“This is rich,” Hollister praised the wine, lifting the glass to the light to see through it. “I like it.”

“I agree,” Dalston nodded while squinting at the wine. “It’s full-bodied, rich, has a depth of taste, and will pair wonderfully with a lot of our products.”

“That’s good and all,” Ben stretched out a leg. “But I want to know more about this rivalry between you and Vega. It doesn’t seem like you have the same rivalry with the Clarkston’s.”

I corked the bottle and wiped a spilled droplet. “I wish I could give you the straight answers as the variations shift from decade to decade. Some say it started back in England before our families fled to Holland and came over to America. It is also possible that our families were two different serfs in England who were constantly at war with each other, and the hatred continued.

“Another version says the Vega’s were our servants back in the old country and were therefore obligated to come when the family fled persecution. When they came here, they broke away and hated us for the servitude they had to suffer from us for years—” I shrugged. “And a third version says one of our families had been given two different commissions from the Protestant church leaders. One was to keep the peace, and the other was never to mingle. Who knows which is which.”

Ben let out a whistle. “That is twisted.”

“I wish I had a time machine to go back and ask my great-great-granddaddy what happened,” I replied while lining up some bottles of white to share. “But until such a machine is made, we shall have to live in mystery.”

“I still think there was a—”

Elbowing Ewan, Ben huffed. “That theory still is a crackpot one with a side of malarkey.”

I quirked a brow, “What...is he talking about?”

“Ewan here thinks there was some forbidden romance going on, or went on,” Mr. Dalston said calmly while swirling his glass. “Some version of Romeo and Juliet.”

My brow shot up. “That’s... well, forgive me for saying it, but that’s insane on the face of it. None of our family members could be in the same room without storm clouds gathering over our heads and lightning flashing around us.”

“You never know,” Ewan grinned. “Hate and love are sides of the same coin.”

Shaking his head, Mister Dalston shifted and lifted a briefcase to the table, popped it, and handed a folder over to me. “Budding rom-com or not, we’ve got business to take care of. Here are the preliminary terms we are ready to start with if we decide to partner with your company.”

I spun the folder open and looked over the temporary contract. What interested me more than the compensation, investments, and worldwide recognition was the long-term business deal, three years to start with, and then seven and

beyond that, complete integration into the Tender T's business manifesto.

"I like this," I said, spinning the page and scanning the second and third. "But I am more interested in what will come after."

"Good," Dalston nodded, "Shall we do a rundown of the terms."

"Please," I replied.

An hour later, the men went on their way with samples of our wine with them to take back to Texas, and I returned to my dad's office with the contract and contact card from them. I rounded up the rest of the files I needed and had them in a separate folder; with the Tender T's folder in hand, I headed back to the house to examine them.

Ryan was not there, and I don't think he would be home earlier that evening. He might be a bookworm, but when he got around his friends, he was all into them until he worked out the urge to be around people and went back to burying his head in books.

* * *

Guilt, sorrow, and a twist of regret were heavy on my heart as I waited for Mom to come out of their master bedroom. They had just arrived home, and while Dad wasn't bedridden, the surgery's effect was still making him drowsy.

I'd barely gotten two words in before Dad had slipped off to sleep again, and I was waiting in the kitchen for Mom to come in. I knew she had to be exhausted and worried, but it was better to get it over with than let it wait. At least now Mom would know that Dad won't be as stressed as before.

The kettle began whistling, and I poured the hot water into a cup already filled with chamomile teabags and honey.

"Please make me one of those," Mom said tiredly behind me. "I could really use one."

I glanced over my shoulder and held back a grimace at how tired and drawn out she looked. At fifty-three, her dark hair was already showing gray streaking through her bob, and the crows' feet at the corners of her eyes were getting more pronounced. She was petite, five foot nothing, while dad was over six foot. I was somewhere in the middle, at five eight.

"Sure, Mom," I plucked out a cup, made it, and then handed it to her. When she sat on the high bar stool, I joined. "How's Dad doing?"

"Well, he just got angioplasty and stenting so that he will be down for a while, and the doctors have said no strenuous work for three to six months before we can go get them removed or replaced," she said. "But I don't know how John is going to cope with such a thing. We all know work is his life."

"That's why I want to tell you I'll be taking over," I said calmly. "I know his work like the back of my hand, and it's why I've been studying so hard to make sure Dad could retire comfortably, knowing I have things in hand."

Catherine, or Cathy for short, didn't look surprised. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"Nine months," I replied, studying her mom's expression. "I know you might have some reservations. I'm not a novice in this business. I was here working and learning as Dad's right hand for so many years. I'm better prepared than you might give me credit for. Matter of fact. I just had a meeting with some people from a Texas beef company who are interested in pairing with our wines."

"Mia—"

"And even more, I went through Dad's books, and I found about a hundred ways to make his system better," I added, the roll of words flurrying through my head, came out in a spiel. "I know Dad likes to keep his things the way he does, but there comes a time and a place to step into the twenty-first century and—"

"Mia," Mom cut in, her face calm and composed. "Sweetheart, take a breath. We know you're brilliant, and we

know you can handle the company. No one is contesting that. Well, I know I am not. Besides, it's not me you have to convince. I know you'll do great at the CEO; it's your dad who'll need the finagling. He's so fussy about how things are done."

"I know he is," I sipped my tea. "I just don't want to do this now. I don't know what this announcement will do to him. It might send him right back to the hospital, even worse this time. But I cannot just go behind his back and take over."

She reached over and patted my hand. "We'll take it one step at a time, Mia. You'll be fine. We'll be fine. Just let us let a couple of days go by, and we'll try to broach the subject with your father, okay?"

Relieved that she had not brushed the situation off or flatly denied me, I nodded, "I can do that."

"Good." Cathy finished her tea and then went to rinse it. "I'm going to get some sleep too, Mia. It's been a long few days. When your brother gets in, please remind him not to eat every edible thing in this house and that the rest of us need to eat, too. I simply do not know where he gets that bottomless pit of his from."

I snort-laughed. "Oh, I'll tell him."

When she left, I grabbed a pack of chips from the pantry, then headed to my room, decided to find my laptop, and made another round through Dad's files to make sure I had not missed anything. On my desk, the contract from the Portman Estate had my heart leaping into my ears—if we got that contract, our brand would become a household name all across the world in a matter of months.

But the chips rested on those three men's court, and all I could do was hope they would gamble with us.

But what if they choose Vega?

"I'll find a way to change their minds," I promised myself.

Chapter Seven

Ethan

I rolled out of bed, knowing that I'd be a grouch all day if I didn't have coffee in the next fifteen minutes.

You're a grouch every day, Cole's voice rang through my mind.

"Shut it," I grumbled to thin air.

I got the coffee maker on and then hopped into the shower. Four days had passed since the men from Texas had come to the Meadery, and while Mr. Dalston had sent me an email saying they were discussing with his boss, nothing else had come yet. The radio silence was grating at me like nails on a chalkboard, and even more, I suspected they had spoken with Mia.

If they had extended the same offer to her, they would have had a hard hill to climb in deciding who to go with. Despite all their snooty condescension about their wine being top-notch... they were right. It was an excellent product, and in all fairness, if the guys from Portman Estate went with them, they wouldn't be disappointed.

What rankled me, though, was that it would be setting the bar just another notch higher for other providers to reach, and it would extend the bias that wine was the premium product. I knew my mead was good, better than good, but until people were deprogrammed, they'd keep seeing it as inferior.

As I stepped out of the shower, my phone rang, and, checking it, I realized I had four missed calls: two from Indie, one from Jenna, and the other from Cole. What could be so serious that they had called in seconds of each other?

While toweling my hair dry, I called Indie. "What's going on?"

"We've got a problem, boss," Indie sounded harried. "The guys in the fields are saying we've got a massive mealybug

infestation on the orange blossoms. They say the windstorms and the torrential rain a few weeks ago are how they got here. If we don't get on top of it, the damage will start to get severe."

Goddamnit. Not now—why *now*?

Not when we had the best contract of the century dangling right in front of us.

Upset, and reasonably so, I was too distracted to measure the oat milk I took with my coffee and ended up with a syrupy mess that was bound to give me diabetes. "How bad is it already?"

"We've covered about half of the fifteen hundred acres," Indie replied. "We're hoping to get through half by this evening, but it doesn't matter, even if it's one acre of damage, we need to get the exterminators in here."

I hunched over and pressed the heel of my hand to my eyes. God, this was not the news I had hoped to hear this morning. Even so, we were prepared. We had money set aside for seasonal pest control, but I was not sure how much this would cost me.

"Get them in and provide me with the estimate," I said. "If it goes over the budget, we'll have to figure something out."

"Gotcha," Indie replied, and I hung up, went to my sink, dumped the coffee out, and then made a new cup. What else was going to go sour today?

I finished dressing and then headed to work, but the moment I stepped into my office, I froze.

If my crops have mealybugs....is it that Sullivan's has them too?

Grimacing, I reached for my landline but had to stop and Google the contact number for the Sullivan Winery. When I called—I actually got the barrel room instead of the office, and a man answered.

"Sullivan Winery, Ryan Sullivan speaking," he greeted me.

Wait—didn't Mia have a brother named Ryan? Wasn't he at college now doing some thermonuclear science... something, or inventing time machines? "This is Ethan Vega. I have an important message for your sister. There are—"

"*What?*" I heard a dull yell in the background—Mia's voice.

"Hell in a handbasket," I heard Ryan mutter.

First—what did he mean by that?

Second—where did that kid get that old ass phrase from?

"Ryan, I need that phone," Mia said. "I need to call Vega *now*."

"Well, you're in luck," Ryan replied. "He's on the phone right now."

The phone was snatched, and Mia's tight voice came through the line, "Vega, would you care to tell me why *your* pests are now damaging *my* vines?"

My hackles went up. "Excuse me? I called to tell you that the estimations I have received have told me that it's the rain and wind that carried the pests here. Do I look like I have the divine power to summon pests to destroy your fields and be petty enough to have them devour *mine*?"

She went silent. "The infestation didn't stray from your fields?"

"No, it did not," I ground my teeth. "And this was a courtesy call to let you know the situation we could both be facing, but now I know we are."

"How are you handling it?" she asked.

"I have called in pest management," I replied. "I'd advise you to do the same."

"I think..." Mia paused. "...I would like to meet with these pest managers. Certain chemicals cannot touch my vine, even if it is secondhand. Can you give me the company's name?"

"My manager is handling it," I replied.

“I’d like to meet with your manager and the pest control people then,” Mia replied quite pompously.

Like a dog with a frikken bone, aren’t you, Mia?

The tension in the back of my neck was raging up to my skull. “Do you have a pen? I’ll give you Benjie Rowe’s number.”

“Go ahead,” she said almost immediately.

After rattling the number off, I added, “Don’t take too much of his time. He’s a busy man.”

“Because why? I tend to drone on?” I could practically *hear* her eye roll. “Don’t worry, Vega. I’ll be quick.”

Now, I was irritated.

I didn’t know what it was about Mia pressed my button so quickly. Others could tap it, but she banged on that sucker like a bongo drum. Why did her dismissive tone—just *hers*, not one else’s because God knew a lot of other people, more powerful and influential than she was, had dismissed me, and it hadn’t even ruffled a feather—make me grind my teeth so hard I felt like I’d soon be swallowing dust.

“Yeah, do that,” I muttered.

She huffed, and then, after a scuffle, her brother was back on the phone. “So... Ethan. H-how are you doing?”

“Right now?” I massaged my throbbing temple. “I have a migraine. I have to go.”

Hanging up the landline, I slumped back into my chair and squinted at the ceiling as if I could see through it and to the bright blue sky. “Are you testing me?”

Sighing, I got up, went to my in-office coffee maker and made a cup. I hadn’t eaten at all, and I called out for delivery and went back to my desk, pulling up files, filling orders, making invoices, studiously ignoring the fact that Mia could turn up on my doorstep at any moment.

My breakfast—a scrambled tofu burrito and buckwheat pancakes—was delivered, and I set aside my work to eat while

keeping an eye on the laptop for any emails. A few popped up, but they were from suppliers confirming our orders. Nothing drastic. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

Eight hours later, I was wrong.

While fixing my dinner at home, I heard bangs on my door.

Frowning, I plucked the earbuds away—and *damnit*, the audiobook on business rebranding was getting to a critical point—when I yanked my door open and found Mia fuming on my doorstep.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“I need to speak with someone who has some sense,” she replied. “May I come in?”

“Mia, if this is about the fields, I am sure Benji would have handled it,” I said stiffly. “You showing up at my home is out of bounds, Mia.”

She scowled. “It’s not a party for me either, but I cannot have your men spraying the field with the chemical they’re planning to use. That might kill my vines quicker than the damn bugs.”

I groaned internally. “Then what do you want?”

Mia bit her lip, and I fought back the sudden burn in my chest. “Can we talk about this inside? It feels strange doing this on your doorstep.”

“No,” I said, turning away and starting to close the door. “You can easily sort out your differences with Benji. Goodbye, Mia.”

“Oh, come on,” Mia exclaimed, “Stop being petty, Ethan. You can fix this, but it’s clear you don’t want to.”

I spun on my heel. “Petty? *I’m* petty?”

She notched her chin up, “Yes, you are.”

“Get in,” I growled. “You clearly do not know a *damn* thing about being petty.”

The moment she stepped in and closed the door, I had her up against it and caged her in with both elbows. Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates while her palms were flat against the door.

“When I was seven, your dad came to talk business with my dad,” I began. “Except he was not there to talk business; he was there to demand my father not to use the same trucks to carry our materials to our factory because they are *tainting* his products. When my father said no, do you know what your father did? He bought that trucking company, rebranded it, and redid the manifesto to make sure they only catered to him and forced my dad to have to use three other companies, all out of the way and four times more expensive.”

Her mouth fell open.

“Your dad was so sure our business was little more than dirt; that little stunt of his made us see red for five quarters *consistently* until Dad had to pony up and get our own trucker. Now, you tell me who is petty?” I demanded.

Her breath—peppermint—flickered over my cheek.

Then, her eyes narrowed. “You’re lying.”

“I am not,” I grated.

“My father would never do something like that,” she said, blind with faith in her duplicitous dad.

Rolling my eyes, I pushed away from her and went to my abandoned dinner. “Do you want the record, Mia? I have three copies: the one I printed out, the one my dad has in his ledgers, and the ones etched on the walls of the cave that used to be our office. Tell me which one you want?”

Her face twisted. “Stop, Ethan, just stop. You don’t have to be so...”

I stabbed my fork into my chickpea curry. “Be honest? Be brutally honest. Why would I be anything but after that bald accusation?”

“Because it doesn’t seem like anything my dad would do,” Mia said.

“You don’t believe me then,” I replied. “I think you need to rip those rose-colored glasses off your face, Mia. My dad was no saint, but he has never gone out of his way to undermine anyone.”

“Is it possible you remembered that wrong?” she asked. “Why were you in the meeting anyway?”

“Because that *meeting* happened in the living room while I was trying to watch my Saturday morning cartoons,” I replied, dropping my fork. “You know what irks me the most? It’s not that your family is successful or that they’ve got such a huge backing. What gets me is that your family makes it look like the rest of us are Neanderthals hunting with spears and rocks and forces it down other peoples’ throats that we are.”

Mia looked away for a moment, and the air vibrated with uneasy tension.

When she turned back, her expression was dull. “I just need to talk to you about the bug currently wreaking havoc on my plants. The chemical control your man is planning on using cannot be used at all. I did some reading, and it has been proven that chemical control on mealybugs works best when sprays are aimed at the crawler stage. We have full-grown pests, Vega.”

“So, I am back to my first question,” I said patiently. “What do you want?”

“Let’s use biological control.” Mia offered. “Lacewings, ladybird beetle, any bugs that will feed on these pests but leave my vines alone is the best thing I can think of, and it’s recommended too. Chemical control is often the last resort. And it’s less expensive too. I would also like to make this joint venture with you.”

“Great,” I deadpanned, “Go with that.”

“I would, but your guy is set on chemicals,” she replied. “Please call him off.”

“Done,” I shrugged. “Is that all, or do you want to share dinner with me?”

Her lips twisted. “I know you’re being facetious, but even if you were honest, I’d decline. I’m not... a curry fan.”

“Splendid,” I replied, knowing she was going to say something like *rabbit food*. “I’ll tell Benjie. If that’s all...?”

Pressing her lips tight, Mia nodded. “Thank you. I’ll get the cost, and I’ll appraise you about it.”

“I’d appreciate it,” I replied. “Next time you need a meeting, call in advance, please.”

Something flashed across her face—hesitation, regret, unhappiness maybe, Mia was hard to read at times—before she nodded and turned to the door. I closed it behind her, then went back to my meal. God only knew if Mia believed me about the crappy thing her dad had done many years ago.

Chapter Eight

Mia

I couldn't sleep that night—again because of Ethan, but not because of another erotic dream. I couldn't sleep because of what he'd said about Dad and our family. My heart was all tied up in knots because of those accusations, and as much as I hated to believe it, a part of me hated to admit he might be right.

We tended to think our wine was the best of the best.

My dad was a sommelier snob; he didn't drink much of anything aside from his special collection or wines he thought were on par with ours. I hated to think Dad had done what Ethan had said... but objectively, I could see it. Dad was a business shark, had been and always would be, so it wouldn't be too far out of the imagination to think he would do that. It hurt, though; it cut me deeply.

Even though it wasn't illegal, it didn't mean it wasn't unethical business.

“Mia, dear,” Mom called as she entered the kitchen, all dressed up in a stylish cream pants suit and modest heels. “I'm going to meet Rosie O'Conner. Look in on your father for me?”

“Sure, Mom,” I replied, glad for the sudden chance to speak with Dad alone. “Have fun. You deserve this break.”

And she truly did; for the past couple of days, she had waited on Dad's hand and foot until the in-home nurse they were looking into could come along. She was due to come this evening, and I wanted to be there when she did.

“I'll be back as soon as I can,” she replied.

Shaking my head, I stopped her. “Take all the time you need, Mom.”

When she drove off, I finished my coffee and took a moment to reconsider what I was about to do. Rinsing my cup,

I poured a cup of cranberry juice for Dad. I headed upstairs and entered their bedroom. Dad was sitting up on a leather recliner, his dark brown hair shot through with silver that glistened in the morning light while he read that morning's newspaper with his bifocals on.

"Hey, Dad," I greeted. "How are you feeling?"

"I wish everyone would stop asking me that," he gruffed while flicking a watery-blue eye look to me. "I'm fine. I'm healthier than a goddamn horse."

"You had a heart attack, Dad," I replied, trying not to smile but failing anyway. "I don't think that means you're fine."

"It was a small one." He turned a page. "I could have left without the surgery, your mom insisted."

For my father, even with his business being a priority, he'd always put Mom and his kids first, no matter what. Despite everything, I admire that about him.

With the haunting thought that I might give him more distress lingering in the back of my mind, it was now or never. I wished Mom was with me, though. "Dad, it's time I take over the company."

He dog-eared the paper, one thick brow lifting high. "Is it?"

"Yes," I said, squaring my shoulders. "I've been studying enology, viticulture, and business management. I've shadowed you enough to know what to do, and it's about time you retired. Dad, a heart attack, even a mild one, is a wake-up call. I'm sure the doctor told you so, and I agree. You've steered the ship well, Dad, but I'm taking the helm now."

"Did your mother put you up to this?" he asked skeptically.

"No, Dad," I refrained from rolling my eyes. "She didn't."

"How long have you been thinking about this?" He pressed.

"Almost a year now," I studied his expression as he came to terms with my announcement. I had made sure not to put any flexibility in my words. I hadn't said '*I think*' or '*I*

believe’ or *‘Maybe it’s time I—*’ because I know my dad, and I know how he would pick away at any ambivalence in my words until they were shreds.

He needed to know this was as good as done.

“I’ve been considering it for a while, and you groomed me for this job since I was a child,” I explained. “We both know Mom won’t fit, and Ryan will be off at JPL or NASA or Tesla anytime soon because his head is in mechanics, not wine press. I know what I’m capable of, Dad, and you need to slow down.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw.

He didn’t need to tell me he was not okay with the idea, but it was past the point now. Dad had to slow down and take care of himself before he aggravated his heart right into the grave.

“You know this is for the best, Dad,” I calmed my tone. “As a matter of fact, it’s overdue.”

He closed the paper, dropped it on his lap, and whisked his glasses off to massage his eyes. “Mia...” I waited. “...As much as I know you’re primed for the job, the winery is at a crucial juncture right now, and more than anything, it needs to be stable. I have some important contracts coming in, and I cannot afford to let them slip by.”

“You mean the Texas steak contract?” I asked, his brows shot up. “I know, Dad; I met with them yesterday.”

“Mia—” his tone dropped to warning. “—You should have let Jackson handle it.”

I was a bit stung that Dad was wary of me doing something so simple, but maybe this would be what it might take to convince him I was ready for the job. “I didn’t stop Jackson from doing his job,” I said. “I just made sure I was present. Look, Dad, let me prove it to you. Let me win this contract so you can see I am up to par to take over. This is our family, our legacy, and I want to keep it this way. I don’t want to give it to our cousins or sell it to strangers. Give me this chance.”

His lips pressed, and I could see him considering it. Finally, he said, “Get this deal, and we’ll talk, but if you don’t, the management goes to Westley, my brother’s youngest son.”

The knot in my chest eased a little, but I still had one more thing to ask him. “Dad, I hate to ask you this, but—” I did a quick calculation in my head. Ethan was thirty-one, so, with his memory at seven, this happened twenty-four years ago. “—twenty-four years ago... did you really ban Orville Vega from using the same delivery trucks as we did?”

His face pinched tight, and his fist clenched the paper firmly enough to rip it in half. He didn’t need to say that he had done precisely what Ethan had told me; his reaction was enough.

“Who told you—” he paused, then his face soured. “That boy! Mia, stay out of it.”

“But did you do it?”

“Yes,” he said stonily.

“Why?” I asked.

“I did it because—” Dad paused. “—Back then, it was only important that I trumped the insolent Vega’s.”

Insolent? That was a very decisive word.

What did he mean by that? And what was he not telling me?

“Maybe you could try to apologize now?” I offered.

“What happened back then is none of your concern, Mia,” Dad replied. “And what I did was rightfully deserved.”

“I disagree. It is my concern, and Ethan hasn’t forgotten, and it has made you the devil incarnate in his eyes,” I told him directly. “And before you ask why I’m even talking to him, there is a joint problem in our fields and his orchard that we’re collaborating to solve. Mealybugs have set in, and we’re working to exterminate them. And no, they hadn’t settled in his orchard and moved to our vines. It’s because of the recent rains and windstorms.”

He grunted. “Just make sure he won’t take you for a ride on the shared costs.”

I knew our families had a century—or possibly *centuries*—old rivalry, but this felt over the top, not just different or odd, but very personal. “Dad—” I frowned. “—what are you not telling me? Why all this hatred?”

“Animosity.” He scoffed and then returned to the paper. “There’s nothing different from what has always happened between our families. Our family founded this town, yet they keep insisting they were the ones,” Dad said, deliberately shifting from the first issue. “If that’s not insolent, I don’t know what is.”

That...that was new. I hadn’t heard of that one before.

I was sure if I asked Ethan, he would have a different version.

I don’t know if this is the right word, but... this is a clusterfuck.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I replied. “Well, I’ll leave you to...reading. The nurse the hospital and mom have coordinated with should be along shortly.”

I left him grumbling about being babysat while I went to my room, sat on my bed, and opened my laptop, checking if there were any emails from Dalston or the other PA. There was nothing—but a part of me had expected that.

Sitting back on the headboard, I tipped my head back and sighed. I didn’t like this riff with Ethan, and I didn’t know why my dad was so set on making sure this rivalry entered the Guinness World Records. It was time this silly feud ended, so what if we made wine while they made mead? I don’t see either of our families griping about the Clarkston’s hard apple cider.

I needed to apologize to Ethan.

“If he will listen to me at all, that is.” I sighed, then shifted the laptop away so I could reach for my phone. I meant to text him, and then I realized, I don’t have his number. God, this was so messed up.

Someone had to make peace, and seeing as Dad wasn't going to do it, it was my job. But how do I make peace with my enemy without contacting him? I was sure he wouldn't like it if I showed up at his house unannounced again.

“But what do I do?”

On a whim, I checked social media, and I found an Instagram page for the Meadery—and a link to Ethan's page. It wasn't very...well, social. He had updates on new mead flavors, a few records of where he'd traveled to in the last few years; there was a rare photo of him in Borneo, holding a plant I suspected they used in their exotic mead flavors.

There was nothing about Ethan there, and just as I was about to click off...he updated.

I'm going to drop into the Mix'D to see their inaugural band night. Karaoke is not my thing, so don't expect me to be on stage. I'm only there for the whisky.

Mix'D was the biggest sports bar in town but was more of a bar-slash-eatery, too. Their hot wings were to die for. Maybe Ethan would give me a few minutes to speak with him after he was properly sauced up.

It was a chance—and I was going to take it.

* * *

The first thing that hit me when I stepped into the bar was the noise. God, I had forgotten how loud bars were and Sports Bars at that. A long bar was the centerpiece of the room, with every version of liquor created from the dawn of mankind on the glass shelves behind it.

Five bartenders shook, spun, and poured out cocktail after cocktail to patrons at the bar while waitstaff rounded the room with glasses or bottles of beer on their trays. A stage was set up to the far east, and people were tuning instruments and fixing mikes when I spotted Ethan in a shadowy nook.

Dressed down in a simple gray Henley and blue jeans, he was nothing like the consummate businessman he was. In this

light, he was just another guy, ready to see some sports on the seventy-inch or enjoy some music.

I held my gift in hand, and while he was looking the other way, I slid into the booth across from him. Ethan looked up, and instantly, his eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here? But more importantly, why are you bothering me?”

Lifting both hands in an *I-surrender* move, I said, “I come in peace.”

He still looked wary. “Why?”

“Because I spoke with my dad about what he did to you and your family so long ago—”

“Not long enough,” Ethan cut in.

“—and I feel it was a despicable thing to do,” I added. “He was being cagey about what happened, but as for me, rivalry or not, nothing like that should ever happen to another businessman who is just trying to get a fair slice of the pie like everyone else. I’ve come to apologize, Ethan. I’m sorry it ever happened, and I promise you nothing like that will ever happen again when I’m the head of the company.”

“When you’re the head?” his voice had taken on a slightly mocking tone. “And here I thought you had already taken over Napoleon style.”

“The paperwork will take a while to be stamped,” I told him. “But I am regretful it happened, Ethan.”

His eyes flew to the gift bag on the table. “What is that? A conciliatory bottle of wine?”

“No,” I grinned while reaching into the bag and pulling the bottle out. “Better, it’s Tequila.”

“This is not a BYOB, Mia,” he replied, one brow arched and drummed his fingers on the small round table.

“I doubt they’d care,” I shrugged, taking two shot glasses out from the bag as well. “Just have one drink with me. After that, I’ll go. Deal?”

He let out an exasperated breath. “You’re not going to let this one go, are you?”

“No chance,” I shook my head.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “One drink.”

I poured out the shots, we took each glass, and after a glass clink, we gulped both shots back. Ethan came up coughing while my lungs felt on fire.

“What the—” he gasped, “What the hell kind of tequila is that? My stomach is about to crawl up my throat and run for dear life.”

I was trying not to hurl. “Not...the...best...visual...image, Vega.”

He reached for a glass of water and gulped. “Jesus, Mia, where did you find this shit?”

“I got it at the general store,” I replied, flagging down a waitress for some water. “It looked good, so I grabbed it.”

“Whatever it is, you could probably use it as paint thinner the next time you’ve got a room to do,” he snorted. “I’m sure I just lost ten linings of my stomach.”

“They’re only five layers,” I replied idly while checking the bottle. The Russian characters interspersed with Chinese did not give me any comfort.

“How the hell do you know that?” he asked while the waitress set a glass of water before me.

“Undergrad years, circuit parties, five hangovers, and three petitions for death,” I gulped the water. “Don’t ask.”

He leaned in, green eyes glimmering, “You, the quintessential good girl, partying? Have I stepped into an alternate dimension?”

“Oh, shut it,” I huffed, balling up a paper napkin from the stack and lobbed it at him. “It’s college. What do you expect when pledging for a sorority?”

“Did you get in?” he asked while another waiter placed a platter of vegan burgers and seasoned fries before him, and

instantly, my mouth started to water.

“No, shockingly.” I shrugged. “Kappa, Alpha... whatever, can go suck it.”

“Sucks. I bet you would fit right into the Alpha Phi Alpha,” he grinned.

“That’s a fraternity,” I scowled. “Stop teasing me. But on that note, I will take my gut-rot tequila and mosey on out of here.”

Ethan stopped me. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... stay a while, okay? Relax, let your hair down for a minute.”

I knew he didn’t mean my literal hair, but my tight ponytail was killing me, so I reached up and plucked the hair tie out. When my hair tumbled over my shoulders, I dug a hand into my scalp to massage the tingling tension out. Ethan was watching me like a hawk.

“I should order something, too,” I replied. “Maybe what you’re having.”

“A black bean burger and sweet potato fries,” he asked. “Sure, if you want. Or, you could order that artery choking, cholesterol-increasing, smothered-in liquid heart-attack oil.”

I knew my face fell; I could feel it, and by his reaction, Ethan saw it too. “I wish you hadn’t said that. My dad just had a heart attack. A minor one but one just the same.”

“Oh shit,” he swore. “I just jammed my foot in my mouth, didn’t I? I’m sorry to hear that, Mia.”

“It’s...” The word fine stuck itself in my throat. “It’s hard, but we’re getting through it. I probably shouldn’t have told you that, though. It’s a secret that I know my dad would’ve preferred to be locked up as if it were a national secret.”

“I get it,” Ethan replied while stretching out a long leg on the outside of the booth. I gave him a skeptical look, and he narrowed his eyes. “Just because I can’t empathize doesn’t mean I can’t sympathize. Heart attacks are scary as shit, and it’s why I want to avoid anything like that as best as I can.”

“Hence the vegan diet?”

“Hence the vegan diet,” he smiled. “Go on, order one, and you’ll see it’s not rabbit food.”

“I never, ever thought that,” I lied.

He snorted, “Yeah, right, and the grass is purple and the sun green. Just get one and keep your comments off Twitter.”

I shook my head. “God, you’re bossy.”

“And don’t ever forget it.”

Chapter Nine

Ethan

Mia was...growing on me.

The tension wasn't so high anymore, but at times, last night, it still fizzled and crackled. I appreciate what she did by apologizing on her father's behalf because God knew I would never get the same thing out of the old goat. It took some sting out of the old hurt, but it hadn't cauterized or healed the festering laceration.

It was not that her father had made us lose money for nearly a year and a half, but it was the audacity and the gall the man had done it with. Our families were personal enemies, fine, but which business directory said it was acceptable to pull personal problems into business matters?

None.

The man had done it out of pure spite, and that still irritated me. I will never forget the innumerable nights Dad had stayed up in the office, shifting money around to make up for the sudden hike in costs, using Peter to pay Paul while barely hanging on.

John Sullivan was a bastard at his rotten, holier-than-thou core, and while I didn't necessarily have an opinion on his heart attack or wish him more hardship.... I had no doubt karma was real.

"Bossman," Benji came in, waving a sheet. "These are the estimates for the biological warfare you're set on using against those bugs. The guys said as soon as the downpayment is made, they'll get on it right away."

"Thanks," I took the paper and, with one look, sighed in relief; the cost was under budget, and I knew if I could handle half of this with my medium operation, the Sullivan Estate, with its massive one, could damn well do the same.

My Spidey-Sense kicked in, and I realized Benji was still lingering at the doorway. “Is something wrong?”

“Not...exactly,” Benji said cagily. “Rumor around town is that you had dinner with Mia Sullivan last night at Mix’D. Inquiring minds would like to know if it was a casual thing, a business thing, or a personal thing.”

By *rumor around town*, he meant that the gossiping mill of bored old ladies had kicked into overdrive, and some people were already betting on one of two disturbing options. One was of us killing the other and burying the body in an unmarked grave, or the second, the most disturbing one, they were planning our marriage and betting on where our future grandchildren would go to college... over tea and slices of pecan pie.

God, I hated this part of the small town.

“If these *inquiring minds* must know, she came to apologize for one of the many shitty things her father had done to my family years ago,” I said while picking up the phone to call Mia. “That’s all. You can probably alert your gran to stop circling the wishing well with a divining rod and horseshoe trinkets while chanting a spell three times for us to fall in love.”

Indie gasped in horror. “My gran doesn’t do *that!*”

“She doesn’t?”

“No,” he said imperiously. “She chants *seven* times... get it right.”

With him cackling like mad and slipping out of my office, I chuckled and made the call.

“Mia Sullivan here,” she answered.

“It’s me,” I said, “I’ve got the estimates for the pest control, and I can either share them with you or fax them over.”

“Fax,” she laughed, “God, do you not have email in your century?”

“No,” I drawled, “We have carrier pigeons, and we ride flying pterodactyls. If you need your trees trimmed, I know a very friendly Brachiosaurus I can call.”

“Christ,” she murmured-laughed, “Just take a pic with your cell and email it to me.”

She gave me her address, and after I did just that, she replied, “*Which account shall I wire the money to?*”

I gave her the details for the expense account Benji was currently in charge of and went on to do my work. By two pm—when I took my lunch—I had contacted a supplier in Hudson Valley about supplying pure lavender honey for our next flavor, dispatched another supply of mead to the local stores, started talks with a company in Japan who was interested in our drink and gotten a report from Benji that the pest guys had gotten their downpayment and were on the job.

Not a bad six hours at all.

When I had a moment to myself, my mind spun to Mia. I was impressed that she had taken it upon herself to apologize on her dad’s behalf.

“What did she mean about her dad being cagey...” I mused, twiddling a pen. “Was it something more to the story that we don’t know or...”

Unsure of what I was even saying, I decided to do myself a favor and go and check Dad’s logbooks. If there were any discrepancies, I would find them in there. Digging out the old ledgers and notes, I found the date from that day and paged through the previous ones, not willing to read over my dad’s grief.

NB—official correspondence: the Chilsom Coolers are experiencing some equipment failure; the coolers are down for maintenance. Reroute the current shipment using McCoy Brothers.

“Hmmm,” I turned to another page. “That’s strange. Dad hadn’t mentioned that.”

When I turned to another, I read: *Administrative notice that the entire holding inside the Chisolm Storage has been thrown*

out, including seventy-five barrels of Sullivan wine, for finding Lactobacillus, Pediococcus bacteria inside. The loss is estimated at seventy-one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars.

Jesus Christ.

Twenty-odd years ago, that was a lot; it was worth one hundred and odd now. A chunk of cash that could seriously make or break a business.

Another note: Sullivan now thinks I had a hand in something to do with the loss. Perhaps I should have forwarded the notice three days ago, but how the Chilsoms think Sullivan and I are friends is beyond me. They should have told him directly.

Instantly, my head flared hot with a *blistering* headache. The pain radiated from the base of my skull and glared around my head in a thick wave.

I didn't need to turn to the other pages to track the time when Sullivan had barged into my house and insulted my dad. No wonder the man had bought the fleet of trucks—it was because my dad had neglected to do the proper thing.

“Its...” I pressed the heel of my hand to my temple, “...all a game of tit for tat. Dad, what the *hell* were you thinking? What the hell am I going to do when Mia finds this out?”

Pushing away from the table, I paced to the line of windows, looking down at the Meadery. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I sucked in a breath. This foolishness, this one-upmanship of the other family, had to stop.

But I still had some explaining to do.

Mia had offered her apology; now it was time to give mine. Grimacing, I went back to my desk and took my phone. I still hadn't gotten her number, so I emailed her, “Could you please come to my home at about seven pm? I need to talk with you.”

Slapping my dad's old journal closed, I went to pour out a glass of whisky and allowed the burn to flare right through me. I felt sick knowing that the attack on my family I had once

thought so wicked and heinous only to find out it was retaliatory.

“Bossman?” Indie came in with a few sheets of paper. “Copies of the payment and correspondence from the pest guys.”

“Thanks, Indie,” I replied, hearing the hollowness in my voice.

He picked up on it, too. “Are you okay, Ethan? You sound...I dunno, like someone punched you in the gut.”

“Might as well. I just realized half of my life was a lie.” I shrugged, then told him about what I’d remembered and what I had just found out. “This feud needs to die.”

Indie whistled. “Damn. I am sorry, but you’re right. This thing between your family is completely insane. Are you—are you going to do something about it?”

“I’m going to try.” My phone pinged, and I went to see that Mia had replied. She agreed to meet me but wanted to know why. I wrote back; *you’ll find out later*. Turning to Indie, I rubbed my face. “I just don’t know what it’s going to take to get this done. Nearly a century of hate is not easily undone in days.”

My secondhand man gave me a sympathetic smile. “Well, if anyone can do it, or at least start the process, it’s you. You’ll find a way, bossman. I know you will.”

“I wish I had your faith,” I replied.

He gave me jazz hands. “It’s not faith, it’s magic.”

“Get out,” I narrowed my eyes. “Your time is up.”

I tried to do my work for the rest of the day until I clocked out at six, stopped by Mix’D to get a vegan dinner for two—just in case—and headed home. I put the food in the warmer and went to take a shower. By the time I came out and dressed in a pair of lounge pants and a ribbed tank, Mia was at my door.

“Always punctual,” I said while stepping aside for her to come in. “I forgot how you would always be ten minutes early

for class back in high school.”

“It served me well,” she replied. “I managed to do my overdue homework in nine. So, what do you want to tell me?”

I paused to look at her; her hair was up in a messy bun, she had on skintight jeans, an oversized sweater with her old Uni’s coat of arms printed on it, and a pair of trainers. I never knew—or expected—Mia to be so casual.

“Before I tell you, have you eaten?” I asked. “I picked up another burger from Mix’D earlier.”

“With fries?” she perked up.

“A double portion,” I replied, going to my kitchen. I could feel her eyes following me as I shared the food on two plates, and when I went back to the table, I placed them before us before I poured two glasses of cranberry juice.

She looked down. “Your burger looks better.”

Wordlessly, I switched the plates, and she ate. “So...are you trying to butter me up or...”

“Or what?” I tried to tease her. “You think this is a date?”

When Mia gave a flat, unimpressed look, I let out a breath. “Yes, I am trying to get on your good side because I fucked up, Mia. Remember what I told you about your dad undermining mine? Well, I found out today that my dad had done it to yours first and in a big goddamn way.”

Silently, I slid the ledger to her and spun the page open. “My dad had failed to pass on some important info to your dad, and he lost a lot because of it. No wonder he decided to repay in kind.”

With a fry in hand, she read over the passage and slowly sat the fry down before wiping her hand on a napkin. “Your dad failed to pass on a message, and Dad...”

“Lost a good chunk of money and product because of it,” I added, suddenly losing all hunger. Pushing the plate away, I folded my arms on the table. “I thought your dad was being petty, but I was calling the kettle black. My dad was also petty.”

Mia stared at the table, and her face had gone completely blank; she had shut down. I knew I had just erased all the good graces I'd earned with her last night. Why, in God's name, did we have to do this one-step-forward, two-steps-back dance all the time? I was beginning to think our family was well and truly cursed.

When her eyes met mine, deep hurt rested in the depths. "You mean to tell me... I thought—" she shook her head and pushed away from her food. "—I thought we were in the complete wrong because I know how much of a shark my dad can be and how arrogant we can be with how we think our wine is the best of the best. I thought all this time I had eons of wrongs to make a right, but..." she pulled away, shaking her head. "I was wrong."

"Mia," I called after as she headed to the door. "Stop. Wait."

She spun. "For what? To let you make more of a fool of me?"

"I didn't know!" I tried to keep my tone civil, but it came out in a shout anyway. "I swear to you, I didn't know!"

"And I'm supposed to believe you?" she asked, backing up against the door. "I thought my family was the devil in this—"

"We're both devils," I replied. "Its tit for tat, Mia; they never made to have any peace between us. I am sure that over the years, each family took a turn to make themselves look like the angel and the other the devil, and it switched with every turn."

Her eyes were bright and liquid. "My dad said our family founded this town."

"My grandfather said we were the ones," I replied.

Her laugh was dry, but her eye-roll was liberal. "Why did I think anything else? I-I've got to go, Vega."

Barely controlled anger and frustration bubbled up inside me. "So, it's back to Vega now?"

She bristled. "What do you want from me?"

“I dunno,” I flung my hands up. “Some understanding, sympathy, *something!*”

Mia jabbed a finger into my chest. “You don’t get to play that card. I should be playing it myself because you lied to me.”

“I didn’t know! I thought I had known the truth only to find it was half of the truth, and I’m trying to make it right by letting you know how badly I fucked up.” I raked a hand through my hair, then chanced a look at her. “The truth is, I never wanted you and me to be enemies, Mia.”

She stilled. “You didn’t?”

“No,” I said, waves of tension rolling off me in swathes, and it looked like she responded to my potent energy. Her hands trembled, and Mia licked her lips. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why?” Mia’s confused gaze twisted my gut.

“Because I hated fighting,” I snapped, “It’s petty and foolish, and I—”

Her skin was flushed, and a droplet of sweat peaked at her hairline. Mia’s limbs trembled, and I could not look away from her gaze. A magnetic force hummed in the sliver of space between us as she licked her lips. My eyes homed in on the movement of her tongue, and before I could question myself, my sanity, or my urges, my hand snatched up, held the back of her head, and my mouth crashed upon hers.

In three seconds, when I expected her to push me away, her hands grabbed me and pressed me closer. A groan rumbled up my chest, and I couldn’t breathe, could barely think as my lips roved over hers before they parted and my tongue dipped inside.

I kissed her with force; the unapologetic possession sent a strange sting through my blood, and sensual sensation overrode everything I was feeling. Mia kissed me back; her lips clung to mine while our tongues twisted and dueled like sabers.

Gripping her arms, I held her against the door while fire unfurled in my gut, the entire press of her breast flush on my

chest. She pressed herself against my body, and I moaned at the pressure she placed on my thickening cock. A twist of pleasure/pain gripped me so strongly that I pressed her even more into the door, and she shivered when my tongue swept against her bottom lip before I suckled on it.

“Ethan...” my name was breathy on her lips.

I slid my tongue into her mouth with a stabbing force and kissed her hard, one hand low on her side to grip her hip. She moved against me, our bodies fitting together easily. Mia’s mouth was soft but just as demanding as mine, urging me to kiss her deeper.

I pulled away to trail her down the curve of her neck and nibbled the skin until she was covered in gooseflesh. I found her pulse point and clamped my mouth over it, sucking until she cried out, “Ethan!”

My thumb went up her torso and thumped at her nipple, feeling it harden at my touch through her soft bra. As my lips brushed across the soft spot just behind her ear, her head fell back, and she sighed lightly. “What...what are you doing?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I bit her ear.

“Do you want to fuck me?” Mia asked boldly.

Did I?

“Yes, but not this time. I’ve got another craving in mind.”

Chapter Ten

Mia

Ethan Vega wanted...what did he want?

“Its...” I shivered. “Is insanity.”

He pulled us from the door, slid his hand under my hips, and lifted me to his chest. “I know, but logic isn’t really my strong suit when I get this turned on. I want to kiss you a lot more...and eat your pussy.”

Scandalized, I gasped. “Ethan.”

I was right about this being insane; we both knew it. But with how he kissed me and I kissed him back, I wanted to believe that there was more to this than we thought. Maybe the tension that had fizzled and crackled between us that night we shared dinner at the bar had been another kind of tension I had been blind enough to mistake for wary animosity.

Ethan rested me on the far side of the island, down from where we were eating, and crouched to pull my sneakers and socks off. He smiled at my manicured feet, toes painted light pink. He pressed his thumb into the arch of my foot, and an unexpected groan left my throat while my head tipped back.

He stood and popped the button on my jeans and, sliding his hands under my butt, eased them down and off. On the way up, he slid his hands over my smooth skin. The calluses on his hands—something I had not expected a guy who manned a desk—sent shivers up my spine.

Ethan didn’t stop there and grasped the hem of my sweatshirt and pulled it up over my breasts, revealing the matching nude, beige, lacy things I had on.

“Hands on the counter,” he said softly. “Don’t move them.”

“Ethan...” I tried to warn him.

Grasping my knees, he bent them and had me resting on the edge as he pulled me closer to dip his head and nose, stroking over my pebbled nipple. Sliding a hand between us, he pressed the heel of his hand over my core, his fingers stroking softly over the seat of my panties.

“Yes?”

“I’ve not...” I swallowed, embarrassed to admit this. “... had *that* done on me before.”

“Wait...what? You’ve never had oral sex before. How in the hell did that happen?” he murmured.

“I was more interested in getting—” he’d trapped my nipple in his mouth and sucked on it through the sheer lace cloth of my bra, swirling his tongue around the hard, little nub, alternating sucking and licking until I was squirming against him. “—good grades. Sex was...wasn’t that much of a priority.”

I wanted so much to grab his head and slide my fingers into his hair—but he had told me, no, *ordered* me not to move them.

Ethan massaged my mound right over my clit, and my mouth fell open with heated pants and soft groans.

“God, you’re so sexy like this. Thighs all trembling...” his mouth found my ear, “...and the thought that no one has ever gone down on you before has got me hard.”

Oh, Jesus, Ethan was one of those guys in bed, the ones whose filthy mouth made you as turned on as his actions. His husky tone was good for it, too; as his breath made gooseflesh erupt over my skin, he slid to his haunches and held my legs wide, pressing his hot mouth over my core.

Fuck.

If this was how good it felt with the cloth between us, how better would it feel if he was skin-to-skin with me? He slid my panties down, and I felt my head spin—this was *Ethan Vega*, the son of my father’s rival.

This could be high treason to my family...but I didn’t care.

He held my thighs wide, but I burned with embarrassment at how he looked over me. He looked at me like a hungry lynx was eyeing his prey—hungry. Ethan dropped his lips and kissed my inner thighs, trailing his lips up to my pussy.

“Your pussy is as gorgeous as the rest of you,” he grinned like a shark. “So pink and so fucking wet.”

If the heat under my skin got any hotter, I’d spontaneously combust and erupt without him even touching me. Before I could connect the dots—trying to find the connection between us fighting, him kissing me, and now me letting him do oral on me—Ethan swiped his tongue right down the middle of my slit and laughed huskily as I let out a gasp.

His long fingers gripped my hip and butt as he kept licking me with long, firm strokes that made my body shake, boiling under my skin, and punched garbled sounds from my chest. When he fixed his mouth over my clit, Ethan sucked it erect, and I arched my hips into his mouth.

Ethan held me fast, and his sinister tongue speared into my body, making me wetter than I had ever been in my life. He kept up a constant rhythm with his lips and tongue, and I realized I liked his rougher touch than his gentle, and feeling my climax rearing up, I began writhing and grinding against him urgently.

“*Ethan...*”

It nearly killed me to keep my hands where they were and only use my body and my words to convey how close I was to tipping off the edge. He sucked on my clit again and slid a finger inside me, and I reconsidered not letting him give me oral, but the lust swirling inside me was ready to let him take me to bed too. The man was wicked with his mouth.

Ethan continued to pleasure me, finding all the places that made my body sing sopranos. He slid another finger inside me and curved it up until he found the spot that made me moan and gasp. While his tongue kept up the steady pace on my clit, I bucked so hard he had to hold me down.

That was all it took. A zing ran through my body, and I felt flat on the table as pure pleasure blasted from my core and possessed my body. I was sure I screamed his name as the waves of my orgasm rolled through me, over and over. Black spots peppered my vision; my chest was in a tight cage and forced me to gasp for air...even while Ethan's mouth was still sealed over my core, the tight flick of his tongue gave me more pleasure than I'd known was possible.

What had I just done?

Gradually, he pulled away from me and kissed my inner thigh again.

"How was that for your first time?" he asked, gently sliding my panties back up.

My first experience with oral sex had been nothing like what I thought it was or how it would end up. It was the furthest thing from what I'd been expecting, and now the beginnings of an uncomfortable aftermath started to grip me. Embarrassment at how I'd come undone in front of him made me want to grab my stuff and run and hide.

How should I react after that....

It was Ethan Vega, of all people.

"I-I..." I shook the haze off from my head, and I sat up. Still somewhat dazed, I fixed my bra and sweatshirt and looked for my jeans. "I—"

Ethan was on his feet and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before he caged my chin with his forefinger and thumb. His expression was muted, his eyes distant. "You're running from me, Mia. Don't do that."

I couldn't hide from him. "I'm out of my element here, Ethan. As a matter of fact, I'm still trying to figure out how we went from shouting at each other to you—to you going down on me. Where is the connection? Please tell me because I am freaking out inside."

"Does there have to be one?" he asked coolly.

“Yes,” I replied, feeling the mania start to tumble in my chest. “Yes, it does. I-I’m breaking my brain trying to find a common denominator in this—”

“That denominator is that we had feelings for each other but didn’t dare admit it,” his eyes were getting cold now. “Don’t pretend we hate each other, Mia. You and I know we don’t, and don’t start pretending we do.”

I knew he was getting frustrated, but I was on the verge of total panic mode. I was not ready to admit it, but I knew he felt the same sensual connection we’d just shared, at least on some level. I’d felt it in his touch, his kiss, and saw it in the flicker of his eyes.

I really wasn’t a raving masochist, I swear I was not, but there was no explanation for why I had gone against everything I held sensible and proper and how the rules of my life were set up—to let Ethan have sex with me. It didn’t matter we hadn’t ended up in bed; me coming harder than I had the whole of my adult sexual life meant something.

Not to mention, my family would crucify me if they got even the tiniest whisper of this.

Ethan was a dangerous bonfire to my senses and my future, ones that would turn me to ash if I couldn’t figure this out... or if I let this happen again.

Looking up, I realized Ethan had withdrawn completely. He was sipping his drink. “Are you going to run now, Mia?”

“I think it might be best,” I replied, my eyes dropping to my abandoned plate. “Thanks for dinner.”

He shook his head; it was clear he was dissatisfied and upset. “Sure.”

I didn’t know what to do, what to say, or even if I should... apologize. My head was twisted up in knots, and I didn’t know what to do. The only thing I could do was to grab my purse and hightail it out there as if my pants were on fire.

I drove home with my thoughts circling in my head like a tornado.

The kiss we'd shared that night had been hot, hotter than the goddamn bonfire we'd been close to, and even knowing I had lacked judgment on kissing a stranger, I wouldn't—couldn't—apologize for it.

Now, even while every nerve ending in my body was screaming at me to turn the car around, plainly tell him how I felt, and go for round two—I damn well knew it was a bad idea. Kissing Ethan Vega—or falling in bed with him—would not lead to anything good. It would only lead to confusion, trouble in the town, and outrage from our families.

I exhaled, trying to ignore the lingering scent of him that still spiraled through my lungs.

There had been a time when I'd been intensely aware of him half a church room across from me, just as I'd spent an equal amount of time trying to ignore his very existence. As a child, I had only seen Ethan as a competition, but I would be lying to myself if I didn't acknowledge I'd admired him from afar, too, especially since he'd matured from beanpole to Greek God.

I had never thought he would like me, much less envision how his nimble fingers would stroke me with such tender reverence, but it had happened, and now I had all the time to think over it.

Parking at the front of our house, I slipped forward and caged my head in my arms, circling the steering wheel.

“God, I fucked up, didn't I.”

It was more of a statement than a question.

I was more confused than I had ever been in my life, but I still had to figure out a way to deal with this. Ethan and I were bound to cross paths in the next few days, even weeks until the men from Texas made their decision.

Not to mention the pests on both farms.

A rapid knock on my window had me jerking upright, and I found a frowning Ryan outside the window. He did the 'roll-down' motion, and I got the window down.

“Are you drunk?” he asked.

My brows shot up. “That’s the first question that comes to your mind?”

He shrugged. “It’s reasonable.”

“It’s ridiculous,” I replied. “Why would I have *driven* home if I was drunk? How could I without wrapping my car around a tree?”

Ryan laughed and stepped aside. “Point taken.”

I grabbed my purse and left the car, trailing Ryan into the house and beelined it to the kitchen to get a drink. I poured a glass of juice and sipped it while asking Ryan. “Were you with Dad today?”

“For some of it,” my brother shrugged. “I left when Dad started to get snippy with his nurse. My friends and I went to the mall and the arcade. Josh wanted a few hoodies, and Ian wanted something to make sure his girlfriend didn’t kill him with a cleaver because he came back at one o’clock the night of the bonfire.”

I snorted. “Good luck to him with that.”

“So, I hear that the vineyard is infested,” Ryan got a drink too. “What’s up with that?”

“It’s not the vines. It’s Vega’s orchard, too,” I replied. “Mealybugs from rain and the windstorms latterly. Even with our rivalry, it wouldn’t make sense to work on each separately when it made sense and was cheaper to do it jointly. Just make one swoop and done.”

“Ah, I see,” Ryan replied, and his expression turned devilish. “So...what’s this about you and Ethan kicking it at Mix’D?”

“Kicking it?” I frowned. “What the heck does that mean?”

“Dating, hooking up, knocking boots, make the beast with two backs, getting down and dir—”

“I went there to apologize to Eth—Mister Vega,” I said, barely catching myself. “Dad told me some very suspect

things about what happened between him and older Mister Vega—” briefly, I told him about what Ethan had told me, what Dad had said, and why I felt like a Benedict Arnold in the situation. “But then Vega tells me tonight that he found out his dad has screwed over our dad first, and I don’t—I don’t know what to feel about it.”

Ryan blinked, then blinked again. “Whoa. That’s... a lot.”

“Tell me about it,” I sighed.

“But you probably knew that was not all of it, right,” Ryan replied. “I’ll bet there were dozens, if not hundreds, of reprisals before that.”

“Don’t I know it? I’ve got to grab a shower, and I know Mom left food in the warmer for both of us. If you eat mine, I will skin you in your sleep,” I warned him as I turned to the stairs.

He laughed. “I promise to keep my hands to my plate.”

Upstairs, I got into the shower but took my time washing. I needed some time to think as well. Now that we knew there was something there, an attraction, a pull—as doomed as it was to be— could we keep our relationship professional without letting the personal threads slip in?

“We are all grown here,” I told myself, “We can get through this without mixing business and pleasure. Not to mention the possibility of getting exiled from either family if they find out about this.”

But as I tried to reassure myself...why did the words ring hollow and so untrue?

Chapter Eleven

Ethan

Was I surprised that Mia had run away like a scaredy-cat seeing its own shadow? No. But did I think it was because it was me, the son of the father's sworn enemy...also no.

Well, not really.

Maybe twenty percent of it was me, but I was sure the other eighty was her reaction to good sex. This brought me to another question: what the hell kind of guys had Mia been with those years? She was twenty-seven; I assumed she was not a virgin...but she felt shy about her own body.

Was it that she truly had been fixated on studying rather than making relationships? Knowing Mia, it was a possibility. The times I came upon her at high school, she was in the library with her nose stuck in a book and making notes like a lawyer in court.

After she had left, I'd boxed up her uneaten food, shoved it in the back of my fridge, went to take a shower, plopped myself in my in-home office, and went through a few files for the Meadery.

There was no notice from the Texas guys, but I had firm hope that they would reach out to me very soon.

At about ten o'clock, I shut my computer down, closed the book I had open, and headed to bed. Checking my phone, I found the one message I had hoped never to see.

Dad: We need to talk, son. Your mom and I need to see you at the clubhouse before we cast off to Pikes Peak cabin tomorrow. You need to explain why you've been seen with Mia Sullivan.

I groaned.

Of all the rumors they could hear about what was going on here...the one about Mia was the one to reach their ears, not

about the pests in the orchard or the newest high profile contract up for grabs.

No—just Mia.

The Eastlake Golf Clubhouse was the last place I never wanted to set foot in. The place was swarming with nauseatingly rich people who thought shutting down a local restaurant for the night made them feel normal and couldn't comprehend why jetting off to Paris to get a custom bag from a designer, take two photos for promo material, and go on to relax on a beach isn't considered "hard work."

Plus, on any given evening, there would be approximately thirty socialites, two foreign princesses, and five cougars who wanted to get into my pants—worst of all—small talk. I loathed small talk; it was literally chatting about nothing.

Going to see them wasn't the problem.

Going to see them and getting harassed was.

I wished I could get in and get out without having to stop every moment, paste on a fake smile, and listen to Mrs. Moneybags of Mini Miss Moneybags go on about their frou-frou puppy or their latest vacation to Ibiza, or worse—why their botox wasn't working.

Could I—for once—cut out the bull, get in and get out?

"Hell would probably freeze over first," I grunted while forcing myself to go to sleep. I was going to need it.

* * *

"Into the valley of death rode the six hundred," I muttered while stepping through the wide glass doors.

Stepping into the dining room of the exclusive golf club, the next morning, it wasn't hard to spot my parents. Dad's silver hair was still thick as ever, even at fifty-nine, but the bifocals on his nose were not tortoiseshell instead of the straight black I knew he once had.

Mom was looking bright in a mauve wrap dress, and her hair was up while sipping on orange juice—or possibly a mimosa. I almost made it to their table—when I got waylaid.

“Bless my beating heart,” a high, faux-French accented voice stopped me cold. “Is that Ethan Vega, I see?”

Mrs. Braithwaite, the seven times divorcée and widower who collected alimony checks and estate payouts as easily as Balenciaga came out with new purses, was the one calling me. It seemed as if everyone *but* the men she married knew about her history, and half of the club was waiting for her to go through Google’s list of reasons for divorce and drop this season’s beau with an *irreconcilable differences* suit.

Oh, damn. I think she had used that one in the marriage before this one.

It could be alienation of affection—I don’t think she’s used that one before. Everyone knows her husband is screwing his assistant.

“Mrs. Braithwaite.” I smiled. “How are you?”

She tried to smile, but the fillers in her cheeks stopped it halfway. “Better now that you’re here. How are you, sweetheart? You look like you’ve grown.”

“I’m the same height as I was, ma’am,” I replied.

“Oh no, dear,” she tittered. “I mean your muscles. That button-down is so flattering, dear. It shows all your best *assets*.”

I just threw up in my mouth.

“I’m flattered,” I replied. “I hope you’re doing well, but I must go. My parents are waiting for me—” I turned, but she stopped me again.

“Would you be busy this Saturday? There is this corporate gathering at my mansion, and my goddaughter is *appallingly* single. I would like for you to be her date for the night.”

And there it was, the offer I was hoping to avoid.

It felt like I was being pimped out without having an actual pimp.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be busy,” I replied, “My best wishes to your goddaughter, but I must go.”

I moved away before she could sink her claws into me, and I got to my parent’s table and dropped a kiss on my mom’s cheek. “Hello, mom. You’re looking as radiant as ever.”

She smiled. “Such a charmer.”

“Hey, Dad.” I nodded to him while taking the third seat. “How’s it going?”

He looked up, his sharp brown eyes meeting mine. “It’ll go a lot better when you explain to me if you’re canoodling with Mia Sullivan.”

“*Canoodling...*” Jesus. “There is no canoodling going on, Dad. Besides, who in this century says that word? I assume you heard some rumors, but of all the rumors, they don’t tell you the proper reason. There’s a mealybug infestation in the orchard and in Sullivan’s vineyard, too. We’re only collaborating to make sure everything is done properly.”

“Oh,” Mom inclined her head. “That sounds like a reasonable explanation, doesn’t it, honey?”

“It does,” Dad replied, his gaze still skeptical. “But how did you decide to contact her?”

“I hired a negotiator from Washington DC,” I deadpanned. “You know, one of those hostile war guys who have experience with demilitarized zones and make sure nothing implodes or detonates. He was very good.”

Dad’s lips twitched at my dry humor. “I’d appreciate it if no part of my Meadery goes up in flames.”

“It won’t, not when I am at the helm,” I told him.

“Have you had breakfast?” Mom asked. “If not, go on and order something.”

I’d had half a cup of coffee that morning, but I wouldn’t—couldn’t—tell Mom that, or I’d get an hour-long lecture on

how good a proper breakfast was. That was what I got for having a retired nutritionist as a mom. It had been an uphill battle when I told her I was changing to vegan years ago, and I don't want to repeat that.

I picked up the lunch menu and ordered a Greek Pasta Salad and pomegranate juice and ate it while listening to Mom tell me all about their trip to their cabin and probably a trip to Europe in the winter to see their friends.

Finishing my meal, I sat back and asked, "So, I assume the rumors about Mis Sullivan was all you called me for, here at the den of delusional land?"

"Den of... delusional land?" mom asked.

"Yes," I shrugged. "Come on, Mom, I know you like the comfort here, but you must've realized that your new friends have no touch with reality. Didn't you tell me one CEO here bought a fleet of BMWs for his kid's school trip? Not hired, he bought them. If that doesn't scream delusional, I am Santa Claus."

She laughed. "They do get over the top, I agree, but delusional is a strong word."

I shook my head. "Well, since that's all I came here for, I shall be getting back," standing, I kissed Mom's cheek again. "We'll talk later, Dad."

"Ethan," Dad warned me, "Don't underestimate Mia. She might be young, but she is still a *Sullivan*."

For reasons beyond me, I was irritated. "Dad, don't you think it's about time we get rid of this silly feud? I mean, John just had a heart attack, and Mia is not back in the town to continue this silly rift."

Dad's brows shot up. "Sullivan had a heart attack?"

Shit.

I shouldn't have said that.

"A minor one, yes," I added. "But that is not just the reason she is in town. She's there to finally do what we always expect her to do and take over the family's business."

Dad harumphed and shook out his paper. “Be careful with that one, Ethan. She was her father’s understudy for years and saw everything he did. I fully expect her to mirror her father’s dirty tricks.”

Oddly, I felt insulted on Mia’s behalf. “She is not going to stab me in the back, Dad. She’s not like that.”

He peered at me. “How do you know that? She is a Sullivan son. They do not care who you are or what you’ve done. They will step on you, trample you into the ground, and walk off as if you did not matter at all. Don’t expect them to look back either.”

Now, I was getting pissed off. Truthfully, I had no right to be so defensive—I did not know Mia at all—but my gut feeling told me that she was not a traitor. Why would she come clean and try to apologize to me when she had felt her dad had tried to screw my family over?

It’s just a shame she didn’t show me the same mindset when I told her the full truth.

As much as I wanted to defend her a lot more—I had no fact to base my purported argument on then again, as much as I hated it, Dad was right—she was a Sullivan. The history between us was not a good one, and as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t let my guard down for trivial, unactual reasons.

Until Mia shows me that she isn’t like her dad, then I’ll believe her.

“I have to go,” I replied. “I’ve got to get back to the Meadery. You know it’s just past Harvest, and we’ve got a lot of restocking to do.”

“About that,” Mom began, and I suddenly tensed at the tone. It was the *when-are-you-going-to-meet-a-good-woman-and-give-me-grandbabies* tone. “I wish you would take some time away from the office and go meet someone. You’re getting older, Ethan.”

Sometimes, I wished my instincts weren’t so right.

“It’ll happen when it’ll happen,” I told her, kissing her cheek. “As for now, I have to get back into the trenches.”

Dad gave me another look, reminding me about Mia, but I pretended to ignore it and left the stodgy clubhouse. I was so glad I'd managed to escape the 'your-mom-and-I-married-in-our-twenties' lecture and hopped into my car. I knew Mom had the right to be concerned, but I was busy twenty-four, seven, three sixty-five and had put my romantic life on pause—the blip of what happened with Mia notwithstanding.

That was something I could never, ever, in the light of day, tell my parents. Mia's dad might have had a semi-heart attack, but I was sure that story would send my dad to the grave.

While heading home, my mind refused to stray from Mia and the reaction she'd given me that night. My hands clenched on the steering wheel.

“Is it that she is conflicted about getting the best sex she'd had in ages, or is it that she's conflicted that I was the one who gave it to her? She must have thought she was sleeping with the enemy...*literally*,” I mused.

The Bluetooth connection on my Range Rover connected, and I answered Benji's call. “What's—”

“They called, bossman,” Benji sounded giddy. “The Texas meat guys. They're giving us up to Christmas on a trial run, three months to pair the best mead we have with five select cuts of steak, sirloin, tenderloin, flank, short rib, and rump. All we have to do is pair which cut goes with which, send our decision back, and they'll take it from there. I printed out the updated contract; all you have to do is sign on the dotted line.”

I grinned, victory dancing before my eyes. “I knew they would. I'll review the paperwork as soon as I get it.”

When we disconnected, I paused and shouted, “Yes!”

All the way back home, I brainstormed what cuts would go with our select meads, but then I wondered if we could go a step further. People usually love three stages of their meat, right—I used to be a strictly medium rare kind of guy—but Cole eats medium, and our dad loves rare; so, what if we went a step further and gave them pairs for all three preparations of their mead?

I would run the idea by Indie and Jenna later on, but all in all, today was a win.

Chapter Twelve

Mia

Nothing was going right—absolutely nothing.

The days seemed to trickle by with no word from the guys in Texas; Dad was being stubborn, Mom was getting frustrated, and to top it all off, Ryan came down while I was in the kitchen with his duffel bag over his shoulder.

My stomach sank.

“Hey, sis,” he grinned and kissed my cheek. “I’ve gotta go back to the Institute.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop referring to the school as if it was a prison.”

“The town is called Fort Collins,” Ryan laughed. “It’s a prison.”

“Why so soon?” I asked while making my coffee.

He made a cup to go and ruffled his hair. “Before I came here, I’d erm... slacked off on some work. So, I’ve got to go back to the lab and get on it before my professors catch on, and those Petri dishes don’t have the cultures they’re supposed to have.”

“Okay,” I held back a sigh. “Call me when you get there.”

He gave me a one-armed hug and grinned, holding the travel cup high as a salute as he headed out the door. When I heard his truck rumble away, I slumped over the counter and rubbed my face. I was all over the place.

I needed to talk to Ethan, but I was too scared to.

I was freaking out about the Texas contract but was hesitant to contact them.

My deal with Dad was hanging on the line. If I didn’t get this deal, my dream to take over before Dad died was, well... dead.

When have you turned into a coward, Mia?

Heading up to my room, I took a shower, dressed, and headed out to the town, hoping I could find Ethan and I would most likely find him at his Meadery. I stopped at Hot Joe to get a breakfast muffin.

“Do you have any vegan options?” I asked.

“Yep,” Harvey replied. “We’ve been making a few stuff, mainly because Ethan Vega can’t cook for shit, and he comes here on a daily.”

I bust out laughing. “I thought you were his friend.”

“I am,” Harvey shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I can’t be honest. Do you want a few?”

“Please,” I replied.

Standing aside, I watched as Harvey filled a box with apple, almond crunch, cinnamon rolls muffins, and banana muffins with apple chunks, and I paid for the box. I took my stuff and headed to the Meadery and found it on a high crank. I suppose it was normal because, after harvest, it was customary to start restocking again.

I met Benji downstairs with a clipboard in hand. He looked up, his expression guarded. “Miss Sullivan, the cape I ordered for you just came in. Please let me get it for you.”

“Cape?” I asked, confused.

“You ran past me so fast last time I thought you were Superwoman in disguise,” he drawled.

“Hence the cape.”

My face flamed, “Er, sorry about that. Is Eth—Mister Vega here?”

“He’s in his office, but please let me call up first,” he said, tapping the headphones on his ear and holding a quick conversation with Ethan.

I pretended to look around to give him some privacy and grew to admire Ethan’s setup. The place looked incredible, modern, a little more streamlined and chrome-y than I like, but

it was very nice. I wondered if he held functions here like my winery did.

“He said you can go up,” Benji said, startling me a little. “And thank you for stopping to ask this time.”

I deserved that, so I took my lumps with a smile.

Heading up to the office, I spotted Ethan at the desk, dressed in blue jeans and a pale blue button-down and a crosshatched vest over it. He looked up, and his eyes zeroed on the white box in my hand. “Are those Hot Joe’s?”

“Yep,” I sat the box down.

He snorted. “You don’t need a peace offering every time you come and see me, Mia.”

“I know, but—” I shrugged. “— it seems like a simple thing to do. You’d bought dinner for me the other night, and I went on to waste it.”

Ethan shifted a paper over and shrugged. “It’s not that much of a deal.”

I bit my lip. It was clear that we were both dancing around the pink elephant, dancing in tutus around the room. “I’m not used to it,” I admitted.

He looked up, one brow arching over a green eye. “What?”

“Sex,” I replied. “Good sex. I’m not used to it. I didn’t fool around in college, Ethan, even though that is what you’re supposed to do. I forced myself to go to parties and got stupid drunk because I didn’t know any better. I had boyfriends, one for three weeks, two days an hour, another for six months, and a third for a year. All of them were like me, head in the books instead of...well, a man ho.”

Ethan sat back in his chair and twiddled a pen. “So...what are you telling me?”

I was getting red right down to the tips of my toes. “The... orgasm you gave me was the best one I ever had, and then...it was *you*. I still cannot figure out how we got... how I got from getting angry at you to allowing you to...”

“Eat you out,” he said plainly.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Are you trying to make my head explode...but yes.”

“So, you’re more upset that it was me who gave you the orgasm than anything else,” he said calmly.

“I’m not upset,” I replied. “I’m confused, conflicted, whatever you want to call it. Ethan, you must have felt something when you did it. I’m from the family yours hates the most.”

“That’s the thing, Mia,” Ethan’s voice was a frustrated growl that twisted something in my belly. “My family hates you for one very direct reason, that of them being all superior and looking down on others, but I don’t hate you. I never did. Sure, I thought you would grow in your dad’s footsteps and try to demean and degrade us, but did not.”

“How—how do you know that?”

“You came to apologize even when you didn’t know the whole story,” he replied. “It told me you’re not... despicably evil.”

“So...what if I am just moderately evil?” I teased.

“I can deal with that,” he shrugged. “Evil needs moderation.”

I wasn’t sure, but I felt like we’d come to an even keel. “For the record, I apologize for what happened between our families. Neither of our folks has been innocent in all this, but it makes no sense to keep it going. We both have good products, and there is no reason for either one of us to be nasty to each other.”

Ethan paused before he stood, went to a fridge, poured something out, and sat it in front of me. “Drink this, and I’ll believe you.”

I looked at the cup. “What’s that?”

“Arsenic,” he deadpanned. “It’s one of my signature mead flavors. The Shitkicker. Drink it.”

I took the cup and took a sip—and my mouth flared alive. The flavors were so strong but harmonious, and the name made sense; if I drank two cups of this, my shit would be kicked. “Its...” I blinked. “...good.”

He smirked. “One day, I want to let you taste every flavor we have. Be warned, it’s over thirty-three, and half of those are alcoholic.”

“You want to get me drunk,” I sniffed.

“Completely shitfaced,” he replied. “I think you’ll be another person when you’re allowed, or well, forced, to let go.”

“I’ve been told I talk gibberish when I get drunk,” I replied just as my phone rang. “Excuse me...” when I plucked the phone out, I saw the winery’s phone number flash on the screen. It had to be Jackson. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mia. There is a little...well, the pest guys, while they were working on the vines, found something in the east field that I think you would want to look at,” Jackson replied.

I frowned, “What? What do you mean?”

“It’s a little chest that looks very, *very* old, and I think you might need to decide what to do with it,” he replied. “Frankly, I don’t want even to touch it because it looks like it might crumble to pieces if I do. I don’t even know how the pest guys managed to carry it to the winery without it disintegrating into dust.”

“Oh, wow,” I blinked. “All right. I’ll be there soon.”

After saying goodbye, I looked at Ethan, but he was looking at me. “Emergency?”

“No.” My lips twisted. “I don’t exactly what it is, but I’ve got to go.”

“Next time,” he replied, and I left the Meadery for the winery.

When I stepped into my dad’s old office, Jackson gestured to the little chest covered in mud stains, resting on a towel on a small table. It was about eight by ten inches wide and seven

high, made of wood with a rich, deep color—or maybe it was because it had been buried for over eighty years—offset by the brass corners, carry handles, and hasp lock.

“Its...” I went to look at it. “...strange. It looks like something from the 1800’s.”

“Well, your family settled here around those years,” Jackson replied.

I touched the wood, and it seemed firm enough, and when I tried to pry the cover-up, it stayed firmly locked. This was a mystery. I doubted Dad knew about this. “Is there a name on it or something?”

Circling the trunk, I tried to spot any carving or etching on it but didn’t find much, but when I crouched, I saw V.L.V in the bottom panel, and I wondered what it meant. A name? Roman numerals, maybe?

“Where did the guys find this?” I asked.

“At the east field, right at the fence line leading to the Vega lands,” Jackson replied. “But firmly inside our lands.”

“I see,” I replied. “It looks like we’ll need a key to see what’s inside. Either that or get someone to pick the lock, but I doubt any locksmith around here is learned in eighteenth or nineteenth-century locks.”

“Or we could get a museum person out here to look at it,” Jackson offered. “I am sure they must have seen a few of these before.”

“I can work with that,” I replied while peering at the box.

Oddly, I felt as if I’d seen it before, but I couldn’t place where but that still didn’t stop the niggling in the back of my mind. Gently, I reached out and lifted it; it was not heavy, and I didn’t feel like there were any rocks or books inside. With a soft shake, I heard... was that paper? It sounded like it.

Huh. Doubly strange.

“I’ll check it out myself, even if I have to go to Denver to get it done,” I replied, then turned to him. “In the meantime, have you heard anything from the guys in Texas?”

“Sadly, not yet,” he shook his head.

“Don’t worry about that,” I replied, “I’ll take care of that too. You can go back to your work, Jackson, while I deal with this.”

He nodded and ducked out of the room, and I went to Dad’s desk, took out Mr. Dalston’s card, and called him. I need to know if they were taking us up on their offer. As I waited, I did a replay of our meeting—while it could have been better, it hadn’t been that bad.

It picked up...but then.

“You’ve reached Trevor Dalston, personal assistant to Mister Hunter Portman. I am away from the phone, but please leave a detailed message with your phone number or email and permissible contact hours, and I shall get back to you. Thank you.”

I internalized a groan. With an even tone, I said, “This is Mia Sullivan calling from Sullivan Winery. I am just calling to see if there has been any development regarding our contract...” I gave him the number for the winery, my number, and email, then signed off.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I stared at the office phone. This was my one chance to prove to Dad that I could run the winery, and if I didn’t get this deal, Dad would probably hand the helm over to Jackson.

As much as I admired Jackson...this was my heritage, my obligation, and my family’s pride. We all knew that Ryan had no interest in running the winery, well, from the administrative point of view. He could breed a new grape breed or give us some organic, non-destructive pesticide for the vines, but his head was in Petri dishes and bacteria, not performance reports nor quality control.

My whole future rested on this deal, and it’s not like I could go back to Dad and make a stipulation. This was it—one or nothing.

Then, on top of that worry was this... *thing* with Ethan.

I didn't know what to call it. Hell, I didn't know there was a word for whatever we were doing. What were they calling stuff like this online again? A Situationship? Enemies with benefits? A hook-up?

“Fuck my life,” I sighed.

But...one problem at a time. Right now, I needed to get out and find out more about this trunk. Ethan.... Ehtan could wait.

Chapter Thirteen

Mia

Shaking my head, I looked at the chest, sitting so innocently on the table, and I wondered what was inside.

Did Dad or Mom know about this? Did they possibly have the key or know where to get it? I'd hate to force the chest open and ruin it. Maybe there was some clue as to what it was in our family's archives.

Dad had set up a couple of safe deposit boxes at the bank and even donated a few things to the local town hall history display so the tourists could get a greater feel of where our family had started. I could begin my search there.

Or I could ask Dad about it.

But I didn't feel like doing that. Maybe make it a last resort or something, but I could use this to take my mind off whatever was happening with the Texas contract. Pressing the heel of my hand to my eyes, I moved from the table, grabbed my handbag, and headed out to my car.

The town was sluggishly empty, which was normal after the harvest boom. The museum was closer than the bank, so I went there first. I had known the curator, a lady named Cécile, my whole life, first because she was Mom's friend and second because she had been the guide for every museum field I'd had at elementary school. For a while, I'd heartily believed she was immortal because she had not aged a day in her life.

Her silver hair was still in the severe bob I knew it to be for years back, and her brown eyes were sharp as ever over her half-moons.

"Mia, darling." She smiled at seeing me. "I have missed you so. How are things, love?"

"Good," I smiled. "Very good, in fact. I would love to catch up, but I need to go through the collection Dad left here. Are all the things in display or..."

“No.” She shook her head. “We have those on rotation. There are some stuff still in the vault if you want to see those first.”

“I think...” I considered it, “...yes. That might be best.”

“May I know what prompted this sudden visit?” she asked as we took off down a corridor towards the basement. “Did your dad send you? He’s not been around here, well, since he donated the treasures to our department.”

“No, he hasn’t sent me,” I replied. “It just so happened that a box was unearthed on our land, and it looks old, like very old. I’ve considered having one of your guys look at it, but first, I want to see where it came from or if there is any clue as to whom it might have belonged to.”

“Ah,” she nodded as we took the stairs down. “Sounds very mysterious, by the way. You don’t think it contains clues to buried treasure?”

I laughed. “I don’t think any of my ancestors were pirates, but if it does have such a thing, I’ll hand it all over to you.”

“Why, thank you, my darling.” Cécile laughed as she punched in the code to the vault. I followed her to a nook where the plaque *Sullivan Estate* stood over it in brushed copper. She handed me a pair of cloth gloves. “Push the button there when you’re finished, and I’ll come get you.”

With a smile, I set my bag aside, wore the gloves, and began looking through the things. I pulled out a drawer, touched old winemaking equipment, and gazed at old portraits. I knew it would be a stretch to think I would find the key here—it was probably lost or destroyed a year ago—but looking at my family’s things, the family tree portrait when great-great-grandfather Elias Sullivan had married Maude Renier, the lines down to their kids and grandkids, only made me that much determined to take over our family’s business.

I crouched and pulled out a drawer and found an old book wrapped in leather inside. Gently pulling it out, I turned the cover to see the faded, yellow-aged pages with surprisingly legible words.

Who owned this?

I turned the pages slowly and saw a repeated name, Sarah—was that her name? Turning to the family tree, I traced the lines down to find Sarah Sullivan; she was the third child of great-grandfather Solomon, my dad's great-aunt. Her brother, a middle child, was her dad's grandfather.

But what had happened to her? Why had I never heard about her before? Dad had told me about his grandfather, whom he had known as a child, but he had never mentioned his aunt. Had she died? Those times, the slightest infection could kill you. Dysentery, measles, smallpox, the plague... well, not the last one. She hadn't lived in 1666 England.

I paged through a few more of the diary and spotted words like *love*, *moonlight*, and *sweet kisses*, but I didn't spot a name. Or maybe I thought I hadn't. Either way, I was taking this home tonight to look through it.

Could it be that those sweet kisses had come from another woman, and she couldn't name her paramour because, in those times, being different was a mortal crime? Had they shipped her off to a convent or something?

I pressed the button, and about five minutes later, Cécile came to let me out. I held up the diary, "I will be borrowing this, but I'll return it as soon as I'm finished. In mint condition, well, same condition I took it with."

She laughed. "Sure, dear. I need you to sign a few forms, and you'll be off."

Half an hour later, though, I wasn't home. I'd gone to Mix'D and had their black bean burger again—by my lonesome—in a shadowed part of the restaurant. After ordering a cocktail, I didn't want to go home.

Home felt... dreary, and as far as I had checked with Jackson, the Texas guys still had not responded. I still didn't know what to do about me and Ethan, and if I went home, I would think myself into a headache about it.

I just wanted a few hours of distraction, and the guys at the bar were setting up for another show. It wouldn't kill me to

enjoy a few hours here, would it?

Reaching up, I pulled the hair tie and let my hair down, dug my fingers into my scalp, and massaged the tense feeling away.

“...You should let your hair down a lot more,” Ethan said behind me right as he slipped into the seat beside mine. “It makes you look less of a ballbuster.”

I laughed. “Not once in my life have I ever been called that.”

“Put in the bank then,” he shrugged. “You’ll be one soon.”

“Nice of you to think that, but—” I sighed “—the card I have is taking me to the cleaners.”

“Reshuffle the damn deck,” Ethan replied, his eyes meeting mine. “You’re going to take over the winery.”

I listened to what he was saying, but my eyes were on the hem of his polo. Was that... a tribal tattoo? Ethan? Mr. *I-Play-By-The-Rules* Ethan?

“Is that a tattoo?” I blurted.

He blinked, then looked down at his left arm. “Yeah, it is. I got it a few years ago when I went to Borneo.”

I suddenly wanted to yank his sleeve up and see the rest of it, even trace the ink with my fingers.

Wait. Where did that come from?

“Why were you in Borneo?” I asked.

“Wanderlust,” he replied, flagging down a server for a drink. “And I was researching exotic flavors for a select batch of mead that is, after I got the spice, is also, fittingly, named Wanderlust.”

“Well, if it’s anything like your Shitkicker, you’ll be the Mead King in no time,” I reached for my cocktail.

He squinted at my drink. “Is that an Irish Tea Party?”

“It...might be?”

“Oh, you’re getting plastered tonight,” he snorted.

“I am not,” I shoved him.

“You’re a buck twenty soaking wet,” Ethan eyed me as he got his glass of whisky. “Keep that up, and you’ll be drunk before the night is over.”

“Shut it,” I grumbled. “I won’t get drunk.”

He toyed with the ice in his glass, and my eyes were drawn to his hand: long fingers that looked lean and strong and a wide palm that narrowed to a bare wrist dusted with dark hair, the muscles of his forearm firm and high. I’d just never considered it to be the sexiest part of a man’s body, but my mouth went dry when I remembered what those hands were capable of doing to me.

“How come you’re here and not at home plotting on how to take over the world?” he asked me with a side-eye.

“World domination is third on my list,” I replied. “Is under scale Mt. Everest and before master ballroom dancing.”

“So, I suppose number one is seamlessly taking over your family’s business, then,” he replied.

I did not want to talk about that with him. As a matter of fact, I wanted to forget how shitty of a run I was having in that regard. I looked down at my drink. “Can we...can we not talk about work right now?”

If there was a sign that said *I-am-not-okay*, it had to be that. Hell, there was probably a big, neon, flashing sign above my head with an arrow pointing down at me. I trained my gaze on the stage instead of daring to look at Ethan. I couldn’t...no, I wouldn’t because if our gazes met, I knew I would be so tempted to tell him everything, and I couldn’t do that.

Not now.

Probably not ever.

We watched the show until, in the growing dark, I dared to look over; Ethan was half-slumped over the table, drumming his fingers on the table, a muscle in his jaw ticking away like a time bomb.

His head snapped to me, and I jumped, but he didn't react—or possibly care that he'd caught me staring. "Want to get out of here?"

What did he mean by that?

My question must have shown on my face because he rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, your virtue will still be intact after tonight. I want to take a drive and show you something."

Enigmatic much?

"Um, sure," I replied.

After dropping a few bucks on the table, we left for his car, and I hopped into the passenger seat. Ethan drove out, and we headed east, where most of the town frayed into woodland and countryside. I didn't know where he was going, but I had to trust him when he said I would be okay.

He drove us to a part of the campgrounds I'd never been to before, but it still gave us an easy walk down to the horseshoe-shaped lake.

Ethan cut the engine off. "Dad told me that this was the original place where our families had our lands, and that tree there—" he pointed to an ancient elm, "—was the divider. When your family realized the soil was no good for their vines, they moved to the valley where the lake would wash out the minerals in the soil and left this part to us.

"Fortunately, these hills were perfect for my family to start their first hive," Ethan added. "In between times, we used this place to fish. It's got the best fishing spots."

I blinked. "How did I not know that?"

"There's a lot of our family history that wasn't told to us," Ethan replied. "Either they were ashamed of it, or it was too reprehensible to admit it."

"Aren't those the same though?" I asked.

"There is a thin line between tripping on a rock and shooting someone in the face and waiting till they turn around to shoot them in the back," Ethan replied.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Stop making all the sense around here. But...why did you bring me out here though?”

He cocked his elbow on the doorframe and ruffled his hair. “Because once upon a time, I wanted to see if our families could make peace for once. There was no reason to keep the one-upping each other for the rest of time.”

I sagged into my seat. “Honestly...I would like that too, but it’s our family we would have to convince. I don’t know if that is a hill I want to die on.”

Ethan gave a strange, strangled laugh. “Why in the fuck is Mrs. Kretchmer’s lecture on Romeo and Juliet coming to mind right now?”

“Two households, both alike in dignity,
from ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
where civil blood makes civil hands unclean...” I murmured.
“...It’s oddly appropriate.”

I made to rebuff the star-crossed lovers’ part but clamped my lips shut so fast my teeth clicked—because we were star-crossed...something. Suddenly, the air grew so tense that I wanted to do anything but stay there. A ridiculous idea came to me, and I stepped out of the car, took my shoes off, and headed to the lake. Ethan’s headlights were on, and I pulled my jeans as I went toward the pond.

“Mia!” Ethan shouted behind me. “What the hell are you doing?”

I twisted to see him half out of the car, his arm slung over the door and incredulity stamped right on his face.

“Going for a swim,” I called, pulling my jeans away. “I never did this as a teen, so I’m doing it now.”

With my underwear and my top on, I waded into the warm water and smiled, then dunked under it and took my blouse off. I turned to throw it on the car when Ethan snatched the sodden cloth out of the air. He looked amused.

“If you want to skinny-dip, it all comes off, Mia,” he told me.

“Tough luck,” I shouted back. “Are you going to join me?”

I fully expected him to tell me no and that I was out of my mind when I heard the plunk of shoes and turned to see him wading in—in only his boxer briefs. Ethan’s long, sexy body was a masterpiece, with miles of taut muscles covered in tan skin, every inch of his defined pecs and abs delineated blocks of muscle, and the dark hair sprinkled over his chest and stomach led to a tempting happy trail below.

Ethan ducked under the water and came up dripping, his body slick and begging for a touch. I kept my hands to myself—or at least I tried. I ran a hand through his hair, and his eyes glimmered.

I was in a trance and followed a rivulet dropping down his temple, to his neck, over his collarbone, tracing its path with a fingertip. His neck arched as my finger traced over his neck muscle, and I loved the smooth tautness of his skin, like satin. His tattoo was three bands of dark ink separated by a thin sliver of his skin.

His slow, wicked smile made my pulse hammer in my ears. “Is this the reliving-your-missed-youth part of the night?”

“Maybe,” I replied.

The feel of his arms sliding around me, the scent of whatever the hell kind of expensive cologne he wore mixed with the scents around us, fresh water and damp earth, felt so primal. It also felt unbelievably strange, the two of us here in the middle of the night.

I slapped my hand on the water and splashed him.

Ethan reeled back and dashed the water from his eyes right before he lunged at me, and a tidal wave came rushing over me. I hacked up water, and I could barely see; Ethan was a blur in my vision, but I hurled water at him anyway.

I didn’t even make a sound when he wrapped his arms around me and trapped my hands. “No, you will not splash me again. Don’t let me take drastic measures.”

“L-like what?” I gasp-giggled.

The barest brush of his mouth set off a million tiny butterflies in my stomach and sparked a raging heat that ignited all the way through my body. And this was barely a taste—but I could still taste whisky on his tongue.

God, I was so attracted to him I was beginning to feel desperate. I groaned and opened my mouth. He plunged his tongue inside to tangle with mine, devouring me in the same way he did with his eyes. His strong arms wrapped around my waist and dragged me close until our hard bodies collided, and I felt his erection rubbing against my belly.

My lips roamed over his jaw, licking and kissing until I reached the spot just below his ear and gently bit down—then... he swept my feet up from under me, and he walked us back to his car.

“I don’t know if you’re ready for this, so tell me right now,” Ethan’s voice was a rumble in his chest. “Are we going to have sex or not?”

The logical answers were *yes* or *no*.

What came out of my mouth was, “*Where?*”

“In my car, on top of my car, in the water, or you can wait till we go home,” he replied. “Take your pick.”

Chapter Fourteen

Ethan

Screw propriety.
Screw the rules.

Screw the mess our families had made for us.

I wanted Mia, and nothing but her rejection of my offer was going to stop us from fucking tonight. The back of my car was not the ideal place, but I was sure I would combust like a bonfire if I had to drive fifteen minutes home.

Mia was trembling in my arms, and I wondered if she was scared or if it was the cold air. She pressed her body to mine, seeking heat. I knew it was the cold air. One-handed, I opened the door to the backseat and sat her on it. Bracing both hands on either side of her, I stared her dead in the eye.

“Yes or no?”

Seated in my car, in nothing but her wet bra and panties, my cock was as hard as an iron. Mia licked her lips, her eyes locked on mine as she slowly unhooked her bra and let it slide off. God, she was beautiful, full tits with pebbled pink tips.

“I take it that’s a yes?” I said, leaning forward to run a finger under her underwear, a soft blush color, just as sheer as the other ones she’d had on that other night.

She scooted up, and I stepped in, closing the door behind us, and kneeled in between her legs. Bending my head, I dropped a kiss on the slope of her right breast, then licked my way around the smooth mound, circling to her areola. I sucked into my mouth first, then pulled away and blew against the straining peak; Mia trembled like a leaf.

Her hands grabbed onto me. “I want your lips on me again,” she said.

I was pretty sure I grinned like the devil. “Where? Your lips?”

Mia glared. “You know where.”

“Your shoulder, your ear? The back of your knee? I read there is a strange erogenous point right there, in the back of your—”

“You’re going make me say it?” She was as red as a fire engine.

“I’d like to hear it, yes,” I teased her.

“My...” Mia licked her lips and shifted her legs wider. Seeing the tender need in her eyes called to something wild in me, and a sweet ache flamed through my gut. “My p-pussy.”

“Good girl,” I murmured.

Lightly fingering the edge of her underwear, she whimpered, and I slid two fingers underneath the lace between her legs. I toyed with the soft fabric, inching the panties down her legs until I managed to sweep them off her legs.

As much as I wanted to be buried deep inside her, I wasn’t in a hurry, taking in her beautiful ass, pale skin, and the glistening lips of her pussy. God, she was sexy and open like this. Her thighs were trembling slightly as I trailed my hands up her inner thighs.

I leaned in and sucked my lips to her inner thigh, sucking a hickey into her skin before I turned to her core; she was embarrassingly wet, and I slid my finger back and forth, up and down, circling her clit until she cried out. Every nerve ending flared to life, and she bit her lip to keep from exploding—but I was not having that.

I sealed my mouth over her, and a cry punched out of her throat, her body bucking up. I encompassed the whole of her pussy with a long, precise lick, buried my nose in her curls, breathing her in. The first dab of my tongue sent her shaking, and Mia clenched over the seat, bunching the edge tightly in her fist.

I kept it up, lashing my tongue over her, lighting up a thousand more nerves than when I’d touched her slickness. Her belly was trembling as she sucked in her breath. I swirled teasing circles around her clitoris and harder flicks just

because I wanted it. Mia's toes curled, and it must feel almost too intense to bear and get even wetter.

"You're so sexy," I whispered, licking my lips. "If you're reacting to this now, how will you do when I slide my cock into you?"

"You're—you're killing me," Mia gasped, a dry laugh coming on the back end. She drove her fingers into my wet hair and arched her hips up, urging me to do more.

Lifting my head, I slid two fingers inside her and curved them up until I found the spot that made her moan. Mia bucked so hard I had to use my other hand to hold her in place while my mouth found and kept up the steady pace on her clit. It was very awkward doing this in the back of my car, but even with the tight space and knees knocking on the back of seats—we didn't give a damn.

"Tell me how much you want this." I pressed my cock into her thigh.

"Please," Mia groaned.

I twisted my body to reach between the seats and tugged the glove compartment open, snagged a condom I kept there, and came back. Mia saw it, and her brows shot up. "You're prepared?"

"I'm a boy scout," I replied, ripping a corner with my teeth. "I'm always prepared."

Grinning, I slid on the condom, placed both hands under her thighs, pulled her down to me, slung her legs over my shoulders, kissed the side of her knee, and slowly thrust in.

Did Mia say she had had sex before—this did not feel like it. Her body was a stronghold around me, and when our eyes met for a second...time stood still. "God, you feel good."

"You're... you're splitting me in half," she was breathless.

"Flattery won't save you," I replied, inching in further. "But thank you. I might start banging my chest like King Kong."

Her eyes were closed, mouth partially open as she rocked her hips back and forth—but only for a time. Pushing forward, I spread her thighs until her knees were near to her shoulders and snapped my hips deep. My cock was gliding in and out, keeping a perfect rhythm, and I bowed over to meet her lips with a hard kiss. Her body had completely surrendered to me, my thick erection filling her over and over and *over* again.

“Please,” she gripped my arms. “Harder, faster...*please*.”

“You like me fucking you, don’t you?”

She nodded, biting her lips as a strangled sound came from her throat. She dug her nails into my back and dragged them down the length of it, the sting of it oddly arousing.

“You’re going to pay for that,” I teased, nipping her neck.

My body picked up speed and force until I was jackhammering into her harder than I had ever taken anyone, loving the sound of my name on her lips. Sweat dripped between our bodies, warm and hot, like the blood raging through my veins.

“Ethan...” she moaned, wrapped her legs around my hips, pulled me close, and started an undulating rhythm against me. It felt so good, so fucking perfect.

I kissed her. It was desperate, wild, and raw; lips, tongue, and the occasional hard graze of teeth clashed as we kissed. Mia combusted. When her orgasm crashed over her, she screamed, bucking against me, her fingers digging into me, her body convulsing again and again—the rhythmic pulses of her body taking me with her.

Heat sizzled up my spine, up my cock, and I came with a caveman roar, partially losing consciousness of anything around me besides Mia’s body and the thick, hot pleasure in my veins.

When I managed to catch my breath, I kissed her neck and slowly pulled out, tied the condom off, and tucked it away to throw into the trash later. Mia was panting hard, her eyes clenched tight, and when she peeled them open, deep blissfulness rested in her eyes.

Reaching over to the front seat, I took up her discarded blouse and handed it to her. “Your panties are still wet. Do you want your jeans?”

She nodded, but I could see sleep drawing at her. “If you don’t mind, I’m probably going to pass out soon.”

I laughed. “Okay.”

As I dressed—went commando—and got into the driving seat, Mia had full-on passed out, curled up fetal styled on the backseat. I drove us to my home instead of hers, as I was sure a battalion would be drawn on me when I crossed enemy lines, and instead of forcing her to get dressed, I parked, ran into my house, grabbed a blanket, and covered her.

With her curled into my arms, I carried her into my house and up to the guest room—but pivoted and went to my master bedroom instead. I rested her on my bed, found a clean pair of my boxers, and slid them onto her body.

I went back downstairs, made sure everything was locked up, and then went to pour a glass of whisky.

“What am I doing?” I asked myself. “This can only lead to more problems between our families.”

When Mia woke up, I knew she would have a million and a half questions. She didn’t know that I’d admired her from afar. Even though I was older and had left high school when she was a sophomore, I had already seen enough of her to know she would be a magnificent woman. There was not one year she was not on the honor roll and had straight A’s. Even at fifteen, she was the president of the debating club, and the future leader association, and she served at the homeless shelter in town every weekend.

She didn’t know I’d lurked over her Facebook page for years, trying to see what she was up to, find out what other achievements she had crushed, and how fast she was shooting up the ladder.

Scandalous, I know, but how would she take it to know I had never followed my family’s legacy against the Sullivans?

“I’m pretty sure she knows now,” I laughed dryly. “Her family probably told her that a Vega’s touch burns like the Devil’s.”

Well, it was time to pony up and tell her the truth when she asked because she would ask; I knew it. I headed back to my room, changed into a pair of PJ bottoms, and slid into the bed beside Mia.

She shifted beneath the covers, and I pulled her slight form against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her from behind and held her tightly, pressing as much of her into me as I could. She was soft and pliable, and her supple body molded to mine like we were made for each other.

This time, sex was the furthest thing from my mind. This time, all I wanted to do was admire her.

“So warm...” she murmured.

Within a few minutes, her deep, steady breathing told me she’d fallen asleep again, and before I knew it, I joined her.

* * *

When I woke—Mia was not in bed.

At first, a part of my heart sucked, thinking that she had dipped out from shame or fear—again. But I heard footsteps in the hall, and Mia came in holding two cups of coffee. She had shed her blouse and was wearing one of my loose T-shirts.

“You went through my clothes,” I gave a judging look.

She shrugged. “I felt better.”

I took the cup. “Still making a peace agreement with food, I see.”

“Don’t want it, give it back,” Mia teased before sipping her drink.

“Not a chance, baby,” I told her.

“Baby...” she echoed, then fixed her hands around the cup while her gaze went serious. “Ethan...what are we doing?”

“Having coffee,” I replied blithely.

She narrowed her eyes. “You know what I mean. What are we doing with the meet-up and the dinner and the sex? You know there can’t be anything here, right? Our families will never accept it.”

“And who says they have a right to tell what two consenting adults do?” I asked, setting the cup on the bedside table. “Frankly, Mia, if you haven’t picked it up by now, this goddamn rivalry means nothing to me anymore. Yes, when I was younger, I felt peeved by it, how your dad always gave us the stink-eye when he saw us, but when I realized my dad was just as guilty, I-I decided it would be only best to stop this bullshit, and I want you to be with me, equally responsible for breaking this crap.”

She looked down and nodded. “I understand that, but... I mean, what are we doing? Are we friends with benefits? Are we just screwing around? What are we doing?”

“Honestly?” I asked. “The truth is not what you might want to hear.”

“Tell me,” she replied.

“I want to marry you,” I replied. She went still. “I’ve admired you for a long time, Mia, even the few instances we came across each other in high school. You seemed so different even back then. And I may or may not have stalked you online.”

She sipped her drink, set it aside, and said, “Excuse me while I faint.”

Tipping over on her side, she landed in the bed, but I knew she was still conscious. “Unconscious people don’t have their lips twitching, Mia.”

She peeked her eyes open. “Can you blame me? You saying you want to marry me would make me pass out.”

“You’re not grossed or repulsed?” I asked.

Mia sat up and raked her hands through her tangled hair. “No. It’s... mindboggling, but I would be lying if I didn’t

admit that you... you're the only person who, well, matches me. Even though I don't know everything about you, I've admired you too. I remember the fight you had on your hands to wrench the business away from your dad."

My head snapped up. "What?"

She blushed. "I remember when you tried everything to convince your dad to upgrade the Meadery. When all the business plans and budgets and pleadings didn't work, you got the suppliers and tech guys to hold a round-robin with your dad and got him to understand your point that living in the stone age wouldn't help your business."

Something...twisted in my chest.

How did she know that? It was not as if it was a public thing.

"How...how do you know that?" I asked.

"I got x-ray vision and parabolic microphone," she deadpanned. When I cocked my brow, she added, "You were in the park one Sunday afternoon. I don't know if you were working things out or psyching yourself up about it, but a leaf from your folder flew away. It had bullet points; the first point said, business plan overhaul, second point said, new marketing plan, the third one said—"

"Integrate records into digital," I added for her because I remembered everything on that sheet. "You stole my plan sheet? I looked around for days to find it and thought it must have fallen into the pond or something."

"I didn't steal it. I picked it up...," she replied. "I just... couldn't find a way to give it back."

"How about, *hello Ethan, you dropped something?*" I teased her. "And give it back with a basket of muffins, of course."

"Of course," she replied. "Anyway, I hung around town for a while, and it was not until I saw the hydro-fitters van come in, by process of elimination, that I knew your dad had to be forced to meet with them. So—" she shrugged. "—And

knowing how stubborn my dad is, I can only assume yours is, or was the same.”

“Dad was a stubborn ox,” I replied. “But eventually, he came around. I hope your dad will do the same.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, and something in her tone stopped me from pressing the issue. It sounded troubling, but I hoped she would see it fit to let me know what was going on and if I could help.

My phone rang, and I picked it up, a bit grateful for the distraction. “Benji?”

“Hey, bossman, sorry to bother you on your day off, but I can’t seem to find the invoice for the Muller brothers. Do you have a copy you can send over?”

“Sure,” I said, “let me go to my office real quickly.”

I stood and headed out, realizing that Mia was following me. It didn’t matter much as I tapped the laptop awake and searched the invoice file. “We’ve fulfilled the supply then?” I asked Benji.

“To the last ounce,” Benji replied. “I just need to make sure we got everything in order.”

I found the document, sent it over to him, and waited for him to confirm receipt before hanging up. Mia was slowly circling my office, coffee cup in hand, until she came to a painting, and the cup slipped from her hand, crashing on the floor.

“Mia!” I circled the table, not caring about the coffee staining the carpet. “What is it.”

She looked at me, then back to the painting, and jabbed her hand to a chest that sat at the foot of my great-grand uncle Victor. He was there in the painting, a tall, strapping young man of twenty, but this time was seated. “That—is that his?”

I was confused. “That was my uncle’s chest,” I replied. “This painting was faded, but I got it redone years ago. Why—what’s so scary about a bloody box?”

Chapter Fifteen

Mia

If only Ethan could understand the emotion running through my head right now, the mix of confusion and indecision.

“Because the pest guys dug up that bloody box on my property a day ago,” I replied before leaning and peering at the chest, “V.L.V., it’s right there. What does it stand for?”

“Victor Luther Vega,” Ethan replied. “He was my great-grandfather’s oldest brother, the heir to the family’s business. From what I knew, it’s said he died two years after that was painted or that he ran away. No one knows which is true.”

I shook my head. “Why would your great uncle’s chest be buried in my family’s land?”

“Maybe they mistook the boundary?” Ethan supposed.

“No,” I rejected that idea. “Back then, they had strong ideals about which was theirs and which was ours. I literally saw a map years ago with those tags on them. No one would have mistaken it. And on top of that, I just found the diary from a great-aunt I never knew about. She seems to have gone missing too because if it were not for her diary and the old family tree at the museum, I would have never known she existed.”

“That’s...odd,” Ethan murmured. “But I wouldn’t think too much about it. Diseases were—”

“I know, I just think it’s... not strange, but more... distressing or possibly, I don’t know, a strange coincidence?” I replied, unsure of what I was saying. “I know it’s not strange for people to disappear or die in those times, but...two of our family’s members just gone at the same time is concerning? Don’t you think so?”

“No,” Ethan shrugged.

He left, and I felt a bit distressed about how nonchalant Ethan was about this. Was I overthinking things—like I'd been told half my life—and seeing things that were not there? This discovery of his relative's stuff turned my head upside down.

Ethan returned with a handful of paper towels and a new cup of coffee for me, kissed me, and crouched to mop up the spilled coffee stain.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't worry about it," Ethan replied. "I'll get the cleaners up here later on."

I turned back to the painting. "Do you...should I give the chest back to you?"

"Nah," he said, going back to his desk. "You take care of it. But if there is a map of buried treasure, hand it over."

"Sure," I replied. "What are you doing today?"

"Housework, laundry, sleep." He shrugged. "Why?"

Deciding to keep my thoughts about the chest for another time, I tried to change the mood in the room. "Because I thought you were one of those guys who worked endlessly, running on coffee and its fumes."

"I used to," he replied. "Before I realized that it was more harmful than helpful. A couple of years ago, I decided to take a day off every week, do a mandatory holiday to travel to a new place, and celebrate Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Year's. What is the sense of working all day if you can't enjoy it?"

"Good point," I conceded. As much as I wanted to stay with Ethan and figure out what this thing was—I really needed to get back home. "Ethan, can you please drive me back to my car? I have a lot of things going on at the winery, and I need to be there."

"Sure," he replied.

As his expression began to shut down, I snatched a handout, grabbed his shirt, and pulled him in. "Stop it."

“Stop what?”

“Thinking that I’m running away every time,” I told him, then tipped up on my toes and kissed him. “One day, we need a couple of hours to talk this over, but stop thinking I’m brushing it off. Yes, at first, I was shocked and scared, and I didn’t know how to deal with it, but...I shared my body with you, Vega. Stop catastrophizing.”

Relief flooded his green eyes, and his lips curved. “Okay, I’ll take you.”

* * *

When I got home, I took a shower and decided to talk to Dad. Dad had to know about his great-aunt, or at least know about her. He’d just come from another checkup, and I knew he would be testy, but I had to know.

“Dad?” I knocked on the door to the library; he preferred to be there instead of in the bedroom. “Can we talk for a moment?”

He looked up from the folded newspaper in his lap, “Sure, Mia. What’s going on?”

I sat. “Dad, you know about our family history, right? About your granddad and his dad?”

“Yes, Mia, I spent time with Grandpa Solomon for a few summers before he passed,” he replied.

“Did he ever talk about his dad and siblings?”

Dad looked up from his paper, his brows lowering. “What are you getting to, Mia?”

“I was at the museum the other day, and I found a family tree,” I started. “I saw a Sarah Sullivan, your great-aunt, who I never heard about. Do you know anything about her?”

His lips thinned. “I don’t know much about her, but I do know she was sent to a convent, or I believe so, at least.”

A convent? Did she want to be a nun, or was she sent there because she'd gotten pregnant outside of marriage?

"Why?"

"I don't know, Mia," he replied. "Why does it matter anyway? What is in the past is in the past, and it doesn't matter anymore. Don't you have more important things to focus on? What about that contract you said you were working on? How is that going?"

Not well.

"I'm working on it," I replied, feeling my gut churn at the lie. "I just—" I blew out a breath. "—wanted to know more about that part of the family. It's just this controversy with the Vega's need to end."

"Mia," Dad's voice dipped to a warning. "Stay out of that. The Vega's are—"

I lost it. "You know, Dad, all my life, I thought the Vegas were trying to undermine us, that they were evil and jealous and wanted what we have, only to know that you were just as nasty to Orville Vega. I get he was just as passive-aggressive and nasty to you, but why was no one the bigger person here? Did you not get tired of this? I mean, in almost what, ninety years, isn't it time to give this up?"

"Mia!" Dad snapped. "What is wrong with you? What's gotten into your head today?"

"I just—had enough with this one-upping each other!" I replied.

Dad's eyes narrowed. "Is that boy, Ethan Vega, getting into your head? And yes, Mia, I know you two are talking with each other. It's all over town, by the way. Mark my word, Mia, if you let your guard down and let him get under your skin, you'll be blindsided when he stabs you in the back. Mark my words."

I made to reply that Ethan wouldn't do that—but how did I know that for sure?

“What I don’t know is why this is keeping on,” I asked. “Isn’t there a time to get over this and move on?”

“Tell that to the Vega’s,” Dad growled, shaking the paper out with extra force. “They’re bad people, Mia.”

“Funny,” I stood, hating that I was calling my dad out. “The pot calling the kettle black.”

I left the room, fuming, and went to the kitchen to get a make a cup of tea. Mom was out running errands, getting groceries, and whatnot, and I was glad for that because if I unloaded on her, she was going to go to Dad, and that would not help anything.

Tea in hand, I went to my room, closed the door, and got into my bed. My phone lit up with a text from Ryan.

Barely made the deadline. Professor Neutron has no idea it’s an overnight job. I may or may not have used illegal accelerants.

I laughed. *Don’t tell me any more about this illegal stuff. I’m a snitch.*

The three dots danced, and Ryan replied, *I won’t tell you about the human cloning experiments then.*

Snorting, I said goodbye and then called Brodie. He answered on the third ring. “Please tell me you have that bottle of wine for me.”

“Even better,” I replied, gazing into the teacup. If only the amber liquid was a wishing well, and my wish to make sense of all this going on would be answered. “Remember when I told you about Ethan Vega?”

“Mister Sexy with the long fingers, yes...” Brodie replied, and I heard the tap-tap-tap of his keys in the background. “What happened?”

“We...we had sex,” I admitted. I heard a crash and a muffled curse. “Brodie?”

“I just slapped my pen holder over,” he replied. “but don’t mind me, tell me what happened before, during, and after. And

if you skimp on the details, I demand three bottles instead of one.”

So, I told him—explicit details omitted, of course—and then added, “He said he wanted to marry me, Brodie, but that’s impossible.”

“Well—” Brodie hedged. “Are you even open to the idea?”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “In a different world, yes, but...it’s a big mess. Ethan and I just found out something strange and mysterious about my family. My dad’s great-aunt just seemed to vanish from the family’s records.”

“Oh,” he said shortly. “But I think you should be more concerned about you and Mr. Sexy’s confession about wanting to marry you.”

“I suppose,” I replied, “I’ve got to go, Brodie, but I’ll tell you what happens, and you better not be writing a story about me. If you have turned me into some modern-day Juliet or something—”

“No worries about that,” Brodie replied, and I had hope for a split second. “I’ve already written it, published it, and it has four hundred reviews on Amazon.”

I huffed. “You... you infidel!”

“I think you mean traitor, but I know you love me anyhow,” Brodie cackled. “I will have that bottle of wine as well.”

“Goodbye.” I laughed and hung up the phone.

Reaching for the cup, I took a sip and paged through Sarah’s diary. I read passages about long days of mind the home while the men worked, illness, and ruined harvest, but then the tone changed.

...The way he looks at me...

...His kind smile...

...My love gave me a locket...

It was clear Sarah was falling in love...but with whom? Maybe Dad was right; she had been sent off to a convent for

an unfortunate pregnancy.

My mind began to wander down a path it should not stray down—the myth about the two families that found peace with a kiss at midnight. Had Sarah been one part of that? Was any of that rumor even true, though?

I paged through the diary, unsure of what I was hoping to see, but the more I saw how Sarah detailed her love and, more importantly, her *unnamed* love, I concluded Sarah had fallen in love with someone she had not been permitted to love.

My head was all over the place: Dad’s deflection and ominous warning about Ethan, this mystery, Sarah’s disappearance, Ethan’s admission, my twisted emotions, and the Texas contract.

The Texas contract—it was my only way to get ahead of this business...but I was failing.

Dropping the book, I reached for my phone and called Mr. Dalston again... And this time, he answered.

“Miss Sullivan,” he greeted me. “I am glad you called. While we were debating your contract, my boss had to be called away. Give us a little more time; Mr. Portman is very busy at the moment with his ill son.”

“Oh,” I drew back, “Oh, of course, I understand. Please get in touch with me when you have a firm word on it, and my best wishes for his son.”

“I’ll relay the message. Thank you for understanding,” Mr. Dalston replied.

Dropping the phone, I sagged sideways on the bed. I was worried about nothing on that front, and while relief washed right through me, I decided to put that on the back burner and focus on the problem I had on my hand. Or in my hands, that is.

What happened to Sarah?

* * *

I didn't sleep that night; instead, around ten thirty, I found myself scouring the internet archives for any record of Sarah Sullivan but found nothing—zip, zilch, nada. Eventually, I just went to bed, but the sleeplessness kept, and I found myself on Instagram, messaging Ethan. He was probably asleep, but I couldn't rest.

Does your family have an archive? Can I snoop around later?

Setting the phone aside, I tried to sleep but still felt unsettled. My mind was on Ethan and how he had touched me, kissed me, made me combust from the inside out, and I wondered if I could—go and see him. It was the middle of the night, but...

I worried my bottom lip and checked my cell again. There was no reply from Ethan, and I wondered if he was asleep. Sighing, I laid back, ready for an uneasy night of tossing and turning... when my phone pinged, and I snatched it up faster than the speed of light.

Ethan: *I have a stuff from my family at the Meadery on display.*

I know it's late, but can I see it?

The three dots danced. *Is that really what you want?*

I sucked in a breath. *No.*

Then get over here before midnight, princess.

I grinned and replied: *on my way.*

* * *

When I got to his house, Ethan was shirtless, and his gray sweatpants left nothing to the imagination. He had me up against the closed door in minutes, his kiss rough, lustful, and devouring. When he pulled back for me to suck in a breath, his mouth found the rim of my ear.

I shivered and squirmed as his tongue ran over the delicate shell, and my nails dug into his muscular shoulders as he

suckled on the sensitive lobe.

“I want your mouth around me,” he murmured hotly. “Have you sucked cock before?”

Ethan’s filthy mouth was turning my blood into fire, and my body was stiff with yearning. “A few times,” I told him, my words thick in my throat, “I don’t think I’m particularly good at it.”

His grin was devilish while he stepped away and gave me room. “I’ll teach you. Get on your knees.”

As if I was hypnotized, I obeyed. And he pushed his pants down, revealing that he was commando. I had never noticed his...size, and I wrapped my hand around his hard cock. The skin of him was hot and silky smooth, and he was so thick that my fingers couldn’t get all the way around him.

Ethan let out a guttural moan, the sound making me even wetter. I moved my hand up and down, stroking him softly, and his hips jerked forward, his cock twitching in my hand.

“Fuck, Mia,” he gasps. “That feels so fucking good.”

When I pulled back, exposing his purplish tip, a drop of liquid leaked from the slit at its center.

“Lick it off.” His dark order had me smiling, leaning in and flickering my tongue over the tip of his cock. His hips bucked. I tasted salty and a bit of musk and wanted more.

Ethan threaded his fingers through my hair, holding me in place, and I wrapped my lips around his cock, taking as much of him into my mouth as I could. Pulse racing, I widened my mouth for him, welcoming the strange sensation of him entering me this way.

“Breathe through your nose,” he said through harsh breaths. “Wrap your lips over your teeth and relax your throat as much as you can.”

I moaned around him, taking more of him deeper and deeper inside me. Gripping his hard thighs gave him free rein in my mouth the way he had with my pussy.

“God, yes,” he moaned. “Just like that.”

The words spurred me on, and I moved faster, sucking and licking, allowing him as deep in my mouth as I could, and soon his hips were jerking. His tight hand gripping my hair almost painfully tight while his hips flexed.

I lost myself in it, the taste of him, the feel of him butting the back of my throat, causing me to gag a little. Ethan pulled away, panting heavily.

“I’m fine,” I told him. “Don’t stop—”

But he said, “Enough. That was enough. Come here.”

I stood to my feet, but he had me up in the air, pressed against the door while pulling my shorts away. Then, he dug into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a condom. “Always prepared, sweetheart.”

From pure core muscle, he held me up, got the condom on, and then slid his arms under my legs, letting my knees rest in the hollow of his elbows, folding me in half. My body seemed to get wetter with need even as he parted my legs wider; I wanted more, everything he had to give.

Ethan took a possessive thrust that made me scream with pleasure. My orgasm seared through me without warning, a thunderclap of fiery bliss that began in my pussy and echoed in the deepest part of my soul. Slinging my knees over his shoulders, Ethan continued to ram into me, his cock shuttling in and out as his eyes burned into mine.

He took me higher and higher, drilling into me, pounding into me, taking what he wanted until I was ready to come again. I convulsed over him, pulsating over his hard cock, pleasure bursting all through my body.

Ethan threw his head back, groaning as he shoved into me, flooding the condom with his release. When he collapsed, his hair, wet from root to tip, was right under my chin, and I felt his harsh breaths on my collarbone.

With our bodies still joined and my arms wrapped around him, I welcomed his weight on me—the feel of his hot skin. For long moments, neither of us moved, bonded by the sweat of our bodies and the frantic beat of our hearts.

Ethan pulled out of me, but when his eyes met mine again, they were far from satisfied. “I’m not done with you, not tonight, not for a long shot.”

I smiled. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Chapter Sixteen

Ethan

Mia slept like an octopus this time, her limbs wrapped around me in a tangle that I didn't know where to start untying her from, and frankly, I was not sure I wanted to do it. She was so soft and sexy in my bed, in my arms, her breasts flush on my chest, one of her legs thrown over mine.

I know she didn't think I was telling her the truth when I said I wanted to marry her, but every word, even though I had not planned on telling her, was damn right and very true. I know I'd shocked her, but I'm at the point in my life where beating around the bush doesn't help anyone.

She shifted in my hold and pressed tight against my hardening body. I had to stop my hands from roaming all over her—her back, her ass, and sinking into her hair. Even worse, her leg was over mine—and she was still naked.

Little needy sounds escaped her throat, and goddamn if I didn't want to let my inner hindbrain take control, but I respected Mia too much. Instead, I kissed her, once, twice, very lightly until her lashes fluttered open.

The haze in her eyes cleared—probably from a dream—and her lips curved. “Morning.”

I kissed her deeply this time, not giving a damn about morning breath in this kiss and while sweeping my tongue through her mouth. As much as I wanted her body again, in this kiss, whatever happened here was up to her. She had the power. I dipped my head, kissing my way along her collarbone and then lower.

Whimpers escaped her throat as she arched in my arms, pressing her breasts closer still, needing me to touch her, caress her, kiss her...hard or soft, and everything in between. I could kiss her forever, make up for the years we'd missed because we'd never been allowed to interact, and it was only right this minute I acknowledged it.

“More,” Mia gasped into my mouth. “Ethan.”

At some point—we did need to talk about this, but it was not this moment.

I was glad we were already naked; it made it easier. Her skin was hot, and her mouth even hotter as she kissed down my neck and played with the flat disks of my nipples. She kissed my belly and trialed her lips through the trail of hair under my belly button.

Her lips teased my cock with light touches, kitten licks, and tender suckles that made me lose my mind. “Mia,” I growled warningly. “What are you doing?”

“Teasing you,” she said impishly.

“Mia,” my voice was guttural as she teased me; the tiny tickles and flutter of her lips, down to the merest touch of her breath of me, made me wild. When she finally held me in her hands, her fingers encircling my cock only to lick a drop off my cock, I had enough.

Hauling her up, I growled. “Who knew you’re a goddamn tease?”

“You,” she smirked.

I slapped her ass. “I want you to ride me.”

She straddled me, and I cupped her pert butt, squeezing her cheeks as she leaned over and kissed me, reached over the table to pluck a condom from the drawer, opened it, and slid it over my cock. I held her hips as she lifted to guide me where she was hot, wet, and ready for me.

Mia’s breath hitched as she slid herself onto me, and I was no better, loving how her body enveloped me like a glove. She was so close to me, so hot, so unbelievably tight, inch by inch, as she slid down on me. She sat up on me, her hair loose, having lost its tie from God knows when, and it cascaded down her shoulders, a lovely tangled mess.

She closed her eyes, head tossed back, obviously reveling in the feel of this: how it felt to have me buried deep inside her from this angle. With my hands on her hips, I watched her

with hooded, lustful eyes, my gaze tracing hotly over her breast and tight nipples. Her hips canted a little, and I desperately wanted her to move—but I was waiting for her.

Her body vibrated around me; her hands were flat on my belly, shoulders tight. Her breath was sharp and staticky before she opened her eyes and began rocking, lifting a little and sinking, using her knees and belly to fuck me.

She rode me slowly, to a languid roll of her hips in a testing way, before she leaned forward and braced her hands on my belly, bouncing a bit faster, her full tits inches from my face. My hands dug into her waist, and words were harsh and desperate.

“God, ride me, Mia.” I met her hips counterpoint to her descent. “Fuck yes.”

Mia inched her hands up to grab my shoulders while she slammed down on me, her breath fast and harsh. The slick sound of our bodies colliding, the erotic sound of skin meeting skin filled the room. Over and over, I fucked into her, and she took all of me.

“You feel so good, baby, you’re so fucking perfect,” I encouraged her.

“E-Ethan, please, I-I need you to...”

I got the message immediately and gripped her hips so we didn’t lose contact; I reversed our positions, her legs went around my waist, and I grabbed both of her hands to pin them above her head. Mia held on as I slammed inside her again and again, murmuring praise and encouragement in her ear as I fucked her.

Mia angled her hips so my body slapped into her clit every time I thrust into her. She ground against me, every fiber of being straining with the need to come. She began gasping, mouth open, the feelings too intense to be contained.

“You like this?” My tone was harsh with my own need as I urged her on. “Come, baby, come for me. Come *now!*”

Her body locked up, her legs tight around me, her back arching off the bed, and she was coming, her body breaking up

into a thousand pieces as I groaned in her ear as a blinding orgasm took me too.

Afterwards, I rolled onto my back, dragging her along with me, and Mia lay curled against my chest, her flushed skin pressed into mine. Together, our breathing slowed, and eventually, our skin cooled. And without a word, I drew the sheets up and over their bodies. We fell asleep—again.

* * *

I could feel someone looking at me, even before I was fully conscious. When I opened my eyes, I found Mia curled up on a chair, clad in another pair of my boxers and another tee. Her hair was as tangled as ever and thrown over her shoulder while she sipped a cup of coffee.

“So, you’ve raided my clothes and my kitchen,” I said thickly. “At what point do I start pressing charges?”

She laughed. “The coffee pot is still full if you want some.”

“Too late.” I sat up and made a gimme motion with my hand at her cup. “Hand it over.”

Mia rolled her eyes but slipped off the chair and handed me the cup; I took one sip and could feel my face twisting, “You... *murderer*. How dare you kill this sweet Jamaican roast with a bucketful of sugar and creme?”

“I like sweet coffee,” she said, swooping it from my hands. “If you don’t want it, give it back and go make your own.”

I shucked the sheets off, found my discarded pants, and tugged them off, feeling her eyes on my back. “What time is it?”

“About two,” she replied.

I twisted to look at her. “Isn’t anyone missing you at home?”

“Probably my mom, but I’m a grown adult. I don’t have a curfew or tabs placed on me,” she shrugged. “I’m also pissed

off with my dad at the moment.”

“Why?”

Her expression dimmed. “He’s hiding shit from me and being a stubborn goat. So...nothing out to the ordinary but—” she shook her head, “—it still irritates me.”

“Is this about your missing relative again?” I asked.

Mia’s eyes flickered up. “It is, why?”

I wanted to tell her to let it go, but I knew this was bothering her dearly. “I—I suppose I don’t know why you’re so invested in this missing woman.” Perched on the edge of my bed, I hunched over and dropped my hands between my knees. “Can you tell me why it’s bothering you so much?”

“I—” she set the cup aside and pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. With her expression troubled, she said, “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s not based on a fact or anything solid; it’s just my gut feeling. I don’t know how a part of my family could be erased from existence, and no one can tell me why. There is no record of her death anywhere either.”

I heard her, but I couldn’t understand it. Didn’t she have other things to worry about? What about the Texas guys? Had they not contacted her yet?

“Well,” I shrugged. “If you still want, I’ll show you the few things I have stored up at the Meadery.”

She perked up, “I’d love that—” her eyes flew to the door behind us. “—Shall we shower?... together.”

“You know that doesn’t *conserve water*, right?” I laughed.

“Who cares.” Mia shrugged. “C’mon.”

I just laughed, following her into the bathroom.

* * *

The historic part of the Meadery tour was not extensive by any stretch of the imagination. It simply showed old mead-making

equipment: cauldrons, hand presses, buckets, stirring wands, and the like, the original drawing for the scope of the orchard—that was five times larger nowadays—and a few drawings of the first Meadery.

I stood patiently as Mia circled the room, stopping every few minutes to gaze at a map or a painting. She touched a few old ribbons won at county fairs, a portrait of my great-grandmother in her austere black gown, and her hair up in pins.

She dropped her gaze to a felt-lined drawer where only brass jewelry lay. She made to move off but then snapped back to the drawer, her eyes going wide. “Ethan! Please open this drawer.”

I didn’t know why she wanted to look at old jewelry, but I got the key and did it anyway. She fished out a locket and turned it over, and I peered over her shoulder to see S.E.S. Gently, she pried the lock open, and a miniature portrait of a girl, a young woman, rather, was inside.

She looked in the other half. “Sarah....Esther...Sullivan.”

I was dumbstruck. What the hell was happening? “Why is your relative’s jewelry in my family’s possession?”

“Why was your great uncle’s chest buried in my lands?” she asked before looking down at the locket. “You don’t think they were involved, do you?”

“That would be insane,” I shook my head. “There is no possible way they could have been. From what I know, our family’s rivalry had been at its worst in those times. I doubt they could have looked at each other without being raked over the coals.”

“They could have found a way,” Mia replied quietly while turning the locket over and over in her hand. She looked up at me under her lashes and just as softly said, “I mean... look at us.”

“We’re...different,” I could barely manage. “May I?”

She gave me the locket, and I turned it over. Could it be that Victor had taken a shine to Sarah? But how? I was a

hundred percent sure, no, a *thousand percent* sure the two could have never mingled in their lives.

But... maybe Mia did have a point.

I wasn't a romantic by any notion, but... emotions didn't follow the rules, did they? Love was certainly an emotion, and I don't believe it was an exception. I tried to see where Mia was coming from. "If they were together...how come no one knew?"

"Someone probably did," Mia replied. "Dad said she had been sent to a convent, and you said he either died or ran away. What if those were the excuses our families gave us to protect the secret and their shame that love could come from all their hate."

Mia turned to the display. "Ethan, I think I need to open that chest."

Chapter Seventeen

Mia

I carried the chest into the museum, where Cécile stood waiting for me. I had contacted her earlier that day, and while she did not have a resident locksmith on hand—well, there was Mr. Harding, but he was not learned in early nineteenth-century locks—she had promised me she would find out.

“It’s in your hands,” I said. “Your capable hands.”

Cécile had a magnifying glass in hand and was roving over the chest with an enraptured look on her face. She touched the lid with a gloved hand, gently sliding her fingers over the lid’s brass affectations.

“This is...remarkable,” the curator whispered. “To have survived for so long in the ground. Frankly, it is a miracle the men found it. If they had not, it might have gone on to rot for eternity, and we would have never known what secrets it hid inside.”

“Honestly, I think it might tell us a story about a possible love match between one of the Vega family and one of mine,” I told her.

Somehow, she didn’t look surprised. “I always thought there could have been a romantic connection between your families,” Cécile said plainly. “And now you and Ethan are following in their footsteps.”

I jerked up. “Me and E-Ethan? What? That’s not—”

“The hickey on your neck says otherwise, dear,” she smiled kindly, and I slapped a hand to the side of my neck—moments before I realized I had stepped right into her trap. With my face burning like the harvest bonfire, I dropped my hand.

“...There is no hickey, is there?”

With a sly smile, Cécile shook her head. “But don’t worry, dear, not a word about you two will slip from my lips.”

I turned away. “Honestly...I don’t even know what I’m doing... what we’re doing.”

“The course of true love never did run smooth, dear,” Cécile replied. “I have faith it will work out.”

“How come?” I asked, truly flummoxed. What had she seen—if she had seen anything at all—that I didn’t know about?

“You don’t know how close the two of your stories run?” she asked. “Sweetheart, you two ran so closely; your tales are practically parallel. The two of you never had the same hatred your fathers had; not once have you ever done anything to harm each other, and do you know that your sophomore science project was based on the prototype Ethan had left behind? Besides, Ryan and Cole were best friends.”

“What?” I gaped. “My brother and his were...friends?”

“Funny enough, almost everyone knew about it but you two,” she replied. “And your respective parents.”

Somehow, I didn’t doubt her—Ryan was sneaky like that.

“Well,” I looked around, “I’m nearly finished with the diary, so I will bring it back in a day or two.”

“No rush, Mia,” she told me. “Take your time.”

“Thanks,” I replied, then ducked out and headed to Mix’D.

It was almost six, time for the bar to open, and I slipped inside to order a few meals because I wanted to share dinner with Ethan. I took the bag of take-out and stepped out—almost running into Mom.

“Mia,” she called out, her brows furrowing. “I haven’t seen you in a while. I thought you’d gone back to Denver.”

I panicked a little. “Sorry, Mom. I-I’ve been at the winery a lot, going through Dad’s files. I’ve been home, but not much. I’ve been in and out while you were out as well.”

“Oh,” she blinked, her eyes dropping to the take-out bag. “Are you going into hibernation, sweetheart? That’s a lot of food.”

I didn’t feel right to hide from her. I didn’t want to lie to her. Maybe she would take it better than Dad did, knowing that I was around Ethan. “I’m going to have lunch with Ethan, Mom. Ethan Vega. We still have to manage this pest situation over the orchard and the vineyard.”

Except, we didn’t—but she didn’t have to know that.

Relief flooded Mom’s face, and she smiled widely. “You don’t know how happy I am to hear you say that. If only your father would have understood that this cockamamie rivalry is helping no one.”

This time, I felt flooded with reprieve. I knew Mom was the one I could count on to have some common sense. “Thanks, Mom. I think so, too.”

She hugged me. “Do whatever you have to do, sweetheart.”

I knew she didn’t mean to sleep with him—but that horse had bolted from the gate, and I would die of mortification if that confession ever slipped from my lips. “Thanks, Mom.”

When she went off, I slipped into my car, spotted the overnight bag I’d packed for later on, and drove to Ethan’s. As much as I loved borrowing his clothes—I needed to be an adult about it, not linger in that silly girlfriend phase—even though I didn’t even know if that was how it was.

When I got to Ethan’s, he was home, just showered; it looked as if he was towel-drying his hair. He was in those goddamn gray sweatpants and a ribbed tank and barefoot. That was oddly...sexy.

I lifted the bag, studiously ignoring the knowing smirk on his face. “I brought dinner.”

“Black bean burger and fries?” he asked, eyeing the bag.

“No,” I deadpanned. “Mushroom and mush peas.”

Ethan rolled his eyes and snagged the bag—or tried to, at least—but I pulled it out of his reach.

“No, not yet,” I grinned. “Be a good boy, and let me shower first before we eat. And we’re eating on the floor.”

“Are we?”

“Yes.” I gestured to the living room and his pristine carpet and entertainment set. “Right there, so get some blankets and pillows and make it comfortable. If one single fry is gone from the pack, I will know. I counted all of them.”

His brows inched up. “Bossy.”

“And I’m glad you know it,” I replied, grabbing my go bag and heading up to Ethan’s private bathroom.

I showered quickly, dressed in my PJs set, shorts and a camisole, then padded down to meet Ethan, hoping he had done as I’d asked him to do. To my delight, the space between the couch and the entertainment center was an oasis of blankets, pillows, and throw quilts. He had pushed the coffee table away for space, and I grinned.

“Good boy.”

“Can you not talk to me like I’m a Golden Retriever.” Ethan’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re more of a Great Dane,” I teased him while dishing out the food.

“Mia,” Ethan’s voice had gone growly again, and I knew I was on thin ice.

I turned with the trays loaded with our food and nearly collided with Ethan. “Hey! Watch it!”

He took the trays from me and walked to the makeshift bed, sat them on the floor, and as he lowered himself to rest at the foot of the couch, I remembered why I wanted to talk to him. I plucked out Sarah’s journal from my handbag and twiddled in the air.

“This is Sara’s journal, and I think, well, no, I suspect the lover she is talking about in here is your uncle Victor. Tell me

if anything I say here resembles what you know about him.”

Ethan looked up from unwrapping his burger. “Ok. Have at it then.”

Sitting, I ignored my food for a while, then opened the book to the last page, which I’d gotten to a few nights ago. *“It’s my time to go back to the market again, and I am happy because, for the last weeks of rain, I have not seen my love.*

“It is the only place we can meet in safety. We can share lingering looks over the stalls, looks that carry more than the words I miss you, or I am happy to see your smile.

“A single glance from him tells me much more. Entire worlds are held in his eyes, symphonies of sonnets, a cascade of words, all of them saying how precious I am to him, how much he would forsake the rest to be with me, how much my mere presence comforts him....”

“Waxing poetic, I see,” Ethan murmured. “I can think of another Sullivan who had a way with words. Except this one demolished their opponent over the debate table with facts and figures.”

I grinned. “Thank you kindly. Ahem. *His warm green eyes are so loving; I can feel him wanting to embrace me even if we cannot do so in public. When we meet at nights, he sometimes brings his dog with him, a precious blind—*”

“Blind Scottish Bloodhound,” Ethan blurted, his eyes wide. “Is that what it says?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Word for word. I take Victor had such a dog then.”

“Well, yeah, I had heard that he had a dog that was blind but could find the barest trail of a rabbit or a wild pig and track down lost cattle,” Ethan replied, but then his gaze dimmed. “It...it could be a coincidence, Mia. Those times, hunting was a way of life, and many people had bloodhounds to sniff our rabbits or birds or whatnot.”

“I understand, but it could be him, right? I mean, she is stressing how they cannot interact with each other in the daytime,” I replied. “Tell me if that doesn’t fit our families.

You said they would be well, tarred, and feathered if they even crossed another's path."

He sat his tray down and drew his feet up while rubbing his face. "I'm not saying it can't be, but...let's not go jumping the gun on this one, okay."

Closing the book, I turned to him. "Is it really that hard for you to think that back in the day, two of our family members could have had love, even a connection? I mean, it's basically what we're doing here."

Ethan rubbed his knuckles down his cheek. "Is it but..."

Now, I was getting deeply concerned and shuffled over to his side. "What is it, Ethan, talk to me. What's got you so worried and tied up in knots?"

He dropped his arms over his knees and stared at me. "I know I said I wanted us to break this rivalry, Mia... but what if it doesn't work?"

Something wasn't right. This was not Ethan—I had never seen him double-guessing himself...ever. Where was this coming from? I straddled him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"What do you mean? Do you think they're going to stop us from making peace...or is that you don't think anyone will accept our relationship?" I asked,

He shrugged. "Both?"

I considered what to say. "You remember when you would walk around high school with that stone face on? No one knew what was going through your head. You were Mr. Stoic. You never let anyone know if you are afraid, panicky, frustrated, or even tired."

His brows furrowed. "Okay..." he dragged the word out. "...why are you telling me this?"

I reached up and used two fingers to smooth out the thick knot in his brows. "You're showing me emotion. I'm honored."

He snorted. "Dork."

“We’ll find a way to make this peace between our families, even if we have to force our dads to see the truth of it,” I replied, “It’ll be fine.”

His left brow lifted. “You can see in the future now?”

“Ugh,” I huffed. “Has anyone told you how aggravating you are?”

“Yes, many times,” he deadpanned.

Rolling my eyes, I slipped off his lap and got to my place, took up my tray, and nudged Ethan. “Turn on that massive TV of yours and get Netflix on.”

“And what are we watching?” he asked, getting to his feet and snagging the remote from the all-black entertainment center.

“The Notebook,” I told him.

“Get out,” Ethan glared, but his lips were twitching.

“Turn on the TV, lover boy, and shut it,” I replied.

Chapter Eighteen

Ethan

The very next day, after the night with Mia, I was on the road driving to my parent's cabin up in the hills. It was time Dad, Mom, and I had a straight, no-bullshit talk. Dad was paramount to a historian; if he did know about Victor and Sarah, was he so deep in trenches of spite and revenge with the Sullivans that he would not even tell me?

The winding roads up the hills were empty—as they almost always were—and the surroundings were so peaceful and serene. I could understand why they came up here every wintertime, to get away from it all.

The interlocking branches overhead dappled the path in spots of sunlight and shadow. That was what my life felt like: spots of light—this thing with Mia, but surrounded by shadow, the secrets that our families kept from us.

Mom and Dad's cabin stretched the meaning of the word; how do you call a three-story house with solar panels, high-speed Wi-Fi, and automatic gates a cabin? Granted, it had a working chimney, was made of all gleaming wood, and had a wrap-around porch, so I supposed it could be defined as one.

I punched in the code for the gate and drove in instantly, parked beside the garage, and headed to the front door. As I pressed the doorbell, I wondered if I should have called first—but that might have tipped Dad off, and I didn't want him to plan a story and spin it to me.

Mom answered the door in cool lounge clothes but wrapped a cardigan tighter over her torso. "Ethan. I didn't know you were coming."

"That's why it's called a surprise, Mom," I smiled. "Where's Dad? Can you get him for me? We all need to talk."

Her expression shifted. "Sounds serious. What is it about?"

I held back a grimace. “Mom, please just get Dad. I don’t want to talk about it twice.”

She was getting worried; I could see it, but she nodded instead of pressing the issue. “I’ll get him. We’ll meet you at the sunroom.”

While she went off, I took the stairs to the solarium and instantly went to the window. Gazing out at the wide landscape around us, the verdant lawn, and the forestry below, I heard footsteps behind me, and turned as they both walked in, my dad already frowning.

“Ethan? Why is your mom upset and confused?” he asked. “Why the sudden visit?”

“Did you know about a romance between Victor Vega and Sarah Sullivan?” I asked directly. “You know all the family history, so why didn’t you tell me about that?”

“Because there was no such thing,” Dad said calmly. “Why would you even ask such a thing?”

“Because I found Sarah Sullivan’s locket amongst Victor’s things,” I replied. “Actually, Mia found it because she found a record of it in Sarah’s diary.”

Dad rolled his eyes and fiddled with his watch—a sign I had picked up years ago that told me he was lying. “Foolishness.”

“You’re lying,” I told him. “I know when you deflect, Dad. You’ve got too many tells, and I know them all. Either it happened, or something *like* that happened, and you know about it, but you don’t want to tell me.”

“Ethan—” Mom stepped forward, but Dad cut her off.

“Where is this coming from?” he demanded. “What has gotten you so up in arms about a silly little rumor?”

A silly little rumor... so he does know.

“Because I’m dating Mia,” I said plainly. I nearly said, *I love Mia*, but that was a little too much to add. I had already cut Dad deeply; no need to add salt to the wound.

Dad's face went as hard as flint. "You'd betray our family like this?"

"Stop, Dad, just stop!" It was the first time since I was a teen that I raised my voice at him. "Stop with all this nonsense. Stop with all this, *ours* or *theirs*, mentality. It's past the point where this silly feud ended. I don't know why it started, but best, believe me, I will end it! It's petty, it's juvenile, and frankly, I had hoped you'd been a better man about it and called it off only to know you kept at it.

"You deliberately allowed the notice about the storage facility to get to Sullivan late so his wine would spoil and then made me think he had sabotaged you by forcing you to pay three times to get our mead delivered," I told him, oddly feeling nothing much when his face paled. "And I know you're going to tell me Sullivan did something before that, but I damn well know if I dig far enough, I will find that you did something first, or your father did it or his father did it—but I don't care."

"You cannot abandon your family for a—a—" Dad stuttered.

"Sullivan?" I asked calmly. "The enemy?"

"Yes," he blurted.

"Well, I'm sorry," I turned to the door. "It's already done, and I'm not going to apologize for it. Please call me when you decide to join the present century, Dad, and get over old grudges."

I left.

I was not proud of it, though, and my gut twisted the thought that I might have alienated my dad over something I was not sure was concrete... one thing was for sure, though—he knew about Victor and Sarah.

He knew, but not once had he said a word.

"Jesus Christ, denial is a hell of a thing," I said through gritted teeth. "How bad could it be to dismiss the truth and hold onto a grudge just for a grudge's sake."

As I was winding way down the hills, Benji called.

“Benji, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much, just about fifty people wondering what miracle or possibly apocalypse made you take two days off in a row in one week,” he said, and I could hear the smirk in his words.

“I just had to go talk to my dad about something,” I replied. “So, you can stop the *big boss eloped* rumors.”

“Damn it,” he muttered, then cleared his throat. “Well, anyway, I just wanted to tell you that the BBQ to decide which cut of beef pairs well with our meads is organized for tomorrow at my house. Show up and be ready to eat.”

“You’re manning the grill?” I replied. “Remind me to walk in with my bottle of ipecac syrup.”

“Oh, shut it, smartass...I mean, bossman,” he caught himself, “Anyway, my sister is running the show. You know she is a chef, so show up.”

“I’ll be there,” I replied.

As for the mention of the Texas contract, my mind instantly landed on Mia; she had not mentioned it, and I—I didn’t feel right saying anything about it either. Besides, I didn’t want to talk about business with her; it would eventually lead to our families’ rivalry, and I was so sick of that.

I didn’t know if there had been anything between Victor and Sarah, and even worse, I didn’t know how it had ended—if there was something at all. It felt like a puzzle where we only had middle pieces; half of the frame was gone, and I could bet when we did put the pieces together, the main part would be missing.

Had he gotten her pregnant?

Had she really been sent to the convent?

Had he run off? How had he died?

What bothered me the most was that it felt like their ending was not a happy one, and I was afraid that Mia and I would follow in their ill-fated footsteps.

* * *

I was still in a mood over Dad when I got to Benji's for the BBQ. As much as I tried to hold the irritation back, Benji saw me, and he lifted a stick with a red pennant flag, then shouted, "Weather report, guys; Bossman is in a *mood*. Walk on eggshells, people, *eggshells*, I say!"

Aside from myself, I laughed, and the ire simmered away for a moment. I went to him, plucked the flag from his hand, and bopped him on the head with it. "Dork." Turning to the guests, I said, "I'm fine. I'm completely fine, no eggshells."

Benji's sister, Amanda, laughed and came out of the house with a tray of meat in her hands. Jenna came out with a second tray, and they got the grill fired on. I went to the row of coolers and plucked up a beer from one of them, turned to Benji, and mock-scowled.

"No mead? You know this is a mead and steak tasting."

"There's cider," he grinned mischievously. "Try it."

While the steaks were prepared, I watched Benji and Jenna, and some of the rest make up the sides, asparagus, mashed potatoes, and vegetable salad. I still felt my stomach sink at how I had handled Dad the other day—but it needed to be done; the bandage needed to be ripped off. It was not like it was covering a cut; it was a fraying bandage over a festering sore.

"Hey—" I jumped at Cole's voice. It was strange—he'd been in and out of the Meadery for the last few days, but I had not had a conversation with him in what felt like months. His gaze was wary and skeptical. "—are you okay?"

My lips twisted, and I looked down at the beer in my hand. "No...not really."

“Is it this thing with Mia Sullivan?” he asked, and I didn’t even have the strength to ask him how he knew it. With how much this town gabbed, it was highly possible everyone around was whispering about it.

“No, it’s about Dad,” I told him, peeling a corner of the beer’s label. “Did you know that there is a possibility that one of our family members could have...fallen in love with one of theirs.”

“You mean aside from you and Mia?” Cole asked, his face straight.

“I am not in—” I gave up. There was no chance I had of changing Cole’s mind from what he had already decided about the situation. “—anyway, I went to ask Dad about it, and he brushed it off like it was nothing. But the thing is, he knew or heard about it but led me, led us, to believe we were nothing but enemies. Cole, I am *done* with this rivalry thing between our families, and I’ll be damned if I let it go on another year, much less a hundred.”

His brows inched up, and he whistled. “Oh, damn.”

“And you—” I jabbed a finger into his chest, “Stop acting like the spotless kettle calling the pot black when you’ve been running around with Ryan Sullivan for years.”

“Oh ho!” Cole laughed, “That’s the difference, brother of mine. I’m not *in love* with Ryan. He’s just a genius kid who has equations and angles in his head, so he can help me hustle a lot of old drunks out of pool money. He’s a good wingman, too.”

“Whatever,” I grunted, taking a swig of my beer. “I just hate this situation, man.”

“Well,” Cole ruffled his hair. “I don’t mind it, and I am tired of this rivalry too. It does need to end, but how the hell do you think you can manage to get that done?”

“Hell, if I know,” I replied. “I just know it needs to be done.”

“Foods ready!” Amanda shouted, and I shoved the situation with Mia and her family to the back of my mind.

“Okay, this is how it’s gonna work,” Benji called out while lifting a box. “Each of these cuts is rare, medium rare, and well done. You’re going to take three sample pieces and three sample cups of mead we think goes well with it and take three voting cards—”

While Benji explained the rule, I checked my cell to see if Mia might have texted me or emailed me—but nothing. I supposed she was busy either at the winery or at the museum where she had given Victor’s chest to the curator.

“*Bon appétit,*” Amanda called over.

While the tasting went on, I was on my third cut when Greer, one of our middle management leaders, came in...with Mia in tow. By that time, we had music on the speakers, and while a few people stopped talking at the sight of Mia, nothing much changed.

She looked a bit confused at what was happening. I would imagine it looked like the strangest barbeque she had ever attended. I mean, we were eating sample squares of beef, not bigger pieces, burgers, or ribs. This was essentially a work meeting, so I was not sure why Greer had brought over the company.

I made to go over there, but Cole shouted, “Ethan, so we got more Stardust bottles? I think it goes best with the strip steak!” I turned to him, unsure of what to say, but he hollered. “C’mon, man. I’ve gotta make my decision for the Texas guys, and I need more mead.”

Mia’s face went white.

Why?

I met Benji’s eye and jerked my head to Cole before I took off and headed off to Mia. But before I got there, she turned and sprinted away. I took off behind her and caught up to her as she got to her car.

“Mia! Mia, stop!”

She jerked to a stop, almost tripping over her feet, but then spun to me with hurt and betrayal in her eyes. “You didn’t tell me you got the contract!”

I stopped in front of her and frowned. “Yes. Does it matter?”

“Of course it does,” she replied, her tone cracking.

Even though she was not accusing me of something wrong, I grew defensive. “I thought you were working on the paperwork to succeed as the head of the family business, and I was a sure thing. Besides, you never mentioned it, so I assumed that maybe they had not contacted you or maybe you had changed your mind about working with them if they had.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle and hunched over like that made her that much smaller. “I-I... I smudged the truth on that,” she swallowed. “When I spoke to my dad about taking over, he flatly told me he wouldn’t allow it, so I told him about the deal with the Texas guys and I bartered with him—”

A rock sunk into my stomach. This was not heading to a place I would like—I knew it.

“—I told him that if I got the contract, he would let me take over, and even now, I haven’t heard from them. The last time I checked, the owner, Mr. Portman, was out dealing with his sick son, and they said they would get back to me. I’ve been so wrapped up in this Sarah business and you and everything else except what I should have been focusing on....”

Jesus Christ.

“...It’s the only way I can take over.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “And if you have the contract, I don’t know if I ever will.”

I went to hug her, to comfort her, to tell her it would be okay, but she shied away.

“Mia, come on,” I tried again, but she backed away again. “I hadn’t planned this. I didn’t *know*; you’ve got to believe me.”

“...A couple of days ago, Dad told me not to trust you because, like your family, you might find a way to stab me in

the back. I-I know this is not that, but...I don't want to think he may be right," Mia replied. "I think I need to go home."

Helpless to do anything, I stood at the curb, watching her slip into her car and drive away. A breeze ruffled my hair and lifted stray leaves on the street, the whistle of the wind hollow and echoing in my ears.

Instead of going back to the tasting, I headed inside and up to my in-home office. I fell into my chair, hunched over the desk, and covered my face with both hands. Eventually, my fingers slipped up to grip my hair hard enough for my scalp to hurt.

This was not right. Neither of us was in the wrong here... but it still didn't feel right. To know that this contract was the one thing that would give Mia her dream, and if she didn't get it, I might be the one she blamed.

I couldn't have that.

But what could I do about it?

Was that anything I could do at all? We'd signed the contract; cashed the check. We were still in the first stage of the trial, and everyone was so excited for this to be our ticket to worldwide recognition, but maybe... maybe...

I booted my computer up and looked over the numbers. We were... comfortable, more than comfortable, actually. Our profits were the best they'd been in years, and I saw no reason why they wouldn't stay that way.

With a heavy heart, I called Benji; the moment he picked up, I cut him off. "Come to my office, please. I need to run an idea by you."

Half an hour later, papers scattered over my desk, and Benji was rubbing his face. "I mean, it's all there, but—"

"We won't take a hit," I replied. "But I don't know if they will oblige my request. Was there anything in their contract for a...I dunno, an escape, no-liability clause?"

"No, but there is this: *advancement of expenses, the Company shall advance the expenses incurred by Indemnitee*

in connection with any proceeding, and such advancement shall be made within 20 days after the receipt by the Company of a statement or statements requesting such advances. It has been five days since we got the contract, and we have not sent an invoice, so hopefully, this can help us?”

I took the sheet and scanned it. “Hopefully—” then I looked at Benji. “Are you okay with this? I know it’s been a dream come true to have a contract like this, but—”

“Hey,” Benji shook his head. “I cannot tell you a damn thing about relationships and emotions and all that, but I do know the business, and if this is her only chance to get atop the ladder, then go for it. Hopefully, they’ll come around again with another contract for us.”

I sagged back in my seat. “You’re okay with my giving up the biggest contract of the century for a woman I don’t even know will reciprocate my feelings?”

“You gotta at least try, man,” Benji replied. “Now, I am going back to the tasting and keep the results, just in case you know.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “Smart.”

When he left, I sighed, sat up, tapped my computer awake and again, and went to book a flight...to Texas.

Chapter Nineteen

Ethan

Austin, Texas, was...hot. Probably not as hot as Houston, but the humidity made me crank the AC up to the maximum. I was heading to meet with Mr. Portman, and it was out of pocket for me—well, for anyone showing up to another's place of business or home (where I understood he mostly worked from) unannounced.

I hadn't even called ahead to find out if Mr. Portman was home or not, and I would fully understand if he kicked me out on my ass. I had to Google the directions to the Twisted Twines Ranch, and I took the long road. On either side of the double lane were sprawling lands with bulls everywhere.

I never felt culture shock before, but this...this stunned me. It was so far removed from the cool hills of Colorado that I was lost for words. I couldn't fathom being in charge of such a large farm—no, *ranch*. I had enough trouble managing a 2500 sq foot Meadery, and I couldn't even calculate how much land I'd passed and what it would take to control it.

As I got closer, I saw men on horseback, real cowboys, lassoing a big-ass bull and having him hog-tied on the ground in seconds—I had to slow down to watch. The only westerns I had been to were old movies on TV and maybe half an episode of Rawhide, but this was live.

"I'd be dead in two seconds," I murmured. As I headed to the ranch house, I could see arching over the slight rise.

The house was not what I had expected—but what *had* I expected? A *shack*? The man was a billionaire; of course, he would have a three, four-story sprawling mansion.

I parked and sucked in a breath—this was risky. I didn't know what I was doing—but I had to try. Mia deserved to take over her family's winery, and I had the key to helping her do so; why not hand it over?

Do you realize that Mia never said they had not denied her flat out? It's not an infinitive; there is a whole lot of space between them not contacting her again and them denying her. Could I have jumped the gun?

I reached for the folder on the passenger seat and stepped out, hoping my jeans and button-down were acceptable for an impromptu business meeting. I got to the porch and made to ring the bell when the door opened, and Ben, the guff cowboy who'd been a part of the trio I'd met, came stepping out.

He drew up short at seeing me. "Mister Vega?"

"Mister Hills," I said. "I apologize for the sudden arrival, and I should have called first because that is simple decency, but I need to speak with Mister Portman. It's an emergency."

He plucked the hat off his head, "I see. I agree about calling first, but emergencies do come about without any sign. Hunter is here, but I'll have to speak to him first. Wait here a moment?"

Relief washed right through me, and I turned to look around. God, this place was magnificent; I would never live there, though, but the splendor was not lost on me. The air was so clean, with no sign of the usual city smog. I smelled earth and trees and flowers.

Maybe a vacation house? For a short stay?

"Vega?" Ben said behind me. I turned to see him opening the door. "He'll see you now."

"Thank you," I replied, then followed him up to an office.

When I stepped in, I saw a tall man, dark-haired, with sharp blue-green eyes...holding a little boy with fly-away hair, asleep on his shoulder. This could be the sick son Mia had mentioned.

"Oh—my apologies, I—" I paused. "—I didn't know I was interrupting."

"I wouldn't have agreed to see you if I had," Hunter Portman replied. "My son Liam sleeps like the dead, but he prefers to have me as his pillow instead of his bed."

Touched at his dedication to being a father, I nodded. “Thank you for seeing me. I need to get straight to the point about the contract your people brokered with me. I had the impression you were interested in Sullivan Wines, too, but it doesn’t seem like any word is coming. I may have jumped the gun, assuming you might not want a partnership with them, but if that is the case, I have to say you would be doing yourself a great disservice. Their wines are wonderful.”

Mr. Portman’s face was unreadable. “So is your mead.”

“I know,” I replied. “But Mia Sullivan has a lot more hanging on this deal than I do. If she gets this deal, she can finally take over the business as she had planned from when she was in diapers.”

“Meaning, if she doesn’t get it, you won’t continue with the one we have together?” Hunter asked knowingly.

“If you have only one deal to give, I want you to give our deal to her,” I said finally, knowing I had just put my heart there on a silver platter.

Hunter stared at me for a long time, his gaze assessing and reassessing before he shifted, reached for a drawer, and pulled something out. He dropped a folder on the table, and through the clear page, I saw “Contract agreement, Twisted Twins Corp, and Sullivan Wines LLC.”

“My lawyers sent this over fifteen minutes ago,” Hunter said. “If you can touch my printer, you’ll probably find it hot. I just printed it off.”

My head spun. “You mean...”

“We want a partnership with both of you,” Hunter replied. “We found that we want to offer diversity with this new campaign; our consumers can choose their pick of wine or mead with their meals.”

“So...” I paused, then rubbed the back of my head. “I came here for nothing then. I did jump the gun.”

“On the business aspect, yes, but not on the moral or ethical standpoint,” Hunter replied. “You just showed me the man you are, Vega, and despite this rivalry I hear you two

families have, I am impressed you came to give your chance for her to have it. That honorable.”

I felt encouraged. “Our families are rivals, but Mia and I... aren’t.”

“Oh really,” Hunter’s brow lifted while his son shifted. “You’re together then?”

“I honestly don’t know what we are,” I replied. “We need to get this rivalry bullshit out of the way first—” my eyes landed on the boy who looked barely six years old. “—oh, I’m sorry.”

“He’s out, but thank you,” Hunter replied. “But you don’t need to worry about Miss Sullivan. As a matter of fact, I’ll be in Colorado next week. Do you think you can sort out your rivalry by then because I would love to work with you two jointly?”

“I...I hope we can.” I replied. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Stick around for dinner,” he said, “Please. I’d like to know more about your Meadery and Sullivan wines.”

“I’d be happy to,” I replied.

* * *

I had a Red-Eye back to Colorado, and while waiting for my flight, I meandered through the shops, looking for something, even a trinket, I could carry back for Mia. What would she like? Hell, would she even want to talk to me or accept whatever I got for her? A book, a keychain, liquor?

Then I saw a wrapped package of truffle chocolate, twenty flavors of minibars, and rounds in an artisan package. “This might be a safe bet,” I murmured and went to cash out. I got it wrapped in a gift bag, too, then thanked the lady and headed to my gate.

Plucking my phone out, I texted Benji. *You would not imagine what happened when I got here. It’s all good, man; I’ll tell you more when I get back.*

I then got onto Instagram and scrolled through my feed, checking out the upcoming beer and wine fests that I was going to hijack with my mead and making dates to tell Benji and Jenna later.

It was about eleven p.m., and I checked my messages, unsure of what to do with Mia. Text her, call her? Was she even up, or would I be disturbing her sleep? On the safe side, I texted her.

Do you believe me when I say it'll be all right?

“We’re about to board,” the attendant at the gate called out. “Please have your boarding passes ready.”

Heavy-heartedly, I shifted to open up my mobile boarding pass and waited until they called us up. Five minutes later, I was buckled in, my head rolling to the window. The flight was mostly empty, and I was glad to have the whole row free. Just before we were instructed to log off all electronic devices, her text came back in.

I want to believe you. Show me why I should believe you.

Grimacing, I shut the device off and leaned back. By the time we were in the air, it was too late to reply, but I made a note to talk to her as soon as I was able the next day... or afternoon. I was sure I would sleep like the dead when I got home.

The drive from Denver nearly killed me, but I got home safe on the downside of three a.m., sleep-walked to my bed, stripping as I went. By the time I toppled to my bed, I was in my boxers, and in seconds, I was out like a light.

* * *

Something was getting on my nerves. Something was vibrating on the bedside table hard enough to cause earthquakes. By the fourth or tenth time it rocked on the table, I slapped a hand out, ready to fling the damn thing into the wall, but then Mia’s name flashed on the screen.

I swiped it open, “Mia?” my voice was a cracked, hoarse mess. “What is it?”

“Are you hungover?” she asked, “You know what, I don’t care. You need to come down to the museum right now. They opened the chest, Ethan, and there are things here you need to see.”

I sat up and looked at the time, nine-thirty-five. I’d barely gotten six hours of sleep, and I felt jetlagged to hell, but if Mia needed me, I had to show up. I had to prove to her I was nothing and would never be like what her dad expected from me.

“I got in late,” I said, pressing the heel of my hand to my eyes. “What’s going on with the chest?”

“It’s open,” she said, breathlessly. “I just got the call, and I don’t think it’s right to go see it without you. Please join me.”

I still felt groggy and unbalanced but decided to see her. “Give me twenty minutes,” I told her, “I’ll be there.”

Chapter Twenty

Mia

I was on tenterhooks stepping into the museum to meet Cécile. When she had called earlier about the lockmaster opening the old chest, my heart leaped into my throat and was now lodged in it. I made sure to drive slowly because my hands were shaking, and my mind was racing with thoughts about this and that.

What was inside?

Why had it been buried in my lands?

Was it truly Victor's?

I got to the museum car park, found a space, and then looked around, hoping Ethan had arrived. When I had spoken to him, he had sounded exhausted, and I had instantly regretted disturbing him, but it only felt right to have him there when we went through the chest if it was his great-grand uncle's chest.

When I didn't see him drive in, I reluctantly left for the doors and found Cécile waiting for me. She was smiling ear to ear and said, "Dear, I think you might have found something more valuable than a map of silver and gold."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She handed me a pair of gloves, and I wore them while approaching the room she had cleared out for the chest. It was open, the hinges dark with oil. Resting in the bed of the chest, leather and velvet lined bed, were letters... dozens and dozens of letters.

"Oh my god," I whispered. "What are these?"

"Look and see," Cécile smiled.

I took one up and read a slashing hand, "To my love Sarah..." My heart tightened as my eyes dropped to the end of the letter. "Yours, Victor V."

I nearly fainted.

I lifted another, gently opened it, and ready, “To the only man I will love...” again, I looked at the bottom, “...Sarah.” I turned to Cécile. “...I was right, they were in love?”

“Who were?” Ethan asked while walking in. I turned to him; he was in dark jeans and his favorite gray Henley; dangling from his hand was a small bag. Dark circles were under his eyes, and his hair looked a mess, but he was sharp-eyed and aware.

I lifted a letter. “Your great-granduncle was in love with Sarah.”

His brows shot up. “You don’t say?”

“Listen to this: *‘Your eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and I could gaze into the well of your gaze for nights on end. I am afraid to touch as how I would want for the sake of sully your innocence. I miss the feel of your gentle touch on the longest, longest nights, and I yearn to hold you in truth and honor.’*”

He sat the gift bag to the side and then reached for a letter, but Cécile stopped him with the gloves. Obediently, he put them on and fished out a letter. *“To the one who holds my heart. Seeing you at the market strains my heart because I cannot touch you. I am not the one who receives your smile, nor am I the one to hear your soft laugh. I miss your soft voice when you read to me under the moonlight. Sarah, you are the only one I will love, and I will find a way for us to be one, even if our families do not agree.”*

Ethan stared at the old, yellowed letter, his brows furrowing. “...Mia, I don’t think Victor died.”

“I don’t think Sarah was sent to a convent either,” I replied.

Our gazes met, and in unison, we said, “They eloped.”

Placing the letter down, Ethan went to get two chairs for us, and I took one, thanking him. We sat close enough that our knees touched. We plucked up letter after letter, trying to put

them in chronological order from the dates they had lovingly placed on the right side.

We worked through the chest, reading out a love story that spanned over three years, and Cécile got us lunches, nothing sloppy to stain our fingers, and we went back to the letters.

Ethan pulled out the last letter. *“My love, I have decided for us to leave Denver and from there to New York to start a life together. If by happenstance we have children, their name will be Vaga, as far removed from my family and yours. Our children will never know hate, or spite or reprisal, only love and true family...”*

My head snapped up. “You...think... do you think we have relatives somewhere?”

“Possibly,” Ethan replied, then sat the letter down. “As fascinating as this, we can deal with this later, Mia. I need to talk to you about two days ago.”

I looked down. “You don’t need to. I—my omission is not your blame. All I could see back then was you having the key to my dream and my future fading away. I had a bad habit of seeing things in black and white too much, Ethan. It’s... it’s not your fault.”

He lifted the gift bag and handed it to me. “Look inside.”

I did and saw a wrapped basket of chocolate, and I plucked it out. Eying him, I teased him, “Now, who is the one making amends with food?”

His lips slanted. “That’s not all. Look again.”

I peered into the bag and saw an envelope; plucking it out, I took the papers out and looked. “This deed of agreement is entered into as of the effective date identified below between Tender T’s corporation of Austin, Texas, hereby known as the purchaser, and Sullivan Wines LLC, hereby known as the supplier...”

I dropped my hands, “Ethan...what is this?”

“Your dream come true,” he replied. “Well, a copy of the real one anyway. What you told me about this deal being the

one thing that would make you take control of the family's business, I flew out to Austin to speak with Mister Portman himself about the contracts. I had feared you would never get yours, and I told him if that were the case, I would gladly switch my contract with him for him to make a contract with you. Turns out, I didn't need to do that because—"

I'd heard enough.

Launching myself off my chair, I crashed into him and took us both to the ground. "I cannot believe you did that!"

His arms were around me. "I told you it would be okay, didn't I?"

"Pardon me for catastrophizing," I told him, getting up to my elbows and looking down on him. "I didn't think you would do that for me!"

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked, "I told you I have no interest in carrying on this stupid rivalry. Your win is my win."

I kissed him. The instant my lips met his, Ethan took control, sweeping his tongue through my mouth, meeting my own, me ceding control and taking it back with each twist and turn of our heads. A low groan rumbled through his chest, and I loved it, just as I liked the grip he had on my arms.

"If we don't stop now," he murmured, "we might get arrested for public indecency."

Somehow, Ethan managed to get us up from the floor and held my body aloft. "I suppose we're not the first ones in our families to get together."

"I suppose not," he said while letting me down and gazing at the table full of letters. "I don't know how our folks are going to take this, though."

"It's either they do or they don't," I shrugged. "The truth is in the middle."

"I wonder where they ended up," Ethan asked while looking at the last letter. "What did he do for a living? What did she become? Did their kids have kids who had other kids?"

“We’ll find that out another day,” I replied while looking around for Cécile. “Now we have the truth; we can work on it. But for now...” I turned to him. “...can we go somewhere and share those chocolates?”

“I’ll be licking it off your belly,” he whispered.

Rolling my eyes, I began to fold the letters back into the chest. “Stop making me blush.”

“Why?” he asked. “You’re cute when you blush.”

“Be quiet,” I told him while dropping the last letter into the box, but something tugged my attention to the roof of the chest. The damask lining was peeling off, and something was poking out. I gently fished it out, and there was a card.

From the writing, I knew it was Sarah’s. “We’ve left this record of our love for those who might come after us to know that love had no boundaries or limitations. Love might find you at the moment you least expect it.”

Ethan had just righted the tipped chairs and came to my side, softly resting a hand on the small of my back. “Huh. I guess she was the one who saw the future.”

Remembering his quip from a few days ago, I elbowed him. “You’re horrible.” I gazed at the card. “How are our folks going to take this?”

“With faints and screams and denial,” Ethan replied. “But after that, the ball is in their court, and we move on with our lives.”

I closed the chest. “Cécile will take over from here. Can—can we go to your place?”

“Sure,” he brushed a kiss over my temple. “C’mon.”

After a word with Cécile, we headed out to our cars, and I trailed behind him heading to his house. Parking, I happily left and followed him inside. “Can you get some coffee on?” I asked.

“Only if you promise not to murder it with cream and sugar,” Ethan narrowed his eyes.

“I promise,” I lied.

He rolled his eyes but got the coffee on anyway. “Do you think we should try and find our relatives?”

“No,” I said instantly. “Well, we can find them but not pull them in, not until we clean house first. We cannot drag them from their peaceful life into our chaos. It might take years, but I won’t do it.”

“Huh, that makes sense,” Ethan braced his hands on the counter and toed his shoes off. “Mia, I meant what I said; I do want to have a relationship with you.”

My heart drummed in my chest, and my hands shook as Ethan looked at me with absolute purpose in his eyes. I believed him. I knew he was set on this—and a part of me was that way, too. We just needed to clean around us a bit more.

He came around the table and grabbed my hand, “You believe me, don’t you?”

“After that grand gesture of...citizenship, yes,” I replied.

“Citizenship...” His lips ticked down. “Are you going to give me the keys to the city then?”

I didn’t know if that was a pun, but I was going to use it. Gripping his shirt, I pulled him in. “...In a manner of speaking.”

Our bodies sparked as my chest met his, and his mouth slanted over mine, the air sizzling around us as our lips meshed. His groan was like a spark to the heat smoldering under my skin, and I all but climbed him like a tree, locking my legs around his waist.

He smelled like musk; I kissed him deep and hard, my ears thrumming to the frantic beat of my heart. Ethan maneuvered us to the nearest couch, sat, and pulled me on to saddle him. His hands clamped to my hips as I dug my knees into the cushions on either side of his thighs.

I slid my fingers into his hair and rubbed myself against him, the deep throbbing between my legs craving connection, craving the heat and hardness of him. The hard ridge of his

arousal felt alternatively good and bad: good that he showed his interest, bad that he was not inside me.

“Christ.” He tore his mouth from mine, his lips attacking my throat and moving lower, his heat under my palms while his tongue licked along my collarbones. “I want you.”

“Take me to bed then,” I replied.

“What about coffee?” he asked.

“Coffee can wait,” I kissed him. “I can’t.”

Ethan laughed and stood with me, “We’ll sort out the rest later. When I’m done with you, they might hear you from my home.”

“Ethan!”

“How about Texas?”

I laughed; the man was getting so freaking smug—when he was not being sarcastic and growly—but he was all mine, and I could live with that.

THE END

Bonus Chapter - Deleted Scene

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Sneak Peek- Christmas in Vines

Chapter 1

Cole

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

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

Loose cannon.

Cocky dumbass.

Egotistical manic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

except wait the madness out and welcome sanity on the New Year?

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

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

I stopped.

That didn’t sound so good.

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

Hell, it sounded dangerous.

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

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

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

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

“You’ve got about ten seconds to go before I nail your pretty face,” I snarled. “And if you ever try to come within a

mile of Willow again, I won't be responsible for your broken *spine*."

Max's eyes narrowed, "So, you're the guys she left me for?"

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

He laughed, then turned to Willow. "You can't be serious. *Him?*"

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

Well... damn.

My arm tightened around her, "I'm going to tell you one last time, fuck off, asshole."

He turned to Willow, "You'll regret this. I'm giving you until Christmas to realize the mistake you made, and I'll graciously take you back when you come crawling back to me."

"She won't," I said.

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

Pivoting a little, I dropped my voice, "Are you okay?"

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

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

Willow pulled away and shook her head, "Thanks, but I'll be all right. Max... Max is all bark but no bite. He's too..."

cushy to get his manicured hands dirty. I wish he would leave me alone.”

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

Before she could nod, I bent my head and kissed her, lightly at first, until her mouth opened and her tongue sought mine—but the second we touched, my axis spun sideways. I moved a little more, and she wrapped her arms around my neck; this time, it was her lips seeking mine. Our tongues tangled, and as the kisses got hotter and more sensual, all lips and tongue and teeth. It was aggressive, erotic, and sensual.

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

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

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

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

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

She punched me in the arm, “Shut it.”

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

“I’m good,” she took out a set of car keys and nodded to a Jeep a few feet away from me. “I’ll be going home.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or maybe they were asleep?

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

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

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

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

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

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

KISA is Knight in Shining Armor. She replied.

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

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

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Cowboy's Secret Twins

The plan was for him to be the best ride of my life, NOT my baby daddy.

Don't hook up with the cowboys.

That's rule #1 at the ranch.

One glance into Todd's sea-blue eyes, and I found myself drowning.

I felt like a bad girl for breaking the rules.

My head is still swirling from that toe-curling night.

But that night came with an unexpected surprise.

I was pregnant... with twins.

Todd shattered my heart when he left the ranch before I could tell him.

I felt like he ran away because he had something to hide.

Seven years later, my family sent out an SOS.

I wasn't expecting Todd "Baby Daddy" Porter to show up.

The ranch has enough fires to put out.

But now we're forced to work together.

Until I know why he disappeared, I have to keep the twins safe.

I guess we **both** have our secrets.

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