



STUCK  
WITH A  
*Billionaire*  
AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE  
NOELLE STONE

# STUCK WITH A BILLIONAIRE

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AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

**My billionaire brother's best friend who shattered my heart is back in town.**

Max was the boy I had crushed on.

Now, he's a handsome man with a chiseled jaw and a gaze that can pierce your soul.

He's a man of every woman's desires.

Trapped in my apartment by an unexpected storm, old feelings ignite like wildfire,

breaking down every wall I've built from my high school tormentor.

The darkness and cold outside fail to tame the flame on the inside.

Each touch was like a spark, setting off fireworks in my body and mind.

It didn't take him long to completely dominate me.

I want to give him my all,

But the whispers in town about his scandal haunt me.

I'm putting my heart on the line,

But for this *new* Max...

I'm willing to risk it all.

## LILY

**T**he sun peeked over the horizon, splashing Willow Bay with vibrant hues of pink and gold. It's always been said that dawn is the universe's way of telling you to grab a fresh start. Today, it felt especially true.

Standing outside my shop, Willow Whims Café, the name inspired by one whimsical walk along our beautiful coastline, I felt a giddy rush of excitement. The annual Willow Waves Summer Festival was only a day away. The anticipation of the familiar festival scents of fresh berry pies, cinnamon rolls, and the deep aroma of coffee brewing gave me a heady mix of nostalgia and excitement. The town center was already filled with old wooden tables adorned with sunflowers looked straight out of a postcard.

Each festival was like stepping back into a picture book of memories. The music, the laughter, the taste of sweet cotton candy... I couldn't wait. I shook my head, driving away that fleeting thought. This year would be magical, I was sure of it.

As I busied myself with setting up for the morning rush, the soft chitter-chatter of the town's early birds reached my ears. Mrs. Peters, our librarian who knew more secrets than the books she lent, was deep in conversation with Mrs. Sullivan, who probably knew the rest.

"Can you believe it? Max Dawson is actually slumming it back to our little town for the festival!" Mrs. Peters' voice dripped with a mischief that made me clench my fists.

I almost dropped the latte I was preparing, my hands trembling just a bit. Max Dawson. That name was a ghost from my past I hadn't been keen on revisiting.

Mrs. Sullivan gasped, "After all these years? What, did Seattle finally get tired of him? You'd think the festival would be too quaint for a city boy like him."

Mrs. Peters leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing. "Well, you know he's been in some sort of trouble, right? Wouldn't be surprised if he's here to lay low. Probably thinks we're just the pit stop he needs to escape whatever mess he's gotten himself into."

I clenched my jaw, irritation bubbling up within me. So, Max was coming back, was he? Just when I thought I'd left those unsettling memories behind, it seemed like the universe had other plans.

Before I could eavesdrop any more, the front door opened with a chime, a foursome of college-aged girls, almost certainly students at the nearby university, poured in, their bright voices drowning out the gossip.

I fought to maintain my composure as I organized the pastries, but it was a losing battle. My heart pounded like a drum solo at a rock concert. Max Dawson. In this town. Today. What in the world had I done to deserve this cosmic joke?

Forcing a smile onto my face, I turned to greet the girls. "What can I get for you guys?" I asked, the picture of small-town hospitality. But inside, I was a tornado of conflicting emotions. Having him back in town didn't just make me jittery; it made me furious, dragging up memories of high school humiliations and broken friendships. So much for the calm before the storm.

The café was alive with the vibrant chatter of its morning patrons. The festival always brought out stories, but today, one story in particular seemed to dominate every conversation. Max Dawson's unexpected return was the talk of the town.

Each whisper, each hushed conversation that wafted in my direction sent me reeling, my emotions tangled in knots. Sure, I felt a jolt of nerves, a shiver of anticipation, but also a strong surge of resentment. Max's return to Willow Bay wasn't just unsettling—it was downright aggravating.



In a town like Willow Bay, everyone knew everyone else's business, and Max wasn't just a footnote in my story. He was my older brother's best friend, and by that token, he'd been a near-constant fixture in my life. My secret childhood crush? Yeah, once upon a time. But admitting that now felt like a betrayal to my own dignity—because Max Dawson had turned from childhood friend to my personal high school tormentor.

I couldn't help but recall our shared past. Us as kids, frolicking in the bay, competing in friendly races to the shoreline, building sandcastles as if we were architects of our own little world. Max had had a much harder upbringing than I did. His family life was rocky, to say the least, and I often caught glimpses of that pain clouding his eyes. He found an escape with my brother and our circle of friends, moments where he seemed truly happy.

And then he changed. The adorable, freckle-faced boy evolved into a striking young man. Though the freckles disappeared, that devilish sparkle never left his eyes. Neither did his newfound cruelty towards me. As we got older, Max became less of a friend and more of a bully, his barbs calculated and cutting. The boy who once helped me build sandcastles now seemed hell-bent on kicking them down.

High school was a seismic shift that left me blindsided. It was as if I'd gone to bed one night with Max as my friend—the boy who'd sprint after the ice cream truck with me, who'd laugh at even my corniest jokes—and woke up to find him replaced by someone who delighted in making my life miserable. Gone was my childhood buddy, in his place stood an adversary who reveled in his petty cruelties.

I still cringed when I recall the day he dunked my head into a water bucket at the school fair, leaving me soaked and humiliated in front of everyone. Or the time he tied my shoelaces together, causing me to trip and sprawl across the hallway floor. With each cruel prank, each dismissive glance, he severed the ties that had once bound us as friends. The boy who used to be my ally in imaginary adventures had turned into the architect of my public embarrassments.

Why the about-face? To this day, I couldn't answer that. My brother Sean vaguely mentioned that Max was dealing with "stuff," but whatever that "stuff"

was, it erected an impenetrable barrier between us. When Max headed off to Seattle after graduation, it felt like the final bricks had been added to the wall that separated us, and he disappeared into a life that I couldn't, and didn't want to, imagine.

So, now he was back. The very thought set my nerves on edge, like I'd ingested a double shot of my own high-voltage espresso. What would this reunion hold? Would he remember me fondly as a childhood friend or as a favorite target of ridicule? Would he flash that same playful grin, or would it be tinged with the hardness of city life and unspoken scandals?

Amidst the festival frenzy and the reminiscing of the past, I was pulled back into the present by Cassidy. She was my 19-year-old barista, with a silver nose ring, teal-streaked hair, and a fashion sense that screamed she was a tad too cool for our quaint little town. But beneath her edgy exterior, she was an absolute sweetheart.

"You seem lost in thought today," Cassidy remarked, passing me a freshly brewed cup of our signature blend. "I mean, even more than usual." She followed her words up with a smile.

"Just... bad memories," I corrected with a tight-lipped smile, already regretting my openness.

"You mean bad memories of a certain someone coming back to town? Word travels fast in Willow Bay," she winked, tapping her phone.

I smiled and rolled my eyes, but couldn't ignore the itch of curiosity. "What have you heard?"

With a conspiratorial air, Cassidy whispered, "Max Dawson? Tall, dark, and painfully handsome? I've seen his recent pictures."

My heart clenched involuntarily as she flicked through her phone and then showed me the image. There he was—Max Dawson, the source of my conflicted feelings, now a grown man. The photo framed him in a swanky Seattle office with a sweeping city skyline visible through the full-length windows. Max sat on the edge of a glossy, wooden desk, dressed in a charcoal suit that accentuated his broad shoulders. The top two buttons of his white shirt were unfastened, offering a glimpse of a tan and a silver chain. His dark hair had an untamed yet

sophisticated look, and his hazel eyes... well, they seemed even more intense, if that was possible. The man in that picture screamed power, confidence, and an undeniable allure.

My voice came out more strained than I'd have liked. "He... he's changed." And not just physically. Gone was the boy who used to be my friend; the man in that photograph looked like someone who would barely remember my name, let alone the person he used to be.

Cassidy smirked. "Understatement of the year. He's like one of those guys from those billionaire romance novels."

Chuckling, I admitted, "Yeah, but I knew him when he was just a kid with holes in his jeans."

Taking a sip of her coffee, Cassidy arched an eyebrow. "So, what's his deal? All I've seen online is that he started his own finance company right out of college, became ridiculously wealthy, and now he's caught up in some mysterious scandal?"

"Sounds about right," I replied as I prepped the espresso machine for another shot. "After he got out of Willow Bay, Max soared. Dawson Financials was like a tech unicorn, but for finance. People said he had the Midas touch."

Cassidy leaned in, her eyes narrowing. "But there's a 'but,' isn't there?"

Exhaling deeply, I continued, "But then something happened. Some scandal a few weeks ago that nobody really knows the details of. He vanished from social media, interviews, you name it. Just fell off the grid, until today."

"People sure do change, huh?" Cassidy mused.

My gaze shifted back to the photo, to the well-dressed man radiating self-assuredness. It was almost impossible to reconcile that image with the teenager who seemed to enjoy making my life miserable. "Yeah," I answered, bitterness creeping into my voice, "people can change in all sorts of ways, not all of them good."

The bell above the café door jingled, pulling me back to the present. Mr. Harris, one of the local librarians, strolled in, the epitome of small-town charm with his bushy white mustache, straw hat, and tweed jacket.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harris," I said, forcing a cheerful tone.

"Afternoon, Lily," he nodded, eyes twinkling. "So, young Max Dawson is gracing us with his presence, is he?"

"Seems like everyone's heard," I said, reaching for the coffee pot to prepare his usual—black coffee, no sugar.

"Ah, that boy used to be such a firecracker, didn't he? Time sure does fly," he reminisced. The corners of my mouth lifted in a wistful half-smile.

"Yes, he did. And it does."

Mr. Harris leaned in, lowering his voice. "You two were close once, before he turned into...well, whatever it is he turned into."

My grip tightened around the coffee pot. "We were," I admitted, barely above a whisper. "But that was another life, one where he wasn't treating me like his personal punchline."

His hand gave mine a gentle pat. "Life has a way of bringing old memories back, sometimes when we least expect it."

I sighed, releasing a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Yeah, and sometimes those memories are better left in the past."

The bell above the door rang out, its cheerful chime so dissonant with the knot forming in my stomach. In strode my brother Sean, his normally neat appearance marred by a disheveled shirt and a loosened tie. His beard had crossed the line from "charmingly rugged" to "overdue for a trim." I could tell something was on his mind.

"Lily," he began, cutting straight to the point, "Max is back. Sooner than I expected."

I blinked, feeling my heart lurch uncomfortably. "Back? As in, here? In Willow Bay?"

Sean chuckled, but there was no humor in it. "No, I mean literally here. He's parked outside."

I found my eyes darting toward the café window, but Max was conveniently out of sight. "Did he say why he's back?"

"Keeping it close to the chest," Sean shrugged, sitting down. "Probably trying to lie low with all that scandal stuff. Keep away from prying eyes, you know?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Or maybe he's nostalgic for the charm of Willow Bay?"

Sean's eyes twinkled mischievously. "You can ask him yourself."

Before I could shoot back a reply, the café's bell sounded again. Conversations stuttered to a halt. Heads turned. It was Max, and he looked like he'd walked out of one of those suave billionaire TV dramas. He was casual but calculated—jeans, a crisp white shirt. But his posture? All CEO. His hair had grown out a little but still had that 'just rolled out of bed but look perfect' style.

The room seemed to hold its collective breath, like we were suspended in a soap bubble of time, fragile and iridescent. The murmurs restarted, but they were distant static to me.

Max looked different, matured by whatever his life had been since he'd left Willow Bay. He scanned the room, locking eyes with a few familiar faces, giving them the barest of nods. Then his gaze landed on me.

The air in the room thickened. We locked eyes, and it was as if every prank, every jibe, every cruel joke he ever aimed my way reverberated between us in that moment. This was not a joyful reunion. This was a reckoning.

**MAX**

**T***en minutes earlier...*

Leaning against the sleek figure of my black Tesla, I took a moment to breathe in the crisp, salty air. The pristine coastal town of Willow Bay, my hometown, lay sprawled out before me. The nostalgic hues of childhood memories painted every corner, yet they starkly contrasted with the sharp monochromes of the city life I had grown accustomed to.

I stared at the familiar wooden sign, etched in elegant calligraphy: "Willow Whims". Of course, Lily would name her coffee shop something quirkylike that. The playful chime of laughter and the soft hum of conversations wafted out from inside. This was it. Ground zero.

Heaving a sigh, I hesitated just a second longer before pocketing my keys. It was time to face the past, to brave the quiet judgments and hushed whispers that were bound to come my way. People here would know of the scandal, of course. News like that travels, even to the most remote places, polluting innocence with the harsh reality of modern life.

More pressingly, I was about to see her again—Lily. I hadn't been fair to her; I knew that. Back in high school, when life started becoming complicated, when the troubles at home escalated, I began pushing people away. I picked on her because it was easier than dealing with my own emotional quagmire. Yet, I couldn't deny that over the years, amid board meetings and business trips, thoughts of her and our small town crept up on me more often than I cared to

admit.

A group of kids on bicycles whizzed past, their laughter echoing the carefree days I once knew. Days of scraped knees, climbing trees, and sunny afternoons with Sean and Lily. It was a simpler time, a stark contrast to the world I now inhabited.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed myself off the car. The city's noise had been replaced by the gentle whispers of waves. The glaring neon lights swapped for the golden hue of the still-rising sun. It was unsettling, yet soothing in a way I hadn't felt in years.

I pushed the café door open, its bell tinkling a merry note that seemed so out of place given the gravity of what I felt. As I stepped in, the air thick with the aroma of freshly ground coffee and baked pastries, I scanned the room. I saw faces I recognized, lives that had moved on without me, eyes that carried a mixture of surprise and something less definable. Some gave me nods of acknowledgement; others looked away.

Ever walk into a room and get that gut sense that you were the very topic of conversation moments prior? Multiply that by a hundred, and that's how it felt walking into Willow Whims. As I stepped in, the room fell eerily silent, save for the soft jazz tune floating in the background. It was as if time held its breath.

I could feel it - the gazes, the whispers behind cupped hands, the obvious attempts to look anywhere but directly at me. There's a unique kind of unease that comes from being the epicenter of attention, and in that instant, I was its very embodiment.

Then I saw her. Lily.

Behind the counter, her eyes widened in that moment of recognition. She looked different, yet so familiar. The girl I knew had blossomed into a woman, a woman who looked like she could hold her own, who had built something meaningful with her life.

But amidst the sea of familiar yet distant faces, there she was, a beacon amidst the shadows of my past. Lily. Even after all these years, she was the very heart of Willow Bay's charm. Those blue eyes, deep and oceanic, still had the power to pull me in. They were filled with a myriad of emotions, surprise,

perhaps a touch of wariness, and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

Her wavy brown hair cascaded like a waterfall, strands shimmering in the café's ambient lighting. And that figure... Good lord. Even under the soft apron and a casual ensemble of jeans and a tee, her sensuous curves were undeniable, hinting at a maturity and allure I hadn't seen before. It was a far cry from the playful, innocent girl of my memories.

However, under the weight of her gaze, bravado faltered. We were both older, worlds apart from the children who ran wild through Willow Bay. But the air was thick with shared memories, with moments of joy, sorrow, and unsaid words.

The café's atmosphere shifted slowly, conversations resumed, but at a much lower volume. The townsfolk tried to carry on nonchalantly, but the air was charged with palpable curiosity. Every gesture, every whisper, and every sideways glance was keenly felt.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, the weight of years, of things said and unsaid, hovered between us like a palpable entity. My heart pounded against my ribs. I knew I had much to answer for, and as those hazel eyes met mine, I realized that I wanted the chance to try. It was not just a reckoning; it was also a door ajar, a sliver of possibility.

It was time to say hello.

Taking a deep breath, I started towards the counter. Each step was heavy with the weight of unresolved history, the echoes of childhood promises long broken. As I drew closer, the bustling café seemed to blur around its edges, until there was only Lily.

"Well, folks," Sean broke the mounting tension, his voice oozing playful authority. "Why don't we all go back to obsessing over our lattes, shall we? And maybe—just maybe—talk about something other than poor Max."

The room chuckled back into life, the tension dissipating momentarily. I shot Sean a grateful look, which he returned with a knowing twinkle in his eyes. He stepped over and clapped his hand onto my shoulder.

"Guess the prodigal son finally got his day in the Willow Bay spotlight," I said, more to myself as I continued toward Lily, who was conveniently obscured



behind the espresso machine.

Sean leaned in, whispering so only I could hear, "I half-expected you to flee the scene, you know. Would've made for a good story, don't you think?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "As tempting as that sounds, I'm not going to feed the gossip machine more than I already have."

"Really?" Sean feigned shock. "The finance tycoon couldn't even bring his private jet to swoop him away?"

I rolled my eyes, a smile threatening to surface. "Even billionaires need a break from the constant luxury, you know."

Sean grinned, "Fair warning, our coffee's the humble kind, if you remember – might not be all that much compared to what you're used to in Seattle."

"Tragic," I quipped. "I had high hopes for an espresso made with beans brought down from the Himalayas on the backs of sherpas."

We shared a laugh, and for a moment, the invisible walls around me seemed less suffocating.

"Speaking of coffee," Sean began, gesturing toward Lily, who was meticulously crafting a latte, seemingly indifferent to my existence. "You should try Lily's special roast. Unless you've developed an allergy to things that aren't gold-plated."

My gaze shifted to Lily. Her focus was steadfast on her work, as if my presence was the least important thing in her universe.

"Given the icy reception," I glanced around, "I might prefer the solitude of your guest room."

"Oh, what's the matter?" Sean quipped. "City boy scared off by a few glares?"

"Let's just say, I've survived gentler hostile takeovers."

Sean clapped my shoulder. "Well, you're here now. No turning back."

When I finally approached the counter, Lily looked up, her eyes as intense as I remembered, yet colder.

"Max," she greeted, a tense undertone lacing her voice. "You're a long way from Seattle."

I fought for composure. "Lily. So I am."

Tension hung in the air. For the first time in years, I was speechless.

"Rumor has it you're practically running the place now," she said, a hint of mockery in her voice.

"Only in the stories," I replied, tight-lipped.

We locked eyes, each waiting for the other to look away. It was Sean who broke the tension. "Hey, we've got a decade to catch up on. Let's save some for another day."

He pulled me away just as I thought I was gaining the upper hand in our unspoken battle of wills.

But as we reached the door, Lily called out, "Max, are you coming to the festival tomorrow? The Willow Waves Festival's kind of a big deal, if you've forgotten.

Her words hung in the air like a challenge. Before I could dissect it, she added, "Could be interesting. But do whatever you want."

For the first time, I felt a genuine smile creep onto my face. "I'll consider it, Lily."

With that, we left the shop, the tension melting the moment I was away from Lily.

"Nice," Sean quipped once we were out of earshot. "I only *kind of* thought she might smash you over the head with a coffee pot."

"Shut up, Sean," I retorted with a smirk. Despite the bad feelings, the thought of seeing Lily again at the festival wasn't just intriguing, it was electrifying. Willow Bay, it seemed, still had cards left to play.

## LILY

The evening had settled in like an old, comforting blanket. Willow Whims being especially inviting that night, if I did say so myself. Flickering candles adorned each table, their soft glow reflecting off the polished wood, adding a touch of romance to the air. In one corner, a string of fairy lights draped over the bookshelf, casting a soft illumination onto the titles, inviting patrons to lose themselves in stories while sipping on their favorite beverages.

Outside, the vast expanse of the ocean had turned into a canvas of colors as the sun kissed it goodbye for the day. Shades of burnt orange, vivid magenta, and deep purples melded together, painting a picture only Mother Nature could conceive. The gentle sound of waves added to the café's ambiance, a rhythmic lullaby for its patrons.

Across the cobblestone street from Willow Whims, the quaint town center of Willow Bay was winding down for the day – mostly, at least. The delightful, charming boutiques with their charming displays began flipping their signs to 'Closed', while golden light streamed out of the vintage bookshop, Mr. Swain, its owner, placing a chalkboard sign out front advertising a poetry reading next week.

A couple of cozy restaurants, with twinkling lights wrapped around their patios, were just beginning to hum with activity, welcoming both families and groups of college students from the nearby university. There was an

unmistakable energy – a blend of small-town charm and youthful vibrancy – that made Willow Bay feel like the perfect meld of tradition and fresh new beginnings.

I stood outside with Cassidy and a couple of other baristas, Jenny and Ben, arranging the outdoor booth for tomorrow's festival. Festive banners fluttered in the gentle sea breeze, the twinkling lights we were stringing up giving the café an ethereal glow.

"You think we'll have enough pastries ready for tomorrow?" Jenny asked, her brows furrowing in concentration as she adjusted a tablecloth.

"With the number we've prepped? We could feed an army," Ben joked.

Cassidy, scrolling through her phone, suddenly let out a chuckle. "It's crazy how big of a deal Twilight Tides is now. I mean, it's trending on Twitter – along with Max, of course." She flashed me a wicked, knowing grin as she held up the screen.

At the mention of his name, my heart gave an unsteady thud. I tried to play it cool, focusing intently on arranging some paper napkins. "Oh? People still talking about him coming back?"

Cassidy winked. "You kidding? Everyone on the west coast wants to know where he's gone. Not to mention how he was spotted at our very own café. You've got everyone buzzing, boss."

I let out a forced chuckle, my cheeks warm. "I'm sure it's just because he's a big city celebrity now." As strange as it all was, I couldn't help but feel a little tinge of excitement at our humble, beachfront town making national news – even if it was for being associated with that jerk Max and his scandal.

As the evening wore on and the preparations continued, I found my mind wandering back to earlier in the day, to the guarded look in Max's hazel eyes, and the sharp, undeniable tug in my heart when our gazes met. He'd changed, grown harder and more reserved, but beneath it all, I could still glimpse the boy who used to run around Willow Bay, his laughter ringing through the air.

"Why the dreamy look, Lily?" Ben teased, nudging me gently.

I shook my head, dispelling the memories. "Just thinking about tomorrow. It's going to be a long day."

Cassidy shot me a knowing look, her lips curled in a sly grin. "Sure, tomorrow."

As Jenny, Ben, and Cassidy became engrossed in a lively conversation about what they were looking forward to at the festival tomorrow, my mind began to wander, and all roads led straight back to Max.

God, he looked good. Those deep-set hazel eyes had always held a sort of mystery that I found utterly entrancing. But now, framed by that chiseled jaw and the slight hint of stubble, they looked dangerously enticing. My heart raced a bit faster as I imagined the feel of those strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me close. What would it be like to feel his lips pressed against mine, to get lost in the intoxicating scent of him, to maybe... My cheeks flushed with the direction my thoughts were taking, but I couldn't help it.

Suddenly, an image from our shared childhood broke through my daydreams. We were around eight, and it was one of those rare snowy days in Willow Bay. Max and I had ventured out to the park near our homes, wrapped in mismatched layers of clothing, our noses turning pink from the cold. Our laughter had echoed as we attempted to build the grandest snowman the town had ever seen. Every time our snowman would reach about two feet tall, Max would accidentally knock it over in his excitement.

After the third time, I'd feigned frustration, prompting Max to run around with a snowball, teasingly threatening to throw it at me. Eventually, I tripped, landing in a soft pile of snow, pulling him down with me. We'd laid there, side by side, looking up at the white sky, our hands touching, our laughter mingling with our breaths visible in the cold air. That moment had been pure, innocent, and filled with the unspoken bond of friendship. It was a bond that time hadn't managed to erase entirely.

My reverie was broken by Cassidy's voice. "Earth to Lily! Where did you drift off to?"

I blinked, coming back to the present and trying to shrug off the lingering warmth of the memories. "Oh, just lost in thought about the festival prep," I lied, avoiding her knowing gaze.

Cassidy chuckled, "Sure, keep telling yourself that."

I joined in the laughter, but a part of me was still back there, laying in the snow beside an eight-year-old Max Dawson, cherishing a bond that seemed worlds away from where we stood now.

I glanced up from folding one of the tablecloths for the booth when I caught a familiar stride in my peripheral vision. Sean was locking up "Dawson's Melodies," the town's beloved music instrument store, and our family legacy passed on from our grandpa to our dad then all the way down to Sean. The amber lights from the streetlamps caught the coppery highlights in his hair, making it shine almost as brightly as his infectious grin.

"Evening, folks!" Sean greeted with his usual enthusiasm, sharing fist bumps with Ben and Jenny and giving Cassidy a playful tug on her ponytail.

"Hey big bro," I greeted, still trying to manage the tricky fold on the cloth.

He chuckled, eyeing my struggle. "Need a hand there?"

"Just because you're taller doesn't mean you're better at this," I huffed but was secretly grateful when he took the other end of the cloth and helped me finish the job.

"You heading home?" Sean asked, as we smoothed out the tablecloth.

I was about to reply when he continued, "Actually, how about joining me at Harbor Hush for a drink? They've got a new bartender, and I hear she makes a mean White Russian."

For some reason, the first thing that popped out of my mouth was, "Is Max coming?" I immediately felt my cheeks warm up, realizing how eager I must've sounded.

Sean raised an eyebrow, a teasing grin tugging at his lips. "Oh, is that what this is about?" he drawled. "No, he's still hiding away at my place, claiming fatigue from the 'long and arduous' journey here." He exaggerated the last part, his voice dripping with playful sarcasm. "But I have a feeling he might show up for the festival."

I rolled my eyes, trying to play it cool. "Just curious. It's not every day a billionaire comes back to town, right?"

Sean chuckled, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. "Sure, that's what it is."

I playfully shoved him off, trying to hide my reddening face. "Okay, okay! I'll join you for that drink. But if you make one more tease about Max and me, I'm pouring it over your head."

Sean feigned innocence. "Who, me?"

We both laughed, leaving the cafe's preparations in the capable hands of the team as we headed for a much-needed evening of sibling bonding at Harbor Hush, the town's rustic seaside bar.

The Harbor Hush was one of those places that successfully merged the line between modern and rustic. With its low-hanging Edison bulbs, vintage maritime décor, and cozy nooks, it managed to pull in both the college crowd and the town's older regulars. The hum of conversations, the light clinking of glasses, and the 90's rock playing in the background created a warm and inviting atmosphere.

Sean was at the bar, speaking animatedly with the bartender, probably trying to haggle a discount or a new cocktail concoction. I took a moment to nestle into one of the velvet-covered booths, my thoughts wandering once more to Max. It was almost maddening how easily he'd become the center of my thoughts again.

Lost in my reverie, I almost didn't notice when Sean slid into the booth opposite me, two glasses in hand. "Buck fifty for your thoughts?" he teased, handing me a glass of amber liquid - my favorite bourbon on the rocks.

I took a sip, the smoky warmth settling comfortably in my chest. "You remember how Max and I were inseparable as kids, right?" I began, keeping my gaze on the swirling drink.

Sean nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. "Yeah, you two were always building forts, riding bikes, having picnics by the bay."

I grimaced. "So why did he turn on me in high school? I've been trying to figure it out. We went from best friends to him being so... cold. No, that isn't even it – he was a goddamn bully."

Sean sighed, swirling his own drink. "Lil, Max has always been a bit of an enigma, even to me. Maybe it was family stuff, or maybe something else, but you're not the only one he pulled away from. I mean, the shit he had to deal with growing up... that was rough."

"I know he had it hard. But still, it's not like he turned into some holy terror to everyone - I was the only one he actively targeted," I countered.

Sean put a reassuring hand over mine. "He was a teenager, Lil. They're notorious for making stupid decisions. We all did."

I nodded, taking a deep breath. "I guess I was just hoping, now that he's back, I might finally get some answers."

Sean chuckled. "Knowing Max, he might've forgotten all about it. Or, he might just surprise you and open up. Then again, he's got a hell of a lot on his mind with all the stuff in Seattle. Truth is, I don't know what's going on in that head of his."

The dim lights of the bar cast a soft, hazy glow around us. Sean took a slow sip from his drink, a pensive look in his eyes. "Lily," he began hesitantly, "have you kept up with the news about Max's scandal?"

I took a deep breath, the weight of the gossip heavy in the air. "I've heard a few things, mostly whispers. Something about him being a whistleblower?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah. It's all over the news. Apparently, he sounded the alarm on some massive financial fraud happening within his own company. But as soon as he did, the division in question came out and said that it was his doing, that he was the guy in charge of the fraud and now he's trying to shift blame. And the media's taking the division's side."

A knot of unease settled in my stomach. "That doesn't sound like Max. He wouldn't be involved in something like that, would he?"

Sean sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I want to believe he wouldn't. But the way they're talking about him...as if he was trying to escape blame by pointing fingers. I mean, there are even rumors that he profited from the scam before blowing the whistle."

I shook my head, disbelief swirling within me. "There has to be more to the story. Max was never that guy. He always stood up for what was right, even if it cost him. He might've been a dick to me in high school, but he's never been a crook."

Sean's gaze met mine, his expression earnest. "All I'm saying is, tread carefully, Lily. The Max we remember and the Max now might not be the same



person. I want to trust him, but who knows what the whole picture is?"

The weight of that possibility settled heavy on my heart. Still, deep down, a part of me wanted to believe there was more to Max's story than what was being portrayed.

We fell into a companionable silence, sipping our drinks and letting the ambiance of the bar wash over us.

Suddenly, the muted TV hanging above the bar caught our attention. The local news was on, and the meteorologist was gesturing animatedly at the screen which showed dark storm clouds converging over a map of Willow Bay.

"That doesn't look good," I remarked, my thoughts now shifting to the preparations we'd done for the festival.

Sean squinted at the TV. "Says it's expected to hit tomorrow."

I groaned. "Of course, on the day of the festival!"

Sean gave a rueful smile. "Mother Nature always has her own plans."

As we finished our drinks, the uncertainty of the impending storm mirrored my feelings about Max's return. Both were unpredictable, full of potential chaos, and I couldn't help but wonder how they would reshape the familiar landscape of Willow Bay and my life.

**MAX**

**T**he familiar sounds of the Willow Waves summer festival hit me the moment I stepped out of Sean's car: the muffled laughter of children, distant music echoing from a live band, and the faint scent of fried food. I'd missed these sights and sounds, but it was another life, a past I'd left behind. It was early in the day but that didn't matter – it seemed like the entire town was there.

I'd thrown on a simple T-shirt, jeans, and baseball cap, attempting to blend in. But let's face it, you can't hide a billionaire in a coastal Washington town any more than you can hide an elephant in a dog park. Regardless, the sunglasses I wore gave me the false confidence that I could wander incognito. I kept my head down and moved forward.

I paused to look at a booth that showcased intricate wooden crafts. Toys, figurines, and intricate jewelry boxes, the kind Lily would've adored back in the day. My mind went to her, that unexpected and tense coffee shop encounter still fresh. It was ridiculous how much space she occupied in my head given our years of silence.

"Max? Is that really you?" The voice cut through my thoughts. It was Mrs. Bennett, my old schoolteacher. The lady was probably close to seventy now, but still as sharp-eyed as ever.

Trying for nonchalance, I lifted my sunglasses and gave her a half-smile. "In the flesh. Good to see you, Mrs. B."

She clasped my arm, her touch grounding me to this town once again. "Look at you! All grown up and doing so well for yourself. We hear about you, you know. The town's proud."

I chuckled, the sarcasm rising. "Only the good parts, I hope."

Mrs. Bennett gave me a knowing look. "Every story has two sides, dear. And in this town, every story has about twenty interpretations."

I laughed, genuine this time. "You always did have a way with words. I better keep moving. Enjoy the festival."

Waving her off, I tried to recapture my earlier determination to simply experience the festival without the weight of the past bogging me down. Easier said than done.

As I moved, I caught snatches of whispered conversations. Some were undoubtedly about me, their tones oscillating between curious and judgmental. It felt like high school all over again – the outsider, the odd one out, but now with a layer of fame or rather infamy added to the mix.

I was lost in thought when I felt a sudden impact against my back. Turning, I found myself staring into a pair of wide, shocked eyes. I'd inadvertently bumped into Lily, causing her to spill a bright red drink all over the both of us.

For a moment, we both just stood there, her blue eyes locked onto mine, the weight of shared memories between us. The world around seemed to blur out, leaving just the two of us in this bubble of surprise and soaked shirts.

And it didn't help matters that the drink had totally soaked through her blouse, causing the fabric to cling to her bra and perfectly outline her breasts. My manhood twitched to attention at the sight of this hint of her body.

"Max Dawson, always making an entrance, huh?" Lily said, her voice less amused and more scathing.

I looked down at the spilled drink staining her shirt and my patience snapped. "Well, maybe if you hadn't been in the way, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Lily raised an eyebrow, her eyes flashing with irritation. "In the way? Really, Max? This is a public event."

I scoffed. "Fine, send me the dry-cleaning bill if it's such a big deal."

"Trust me, I will," she said, her tone icy.

Unable to help myself, I muttered, "I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

Lily's eyes narrowed further. "Now you say sorry? Ten years too late, I'd say."

"That's not fair, Lily. It wasn't just my fault we lost touch," I retorted, my voice rising.

Her laugh was bitter. "You left without a word, Max. You forgot about all of us as if Willow Bay was just a stepping stone for you."

"You have no idea what it was like for me," I said defensively, "the pressures I was under."

"Sacrifices? You're a billionaire, Max. Don't pretend you're the victim here," Lily sneered.

My voice took on an icy tone. "So, you've been reading about me? Is that how you get your kicks these days? Judging me from tabloid covers?"

"Well, you didn't give me any other way to know about your life, did you?" Lily shot back.

The tension between us was palpable, the atmosphere charged. "I had my reasons for leaving, Lily. Not that you ever cared to find out."

Lily's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "And what about the people you left behind? Did you care about how we felt?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came.

Lily shook her head, her voice tinged with regret and something else—finality. "You know, this town might be small, Max, but its heart is big. But you have to be part of that heart. You can't just waltz back in expecting to pick up where you left off."

Before I could muster a response, she turned sharply. "Enjoy the festival, Max."

I watched as she stormed off into the crowd, the space she left suddenly colder, my emotions as unsettled as the looming storm clouds above.

The rhythmic drumming of rain on the ground joined the beat of the live band in the distance. I was still reeling from the confrontation with Lily, and just as I was about to exit the scene entirely, Sean appeared, his brow furrowed with

concern.

"Hey, man," he said, a hint of caution in his voice. "I saw you two from the stage. Everything okay?"

I resisted the urge to laugh bitterly. "Do I look okay?"

Sean's eyes darted to the stained ground where the spilled drinks still shimmered, and then to the disappearing silhouette of his sister. "What happened?"

"Does it matter?" I snapped, my frustration evident. "Every time I'm around her, it's like stepping on a landmine. It's been one misstep after another since I got back."

Sean crossed his arms, his gaze hardening slightly. "Lily's had her fair share of challenges, you know. And you waltzing in after all these years, well... it's bound to stir up some old feelings."

I exhaled, my anger slowly ebbing away. "I get it. And I didn't come back to cause problems. Hell, at this point, I'm wondering if coming back was a good idea at all."

Sean stared at me for a long moment before shaking his head. "You can't keep running, Max. From Willow Bay, from Lily, from yourself. You have to face the past at some point. And from what I can see, now's as good a time as any."

His words resonated with me, and the weight of the past decade settled heavily on my shoulders. But before I could respond, the once gentle patter of raindrops turned into a torrential downpour. People around us began to scramble, trying to find shelter from the deluge.

Sean, ever the pragmatist, grabbed my arm and pulled me under the canopy of a nearby tent. We were closely followed by festival-goers trying to escape the sudden rainstorm.

"Well, this is unexpected," Sean commented, a bemused smile forming on his lips as he glanced at the rain-soaked crowd.

Water streamed down my face, and I wiped it away, trying to find humor in the situation. "Seems like I brought the storm with me, huh?"

Sean chuckled. "You always did have a knack for making an entrance."

I shot him a wry grin. "Maybe I should add 'bringer of storms' to my resume."

Both of us watched as the festival transformed into a chaotic blend of laughter and shrieks. Kids gleefully danced in the rain, while vendors tried in vain to protect their goods. The atmosphere, despite the unexpected weather, remained joyous. It was Willow Bay, after all; a town that took every curveball in stride.

Sean elbowed me gently. "See? Life goes on, rain or shine. Maybe you should remember that."

I turned to him, grateful for the advice but still battling my inner demons. "I'll try," I said simply, my voice almost drowned out by the rain.

And as the skies continued to pour, the uncertainties of the future loomed large. But for now, in the shelter of a canopy amidst the heart of Willow Bay, there was a momentary respite from the storm.

**LILY**

**T**he festival was alive with laughter and music, kids lining up for cotton candy, and adults enjoying craft beers and local foods. My little coffee stand was doing surprisingly well, given all the other attractions. Still, even as I poured a perfect cappuccino for a customer, my mind kept drifting back to my encounter with Max.

Did I go too hard on him? A part of me—a part I didn't want to acknowledge—wondered if I'd let the years of built-up resentment spill over unjustly. But another part of me, the one nursing old wounds, bristled at the idea of letting him off the hook so easily. It was a whirlpool of confusion, and I was caught in the middle.

"Thank you, Lily! Delicious as always," Mrs. Henderson said, taking her cappuccino with a warm smile.

"You're welcome. Enjoy the festival!" I replied, forcing cheer into my voice.

Just then, a gust of wind tousled the paper lanterns strung above the stands. The sky had suddenly turned a shade darker, a portent of the storm to come. I glanced up and sighed. This day was becoming more complicated by the minute.

"That... that doesn't look good," Cassidy said, her eyes on the clouds above. The first drops of rain began to fall as soon as she finished her words.

I nodded, and as I did, my gaze involuntarily shifted to where I'd last seen Max. He was standing alone, maybe thirty feet away, sheltered beneath the overhang of a food truck. He was alone, standing in the crowd like a ghost. Our

eyes met across the rain-tinged distance, and this time, the connection lingered. The air between us was thick with words unsaid, tensions unresolved.

I turned my attention back to the customers huddling under my stand's awning. I smiled, poured them coffee, and handed out pastries, the aromas mingling with the smell of rain-soaked earth. The festival might have been shaping up to be a washout, but life went on.

Yet even as I chatted with a group of teenagers about their favorite coffee flavors, a part of me remained tethered to Max. Our argument had opened up old wounds, and I wasn't sure if I wanted them to heal or fester. Was I ready to forgive, or did I want the comfort of my resentment? The rain began to come down harder, a loud hush sounding as the drops fell onto the awnings of the dozens of booths.

Just when I thought the storm had peaked, a booming clap of thunder ripped through the sky, so loud it momentarily drowned out the chatter of the festival. The wind began to gust more violently, pulling at the awning of our coffee stand and making the paper lanterns dance frantically in the air.

"Okay, this is getting serious," Ben remarked, gripping the counter to steady himself.

Jenny looked nervously at the electrical cords running along the ground, now submerged in quickly pooling rainwater. "Lily, should we start packing up?"

Cassidy, who had just finished handing a hot chocolate to a shivering customer, added, "Yeah, this doesn't look like it's letting up anytime soon. Plus, it's not safe."

I surveyed the festival grounds. Other vendors were already dismantling their stalls, their movements hurried and faces pinched with worry. Families were rushing towards their cars, and event organizers were scrambling to secure anything that could be lifted by the wind. Even the most seasoned locals looked unsettled; this was no ordinary storm.

"Alright, let's do it. Jenny, start unplugging all the electrical appliances. Cassidy, help her wrap up the cords and get them off the ground. Ben, let's start stowing away the non-essentials. We need to secure the awning before it flies away."



They all nodded, and we sprung into action. But before we could make much progress, another peal of thunder, louder and closer than the last, reverberated through the air. The wind picked up with such force that it knocked over one of our empty display racks.

"Whoa!" Cassidy exclaimed, barely dodging it in time.

My heart pounded. I'd been in storms before, but nothing like this. It felt as though the weather was echoing the tumult of emotions I'd been experiencing, culminating in an explosion of uncontrollable elements.

As I fought to unclasp the awning, gripping it tightly so it wouldn't get swept away, my thoughts drifted to Max. Where was he now? Was he safe? The concern I felt irritated me, but it was there, undeniable and gnawing at the edge of my consciousness.

"Go, all of you!" I yelled over the howl of the wind and the pounding of the rain. "Get to your cars and get home! It's not safe!"

Ben, Jenny, and Cassidy exchanged glances, clearly hesitant to leave me alone.

"Are you sure, Lily? We can stay and help you finish up here," Ben offered, his eyes filled with concern.

I shook my head resolutely. "I'll be fine. Your safety is more important right now. This storm is getting worse by the minute. Go!"

They gave me reluctant nods, and with quick waves, they dashed off into the storm, their figures rapidly blurring in the curtain of rain.

Alone now, I took a moment to look around. The festival was in disarray—canopies toppling, signs flying, people huddled under whatever shelter they could find. I scanned the area for Sean, but there was no sign of him. My phone buzzed incessantly in my pocket. No doubt, friends and family were checking in, but now wasn't the time.

As if to underscore the point, another gust of wind roared through the area, and I heard the ominous creaking of the metal poles supporting my stand. My heart sank. If I didn't stabilize it soon, I'd lose the stand, the coffee machines, everything.

Just then, through the sheets of rain, a figure appeared. At first, he was just a

silhouette, indistinct and blurred. But as he came closer, I recognized him—Max.

He was soaked through, his jacket and jeans clinging to him, but he looked determined. Without a word, he moved to one corner of the stand and braced himself against the wind, using his body weight to stabilize it.

I rushed to the opposite corner and did the same. For a moment, we were locked in this unspoken alliance against the tempest, both physically anchoring a ship that seemed destined to capsize.

Finally, Max broke the silence, his voice barely audible over the storm. "You should have gone with them, Lily. It's not safe here."

I shot him a glance, the rain streaming down my face mingling with a stubborn tear or two. "I could say the same about you. What are you doing here, Max?"

He looked at me, his eyes searching mine as if looking for something he'd lost long ago. "Let's... let's just get you inside."

Something in his voice caught me off guard—a sincerity, a gravity I hadn't expected. It confused me, but also anchored me in a way I couldn't quite understand or articulate. The storm was still raging around us, the winds howling like wounded animals, but for that one fleeting moment, amid the chaos and the downpour, it felt like we were the eye of the storm—still, silent, and almost peaceful.

Max didn't say another word as we navigated the soaked terrain to move my coffee stand into the shop. Each of his movements was precise, efficient, and full of a focus that I hadn't seen in years. Why was he helping me? A part of me wanted to ask, but his intensity silenced my curiosity, at least for the moment.

Finally, the stand was safely inside, away from the pelting rain and the howling wind. I locked the door behind us and turned to face him. His eyes met mine, but before either of us could speak, he preempted the conversation.

"Where do you live, Lily?" he asked, his voice tinged with urgency.

"Right above the shop," I answered, pointing to the staircase at the back.

As if on cue, a blinding bolt of lightning ripped through the sky, and with a horrific crash, it struck one of the big trees downtown. The impact was so forceful that the tree split down the middle, its massive trunk lurching forward

before toppling over. I gasped as I realized where it had landed—squarely on Max's sleek, undoubtedly expensive Tesla.

"And it looks like you're coming with me," I said, my voice a mix of disbelief and relief that we weren't near that tree.

For a moment, Max looked as if he was about to protest, but instead, his shoulders slumped ever so slightly, as if finally conceding to the storm's untamed will—or perhaps to the capricious fates that had pulled us back into each other's lives.

He looked up at me, his eyes softer now, vulnerable even. "Looks like I am."

We ascended the stairs to my apartment, each step feeling heavier than the last, weighed down by the storm-soaked clothes clinging to our skin. As I unlocked the door and stepped inside, I couldn't help but feel a sudden vulnerability wash over me. My apartment was my sanctuary—a cozy little haven filled with plush pillows, thrift store finds, and a gorgeous view overlooking the town and beach. It was quaint and charming, everything I loved. But now, as billionaire Max Dawson stepped over the threshold, I couldn't help but wonder what he thought.

"Get out of your wet clothes," Max commanded, breaking into my train of thought. There was no arguing the sense in that. Nodding, I grabbed an oversized T-shirt and cloth shorts from a drawer and handed them to him before grabbing my own set of dry clothes.

"Fancy," he said, a small smirk on his lips as he regarded the clothes.

"Sean likes to swing by here and change after the gym sometimes. And he's not always great about taking his clothes with him." I grinned. "Don't worry – I make sure they're washed." With that, I ducked into the bathroom.

While changing, I pondered the surreal nature of the situation. Max Dawson—in my apartment, waiting for me. It was so wildly unlikely that if I didn't know better, I'd think I was in some kind of dream—or perhaps a nightmare, considering how our earlier interaction had gone.

The ping of a text message pulled me back to reality. It was from Sean, letting me know he was okay and had taken cover at a friend's place. More texts came in from the rest of the shop crew, letting me know that they were either

home or someplace else safe. I breathed a sigh of relief and quickly texted back that I was fine, too, neglecting to mention my current company.

Finally, I changed into a dry set of clothes—a simple tank top and shorts—and headed back into the living room, my mind a little clearer but my heart still pounding in anticipation. Opening the bathroom door, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Max was right in the middle of changing, his shirt already off, standing in nothing but his boxer briefs. For a moment, all I could do was stare. His body was impeccably sculpted, every muscle defined in a way that was simply...distracting. Astonishingly distracting. I felt my cheeks flush with a heat that had nothing to do with the weather outside.

"A little privacy?" he asked, his voice sharp but not unkind.

Before I could stammer an apology, the lights flickered and then, with a final dramatic flair, went out completely. The storm had knocked out the power.

The room plunged into darkness, save for the occasional flash of lightning through the windows, and I felt rather than saw Max move to put on the shirt I'd given him.

"Perfect timing," he muttered, the humor not entirely absent from his voice.

"I'll get some candles," I replied, grateful for the cover of darkness to hide the swirl of emotions I was sure were painted all over my face.

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**MAX**

**T**he moment the lights flicked off, the apartment was shrouded in darkness, a pitch-black canvas devoid of shape or form. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the low light, and in that brief bit of nothingness, my mind wandered. Images of Lily in those tiny shorts and a skimpy spaghetti strap top flashed in my head. Unbidden yet undeniable, I felt a twitch of arousal, my manhood coming to life at the most inconvenient time.

The scratch of a lighter interrupted my thoughts. Lily was bending over a small table, setting down a series of candles. She bent over enough that her shorts rose, exposing her smooth thighs and the bottom inch of her rear end. It took all the restraint I had to stop staring.

One by one, she lit them, bringing a soft, cozy firelight to life that drove the shadows into the corners of the room. The warm glow cast her features in a delicate silhouette, adding an intimate touch to the unexpected night.

She moved toward the window, and I found myself following her, drawn in by the mysterious aura she had always carried, even more pronounced now against the backdrop of a storm that seemed to echo my own internal tumult.

We watched in silence as the storm rolled in. Waves crashed against the shore, clawing at the beach as if trying to claim it. The rain came down in torrents, washing away the remnants of the festival, cleansing and destroying in equal measure. The square outside was already submerged under what appeared to be a foot of water.

"What a disaster," Lily said, shaking her head. Her words echoed my thoughts but went further, seeming to encapsulate not just the chaos outside but the messiness that was us. Our history, our missed opportunities, our renewed tension—it was all there, swirling around us as palpable as the storm that raged outside.

"Yeah," I replied, keeping my tone neutral. "But sometimes, disasters are a way to reset, to start fresh."

She glanced up at me, her eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, all the noise faded away—the howling wind, the crashing waves, even the drumming rain seemed to quiet. We were two people caught in a tempest, both outside and in, each grappling with the chaos in our own way.

Still in the soft embrace of the candlelight, Lily moved toward the small kitchenette area of her apartment. "You want some coffee? I've got a butane hot plate, so we're not entirely at the mercy of the storm."

"Sure," I agreed, grateful for the offer but mostly for the momentary distraction. It was a struggle to keep my eyes off her as she busied herself with the coffee pot, her movements fluid and graceful. She had changed so much from the gawky girl I'd once known. Over the years, she had blossomed into a woman whose mere presence commanded attention. Stunning, confident, complex—she was all the things that awakened a man's most primal desires, and I found myself caught in the web of her allure.

As the aroma of coffee began to fill the air, Lily walked over with two steaming mugs, placing one in front of me before sitting down. She eyed the oversized T-shirt I had borrowed from her, a playful smirk lifting the corners of her lips.

"So, I never thought I'd see the day Max Dawson would trade his designer threads for something a little more... down-to-earth," she quipped, clearly finding the whole situation amusing.

But instead of going along with the joke, I found myself unexpectedly irked. "Somehow, I don't think my clothing is the most pressing issue right now."

Lily's smile faded, replaced by an expression I couldn't quite read. It was a mix of disappointment and something more complex, perhaps a flicker of the

hurt and tension that had marred our earlier encounter. And just like that, the atmosphere shifted, growing heavier as if weighed down by the unsaid words and unresolved issues between us.

We sat there, each nursing a cup of coffee, the atmosphere between us heavy but polite. The rain lashed against the windows, almost as if it were trying to get inside, yet we were still cocooned in a silence that was at once awkward and telling.

"To think we used to get into so much trouble back in the day, huh?" Lily broke the silence, a soft smile on her lips as she peered into her coffee cup as if it were a crystal ball holding fragments of our shared past. "Back when we were kids?"

"And look where that got us," I snapped, immediately regretting the bitterness that had laced my words.

She looked up, her eyes clouding over with a mixture of surprise and hurt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I sighed, immediately regretful. "Forget it. It was uncalled for."

"No, tell me. I want to know what you mean by that," she shot back, setting her mug down with more force than necessary. "Go on, be honest. What's one more cruel word among so many others you've thrown my way over the years?"

I felt my own temper rise, a reflexive defense against her accurate hit. "You're seriously bringing up the past *now*? After all this time?"

"I am! And why wouldn't I? You made my life miserable, Max. With the way you treated me, I should've left you out in the storm," she fired, her words tinged with emotion.

"I made your life miserable? Lily, I left! I let you live your life free of me," I said, defensive and biting.

"You left because Seattle offered you more, and now you're back because Seattle didn't want you anymore! Running back to little Willow Bay, thinking it'll welcome you with open arms," she said, her voice laced with disdain.

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks because they were true. I left to chase my dreams and had returned because I'd felt like a failure, expecting solace in the familiarity of my hometown. But in my hurt, I revealed more than I intended

to.

"You think I wanted to leave? I had to, Lily. The longer I stayed, the harder it was to ignore what I was feeling."

"And what was that?" she asked, skeptical yet curious.

"I wanted you, okay? I wanted you like crazy. And I knew that I shouldn't, couldn't. You were off-limits, my best friend's little sister, for God's sake. So I ran, both towards something and away from something. I built up walls, and acted like a jerk because it was easier than facing the truth. But you're right; I shouldn't have treated you that way. It was unfair to both of us," I said, my voice tinged with a vulnerability I hadn't allowed myself in years.

Lily stared at me, her eyes wide and unblinking. And then, as if the storm outside had suddenly moved in, her expression broke, her face a flurry of emotion—shock, realization, and finally, a softening, as if some long-held tension had finally been released.

"I never knew, Max," she whispered, the anger in her voice replaced by something else, something more complex.

"Well, now you do," I said, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, yet simultaneously feeling a new one settle in its place. Because the truth was out there, and neither of us could hide from it any longer.

The room fell quiet, the only sound the relentless rain against the window, a backdrop to a moment filled with both regret and revelation. Two people, once so close, trying to navigate the intricate map of a past marred by mistakes and a present clouded by unspoken truths. As we sat there, our eyes finally meeting in an unguarded moment, I couldn't help but wonder what this meant for our future—if there was to be one at all.



**LILY**

**T**he rain kept pouring, each drop pounding against the windowpane as if demanding to be let in. The apartment was filled with a warmth that the storm outside couldn't quench, the flickering candles casting soft shadows over Max's face. He looked different in this light. His strong, assured demeanor softened, making him resemble the boy he once was—a boy who had to grow up too fast.

The room was quiet but for the sound of the rain. Max's revelation had added a new layer to our complicated history, and I couldn't help but recall the young, brilliant kid who'd been my first real friend. A kid who had lost his parents far too young and was thrown into a world he was ill-equipped to navigate. The rain tapped gently on the window pane, the rhythm oddly soothing in its persistence.

Max's presence in my apartment was like a current of electricity, the space suddenly feeling much smaller than it ever had before.

He looked around, his gaze settling on a photo of me and him and Sean from middle school on my bookshelf. The memory of what we once shared hung heavy in the air, further complicated by the recent rumors surrounding him.

Unable to keep my thoughts to myself any longer, I blurted out, "I saw the news, Max. About the scandal. How could you get involved in something like that?"

His eyes darkened, his jaw set. For a brief moment, the hurt in his eyes was unmistakable. But then he squared his shoulders and met my gaze. "I didn't get

involved in the scam, Lily. I discovered it."

I raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "So you're saying the media's got it all wrong? That seems unlikely."

He leaned in closer, his voice filled with restrained emotion. "I was the one who found out about the financial fraud happening within the company. Senior executives, people I trusted, were manipulating the system for their own gain. When I found out, I couldn't turn a blind eye. So I reported it."

I eyed him warily. "But the news says you were a part of it. That you profited before turning them in."

Max ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident. "Yes, because those same executives tried to drag me down with them. They fabricated evidence, made it look like I was involved. But all of it...all of it was a lie. They wanted to discredit the whistleblower."

My heart raced as the weight of his words sunk in. "Why should I believe you?"

He stepped even closer, his gaze piercing into mine. "Because you know me, Lily. You know the kind of person I was, the values I held. I might've changed in many ways over the years, but my core, my integrity, has remained intact." He placed his hand on his heart as he spoke.

I swallowed hard, memories flooding back - memories of a young Max standing up against bullies, always choosing the harder right over the easier wrong. The conviction in his voice, the raw honesty in his eyes, it was all so unmistakably Max.

Tears welled up, not of sadness, but of relief.

"I believe you, Max," I whispered. I reached across the space between us, placing my hand gently on his. "Max, you can tell me anything. You know that right? Scandal or anything else."

He looked at my hand on his and then into my eyes, visibly wrestling with something inside him.

Finally, he sighed. "After my parents died, my life was a mess, Lily. I felt like I was spiraling, getting shuffled from one foster home to another. I couldn't control anything. And then I saw you change, grow from this gawky teenager

into this incredibly beautiful young woman."

He paused, looking away as if grappling with memories he'd long suppressed.

"It scared me," he continued, his voice tinged with a vulnerability I'd never heard before. "It scared me because things were already so chaotic, and I was certain I was going to lose you too. And so, in my messed-up mind, I figured it was better to push you away on my own terms rather than wait for it to inevitably happen."

I sat there for a moment, absorbing his words, as pieces of the past slid into place like a jigsaw puzzle I'd been trying to solve for years. His words made a painful sort of sense.

"Max, you didn't have to push me away. You could've just told me how you felt. I would've understood, more than anyone."

"I know that now," he said softly, looking back at me. "But back then, the fear of losing you, of not being good enough for you, was too overwhelming. Not to mention the possibility of losing my best friend."

I squeezed his hand, offering him a small smile. "Well, you're here now. And you're more than good enough, Max. For what it's worth, you've always been."

He looked at me, his eyes searching mine as if looking for something he'd lost long ago. And maybe he found it because the tension in his shoulders eased and he finally smiled back—a real smile, warm and genuine, not guarded or calculated. It was the smile of the boy who had once been my best friend a lifetime ago.

The weight of Max's arm around me felt like an anchor in the storm of emotions I was battling. I felt grateful for his openness, for the vulnerability he'd allowed me to see. And yet, a small voice in my head nagged at me. Being able to understand his actions didn't automatically erase the hurt he'd caused.

"Max, I'm glad you told me all this, really, I am. But that doesn't change the fact that you were cruel to me, that you left me scarred in ways that I'm still healing from," I said, my voice trembling. "Don't you understand how devastating it was for my best friend to turn into my worst enemy?"

As the words left my mouth, I felt something inside me break. Tears I hadn't

known I'd been holding back began to brim in my eyes. It was as if years of repressed emotions had finally found their release.

Seeing my tears, Max seemed to be struck by his own realization. For the first time, I saw him let go of his carefully constructed walls, his eyes shining with a depth of emotion he'd never allowed himself to show before. He moved closer, wrapping his arm around me, pulling me into his embrace as if trying to shield me from my own sorrow.

"I'm sorry, Lily," he said, his voice soft and low and reassuring. "I'm so goddamn sorry."

The closeness, his touch, it was all too much. Tears spilled over, cascading down my cheeks. I didn't try to stop them; I let them fall, let them wash over me like a cleansing tide. Max tightened his hold, his own eyes shimmering, though he fought back his own tears.

As the minutes ticked by, the tears finally subsided, leaving a fragile sense of relief in their wake. I looked up, my eyes meeting his, and I saw it—the unspoken desire, the raw need. We were both laid bare, all pretenses stripped away, and in that moment, there was nothing left to say.

Max leaned in, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that was as hard as it was soft, as desperate as it was tender. And I kissed him back, my heart pounding in my chest, surrendering to an emotion so powerful, so terrifying, that it felt like another storm all on its own.

As the kiss deepened, my senses were engulfed by him—the feel of his lips on mine, the taste of his mouth, and the scent of his skin. Each touch was like a spark, setting off fireworks in the hidden corners of my body and mind. His kiss was a question and an answer rolled into one, a mingling of past and present, of regret and longing. It was as if he was apologizing and declaring all at once, his lips saying what words couldn't capture.

His hands slid up my sides, pulling my shirt slightly, his touch leaving a trail of fire on my skin. A surge of want, intense and pure, cascaded through me. As if sensing my surrender, he paused, pulling away just enough to look into my eyes, his own dark irises searching mine for any sign of hesitation.

"Are you OK with this?" he asked, his voice tinged with a vulnerability I'd

never heard from him before.

In response, I caught my breath, steadying my racing heart as I framed the question that had been burning within me. "Yeah, I am. Do you want me, Max, as much as I want you?"

For a moment, he stared at me as if contemplating the weight of my question, and his answer. Then, his lips curled into a warm, boyish smile—the kind of smile that once upon a time signified friendship, camaraderie, and simple joy.

"Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting for you to ask me that?" he asked.

His words were like the final pieces in a puzzle, snapping everything into place. It wasn't just about desire; it was about years of unsaid words, unexpressed feelings, and missed opportunities. But here and now, all of that seemed to fade away, leaving only the raw, unfiltered reality of us—two imperfect people, with a past as complicated as the storm raging outside, yet with a present moment that held the promise of something beautiful.

As we stood there, my fingers fumbled with the bottom hem of his shirt, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum. Max chuckled softly, his hands equally clumsy as he worked to remove my top. It felt like we were back in high school, navigating the uncharted waters of intimacy with a mixture of eagerness and hesitation. The electricity in the air was palpable, both of us keenly aware that we were crossing a line that could never be uncrossed.

Finally, the last barriers of fabric fell to the floor, and we took a moment to simply look at each other. The air was thick with anticipation, the room aglow with the warm flicker of candlelight. I took in the sight of him—each muscle, each scar, a testament to the life he had led, the choices he had made. In turn, I saw his eyes roam over me, their dark depths filled with a mixture of awe and desire that sent shivers down my spine.

Breaking the brief silence, he leaned in, his lips meeting mine in a kiss so tender it made my heart ache. Slowly, his hand slid down my body, finally coming to rest between my thighs, rubbing me over my panties. The sensation of his touch there was electric, a bolt of pleasure that ricocheted through my core, leaving me gasping for air.

My body responded almost on its own, each stroke of his fingers amplifying the waves of pleasure coursing through me. It felt like I was standing at the edge of a cliff, and with one more push, I was sent tumbling over. Release washed over me in a deluge, my grip tightening on him as if he were the anchor, keeping me grounded through the storm of sensations.

In that moment, all the years of distance and misunderstandings felt inconsequential. All that remained were two souls, laid bare in the most literal and figurative sense, rekindling a connection that had never truly been severed.

As the storm howled and raged outside, the atmosphere inside was a contrasting symphony of quiet passion and rekindled love. Max moved to hover over me, our eyes locking in a gaze that spoke volumes. I glanced down, the sight of his thick, long manhood surreal.

Was this really happening?

"So, is this the part where you say something incredibly cheesy?" I teased, my voice tinged with breathless excitement.

He grinned, the boyish charm that I'd fallen for all those years ago shining through. "Oh, you'd love that, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," I smirked, pulling him down to me.

I took hold of his hardness, stroking him for a few seconds, the sensation of his manhood against my fingertips making me somehow wetter than I already was. I teased his end, watching his handsome face tighten in pleasure. Then, when I was finally ready, I guided him into me.

I gasped as he pushed past my lips, his thickness stretching me out, my walls gripping him tightly. I was so wet for him, so slick, that he soon had all of his many inches inside of me. He pushed down deeply, bottoming me out, holding me there for several long, wonderful moments before pulling out and driving into me again.

I moaned, my breasts swaying back and forth from the rhythm of his thrusts. He looked so goddamn gorgeous over top of me, his muscles flexing and tensing, his dark, smoldering eyes staring down at me. I felt on the verge of melting.

What happened next was nothing short of magical. With every touch, every

kiss, every whispered word, I felt a connection to Max that went beyond the physical, delving deep into an emotional realm I'd never explored with anyone else. As we moved in perfect harmony, I realized we were reclaiming a part of ourselves that had been lost and neglected for far too long.

"Just like that, Max," I let out. "Please, just like that!"

When we finally reached the pinnacle of our intimacy, climaxing in a stunning crescendo, it was as if the universe itself was acknowledging the rightness of our union. I came harder than ever in my life, pleasure rushing through me. I wrapped my legs around him in a vice grip, holding him right where I wanted him as Max's muscles tightened with his own orgasm, grunting hard as he spilled his warmth deep inside of me.

Drained yet invigorated, we collapsed beside each other on the floor, letting the warmth of our entangled bodies counter the chill of the storm outside. We kissed gently, his hand on my cheek.

He chuckled softly, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between us.

"What's so funny?" I asked, my eyes still fixated on the window where sheets of rain were illuminated by occasional flashes of lightning.

"It's just... it took a scandal in Seattle and an apocalyptic storm to get us here," he mused, his voice tinged with disbelief and wonder.

I turned to look at him, my heart full. "Well, whatever finally got you into my arms is good with me," I said, capturing his lips in a soft, lingering kiss.

**MAX**

**W**hen I opened my eyes, the first thing that hit me was sunlight—a stark contrast to the torrential downpour that had served as the soundtrack to last night. The second thing that grabbed my attention was Lily, her hair a halo of gold in the morning light.

"Morning," she murmured, stretching her arms above her head in a way that did intriguing things to the fabric of her T-shirt.

"Good morning," I replied, unable to keep the warmth out of my voice. "Do you always wake up this beautiful, or is today special?"

She grinned, playful and a little bit coy. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I had some extra motivation."

The banter felt natural, and easy. It was a startling reminder that whatever had been reignited between us wasn't just about last night; it was the rekindling of a friendship that had once been the cornerstone of both our lives.

Fully dressed, we made our way downstairs and out into Willow Bay's town square. The store was a mess, but we put that aside for the moment as we made our way outside.

What a difference a day makes. The sky was a brilliant azure, and the air smelled of damp earth and renewal. The townspeople were already out in force, clearing debris and repairing the damage from yesterday's storm. It was a testament to the resilience of this community—a quality I used to take for granted.



Lily was greeted warmly as we strolled through the square, her local celebrity status evident in the smiles and waves she received. She was more than just the owner of the coffee stand; she was a part of the fabric of this town.

"Looks like they've got things under control here," I observed, impressed despite myself.

She nodded. "That's how we do things in Willow Bay. We look out for each other."

Her words resonated, and not just because they encapsulated the spirit of the town. They also served as a gentle rebuke of my own past actions, a reminder of the community and connection I had left behind when I turned my back on her all those years ago. But today wasn't about the past; it was about the possibility of a future, one that I suddenly found myself wanting more than I ever thought possible.

As we walked hand in hand, helping where we could but mostly just enjoying the newfound closeness, I wondered what came next for us. The path was uncertain, but for the first time in a long while, that uncertainty felt like an opportunity rather than a threat.

Sean ambled over, broom in hand, a wry smile taking over his face as he sized up Lily and me. "Well, well, if it isn't the king and queen of Willow Bay," he quipped, eyes lingering on our interlocked hands.

"Very funny," Lily retorted, but her eyes were smiling. She glanced over in the direction of her shop, her crew in the middle of surveying the damage. "Duty calls, guys. Be back in a sec."

She bounded off, and once she was gone, Sean's gaze shifted to me, amusement still dancing in his eyes. "You're looking a little less GQ today, Max. What's the occasion? Decide to finally let the commoners see you in something other than a three-piece suit?"

I chuckled, looking down at my borrowed T-shirt and jeans. "Sometimes circumstances dictate the attire. But hey, it's comfortable."

"So, what's the damage?" I asked, switching gears and nodding toward the cleanup efforts.

Sean's expression turned serious. "A few minor injuries, thankfully. No one

was seriously hurt, but we're looking at some hefty damages to the property and stalls. It's going to take a bit to get everything back to how it was."

As he talked, wheels started turning in my head. I'd been detached from this town for years, but there was a connection here that couldn't be ignored, not anymore. And after last night, there was a woman standing beside me that I couldn't—didn't want to—walk away from.

As I watched Lily confer with her barista team, my eyes drifted over the wreckage of her café. Shattered glass fronts, drenched countertops, and likely some irreversible damage to her coffee machines—it was a disaster. "We have insurance," I overheard Lily say, her voice tinged with defeat, "but it doesn't make this any easier to swallow."

As she spoke, I cast my gaze around the square, taking in the patchwork of damaged storefronts and debris-strewn streets. But something was different this time. The weight of my past mistakes and estrangement from this town suddenly seemed less like an insurmountable wall and more like a door—a door that had just been unlocked.

It was as if, in letting Lily back into my life, I had inadvertently reopened my heart to Willow Bay. And instead of the fear and regret that typically clouded my perception of this place, what filled me now was a sense of homecoming. Lily came back over, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze.

"What's on your mind?" Lily interrupted my train of thought, her eyes curious and somewhat anxious.

I looked down at her and smiled. "You know, I think this place could use a billionaire's touch."

Before she could respond, I stepped away and moved to the center of the square. Conversations hushed and all eyes turned toward me. This was uncharted territory, stepping into the limelight in a town where I had been more shadow than substance. Yet today, it felt right.

"Hey, everyone," I began, my voice echoing through the silence. "It's been a while since I've been here, in the heart of Willow Bay, standing alongside all of you. This town nurtured me, raised me, and gave me more than I can ever repay."

A murmur of acknowledgment rippled through the crowd. I continued, "Last night's storm reminded me of something essential—life is unpredictable, and sometimes, it can be harsh. But it's also in those moments of crisis that we reveal our true character, and I'm proud to say that the spirit of this community has never waned."

Heads nodded, smiles formed, and I knew it was time to make my move.

"So here's my promise to you all," I declared, locking eyes with Lily for a brief, fortified second. "I'll personally cover the cost of all repairs to the town square. And not just that, but I'll also sponsor next year's festival to make it the biggest and best this town has ever seen."

A pause immediately followed my words, as if not a soul could believe what they were hearing – and from who.

Then, a roar of cheers erupted from the crowd, punctuated by claps and whistles. The sense of collective relief was palpable, but for me, the true reward was walking back toward Lily, whose eyes were shining brighter than I'd ever seen them.

She came over to me, then leaned in and planted a soft, proud kiss on my cheek. "Look at you, playing the local hero," she teased.

"Guess that means I might have to stick around for a while," I retorted, feeling more rooted in that moment than I had felt in years.

"Oh, is that so?" She raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a sly grin.

"Absolutely," I confirmed, my arm finding its way around her waist. "After all, I can't let all my hard work go to waste, can I?"

She laughed, her head leaning against my shoulder. "You know, most people bring a bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers on a second date. You've just set a whole new standard, Max."

"Only the best for Willow Bay's queen," I replied, feeling my heart swell at our easy banter, the town's support, and the promise of something genuine and lasting with Lily.

"I could get used to this," she replied, her eyes reflecting the bright, clean morning light.

"Me too," I said, realizing that the billionaire's touch wasn't about money at

all. It was about finding home—in a place, in a community, and most importantly, in the person standing beside you.

## EPILOGUE

**L**ILY  
**One year later...**

The air in the nursery was thick with the smell of fresh paint and the newness of pine wood. Max and I stood in the middle of the room, debating the assembly of the crib that seemed to have too many screws and not enough instructions.

"You know, you could just sit down and direct. You don't have to do the heavy lifting," Max grumbled, holding up a piece of the crib, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

I laughed, kneeling to pick up a stray screw from the floor. "Since when have you known me to just sit down and direct? Pregnancy isn't a disability, Max."

He snorted, reluctantly admitting defeat with a shake of his head. "Well, when you put it like that. But remember, you're carrying precious cargo."

Without thinking, I placed my hand on my baby bump, the familiar warmth spreading through me that always did when I was reminded of my pregnancy.

"As are you," I retorted, motioning to the crib piece he was holding as though it was an intricate part of a spaceship. Max's phone buzzed from the small table nearby, distracting him. He glanced at the screen, and I could see his CEO mode activating even before he read the message.

"It's the team in Seattle. They're finalizing the new software update," he said, shooting off a quick reply.

Life had been a whirlwind for us. Max and I had been splitting our time between Willow Bay and Seattle. Willow Whims, my café, was in the opening phase of establishing a second location near our Seattle home. Max's tech company was funding scholarships for local students in Willow Bay, and his Seattle-based team was revolutionizing green energy software. We had managed to blend our worlds, turning them into one beautiful mess of community meetings, late-night coding, coffee tastings, and, soon, diaper changes.

"I can't believe next year's Willow Bay Festival will have a new member," I said, smiling at the thought of our child experiencing the joy and unity of the community event that had always meant so much to me—and now to us.

Max set down the crib piece and walked over to me. He enveloped me in his arms, resting his hands gently on my protruding belly. "This festival will be the most special yet."

His phone buzzed again, but this time, he ignored it, keeping his focus entirely on me. I marveled at how much had changed in a year. How the once-arrogant billionaire standing in front of me had softened into a loving partner and soon-to-be father, all without losing the tenacity that made him so compelling in the first place.

And me? I was about to become a mother, something I had always dreamed of but never thought would happen in such a sweetly complicated, utterly beautiful way.

The room around us was still a work in progress—much like our life together. But at that moment, surrounded by the chaos of paint cans, unassembled furniture, and the life we'd built, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace.

My phone buzzed with a call from Sean. "Hey, you two lovebirds ready to come down? The festival's kicking off!"

"We'll be right there!" I assured him, sharing a glance with Max. We both knew the crib would have to wait—today was the first day of the annual Willow Bay Summer Festival, and nothing trumped that.

Max had a strange expression on his face as he stared at his phone. "Something wrong?" I asked.

"Ah, I almost forgot something," he muttered, quickly retreating into our bedroom.

When he emerged, he'd pocketed something—though it wasn't immediately clear what. He looked uncharacteristically evasive, and his eyes darted around nervously.

"Everything okay?" I prodded.

"Fine, everything's perfect," he said, obviously dodging the question. I decided not to press, though curiosity itched at the back of my mind.

Sean was waiting for us out front, his arm draped over his new fiancée, Emily—the owner of one of the local florists, a gorgeous, radiant woman with laughter that was just as infectious as his.

"What took you so long? Max already running you ragged with Ikea duty?" Sean joked as we climbed into their SUV.

Max rolled his eyes but laughed along, his mysterious tension momentarily forgotten. As we drove, I soaked in the beauty of Willow Bay—the winding roads, the quaint little shops, and the vast, inviting ocean. A prayer of gratitude slipped from my thoughts into the universe.

The town square was a testament to the resilience of our community. I remembered last year's storm and how, thanks to Max, the town had rebuilt faster than anyone thought possible. Storefronts were not just repaired but rejuvenated, the common spaces were lush and inviting, and everyone seemed to wear an expression of buoyant hope.

In a way, the scandal that once swarmed around Max felt like it belonged to another life. The media soon lost interest when a new narrative emerged—a billionaire coming back to his roots and investing in his own community. Redemption, it turned out, was a story people loved more than downfall.

We parked and started wandering through the festival. Our eyes met, and for a second, the noise of the crowd faded away. Max leaned in and whispered, "I have something for you," pulling a small, wrapped box from his pocket.

"What is this?" I asked, intrigued yet confused.

"Open it," he nudged.

Carefully, I unwrapped the box to reveal a delicate locket. Inside, there was a

tiny photo of us from high school on one side and an ultrasound image of our baby on the other.

"It's our past and our future," he said softly, his eyes luminous.

Tears filled my eyes as I looked up at him. "Max, this is beautiful."

He gently put the locket around my neck. "Now you have us, all of us, close to your heart, where we belong."

Sean and Emily wandered back toward us, both bearing candy apples, and grinned. "What's the emotional moment here? Are we having a group hug or what?" Sean jested.

"Group hug it is," I said, pulling them all in. As our laughter filled the air, mingling with the festive sounds around us, I thought about how incredibly lucky I was to be surrounded by people I loved, in a place that meant everything to me at a time when the future held nothing but promise.

Willow Bay, Max, our unborn child, and our life together—it was more than I ever dared to hope for, and it all started right here, one fateful storm ago.

The festival was in full swing, filled with laughter, music, and the aroma of funnel cake and caramel popcorn. Willow Whims, my humble little coffee shop that was the lifeblood of Willow Bay for caffeine addicts, was doing better than ever. My crew was manning our booth like the pros they were, offering freshly brewed coffee and some of our special pastries. People were already buzzing about how my second location near our home in Seattle was set to open soon. Life, it seemed, couldn't get any better.

I was brought back from my musings when Max nudged me gently. "Hey, I need to tell you something," he said, his eyes twinkling but serious.

"We're right in the middle of the festival, Max," I chuckled, "What could be so—"

He interrupted me. "I lied earlier. I have another present for you."

Confusion flickered across my face. He led me a little away from the crowd, but I could still hear the echoes of the band and feel the vibrant energy around us.

"Lily," he began, his voice tinged with emotion, "It took a scandal and a storm for me to realize something. In my own messed-up way, I've always loved



you. I'm so glad you're back in my life, and I don't ever want to spend another day without you."

Then, right there in the middle of the annual Willow Bay Summer Festival, Max got down on one knee. "Lily, will you marry me?"

My scream of delight was so loud it practically drowned out the band. Heads turned, eyes widened, and as I looked around, I realized nearly the entire festival was watching us. I didn't care. With tears in my eyes and my heart overflowing with happiness, I managed to get out the word, "Yes!"

Max slipped the ring onto my finger, and it was as if the entire town cheered with us. Sean and Emily rushed over, joined by my Willow Whims crew, and we were suddenly enveloped in a group hug so tight it felt like a physical manifestation of the community's love and warmth.

As Max and I stood hand in hand, our eyes meeting in a silent vow of eternal love, I knew we'd found our forever. It started with friendship was tested by life's storms, but now, the skies were clear, and the path ahead was filled with endless possibilities.

And so, under the golden Willow Bay sun, amidst the festival that symbolized everything good and hopeful in life, Max and I started our new chapter. A chapter I knew would be filled with love, laughter, a little one on the way, and many, many more summer festivals.

Happily ever after wasn't just for fairy tales. For Max and me, it was our reality, our truth, our forever. And as anyone in Willow Bay would tell you, forever was a pretty good place to be.