

# NEW HOPE, OLD GRUDGES

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*New Hope, Old Grudges*

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*For Juni*

# *Contents*

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Anne Malcom](#)

# *Chapter One*

WILLOW

BLUE and red lights flashed in my mirror as I crossed the town limits to New Hope, Colorado—population 5,081, according to the sign. Someone had long replaced the one where a bunch of high school kids had graffitied to write ‘*No Hope.*’ It wasn’t a surprise, since the last time I’d seen that sign in my rearview mirror was over a decade ago, confident that I’d never see it again and that my future was bright.

Now the only bright thing was the lights of a cop car that were flashing in my mirror, illuminating how shitty my luck and life were.

“You’ve got to be fucking *kidding* me,” I muttered, turning off to the shoulder.

I took one last slurp of bitter, cold gas station coffee in an attempt to calm myself down. Not really something that worked, considering the entire situation ... or shitshow, otherwise known as my life. Especially since I could barely afford shitty gas station coffee let alone the price of this ticket.

I thought wistfully—and bitterly—back to when I’d spend upwards of ten dollars on some fancy latte or smoothie from a famous grocery store in L.A. and didn’t even think twice about it.

Bitter, cold and cheap was the only thing I’d be tasting in the foreseeable future. Perhaps forever, considering I was coming home to the town I’d vowed to never set foot in again.

Never was a funny thing.



It happened more often than you thought. Right about the same time as rock bottom.

My fingers thrummed on the steering wheel as I wound down my window and heard the crunch of the incoming officer's boots on the gravel of the shoulder.

The crisp air of November in Colorado hit me square in the face. I cringed at it, losing feeling in my ears almost immediately. The cold settled into my blood that had thinned after a decade of rarely experiencing temperatures below sixty.

A tanned and muscled forearm leaned on the ledge of my open car window, "Good morning, ma'am," the voice drawled as he leaned down to my eye level. "Your brake light is out. Not something I normally would've noticed on this stretch of road considering it's dead straight, it's a Saturday, and it's not hunting season, so there is no one driving into New Hope except you and me." The officer's tone was warm, friendly, teasing almost.

It set my whole body to stone.

"Hence my surprise at the brake lights with no real reason as to why you're slowing down going into town at six in the morning," he continued, obviously not noting my shock. "If I was going to catch anyone, I would've thought they would've been in a rush to get to wherever they're going, even if only to get in front of a warm fire with a cup of joe."

It was a combination of the bitter cold air, the sleep deprivation and my overall sense of despair that shocked me into a few beats of slack-jawed silence. Well, it was not *just* those things.

It was those things combined with the man wearing the police uniform.

It solidified that my luck was well and truly in the crapper when I saw the square jaw, the tanned skin and the unfortunately familiar, piercing hazel eyes of the man I'd hated for years. Of course, I tried to tell myself I'd forgotten him and all his buddies. But you don't forget people who tormented you for most of your formative years.

He wasn't a boy now, of course. He'd aged. And I'd told myself he'd do it shittily. That he'd impregnate Sally Ingles, the head cheerleader, that they'd get stuck in this town, he'd never get higher than being star quarterback, never graduate college, and drown his sorrows in Bud Light, getting a beer gut and balding before thirty.

His tight-fitting uniform showed that there was no beer gut, nothing but muscles that seemed to ripple underneath the fabric. He still had that head of light brown hair, shiny and worn close against his scalp, which only sharpened his angular features. He had something more than a five o'clock shadow but not quite a beard. It looked unkempt and rugged but also somehow worked in a big way. And an angular scar across his strong brow framing coppery eyes. I found myself curious as to who gave him that scar and if I could get their address so I could send them a fruit basket or something.

Not that I could afford to send anyone anything, even a fruit basket.

"*You?*" I spluttered, finally finding my voice. "Of course." I hit my palm on the steering wheel. "*Of course*, the universe isn't done fucking with me. *You're* the welcome brigade, here with the flashing lights, the faux small-town cop charm and the ability to give me a ticket I most definitely cannot afford."

Giving attitude was not smart. I didn't know how much Brody Adams had changed in a decade and a half, but I was guessing he wasn't the kind of man who liked women with attitude. His empty ring finger told me that he hadn't found a woman he liked enough—or was meek and subservient enough—to pull the trigger.

It also wasn't smart of me to highlight my dire financial straits. You're not supposed to give bullies ammunition, show your weak spots. But I was tired. I was defeated, and I was pissed off.

Brody's dark brows shot up at my words and my obvious fury, not in anger but in confusion.

“Now, I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” he said, voice still low, rumbly, almost warm. He didn’t even have steam coming from his mouth despite the chill in the air.

Damn fucking mountain man.

“You seem to know me well enough to dislike me, if getting up this much fire before the sun has truly risen is anything to go by,” he continued. He had the gall to have a twinkle in his eye and half a smirk on his face.

“You don’t remember me,” I scoffed. Yeah, I might’ve looked a little different insofar as I had learned to tame my wild hair so it was no longer orange and frizzy. I’d had it colored and treated so it was auburn and shiny.

Though I wouldn’t be able to afford those treatments anymore.

My skin had cleared up since high school, and a lot of the freckles that had covered spots not taken over by acne had faded with the California sun, resulting in a light dusting over my nose. I got Lasik surgery after carefully weighing the pros and the cons of such a procedure. Though there had been instances of it not working for some people, it was successful for me, so I didn’t need to wear glasses anymore.

My once shapeless frame had finally filled out in the right places, though more weight went to my butt and thighs than I would’ve liked.

In short, I’d grown up. I’d grown out of all of those awkward teenage features that plagued most of the population who weren’t starring in a CW series.

But even though I lived in L.A., I hadn’t gotten any surgical procedures—beyond the Lasik—nor had I drastically changed my appearance. I still looked like me.

Just like Brody Adams looked like him.

Yes, there was gray in his stubble and hair, the scar, the muscles, and that joyful sheen of youth seemed to have gone. But in my mind, he was still the captain of the football team and one of the leaders of my torture brigade.

“I would definitely remember you if I was at my best when we met,

which I obviously was not,” he continued, sounding friendly and apologetic.

“We didn’t have some drunken one-night stand,” I snapped, guessing at what he was alluding to.

“I know,” he replied. “I don’t do drunken one-night stands.” He had the gall to sound like he was some kind of decent guy who respected women. Too bad I had hard evidence to refute that fact.

“Oh, *please*,” I muttered.

He leaned farther into the open window. Too close. “I’m gonna offer you an apology for whatever I did to ignite this ire, and how about I let you off with a warning for the brake light?”

He was still going for the easy, teasing, friendly small-town cop routine. With just a smidge of that smoldering, rugged male thing that probably worked on a lot of women. At least the women who hadn’t gone to high school with him.

“Oh, yes. That’ll fix *everything*,” I snapped. “You letting me out of the ticket. How *gracious* of you.”

I had an overwhelming urge to headbutt him. Even though I had no idea how to headbutt someone. I’d taken one self-defense class when I moved to L.A., but it was a disaster because I was not what anyone would call athletic nor coordinated.

Headbutting him would likely only give me a bleeding head and more than likely a charge of assaulting a police officer, so I refrained.

Brody reeled back from my words and the anger behind them, obviously still surprised, still trying to remember me.

He opened his mouth again, probably to try more of the charm.

“Is that it?” I asked him, thrumming my fingers on the steering wheel. “I said I’d come back here when hell froze over, and it is definitely cold enough for that. I’ve been driving for ten hours, and I would really like this interaction to be over.”

I didn’t think his eyebrows could’ve gone higher, but they did. And I

waited. For the boy I'd known to show up in the man I didn't. Because people didn't change. And he was obviously given power and authority, and bullies did not wield power with benevolence. So I waited for the change, for him to use that badge to make sure I paid for my insolence against him.

Except it didn't happen.

He stepped back from the car. "Promise to get that brake light fixed?" he asked, tone still light but expression tight with confusion. "Winter's closing in, and the roads get treacherous."

I rolled my eyes. "I may have been gone for a while, but I know plenty about the roads. I grew up here."

I wound up my window, but not before muttering, "Asshole," under my breath, loud enough for him to hear.

Then I sped off. In the direction of hell, which had indeed begun to freeze over.

## BRODY

I watched the Prius sped off much faster than it had been going when I pulled it over. A single brake light flashed as it made its way into town. It seemed like a ‘fuck you’ since there was no need to brake, and the woman driving quite obviously hated me.

I rubbed my jaw as the Prius turned around the bend that led to New Hope. I thought I had a pretty good reputation around town, a pretty good memory. And I definitely thought I was a good enough man to ensure that beautiful women didn’t hate me on sight.

I didn’t do drunken one-night stands. And I wouldn’t have needed to be drunk to sleep with the woman in the Prius. It sure as fuck wouldn’t have been one night either.

I pulled over plenty of beautiful women. I made it a point not to make any kind of advances toward any woman while wearing a uniform. I was well aware of the power imbalance and how fucking problematic that shit was.

Yet I was tempted as fuck when I pulled over the redheaded bombshell. Even more so when her green eyes had lit with a fiery hatred when they landed on me. I didn’t think a woman could be sexier when pissed off.

I just didn’t want this particular woman to be pissed at me. But she was. And I had no fucking clue who she was.

A breeze jerked me out of my thoughts. It had a bite to it. We’d already had our first snowfall, and Thanksgiving was amping up to be the welcome of winter with a blizzard predicted. Not that I held much stock in weather predictions, especially a week out. Shit changed on a dime out here.

I shook off the chill and went back to my vehicle.

“Hannah,” I said over my radio. “Need you to run this plate...” I rattled off the number that I’d memorized from the Prius.

“Got it,” Hannah replied, voice groggy.

“And I’ll pick you up a coffee on my way back to the station,” I said with a smile.

“Quad shot,” she requested.

“Ten-four.”

Then I drove in the same direction the stunning redhead had, back into my town. The one that I loved, but the one she obviously hated.

Along with me.

A puzzle.

One I’d figure out.



“Willow Watson,” I said aloud over my coffee—not a quad shot like Hannah because although I enjoyed coffee, I did not enjoy heart palpitations. Luke’s, the local coffee spot, did only espresso drinks that would put hair on your chest. The owner, Gretchen, was apparently a *Gilmore Girls* fan, and the name and branding were an ode to that. Not that I watched the show.

*Willow Watson.*

She was a local. Grew up here. We went to school together, apparently. She was the year below me. I searched my memories for the redhead with the freckles, captivating eyes, the flush in her cheeks. There was no way I would’ve looked over her. Like a lot of teenage boys, I was an immature asshole, and I was horny as fuck, so if there was a bombshell like her within a fifty-mile radius, I would’ve taken notice.

Not to mention all the bullshit I had going on at home. There was a lot from that period of my life I’d repressed, much of it a blur of football games, fights with my father and drunken nights in fields with a bunch of people I’d thought I had to impress.

But Willow Watson was nowhere in those memories. How in the fuck that happened was anyone’s guess.

She remembered me, though, and her memories were not good. I winced at the thought. I was a pretty cliché asshole during that period of my life, trying to make up for the bullshit at home, trying to seem strong when I really felt weak. So ... yeah, I slammed some kids into lockers, teased people who were brave enough to be individuals when I was nothing but a clone.

But I didn't even have a memory of being an asshole to her. That was not good.

It wasn't good she hated me either, because I could not get her out of my fucking head. Why was she back in town? What happened to make her despise New Hope so badly? Who put that hurt behind her eyes? And why in the fuck did I want to hunt them down and kill them?



## *Chapter Two*

WILLOW

IT HURT DRIVING down the tree-lined driveway. Physically hurt. I gritted my teeth against the tears that pricked the back of my eyes. No way could I cry. I didn't cry when I lost my business, my home, my reputation, my self-respect. I wouldn't cry now. I wouldn't think about being taught to drive down this gravel road, hearing my father's patient instructions even as I lurched into second gear, grinding the gears as I did so. I wouldn't remember the kisses on skinned knees, the crinkle of his eyes as he smiled at me running down the driveway coming home from school, unexpectedly finding him there waiting for me.

Despite my promises to myself, a single tear ran down my cheek. I wiped at it angrily.

"Fucking Brody Adams," I muttered. This was his fault. Though I certainly wasn't at my best entering town again, I had a certain amount of resolve, of mental strength leftover. In fact, I was impressed at just how much was left considering my life had imploded dramatically and completely. But when you're ruined, coming home with your tail between your legs, and you encounter your childhood crush turned bully, things tended to turn to shit. Especially when that childhood crush turned bully didn't remember you and had the ability to give you a ticket. Granted, he didn't give me a ticket, but that seemed out of pity or him pretending he was some friendly small-town cop.

I had no doubt he was using his authority as some kind of fucked-up power trip. The mere thought of him having *any* kind of power over me sent chills down my spine. I wanted to run. Badly. But I couldn't. If I had anywhere else to go, I'd be there right now.

This was a last resort.

And a karmic joke.

In addition to me having to face the place I vowed I'd never go back to, I had to live here under the rule of the man who'd caused me to run in the first place.

I parked my car next to my mother's vintage VW Bug. The same one she'd driven for years. It was metallic green. It only got up to 60 mph, and you could hear it coming from a mile away. Just another thing to set our family apart from those middle-class to upper-middle-class families in New Hope who upgraded their American-made vehicles every three years.

My father's truck was in the detached garage, I guessed. It had been years... Maybe she'd gotten something else. Something newer, more practical, in need of less maintenance. But I knew better than that. The old Ford would be in there. The one my father restored himself. With my brother and me.

*"You're not just watching, Tittlemouse," he said, handing me a wrench. "I'm not bringing up a girl who doesn't know how to take care of herself. You're gonna know how to do everything a man can do, and you'll do it better." His brown eyes crinkled at the sides as he winked and then kissed me on the head.*

I squeezed my eyes shut at the memory. I couldn't even see the truck right now, but I knew the fucking thing was there like the Titanic, a ghost ship lurking and waiting to haunt those stupid enough to climb aboard.

I'd have to see it. Because my mother's Bug was not suitable for Colorado winters. I was surprised she was still driving it this late, but perhaps there hadn't been a big enough snow yet. Soon... Soon she'd switch out

vehicles and drive that truck.

The trees and bushes surrounding the house already had Christmas lights strung around them. There was no order, no uniformity. They were hung with chaos, with wild abandon. My mother loved Christmas and any and all religious holidays, despite the fact that she did not follow any organized form of religion aside from dabbling in Wicca.

The sight of the multicolored lights that illuminated the pink shutters of our cabin brought back memories of all the Thanksgivings and Christmases I'd spent at this house.

My knuckles turned white from the force I used to grip the steering wheel.

I stayed in the car for three minutes and thirteen seconds when I parked. It would've been longer had the door to the house not opened. I was surprised I had gotten the three minutes. Despite the early hour, my mother was up. She was a *morning person*.

Many of my teenage years were punctuated by her blasting Fleetwood Mac on the dusty, old record player as the sun was coming up.

I couldn't listen to Stevie Nicks without shuddering, trying to shrug off unwanted memories of a past I'd long left behind.

Her multicolored kimono flowed behind her as she ran out the door wearing purple slippers. My mother was a purple person.

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to find the mental strength to face her and her perpetual good mood and positivity.

I didn't find it by the time she wrenched the car door open.

"*You're here!*" she shrieked, reaching over to unbuckle my seatbelt. She smelled of patchouli. My eyes watered at the smell suddenly, and I let myself be pulled out of the car into my mother's arms. I didn't know if she was surprised that I let her hug me for over a minute, but I was sure she was glad. My mother was naturally affectionate. She kissed us on the mouths until we were teenagers and would've done it to this day if we hadn't protested.

I didn't remember when I started shying away from my mother's affection, when I forced the distance between us, but she never faltered. Not once.

"Let me look at you!"

She released me, and her eyes flickered over me.

I thought about what she'd see.

Stained workout clothes, expensive ones too, from when I had money. The leggings clung to what used to be my curves, but I had dropped a dangerous amount of weight since everything happened. My skin was sallow, there were likely bags under my eyes.

She clicked her tongue. "Gorgeous!" she declared, sounding as if she actually believed it. "But you must be starving. Leave the bags. We'll get them later." She shut my door then ushered me up the walk. "I've got breakfast ready for you. And hot tea. Chamomile. No coffee. Because after you eat, you're going straight to bed."

My mother didn't hesitate to launch into nurturing mode. It was just her way.

I scoffed. "Mom, there's no way I'll be able to sleep." Even though exhaustion painted my bones, there had been too much buzzing in my head before even stepping foot in my house for the first time since my father died.

"Nonsense," my mother waved me off. "A full belly does wonders for a tired soul." She spouted off fortune cookie type statements like that on an hourly basis.

I didn't try to argue with her. I knew better.

There were too many ghosts in here for me to sleep. Full belly or not.



I woke up with a dry mouth and a disembodied mind. My heart rate skyrocketed as I took in the strange surroundings.

Except they weren't strange

They were familiar.

Too familiar.

Nancy Drew books on the shelf, *Twilight* poster on the wall, journals bursting with sketches still piled on my sage-green dresser that had hand-painted wildflowers all over it.

I was here.

New Hope.

My home.

The urge to throw back the covers and sleep for the rest of time was overwhelming. But I could smell food cooking, and my stomach grumbled loudly. I'd tried to eat my mother's food when I first arrived, but I'd been falling asleep at the plate. She'd quickly ushered me to my old bedroom where I didn't even remember falling asleep.

When did I last eat? A gas station donut? A hundred miles ago? More?

Although I was pretty down, I wasn't about to go on a hunger strike. My lack of sustenance was a result of lack of funds not will to live.

I squinted around the room and at the darkness that came from the crack in the curtain. I'd slept all day.

Great. If only I could sleep through the rest of my days here, then I'd be golden.

I pushed back the covers and frowned at my suitcase. It was open. And empty. My mother had been in here. Not just watching me sleep—as she had done regularly into my teens despite my continued protests—but unpacking my bags.

I swallowed the fire in my throat. It was a breach of privacy, but my mother didn't really believe in privacy. Beyond that, it was a sign she knew I was going to be staying a while. Because I had nowhere else to go.

It took a lot of effort to support my own weight as that thought hit me, but I did it. Falling to my knees now wouldn't achieve anything. So I changed

out of my dirty clothes into some sweats then padded down our hall in sock-covered feet.

The cold outside was nowhere to be found in this house. It had always been warm, always smelled of home cooking, everything was soft, inviting and welcome, if a little chaotic. Pictures on the wall were always a little off-center, always a little askew. Rugs and pillows were mismatched. Crystals were cluttered on various surfaces, a rogue Tarot deck beside a half-burned candle or a nude woman figurine.

All my mother.

But my father still remained. Dog-eared biographies on Abe Lincoln and histories of countries like Rhodesia. His reading glasses sat on the coffee table as if he were just going to walk past and pick them up.

My mother had done nothing to communicate that the man had died two years ago.

“Oh, brilliant timing.” My mother appeared from the kitchen, her hair escaping in tendrils from the messy bun on top of her head. She did not follow the doctrine that women of a certain age should suddenly cut their hair short and dress conservatively. Her hair was long and flowing, wild, and she wore the same things she always did. Today it was a long, flowing skirt, cowboy boots and a chunky knit—all varying shades of purple. Chains hung from her neck. All of them mine.

Another punch to the chest.

“I made eggplant lasagna,” she declared. “It’s vegan. If you don’t count the cheese. Or the beef.” She winked. My mother toyed on and off with the idea of being a vegan because she certainly agreed with all of their principles, but she also loved a medium-rare steak.

My stomach growled as I looked at the steaming dish on the dining room table. Candles were lit, illuminating the cozy space. The table was long, made of reclaimed wood and surrounded by mismatched vintage chairs. It was always full.

Except now. Two plates were set—plates handmade by my mother, of course—along with two glasses and a bottle of wine in a decanter.

Another punch.

My mother's eyes followed mine to the table. In that way of hers, she seemed to guess what I was thinking.

“Your brother wanted to be here,” she straightened the knife on the setting in front of her. “But he's working late.”

That was bullshit, and we both knew it. I hadn't spoken to Harry in two years, not since that horrible phone call. He hated me. Rightfully so, I guessed. I'd made my peace with it.

Or I'd thought I had. My throat burned slightly as my eyes found a framed photo of us, much younger, arms around each other, grinning wildly. I barely recognized myself, the frizzy hair, the glasses, the acne. No, that's not true. I recognized her all too well. I still saw that girl in the mirror every day.

“That's fine. I'm sure he's busy.” I shrugged, keeping up the charade. My mom may have been naïve in many ways, but I was sure even she understood the rift that I'd created and just how permanent it was.

Her eyes glistened for a beat, communicating a sadness that was hard for me to witness. Luckily, my mother was not one to wallow.

“Sit,” she clapped her hands together before pulling out a chair. “You look starving, and your aura is all off ... understandably.” For a split second, there was pity in my mother's gaze. But only for a second before she covered it with a warm smile. “Nothing that good food and a decent amount of wine can't fix.” She winked at me again.

Although I really didn't feel like it, I smiled back at her. Because it really was impossible not to smile around someone like her. Who didn't let life get her down, even for a second. Who never stopped loving you. Even when you gave her every reason to.

My body stiffened with a guilt so overwhelming, I almost cried out in



pain. I'd been so hard on this woman. I'd shut her out, screened her calls ... abandoned her when she needed me most.

I opened my mouth to apologize, my eyes watering. "Mom—" I choked out.

My mother reached out to squeeze my hand. "Eat. Drink. You need your strength. The rest we'll figure out later. Together."

I squeezed her hand back, nodding silently to hold in my tears.

Then, for the first time in over a decade, I sat at my family's dinner table without my father.



You'd think I wouldn't sleep well that night after sleeping the entire day. You'd be wrong. Especially after two helpings of my mother's eggplant lasagna then two helpings of her peach cobbler plus over half the bottle of the wine she opened.

I collapsed back into my twin bed, had about three minutes to contemplate what my life now looked like, then mercifully, passed out.

I heard my mother moving around the next morning, early. The smell of coffee almost coaxed me up, since my mom made some of the best coffee I'd ever tasted. She added her special blend of cinnamon spices and in the fall and winter made her own pumpkin-spice syrup that Starbucks likely would've paid her millions for. It was that good.

But even her coffee and pumpkin spice wasn't enough. I squeezed my eyes back shut and willed myself into unconsciousness. Unlike my mother and various 'gurus' in L.A., I did not believe in the power of willing something into being. But this time it worked.

By the time I emerged from my room, the house was quiet. That meant my mom was gone.

There was absolutely no chance our house was quiet when Fern Watson

was around. Music would be playing, she'd be using her singing bowls, belting out the latest pop song and getting all the words wrong.

My father's low chuckle would punctuate those sounds. A murmur of his voice, gentle, always gentle with my mother, even though he was a big man. Well over six feet, muscled from working in the forge and a belly from my mother's cooking that didn't take away from how handsome he was.

He was born and raised in New Hope. He was a mountain man at heart, wore plaid, boots, had a dark and full beard, had calluses on his hands from his teenage years onward.

Mom was the free spirit who had been backpacking across the country when she found herself in New Hope, found my dad. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The Weird Watsons. That's what they called our family. Stupid and unoriginal name for sure. But kids came up with it. Kids were fucking stupid. More importantly, they were cruel. Especially to those who were even a little different from them. And we were a lot different. My mother read fortunes for a living, ran the town's only 'occult' store, Trix—Occult to the small but vocal religious zealots in town. She sold crystals, candles, books and anything 'spiritual' you could think of. This was before it was trendy and didn't exactly do a booming business, though enough to keep the lights on, apparently.

My father turned his hobby of blacksmithing into a real business. People all around town used them for their farms, their animals, their tools. He had artisan boutiques commissioning him for all sorts of stuff. If he'd wanted to, he could've taken it further and charged outrageous prices. But that wasn't my father.

We'd never been rich growing up, but I'd never wanted for anything—except normalcy, maybe.

*Cold brew is in the fridge if you're on the iced coffee thing you millennials are into.*

*Otherwise, make yourself a nice warm mug, curl up by the window then grab one of the steamy paperbacks I've set beside the mug. Reading is an escape that helps heal all wounds. Especially if it's got some hot sex in it.*

*Oh, and there are chocolate chip muffins, freshly baked this morning. Sex, chocolate and coffee, it's impossible to be sad with that combination.*

*Love you eternally. Into this life and the next.*

*Fern (Mom) xxx.*

The note in my mother's signature looping script sat on top of her espresso machine. Beside it was a mug shaped like a turkey and a stack of romance books.

I didn't want to smile. There was really nothing for me to smile about. But I did. Because my mother hadn't changed in all these years. She still left notes. Long ones. She still signed them with her first name then *Mom* in brackets. She was still her, despite the heartbreak I know she endured losing my father, her best friend.

Feeling numb and without anything else to do, I followed my mother's instructions. I made coffee. I ate a muffin. I went to the window nook with the plan of losing myself in a romance novel. But then I made the mistake of looking out the window.

Our house was at the base of the mountain that New Hope was scattered around. We were surrounded by woods on all sides, more mountains in the background. There were other homes dotted around, but you only saw their lights at night. Otherwise, we had complete privacy. My mother's garden was winterized, but there were plenty of sculptures sitting on the outdoor

furniture. Fairies, sundials, crystals. Whatever deity she was worshiping.

And amongst it all was something else. Something that stabbed me in the gut.

I stared at the structure out back. It was the same as it always was, hedges neatly trimmed on either side, flower boxes empty because the flowers were long dead. But the paint on the exterior showed no signs of chipping, the windows were gleaming, and I half expected to see the amber glow of the forge.

But I didn't.

I wouldn't.

I tossed the paperback aside.

There was no escape.

Not from this reality with the dead father I never got to say goodbye to, to apologize to. Not from the life that had gone down in flames. And not from being stuck in the town I hated with my high school bully serving as the local sheriff.

## *Chapter Three*

BRODY

## IT WAS FRIDAY NIGHT.

Friday night meant beers at Kelly's Bar where they had a live band. The band was usually a shitshow because we didn't have a whole lot of musical talent here in New Hope, and we were too out of the way for any of the decent bands who toured the country.

Half decent was usually the best we could hope for.

Tonight there was a young, blonde country singer.

And she was more than decent. She had some damn good pipes, and I wondered what the fuck she was doing here and not in Nashville being signed by some record exec.

She was pretty too. Very pretty. Too young and too skinny for my liking, though.

I liked my women to have some meat on their bones. And to be uncomplicated. The young blonde country singer was definitely trouble. Ten years in the Marines and three as the sheriff told me that.

Plus, my mind was on a redhead.

One who was definitely fucking trouble.

And one who happened to hate me for reasons I couldn't quite gather.

"Wouldn't kick her outta bed," Sam said from behind me.

I turned to my old high school buddy where he was perched on his barstool. It all but had his ass print molded to it for how often he was planted

in it. I came to Kelly's every Friday because I liked routine, and it was part of the gig to show my face around town. I preferred my own beer, own back porch and my own company, though.

But Sam was always here, we'd been buddies in high school and we'd fallen into an old routine.

Sam was the same as he was in high school except his sandy-blond hair had receded some, his gut was larger from his beer consumption and he was married now. To his high school sweetheart, Angela Harris.

Despite the wedding ring and the two kids at home, he was here every night and was currently leering at the singer in a way I didn't quite like. I was coming to understand there were a lot of things I didn't quite like about my old buddy.

Not at all because he'd changed. He was exactly who he was back in high school. Which made me really fucking ashamed of who I was in high school since I didn't see what a douche he was.

"Do you remember Willow Watson from high school?" I asked him, changing the subject from the country singer who was barely old enough to be in the bar.

Sam clicked his tongue and chuckled, still leering at the singer. "Weirdo Watson?" he asked, draining his beer, slamming it down then signaling for another.

"Weirdo Watson?" I repeated, the insult sounding chillingly familiar.

He nodded, wiping beer foam from his upper lip. "Yeah, her mom owns the fucking witch store or whatever. She's got a brother. Didn't play football, probably gay." He smiled at himself as if he thought he was hilarious. I scowled at my friend but didn't get a chance to interrupt.

"She was a year below us." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Ugly as sin. All arms and legs, no tits. Glasses. Always fucking *reading*." He said this as if it were a crime and not the sign of an intelligent person. "You should remember her, bro. You gave her so much shit."

My stomach pitted.

With my asshole buddy beside me, a beer in my belly and a concentrated effort, I remembered following a redheaded girl, shoulders hunched as she walked down the halls as if she were trying to paint herself into the walls.

The memory was blurry, though, and I couldn't remember what I might've done to garner such vitriol from her all these years later.

I rubbed my hand over my jaw. "Were we really that bad to her?" I asked, racking my brain.

Sam chuckled again. "Bro, we were fucking dicks." He shrugged. "But we were teenagers who didn't know any better. And she was fucking weird."

I frowned at my oldest friend, not liking the sound of that chuckle. It sounded mean. Cruel.

"We were old enough to know better," I told him, the urge to smack him around the ears overwhelming.

The smile went from his face as he understood I wasn't going to laugh about terrorizing a teenage girl.

"Sure," he replied somberly. "We're all reformed here, Sheriff." He gave me a mock salute. "Why are you asking about...?" he trailed off and went slack-jawed as his eyes went to the entrance. "Who the fuck is *that*, and does she want to ride on my mustache?"

My hand tightened around my beer, and I made the executive decision to cut ties with my old buddy. Every week, he seemed to drink more, say more stupid shit and devolve into a neanderthal.

Even though I didn't want to play into his bullshit, I turned to look at who was coming through the door, if only to catch a glimpse of who I would have to protect if Sam decided to have another drink and forget he was married.

It was then my own eyes went wild.

It was Willow fucking Watson.



## WILLOW

Why I decided to go to the bar was anyone's guess.

Well, it wasn't *that* surprising. It was either that or stay at home for my mother's full moon circle. No way did I want to be nearby when it was going on. I had enough of those ceremonies and rituals to scar me for a lifetime, especially the 'goddess party' she threw when I got my first period. One she thought was a good idea to invite all of my 'friends' to.

I didn't have any friends when I got my first period. And my mother calling all the teenage girls in my class to celebrate my menstruation was a sure way to ensure I never had any friends.

So yes, the bar made sense. Kind of. Only in the sense that there was liquor for sale. Numbness. That's what I needed. I would've preferred to do my drinking alone in a bathtub like any self-respecting person residing in a pit of despair, but the only available bathtub was full of 'moon water' and crystals.

The bar itself wasn't the kind of small-town bar where every head swiveled to a newcomer walking through the door. Thank God. It was Friday night, and Friday nights in a small town meant everyone was at the local bar to blow off steam, drink away their sorrows or hit on someone. The town was just large enough to have a small amount of tourists who either couldn't afford Vail and were commuting for their vacation or used this as a pit stop along the way.

I resisted the urge to tug at my dress or play with my hair as I walked up to the bar and felt many curious eyes on me.

I should've dressed more discreetly. I should've stayed in the stained sweatpants and ratty tee that had been my uniform for the past week. But I'd told myself that I needed to stop wallowing, stop acting like the victim and most importantly, not to sink into the identity of the girl who used to reside in

the room I was sleeping in.

The girl who was weak, uncomfortable in her own skin and who let others determine her worth.

Sure, the federal government determined my worth as zero, but that was neither here nor there.

In my hasty exit from my condo in L.A., I'd managed to gather up some clothing. I'd left them crumpled in my suitcase, relics of an old life that taunted me with the places I'd worn them, the person I was in them.

I'd had to sell most of my purses and higher-ticket clothes just to make it back to New Hope, but not all of it.

Not the simple, auburn turtleneck dress that hugged every inch of my body all the way down to my calves. Not the supple tan leather boots that had a pencil-thin heel. Not the deep-maroon wool coat that complimented the dress perfectly.

I wasn't overly into fashion, labels and brands. I was interested in the power that clothes gave me. It was almost a scientific experiment. If I combined the right number of items together, complimenting shades—I found monotonous worked best—and good quality items, people looked at you differently. People looked at you like you were someone who had their shit together. Most importantly, they didn't look at you like you were an easy target.

That also had to do with the hair, makeup and jewelry. All components must be present for the experiment to be successful. So I'd kept my auburn hair maintained, found the best products to make it shiny and bouncy. I'd watched videos on how to apply makeup in a way that didn't make my alabaster skin look pale. I'd figured out ways to make my rather small nose look in proportion to my relatively large mouth and eyes.

I'd found a 'cat eye' made me look both sharp and professional enough to be taken seriously at the same time as being found attractive by most men.

Another unfortunate fact I'd learned early... People were nicer if you

were deemed conventionally attractive.

More so in L.A.

The town of beautiful people where entire industries revolved around making women believe they wouldn't be worth anything unless they 'fixed' their noses and erased their wrinkles. In addition to starving themselves.

I did not have experience being attractive. In high school, I was what people would call an ugly duckling. I went through puberty late, which, of course, made my menstruation party all the more mortifying since everyone else in my class had gotten their periods years before.

So while my classmates were developing breasts and discovering the power of their sexuality, I was gangly, all limbs, flat-chested, wore glasses and on Accutane to calm my acne.

I didn't 'blossom'—as my mother called it—until right before college. Right when I left this town only to come back for fleeting holiday visits when I holed myself up at home, eating my mom's gingerbread cookies, hanging out with my dad in the forge, tinkering with jewelry, the thing that would propel me to a short-lived period of fame and fortune in L.A.

I knew it was common practice for those who came home to their small towns for the holidays to congregate in the bar, to see each other, catch up on old times, brag about their lives, glimpse that old flame to reassure yourself you made the right choice or remind you of some bad decision-making as you strolled down memory lane. At least that's what popular culture told me.

Again, I didn't have any experience with these small-town phenomena, but the bar I entered the week before Thanksgiving seemed to communicate that kind of vibe.

My eyes scanned the large room. I'd never been inside it, not once. I'd seen it from the outside, with the quaint wooden sign, the frosted windows so you couldn't see in. I'd expected it to be dark, maybe even seedy. But the inside was well lit and nicely decorated. Definitely leaning into the Colorado mountain theme with a long wooden bar, a lot of earth tones. But no mounted

heads on the walls. Just art by local artists—which I could spot only because my mother also stocked art by local artists and had posed nude for more than one.

Though not every head turned at my arrival, I did notice a few stares. Confidence wasn't even close to one of my qualities, yet I had learned a bit in L.A.—mostly 'fake it 'til you make it.'

I jutted my head upward and walked like I didn't have a care in the world, like I owned the room and like I wasn't at all self-conscious about walking into a bar alone on a Friday night.

Luckily, there was an empty stool close to the door, so I didn't have to do too much walking and didn't have to meet the eye of anyone staring. I'd probably catch someone I went to high school with.

I settled onto the comfortable stool. The couple to my left were having a heated argument, and the man to my right was engrossed in the game on the TV, therefore, no one was thinking that me sitting at the bar meant I wanted to make friends.

Perfect.

“What can I get you?”

I jerked at the voice, husky like she smoked a pack of cigarettes a day. The bartender's weathered, tanned skin added to that theory. Her hair was bleached blonde, her skinny, muscular arms were exposed in a Harley Davidson tank, and she was wearing jeans that looked like they were painted on. She was pretty, in a harsh type of way.

I fumbled to think of a drink that would make a woman like this respect me.

“Whiskey. Neat.” The words out of my mouth had never once been uttered in the past. If I did drink—though I rarely did—it was sweet white wine, chilled to perfection. Or red wine with my mother.

The bartender's kohl-rimmed eyes regarded me for a second, taking measure with an expert gaze I guess she'd honed being a bartender. I felt

uncomfortable under it. Like I was being weighed for sturdiness and coming up lacking.

Then again, my resilience had already been established; I was here at a bar in my hometown with nothing to show for my years away. A cliché.

I thought she was going to refuse to serve me on account of being a failure. But of course not. She was a bartender. Failures were her bread and butter. Therefore, she just nodded. “Preference?”

My mouth went dry. I couldn’t think of a name of a whiskey if my life depended on it. “Dealer’s choice,” I said.

Again, the probing look, then another nod.

Seconds later, a glass tumbler was set in front of me with amber colored liquid in it. I regarded it for a split second then grabbed the glass and took a meager sip.

I had to school my expression, and it took everything in me not to cough and splutter like a teenager trying cheap booze for the first time.

I’d never been a teenager trying cheap booze for the first time. Our house always had expensive wine, and we’d been offered it since we were fifteen. My mother was ‘European’ that way.

My father didn’t drink hard liquor. Maybe a sip of wine here and there. But he didn’t like alcohol, and I’d followed his lead, as I always did, wanting to earn his respect even though he’d never made me feel like it was something I had to earn.

Even though my father rarely drank, had the odd cigar on special occasions, hiked out in the woods and ate heartily but healthy, he’d died of a heart attack at sixty.

On that thought, I downed the rest of the glass, wincing at the burn but embracing the softening of my thoughts that came afterward.

It was after I downed the drink that my gaze wandered down the bar. I was now feeling brave enough to see who else was at the local watering hole, to see if I could glimpse a familiar face.

I didn't have anyone that I was hoping to see, not a single kindred spirit with whom I had hung out with in social Siberia. When you're from a small town, a small high school and labeled persona non grata, even the 'nerds' didn't want you in their crew.

But whatever. I survived, didn't I?

Just.

My heart stuttered as my wandering gaze found another one, one that looked like it had been zeroed in on me for a long time. That made my spine prickle. And not entirely in a bad way.

Brody Adams.

He was here.

Sitting at the bar. Thankfully, the other end of it, and it was a long bar, but still, in relatively close proximity.

He wasn't in uniform. Obviously.

A leather jacket hung on the back of his stool, and he was wearing a long-sleeved Henley. It molded over his broad shoulders, clung tight to his muscular arms. Jeans not entirely visible from my perch, but I bet the asshole looked great in them too.

It was then I realized that I'd been staring at him for a long time, and he was still staring at me. There was a knit to his brow, like he was trying to figure me out. Remember me.

Oh yeah, because he forgot who I was.

My grip tightened on my glass, and my eyes narrowed, flickering to the man beside him.

He was fatter, older and generally worse for the wear, but I recognized him too. Sam Norton. Another one of my tormentors. He had been particularly cruel.

And he was leering at me in a way that made me want a shower.

My furious gaze found Brody's.

His choice of drinking buddy told me what I already knew: people didn't

change. Brody Adams was still an asshole.

And unlike his buddy, he hadn't received karmic justice in the form of a bald spot and a beer gut.

He deserved to pay for his sins. If karma wouldn't do it, then I'd just have to figure out a way.

## *Chapter Four*



## WILLOW

IT WASN'T my best idea. Not even close. In fact, it was my worst idea. But I had a thirst for vengeance. That and I'd drunk quite a lot of whiskey. It turned out whiskey made me mad. And confident.

Revenge was a dish best served cold, and it was winter in Colorado; it was always cold.

Plus, I was drunk.

I made a snap decision when I saw Brody get up and head toward the restroom. My heart had thundered for a moment when he got up, his eyes on me. I had the wild thought he was going to walk up to me. There was a certain kind of intensity in his eyes that made my stomach pitch.

But no, he was Brody Adams, I was Weird Willow Watson. He wasn't going to come talk to me in front of all these people, especially with his old buddy perched beside him.

Hence my plan.

I got up and followed him.

The bar was busy, and usually, that meant that the restroom lines would be out the door—the women's, not the men's, of course, because men had it easier in almost every way, down to not having to wait in line to pee—but for whatever reason, at that specific point in the night, I was the only one in the narrow hall that led toward the separate bathrooms.

I waited for Brody to come back, not meeting the eye of the couple of

men who walked past me back into the bar.

I almost backed out. It was a stupid plan. But I felt I had to do something, have some agency over my past, have a victory somewhere.

Before I could lose my nerve, Brody rounded the corner. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me leaning against the wall. I pushed off, swaying my hips as I walked toward him.

“Willow,” he drawled my name, his voice deep and throaty. No friendly small-town cop to be seen. No, this was a different man.

“Oh, you remember me *now*.” I tried to sound teasing and flirty, but it came across as irritated.

His expression fell with what looked like genuine regret. “About that, I need to—”

“You don’t need to do anything,” I interrupted. “The past is the past.” I stepped in front of him. “I want to talk about *now*. About the fact that you’ve been staring at me all night.”

I surprised even myself. Avery, my best friend back in L.A., would be snapping her fingers in her version of applause, seeing me put myself out there like that.

She’d always pushed me to be more sexual, more confident. And here I was. All it took was three whiskeys and eighteen years of pent-up anger.

“You want me,” I continued, trying to turn my voice into a sultry purr. I didn’t know if I succeeded but I soldiered on. “I may not be super well-versed in the dating world, especially with men like you, but I know that all men look at women a certain way when they want them.” I was brave enough to step a little closer. “And we can keep it a secret, we can do it right here so no one will know that you stooped low enough to get into bed with me. Or in the restroom,” I amended, nodding my head to the doors.

Brody’s face was all hot guy melty when I spoke—giving me hope that the sultry thing was working—until I said the last part. Then his mouth thinned, his posture stiffened and he looked all around pissed off.

Through my drunken haze, alarm bells started ringing. Maybe I had read it wrong. His glowering gaze told me I'd read it wrong. Who did I think I was? I was still the weirdo he punished for giving him empathy, even if my acne was gone and I had discovered a hair product that worked for me.

He was not the same guy; he was more dangerous, had an air about him that read 'don't fuck with me' ... and here I was, fucking with him.

Before I knew it, he had advanced, and I had retreated. My back hit the wall. Not hard, but the cold, hard surface was jarring. I didn't have a moment to get myself out of the situation because Brody was there, right there, palm flat on the wall beside my head, body so close to mine I could feel its warmth. His head bent down so our lips were inches apart. His eyes were still glittering with that dangerous fury.

My heart pounded in my chest—I was suddenly and painfully sober. Who did I think I was? I was not equipped to handle situations like this, *men* like this. I should've let the past lie.

“What was your plan?” he asked, breath hot on my face.

Though my body trembled with fear and ... something else, I kept my eyes on his. I couldn't rip my gaze away if I tried. “W-what?”

“Your plan,” he repeated, leaning in even closer. “The last time I saw you, you made it very fuckin' clear what you thought of me. You strike me as a woman who knows her own mind and doesn't change it on a dime. I wronged you in the past. Pretty badly for it to still have your eyes burning with anger toward me eighteen years later.” He reached out to toy with a piece of my hair.

My lips trembled. Yeah, this had gotten way out of hand, and he saw through my ruse immediately.

Surely, someone would come and interrupt us. There was no way a bar full of drunk people had this much bladder control.

Yet here we were. Alone, the throaty voice of the country singer nothing but a mumble in the background.

“If you coming onto me is my punishment, then I’m more than willing to do the time,” he murmured. “Except I’m thinking that’s not what you had in mind.”

I bit my lip. Again, I didn’t consider myself an evil genius, but I also didn’t think my plan would be that clear. That made me angry.

I jutted my chin upward, refusing to let him intimidate me with his size, with his authority, with his sexual energy.

“Maybe I just want you,” I replied. “Maybe I want to have some angry, hate sex.”

It was when the words came out of my mouth that I realized that I kind of *did* want to have some angry, hate sex. My pussy thrummed with the thought of it. Whether it be the booze, my dire situation or temporary insanity, I leaned forward so our lips almost brushed.

“Maybe I just want you to take me to a bathroom stall, turn me around, lift up my dress and fuck me hard.” My finger looped around one of his belt loops to pull him close to me. Close enough to feel his hard cock through his jeans.

My pussy pulsed again. I forgot about my revenge, my juvenile plans to seduce him, steal his clothes and make him walk through a crowded bar naked. It was a stupid plan.

Getting him to fuck me, on the other hand, felt like a brilliant idea.

I could get him back by getting my orgasm and then refusing to let him finish. Yes, *great* plan.

My hesitance from before about whether he wanted me was long gone. His cock was hard, his eyes were alight with desire. I could practically smell the masculine energy radiating from him.

“Oh, I would love nothing more than to take you into that restroom and fuck you so hard you forget any sins I’ve committed against you in the past, to worship you,” he rasped, voice deep and wild.

My body tingled with the visual.

Brody's lips lingered against mine, and I smelled the beer he'd been drinking, the woody aroma of his cologne and then a smell that belonged only to him.

"But..." he murmured, just as I was about to close my eyes and let him kiss me. "You're drunk." He leaned back so our lips were no longer brushing then tucked hair behind my ear. "You're drunk, and you still don't like me very much. As much as I want you, me taking you to that bathroom and fucking you would be cementing your opinion of me as an asshole."

My breathing stuttered as his words penetrated.

"I'm not a bad guy, Willow," he growled, keeping me pinned against the wall. "I'm not gonna take advantage of you here and now. Not a bad enough man to do that. But I will fuck you dirty like the bad girl you are when you're in my bed where you can scream as loud as you want, and a bar full of assholes isn't going to hear you."

I blinked slowly. My body was still reeling with his presence, with the way I'd spoken to him and the way he'd spoken to me. My sexual life before this could easily be described as vanilla. There was no way I'd been in this position with a long-term boyfriend, let alone an old bully.

An old bully who was trying to masquerade as a reasonable man.

Finding my senses, I lifted my hand, placed it on his chest then shoved. Hard.

Now, I was tall, but I wasn't strong. Brody was a large man and all muscle. If he didn't want to move, he could've resisted my shove. Easily. But he didn't. He let me push him back, push him away from me.

"Fuck you, Brody Adams," I spat, unable to come up with anything more original.

And then I turned on my heel and stormed off, fighting tears of anger and shame.

I'd broken many promises to myself lately, but I'd never broken a promise to eighteen-year-old me until right then.

## EIGHTEEN YEARS EARLIER

Although I was called a nerd on a regular basis— apparently, they couldn't come up with a more original insult for a girl with glasses who wasn't a complete idiot and took schoolwork seriously—I didn't make a habit of staying late after school for any kind of extracurricular activities. I wasn't an extracurricular kind of girl. Even though they looked great on college transcripts.

My grades were good enough to get me into a decent college. I didn't have unrealistic expectations about the Ivy League which, in my opinion, was overpriced and useless for the future I wanted anyway. I didn't really believe in college, but Dad wanted me to go, and it was the fastest way out of New Hope.

Hence me doing the one extracurricular that didn't require me doing any kind of socializing: chess club. It was just me and the Columbian exchange student, Rico, and he joined by accident. Which meant that chess club no longer existed.

I was not unhappy about that fact. I told myself I had tried to make it work, but it wasn't meant to be. I was applying to every college I could, casting my net wide. As long as I got out of that place, it didn't matter where I went.

I was taking a detour through the football field in order to get to where I'd arranged for my mother to pick me up. Although everyone had left school at that point, I didn't want to risk someone seeing her pick me up in her loud, obnoxious car and have her do something that would give people more ammo to tease me with. They had plenty of ammo as it was.

"You're an embarrassment!" The loud and angry voice carried across the field. I had been underneath the bleachers, out of sight of the owner of the voice.

It sounded vaguely familiar. Though I wasn't nosy, I found myself moving closer while still staying out of sight.

That was when I saw Dr. Adams and Brody. Brody looked nothing like the cocky a-hole who sauntered through the halls of New Hope High, arm slung around a cheerleader, smirk on his face like he owned the world.

No, he was sitting on the bleachers, curled over, his head between his knees.

“Look at me when I'm talking to you!” Dr. Adams demanded.

I was surprised. More than surprised. Dr Adams was my doctor. He was pretty much everyone's doctor. It was a small town, and he was well respected. He was kind, easy to smile and didn't make you feel small, stupid or embarrassed. Though my mother had really tried to test that theory at the last appointment we had... We'd gone, planning on talking about me going on the pill for my acne and heavy periods, and she ended up asking how it would interfere with my sexual desires.

My mother was against most modern medicine and violently against me 'messing up my hormones' with the pill. I was violently against being almost eighteen-years-old and still covered in pimples. It had taken me that long just to convince my mother to even let me go to the appointment; she'd spent years telling me I'd grow out of it, that it was natural, that I was still attractive.

She was wrong on all counts.

And I'd been eternally grateful to Dr. Adams for finding a way around all my mother's questions and concerns in order to prescribe me something that he assured me would help.

I'd never seen his handsome face so red, so angry, especially not toward his son. Not that I'd been around them a whole lot. I didn't attend football games for obvious reasons. But unfortunately, I lived in a small town and had the occasion to see them together from time to time, out for dinner with my parents, at the coffee shop with my mother.

Dr. Adams was always smiling, warm toward the son I didn't believe deserved such a nice father, and I'd always thought such a kind man raising such a butthead was a firm plus in the 'nature' column of the nature versus nurture debate.

Brody's head snapped up at his father's words.

"You're lazy," Dr. Adams spat. "You spend too much time out there on the field, thinking your shit doesn't stink, thinking you're someone. But you're not. Your grades are falling, and you're nowhere near as good as you think you are on this football field. At this rate, you'll end up some insurance salesman with a bald spot, a fat ex-cheerleader for a wife, and a disappointment to me and your mother's memory."

I blinked, unable to fathom the venom this man was spitting toward his own son. I forgot for a moment that I'd wished this kind of treatment and more against Brody Adams. Not that he was really the main instigator of the shit the football team called me—his buddy Sam Norton was—but he laughed just like the rest of them. He embodied everything that was wrong with this place. Maybe it burned a little more to have him join in on the taunts because I'd always had a little bit of a crush on Brody. That was until he and his buddies coined the term 'Weirdo Watson.'

"Dad—"

*Slap.*

The sound seemed to echo through the football field. I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle my gasp at Dr. Adams slapping his son with an open palm.

"Don't talk back to me," he hissed, grabbing Brody by the collar of his shirt then tugging him upward. "Don't come home tonight until you've run twenty more laps. I can't stand the sight of you." He let go of his son who slumped back down onto the bleacher.

"Yes, sir," Brody said, eyes downward.

Dr. Adams gave him one last look of distaste before walking away,



luckily in the opposite direction of my hiding spot.

I didn't know what possessed me to do what I did next. Temporary insanity? A rogue wave of empathy I got from my mother? My father's voice in my head, telling me to do the right thing, maybe.

But instead of walking away and forgetting I saw anything, I walked toward Brody, still slumped over his knees. Wordlessly, I sat beside him.

He jerked up, obviously not noticing me walk up.

He rubbed his red eyes quickly, trying to wipe away tears.

I looked toward the football field so he didn't have to feel like I was watching him. "Your dad's a dick," I said after a few beats.

His head turned in my direction, but I still didn't look at him. I was holding my breath, waiting for him to tell 'Weirdo Watson' to fuck off, get away from him, put me back at my spot at the bottom of the high school totem pole.

"Yeah, he is," he agreed instead.

I turned to look at him. He had a sheepish, embarrassed and sad look on his face.

"He's wrong, you know," I told him, meeting his eyes. "About your mother being disappointed in you. I didn't know her, but my mom did. And my mom speaks really highly of her. The kind of person I reckon she was is the kind of person who would only ever be proud of her son, and the only disappointment she'd feel is that she left you to deal with him alone."

I nodded in the direction his father had gone. And then, without thinking, I reached out to squeeze his hand.

Brody jerked at the contact, and I immediately regretted it, trying to pull my hand away. But he tightened his hand around mine before I could.

He looked at me with soft eyes, with none of that boyish arrogance I'd seen in the halls. He looked much younger. Much more fragile. The corner of his lip turned up in a sad smile, then he opened his mouth to say something.

"What is going on here, huh?"

I jumped at the voice, and Brody yanked back his hand as Sam Norton and a few more boys from the football team sauntered over.

“Weirdo Watson bothering you, bro?” Sam sneered.

Brody chuckled. “No, she’s just trying her luck.” He stood, putting his back to me. “Can’t blame a girl for trying. Even though she’s way out of her league.”

My face flamed as the rest of the boys laughed too.

“In what fuckin’ world would Brody want anywhere near *you*?” Sam taunted, eyes burning with cruelty.

I stood, gathering my bag but fumbling in my haste, letting my books fall. Brody glanced behind him but didn’t move to help me, to show me any kindness.

“Let’s go,” he said to Sam. “We’ll leave her to her books.”

“Yeah, and leave Adams alone, Weirdo,” Sam snarled.

“Leave Adams alone,” a few of the boys chanted.

I heard them giving him shit as they all walked away. Brody didn’t look back at me. Not once.

That was not the end of that, though. By the next day, word had gotten around about me ‘coming onto’ Brody. I became the laughingstock of the school. It was unyielding, the teasing, the taunting ... right up until graduation when I got the fuck out of Dodge.

I promised myself I’d never put myself in a position to be hurt by Brody Adams again.

## *Chapter Five*

WILLOW

IT PRETTY MUCH CEMENTED MY failure, standing behind the counter of my mother's store, serving customer after customer. In high school, I'd worked here too, another thing to tease me about, people calling me 'Hermione' and not as the compliment in which I chose to take it. Hermione carried those boys, if you asked me.

I'd hated working there then, and I hated it now.

Now, it wasn't the work... It was what it signified. How far I'd fallen.

My mother, on the other hand, hadn't fallen at all. No, her once modest little store had reached new heights, not just with the increased tourist foot traffic but with the new wave of spiritualism being trendy instead of fringe like it had been when I was in school. Women my age with expensive purses and polished outfits were buying crystals, men with low buns and knit cardigans were getting sage, teenagers were buying books on the occult.

My mom had even expanded to the store next door, the store light and airy, smelling of pine and cinnamon.

In short, Mom was kicking ass.

I was immensely proud of her. And again, immensely ashamed of myself for being so ashamed of her in the first place.

Swimming in self-hatred and regret, I pasted on a smile for customers and mentally calculated how many days it would take me to earn enough to get out of here.

Even though my mother was paying me way too much, it would still take way too long.

The wind chimes over the door didn't make my head lift—I'd long since tuned them out with all of the comings and goings. Plus, I was trying to agree with the woman in front of me that the crystal she was buying would suck up all the negativity left over from her narcissistic ex, when I knew that the stone was the result of hydrothermal activity, nothing more, nothing less.

And who was I to try to bring someone down? If this woman truly believed this piece of rock would improve her life and was willing to pay twenty bucks for it, I wasn't going to step in the way.

Maybe I should've got some for myself while I was at it. Couldn't hurt.

So it wasn't until after I had bagged up the crystal, wished the woman a pleasant day and rounded the counter to adjust the crystal display that I saw who had come into the store, holding a Kama Sutra Tarot card deck in his hand.

Brody Adams.

Looking as good as he had last Friday night.

Better, even.

His uniform again seemed to be tailored for him, and his muscles, his presence towering and masculine in the store that definitely catered to the divine feminine. His dark hair was longer on top, slightly messier than it was before—it was windy outside. His jaw was still covered with the almost-beard stubble, and the scar over his eye seemed more prominent against his tanned skin in the light of the store.

I stopped in my tracks as his hazel gaze went over me. I couldn't control the shiver I felt under his stare, remembering the words at the bar, the husky promise in them.

My back went straight. I pushed those memories away. I instead held onto old memories, much more visceral and formative.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, folding my arms, secretly happy

I'd worn the red cashmere sweater that did great things for my complexion and had bothered to put on makeup.

Brody held up the Tarot deck. "Shopping."

"We're closed," I told him sharply, refusing to react to the sexual deck he was holding.

"It's the middle of the day," he observed. "And they don't seem to think you're closed." He nodded to the couple of teenagers in the book section.

"Let me clarify." I stepped forward to snatch the deck from his hand. "We're closed for *you*."

I'd gotten close enough to smell him. He smelled of cedar and snow and something that screamed that he chopped wood in the wilderness.

Brody's gaze tightened. "Look, I came in here because I wanted to apologize. Again. For the past. For not remembering you. For hanging out with assholes like Sam Norton."

To his credit, he looked and sounded sincere. He very well might've been. Or he might not have been. Men were great liars. I'd learned that the only way women could, the hard way.

"Okay, your conscience is appeased, now ... go." I shooed him away with my hands.

Brody stayed in place, not moving his eyes off me.

He didn't go. Nor did he speak for a long time. At least a minute. Which was a long time to stare at someone without speaking. His gaze was electrifying and unyielding, and I refused to break it, even though I really wanted to.

"Can you at least remind me of what it is I did to you?" There was a plea in his voice. A healthy dose of shame. Regret.

But that wasn't enough to save him.

I blinked in shock. Holy *crap*. He still didn't remember. That one interaction cemented my hatred for New Hope, took years of therapy to heal from and still haunted my dreams, yet it wasn't even worth *remembering* to

him.

I saw red. “Remind you?” I repeated. “How nice that you have the luxury of forgetting interactions with girls who should’ve known better than to show Brody Adams kindness.”

He looked genuinely remorseful. In fact, he looked a little like that boy whose hand I’d grasped all those years ago. “It’s not personal,” he muttered finally. “My life back then wasn’t at all how it looked. You said you never wanted to come back here. Well, neither did I. But after I went through basic training, was deployed, saw shit and did shit that I don’t care to remember, I figured that a small town in the mountains was a place I could find peace. And in order for me to find that peace, I had to forget a lot of the shit I had to wade out of when I was an asshole teenager.”

I was momentarily stunned. I hadn’t expected him to be so frank, so vulnerable, especially not in front of a collection of very phallic fertility statues. I expected arrogance. Was prepared for that.

But I rallied. “I’m glad you’ve found your peace,” I replied, not knowing if I was being sarcastic or not. “But I haven’t. Not with you standing in front of me. Not with you near me. So if you’ll kindly leave me alone and let me figure out my dumpster fire of a life in peace, I’d sure appreciate it.”

He regarded me with regret but also with a tinge of that fiery hunger from Friday night. I did my best to resist it. I had always gone for the manicured men in L.A. The softer ones who didn’t have callused hands, had never held an axe in their lives and contracted out any and all work around the house. I didn’t think I was into the rugged mountain man.

Especially one in uniform.

Especially one I hated.

But it turned out I was.

Not that I’d be a slave to my baser instincts.

“You can’t hate me forever,” he said finally.

I scrutinized him, surprised at his words and glad he’d spoken them,

reminding me he was the same entitled asshole he'd always been. "I can do whatever the fuck I want. That's my prerogative as a grown-ass woman with agency and rights, so I'll go on hating you until, I don't know, the end of time."

His nostrils flared, and I noted his fists clenched at his sides. "I said I was sorry."

I threw my hands up. "Oh, he said he was sorry." I looked upward as if I were speaking to the sky. "Well, that changes everything." My narrowed eyes went back to him. "Let's braid each other's hair now and talk about our hopes and dreams."

"Jesus, Will, I—"

"Don't call me Will," I snapped. "Only my old friends call me that, and if you're anything, you're an old enemy. I expect my enemies to address me by my full name, or *Ms. Watson* if you'd prefer. Which I personally would."

He scrubbed his hand across his jaw in frustration. The gesture was not hot. Not at all.

"I don't want to be fucking enemies, *Ms. Watson*," he seethed, stepping forward, right into my personal bubble.

I did not step back. Though I most definitely should've. I didn't like people in my personal bubble. I was not an affectionate person. Which had upset my small number of romantic partners to no end.

I didn't like people standing too close to me in line at the grocery store, airport security, anywhere. Yet there I was, letting Brody Adams get up in my space.

I held my breath as his scent became stronger. More intoxicating. Up closer he towered over me, made me feel small, petite, protected ... dominated.

I didn't like any of those things. I liked being tall, not needing protection, and I certainly didn't consider myself submissive. Yet I was almost sweating with wet panties.



I swallowed, looking down at his boots.

His hand came to my chin, forcing it upward.

I supposed I could've squeezed my eyes shut, but that seemed overly juvenile, and I wanted to prove to myself, and him, that I could maintain eye contact without having a reaction.

My body didn't help me with this as my cheeks flushed, and my thighs clenched as our eyes met.

"I don't want to be enemies, *Ms. Watson*," he repeated. "I want to take you out to dinner. Then I'll be taking you home."

His voice, smooth and warm, hit me square in the vagina again. In a good way. In a very good way.

Until the words filtered past my animal brain to the more logical centers. My body stiffened. "How nice of you to come in to tell me what *you* want," I retorted, voice saccharine sweet. "I would rather have my Pap smear done by Edward Scissorhands." I didn't break eye contact. "Now remove your hand from me before I file a sexual harassment suit against you and get you thrown out of office."

I was fairly certain I wouldn't be able to make good on my threat, but I liked the way it sounded.

And it worked. After one very long second. Good thing too since my resolve started to waver.

It was because I hadn't had sex in a long time. Hadn't had good sex in an even longer time. I was in the presence of a male, a conventionally attractive one who had a sexual presence. It was a reflexive reaction. That was it.

Brody thankfully stepped back. With effort, I held myself upright, hoping my gaze was icy.

"I'm not giving up," he replied, jaw hard.

"Well, then, I'll be seeing you at the station when I file my restraining order," I shrugged.

"I look forward to seeing you." His eyes trailed purposefully up and down

my body, leaving fire in their wake before he turned and walked out the door.

I couldn't help but watch him walk away. He may have been an asshole, but he had a great ass. And I must've been in some kind of trance because I almost shrieked when my mother appeared at my side.

"Cacao," she offered, holding a steaming mug. I'd long gotten used to my mother serving me cacao rather than hot cocoa like the rest of the moms during the holiday season. I'd actually acquired a taste for it and always had it this time of year.

I took the mug she offered, sipping to center myself. "Thanks."

"You and the sheriff seemed to be having a ... *heated* conversation," my mother commented over the rim of her mug. It was in the shape of two large female breasts, complete with areolas decorated in detail.

I sipped from my own mug, a regular one. As regular as you could get in my mom's store, at least. I didn't answer her which, of course, only made my mother more interested.

"You have a history," she deduced.

"You could say that," I murmured.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh my goddess, this is perfect. A second chance romance. The timing wasn't right, so now you're back—"

"I'm not back," I interrupted her. I immediately felt guilty for my harsh tone when the light dimmed in my mother's eyes. "And it's not a second chance romance," I added, my tone less biting this time though firm. "There was never a romance between us. Do you remember what I looked like in high school?"

Mom reached out to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. I let her, despite the gesture making me feel ten years old.

"I remember you were unique and radiant."

"The oil on my face from my acne did not make me radiant," I rolled my eyes. "And despite your sunny outlook on life, even *you* have to admit I wasn't the girl the captain of the football team," I nodded to where Brody had

left, “was going to give the time of day. Unless it was to taunt me.”

My mother’s perpetually sunny gaze turned stormy. “*Taunt* you? What are you talking about?”

For obvious reasons, my parents had not known about my bullying in high school. My brother was old enough to where he’d already graduated before it got to its peak. My father might have been a mild-mannered man, and my mother might’ve been a peace-loving hippie, but they loved me fiercely. There was no way either of them would’ve stood aside and let me be bullied. They would’ve stepped in, likely making things worse.

So they never knew.

“It’s nothing.” I waved my hand. “Forget I said anything.”

“Willow Artemis Watson. I have never and will never forget a single word you say,” she huffed. “You were ... *taunted* in high school?” She sounded stricken.

I sighed, hating the look on her face and wanting to protect her from the past. “No, Mom. I just wasn’t exactly the prom queen and didn’t look like the shiny, pretty cheerleaders. I had a rather ... eccentric background. It was like shooting fish in a barrel for people like Brody.”

Mom clicked her tongue, her fiery gaze aimed toward the front door of the store. “I’ve got half a mind to march down to the Sheriff’s Office and give him a talking to.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Mom, you cannot tell the sheriff off for something he did eighteen years ago.”

“I can, and I will if it’s something done to my daughter.”

She was dead serious.

“Mom,” I sighed again. “With everything that’s happened, the last thing I want is more attention on me. I left L.A. because of it all. I want to exist here without notoriety, without making any waves. I just need to ... be. Can we drop it?”

The tilt to my mother’s head made me worried that she would not respect

my wishes—for the first time in recorded memory. But after a bit more of her angry staring, she focused on me, smiling sadly. “Yes, baby, of course.” She cupped my cheek. Again, I let her. “You need to heal. And we’ll forget about Brody Adams. He’s barred from the store and no longer gets my Christmas cookie delivery.”

I didn’t bother to argue with her on that one. Plus, my mother’s Christmas cookie delivery was famous in town. You had to practically murder puppies in the street to get off the list.

“Trust me, Mom, I’m going to forget about Brody Adams.”

My chin burned from where he touched me for the rest of the day.

I didn’t let myself think about that.

But I dreamed of Brody Adams.

## BRODY

It was three in the morning.

I'd woken up with a jerk ten minutes ago.

It wasn't a nightmare on a battlefield, carrying the weight of my dead buddy that woke me this time.

No. It was a memory of sitting on the bleachers, the warm and dry grip, the comfort I'd needed on a day that I'd scrubbed from my memories.

I didn't believe in repressed memories. I thought that was shit therapists spouted in order to justify ten extra sessions at two hundred bucks an hour. But there was no other explanation as to how I didn't remember that interaction with Willow until now. I mean, I remembered the interaction itself, how a shy girl showed me kindness I didn't deserve. But I didn't remember it being Willow, and I sure as shit didn't remember the crap we pulled on her after it.

Shame coated me like oil.

My father hitting me. Speaking to me like that was not out of the norm. It only stopped when I got back, when he realized I wasn't scared of him anymore and I was someone to be feared.

Not that I interacted with the man. I steered clear of him. Fuck what the town thought. My father, now retired, still held a stellar reputation, and it was the one black mark against me that I didn't seem to want to take care of him in his old age.

He didn't deserve it. But I would. When it was time, I'd make sure he was put in a place with great care, where he was comfortable.

*"Never let someone drag you out of your character."*

One of the many lines from a letter my mother wrote to me while she was pregnant. Like she knew that she wouldn't be able to give me advice like that in person. That letter was all I had of her, beyond the photographs around the

house where she was smiling, beaming, and the anecdotes everyone in town had about her. A good woman. One, for whatever reason, married to a piece of shit. Maybe my father wasn't a piece of shit when she was alive. But I figured that a person doesn't just turn rotten, not a good one, certainly not when faced with their only child growing up without their mother.

Yeah, it was my opinion that my father had always been rotten. He just hid it from my mother, or my mother chose to see the best in him.

I'd always strived to make sure I was never like him. I'd gone through brutal training, had let Uncle Sam strip away all that I was to create something new, someone new. Someone better. Harder.

Then I'd come back here with more memories to repress and the goal of a quiet life. Maybe a family. Though not likely. I was still haunted by the things I'd seen, things I'd done. Still worried that my father's character lurked within me like a latent disease, ready to flare up at any moment.

Willow was the embodiment of my fears. The hurt on her face, the hurt that she'd carried for years was on me. And I wanted to fix it. But I also wanted to fuck her.

Badly.

Her anger, the way it made her eyes glow, the way it made her cheeks flush, the huskiness to her voice, it all got me rock hard.

Not to mention her sitting at the bar drinking whiskey, trying to hide her wince as she downed it, oblivious to me staring at her for a good half hour until her emerald eyes went wide as they met mine and her full lips flattened into a grimace.

I had not expected her to follow me to the restroom. But I'd known her attempt to seduce me had nefarious intentions. Not that it wasn't hot as fuck. But she was drunk. And angry. But she'd still wanted me. I'd seen that plain on her face, watched her battle with anger and need. I'd had to fight my baser nature not to take her to the restroom and fuck her just like she'd requested.

It was a good thing I didn't, now that I truly remembered why she hated

me. That would've ensured I'd only get to fuck her once.  
And I didn't want to fuck Willow once.  
Something told me I'd never get my fill of her.

# *Chapter Six*



WILLOW

I HADN'T SEEN my brother since I arrived home. My mother continued to craft excuses about his work schedule, about being busy with his three-month-old then barraging me with countless pictures of the new baby. Not that I minded. I did love seeing my adorable niece, even if it hurt my soul to not know her.

I didn't come home for the death of my father or the birth of my first niece. It was understandable that my brother didn't want to see my face. What wasn't understandable was that my mother didn't seem to be mad at me at all. She had every right. Not that that was my mom's style. I hadn't seen her angry, not once. Not at me, not at my father, not at my brother. And as much as I held him on a pedestal, I knew the man was not perfect, and there were plenty of opportunities for my mom to get mad at him for long hunting trips, for the smell of his cigars, for leaving socks around, for doing the various things men—even great men like my father—did in marriage.

So no, my mother was not mad at me.

But my brother was.

*“You're a piece of work, and Dad would be ashamed of you. I'm ashamed to call you my sister.”*

Those were the last words he'd spoken to me before he hung up on the phone call we had last Christmas, the first one without Dad. I deserved his anger. And more.

My stomach had been in knots all morning as I helped my mother prepare Thanksgiving food. There was a lot to do since she also made meals for a handful of retirees who lived around the mountains, dropping them off before we all sat down to eat. Well, that's what usually happened. There was a storm forecast, a particularly nasty one for this time of year, and it looked like our annual food delivery wouldn't be happening. Still, we made the food. The pumpkin pie, sweet potato casserole, the turkey and the Tofurky my mother pretended she ate and no one called her out on.

Even with the busy hands, my mother's spiced apple cider and Perry Como playing on the record player, I couldn't escape my nerves. Who was I kidding? It was *because* of that combination that I couldn't escape my nerves. All of them were Thanksgiving traditions, held on throughout all the years even though I hadn't been home for the holiday.

What wasn't there was the scent of my father's cigars. His booming voice, singing along to the songs and him dancing around the kitchen with my mother.

His presence was everywhere in my memories of the holidays, which meant his absence was everywhere.

My entire body stiffened as the sound of a car crunched over the record playing, signifying my brother's arrival.

"They're here!" my mother announced unnecessarily, clapping her hands and letting the ladle clatter against the pan as she dropped it in order to run to the door.

You would've thought she hadn't seen her son or grandchild in years. When in reality, she went over there every morning to give Harry's wife a break, time to go to Pilates, to do whatever she needed to do that didn't require being a wife and mother.

Mom had offered for me to come over with her every day. I'd been too much of a coward, although I'd been dying to meet my niece.

Today was the day.

“Oh my god, she’s more darling than she was yesterday!” my mother gushed from the front door.

I placed the ladle on the holder, wiping my hands on my apron before taking a long sip of my cider. It hit my stomach then almost came back up.

Almost.

I heard them rustle at the door, taking off their coats and boots, Mom fussing over the baby.

When I walked into the living room, Mom was holding what could objectively be called the cutest infant to exist. I immediately fell in love. She regarded me with dark blue eyes and a serious gaze that had belonged to my father.

“Meet your aunty,” my mother declared, thrusting the drooling, now smiling baby at me. Though I didn’t have any experience with babies, I took her, not too sure about how to hold her.

“You don’t have to support her head, my darling,” my mother informed me. “She can do that.”

I jostled her and looked into her wide blue eyes. My father’s eyes. “Hello, little baby,” I said awkwardly.

I received a drooling smile and a coo in response.

“Sarah,” I said, greeting my sister-in-law. I didn’t know her well; I had come back for the wedding but not long enough to bond. Even if I had been around, I wasn’t really the type of person who ‘bonded’ well with others.

She smiled warmly at me.

“You make really cute babies,” I told her, an understatement.

Her eyes lit up. “Don’t I know it.” She breezed in to kiss the baby, then surprisingly, me on the cheek before going into the kitchen.

“Harry.” I turned to the man shrugging off his jacket. The man who had my father’s coffee-colored hair, his dark brows, his long nose.

It hurt to look at him. Even more so when my brother did not have a warm smile for me like his wife. He had something very close to a scowl on

his face as he took me in. Then his mouth opened, and I got the feeling he was going to say something to match that scowl. But his eyes stuttered on the baby in my arms, veering toward my mom who was somehow oblivious to the disdain on my brother's face and was smiling with tears of joy shimmering in her eyes. Both her children together, for the first time since her husband died.

Harry pressed his mouth shut as if he were being persuaded by the better angels of his conscience, then nodded once at me. "Willow," he replied, voice stiff.

There was a long and awkward pause in conversation, Stevie Nicks singing about being on the edge of seventeen in the background.

But with my mother around, there was never awkwardness or stilted conversation for long.

"My children are home, my grandchild is perfection, the wine is breathing, and the food is cooking. What more could I wish for?"

Both my brother and I looked at each other, speaking a silent truce, if only for our mother's sake.

It was Thanksgiving, after all.

Family drama could wait until at least dessert.



It turned out the drama would not wait until dessert. It simmered hotter than mom's cider, bubbling through conversation that my mother never let pause. Through appetizers I knew were delicious but somehow tasted like ash.

There was no denying my brother's attitude toward me, the hatred he couldn't hide. Everyone was ignoring it, his wife trying extra hard to make conversation with me. The baby was the only saving grace, since conflict could be paused when there was a little, chubby infant being passed between family, watching us all intently.

But eventually, dinner had to be served, the baby needed to nap and the adults had to sit at the table with their feast and their resentments.

“Okay, I’d like to propose a toast—” My mother held up her wine glass. Except no one else got the chance to hold up theirs.

“I’m sorry, are we really going to sit here like Willow has been at this table every year?” Harry interrupted, fury saturating his tone. “Like she’s been here for Mabel’s birth, Dad’s *death*,” he hissed.

The words were barbed, and they struck home.

“Harry, can we please not do this?” my mother pleaded. “Willow is home with us *now*, that’s all that matters.”

“No, Mom, that’s not all that matters,” Harry huffed in obvious annoyance. “I appreciate and love your ability to forgive even the most egregious of acts, but I’m not cut from the same cloth, and I’m not going to let *you* get away with what you’ve done.” He jabbed his finger at me from across the table, and I flinched.

“Harry—”

“No!” he yelled. “You don’t get to talk now. You could’ve come home and talked to me when my *daughter was born*.”

“I sent gifts,” I whispered.

“Oh, yes, let’s not forget the expensive gifts, those fixed everything.”

“Babe.” Sarah put her hand on Harry’s. “Maybe give Willow a break, she’s been through a lot.”

I was thankful to my sister-in-law for coming to my defense, especially considering we barely knew each other.

“Willow has had plenty of breaks,” Harry seethed. “We’ve all made our excuses for you, but I’m fucking done. Where were you when Dad died, huh? Living your life in L.A., having forgotten all about your family, what mattered.”

“I never forgot about you.” Emotion clogged my throat, my voice barely audible.

He laughed. The sound was cold and ugly. “You could’ve fooled me. And you could’ve fooled Dad. That man believed in you until the day he died, and I don’t know why the fuck he did.”

“Harrison,” my mother snapped, sounding the closest to mad she’d ever been. “Don’t speak to your sister that way.”

“Someone has to,” he scoffed. “Someone has to hold her accountable for her actions.”

“Oh, the golden boy coming at me because I didn’t stay here and get married and have a family,” I replied, going on the defensive even though everything he was saying was right.

“If there was a golden child, it was you,” Harry shook his head. “You were dad’s best friend. He said it openly and freely, and it never bothered me. Not until the day we buried him without you.”

My chair screeched as I pushed it back, unable to hear any more.

“You’re right!” I yelled. “I fucked up. I failed him. Failed you. Failed mom. And I’ll hate myself until the end of time for my cowardice. But guess what? I got my karma. I lost everything. Every single thing I owned, every single thing I’d accomplished. The man I thought I loved. All the people I thought were my friends, except one person. I have nothing.”

Tears were streaming down my face.

Harry’s face didn’t soften. “You don’t have nothing,” he said quietly. “You have this.” He held his hand out to the table. “You have a family. But that’s never been enough for you. You’ve never seen that.”

The words punctured my already soft skin, dropping like a bomb in the room. My mother didn’t even step in to argue with Harry on this because he was right. He was totally right. This short time at home, the encounters with Brody Adams, the memory of how his father had treated him... It all served to remind me of what I had, what I’d always had and taken for granted.

Maybe, just maybe I could repair things with my mother, but the task was infinitely harder with my brother. And my father? That chance had come and

gone, and I'd never get to tell him how much I loved him, how important he was, the part he played in creating everything I was. I'd never get to tell him sorry.

All of it was too much.

So I did what I did best... I ran.

# *Chapter Seven*



BRODY

WORKING on Thanksgiving wasn't a chore to me. In fact, it was a relief since I didn't have anywhere to go. My mother had been an only child, and everyone from her side of the family was dead. My father's side was scattered around the country, none of them close. I'd never had fond memories of the holidays. It was always a quiet dinner with my father getting more and more drunk, wailing on about how I took his wife from him.

He'd either pass out or smack me around.

Yeah, those memories weren't fond. So being at the station was preferable. We usually didn't get a whole bunch of calls. An accident every now and then. Unfortunately, some domestic violence calls too. There were plenty of families—even in the predominantly upper-middle-class town of New Hope—that had holidays similar to the ones I'd had. I'd found that violence inside the family home penetrated every class, every income threshold.

Luckily, we didn't get any of those calls today.

What we did get was a call to the Watson household. One I rushed to answer.

Though I didn't know her beyond the unfortunate memories of our high school past and the angry ones from recently, Willow had been on my mind constantly. The woman was doing something to me. I wouldn't rest until I earned her forgiveness, until she smiled at me. Until she warmed my bed.

My feelings toward her ran deeper than they should've, considering our history and her disdain for my existence. Therefore, I was worried when I pulled up to her family home. It was always interesting, always something new to look at. Her mom was known around town for being 'quirky' but also one of the kindest people you'd meet.

Fern was opening the door before I'd even made it up the front step, the place lit up for Christmas with colors sparkling against the snow.

"Come in out of the cold," she ushered me inside, shoving a steaming mug in my face. "Here, this will warm you up."

I smiled at the woman, the one who radiated a motherly energy even though she looked the furthest from a conventional mother I'd ever seen.

I took a sip of the mug, thankful, then coughed. It was delicious, tasting of apple, cinnamon and booze. A lot of it.

"As delicious as this is, I can't drink on the job, ma'am," I told her, regretful of the fact since it was damn delicious.

She put a palm to her head. "Right," she took the mug back. "They frown on that these days."

"That they do," I replied, hiding my smile. "But I'll be happy to have a mug of that when I'm off the clock."

Her friendly grin suddenly vanished. "I'll gladly do that. I promise I won't even poison it once you get my daughter home safe and issue her a world-class apology for the way you treated her in high school."

I could feel the blood drain from my face as the warmth from the cider dissipated. I'd had dealings with Fern over the years, mostly because I'd been here seeing her husband. Neither of them had shown me anything but kindness, nothing to hint at the fact that they knew anything about my history with their daughter.

I didn't think Fern was capable of sharp gazes or subtle threats. Yet here she was. The mother who loved her daughter fiercely and was obviously enlightened as to what an asshole I'd been.

“I promise you that I’ll apologize as often as she’ll let me.” I didn’t lower my gaze. “And I’ll let you know too that I’m deeply ashamed about the boy I was before and how my actions hurt your daughter.”

She gave me a long, measured, cold look that actually had me shaking in my boots a little. I’d had some tough, dangerous and downright deadly sons of bitches staring me in the face, but none unnerved me quite as much as a look from a five-foot-three woman wearing what seemed like five different shades of purple.

After several long moments where all I could hear was my heartbeat slamming, that cold and calculating gaze was gone. Her face was light and kind again. “I accept your apology,” she said. “Our actions as dumb kids only mean something about who we are if we don’t use them as lessons to create compassionate adults.”

I was struck by her sincerity and ease of forgiveness. Apparently, her daughter was not of the same temperament. Then again, Willow had every right to hold her grudge.

“Tell me what happened,” I changed the subject, my thoughts wandering to the furious bombshell as I moved farther into the room, nodding hello to Harry and his wife.

“She drove off about an hour ago,” Fern wrung her hands. “We’ve tried to call her, but it’s going straight to voicemail. Normally, I wouldn’t worry—she can take care of herself—but this isn’t like her, and she hasn’t driven roads like this in years.” Worry structured Fern’s face. It was pretty, her face. Wrinkles that she wore well, her daughter’s eyes, nose. Her long hair was streaked with gray, shiny curls bouncing down her back. Her small figure was encased in a long, violet velvet dress, and she had a shit ton of jewelry adorning her body. Crystals and symbols. A memory of kids at school snickering as she dropped off Willow, kissing her full on the lips, surfaced.

*“Weirdo,” “freak,” “witch...” A chorus of insults trailed behind a red-faced Willow as she walked past us.*

*I laughed with my friends.*

Fuck, did I even chime in with an insult of my own?

Shame burned my throat.

“This is exactly like her,” Harry argued, jerking me back into the present. “Running away.” There was anger in his tone, plenty of it. But there was worry too. He might have been mad at his sister, but he loved her. Very much.

Something pinched in my chest, standing in the warm, cluttered yet comfortable house that contained a family. A broken one, maybe. But not ruined beyond repair.

“She left in her Prius,” her mother continued.

A spark of worry ignited in my gut as I looked outside. The conditions were shitty, and they were looking to get even shittier. No way that car could handle these roads how they were.

“Willow is smart enough to know that she can’t drive these roads,” her brother stated firmly. “She would’ve pulled over somewhere, hopefully in tow, and is probably enjoying a hot meal at Shaky Bridge Diner.”

I kept my expression even, as I had throughout my career as the sheriff. But for whatever reason, it was so much harder to do so when I was consumed with concern over Willow. “Main Street’s shut down,” I told them. “The few places that were open on Thanksgiving closed because of the weather.”

I watched both of their faces fall.

It was then I did something I never did to families since I started the job.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find her and bring her home, I promise.”

“I’ll go in my truck,” Harry announced, grabbing his jacket from the back of the sofa.

I clapped my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t doubt your ability to navigate this weather, but you’ve got a job to do here.” I nodded to his wife, small child and then to his mother. “I’ve got her.”

He looked like he was going to argue. I didn't know Harry well; he was a year or two above me, and he hadn't run in my circles. He hadn't played football, was quiet but not unpopular. He'd gone to college locally, got a job at the small, local law firm, so I'd dealt with him from time to time, but he only handled petty criminal cases and only if his boss, Joseph, was out sick or had too many cases as it was.

I'd always thought of him as kind of ... soft. He didn't hunt. Didn't go to the bar, didn't do any of the things I'd thought made a man a man. But then again, I wasn't taught jack shit about what it takes to be a man.

It was here, seeing it now... him battling between his duty as a father, a brother and a son against the bullshit veneer of masculinity. That was when I realized he wasn't soft at all.

He nodded once, gaze steely, submitting to me in front of his family. Something braver than fighting me trying to protect his own fragile ego.

"Do you have any idea where she'd go?" I asked them.

Harry shook his head, gripping the back of his neck, obviously frustrated at his lack of knowledge.

I looked at Fern who was clicking her tongue. "There's not many places in this town that hold fond memories for my Willow." Her tone was tinged with regret.

I had a whole bunch of regret too, plus the overwhelming sense of shame that I'd had a hand in making sure this was a place where Willow couldn't find happiness.

"Was there anything in particular that made her leave?" I asked, doing my best to maintain my composure, remember my job.

"We were arguing," her brother ran his hand through his hair. "It's my fault."

His wife, Sarah—a couple of years below me, and someone I only vaguely remembered, was pretty and quiet. Sam had called her frigid because she wouldn't go out with him—got up from the sofa to put her arm around

him.

“This is not your fault,” she said, voice soft and gentle yet firmly bringing her point across.

He looked at his wife with adoration, nodding once before kissing her head and tucking her into his side.

I felt discomfort in my chest area and thought about my empty cabin, my empty bed and my empty fucking life. Fuck, did I want someone to look at me like that, someone who was mine.

Fuck, did I want that someone to be Willow.

The thought came into my mind of its own volition, and again, I was struck by how powerful my need for her was after a scant few reactions. But I'd felt something for her that day on the bleachers, her soft gaze, her joking tone, her comforting grip. Yeah, even then I'd felt a magnetic pull to her I couldn't describe.

And I'd let my fucking ego smother that thought so I could keep my spot in the high school hierarchy, thinking that meant I was worth something.

“It's not your fault,” I reassured Harry. If anything, the fault was mine. Wasn't I part of the reason that she hated this place so goddamn much?

“I won't come back without her safe and sound,” I declared, making to leave.

I wouldn't come back without her.

And I wouldn't let her leave New Hope without making her mine.

## WILLOW

If you were going to drive off into a snowstorm after a fight with your family on Thanksgiving, it was best to do it in a vehicle suited for the conditions.

That thought punctured through my emotions when the wheels slid against the icy road the first time.

I gritted my teeth as I kept the wheel steady, careful not to overcorrect. Just like my father taught me.

My tears increased as I thought of driving lessons in the snow, my teenage panic, my father's measured calm even as I'd come close to crashing a bunch of times. And then the time I did crash, right into our fence. There were no raised voices, no annoyance, no shame. There was a reassuring hand on my shoulder, a gentle squeeze.

*"Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we crash," my father said. "If we're lucky enough, all it serves to do is teach us a lesson that ensures we know how to avoid it in the future. It's not failure nor weakness, it's part of the lesson."*

I gritted my teeth as I heard my father's voice in my ear, driving on. Though if he were alive right now, my father would gently tell me to pull over to the side of the road, get myself together, then calmly and carefully drive home to talk it out with my family.

Except he wasn't there to play the mediator, to bring us all together. In his place was an empty, yawning chasm that caused black spots to dance in my vision and me to press on the accelerator harder than I should've. The car fishtailed once again but I corrected, determined.

*"You can do anything you put your mind to, Tittlemouse," he said. "You are capable."*

Unfortunately, my father's words did not serve driving a hybrid ill-equipped for a blizzard. Therefore, after correcting twice and gaining false

confidence, I slid off the road entirely, crashing headfirst into a snow drift.



## *Chapter Eight*

WILLOW

## I WASN'T HURT.

Aside from a headache from the airbag deploying, and the ensuing panic of getting it deflated and thinking I was going to suffocate.

No bleeding. No broken bones.

Physically, I was fine.

For now.

I'd crashed in the upcoming twilight in the middle of a blizzard on Thanksgiving night. That wasn't exactly a recipe for being fine.

"Fuck!" I screamed, slamming my hands onto the steering wheel as I regarded the whiteout surrounding me. I was well and truly buried in a snowdrift. Despite knowing what I'd find, I tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge. There was too much dense snow packed against it.

Panic crawled up my throat.

I scrambled to get my phone from my purse sitting in the passenger seat. The screen flashed with my lack of signal. How in the fuck we still lived in a world where there were places with no cell phone signal, despite all the satellites clogging up our atmosphere, I had no idea.

I was stuck. In a snowdrift. In a blizzard. Down a road that would probably not be traveled tonight. I didn't think anyone else was stupid enough to want to go visit their dead relatives unless they planned on joining them tonight.

My headlights were still visible, but I didn't know how long that was going to be the case. The snow was still falling at a heavy pace, night was fast approaching and my car battery wouldn't last forever.

I wasn't dressed for the weather either. I was wearing a soft cashmere sweater, thin leggings and Ugg boots. I'd been ready for Thanksgiving dinner, not a night in my car out in the cold. And because my car had come with me from L.A., I didn't have any emergency gear like blankets or flares or shovels. All of the things my father ensured that I had when I was living here.

Fear barreled through me as cold crept in from the windows, the doors, the spores in the air. Sure, I'd been in a pretty miserable and depressed place these past few weeks, but I never actually wanted to die.

*"You have a family. But that's never been enough for you. You've never seen that."*

My brother's words echoed against the icy interior of the car. I thought of him. My mother. That squishy little baby. People who loved me. And despite my brother's anger, he did love me. That I knew.

I'd been so determined to leave New Hope behind, I didn't realize I was abandoning the people who would be in my corner no matter what.

And if I didn't get out of this, I'd be hurting them more.

Regret stung like a snake bite.

I had to survive.

That's all there was to it.

Except that I was pretty sure that me surviving this situation required a miracle. And didn't those only happen in cheesy Christmas movies?



I must've drifted off because the last thing I remembered was being very cold and very mad at myself for actually dying in the place I'd vowed to leave

forever.

At least the cemetery wasn't far. They could just haul me up and throw me in a hole. But the ground was too hard to dig holes. So I'd have to spend time in the chilling drawer of the morgue. Did we even have a morgue?

It wouldn't matter too much to me anyway. I'd be dead, and I didn't believe in any kind of afterlife.

Though I was momentarily questioning that belief when I'd gone from freezing cold, exhausted and thinking of my inevitable demise to being in motion and nestled up against something warm and pleasant smelling. It smelled like snow, cedar and leather. And something else. Something woodsy and comforting.

Hair was brushed from my face. "Willow? Can you wake up, baby?"

*Baby?*

I must've been in some kind of afterlife because I was no one's baby.

## BRODY

I'd been in a lot of pretty fucking intense and scary situations. Situations where I was sure I was going to die. Situations where I'd feared my friends would die. I'd watched one of my best buddies take his last breath.

Fear was an old friend, one I thought I'd gotten familiar with.

But nothing prepared me for what I'd felt when I saw the dim headlights of the car in the snowdrift, the vision of Willow's unconscious body after I'd dug through the snow to open her door.

Her skin was icy to the touch, her limbs like lead as I carried her to my truck, turned the heat up as high as it could go then covered her with the emergency blankets I kept on hand for situations such as this.

I ran my knuckles down Willow's porcelain cheek. Her lips were tinged blue, her breathing shallow but there. She was breathing.

"Willow?" I murmured, wrapping her tightly with the blankets. "Can you wake up, baby?" I knew I had to get her somewhere warmer than the interior of the truck. She needed to change out of those clothes, get a hot drink. That's if she wasn't as far gone as I feared. Then she'd need serious medical attention. I pushed that thought out of my mind. For now.

I needed to get her awake and alert, get her body heat and heart rate up.

Her eyelids fluttered at my words, and my own heart pounded against my chest.

I kept rubbing her body on top of the blankets as she struggled to open her eyes. Once, twice, three times she blinked.

She was groggy, confused, and then, very quickly, she was pissed.

"You," she croaked. "You are so not the knight in shining armor, so don't even think about it."

I wanted to smile. Fuck, this woman. Battling what I really fucking hoped wasn't serious hypothermia, there was still enough fire in her body to spit at

me.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I replied, hand on her face. “You keep being pissed about that, it’ll keep you warm.”

“Don’t you worry, I’m not going to stop being pissed at you.”

“Good.” Without thinking, I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Let’s get you home, then.”

I had made a promise to her mother that I’d get her home.

I just hadn’t said *whose*.

Though I might’ve been a better man than I was a boy, I still wasn’t the good guy.

## WILLOW

I went in and out of consciousness for what felt like hours. It could've been minutes, who knew? It was like when you laid down for a twenty-minute power nap in the afternoon then woke in the dark with no idea what day it was.

I remembered the blast of warm air in the truck, blankets, the vibration of the engine.

I remembered being very pissed off to see it was Brody Adams looking down at me, eyes smoldering with concern as he called me baby. What was that about?

And had he kissed my forehead tenderly?

I must've hallucinated that.

I lost a bit of time as we were in the truck in one blink, then I was back in his arms, walking through the warm, cozy interior of an unfamiliar house. There was an excited bark as lights went on.

"Velma, down," Brody's voice boomed with warm authority. Canine heels clicked against the hardwood floor, then I saw a flash of chocolate colored fur curled up in a bed by a fireplace.

We were in a living room with cozy looking brown sofas, floor to ceiling windows showcasing the snow that tried to kill me. I didn't get to look more because soon we were ascending a staircase, walking down a hall and entering a spacious bathroom. It was tiled in white with deep sinks, large mirrors, a walk-in shower and a large tub.

It was the bathroom of my dreams.

Looking in the mirror, my eyes caught my reflection. I was still bundled in blankets, and I was shocked at how pale I looked, how my lips seemed like they'd been smeared with blood, and my nose was red. Purplish smudges underneath my eyes showed just how cold I was.

Then I stopped looking at myself and turned my attention to the owner of the muscled arms that were holding me to his chest.

Brody Adams.

Was holding me in his arms.

In his bathroom.

After saving my life.

We stayed like that, staring at each other in the mirror as if we were frozen in time.

It was all so freaking surreal, I didn't even know what to say, what to do. I didn't have full control over my thoughts, my teeth chattering as if on cue.

Brody jerked.

"We've got to get you out of these clothes and into a warm bath," Brody said, walking toward the tub. His voice was firm, deep, warm. Warm was good. Warm was *great* right now since it felt like my bones were frozen solid.

"Can you stand?" he looked down at me, his voice soft, tender.

I swallowed at the proximity to his face, his lips. I felt small and vulnerable, and I didn't like it.

"Yes, of course, I can. In fact, it was totally unnecessary for you to have carried me this far," I stated confidently. Or tried to sound confident. My words came out sounding husky and rough.

Brody stared at me with concern for a moment, looking as if he might argue with me, but luckily, he just nodded because I didn't have the energy to argue. I was suddenly very tired.

Like I was made of delicate glass, Brody gently put me down on my feet, holding me steady as he unwrapped the blankets. I'd never had someone handle me so tenderly in my entire life.

"You good?" he murmured, his hands on my hips steadying me.

I swallowed past a lump in my throat. "Of course," I lied.

His grip flexed on my hips, and the areas burned white-hot.



My body swayed as if I were on turbulent seas when he let me go. Brody jolted like he was going to catch me.

“I’m good,” I snapped, leaning on the edge of the bathtub.

Brody pursed his lips, obviously unhappy, but he let me be. He turned to the knobs of the tub, then the sounds of rushing water filled the silence.

Despite the warmth of the room, I shivered, looking at the steaming water with need.

Brody’s back was broad, shoulders wide and muscled. I looked from the water to his long, large hands working the knobs, holding them under the water to test the temperature.

I licked my lips.

Brody turned around. “I’m going to go get you a mug of hot cocoa and a bottle of water before you get in the bath. I’ll be right back.”

Before I could say anything, he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me, not roughly but firmly down onto the wide ledge of the bath so I was sitting. “I’ll be right back.”

I probably should’ve argued. Should’ve asked where we were—though I was pretty sure it was his place—should’ve demanded to be taken home, but I didn’t have the energy.

Plus, being taken home would’ve delivered me to my presumably worried and overly-doting mother and still mad brother. I’d have to face love, concern, anger. I only deserved one of those things.

So I didn’t argue with Brody. Nor did I think of anything as I watched the large bath slowly fill up. I didn’t think of the fight that led me there, the words that held true, the graveyard where my father’s body lay. I didn’t think of my ruined life. I didn’t even think of the fact that it was Brody Adams’s bathtub I was staring at.

It was nice.

I jumped when a large form moved beside me, placing a steaming mug and a bottle of water next to the now full bath before turning off the knobs.

Hazel eyes met mine. Again, they were intense, filled with concern ... warmth.

“Do you need me to help you with your clothes?” he asked.

I blinked. Then I found my anger. “No, I don’t need you to undress me.”

Brody held up his hands in surrender, and although he still looked concerned, I could’ve sworn he was hiding a smile.

“There’s a robe you can wear.” He nodded to a dark-green, plaid robe hanging on the back of the door. “I’ll leave some fresh clothes by the door for you.”

I pursed my lips, stopping myself from thanking him for the kindness. I also stopped myself from refusing the offer. Though my clothes weren’t wet, they felt like they were made of icicles, so I was glad I wouldn’t have to put them back on.

We stared at each other, his eyes still glittering with warmth.

My stomach swirled, and not in a way that was entirely uncomfortable.

“Some privacy?” I asked, my voice now a little stronger.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

I scowled at him. “I won’t. Need you. Ever.”

“We’ll see,” he pursed his lips before he left the room.

I stared at the door, thinking I probably should’ve argued with him, and I definitely shouldn’t have been feeling just a little turned-on when there was a high probability that I was still mildly hypothermic. I told myself it was the hot bath and the hot cocoa that warmed my bones. Not the look Brody gave me when he left the bathroom.

## *Chapter Nine*

WILLOW

I STAYED in the bath for a long time, topping up the water every time it cooled to the point where the water level was dangerously close to splashing over onto the tile floor. A petty part of me wanted to keep filling the bath up until it overflowed, leaving puddles all over the floor.

But I wasn't petty. So if I had done it, I would've felt too guilty then ended up having to clean up the mess I made. I was already in the middle of cleaning up a pretty big mess as it was. Therefore, I eventually made myself get out of the bath. My muscles groaned as I did, exhaustion coated my body so even the simple act of drying myself felt herculean.

I wrapped Brody's robe around my body. It was soft from being washed so many times, and it smelled of Brody and laundry detergent. I inhaled the fabric deeply before I quite knew what I was doing.

Smelling Brody Adams's robe was not sane behavior. Then again, I had almost died in a snowdrift, so I was cutting myself some slack. I also didn't beat myself up for sniffing the soft sweats he'd left at the door.

The bottoms were not swimming on me like those women in movies wearing their boyfriends' clothes. I had hips and ass and was taller than most women, so his sweats weren't ridiculously loose. Though I had to fold them over a couple of times to keep them on my hips. The Henley he provided was loose everywhere except the chest area. I snuggled into the knit sweater and socks he provided after taking the time to towel dry my hair as much as I

could.

I regarded my reflection. Though I was still pale, there was a flush to my cheeks now. Though small shadows remained underneath my eyes, I no longer looked near death. I was still tired, though, my limbs feeling heavy.

The urge to lock myself in this bathroom for the rest of time was very inviting but ultimately not sustainable. I needed to dig deep because I had a lot to get through before I could find my way to sleep tonight. I first had to face Brody, then face my family. So after making sure I'd folded my used towel neatly on the towel rail, draped the bath mat over the bath and wiped up any rogue droplets of water, there was nothing left to do other than open the door.

It led to the long hall Brody had carried me down. To my left were a couple more doors with one on the end that I guessed was his bedroom.

A wild urge to go left and snoop in his room overcame me until a sound from my right pulled me to my senses. It was the clang of a pot, coming from downstairs.

My socked feet padded down the hall and then down the stairs. They gave a view to the open plan living and kitchen area. To the right of the stairs was a large kitchen, to the left was a living room with a fireplace.

The dog I'd heard was a Chocolate Lab, still in its bed, but its head was cocked toward me on the stairs, tail thumping as it wagged.

I loved dogs.

My family loved dogs.

We'd always had them. Until I moved out, at least. And our last old dog, Nyx, a Black Lab, had died. My father had been talking about getting a new puppy before he died.

It was too much.

Another clang from the kitchen shifted my attention. Brody was there, kitchen towel over his shoulder. Cooking.

At some point, he'd changed out of his uniform and was now wearing

sweats and a Henley like the one I was wearing.

Unlike his shirt on me, his was tight. Tight enough to show sculpted biceps, rock-hard pecs and what were likely washboard abs.

I swallowed as he looked up. His eyes were still warm and concerned and intense.

I gripped onto the railing of the stairs.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Fine,” I croaked before clearing my throat. “I’m great. And I’m ready to go home now.”

That was a lie. I was most definitely not ready to go home. But I couldn’t stay here. And I had nowhere else to go.

“Food will be ready in ten,” he replied. “Go warm yourself by the fire.” He nodded behind me.

“I didn’t say I wanted to warm myself by the fire,” I folded my arms over my chest. “I said I was ready to go *home*.”

Brody didn’t look perturbed by my anger. He looked pretty close to being amused by it, which only served to annoy me further.

“We need to wait until the weather slows.” He gestured with his spoon to the floor to ceiling window. It was almost too dark to see the snow falling at a steady rate.

I chewed my lip. That should’ve made me feel panicked, trapped. But instead, I felt relieved. A valid reason not to go and face the music. Even if it meant I was stuck in the house of my childhood bully with no way out.

There was still an angry part of me that was willing to brave my family in order to get away from Brody, but that part of me was just as tired as the rest. So instead of arguing, I walked down the rest of the stairs and toward the fire.

## BRODY

I lied.

The weather was coming down pretty bad. And conditions were terrible. Dangerous. But I was a member of law enforcement. I had vehicles to handle this kind of weather. I'd grown up in New Hope... This kind of weather had never stopped me from getting anywhere before.

But I didn't have a redheaded bombshell in my house, wearing my clothes and spitting fire at me before.

So I used the current conditions to my benefit. It helped that I had another deputy who could take care of things in town. And I was always able to make it in if the occasion called for it. Of course, if that happened, then Willow would find out I was lying. A gamble I was willing to take.

It was wrong of me, taking advantage of the weather, the holiday, her family situation in order to spend more time with her, to attempt to win her over, but I was discovering that maybe Willow was right... I wasn't a good guy.

Seeing her in my clothes did something to me. More evidence to the point I wasn't a good guy. She'd almost just fucking died in a snowdrift, and here I was, hard as rock because I liked seeing her in my clothes, liked knowing she was naked in my bathroom.

My attention followed her ass as she descended the stairs, pointedly not looking at me and walking toward the couch.

Velma immediately left her bed and hopped right on top of her.

I opened my mouth to yell at her but stopped when I saw her beam.

She rubbed my dog's fur, letting her kiss her face and murmuring to her.

My cock pulsed.

I was sick. Seeing her with my fucking dog made me horny.

But something about it seemed so right. Me in the kitchen, cooking us a

Thanksgiving meal, Willow fresh from the bath on the couch with my dog.  
Except the fact that it didn't feel right to her.  
I'd just have to change that.



## WILLOW

The fire was warm. Lovely, in fact. It didn't quite work to chase the chill that seemed to have settled into my bones, but my teeth stopped chattering, and I had regained feeling in all of my limbs. The warm weight at my legs belonged to the Lab that had already greeted me with kisses and seemed to be content laying on me.

I was more than content with it too.

Brody had been gone for a while. Not before repeatedly checking me over and then staring far too intensely with worry pinching his features.

Real worry too. Like he was actually *concerned* about my well-being. He'd brought me another mug of cocoa too. Which was delicious. I wasn't used to the sugar, the marshmallows, but I enjoyed it in a big way.

It was all much too picturesque... The fire, the snow, the cozy clothes, the dog, the square-jawed, muscular man in the kitchen. Like some kind of cheesy holiday movie where two unlikely old acquaintances become lovers.

Except we were old enemies. And no way were we going to become lovers. Despite the way my core tightened at that thought.

As if to chase away the thought, I got up from the sofa, snatching the mug from the coffee table in order to go wash it and demand to leave.

The dog, Velma—the name had been a surprise. Surely it couldn't be after the nerdy girl from Scooby Doo—followed me as I got up from the sofa, almost pressing into my leg as I walked.

Brody was putting steaming plates on a round dining table when I walked into the kitchen. It sat in front of yet another window, gray, plush drapes pulled back to reveal the diminishing view of the mountain and the twinkling lights of the town below us.

I struggled to figure out exactly where we were. There was no way I could recall how long we were driving to get here and which direction we

went. I was unconscious most of that time. It could've been five minutes, or it could've been fifty.

But we were on the mountain somewhere, as the town below us communicated, and this version of Brody Adams seemed more mountain man than football player, so I took a wild guess that he had some acreage.

"I'm going to wash this, then we can go," I declared.

I noticed Brody had set the two plates on the table—the table with napkins, placemats and candles—as he took the mug from my hands.

"I got it," His hand went to the small of my back, then he guided me to the table.

Why I let myself be guided was anyone's guess. Delayed shock. That had to be it.

I found myself sitting at the table with something that looked like soup and dumplings in front of me.

"I know it's nowhere near as good as the food your mother had prepared for you, but it'll warm you up, fill your belly."

I just looked into the bowl. The food smelled amazing. He'd been at my mother's place, was aware of our Thanksgiving feast.

She'd called him.

Not surprising. I'd driven off in a blizzard without warm clothing or an appropriate vehicle.

Embarrassing, though.

"Eat," Brody ordered.

"I'm not a dog." I scowled at him, rubbing the head of the animal at my side. "You can't command me like you do her."

"I don't command her either. She has a will of her own. I like that in women."

I rolled my eyes.

Bull. Shit.

"Oh, you think you're so funny and charming, masquerading as a feminist

with quips like that, but remember, Brody Adams, I went to high school with you. I know *exactly* who you are.”

His gaze turned stormy. Almost tortured.

“I’m not the same person I was in high school, Will,” he muttered quietly.

I threw up my hands, not bothering to chastise him for addressing me by my nickname. “Maybe you are, maybe you aren’t. My prevailing philosophy is that people don’t change a whole lot. But even if you had, I don’t care. You’re not convincing me you’re some good guy because you wear a badge, you saved me from certain death, you have a cute dog, you cook food and you smell nice.”

Crap, I hadn’t meant to say that last part.

Brody’s eyes twinkled, obviously amused by me. That pissed me off. It also pissed me off that he looked exceptionally handsome with those twinkling eyes.

“I’m not asking you to believe I’m a good guy. Just askin’ you to eat. Whether you do or not is completely up to you, but I was at your place, and there was an untouched Thanksgiving dinner on the table, you’ve been gone for a few hours and your body burned a lot of energy trying to keep itself warm. You need the calories.”

As if on cue, my stomach growled. Loudly.

Brody pursed his lips as if he were trying not to laugh.

Good thing he didn’t laugh. I might’ve exploded.

I wanted to refuse the plate of hot food out of principle.

But again, I was hungry, I was tired, and I was overwhelmed.

“This is because I want to do it, not because you told me to do it.” I picked up the fork.

Brody’s face was carefully blank. “Of course.”

And of course, it was the best thing I’d ever tasted.

And that was how I ended up eating Thanksgiving dinner with Brody Adams.

# *Chapter Ten*

WILLOW

“OKAY, I’M READY TO GO.” I put down my fork and stared at my clean plate, wishing for more. Not only was there chicken and dumplings but there was also *pie*.

And I was ravenous.

It didn’t escape me that there was no one else at this table. Brody hadn’t mentioned missing any kind of Thanksgiving dinner. I wanted to ask who he had planned to spend the holiday with. He’d been on duty, so maybe he hadn’t made any. He was still the sheriff on holidays. But he wasn’t working now, and there didn’t seem to be any plans for him beyond the pre-purchased pie.

His father still lived here, was still alive as far as I knew, but he wasn’t spending the holiday with him. I guess it didn’t surprise me, given what I knew of the man.

I felt a stab of pity for Brody, sitting here in his picturesque cottage with his dog and no family.

I quickly shoved that thought away.

I didn’t know anything about his life now, but I sure as shit wasn’t going to pity him. Nor was I going to ask questions about his life. Beyond opening it to eat, I kept my mouth shut. As did Brody.

It wasn’t awkward. It should’ve been. We had sat together with years of ugly history between us, with years of resentment and anger—on my end, of

course. He hadn't even remembered that he ruined my teenage years. Then there was the failed seduction routine, let's not forget that.

It was a recipe for the world's most awkward Thanksgiving dinner if I'd ever heard. But yet...

He had Dean Martin playing through Bluetooth speakers. A dog was panting happily at our feet. The snow fell silently at the window, the fire crackled in the background. Our silverware clattered against plates. Somehow, all of that served to replace conversation, and the dinner was actually almost ... nice.

Except there was Brody's eyes on me the entire time. I felt them like a weight, heavy, intense, unyielding. I refused to meet his gaze, concentrating on my food, on the snow outside, the framed art on the walls. I would've looked at the weave of the carpet if I'd had to.

"You can't go," Brody replied to my statement.

I frowned at him, finally looking in his direction.

He'd rolled up the sleeves of his Henley, revealing sinewy forearms. I swallowed my appreciation for them. I hadn't been into muscled men in the past. I liked them smaller, nerdier, anything that didn't remind me of the boys who taunted me, trying their best to practice toxic masculinity.

Yet here was the exact boy who'd taunted me, yet his masculinity was no longer practiced. It seeped off him like cologne. And it didn't smell toxic. Not one bit.

"I can go," I sighed. "It's a free country, and you can't keep me here."

Something moved on his face, an expression I couldn't place. "I'm not keeping you here. The weather is keeping you here." He nodded outside.

I'd been looking out the window periodically like someone might mindlessly stare at the TV ... not really seeing it.

Now I saw that the snow was falling fast and heard the whistle of the wind picking up.

It looked worse than it had when I went out in it and almost died.

“But you’re a mountain man,” I exclaimed. “You have a truck.”

“I also have precious cargo.” His eyes quickly ran a path from my head to my toes then back again. “And this weather means emergency trips only.”

“This *is* an emergency trip,” I argued, ignoring the ‘precious cargo’ and the way it made me feel.

Brody’s features were instantly covered in concern. “Why? What’s wrong?” he rushed from his chair to kneel at my knees as if he were about to examine me.

I pushed out from my own chair quickly in order to get out of his vicinity. “Nothing’s wrong with me ... physically.” I walked to the window to examine the weather. It looked very bad.

“You did this!” I turned around to begin pacing, as if he were to blame for the weather.

“Will, will you sit down?” he watched me pace with a crease between his brows.

I ignored this and continued to tread his cozy rug in my oversized and annoyingly warm socks, staring at the snow coming down outside. The peaceful fall of the flakes was infuriating. It might’ve been serene and calming if I were in a cabin alone with a hot drink, a bunch of cookies and a stack of books.

Not with the man who tormented me in high school who I still hated.

The man who was far too handsome for his own good.

And had saved me from certain death.

Then dressed me in soft clothes that took the chill from my bones and smelled nice.

“Why did you bring me here to your house? Why didn’t you take me home after you found me?”

“My place was closer,” he hiked up a shoulder. “Weather was packing in. My main goal was getting you safe and warm. You need to sit.”

I stopped pacing to glare at him. “I need to do whatever it is I want to do

because it's becoming increasingly clear that I'm stuck here with you."

The corner of his mouth turned up in a playful smirk. "I don't bite."

A surge of desire shot through me. I did not need to think about him biting right now. Or his mouth.

"I need wine," I declared, spying the wine rack beside a bookshelf. I strode toward it purposefully, grabbing a bottle opener after yanking open a drawer in the sideboard and rifling through it.

I held up the bottle. It had a French label.

"Is this expensive?" I asked Brody, who was still watching me. Not giving him a chance to reply, I slammed it down on the sideboard. "I hope it is," I said, tearing into it without looking at him.

There were wine glasses lined up neatly behind the glass door of the sideboard. I distractedly thought about how organized and nice it looked, wondering whether an old—or current—girlfriend had decorated. I couldn't imagine Brody shopping for long-stemmed red wine glasses or lining them up just so.

I sloshed the wine into the glass, spilling a little and not caring.

"If you drink that," he nodded to the wine, "I'll have to keep my eyes on you for the rest of the night."

My mouth went dry, and somewhere else got decidedly wet.

"What are you talking about?" I huffed, clenching the stem of the glass.

"You may have gotten mild hypothermia." He walked toward me, getting another glass from the cabinet. His warm body brushed up against mine as he did so, his scent overwhelming and intoxicating.

Brody intentionally pressed his torso against mine, fingers brushing where I was still clenching the bottle.

I jerked, releasing my hold then stepping back so he could pour his own glass of wine.

"You're not supposed to imbibe alcohol if you have hypothermia," he continued. "But I can only guess at how me trying to take that glass from you



would go.”

I held on to it harder. I wasn't overly attached to wine, but I wasn't about to let Brody tell me what to do.

I must've shown that on my face because he chuckled. The sound was warm and pleasing.

“Yeah, I thought so,” he murmured, a smile in his voice. “So we'll drink together, and I'll keep an eye on you.” He nodded to the living room. “I'm sure there's a Christmas movie on in there, if you're the kind of woman who likes that on Thanksgiving night. I figure your mom may be one for traditions, but I don't know how traditional she is.” There was even more smile in his tone. More warmth.

I didn't want to smile. But I couldn't help it. He was talking about my mother with a fondness that should've pissed me off. He was right. My mother did not seem like someone who would go the traditional route on Christmas. And in a lot of ways she was decidedly more pagan.

But she was traditional in some ways. As was I. I loved Christmas movies. And it was a rule in our house that we always decorated the tree after Thanksgiving dinner, with music playing and one of our movies on in the background.

I thought of the empty tree in our living room, the box of decorations my mother had set down earlier today with a wide smile on her face.

Something sharp stabbed me in the stomach.

“A movie,” I relented. “No talking. Opposite sides of the sofa.”

Brody pressed his lips together as if he were suppressing a smile. “You're the boss.”

My stomach didn't hurt with those words. No, it dipped. All the way down to my panties.

I scowled at him as I stomped around the table in order to make it to the living room ... Going the long way so I didn't have to get close to him.

Except I had no choice but to be close to Brody Adams. I was stuck in

this house with him. And I was getting more and more turned-on by him.

# *Chapter Eleven*

WILLOW

NIGHT HAD FALLEN. The bottle of wine sat on the coffee table between us. The fire was roaring, the dog curled up in her bed in front of it.

*Home Alone* was playing on his flat screen TV. I couldn't help but notice Brody's lack of Christmas decorations.

Then again, it was only just Thanksgiving. And he was a man presumably living alone—he wasn't likely to decorate.

I thought about his father, wondered if he'd grown up in a home with Christmas traditions. With joyful Thanksgiving dinners.

Something told me he hadn't.

I glared at the TV. I wasn't supposed to be thinking about Brody, his childhood, and I certainly shouldn't have been feeling bad for him.

It seemed like the man at the other end of the long couch—not long enough with his large body folded into it—was having similar thoughts to me since he spoke for the first time since the TV had flickered on and he'd asked me what I wanted to watch.

"I'm sorry," he broke the silence. "For what I did to you when we were kids."

My heart stuttered. Another apology. A simple one. Spoken softly after a semi-dramatic rescue, after the warm bath, hot cocoa, the meal, the pie, the crackling fire, the cute dog.

"We're not talking about that," I stated firmly, staring at the TV.

Macaulay Culkin was no longer screaming on screen. I glared at the remote in Brody's hand.

"Turn it back on," I demanded.

Brody didn't turn it back on. He tossed the remote on the end table, out of my reach, then positioned himself on the couch so he was closer, facing me.

"I swear to God, Will, I did not understand the weight of what was happening to you." His tone was full of regret. "And that's not an excuse. I should've. I was a stupid fucking kid full of anger. I was so self-absorbed, so fucking determined to be better than him, when in reality, I was him. A bully."

It wasn't hard to guess who he was talking about. My mind went back to that day, that horrible day. I thought about the sound of the slap, the sneer of disgust on his father's face, the tears in teenage Brody's eyes.

"My dad hated me," he continued. "Because I reminded him of my mom, I think. Because I was the one who killed her."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, forgetting that I was supposed to be avoiding meaningful conversations. "Your mom died giving birth."

I knew the story. Everyone in New Hope knew the story. It was tragic. His mom died in childbirth, so his heartbroken father raised him by himself. He was at every one of his games, was by all accounts the perfect father to the town's golden boy.

But all was not as it seemed. I knew that firsthand.

"My mom died giving birth to me. Therefore, it was my fault."

I opened my mouth. Shut it again. There was so much sadness in his voice. A mature kind of sadness, that had been planted, taken root then grown big over the years.

"That is insane," I said finally. "You were a baby. Your life has nothing to do with her death."

I didn't know why I was comforting him, all I knew was I had an overwhelming urge to take his pain away and kick his dad in the shins, even

though he was in his sixties.

Brody shrugged. “That’s not why I’m telling you that. I’m letting you know why I was a piece of shit back then. Even though the reasons don’t matter much when plenty of people had it worse, yet they managed to turn into much better people.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” I pursed my lips. I didn’t like remembering that period of my life. Didn’t like that I was beginning to understand Brody, to forgive him. I didn’t know who I was without my grudges.

He looked like he was going to push it, but then he nodded once. “What do you want to talk about, then?”

I motioned to the dead TV. “I don’t want to talk. I want to watch the movie.”

When he didn’t turn it on or say anything, I forced myself to look at him. Brody’s eyes were electric. My fingertips tingled as I took a small sip of wine. “You wanna come get the remote?” he invited playfully.

Holy. Shit.

Hello, ovaries.

I was getting whiplash from all of the different sides of Brody I was seeing all in one night. There was the heroic sheriff. The concerned man. The caregiver. The cook. The dog dad. The tortured soul. And now this, the sexually playful mountain man.

It was all too much.

“Fine, we’ll talk,” I groaned, leaning forward to refill my wine glass. I felt Brody’s eyes on me the entire time, and my upper lip started sweating.

I leaned back on the comfortable couch, suddenly very aware of my lack of bra and my aching nipples.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked after a silence that was too long and too loaded with sexual tension.

“How about where you’ve been for the past eighteen years.”

“I’m sure you know my Dad is—was— a blacksmith,” I corrected, having trouble thinking about my father in the past tense. A hole inside of me throbbed at the reality of my father only existing in the past, in memories I hadn’t known I needed to treasure, keep safe so they didn’t become fuzzy at the edges like they were now.

“Yeah, I know,” Brody grinned. “All of my horse’s shoes were made by him.”

I didn’t know what surprised me more—that Brody had horses or that my father had shod them. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for people to have horses here, so I didn’t know why I was surprised. And if people had horses around here, their shoes were made by my father.

“Your father was a great man,” he added.

My spine prickled with discomfort. Brody had known my father as an adult, had liked him. Again, that was not uncommon. My father was a well-liked man. It was almost impossible to dislike him. He was patient, kind, easy to laugh, and lent a hand to anyone who needed it. Whether they deserved it or not.

Of course, my father hadn’t known that Brody was one of my high school tormentors. My father hadn’t known I’d been tormented.

And if he had found out later that Brody had been bad to me in school, it wouldn’t have affected how he treated him in adulthood. My father was a forgiving man, believed people could change.

I hated that Brody had known him, known him well enough to smile with familiarity and grief when speaking about him.

My father was mine. And this man did not deserve to know him, did not deserve any kind of fond memories.

*Easy now, Tittlemouse,* my father’s voice said in my ear as I felt anger crawl up my throat like lava.

I studied the contents of my wine glass, forcing myself to take a calming breath. I was stuck here with Brody, and I’d already gotten plenty mad about

our past. There was no sense in also getting angry that he knew and liked my father.

We both had to survive being here without any blow ups. Although surviving didn't mean I had to tell him about my past, most especially what landed me here, but what else was there to talk about? The weather?

“He had a forge in the backyard, it's still there,” I offered.

“I know,” Brody nodded. “Been there.”

I clenched my fists. Again with the rage at his familiarity. The forge was Dad's and my place.

Brody's eyes flickered to my clenched fists. I watched him note the gesture like a cop might, but he didn't say anything, just regained eye contact with me.

I took another deep breath. “He taught me about metal, about how it works, about how to shape it, turn something seemingly set in stone into something else entirely.”

It took a lot for me to say the words and not get lost in the memories.

“I had a jewelry brand,” I explained. “In L.A.” I swallowed my wine, resisting the urge to down the glass in one gulp. This story was so much more palatable if I was drunk. But if I got drunk, my inhibitions would be much too low, and I'd do something stupid like give in to my baser urges.

“It started slow,” I continued. “But it was doing well. Quite well, I guess.” I wasn't sure why I was downplaying it. My jewelry brand had been the *‘it’* label for a time. Celebrities wore it. Maybe talking about just how far I'd fallen was too much.

“I had staff. And my, um, boyfriend ... fiancé, I guess... Well, ex-fiancé gave up his job at a Fortune 500 company to take over as the CFO since the business grew so big so quickly, and I didn't have experience on the business side. Or that's what he said,” I scoffed. “That I should take care of the creative part, and he'd take care of the rest.” I shook my head, thinking about how stupid it sounded out loud. “I trusted him, why wouldn't I?” I looked at



the snow over Brody's head. My heart hurt thinking of everything I'd built. "But I shouldn't have trusted him. He, uh, he embezzled all the profits, made shitty deals with manufacturers, pretty much ruined my company and bankrupted me." I didn't mention that the reason I was bankrupt was because I chose to pay all of my staff redundancy packages rather than bailing out my company.

"It's not an original story," I threw up my hands. "I'm just another millennial coming home with her proverbial tail between her legs after life chewed her up and spit her out, leaving her failures for the world to see."

It wasn't until now that I looked at Brody. I'd been focusing on the snow over his head the entire time. I couldn't look my high school bully in the eye while I recounted my fall from grace. It was just too much.

But I couldn't keep my eyes off him for too long. He was magnetic; my body had been angling closer to him this entire time, constantly aware of his breathing, the subtle scent of him in the air. I caught every small movement he made out of the corner of my eye. And I'd noted he'd gotten tense during my story. I hadn't noticed he looked furious, though.

"You didn't fuckin' fail, someone fucked you over," Brody snarled.

*Snarled.*

Feral like.

I just blinked at the emotion. He looked pissed. Uber pissed. Not at me. At least I didn't think so. He looked pissed *for* me.

It was ... odd. And comforting. Though it shouldn't have been. I'd never had someone feel murderous rage on my behalf. Although my mother had mentioned Geoff once since I'd been home, and it had been to wish ill on all his dreams.

"I gave someone the opportunity to fuck me over," I corrected him. "I gave someone the power and control over my life because I thought that I could trust them. A hard lesson and one I shouldn't have had to learn." I sipped more wine. "It's not original, Brody. Men fuck women over all the

time. Women fuck over men. Humans are brutal to each other. As we well know.”

He flinched like I hit him.

“I didn’t mean—”

“No, I deserve it,” he interrupted. “For what I did to you. For forgetting about it.”

Again, he sounded utterly remorseful and regretful. I wanted to accept his apology. “We’re not talking about that anymore,” I reminded him.

His open mouth told me he wanted to push the issue, but he must’ve thought better of it.

“The fuck who was stupid enough to ensure he was never going to spend the rest of his life with you... Where is he?” he demanded.

I stared at him, confounded by the way he’d chosen to describe Geoff. There was so much passion there, anger. There was the insinuation that spending a lifetime with me was a gift.

“He, um, I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Nor does the US Government, but I’m sure they’d like to. He disappeared when everything started falling apart.”

I remembered it too clearly, though I wished that the trauma of it all had made it hazy. I woke up to an empty bed—not unusual since Geoff routinely went to the gym before work in the mornings. But he didn’t normally take all of his belongings with him.

I hadn’t cried. Hadn’t been upset when it was clear that he’d left me. I hadn’t felt much of anything. A red flag when the man you were supposed to be spending the rest of your life with leaves you and you’re not overly upset. Then again, anything that happened to me in the wake of my father’s death seemed mild. And I’d been second-guessing the entire relationship for a while. He was self-absorbed, he had no empathy for my grief over my father and he’d started commenting in a subtle but pointed way about my weight.

Yeah, an asshole.

He'd done me a favor by leaving so I didn't have to navigate the awkwardness of ending an engagement. But when I'd arrived at my office, I'd encountered men with cheap suits and badges, questioning me about misappropriated funds.

I realized then that in the wake of my father's death, there were still things that could strip me apart. Like losing my company. My friends who didn't answer my calls when I was no longer the jewelry designer to the stars.

Apart from Avery.

She had been there for me. She helped figure out how to pay my staff, how to get me a lawyer to ensure there wasn't any legal blowback. That had been humiliating, having a bunch of people see how I'd handed over my life's work to someone so evil and let them take it from me, right under my nose.

"Jesus, Will." Brody raked a hand over his face. "I had no idea."

I smiled sadly. "Well, I'm glad to hear the news wasn't national, at least. It was quite the scandalous story in L.A. for a while. Until I left. And deleted all Google alerts with my name attached."

"That's why you're here," he deduced.

"Because I had nowhere else to go." I admitted. "Figures that I'd come back only when my life was in the toilet and not when my family needed me."

Something moved in his eyes, replacing the fury that had burned there when I was speaking about Geoff.

"The fight that you and your brother had..."

"Was because of me," I finished for him. "Because I didn't come home when our father died." My throat was tight. Thick with grief. With shame. I didn't care what Brody thought of me. That's what I told myself, at least. Still, my gaze went downward, and my cheeks warmed.

"I couldn't face it," I whispered. "The house without him. This town without him. I had a ... *complicated* relationship with my mother. You

already know about the ... *complicated* relationship I had with those in my peer group.”

Brody winced and opened his mouth, likely to apologize again. I waved him off. Who would’ve thought I would’ve been waving off Brody Adams’s apologies? Who would’ve thought I’d be stuck in a cabin with him on Thanksgiving?

Life was exceptionally funny.

Kick you right in the vagina kind of funny.

If anyone would’ve enjoyed this situation, it would’ve been my father.

“My father is the only reason I would’ve come back to this town,” I sighed. “And even when he was alive, I didn’t. I found excuses for every holiday, for every anniversary, for every birthday, every fucking full moon ceremony my mother threw.” I rolled my eyes but felt a pang of guilt for the attitude I’d given my mother pretty much my entire life and the consistent love, patience and acceptance she’d met that attitude with.

“They came to visit in L.A.,” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “When the first luxury department store stocked my jewelry, they both came. My mother wore every single piece I’d ever designed, even the stuff that I’d thought I’d thrown away as ‘mistakes’ when I was still learning.”

I smiled at the memory, even though I hadn’t smiled at the time. I’d been embarrassed, as I always was of my mother. But in L.A., the place where it was impossible to be ‘weird,’ my mother fit right in. In fact, everyone at my launch party thought she was some eccentric billionaire and had sucked up to her, then subsequently came to me about opportunities to stock my jewelry after my mother had done nothing but sing my praises. Well, and also read everyone’s auras.

“They made the effort to see me, both of them, even when I didn’t deserve that effort.” I shook away the tears I was not going to let fall. “There were no guilt trips about me not coming back.”

“And when my father died, I just...” I paused, looking at the snow falling

outside. “I couldn’t come back,” I whispered. “Because if I didn’t come here, if I didn’t watch him get put in the ground, if I didn’t step foot in a house that didn’t contain his laughter, then I would be able to believe he was still here... Alive.

“It’s a fucking bullshit excuse for me being a coward.” I shook my head. “My brother was right... Losing everything I worked for was my karma.”

Suddenly, Brody was not across the sofa from me. He was no longer holding a wine glass and mine had clattered on the coffee table. He’d done all of this in smooth movements, his hands now on my neck. “You stop that fucking shit right now,” he growled, pinning me with a fierce gaze. “No fucking way in hell did you deserve a second of what happened to you, and I won’t hear another second of you trying to lay any blame on yourself for how you dealt with your grief.”

I froze, not knowing how to respond to the emotion in his words. At his hands on my neck. His grip was firm, dry, yet his fingers were rough against my skin.

My heart was a hummingbird in my chest.

I was going to have sex with Brody Adams. I’m not sure at what point of the night I made that decision. I’d like to think it was after the wine, but I was also good at lying to myself. But whenever I decided something, I did it.

The sexual tension between us had been simmering since that night in the bar. Yeah, I told myself I was going to seduce him purely to get back at him, but I had reasons of my own.

“I think, I’m done talking,” I whispered, our mouths inches apart. “In fact, I think I’m ready for bed.”

I replicated the seductive tone I’d used in the bar, but this time it was huskier, roughened by true need.

“I’ve got a guest room,” he murmured, veins in his neck pulsating. I saw him trying to hold on to his control. Trying not to take my words for the double entendre they were.

I licked my lips which tasted like red wine and bad decisions.

“I don’t want to sleep in the guest room,” I rasped. “In fact, I don’t plan on sleeping at all. But I will feel your bed against my back.”

## *Chapter Twelve*

WILLOW

AS SOON AS I spoke the words, Brody's gaze zeroed in on me with a carnal hunger I felt in my pussy.

"Will..." he tried to lean back, but I grabbed on to the sides of his shirt. "You don't say shit like that to me," he warned as I held on to him. "Not if you don't mean it. You've been drinking, you had a scare, an emotional moment with your family... I'm not takin' advantage of that."

"No," I leaned forward, gripping the sides of his shirt tighter, inhaling his scent and tilting my chin upward so my lips were almost brushing his. "I don't want the good guy sheriff thinking about whether or not I'm in my right mind. I want the guy who will fuck me into oblivion because he's wanted to since the moment he saw me." My breath hit his face, and I almost kissed him. But I pulled back at the last minute.

"But if you're not that guy..." I leaned back on the couch, letting go of his shirt before acting as if I were about to get up from the sofa.

Brody's hand circled my wrist tightly. The skin protested just a little, but in a way I liked, then he yanked me back to him, lifting me so I was straddling him.

I gasped. We were both wearing soft sweats, and his rock-hard cock found my clit through the fabric. I rubbed against him on instinct, already ready to explode from the friction.

"I'm that fuckin' guy," he growled against my mouth. "I'm the fuckin'



guy who's gonna fuck you so good you're only ever gonna be mine from this moment on."

I opened my mouth to let him know that I was never going to belong to any man let alone him, but I didn't get the words out because he kissed me.

Hard.

It wasn't a kiss. It felt like a brand. Like his lips were searing ownership onto my very soul.

I rubbed myself against him like a wild animal, already ready to explode from a kiss and some dry humping. Like I was in high school.

Except I didn't kiss let alone dry hump anyone in high school, and if I had, it certainly wouldn't have been Brody Adams.

Instead of those thoughts being cold water to my burning-hot desire, they only fueled the fire more. Because I was on top of Brody Adams, his cock was hard for me, he wanted to brand me with his kiss, he wanted me to be his.

Which meant I had all the power.

I pulled my head back, even though all I wanted to do was get lost in the kiss. Brody's eyes were molten with desire, mad with it. His body was rigid with need, his hands kneading into my ass.

"I want you to make me come," I informed him.

His eyes flared. "Oh, I fuckin' plan on it, baby." He leaned in to kiss me again, but I put my finger to his lips.

"No, I want you to get on your knees right here, bury your face in my pussy then eat me until I scream."

I didn't know where this was coming from. I'd never spoken to a man like this in the bedroom before. Dirty talk made me feel fraudulent and awkward.

But the words came out of my mouth of their own volition, and I got a rush of satisfaction seeing Brody's face twitch with surprise followed by a wicked smile.

“Oh, I can definitely fuckin’ do that,” he rasped. “You want to order me around, Will? You want me on my knees for you?”

I nodded, cheeks hot.

Brody didn’t hesitate. He pushed up from the sofa, then I wrapped my legs around his waist on instinct. Brody let out a low growl as I rubbed my pussy against his rigid length.

I almost took back my demand. Almost amended it with an order for him to fuck me right there, right then.

“Is this what you had in mind that night at the bar?” He nipped at my lower lip. “You think this would be punishment?”

He dropped me carefully onto the sofa, arching me up so he could tug off my sweats and panties in one smooth move.

The warm air hit my skin, making me instantly aware of how exposed I was when Brody knelt at my feet. My bravado rapidly fell away, and I attempted to close my legs, suddenly shy.

Brody’s hands were at my thighs, firmly pushing them apart. His eyes could’ve blistered me with their passion. “No way, I want to see you. Want that pussy displayed to me like the fucking feast it is.”

Goose bumps raced over my skin, and I was no longer shy. Not one bit. Not with Brody’s eyes on me, not with the way his voice was almost bestial. The fire glowing behind him, the snow falling in the background. I propped myself up on my elbows, leaning back and keeping my legs wide, never dropping my gaze from Brody.

He pointedly looked down and let out a low growl.

My body quivered under his gaze of my most intimate part.

Brody licked his lips.

One of his hands left my thighs so he could run it down the seam of my pussy. My body jolted at his touch, almost exploding as he spread me apart farther so he could toy with my clit.

I jolted again, so close, already teetering on the edge of a climax.

“You think this is punishment?” Brody leaned forward so his mouth was almost there. But instead of laying it on me, he inhaled, long and deep, smelling me. *There.*

My body was hotter than the flames of the fire behind him.

His eyes darted up, his breath kissing my pussy, sending little spasms of pleasure through my body.

“If you want my penance to be kneeling at your feet and eating your pussy every day for the rest of my life, I’ll gladly serve my sentence,” he whispered, his voice rough.

I gaped at him, unable to speak, barely able to think.

But I didn’t have time to think. Because he dove right in. No more toying with me, no more whispered words that made promises of forever and made me question everything.

No. There was just pure, mind-blowing pleasure.

His mouth moved against the sensitive skin of my pussy with an expertise and ferocity I’d never experienced in my life.

I came what felt like immediately, my body splitting into 1,001 pieces, the world falling away around me. All that existed was me and Brody and Brody’s mouth.

He didn’t pause as my orgasm racked over me, didn’t give me any reprieve. If anything, his glorious assault became more enthusiastic. I barely had time to recover from the earth-shattering first waves of pleasure before another orgasm took over my body.

Brody lapped at me with reckless abandon, gripping my hips hard enough to bruise, holding me tight to his mouth.

I didn’t know whether I wanted him to stop so I could catch my breath and form a thought or keep going for the rest of time so I could live in this hedonist state.

I was both relieved and disappointed when his mouth left me. My breathing was rapid and shallow, my lungs burned, and I felt both weightless

and like my limbs were made of lead at the same time.

Brody's gaze was hooded and animalistic as he gazed up at me from between my legs. He slowly licked his lips, tasting me.

My own lips quivered.

"That will not be the last time I taste your cunt on my lips," he promised in a rough voice.

He knifed up, and somehow I came with him, the move effortless. I didn't know I was capable, but somehow, my legs found enough strength to wrap around his hips. Again, his stiff cock pressed against my now bare and incredibly sensitive core.

I cried out.

Brody kissed me. "Taste yourself on me?" he murmured against my lips.

I did. And I hadn't thought I was into that kind of thing. But I totally was.

All of a sudden, we were moving. Every step Brody took created more friction. My body cried out with more need even though I didn't think I was capable of coming again.

Brody ascended the stairs with impressive speed considering he was carrying me and I wasn't exactly light.

Soon, we were down the hall and in a bedroom. I barely took stock of my surroundings, not having the opportunity to before I was thrown on a bed.

The comforter was soft, smelling of pine laundry detergent and Brody.

He loomed above me, a picture of rugged masculinity, need pulsating from his very pores. The veins of his neck were taugth, his chest visibly moving up and down.

"Arms up," he commanded.

Without question, I did what he asked.

I expected from the look on his face that Brody would damn near rip his shirt from my body.

He didn't.

Instead, he leaned over me, grasping the hem before rolling it up with

devastating slowness. His lips covered every piece of new skin he exposed, setting my skin on fire with each kiss.

Finally, he revealed my breasts, my aching nipples. He let out a hiss of approval, his hand kneading my breast roughly.

“Gonna cum on these tits,” he declared, his eyes rushing up. “If you’ll allow that?”

My body shuddered as I held Brody’s ochre gaze. Again, not something I was normally into, but the mere thought of it made my pussy clench.

“I’ll allow it.” My voice was thin and raspy.

He grinned wickedly as he leaned down to put my taut nipple in his mouth.

My back arched as he sucked on it, desire building to almost a breaking point as he did the same with the other.

That was when his shirt was ripped off me by the savage hunger he was barely restraining.

I was naked in front of him, laid out for him on his bed. He leaned back, standing up, eyes feasting on me with the same intensity his mouth had before.

“Jesus Christ.” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “I don’t know how in the fuck I got so lucky.”

My insides twisted.

Never had a man stared at my naked body with such fervor. Such hunger. Such reverence.

Never had I thought a man would do that.

Most especially not Brody Adams.

Without ceremony, he pulled his shirt over his head, kicking off his sweats so he was naked in front of me.

And holy fucking *fuck*.

I’d known he was solidly built from the look of him in clothes. But the look of him naked was something else.

I went up on my elbows.

His abs could've been carved from marble, two jagged scars marring the otherwise perfect, smooth skin of his abdomen. His pecs were the same, chiseled, defined with a small patch of dark chest hair running between them and down past his Adonis belt to...

The most magnificent cock I'd ever seen.

I was not one to describe cocks as *magnificent*. I'd always thought they were kind of ... ridiculous looking.

But yeah, Brody's hard, long cock standing at attention for me ... it was magnificent.

And it was big enough to make me squirm from just thinking about it going inside of me.

"Keep looking at my cock like that, I won't be able to control myself for a second longer," Brody growled.

My eyes snapped up to his hungry gaze.

There was a phrase 'if looks could kill', but this one was 'if looks could make a girl come right here and now.' Yeah, that would be the phrase used to describe the expression on Brody's face.

"I don't want you to control yourself," I found myself saying. "In fact, if you don't get down here and fuck me dirty and rough in the next thirty seconds, I'm leaving."

I shocked myself with my words, the control I was taking of the situation. But I couldn't help it. The way Brody was looking at me showed me I was the one with the power here. He would do anything I asked. Anything I ordered.

His body jerked, and his cock pulsed in response to my words.

He moved in a blur, going to his bedside table to retrieve a condom, the foil crinkling before he sheathed his cock.

He grabbed my hips, pulling me to the edge of the bed then pressing his torso onto mine. "I normally don't like bein' told what to do, outside the

bedroom, most especially inside, but fuck, woman, you almost made me come right there and then.”

My body twitched as his cock pressed against my soaking entrance, teasing me, his lips brushing against mine.

I looked into his eyes. “You better not come until you’ve made me scream,” I told him on a rasp.

His eyes went wide, then he leaned in to kiss me fiercely. “Oh, you’re gonna scream.”

Without another word, he slammed into me.

Rough.

Beautiful.

Fucking perfection.

My back arched off the bed as his cock plunged in and out, not giving me a moment of respite. I’d worried about him being too big. And he almost was. I was teetering on the edge of pain from his cock filling me up. Except it was a kind of pain that made the pleasure that much more intense.

I threw my head to the side, looking at the snow falling outside Brody’s bedroom window, having an out of body experience.

Firm pressure at my chin forced my gaze back to him.

Brody’s face was inches from mine, his eyes copper fire.

“No,” he commanded, slamming in harder. “Your eyes are on me when my cock is inside you.”

I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut to avoid the intensity, the pleasure, but I was held captive by his gaze.

“Yeah,” he drawled, a vein in his neck pulsating. “You look into my fucking eyes, and you come for me, Willow.”

“I’m not going to orgasm on command,” I snapped. “That’s—”

He plunged into me again, arching upward to the perfect spot, making me see stars and orgasm on his command.

My nails dug into his back, breaking the skin there. He grunted, in pain or

pleasure, I didn't know. I didn't care.

I screamed out at the way my body exploded, unable to fathom that I was capable of feeling this way.

I was barely aware of Brody continuing to slam into me, his expression more intense, his muscles tensing tighter and tighter. My orgasm quieted, and my grip on him relaxed ever so slightly. In the next moment, with a roar, he was no longer inside me, the condom was gone, and he was coming in hot spurts, all over my tits.

I gasped at the pleasure, at an act that should've felt demeaning yet again served to make me feel more powerful than I ever had.

Brody pumped his cock until there was nothing left, collapsing on the bed, half on top of me, breathing heavy. His lips found my damp forehead.

"Never in my life has fucking been that good," he murmured, voice jagged.

I was not capable of speech, but I tended to agree with him, though I wouldn't say it out loud.

His eyes were still ringed with feral hunger, but they were softer now. My eyes were getting heavy as I regarded him, my body at its breaking point.

"Let me clean you up first, baby, before you pass out on me." he kissed my head again.

He leapt off the bed, and I appreciated his ass as it moved away from me, presumably to a bathroom.

Though I was tired, exhausted, there was no way I was going to pass out with Brody's cum still warm on my chest.

Except I totally did.



## BRODY

It was four in the morning. It had stopped snowing. The storm had passed. The roads would be cleared soon. And I'd be in charge of coordinating a lot of that effort. Small-town sheriff had a lot in the job description. Especially this time of year. There would be tourists not used to the roads, getting in minor wrecks, the normal post-Thanksgiving traffic.

I should be getting up. Making calls. Plans. Making sure there were no more accidents. But I had Willow Watson sleeping on my chest.

I looked down at her. She frowned even in her sleep. She was frowning the day I pulled her over driving into town. *Scowling* would be more accurate. Especially when she recognized me.

I winced at the memory. I hadn't known then why the breathtaking woman seemed to hate me on sight. The cop thing did that to some people, sure, but with Willow, it had seemed a lot more personal.

And it was.

I lightly brushed some hair from her face, gently tracing the crease between her brows with my thumb, trying to smooth it. Take away her worries. Take away the past.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't do that.

I wanted to hunt down her piece of shit ex and kill him with my bare hands. The need to do that was overwhelming. I told myself I'd left that violent part of me on another continent, I'd retired that part of me, stowed it away with the medals I didn't feel like I deserved.

But the killer in me was alive and well, and he wanted to avenge any and all damage done to my woman.

My hand stuttered at the thought. I kept a lock of auburn hair between my fingertips, rubbing at the silky strand.

*My woman.*

Yeah, I'd considered her that for a while.

Her story fucking tore at me. I'd figured that the reason for her coming home when she quite obviously hated it here wasn't a good one, but ... *fuck*.

My fist clenched around her hair, and she jostled slightly.

I forced my body to relax, not wanting her to wake up and spit fire at me. Not yet, at least. I understood that for her, the battle was far from done.

She'd submitted to me last night, but she'd done it angrily, with all of her fire. And fuck, her ordering me to my knees.

My cock stood at attention at just the thought.

I stroked Willow's bare back, the skin silky alabaster like the snow outside.

The death of her father had ruined her. I saw that in her eyes when she spoke about him, like he'd died yesterday instead of two years ago. Guilt for not coming back here drowned her in a weight that she didn't deserve to carry.

I hated that for her. The pain. But I loved that she had a father she loved enough to grieve so completely.

She was so much more complicated than I'd first thought. And pulling her over that day, I'd known she was complicated, from her first scowl. I'd wanted to figure her out. Wanted her to be mine. Wanted her to want to be mine for more than just one night.

On that thought, my hand crept down her back to her glorious ass, cupping it, kneading it then flipping her onto her back.

Her eyes opened suddenly, no sleepy laziness for Willow. Her cheeks flushed as awareness settled over her, then her body tensed.

Before she could open her mouth, convince herself that she still hated me, my hand went between her legs where her pussy was already wet.

Her body relaxed, giving into me instantly.

I laid my lips on hers, claiming her mouth.

She kissed me back without hesitation.

“I’m not done with you yet,” I murmured against her lips, my fingers entering her velvet warmth.

She let out a mew of pleasure, and my cock throbbed.

Yeah, I’d never be done with Willow Watson.

# *Chapter Thirteen*

WILLOW

I HAD sex with Brody Adams last night.

Fuck.

*I had sex with Brody Adams.*

Was I high?

First off, he was a cop, so even though marijuana was legal, I didn't think he was the kind of guy to partake, so no.

Was I drunk?

Two glasses of wine made me tipsy at *most*, and they were counteracted by a belly full of Brody's cooking, so no.

Was I mentally unhinged?

Considering the events of the past month or so ... maybe.

That was the only way to explain having sex with him last night.

And this morning?

I was as well rested as I'd been in my life and no longer emotionally reeling from the fight with my family. Nor was I vaguely traumatized from my minor car accident. Yet I'd slept with him. Again.

Had the best sex *of my life*.

And instead of scampering away once the sex in question was over with, I'd done the unthinkable... I'd obeyed his soft command of, "Go back to sleep," then let him *kiss me on the forehead* before snuggling into soft sheets that smelled of him and going back to sleep.

Now it was after ten in the morning, and I was in Brody Adams's bed. In his cabin in the woods. With his adorable dog lying on top of my feet.

"Shit," I whispered. I wanted to pull the covers up over my head and try my best to teleport back to my twin bed at my mom's house. But my bladder had other ideas. And I really needed a better game plan.

So I got out of bed. Told myself I didn't have a choice but to snatch the flannel off the back of the armchair in the corner of the room to cover my naked body. It was winter, for goodness sakes. Never mind that the house itself was cozy-warm. I inhaled Brody's scent from the shirt, as if I didn't smell him all over me. Feel him all over me.

As I used the facilities, my body was delightfully sore—like I'd had some kind of workout. I didn't work out. I'd gone to Geoff's fancy gym exactly once where I'd been judged by skinny, glossy women in overpriced leggings then had never gone back.

But I had hurt the next day.

That was the only time in my relationship with Geoff that my body had hurt from physical exertion. We didn't have sex so intense and so mind-blowing that my limbs ached the next day. Our sex life was vanilla, and I had an orgasm exactly fifty percent of the time.

It was that way with every man I'd been with.

I'd thought that was just how it was. Thought that sex was overly hyped by television and books, written by men to make women feel guilty for not feeling the things they were supposed to, and therefore faking it for men who didn't go to any effort beyond getting themselves off.

It turned out that kind of sex existed. In a big way. Brody put in effort. My cheeks flushed in the bathroom mirror at the mere memory of it.

The space was clean, shiny and modern. Another reproduction of the bathroom I'd bathed in last night, but this one with a bigger shower that looked glorious. He'd obviously done the place up since the cabin looked to be older, yet the kitchen and bathrooms were modern and expensive looking.

I wondered about when this was done, how he got the money for it. Small-town sheriff didn't pay well. He'd mentioned enlisting after high school. I wondered about that. I'd made it my business not to know anything about Brody Adams, but I was curious.

I pondered on those thoughts while brushing my teeth with my finger. Brody's toothbrush sat neatly in the charging station beside the sink, and I had the strangest urge to use that instead of my finger. Despite the fact he'd been inside me, using his toothbrush seemed much too intimate.

The shower was inviting, but I didn't want to wash Brody off me. Not yet. Though I should've wanted to.

There was a note on the dresser mirror I hadn't noticed before, a stack of clothes beside it. My clothes. Washed and folded, by the look of it. When in the fresh hell had Brody had time to launder my clothes, neatly fold them, then set them on the dresser? And how had I slept through it?

Oh yeah, I'd gotten in a massive fight with my brother, almost died in a snowdrift, then had the best sex of my life. That would tire a girl out.

His handwriting was neat, the note written in all capitals. Not because he was shouting at me from the page but because that's how he wrote. Bold. Masculine. Unable to ignore.

*Clothes are clean. I don't want you leaving this house until I get home. Which obviously means you will. So when you leave this house, it better be wearing my jacket. It's too cold for your thin blood.*

I paused, fingers clenching the paper and unable to suppress my smile. The second I'd read the order to stay in the house, I'd known I'd be leaving the first chance I got. And apparently, Brody knew that too. My gaze flickered to the jacket lying beside my clothes. It was heavy and would be far too big.

And it'd be warm. Because it was too cold outside for the clothes I'd left the house in yesterday.

Was it only yesterday?

It felt like I'd been here for days.

I looked down to continue reading the note.

*Coffee is ready to go downstairs, there's food in the fridge, the rest of the pie if you want that for breakfast. I don't have many traditions, but pumpkin pie for breakfast after Thanksgiving is one of them.*

There it was. A little piece of him. A holiday tradition when he'd said he didn't have any. My mind went to a boy eating cold pumpkin pie in a cold house.

*I'm assuming it'll be a fight to see you again. Just know I'm ready to fight for you, Willow. I still taste your pussy on my tongue as I write this, and I'll tell you, I have not yet had my fill.*

The final line of his note made my knees shake. I crumpled up the paper, intending to throw it—and my feelings for Brody—away. But I quickly smoothed it out against the dresser. And once I was dressed, I slipped it into the pocket of Brody's jacket.

I padded down the stairs. The house looked different in the daylight. Just as beautiful, all the windows showing the sun streaming in. There was never a brighter sun than when it glistened off the snow the day after a storm. I'd missed that. I hadn't realized how much until just then.



The smell of the winter air. Hot chocolate on cold nights. The crunch of snow underneath boots. I looked to the windows, to the scenery all around. There was no mistaking the charming nature of my hometown.

The snow outside looked packed high, but it was no longer falling. That meant the roads were probably safe enough to travel on by now. Or they would've been if my car wasn't in a snowdrift.

The house was quiet except for the clink of canine toenails against hardwood.

"Hello, girl," I greeted Velma warmly as she dutifully held her head up for a scratch.

It was nice to be greeted by an excited dog. My heart pulsed with hurt again, thinking about the house that had always had a dog in it until my father was gone.

Hurt mingled with panic as I thought about home, namely getting there. I didn't have a vehicle, and I wasn't ready to walk home, even if I had slightly gotten my bearings after peering through the window. Brody lived on the same side of the mountain as us, just farther up. He'd been lying when he said his house was closer last night.

It was about equal distance to his or mine from where I'd crashed.

But he'd taken me here.

That pissed me off.

I wanted to stay pissed off except the note was heavy in my pocket, and my purse was sitting on the granite kitchen island.

I rifled through it for my phone, hoping it still had battery and finally had a signal. It did, on both counts. And there were about a hundred missed calls from my mother.

I winced.

She must've been worried sick.

I hoped Brody at least had the good sense to call her last night to tell her I was alive.

“Will,” she answered, sounding cheerful and calm.

Brody must’ve called her.

“Mom.” I cringed at how sheepish I sounded. “I, um...” I tried to think of what to say. I owed her about a thousand apologies, but none of them were going to be right over the phone. “Can you come and get me?” I asked instead.

“Of course! My stars,” she agreed without hesitation. “I’ll be there in ten. I love you.”

No matter how long the conversation was, no matter how recently we’d seen each other, my mother always ended phone calls with, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I replied without wavering like I had in the past.

The storm had made plenty of things clear for me, namely being that I had been a bitch to my mother for long enough.

It was time to grow up.



My mother was at Brody’s within the promised ten minutes.

She’d been out of the car before I could close the front door to Brody’s house, slinging her arms around me the best she could while I swam in Brody’s bulky jacket.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” She kissed my cheek.

I let her, thinking of how I’d ruined Thanksgiving.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She waved me off, kissing me full on the lips before letting me go and peering behind me. “Brody’s place is lovely. I’ve never been inside. Should we go snoop through his underwear drawer?”

My mother was serious. Of course, she was. “Mom, I just want to go home if that’s okay?”

All mischief left her eyes. They turned so tender and soft, I almost broke

down then and there.

“Of course, it’s okay,” she murmured. “You can always come home.”

Then luckily, before I could cry, she bundled me into the truck—my father’s truck—and we were off down the driveway.

I didn’t speak for a while because I was getting my bearings. The truck still smelled of him. The leather on the seats was still worn, the console as clean as ever. The radio still blared with a little bit of static.

My father still existed in this truck, yet his absence was almost unbearable. I stared out the window at the snowcapped trees passing us by.

“Why didn’t you get another dog?” I blurted, looking from the window to my mother’s profile. “He was talking about it right b-before...” I drew in a heavy breath. “Right before. Obviously, I know why you didn’t straightaway, but I figured you would’ve by now. Why haven’t you?”

My mother glanced from the road to me, her gaze as soft as it always was. But there was sorrow there too. Bone-deep sorrow that she’d either been hiding or I’d been ignoring. “I wanted to,” she said. “But I haven’t had the heart to just yet.”

My mother not having the heart... an impossible concept.

I reached out without thinking, my hand finding her thigh and gripping it.

My mother looked momentarily shocked, then without hesitation, one of her hands left the steering wheel to lay on top of mine and squeeze.

My mother never withheld affection from me. Not when I needed it and not when I didn’t deserve it.

“You hate me,” I said to my mother, my throat suddenly dry. “You should hate me. For being gone for so long. For not coming back.”

My mother lifted our hands so she could kiss the back of my palm. “Honeybee, you are my sun, my moon, my stars... Every molecule of me loves you without end. There is no way I could ever hate you.”

Tears swam in my eyes. “But I wasn’t there. When Dad ... *died*. I wasn’t there. I failed him.”

“Your father thought, rightly so, that the sun rose and set with you, my darling girl.” My mother looked away from the road again, regarding me with a glistening gaze. “Nothing you have done or ever could do would be considered a failure in his eyes.”

“But the funeral—”

“Funerals are for the living,” Mom interrupted me. “Those who have passed on don’t need them, though I’m sure they love to watch.” She winked. “You know your limits. What you can handle. What you can’t. The kind of pain you can bear. I knew you wouldn’t be able to watch the earth take your father back. He knew that. And he would never have held that against you.”

There was my mother. Perpetually understanding, perpetually forgiving, perpetually loving, no matter what I did to her.

“But you needed me,” I argued, unwilling to let her let me off the hook.

“Maybe,” she conceded. “Selfishly I needed you. But the moment I brought you into this world, I understood that there was no such thing as being selfish in motherhood. Your needs, your wants, everything that you are will always come before what I need. No matter what.”

I was getting irritated with my mother for being so kind to me when I deserved a little cruelty. “But you advocate self-care, filling your cup before you can fill anyone else’s.”

She smiled. “Oh, a lovely theory. But in motherhood, there is no such thing as a full cup if your children’s are not overflowing.”

She peered over at me as we made it to our driveway. “And if you don’t mind me mentioning, my darling, your cup looks to be overflowing. In one respect, at least.”

My cheeks warmed. My mother had always been intuitive when it came to me, had known the first time I saw her after losing my virginity. Unsurprisingly, the woman was not chaste about sex; she was completely open about it, never once making me feel ashamed about my body or its desires.

Despite this, I'd never been a sexual person, and I certainly hadn't wanted to talk to my mother about it.

"Did you have some glorious makeup sex with our sheriff?" she asked straight up. "I know there's history with you two, but sometimes history makes the sex that much hotter."

The woman wasn't wrong.

"It wasn't makeup sex," I corrected. "It was hate sex."

There was a long silence. I stared straight ahead so I didn't have to see my mother's knowing gaze. "Well, even if it was hate sex, it looks to have done you a world of good."

I pursed my lips, unwilling to agree with her. Out loud, at least.

My mother reached over to squeeze my shoulder. "I'm so glad you're home, Bunny," she said, using my childhood nickname because I'd been born in the Year of the Rabbit.

I stared at the house after she parked the truck. It still hurt to look at it. But for the first time, I wasn't seeing it as a prison. I was seeing it as a fresh start.

I looked at my mother. "I'm glad too," I whispered.

Her eyes swam with tears. "And I'm so glad you got laid good," she added.

I barked out a sound between a sob and a laugh.

"I'm predicting Brody Adams will be sitting at our dining room table come Christmas?" She rubbed her temples with a grin.

"Absolutely not," I barked. "I'll never be seeing Brody Adams again."

## *Chapter Fourteen*

WILLOW

“OKAY, so not only have you gone full radio silence on me, but you’ve also been living out a Hallmark holiday movie and not fucking telling me,” my best friend accused.

I’d just returned her calls for the first time since I arrived home. Despite her being the only one who stuck with me when I was persona non grata in L.A., despite her showing that she was a real friend. Or maybe because of it.

In addition to telling her I was alive and well, I’d told her about my Thanksgiving adventure—if that’s what you could call it.

“It’s not a Hallmark movie,” I argued. “First off, Hallmark is PG at most, and this was definitely R-rated.”

Avery let out a squeal of delight, but I spoke before she could get too excited.

“And unlike a Hallmark movie, we’re not having a happily ever after. That was the end of our story.”

The words tasted sour in my mouth as I said them.

“I smell bullshit,” Avery scoffed, but being the true friend she was, she didn’t push it. “At least you got laid, and Geoff wasn’t the last man you screwed... Cleaning out the pipes is good for the soul and the pussy.”

I grinned at how crude my friend could be, but she wasn’t wrong. I’d definitely needed a palate cleanser. Except I worried that Brody feasting on me had ruined me for all other men.

I pushed that thought away.

“I’m not calling about that,” I cleared my throat. “I’m calling to let you know I’m alive, to check up on you, and to let you know I’m designing again.”

I said the last part timidly, but my best friend was far from timid.

She let out another squeal.

Before we were friends, she was the publicist for my brand. One of the best in the city. And she’d worked her ass off to get me talked about in the right ways, doubly so when I was being talked about in the wrong ways.

As powerful as Avery was, even she couldn’t stop the storm that came my way. But she had tried to convince me to stay with her, to not give up on my brand, to keep going. She’d believed in me when I hadn’t.

The truth was, I’d given up a long time before my brand went under. Right when my father died, my heart and soul went out of my craft. Every time I tried to design something, I saw my father’s hands working metals, gently and patiently teaching me the same.

Then I saw my father dying in that forge, the one that had led to the life I had created in L.A..

I’d lost my spark, my muse.

“It’s nothing big. In fact, it may not be anything,” I hedged. “But I’m designing, and I’m going to go to the forge today.”

I heard Avery’s swift intake of breath. She knew what that forge was to me. What my father was.

“Then I’ll start drafting the press release of WWW ‘s return,” she chirped enthusiastically.

“No,” I half shouted into the phone. “No.” I repeated, calmer this time. “Not yet. I’m not ready to return like that. I’m just designing.”

There was a pause then the clicking of laptop keys. “Mm-hmm, yep. Sure, babe,” she muttered, not convincing me at all.

“I’m serious, Avery.”



“I know, and I totally agree.” More clacking of keys.

I swallowed a smile.

“I’m just happy you’re getting back to your passion, Willow,” she said, quietly and more seriously.

“Me too.” I’d felt like I was sleepwalking through these past two years, swimming through my grief, drowning in it. And I hadn’t had the escape of my designs, hadn’t felt alive.

And now, well, I did.

“WWW will be back,” Avery proclaimed.

“Maybe.” I bit my lip, not ready to hope that big.

WWW.

My brand name, the letters interlocking in a long and elegant script. One of my signature pieces was a delicate necklace with the simple logo sweeping through mixed metals.

No one knew what the third W meant. Willow Watson was my name, two made sense. Three didn’t.

You wouldn’t know the meaning of the third unless you went to high school with me.

Weirdo Willow Watson.

The name that defined my high school years also defined my adulthood.

But for the third time, I was redefining it.

I just wasn’t sure what it meant yet.

## TWO WEEKS LATER

I was avoiding Brody.

Which was going pretty well since he had a demanding job, it was the busiest time of year for New Hope, and I was screening all calls, spending pretty much all of my free time in the forge or sketching. Inspiration had hit me these past few weeks.

Inspiration that had nothing to do with the steamy night I'd had with Brody Adams.

Nothing at all.

My new pieces were hard edges, smooth and hammered metal meeting as if in conflict. Gold and silver clashing angrily in pendants that became fluid.

Wide rings that were both delicate and tough at the same time. I'd set some of the crystals from my mother's store in them. Burnt copper stones—a great color to work with. It was just a coincidence that they were the color of Brody's eyes.

It was also a coincidence that the first time I stepped foot in my father's forge, I was wearing Brody's jacket, the one I had yet to return. And that I wore every time I'd been in there since.

I was getting coffee. Just getting coffee. Minding my own business. I needed the coffee because I'd been working nonstop, barely sleeping.

Plus, my mother had informed me that the chocolate muffins here would make me sell my soul to Hades.

I was in a chocolate mood and had planned on getting extra for my mother. Things had been getting better between us. Not that they were ever bad from her perspective. But now I was letting her in. Letting her be my mom. My friend.

It felt nice.

With my brother, it'd take a little longer. We'd had more dinners,

brunches since the ill-fated Thanksgiving dinner. He was still cool toward me, but most of his grudge had melted away. He wasn't able to hold on to bad feelings; he was his mother's son.

Life was, in general, looking up. Of course, I was still broke, forgoing working in mom's store because I was too busy making jewelry. Plus, the chances of Brody finding me there were just too high.

I was still living in my childhood bedroom, still the owner of a brand that had once been a big deal before it came crashing down, but I had hope.

The Christmas music playing in the coffee shop made me feel cheerful. I'd always loved the holidays. Loved cuddling up with my father while watching all of our favorite movies: *The Holiday*, *Love Actually*, *The Family Stone*. My family was a sucker for anything with romance. We played records all month long, I baked with my mom. The town went all out with decorations. Snow covered everything.

I hadn't had a white Christmas in years. Had worked through the holidays, never once engaging in a tradition when I was away from my family.

It hurt, it fucking killed to be facing the holiday at home without my father, but I figured he'd be happy I was here.

I was so deep in my own head that I didn't notice him until he was there. Like *right there*. Grabbing me by the hips and yanking me forward.

“What are you—”

I didn't get to finish, didn't get to drink Brody in in his uniform, with his scruff of stubble resembling more of a beard. No, I only got a flash of that before his lips crashed against mine, his hands sliding down. To my ass.

He plastered me to his body and plundered my mouth. In the middle of the coffee shop. The very busy coffee shop.

We hadn't spoken in weeks. I still hated him. Didn't I?

Except I carried his note around with me wherever I went. I wore his jacket out in the forge. I dreamed of him inside me. Of him teasing me as we

sat on his sofa.

I forgot those things as I relaxed in his arms and kissed him back. Enthusiastically. My body sang for him, waking up with his touch and remembering everything he'd done to me on Thanksgiving night. Suddenly I was hungry for him. Fucking starving. I was ready to claw at his clothes, tear them off right there so I could feel his skin on mine, get his cock inside me.

But just as soon as I was about to lose all of my inhibitions, Brody broke off the kiss. But he didn't let go of me. His arms were still around me, his hand on my ass, face inches from mine. His gaze roved over me, drinking me in. No, *feasting* on me. Looking at me as if we'd been apart for years, as if he were starving and I was a banquet.

My knees shook with the effort it took to stay standing. But I wasn't even holding my weight.

Brody was.

Then it dawned on me... Brody just kissed the ever-loving shit out of me in broad daylight. In a crowded coffee shop.

And I was supposed to hate him.

I opened my mouth.

Brody covered his lips with mine, silencing me.

For someone who was supposed to hate him, I sure kissed him back. For the second time.

His eyes were lazy as he pulled back again.

"You want to yell at me, you can do it tonight," he drawled before I could speak. "I'm pickin' you up from your place at eight. You're comin' to mine. I'm gonna cook for you, eat you in front of the fire, and take you to bed again."

He spoke low, low enough to make sure that no one heard what he said.

But still... People didn't speak of going down on each other in crowded coffee shops.

Except they did.

He did.

And I kind of liked it.

He grinned wickedly as if he could tell he just soaked my panties. He kissed me hard, fast and closed-mouth, let me go, then walked out the door before I could even attempt to argue with him.

I watched, slack-jawed as he disappeared from view.

I shook myself, looking around the coffee shop. Most eyes were on me. My cheeks flushed as I locked eyes with a woman a little younger than me. She had on earmuffs, a big coat and an expensive purse.

“Girl, that was fucking amazing,” she grinned at me.

I opened my mouth to argue with her.

But I couldn't.

It was fucking amazing.

## BRODY

Word got around fast in small towns. Especially when you were the sheriff and you kissed your woman in the busiest coffee shop in town at the busiest time of day.

I'd done that on purpose.

Willow had been avoiding me. Which I'd half expected. She still wanted to hate me. That made sense. She was strong-willed. And sex, even if it was the best sex of her life—it was certainly the best of mine—wasn't going to erase the past.

I'd let her avoid me. Because of my plan. I was going to catch her off guard.

Which I did.

And fuck if it made my cock hard to see her eyes go lazy with need then alight with fire when she realized what had happened.

There she was... The spitfire. My spitfire.

And despite her protests, she'd be coming to my place tonight. Because I knew she felt it too. Whatever the fuck it was between us. Knew that she couldn't fight it. She'd kissed me back. She would've let me fuck her on the counter of the coffee shop if we'd kept going. I would've done it if it wasn't illegal.

I couldn't do things like that, being the sheriff. And I didn't want anyone seeing my woman come. That was for me and for me only.

I was at Kelly's out of habit more than anything else. Killing time before I went to get Willow. It was my routine, come here for one beer after work. But that was when I didn't have anyone but Velma waiting for me at home.

I liked the idea of Willow waiting for me at home.

Except she said she hated it in New Hope, was planning on leaving as soon as she could. That sent my mind reeling. One fuck and I was addicted.

No, I'd been addicted before that. The idea of Willow going anywhere filled me with dread.

I was so in my head that I'd approached the bar and hadn't realized who I was standing beside. My old high school buddy who I'd avoided these past few weeks.

"Fuck, bro, up here!" Sam grinned lewdly, holding up a meaty palm for a high five. "You banged it out with the ugly duckling. How was it? I bet she's a fuckin' freak in the sack, the weirdos always are."

I didn't consider myself an overly reactive person. Actually, I considered myself quite the opposite. I was trained to be that way. Letting emotions rule my actions would've meant the death of me or one of my brothers.

And now as town sheriff, I had to resist the urge to break asshole's noses even though I really wanted to or they really deserved it. I had to be the cooler head.

My head was not cool when I plowed my fist through the face of the idiot I'd once considered a close friend.

He writhed on the ground, groaning, blood pouring from his nose.

"What the *fuck*, m-man?" he spluttered.

Mindful of my audience but not regretful of my actions, I looked down at him. "You speak one more fucking word about my woman, I'll end you."

Deciding it was time for a new routine, I turned and went in the direction of the door, ignoring the cheers from around me.

"I'm pressing charges!" he yelled at my back.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I muttered, striding out the door.

I wasn't fucking around anymore. I was going to get my woman.

## WILLOW

I told myself I wasn't going to be waiting for Brody tonight. That I'd be taking a drive in my luckily retrieved car. That I'd check into a motel. Or I'd tell my mother to simply ignore him at the door.

Except I still couldn't afford a motel.

There wasn't a blizzard, so technically, I could've taken a drive. But I didn't.

And my mother certainly wouldn't ignore Brody Adams at the door. She hadn't mentioned him again, but I knew that she was hoping for some kind of romance.

I was determined that no romance would be had.

That's why I was waiting at the door at eight. I had put on red, lacy underwear for confidence. Same with the tight jeans and bright red turtleneck sweater that hugged my curves and showed off a sliver of my stomach.

I'd blow-dried my hair wild and long, in the '90s style blow-dry, my makeup was light, but I'd gone to the effort of putting it on.

For the same reason as the underwear.

Confidence.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach as the sound of a truck crunched in the driveway. I looked out to see his vehicle parking.

"Bye, Mom!" I yelled, wrenching open the door before he could knock on it and my mother could invite him in. We didn't need that.

Brody was already halfway up the walk when I slammed the door shut. He looked much better than he should've, wearing a black beanie, a bulky jacket with a flannel underneath, faded jeans and boots.

His eyes immediately went to me, my outfit, eating me up, and then his brows knitted together. "You need more clothes on," he growled. "It's below freezing."



My steps faltered at the look of hunger then concern for my well-being.

“I’m not planning on being outside for long.” I snatched his hand, attempting to drag him in the direction of the truck. But he stayed rooted. I wasn’t strong enough to drag two hundred pounds of pure muscle anywhere.

“First things first.” He drew me forward until our bodies were plastered together. His lips crashed down on mine, then he opened his jacket and wrapped it around me as he kissed me. With tongue. On our walkway. In full view of my mother, who was no doubt watching from the window.

Like in the coffee shop, I couldn’t fight the kiss. I melted into it and his warmth.

“First thing you do when you see me is kiss me,” he grumbled against my mouth.

“No, it’s not,” I snapped. “And we’re going to be talking about all this kissing without permission at your place. My mom is watching and getting the wrong idea.” I didn’t move. Only because it was cold and he was warm.

Brody’s eyes flickered in the direction of the house then back to me. “Feels like I had your permission,” he countered, his attention back on me. “And if your mother saw me kissin’ you, she got the right idea.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but it was cold, and my mother would only be a spectator for so long before she inserted herself into the story.

“Truck. Your place. Now. No more talking.”

Brody’s gaze heated, then his hands went downward. To my ass. He squeezed. “Like it when you order me around. Gonna like it better when we’re naked.”

My toes curled in my boots. “We’re not going to be naked.” I rolled my eyes. “We’re merely going to your place to straighten things out.” I stepped out of his embrace, the cold biting me as I did. “Now let’s go. No more kissing. No more talking.”

Brody smirked and stepped back. “Lead the way.”

I scowled at him and stomped to his truck, promising myself my resolve

would stay strong.



We didn't make it to the bedroom.

Not the first time.

We barely made it through the front door.

We'd been on each other, tearing at each other's clothes like animals. They were littered behind us, left in our wake, having taken off only what we absolutely needed to in order to get what we needed: Brody's cock inside me.

My jeans were twisted at my ankles as my palms pressed against his rug, me on my hands and knees, Brody pounding into me from behind. He held a fistful of my hair, yanking me backward with a blissful amount of pain to offset the overwhelming pleasure of him inside of me.

We both climaxed at the same time, him exploding into the condom inside me.

I kind of blacked out after that.

There was peeling off each other's clothes. Then there was Brody's frown. "You've been away for too long," he decided. "You aren't dressed for the weather. You are getting cold." His fingertip brushed over my stiff nipple.

I shivered delightfully.

"We gotta warm you up," he playfully snarled, lifting me.

That's how we had sex in the shower.

I got plenty warm.

Not that I was cold in the first place.



"Will you tell me about what happened to you after high school?" I asked Brody, lying on top of him.

We'd made it to bed, both of us with hair still damp from the shower. I smelled of Brody's body wash. I liked that a lot. He'd left long enough to make us both sandwiches and bring in wine.

He'd informed me he planned some kind of fancy dinner, but that would require both of us leaving the bed for an extended period of time.

*“And, baby, I don't plan on you leaving my bed until you pass out with my cock still inside you,” he'd informed me roughly.*

I hadn't argued with that.

So sandwiches it was. They were delicious. The man could cook, even if it was a humble sandwich on crusty French bread with shaved turkey, mayo and cheese.

Brody leaned to the side table in order to stow his and my wine glasses before settling me back to be laying on his chest. He slowly trailed his fingers up and down my spine. “Why do you want to know that?”

“Because I want to know *you*,” I said. “The you who isn't the captain of the football team, the bully. Because I don't think that was ever you.”

I didn't know how I'd gone from being sure I still hated Brody to doing a complete one-eighty. Maybe it was orgasm number five. Maybe it was him worrying about me being cold. Maybe it was back in the bar when he'd refused me because he didn't want me doing something I'd regret. Maybe it was him saving my life. Or naming his dog after the nerdy girl in a cartoon.

His eyes flickered with emotion, then his gaze became so tender, so reverent I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut.

No one had ever looked at me like that before.

As if he couldn't help himself, Brody leaned in to kiss me delicately on the lips.

“I wasn't good enough for a football scholarship to the Ivy League, much to my father's disgust,” Brody answered after lingering at my lips for a long time.

My hands fisted at the mention of his father.

Brody noted that, lifting them to lay his lips on them.

“Love to see that fire, baby,” he murmured. “But don’t waste it on him.”

“I can save my fire for whoever I see fit,” I pursed my lips.

Brody chuckled. It was quickly becoming my favorite sound.

“As you wish,” he kissed my head.

“So, the story, please,” I urged.

He sighed. “It’s not a happy one.”

“Neither was mine.”

*Not until now*, is what I didn’t add.

He rubbed my arms. “Not getting the scholarships was the best thing that happened to me. I wanted something else anyway. Wanted to do something that mattered. Wanted to prove I was a man, strong, something more than my father.” He shrugged. “It’s pretty cliché, enlisting when those are the things you want, but I was a cliché, angry kid. I became a man quick enough through basic training, though.”

It was impossible not to know he’d served. The look about him, the way he carried himself was different. Like he was dangerous, like his past was something more than football games and cheerleaders.

“War was nothing like I’d expected,” he continued. “None of the glory. Fuck, none of the excitement either.” He ran a hand through his hair. “We were bored shitless most of the time.” He looked off into the distance, as if he was seeing something far away. “Until we weren’t,” his voice was quieter now. “I was in for ten years. Left when I had to deliver my best friend’s dog tags to his widow.”

My heart stuttered over the pain in his voice.

I stroked his face.

He leaned into my hand, laying a kiss in my open palm.

“I didn’t know where else to go so I came here,” he said. “It’s that simple, I guess. Apart from my father, I love everything about this town. It’s my home.”

I chewed my lip. It was so simple for him. Sure, he had plenty of demons that followed him around, plenty of pain in his past, but he hadn't attached it to the place he grew up like I had. He sounded like New Hope was his sanctuary, and I'd viewed it as a prison all these years.

But I was starting to question that.

My eyes shifted to the window. It was too dark to see the snow that blanketed the trees and surrounding mountains. I'd been spending my days out in the crisp winter, the forge warming me, my mom bringing me warm mugs of coffee. I'd woken up without the sounds of the city, without the smog, the overcrowding, the clogged freeways.

I thought I'd preferred the bustle of the city, thought I'd craved it. But now, in the quiet of my hometown, I wondered whether I'd just been seeking the noise so I didn't have to listen to the voices in my head. The ones that told me I needed to let go of my past.

Even though you couldn't say I was letting go of my past when I was currently naked and tangled up with my high school bully.

But I didn't think about that...

"Now, are we done with story time?" Brody asked. "Because I remember promising to make you fall asleep with my cock inside you." He turned us to cover my naked body with his, cock poised at my entrance.

His lips brushed mine.

"And I'm a man of my word."

He was.

I hadn't thought such a thing was possible, but I fell asleep with Brody's cock inside me.

# *Chapter Fifteen*

BRODY

I DROPPED Willow off at her place the next morning. I hadn't wanted her out of my bed. Hadn't wanted her out of my house. But as much as I wanted to fuck her into oblivion, I had a shift, had responsibilities.

I'd fucked her plenty last night. The vision of her flushed face, the way her back arched as she came, it made my cock hard just thinking about it.

Which I couldn't do.

I was at work. So I focused. Focused on things that didn't make my cock hard. Like the future. Like Willow's future. She didn't consider this place her home like I did. She was in a state of flux, her life in L.A. ruined. My hand flexed into a fist, thinking about it. Thinking about the asshole ex I wanted to bury.

Willow Watson was not someone to stay down for long. She was already back in the forge, already had a creative fire lighting up her fucking soul. She was already a firecracker that day I'd pulled her over driving into town, but there had also been something tired about her. Something defeated.

That thing was gone now, replaced with a grim determination and a defiant tilt to her chin.

She would get to where she wanted to be. I knew that for a fact. And where she wanted to be was not here.

I was mulling over that disturbing thought when there was a knock at my door.

“Enter,” I muttered.

“Sam Norton came in here, wanting to press charges against the sheriff for assault,” Hannah, my deputy said, leaning against my desk and cradling what I guessed was her third coffee of the morning. Hannah was a good cop, better woman, and a newly single mother to a baby who apparently didn’t like sleeping all that much. I’d given her all the maternity leave it was in my power to give, which was sweet fuck all and should’ve been criminal in my opinion. Luckily, Hannah was born and bred in New Hope, and had family to help, including a mother who took to the grandma role utterly and completely, and watched Maisie—Hannah’s daughter—while she worked.

“Did he now?” I asked, taking a sip of my own coffee.

Hannah nodded. Despite her consistent lack of sleep, it didn’t show on her porcelain skin which was as clear as ever. She had delicate features and a petite frame that fooled plenty of people into thinking she was weak. She was anything but. As the asshole ex of hers who’d tried to lay a hand on her found out.

“He did. I took his statement, of course.”

“Of course,” I hummed. We ran a clean department, and even if I was well liked by my deputies, I would never expect them to look the other way if I ever broke the law. They knew that.

Hannah looked like she was hiding a smile. “And then I went down to Kelly’s to get witness accounts, and wouldn’t you know... I couldn’t find a single person willing to corroborate his story.”

I swallowed a smile of my own. I didn’t expect people to do anything like that, but I wasn’t all that surprised either. We were a close-knit town, looked after each other, and I tried my best to do right by everyone living here. Sam did not. He was not well liked.

“So you and Willow Watson, huh?” Her smile tilted, teasing in her tone. A fond kind of teasing, though.

I wasn’t one to talk about my personal life, namely because I didn’t have



a personal life beyond one-night stands I had exclusively with the winter tourists because I didn't shit where I ate, and all the single women around here were looking for something serious.

I was not.

I was content being the sheriff, with my cabin, my dog, and having a good fuck with a woman who knew the score.

Then Willow happened. And I knew I wouldn't be content until she was mine.

I debated over shutting Hannah down. She wouldn't be offended. She'd respect my need for distance and privacy. She didn't take shit personally.

"Yeah, me and Willow Watson." I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my jaw.

"I did not see that happening," she replied.

I frowned at her. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, I was two years below you in school, but I remember you, I remember her. You and Sam were rough on her. Well, you not as much. It was more Sam and the rest of the asshole football team. But you definitely weren't her white knight, coming to her rescue."

My jaw clenched, hearing her lay it out. I didn't like that someone I respected, someone I wanted to respect me, knew what a piece of shit I'd been.

"Fuck," I muttered.

Hannah put her hand on my shoulder. "You're not the same person you were then. None of us are. She's obviously forgiven you. By the looks of that tortured expression, you've got to forgive yourself."

I snorted. "You talking in fortune cookies now, Fields?"

She laughed. "Nah, I'm just sentimental now that I've got a kid. Or maybe I've completely lost my mind since she's decided screaming at three in the morning is her new favorite sport."

I winced. "You need the rest of the day off?"

“Fuck no,” she rubbed her eyes. “This is the only peace I get. Don’t get me wrong. I love her more than life, but I’m not exactly the stay-at-home mom, baking cookies type of woman.”

I smiled at that. Despite her small stature, delicate and feminine features, Hannah was not that. Her golden hair was always slicked back in a severe bun, she never wore a lick of makeup—though she didn’t need it; she was pretty naturally, though I’d never look at her that way because I was her boss, and I thought of her as a kid despite our slim age difference. She worked out daily, and all of her small muscles were defined, powerful.

“Better get back to this statement.” She held up the thin file. “I’m thinking that Sam had too much to drink, slipped and fell, then had an unfortunate memory lapse as to how the incident occurred.”

I chuckled. “You don’t want my statement?”

Again, I wasn’t a dirty cop. If my deputy asked me what happened, I’d tell her straight, on the record, come what may.

“Nope,” her espresso eyes twinkled, popping the P with a wink.

As much as I wasn’t a dirty cop, I was happy that I didn’t have to deal with the paperwork.

She turned to leave but paused before looking back. “Happy for you, boss. You deserve it.”

I pursed my lips, leaning back in my chair.

There were a lot of things I was sure about in this world, top of the list being I didn’t deserve Willow Watson.

But I’d have her anyway.

# WILLOW

## ONE WEEK LATER

Something had come over me. Beyond getting back into my father's forge, making jewelry again and not totally hating living in New Hope.

I would go so far as to say I was liking it. Especially as Christmas got closer, and I became wrapped up in traditions I'd made myself forget.

Then there was Brody. Me and Brody.

And there was definitely a me and Brody.

I'd stopped fighting it.

Sure, I fought *with* him plenty. About being too overbearing, too worried about how many clothes I wore, when I was driving, and generally being an overprotective male.

We also fucked plenty.

The best sex of my life.

And it was no longer hate sex.

It was like sex. At the least.

I *liked* him.

Hence why I'd been behind the wheel of my father's truck, driving up to his house with a Christmas tree strapped to the roof, traditions on my mind.

"What the *fuck*?" Brody was out the door, still in his socks, the words muttered in an angry tone as I hauled the tree across his driveway. He'd gotten rid of the snow, so my boots crunched against the icy concrete as I balanced the weight of the tree I'd taken from the back of the truck.

"Willow, give me that," Brody demanded, appearing in front of me, brows knitted.

"I got it." I stepped back as he tried to take the tree. "I'm not some fragile

flower that can't lift and carry heavy objects. I get you're a mountain man, but you forget my father was one too, and he taught me his ways. Step aside." Despite my bravado, my arms were starting to burn.

I was telling the truth; my father didn't raise a demure little girl who didn't know how to handle herself on the mountain. But I hadn't been on the mountain in years.

"I'm well aware you're not a fragile flower," Brody bit out. "But you're my woman, and I will not have you carry that shit while I'm watching."

I gritted my teeth against the weight of the tree and his alpha male masculinity. I wanted to hate it. But I liked it. Just a little.

Okay, a lot.

But I had appearances to maintain.

"You're not watching," I struggled to keep my voice even. "There's a box of decorations in the car. You can grab those. I don't want to argue. I'm cold, and once the tree is decorated, I'm planning on you fucking me in front of it."

If there was a sure-fire way to get a man to do what you wanted, it was the promise of sex. Brody's eyes awakened with hunger, but he still stood in my way, his jaw tight.

I stared-off with him, shoulders burning. But at that point, I would've collapsed in the snow before letting him take over.

I didn't know if Brody realized that or just decided to let me have a win. Either way, he stepped aside. My muscles thanked him, and I gave him a scowl as I walked past.

"I'll be tanning that ass bare before I fuck you." He swatted my butt.

Okay, so maybe I didn't totally win.

Then again, I thought of Brody 'tanning my ass' naked, and my spine tingled.

I totally won.



A few hours later, Brody had a Christmas tree standing in his living room, the lights sparkling against the backdrop of the fireplace. I'd bought some decorations and stolen the rest from home. Though my mother was aware of my theft and fully in support of it. She'd been unusually tight-lipped about my relationship with Brody, but whenever he came to pick me up or came in for coffee and to talk with my mother, she grinned like the Cheshire cat.

The decorations were the perfect mix between pretty and tacky. My mother was of the firm belief a tree—or a home, for that matter—should never look perfectly curated and always just a little bit tacky.

Which I thought I'd achieved with Brody's tree.

I titled my head, adjusting the final decoration—a crooked witch's hat—then stepped back.

Arms went around my middle, and Brody rested his head on my shoulder after kissing my neck. "I've never had a tree in this house," he murmured.

"Well you've never had *me* in your house," I told him smartly.

His arms flexed around me. "I'm well aware of that. Two things that look fucking perfect here."

My heart fluttered.

He kept saying things like that. Things that made it seem like he didn't consider this a holiday fling.

I'd told myself that's all this was.

It was getting harder and harder to lie.

"Didn't we make plans to fuck in front of this tree?" I whirled around in his arms.

Brody's eyes smoldered with desire as his hand slipped under my sweater.

"Oh, fuck yeah, we did," he growled.

For the next few hours, I didn't think of anything but Brody fucking me. I didn't think of the future beyond that.

But I couldn't escape it forever.

I also couldn't escape the dread I felt at the thought of a future without Brody Adams.

# *Chapter Sixteen*

WILLOW

I DRUMMED my fingers against my coffee mug. It was my second. Brody's was steaming in front of him, along with a donut. Not just a cop joke... I'd quickly discovered that he had a sweet tooth.

I'd also discovered that he read fantasy books, dog-eared pages of paperbacks, was a fantastic cook. That he got up early every morning, even on weekends. He was a tidy person ... outside the bedroom. Generous inside and outside the bedroom. He didn't seem to have a whole lot of close friends but seemed to be well liked and respected by everyone in town. He was a good guy.

And I was in love with him.

Everything about the Brody Adams of today was utterly loveable. And the Brody Adams from years ago I'd hated? He didn't exist anymore. And even then, he hadn't been who I'd thought he was.

People rarely were.

I wasn't the Willow I was back then. I wasn't the Willow I was three months ago.

But there were decisions to be made. Yeah, life was looking up for me. I could pay for coffee and donuts. I might not have been able to pay for a whole lot more. Like an entire store. Like a relaunch.

I thought about the call I'd gotten yesterday from an old buyer from a department store with an offer. A really fucking good one.



I thought about the jewelry that I'd made this past month in my father's forge. Nothing like the stuff that had launched my brand.

Better.

Much better.

And now I had the means to continue making it so.

I thought back to yesterday.

My mother and I were having coffee. Talking about the upcoming Christmas dinner when she'd not so slyly asked if Brody would be joining us.

I'd bitten my lip, then said I'd have to ask him. Said he might be working. I was hedging my bets, especially since my mother barely restrained a squeal of delight.

"Mom," I warned.

She held up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, I'll stop. But let me just say, you'd make gorgeous babies."

"Mom!" I shouted then.

"Subject change time," she whispered, reaching into her purse to retrieve an envelope, sliding it across the table.

"What's this?" I asked.

Mom shrugged. "Open it and find out."

I opened the envelope and found a check. Addressed to me. With a really big number on it.

I gaped at my mother. "What is this?"

"This is you getting WWW back up and running. You're designing now. It's time." She sipped from her coffee like it was no big deal. But I knew from her eyes it was. That it had been killing her to watch me struggle.

I blinked away tears. "Mom, I can't accept this."

"You can and you will," she said firmly. "Your father was a cheap bastard. When I started making good money off the store, he started squirreling it away so I couldn't spend it all on alpacas and yurts."

I didn't even mention the fact that there was both a yurt and two alpacas

in our backyard.

“I have this and more,” she continued. “I’m actually quite a wealthy woman.” She beamed. “And as one, I’d like to see my daughter take over the world with her talent. And now that I see you’ve found your muse, it’s the perfect time.”

“I d-don’t know what to say,” I stuttered.

“Tiddlywinks,” my mother scoffed.

I stared at her.

“It’s a fun word to say.”

“Mom...”

“Honey, you know money is just numbers on a screen to me. My daughter’s happiness is priceless. Seeing you coming back here, knowing what you’d gone through, it stripped me down to my core. But now I see the light in you. And I want to contribute.” She nodded to the check. “That’s my small way of doing so.”

“This is not small,” I argued, tapping the check.

“Like I said, I’m a wealthy woman.”

“Are you sure?” Various emotions swirled through me as my fingers trailed over the amount that would indeed give me the opportunity to relaunch my brand.

“I’ve never been surer about anything in my life,” she patted my hand. “Well, other than my love for your father and that the FBI killed Marilyn.”

I bit back my smile. “I have a condition,” I said.

She tilted her head. “I’m not seasoned at gifting money, but I think it’s the giver who stipulates things.”

As if my mother would add strings to anything she’d given in her life.

“I want the launch of my brand and the online exclusive stockist in Colorado to be Trix.”

My mother’s eyes warmed. “I think we can do that.”

Things had moved quickly since then. Thanks, of course, to Avery. She

had almost burst my eardrum with her screams when I updated her on the situation with WWW. She was already in full swing for the launch and taking over my social media. I didn't bother to try to slow her down. I didn't want to.

She was planning a visit to New Hope in the new year. She'd spoken to me about scouting apartments too.

Everything moved at hyper speed, and I had a whole lot to talk to Brody about. On Christmas Eve of all days. The busiest day at my mother's store, in our household, and I was guessing for the sheriff of New Hope. I probably should've waited until after Christmas, at least. But I didn't do secrets.

Hence our coffee date. Though all of the news seemed a little heavy to share over java with tourists crowding us.

I hadn't been taking notice of the throngs, a mix of locals in their sensible winter gear and skiers and tourists in expensive, impractical clothes.

But one stood out among the rest. Because he came forward and grabbed my arm to pull me out of my seat and then his manicured hands settled on my hips. He was wearing a branded puffer vest with a cashmere sweater underneath. Slacks and loafers, of all things. In the middle of winter. In Colorado.

"Geoff?" I squinted to make sure I wasn't seeing things. But sure enough, here was Geoff, hair coiffed, tan fake, teeth faker here in the flesh. I looked to the entrance. Brody would be here any minute. He was never late. Turned up where and when he said he would. Geoff was late to every date and event we ever had.

"Wills," he drawled, touching my hips. "I'm so glad I found you."

I frowned at his touch, at his expensive aftershave, which he wore way too much of. "I wasn't lost," I snapped, not pulling myself out of his grip because I was still too shocked to see him standing here. "You were, though. Along with all of my money, my business, my reputation."

There it was. My anger. Slow to build but building it was.

I'd buried it away, this fury. I'd disguised it as shame, I'd transformed it into self-hatred and blame. Blame for myself. As if loving and trusting someone were something to be ashamed of.

"How did you find me?" I demanded, considering throwing the hot coffee in his face. How tempting it was.

"Your brand's social media. It tagged the location, and I remember you saying you were from a small town in Colorado, so I figured this was it. I've been looking for you everywhere."

He *figured* this was the town I was from. He couldn't even remember my hometown. I'd told him about it numerous times.

"Willow, you need to help me," he pleaded, his hold on my hips firmer.

I shook my head. "What I need to do is inform the government of your whereabouts so they can arrest you." I tried to step out of his grip, but he held fast.

I frowned. "Let me go, you're hurting me."

His eyes, I now noticed, were bloodshot and manic. "No, Willow, I need you—"

"You need to get your fucking hands off her right fucking now."

The voice boomed through the crowded coffee shop, and it felt like all the patrons looked in the direction of its owner.

Brody.

Of course.

Right on time.

His gaze was murderous, zeroed in on Geoff's hands on my hips.

Geoff, obviously still having some survival instinct left, immediately let me go. His eyes darted around the café, as if he were looking for an escape, but Brody was between him and the exit, and the line out the door made it impossible for him to push through.

Brody stepped forward. Though I knew it was physically impossible, it seemed like the room shook with the weight of his steps. His fury.

Geoff shrank back, making as if he were going to hide behind me, use me as a shield.

That figured.

Brody grabbed him by the scruff of his fancy vest, yanking him up to the toes of his loafers like he weighed nothing.

The size difference between them was immense. Geoff was slight, trim and manicured. Brody was towering, grizzly and muscled.

“I’m guessing you’re the piece of shit who ruined my woman’s life,” Brody gritted out, shaking Geoff roughly. “I’ve been imagining what I’d do to you if I got my hands on you.”

My heartbeat, fluttering with alarm, I quickly put my hand on Brody’s arm.

“How about we let him go, honey?” It was the first time I’d used any kind of term of endearment with him.

Brody looked as if he might not heed my request, but he did, dropping Geoff roughly so he stumbled on his feet.

I used the opportunity to put myself between the men.

Brody was breathing heavily, seething with fury.

“What are you planning on doing here?” I asked him.

His eyes were still on Geoff. “Beating him within an inch of his life sounds appealing.”

I stared at Brody. The man who looked dangerous, imposing but never used those looks to make me feel like he was violent.

Except for right now.

“You’re the sheriff,” I reminded him, clutching his shirt and nodding to his badge. “You cannot beat the shit out of people because you don’t like their past actions.”

His furious gaze ripped from where I assumed Geoff was standing. If he had any smarts about him, he would’ve run for the hills. But Geoff, despite his Ivy League education, did not have any smarts.

“Right now, I’m not the sheriff. I’m the man whose woman was hurt by that *fuck*,” he spat the word through his teeth like it was something that could hit the sidewalk. His eyes darted back to Geoff, glittering with a barely contained violence I hadn’t seen before. The violence that showed me the man he might’ve been in the past.

It was easy to forget that Brody Adams, the current sheriff, my old bully, my new—boyfriend?—had also once been some kind of special ops soldier. Had been a deadly, highly trained, dangerous individual.

It was impossible to forget all that in that moment. And so help me God, I found it hot as hell.

I grasped his stubbled chin in my hands, forcing his face downward, toward mine. “As much as it’s ... *sweet* that you think beating up my ex is a nice gesture, can we maybe do something more traditional? Flowers? Chocolate? Steak dinner?”

Brody just blinked as my words filtered past all that masculine rage I’d previously thought myself too evolved to find attractive. My panties made a liar out of me.

“But he ruined your life.”

I tilted my head to regard him and ponder that statement. Yes, Geoff had ruined my business, decimated my finances, and then demolished my reputation—in certain circles, at least, circles I now knew I didn’t need to be a part of—but had he ruined my life?

“A couple of months ago, I might’ve agreed with you,” I cupped his cheeks. “But from where I’m standing, my life doesn’t seem all that ruined.”

I whispered the last part. Because I was kind of a coward. Brody had been speaking freely about his feelings, yet I’d been keeping mine close to my chest, still afraid of getting hurt.

Brody’s eyes no longer blazed with fury as he regarded me. No, they were twinkling now. With tenderness.

I would say love, but that was utterly ridiculous. It was ridiculous for one

of us—me—to be feeling that. He couldn't be too.

Before he could say anything, a flash of purple distracted me.

I didn't know whether it was a coincidence, whether word really did travel that fast in small towns or my mother really was clairvoyant like she claimed to be. However she found herself in the coffee shop didn't matter, because she found Geoff, made a beeline for him, then didn't hesitate to plow her fist through his face.

My mother.

The petite woman who wouldn't harm a honeybee. Who had never so much raised her voice in anger let alone a fist. Punched my ex-fiancé. In the face.

I gasped as he crumpled to the floor.

She stood over him. "That's for hurting my little girl."

My eyes were wide as I took my mother in. Brody's were not. They were alight with delight, his mouth turned up in satisfaction.

"Sheriff." Mom turned to him, straightening her scarves. "I think there's a fugitive for you to apprehend."

Then she walked over to me and kissed me full on the lips. "We'll see you both for Christmas dinner tomorrow," she said. "Bring pie." Then she sauntered off from the café.

# CHRISTMAS EVE

## WILLOW

In all of the excitement of the afternoon—Geoff turning up in New Hope, being threatened by Brody, punched by my mother, then arrested by Brody—I hadn't been able to inform him of my news or my plans.

He'd been tied up with the paperwork it took to transfer someone wanted out of state. I'd met him at his place because we'd already made plans to spend Christmas Eve together.

I hadn't mentioned going to Christmas dinner at my mother's house, but I assumed that's what we'd both be doing.

My mother had her own Christmas Eve tradition with her local 'coven' which I did not partake in.

Instead, I'd gone to Brody's, cooked us some Christmas Eve fettuccine—an ode to *The Holiday*—put on a movie, then curled up with him after he told me Geoff was 'taken care of.'

"You don't mean dead, right?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "No, baby. With the proper authorities."

I nodded. "Just checking."

Deciding that I'd utilized enough brain power thinking about Geoff, I changed the subject, putting down my mug of hot cider—my mother had packed a thermos for me to bring—and faced Brody.

"I know you don't have many holiday traditions—"

"I don't have *any* holiday traditions," he corrected. Then his eyes went to the tree, and they darkened. "Well, I have some new ones I'm a big fucking fan of."

My body flushed with heat, knowing that he was thinking about us



fucking in front of the Christmas tree after I'd finished decorating it.

"Yeah, that's a new one for me too," I murmured.

"Like that," he kissed my head before returning his eyes to me. "Making new traditions with you."

My heart sang with the weight of his words. He was free with saying those things, declarations that were far too intense and permanent sounding for how long we'd been together. He made it sound like it wasn't a question whether we'd be here next year with the same traditions.

I swallowed on that thought, my stomach pitching, and I wasn't sure if it was with discomfort or excitement.

Luckily, I had something to distract me.

I reached forward to my purse, retrieving the small, wrapped box from it.

I suddenly felt shy and awkward, looking down at the gift. Brody's fingers were at my chin, tilting it upward in seconds.

"You'll never lower those stunning eyes to me," he murmured.

My heart melting, I cleared my throat. "Well, one of our family traditions is that we each get to open one Christmas gift on Christmas Eve."

I handed him the box.

He looked from me to the box. His eyes were soft. The deadly man from this afternoon was nowhere to be seen.

His large fingers gently worked at the wrapping, opening the velvet box to reveal the hammered silver ring inside.

"I know you aren't really a jewelry kind of guy," I shrugged, "but I thought you may make an exception. It's the first thing I made in my father's forge. Wearing your jacket, the night after Thanksgiving."

I'd been up almost all night making it. I hadn't let myself say it was for him until yesterday.

The ring was simple, rough but elegant at the same time. The band was wide, hammered silver with an incredibly thin gold band running through the center. It was undoubtedly masculine but not entirely what it appeared at first.

Like Brody.

“You don’t have to wear it—”

Brody’s hand curled behind my neck, then he drew me forward until our mouths met, kissing me brutally.

I returned the kiss enthusiastically until he broke it off.

Brody kept me close, our noses almost touching as his eyes seared into mine. “Besides what I’m holding right now,” he squeezed my neck meaningfully, “this is the most precious thing I’ve ever had.”

My breath turned shallow. Even though he shared his feelings freely, I never got used to the intensity of them. And how they felt right when they shouldn’t. Not after this short of a time.

Brody leaned back so he could slip on the ring.

On his left hand.

Fourth finger.

I opened my mouth. Closed it again. Opened it again. To say what, I didn’t know, but Brody didn’t give me the opportunity.

“Since we’re doing gifts…” He let me go only to reach into the pocket of his jeans.

“This was incredibly hard to find, but your friend, Avery, is a force of nature.” He peered up from beneath his lashes, presenting a box.

I didn’t know what to say first. “How did you know about Avery?” I asked, deciding that was the most sensible question, and that it would help me recover from the ring episode.

He grinned, showing off his white smile. “I’m the sheriff, remember?”

I thought about that. Even a great sheriff couldn’t connect those dots.

“That and she called the station demanding to speak to me, then threatened to disembowel me if I hurt you again,” he added with twinkling eyes.

I let out a chuckle. “Yeah, that sounds like Avery.”

“Like that for you, baby,” he murmured softly, running his thumb along

my bottom lip. “That you’ve got a friend like that.”

“Yeah, me too.” I missed my friend. I was so looking forward to her coming here, showing off New Hope. Showing off Brody.

A weird thought. I’d also limited the exchanges she had with Geoff, knowing she didn’t like him. I’d never been proud of my fiancé, a part of me knew he was the wrong one. That’s why I’d never brought him home.

“Anyway, now that I’m seeing what you’ve got me, I’m second-guessing this.” Brody’s words jerked me out of my thoughts, finding him gesturing with the box.

He moved to put it back in his pocket, but I snatched it off him with a grin. “Uh-uh, no take-backs,” I wagged my finger. “Plus, if Avery was involved, it can’t be bad.”

I realized my hands were shaking as I unwrapped the box. It was small. Jewelry for sure. Jewelry was not a first holiday together kind of gift, especially when your relationship started at the *beginning* of the holidays.

My hands shook even more as I ran my fingers over the glossy emblem against the velvet box.

WWW was stitched into the fabric.

I looked up at him.

For the first time in his life, Brody looked unsure, rubbing the back of his neck. “See, now I’m questioning this. Giving you something you made seems so fucking stupid, but—”

I held my finger up to silence him before opening the box. Inside it was a silver necklace. The interlocking chain was chunky, deliberately inconsistent sizes and textures. The WWW in the middle of the necklace was delicate and fine compared to the links around it. A tiny diamond was set into the peak of the last W.

It was the first piece I ever sold. I recognized it immediately because it was one of a kind. I knew that people scrambled after this particular piece, its scarcity making it all the more popular. And valuable.

My eyes were misty as I looked up at Brody.

“You hate it,” his expression was structured in worry. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you something new. I, just...” He dragged his palms down his face. “I wanted to remind you where you started. I want you to remember who you are.”

I shook my head, trying to shake the tears away.

“I fucked up,” Brody’s voice was flat. “I’ve never given—”

“Will you shut up?” I whispered against my tears.

Brody’s lips flattened as he stared at me, wincing as if he were waiting for me to lay into him.

I went up on my knees, holding the box tightly while I crawled into his lap. His arms instantly went around me. “This is without a doubt the most special gift anyone has ever given me,” I told him, a single tear trailing down my cheek.

Brody immediately wiped it away.

“Thank God. You gave me a heart attack, thinking I’d hurt you. I don’t ever want to hurt you again.” There was regret in his voice. An apology.

Though I could never forget our past, I’d stopped dwelling on it. I’d stopped blaming him for it long ago.

Apparently, he had yet to stop blaming himself.

“I told you, I don’t want you apologizing for the person you were before,” I told him.

“I told you, I’m going to atone for being the reason I lost years when you could’ve been mine.” He grabbed my hand and kissed it. “Gonna make it up to you for the rest of my life. If you’ll have me.”

I froze, unable to handle all the emotion, on this night of all nights. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’d like, very fucking much, for you to stay here. To make a home with you. Make a family with you. Make memories with you to erase every single bad one you have of me or this place. “

My whole world seemed to tilt. I hadn't been a small-town, family kind of girl. All I'd thought of was escape. Making myself something to prove to those bullies that I was more than what they'd made me.

Except Brody was one of those bullies.

And he thought I was more than even I did. He considered me ... his.

"You're serious," I whispered.

"Yeah, I'm fuckin' serious." He pulled me closer. "But I know that's selfish. Know that you don't want to stay. That you've got a whole—"

"I want to stay," I blurted. I hadn't even known I was making that decision until right now. Somewhere deep down I'd known that I couldn't leave. That I didn't want to. But now, here, in front of Brody, it had come to the surface.

He flinched as if I'd hit him, shock blanketing his face.

"As much as I want you to, you can't stay just for me." He said the words as if they physically pained him. "I don't want you resenting me, staying when you want to be somewhere else. You're only just designing again."

I fell a little more in love with him just then, and I wondered if it would be like that for me too, like my mother and father had been. Falling more and more for each other every day.

I hoped so.

"I'm not staying just for you," I told him honestly. "I'm staying because I have a mother I didn't realize I wanted to be best friends with. Because I have a niece I want to watch grow up. Because I have a brother I want to get to know again. A sister-in-law I want to connect with. Making my jewelry in my father's forge is part of the magic. Is what I have left of him. I don't want to leave that. I've got a town I've fallen in love with." My hand reached up to stroke his jaw. "And a man I simply can't live without," I added in a whisper.

His eyes were molten, hands a brand on my hips.

"Well, if that's the case." He kissed me softly and slowly. "You know, we'll have to get married."

I leaned back and arched a brow, even though my heart was in my throat. “You’re *telling* me we’re getting married?” I asked in a sharp tone.

He chuckled. The sound warmed my insides. “I know better than to tell you anything. Figured you may be agreeable to that, though.”

I pursed my lips, tracing the lines of his face, illuminated by the lights of the tree, seeing ghosts of the boy he was before mixed with the man he was now. It was just then I realized without the boy he was before, he wouldn’t be the man he was now. And I realized I’d go through the years of torment all over again just to be standing in front of this man.

My man.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I’d be agreeable.”

Just like that.

A happily ever after.

Or something darn close to it.

And wouldn’t you know it, just like my mother ‘predicted,’ he was sitting at the dinner table on Christmas day.

And the next one after that.

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# *Acknowledgments*

I have written a lot of books.

Writing, like reading, is my escape. It brings me such joy and it rarely feels like ‘work’.

I started writing when I was getting my Bachelor’s Degree. I’d stay up all night to finish assignments and books.

I continued writing through mental health struggles, breakups, makeups, moves across the world, sickness, miscarriages and finally, pregnancy.

Some of those times it was hard to write. Really hard.

But I had no idea what writing would be like with a newborn. I wrote this novella right after our rainbow baby was born. I thought it would be a breeze because newborns sleep all the time.

I bet all the mums are laughing as they read this.

I’m writing this as I watch my little girl wake up from her patented thirty minute crib nap.

Thirty minutes is what I get to eat breakfast (two mini Kit Kats and a banana), clean (sterilize bottles) and write these acknowledgements ... *and this is as far as I got before she woke up.*

Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, writing a book is hard. Writing a book with a newborn, even with all the help I had, is even harder.

I’m so proud I managed to get this story out. It’s what my soul needed in the midst of the newborn trenches. And I wouldn’t have gotten it written without the people around me.

**Taylor.** My husband. My baby daddy. My best friend. Watching you be a father to our little girl is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You have stepped up in so many different ways. From cooking every meal, doing every

dish, rocking our daughter to sleep, getting up in the middle of the night, the list is endless. This book, our daughter and my sanity would not exist without you. I feel so lucky to have you.

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And last but not least, **you, the reader.** Without you, dear reader, I would not be here. I would not be creating stories as a job. Thank you for making my dreams come true.

## *About the Author*

**ANNE MALCOM** has been an avid reader since before she can remember, her mother responsible for her love of reading. It started with magical journeys into the world of Hogwarts and Middle Earth, then as she grew up her reading tastes grew with her. Her love of reading doesn't discriminate, she reads across many genres. She can't get enough romance, especially when some possessive alpha males throw their weight around.

One day, in a reading slump, Cade and Gwen's story came to her and started taking up space in her head until she put their story into words. Now that she has started, it doesn't look like she's going to stop anytime soon, with many more characters demanding their story be told as well.

Raised in small town New Zealand, Anne had a truly special childhood, growing up in one of the most beautiful countries in the world. She has backpacked across Europe, ridden camels in the Sahara and eaten her way through Italy, loving every moment.

Now, she's living her own happy ever after in the USA with her brilliant husband, her precious daughter and their two dogs.

*Want to get in touch with Anne? She loves to hear from her readers.*

*You can email her: [annemalcomauthor@hotmail.com](mailto:annemalcomauthor@hotmail.com)*

*Or join her reader group on [Facebook](#).*

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Hollow Hearts

Deadline to Damnation

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[Wretched Love](#)

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Wrathful Souls

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Lies That Sinners Tell

Truths That Saints Believe

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