





And Then I Met You

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Dedication

Dedicated to everyone reading this book, especially those struggling right now. I hope you find a way to *live like Willow*. You deserve it. All my love.

Prologue

Have you ever met someone and known from that very first moment that they were going to have a big impact on your life? That's how it was with Willow Stone. She was that person to me. She will always be that person to me.

And this is her story.

Before you get your hopes up, I need to issue a warning about this story. There's happiness. And there's an ending. But there's not a happy ending. At least, not in the conventional sense.

Anyway, my moment came at freshman orientation when the girl who would eventually become my everything stood up during introductions and proudly announced, "My name is Willow Stone, and I'm going to die on December 27th, 2019."

Chapter 1

August 8, 2007

"Two weeks until you leave us," my dad said, letting himself into my room as I sat on my bed reading.

From anyone else's father, this might be the beginning of something endearing. Maybe a monologue about how sad it is to have their little girl, their only child, leaving home. The tone of my dad's voice, and the fact that I know him, told me it wasn't going to be that type of conversation.

He ran his eyes around my room before looking back at me. "Doesn't look like you've packed at all."

I shook my head and held up the book in my hands. "I'm working on the book they wanted us to read for orientation."

"Shouldn't you have read that weeks ago?"

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes at my dad, but I knew that would not go over well, so I controlled myself. "The fact that I'm reading it at all is a big deal. Lisa told me no one actually does the suggested reading, and they just skip that part of orientation."

My dad didn't try to hide *his* eye roll at the mention of my best friend's name. I didn't know if it was the fact that Lisa was a little darker than most people in this whitewashed town (God, I hoped not. My dad wasn't winning any father of the year awards, but I hated the thought of him being *that* awful) or maybe that she was out and proud (something that I would never be. Lisa knew I was gay, but that's something I would take to my grave since my family would never accept it). It also could have been the fact that she acted like a normal teenager and actually had a social life, something that apparently wasn't acceptable in the Burns family.

"Rosemary," my dad said sternly, bringing me back from my thoughts.

I cringed at the sound of my own name. I absolutely *hated* the name Rosemary. It sounded like someone who lived in Europe in the 1800s, not someone born in a small New Jersey town in 1989.

"Yes?"

My dad huffed and shook his head. "Just read the book, and *please* make other friends at college. Being away from Lisa Marcos this past year was really good for you. Don't let her drag you down just because you're at the same school again."

I bit my tongue to keep myself from saying something I would regret. If by really good for me, my dad meant extremely lonely, then he was exactly right. I wasn't exactly an outcast, but I also was far from being a social butterfly. Most of my friends were friends by extension because of Lisa and therefore had all graduated a year before me. It didn't help that my parents kept me on such a tight leash that I had absolutely no chance at a social life. The daughter of Curtis and Louise Burns needed ample extracurriculars. The daughter of Curtis and Louise Burns had to be valedictorian. *That*'s how you got into a good school, and *that*'s how you became successful. Except, I was starting to think my idea of success might be different from my parents'. What was the point of being successful if you weren't happy?

Well, my dad would say *success is what makes people happy*, *Rosemary*. Although, that certainly didn't seem to be the case for him. My dad was a hotshot lawyer who represented people for big money, and he still seemed to have a permanent scowl on his face. Not in public, of course. In public, he pasted on the same fake smile my mother, the dentist, always wore.

"Are you even listening to me?" my dad asked, bringing me back from my thoughts. "You need to take this seriously. It's bad enough you're not going to an Ivy League school and are still undecided about your major. You need to work extra hard so you have plenty of options for postgraduate school, whatever it is you decide to do."

Whatever I decided to do really meant when I chose whether to go into law or medicine, neither of which I had an interest in, but that didn't seem to matter to my parents. Starting school undecided was my way of giving myself time to decide whether to suck it up and do what would make my parents happy (the route I always seemed to take) or actually doing what I wanted. The problem was, I wasn't sure what I wanted. I was so used to doing whatever would make everyone else happy, I didn't actually know what made me happy. Maybe it wasn't the job that mattered, but rather what

I did with my life outside of work. At least, that's what I told myself as I sincerely considered a job that my parents would want me to have. At least it would bring plenty of stability. I'd have time with my kids and the money to give them a good life. Just because I did a job similar to my parents didn't mean I had to live my life like them. Although, that seemed to be exactly where I was headed.

My dad huffed his disapproval at my lack of response, then all but stomped out of my room. Now, I did roll my eyes. What a child.

Two weeks, I reminded myself. In just two weeks, I would be out on my own, three hours away from my parents and free to do whatever I wanted (within reason, of course). But now the question was, what did whatever I wanted even look like?

"Welcome to the first day of orientation!" my much too enthusiastic resident assistant, Eileen, said, clapping her hands together to emphasize how excited she was.

I wondered how much of this was real and how much was a show to help people who might feel uncomfortable about starting college. My mind didn't have time to wander because Eileen was ready to go.

"I'm so happy to see you all here and pumped that we will be floormates this year. Just to remind you, I'm room 321, and my door is always open. Figuratively, at least. Knock anytime you need me. I'm here for *you*." Another clap. "Now, I'd like to start us out with some ice breakers. Everyone go around and tell us your name, where you're from, and one interesting fact about you."

I tried to listen as my floormates introduced themselves, but it was hard since my mind kept drifting to my introduction. This is what I did whenever I had to speak in front of a group. I repeated what I was going to say over and over in my head in the hopes that I didn't sound like an idiot when I finally said it out loud.

I was standing toward the back of the study lounge we were in, leaning against the wall rather than sitting on one of the couches or chairs like most of my floormates, which meant I would be the last to go. This was

both a blessing and a curse. It gave me time to prepare but also ample time to overthink.

I focused across the room when the only person left other than me stood up. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of her. She was stunning, and I was shocked I hadn't noticed her before. Her hair and eyes were both dark brown just like mine, but unlike the frizz on my head, hers was perfectly straight. When she ran a hand through it before she started to speak, I saw that the bottom layer was colored blue. God, that was cool. Who was this girl? As if reading my thoughts, she began to speak at that very moment.

"My name is Willow Stone, and I'm going to die on December 27th, 2019."

What the hell? I put my hand on the wall to steady myself as I tried to figure out if I really heard what I thought I did.

A cough that came from Eileen grabbed my attention away from Willow. For the first time, my RA no longer had a smile plastered across her face and instead was wide-eyed. "Excuse me?" she asked, clearly also thinking she must have heard wrong.

Willow just smiled proudly as she rocked back and forth on her feet. "Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot to say where I'm from. I grew up just fifteen minutes from here in Melsborough, so if anyone needs advice on the best places to eat, I'm your girl." Her eyes swept across the room and landed on mine, once again causing me to lose my breath. "Last but not least."

My mouth opened and words came out, but I honestly didn't even know what I was saying. Luckily, after Willow's introduction, it didn't appear as though anyone was listening to me anyway.

Once I was done, Eileen announced we were going to have a social hour, and we were welcome to stick around for as long as we wanted to, but we didn't have anything official until the first-year carnival later that night.

The majority of the girls immediately flocked to Willow. I used this as my opportunity to sneak away so I could finish unpacking. As I was walking out the door, I heard Willow telling the group that it was all a joke to see how people would react.

I was half-tempted to turn around and join them, telling myself it would be good to get to know my neighbors, but I knew the truth. The

person I really wanted to get to know was Willow Stone, and the way my heart beat when I thought about it told me that wasn't a good idea.

I had only been back in my room for about fifteen minutes when there was a knock on the door. I figured it was probably my roommate so when I opened the door to find Willow standing there, I was sure the shock probably showed all over my face.

Willow craned her neck to look around me as if she was searching for someone. "Mind if I come in?"

"Oh... of course." I stepped to the side to let her through, then closed the door behind us.

Willow hitched her thumb toward the closed door. "So, which one of them is yours?"

"Excuse me?"

Willow's lips lifted up on one side as she tilted her head in the other direction. "Which of those girls is your roommate?"

"Oh." I shook my head. Why the hell couldn't I speak? "My roommate wasn't there. Her boyfriend is a sophomore, so she went to his apartment almost immediately after arriving. I have a feeling I'll have this room to myself most of this year."

"Looks like we're in the same boat." Willow walked over to my bed and ran her hand over the comforter before hopping up onto it. She let her legs hang over the side, then patted the spot beside her to encourage me to join her. Once I was sitting, she turned and looked me straight in the eye, causing my heart rate to pick up once again. "My roommate also has a boyfriend here. He lives on the floor just above us, but if I had to guess, I'd say she's going to spend most of her time there."

I nodded my head and looked toward the floor, unable to handle her stare. "I'm sorry to hear that. You strike me as someone who would be excited to spend time with her roommate."

I saw Willow shrug out of the corner of my eye, a small smile parting her lips. "It's all good. We can spend time with each other instead. You're more interesting than my roommate anyway."

I chuckled and finally looked over at her, finding those eyes still focused intently on me. "I think you've got it wrong. I'm really not that interesting."

Willow threw her head back in laughter as if I had just said something hilarious. "That's exactly what someone interesting would say."

I couldn't help but smile at this. I worried she was soon going to figure out she was wrong, but it was nice to hear a compliment from such a pretty girl. Growing more confident, I turned my body slightly so I could face her. "So, what's an actual interesting fact about you?"

Willow's smile dropped and she chewed on her bottom lip. Her eyebrows furrowed as if she was studying me. "Can you keep a secret?"

I looked around my empty room. "I'm not sure who I would tell."

Willow leaned closer to me, shivers going down my spine when her breath tickled my ear. "My interesting fact wasn't actually a joke," she whispered.

I pulled away and this time I was the one doing the staring. There was no trace of a smile left on her face, and I saw sincerity in her eyes. I kept looking at her intently, expecting her to eventually start to laugh, but when that didn't happen, I shook my head. "I'm so confused. How...? What...?" Then a terrible thought hit me. "Are... are you sick?"

"Nope." Willow hopped off the bed, then turned back around to face me. She shrugged, the slightest smile returning to her lips. "At least not that I know."

"I'm so confused right now." I know I had already said that, but I wasn't sure what else *to* say. None of this made any sense.

"Come to the first-year carnival with me, and I promise I'll answer any questions you have."

"Um... sure."

Willow's smile grew bigger. "Perfect. I'll pick you up here at seven." She winked, turned around, and walked out the door without saying another word.

I had so many questions as I stared at my closed door, most of which revolved around this girl's claim that she knew when she was going to die. But one question was louder and more persistent than all the others. Had I just agreed to go on a date with Willow Stone?

Chapter 2

I considered what to say as Willow walked beside me at the carnival, holding cotton candy in one hand, a corn dog in the other, and switching between taking bites of both.

We had been there for a little over an hour, and while the conversation had been really nice, we hadn't gotten back to the discussion from my dorm room.

Willow stopped walking, wiping her face with the side of her arm as she turned to look at me. "I can see your mind working. You clearly have something you want to say."

I looked around at all the students surrounding us, some clearly drunk and so loud that it was almost impossible to hear a conversation right in front of you. "I do, but I don't think this would be the easiest place to talk about it."

Willow nodded her head back toward the dorms. "Want to go to my room? My roommate's not there, and it will be quiet."

I swallowed hard. I had no reason to believe this was anything more than a friendly interaction, but was Willow expecting something by inviting me back to her room? I chastised myself for even thinking that way. Just because I found her attractive didn't mean she was gay, and it definitely didn't mean she was attracted to me. "That sounds great."

Willow must have noticed my hesitation because she stared at me for an uncomfortably long time as if she was trying to figure something out. "We don't have to if you don't want to. I'm more than happy staying here. I know we haven't really socialized with anyone else. If that's what you want to do, I'm fine with it."

I put a hand on Willow's wrist to stop her rambling but quickly pulled it away because of the shockwaves it sent throughout my body. No matter where Willow stood with things, I couldn't allow myself to develop those types of feelings. "No. Hanging out in your room sounds perfect."

We were both quiet as we walked back to the dorm, and it made me wonder what was going on inside of Willow's head. Once in her room, Willow sat down on her desk chair and put her feet up on her desk, leaning

back into her hands and looking completely relaxed. "So, what do you want to know?"

I laughed lightly, surprised by her forwardness. "Oh, we're just jumping right into it, aren't we?"

"I assume you've been waiting all night to ask, so go ahead."

I put my hand on the desk that I assume belonged to Willow's roommate. "Okay. I guess I'll ask the obvious one. Why do you think you're going to die in twelve years?"

"Psychic told me."

Without meaning to, I laughed out loud. Was she for real right now? "Wait. What? Are you serious? You do realize that's all a load of bull, right?"

Willow took her feet off of the desk and scooted her chair closer to where I was standing. "That's what I thought. It was my sixteenth birthday and my friend and I decided we would go to the psychic for a good laugh. Then, I was there, and this lady was looking at me as if she had just seen a ghost. When I asked what she saw, she started giving me some bullshit answers about how I'm strong and social and am *going to make a big difference in the world*. But I could tell she was holding back. I prodded until she told me she saw my death. Well, not my actual death. She couldn't tell me what will happen. Just that she could see the exact date."

"No offense, but I think you might be wrong about this. There's no way this lady actually knows when you're going to die."

Willow stood from her chair and grabbed my hand, pulling me to her bed and motioning for me to sit down beside her. "Trust me, I know how crazy this sounds. For the first year after finding out, I tried to just forget about it. But, I don't know, something was just telling me it was true. Like my intuition was yelling at me, telling me to believe it. So, I went to see *another* psychic and you'll never guess what happened." Willow's eyes were comically large as she stared at me waiting for a response.

"She said the same thing?"

"Ding, ding, ding. The *exact* same thing happened. You can't tell me that's a coincidence."

I opened my mouth to argue, but a pit formed in my stomach when I realized I believed it too. Something was telling me, for as crazy as all of

this sounded, it was completely true. "Willow, I'm so sorry." Without taking the time to overthink it, I reached out my hand and squeezed hers.

Much to my surprise, Willow threw back her head in laughter, the sound so loud I was sure everyone in the building heard her. "You don't have to be sorry. This was the best thing to ever happen to me."

"Finding out you're dying?" I tried my best to keep my voice level so it didn't sound like I was judging her.

"Technically, we're all dying. The problem is we're not all living." She wiggled around on the bed as if this was all very exciting instead of extremely morbid. "Just think about it. People let themselves just kind of trudge through life because they think they have all the time in the world. I have approximately 4,510 more days on this earth. You better believe I'm not going to waste any of them."

I couldn't help but smile. Willow's enthusiasm was contagious. "And what does that mean exactly? Skydiving? Climbing the Rocky Mountains?"

Willow raised an eyebrow at me. "You do realize you're just quoting a Tim McGraw song right now, right?" Instead of waiting for me to answer, she shook her head. "I'm not making some outlandish bucket list. I'm not trying to pretend I'm going to travel the world or something. I'm an eighteen-year-old who's going to die just after I turn thirty-one—it would be unrealistic to think I would ever find the time or money for that. I just want to live my life to the fullest and not take a moment for granted. I want to watch the sunrise, pay close attention to how the fall breeze feels against my skin, take in the smells of every season. I don't want to overthink things. If there's someone I miss, I'm going to just tell them, and if it's possible, I'll get into my car and go see them. If I want to kiss the pretty girl sitting beside me, I'll kiss the pretty girl sitting beside me."

I thought I had heard that last part wrong until Willow ran a finger over my cheek and leaned closer, stopping and closing her eyes when we were just inches apart. "That is, if the pretty girl says it's okay."

God, I wanted to kiss her. I was pretty sure I wanted to kiss her more than I ever wanted anything in my entire life. And it would have been so easy. The slightest movement would have put my lips in contact with hers, and I had to imagine it would be magical. But... I couldn't. "Oh. I'm... I'm not..."

Willow's head flew back as if I had just slapped her, and she put a hand over her eyes. "Oh God. I'm so, so sorry. I don't know why I assumed that you were gay. I just... I thought I was getting a vibe. I don't know." She moved her fingers apart to peek at me through her hand. "I really hope I didn't ruin our chances at being friends. I think you're really cool, and I didn't mean to offend you in any way."

I grabbed Willow's hand away from her face and kept our hands connected as I laid them between us on the bed. "Since you told me a secret, can I tell you one?" When Willow nodded her head, I took a deep breath and blew it out. "You weren't wrong. I am gay. The problem is my parents would never be okay with it, and I don't even know if *I'm* okay with it. So, my plan has always been to find a guy that I can be happy with. That, or stay single."

"Can I be honest with you? I mean this in the nicest way possible, but that's a terrible plan. I'm not saying this as the girl who really wants to kiss you, but as someone who is all about living life to the fullest. I think you're holding yourself back from happiness."

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. "That's what my best friend always tells me."

"Your best friend sounds very smart."

"She goes to school here, so I'm sure you'll meet her at some point."

"I hope I do." Willow smiled at me in a way that had me completely rethinking the whole not kissing her thing. "Listen, you obviously need to do what works for you. I would never pressure you into anything. But, just for the record, if you ever decide you want to kiss me, the offer stands."

God, it was getting hard to stand my ground. I barely knew this girl, and she was already making me come undone. "See, that's the thing. The issue isn't that I don't want to kiss you. The issue is that I really, really do, but I can't. I don't think I could ever come out or actually date another girl, so it wouldn't be fair to you."

"It's funny you should mention that since I'm not actually interested in dating either. At least, nothing serious. I mean, come on, how unfair would that be? I can't have someone wasting their time dating me when I'm going to croak just barely past marrying age."

"So, what you're saying is..." I let my words trail off so she could finish the thought I didn't dare speak out loud.

The way she smiled told me she knew exactly what I was getting at. "If you wanted to kiss me just to see what it's like to kiss a girl, I wouldn't overthink it or anything. It could be a one time thing." She bit her lip then added, "Only if you want to of course though."

Oh, *I* want to. With a complete and utter lack of grace, I quickly dipped my head toward hers, but instead of our mouths connecting, it was our foreheads that slammed into each other.

I rubbed at my forehead, which was now throbbing even though it was my ego that had taken the brunt of the hit. "Maybe I should have mentioned that I've never actually kissed *anyone* before."

I stared down at the blue comforter on Willow's bed, embarrassed by even the thought of the look that might be on her face right now. I didn't have to think about it for long, because soon her hand came to rest on my chin, gently pushing it up so I was forced to look at her. Much to my surprise, there was no judgment in her eyes, only warmth.

"I've got you," she whispered as she tilted my head a little bit more and connected our lips.

Her lips were warm and soft and when she opened her mouth to mine so our tongues could meet, she tasted like the cotton candy and corn dog she had been eating. I never thought that was a combination I would enjoy, but right now I was craving it. I wanted more of her. I wanted to taste her on my tongue for the rest of the night. Heck, I wanted to taste her for the rest of my life.

Much too soon, Willow pulled away, pushing a piece of hair behind my ear and staring intently as if she was waiting for my feedback.

I brought my fingers to my still-tingling lips. "Shit," I said breathlessly. "I'm so freaking gay."

Chapter 3

"Let me get this straight." Lisa waved a hand in the air dramatically. "Classes haven't even started yet and little Miss I'm-Never-Coming-Out is already kissing girls." She shook her head and her long black hair that was currently styled into dreadlocks shook with it. "I underestimated you, Mary."

"I'm not kissing girls. I kissed one girl one time."

Which was true. After that kiss, Willow and I had spent the rest of our time talking about school and what classes we were taking this semester. I found out she was also undecided and that we had a first-year English class together.

That was three nights ago and I hadn't seen her since, with the exception of passing each other in the hall a few times.

"Okay. So, does this mean you're going to kiss more girls or maybe kiss this specific girl more?"

I shook my head. "She knows where I stand with things. I can't date a girl. Not with how my parents are."

"Oh yes, Curtis and Louise Burns couldn't possibly deal with the neighbors finding out they have a gay daughter. What would they say at the country club?" Lisa spoke in a British accent and dramatically threw her hand across her forehead when she was done speaking. Once her theatrics were over, she stared me straight in the eyes with her *no bullshit* look. "Your parents aren't here, Mar. What they don't know won't hurt them."

She made it sound so simple, but that just wasn't me. I was the girl who did what was expected of me. It was just easier that way. At least, that's what I had always believed for the first eighteen years of my life. One stupid kiss, and I was rethinking everything. One amazingly perfect kiss, but still. That thought got me wondering if the kiss was as good for Willow as it was for me. Even though I didn't ask, I was sure she must have kissed other people in the past. Where did I measure up? What if I didn't measure up at all?

"I know that look," Lisa said with a laugh. "You're lost inside your head right now." She perked up slightly the way she always did when she

had an idea I was almost sure to hate. "I know just how to get you out of it. You're going to the barn party with me tonight."

"Barn party?" I asked with a laugh.

"Hey, don't knock it 'til you've tried it. It's an old barn about fifteen minutes from here. The party is always a mixture of East Pine students and townies. It's the safest place to party during the first few weeks of school because the cops are out like crazy in the area looking for underage drinking. They don't stray super far from the school though."

Fifteen minutes away. Now, it made sense why Lisa probably wanted me to come. "I can drive you if you want. I can't guarantee I'll stay, but if you call me, I'll come back and get you."

"Hell no! I'm not inviting you as my chauffeur. I'm inviting you as my bestie. There's a few guys on the football team who actually care enough not to drink. One of them lives in the same apartment complex as me so he's going to drive us. You can stay at my place tonight. That way you don't get cited for underage drinking when you're back in your dorm."

"I'm not planning to drink," I answered quickly. I didn't drink at all through high school and wasn't sure that I wanted to start just because I was in college.

"Aw, come on, Mar. One drink for your oldest bestest friend?" "Maybe."

Lisa clapped her hands together. "Kissing girls and drinking alcohol. What's next?"

She wiggled her eyebrows and all I could do was laugh. "I guess you'll just have to wait and see."

I'm not sure what I was picturing when Lisa said barn party, but it certainly wasn't a run-down, abandoned barn way out in the middle of nowhere. That didn't seem to be bothering anyone though. The large barn was filled with tons of people our age either playing drinking games or dancing on the makeshift dance floor in the middle. I had no idea where the music was coming from, but it was so loud I could barely hear Lisa right beside me.

She tried to say something, but I couldn't hear so she leaned in closer. "There are so many hotties here."

"Yeah, but how many do you think are actually gay?"

She put a hand on my arm and looked at me the way a mother would look at a naive child. "Oh, honey, this is college. No one has to be gay to have a good time." She winked and then skipped away from me as if she hadn't just blown my mind.

I followed her to what seemed to be a makeshift bar filled with different types of beer, liquor, and wine coolers and watched as she pulled the guy standing behind the table into a tight hug. "Phil! I didn't know if you'd be here." She let go of him and turned toward me. "Phil is a townie. He graduated from some school out of state last year, but he came to a few parties when he was home for breaks and apparently still comes now for whatever reason."

Phil had a buzz cut, which was in stark contrast to his long dark brown beard. He had a big build and towered over both of us. Even though I didn't know him, there was something almost familiar about his big brown eyes.

He ran a hand through his beard as he looked around the room. "I didn't *want* to be here, trust me. I'm getting too old for this shit. But, it's my little sister's first barn party. You better believe I wasn't letting her come here alone."

"Wait, you have a sister? Why didn't you ever tell me that?"
Phil laughed at Lisa's question. "Because she's gay, and I know
you."

Lisa put a hand on her chest in mock offense. "I'm appalled that you think I would be anything but the perfect gentlewoman. Now make us two drinks as an apology."

"Oh, I don't—"

Lisa put her hand out to stop me. "Don't listen to her. She wants one."

"Two Fantastic Phils coming right up."

My eyes went wide as I watched him grab different types of liquor and add them to our cups, followed by the slightest bit of Sprite.

Lisa picked up both cups and handed one to me, then held her cup out for a cheers. "To three years of crazy college antics with my best friend."

I tapped my cup against hers and closed my eyes before taking a sip. I coughed when the liquid hit my throat. God, that burned. Why did people enjoy drinking? This was miserable.

Lisa simply laughed and patted me on the back. "Don't worry. You'll get used to it."

A smile spread across Phil's face as he focused on someone behind us. "There she is!"

When I turned around, I was shocked to see Willow running toward us, her arm intertwined with another girl's. The girl had long, dirty blonde hair and blue eyes and looked to be about the same age as us.

"What's up, bro?" she asked when she reached the table. Then she turned her focus toward me, her smile growing as soon as our eyes met. "I didn't know you'd be here."

I nodded my head toward Lisa. "She dragged me out. This is my best friend, Lisa, who I told you about. Lisa, this is Willow."

"It's very nice to meet you, Willow. I've heard a lot about you." Lisa smirked as she looked over at Phil. "I don't think I'm the one you need to be worried about, Philly."

Phil looked between all of us, as if he was trying to calculate something. "Okay. I'm confused. Is there some type of weird lesbian club I don't know about where you all just magically know each other?"

"Something like that," Willow said with a laugh. "Or, you know, it could just be that Rosemary and I live in the same dorm." She kept her eyes focused on me instead of looking at her brother. "By the way, this is *my* best friend, Tori. She doesn't go to East Pine, but I'm sure you'll still see her around a lot since she still lives in town."

Before I could say anything, Lisa took a step closer to them. "It's so nice to meet you, Tori. I'm surprised I haven't seen you here before."

"Phil here is like a big brother to me. He wouldn't allow *either* of us to come before now."

"Well, looks like we need to make up for lost time." Lisa smirked, and I rolled my eyes. What a hopeless flirt. "Can I interest you in a drink and some dancing?" She motioned her hand over the drink table as if she had brought it all.

Tori agreed and soon it was just me and the Stone siblings.

"Looks like we've been ditched," Willow said with a laugh as she watched our best friends walk away together. She brought her gaze back to me, and her eyes sparkled in a way that I wished was reserved just for me. Obviously, it wasn't. We barely knew each other. That didn't stop me from gazing back at her, unable to focus on anything else.

I was brought back to reality by the sound of a throat clearing. I looked toward the sound to find Phil staring at us, his lips tipped up to one side and his eyebrow raised just slightly. "Why do I get the feeling I'm about to be ditched too?"

"Not until you make me a Fantastic Phil," Willow told her brother.

Phil crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at her. "You know the rule. I only make you those when it's just you and Tori drinking at the house."

"Aw, come on, bro. You're here. What could I possibly get myself into? Just one to give me the courage to talk to this pretty girl?"

Willow batted her eyes at her brother and brought her hands together in a begging motion. Phil rolled his eyes but put together the same drink he had made me and slid it toward his sister. Instead of saying anything to her, he addressed me. "Don't let her do anything stupid."

I nodded my head, then took a big sip of my drink, trying not to wince when it hit my throat. Willow grabbed the hand not holding my drink and began to drag me away from her brother. "Let's find somewhere quieter so we can talk."

Except, with the feeling of my hand in Willow's, talking was the last thing on my mind.

An hour later, I found myself sitting on a hay bale beside Willow, giggling into my empty cup as she did the same. I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or the company, but I felt more relaxed and happy than I could ever remember feeling.

"You're drunk," she said with a laugh as she bumped her shoulder against mine.

I bumped my shoulder back against hers. "Am not."

Willow lifted an eyebrow. "How much did you drink in high school?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, none. Never. I mean, this was my first drink."

"Oh yeah, you're definitely drunk. Fantastic Phils aren't for the weak."

I laughed once again. I couldn't seem to help myself. "Are you calling me weak?"

"No, I'm calling you a lightweight."

"So, do you drink a lot?"

"Nah, not really. A little bit here and there. I'll drink enough to get buzzed, but never more than that. Ever since finding out about my short timeline, I wanted to make sure I remembered everything."

My head spun at the reminder of Willow's impending early death. Or was that from the alcohol? "So, who all knows about... you know...?"

Willow laughed. "My death?" I nodded my head and she shrugged in response. "No one. Just you."

Wait. What? I must have heard that wrong. Shit, maybe I was drunk.

"I'm serious," Willow said with another laugh, clearly reading my mind.

"But why?"

"Why didn't I tell anyone else or why did I tell you?"

"Both?"

Willow sighed. "First of all, most people would just think I'm crazy. I mean, I was totally testing the waters at orientation, and I got exactly the response I expected. Dropped jaws. Skeptical eyes. Plus, even if they believed me, I never wanted to put this on my friends and family."

"But don't you think they would want to know? You know, so they could take advantage of the time they have with you."

"I want people in my life to spend time with me because they want to. Not because they think it's going to be cut short. My people are the kind who think they have many more tomorrows but still wanna be part of my today."

I swallowed hard. "That's beautiful." And it really was. The way Willow looked at life was amazing. I wanted to drink it in. I wanted to bask

in it.

But then, my original question returned to me. If she didn't want people to know and act differently around her, why *did* she tell me? Was it because she didn't expect me to be a significant part of her life? For some reason, even though I barely knew her, that thought hurt. I *wanted* to know Willow.

"So, now you're really wondering why I told you, huh?" The way Willow smiled at me almost made me forget all my worries. "It's just, I've been dying to tell someone." She elbowed me in the side playfully. "No pun intended."

"So, let me get this straight. You were desperate to tell someone so you decided to tell some random girl you just met."

Willow stared at me for at least a minute, never once looking away or even blinking. The weight of her stare almost knocked me over. "I don't know. You don't seem random to me." She cleared her throat and looked down at her cup, chuckling uncomfortably. "Wow. Maybe *I'm* the lightweight. My brain apparently doesn't want to tell my mouth not to say certain things."

An agonizing silence stretched between us as Willow continued to look down.

"I really liked kissing you." Wow. Smooth.

My words caused Willow to finally look up, and a smile spread across her face. "I really liked kissing you too." She scooted closer to me, and I didn't know if that meant she was going to kiss me again, but that didn't stop my body from buzzing in anticipation.

"You've probably kissed a lot of people though." Ugh. Why the hell was I talking right now?

Willow moved even closer to me and placed her hand on my knee. This time, she licked her lips as she stared at me, leaving no question what she wanted. Unfortunately, instead of kissing me, she squeezed my knee. "I can tell you're nervous. I'm all about honesty, so let me put it all out there for you. I kissed someone for the first time when I was thirteen. It was a boy, and it sucked. I dated a guy for about six months when I was in ninth grade. The most we ever did was make out, and that happened very sparingly since I didn't enjoy it at all. We actually broke up because he told me he was pretty sure I might be gay. At first, I thought he was just full of

himself and couldn't figure out why I wasn't that into him, but the more I thought about it, I was like *shit*, *he*'s *right*. Anyway, Tori and I came out to each other in tenth grade, kissed once, and both decided that was a terrible idea. In eleventh grade, I came out to everyone else. The end of eleventh grade was when I came to my first barn party."

I was about to say something when Willow held up her hand. "My brother is an idiot for actually believing I didn't come to a barn party at all when he was away at school, but whatever. At that party, I made out with some straight college girl, and that's when I learned how much better it is to kiss girls. So, at this same barn party last year, I made out with two different girls. One of them was gay and in her first year at East Pine. We talked throughout the year and hung out a few times. Before summer started, there was another big barn party, and we ended up going back to my house since no one was home. We had sex. It was the first time for both of us, and kind of our form of goodbye since she decided to transfer to a school closer to home."

I hated the way my stomach dropped when I heard about Willow having sex with someone else. We barely knew each other and both agreed this couldn't go anywhere anyway, so why did the thought of her with someone else make me sick?

Willow was once again somehow able to read the look on my face, and she removed her hand from my knee so she could take my hand instead. "I promised complete honesty, and there's a very important part I didn't mention yet. I felt more from that one kiss with you than I have felt with anyone else. I know you don't want to come out, and I'm not looking for anything serious, but I like you. I have fun hanging out with you, and if I let myself, I'm pretty sure I could have a huge crush on you. I want to be your friend above anything else, but I'm also down for whatever else you would want from me physically." I swallowed hard at the thought of all that could entail, and Willow shook her head. "I'm not saying that to put any pressure on you. We're friends first and foremost, and that's more than enough for me. I just want you to know that if you ever want anything else, like kissing or more, I'm also down to have those benefits."

A silence hung between us once again as I tried to remember how to talk. "Are your parents home now?" Oh God. Why the hell did I just say that? Kissing Willow sounded great, but I definitely didn't want anything

more than that, and now she was going to think I did. "Wait. That wasn't... I wasn't trying to say we should... I'm not looking for anything like that. Well, maybe not never. I don't know. I'm not ready. I just... don't want to do anything in public."

Willow smirked and squeezed my hand before pulling away. "You're cute when you ramble. Unfortunately, my parents *are* home tonight, so that's a no-go." I was starting to feel disappointed until Willow spoke again. "It's a good thing we're practically going to have our dorm rooms to ourselves this semester."

This year had suddenly become much more interesting.

Chapter 4

Summer 2008

"Another year down!" Lisa yelled as we walked into the end-ofsemester barn party.

This was the fourth or fifth barn party Lisa had been to this year but only the second one for me. I was so worried my parents would somehow find out that I had drank that first weekend, that I hadn't drank again since. Apparently, I didn't have the same irrational fears of them finding out about me hooking up with another girl. While I might not have been getting intoxicated, I spent plenty of time drunk on Willow Stone.

On the outside, we were just two close friends, but behind closed doors, we were anything but friendly. Sure, things never progressed beyond long makeout sessions with some heavy petting, but that was more than enough for me. Well, kind of. I was getting closer and closer to throwing caution to the wind and taking things a step further, but something always stopped me. Making out was one thing; sex was a whole other level. I wasn't sure if I could have sex with Willow and not completely lose myself in her.

I knew I had feelings for her that went well beyond friendship. I mean, how could I not? She made me a better person. She made me a stronger person. This past year, my confidence had increased immensely. Not enough to get me to stand up to my parents but enough to make me more comfortable in large groups of people my age. Sure, I still preferred time spent one-on-one or just with Willow, Lisa, and Tori, but I was coming out of my shell, and I owed that all to Willow.

"And look! It's our future roomies!" Lisa said, bringing me back to reality just in time to see Willow and Tori walking over to us. The four of us had been close ever since the first barn party where Lisa and Tori realized they had a ton in common but absolutely no chemistry. This, in turn, led to the four of us deciding to rent an apartment together. It worked out perfectly since Willow and I wanted out of the dorms and Tori wanted out of her parents' house.

Once they were next to us, Willow gave me a high five, which had become her usual greeting when we were in public. I preferred her private greetings much more, but this is what I got for being deep in the closet. Although, I wasn't sure I was fooling anyone at school since the three girls I spent most of my time with were all very out and proud.

"It's great to see you, Rosemary," Willow whispered in my ear as she subtly squeezed my side. If anyone else tried to call me Rosemary, aside from my parents, I immediately corrected them. But, I loved the way it sounded coming from Willow's lips, to the point that I was actually starting to like my name.

"Ugh," Lisa groaned. "I'm totally going to walk into my room next year to find you two having sex, aren't I?"

"Oh, we're not... I mean, we don't... I'm a... I haven't..." My body heated up and I could feel my face turning red as I looked around the room to make sure no one could hear our conversation, which, of course, they couldn't. *Thank you, obnoxiously loud music*.

Lisa laughed and patted my shoulder. "Calm down, Mar. I'm only kidding. You two can do whatever the hell you want. But, since you insist on sharing a room with me instead of your lover-girl here, please put a sock on the doorknob to warn me."

Tori slipped an arm through Lisa's. "Stop giving these two a hard time. Let's get drunk, and leave them to do whatever it is they want to do."

Willow and I both watched as they walked away arm in arm, and then Willow focused her attention back on me. "So, do you want to drink tonight or...?" She let her voice trail off.

"Not really. Honestly, I only came so I could see you one more time before I head back home tomorrow."

Willow reached her hand out toward me, then pulled it back, using her head to motion toward the barn door instead. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Once we were far enough away from the barn not to be seen, I grabbed Willow's hand. "Where are we going?" I asked as I squinted my eyes, trying to see past the large expanse of darkness in front of me.

"You'll see," Willow said as she pulled me along.

After ten minutes of walking through complete darkness, we finally came upon a well-lit road. We followed this road for three blocks before

turning into a cute townhouse development.

Each house looked the same with gray siding and black shutters and doors. We passed about five houses before Willow stopped in front of number four hundred and pointed at it.

"Home sweet home," she announced proudly. "I've wanted to bring you here all year. I thought about inviting you so many times when I came home for the weekend. It feels weird for you not to see my house when it's so close to school, but I also wasn't sure how you would feel about meeting my parents."

"I'm very good with parents," I teased, even though I had an idea what she was getting at.

"Oh, I don't doubt that. The thing is, my mom is very pro me getting a girlfriend, and she automatically assumes any girl I hang out with is gay. I didn't want her to say or do anything that might make you uncomfortable."

If I wasn't so worried about anyone outside of our bubble finding out that I was gay, I would have pulled Willow into my arms and kissed her. She was so aware of everything I needed and willing to do whatever to make me comfortable. "So, why tonight?" I asked before my body could betray me.

"We were nearby, and my parents aren't home right now. They're having a date night, so they shouldn't be back for a few hours." Her eyes met mine, and they sparkled under the light illuminating her driveway. "Do you want a tour?"

"Sounds wonderful."

As soon as we walked through the front door, her house felt more like home than mine ever had. Unlike my house that had nothing out of place and was set up by an interior decorator in a way that would impress *important guests*, Willow's house looked lived in and loved, with personal touches everywhere.

Right inside the door was a pile of shoes that my mother would have never allowed. Instead of being filled with expensive artwork, the walls were covered with pictures. As I followed Willow through the short hallway, I was greeted by all of her and Phil's school pictures, as well as pictures from what I had to assume were all sorts of family vacations.

At the end of the hallway, there was a stairway to the left and a small kitchen to the right. The hallway led into a large family room area.

Willow pointed to both. "Kitchen. Family room."

"Quite the tour," I said sarcastically.

Willow shrugged. "There's not much to see." She hesitated a moment, nervously chewing on her lip before adding, "I thought you'd be more interested in seeing my room."

My stomach did flips as my mind circled through the implications of that statement. "Is this some sort of tradition? Taking the girl you've been hooking up with back to your house for one final hoorah?" It was meant to be a joke, but the way my voice trembled said otherwise.

Willow's brows furrowed in confusion, then her eyes went wide. "Oh my God, Rosemary, I promise that is not why I brought you here." She reached out and grabbed both of my hands in hers. "You're not just some girl I'm hooking up with. You're one of my best friends and most important people in my life. I brought you here because I wanted to let you into another part of my world, not because I was expecting anything to happen. I really hope you believe me."

The harder she worked to show me that wasn't why she brought me here, the more I wished it was. I had never thought about who I would lose my virginity to. Honestly, I always sort of assumed it would be with a guy, once I found one I could have a happy and stable life with.

My stomach never did somersaults thinking about that moment. My palms didn't sweat as I imagined my hands exploring someone else's body. But, right now, with Willow gazing into my eyes while she said all of the right things, that's exactly how I felt.

"Take me to your room," I said breathlessly.

Willow must have caught the tone of my voice because her eyes went even wider before she turned around and quickly pulled me up the stairs behind her. We passed one closed door before coming to another, this one open. The walls were a very light blue and the comforter on the full-size bed was gray to match the bookshelf and desk. Pictures were scattered all over this wall as well, except much more randomly than the pictures downstairs.

"Well, here we are. Another look into my world," Willow said, sounding much less confident than I was used to her sounding.

Where she lacked confidence, I picked it up. I stepped close to her and brought my arms around her waist to pull our bodies together. It was much less smooth than I anticipated and Willow groaned at the unexpected impact, which made us both break into a fit of giggles. The laughter ceased as soon as our eyes met. I never understood when people said they felt like their heart was beating out of their chest until Willow Stone's eyes bore into mine, and I could see every emotion and desire deep within them. My heart beat so hard and so fast, I was pretty sure if I looked down, I would have seen it pushing through my skin. But I couldn't look down, because all I could do was keep looking into those eyes that had me completely captivated.

That was until those eyes closed, right before Willow's lips descended on mine. The kiss felt so familiar, yet so different. It was more desperate than usual, like both of us were trying to pull more from each other. And I knew exactly what I needed. I needed all of Willow. I wanted her to be the first person I gave myself over to completely. Hell, at this moment, I wanted her to be the only person. I knew that wasn't possible, but those were thoughts for another day. Worries for another day. Right now, this moment was all we had, and I wanted to take advantage of every second.

I moved back in the direction I remembered seeing the bed and pulled Willow along with me, never removing my lips from hers until I felt my legs hit the bed. I lowered myself down onto it and Willow lowered her body onto mine. I was acutely aware of every single spot her body touched mine. We continued our kiss, and I couldn't stop myself from running my hands underneath her shirt and over her ribs. My fingers tingled at the feeling of her skin underneath them.

Willow moaned into my mouth, causing me to become even more turned on. I couldn't stop myself now. I was at the mercy of my body; the mercy of whatever Willow wanted to do with me; whatever she wanted to do *to* me. Without a thought of what any of this meant and how it could change things, I brought my hand to the button of her shorts. Much to my surprise, another hand met mine there and pushed it away.

When I gave Willow a questioning look, she shook her head and rolled off of me. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Oh." My heart dropped. What did I do? Where did I go wrong? Why wasn't I good enough?

"This has nothing to do with you," Willow said quickly.

When I rolled on my side to look at her, her eyes still held the same desire from before, only this time there was something else present. Trepidation? Regret? Fear? I had no idea.

She ran a hand through my hair, and it caused a shiver to run down my spine. "Well, I guess that's a lie. It actually has everything to do with you, but not in the way you think." She placed one chaste kiss on my lips. "Meeting you and getting closer to you this year has been one of the greatest things to ever happen to me. You're like no one I've ever met before. You make me feel more than anyone ever has. You deserve the world, which means I want your first time to be special."

"But being here with you is special," I argued. *What part of that didn't she understand?*

"I know. I feel it too. But you were right before. You deserve more than spur of the moment goodbye sex before we leave each other for the next three months." She took my hands in hers just as she had downstairs, but this time she lifted them to her mouth and kissed my knuckles, one at a time as if she was worshipping a precious object.

"I thought you were supposed to be the girl who doesn't overthink and lives in the moment in case we don't get tomorrow?"

"This isn't about me. It's about you. It's about everything *you* deserve and *you* living your best life. Come on, I saw the way you acted when Lisa joked about us having sex. You're not ready, and that's fine."

"But what if I am ready?" My voice sounded much more whiny than I intended, and now I worried I sounded like a petulant child rather than an adult who knew exactly what she wanted.

Willow smiled and kissed me once again. "Then you'll be even more ready the next time we see each other and it will be even more special."

I smirked when her words registered. "So, next time?"

Willow cuddled into me and burrowed her head into my neck. "As long as you still want to. You never know. You might fall madly in love with someone this summer."

I knew that wasn't going to happen because I was pretty sure I had already fallen in love, and it was with the girl lying in my arms.

Chapter 5

"Rosemary Eloise Burns, what is taking you so long?" my mom yelled at me from downstairs. "Our dinner reservations are in fifteen minutes. We can't leave the Rykers waiting."

I stared at myself in the mirror, taking in the outfit my mother had picked out for me. It was a long white dress with a floral pattern and a neckline cut way too low. I hated everything about it, but my mother didn't care about that. The only thing she cared about was what Silas Ryker thought of it. What kind of name was Silas anyway? And why had a twenty-two-year-old college graduate about to start law school agreed to dinner in some strange attempt by our parents to set us up?

The better question might be why I agreed to it, although my parents didn't give me much choice in the matter, because, really, why should it be up to me who I date? To them, it only made sense that I would date the son of one of my dad's new colleagues. If Silas was anything like his dad, aside from being the completely wrong gender, he also wouldn't be my type since I didn't like arrogant douchebags.

I sighed and looked at the girl in the mirror that I barely recognized. I had only been home from school for three weeks and I already felt like I had lost some of myself. There was no time to harp on that now though, so I turned around and headed downstairs.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that Silas didn't seem to be anything like his father. He was quiet throughout most of dinner, only speaking when questions were directed toward him. He was also enough of a gentleman to keep his eyes on mine rather than ever letting them stray to my chest, so my mom's dress choice wasn't having the effect she desired, which also made me happy.

"So, Rosemary, your dad tells me you're still trying to decide between pre-med and pre-law?" Mr. Ryker asked halfway through dinner, a smirk on his face and his eyebrow raised slightly, as if he expected me to choose that moment to dash my parents' dreams and say I wasn't interested in either. The fact that I could tell that would make him happy made me want to jump across the table and slap him. *Arrogant asshole*.

"Yes, but she's going to declare by the end of this semester. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" my dad answered before I had the chance to speak.

I nodded my head because what else could I do? When I looked across the table at Silas, I was surprised to find him studying me with a concerned look on his face. I was even more surprised when he spoke directly to me. "Would you like to take a quick walk with me while we wait for dessert to arrive?"

I immediately agreed because I had the feeling he was doing this in order to save me from a conversation I didn't want to have. I also knew there would be no complaints from any of the adults at the table since they would assume their plan had worked and this was the first step to me becoming Mrs. Silas Ryker. And who knew? Maybe it was. So far, Silas seemed nice, maybe slightly on the nerdy side, but that certainly didn't bother me. Maybe he was exactly the kind of guy I could live a comfortable life with, if I could get past the fact that he was, in fact, male and I would be marrying into a family even more terrible than my own.

"I thought maybe you could use an excuse to escape," Silas said as he held the door open for me and let me walk outside in front of him.

I took a deep breath of the fresh summer air and already felt lighter. "Well, you were right, so thank you."

Silas shoved his hands deep into his pockets as we walked side by side through the restaurant's parking lot. "I know my parents can be... a lot. I needed a break from them too."

"I get it. My parents are the same way."

"So, forgive me if I'm crossing a line here, but are you really undecided or do you just not want to tell your parents what you actually want to do?"

"Both? Neither?" I stopped walking and stared out across the parking lot. I hated to admit just how utterly lost I was when it came to my future. "If I'm being completely honest, I have no clue what I want to major in and that's mostly because I haven't allowed myself to think about what *I* want."

"What do you want?"

It was nice of him to ask. The only other person who ever did was Willow. Everyone always just expected me to make certain decisions, even Lisa. Not because she didn't want me to think for myself, but she had known me long enough to realize I wouldn't. I did anything to make my parents happy.

"I just want to be happy," I said with a sigh. It was the most honest I had been in a long time. Definitely the most honest since being home from school.

Silas sighed as well in response to my answer. "Don't we all," he said, and I could tell there was much more behind that, but I wasn't one to pry. Silas stopped walking and turned to face me, suddenly looking nervous and unsure. He fidgeted with his hands as his eyes darted toward the ground. "Would you want to... maybe... you know... get dinner with me sometime... without our parents?" He cleared his throat, and for as much as I wasn't attracted to guys, it was actually rather adorable. "We could see a movie, too."

"That sounds fun. Let's do it."

We both stood there, looking around the parking lot at anything but each other. I wasn't sure how long this grueling awkwardness went on, but I was happy when Silas cleared his throat and motioned back toward the restaurant. "We should get back inside."

"So, you have a date... with a guy..." Willow said over the phone later that night. It wasn't exactly a question, but it also wasn't a statement. It floated somewhere in between, and with anyone else, I would feel judged, but I knew that wasn't the case with Willow. "How do you feel about that?"

I thought long and hard. How did I feel? "Happy? Maybe? Silas is surprisingly nice. Seemingly harmless."

Willow giggled on the other end of the phone. "I would love to make your dating profile. Looking for a guy who is nice and harmless to spend forever with. Looks don't matter since I won't be attracted to you anyway."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. No matter what was going on, Willow could always make me smile,

and it was something I loved about her.

The butterflies in my stomach took off when that word flitted into my mind once again. *Love*. Loving Willow was complicated for so many reasons, the main one being that neither of us wanted this relationship to become more than it already was.

"Are you still there?" she asked. "Just so you know, I was only kidding. If you're happy, I'm happy. Well, mostly. Kind of sucks that I'll lose my makeout buddy if you get a boyfriend."

My stomach dropped. I hadn't thought of that. Being with Silas and checking off that box meant losing part of what I had with Willow. Not that the physical parts of our relationship were the most important aspect, but I still didn't want to give that up.

I groaned dramatically into the phone. "Ugh, why did you have to remind me of that?"

Willow laughed loudly, and it was the most wonderful sound in the world. "I'm just being honest. If this is what is going to make you happy, then I'm happy for you. I mean it."

"Is it weird if I call you after the date to tell you about it?" I had no idea how this worked. Willow and I were friends. That's what we had agreed to stay. Still, I couldn't help but feel like I was somehow cheating on her by going out with Silas.

"I'd be offended if you didn't."

My first date with Silas was nice. It was so nice actually that I agreed to a second date, then a third and fourth as well. Over the next month, anytime I wasn't with Lisa or babysitting my next-door neighbor for extra cash, I was with Silas.

We had fun together. I had learned that when he wasn't with his parents, he was actually pretty funny. He had a goofy sense of humor, and we found the same nerdy jokes amusing. We spent most of our time together either playing video games or riding bikes, and even though my heart never pounded out of my chest when I was with him, I did like the feeling of holding his hand.

I also liked that he didn't push to take things further than hand-holding. He told me from the beginning that we could take things at my pace, and he had been a complete gentleman about respecting the fact that I wasn't ready for anything physical.

And by *not ready*, I actually meant scared. Scared by the fact that I continued to feel more on my nightly phone calls with Willow than I did when I was with Silas. Scared that I would have to face what I already knew deep down—no matter how much I enjoyed Silas's company, it wouldn't change what my heart actually wanted.

That fear came to fruition when, after a month of dating and hanging out, Silas shyly asked me to be his girlfriend. He looked so cute standing on my front porch with his hands shoved in his pockets as he rocked back and forth on his heels, how could I not say yes?

It was the perfect moment. There was a slight breeze that was keeping it from being overly warm, and the way the moon shined down caused an ambiance of romance. So, I said yes, then put my arms around his neck to pull him down toward me. Our lips touched and I felt... Well, I felt his lips on mine. No butterflies. No tingles. Nothing. I opened my mouth to his, because making out had to be fun no matter who it was with, right? Apparently not. It wasn't terrible, but it also wasn't something I had any desire to keep doing.

Luckily, Silas continued to be a gentleman, taking the hint once I removed my lips from his and not pushing anything more. He looked down to the ground and rubbed at the back of his neck. "Wow, that was... wow. Thank you."

His reaction made me wonder if that was his first kiss. We never talked about past relationships or hookups, but I had assumed he was at least a little experienced since he was older than me. Still, nothing about the way he was acting resembled someone who had kissed a bunch of girls. His face was red, and he continued to stare at the ground while I thought about what to say next.

"Well, have a great night, *boyfriend*," I said as flirtatiously as possible.

This brought a smile to Silas's face and he let out a chuckle as he finally looked back up at me. "You too, *girlfriend*."

It was painfully awkward in a way that only the two of us could pull off, but that made it feel right. Maybe this was exactly what I needed. Maybe Silas Ryker was exactly the type of guy I had been looking for. Although, the part that made all of that even more exciting was it gave me an excuse to call Willow and dissect everything that had happened tonight; an excuse to stay on the phone with her until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore and fall asleep to the sound of her voice.

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Chapter 6

"It's almost your month-a-versary," Willow said over the phone, sounding much more excited about it than I felt.

It's not that things were going badly with Silas. It was quite the opposite; I enjoyed my time with him. Being his girlfriend was better than I ever expected it to be. Deep down, I knew that this was mostly because he seemed to be just as disinterested in the physical part of the relationship as I was. We were essentially good friends who cuddled while we watched movies and kissed at the end of a date. I didn't know how long this would be enough for him, but I was going to enjoy it while I could.

That's where the excitement ended though. There were no butterflies. There wasn't a burning desire to be close to him and feel his lips on mine. Nothing like I had come to want and expect with Willow.

"Sure is," I answered with as much enthusiasm as I could muster up.

"Rosemary," Willow groaned, and I could tell by the tone of her voice that a lecture was about to follow. "You know I support you in whatever decisions you make, and while I have to admit that this relationship is going better than I originally expected it to, is it really worth it?"

"Is what worth it?" Truthfully, I knew exactly what she meant, but I didn't want to admit it.

"This. Settling. Being with a guy when it's clearly not what you want."

Even though we weren't together, I could still picture Willow's hands moving animatedly while she spoke, the way they always did when she was trying to make a point. I couldn't help but smile at that thought and found myself drifting into a daydream as I imagined it. The butterflies I had yet to experience with Silas fluttered through my stomach at a rapid rate, and I let myself enjoy the sensation.

"Are you even listening to me?" Willow asked after a minute of silence from my end.

I shook my head in an attempt to bring myself back to reality. "Yes. Sorry. I'm fine. I promise. I appreciate your worry, but everything is okay on my end."

Willow sighed. "That's the thing. I don't want you to just be okay. You deserve so much more than *fine* and *okay*."

Damn butterflies. "I'm happy with okay. Seriously. Don't worry about me."

"Fine. Now that I said my piece, we have something very important to talk about. I'm mad at you." The playful tone of her voice didn't match her words, so I wasn't worried.

"Oh, yeah? Why is that?"

"I had to hear from *Lisa* that your birthday is the day after your anniversary. Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrugged as though she could see me. "I don't tell anyone when my birthday is."

"But I'm not just anyone, am I?"

No, she certainly wasn't. "Of course not."

"Well, what should I get you? The least you can do is give me some ideas since it's your fault I'm finding out so late."

"I don't need anything, Willow. Seriously."

"I didn't ask what you needed. I asked what you wanted."

What I truly wanted, I wouldn't be getting for almost another month. I wanted to be back with Willow. I wanted to hear her laugh in person and watch her swing her arms around while she told a story. That, unfortunately, wasn't something she could send in the mail, so I softly whispered, "I miss you," instead of answering her question.

There was silence on the other end for a long time and I figured that meant Willow was gearing up to chastise me for still not answering her question. Instead, when she did speak, her voice was soft, just as mine had been. "I miss you too, Rosemary." Then, in complete contrast, she let out a loud, boisterous laugh. "And don't worry. Even though it's late notice, you'll get your birthday present right on time. I'll make sure of it."

I pulled up to Lisa's house and checked the clock on my dashboard one last time before shutting off my car. I had exactly thirty-five minutes before I had to leave if I was going to make it on time for my one-month anniversary dinner with Silas. I had no idea why Lisa insisted I come by, but I knew it must be important. She knew how anxious I got with time so she wouldn't have asked me if it wasn't.

I heard the front door open as I was making my way up the sidewalk, and I expected to see Lisa walk out. What, or who, I saw instead almost made me fall to the ground. I blinked a few times because I didn't believe it was real. There was no way Willow Stone was walking toward me right now.

I knew it was real as soon as she wrapped me in her arms. There was no way I could imagine that feeling of being so safe and loved.

"I've missed you so much." Willow burrowed her head into my neck as she held me even tighter, the feel of her breath against my skin as she spoke causing a chill to run down my spine.

"I've missed you, too," I whispered. "God, I missed you so much."

I didn't even realize I was crying until we broke apart, and I felt moisture on my cheeks. I wiped my eyes and laughed at myself for being so ridiculous. I couldn't help it though. Willow was standing right in front of me. All of the feelings I had convinced myself might not have been as strong as I originally thought immediately returned ten-fold.

"I hope this means you like your birthday surprise," Willow said with a laugh.

"I do. I absolutely love it. But, how...? Why...? What...? Ugh, I can't even finish a thought. I'm just so happy you're here."

Lisa looked at the watch on her wrist, then back at me. "You don't have much time. What do you say we head inside and hang out for a few minutes until you have to leave?"

I almost asked what she was talking about, my date with Silas completely wiped from my mind at the first sight of Willow. *Shit*. "You're right. Let's go." I slipped an arm around Willow's waist and walked beside her into the house. "So, what's your plan? How long are you here for?"

In true Willow fashion, she simply shrugged her shoulders. "Not sure. I didn't really plan that far ahead. I definitely want to spend your birthday with you, but if you want time alone with your boyfriend

tomorrow, that's fine too. Lisa said I'm welcome to stay here, but I'm also down to stay at your house if you think it would be okay with your parents. You're the birthday girl. It's really up to you."

"You can stay at my house," I answered much too quickly. I wasn't sure why I was so eager to get Willow alone. It's not like anything could happen between us, and even the fact that my mind went there made me feel guilty.

I had a boyfriend. I was choosing to have a boyfriend. It was unfair of me to be thinking about Willow this way when I was with someone else. I felt like such a jerk.

"What did you say?" Willow asked as she slipped away from my grasp and sat on the couch in Lisa's family room.

"I said you can stay at my house. I'm sure my parents won't mind." Willow tilted her head and furrowed her eyebrows. "No, I meant after that. Did you say something about being a jerk?"

Shit. Did I really say that out loud? "You must have misheard me," I lied.

"I heard it too," Lisa said as she threw herself onto the recliner. She laughed as she looked from me to Willow. "I have a few guesses why you might be calling yourself a jerk, and I'd say they probably all have to do with the impure thoughts you're having about this one." When my face turned red, she laughed even harder. Lisa was one of those people who didn't understand social filters, even at her best friend's expense. Normally, it was something I loved about her, but at this moment, I could have lived without it. "What's the saying? You can lead a lesbian to a boy but you can't make her drink?"

Even through my embarrassment, I couldn't help but laugh. "You're ridiculous."

Willow picked up a pillow from the couch and threw it at Lisa. "Ignore her. She's just jealous that she's not dating anyone." She patted the spot next to her, then smiled when I took the hint and sat down, both of us ignoring the way Lisa lifted an eyebrow as she watched us. "Now, let's talk about what we should do for your birthday tomorrow."

"I'm so sorry I'm late," I said once I made it to the table Silas was already seated at.

He stood from his chair and pulled out mine. "No worries at all. Your friend is here. I would have understood if you canceled."

"And missed celebrating one month with the coolest guy in the world? Never." I placed a quick kiss on his cheek before sitting down.

"You seem different tonight." Even though there was nothing accusatory to his voice, it still felt that way. Mostly because I knew exactly why I was different. I felt lighter when Willow was around; more like myself.

"In what way?" I asked, curious to hear his answer.

"Happier. Like sincerely happy. It's nice to see. You have this sort of glow to you that I'm not used to."

That's all it took. Those words were enough to make my whole facade come crashing down. What the hell was I doing? Silas was right, even if he didn't know exactly what he was right about. It didn't matter how much I tried. It didn't matter how sweet he was. He would never make me truly happy. Not in the way Willow did. And sure, maybe what Willow and I had wasn't official or permanent, but it was real. I wanted real.

That's what Silas deserved too. He didn't deserve this half-commitment I was giving him. Now, how was I supposed to tell him that? I wasn't naive enough to think I was going to somehow break his heart after a month of being his girlfriend, but I still felt like a jerk.

"Did I say something wrong?" Silas asked, interrupting my internal monologue.

"Silas... I..." I shook my head as my heartbeat picked up and my palms became sweaty. Just how honest did I want to be right now? He deserved the truth, but was I ready to say it? I took a deep breath. "I think you're a great guy, but I can't do this. It's not you. It's me." I laughed awkwardly. Did I really just use that line? "Seriously, though. It really is. The thing is, it doesn't matter how great you are. I'm never going to like you that way, because I... I like girls." I said the last three words so quickly, I wasn't sure if he would even be able to decipher them. In a way, I hoped he wouldn't.

"That's great." My head shot up, sure I must have heard that wrong, and Silas cleared his throat. "I just mean I'm really happy for you. You

deserve to live your truth."

"R-really?" My voice cracked, and I worried I might start to cry. I really didn't deserve him being this nice to me.

Silas reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Of course. I... I just really appreciate you being honest with me before this went any further. And just for the record, I'm okay with not telling our parents this is over. If, you know, you wanted to keep it up."

Now a few tears did fall. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I understand. I..." Silas swallowed hard and looked down at our hands, still joined on top of the table. "I just know what it's like always trying to impress your parents, even when it's at the expense of your own happiness."

Why did it feel like he was suddenly holding back from me? What... oh shit. My eyes snapped up to stare at the guy sitting across from me, and it suddenly all made sense—the connection between us, why he was okay with how slow I wanted to take things, the reason this always felt so much like a friendship more than anything else. "Wait. Are you—?"

Silas shook his head to cut me off, then quickly looked around the restaurant as if I had just announced his secret to everyone. "Please don't say it out loud. I'm not as brave as you. I'm not sure I ever will be."

I squeezed his hand. "I meant what I said. You're a really good guy. You deserve to be happy."

"So do you." Silas removed his hand from mine and picked up the menu. "Speaking of which, we can't really leave now, but what do you say we finish this dinner up quickly so you can get out of here. I have a feeling there is someone you'd much rather be with right now."

My face immediately heated up and I could only imagine how red it must be. "Oh. We're not... Willow isn't...."

Silas threw both hands in the air to cut off my rambling. "Hey, you don't owe me an explanation. I'm just your boyfriend." He winked, and I laughed out loud. I knew at that moment that I had been right—Silas was going to be an important part of my life for a long time.

Chapter 7

Done at dinner. Meet me at my house in fifteen? I took a deep breath after sending off the text to Willow and held it while I waited for her response.

See you soon :) Are you sure your parents won't care?

They'll be fine with it! To be honest, for once, I hadn't even thought of my parents. It didn't really matter if they cared. I needed to talk to Willow about tonight. I wanted to wake up with her on my birthday. If my parents had an issue with that, they could deal with it. At least, that's how I felt until I pulled in the driveway and saw their cars. I'm not sure where I convinced myself they might be, possibly out schmoozing the neighbors, but they were very much home. I quickly turned off my car, hoping they wouldn't realize I was there so I could have a few minutes to talk to Willow in private before going inside.

Of course, I had no such luck, and less than a minute after pulling in, my phone rang with a call from my mom.

"Why are you just sitting out there?" she asked as soon as I picked up, not even giving me a chance to say hello.

Just like that, all my confidence and bravery from earlier melted away, and I was once again that scared girl, praying my parents wouldn't be mad at me. "Oh, um, I actually have a friend staying over tonight, so I was just waiting for her to get here."

"A friend, hm?" I couldn't decipher the tone of my mom's voice, so I wasn't sure if she was more confused or annoyed. Knowing her, it was probably a little of both. "And who is this friend? I swear you better not be trying to sneak Silas in. I think you two are just delightful together, but I swear if you get pregnant—"

"It's not Silas," I said, cutting her off. "It's a friend from school. She surprised me for my birthday."

"Isn't that nice?" Only the tone of her voice told me she didn't find it nice at all. "Next time, please give us a warning. I would have had the cleaning lady do an extra day if I had known."

I rolled my eyes. Of course that's what my mom was worried about.

"Does your friend not know how to ring a doorbell?" my mother said again.

"I wanted to help her carry her bags." Why did I always have to sound so unsure when talking to my parents?

"Bags? How long is she staying?"

Like my own personal savior, Willow pulled into the driveway at that very moment. "I'm not sure, Mom, but she's here. We'll be right in."

"Hey, stranger," Willow said as she got out of her car.

It took everything in me not to pull her into a tight hug, but I knew my parents were waiting for us. On the off chance they were watching from the window, I didn't want them to catch any lingering touches. "I missed you," I said softly, as if they would somehow hear.

"I missed you too. I'm excited to hear about your night. I hope you didn't cut it short on my account."

"I'll tell you all about it later. First, you have to deal with my parents. I'm sorry."

Willow shrugged, a huge smile adorning her face as if it was no big deal. "I'm great with parents."

You haven't met my parents, I thought to myself.

Before we reached the front door, it swung open and my mother looked at Willow with her big, fake smile. "It's so nice to have one of Rosemary's friends here."

Willow hiked her bag up higher on her shoulder and reached out a hand. "I'm Willow Stone. It's wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Burns."

I saw something switch on my mom's face, her smile suddenly becoming more sincere. "With manners like that, you are welcome here anytime." She motioned toward the inside of the house. "Come in. Let me give you the tour."

After guiding Willow through every single room in our house, aside from the bedrooms, my mom finally directed us to the living room to sit down. "Are you hungry, dear?" she asked as if she ever cooked.

"No, ma'am, I'm fine."

"So, Willow," my dad, who had joined us about halfway through the house tour, said as he sat down in his favorite recliner. "Tell us more about yourself. What are your plans for the future?"

I cringed. Of course that's all my dad cared about.

Without missing a beat, Willow answered, "I'm not sure exactly what I want to do yet. I'm currently undecided, but I am going to declare business once we get to school. I figure that will help me to keep my options open."

My dad nodded his head. "Smart choice. As I'm sure Rosemary has told you, she's still deciding whether to do pre-law or pre-med. Never could make up her mind about anything. Been that way since she was a little girl."

Willow gave me a knowing smile before focusing back on my dad. "Well, I know *whatever* Rosemary decides to do, she'll be great at it."

"She's a Burns. She doesn't have a choice," my dad said with a wink.

The heavy feeling that always settled in my gut whenever my parents put pressure on me crept in with his words. Even when my dad said things playfully like this, I knew there was truth to it. Anything less than one hundred percent had never been enough for my parents.

Willow looked between my parents and smiled politely. "I'd love to hear more about the two of you." She didn't acknowledge me as she said it. She didn't touch me or even look at me, but I had never felt so seen and so cared for.

This was all I could think about as both of my parents went on a tangent about their favorite subject—themselves. I let myself zone out until my dad announced he was ready for bed and my mom followed closely behind him.

"Thank you for that," I said once I was sure they were out of earshot.

"You know I've always got your back."

I stood up and reached my hand out toward Willow. "Want to head upstairs?"

Once she was standing, even though everything inside of me was begging me not to, I dropped her hand. I couldn't risk one of my parents coming out of their room for something and seeing us.

I led her up the stairs, past my parents' closed bedroom door, and down a long hallway that contained their offices and a guest room. At the end of the hall, I opened the door that led to another staircase and laughed when Willow's eyes went wide at the sight.

"You have a secret staircase? Where are we going? Narnia?"

"I wish it was that exciting, but, no, it's just my room up here."

"You have a whole floor to yourself?"

When I opened the door at the top, I pointed toward the other end of the hallway. "Technically, that's all storage in that room." I pointed out the rest of the rooms one at a time. "That's my bathroom. That's my study area. That's a room for my guests." I opened the door right in front of us. "And this is my room."

Willow pointed to the door next door. "So, that one is my room for the next few days?"

Feeling much more confident now that we were far from my parents, I shook my head and pulled Willow into my room by her T-shirt. Something animalistic took over as I slammed the door shut and pushed her up against it. Willow's eyes went wide in surprise, but unlike her response to the staircase, there was something else in them.

I really hoped it was desire as I leaned in closer to her, stopping when my lips were just a breath away from hers. "You were right. I'm not fine with just okay." I placed a quick kiss on her lips and felt everything that had been missing these past few months—the sparks, the fireworks, the *love*. "I need more than okay." Another kiss. "I need this." And another. "I need you."

I'm not sure what I was expecting from my surprise attack, but it wasn't for Willow to gently push me away and shake her head. "We can't. You have a boyfriend."

Shit. Of course she thought that. She had no reason to believe anything had changed over the last few hours. "No. I don't, actually."

Willow tilted her head, and the slightest and absolute cutest, smile parted her lips. "You don't?"

I shook my head and smiled back at her. "Nope. Well, if my parents ask, yes, but I'll explain that in more detail later. If you're okay with it, I'd rather do something else right now."

"Something like this?" Willow asked before bringing our lips back together.

I was going to answer, but I was too caught up in the moment to say a word. Too caught up on the feeling of her lips on my lips; the taste of her tongue against mine.

Stumbling through my room, we somehow made our way back to my bed and made out for who knows how long before the alarm on Willow's phone interrupted us. She grabbed it and held it up to show me that it was now midnight and officially my birthday. It was sweet but the last thing I cared about right now.

Apparently, Willow didn't feel the same way because she put enough space between us for her to be able to look into my eyes and run a hand through my hair. "Happy birthday, you big bad nineteen-year-old. How does it feel?"

I closed my eyes and breathed in Willow's intoxicating scent and the feeling of her hand in my hair. "Right now, it feels pretty darn good."

Willow bit her lip and continued to stare at me intently before letting out a soft chuckle. "I still can't believe you're just turning nineteen and I'm going to be twenty in a few months."

"Had to start early. Now that you met my parents, would you expect anything else?"

Willow must have noticed the heaviness that suddenly came over my voice because she placed a quick, but sweet, kiss on my lips. "Let's not talk about your parents right now." Her eyes lit up as she wiggled her eyebrows. "Now that I'm here, you can tell me what you want for your birthday."

The weight of Willow's stare shot right through me and landed on my core, and I knew exactly what I wanted. "You."

Willow giggled. "You already have me, silly. What else do you want?"

"I mean, I want..." I slid my hand down her body and ran it over the front of her shorts. "I want you."

I watched Willow's throat move as she swallowed hard. Her eyes looked even deeper into mine. "Are... are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything." I continued to run my fingers over the front of her shorts. I had no idea what I was doing, but I must have been doing something right, because Willow's breath hitched as she threw her head back slightly.

"I can't give you forever," she said in a pained whisper.

"All I want is right now."

The words felt true in the moment, even though, deep down, I knew they weren't. I wanted so much more than just this one moment. But that didn't matter right now. Those were thoughts for another day. This was exactly what I wanted right now.

Willow nodded, finally conceding to my wishes. That's when it hit me. I had no idea what I was doing. Absolutely no idea.

Reading my mind the way she always did, Willow whispered reassuring words into my ear. "I got you. We'll just do what feels right. That's all that matters. Don't overthink it."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding and moved my hand from the front of her shorts up to the button. "Can I?"

Willow's breathing became even more erratic, and she responded with only an emphatic nod. My hand fumbled around as if I had never unbuttoned a pair of pants before, and I had to bring the other hand down to help get the job done. My hands shook as I dragged the shorts down her legs. How much I wanted this didn't do anything to calm my nerves.

I let my eyes roam up and down Willow's legs before moving back to her face. "Shirt?" I did some weird motion with my hand as if I was casting a spell. *Good God*, *I'm awkward*. "Can I?"

Willow lifted her arms and smiled. "I'm all yours."

Luckily, I didn't struggle with her shirt quite as much as her pants, which was surprising since my hands were still shaking. I sat back once her shirt was off and took in the sight in front of me. For a moment, I forgot my own name. Hell, I forgot how to breathe, which became obvious when I let out a small cough after essentially choking on my own saliva.

I laughed awkwardly and stared down at the bed. "I'm such a mess. Are you sure you want to do this with me? I'm not asking because I don't want to. I really, really do. I'm just me, and you're you, and I don't know."

I stopped talking when soft fingers landed on the bottom of my chin and delicately directed my face so I was focused on Willow once again. *Those eyes*. It was like they told a new story every time I looked into them. "You're you, and that's exactly why I'm here. There's no one else I want to be sharing this moment with, and that's because I love absolutely everything that makes you you."

Love. There was that word again. I wanted to ask her what she meant by it. It wasn't the first time she had said it to me, but every other

time felt friendly—a quick *I love you* before hanging up the phone; a *you know I love you*, *girl*, when she's teasing me. Never like this though. Never in such a heated moment with such conviction. I couldn't let myself overthink it though, because, really, it didn't make a difference. Either way, I wanted to do this right now, and either way, it wouldn't change the future.

"You're beautiful, Rosemary. That's all you need to know." She ran her eyes over the length of my body. "May I?"

"Please." My voice came out in a breathless whisper, leaving no question as to how much I wanted this. How desperate I was to feel Willow's hands on my bare skin. Her body on my body.

Just thinking about it caused a moan to escape from my throat, which made Willow start to laugh. "I haven't even touched you yet."

Her laugh made me laugh and soon we were both on our backs, giggling uncontrollably. After a minute, Willow rolled over and tickled my sides, causing me to laugh even harder. The more I laughed, the more she tickled me, until she was straddling my hips and running her hands up and down my sides. Smooth as ever, she easily transitioned from tickling to lifting my shirt over my head. Once my shirt was off, she bent down and placed kisses across my chest. As she kissed, she wrapped her arms behind my back, and before I could even comprehend what was happening, she slipped my bra off. My laughter ceased when I felt the cold air hit my bare chest.

My chest heaved up and down with deep breaths as Willow, still straddling my hips, stared down at me. No one had ever looked at me that way, her eyes studying my body as if she was trying to commit it to memory. With Willow looking at me this way, it was the first time in my life I ever *felt* beautiful. She made me feel like I was someone worth looking at; someone worth touching. And when she bent back down and took a nipple into her mouth, I swear I saw stars.

I whimpered as her tongue circled around one nipple, while her hand went to the other, her touch somehow soft yet firm all at once. As desire shot through me from where she was touching all the way down to my center, I couldn't take it anymore. I scratched at her back until I found the hook of her bra and growled when my hands wouldn't work the way I wanted them to.

Willow pulled away from me and sat up, smirking as she reached her hands around to unhook the bra herself. Her smile dropped and her face contorted as she continued to move her hands behind her back. "Shit. No wonder you couldn't get this. What the hell?" Her tongue dipped slightly out of her mouth and she stared up at the ceiling as she focused on the task at hand. "Screw it," she finally said, growling the same way I had just a moment earlier before pulling the bra up over her head.

Before I could fully appreciate the sight in front of me, she rolled off of me, then hopped off the bed. "Sorry. I'm ready to lose all of this," she explained as she pulled down her underwear.

Now, it was me who was staring. I couldn't have looked away if I tried. Willow's body was perfect. There was a hint of a six pack on her flat stomach, and her muscular arms and legs looked like those of an athlete.

When she looked at my pants that were still on my body and raised her eyebrows in silent instruction, I could feel my insecurities coming to the surface. What if she didn't like what she saw? What if my body didn't compare to the first person she had sex with?

Willow hopped back onto the bed and lay down next to me. She ran a hand over my stomach before bringing it to rest right at the waistline of my pants. "How many times do I have to tell you you're beautiful for you to believe me?" she asked with a laugh that was playful instead of teasing. Her fingers skimmed just inside my pants. "Are you sure?"

"God. Yes. Please." My mind was too flooded with thoughts of what was to come to form a coherent thought, but my words were enough for Willow.

She unzipped my pants and pulled them down along with my underwear. She didn't try to make it extra sexy or sensual by taking her time, but that was more than okay with me. All I wanted was to be naked with her.

And then we were. Just like that. I was lying naked next to an equally naked Willow Stone, and it hit me once again that I had no idea what I was doing.

"Remember what I said," Willow whispered. "Just do what feels right, and it's going to be perfect." She put one hand on my hip, then leaned in to kiss me, and all other thoughts drifted away.

My fingers spread over her stomach, then as if they had a mind of their own, slid lower onto her center. I still had no idea what I was doing, but it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was that Willow seemed to be enjoying it, her body pushing against my hand as we continued to kiss. I slid a finger through her wetness, gasping at the exact same time Willow did.

Our mouths fell apart, and Willow bit down on my shoulder as I continued to explore. She brought her hand to meet mine and directed my finger onto her clit. "Right... here... please."

Once I started to work my thumb over her clit, she pulled her hand away, and after some clumsy maneuvering, brought her hand to my center as well. The stars from earlier returned and it took everything inside of me to stay focused on the task at hand as my body writhed under Willow's touch.

"I'm not..." I could hardly breathe at this point, let alone speak.
"Not going to last much... ah... longer."

I moved my fingers through Willow's wetness once again as her fingers circled around my clit. "You can..." Willow's words were cut off by a low moan. "Inside."

Even though it wasn't exactly a coherent thought, I still knew exactly what she was asking. "You want that?"

"Yes." The word was more of a guttural moan because I was already moving one finger inside of her. "Oh God, yes, Rosemary. Another one. Two. I want two."

For a second, I couldn't comprehend what she was talking about, but then I realized she meant fingers, so I removed the one that was currently inside of her and pushed two in instead.

Willow bit down on my shoulder once again and moved her fingers more rapidly until I couldn't take it anymore. I shoved my face into her neck, screaming out my pleasure until my body went stiff. Willow pushed hard against my fingers, her body shaking against them until her body gave out as well.

I stared up at the ceiling as I replayed everything that had just happened. I could barely catch my breath, but it was totally worth it. "Best... birthday... present... ever."

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Chapter 8

"Happy birthday," Willow whispered into my ear before placing a kiss on my cheek.

I smiled as I pulled her pajama-clad body up against mine. I'd like to say that my first ever sexual experience led to a marathon of sex that lasted all night, but I've never been that cool.

Once we were done, I could barely keep my eyes open, so Willow suggested we get into our pajamas just in case my parents decided to pick the lock and barge into my room uninvited. Of course, that would never actually happen, but I appreciated that she was entertaining my irrational fears.

"Is there a nineteen-year-old up there?" my dad yelled from the bottom of the steps.

I had to hand it to them. For as much as they could suck most other days of the year, they did always make a big deal out of my birthday, spoiling me silly even now.

"Coming down in ten," I yelled back. I sighed and focused my attention on Willow, the feeling of her body up against mine making it hard to find any motivation to get out of bed. "We should get up. He's really extra about my birthday. He's honestly probably timing us right now and will try to come up the second it hits ten minutes."

Willow jumped out of bed, and it reminded me of what she had done the night before, right before she stripped off the rest of her clothes. This thought immediately caused my body to heat up. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, willing those thoughts to go away before I did something stupid like have sex with Willow when my dad very well could try to come up any minute.

"What are you doing? Praying?"

I jumped at the sound of Willow's voice but laughed when I opened my eyes and saw her staring at me, a smirk on her face and head slightly tilted. "Essentially, yes. Praying I can keep my hands off you in front of my parents today." Willow dramatically placed her hand over her chest. "Rosemary Burns, are you talking dirty to me right now?"

"Maybe." I tried to make my voice sound flirtatious, but I was pretty sure that was offset by the blush I could feel creeping across my face and neck.

When I stood from the bed, Willow immediately walked over and put a hand on each of my cheeks. "You're so freaking cute," she said as she leaned in closer before placing a much-too-quick kiss on my lips. To my surprise, she followed it up with a light smack on my ass. "Now, get that cute butt dressed so I can schmooze your parents some more."

When we left my room a few minutes later, we found my parents in our dining room. My mom was putting plates down on the table that was already filled with sausage, bacon, eggs, and pancakes.

"May's Diner?" I asked as I took a seat in front of one of the place settings, motioning for Willow to sit down beside me.

"Only the best for my little girl," my mom said in a singsong voice. It was always shocking how they could be so sweet on rare occasions when most of the time they were cold and distant.

My dad walked in a minute later and sat across from us, his face serious as he stared at me. "You look different."

Oh God. He knew. How did he know? "Wh-what?" I said, my voice cracking. I never was good under pressure.

"Older, I'd say. Almost like you're nineteen or something." He winked, and I finally breathed again.

Willow looked at me, then my parents. "Thank you so much for breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Burns. This all looks amazing. And thanks again for letting me stay here on such little notice."

My dad smiled, and it actually looked genuine. "Stay as long as you want. You are a polite, driven young lady. I'm happy my daughter has a friend like you. I think you're a good influence on her."

I almost spit out the orange juice I was drinking. If he only knew.

"Speaking of good influences..." My mom pursed her lips and lifted an eyebrow. "What are your plans with Silas today?"

"Silas?" I almost forgot in my parents' minds, we were still dating. Even though things had just ended between us last night, it felt like ages ago. Sex with Willow made everything seem so much different and new. It changed me. Cracked me open. I could never go back to my old self. Well, except right now, in front of my parents.

My mom chuckled. "Silas—your boyfriend. I was sure you would have made plans with him."

"She did," Willow answered before I could think of what to say. "A group of us are going out to dinner tonight."

"Perfect. Bring him here afterward. We'll have cake." My mom stood from the table and walked away so I wouldn't even have the option to argue if I wanted to.

"So, let me make sure I have this straight," Lisa said as we walked into my parents' house after dinner. She pointed between me and Silas, who were now holding hands. "You two aren't real dating anymore, but you're acting more loving than I've seen yet because you're fake dating now."

I laughed because it was all too ridiculous not to. "Precisely." Lisa skipped ahead of us. "This should be fun."

For what it was—a night with my parents, my fake boyfriend, the girl I had lost my virginity to the night before, and my best friend who can't ever keep her mouth shut—it was actually a really good night. We ate cake, my mother swooned over how sweet Silas and I were together, my father talked Silas's ear off about starting at Columbia, and Lisa and Silas both made it a point to head out early, which I know was for my benefit.

I stretched my arms over my head and yawned dramatically once it was just me, my parents, and Willow. "I'm tired. I think I'm ready for bed." I yawned one more time to get my point across, then worried I might be overselling it.

My mom looked at the clock across the room. "It's barely nine. You're really going to go to bed this early when you have company?"

I shrugged. "I figured we'd just watch a movie or something." *Or something*. I looked around the room, hoping it would keep my mom from seeing the guilt that was clearly written all over my face.

If my mom caught my awkwardness, she didn't show it. She simply turned back to the TV and relaxed further into the couch. "Well, sleep tight.

I'll be sure not to get too rowdy down here. Wouldn't want to keep the old nineteen-year-old up."

I ignored her sarcasm and motioned for Willow to follow me upstairs. Once we were in my room, Willow put her hand over her face and started to giggle. "Watch a movie *or something*, huh? What's the *something*? Chess? Reading out loud to each other?"

I put up a finger as if I was going to lecture her. "Hey, don't joke about that. Reading out loud to each other actually sounds nice."

Willow smirked and put one hand on my hip. "So, is that what you want to do right now? We totally can. It's your birthday."

I rubbed my nose up against hers. "Not quite."

"Hm, I'm not quite sure what—"

I cut Willow's words off with a kiss. She kissed me back, and it was absolutely perfect. It was the kind of kiss that made my toes curl; a kiss that made me question how I was ever able to convince myself I could be happy with a guy or with anyone other than her for that matter.

I stopped the kiss only so I could pull her over to my bed. Things went more quickly this time with only minor fumbling on both of our parts as we took off each other's clothes. Sticking with what I knew, which wasn't much, I instinctively moved my hand down to Willow's center.

Before I could do anything, Willow's hand landed on mine to stop me. "Wait." She licked her lips and cleared her throat, never once removing her eyes from mine. "I was hoping I could go down on you."

Oh my God. Could someone come just from words? Because I felt like I was about to. I never knew how much I wanted someone's mouth on me until Willow suggested it, but now my body was buzzing with anticipation. Chills ran down my spine and all the way to my toes.

"Is that okay with you?" Willow asked when a whole minute passed without me saying anything.

At first, all I could do was nod, but after a few more seconds, I finally got my mouth to move. "I believe I would very much enjoy that." What the hell?

Willow smirked. "Good. I'm glad, because that's kind of the point."

All I could do was watch as she made her way down my body, taking her time as she went and placing kisses on my bare skin along the

way. She kissed the inside of each thigh, then gently pushed my legs apart. "Just so you know, I've never done this before, so bear with me, okay?"

Her confession made me feel even more turned on. I couldn't believe I would be the first person Willow ever tasted; the first person she ever made come with her tongue. Just knowing that made the whole thing so much sexier.

Then she tentatively ran her tongue up my center, and I was completely done for. My head shot back, heavy against my pillow, while the rest of my body felt light. It was almost as if I was floating in the clouds, watching the sight take place below. Except, I could feel everything. Damn, could I feel it. Every swipe of her tongue sent a new set of shockwaves through my body.

When she hit a particularly good spot, I found myself begging for more. "There, yes, right there," I whispered into the silent room, the sultriness to my voice something I didn't recognize at all.

Then my hands were in her hair and I was pressing her even tighter up against me, my hips pushing up to meet her tongue on every stroke. Then came the explosion of feelings—lust, love, need all culminated in the most earth-shattering orgasm. It was the kind of orgasm that causes your toes to curl in a way that I would later learn doesn't always happen no matter how great the sex is.

Willow wiped at her mouth, then crawled up the bed so she was level with me. "Was that okay?"

Without meaning to, I laughed loudly. "Okay? I would tell you it was the best orgasm I've ever had, but that doesn't hold much merit given that it's only the second. I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure that was the greatest orgasm anyone has ever had in all of history."

Now a wide grin spread across Willow's face. "Wow, those are some big compliments there, Miss Burns."

"Well, I mean it. All of it."

Willow placed a quick kiss on my lips. "Well, happy birthday."

I looked at her as she relaxed back onto the bed. "Do you really think I'm going to let you do that and not return the favor?"

Willow pushed up a little so she was resting her weight on her elbows. She kept a cool face but I could see the eagerness sneaking through.

"I didn't want to push anything. It's your birthday, so whatever you want works for me."

"I want to..." I was taken over by shyness, because really, never in my life did I expect to find myself in this situation. "I want to do what you just did."

"You shouldn't do it if you can't even say it out loud." Willow stared at me as if she was issuing a challenge, appearing serious at first until she cracked a smile after a few seconds. Still, she continued to stare, which told me she wasn't backing down.

"Fine!" I growled. "I want to go down on you. I want you in my mouth. I want to taste you."

I couldn't believe those words had just come out of my mouth, and Willow looked just as surprised. She licked her lips as desire flashed across her face. After a few seconds, her smile returned and she playfully bumped her shoulder against mine. "Well, now you're just being dirty."

I playfully shoved her, before I not-so-playfully pushed her back down against the bed. Unlike her, I didn't take my time kissing down her body. I had one destination on my mind, and I didn't want to waste any time.

If Willow was upset by the lack of foreplay, she didn't show it. After just one hesitant lick, her hands were already in my hair. I let my tongue explore until I hit a spot that caused Willow to buck up against me. Taking that as a sign, I continued to keep my tongue there, happy when her hands tightened in my hair. It didn't take much longer for her to completely lose control underneath me, and I loved it so much. God, I loved it. I was pretty sure I could become addicted to the feeling of having sex with Willow. Even though I didn't have any other experience, I had an inkling it wouldn't be like this with just anyone.

Just when I thought I couldn't fall any deeper, Willow encouraged me to move up beside her and pulled me into her arms before whispering, "Jammies and snuggles?" Done. I was done.

The next day, I was woken up to the feeling of Willow placing kisses along my face and neck. I blinked open my eyes and Willow pulled

back to look at me. "Did I wake you?"

"Wasn't that kind of the point?" I asked with a tired laugh.

She shrugged but smiled her trademark smile. "Yeah, I guess so."

"What time is it?" I asked through a yawn. I could tell from the complete lack of sunlight coming through the windows that it must be early.

"Just after five, which means we have about an hour until the sun rises. Do you want to watch it with me?"

"You're asking me if I want to watch the sunrise with you?" It was so unbelievably sweet, I almost couldn't believe it was real. Even after everything we had done, this felt so special.

"There's no one else I'd rather watch it with." There was a softness to her voice that told me she meant it. "Unless you would rather keep sleeping. That's fine too. This trip is all about you."

I put a hand on her cheek and kissed her lips once before pulling back. "There's nothing I'd rather do right now."

We quickly got dressed and left the still-quiet house. Willow drove around until she found a spot that she proclaimed would be perfect, and she was right. Everything about the moment was perfect—the reds and yellows of the beautiful sunrise, the sparkling eyes of the gorgeous girl sitting beside me, the feeling of Willow's arm wrapped tightly around my waist as she pulled me close.

"I make it a point to watch at least one sunrise and sunset every week," Willow said as she continued to stare at the sky. "Even when it's cloudy or cold and not nearly as beautiful as the one today, there's still something special about it. There's something about watching a day begin and end that makes me feel alive. It's like no matter what kind of day follows or what I've already been through during the day, watching the sun rise and fall helps remind me that there's beauty no matter what. Life begins and ends and the world continues to turn."

There was so much I wanted to say to her at that moment. So much I wanted to confess about how much she had changed me and how I wanted so much more. Like, how I wanted forever even if forever wasn't that long. But I didn't have the courage to say those words. "Whenever we're together, can I join you? Can we watch together?" was what I said instead.

The way Willow smiled told me I had chosen the right words. "Beginning and ending my day with you? There's nothing better than that."

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Chapter 9

Winter 2008/2009

"It's getting closer to the time you need to declare a major, you know."

I looked over at Willow who was currently lying beside me in my bed and running her fingers along my arm. It felt so good, and I had no idea how I was supposed to leave her after my final the next day. Most people were excited for Christmas break, but to me, it sounded like torture. A month without Willow Stone? No, thank you.

"I know," I said with a sigh. "I just have no idea what I want to do with my life."

Willow stopped moving her fingers and gently squeezed my arm instead. "And that's okay."

I laughed. "It's clearly not. My parents want to know. The school wants to know. Now *you* want to know."

"Technically, I just pointed out that it's getting closer. I didn't actually say I wanted to know. Just for the record, I mean it. It's okay not to know. You're nineteen. *But* I have a feeling you might actually know. You just don't want to say it because it's not what's expected of you."

How did she do that? How did she always just know? "Remember how I babysat my neighbor this past summer?"

"Of course I do." Willow nudged me playfully. "You talked about her more than you talked about your *boyfriend*."

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew she was probably right. "I absolutely loved it. We read together, I helped her with some things she would be learning in the upcoming school year. What I really want is to work with kids. I want to be a teacher." My smile was wide as I talked about it, then dropped once I realized how ridiculous I sounded. I stared down at my comforter now instead of looking at Willow. "It's dumb though. My parents would never be okay with that. Even you probably think it's lame, Miss Live-life-to-the-fullest. Teaching isn't exactly the world's coolest dream."

Willow moved her hand from my arm to my hand, lacing our fingers together. She squeezed my hand, causing me to look up at her, and I could see the sincerity in her eyes that I knew meant whatever she had to say was true. "I think it's super cool. First of all, what job could be more important than shaping our youth? Second of all, I saw the way your eyes just lit up talking about it. Finding your passion, no matter what it is, and no matter what anyone else thinks—that's living life to the fullest."

She seemed so sure. I wanted to be that sure too. I didn't want to question every single decision I made. "But what if I'm wrong? What if I change my mind? What if I wake up one day and realize I'm just not passionate about it anymore?"

Willow shrugged. "Then you do something else."

I chuckled. "You say that like it's easy."

"It's not, but it's worth it." Willow squeezed my hand once again. "Listen, things happen all the time that have the ability to make us unhappy. It's what we do about it that matters. You can either change your circumstances or learn to be happy in your current circumstances. Neither choice is easy, but it's better than falling into the state of just *existing* that happens to so many people when they lose that passion."

Willow was right. I didn't want to just exist. I wanted to be happy—as happy as I was in this moment lying beside her (if that was possible). "Okay." I took a deep breath and let it out. "You're right. This is what I want, and I should do it."

Willow laughed joyously as she placed kisses all over my face. "I knew you were smart. I'm so proud of you, Rosemary."

"Let's not get too carried away. You should hold your pride until after we make sure I work up the courage to tell my parents."

"You'll do it. I have no question, because you have no choice. In situations like this that affect your happiness, you have to say consequences be damned and do the thing that's going to make you happy. And you deserve happiness more than anyone I've ever met."

When Willow said things like that, I knew she meant it, which made me start to believe it too. "You're right. By the time I come back to school, my parents will know exactly what my plan is, and I'll declare my major."

"Three more days," Willow said during one of our last nightly chats over Christmas break.

"I know." I groaned internally since I knew what she was getting at. I still had yet to tell my parents what I was declaring my major as, even though they had asked me multiple times. Somehow, I had found a way to change the subject each time it came up, but I couldn't do that much longer.

"Hey, I was just saying it because I'm excited to see you."

"You and I both know that's not why you were saying it."

"Well, I am excited to see you."

I sighed. *God*, *I missed this girl*. Phone calls and the occasional FaceTime didn't even begin to compare to actually being with her. "I'm excited to see you too." I dropped my voice. "*All* of you."

The line was silent for almost a minute and I thought the call had dropped until I heard Willow clear her throat. "Sorry. I wish I had something smooth to say back, but I'm speechless. I wasn't expecting that from you."

Honestly, I hadn't been expecting it either. Willow brought something out that I didn't know I had in me; a desire, a passion. I loved it so much that it didn't even scare me that this couldn't last forever. Well, kind of. Moreso, it kept me from thinking about that fact. I shook my head to try to rid it from my mind at that moment as well.

"I can't wait for that either, though," Willow said, interrupting my thoughts. "At the risk of sounding uncool, what I miss most is what happens right after, when we lay together and snuggle naked, just talking about life."

My body heated up at the thought. "Can we just go back *now*?"

"You know I'll head back to the apartment whenever you do, and I would love a few extra days with you, especially since Tori is on vacation and Lisa won't be back until the weekend. It's just too bad you haven't told your parents yet. You can't leave until you do that." Willow's voice made it sound like a challenge, like she was silently saying, *As soon as you tell them, we can be together.*

That was enough for me. It was all the encouragement I needed. "Okay. I'm going to tell them now. Be ready. If they don't try to sit me

down for a lecture after I tell them, I'll come back today."

"I'll be ready. Don't worry about that."

We said our goodbyes and I hung up the phone, my confidence dropping immensely once I didn't have Willow on the other line. I could do this though. I had to for so many reasons.

I gave myself more time by packing up the rest of the stuff I would need for school, then took a deep breath before heading downstairs. It was Wednesday, which just so happened to be the day my mom got home early, and my dad normally worked from home. When I got down to the second floor, my dad was still in his office, and my mom was in their bedroom, most likely changing from work.

I stood in the hallway between the two and cleared my throat as if I was about to make a major announcement, which I guess actually was exactly what I was doing. "I need to talk to the two of you," I said loudly. When I didn't get a response, I added, "It's about my major."

"What's that, dear?" my mom asked while walking out of her bedroom.

Not even five seconds later, my dad's office door was opening as well. "Did I hear something about your major?"

When I nodded, my dad motioned me into his office and my mom followed closely behind. With both their eyes on me, this suddenly didn't feel like such a good idea. Willow's words from last month floated into my mind. *Consequences be damned*. I had to do what made me happy.

"I've decided on my major." My parents both continued to stare at me without saying a word, and I knew that meant I had no choice but to just say it now. "I know this isn't going to be what either of you want or expect, but it's what *I* want, and I think that's what's really important. I'm not passionate about anything medical- or law-related. It's... it's not what I want. I want to be a teacher. I'm going to declare elementary education as my major."

I shut my eyes and waited. Waited for the shouting. Waited for the lecture. Instead, I heard laughter. I opened my eyes to find my mom laughing as if I had just told a joke.

"Oh, honey, that's cute. Not realistic for a daughter of mine, but still cute."

I looked between my parents who now both had smirks on their faces that I wanted to slap right off. "This isn't a joke. It's what I want to do. I... I think I deserve to do what makes me happy."

"Success is what makes people happy, Rosemary." And there it was, my dad's famous words. His voice was now firm, the smirk no longer on his face.

"I think I could be a very successful teacher."

This brought back their laughter once again. Gee, I knew they were never the greatest, but had they always been *this* big of douchebags?

"I guess that depends on your definition of success," my mom said once her laughter ceased.

"Yes, it's a joke to think people like us would consider a career like that successful," my dad added. "What does Silas think of this crazy idea?"

"He supports me." Which was true. Silas agreed with Willow that if teaching is what would make me happy, I needed to do it. Sure, he wasn't actually agreeing as my boyfriend since that's not who he was, but they didn't need to know that.

"That's good." There was sincerity in my mother's voice and for a second, I thought she might actually be nice. "I hope he likes supporting you since that's what he'd be doing his whole life if you actually choose this career path."

Then the laughter was back once again, and I was stewing. For once in my life, I had been honest with my parents about what I wanted and they quite literally laughed in my face. It was so unfair, and I couldn't take it. "I'm leaving," I said, much more loudly and firmly than I expected. When my parents looked at me in surprise, I almost backed down, but I was way too angry for that. "I don't deserve to be treated this way. I won't just stand here and let you laugh at my dreams. I'm going back to school."

I stomped away from them without another word. I was shocked I had just said all of that to my parents, but I also wished I had said more. They deserved everything I could say to them. I know you're supposed to respect your parents, but how could I respect people who were so blatantly disrespectful to me? I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Instead, I grabbed everything I needed for school and got in my car, not even giving it a second thought as I drove away. Once I was on the road, I called Willow and told her I was heading back and hoped she would

be there when I arrived. She didn't push me for more details, but instead just promised that she would be there. I was thankful for that, because right now, the last thing I wanted was to talk about what just happened. All I wanted was Willow Stone.

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Chapter 10

When I walked into our apartment, Willow was sitting on the couch waiting for me. She looked perfect in her white T-Shirt and black sweatpants, with the bottom layer of her hair now purple instead of blue, something she had decided to do spur of the moment during Christmas break. She was absolutely everything I needed at that moment, so I didn't even give it a second thought before marching over to the couch and straddling her lap.

"Rosemary, what—?"

In a move completely out of character, I put a finger over her lips to stop her words, then moved my hips against hers. "I don't want to talk right now."

Willow closed her eyes and bit her lip. "But don't you... Ah... don't you think we should?"

"Not right now. Please." I was pleading, but I didn't care. I knew what I wanted. I peppered kisses along her neck, up her jaw, and then finally on her lips.

Willow pushed me away, just slightly, enough so she could speak. "I just don't want to take advantage of you when you're clearly going through something."

I looked down at our bodies and the way mine was still rocking against hers. "What part of this says you're taking advantage of me?" I stopped for just a moment, because I wanted to make sure we were on the same page. "Do you want this?"

"Of course I want it. When do I not want it? I just don't want—"

I cut her off once again, this time with my mouth. I couldn't resist placing a few kisses on her lips before pulling away again. "I'm telling you this is what I want. Yes, my parents' reaction was shit, and I don't want to deal with it right now, but that has nothing to do with what I want from you."

Willow nodded as if she finally understood. "Your room or mine?" "There's no time for that. I want you right now. Right here."

Willow's eyes went wide as if she didn't recognize the girl in front of her. Heck, I barely recognized myself right now, but I was hungry, so hungry. I stood up and made quick work of removing all of my clothes. I thought about trying to make it look sexy but decided on speed rather than show, which ended up with me looking about as far from sexy as I could get. Willow didn't seem to mind though. Her eyes scanned my now naked body. She ripped her shirt over her head, along with her sports bra, then wiggled out of her pants and underwear as she continued to sit on the couch staring up at me. I wouldn't say it was the smoothest move ever, but that didn't keep it from being sexy as hell.

I straddled her once again and immediately moved my hand down to her center. There was no time for foreplay. I needed both of us to come as quickly as possible. Willow seemed to understand, and she moved her hand down as well. There was some fumbling around as we tried to figure out how to stay connected like this but also get our fingers inside of each other, but it didn't matter. Nothing took away from how turned on I was. Soon, I was riding two of Willow's fingers, along with her lap, while also rubbing her clit. Her breathing became labored at the same time I felt myself slipping over the edge, and like clockwork, we both reached our climax at the same time, moaning into each other's mouths as we kissed and came down from this high.

I flopped off her lap and onto the couch, again letting sexiness be damned. How I looked right now didn't matter. All that mattered was how I felt, and for the first time since leaving my parents' house, I felt absolutely terrific. I looked over at Willow, hoping she was equally as satisfied, and the wide grin on her face told me she was.

"Wow. That was... wow," Willow said after a minute of catching her breath. "Who are you and what have you done with sweet, innocent Rosemary?"

I leaned my head on her shoulder and draped an arm across her stomach. "Blame yourself. You're too irresistible for me to remain sweet and innocent."

"That's too bad. I love sweet, innocent Rosemary. Don't get me wrong though. I love this Rosemary too. I love every side of you."

There was that word again. *Love*. It seemed to hold so much more meaning when it came during or after sex, even though I wasn't sure if it

should. I wanted to ask, but I couldn't stand the thought of someone laughing in my face for the second time today. Not that Willow would ever be cruel like that, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't want to hear any answer she gave, so there was no point in asking.

"I love you too, Willow," was all I said instead.

Her smile went even wider, and she placed a quick kiss on my forehead. "Have you eaten yet?" When I shook my head, Willow extracted her body from mine and stood from the couch. "What do you say I order us something and then you can tell me what happened with your parents?"

I sighed. *Back to reality.* "If we must."

Willow allowed me to avoid the topic of my parents for the hour while we waited for our food to arrive. Once we had our plates stacked with pizza and breadsticks down on the coffee table, she gave me the look that said it was time. "Are you ready?"

I nodded my head, but before I could even start to explain it, tears came to my eyes. "They laughed at me."

"They *what*?" Willow sounded just as flabbergasted as I felt when it happened.

I nodded once again, then wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt. "They acted like it was a joke. Like *I'm* a joke."

"You're not a joke." Willow's voice had more bite to it than I had ever heard from her before, and I could tell by the redness on her face and the way her eyebrows furrowed that she was angry. Her eyes softened when they focused on me, and she placed her hands on top of mine on the coffee table. "I know that's not the response you wanted from them, but for what it's worth, I'm really proud of you."

"Thank you." I smiled, and it was actually sincere. "For what it's worth, you make even the suckiest day better."

"I hope so." Willow was quiet for a few seconds as if she was contemplating something. "You're still going to declare elementary education, right? Telling your parents was a huge step. I don't want you to give up your goals now. You're way too close to doing what makes you happy."

"Hell yeah, I'm going to declare it. I need to prove those assholes wrong."

Willow took her hand off of mine and held it up for a high five. "That's my girl."

I wish. I tried to shake this thought from my head. Why was I even thinking like that? I may have come out to Silas and was essentially out at school, but there was no way I could come out to my parents. If this was how they reacted to my major, God only knew how they would react to finding out I was gay. No. It was good Willow didn't want anything serious. It was what was best for both of us.

"What's going through that mind of yours now?" Willow tilted her head the same way she always did when she asked me that question since she always seemed to catch me when I had drifted far away.

I looked away from her. "Nothing. It's stupid."

"I would never think anything you have to say is stupid."

"Okay, then it's embarrassing." Willow continued to stare at me and I knew there was no way I was going to get away with not telling her. I couldn't even lie because she would see right through it. "It's just... you called me your girl. Sometimes, I wish I was."

Willow was still staring at me, only now it was even more intense. Her eyes continued to bore into me until one lone tear rolled down her cheek. She looked down and brushed it away with her hand. "Sorry to get emotional. I wish that was the case, too. Truly. You know we can't be together though. I could never do that to you. I mean, how unfair would it be for me to waste your prime dating years just to leave you when people are starting to settle down?"

"Time with you could never be a waste," I answered honestly.

"That's sweet, but I still couldn't do it. I love you too much for that."

There was that word again. I couldn't ignore my burning question anymore. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"When you say *I love you*, how do you mean it?"

Willow looked up toward the ceiling, and I had a bad feeling about her answer. "I told myself I would never lie, but sometimes it's hard to tell the truth when I know it could hurt the other person." Well, there was my answer. "So you love me, but you're not in love with me?"

Willow looked back at me and furrowed her eyebrows. "No. I'm absolutely in love with you. I didn't want to tell you that because I didn't want to make this harder, but I can pretty much guarantee I'll never love anyone the way I love you."

It should have been so simple. The girl I loved felt the same way. Only it wasn't simple at all, so she was right. It hurt. In fact, I never knew it could hurt so bad to hear someone say they loved me. "Willow, I—"

Willow held up a hand to cut me off. "Could you do me a favor and not tell me how you feel? It's honestly going to hurt either way, so I think I'd rather not know." Willow wiped away a few more tears as she chuckled and shook her head. "Wow. This got way too deep way too fast. Want to go build a snowman?"

"What?" I asked with a laugh, looking outside to find that it had indeed started to snow. The mood in the room easily shifted from heavy to light.

Willow shrugged. "I don't know. This day has been kind of crappy all around, but we can't let it go to waste." She elbowed me in the side and wiggled her eyebrows. "Come on. It will be fun."

I couldn't resist that smile if I tried, so I agreed and soon we were bundled up and heading outside into the snow. As soon as we were outside, Willow dropped onto the ground and made a snow angel.

She gestured to the spot of perfect snow beside her. "Your turn."

I wrapped my arms around my body as my teeth chattered. "I can't. It's too cold."

"Live a little." Willow winked at me before shooting me a fake frown. "Please. My poor snow angel is so lonely. She needs a friend."

"You don't fight fair," I said before throwing myself into the snow beside her.

I made my snow angel, then stopped to look over at Willow when she grabbed my gloved hand. She leaned over and kissed me before pulling back and giggling like a giddy little kid. That laugh was contagious so soon I was laughing right along with her as the snow continued to fall down on us. Soon nothing else mattered. Not my parents. Not the future of my love life. Not even the cold snow surrounding us. All that mattered was Willow and this very moment and the time we had *right now*.

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Chapter 11

It was a month into the second semester of my sophomore year and I absolutely loved my first teaching class that I had somehow been able to get into at the last minute. What I didn't love was the silent treatment my parents were giving me ever since I walked out at the end of Christmas break.

I had tried to reach out to them a few times, but they told me they were too hurt by how I had treated them to talk to me right now. I found that ironic given how they had treated me, but I didn't want to fight. If they wanted to be immature, I would let them.

To say I was shocked when my phone suddenly rang with a call from my mom on a random Wednesday in February would be an understatement. I considered not answering, then thought better.

"Hello?" I answered, my voice sounding much more timid than I wanted it to.

"Has Silas called you yet?"

"Not today." Or this week.

"He must still be in class. We're going to New York this weekend." *What the hell?* "Who's we?"

"You, me, your father, and the Rykers."

Well, that sounded terrible. "What if I'm busy?"

"Too busy for your boyfriend?" my mom asked, an accusatory tone to her voice.

"Of course not. Sounds wonderful."

"Great. I'll text you the details. See you soon."

She hung up without another word. Nothing was said about the past month, which I was sure would only make this upcoming weekend that much more awkward.

"There's my sexy girlfriend." Silas held his arms out toward me as I got off the train, and as much as I was dreading this weekend, it was nice

to see him.

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" I said while pulling him close to me. "Now, could you please tell me what this weekend is all about?"

"You know just about as much as me, but if I had to guess I'd say my parents are worried I'm not giving my girlfriend enough attention and your parents are hoping I'll help gang up on you to convince you to change your major."

"Which you're not going to do, right?"

Silas dramatically threw a hand over his chest and I was once again shocked that I hadn't noticed he was gay before he told me. "What kind of boyfriend do you think I am, dear?"

"Hopefully, the kind that makes this weekend bearable."

"Always."

Silas kept his promise, and when it was time for our final meal of the weekend before I caught my train, I was actually starting to believe that just maybe I would get by unscathed.

That was until my mother clasped her hands together and said, "We need to talk."

It hit me then why she had waited until this lunch. Silas's parents were no longer there, so my parents didn't have to feel embarrassed discussing this in front of them. *Of course. Why didn't I realize that sooner?*

"What's up?" I asked, deciding that playing dumb was the best tactic.

"Well, it appears we're not going to get an apology from you for running out of the house last month, so we'll just skip over that part." My mother cracked her knuckles in the way that always made me cringe. "I think it's time we realistically discussed your future career plans."

Silas grabbed my hand and gave me a slight nod as if to reassure me that he had my back. Knowing that was enough to give me the confidence to speak up. "There's nothing to discuss. I already made my decision. My major is elementary education. In fact, I already started one of my major classes, and I love it."

Instead of addressing what I said, my mom turned her attention to Silas. "And how do you feel about all of this?"

I squeezed Silas's hand and he smiled over at me before focusing his attention back on my mom. "I'm very happy for her, ma'am. She found her passion, and I think that's great. I also think any child who has her as a teacher is going to be extremely lucky. I have no doubt that she'll make the best teacher ever... ma'am."

Even though I had to hold back my giggle over his excessive use of ma'am, his words still warmed my heart. He might have been faking being my boyfriend, but I knew that wasn't fake, and I felt lucky to be his friend.

My dad cleared his throat, then looked between Silas and me. "And you two are both sure this is what you want for your future?"

I wanted to scream. Even *if* Silas was my boyfriend, it really wasn't his choice what career I chose. Relationships were about support, not control.

Now Silas squeezed my hand, which I took as him silently volunteering to handle it. "Rosemary's career choice is hers to make, not mine. But as I already mentioned, sir, I'm very happy about the choice she made. She's going to be a great teacher."

Now my father turned completely to me, his eyes burning into mine as if he were trying to intimidate me. "Just so you're aware, if you choose this career and things don't work out between you two, we aren't going to just hand money over to you. You're choosing to live like that."

The urge to scream was only getting stronger, but somehow I kept my cool. "I wouldn't expect you to," I said with only a slight quiver to my voice.

My dad let out a huff that I'm not sure was supposed to be audible, then pasted on his best fake smile. "Well, no need to harp on it. You're an adult. You can make your own mis... decisions."

I decided to ignore his slip and focused on just getting through the rest of lunch, which was surprisingly easy when I let my mind drift to who would be picking me up at the train station.

I sprinted off the train and ran right into Willow, laughing when she groaned at the unexpected contact. "God, I missed you," I whispered into her ear. I let my voice drop even lower before adding, "Would it be weird if I kissed you right now?"

Willow pulled back slightly. "You want to kiss me out here? In front of all these people?"

I looked around and tried not to get nervous about just how many people were around, but when I looked back at Willow, all of those worries floated away because she was all I could see. "Please?"

Willow smirked as she leaned closer to me, stopping when our lips were just inches apart. "You don't need to beg."

So, I didn't beg. Instead, I closed the little bit of space between us and enjoyed the sensation of her lips on mine. The air was frigid, but I could no longer feel it, my body warm throughout from the kiss.

When the kiss ended, Willow kept her forehead resting against mine and pushed a piece of hair behind my ear. "So, how was it?"

"It was everything you would expect from a weekend with my parents, my fake boyfriend, and his narcissistic parents."

"Ouch. That fun, huh?" Willow asked with a laugh.

"Maybe I'm being too harsh. It wasn't awful. But obviously being here with you would have been much better."

"Did you guys discuss your major?"

"Yep. Pretty much, my parents told me I can do what I want, but they're not bailing me out when I inevitably fail."

Willow pulled back slightly and held onto my hands. "Sounds like you need some fun."

"Any suggestions?" I'm not sure why I even asked. Of course Willow would have suggestions. She always had some crazy idea working itself out in her head.

"Beach?"

And there it was. I laughed because it was even more ridiculous than I expected. "The closest beach is like an hour away and it's the middle of winter."

Willow's smile only grew with my words. "Exactly. No one is crazy enough to go to the beach right now. We'll have it all to ourselves."

"And what do you suggest we do there by ourselves? It's going to be dark by the time we get there."

Willow shrugged, but the smile never left her face. "Hold hands as we go for a walk along the water."

"How do you always make the worst ideas sound amazing?"

Willow's smile became a smirk, because she clearly realized she had won. "Can I take that as a yes?"

I groaned. "Fine. It's a yes, but if I get sick, you're taking care of me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Willow winked then began to skip away from me, turning around once she realized I wasn't right behind her. "If you hurry up, I'll buy you some McDonald's on the way."

I put a hand over my chest. "You treat me too well."

By the time we made it to the beach, my stomach was full of food and my heart was full of Willow. She took my hand and led me onto the beach which was all ours. As we walked along the water, she told me all about her weekend and I rehashed the details of mine. She told me stupid jokes and I laughed as the moon shined down on us. It was freezing, and I could barely feel my hands since I wasn't wearing gloves, but it was perfect.

"We should probably head out soon," I said about an hour into our walk. Even though I didn't want to, I figured it was the best idea so we didn't actually get sick.

"Okay. Just another minute." Willow dropped my hand and sat down. She closed her eyes and smiled as she ran her hand along the sand. Then she stared out at the ocean as she continued to do it.

Much to my surprise, after a minute, she took off her shoes and socks and dug her feet into the sand as well.

"You're insane. What are you doing?" I asked, exasperation evident in my voice.

"Taking in my surroundings. Enjoying life."

"Enjoying the frostbite?"

Willow looked up at me and smiled the smile that I knew could convince me of anything. "Don't knock it till you try it."

I shook my head and took a step back. "Oh, no. No, no, no. I'm happy you're enjoying life, but I'd like to keep my toes."

Willow raised both eyebrows and brought her hands together. "Please?"

I huffed before doing exactly what she wanted. I shivered as I took off my shoes and socks and felt the cold sand against my bare feet. When I sat down next to Willow, I dug my toes into the sand and let the sensation wash over me—the feeling of the sand in my toes, the way the ocean looked under the moonlight. As always, Willow was right. There was something special about this moment. Something that served to remind me that, even when things got hard, maybe life wasn't so bad. Because even when things are going wrong, beautiful moments like this still exist.

"Okay, you were right," I conceded. "This is pretty perfect."

Willow grabbed my hand as we looked out at the ocean together and the moment somehow became even more perfect. "See. Sometimes it pays to be spontaneous."

I nodded my head in agreement, even though I wasn't convinced that was what made this moment so wonderful. Spontaneity was great and fun, but the real beauty came from slowing down and appreciating what was around you. It was the way Willow lived her life and how I was slowly learning to live mine.

Of course, we were both sick for the next week, but Willow didn't even let that time go to waste. We skipped class, made a blanket fort, and watched movies until we couldn't keep our eyes open. Willow made us homemade chicken noodle soup that we ate in our fort, and at night we would cuddle and tell ghost stories.

As I watched Willow drift to sleep one night, a thought popped into my head. This was all I wanted for the rest of my life... or at least for as long as time would allow.

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Chapter 12

Fall 2009

"So... I met someone."

I pulled my phone away from my ear and stared at it in disbelief, thinking I must have heard that wrong. "What did you say?"

"Well, I mean I didn't just meet him. He's in my class, but we just started dating this past summer."

I wasn't sure why Silas was being so strange about this. Of course I was happy for him. I was surprised since he had told me he never actually thought he would be courageous enough to act on his feelings, but I was so happy he found someone who made it worth it.

"That's amazing! I'm so happy for you!"

Silas made a sound that was something between a laugh and a cough. "Thanks. The thing is... it's kind of getting serious."

"Is there a problem with that?" *Ah*. That's when it suddenly hit me. "You're breaking up with me, aren't you?"

"I want to come out to my parents eventually. Not yet, but I figure I should ease them into it by first ruining their dreams of us being together forever. Don't want to hit them with all of it at once."

I was proud of Silas for taking this step. He deserved it. "Well, consider me dumped," I said with a laugh. "Seriously, though, this is wonderful. I can't wait to meet him."

"I just hope your parents don't give you a hard time over it."

"Eh, they already hate me for my career choice. Why not throw something else in there too?"

"You could..." Silas hesitated as if he wasn't sure he wanted to finish his thought. "Come out to your parents too. If you wanted to. I'm not saying you have to. I just thought that might make things easier on you and Willow."

"Willow and I are just friends with benefits."

Silas let out a slight laugh. "Come on, Mary. You know you guys aren't fooling anyone."

"Seriously. I'm not lying." It hurt to say it, but it was unfortunately the hard truth, no matter what anyone else thought.

Silas sighed dramatically, and I wasn't sure if it was because he didn't believe me or was just as bothered by that fact as I was. "Fine. Anyway, how was the rest of your summer? Ready for junior year?"

We continued to chat for another hour until Silas had to hang up to get back to studying. He promised to text me as soon as he told his parents about the breakup so I could be properly warned. I had to guess it was one of the easiest breakups in the history of breakups. That is, until my mother found out.

When I pulled into my parents' driveway at the beginning of Thanksgiving break to find my mom standing on the front porch waiting for me, I knew it wasn't a good sign. My mom wasn't the *wait with open arms* type of parent, so I knew this had to do with the fact that I had been avoiding the topic of my break up with Silas. It was easy when I was at school and could lie about how I needed to get back to studying whenever she called to try to talk about it, but now that I was home, I was trapped.

"Hello, darling!" my mom yelled as soon as I stepped out of the car.

I took my time getting my bag out of the car and walking up the driveway.

"If you were walking any slower, you would be going backward," my mom said when I was almost on the porch. She waved her hand at me. "Get up here. We have a lot to talk about."

"What's up?" I asked, trying to feign nonchalance.

My mother clearly wasn't having it. She threw her hands on her hips and glared at me. "What's up? Really? Your father found out at work you and your boyfriend broke up, and you've barely spoken to us since."

I shrugged and dropped my bag onto the ground beside me. This conversation wasn't ending anytime soon so I figured I should make myself comfortable. "There's not much to say. It ran its course."

My mom scoffed. "Ran its course? What does that even mean?" "It was mutual. We just realized it wasn't going to work out."

"Is this because you only visited him once over the summer? I told you that wasn't good enough."

Of course my mom assumed this was my fault. I gritted my teeth. "It was mutual."

"Breakups are never mutual, honey. Is this because your futures don't align?"

"No, Mom." The more she spoke, the more my blood boiled, and I felt like I was going to lose it any minute.

"Then what is it? Clearly, there must be something you can fix."

Fix. Because there was something wrong with me. No matter what, my parents would always think I didn't measure up. I was seething. There was a ringing in my ears mixed with thoughts of all the times my parents told me I wasn't good enough. "There's nothing I can fix, okay?" My voice was raised, but that didn't seem to deter my mom.

"There's always something you can fix. Perhaps—"

I couldn't even think straight anymore. I had no control over what was coming out of my mouth. Obviously... or else I would have never said the next words at that moment. "I'm gay! For God's sake, we were never actually even together."

I put my hand over my mouth, but it was too late. My mom's eyes went wide and I had to imagine mine looked the same. "Excuse me?"

There was no taking it back now. I had already put it out there. Now, all I could do was make sure I didn't throw Silas under the bus. My voice shook as I tried to explain. God, I had really done it this time. "Silas was doing me a favor. He pretended we were together so I didn't have to come out."

My mom looked back and forth as if she was searching for something. "We need to get inside *now*. We can't have the neighbors hearing this nonsense."

I followed her through the front door and into the kitchen. She was silent as she opened each cabinet and closed it, never actually taking anything out. She shook her head back and forth while mumbling something under her breath, then turned back around to face me. "You're not gay."

She said it so matter-of-factly that it was like she was pointing out my eye color, not commenting on something that was extremely personal to me. I was quiet as she stared me down, the words that had come so easily before now stuck in my throat. "I am, actually," I said softly.

"Don't you dare mention this to your father." That was all she said before marching out of the room as if I hadn't just shared something huge with her.

I threw myself onto a chair at the kitchen table and let out a long, deep breath. I stared at the wall in front of me, its color a perfect (and bland) tan. My eyes drifted to the granite countertops and the immaculate stainless steel appliances. It was all done to perfection, not a thing out of place, no hint of life. I was in utter disbelief at what I had just done, and I knew things would get much worse before there was any shot of them getting better, but I still found myself smiling as these thoughts circled through my brain.

Just like this kitchen, and the rest of my house, my parents had carefully crafted me to their idea of perfection. I wouldn't say I was completely lifeless, but I definitely wasn't *living*. Not in the way I had been since meeting Willow. Not in the way that I could now that I spoke my truth out loud. I wouldn't say I felt good exactly, sitting in that kitchen all alone, rejected after speaking my truth, but I felt alive. And, really, was there a better feeling than that?

Without giving it much thought, I took my phone out of my pocket and sent a text to Willow that simply said, *I just came out to my mom*.

I shouldn't have been surprised when my phone started vibrating with a call from her just a few seconds later. I picked up, and before I could even say anything, I was greeted with, "What the hell, dude? You do something huge and send one cryptic text to tell me?"

I laughed because her voice wasn't angry or accusatory. I could tell she was smiling as she said it, clearly excited over my surprising news.

"You're laughing. That's good. Does that mean it went well?"

I laughed even harder now. Not because there was anything funny about my mother's reaction, but the idea that she could react well was just humorous. "Absolutely not. It was terrible." I looked around the kitchen for any signs of my mom lurking around a corner somewhere listening in. I didn't see her and was sure she was up in her office trying to find anything to do to avoid her gay daughter. I didn't want to risk it though, so I stood

from the table and headed back toward the front of the house. "Give me a second."

I walked back out the front door I had just come in minutes before. Soon, I was in my car again and felt safe to talk about what had happened.

Willow was quiet as I rehashed the story and remained quiet for a moment after I finished before letting out a low whisper. "Shit, Rosemary, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I am, actually. For now, at least. I don't think reality has totally hit me yet."

"Makes sense." Willow's voice became softer as she said, "I wish I was with you." *God*, *I wanted that too*. "Is Lisa home right now?"

"She should be." I started my car because Willow was right. I shouldn't be alone once the full reality of what I did hit me.

"Good. I'll let you go so you can get a hold of her. But call me later, okay?"

I promised I would, then sent a text to Lisa asking if she was home and if I could come over. She said yes to both, so I did the short drive to her house. Once I was there, I retold the story of what had happened with my mom. Lisa was just as shocked as Willow, but she didn't hold back her not-so-sweet feelings about my mother.

I decided to text my mom to tell her I was at Lisa's on the off chance she decided to actually worry about me. I didn't hear anything back for two hours, and once I did get a text, it was from my dad instead of my mom.

Your mother just shared some very upsetting news with me, the text read. Since he already knew about the breakup, I assumed she must have shared the news of her gay daughter.

So much for not telling him.

Before I could even consider how to respond, another text came through. *I think it's for the best if you stay at Lisa's tonight.*

That's when it hit me. It was two days before Thanksgiving and my parents didn't want to see me. It had been almost three months since I saw them and one revelation was enough to make them not even miss me. My eyes burned as the tears spilled out. Lisa read the texts, whispered some expletives under her breath, then took me in her arms.

I shook as all of the emotions that I probably should have felt earlier came pouring out. Lisa held me tight and ran a hand through my hair. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

I took a few heaving breaths and shook my head. "I just wish we were back at school." What I really meant was that I wished Willow and Tori were there with us. I needed all of my best friends right now.

"I know, sweetie, I know."

Once I was able to gain some control, I pulled out of Lisa's embrace and wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. Once Lisa made sure I was okay, she stood to her feet. "I'm going to tell my parents you're going to be staying here tonight. How much or how little would you like me to share with them?"

"You can tell them the truth." I was sure they would have questions about my sudden appearance, so I figured they might as well know what was happening.

Lisa nodded and left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I was so lost in my own little world that I didn't even realize Lisa had come back until she spoke. "My mom says your mom's a bitch and your dad's a dick."

This made me laugh out loud. Mrs. Marcos was the sweetest woman I'd ever met. There was no way those words would come out of her mouth. "No, she didn't."

"Okay. She said your parents are extremely misguided and broken, but that's essentially the same thing when coming from my mom."

I laughed once again, and it felt good. "Very true."

After a bit, Lisa's mom brought dinner up to Lisa's room for us, only sticking around long enough to give me a hug and tell me she was sorry. We ate, then binge-watched old *Criminal Minds* episodes Lisa had on DVD, which was our go-to when one of us was upset.

After three episodes, I could barely keep my eyes open. "I think I need to just call it an early night. I'm sorry."

"Just a few more," Lisa said quickly, before adding a much more calm, "Please."

I thought it was strange, but was too tired to question it, so I agreed. I was able to stay awake through one more episode, but then my eyes became too heavy to hold open, so I let myself drift off to sleep.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when I was awoken to the feeling of a pair of lips on my forehead. I figured I must be dreaming because Lisa was the only one there and obviously she wasn't kissing me. It felt so real though. It made me feel warm and at peace like... "Willow?" I asked as I opened my eyes, still under the assumption I was dreaming.

"We heard you could use your friends," Willow whispered.

I blinked my eyes and realized it wasn't just Lisa in the room with me, but now both Willow and Tori were here too. "You guys drove all this way to check on me?"

Tori wiggled the bag she was holding from the grocery store close by. "And we brought ice cream."

Somehow, I was able to keep myself up for hours after they arrived. We ate ice cream and laughed together until none of us could keep our eyes open anymore. Then Lisa blew up her air mattress that we all agreed Willow and I would share, and as I fell asleep in her arms, things didn't feel quite so bad.

The next day was just as good. Willow woke me up early to watch the sunrise with her, then the four of us went out to breakfast before plopping ourselves onto Lisa's living room couch for an afternoon of movies and snacks.

By early evening, I had yet to hear from my parents. We were supposed to be driving to my aunt and uncle's house that night, so I had no idea how to take their silence. Even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, Willow convinced me to rip the band-aid off and just call them. She held my hand while I attempted each of my parents, both of their voicemails picking up after just two rings.

Almost immediately after calling, my phone dinged with a text from my mom. On our way to your aunt and uncle's. Told them we didn't know if you could make it. Up to you if you want to meet us there.

"Wow." I held the phone toward Willow so she could read the text too.

"Come to my house for Thanksgiving dinner." I don't know what I was expecting Willow to say, but it certainly wasn't that. When I gave her an unbelieving look, she continued. "It will be fun. It's just my immediate family, so it's not like you'll have to be around a lot of people. No big."

Except it was a big deal. We had been living just fifteen minutes from Willow's hometown for two years now, and in that time, I had only been at her house that one time. I still had yet to meet her parents, and it felt like much more than a big deal. It felt huge.

Still, I wasted no time accepting her invitation. In the past, I would have driven to my aunt and uncle's and sucked up to my parents until they stopped being mad at me. It never actually made me feel better and most of the time ended up having the complete opposite effect. But, it felt like the right thing to do, so it's what I did. For once, I wanted to do what made *me* happy, and that was spending Thanksgiving with the person I was most thankful for.

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Chapter 13

"There's my little girl," a high-pitched voice yelled from the front door as soon as we were out of the car at Willow's house.

Willow groaned. "*Mom*, it's late. You're going to wake the neighbors shrieking like that." She let out a good-hearted laugh before walking up the short sidewalk and greeting her mom with a kiss. "I've barely been gone for twenty-four hours."

"Doesn't mean I can't miss you."

Their interaction made me long for something I never had. Even at their best, my parents weren't this loving. As if sensing my unease, Willow's mom chose that very moment to wrap me in a tight hug. "And you must be Rosemary. I've heard *so* much about you." When she pulled back, she motioned inside of the house. "Come in. I must give you the tour."

Willow gave me a look that told me I shouldn't mention the fact that I had been there before so I let Mrs. Stone show me around as if I was seeing everything for the first time. Mr. Stone was already asleep and Phil was out with some friends, so once the tour was over and Mrs. Stone confirmed about fifty times that I didn't need anything, she let us go to bed with the promise that we would get to know each other tomorrow.

I quickly fell asleep with Willow's arms wrapped around me once again and when I awoke the next day, the smells of Thanksgiving dinner were already wafting into her room.

"What time is it?" I asked when I felt Willow stirring beside me.

"Probably way too early for my parents to already be cooking." Willow grabbed her phone and blinked a few times to focus on it. "Wow. It's ten already. We normally don't eat until at least one though. They must be excited that you're here."

"Your parents cook the meal together?" It was weird to think about since I was used to my parents. Neither of them really cooked at all, instead ordering takeout or having my nanny cook when I was younger and our maid, Peggy, once I no longer needed a nanny. On the off chance that they cooked, they *never* did it together.

"Yeah. They cook a lot of meals together. My dad makes the main dish and my mom does the side. On Thanksgiving, my dad makes most of the meal and my mom makes dessert."

"Has it always just been your immediate family together on Thanksgiving?" It sounded like a lot of food for a family of four.

"My Grammy and Pap, my mom's parents, used to come, but my Pap died my sophomore year of high school and my Grammy died the summer before college. I don't even remember my dad's parents. They both passed away when I was under five." She shrugged nonchalantly. "I guess people in my family just die young."

A sick feeling settled in my stomach, and I suddenly felt like I could throw up. We were a month away from the date I dreaded ever since meeting Willow—the date of her impending death. Ten more years. Ten years felt like an eternity at this point, but it didn't feel like enough time with Willow.

Willow grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "Hey, now, don't drift away from me thinking about things we can't change that are in the very distant future. We have today, and that's all that matters."

"You're right." I smiled and tried to push those thoughts from my mind. "Ready to show me what the Stone Family Thanksgiving is all about?"

Willow jumped off the bed and reached her hand out toward me, pulling me up as soon as I took it. "Hell yeah! Let's do it."

We both showered and changed and within an hour were heading downstairs toward those amazing smells. Willow's mom was looking into the oven and a man who I had to assume was her dad was reaching around her to stir something on the stove.

Willow walked over to her mom, placing a hand on her back and a kiss on her cheek. It was such a simple, sweet gesture, but it had me swooning. *Could this girl be any more perfect?* "How's it coming, Mama?"

Her mom jumped slightly as if she was startled, then started to laugh. "Hasn't anyone ever told you not to sneak up on someone in the kitchen?"

Willow laughed with her now. "There was absolutely no sneaking. Trust me."

Her mom stood up and wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing. "Well, I can't speak for your father's end of things, but I can tell you that dessert is going to be terrific."

Her dad now turned around, wearing an apron that matched her mom's. "The meal won't be too shabby either." He reached his hand out to me. "Mr. Stone. It's very nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you that it feels like we've already met."

"It's very nice to meet you too, sir. I can't thank you enough for allowing me to come last minute."

He waved a hand at me. "It's nothing. We always have extra food here."

"And we've been dying to meet the girl our daughter can't seem to ever stop talking about," her mom added.

Willow's face turned the slightest bit red and I could feel mine doing the same. Instead of reading too much into it, I took the time to study her parents. Willow and Phil seemed to be the perfect combination of both of them. They had their mom's dark hair and their dad's dark eyes. Mr. Stone's short, dirty blonde hair and Mrs. Stone's blue eyes kept them from resembling either one exactly.

Willow pushed me out of the kitchen. "We're going to watch TV until lunch is ready."

"Should only be about another hour," her mom said in a singsong voice. "Don't worry, Rosemary, we'll chat more during lunch."

"I'm sure she was super worried about that," Willow said sarcastically before leading me into the room that wasn't very far from her parents. She looked behind her toward the kitchen. "Actually, come to think of it, how would you feel about a walk?"

"A walk sounds wonderful."

We put on our shoes, then left the house and followed the sidewalk that wound around Willow's neighborhood. Willow stuck her hands in the pockets of her jeans, then looked at my hands before smiling at me sheepishly. "I would totally hold your hand right now, but then one of the neighbors would ask my mom about the cute girl they saw me holding hands with and my mom would automatically assume we were dating. She literally just met you but has already told me how much she loves you just based on what I've told her about you."

I nudged her playfully in the side. "Which sounds like it's a lot, according to both of your parents."

"What can I say? I'm kind of obsessed with you."

"Well, that's good because I'm kind of obsessed with you too."

There was lightness between us as we both giggled and stared into each other's eyes, but just as quickly, it seemed to dissipate and the air suddenly felt heavy around us. Willow cleared her throat, looked toward the ground, and began to kick at a small rock. "So, now that your parents know you're gay, you can actually start to date."

I hated when Willow said stuff like this. I hated the reminder that no matter how close we were and no matter how we acted, I could never actually be with her the way I wanted to. My eyes burned from the tears that were threatening to fall, but I fought to hold them back. I didn't want Willow to feel bad. None of this was her fault. "I don't... I mean... I just don't think I'm looking to date right now. I have a lot to deal with now that my parents know. Throwing dating into the mix would be too much." I stared at Willow until she finally looked back up at me. "I'm also not ready for things to change between us. I need you now more than ever." This time, I couldn't stop the tear that ran down my cheek.

Willow stopped walking and turned to face me completely, her lips dipping into a frown when she saw the tear. "You need me to be your friend." She reached out and wiped the tear from my cheek. "I know this is probably the last thing you want to hear right now, but I'm thinking maybe we should start to cool things down between us. I don't mean we need to go cold turkey on all the physical stuff, but I think it will be easier if we start to slow it down now. That way, when you are ready to date, it won't be such a weird transition."

I wanted to tell her I would never be ready to date. That I would rather be stuck in limbo with her than pursuing something real with someone else. Instead, I just whispered a strained, "Okay," and started to walk again.

We were both quiet for the rest of our walk, which probably turned out to be a blessing, since Thanksgiving with the Stone family was anything *but* quiet. As soon as we were back in the door, Phil came barreling toward us, wrapping both of us into a bear hug together. "Two of my favorite girls. Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving," Willow said with a laugh as she struggled to push him away from us. "I'm surprised you're up and alive right now given how late you were out last night."

Phil wiggled the beer can I hadn't realized he was holding, then took a big swig of it. "Hair of the dog, sis." Phil's face became serious as he focused on me. "You doing okay, Mary? I'm really sorry about your parents."

Before I could answer, Mrs. Stone walked around the corner. "They'll come around. Parents just need time. It took me and Willow's dad a few months to grasp the news when she came out." She waved a hand at Phil. "Luckily, she had this guy to vouch for her and convince us we were being idiots." She put a hand on my shoulder. "And until that time comes, you have a family right here."

Oh God, please don't start to cry again. Of course Willow also had the perfect family because everything about her, minus the small detail of her untimely death, was absolute perfection.

"Today is all about what we're thankful for," her dad said as he joined us. "Let the poor girl enjoy her day. We have food to eat and football to watch."

That's exactly how the day went. After eating a meal where Mrs. Stone spent most of the time nicely grilling me about every single part of my life, we all settled into their family room and spent the day watching football. Even though their team, the Jets, weren't playing, it didn't stop them from being completely enthralled by the games. I enjoyed sports but didn't watch them much, mostly because neither of my parents did. They had *better things to do* than sit around and watch TV. By the end of the day though, I was yelling at the screen as the Giants lost to the Broncos.

"Who knew you were a football fan?" Willow asked with a laugh.

"Looks like we'll have to take her to a Jets game at some point," Mr. Stone added, and it didn't sound at all like an empty promise, which made me so happy that I almost forgot about my problems from home and my changing relationship with Willow.

Almost. These thoughts came whirling back in and Willow must have noticed the moment they hit. "Want to go for a drive?" she asked softly. "I left an outfit back at our apartment that I wanted to wear tomorrow."

I wasn't sure if anyone in her family actually bought that lie, but they didn't question us as we got up and left.

"So, are we really going to the apartment?" I asked once we were in the car.

Willow gave me a knowing smile. "Only because my mom *will* start to ask questions if we come back empty-handed. Are you okay?"

"I will be," I answered softly, before turning to look out the window as she drove. I didn't speak the rest of the drive, and Willow didn't try to push me, which I appreciated.

When we walked into the apartment, my eyes immediately went to the couch where Willow and I had mind-blowing sex after the last time I disappointed my parents. I needed that now. It wasn't that I needed sex to fill the void in my heart. It was the closeness to Willow, that connection we shared whenever our bodies were locked close together.

As if reading my mind, Willow turned to me and ran a finger across my cheek. "I know what I said, and I still mean it, but tonight..."

She let her words drift off, and I nodded my head. "Make love to me, Willow Stone."

She picked me up and carried me into her room, carefully placing me down on her bed before crawling on top of me. We kissed for a few minutes before removing each other's clothes. I took each step slowly, wanting to take in every single moment since I didn't know if this was the last time we would be together like this.

Willow kissed across my chest and neck before pulling back to stare into my eyes once again. I saw so much in those eyes. So much love. So much passion. Nothing else in the world mattered when Willow Stone looked at me like that. "I want to try something we've never done before. If... if that's okay." I nodded my head, and the sweetest, most genuine smile came onto Willow's face. "Can you spread your legs just a little wider for me?"

I did as she requested and whimpered when our centers met. She slowly moved her body against mine and the wetness from both of our pleasures combined. She picked up the pace and I pushed my body up into hers. I wanted her inside of me and all around me, and that's how it felt as she let her body grind into mine. This was exactly what I needed. This connection and love that only Willow could give me. It wasn't long before I

was crying out in pleasure and just a few seconds later, Willow did the same.

Her chest heaved as she rolled off me to lay down beside me. I took her hand in mine and squeezed it tightly. "I love you, Willow." She could take that however she wanted to, but I knew exactly how I meant it.

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Chapter 14

Summer 2010

My parents' radio silence following my coming out gave me the opportunity to grow even closer to Willow's family since they let me stay at their house for every break throughout the school year, including Christmas break. Christmas with the Stone family had been one hundred times better than any Christmas with my family, but I still felt the loss over not having even heard from my parents over the holiday. Even my texts to them were left unanswered and ignored.

I was shocked when the school year was coming to an end and I received a text from my mom. *Will you be coming home this summer?* Before I could respond, another came through. *We would like to talk to you.*

I had no idea how to take it, but Willow convinced me that since my parents were reaching out, I should at least give them a chance. She even offered to visit once I had been home for a few days, which was an offer I gladly accepted.

When I arrived home this time, my mom wasn't waiting on the porch for me. Walking into the house felt like walking into a foreign land. There was nothing warm or welcoming about it, and all I wanted to do was turn around and run away. I heard Willow's voice in my head telling me I didn't know how much time I had left with them and if they were willing to try, I should too.

I walked around downstairs, but no one was around. "Mom? Dad?" "We'll be right down," my dad answered firmly, and I assumed he must be up in his office.

A few minutes later, my parents walked downstairs together. My mom was her usual rigid self at first, but after a few seconds her face appeared to soften and she closed the few feet between us and pulled me into her arms. Sadly, I couldn't remember the last time my mom hugged me. It felt weird but also strangely comforting. I let myself lean into it and enjoy it rather than questioning what was going on. "I missed you," she whispered into my ear before pulling away.

"You did?"

My mother let out a scoff that was more on brand for her. "Of course. You *are* my daughter. I might not like most choices you have been making lately, but that doesn't mean I don't love you."

I wanted to point out that it sure felt that way when they spent months ignoring me, but it didn't seem worth the fight. I didn't have time to say anything anyway, because soon my dad was standing beside us as well. He placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I've missed you too." He took his hand off my shoulder and gestured down the hall with his thumb. "Let's go into the living room so we can be more comfortable for this talk."

For the first few minutes after sitting down both of my parents were quiet, and I wondered if we were ever going to talk or just stare at each other in silence. Then my mom gave my dad a look and they seemed to be having a silent conversation, which ended with my dad giving her a brief nod.

My mom sat forward in her seat and focused on me. "Your father and I needed time after that outburst of yours to decide how to handle it. We considered cutting you off completely since having a daughter who... well, *that kind* of daughter doesn't uphold the Burns name the way we need her to."

Ouch. Well, that hurts.

"We do love you though. I know you might not believe it, but we do. We only want what's best for you. *This*, of course, isn't what's best for you, but from what we've read, when someone decides to live this lifestyle, it's highly unlikely you'll convince them to do otherwise. So, all we ask is for you to keep *that part* of your life separate from ours. We don't want to hear about it, we don't want to see it, and we certainly don't want anyone around here talking about it. Other than that, you're free to do what you want. It's your life, after all."

That was a lot to take in, and I had no idea how I was supposed to respond. I knew this was my parents' strange attempt at being nice and extending the olive branch, but it didn't make it right by any means. I leaned back and looked toward the ceiling, blowing out a deep breath as I continued to consider how to go about this. I started to think about how Willow would handle a situation like this. She would be kind, but honest. She would be understanding, but not allow herself to be walked all over.

I took another deep breath before speaking. I made sure to keep my voice level and calm, even though that's not how I felt. "I can't say that's the response that I was hoping for, but unfortunately, it's also better than I expected. All I've ever wanted was to be accepted and loved by you two. I've always tried so hard to make you proud, but there are certain parts of me I can't change. I used to think I could ignore this part of me and still be happy, but I can't. It's sad that you two can't accept it and I hope someday you will. I mean that for your own sake because you will miss out on a very big part of my life if you don't, and as much as I don't want it to happen, you might lose me completely someday. But for what it's worth, I've missed both of you as well."

My dad nodded his head and stood from the chair he was sitting in. "Well, I'm glad we could talk. No need to harp on it though."

My mom followed his lead and stood as well. Once they were almost out of the room, I remembered I wanted to tell them about Willow's visit. "Oh yeah, my friend, Willow, who was here before is coming to visit in a few days. I hope that's okay."

My mom turned around and lifted her eyebrow slightly. "She's not your girlfriend, is she?"

I wish. "No, she's not."

My mother's face lit up and her mouth turned into a wide grin. "That sounds wonderful. We really like her."

I was so relieved when Willow arrived a few days later. My parents weren't being mean, but they were far from warm. It felt like walking on eggshells ever since getting home, and I needed a sense of normalcy.

I met Willow at her car and by the time we made it to the house, my mom was waiting for us right inside the front door. "Willow, darling, it's wonderful to see you," she said before pulling Willow into her arms.

As if that wasn't odd enough, my father came bouncing down the stairs like an excited puppy to greet her. "Let's all head to the kitchen. I picked up some meat and cheese platters earlier. I'm sure you're hungry after your drive."

"I made sure Rosemary's guest room was cleaned for you," my mom said to Willow before turning to me. "Could you take her bag up for her?"

Willow gave me a knowing smile as I grabbed her bag, then followed my parents toward the kitchen. I took her bag upstairs but put it in my room instead of the guest room. I sat down on my bed to give myself a chance to breathe since I knew Willow could handle my parents.

After a few minutes, I made my way downstairs, and slowed when I heard Willow mention my name. "Rosemary would never tell you this, but she's the best in her program. She has a 4.0 and even got an award last year. There's a daycare on campus for the professors' kids, and Rosemary works there a few days a week after class. I happened to mention to my one professor that Rosemary was my roommate and he went on and on about how much his daughter loves her. She's definitely living up to the Burns name. You should both be really proud. I know I am."

Heat flooded my face as a lone tear rolled down my cheek. My heart felt like it could burst. If it was appropriate, I would have marched right into that kitchen and kissed her. Cooling down on the physical part of our relationship hadn't made me love Willow any less. We hadn't slept together since Thanksgiving and kept our makeout sessions to no more than once a week, but I still felt her within my whole body. Eliminating some physical intimacy had only made our emotional connection even stronger.

I was so enamored by her words that I didn't even care that the only response from my parents was my mom saying, "She's very lucky to have a friend like you."

"No, Mrs. Burns. I'm the lucky one."

If my heart wasn't gone before, it was now. Willow had it and I wasn't sure if I would ever get it back. I didn't think I wanted to.

I walked into the room and was greeted with her contagious smile. It was that smile and the replaying of her words to my parents that got me through the next few hours with them.

I was relieved when my parents said they were going to bed so I could finally have some time alone with Willow. "You obviously don't have to stay in the guest room," I said once we were up in my room.

"Oh." The look Willow gave me told me I wasn't going to like whatever she was about to say. "I actually think it's for the best if I stay

there."

"Don't worry, I won't try anything." I tried to laugh, but it came out sounding strained.

Willow smirked at me. "It's not you I'm worried about."

I sat down on my bed and patted the spot beside me. When Willow sat down, I laid my head on her shoulder. "I heard what you said to my parents. It was really sweet."

"Well, I meant it. You're going to do amazing things, Rosemary. Your future is bright." I could feel Willow's body stiffen beside me and I could tell she didn't want to say the words that were about to follow. "Which is why I really think it's important for you to start dating when we get back to school. You deserve to find someone who is going to be with you every step of the way for years and years to come."

"But why can't that be you?"

Willow sighed. "You know exactly why it can't."

I knew she was right, kind of, but none of that mattered to me. I wanted the time with her that I did have. "I don't like this." I chanced taking her hand in mine and was happy when she didn't pull away. "Are you going to start casually dating again too?"

"Do you want me to?"

Did I want her to? Absolutely not. Did I think she deserved to have fun and live the life she had left to the fullest? Absolutely. "That's not really up to me."

Willow held my hand tighter. "I want to make these decisions together."

I wanted us to make every decision together. I wanted Willow to be my person. That didn't seem possible right now though. "Friends don't decide if and when their friends date."

"We were never really just friends, were we?" There was a pain in Willow's eyes that I wasn't used to seeing. The girl who was normally so full of life seemed so lost right now.

"No, I guess not."

The pain only seemed to get deeper with my words. "I don't want to lose you though."

Me either. That was the last thing I wanted. I would give up the world before I gave up Willow. "You're not going to lose me. If this is what

you want, we'll find a way to make it work."

"It's not what I want. It's what *you* need."

It didn't feel like what I needed. What I needed was for Willow to take me in her arms, make love to me, and tell me that we would make the most of the time we had together. I could tell from the look in her eyes I wasn't going to get that though.

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Chapter 15

Fall/Winter 2010-2011

"So, let me get this straight." Lisa looked across the dinner table at Willow and me and waved her fork between us. "You two broke up?"

I rolled my eyes. I was happy when Lisa decided to stay in the area after graduation and she and Tori agreed to live with us another year, but starting my senior year with their interrogation wasn't what I wanted. "We were never dating."

Both Lisa and Tori laughed at this as if I was joking. "Whatever you say," Lisa answered sarcastically.

"Seriously. We were friends with benefits and now we're just friends."

Lisa lifted an eyebrow as she stared at us. "Then why are you holding hands?"

Shit. It was so natural I hadn't even realized we were. Willow must have felt the same way because her eyes went wide when she looked at our interlocked fingers. She pulled her hand away from mine and gave Lisa a sheepish grin. "Old habits."

"And you want me to set you guys up with other people?" The tone of Lisa's voice told me just what she thought of our plan, and it wasn't positive.

"Just Rosemary," Willow answered quickly. "I'm doing my own thing for now."

Lisa looked between us one more time as if she was trying to assess if this was all just a big joke. Finally, she shook her head and clapped her hands together. "All right then. Let's do this."

Lisa didn't mess around with setups and by Christmas break, I had already been on dates with five different girls. Only one of them actually went past the first date, but she seemed to get bored when date three rolled around, and I still didn't have any interest in even a kiss. The problem was I didn't want to kiss anyone other than Willow.

The other problem was Willow hadn't kissed me since the beginning of summer, which only made me want her more. I missed her. I could tell she was trying to be respectful by giving me some space, but it wasn't helping. The more space she put between us, the more I longed for her.

I knew it was only going to get worse in the upcoming semester since I would be student teaching. I would barely have time for anything, let alone hanging out with Willow on top of going on dates. I thought about just saying *screw it* to dating for now, but Willow was right, I really did want to find someone.

Christmas break was uneventful. My parents were cordial, but still my parents, so I was happy to get back to school.

Since I had turned twenty-one a few months earlier and had yet to go out, I let Lisa convince me to go to the barn party with her, Tori, and Willow.

When we walked in, I expected Phil to run over to us and was surprised when he didn't. "No Phil tonight?" I asked Willow.

"No, believe it or not, my brother is *finally* growing up. He has had a girlfriend for a few months now and has been looking at houses so he's not living with my parents anymore."

It made me sad to realize I had missed all of that. Junior year, I had grown so close to the Stone family, and now this year, they were almost like strangers again. I made a mental note to tell Willow I wanted to see them again, and I hoped she would agree.

"Drinks on me," Lisa shouted before skipping over to the drink table and filling four cups with way too much alcohol.

Normally, I would have declined the drink or just pretended to drink it, but tonight was different. I needed to let loose. So, I chugged it down quickly so I wouldn't have to taste it.

Lisa filled my cup once again and laughed when I started to drink that quickly as well. "Slow down, killer. Don't get drunk yet. There's someone coming who I want you to meet."

Her warning came a little too late. With my low tolerance, I could already feel the alcohol doing its job. Since I couldn't exactly think straight,

I drank down the rest of that one and requested a third that I promised to drink slowly.

"Hey, cutie, wanna dance?" I turned around, thinking the question was addressed to me, but felt my heart drop when I realized the extremely attractive blonde was talking to Willow.

Willow looked to me as if asking for permission, and since it would be ridiculous for me to stop her, I gave her a dorky thumbs up to encourage her to go. That didn't stop the physical pain in my chest that came as soon as they walked away together. I watched as they made their way to the middle of the barn and wasted no time dancing up against each other. That's when it hit me that I had never danced with Willow. Because I was so worried about staying in the closet for most barn parties we had attended, that wasn't ever something we did.

And, God, she looked like a good dancer. Of course she was. What did Willow ever do that wasn't absolute perfection? Dancing wasn't an exception. The way she moved her body against the blonde's in rhythm with the music was perfect. Or, at least, it would have been if it had been me and not someone else. I forced my eyes away from them and quickly finished the rest of my drink.

I felt an arm drape around my shoulder and turned to see Lisa beside me. "So, that girl you were just shooting daggers at with your eyes is the one I was going to set you up with. Seeing as how you now look like you want to kill her for dancing with Willow, I'd say that's a bad idea for multiple reasons."

"Whatever." I knew it wasn't fair to be rude to Lisa, but I wasn't in the mood for her jokes right now.

"If you want to be with Willow, why don't you just tell her?" Lisa asked, her voice now soft without a hint of sarcasm.

If only it were that easy. "She knows."

"You're telling me the girl I see making googly eyes at you constantly knows you want to be with her but doesn't want to make it official?"

"Yep." I felt like I should defend Willow's honor since the way Lisa put it made her sound like a jerk, but what was I supposed to say? It's not like I could tell her the truth. I looked back out at Willow to find she was somehow dancing even closer to the blonde than before. I was seething with

alcohol, anger, and hurt, and I couldn't take it anymore. "I need some air," I said in a voice that came out more as a growl.

"Do you want me—?"

"I just want to be alone," I said much louder than I meant to as I stormed away.

I was outside for only a few minutes when I heard footsteps behind me. I was about to nicely ask Lisa to leave me alone when a voice not belonging to Lisa spoke.

"Are you okay?"

I turned around to see Willow staring at me like a little lost puppy. If it wasn't for the alcohol, I probably would have lied, but that wasn't a possibility right now. "No, I'm not okay," I said with more bite than expected.

Willow winced as if hurt or surprised by my tone. "What's wrong?" "Seriously, Willow? Seriously?"

She took a tentative step toward me. "Is this about the dance?"

"Yes! Well, no. I don't know. It's about everything. I'm so mad at you." All of the feelings I had been trying to contain since meeting Willow were all mixing together and I was on the edge of exploding. Only, I couldn't do that. I didn't want to take this out on her. It wasn't her fault. At least, not exactly. "Never mind. I'll be fine. I just need some time alone." I turned around, ready to walk away before I said or did something I would regret.

"No." A hand gently grabbed onto my arm to stop me.

"Please, let me go. I'm drunk and mad. I don't want to say anything I'll regret."

"Just say it."

"What?" Now she was just being crazy.

Willow held her arms out to the side as if presenting herself. "Let me have it. Tell me how you really feel."

I shook my head and tears started to fall from my eyes. "No. I can't. I won't."

Much to my surprise, and annoyance, Willow smiled at me. "You're allowed to feel, Rosemary. If someone pisses you off, you have every right to tell them how you feel. So, tell me."

"I'm pissed at you, okay?" I yelled. "I'm so freaking mad at you. All I've ever wanted was to be with you. You're the only person I want to be with, and you won't allow that to happen. You'll cut things off with me *for my own good* and then dance with someone else right in front of me. How is that fair? Huh, Willow? How is that fair when I'm madly in love with you? When I would give anything to be with you?"

Willow's smile dropped into a grimace and her eyes went darker than I'd ever seen them before. "I'm madly in love with you too, Rosemary. I've told you that." She pointed toward the barn. "I didn't want to dance with that other girl. I wanted it to be you. You should know that."

"But it can't be me, right? And somehow you're just completely fine with that. Well, I'm not."

"I am *not* fine with that," Willow yelled. I had never even heard her raise her voice, so it was almost scary to see this reaction from her. She took a step and I thought she was coming closer to me, but she began pacing back and forth instead. "I thought I had it all figured out. I thought I could be happy with just doing my own thing in the time I had here. *And then I met you*. Every time I look at you, all I can think about is what a future with you would be like. A future that I don't have. A future that I can't give you."

"What if I just want tonight?"

Willow came to an abrupt stop and brought her eyes back to mine. For a second, it looked like she was considering it, but then she shook her head. "You're only saying that because you're drunk."

I took a few tentative steps toward her but stopped before I got too close because I knew I wouldn't be able to control myself. "You're right. I'm drunk. I'm mad. I'm hurt. I'm also very jealous and extremely turned on." One more step. "I didn't like watching you dance with that girl because the only body I want that close to yours is mine."

This time, it was Willow who took a step closer, her eyes never straying from mine. "I was thinking of you the whole time."

I took another step. "It's been way too long since I felt your body against mine."

With Willow's step, we were now toe to toe. Her eyes drifted to my lips, before focusing back on mine. Just that look alone was enough to make my body feel like it was on fire. "It's been 407 days."

Done. "I can't wait a second more." And then my lips were on hers and I was kissing her as if we had never kissed before, as if we would never kiss again.

Willow pushed into me but never removed her lips from mine. Instead, she silently encouraged me to move further away from the barn. Far from everyone else. I knew why she was doing it, so I walked backward as quickly as I could, stumbling over sticks and rocks and old beer cans but refusing to break the kiss. Refusing to pull away from the touch that I missed so much. I tripped over something big and almost fell, but Willow held onto me tightly.

She broke our kiss and grabbed my hand, then nodded her head toward the dark field where she had parked her car earlier. "Follow me."

When we reached her car, she quickly unlocked it and opened the back door. She didn't hesitate at all before laying across the seat and pulling me down with her. I could already tell this wasn't going to be anything like the last time we had sex, and that was okay. I didn't need slow and sensual. Right now, I was more than fine with fast and rough, and that was exactly what I was going to get.

I pulled the door shut behind me just in time for Willow to reach up and rip off my shirt and bra in one swift motion before doing the same with her own. I sat up and wiggled out of my pants and underwear, and Willow followed suit. Soon, we were both horizontal in the backseat of her car again with my body on top of hers.

I moaned at the sensation of our bodies moving as one. How did I go so long without this? How did I ever convince myself I would be okay with never again feeling Willow Stone underneath me? I wanted her under me, on top of me, and everywhere in between every day for the rest of my life. Well, for the rest of her life, but I refused to think about that right now.

Instead, I brought one of her nipples into my mouth, while I pinched the other between my thumb and forefinger. Willow grunted and moved her hands down my body, resting one on my hip and dropping the other lower to run a finger through my folds. She moved her finger up and down my center before pushing two fingers deep inside of me.

I wasn't going to last long, and that was okay. "Three," I gasped. "I want three fingers inside of me."

Willow growled and bit into my neck as she shoved a third finger in with the other two. I moved hard against her hand and I could tell the way I was pushing into her had her close to the edge as well. I pushed harder into her as I sucked and teased her nipples even harder.

Willow screamed out in pleasure at the same time her fingers hit just the right spot and caused me to topple over the edge. For a minute, we both just lay there. My eyes looking down into hers. Her eyes focused up into mine. Both of us saying words in silence that we were too afraid to speak out loud. That was, until I finally found the nerve, and my voice. "I don't just want tonight."

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Chapter 16

I awoke the next day with a splitting headache and had to work to put together the pieces from the night before. Alcohol. Lots of alcohol. Willow dancing with another girl. Me getting mad at Willow. Me yelling at Willow. Sex with Willow. Amazing, hot sex with Willow. In the back of her car. Outside of the party.

I told her I wanted more and she kissed me and promised we would talk about it once we were both sober. We went back into the party with Tori and Lisa and drank some more. We danced together. Finally. It was as good as I imagined. Phil walked to the party and drove us back to our apartment in Willow's car.

I told him I was in love with his sister. *Shit*. I. Told. Phil. I. Was. In. Love. With. Willow. He laughed and told me he already knew that. Phil dropped us off at our apartment and his girlfriend met us there to drive him home. I also told *her* I was in love with Willow. Oh lord, what the hell was wrong with me? I should *never* drink alcohol.

Lisa had to help me into our bedroom and as we were stumbling inside, I made sure I reminded Willow one more time that I was in love with her. She simply laughed the same way Phil did, told me she knew that, and promised once again that we would talk in the morning.

The morning. Which was now. Well, technically, it was afternoon according to the clock by my bed. How the hell had I slept until 12:30? Oh yeah. Alcohol. Lots of alcohol.

I pulled myself out of bed and walked downstairs where I found Willow cooking eggs and bacon.

She turned around and smiled at me, holding the pan of bacon in the air. "I thought you could use a little something to soak up all that alcohol."

I cringed. "Just how embarrassed should I feel this morning?"

Willow shrugged as she grabbed a plate and put a spoonful of eggs and three pieces of bacon on it. "Depends how embarrassing you find it to tell everyone in attendance at the barn party that you're in love with me."

I gasped. How had I forgotten that part? "Oh God, I didn't."

Willow threw her head back in laughter. "No, you didn't. You did tell my brother though. He found the story so funny he relayed it to both of my parents, and now my mom has been texting me all morning asking how long we have officially been dating."

I threw my hand onto my forehead. "Ouch. I'm sorry."

Willow smirked and grabbed my hand away from my head. "It's cool. There are worse things she could think I'm doing."

"So, about last night..." *Might as well rip the band-aid off now.* "I know I was wasted, but I meant what I said."

I looked around the apartment for any sign of Lisa or Tori and as if reading my mind, Willow said, "They're both out for the day."

I nodded. Time to put it all out there. "I know we don't have forever, at least not in the conventional sense, but I want to spend the time we do have together. You're the one who's always talking about living life to the fullest and never taking any moment for granted. For all we know, I could die tomorrow. Maybe we have five days left together. Maybe we have eight and a half years. No one ever really knows. Well, almost no one. I guess you do." I shook my head. *No getting off track*. "My point is, I want to live life the way you do. I want to love and live so fully my heart feels like it's going to burst. That's how it is when I'm with you. So, yeah, maybe our forever isn't meant to be that long, but that doesn't mean it can't be great. I don't want to miss out on that greatness just because we're both scared of the end."

Willow leaned back against the counter as if she needed it to hold her up, then ran a hand through her hair and blew out a breath. "Wow. That sounded like a speech I would give. Impressive." She smiled and I swore it lit up the room. "Looks like I'm rubbing off on you."

I walked over to her and wrapped my arms around her waist. "You make me a better person, Willow. You make me strong. You make me happy. I don't want anyone else."

"So, what? We just act like I'm not croaking at thirty-one? We don't even know how I'm going to die. What if I get really sick and you have to spend the last five years of my life taking care of me or something?"

"That's fine. It will be worth it for all the good years we'll have. We'll watch hundreds of sunrises and sunsets together. We'll walk barefoot in the sand while holding hands. Feel the fall breeze against our skin while we hold each other tight."

"You don't fight fair. You know that, right?" Willow sighed and pushed a piece of hair behind my ear, all while staring into my eyes in the way only Willow could. "I need to really think about this, okay? I don't want you to get hurt."

I wanted to argue that it would hurt more to not be with her, but instead I simply nodded my head. She gave me a kiss and told me she was going to go on a drive to think, then she was gone. I sat down at the table and tried to eat the food she had made me, but it was too hard. I had no idea how long she was going to be thinking about this or what conclusion she would come to, and it had me on edge.

I didn't have to wonder for long, because not even five minutes later, Willow barged back through the front door. "I'm done thinking. I want to do this."

"Y-you do?"

"I do. I have a few rules though. We can't spend all of our time together. We both need other people in our life. You need a crew to fall back on when I'm no longer with you. If you ever fall out of love with me, you need to break up with me. Please don't stay with me because you feel like you have to or you worry you'll feel guilty once I'm gone. You deserve to love fully, even if it's not with me. Speaking of which, I need you to be open to finding love again. Don't let the end of my life be the end of your love story. Last but not least, if we're doing this, we're *doing it*. There's no half-assing it. No holding back because we're scared. We're going to treat our relationship how any couple our age would, except a million times better, of course. We won't let a day go by wasted."

I closed the little remaining space between us and threw my arms over Willow's shoulders. "You know I'd agree to anything if it means I get to be your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend." Willow giggled like a giddy child. "I'm going to be, like, the most extra girlfriend in the whole world. Consider yourself warned."

I giggled right along with her. I couldn't remember a time I had ever felt this happy. Probably never. "I don't doubt that one bit, and I can't wait."

Willow wrapped her arms around me and picked me up. "First, we must consummate the relationship. Your room or mine?"

I wrapped my legs around her waist and held on tight. "How about yours, then mine?"

"That's my girl."

I sure am.

After consummating our relationship not only in each of our rooms but also on the couch and in the shower, Tori and Lisa got home. Even though it was disappointing to no longer have the place to ourselves, it was probably for the best since I could barely feel my legs anymore.

"We have an announcement," Willow shouted as we walked downstairs hand in hand to greet our friends. She lifted our joined hands in the air once we were in front of them. "We are officially dating."

"Obviously." Tori crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes. "Honestly, guys, why do you think we both left for the day?"

"Yeah, you probably had sex in every inch of this apartment," Lisa added.

Willow looked around and lifted an eyebrow. "Not every inch."

Lisa and Tori looked at each other and nodded. "Time to enact the plan?" Lisa asked seriously, to which Tori nodded once again.

"Plan?" I asked.

Lisa put an arm around my shoulder. "You're being evicted, buddy. Have your stuff out of our room by the end of the night."

What the hell? "And where am I going?"

Lisa laughed. "To Willow's room obviously. If you two are going to be screwing like rabbits, you might as well have a space of your own to do it."

It took us almost no time to switch mine and Tori's stuff, and by the end of the night, Willow and I had our new room rearranged with our two twin beds pushed into one. Willow lay across the two beds and stretched out her arms. "Check out all this space. So much room to have some fun."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of fun?" I asked as I sat down on the bed next to her. I was absolutely exhausted but could try for another round for her.

Willow wiggled her eyebrows. "Let me show you."

I expected her to grab me and either push me onto the bed or kiss me. Instead, she stood to her feet and started to jump, laughing hysterically as she hopped from one part of the bed to another.

She was adorable, and best of all, now she was all mine. I shook my head and laughed along with her. "You're such a child."

She reached her hand down to me and helped me up. "A child who loves you," she said before placing a quick kiss on my lips and then getting back to jumping. I watched for a few seconds until she stopped and scowled at me. "What are you waiting for? We're jumping."

I held her hands and jumped up and down with her, and it was absolutely ridiculous but also so Willow. Nothing ever surprised me with her. Well, except how she could constantly take the most simple things and turn them into something special. Like this moment. All we were doing was jumping on the bed, but I knew it would be ingrained in my memory forever.

After only a few more minutes, we were both exhausted so we lay back down. Willow took ahold of my hand and stared up at the ceiling, a wide grin parting her lips. "Our first place together."

"First of many," I added, and we both giggled uncontrollably. Man, we were insatiable. "It's funny because this all feels so new, but at the same time, so much the same. If you think about it, we've pretty much been together since freshman year. Now we just finally have the title."

"Yep. August 22, 2007. First date. First kiss. Last time I saw my heart."

I loved this woman so much. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Remember everything down to the day."

Willow shrugged. "I just remember the special days."

"But how did you know that day was always going to be special to you? It was just a kiss."

Willow looked over at me, her face suddenly serious. "I always knew you were special, Rosemary. From the moment I saw you at that first floor meeting, I knew there was something about you. Washed-out blue jeans with just one small hole in the knee. Your red East Pine T-shirt that

you probably bought at the bookstore that day. The way you stood away from the rest of the group, not in a cold way, but just completely unsure. You were magnetizing."

There was so much I wanted to say to her, so much she needed to know about how I felt and how much she had changed me already, but we had time for that, so I simply squeezed her hand and whispered, "I love you, Willow Stone."

From the way she looked at me, I could tell she heard all of the words I left unsaid. "I love you too, Rosemary Burns."

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Chapter 17

Summer 2011

"I didn't know someone could make one of these graduation gowns look sexy until I saw my girlfriend in one," Willow said as she wrapped her arms around me from behind and laid her head on my shoulder.

I turned around and ran my hand through her hair. "I love the red." Willow twirled a piece of the colored bottom layer of her hair as

she stared down at it. "Figured I should show some East Pine pride."

"So..." I said, letting my voice trail off.

"So," Willow repeated.

"I want to tell my parents about us today." Even just saying those words made my heart beat faster and my palms sweat.

Willow's eyes went wide. "Really? That's... I mean, that's amazing. It's huge. I just kind of assumed you wouldn't ever tell them since they told you they didn't want to hear about that part of your life." She held onto both of my hands. "If this is about the party at my house today, you don't have to worry. My family knows not to say anything."

I shook my head. I had thought long and hard about this, and even though I was sure it wouldn't go well, this was still what I wanted. "It's about *you*. You don't deserve to be kept a secret."

"You know I understand though, right?"

"I know, which is just even more reason to tell them. You're so good to me. They need to learn to accept this part of my life. That or...." I trailed off once again, because for how terrible my parents could be most of the time, I still didn't like the thought of losing them.

Willow squeezed my hands. "They'll come around eventually. It probably won't be today or even tomorrow, but I have faith that it will happen."

I nodded my head. I wanted to believe her, but almost twenty-two years of dealing with my parents made that difficult. "I'm going to wait until after the party. That way, they'll have more time to see how amazing you are, not that they need it since they already love you. At least, for now they do." I laughed. If there was something that could change my parents'

opinion of Willow, it was definitely this. "I also don't want them to skip the party, and I'm pretty sure they will if they find that out first."

Willow squeezed my hands once more. "Whatever you want to do, I support, my dear."

Graduation was fine and the party at the Stone's house was wonderful, but I couldn't fully enjoy either with the thought of telling my parents in the back of my mind. There were a few times I almost changed my mind since they were actually acting human. They seemed to genuinely enjoy Willow's parents and still only had terrific things to say about Willow. Even though it might have been fake, they even acted proud when anyone brought up the second-grade teaching job I was offered. It was in the same school where I had done my student teaching and only a five-minute drive from our apartment that the four of us had decided to stay in for another year.

"I think we're going to head home," my mom announced when it was just our two families left. "Long drive ahead of us."

"Let me walk you out." My voice cracked slightly from nervousness, but I was pretty sure Willow was the only one who noticed.

Once we were standing by their car, I gave both of my parents a hug, more so to waste time than anything else. *You can do this, Rosemary. You got it.*

"We had a great time today," my mom said after our hug. "Willow's family is very nice. I can see where she gets it from. I'm glad you have a friend like her."

"Speaking of which," There was that crack again. "Umm... about Willow. She's ummm... for a few months now, she's been... we've been... She's not my friend. She's my girlfriend. Ever since January."

My mom clenched her jaw and looked toward my father who also clenched his. "Tell the Stones thank you for such a nice day."

She turned and walked to the passenger side of the car, both she and my father getting in without another word. When I stood staring at them, my father rolled down his window. "We really have to get home."

"That's it?" I asked. "You're just not going to acknowledge what I told you?"

"We were very honest from the beginning that we don't want any part of this," my dad said firmly. "Willow is a nice girl, but since the two of you have decided to go down this path together, she is not welcome at our house with you. Please make sure she doesn't take it personally."

I scoffed. "Oh, yeah. Nothing personal about that."

"Goodbye, Rosemary." My dad put up his window and pulled away before anything else could be said.

I was still stewing over my parents when Willow and I lay in our bed a few hours later. Even though I didn't expect telling my parents to go well, it was still disappointing when they reacted exactly as I expected. "I think I'm going to tell my parents that if you're not welcome at their house, I'm not coming there either."

Willow paused the motion of her fingers across my arm. "Are you sure? I don't want to come between you and your parents."

"I'm sure. I don't want to cut them off completely, but they need to realize that they can't just accept bits and pieces of my life."

Willow kissed my forehead and began moving her fingers along my arm again. "I'm proud of you. This is a far cry from the girl I met freshman year who was going to marry a man just to make her parents happy."

"It's all thanks to you. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without you."

"Nah, you always had it in you. I just helped bring it out."

I sighed as I picked my phone up off the nightstand. "Might as well get this over with."

Willow scrambled to sit up. "You're calling them now?"

"I'm texting them. I know it's the cowardly way out, but honestly, I doubt they would answer anyway."

I thought for a little bit before typing out and sending a text message to the group chat with both of my parents. *Thanks for coming to my graduation and the party. Mr. and Mrs. Stone said it was a pleasure to meet you, and Willow was happy to see you again. I've been thinking*

about what you said and have decided that if Willow isn't welcome, I'm not coming home to visit. This isn't an easy decision for me to make, but I hope you understand.

I held my breath as I awaited their response, which came from my mom. It's not that Willow isn't welcome. We just won't have this type of relationship on display at our house. Your father and I like Willow, but we cannot support this. I hope you understand.

I don't understand, but it is what it is. Until you are able to welcome my girlfriend, I unfortunately will not be coming home, even for holidays. That's not what I want, and I assume it's not what you want either.

It took a few minutes for a response to come through from my dad. *You've certainly given us a lot to consider.*

"I've given them a lot to consider?" I repeated out loud. "What the hell does that even mean?"

Willow twirled a piece of my hair between her fingers. "I think it's a good sign. I know they have an ass backward way of showing it, but your parents *do* love you. They don't *want* to push you away, but they are too stuck in their ways to realize they're being stupid."

"So, what do I do now?"

"You wait. Give them time to figure it out. What you did so far was good. It was brave. They'll come around eventually."

"And what if they don't?"

"Then you learn to live with your new normal. You lean on your chosen family. You give your energy to the people who love and care about you."

"You say that like it's so simple," I said with a laugh. I wanted it to be that easy, but being rejected hurts, no matter how many other people you have in your life.

"It's not. I love you though, and I'm going to do anything to make you happy. And in the times I can't make you happy, I'll hold you until you don't feel sad."

Willow stuck to her word. She kept me busy over the summer so I didn't spend time thinking about my parents. She spent the day in bed with me on my birthday when I didn't feel like celebrating. She held me when I cried on Thanksgiving because another holiday had passed without my parents. She reassured me that this had to be just as hard for them, and if it wasn't, then they were crazy.

She didn't say I told you so when they reached out and told me just how hard it was not having me with them on Thanksgiving.

"How am I supposed to respond to this?" I asked as I stared at the text while Black Friday shopping with Willow.

"What do you want to say?"

"That none of this would be an issue if they could just pull their heads out of their asses and let you come with me."

Willow nodded, a serious look on her face as if she was considering my response. "Say that, but in words you would use with your class."

"So, not ass?"

Willow laughed and shook her head. "Not ass."

I typed out my response, trying not to overthink it too much. "I told them it didn't have to be this way, and we could still come sometime around Christmas if they were willing to have you."

"That's perfect, babe."

Her words made me smile. We had been officially dating for almost a year now, but I still found myself getting giddy over the fact that she was actually mine. These little pet names were the perfect reminder of how far we had come.

The moment was broken when my phone started to ring. I was shocked when I saw who it was, and held the phone out toward Willow. "It's my mom."

Willow motioned toward the phone. "Answer it!"

"Hello?" I answered hesitantly before putting on speakerphone so Willow could hear. I didn't care if the other shoppers overheard. I needed her support right now.

"Honey, I wish you could understand how conflicted we are." *Leave it to my mom to just jump right in.*

"Your father and I want to see you. We miss you. We would love to see Willow, too. It's just...."

"It's just what, Mom?" I was seething. I didn't want to hear whatever dumb excuse she was about to give.

"Your father and I have a certain reputation to uphold around here."

"So, you're embarrassed of me? That's what this is about?" I was about to say more when Willow took the phone from my hands.

"Hi, Mrs. Burns. This is Willow. Please don't answer that question, because I know you'll try to deny it, when, in reality, you are embarrassed. Let me tell you this though—more people would judge you for pushing away your daughter than for having a gay daughter, and basing your decisions on those who would do the latter is very sad. I mean no offense by that." She kept her voice calm and cool, but I was still expecting my mom to flip out any moment. I thought Willow was done, but then she added. "Even though I don't like your reasoning for keeping us away, you are more than welcome to spend Christmas with my family, if you would like."

What the hell? I was sure I had heard that wrong. Every single part. Had Willow really just lectured my mom and then invited her to Christmas with her family? I held my breath. This was it. We were both going to get it now, and if my mom ever spoke to me again, I would never hear the end of it.

"Your parents would be okay with that?" my mom asked softly, sounding so unlike herself that for a second I thought someone must have stolen her phone.

Willow shot me a satisfied grin. "Totally. The more, the merrier in the Stone house."

"I'm going to have to talk this over with Rosemary's father, but if you're sure your parents won't mind, we will most likely be accepting your invitation."

"I'm sure. Have a good day, Mrs. Burns."

My mother hung up without another word and I stared at Willow dumbfounded as she handed back my phone. "You just invited my parents to spend Christmas with your family...." I said slowly, letting my words trail off at the end for dramatic effect.

Willow simply smiled at me. "Yep."

"What were you thinking?"

This time, she shrugged but continued to smile, and even let out a little chuckle. "I guess I wasn't." She winked before skipping away from

me.

That girl....

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Chapter 18

Winter 2011

"Merry Christmas," my mom said hesitantly as my parents entered the Stone's house on Christmas Day.

There was no hesitance from Mrs. Stone as she ran into the hallway to greet them, shrieking as she pulled each of them into a tight hug. "And a very Merry Christmas to both of you."

I couldn't help but laugh as I watched my parents stiffen up during the hug. Willow looked over at me and gave me a knowing smile and a wink, and it was so cute that all I wanted to do was pull her into *my* arms. Unfortunately, we had agreed to keep our public displays of affection to a minimum to try to ease my parents into everything, so I had to keep my hands to myself.

"Come in." Mrs. Stone motioned down the hallway. "Let me take your coats and then you two can make yourselves at home in the family room while we finish cooking."

My parents slipped out of their coats and my dad pulled two envelopes out of the pocket before handing it to Mrs. Stone. He gave one envelope to her and the other to me. "Merry Christmas," he said seriously, as if it was a business transaction rather than a present.

Mrs. Stone thanked him a dozen times as she directed him to the family room. We followed them in and I ripped open the envelope addressed to both me and Willow, which contained a very plain Christmas card that my parents simply signed and a check for one thousand dollars.

Willow sat next to me on the floor so my parents could have the couch, and her eyes went wide when she saw the check. "Wow, Mr. and Mrs. Burns, you didn't have to do that."

My dad waved his hand. "Your family was nice enough to host us today. It's nothing."

"Still. I really appreciate it."

My dad smiled and it actually seemed sincere. It was a little bit strange, but also nice, how Willow could have that effect on him. "So, Willow, Rosemary tells me you've been working as an admissions representative for East Pine."

Willow's eyes lit up the way they always did whenever she spoke of something she was passionate about. "Yes, sir! It's not the highest-paying job in the world, but I absolutely love it. My years at EPU were the best years of my life so far. It makes me so proud to talk to prospective students about my alma mater."

My dad nodded his head as if he was really considering every single word she said. "I love the way you talk about it. You sound so passionate."

I had to agree with my dad on that. It was one of the things I loved most about Willow. She was passionate and excited over the simplest things. She would come back to our apartment and practically dance across the kitchen as she told me about the students who she had convinced to attend EPU.

Willow smiled proudly at my dad before quickly squeezing my hand. "Passion is the most important thing in the world. It'd be a waste of your life to live without passion."

I expected my dad to fight her on that, but instead he said, "That's an interesting take on things."

The conversation didn't go any further because Mrs. Stone announced at that moment that the food was ready. Phil and his girlfriend, Stevie, joined us all for lunch, and it was surprisingly nice. My parents were able to hold a pleasant conversation without a hint of judgment, which was very unlike them. Snow fell outside, and it really felt like the perfect Christmas.

Near the end of the meal, Willow's eyes went wide as she looked outside. A big grin came to her face and she stood up and ran to the window, putting her hands and face up to the glass like a little kid. "It's really laying out there." She turned around and looked between all of us, her smile only growing. "You know what that means."

I looked to Phil because, no, I actually had no idea what that meant. Phil shook his head at his sister. "Huh-uh. It's too cold out there. We have guests."

"Your brother is right, sweetheart," Mrs. Stone said sweetly.

Willow's mouth dropped open as if she was shocked by their response. "Oh, no. Absolutely not. This has been a tradition since I was little. If it snows on Christmas, everyone has to do at least one ride down the big hill." Her eyes moved from her mom over to my parents. "Everyone."

"The big hill?" my mom asked.

Willow nodded her head up and down. "Yep. There's a giant hill on the other side of the neighborhood that is perfect for sledding. It's a Stone Christmas tradition."

"I don't think I've been on a sled since Rosemary was a little girl," my mom said, her voice sounding aghast that Willow would even suggest it.

"Sounds like it's the perfect time then." Willow didn't wait for anyone to respond. Instead, she went to the coat closet and grabbed everyone's coats, then went down into their basement and came up a minute later carrying a tub filled with hats and gloves. "Anything you need to keep warm, you'll find in here." When no one moved, she crossed her arms in front of her chest but kept the smile on her face. "Just for the record, I'm not taking no for an answer."

I stood and grabbed my coat from the pile she had made and then took a pair of gloves and a hat out of the bin. Much to my surprise, everyone else, including my parents, followed suit. Turns out, I wasn't the only one Willow was able to influence.

Ten minutes later, we were all standing at the top of the hill that was definitely just as Willow had described it—big. It was also steep and I had to imagine the sleds were going to fly down. I was sure my parents would refuse, but when Willow looked at them and said, "Guests first," they climbed into one of the bigger sleds together.

They looked like children as my dad counted down from three before pushing off the ground to get them moving. Once they were moving, they were really moving. They were going so fast, I wondered how they would ever keep it controlled. I didn't have to wonder for long because, just as the thought came into my head, the sled tipped to one side, shooting my parents out onto the snow.

Willow gasped as we all stared down the Hill at them, awaiting their reaction. *Shit. This was not going to be good*. And then, the strangest thing happened—both of my parents started to laugh. An honest to God

belly laugh. Laughter that was so boisterous we could hear it from the top of the hill.

I leaned closer to Willow to whisper in her ear. "I've never heard my parents laugh in my entire life."

"Should we be scared?" she whispered back, a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"Probably."

"I can't believe your parents rode down the hill three times today," Willow said with a laugh as we lay in her childhood bed later that night.

"I'm just trying to figure out who possessed them, because those people at your house today were not my parents," I answered playfully.

"What can I say? I bring out the best in people."

I turned on my side so I could face her more fully. "Seriously, though. You really do." It was true. Willow was not only an amazing person herself, but she had a way of bringing out the best parts of everyone else too, even my parents. "I honestly don't know how I got so lucky."

"It wasn't luck. It was fate."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I do. I think fate puts something in front of us and it's our choice what we do with it."

I moved once again to roll my body on top of Willow's. "I know what I want to do right now," I said suggestively.

"Soon! We have to make sure my parents are definitely asleep first. You're too loud. If they're awake, they'll definitely hear. I have something for you anyway." She gently pushed me off her and then walked across the room and grabbed a small bag out of her closet. "Now, I know we said no gifts."

"Because we are trying to save up the little bit of money we have," I said in a lecturing tone.

"It wasn't expensive. I promise." She sat down on the bed and sat the bag in between us. "Do you remember when I came to visit you on your nineteenth birthday?"

Did I ever. "How could I forget? It's the first time we had sex."

"Well, that night, you made a comment about how you thought reading out loud to each other sounded nice."

"I did?" I asked with a laugh and a snort. "How do you even remember this stuff?"

Willow pushed the bag closer to me, encouraging me to open it. "I remember everything about you. I'll never forget. Ever."

I opened the bag to find a book inside that was written by an author I had never heard of. "Laurel Lake?"

Willow nodded. "She writes lesbian fiction." She pointed to the book. "Do you want to read out loud first or should I?"

I didn't have a chance to answer because my phone started to ring at that moment with a call from Silas. It seemed strange since I couldn't remember the last time the two of us actually spoke on the phone. We texted at least a few times a week, but since we were both busy, we hadn't had an in-depth conversation in a long time. Normally, our texts were about our parents and how they were reacting to their children being gay. Mine were surprisingly, and sadly, handling it better than Silas's. At least better than his dad who had refused to talk to him since he came out. From what he told me, he and his mom still spoke and she was starting to come around, but they didn't speak as often as he'd like since it needed to be kept a secret from his dad. *Asshole*.

As soon as I answered, Silas started talking at a mile a minute, and I could barely keep up. Luckily, I was able to distinguish the words *proposed* and *engaged*, and given his level of excitement, I was able to put the pieces together.

"No way!" I screeched, the excitement bubbling out of me. "Dude. No way!"

"Yes, way," Silas screamed.

Even though I couldn't see him, I could tell just from his voice how happy he was, and I loved it. He deserved this and I was so glad he found it. "Well, come on, give us the story," I said as I scooted closer to Willow so she could hear too.

"We're in Pennsylvania for Christmas with Aaron's family and they live in the middle of nowhere, so he took me on the most adorable walk through the snow and asked. It was perfect. He's perfect." "And New York is one of the cool states that actually understands that love is love, so it will be legal for you guys," Willow said excitedly.

Silas sighed. "We just wish the other states would catch up since we aren't planning to stay in New York."

"You're not?" This was the first time I was hearing about this, which I guess shouldn't have been surprising.

"We want to open a law office together and it's way too expensive to do that in New York, at least in the city, and we aren't really interested in other parts of the state."

"Where are you thinking of opening up an office?" Willow asked, staring at the phone intently as she awaited their answer.

"Probably either Pennsylvania or New Jersey. We don't want to be in a city, but we also don't want to be in a town filled with small-minded people."

An idea popped into my head, and although I knew the chances of it ever happening were low, I had to throw it out there. "What about a small town that tends to be more liberal because of being a college town?"

The way Silas laughed told me he knew exactly what I was talking about. "Maybe if you ever invited us for a visit, it could be added to our list of possibilities."

"You know you're welcome anytime!" Willow said cheerfully.

"We'll definitely take you up on that, but for now, we have a bunch of others to call. Love you both."

"Love you too!" Willow and I said in unison before hanging up.

Willow picked up the book that was now lying beside her on the bed. "I'll go first, but I'm saving all of the sexy scenes for you."

"So you can get extra turned on?"

"Nope. So I can laugh when your face gets all red with embarrassment when you have to read the words *clit* and *panties*." Willow brought a hand to her mouth and snickered, clearly proud of her joke.

I took the pillow from behind my back and hit her with it, which only made her laugh even harder. Her loud, carefree laugh was contagious, so I started to laugh right along with her. Soon, we were both rolling around the bed in a fit of giggles.

I loved moments like these, and I loved our life together. That, along with Silas's engagement, had me thinking about our future. It didn't

matter if it was legally binding. It didn't matter if it meant I was going to be a widow at age thirty. I was going to marry this girl someday.

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Chapter 19

Summer 2012

"I'm so excited I somehow scored an invite to this wedding," Lisa said as she wiggled in her seat next to me. "I've never been to a gay wedding."

Tori threw an arm over Lisa's shoulder. "I'm excited that you're a single bitch who had no choice but to bring me as your plus one."

I rolled my eyes at the two of them but still cracked a smile. They were both crazy, but I was going to miss them when we all moved out of our apartment in a month. Willow and I had found a cute one-bedroom apartment that was halfway between the university and the elementary school where I taught, and Lisa was moving to the next town over to be closer to her job. We had no idea what Tori's plan was, but that was par for the course with Tori.

When music began to play, I shifted my eyes down the beach to where the wedding party was walking. If someone would have told me when I met Silas that he would be getting married to another man on the beach in the middle of July, I would have thought they were absolutely crazy, but now I thought it was perfect.

Aaron's mom walked Silas down the aisle, then looped around to walk Aaron down the aisle as well. No one from Silas's family had attended the wedding, so I was happy to see he was marrying into such a loving family. It made me wonder if my parents would come around enough to be at my future wedding. As if sensing I was drifting away with my own thoughts, Willow grabbed my hand and squeezed. As much as I knew it would hurt if my parents didn't come, I also knew nothing could take away from the happiness I was going to feel when I made the woman standing beside me my wife. We had never talked about future wedding plans, but I hoped Willow was on the same page as me.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I almost missed the wedding happening right in front of me. Luckily, I snapped back to reality in time to watch them say their vows and dance back down the aisle together. Silas and I had changed so much since we met. We both had a level of happiness

that could only be achieved by becoming our authentic selves, and this day was the culmination of that happiness for him.

It didn't take long for the drinks to start flowing, and soon we were all feeling it. "I have to tell you bitches something," Tori slurred as she pulled us all close to her. "I'm moving to Vegas."

"Vegas? Why?" Lisa asked, which was exactly what I was wondering too. Tori had never mentioned wanting to live in a different state, let alone on the opposite end of the country.

"Why not? Figured I might as well live life now before I'm tied down."

Both Lisa and I were quiet, and I was sure she also had no idea what to say about this. It was all so sudden. Willow didn't seem to have the same reservations. She lifted a hand in the air for a high five. "No way, bestie! That's amazing. You're gonna have so much fun."

Tori agreed and started rambling about all the plans she had for when she got there. Lisa joined in, adding her own ideas. As the two of them went back and forth, I looked back at Willow, who was now staring off into the distance with a faraway look in her eyes.

I gently elbowed her in the side. "You okay?" I whispered.

She nodded and smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Doing great."

"What happened to always being honest?"

"We'll talk later," Willow said softly before joining in on Tori and Lisa's conversation.

By the time *later* arrived, Willow and I had sobered up quite a bit. "So, your best friend is moving across the country," I said as we lay in our hotel bed. "How are you feeling?"

Willow opened her mouth to answer, but no words came out. Instead, a few tears fell from her eyes. She wiped them away and laughed at herself. "I'm happy for her. Really. I am. I'm glad she's branching out and living life to the fullest. I'm just really going to miss her, and you know...."

Willow didn't need to say anything else because I knew exactly what she was getting at. "You could tell her. I'm sure she wouldn't leave if she knew."

"She definitely wouldn't leave," Willow answered without question. "That's exactly why I *can't* tell her. It's like I told you in the

beginning. I don't want people to base their life choices on me. If this is what she wants to do, she should do it. Plus, it's Tori. It's going to suck being so far from her, but it won't change anything. We'll always be best friends. She's like my sister."

"I know. I just hate to see you sad." I kissed her cheek, then sat up straighter when an idea popped into my head. "What if we helped her move? I'll still be on summer vacation and you can work remotely for a few days. We could ride out there with her, then fly back. A one-way ticket shouldn't be that expensive. If there's enough space, I'm sure she'd let us stay at her place. Then we wouldn't even have to pay for a hotel."

Willow tried to play it cool, but I could see the excitement dancing in her eyes and could feel it by the way she was squirming beside me. "Are you sure? We probably won't be able to do anything too exciting for your birthday if we're going to Vegas a few weeks later."

"Are you kidding me? We'll celebrate in Vegas. That sounds pretty exciting to me."

Willow laughed joyfully, and oh my God, I loved that sound so much. "Let's do it."

The drive to Las Vegas went surprisingly well. We all rode in the U-Haul Tori rented, which she was weirdly good at weaving in and out of traffic. Since her car was on its last legs anyway and wouldn't have made it across the country, her plan was to find a used car to buy after arriving.

The apartment she was renting wasn't exactly nice, but it was good enough for what she was looking for. The two girls she was moving in with seemed cool, so I was happy to see that. It was a few miles off the Strip, so away from all the sights and sounds of Las Vegas.

We decided to spend four days there. The first was to help Tori unpack, the next two to spend time with her, and the final night and day, Willow had rented the two of us a hotel room on the Strip since she was insistent I needed to get the whole Vegas experience.

Unsurprisingly, Willow took advantage of every last minute she had with Tori, making sure the two of them fit in as much together as they

possibly could. By the time our night alone came, I was so exhausted that the thought of doing anything made me want to hurl.

"So, I know tonight was supposed to be all about experiencing Vegas," Willow said as she looked around our hotel room, "but how would you feel about going down and playing some penny slots to say we did it, then ordering some room service and hanging in the room?"

"I think I've never loved you more." I wrapped my arms around Willow's waist from behind and rested my head on her shoulder. "Are you sure though? I figured you wouldn't want to miss anything."

Willow laughed and turned around in my arms to face me. "Have I taught you nothing, my dear? Living life to the fullest isn't about *what* you do. It's about *how* you do it."

"So, how are we doing it tonight?" I asked flirtatiously.

Willow smirked, and her eyes sparkled with her smile, causing a million butterflies to take flight in my stomach. "Come with me, and I'll show you."

Even after all this time with Willow, it still amazed me how she was able to make every moment special. She tried to strategize the penny slots, which was unsurprisingly impossible, and we both laughed hysterically as we quickly wasted twenty dollars. Willow insisted on spending one more dollar after that, which she dubbed our *lucky dollar*. She must have been right since we ended up winning fifty dollars.

Willow waved the ticket in the air in front of me. "Told you! Thirty dollars richer. Now we can afford our room service."

I shook my head but couldn't help the smile that came to my face. "I guess we better collect our winnings and figure out what we want to eat."

Willow wiggled her eyebrows, then leaned in close to whisper in my ear. "I know exactly what I want to eat."

I laughed and pushed her away, but my body was already heating up at the thought of her mouth on me. "After we eat food. I'm starving."

After the room service arrived, we both ate quickly, since it turned out our hunger was for something other than food. I put the trays from dinner onto the floor, then rolled toward Willow, sliding my arm around her waist. "So, I believe you said something about eating."

I was expecting a flirtatious grin from Willow, but instead, she looked nervous. She bit on her lower lip while she looked everywhere

except at me. "So, I bought something, and I may have brought it along, but if you don't want to use it tonight, we totally don't have to. We don't ever have to use it if you don't want to." She jumped out of the bed and walked to her bag, then hesitantly pulled out a dildo and harness.

My eyes went wide as I stared at it, a mixture of nerves and excitement running through my stomach. "Did you want to use that on me?"

"Or you can use it on me. It's completely up to you. Or, like I said, we don't have to use it at all." Willow kept it in her hands as she walked over to the bed and lay down next to me.

My body came alive with her words. An unusual combination of heat and chills ran from my head to my toes and back again. I was so on edge but in the best way possible. Unable to stay still any longer, I grabbed the strap-on and jumped out of bed. "I want to use it on you." I hated how timid and unsure my voice sounded, so I cleared my throat in the hopes that the next part would sound more confident. "First. *Then*, I want you to use it on me. If that's okay." My voice made a noise that was somewhere between a squeak and a crack. *So much for sounding confident*.

Willow quickly nodded her head. "I love everything about that plan. Yep. Let's do it."

I nodded my head more tentatively, then started walking toward the bathroom.

"Wait, where are you going?" Willow asked.

"I'm putting it on in the bathroom. I want it to be a surprise for you." In all honesty, I knew I was going to struggle to get it on, and the last thing I wanted to do was ruin the mood by making Willow watch me fumble around with the straps.

Which is exactly what happened. It took me stepping in and out of it multiple times and fiddling with random straps until they made sense to finally get it on. The look on Willow's face when I walked out was totally worth it though. She swallowed hard as she looked up and down my body, her eyes going wide as they landed on the object between my legs. "Holy hell, you're sexy," she said breathlessly.

I did a sort of waddle over to the bed, still not completely sure how to handle my extra appendage. "Still sexy?" I asked with a giggle.

Willow smirked. "Even sexier."

"I'm not really sure what I'm doing," I said as I lay on the bed next to her.

Willow shrugged. "The good thing is, we're learning together. I guess you just kind of do what you would do with your fingers."

I wiggled my fingers in front of her face and started to laugh again. "I have a little more control over these." I slid on top of Willow and became stupidly nervous again as I stared down at her. "I guess I need to get you wet, huh?"

Willow let out a strained laugh that almost sounded like a groan. "You've already achieved that, trust me. I also have lube with me. But, of course, I'll never turn down some extra foreplay."

I slipped a hand between her legs and ran my fingers through her folds and over her clit before pushing two inside of her. I pulled them out, then pushed them back in even deeper. I did this a few times before moving them back up to her clit again. When she threw her head back on her pillow and began to moan, I replaced my fingers with the dildo, rubbing it over her clit, then across the rest of her center. It was already wet just from that, but I turned to the nightstand where I saw Willow had the lube and reached out for it. My hand covered it at the same time her hand covered mine.

"Let me do it," she said just above a whisper.

She poured some into her hands, then ran it up and down the dildo. Even though she wasn't actually touching me, I swore I could feel it. Watching her give a hand job to the object attached to me had me so turned on, I thought I might come just from watching that. Once she was done, she nodded as if to say she was ready.

I maneuvered myself on top of her and brought the dildo to her entrance. "Are you sure?"

When she nodded once again, I tentatively pushed it into her. Willow cringed at the contact, and I thought about stopping then and there. "Are... are you okay?"

Willow continued to cringe, but now she bit her lip as well. "Yeah. It hurts a little, but I know that's normal. I like it. Trust me."

I pushed in a little further and Willow let out a pained groan, but I could tell by the look on her face that she liked it. So, I pulled out a bit and pushed in harder this time. Willow's mouth dropped open and her eyes shut,

and I knew it was working. I moved out and in a few more times, picking up my pace with each thrust.

"Babe?"

I stopped my motion to stare down at Willow who was already staring up at me. Her face was serious, but her eyes were sparkling. "Yeah?"

"Fuck me."

That was all I needed to hear. I pushed into her even harder, then quickly moved in and out, loving the sounds I was eliciting from her. My center pulsed as she screamed out my name, and I knew it wouldn't take long for me to be screaming hers in the same way.

When she tugged on the dildo still attached to me and said, "Your turn," I was completely done for.

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Chapter 20

Winter 2012/2013

"Do you guys have plans for New Year's Eve?" Silas asked when he and Aaron called to wish Willow a happy birthday.

"Lisa is trying to convince us to go out, but we're not sure where to go," I admitted.

"Perfect!" Silas answered excitedly. "Come out in Philly with us. We're going to a gay bar with some of our friends who live there. I'm sure they would be fine with the three of you crashing at their house with us that night."

"Two, most likely," Willow corrected. "Lisa is set on going home with someone so I'm sure she'll find somewhere else to stay."

"So, can we take that as a yes?" Aaron asked.

Willow looked at me for reassurance and when I nodded my head, she yelled, "Hell yeah," into the phone.

"That's great, because we were also wondering if we could maybe take you up on that visit offer, and come stay at your place for a few days after New Year's."

Now I was the one to yell, "Hell yeah." This was going to be fun.

"Okay, everyone, remember the goal for the night," Lisa said as we walked into the bar on New Year's Eve. "Get me laid."

Silas and Aaron's friends just smiled at her, but Silas threw his head back in laughter then leaned closer to Willow and me, putting a hand on each of our shoulders as he spoke. "You two have fun with that. We'll go get the drinks and meet you on the dance floor."

Lisa was already on the prowl so Willow and I had no choice but to follow behind her. She carefully studied all the girls she walked by, but none of them must have lived up to her standards because she kept searching. Before long, the boys were joining us, Silas juggling three drinks while Aaron held two. Aaron handed his extra to Lisa, and Silas gave one to me and then Willow.

He nodded toward Lisa. "I'm shocked she hasn't found anyone yet, with the mission she's on." He put a hand onto her shoulder to grab her attention. "How do you feel about lawyers?"

Lisa looked from Silas to us and then back at Silas. "Is this a trick question? I love you, of course."

Silas rolled his eyes. "I'm talking about lawyers of the female variety who swing your way." He pointed over to the bar where three girls stood. Two had dark skin and long black hair and looked like they had to be sisters and the third had shoulder-length brown hair and what could only be described as sad eyes. "The one with the shorter hair is in her last year of law school. I thought she might be your type."

"Hot and rich?" Lisa asked. "How'd you know?"

Silas laughed. "I think she's pretty drunk though. She was very talkative and her friend and sister seemed surprised by that."

The girls must have noticed our not-so-subtle staring because they walked over to us. The one who Silas was talking about reached a wobbly hand out toward us. "I'm Maggie. This is my sister, Kiera, and my sister from another mister, Ryann."

Oh yeah. This girl was completely toasted.

We talked for a few minutes before Lisa told them we were going to the dance floor and dragged us away. "You didn't even get her number?" I asked when we were out of earshot.

"I'm looking for a hookup, not anything long term. That girl is ending her night by the toilet, not in bed with another person."

I looked back at the group as we walked away and saw Maggie throw her arms over the two other girls while loudly saying something about how happy she was to have them there. Lisa was definitely right about that. Soon, their group was joined by more friends and Lisa was back on her mission to find a not-so-drunk hookup.

Once we were out on the dance floor, I lost track of everything and everyone else, except for Willow. Even after five years of hooking up, her body still drove me completely insane. She stood behind me and held me close as I danced up against her. I wanted the moment to last forever. It was

all absolutely perfect until my mind decided to remind me that, after tonight, I would have six more New Year's Eves with Willow. Six more opportunities to welcome in a new year together. Six. *Six*.

"Don't think about it, babe," Willow whispered in my ear. She kissed the spot just below my ear, then down my neck, and it almost made me forget. Almost.

Willow backed away and reached her hand out toward mine, then pulled me off the dance floor and out of the bar. Once we were standing outside, she turned to face me and pushed a strand of hair behind my ear before leaning in to place a soft, but quick, kiss on my lips. "Run away with me."

"Excuse me?" I asked with a laugh.

"Let's run away together just for tonight."

I loved the idea of running away with Willow. I would run away with her forever if I could. No one to bother us, nothing to come between us. Still, I knew that wasn't realistic, even just for one night. "We're here with our friends. We can't just leave them."

"I know, I know. You're right. Let's go back in, stay until the bar closes or they decide to leave, then tell them we decided to stay somewhere else tonight."

I laughed once again. "You do know that's not actually running away, right?"

"It can be if we say it is." Willow smiled. Her eyes glistened from the light of the street lamps, and all I wanted was to actually run away with her.

"Fine, Willow Stone, you convinced me. I'll run away with you."

On our way back into the bar, we bumped into Lisa, who had her arm linked with a tall blonde. "Perfect! I've been looking for you two. I'm heading out. I'll call you tomorrow."

She gave each of us a hug and I told her to be careful, to which she responded by scoffing and saying, "Okay, Mom."

We had just found Silas's group of friends when the countdown to midnight began. As people shouted Happy New Year and kissed, hugged, and high-fived all around us, Willow dipped me in her arms and kissed me as though it was our first and last kiss all at once. It was so perfect I let myself forget that we only had six more midnight kisses left. All I cared

about was this moment in her arms, kissing as though there was no one else in the room. And there might as well not have been, since all I saw was her.

When the kiss was over, my knees felt so wobbly, I could barely stand. Luckily, Willow was holding me tight as if she would never let me go.

Silas pulled us both into a tight hug. "Happy New Year, ladies. Now, if you don't mind, us old men are going back to the apartment. Stay out as late as you want. I'll keep my phone turned up so I can let you in when you arrive."

"No need," Willow said as she pulled me even tighter up against her. "We're out for the night."

"Yep. We're running away," I added with a giggle.

Willow laughed along with me. "Forever." She now laughed even harder. "Or at least until we meet for brunch."

Silas furrowed his eyebrows and looked between the two of us. "Okay, you two are strange, but as long as you're safe, you can do whatever you want." He started to walk away, then turned around and wiggled a finger at us. "Don't get pregnant."

Willow put both hands in the air. "No promises." Once he was gone, she turned to me with a wide grin on her face. "Ready to run away with me?"

"Of course. Now, the question is, where are we running to?" "Wherever the night takes us."

I couldn't help but laugh once again. I felt drunk even though I had barely drank any alcohol. "And where is the night taking us?"

"First, to go get some food because all of that dancing made me work up an appetite."

We left the bar and walked around the city until we found a small diner that surprisingly wasn't very busy and sat in a booth near the back. "Running away to fried food," I said as I looked over the menu. "Great choice."

"Or twenty-four-hour breakfast. Can't go wrong with that."

I looked across the booth at Willow—eyes sparkling, wide grin, cheeks still rosy from walking through the freezing city—and the thought of losing her popped into my head once again. Willow reached across the table and covered my hand with hers. "I told you not to think about that, babe."

"How do you even know what I'm thinking about?"

"Because I know you. Whenever you're thinking about *that* you get this far-off look in your eyes as if you're miles, or I don't know, almost *seven years away*."

I sighed, and my chest ached from all of the thoughts running through my head. "Seven years really isn't that long."

"How long have we known each other?"

I was too tired to do the math so I just shrugged. "I don't know. Feels like forever."

Willow pounded her fist against the table almost triumphantly. "Exactly!" she shouted. "It's been just over five years, and we have just under seven left. Using your mathematical logic, that means we still have forever together."

The ache in my chest slowly dissipated as it was overcome with warmth; warmth and love for the woman sitting across from me, who now had a proud smile on her face. "How do you always do that?"

"Do what?" Willow asked, her face becoming serious again.

"Find a way to twist everything into a positive."

"Sometimes that's the only way to get through life. There's always going to be something good, no matter how bad life gets. You just have to be willing to find it."

"You should write a book," I joked. Although, I was only half kidding. The world could benefit from all of Willow's wisdom.

Willow's smile grew, and her eyes sparkled even more. "Maybe I will." She took a sip of her water and made an exaggerated *ah* sound. "Enough talk of the future though. We're running away, remember?"

"And where are we running away to next?" I tried to stifle my yawn, but it escaped anyway.

Willow raised an eyebrow and laughed at me. "From that yawn, I'd probably say we should find somewhere we can sleep."

"If you're going to try to convince me we should hitch a ride to the beach and sleep by the ocean in this weather, the answer is no."

Willow laughed even harder this time, throwing her head back in a way that made the veins pop out in her neck, and I wanted to memorize every single one. "I was going to suggest finding a hotel outside of the city and taking a cab there, but I think I like your idea better."

"The hotel sounds just fine."

While we ate, Willow searched for a hotel and called around until we found one about a half hour outside of Philadelphia that had vacancies. It didn't take long for us to hail a cab.

Willow gave the driver the hotel address, then turned toward me. "Wanna make out?" she whispered, although I figured the driver heard from the way he turned up his music as if he was trying to give us privacy.

I thought about arguing how we were too old to be making out in the back of a cab or how *maybe* we shouldn't be doing this in front of a stranger, but in the end, there was nothing I wanted to do more. Instead of answering, I leaned across the seat and kissed her. I could feel her smiling against my lips, clearly happy to have her request fulfilled.

I couldn't believe it when the car stopped and the driver told us we were at the hotel. I was so caught up in kissing Willow that it seemed more like three minutes than thirty. We were both love drunk as we went into the hotel, gave our name, and got the keys to our room. It wasn't the nicest hotel, but it did the trick for the few hours we would be staying there.

"So, what now?" I asked as I threw myself down on the bed.

Willow got into the bed and crawled on top of me, smirking down at me once we were face to face. "We could continue what we started in the cab." Then her face lit up as if she had just come up with an idea, and she jumped to her feet. She picked up a pillow and jumped up and down on the bed. "Or we could have a pillow fight."

I stood up as well and the two of us laughed hysterically as we jumped on the bed and attacked each other like we were little kids at a slumber party. The tiredness and anxiety I was feeling earlier floated away as I forgot the world for just one night. Willow was right. It was good to run away every once and a while.

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Chapter 21

A few days after New Year's Eve, Silas and Aaron arrived for their visit. Willow had made it her personal mission to make sure they had the best time ever, so we were starting out the trip by taking them to dinner at a local staple.

It was a small family-owned diner right at the border of Willow's hometown and where we lived now. As soon as we walked in, it was obvious they were busier than usual. People were crowded out the door waiting for tables and pick-up orders.

"Eating in or picking up?" the girl at the hostess stand asked. She had a smile on her face, but one look in her eyes told me she was exhausted.

Willow turned toward the rest of us. "Do any of you have a preference?" When we all shook our heads, she looked back at the hostess. "Which would be easier for you?"

The girl's mouth dropped open a bit and her eyes went wide. "Excuse me?"

"You seem busy, so I was just wondering which option would be less overwhelming for the staff here."

The girl was silent for another few seconds, then she shook her head and laughed. "Sorry. I'm just not used to people being so accommodating. I guess takeout since a lot of people seem to want to eat here tonight, but I have to warn you that you'll probably be waiting over an hour for your food. You're welcome to leave and come back to pick it up though."

"That works for us, right, guys?"

We all agreed because how couldn't we? Willow's patience and positivity was contagious. The hostess handed us menus and we stepped off to the side as we decided what to order.

A few minutes later, a man breezed past us, huffing obnoxiously as he practically ran to the hostess stand. "Excuse me. We've been waiting outside in the *freezing* cold for over an hour. We were told it would be forty-five minutes."

I looked up from my menu to watch the scene in front of me. The hostess's posture was now stiff, but she kept her composure. "I apologize, sir. We're understaffed tonight, and it's hard to predict how long patrons will stay once seated. Could I have your name?"

The man scoffed. "It's Vinny, party of six."

The hostess smiled politely. "Good news! It looks like there's just one party in front of you."

Apparently, this wasn't good news to the man. His scowl became even deeper, and he threw his hands in the air. "You know what? Just forget about it. We'll take our business elsewhere."

As he walked out, I could hear other people who hadn't been complaining before also grumbling now. I hated how negativity spread like wildfire and wished there was something I could do.

Willow held her menu toward me. "Just get me the chicken fingers and fries and a milkshake. I'll be right back."

I watched her skip out of the diner but had absolutely no idea what she was up to. We ordered our food, then moved outside to make room for other people. In the rude man's defense, it *was* freezing, but he still didn't have to take that out on the hostess. They were clearly doing their best. Still, his words had an impact, and the groups of people waiting outside couldn't stop complaining about how cold they were now.

"Did I hear people were getting chilly and antsy?" a voice shouted over the crowd, and I turned to find my girlfriend proudly holding two bags from the convenience store that was just down the street from the diner.

She pulled hand warmers from the bag and handed them out to everyone waiting outside. "I also have chocolate bars," she announced proudly, then wiggled one in front of the crowd. "I'm thinking of a number between one and one hundred. Take turns guessing. The first person to get it right, gets a candy bar."

After a few rounds of the *guess the number* game, Willow was out of candy bars, so she found a website full of interesting facts and started reading them to the crowd. I couldn't believe it when an hour had passed and our food was done.

"It's on the house," the hostess said when she handed us the bags.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "You don't need to do that."

The hostess nodded her head toward everyone who was still waiting. Most of them now had smiles on their faces or at least seemed more content than before. "Of course." She looked at Willow. "You made tonight so much easier for us by keeping everyone happy. That's worth so much more than this food. So, thank you."

We thanked her once again and then headed outside, Silas and Aaron a few steps ahead of us. "Hold on," I said to Willow when we were away from everyone else. "That was really awesome what you did."

Willow shrugged. "I just saw an opportunity to help out, so I took it. No big deal."

I grabbed her hand and forced her to face me. "It is a big deal though. You're so patient. You will probably end up living less than half the amount of years most of those other people will, yet you don't get upset if your time is wasted."

Willow shrugged once again. "I was with my friends. That's not wasted time to me. Time is only wasted if you allow it to be. Most people are so worried about *wasting time* that they end up wasting it by not just embracing and enjoying every moment."

She turned away from me and continued walking to the car as if she hadn't just dropped an insane amount of wisdom. It made me wonder if she knew that she taught me something new every day. Either way, I made a vow to myself at that moment not to waste any more time with Willow by worrying about the future. I was going to make the most of what we had left instead.

"Thanks again for having us," Silas said as we went on a cold walk through town that Willow insisted we all take. "We love this cute little town, and we obviously love you girls as well." He stopped suddenly in front of a small building on the main street with a *For Sale* sign in the window. "Um, babe...."

Aaron grabbed his hand and stared in awe at the building as well. "This is exactly what we've been looking for."

It all seemed way too good to be true, but they wrote down the number on the sign and called once we were back at the apartment. It was well within the range they wanted to pay, which only made them more convinced. They stayed an extra day so they could take a tour of the building, and their faces lit up as they spoke about how they could set up an office there.

Everything was a whirlwind after that. They put in an offer that was accepted a few days later and closed on the building just a month after that. The next few months were spent with their time divided between New York City and East Pine. They bought a house and stayed with us while they were in the process of moving, then worked to get their law office up and running.

By the fall, all of their hard work had come to fruition and their law firm was set up. They had so much to celebrate, but the celebrations of Silas and Aaron moving and getting their law firm off the ground were overshadowed in October that year when the gay marriage ruling became final in New Jersey after the governor dropped his appeal.

Willow insisted that we had to all get together to celebrate. "To love," she shouted as she held her glass of wine in the air for a toast.

"To love," we all repeated.

"So," Aaron said, dragging out the word. "Now that it's legal in New Jersey, when are you two getting married?"

"I guess it depends when this girl asks me," I joked as I bumped my shoulder against Willow's.

For a split second, Willow's mouth fell open slightly as if she was surprised, but she recovered quickly by flashing the guys a wide smile. "Looks like we'll have to see, huh?"

The conversation moved on, but I could feel Willow tossing glances at me the rest of the night. As soon as Silas and Aaron left our apartment, Willow turned to me and furrowed her eyebrows as she seemed to study me. "You want to get married?" she asked after a minute.

I guess we had never talked about marriage before. Talking about the future was scary for both of us given how limited that future was. "Of course. Does that surprise you?"

Willow looked toward the floor where she ran her foot across the carpet nervously. "I just thought... you know... you wouldn't want to—"
"Be a widow before I even hit thirty-one?" I finished for her.

When she nodded, I took a step closer to her. "It wasn't my ideal plan for my life." She continued to stare at the ground, so I took another step and put my hand under her chin to force her to look at me. "But that doesn't stop me from wanting to marry you. In fact, it makes me want to marry you even more."

My words brought the sweetest smile back to Willow's face. "Really?"

"Of course, babe. I love you."

Willow smiled, and I could see ideas and plans dancing around in her eyes in the form of that signature sparkle. "Well, you've certainly given me a lot to think about."

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Chapter 22

Willow was acting strange the two weeks following the marriage equality announcement in New Jersey. I probably would have thought more about it if I hadn't been so caught up in the preparations for Halloween celebrations at the elementary school.

I didn't even think anything of it when she suggested a surprise trip the weekend after Halloween. It was such a Willow thing to do, so why would I? We checked into a beachfront hotel, which I quickly realized was located right around the same spot where we sat on the beach that cold February night when Willow brought me there to help me forget about how my parents were treating me over my choice of major.

We ate dinner on our hotel balcony as the sun set and went to bed early so we could get up to watch the sunrise. Willow surprised me by ordering breakfast for us to take down to the beach, and she set up a blanket in the sand with all of our food on it. She insisted I take my shoes off since it was tradition, and we ate and talked until the sun started to come up.

I dug my toes in the sand as I watched the sun rise over the horizon, casting a beautiful orange glow on the ocean. "2,246," Willow whispered.

"Huh?" I looked away from the rising sun to focus on her, but she was still staring off into the distance.

"We have approximately 2,246 more sunrises left together. I want to spend as many of those as possible as your wife."

Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, Willow pushed herself up onto one knee and pulled a small brown box out of her jacket pocket. Her eyes already glistened with tears, and I knew mine were about to start falling too. "I love you, Rosemary Burns. When you came into my life freshman year, you took everything I thought I wanted and flipped it on its head. Now, all I want is to spend the rest of my life with you. I was shocked when you told me you wanted to get married. None of my bucket list items hold a candle to being able to call you my wife. So, will you make all of my dreams come true? Will you marry me?"

I was too shocked to speak, so I just nodded my head and wiped the tears that were now streaming down my cheeks. Willow laughed her full

belly laugh before pulling me into the world's tightest hug. When she pulled away, she shakily pushed the ring onto my finger.

I stared down at it. I didn't understand anything about rings, but I knew I loved the one on my finger. There was a big diamond in the center surrounded by small diamonds that covered half of the band. Honestly, it could have been plastic and I would have loved it since it was from Willow, but it was absolutely perfect. "It's beautiful, Willow. I'm the luckiest girl in the whole world."

Willow sat up on her knees and took both of my hands in hers. "I don't want a long engagement. I'm not saying we have to elope or anything. I want to give you time to pick out your dream dress and to find the perfect venue, but I don't want to wait longer than a year. Sorry. I'm just so excited."

I laughed at her rambling. "I'm excited too, babe."

"Did you want to call your parents and tell them?"

My stomach dropped at the idea of telling my parents. They had definitely come a long way since I came out, but they were far from being PFLAG parents. They loved Willow, and as long as we didn't act like we were in a relationship around them, they were happy to spend time with us. The face my mom made when I accidentally let *babe* slip the last time they visited was enough to tell me they were far from accepting this.

"I don't want to ruin this amazing day by telling them. Let's worry about that later. Did you tell your parents yet?"

Willow shook her head. "I haven't told anyone. I wanted to be able to do it together." She pulled me tight up against her. "How about we keep this between us for today? Give ourselves a chance to celebrate before inviting all the craziness in."

"I think that's a wonderful idea. You do know Tori and Lisa are going to kill us for not telling them immediately though, right?"

Willow waved her hand. "They'll get over it. What do you say we invite Lisa, Silas, Aaron, and my family over for dinner tomorrow, and we'll tell them all together? We'll call Tori too, so she doesn't get pissed."

"That sounds absolutely perfect, future wife."

Willow's smile went bigger than I had ever seen it before, which was saying a lot. "I love the sound of that."

The next day, I kept my ring in our bedroom when everyone arrived for dinner. I waited for a nod from Willow signaling to me to get it, then heard her explaining to everyone that we had something to show them. I stayed upstairs until I heard Tori answer the call, then ran into the room holding out my ring finger and shouting about being engaged. Mrs. Stone jumped up and down and clapped her hands together. Lisa said, "Called it," and Aaron whispered something to Silas about owing him twenty dollars.

"Was no one surprised by this?" I asked with a laugh.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but I, for one, am surprised that my baby sister got engaged before me," Phil said while rolling his eyes playfully.

Phil's girlfriend, Stevie, nudged him gently, also rolling her eyes. "And whose fault is that?"

Mr. Stone took a step closer to us and put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm just happy both of my children have found women willing to put up with them." He winked and squeezed my shoulder before backing away so Mrs. Stone could take a closer look at my ring.

"We need to start planning," she said excitedly. "Have you girls thought at all about where you want to have it? And when?"

Willow laughed and pulled my hand away from her mom, who still had a strong grip on it. "Let a girl breathe, Mom. We just got engaged yesterday. We haven't made any plans yet."

"So much judgment coming from the girl who was telling me she wanted a short engagement," I teased.

"I do know I want it to be somewhere special to us. I've thought about East Pine, but I don't really want to get married where I work. Then there's the beach, but that could get risky with the weather. I don't know. I just want it to be in a place where we have a lot of memories, but I also think it's crazy to put all of our money into one day." Willow was talking a mile a minute, and I could tell she had definitely thought about this. *Like mother*, *like daughter*.

"Why don't we just get married at the old abandoned barn?" I joked. Much to my surprise, Willow's eyes lit up. "Oh my God. Do you think we could?"

"We could. There's just that little issue of trespassing," I answered sarcastically.

"But how is that any different than...?" Willow looked over at her parents and let her words trail off.

Her dad raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms in front of his chest, but his face still broke into a small smile. "The barn where all of you kids go to drink?"

"You know about that?" Willow asked, aghast.

Both of her parents started to laugh. "Of course we know about that, sweetheart," her mom said with a giggle. "Did you kids really think it was some well-kept secret? You're just lucky the cops around here are too worried about what's going on at the college to do anything about it."

"So, I take it they wouldn't do anything about an impromptu wedding either?" Willow asked. Her eyes sparkled, and I swore I could see the ideas swirling around in her mind.

Her dad laughed. "Unfortunately, I think that's a bit different, sweetheart."

Willow's smile dropped, and even though she tried to hide it, I could see the disappointment in her eyes. "Well, how could we *legally* do it?"

Her dad rubbed at the little bit of stubble on his chin. "I suppose you would have to get ahold of the owner somehow and see if they were willing to let you. Old man Rivers left it to one of his grandchildren when he passed away. That had to be almost fifteen years ago. I'm not sure they ever even came to check on it. Whoever it is definitely doesn't live in the area. From what I know, they don't even live in this state."

Willow shrugged and smiled once again, but I could tell it was strained. "Well, we'll figure something out. Wherever we get married, I know it will be perfect."

We were definitely going to figure something out. Well, correction, *I* was going to figure something out. It was completely out of my comfort zone and also a little bit insane, but I was going to do whatever I could to find the owner of the barn and reach out about having our wedding there. Willow had made all of my dreams come true, and it was time I made one of hers, no matter how crazy it was.

One nice thing about small towns is, if you do enough digging, you can find out any information you want about its residents, alive or dead. When I explained my plan to Mrs. Stone, she immediately jumped on the case with me, talking to friends and neighbors until she found out more about Mr. Rivers' family. Within just two weeks, I had the name and number of the grandson he left the barn to.

I took a deep breath as I stared down at the number on my phone. I only had about a half hour until Willow got home from work, so I knew I didn't have any time to waste. The phone rang just three times before I was sent to voicemail. I thought about just hanging up but knew I had to do this. I took another deep breath before speaking. "Hi, Mr. Rivers. I'm... umm... really sorry to bother you, but my name is Rosemary Burns. I, uh, just wanted to speak to you about the barn you inherited from your grandfather. If you could call me back, I'd really appreciate it. It's really important. Truly." I gave him my number, then said an awkward goodbye before hanging up.

I figured there was no way I was going to get a call back, but just a few minutes later, the phone rang. "He-hello?" I asked hesitantly.

"Hi. Yes. I believe you just called me. This is Bruce Rivers." The man's tone was serious, but his voice was also warm and inviting.

"Oh. Yeah. Hi, Mr. Rivers. I'm very sorry to bother you. I have a very strange favor to ask you. So, my girlfriend proposed to me a few weeks ago, and as strange as this probably sounds, she really wants to get married at your grandpa's... umm... I mean, your barn. It's a long story, but we have some memories there. I know it's a long shot, but I was wondering if we could have your permission, or whatever it is we need, to have our wedding there. We can pay you to rent it out, and we'll do all the work to get it set up. You don't have to do anything obviously. This sounds really crazy when I say it all out loud, but it's what my girlfriend... fiancé... wants. She's the greatest person I've ever met and she would do anything to make every single person in her life happy. I just want to be the one to make her happy for once. She deserves that." God, why was I word-vomiting all over this man? He didn't need my whole life story. What was next? Was I also going

to tell him that Willow was going to die? "So, yeah, you can think about it. I just wanted to ask. It's okay if you say no. No hard feelings." *Okay, Rosemary, shut up.*

The line was silent for what felt like forever, and I honestly thought the call had dropped before Mr. Rivers finally spoke. "You're marrying a woman?"

Shit. I didn't think about that part. This man might be a crazy homophobe. Now it definitely wasn't happening.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to say that so bluntly," he apologized. "It's just... My daughter just came out to me a few weeks ago. She's eighteen and just started college. My wife and I always kind of suspected it, but... anyway... now I'm the one rambling. It's such a strange coincidence." His words were coming out fast, as if he was excited to learn this information. "May I ask why the barn is so important to you guys?"

Oh, great. I didn't think of this part either—explaining that a bunch of high school and college kids have been using his property to party. I definitely couldn't explain that it was where we shared one of our first kisses and also where I had maybe the best sex of my life and how that party eventually led us to make things official. "So, since the property isn't being used, students from the high school and college nearby kind of go there to party. We spent a lot of time there together."

The silence on the other end was shorter this time, and soon, Mr. Rivers laughed in response to my confession. "Oh, man. Gramps must be rolling over in his grave. I'm actually happy it's getting some use. I had a lot of great memories there growing up, and I'm glad someone else has memories there now too. I would have loved to do something with the barn, but I just don't have the time. We live in Connecticut, so the back and forth commute is a bit much. I should sell it. I just don't have the heart. I don't want it to go to the wrong person."

"That makes sense." I wasn't sure what to say but figured my best chance of getting him to agree was to keep this conversation going.

"Sorry. I'm getting off track again. If you want to get married at the barn, by all means, go ahead. You can do whatever you want to it, as long as you don't knock it down. I'm ecstatic it's going to get some love."

I shook my head because I couldn't believe this was happening. I swore I must have been hearing it wrong. I don't know how I expected this

conversation to go, but I definitely didn't expect it to be *this* easy. "Wow, that's amazing. Thank you so much. Just let me know how much we can pay you and whatever else we need to know."

Mr. Rivers scoffed. "You don't need to pay me anything. Like I said before, I'm just happy it's getting some love. Plus, as crazy as it sounds, given the timing, it feels like it's meant to be." He cleared his throat. "I do have one favor to ask you. Could I come down with my daughter sometime while you guys prepare? She's struggling with this a bit, and I'd love her to see some positive representation."

"Oh my gosh. It's your barn. You can come anytime. Come for the wedding if you'd like. We owe you big time for this."

"Just enjoy the rest of your life with your wife, and I'll be happy."

A heavy feeling settled in my stomach the same way it always did when something reminded me of Willow's untimely death. I couldn't think about that now though. These were happy times. "Mr. Rivers, I guarantee I'm going to love her forever."

"Then go ahead and plan your dream wedding."

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Chapter 23

In the weeks following my talk with Mr. Rivers, I learned so much about weddings and county ordinances that my head was spinning. It turned out it was good that Mr. Rivers wasn't charging us because that would have made the barn into a commercial venue, which would have involved applying to the local zoning board to have it zoned for commercial purposes. I also now knew way more than I ever wanted to about farmland preservation laws, which didn't matter in the end since the Rivers' land wasn't preserved.

When I was completely sure we wouldn't run into any issues with having the wedding at the barn (as long as the celebrations ended by eleven p.m., which I found funny given how late the very illegal barn parties always went), it was time to tell Willow. I wanted it to be special, so I bought a ring in order to propose back to her and waited until Thanksgiving Day.

We spent Thanksgiving with her family at her parents' house and when the meal was over, I asked Willow to go for a walk with me. I made sure our walk led us to the barn, and once we were there, I motioned for her to follow me to the spot behind the barn where we sat together at our very first barn party. I turned to face her and took both of her hands in mine.

"This is the spot where we chose to be friends with benefits." I laughed and shook my head, the tears already threatening to fall from my eyes. "I think those benefits went far beyond what either of us ever expected." I squeezed her hands. Now the tears did fall. "This was also where I finally found the liquid courage to tell you I wanted more. You could say this barn helped lead us to where we are now. Which is why it needs to be the place we take the next step in our lives."

I dropped down on one knee and pulled the ring box out of my pocket. "Willow Stone, I know we already promised to spend the rest of our time together, but will you marry me right here at this barn?"

"But... I... I thought we couldn't."

I stood back up and slipped the ring on her finger. "I found the owner. I did all the research. It's all figured out. We can get married here."

Willow's eyes became wet with tears and she wiped them away with the sleeve of her jacket. "We can?"

I nodded. "We can."

Willow let out a high-pitched screech before jumping into my arms. "Is that a yes?" I asked with a laugh.

Willow placed kisses all over my face and neck. "That's a *hell yes*. I can't wait to marry you here. It's going to be the best wedding in the history of weddings. I love you so much, Rosemary Burns." Willow slipped out of my arms and began to quickly skip away from me.

"Where are you going?" I yelled after her.

She turned around to look at me, smile wide, eyes sparkling, looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her before. "Back to my parents'. We have a wedding to plan."

We sure do.

Before we dove deep into wedding planning, we decided it was for the best if we told my parents about our plans. A few nights after Thanksgiving, I put my phone on speaker and gave them a call.

"Hey, sweetheart, how are you doing?" my dad asked when he answered the phone. It was still weird to me that he'd seemed to loosen up so much in the past few years, but I was starting to adapt to it. I liked the new normal.

"I'm good. Great, actually. Is Mom around? I need to tell you guys something. Well, we do. Willow and me."

"Your mother is right here." My dad's voice was now much more serious, as if he was concerned about what I was about to say.

"So, as I'm sure you've both seen, gay marriage is now legal in New Jersey. Well, Willow and I are engaged. We're getting married."

The other end of the phone was silent for at least a minute before my dad finally cleared his throat. "You know there are ways to protect yourselves legally without getting married."

That certainly wasn't the reaction I had hoped for. "We know that, Dad. That's not what this is about. It's about making a commitment to the woman I love. It's about celebrating that love."

More silence, and then it was my mom who spoke. "Honey, you know we have done everything we can to support this alternative lifestyle of yours, but we don't see the need to parade it around."

Wow. "We're not parading it around. We're doing the same thing all other couples do." I couldn't hide the anger from my voice, and I didn't care. For how far my parents had come, they clearly still had so far to go, and I wasn't sure if they would ever get there.

Willow reached out and squeezed my hand before speaking into the phone. "Why don't we all just take a breather and talk again in a little bit? It will give the two of you a chance to talk this over."

"That is a good idea. Thank you, Willow," my dad said right before cutting off our call.

I groaned as I threw my phone onto the couch. "Well, that went well."

Willow pulled me in close and rested her head on top of mine. "You never know. Maybe once they talk it out, they'll be better with it."

I let out a disgruntled laugh. "Have you met my parents?"

We were both quiet for the next few minutes as I let myself enjoy the warmth and comfort of being wrapped in Willow's arms. That comfort went away as soon as my phone started to ring with a call from my parents.

As per usual, as soon as I picked up, my mom started to speak. "We are happy for you girls. We love both of you and are glad you found each other. Even though we find the wedding unnecessary, we have decided to show our support by paying for it."

"You want to pay for our whole wedding?" I asked, sure I must have heard it wrong. That seemed like a very big change for a conversation that lasted less than ten minutes.

"Yes, we do," my dad answered. "Please accept that as a sign of our love and support since we can't attend the wedding. We do not want to bear witness to the event, but we do send our kindest regards."

What the hell? Did my parents even know what support was? Because this wasn't it. "I don't want your money. I want *you*."

"And you still have us," my mother said, a sweetness to her voice that I wasn't expecting. "Just not on that day."

"Just not on the biggest day of my entire life." I scoffed. They had to see how ridiculous this all was.

My dad cleared his throat, which was his signature whenever he felt uncomfortable. "I think you will soon learn that this is far from the biggest day of your life."

"I don't want the money," I said, surprising even myself. Neither of our salaries were anything to write home about so we were far from swimming in extra cash.

"You will take the money, young lady," my dad said firmly, somehow sounding angry at *me*. "I'm going to go to the bank tomorrow and get a certified check that I will give you the next time we see you."

I crossed my arms over my chest as if he could see me, and I suddenly felt like a child once again. "Fine. But just so you know, if you miss my wedding, I don't think I'll ever be able to get over it. It might not seem like a big deal to you, but it is to me. Writing a fat check, while certainly appreciated, doesn't make up for your lack of presence. I would rather have you two there than have all the money in the world."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but you will receive the check shortly." My father hung up before I could say anything else.

Willow wrapped her arm around me once again. "Don't worry, babe. Even without them, this will still be the greatest wedding of all time."

I smiled over at the woman of my dreams and felt sincere happiness when I thought about our big day. "You're right. Best day ever."

Between my parents' financial support and everyone else's actual support, we were able to plan our wedding for the first weekend in June, just six months after getting engaged.

Even Mr. Rivers ended up playing a bigger part than originally expected. After coming for a visit, he became nostalgic over his grandpa's farm, where we learned he used to spend every summer, and his daughter became mine and Willow's biggest fan.

Having him around to help definitely made things easier, especially when we had to get permits to serve alcohol and bring in a portable restroom. We ended up inviting his whole family to the wedding, and they all decided to come.

My parents, on the other hand, didn't come around. It was the day of my wedding, and I couldn't believe I would be going through it without any family members by my side. Luckily, I had Silas, who understood exactly what I was going through, and Lisa and her parents who were like family to me.

As I gave myself one more look in the mirror, Silas looped his arm with mine. "Are you ready?"

In spite of what was missing, I had to smile over everything I was gaining. "Ready to marry the love of my life? You bet."

I stared at my white full-length princess gown and took a deep breath. I was so ready to make Willow Stone my wife.

Silas gave me a gentle nudge to signal it was time to go. We walked out of the small house where I had been getting ready upstairs while Willow was getting ready downstairs. I took in the ceremony space we had set up outside the barn and couldn't believe we had pulled it off. This looked nothing like the abandoned property filled with beer cans and empty cups from just a few months ago.

There were two rows of chairs set up with an arbor at the end for us to stand under. I lost my breath as I looked at that arbor because the most beautiful woman in the entire world was currently standing under it. Willow's hair was half up and half down in a way that showed the subtle blue color underneath. She was wearing a tight mermaid-style gown that hugged her body perfectly. I made sure to take her in completely before I continued my walk down the aisle.

I wanted to remember absolutely everything about this moment. The way her hair danced with the slight breeze. How her eyes shimmered and glowed even more than usual when she first saw me. The tears that streamed down her face when I finally moved toward her.

"You're stunning," she whispered once I was next to her.

I ran my eyes up and down her body, making it no secret what I was doing. "Not as stunning as you."

"We'll have to agree to disagree on that." Willow winked, and it was a good thing she was holding my hands or else I might have collapsed from how sexy it was.

Phil performed the ceremony for us, and while I was pretty sure he did an amazing job, I couldn't be positive since I was too lost in the woman

standing in front of me to focus on anything else. I was lucky I was even able to choke out my vows.

All I know is when he said I could kiss the bride, it was like no other kiss I had ever experienced in my entire life. All of our past kisses had culminated in this one moment and there was so much love and passion, I couldn't imagine how things would get better than this moment. Then again, I was marrying Willow Stone. I knew she would find a way to make every single day better than the last because that's what she always did.

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Chapter 24

Summer 2014

"I can't believe you won't tell me where we're going. It is *our* honeymoon," I said as we pulled into airport parking.

Willow put the car in park and wiggled her eyebrows at me. "It's so much more fun this way though. Don't you think?"

"I think you're crazy," I said with a laugh. "But, you're right. It is fun this way. *And* I love you. *And* I'm so happy you're my wife."

"Wife. I'll never, ever get sick of hearing that word."

I leaned over the center console and placed a kiss on Willow's cheek. "Wife." I continued to kiss her face and neck as I repeated the word. "Wife. Wife. Wife. Wife."

Willow grabbed my face and kissed my lips before I could pull away. "I love you."

I sighed in content. "I love you, too."

"I hope you love me even more once you find out where we're going." She laughed conspiratorially as she hopped out of the car.

Willow did a good job of hiding where we were going even once we were in the airport. She didn't let me see our boarding passes, and she kept us away from the gate as long as possible.

When she couldn't keep us away any longer, I looked up at the TV screen that read *Orlando*, *Fl.* "Wait, are we...?"

Willow nodded her head up and down quickly. "Yeah." "No."

"Yep." Willow popped the *P* as if she was extremely proud of herself. "You told me you've never been to Disney World, and I just can't have a wife who's never experienced the Happiest Place on Earth. That's just blasphemy."

"Then I'm glad you chose this so we don't have to get a divorce."

"My thoughts exactly." When they called for first class to start boarding, Willow nodded toward the gate. "That's us."

"You booked us for first class?" I didn't even try to hide the giddiness from my voice. Even though my family had enough money to

take multiple vacations a year, my parents thought they were a waste of time. Why travel the world when you could be working? The only times I had actually been on a plane were when I went to Texas with Lisa's family and when I flew back from Las Vegas with Willow, and we didn't fly first class either time.

Willow reached out and took my hand, then dragged me toward the gate. "Did you really think I was going to let the extra wedding money from your parents go to waste?"

My giddiness evaporated at the mention of my parents, and a lump formed in my throat. I tried to swallow it down, but it was like swallowing a brick.

Willow looked back at me and squeezed my hand. "Hey, when your parents finally get their heads out of their asses, you can thank them for the first-class trip to Disney World. Until then, don't let them bring you down." She squeezed my hand once more and gave me a sympathetic smile. "Forget I even mentioned them. I'm really sorry I did."

Forgetting them was easy once we walked onto the plane and I saw our seats. Legroom certainly wasn't an issue in first class and clearly neither was comfort. The seats were huge and each one of ours already had a blanket sitting on it waiting for us. There was a TV in front of each of our seats and a drink menu sitting on the armrest. It was just our two seats on one side of the aisle, which meant I didn't have to bump elbows with a stranger.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Willow whispered in my ear before nudging me gently to encourage me to sit down.

"Have you flown first class before?" I asked as I let my body sink into the seat.

"Just once. My family was flying home from California and our flight was overbooked. We volunteered to take a later flight, and in exchange, they put us in first class." Willow wiggled around in her chair like an excited child. As if flipping a switch, she gave me a coy smile and leaned closer to me. "You wanna know the best part of all this space?" she asked seductively.

I swallowed hard. What the hell was she about to suggest?

She bent down to her backpack and pulled out the bag from the airport gift shop filled with at least five different types of chips. "Room to

eat all of our snacks."

"You're a child," I said with a laugh.

"Not quite." Willow picked up the drink menu and twirled it in her fingers. "A child wouldn't be able to buy alcohol to go with all of their snacks."

By the time we landed, we were full of chips and way too much alcohol. We giggled as we made our way through the airport to get our bags and laughed some more when we struggled to grab our bags off the carousel.

"How the hell are we supposed to get to our hotel?" I asked as we stumbled through the airport. I could barely walk. There was no way I was going to be able to drive.

"A shuttle will take us to our hotel."

"And what hotel is that?" I tried to lift one eyebrow, but instead ended up squinting one eye while I contorted my face as if I was in pain.

Willow threw her head back in laughter, as if my inability to raise an eyebrow was the funniest thing in the world. "The Contemporary. It's the resort the monorail goes through."

I did something that was a mix between a skip and a jump. "No way! That's amazing."

"I hope you're still this excited when you're not buzzed."

"How could I not be? I'm in Disney World with the love of my life. *My wife.*"

"And if you like it, I think we should come back as much as possible."

"Definitely. And someday we can bring our kids here with us." The words slipped out before I even realized what I was saying, and I put a hand over my mouth as if I could somehow push them back in.

Willow and I had never talked about kids. I assume that's because we both knew it didn't make sense to have them. There was no way Willow was going to want to bring a child into this world knowing she would have to leave them. I knew this meant my dream of having kids would probably never come to fruition, but that was okay because I got to spend these years with Willow. Right now, that was all that mattered to me.

Willow stopped walking and turned to look at me. "Do you want kids?"

"No. I mean, I used to. It just... it doesn't make sense for us, right? It couldn't possibly work. I..." I cut myself off before I said something I might regret later. "I don't think we should talk about this when we've been drinking."

"You're right, but I do want to talk about it later, okay?"

Willow walked away before I could even respond and left me standing there wondering what the hell had just happened. She *wanted* to talk about it? What did that even mean? Did *she* want kids? I shook these thoughts from my head and followed after her. There was no sense in getting caught up in it now.

One good thing about my slip of the tongue was it sobered us both up enough to allow us to act like adults on the shuttle and then properly check into our room. Yet, when we walked in, I could tell the buzz was still very much present.

My eyes landed on the bed, which was large and inviting, then snapped back to Willow, who was still standing by the door, taking it all in. I didn't have the capacity to take it in because I suddenly only had one thing on my mind. I pushed her up against the wall, pinning my body against hers as I kissed her. I could barely breathe with the intensity of the kiss, but I didn't care.

After a few minutes, I pulled back because there was something else I wanted. "You brought King Triton, right?"

Willow furrowed her eyebrows. "King Tri—" Her lips split into a smile and she threw a hand over her face. "Oh God, did you just name our strap-on after a Disney character?"

"Maybe." We both laughed and I moved her hand from her face. "It doesn't have to be King Triton. It could be..." I laughed even harder as ideas floated into my head. "Prince Coming?"

"Stop, stop," Willow begged, but she couldn't stop laughing. "Okay, but how about Donald Dick?"

Willow pushed me away as if she was disgusted, but her face said otherwise. "Oh my God. I'm totally not letting you forget this once you sober up."

I opened Willow's bag and searched until I found the dildo, then held it up. "Good, because I'm not going to let you forget *this* once you sober up."

Willow held out her hand. "I want to wear it this time." "But—"

She put up her hand to cut off my argument. "Trust me, I'm not going to forget this. I want you to scream out my name while—" She paused as if she was considering what to say, then shook her head. "No. I can't do it. Can't use your names. I want you to scream while *I'm* inside of you."

I wanted that too. God, did I want that. "Well, what are you waiting for?" I tried to speak as smoothly as possible, but the sound of my voice cracking gave away just how much I needed her inside of me.

Willow put up one finger. "I just need one minute." She grabbed her suitcase and dragged it behind her into the bathroom.

I sat down on the bed as I waited for her. I wasn't timing it, but I could tell it was taking much longer than a minute, and I was getting impatient. I was about to yell something at her when she opened the door.

My mouth dropped open at the sight in front of me. She was wearing a Mickey Mouse sports bra and matching socks and the strap-on. "I…" My mouth opened and closed a few times because I couldn't seem to remember how to form words. I mean, who could blame me? I had never seen anything sexier in my entire life. I shook my head and laughed. "I hope you don't think we're getting pictures with Mickey on this trip, because after seeing all of this," I motioned my hand in front of her body, "I will never be able to look at him the same."

"Do you like it?" The way Willow smirked told me she already knew the answer to that.

I laughed once again. "Is that even a question?"

Willow nodded her head toward me and lifted her eyebrows. "So, what are you waiting for?" she asked, repeating my words from just a few minutes before.

I knew exactly what she meant so I jumped off the bed and quickly stripped out of my clothes, only tripping over my own feet a few times as I tried to get my shorts off.

Willow moved her eyes up and down my body and licked her lips, then finally closed the remaining space between us. She placed her hands on my hips, then took her bottom lip between her teeth. *Good lord. Just when I thought she couldn't get any sexier.*

I got onto the bed and pushed myself up onto all fours, turning my head to look at Willow. "Is this what you meant?" *Oh yeah. The alcohol was still very present in my system. I had no idea what I was doing right now.*

Willow stared for a few seconds, her mouth slightly ajar, then let out a boisterous laugh, throwing her head back as she did. After a few seconds, she gained enough control to bring it down to a light chuckle. "You look sexy as hell right now, but I can't lie. I haven't watched nearly enough porn to logistically figure out how to make that work. What do you say we stick to the old-fashioned way?"

"That sounds great." *And much safer*. I rolled onto my back and smiled as Willow crawled onto the bed.

Willow wasted no time running her hand down my body and across my center and just that one touch already had me wet. Hell, I was wet before her touch just from seeing her. "I already put the lube on but wanted to make sure you're nice and ready for me."

I made a little grunt of acknowledgment because it was all I was able to get out with the magic that was her fingers at that moment. They moved through my folds before circling my clit and then plunging inside of me. I whimpered as Willow used two fingers to push deep inside and her thumb to continue rubbing at my clit. Between the alcohol and her outfit I knew I wasn't going to last long. I pushed at her hand to signal for her to stop, so I didn't come just from her fingers.

Willow understood what I needed and grabbed the dildo with one hand, slowly pushing it inside of me. I groaned from this first bit of contact and moved my hands to her ass to hold her against me, so I could let myself feel for a moment before I started to lose all control. Willow slowly pulled out of me, then pushed in more firmly.

My hands dug into the bed and wrapped around the fitted sheet below me as I pushed my head even harder against my pillow. "Ah, yes, please."

Willow stopped for just a moment to look down at me, a smirk on her face that told me she knew exactly the effect she was having on me right now. Then, she pulled out once more, and this time, moved in and out rapidly. I held onto her ass once again as she filled me up. I was almost ready to lose it completely when I had another idea. "Wait," I was somehow able to squeak out.

Willow stopped her motions and stared down at me, her eyebrows furrowed as a look of confusion drew across her face. I moved a shaky hand up to her face and ran my finger across her cheek. "Switch positions with me. I want to ride you."

Willow's eyes went wide. She quickly, but gently, pushed herself off me and lay down on her back. "Hold on," she said, then reached for the lube that was now sitting on the nightstand. "Maybe I should add more."

That seemed unnecessary given how wet I was, but it gave me another idea. I put my hand on hers and grabbed the lube. "Let me do it."

I straddled her body just below the strap-on and made a show of running my hand up and down the dildo as if I was giving her a hand job. Willow lifted her head and groaned as she watched the sight in front of her. I kept one hand on the dildo and moved the other underneath her bra, playing with her nipple the way I knew she loved.

"If you keep this up, I'm going to end up coming before you do," Willow said in a breathy whisper.

Now, it was my turn to smirk. "I wouldn't hate that."

"Please, babe," Willow begged.

"Please, what?" I asked as I continued working both of my hands. I loved this sudden change in control.

"Ride me."

I moved my hand around as if I was holding a wand and casting a spell. "Your wish is my command."

Willow let out a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a laugh. She held onto the dildo so I could carefully slide onto it. I had never done it this way before so it took me a little while to figure out how to maneuver myself, but once I did, *Oh. My. God*.

I moved up and down on top of her as I continued to play with her nipples. Willow used her free hand to do the same to mine, and I was completely done for. I screamed out her name as I fell down on top of her, and she pushed up against me before letting out a long groan of pleasure as well.

She buried her face into my neck. "That was... wow. Just wow." "Happiest place on earth, right?" I asked as I rolled off her.

Willow smiled over at me and reached out to grab my hand. "Oh, just wait, babe. You have no idea."

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Chapter 25

Willow was right. I had absolutely no idea what to expect from Disney. What I wasn't expecting was to get emotional the first time we walked into the Magic Kingdom, but that's exactly what happened. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the castle in front of me and could actually feel my jaw drop. Seeing it in person was so much different than seeing it in pictures.

I was embarrassed when a few tears escaped and began to run down my cheeks. I lifted my hand to wipe at them but was stopped when Willow grabbed that hand. "It's okay to let yourself feel, babe. Our emotions are what give us life." She nodded her head off into the distance. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

She continued to hold my hand and I followed after her. We walked down a path that seemed to be the opposite of where most people were going until we stopped in front of a large stone fountain with a "C" at the top of it.

"It's Cinderella's Wishing Well," Willow explained before reaching in her pocket and pulling out two pennies that I had to assume weren't just coincidentally in there. "While everyone else is busy rushing around to be the first ones on the rides, I like to stop here and make a wish." She dropped my hand and placed the penny against my palm. "Now, we can make wishes together."

I closed my eyes. There was only one wish on my mind. It was the same wish that was always on my mind. *I wish to grow old with my wife*.

I was about to open my eyes and throw the penny into the well when I felt a hand close over mine. "Wait," Willow said seriously. "Please don't wish for something that could never come true."

"But how...?" I opened my eyes and looked over at her.

"Because I'm your wife, and I know you. You really think I couldn't figure out what was going on inside that head of yours?" Willow smiled proudly.

My lips dipped into a frown. The way Willow was such a realistic optimist made my head spin. "What if it could come true though?"

Willow tilted her head and gave me a look that told me she thought I was being crazy. "You know it can't, babe." She reached out and took my hand once again. "I can tell you one thing though." She held the penny in her other hand between her thumb and pointer finger up in the air. "This is the first time I've been here that I don't feel like I need to make a wish because you've made all of my wishes come true."

As usual, Willow was right. All of my wishes, hopes, and dreams had also come true because of her. So, I tossed the penny into the well without giving it another thought. After Willow and I both watched it bounce in, she took me in her arms and dipped me, then gave me a kiss that I felt all the way in my toes.

When she lifted me back up, I ran my finger along her cheek and placed another quick kiss on her lips. "How did you know that's what I wished for?"

Willow smirked. "Told you I know you." Willow kissed the penny she was still holding and held it up once again. "This one is for all the hopes and dreams yet to come true for us that are so big our minds can't even fathom them yet."

As I watched the penny leave her fingers and fly through the air, I knew this was yet another thing Willow was right about. If I thought things had been good so far, I could only imagine how much better they were going to get now that she was my wife. And it was all starting with this magical trip.

I've heard it said that you haven't truly experienced Disney until you've experienced it through the eyes of a child, but after our week, I was pretty sure the same could be said for experiencing Disney with Willow Stone. Her excitement for life made the whole trip that much more magical.

Instead of just racing around from one ride to the next, we took the time to appreciate every little thing about the parks. Willow would point to different buildings or statues and tell me the whole story behind them. She insisted on searching the parks for the *Hidden Mickeys* that I didn't even know anything about until she mentioned them.

On our last full day of vacation, she told me she had a special surprise for me, and I had no idea what could be more special than everything we had already experienced together.

"So, are you really not going to tell me where we're going?" I asked as I put on a pair of earrings and slid my feet into my high heels.

All I knew was Willow wanted me to dress up for whatever we were doing, so I wore the one dress I had brought along, which was a tight black cocktail dress. I looked in the mirror and was satisfied with what I saw.

Willow must have been too because she wrapped her arms around me from behind and rested her head on my shoulder. "You look absolutely stunning. I can't believe you're my wife."

I spun around so I was facing her and put my hands on her hips as well. *I* couldn't believe *she* was my wife. She was wearing a short red dress that perfectly matched the red she had in her hair now. The skirt of the dress puffed out, making her look just like a Disney princess. My very own Disney princess. "*You're* stunning." I booped her nose. "You're also avoiding my question."

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly and Willow laughed. "Okay. I'll tell you one thing. Your stomach won't be growling for long." She looked down at her watch. "Speaking of which, we need to go. Are you ready?"

I removed my hands from her waist and locked my arm with hers. "Good to go. How are we getting to this mystery location with food?" "We're walking."

I looked down at my heels. They suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea. "How far are we walking? You may need to carry me." I lifted my foot. "You know I never wear these things."

Willow laughed once again. "I'd carry you anywhere, darling, but I don't think it's going to be necessary in this case."

I wasn't sure I believed that, but I followed her out of the hotel room anyway. When we got to the elevators, I was surprised to find Willow hit the up arrow instead of down. Willow smirked when she caught me staring. "Told you it wouldn't be necessary."

That's when it hit me where we were going. When looking through the information about our hotel, I had learned there was a restaurant on the top floor that had the perfect view of the Magic Kingdom fireworks. That didn't make sense though. "Wait. I thought—"

Willow's smile grew even wider. "That the restaurant books up months in advance? It does."

"Does that mean...?" I let my voice trail off because I was too excited to form words.

"We have reservations."

"Have I mentioned how much I love you?" I whispered as we walked into the California Grill and were directed to a table right next to one of the large windows that lined the whole restaurant.

Willow pulled out my chair, then pushed it in once I sat down. She leaned down so her mouth was right by my ear and whispered, "You have, but if you want to show me later, I'd be fine with that."

Dinner was amazing and the fireworks were even better. Willow leaned back in her chair and patted her stomach. "Dessert?"

Normally, I'd say no because I was absolutely stuffed, but I wanted an excuse to keep this date going. "Why not? When in Disney, right?"

Willow smirked. "Exactly." She reached a hand across the table to take mine and her face became more serious. "So, there's something we need to talk about. I may have been drunk from our flight, but I haven't forgotten."

Oh God. I had almost forgotten about what I said in the airport. I shook my head. "That was just a slipup. Don't worry about it."

Willow tilted her head slightly. "I am worried. I want to make all of your dreams come true. I just can't believe we never talked about kids."

"I think we both realize it's not in the cards for us."

"But you want them, don't you?"

I squeezed Willow's hand to try to reassure her. "What I want is *you*." Willow just stared at me blankly, clearly not satisfied with that answer. I sighed and moved my hand to my forehead. "Listen, yes, I used to want kids. If things were different, I obviously still would. But I don't want you to feel guilty about the fact that it's not in the cards for us."

"But what if it could be?"

For a moment, I became irrationally hopeful, a part of me convinced that Willow's fate had somehow changed. I shook these thoughts away. There was no way. "What do you mean?"

Willow sat up taller in her seat and I knew she was about to start talking a mile a minute, so I listened carefully. "This is obviously all up to you. I don't ever want to do something selfish that makes your life harder, but I've been thinking about this ever since you let that slip in the airport. I want kids too. Sure, I had definitely given up on the idea of that being a possibility, but I would love to bring a child into the world."

My whole body heated up, and I had no idea if it was nerves, apprehension, or excitement. "What are you saying, Willow?"

"What I'm saying is, we don't have to make any decisions right now, but we also don't need to take the option off the table completely. If you want to have kids, and are willing to take on all that entails once I'm gone, I'd love to as well. Whatever you decide is fine with me. No pressure. I just wanted to let you know where I stand with things."

I blew out a breath. "Wow. Just... wow. Sorry, I never even considered this being a possibility. Who would carry?"

Willow's smile widened. "I would love to, but if you wanted to, that's fine too."

If Willow carried, I would always have a piece of her with me. That couldn't be my only reason for bringing a child into the world, but it certainly made the prospect even more exciting.

Willow squeezed my hand. "We don't have to decide anything right now. If we decided to do it, I wouldn't want to have the baby too soon anyway, because I don't want them to get attached to me before I'm gone. I don't want them to miss me."

Well, that was a depressing thought.

Willow smiled and I knew she had read my mind once again. "I'm not trying to be morbid. Just honest. Let's not talk about this right now. I wanted to bring it up so you could think about it, but I don't want to waste even a second of our honeymoon being sad. It's not like we get another one. We need to enjoy our last night here."

I knew she was right. Well, kind of. I was sure this honeymoon feeling would continue once we were home. I didn't need Disney to feel the magic that my wife made me feel every day. I was naive to believe that though, because life isn't a honeymoon, even when you're married to Willow Stone.

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Chapter 26

Fall 2014

"Want to go on a walk to the barn?" Willow asked on a Sunday in early September after dinner with her family.

It was a week until school officially started for me and since both of our schedules always became crazy in the fall, taking this time to slow down and enjoy each other's company was the perfect plan. "That sounds wonderful."

Willow took my hand and we said goodbye to her family, giving an extra hug to her brother and his now fiancé who had just gotten engaged the week prior.

"I still can't believe Phil is engaged," Willow said as we walked. "I know he's older than me, but I thought it would take him even longer than this to finally grow up."

I laughed because I agreed, but as someone who wasn't his blood, I wasn't going to say that. "Phil's a good guy. I'm glad he found Stevie."

"Oh, I'm glad, too. I'm extremely happy he stopped dragging his feet on proposing. I was worried she would get sick of waiting and leave his ass."

"Oh, shit." I stopped in my tracks when the barn came into view. I wasn't sure why I thought things would change after we had our wedding there, but I wasn't expecting to see beer cans and red solo cups thrown throughout the yard without a care. "Looks like all the cleaning up and renovations we did around here didn't stop the back-to-school barn party."

Willow squeezed my hand but continued to look straight ahead. After a few seconds, she shook her head, her face a mixture of sadness and anger. "I know this is hypocritical of me after all the barn parties I went to, but I'm kind of pissed that it would still happen given all the work we did here."

"I'm definitely surprised, but I'm not sure why I should be. It might look nicer around here, but it's still very much abandoned. It's not like Mr. Rivers has been back at all since the wedding."

Willow looked down and kicked at the beer can laying on the ground by her foot. "I know you're right. I just..." Willow sighed, and I could tell she was trying to keep her frustrations in check. "After meeting Mr. Rivers and hearing his stories, I feel like this barn deserves better."

I nodded. "I get it. Trust me. I'm just not too sure what we can do about it."

Willow shrugged, then reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. "I think we should at least tell him," she explained as she hit a few buttons.

Within a few seconds, the phone began to ring over the speakerphone and then Mr. Rivers answered with a joyful, "Hello."

"Hi, Mr. Rivers," Willow said. The slow hesitation in her voice told me she was worried about telling him about the current state of the barn. "I just wanted to let you know that your barn is still being used for parties. At least, it looks like there was one here recently."

The other line was silent for a minute before Mr. Rivers began to speak. "I guess I really shouldn't be surprised by that. It's what the barn has been used for all these years. I shouldn't expect that to stop just because it was used for something else once."

Willow nodded as if Mr. Rivers was able to see her. "It was a logical assumption. I figured after they weren't able to have the end-of-year party here because of us being in the process of fixing it up that they would find somewhere new to party."

Mr. Rivers laughed. "People love traditions, even if that tradition is getting drunk in an old barn." After a moment, his laughter died off. "My wife has been trying to convince me I should sell the place, and I'm starting to think she's right. I'm sure we could get a decent amount of money for it, but that's not what's really important to me. I just want someone to love it the way my grandpa did. I know I've had plenty of it already, but I need more time to think about it. Know anyone who could use it for something other than underaged drinking in the meantime?"

Willow's eyes lit up, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. "Actually, now that you mention it, my brother just got engaged, and I bet he would love to get married at the barn. Would you seriously be okay with that?"

"That would be wonderful. Tell your brother, it's all his if he wants it."

Willow did a movement that was something between a skip and a jump. "I'll definitely do that. Thank you so much, Mr. Rivers." Willow couldn't stop fidgeting as she finished the conversation and hung up the phone.

I put a hand on her shoulder to try to contain some of her jitters. "Why are you so excited about this?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm not super excited about the prospect of Mr. Rivers selling the barn because that means we won't be able to just come back and visit anytime we want. Plus, if Phil agrees, I'll get to help plan his wedding. I would absolutely love that."

I didn't want to burst her bubble by telling her just how much work it would be to help him plan his wedding, so I bit my tongue. I figured Phil probably wouldn't agree anyway, which was apparently the wrong assumption. As soon as Willow mentioned it to him and Stevie, they were all in.

So was Willow. She put so much into wedding planning, our own marriage was put on the back burner. I tried not to let it bother me. It was her brother's wedding after all. But, as the holidays quickly passed by, I couldn't help but count how many more we had together. The day after Willow's birthday, my brain reminded me I only had five more times to wake up beside her and wish her a happy birthday. The same thoughts floated into my head after Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year.

I couldn't mention any of this to Willow because I didn't want to dampen her mood. She was so excited over wedding planning, nothing else seemed to matter. Except, I knew that wasn't the case. Of course I mattered to Willow, and if I had actually taken the time to tell her any of my concerns, she would have stopped everything to address them.

I couldn't do that though. It was bad enough that I felt bitter over the time I was missing out on with her as she planned this wedding. I wasn't the only one who was going to lose her. Everyone else deserved her attention just as much as I did. On top of all of my other emotions, I felt guilty for feeling the way I did. It was completely unfair, and I was angry at myself for it.

The only thing to get me through was the countdown to the wedding. I kept telling myself that once it was over, I would have my wife back and wouldn't have to feel any of this anymore.

When mid-July finally arrived, I breathed a sigh of relief. Willow had done an excellent job helping to plan the wedding, the barn looked beautiful, and the whole Stone family was absolutely beaming. Those months were totally worth it, and now things could slow down and Willow and I could get back on track.

"It was a gorgeous wedding," Mr. Rivers said later that night, echoing my thoughts from earlier. Since we were using his barn, Willow thought it was the right thing to do to invite him to the wedding again, and he had readily accepted. Mr. Rivers sighed as he looked around the barn. "I really do need to sell the place. I just want it to go to the right buyer." He looked toward Willow and me. His eyes sparkled with what seemed to be sadness and possibly nostalgia. "You two aren't looking to buy a house or start a wedding business, are you?"

He laughed, and I was about to tell him, unfortunately, we were not when I saw Willow's eyes light up the same way they always did when she had a crazy idea. "Would you really sell to us? How much are you thinking about asking for?"

Mr. Rivers' eyes went wide before a smile spread across his face. "I can't tell if you're serious right now or just messing with me. If you *are* serious, we could definitely work something out. Like I've said in the past, I'm more worried about who it goes to than what we make selling it. I have no question that no matter what the two of you do with it, it will be loved in the way I want it to."

"I'm dead serious, Mr. Rivers. I loved planning my wedding and my brother's." Willow began to bounce back and forth on the balls of her feet. "Maybe I could turn this into a full-blown business. Oh my gosh. How great would that be? Wouldn't that be awesome, sweetheart?"

Awesome? That wasn't exactly the word that came to mind when I thought about buying, restoring, and using a barn as a commercial property. The words that popped into my head were more along the lines of stressful, agonizing, and completely *insane*. But as I watched Willow's bouncing become more exaggerated the more excited she became, I couldn't find it in my heart to burst her bubble. She deserved the world, and who was I to

keep her from going after everything she dreamed of, even if those dreams seemed to come out of left field?

Instead of voicing my concerns the way I should have, I smiled and said, "Completely awesome, babe," all the while hoping this was something she would change her mind about after sleeping on it.

I should have known better than to believe Willow would change her mind once an idea popped into her head. Instead, in full Willow fashion, she jumped into it headfirst. The four months following the wedding were spent with Willow using all of her free time to research zoning laws and talk to county commissioners about the specific zoning laws in our county, learn everything there is to know about event planning and certifications you could get as an event planner, and discuss everything she found out with a very patient Mr. Rivers.

"We should take a trip together next week," Willow said on a Friday night in November after filling me in on everything new she had learned that week.

My head was still spinning from all of the updates she had just given me on the barn, one of them being that she thought we were ready to take the jump and purchase it, so I could barely even comprehend what she was saying. "A trip? But next week is Thanksgiving. We always spend Thanksgiving with your family. Plus, do you really think it's a good idea to put money into a trip when we are about to buy a barn?"

Willow laughed and pushed her shoulder against mine playfully. "First of all, did you listen to anything I just said? The bank approved us for a loan and Mr. Rivers dropped his offering price for us once again because he really wants *us* to buy it. At this point, we could move into the little house on the property and pay less per month than we're currently paying for rent. Second, I wasn't thinking of a trip we had to pay for. I thought *maybe* you would want to go back to your hometown for a few days and spend Thanksgiving with your parents."

"My parents?"

Now Willow was really talking crazy. I had barely spoken to, let alone seen my parents since our wedding over a year ago. We talked here and there, but I couldn't get over the fact that they didn't seem to think they did anything wrong by not attending our wedding.

Willow leaned her head onto my shoulder. "Yeah. I know they have that stupid rule about the two of us not visiting, but I'm sure they'd make an exception since they really seem to miss you. I think you miss them too."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. "I do not. If they don't care enough to come to my wedding, why should I care about seeing them?"

The truth was, I did care. I cared *a lot*, which was exactly why acting like I didn't care seemed like the easier choice.

"Come on, Rosemary. I'm your wife. You can't fool me." She tilted her head down to force me to look her in the eye. "I feel like you've been distant lately."

I scoffed and could feel all of the emotions I had been trying to keep inside threatening to burst out of me. "*You* feel like *I've* been distant? Really?"

Willow studied my face and I could tell by the look in her eyes that for once she didn't know what I was talking about. "Yeah. Just a little bit. And that's okay. It's no big deal. I just thought it was because of your parents."

"This has nothing to do with my parents." There was a bite to my words that I immediately regretted. The last thing I wanted to do was fight with Willow. Holding this in was starting to feel impossible though.

"What's going on, babe?" Willow asked softly, which only served to make me feel even more guilty about all the hard feelings I was harboring toward her at the moment.

"Nothing. Seriously. Don't worry about it." I shook my head and tried to smile, but I could tell by the look Willow gave me that it wasn't convincing at all.

"Do you remember what I told you the night before we started dating?"

I tried to think back, but between the time and the alcohol, it was hard to remember precise details from that night. "I was really drunk," I admitted and couldn't help but laugh at the memory. "You were dancing with that girl and I was super jealous, so I drank way more than I should have."

"See. You do remember it. Anyway, what I told you that night is that you're allowed to feel, and you have every right to tell people how you feel." She motioned toward me with her hand. "Well, go on. Tell me what's up."

"I..." I thought about the best way to put into words everything that had been building up inside of me over the past year, but then stopped myself. "I can't fight with you, Willow."

"If you can't fight with me, then who can you fight with?"

I threw my hands up. What was she not getting about this? "Literally anyone. I can't fight with you knowing what I know."

Willow's eyebrows furrowed and her lips dipped down slightly. "Well, your logic is completely flawed." The tone of Willow's voice was one of annoyance, and that's when I realized I had never actually heard Willow use that tone before.

Shit. By trying *not* to piss her off, I had gone and done that exactly. Any reasonable thoughts left my mind at this point, because why had I held all of this in just to have it backfire on me anyway. "How so?" I asked, a challenge to my voice I couldn't have kept out if I tried.

"Anyone in your life could die tomorrow. Heck, they could die in five minutes. Yet, you'd be fine fighting with them. You know you still have over four years with me. What could you possibly say that would affect us for that long? Fighting for four hours doesn't come anywhere close to four years. We have plenty of time to make up."

"That's not the point," I said much louder than I anticipated. "The point is I *know* I only have a limited amount of time with you, and I don't want to waste even a minute of that time fighting."

"The way I see it, we have two options. We could walk around on eggshells in fear of what's to come, or we can live with passion. Sometimes that means fighting for and with what and who we love. That's just life." She stared at me as if she was waiting for me to say something and when I didn't, she groaned and threw her hands in the air. "Look, you're clearly mad at me, so just tell me what you're mad about."

"Fine," I yelled, startling even myself. "I'm mad at you, okay? I'm pissed that I feel like I have to walk on eggshells around you because of what I know. I'm ticked off that I spend so much of my time thinking of what's to come. I hate that I can't even tell you how I really feel about you

buying this barn, which is that I think it's a completely rash and insane idea. We didn't even talk about it. Hell, we barely find time to talk at all anymore with how busy you are with everything else. I let it slide when it was your brother's wedding because he's family, and that's important, but now you're spending all of your time chasing a dream that I didn't even know you had."

"Seriously, Rosemary? It would have been nice to hear all of this... Oh, I don't know... months ago... before I put all my time into it. If I had any idea you weren't okay with it, I would have stopped. You never once said anything."

Both of our voices were raised now and it didn't seem either of us were ready or willing to back down, which was exactly what I was afraid might happen.

"That's because I don't feel like I can. Who am I to stop you from doing what you want to do? You live your life so freely because you don't have as much time as everyone else. And I love that about you. It's what made me fall in love with you. I don't feel right taking that from you. But who's going to pick up all the pieces once you're gone, huh? Who's going to pick up where you left off? Because it can't be me, Willow. I'm going to need someone to pick *me* up off the ground. I'm going to need someone to carry *me*, because I don't know how I'm going to live without you."

By the time I was done with my rant, my anger had turned into sadness and my raised voice was replaced with sobs. I could barely breathe as I heaved to try to gain some semblance of control, but it was useless. It was like a volcano had erupted inside of me and there was no way of stopping it now.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but what I didn't see coming was two strong arms wrapping around me from the side and enveloping me in a blanket of love. "I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so, so sorry."

I let myself enjoy the warmth from Willow's embrace for a minute before pulling away. I wiped at my eyes as I tried to focus on Willow and when my vision finally cleared, I could see the worry lines on her face as she watched me closely. "No, I'm sorry. You're right. I should have just talked to you about all of this."

Willow smiled and ran her fingers through my hair in the way she knew I loved. "We're talking now. That's all that matters. And hey..." She looked down at her empty wrist as if she was checking a watch. "Our fight

lasted, what? All of five minutes? Not bad, huh?" She turned her head and this time, it appeared like she really was checking the time on the clock on our nightstand. "It's getting late, but what do you say we have a long, serious discussion tomorrow about the barn?"

I nodded and wiped away a few more tears that had escaped from my eyes. Willow leaned in and kissed the two spots I had just wiped, then put a hand on my cheek. "Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about the other stuff. I really wish there was."

I leaned into her hand and as the warmth from her touch spread through my whole body, I knew exactly what I needed. "There is something you can do. Make love to me tonight and every night for the rest of your life."

Willow smiled brightly, and I swore I could feel that throughout my body as well. "There is nothing I want more, sweetheart."

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Chapter 27

"Alright, let's talk." Willow intertwined her fingers together on top of our kitchen counter, and it was hard to focus on the conversation at hand since my mind immediately went to all of the wonderful things those fingers had done the night before.

Maybe fighting wasn't so bad if it ended like that. I had always heard that makeup sex was amazing, but words really didn't do it justice.

"You're totally thinking about sex right now, aren't you?"

Willow's voice brought me back to the current moment, and I looked across the table where she was smirking at me. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you were staring at my hands and licking your lips. Plus, your face is extremely red now. Definitely sexy thoughts."

"You have no way of actually knowing that." When Willow's smile grew even bigger, I groaned. "Fine. I was thinking about sex. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." Willow's smile dropped as she became more serious. "Now, about the barn."

"I've been thinking about that, and maybe *I* was the one who was being rash. I shouldn't have shot it down last night after all the hard work you've put in these past few months."

Willow shook her head. "No. Don't do that. We need to have an honest discussion. We're a team, and we're not doing anything until we are on the same page."

"Okay. Then, I guess I'm wondering why this is so important to you. I never even heard you mention being interested in event planning until Mr. Rivers mentioned it."

"I know, and I can understand why it would seem crazy and completely out of left field, but I really have thought it through. I love working with people. When I can make someone smile, it feels like *my* dreams are coming true. I know that's weird, but it's just how I've always been, even before I learned about my fate. I never thought of event planning as a career option, but as soon as Mr. Rivers mentioned it, something clicked, and it was like I found what I was looking for. I love my job as an

admissions representative, but there is something inside of me telling me that *this* is what I'm meant to do. I guess I got so caught up on that feeling that I forgot to take a step back and ask how you feel about all of this." Willow reached her hand across the table and squeezed mine. "I really am sorry about that."

"Stop. I get it. When you're passionate about something, you dive in headfirst. It's one of the things I love about you. And hearing you talk about it this way makes me want to dive in headfirst too. I just have some concerns." God, even saying that made me feel guilty. Willow was clearly excited at the prospect of owning the barn and starting her own business, and the last thing I wanted was to be the person who dashed those dreams.

"Of course. Lay it on me."

I took a deep breath because I hated talking about this, but it had to be said. "This is *your* dream, and I'm happy to support it, but what happens when you're not here anymore? Teaching is what I love. I don't want to have to give that up to take over your company."

"And I would never ask you to do that," Willow answered quickly.

"Then, what happens? Mr. Rivers wants to sell the barn to us because he wants it to be loved. I can't love it in the same way you will, and it wouldn't be fair to just let it wither away once you're gone."

Willow looked down at the table and traced a pattern along the top with her finger. "I guess I didn't think of that part."

I placed my finger's under Willow's chin to force her to look at me. The guilty feeling in the pit of my stomach only grew as I watched some of the light drain from her eyes. "Hey, it doesn't mean we can't find a way to make it work. It just means we'll have to think a little harder."

"You actually want to make it work?"

"I want you to be happy. I want all of your dreams to come true in the same way you've made all of mine come true. If that means figuring this out, then of course I want to make it work." And I meant that. For the first time since all of this started, I truly did want to find a way to make it work.

Willow looked back down at the table as if she was thinking, then after a minute brought her eyes back to mine, some of the light returning to them. "What if I found someone to leave it to? If I actually make this crazy dream a reality, I'm going to need help. I'll try to find someone who loves the place and will care for it just as much as I do, and I'll leave it to them."

"And what if you don't find someone?"

Willow shrugged, took a few more seconds to think, then smiled. "I'll leave it to Mr. Rivers again. No harm, no foul, right?"

"That..." I gave myself a minute to work out the logistics of all of it, "could actually work. We just need to make sure everything is in your name—the property, the company you create. That way, you have full control over what happens to it once you're gone."

"And you think this is an okay investment financially?"

Even I was surprised by the full one-eighty I had done since the night before, but instead of the apprehension and annoyance I used to be feeling, now I just felt excited. "Absolutely. What you said last night makes sense. The house on the property is small, but it's still bigger than our apartment, and we'll pay less in mortgage than we're currently paying in rent."

Willow bounced up and down in her seat, the excitement radiating out of every pore in her body. "So, we're doing this? We're buying a barn?"

"We're buying a barn!" I had to laugh because it was all so crazy and ridiculous, but what did I expect from a life with Willow Stone? Once our laughter ceased, I knew there was something else we needed to discuss. "You were right about something else last night."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

I took a deep breath and hoped I didn't regret what I was about to say. "I'm still mad at my parents. I don't think I'll ever forgive them for missing our wedding. But, I do miss them, and if you were serious about going to see them for Thanksgiving, I think we should."

Willow smiled just as wide as she did when I said we could buy the barn. "Let's do it."

It felt strange pulling up to my childhood home. I couldn't remember the last time I had been there. Given how little it felt like a home while I was growing up, it felt like even less of one now. "I can't believe they actually let us come here," I mumbled as I shut off the car. "All of the neighbors must be away for Thanksgiving."

Willow reached across the center console and squeezed my hand. "It's a step in the right direction. A very small step that should have happened years ago but still a step."

"I guess you're right," I said but still huffed as I got out of the car. I was starting to question why I ever thought this was a good idea.

I was still contemplating my escape when the front door opened. My dad stepped out and waved his hand back and forth. "Welcome, ladies!"

He appeared happy to see us and that was confirmed when we made it onto the front porch, and he pulled us each into a tight hug.

My mom joined us outside and greeted us in the same way just a moment later. "We've missed you both so much." She placed a kiss on my temple before pulling away.

"Shall we head inside?" my dad asked but turned before waiting for the answer.

I smelled food as soon as we were through the door. "Lunch is already here? Where did you guys buy the food from this year?"

My dad laughed as if I had just told a joke. "We did it a little differently this year." He motioned for us to follow him and led us into the kitchen where there was food in the oven and on the stove.

"I thought you normally give Peggy time off for the holidays," I said as I searched the kitchen for her.

"We do," my mom said with a laugh. "This is all us."

I spun around to look at my mom, sure she must be kidding. "You guys are cooking?"

"Yes, dear, is that so surprising?" my mom asked with another laugh.

"Yes, actually. I didn't even know you two knew how to cook."

"Of course we know how. We just normally choose not to. We're very busy, you know."

I would have believed my parents' bodies had been taken over in some weird alien encounter if it wasn't for that last comment from my mom. "Why this year?"

My mom walked over to me and pulled me into another hug. "We wanted it to be special for the two of you. We're so excited to have you here."

"Why don't you two take your bags upstairs and we'll let you know when lunch is ready? It should only be a few minutes," my dad said, practically shoving us out of the room.

"They're being really weird," I whispered to Willow as we headed upstairs. "It's not just me, right? This is very strange."

Willow linked her arm with mine. "Honestly, at this point, nothing surprises me with your parents. They are so all over the place sometimes I think they don't even fully understand what's going on." She leaned closer and said the next part even softer. "I say we just enjoy it and hope their food doesn't end up killing us."

I laughed, feeling much lighter than I had in a very long time. "Sounds like a good plan."

"So, your father and I were talking." My mother paused to dab her napkin across her mouth. I waited in anticipation of what she was about to say, feeling anxious for the first time since arriving. Thanksgiving lunch had gone surprisingly well, and the food was actually really good. Who knew my parents could actually be domestic? "We were wondering if you two had any pictures or videos from your wedding that you could show us. We would love to see them."

That was probably the last thing I expected my mom to say, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. My parents had barely even acknowledged the wedding since giving us money for it and they had certainly never acknowledged the fact that Willow was now my wife. "Oh, um, yeah sure. There's a website for both our photographer and videographer. We can pull them up if you'd like."

"That would be wonderful." My mom turned toward my dad. "Honey, don't you have some sort of wire to connect the computer to the TV?"

My dad was already standing from the table as if he was in a rush. "Of course. Let me go get it. We'll watch in the living room."

Not even five minutes later, we were all sitting in the living room with the wedding video playing over the TV. I figured that was easier than scrolling through hundreds of pictures, and my parents seemed to be strangely happy to be watching the day they refused to be a part of.

My mom put her hand over her mouth at the first sight of me in my dress, and I even saw a few tears run down her cheek, a sight I'm not sure I had ever seen before. My dad's face was stiff but almost in a way that made me think that he was also trying to hold back tears.

They both watched the ceremony intently, and my mother, honest to God, clapped as we walked back down the aisle together.

"What is this venue?" she asked when the video switched to us walking into the reception. "It's beautiful."

"Funny you should mention that," Willow said proudly. She looked to me for reassurance and I nodded my head to let her know it was okay to continue. "It's a long story, but we're actually buying the property where we had the wedding."

"You're what?" my mom asked, her voice sounding surprised but more in an intrigued way than judgmental, which was unusual for her.

Willow nodded excitedly. "The owner gave us an amazing price, so we'll actually be paying less for our mortgage than we're currently paying for rent."

Before anyone could say anything else, the doorbell rang. "Are you expecting someone?" my dad asked my mom.

My mom shook her head and before she could even fully stand up, the sound of the door opening and a high-pitched, "Hello?" echoed through the house.

I recognized the voice immediately. It was our nosy next-door neighbor, Mrs. Boris. She had lost her husband about ten years ago and ever since then, she seemed to have no respect for boundaries. This wasn't the first time she had just walked into our house uninvited, and I was shocked my parents still didn't keep the front door locked all the time.

Instead of answering, my mother quickly moved her eyes back and forth across the room as if she was looking for something. As the sound of Mrs. Boris's footsteps got closer, my mother dashed across the room and slammed the computer shut, causing the picture up on the TV screen to disappear.

"What are you watching?" Mrs. Boris asked, her voice loud in my ear as if she was standing right behind me, but I didn't dare turn around. I had learned years ago to avoid eye contact with her unless you wanted to be pulled into an hour-long conversation you couldn't possibly get out of.

"Oh, nothing. Just some movie that was on TV," my mom answered quickly, the shakiness to her voice giving away the fact that she was lying.

Of course she was lying. Couldn't let the neighbor know she had a gay daughter, could she? Story of my life. Just when I thought my parents might have turned over a new leaf, they go and prove me wrong.

"Oh." I didn't have to even look at Mrs. Boris to know she wasn't buying the lie. "It looked like you were watching a wedding. Rosemary, are you married?"

Before I could even contemplate how to answer her, my dad let out a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a huff. "Do you really think we wouldn't tell you if our only child was married?"

Well, that's rich.

"Rosemary is still waiting for the man who lives up to her high standards," my mom quickly added.

Mrs. Boris turned her attention to Willow. "And who are you, dear?"

Oh yeah, she knew exactly what was going on. I probably would have found the whole situation funny if I wasn't so disgusted about how my parents were acting.

"This is our niece, Willow," my dad answered before she could. "Her parents are away, so we were lucky enough to get to spend Thanksgiving with her this year."

"Hm. Funny. I didn't know you had a niece." When we were all silent for a few painstaking seconds, Mrs. Boris sighed dramatically. "Well, I guess I better get going. I just came to say hello. Enjoy the rest of your holiday."

The silence remained even after she was out the door. It continued as my mom opened the computer up and turned the video back on. "Shall we continue?" my mom asked, plastering her best attempt at a fake smile onto her face.

I thought about trying to forget about everything that had just transpired over the past ten minutes and act like it never happened, but I was too angry to do that. I jumped to my feet and slammed the computer shut myself this time. "You know what? I don't think I'm in the mood to watch this anymore. Come to think of it, I actually think my *cousin* and I

are just going to go back home. Wouldn't want to risk any of the other neighbors finding out your daughter is gay."

Willow didn't say a word as she followed me up to my old bedroom where I grabbed the bags we had just placed there a few hours earlier. She stayed quiet as we left without saying another word to my parents. Once we were in my car, she simply reached across the center console and held my hand, and that said more than any words ever could.

"I'm sorry," I said as we took the exit out of town. "I didn't mean to freak out. It's just... I really thought we were getting somewhere and then my parents had to ruin it. It's always one step forward and two steps back with them." I removed my hand from hers to wipe at the tears that had started to run down my cheeks. "It just sucks feeling like my own family is embarrassed of me."

Willow grabbed ahold of my hand once again and squeezed it tightly. "Hey, your family is the people who are there for you and love you just as you are. It's me and Lisa and Tori and Silas and Aaron. Your parents are your blood, but until they start acting like it, they aren't your family. We are, and we all love you so much."

Willow was right. The family I was born into might not be everything I was hoping for, but the family I had created was the best one ever, and I would do anything for them.

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Chapter 28

2016

The months that passed after Thanksgiving were a complete whirlwind. I talked to my parents sporadically, but those talks never went well. They didn't understand why I was so upset about how they acted that night, and without a proper apology, I couldn't move past it. I was sick of being a dirty little secret to them.

Moving forward with purchasing the barn at least helped to keep my mind off it most of the time. First, we had the closing. Then we had to move and re-do the house to make it ours. This wasn't easy given how old and outdated it was. Once that was complete, Willow started to work on doing everything that needed to be done to have the barn approved for commercial use. Luckily, with her stellar personality, she had an easy time with the zoning board. She was meticulous and careful to make sure she did everything she needed to do to comply with all the zoning laws.

Even with all of this going on, she still made it a point to make sure we stayed on the same page and she never got too caught up in everything to forget about me and making time for us. Unfortunately, that didn't leave much extra time for other people, and when Tori called us one day in late April, it hit me how little we had kept in contact with her over the past few months. In our defense, the effort went both ways, and she hadn't given much either.

"What's up, best friend?" Willow said when she answered the phone, putting it on speaker so I could hear as well.

"Not too much." Tori sounded different than normal. Her voice was strained in a way. "Well, okay, that's a lie. A lot is up."

When she didn't elaborate, Willow furrowed her eyebrows at me and I shrugged in response. "What's going on?" she asked Tori. "Are you okay?"

Tori laughed. "That kind of depends on your definition of okay." "Alright. Well, do you want to elaborate?"

"You know how my sexuality has always been more... fluid?"

Willow laughed. "Yes. What's the saying you always use? Boys for a good time, girls for a long time?"

Tori laughed too, but it was more of a nervous laugh than anything genuine. "That's the one." She cleared her throat. "It turns out, I may have been having a little bit too much of a *good time*."

"What does that mean?" Willow asked, concern now present in her voice.

"It means that you two are going to be aunts."

"Oh, shit." Willow's eyes went wide, her mouth dropped open, and I had to imagine my response mirrored hers. "I mean, congratulations. Or maybe, sorry. I don't know. How do you feel about this?"

"Scared to death but also a little excited I guess." Tori laughed again. "I don't know. I always assumed that if this ever happened to me I would, you know, get it taken care of. But now that it's a reality, I actually want to keep the baby. It's not how I planned, but I think I'm ready to be a mom."

"What about the guy? What's his deal?" Willow asked.

"One-night stand. I never even got his number."

"Okay. So, what's the plan?"

"Well, first up is getting a new place since my roommates obviously don't want a baby living with them."

Willow turned to me, and I could tell by the look in her eyes just how worried she was about Tori. "Do you have a support system over there?" she asked softly.

"I have friends. I'm not so sure they're ride or die stick-with-youafter-having-a-baby friends though."

"Maybe it's time to move back home, Tor." Even with how much she missed her, Willow had never once pressured Tori to move back home. But I knew Willow was concerned about Tori trying to do this on her own, which made sense, because I was too.

Tori scoffed. "Absolutely not. There's no way I'm crawling back home with my tail between my legs and asking my mother and Rick the Dick for help."

Everything I knew about Tori's family life came from Willow since Tori refused to talk about it. This was the first time I had ever even heard her mention her parents. Her mom was an alcoholic and spent most of Tori's childhood drunk. When she finally got sober, she started going to church and ended up dating, and eventually marrying, the pastor. The way Willow told it, when her mother found Jesus, the little girl who used to hold her hair back while she puked suddenly wasn't good enough for her. Nothing Tori did ever satisfied her and at this point, they had almost no relationship at all.

"I'm not telling you to go home to them. I'm asking you to come home to us. Obviously, we're going to support you through this, but we can only do so much from so far away."

"I'm not coming back, Willow. I'm sorry."

"I just don't want you to go through this alone," Willow said, her voice laced with sadness and her eyes on the brink of tears.

"I know, and I appreciate that. But, with a friend like you, even this far away, I know I'll never go through anything alone."

Tori was right about that. Even from a different state, Willow was the greatest support system for her best friend. During her second trimester, she convinced Tori to fly back home for a small baby shower that Willow and her mom threw. Tori's mom and stepdad weren't present at the shower, but even Willow didn't know if that was their choice or Tori's.

We made a plan to visit her in December since Willow and I both had breaks from work and would only have to take a little extra time off and flew in three days before her due date, which ended up being the perfect timing since she delivered her baby girl a day early. Willow was with her in the hospital while I prepared her small apartment for their arrival.

By the time they made it home, Lisa had flown in to join us as well. We had a banner made that said, *Welcome home*, *Bella Torrence Fittery*, and threw streamers in the air when they walked through the door. Tori looked happy, but tired, and Bella was a spitting image of her mom. If I didn't know any better, I would have believed Tori made her completely on her own. The little bit of hair she had was golden blonde and her eyes were somehow already just as blue as her mom's.

Lisa stayed for just shy of two weeks, and Willow and I stayed for three. Since Tori had decided on formula feeding, we each took turns getting up with Bella throughout the night. We developed a pretty good system, and I had to admit that spending so much time with Bella had my baby fever going out of control. Willow and I hadn't talked about a baby too much since our initial discussion, but I made a mental note to bring it up once we were home, because I was ready.

I hoped Tori was ready to take on the extra responsibility once we were gone. In the whole time we were there, only one friend came to visit and that friend didn't appear to have a maternal bone in her body. Before we left, Willow tried to convince Tori to move back once again, but it was to no avail. Tori was hard-headed, and when she made up her mind about something, she stuck to it.

"Do you think Tori is going to be okay?" I asked Willow once we were back home in our own bed.

Willow kissed my forehead and ran her fingers along my arm. "Tori is tough. She'll do whatever she has to in order to push through all the hard stuff and be the greatest mom ever. I just hope she doesn't completely lose herself in the process."

"She really is going to be a great mom," I reassured her. "You'll be a great mom too," I said tentatively, hoping that option was still on the table.

Willow stopped the movement of her hand and stared down at me. She was stoic for a few seconds before a wide grin spread across her face. "Really? Does that mean you want to have a baby? You hadn't said anything, so I just assumed you changed your mind. Which would be completely fine, by the way. I know it's expecting a lot from you."

I turned in her arms so I was facing her. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it." I ran a finger over her cheek and across her jaw, placing a light kiss on her lips before pulling away to look at her once again. "I want to start a family with you, Willow Stone. I want to spend the rest of our time together loving a little human as much as we love each other. I want to have a little mini you, so you can be with me even when you're gone."

"Oh, sweetie." Willow wiped away the tears that had started to fall from my eyes. "I'll always be with you no matter what. Everything you said sounds perfect though. Let's do it. Let's start a family together."

"Let's start a family together," I repeated, and I couldn't remember a moment I had ever felt happier. At that moment, I wasn't sure if it was possible to feel happier than this, but I was about to learn that it definitely was.

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Chapter 29

2017

Life seemed to move at supersonic speed after we decided to get pregnant. Willow and I immediately jumped online and found a sperm donor. She insisted that we find someone with characteristics similar to me since she would be the one carrying the baby. In the end, we chose someone with brown curly hair and brown eyes who was reported to be average height and weight and described himself as a hard worker and a people pleaser. We bought five vials of sperm and prayed that it didn't take more attempts than that.

By May, we had chosen the fertility clinic, Willow had finished all the preliminary testing she needed, and we were ready for our first round of intrauterine insemination.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked Willow as she awaited the insemination.

"I was born ready," Willow said with a smile that was bigger than any I had ever seen before.

The doctor smiled at both of us, wished us luck, then proceeded with the insemination. She told us we were free to leave whenever we were ready but to take our time. "Is it weird that I kind of hope it doesn't work the first time?" Willow asked once the doctor was out of the room.

I laughed because she had to be kidding. Right? "It's not just weird. It's insane."

"Okay. Maybe I don't *hope* that it doesn't work because I am so ready to be pregnant, *but* it would be cool to get to experience this again."

I looked around the room and laughed once again. "Experience what? Getting something shoved up your lady parts by a complete stranger? I think there are more exciting ways to experience that."

Willow lifted an eyebrow and threw a hand over her chest. "Rosemary Stone, did you just make a dirty joke?"

"It seems I did. How did this one compare to my dildo names on our honeymoon?"

Willow cringed and made a fake gagging sound. "Oh God. Don't remind me. That was awful."

"Come on. You love me. You also love Donald Dick."

We both broke into a fit of giggles that continued to get worse instead of better, both of us getting more out of control the louder the other got. I held onto my stomach as I tried to catch my breath and force myself to calm down.

"See," Willow said once she stopped laughing. "This is what I mean. Obviously, I hope the insemination worked this time, but it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if it didn't because it would just be another opportunity to make more memories with you."

My heart swelled and I thought I might start to cry. Instead, I reached out and took Willow's hand in mine. "You're so amazing, babe." My voice cracked slightly because of all the emotions I was feeling.

It was true. My wife was like Supergirl and the next few months only proved that was true. She worked to get her business off the ground, starting by planning a few small events, such as business meetings and family reunions, while also working on the marketing side. On top of this, she continued to keep a positive attitude through three more failed attempts at getting pregnant. Every time I was upset, she brought me back by reminding me that everything was going to work out just as it was supposed to.

"Psst, babe, wake up," Willow said early one morning in late August while gently shaking me.

I opened one eye to look at the clock and groaned when I saw the time. "Babe, it's barely past five. Your appointment isn't for hours."

"I know, but I want to watch the sunrise."

I opened my other eye so I could now focus on Willow. "Don't you think it would be better to get some rest so your body is prepared?"

Willow rolled her eyes and pulled the comforter off of me. "My body is going to do whatever it wants to do, but I have a good feeling about today." She jumped out of bed and pointed to the window. "Let's go. If today ends up being the day that this works, I want to be able to describe what the sunrise looked like on the day my child was conceived."

How did she *always* do that? How did she turn the simplest things into something so important and big? Also, how did it still surprise me after

all these years together? This was just how Willow was. It's how she had always been. It's how she would be for the eight-hundred fifty-two days we had left together. God, when did that number drop below one thousand? The countdown that was always in the back of my mind was starting to get way too real.

I shook these thoughts away. That wasn't the focus of today. The focus was to watch a beautiful sunrise with my wife and then make another attempt at starting our family together.

There was something special about the sunrise that morning, and I had a feeling Willow was right. As I watched the golden flecks of yellows and whites as the sun rose, I made a mental note of every single sight and sound. I paid close attention to the few birds chirping in the distance in the otherwise quiet surroundings. I took in the feeling of the slight breeze of warm air hitting my skin. I remembered the smell of dew and morning air.

These were all things I would have missed if it wasn't for Willow. Things that most people *would* miss. Two weeks later, when Willow took a pregnancy test that ended up showing two distinct lines, I was so happy that I remembered all of it.

"The OB should be calling any minute," Willow said as she paced back and forth across our living room.

I walked up to her and placed my hands on her shoulders to stop her. I ran my eyes over her body, my stomach fluttering at the little bit of a belly she had now. It was small enough still that no one else would think anything of it, but since I knew what was happening, it made me happy every time I saw it. I watched as Willow took a deep breath and blew it out dramatically. How was I the calm one right now? That never happened.

I removed my hands from her shoulders to run them up and down her arms. "What are you so nervous about? Our baby is healthy. This is the fun part. We get to find out if it's a baby boy or girl."

Willow shrugged and took another deep breath. "I don't know. What if this blood work shows something we didn't expect like the baby has two heads or something?"

I tried, and failed, to lift one eyebrow. "Would you have a problem with a two-headed child?"

My joke finally got Willow to crack a smile. It was small but still very much so present. "Stop. You know I don't care. I just want them to be healthy."

I couldn't help but laugh at how different the dynamic was between us right now. It was like we had switched bodies. "It seems I finally found your kryptonite," I joked.

"What do you mean?"

"I always wondered if there was anything in the world that could stress you out or make you nervous. It turns out it's your child." I playfully pushed her shoulder. "And here I thought you were going to be the chill parent."

Our conversation was cut off by the sound of Willow's phone ringing. She picked it up and immediately turned on the speakerphone. "Hello?"

"Hi! I'm calling from Melsborough Medical. I have the results of your blood test if you're ready to know the gender of your child."

"We're ready," Willow squealed, a child-like giddiness in her voice that was more like the Willow I was used to.

"You are going to have a beautiful baby girl. Congratulations."

I looked at Willow whose mouth dropped open as tears started to fall from my eyes. I wasn't even sure if we said goodbye to the lady on the phone, because all of my focus was on my wife. I reached out and ran my hand over her stomach.

"A baby girl," I said just above a whisper. I'd never admit this out loud, and I would have been happy no matter what the gender, but I was hoping for a girl.

Willow laughed lightly. "Are you ready for this? She's probably going to end up just like me." She stuck her tongue out as if she believed that I would be anything but ecstatic about that fact.

"I hope she is. I hope she's just like you." I picked Willow up and spun her around, which was only a little tougher than it was in the past. "I hope she has your eyes and nose and hair. I hope she's just as curious and wide-eyed as you and looks at the world like it's her playground. A daughter like you would be the greatest thing in the entire world."

By the time I sat Willow back down, I was literally shaking with excitement. It was like I could suddenly see the future in front of my eyes, and I loved the view.

"I'm so happy you're so excited about this," she said with another laugh. "Do you think we should tell everyone on Thanksgiving? We'll already be at my parents' house. We could have your parents come too..." She hesitated for a moment, and added, "You know, if that's what you want."

At the mention of my parents, some of my excitement was lost. I barely even talked to them at this point. They still didn't understand why they should apologize for how they acted on Thanksgiving two years prior or for the fact that they didn't come to our wedding. I wasn't sure how I was ever supposed to get past that.

"What if I'm not ready?" I asked softly. I looked down at the floor because I was embarrassed by how small I felt whenever my parents were brought up.

"That's fine. But what if I talked to them for you?"

My head shot up so fast, I almost gave myself whiplash. "You want to talk to my parents?"

"I want you to be happy, and for all their faults, they're still your parents so I know the way they act has a direct impact on how you feel."

"But, what would you even say?" I was so dumbfounded by the fact that someone would voluntarily deal with my parents, I wasn't sure what else to say.

"I have a few ideas." Willow flashed me her signature grin. "Don't worry about that part. I can handle it."

"Are... are you sure?" Normally, I would have shot this idea right down, but if anyone could get my parents to come around, even the slightest bit, it was Willow.

"Of course. I'm free tomorrow. Do you think your parents will be around? I'll drive there first thing in the morning."

I just stared at her, my mouth slightly ajar, because, even after all of these years, I still couldn't believe that she was mine. I had no idea what I could have possibly done to deserve her, but I was so happy that I got her somehow.

Willow tilted her head slightly. "What's going on inside that head of yours?"

"I was just thinking about how I hope our daughter is *exactly* like you."

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Chapter 30

"Your parents will be at my parents' house for Thanksgiving."
That was all Willow said when she got home from spending her
whole day with my parents. I waited for more information, but after a
minute of silence, I realized that was all the information I was going to get.
"So... how did it go?"

Willow shrugged. "I'm honestly not sure. Your parents are very hard people to read. I did tell them that we had some big news to share with them and if their reaction was going to be anything other than pure joy, I didn't want them to come, and they still are. That has to mean something, right?"

"I hope so."

I wanted to believe that Willow could make a difference with my parents, but I knew even she wasn't a complete miracle worker. My parents had already come a lot farther than I ever expected them to. Sure, I wasn't happy with where they were at, but I was also not naive enough to believe they could actually get to the point I wanted them to. Only time would tell.

The next day, I was the one pacing the house as I waited for my parents to arrive. When they finally did, they acted the same as usual—graciously neutral. I couldn't even enjoy the meal because I was so nervous about how they would react to our news. Would they be angry? Would they say this baby wasn't their grandchild since there was no biological relationship? I had absolutely no idea, but I didn't have a good feeling about it.

"We have something to tell everyone," Willow announced at the end of the meal. She looked at me and grabbed my hand. "Do you want to tell them or should I?"

"You tell them. You're the one who..." I stopped myself before I said anything to give our big news away. "I think you should tell them."

Willow squeezed my hand and wiggled in her seat. "We're pregnant!" she practically screamed.

Her mom's reaction was so over the top, I couldn't even pay attention to how my parents had responded to the news.

Mrs. Stone let out a loud screech before jumping to her feet and running around the table to pull us both into a tight hug. "Ah! I'm going to be a grandma. I can't believe it. This is so exciting." Her head moved back and forth between the two of us. "Which of you is carrying? Because you both look great. Do you know the gender? When are you due?"

"Take a breath, Mom," Willow answered with a laugh. "I'm carrying, I'm due on May 20th, and it's a..." She banged her hands on the table as if she was playing the drums. "Girl!"

"Ah!" Mrs. Stone shrieked once again. "I'm going to have a granddaughter." She looked to Mr. Stone who was wiping at his eyes with a napkin. "We're going to have a granddaughter." Next, her attention turned to Phil and Stevie. "Our first and only grandchild."

Phil threw his hands in the air. "What can I say, Mom? I'm always one step behind." He looked at Stevie as if he was asking her a silent question and I noticed her give him a very subtle nod. "Or in this case, one month."

Mr. Stone choked on his water at this new revelation. "What?" he asked. "Are you serious?"

Phil's lips twisted into a huge grin that so perfectly matched Willow's, there was no denying they were siblings. "Sure am. We were planning on waiting until Christmas to tell all of you, but Willow kind of stole the show."

Willow grinned back at her brother. "Sorry not sorry, bro."

Mrs. Stone waved her hand. "Oh, hush. No one needs to be sorry. This is the greatest Thanksgiving of my entire life."

Soon, everyone in the Stone family was standing up and moving around the table to exchange congratulatory hugs. The moment was so beautiful, I almost forgot my parents were there until my father cleared his throat.

"Congratulations to all of you," he said without standing. He looked toward me with a straight face. "Rosemary, could we talk to you for a minute?"

I nodded my head, and Willow squeezed my hand in a silent *good luck* as I stood up. I led my parents upstairs so hopefully the Stones wouldn't hear whatever they had to say. They had promised Willow nothing but pure joy, but I didn't believe it.

Once we were upstairs, I leaned against a wall, crossed my arms, and stared at my parents. "What's up?"

My dad cleared his throat and stood up taller. "First of all, I think I speak for both your mother and I..." *Great, here it comes.* "When I say that we are both very happy for you."

I had to lean harder against the wall because I was so shocked by his words, I almost fell over. "You... you are?"

"Of course we are," my mom said as if it should have been obvious. "You've been dreaming of being a mom since you were a little girl. You used to take better care of your dolls than some people do with real children. After you came out, we didn't think this would be a possibility for you."

"The magic of science, huh?" I let out an awkward laugh because I still wasn't exactly sure where this conversation was going.

My mother blinked her eyes, and if I didn't know any better, I would have thought she was trying to hold back tears. That couldn't be though. This was my mom we were talking about. "Can I hug you?" she asked in such a soft, humble voice, that if I didn't see her lips move, I wouldn't have believed it was her.

I had barely nodded when my mom pulled me into a hug that was so tight, I almost lost my breath. Right when I thought the moment couldn't get any crazier, I felt my dad's strong arms wrap around the two of us as well.

"We owe you an apology," my dad said as he pulled away.

My mom also let me go and nodded as she wiped at her cheeks, which were now wet with tears. "We really do. For so many different things. I don't even know where to start."

"Why don't you just start wherever feels right?" This was a big moment, and I wasn't going to give my parents an easy out. It needed to mean something.

"We're sorry about all the pressure we've put on you from the time you were little. We've always only wanted what was best for you, but it's clear that we didn't actually know what that was."

My dad put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "What your mother is trying to say is that we're proud of you... for everything."

"Why now? Why the sudden change?" I asked, still not quite believing this was all real.

"Your wife sat us down the other day and, in the nicest way possible, told us we needed to change our ways or we were going to lose you forever," my mom explained. "I know we haven't always done the best job of showing it, but we love you more than anything else in the entire world. We don't want to lose you any more than we already have."

My dad reached out and took my mom's hand, an exchange that would seem so normal to most people but definitely wasn't something I ever saw with my parents. "Her conversation opened up a conversation between the two of us. We talked about everything—our own relationship, how we raised you, the way we've been treating you ever since you came out. We can't take back the things we've done, but we want to make up for them moving forward."

"Is this for real?" I asked, my voice cracking from all of the emotions I was experiencing. "It's just such a big change that I'm having trouble believing it's actually true."

My dad nodded. "We understand. We don't expect you to forgive us, but this apology was long overdue. We've just been too stubborn and stuck in our own ways to see that."

"But that ends today," my mom added. "We want to be better parents to you and the greatest grandparents ever to your baby girl."

Those were words I never thought I would hear and I wanted to be able to bask in them, but it was so hard given my history with my parents. "I want to believe you, but there's been so many times I thought you were coming around, and I was wrong. How am I supposed to know it's different this time?"

"You're just going to have to give us the time to prove it to you," my dad answered sincerely.

My mom nodded along with his words. "To start, we want you to know that we talked to Mrs. Boris."

"About what?"

"Thanksgiving two years ago. We told her we were sorry about how weird we acted that night, and that the reason we did was because we were trying to hide the fact that you were gay."

I was sure my eyes looked like they were about to pop out of my head, because that's how it felt. My parents had actually *told someone* that I was gay? I never thought I'd see the day. "What did she say?"

Much to my surprise, my dad chuckled. "She didn't say much. She just slapped us both on the side of the head and told us to get our acts together and be better."

"And she's right," my mom said. "We need to do better."

"Wow... I just... I'm at a loss for words."

My dad nodded his head toward the stairs. "What do you say we head down and spend time with everyone? If you want to talk about this more later, we definitely can, but we should be gracious guests right now." When we started to walk, he put a hand on my shoulder and leaned in close. "You have one hell of a wife."

I smiled wider than I ever had in my whole entire life. "Don't I know it."

"Are you happy with how today went?" Willow asked hours later when we were back at home laying in our bed.

"Happy?" I let out a loud, boisterous laugh that was completely unlike me. "I'm ecstatic. It was such a great day. I don't know exactly what you said to my parents, but I think it worked. I'd say I'm cautiously optimistic for now."

Willow pulled her phone off the nightstand. "It's not too late. Want to try FaceTiming Tori and Lisa to tell them our big news?"

"That sounds great. This was also Lisa's first holiday with her girlfriend's family. We definitely need to hear how that went. And get a full life update from Tori. I feel like we never hear from her anymore. When was the last time you talked to her?"

Willow's smile dropped into a frown and her eyebrows furrowed. "I think it was like a week ago, but we didn't talk long. Everytime I'm on the phone with her, she sounds so stressed out. I'm worried about her. She's

miserable out in Las Vegas but too proud to come home. I wish there was something I could do."

Right at that moment, an idea popped into my head. It was crazy but perfect all at once. It was the type of idea I would expect Willow to come up with. "What if you make her think that *you* need *her*? I mean, it's not like it's a lie. If you want to start doing bigger events, you're going to have to hire more people to work with you. Tori would be perfect."

Willow's face brightened and she sat a little taller in bed. "Do you really think she'd go for it?"

"Why wouldn't she? You said it yourself that she's miserable out there."

"She has her apartment and everything though. She'd have to worry about finding a place here, and unless she waited for her lease to end, she'd be paying for two places every month."

"So, I had another crazy idea as well. What if we asked her to move in with us for a bit? We could tell her that we need the help with the baby coming. Which, I'm sure, also won't end up being a lie. We could use all the help we can get."

Willow laughed her loud belly laugh. "That is an extremely crazy idea. You are suggesting we have three adults, a toddler, and an infant living in this small house. It's bat shit, and I absolutely love it."

"Let's give her a call."

Willow pulled up Tori's name on her phone but didn't hit the button to FaceTime her. "Wait. Are you sure about this though? I know we try not to think about it, but we're down to just two more years together. Are you sure you're okay with sharing me for some of that time?"

"I saw the way your face lit up when I told you the plan. You deserve all the happiness in the world these next two years, and I know you'll get that if you're surrounded by all the people you love."

"I honestly don't know what I did to deserve you."

"I'm the lucky one, babe. Let's live out these last two years in true Willow Stone fashion—filled with laughter, love, and a whole lot of crazy."

"That sounds absolutely perfect."

"Yes, it does

Yes, it does.

Chapter 31

It didn't take much to convince Tori to move back, especially after she realized that we were going to have a kid as well and the two could grow up together. She gave her two-week notice at work right after we talked, convinced her landlord to end her lease early, and moved in with us right before Christmas. She promised she was going to start looking for her own place as soon as she was settled, but neither Willow nor I were concerned about that.

Willow was content, Tori seemed happy for the first time in forever, and if it worked out with Willow and Tori working together, there was a chance Willow could leave the company to her. I was getting ahead of myself though. A lot needed to happen before that would be a possibility.

I was so preoccupied with Tori moving in and spending the holidays with both Willow's family and mine, that I didn't focus on the impending date of Willow's death as it passed, which was good since I felt sick every time I thought about what little time I had left with her.

As much as I didn't want them to, the next few months flew by. Willow and Tori booked and began working on their first few weddings, the first of which was scheduled for mid-June when Willow would be on maternity leave from the job she still had at East Pine but hopefully recovered from giving birth.

Even with everything she had going on, Willow was very cognizant of spending time with me. We watched either the sunrise or sunset together almost every day and made love most nights. The closer it came to her due date, the stronger our love seemed to become.

On the day she was due in mid-May, we set up a blanket in our yard and ate breakfast together while we watched the sunrise. When Willow was done eating, she laid down on the blanket and rubbed her belly. "Any guesses as to when this little one is coming?"

"Today?" Wishful thinking.

Willow laughed. "I don't think she's in any kind of hurry, so I doubt it." She looked down at her stomach. "What do you say, little bean? Ready to come out into the world and meet your two mommies?" After a few

seconds, she looked from her stomach over toward me, eyes wide as she grabbed my hand. "Maybe she is ready. Feel how much she's moving in there."

I put my hand on her stomach, and sure enough, our baby girl kicked hard against it. I had felt her kick multiple times at this point, but something about this moment felt extra special. Maybe it was the golden rays of the newly risen sun shining down on us. Maybe it was the feeling of the grass underneath my feet. Maybe it was the fact that our daughter could enter the world at any time now. But, most likely, it had to do with the way Willow moved her hand on top of mine and just stared at me—her smile brighter than the morning sun, the passion in her eyes more beautiful than any earthly wonder. I could watch a billion more sunsets all over the world and none of them could possibly compare to the beauty of this moment I was sharing with my wife.

We were both silent because no words were needed. I took my hand off her stomach so I could lean down and place a kiss there. Our daughter kicked right where I placed my kiss and both Willow and I giggled.

Willow ran her fingers through my hair, then placed her hand underneath my chin and directed my face upward so she could place a kiss on my lips. When she pulled away, she stared at me once again, the intensity from before still there. "I love you two so much," she said softly. "I can't wait to cherish every single little moment with both of you."

And I knew she meant it. Of course she did. Even though we had limited *little moments* together, I knew Willow would make every single one of them feel like a big moment. I knew she would love our daughter more fiercely than any other mother in the world, and I was so ready to watch her be a mother, to experience this next chapter of our lives together.

Luckily, I only had to wait another week for that to happen. After a long day of work, Willow and I sat outside waiting for the sun to set when all of a sudden, she put her hand on her stomach and let out a soft, "Oh." A moment later, she let out an even louder, "Oh," and winced in pain.

"Babe? Are you okay?" I asked.

Her cringe became a smile as she turned to look at me. "I... I think I'm having contractions. Like real ones."

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of me, and for a second, I couldn't remember what I was supposed to do when this happened. I sat

there, frozen, before snapping out of it and jumping to my feet. "We need to get to the hospital. Go sit in the car. I'll get our bags." My words were coming out quickly between deep breaths.

I turned to hurry back to the house, but Willow grabbed my arm to stop me. "Stay calm, babe. We've got this." She leaned in and kissed me, causing some of my anxiety to drift away.

I took another breath to steady myself, then reached out and grabbed her hands. "Yeah, we do."

The next few hours were a complete blur. After going into the house to get our bags and informing Tori what was going on, I sent a quick text off to both my parents and Willow's to let them know as well. We got to the hospital and were checked in quickly. Willow's contractions slowly got closer together and she became more dilated with each passing hour.

When the doctor told her it was time to push, we only did a few rounds before they realized the baby was not situated the way she needed to be, so a c-section was necessary. As soon as I felt myself starting to panic, Willow squeezed my hand and repeated her words from earlier. "We've got this, babe."

It was only a few more minutes before we were in the room where they would be doing the surgery and then everything moved at warp speed. The doctor and the rest of the medical staff worked quickly and efficiently, and before I knew it, they were holding up my baby girl.

Everything else in the room drifted away as I stared at her. The little bit of hair she had was brown and from just one look at her, I could already tell she had Willow's nose and mouth. *Our baby girl*, I thought to myself as I continued to stare, tears streaming down my face as a wide grin spread over it.

I was so caught up in the moment, I almost didn't hear the doctor asking if I wanted to cut the umbilical cord. I took the instrument they handed me and followed their directions about how to use it, barely able to see through my tears.

"Are you ready to meet your baby girl?" the doctor asked Willow.

"I've waited for this moment my entire life," Willow answered, and even though she had taken so much medication at this point she was probably high as a kite, I knew she meant it. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I was surprised when the doctor handed the baby over to me. "This is your moment to share. Enjoy."

She was so light, so delicate. It felt like if I made one wrong move, I could break her. I slowly and carefully walked her to where Willow could see her, and I'll never forget the moment she laid eyes on our baby girl. They lit up with more love than I had ever seen before, and she just stared in the same way I had. "She's absolutely beautiful, Rosemary."

"She's perfect," I whispered as I looked from Willow to her.

Emery Louise Stone. Born May 27th, 2018, at 11:22 a.m. The second love of my life. Our little family's missing puzzle piece. As I stared down at her, I knew my life was complete.

Willow's parents were the first to meet Emery, but mine weren't far behind. I was shocked when both of my parents had tears come to their eyes as they held their new granddaughter.

"She's beautiful, honey," my dad said softly.

"I've never loved someone more," my mom added.

My parents had come a long way since Willow talked to them, but I saw something click that day as they stared down at Emery. I could see the change in their eyes, and I could tell the parents that I knew from growing up were completely gone. Who knew all it would take to change them was Willow Stone and the world's cutest baby?

I didn't get the chance to bask in the moment too long because soon Tori and Lisa were at the hospital as well, as loud and crazy as ever. They were followed by Phil and Stevie and then Silas and Aaron.

My parents, who stayed at the hospital the whole time, were surprised when Silas showed up, since I hadn't really talked to them about him since our fake breakup.

My father reached out a hand toward him and gave him a firm handshake. "Silas. It's great to see you. I thought you were still living in New York."

A sad look flashed across his face, but he quickly recovered. "No, sir. I live in East Pine now." He grabbed ahold of Aaron's hand. "My husband and I run our own law office together."

My father's eyes drifted to their hands, but there was no judgment in them, just understanding and maybe a little bit of sadness. I knew my dad still worked with Silas's father, so I was sure this was all a shock for him to learn. Of course, that asshole had told him nothing, including the fact that he hadn't spoken to his son in years.

When my father looked back into Silas's eyes, he gave him a smile that spoke more than words ever could. "Well, if you two ever need help with anything at all, you just let me know, okay?"

He then reached over and grabbed my hand and spoke more silent words to me. Emery hadn't only changed my life already—she had changed his as well. Silent apologies and promises passed between us as he squeezed my hand before turning to stare at his granddaughter.

I caught Willow's eye and she gave me a knowing smile, and I knew this next year and a half was going to be the greatest, but also, most challenging, time of my entire life. I was ready for the ride though.

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Chapter 32

Having a newborn was far from easy, but when you had an army of supporters and a wife like Willow, it didn't seem so hard. A month into Emery's life, time had no relevance anymore and we mostly just slept whenever she did.

One morning, when all three of us were awake before the sun was even up, Willow pointed out the window to where it was just starting to peek above the horizon. "I think it's time."

"Time for what?"

Willow threw a hand over her chest like she couldn't believe I would even ask that. "Time for Emery to watch her first sunrise," she said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

We wrapped her in a blanket, even though it was a pretty warm summer morning, and all headed outside together. We sat down on a hay bale that was put out as a decorative piece and watched in silence.

After a few minutes, Willow broke the silence. "I need you to promise me something."

"What's that?" I asked. I was worried to hear what she was about to say, not because there was anything I wouldn't do for her, but because I had a feeling this promise was going to involve a time I didn't want to think about.

"Promise me that once I'm gone, you two will still watch the sunrise together and think of me every time you do."

"I'm not sure how I could possibly think about anything else." It didn't take long for the tears to start. *God*, *I hated how much I cried now*. "I hate the thought of you being gone."

Willow leaned over where Emery lay in my arms and gave me a kiss, then pulled away so she could use her thumb to wipe the tears from my face. "Stop that," she said sweetly. "No sad tears over me being gone. Only happy tears over our time left together."

I looked down at the little girl in my arms and then back at Willow. "What are we supposed to do without you?"

"You'll never truly be without me. I'll be in every sunrise and every sunset. I'll be the rainbow that shows up after the storm. Most importantly," she tapped on my chest, then did the same to Emery, "I'll always be right in here. As long as you never forget me, you'll carry me with you everywhere."

"I could never forget you. Not in a million years. I could live ten thousand different lives, and I would carry you with me in each one."

Willow stared into my eyes for just a brief moment before wrapping her hand behind my neck and pulling me in for another kiss. I reminded myself not to cry as I moved my mouth against hers. It was a little bit easier with her lips on mine, since it wiped all other thoughts from my mind.

"Get a room!" a voice called out from behind us, and I turned to see Tori walking toward us with Bella in her arms.

"What are you two doing awake?" Willow asked. "That little cutie normally sleeps for another hour."

"Normally, she would, but Mr. Burns decided to call the landline ten minutes ago and wake us both up. I don't even understand why we have a landline. No one does that anymore."

"Technically, it's our business line, and most businesses do have landlines," Willow reminded her.

"My dad called?" I asked. "Why didn't he just call my phone?"

Tori did a move that kind of looked like a shrug but wasn't quite that since she was trying to balance a wiggly Bella in her arms. "He said he tried a few times, but you didn't pick up. I wasn't sure where you guys were so he said I should just have you call back at your earliest convenience because it's nothing urgent."

Only my dad would call multiple times before 7 a.m. over something that wasn't urgent. Still, it had me intrigued, so I stood and handed Emery to Willow. "Are you okay with her for a few minutes? I'm going to go call him back."

"Of course. We'll be just fine."

As I walked inside, I heard Willow offering to watch Bella so Tori could get some more sleep. *Of course*, I thought to myself, because she was as close to perfect as a human could be. Why was *she* the one who had to have her life cut short? All the terrible people in the world and one of the

best wouldn't even live to see her daughter's second birthday. It was so unfair.

I shook these thoughts from my head because I could feel the tears coming and had promised Willow only happy tears. Yeah, right, like that was ever going to happen.

I found my phone and shook my head when I saw the five missed calls from my dad. I hit his name and the phone only rang twice before he picked up with a rushed, "Hello?"

"Is everything okay?" I asked out of habit.

"Of course," my dad said as if it was a crazy question. "Didn't your roommate tell you it was nothing urgent?"

"She did, but your six calls told me otherwise."

"Is Willow with you right now?"

Why wouldn't he just tell me why he was calling? "No, she's with Emery. Why?"

"This involves both of you."

What the hell? "Dad, could you please just tell me what's up? You're scaring me."

He grunted as if my worry was completely unwarranted. "Fine. You'll have to share this with her later. Your mother and I have been talking about it, and we want to buy you a new house."

"What?" Even though I knew buying a house wouldn't be a financial burden on my parents, I still figured I had to have heard him wrong.

"We think it's time you found a bigger place. Your house is much too small, especially with the amount of people you have living in it."

He wasn't wrong. With two kids and three adults, this tiny twobedroom farmhouse wasn't one for any extra space. "I can't let you do that, Dad. It's too much."

"Please, sweetheart, it's the least we can do."

I could hear all the words he had left unsaid. The least we can do after all the pressure we put on you growing up. The least we can do after taking years to accept your relationship. The least we can do after missing your wedding.

"It's still too much, Dad." An idea popped into my head at that moment that I thought could be a good compromise. "We definitely could use a new house but have been holding off because we can't afford to pay two mortgages. What if you pay off the barn for us since there's not a ton left on it anyway?"

"And you let us pay the down payment on your new house."

"Let me talk to Willow, but if she agrees to it, we have a deal."

I sighed as I hung up the phone, although I wasn't sure if it was one of relief or anxiety. Either way, it looked like we were getting a new house.

It was no surprise that Willow agreed to let my parents pay off the barn and give us the down payment for our new house. She thought I should just let them buy the house but only because she wanted me to be taken care of once she was gone. *Gone*. That word was coming up more and more lately, and I absolutely hated it. *No tears*, I reminded myself once again.

After paying off the barn and getting approved for another home loan, we began our house search. Unfortunately, we weren't having much luck and had to take a break for Willow and Tori to host their first wedding. Even though she would never admit it, I could tell she was really nervous. Luckily, the wedding was for a girl who graduated from high school two years after Tori and Willow, and while they weren't exactly friends, the three had always been cordial, which took some of the pressure off.

My job was to take the girls to Willow's parents' house for the day so they wouldn't interfere with the festivities. Since it was a nice summer day, I decided to walk them there in the double stroller the three of us had recently bought together. I was about to turn into their neighborhood when I noticed someone standing outside of the house I had always admired whenever Willow and I passed it. It was a modest-sized single family home with gray siding and a black door and shutters. There was nothing overtly special about it, but something about it always seemed special to me.

I watched as the person standing in the yard took whatever they had tucked underneath their arm and pushed it into the mulch in front of the house. I figured I had to be imagining it when I saw that it was a *For Sale* sign. I blinked a few times because there was no way this was happening right now. When there was no denying it was real, I figured it had to be fate.

"Looking for a house?" the lady asked when she noticed me standing there.

"I am, actually."

She looked down at her watch and then back at me. "I have a few minutes. Want to come take a look?"

The inside was even better than I expected. It was a modern, open-concept home with the kitchen, dining room, and living room all opening up into one another. There was also a half bath, a small den, and doors leading to the two-car garage and a semi-finished basement. Upstairs, there was a master bedroom and three smaller bedrooms.

We definitely didn't need that much space, especially once... *Nope, not thinking about that right now.* Still, I couldn't hush the voice in my head that was telling me that this was meant to be our house.

"Sorry I don't have more time," the realtor said as she herded me out of the house. "Feel free to contact me or have your realtor contact me if you have any questions. If you're truly interested though, I wouldn't drag your feet. This was just listed a few hours ago and we already have people showing interest."

That same voice that had been telling me this was meant to be our house was now telling me that I needed to act immediately. I tried to call Willow but wasn't surprised when she didn't answer. She had already warned me she probably wouldn't have her phone for most of the day.

It wasn't like me to make big decisions on my own, but this one felt important. I called my realtor and asked her what we needed to do to put in an offer. She said she needed to look into a few things but would be able to get back to me shortly with more information about how much she thought we should offer.

When I got to Mr. and Mrs. Stone's house, I talked it over with Mrs. Stone, and she assured me that Willow would completely understand if I put in an offer without discussing it with her first. She probably would have said that no matter what, since buying that house would mean we'd live even closer to them than we already did, but I was pretty sure she was right in this case. Willow was understanding of everything and had also told me she wanted me to make the final decision since I would be living there longer. My chest ached at that thought, so I pushed it to the side.

A little over an hour after speaking to my realtor, she called back to give me more details on the house. It turned out that there really was a lot of interest in the property so if we had any hope of getting it, we would need to offer at least the asking price. After talking it over, I decided to offer ten thousand over asking. The realtor promised to have all the paperwork completed and sent to me within a few hours so I could sign it and we could put it through. Luckily, since Willow and I had decided to put the house completely in my name, I could take care of all of that, even if I didn't hear back from her before it was time to sign.

As soon as the paperwork came through a few hours later, Mrs. Stone watched the girls so I could focus on getting everything signed and sent back. Once it was sent, I immediately started second-guessing myself. I spent the rest of the day worried that I had made a big mistake and Willow was going to be mad at me.

Since the wedding went late and both girls were asleep by the time it was over, Mrs. Stone volunteered to watch them for the night so Willow, Tori, and I could get a good night's sleep. I was going to walk back home, but Willow insisted on picking me up, so I paced back and forth while I waited for her to arrive at her parents'.

As soon as she opened the door and saw me in the hallway, her face became serious. "What's wrong?"

"I did something really crazy today," I said as I continued to pace.

"Lucky for you, I love crazy." Willow walked over to me and put her hands on my hips to stop me from moving. She leaned in to kiss me and smiled when she pulled away. "Now, tell me what's up."

"So, I know I should have talked to you before I just went ahead and did this, but I kind of, sort of put an offer on a house."

"Kind of sort of?" Willow asked, her smile now more of a smirk.

"Okay. I totally did. If you're mad though, it's your mom's fault too. She told me you would be fine with it."

"Why would I be mad?" Willow asked, as if I had bought dinner without consulting her rather than possibly a whole-ass house. "This is amazing, babe."

"You don't even know what house I put an offer on. It could be a piece of junk for all you know."

Willow shrugged, her smile only growing bigger. "Then it would be a fun fixer-upper for us. I have a feeling I know exactly what house you put an offer on though, and it's definitely not a piece of junk."

"Oh yeah? And how could you possibly know that?"

"I saw the *For Sale* sign on that house you're always staring at before I pulled into the neighborhood. Is that the one?"

How did she do it? How in the hell did she always do that? I nodded. "That would be the one."

Before I even knew what was happening, Willow picked me up and spun me around. "Babe!" she squealed. "This is so amazing."

"Well, don't get too excited," I said when she put me back on the ground. "We probably won't know whether or not we got it for a few days. It's apparently really popular so there isn't going to be any negotiating. They'll most likely just take the best offer."

Willow squeezed my hand and gave me a reassuring smile. "Whatever's meant to happen will. Either way, it's going to work out. Just for the record though, I really think this is meant to be."

"Only time will tell." But, I was pretty sure she was right. This was definitely meant to be.

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Chapter 33

It turned out we were right and just a few days later, the seller accepted our offer, and we agreed to close on the house a month later. Another month that flew by. Too fast. Time was going by way too fast.

My parents convinced me to let them pay a very large down payment, making our future mortgage just as cheap as it had been on the barn. Since we were moving, and the barn was now paid off, we convinced Tori to stay there rather than looking for another place. She tried to fight us on it and insisted we at least take rent payments from her since Willow owned the property, but Willow refused since Tori was pretty much family.

After all the paperwork was signed at the closing and we had our keys, Willow shook hers in front of me. "Shall we go to our new house?"

"Should we pick Emery up from your parents' before we go?"

"I obviously want to experience the new house with both of you, but I thought maybe for now, we could go just the two of us." Willow wiggled her eyebrows at me, and I knew exactly what she was getting at. "The closing went faster than expected. My mom won't be expecting us yet."

"Do I need to remind you we haven't actually moved in yet? There's no furniture in there."

"When has that ever stopped us before?"

I thought about arguing and coming up with all the reasons we shouldn't do it. All of the other things we should be doing raced through my mind, then I remembered how fast time was going by and how much I had been wishing it would slow down. This was the perfect opportunity to slow things down and just enjoy the moment.

As much as I wanted time to slow down, I did *not* want the drive to the house to go slow. It was only a five-minute drive, but even that seemed too long. My leg bounced up and down as I looked out the window.

Willow put her hand on my leg and started to laugh. "A little excited, babe?"

"That's just a *bit* of an understatement. We haven't had sex since before you gave birth." I paused for a second. *Oh shit*. "Umm... are we

even allowed to be having sex now? What's the c-section rule again?"

"It's six to eight weeks, so we're totally fine. Plus, that has more to do with penetration, so maybe we should keep Donald Dick out of this just to be on the safe side."

"Don't worry, Donald Dick wasn't invited."

I watched Willow as she burst into laughter and got lost in the view. She was so beautiful when she laughed. I loved everything about it—the tiny wrinkles that formed by her eyes, the way the volume of her laugh was constantly fluctuating, how her whole body shook.

Willow pointed in front of her. "Home sweet home." I looked to where she was pointing and realized we were in the driveway of our new house. "Wait!" Willow yelled when I put my hand on the car door to open it. "Allow me."

She ran around, opened my door, and as soon as I stepped out, she lifted me up and began to walk inside. "I thought I could carry you across the threshold."

"How very chivalrous of you."

She fumbled with the keys for a moment and I worried she might drop me, but she held on until we made it through the door, half setting me down, half dropping me. She looked down at me. "Where should we take this?"

I licked my lips and ran a hand as far as I could up her leg. "Right here is fine with me."

Willow nodded, then pulled off her shorts and underwear in one quick motion. Her shirt and bra followed quickly behind.

"Not wasting any time, huh?" I asked when she dropped down onto the floor next to me.

"Well, like you said in the car, it's been way too long since we had sex." She ran her eyes over my body. "And you're very overdressed."

Taking a hint, I quickly jumped to my feet and stripped out of my clothes as well, then dropped back onto the floor. "So, where should we start?" I asked.

Willow lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "Start?"

I ran my hand up her stomach, then took a nipple between my fingers. When Willow let out a low growl, I bent over her and took her other nipple into my mouth, swirling it with my tongue and making a

popping sound when I let it go. "You said your mom wasn't expecting us anytime soon." I took her nipple into my mouth once again and relished the sounds it brought out of her. After a second, I pulled away once again. "I thought we should take advantage of that. What do you think?"

Willow's breathing was already ragged and it took her a few breaths to push her words out. "I think if you don't bring your mouth back to my nipple, I might suffer an early death."

I ignored her morbid joke because I was much too turned on to think about it at the moment. Instead, I brought my mouth back down to her breast and gently bit down on her nipple. She let out an even louder moan this time, which had me so turned on, I could barely take it. "Hmm... it appears you like that. Is there anywhere else you'd like my mouth?"

"Good lord, babe, do you even have to ask?"

I kissed my way down her stomach, bypassed the spot where she really needed me and kissed up her legs instead, starting by her knees and making my way up the inside of each of her thighs. Once I was pretty sure I had tortured her enough, I ran my tongue up her center in one long, broad stroke.

Willow immediately started to whimper and put her hands in my hair to pull me even closer against her. "I'm not going to last very long," she said between big gasping breaths.

"In that case, I guess I should take care of myself too." I got up on all fours, keeping my mouth against her center, but bringing my fingers down to mine. I moved my fingers in the same way I was moving my tongue, and when I shoved my tongue deep inside of Willow, I moved two fingers inside of myself.

My tongue moved in and out as my fingers did the same and both Willow and I lost control of our bodies together. I tasted her come on my tongue at the same time I felt my fingers become soaked with my own.

I fell into a heap beside Willow, and I'm not sure how long we lay there, chests heaving up and down, before Willow finally spoke. "Where to next?"

"We should probably check the shower to make sure it's working properly."

"Great plan. I'm sure all the bedrooms could use some inspecting too."

An hour and a half later, Willow and I lay on the floor of our empty master bedroom, both completely spent after properly christening the house. "Can we make each other another promise?" I asked once I had caught my breath enough to speak. "Can we just slow things down a bit? Try to keep time from moving so fast."

Willow rolled onto her side so she could look at me. "I'm not sure if we really have the ability to slow down time. We can make the most of every single moment though."

I let out a long sigh. "I feel like we already do that though."

"What if we did even more of it?"

I knew Willow wouldn't suggest that unless she already had an idea, so now I was intrigued. "What's going through that head of yours?"

"I know you love your job, so you can shoot me right down if you choose to, but what if you took a break from teaching? You're already taking three months off at the beginning of this school year because of Emery. What if you put in your notice and helped us out at the barn for the next year and a half? I talked to my boss, and he said I only need to go back to EPU for a month or two once I'm done with my maternity leave, so they have enough time to hire and train my replacement. If we both left our day jobs, we'd have so much more time together." I was so surprised by her idea that I wasn't sure what to say and Willow must have taken my silence as a no because she waved a hand and shook her head. "You know what? Forget I even mentioned that. It's a dumb idea. You love teaching."

It wasn't a dumb idea though. It wasn't at all. "You know what I love even more than teaching?"

"What?"

"You. Teaching will always be here. You..." I stopped because I couldn't say the words out loud. "Well, teaching will always be here."

"If this is what you *truly* want, and you're not just saying it to appease me, I think we should do it. I know I'd love to have all that extra time with you."

"But, can we make it work financially?" I asked, hating myself for always being the realist.

"We can. Our business is just about to take off, and with you working with us, we can book a lot more events." Willow took both of my hands in hers. "This is going to be great, babe."

Great while it lasts. Great for the next year and a half. Great until she's gone. Those were all the thoughts that ran through my mind, but instead of voicing them I smiled and agreed with her, because if I only had 487 more days with my wife, I wasn't going to waste a moment on negativity.

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Chapter 34

Winter 2018/2019

Willow was right. Even though we were together so much more now, it didn't give us magical powers to slow down time, and December 27th, 2018, came way too quickly. One more year with my wife. One more year as a complete family. If it was up to me, we would have just run away and spent this last year with just the three of us. Willow wouldn't let that happen though. More than just wanting more time with all the people she would be leaving behind, she wanted me to be in a good place. In her opinion, shutting everyone else out to just focus on her wouldn't do that.

Just because I knew she was right didn't make it any easier. The closer it came to the date I was going to lose her, the more I wanted to push everyone else away.

These thoughts and the ache in my chest were the reason I had woken up a little after midnight on this dreadful day and hadn't been able to fall back asleep. I looked at the clock on our nightstand that read six o'clock and knew that Willow would wake up shortly to her alarm or to Emery waking up.

A moment later, there was movement next to me in bed and Willow blinked her eyes open to look at me. She yawned and rubbed her hands over her eyes before blinking at me one more time. "How long have you been up, babe?"

"A while." Not a complete lie.

Willow sat up in bed and stared at me, studying me for a minute before speaking. "You've been up all night, haven't you?"

"It's December 27th." There really wasn't any other explanation needed aside from that. How was I possibly supposed to sleep today?

Willow laid her head on my shoulder, linked her arm with mine, and pulled me closer up against her. "I know, but, hey look at me, I'm doing great. I'm still not sick or anything, so it looks like it will probably be some type of freak accident."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

"It's better than the alternative." She was right. The last thing I wanted was for her to suffer or be in any sort of pain.

"I know. I just hate this." All of my thoughts from throughout the night swirled around in my mind. "What if we tried to keep it from happening? We could go somewhere and—"

"Absolutely not. There is no way I'm getting the two of you wrapped up in my fate. You and Emery are going to live long, fulfilling lives. That's why I'm going to make sure I'm not around you two on this day next year."

"But we could just get a cabin out in the middle of nowhere or something. Get there a day or two early. Not leave at all."

"And what about when the cabin burns down or someone breaks in? I'm not tempting fate." Willow reached out and took my hand. "Let's not focus on that day. We have a whole year that is going to be the best year yet."

I sniffled as the tears I'd been trying to hold back started to fall. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to do without you. I'm going to miss you so much."

From the way Willow looked at me, I could tell she was holding back tears as well. "I'm going to miss you too. Just because I try to stay positive doesn't mean that I'm not dreading the day I leave you two. All I want is to grow old with you and to watch Emery grow up. I want to see how much trouble Emery and Bella cause as teenagers. I can only imagine if they're anything like Tori and me."

The mention of Tori reminded me of another one of the thoughts that had kept me up last night. "Speaking of which, have you thought about what you're going to do about the company?"

"Obviously, I want to leave everything to Tori, but I don't want to do it if it's going to be a burden to her."

"You could..." I contemplated not saying my next words because I didn't want to start a fight. Willow was all about not holding back, so I owed this to her. "Tell her the truth."

"That I've known about my impending death since we were teens and decided to wait until a year before to tell her about it? She'd never forgive me."

"Of course she would. Plus...." I let my words trail off.

"Plus, how could she stay mad at me once she knows our time is limited?" Willow finished for me. "I've thought about that. I'm not trying to be a jerk, but Tori is my best friend. I don't want anything to change between us now. I want to enjoy this last year together. It's hard enough with you knowing."

I knew she wasn't trying to be hurtful, but her words were like a knife to my heart. "You think I make it harder for you?"

Willow sat up taller and turned to face me more fully, a sincerely apologetic look in her eyes. "That's not what I meant at all, babe. Having you to talk to about this, having someone who understands and knows every single thing about me, it's wonderful. I just hate when it becomes the focus between us. I'm not blaming you for that. How are you not supposed to think about it?"

"I'm sorry. I'll try harder not to harp on it."

"Please don't ever feel like you can't talk to me about how you're feeling, okay? I just don't want this to be what defines us over this next year. I just want three-hundred sixty-five days of love and laughter. Don't worry about *Stone Barn Events*. I'll figure it out. I'm going to talk to Tori and make sure we're on the same page, even if she doesn't know exactly what page that is. I'll do it when everyone is here on New Year's Day."

I threw my hand over my face and laughed. "Remind me again why we decided to host a party with both of our families and most of our friends only a few months after moving into a new house?"

"Because this is going to be the best year of our lives. What better way to start it than with all of our loved ones?"

I was still running around the house like a crazy person, trying to get everything clean, when the doorbell rang announcing the first of the guests on New Year's Day. Luckily, Willow and I didn't do anything for New Year's Eve, so I at least wasn't nursing a hangover. When I opened the door to Phil and Stevie, it didn't appear that the same could be said for them.

"Rough night?" I asked with a laugh.

Phil handed me the car seat that my nephew, Brody, was sound asleep in. "When my parents volunteered to watch this little guy, we seemed to forget that we're not young anymore. I feel like shit."

Willow's loud laugh echoed behind me. "You look like shit too."

Phil laughed with her, their laughs sounding eerily similar. "Why do you two look so put together? Didn't you have any fun last night?"

Willow took the car seat from my hands and made silly faces at Brody who was just waking. "We had a ton of fun. We snuggled on the couch and watched TV. It was perfect."

Phil laughed once again. "If this is how you're acting already, I can't imagine how much fun you'll be in a few years."

Stevie slapped Phil playfully on the shoulder. "Don't make fun of them. If they want to act like old ladies, that's their choice."

Phil put both hands in the air. "I'm just saying. If you're this boring after one child, just wait until you guys have three more."

I might as well have drank the night before because now I felt like I was going to throw up. Bile rose in my throat and a heaviness formed in my stomach. I wanted to act normal and pretend there was no reason talk of the future would upset me, but I couldn't. I wanted three more children with Willow. I wanted Phil to make fun of us for choosing to sit on the couch on New Year's Eve every year until we were ninety-five. But I wasn't going to get that, and it was so unfair.

"I think I hear Emery," I lied before turning around and hurrying up the stairs.

Instead of going into Emery's room, I went to the bathroom, lifted the lid on the toilet, and let out all the contents of my stomach. I promised Willow we would make this our best year ever, and I owed that to her, but how could I do that when it made me physically ill to think about a future without her? How could this year be the best when it was going to end in the worst way possible?

I felt her presence before I saw her. As soon as a hand landed on my back, I knew it was Willow. "I think Emery really is up now," she said softly. She nodded her head in the direction of Emery's room. "Want to come with me to get her?"

I let Willow help me up onto my feet, then silently followed her out of the bathroom and into Emery's room, where she was sitting up in her crib waiting for us with a big smile on her face. In spite of how I was feeling, her smile made me smile. "She looks just like you when she's happy."

"She looks just like me when she's angry and sad too," Willow said with a laugh.

"I know, but she has your spirit, and that shines through when she's happy."

Willow picked up Emery and rested her against her hip, then slipped her arm that wasn't holding Emery around my waist. "Exactly. It's going to shine through a lot for you. I promise. You two are going to be just fine. And, someday, when you do have more kids, they're going to be amazing too."

A lump formed in my throat. I didn't believe that there was a *someday* for me without Willow. "I don't know about that," I answered honestly.

Willow pulled me closer up against her. "I do." She kept her arm around my waist and walked the three of us over to the mirror on the back of Emery's bedroom door. "What do you see when you look in this mirror?"

I looked at the reflection of the three of us, and my heart warmed at the sight of my perfect little family. "My two favorite people in the whole world."

"What else?"

"My whole heart."

"And?"

As I continued to look into the mirror, Emery smiled wide enough to show off her two bottom teeth and then laughed at her own reflection. Her laugh caused Willow and me to both start laughing as well, and the woman I saw reflected back at me wasn't scared or sad or lonely. She was happy and content and had everything she needed. "Pure happiness," I whispered in response to Willow's question.

"Exactly. And you should always be this happy. Don't stop living your life, Rosemary. Don't limit yourself to just this year. There's so much life ahead of you. You keep seeing this as a countdown to the end, but it's not. Not for you. So, what do you say we enjoy the ride while we're still doing it together?"

I turned to face Willow and put my hand on her cheek, loving the warmth that radiated from it. "It's been one hell of a ride."

"And it's only going to get better. Trust me. I've got big plans for us this year."

I pulled back and studied her face to see if it gave any hint as to what she could possibly be referring to. "Should I be scared?"

Willow held her two fingers close together. "Maybe just a little," she joked. "We better get downstairs though. It sounds like everyone is here."

Sure enough, by the time we got downstairs, my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Stone, Silas, Aaron, Tori, Bella, Lisa, and Lisa's girlfriend, Abigail, had all arrived. Even with a full house, the day went really smoothly and it was a great start to the new year. The only odd thing was how Willow and my dad kept talking to each other in hushed voices as if they were sharing a secret. I made a mental note to ask Willow about it later but didn't let myself overthink it since it was probably nothing.

Just as Willow and I suspected would be the case, Tori stayed later than everyone else. While our daughters sat on the floor next to each other playing, we all took a seat on the couch together. "So, Mary, how is it going spending all your time with this one now? Are you sick of her yet?" Tori asked.

"Believe it or not, no. It's been wonderful."

"Wonderful enough to stay with *Stone Barn Events* forever and never go back to teaching?" Tori's playful tone told me she already knew the answer to that.

"Absolutely not. I'm just doing this to help you guys out until you have the means to hire more people." The opportunity couldn't have presented itself more perfectly, so I took advantage of it. "What about you? Still enjoying it?"

Tori laughed. "That's an understatement. God, I love this so much. I can't believe I didn't think of going into a career like this sooner. Thank God you guys forced me into it."

"So, you don't think you'd ever want to do anything else? This is your endgame?" Willow asked.

"Totally." Tori's eyes shot up and looked between the two of us. "Why? You're not firing me, are you?"

"Come on, you really think I would fire my bestie?"

Instead of laughing with Willow, Tori's face grew more concerned. "You don't want to give up on this though, do you? I know we're still figuring this all out, but I know we'll get there."

Willow put a hand on Tori's leg, which was now bouncing up and down. "Chill out, dude. I'm not giving up. I was just curious how serious you were about this."

"You're both being weird." Tori looked between the two of us once again, and suddenly, a smile came to her face. "Wait a second. I know what's going on here."

"You do?" Willow asked.

"Yeah. I heard you talking to Silas about preparing wills now that you have Emery. You're trying to figure out what to do with the barn if you both croak, aren't you?"

"That's actually exactly what we're doing." Willow gave me a quick wide-eyed look, but I wasn't surprised Tori had figured it out (minus the whole Willow definitely dying thing) because she and Willow were always on the same wavelength.

"How oddly morbid of you." Tori laughed at her own joke, completely unaware of just how heavy this moment was.

Luckily, Willow had no trouble pretending it was no big deal. "So, as you so eloquently put it, if I croaked, would it be okay if I left it to you?"

"Don't you mean if you both croaked?"

"Nah." Willow pointed her thumb at me. "This one here has no interest in being in charge of it, so it would be all yours if something were to happen to me."

Tori shrugged as if it were no big deal. "Sounds good to me. Isn't being an adult strange? We have to be prepared for all of these crazy things that are never actually going to happen."

Yep. Totally crazy....

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Chapter 35

Spring 2019

It only took a few weeks after our party for me to figure out what my dad and Willow were talking about. It turned out they were trying to plan a surprise trip to Disney for both of our families at the end of April as an early first birthday celebration for Emery. It was also one last hurrah before our busy season at the barn. The surprise didn't pan out since my dad accidentally let it slip to my mom, who in turn told Willow's mom, who let the rest of us know.

Willow and my dad were disappointed they weren't able to keep it a secret, but I was happy about it. Planning for the trip gave me something else to focus on other than the obvious.

By the time the trip came, we had everything planned out down to the very last minute. At least, I thought I knew exactly what the plan was. My dad and Willow were able to pull off one surprise and that was going to the restaurant we went to on our honeymoon, California Grill.

The view was even more beautiful than I remembered, and as we watched the fireworks through the windows, Willow leaned over to whisper in my ear. "I have something to ask you."

When I turned to look over at her, I realized everyone at the table was watching us. "Wait, what's going on?"

"You know how much we all love you, right? Especially me?" "Of course, but what—"

I cut myself off when Willow dropped down onto one knee beside me and pulled out a wedding band that matched the one I was already wearing. "Almost five years ago, I made the greatest decision of my entire life when I married you, but there were a few very important people missing that day." Willow looked over at my parents, then where Emery was sitting on my lap, and finally, back at me. "They all want to be part of it, and you know I'll never turn down an excuse to marry you again, so Rosemary Eloise Stone, will you remarry me?"

"Of course," I said as tears streamed down my face.

"Only happy tears, right?" Willow whispered as she slid the newest ring onto my finger.

"The happiest of tears," I whispered back.

As if she knew exactly what was happening, Emery clapped her hands at the same time Willow and I kissed. Willow pulled back, all three of us bursting into a fit of giggles as she clapped along with our daughter.

When my dad got up from his seat and started walking over to me, Willow took Emery from my lap, and I stood to greet him. Without saying a word, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a tight embrace. He held me close for a few seconds before finally speaking. "I can't go back in time and be at your first wedding, and I know I'll never make that up to you, but I hope this is a start."

When I pulled back to look at him, I saw a sparkle in his eye that I'd never seen before. It was almost mischievous. "Wait. Was this your idea?"

A wide grin spread across his face. "It was a joint effort," he said with a wink.

Willow playfully rolled her eyes at my dad. "Don't listen to him. This was all his idea. I obviously went along with it. I'd never turn down another opportunity to marry the love of my life."

None of this seemed real right now, and I couldn't believe it was happening. "So, we're really doing this? We're getting remarried?"

Willow shrugged and pushed Emery higher up on her hip. "We already reserved the venue so it would be kind of awkward if we didn't."

"Venue?" What the hell was going on?

Willow smirked, and I had a pretty good idea of what she was about to say. "Yeah. Maybe you've heard of it. It's a really cute barn in Melsborough. I hear the owner is really cool."

"Is that so?" I asked sarcastically. "I've heard she's kind of crazy."

"The best are." Willow winked before becoming serious again.

"We're getting married at the barn on our five year anniversary—June 7th."

"I thought we were hosting weddings every weekend this summer."

"We are. Including ours. Ours will be on Friday and we'll have another on Sunday. I figured we deserved to have a little staycation honeymoon on Saturday."

"And *I* will be walking you down the aisle," my dad added.

The sound of a throat clearing across the table brought my attention to my mom. She put one finger in the air as if to tell us she had something important to say. "Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I think we should *both* walk her down the aisle." She looked directly at me. "That is, if that's okay with you."

"It's not just okay. It's better than okay. It's absolutely perfect."

My mother stood from her seat and grabbed Emery out of Willow's arms. "Speaking of perfect—we're going to steal this perfect little girl for the night so her mommies can celebrate."

Did my mom just offer to take our child so I could have sex with my wife?

"I think Magic Kingdom has extra magic hours tonight. If you leave now, I'm sure you'll have at least an hour there."

Okay. That made more sense. I knew my parents had come a long way, but I certainly didn't think they had come *that far*.

"A little extra magic sounds great to me," Willow said with innuendo to her tone that it seemed like only those under fifty picked up on... thank God.

I reached out, took her hand, and winked. "What are we waiting for?"

"Um, babe, I think we might have taken a wrong turn," I joked as Willow opened the door to our hotel room. "This doesn't look like the Magic Kingdom."

She turned toward me and had a devilish grin on her face. "It is where the magic happens though." She wiggled her eyebrows, and I burst into laughter.

"That was so lame."

"Whatever. You love me."

I put my arms around Willow's waist and pulled her up against me. "I do." I nodded my head toward the bathroom. "I also love that shower."

"And I love where your head's at."

We both quickly stripped out of our clothes and headed toward the bathroom. I turned on the shower and waited for it to reach a good

temperature, then motioned for Willow to get in.

I stepped in after her, and she immediately clamped her hands together behind my back and pulled our bodies flush up against each other. She brought her lips to my ear and just the feeling of her breath against my skin already had goosebumps breaking out on my arms.

"Do you remember the first time we had sex?" she whispered.

"How could I ever forget? It was my nineteenth birthday. I had just broken up with Silas."

Willow broke into a fit of giggles. "Oh God, I always forget that you two dated. That's so weird."

"It worked out well since we were both so gay."

"I'm not going to lie, I was so jealous when you were dating him. I thought you two were going to have sex, and that thought killed me."

I shook my head and brought my hand under Willow's chin to make sure she was looking right at me. "It was never going to be anyone but you."

Willow dropped to her knees in front of me, then stared up at me. "What about the first time I ever went down on you? Do you remember that?" She ran her tongue up my center as if I needed a reminder, which I most certainly didn't, but I also wasn't going to turn down.

"Y-yeah. It was the next day."

Willow ran her tongue up my center once more, stopping her path to circle around my clit. She pulled away and smiled up at me once again. "I'm so glad you're the only taste I'll ever know."

I wanted to say that the same was true for me, but Willow read my mind and shook her head. "You still have a lot of life to live, Rosemary."

Nope. Not doing this right now. "Let's just focus on tonight."

"Tonight, I'm all yours, darling." She twirled her tongue around my clit one more time. "And you're all mine."

Yes, I was, and I always would be.

"Is there anything specific you want at this wedding?" Willow asked when we lay in bed a few hours later, both completely love drunk from so many rounds of sex I lost count.

- "I just want all of our friends and family there."
- "You don't have to worry about that. That's already all figured out."
- "Was this seriously my dad's idea?"
- "Completely. He pretty much had the whole thing figured out when he brought it up to me on New Year's."

I slammed my hand down on my pillow and laughed. "So, *that's* why you two were being all shady that day. I just assumed you were talking about Disney."

"That was part of it. Your dad asked if I was okay with reproposing, then wanted to know if I had any ideas of where I'd like to propose." Willow cackled. "I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head when I suggested Disney."

"Yeah, my dad's never really struck me as a Disney type of guy."

"Could have fooled me. He's been having a great time on this trip."

"What can I say? He's a changed man." I lifted Willow's hand and kissed the back of it. "Because of you."

"Nah. It's been in him all along. You and I just helped bring it out."

"We make a pretty good team, don't we?"

"We do." Willow laid her head down on my shoulder. "Hey, babe?" "Hm?"

"Just so you know, I'd marry you a million different times in a million different lifetimes, and it still wouldn't be enough."

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Chapter 36

June 7, 2019

Our second wedding was even more beautiful than the first. To everyone else, it was a celebration of all the years to come. For us, it was a way to celebrate the time we had together and the love we shared. Instead of a commitment to spend our lives together until we were old and gray, it was a promise to make our last six months together the best we've had so far. No one could possibly understand what this day meant to us because no one knew what was ahead, which somehow made it even more special.

I put on my knee-length white dress and looked at myself in the mirror the same way I did at our wedding five years ago. My hair was styled into a simple braid that my mom did for me, and instead of Silas standing beside me, it was my dad.

"You look absolutely stunning, honey," he said before bending down to place a kiss on the top of my head.

"You really do," a voice said from behind me.

I turned around to see Willow leaning against the open door frame. She was wearing a white sundress and was holding Emery against her hip. She stared at me as if it was the first time she was ever seeing me, and my heart fluttered in my chest like it really was the first time.

"Isn't it bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?" I joked.

"I don't think that counts when you're already married. Plus, I wanted to give you something." She held Emery out toward my dad. "Trade me?"

"You know I could never say no to this little cutie." My dad took Emery and immediately started making faces at her to make her giggle.

Willow took my hand and pulled me out of the room. "Come with me."

"Are you trying to make me miss my own wedding?" I asked as I followed her out of the back door of what was now Tori's house.

"Seeing as how I'm one of the brides *and* the wedding planner, I think you'll be okay."

"Where are we going?"

Willow pointed to a hay bale that was in the exact spot where we sat at our first barn party together. She dropped my hand and skipped over to it. She sat on one side and patted the empty spot next to her.

Except, when I went to sit down, I noticed that it wasn't empty. There was a small piece of paper, and when I picked it up, I saw 8/22/2007 written across the top in Willow's handwriting. "What is this?"

"Sit down and I'll explain." Once I was sitting, Willow pointed at the note in my hands. "This is a note I wrote you on the first night we met."

"If you wrote me a note that night, why didn't you ever give it to me?"

"I'm giving it to you right now," Willow answered with a tone that told me she thought it was a dumb question.

"I know that. I mean, why didn't you give it to me back then?"

"It wasn't meant for back then." Willow picked up the note and twirled it in her fingers. "I've been writing you notes since the first time we met so I could give them to you once I was gone. I have a few boxes filled with them. I've written one almost every single day from the time we officially started dating and wrote a ton before that too."

"So, let me get this straight." My voice cracked because I was already getting emotional. "You've been planning this all along? But how did you know after knowing me for *one day* that we would be here now?"

Willow laughed and looked around her. "Here? Getting married for the second time at the barn I own with our daughter present? I definitely didn't know that's where we'd be. But I knew from the moment I met you that you'd always be a big part of my life."

"You did?"

"I've told you that multiple times, babe," Willow teased.

"Yeah, but I thought that was just one of those things that people say. It's easy to pick out the big moments when looking back. It's not as easy when you're living them."

Willow slowly shook her head, a seriousness to her face that I wasn't used to. "It wasn't just something I said. When I noticed you across the room at orientation, it was like my heart went, *Oh. There's everything you didn't know were missing*. That's why I came to your room that day. I *had* to know you. I couldn't explain why, but I just knew. And then when

we kissed..." She went back to her playful self as she made a *mind blown* motion with her hands. "I was done for after that. Heart gone. Forever."

"Can I read it?" I asked but stole it from her hand before she could actually answer.

It wasn't a long note, and it's not like she poured her heart out and confessed her love after one day, but the few words written on that page said so much.

Dear Rosemary Burns,

Mark my words. This is only the beginning.

Love,

Willow

I wiped at the tears now running down my face. I was so overcome with emotion, I could barely speak. "Willow, this is... wow... there's more of these?"

"Just a few," she said sarcastically. She winked at me then turned around and grabbed something that was laying on the ground behind the hay bail.

When she turned back around, I saw that she had two more notes in her hand. "I picked out a few good ones for you, but you'll get the rest in a few months." She handed me one of the two notes. "This is the one I wrote you after we had sex for the first time." Her face turned the slightest bit red, which might have been the cutest sight in the entire world. I couldn't believe we could still have this effect on each other after all this time.

I turned the note over in my hands and read the words written on it. If I thought the first one had made me emotional, I really wasn't prepared for this.

Dear Rosemary,

I'm sitting next to you in your bed right now. You're fast asleep, and you have such a cute, soft little snore. We just made love for the first time, and it

was better than words can describe. I can't just call it sex, because it's so much more than that. I haven't told you this because it would make things way too complicated, but I'm head over heels in love with you. I couldn't tell you the exact moment it happened, because I'm pretty sure I've felt this way all along.

I'm not sure where our lives will have taken us by the time you read this letter, but above all else, I hope you're happy. I also want you to know that not only do I love you today, but I'll also love you tomorrow and every day after that.

No matter how far apart we are when you read this, I hope you can still feel my love.

Love always,

Willow

I took in a few deep breaths as I tried to gain control of my emotions. There was no greater gift in the world than what I had in my hands. The diamond ring on my finger didn't shine nearly as bright as my eyes as I just stared down at the note in my hands. "I can't believe you did this for me."

"I did it for both of us, so you could always have a piece of me. These tell the story of our life together. Our beautiful, perfectly imperfect, life." Willow traded the paper in my hand for the one in hers. "Just one more today. I can't have you ruining all of your makeup." She pointed to the note. "This one is..."

"Our wedding day," I said softly as I read the words.

To my dear (almost) wife,

I'm supposed to be getting ready for our wedding, but I couldn't do that without writing you a little note first. I can't believe we actually made it to this point. You changed my life from the moment you walked into it.

Obviously, you know I never expected for this day to happen. I'm so thankful for the night you got drunk (and jealous), and let me have it.

I'm so lucky to get to call you my wife. Our forever might be shorter than others', but that doesn't mean that it won't be completely fulfilled.

I know today isn't exactly what you were wishing for, but I hope by the time you read this, things have changed with your parents. If they have, congratulations on never giving up and somehow powering through to this point. If they haven't, then fuck them.

Anyway, Tori is yelling at me right now so it looks like I'm out of time. See you on the other side (of the aisle).

Love,

Your Wife

I laughed at the same time I wiped away my tears. "You're right. I can't handle any more of these right now." I was straight-faced and serious by the time I turned to Willow. "Thank you for doing this. I'll cherish these and the rest of my letters for all of my life."

Willow looked around, then slapped her hand down on the hay bail. "Ready to get remarried?"

"Always."

I walked down the aisle first this time, sandwiched between both of my parents. We stopped just in front of the podium where Lisa stood since she had insisted on officiating the wedding this time around. My mom kissed one cheek and my dad kissed the other before they both sat down.

I looked out at everyone who was there to celebrate with us. It was a small group but filled with the most important people in our lives: both of our families, Tori, Bella, Lisa and Abigail, and Silas and Aaron.

Then, all of my attention went to my beautiful wife who was now walking down the aisle with one arm draped through her dad's. Even though I had just seen her a few minutes earlier, seeing her now still took my breath away.

I couldn't believe that I was lucky enough to not just marry her once, but *twice*. I took a deep breath and blew it out, wondering how I was ever going to get through my vows. I didn't need to wonder for long because Lisa's introduction seemed to fly by and soon she was placing the microphone in the hand that wasn't shakily holding the paper with my vows in it.

I cleared my throat more times than any human ever should, which made everyone else laugh. I chuckled at myself as well, then took one more deep breath before reading. "Willow, to say you changed my life would be the understatement of the century, because you change the life of every single person you come in contact with. You swept into my life and blew my whole world apart in the best way possible. I can honestly say that you made me the person I am today. Because of you, I am more *me* than I ever thought possible.

"Getting to spend my life with you has been the greatest blessing, and I'm so thankful for not only the time we've spent together so far, but also the time we have left together. I promise to make every moment count. I promise to never miss an opportunity to tell you I love you. I promise to remember every kiss, touch, and belly-laughing moment for the rest of my life.

"I hope I've brought even half as much joy to your life as you've brought to mine, because you deserve that and so much more. Thank you for giving me the confidence to be myself. Thank you for not only making my family stronger, but for helping to create our perfect little family. Most of all, thank you for loving me and for choosing me over and over again."

I blew out a breath and smiled at the fact that I had somehow made it through that without completely losing it. Now, if I could also make it through Willow's vows, that would be a complete miracle.

Willow wiped at her eyes and stared at the paper in front of her, blinking back more tears before she started to read. "Rosemary, I had a hard time coming up with what to say to you today because everything I've ever felt, I've either told you or can't find a way to put into words. I have a

feeling you're going to try to say that I changed your life, but the truth is that you were the one to change mine. It's no secret to anyone that I've always made the most of life, but you were the one who made my life worth living.

"There is no adventure greater than a life spent with you. Watching you grow and change throughout these years has been the most magnificent pleasure of all.

"On this day, there are just a few things I want to remind you of. You can do anything you put your mind to. Everything you have become has been inside of you all along. Even though you don't always believe it, you are the greatest mom in the whole world. The amazing woman Emery grows into will be all thanks to you. Most importantly, whether I'm lying right beside you in bed or millions of miles away, I'm always with you. No distance or time could ever separate a love like this. I love you, Rosemary Stone. I always have and I always will."

We were both in tears, this moment heavier than anyone could imagine. My heart was full but also breaking, all at once. Even Lisa had to take a moment to collect herself before she could continue on with the ceremony.

There were minimal tears until the very end when Emery decided she needed to be with her moms immediately. She reached her arms out toward us and Mrs. Stone walked her over to where we were standing. As soon as she was in Willow's arms, she started to giggle, which made both of us laugh as well.

It was the perfect end to the perfect ceremony and when Lisa announced that we could kiss, Willow and I both had the same idea as we leaned in and each kissed one of Emery's cheeks. The love in my heart grew even more in that moment with my wife and daughter, and I wasn't sure how that was possible. It's like every time you think you know what love is, life comes in and shows you that it can be so much more. Life was beautiful in that way, and it was this beauty I would need to remind myself of in the coming years when things got hard.

But for now, all of my focus was on celebrating the beauty of this moment and all of the moments to come over the next six months.

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Chapter 37

We could have kept the celebrations after the wedding small and simple since it was such a small group, but my wife didn't understand either of those words, so we had a full reception with food, drinking, and dancing. The setup resembled more of one of the old barn parties than the receptions we put on for the weddings we hosted.

Just like the barn parties, Phil stood behind a big table filled with alcohol. "Aren't you getting too old for this?" Willow joked as we walked over to him. "Shouldn't you be, I don't know, hanging with your wife and son?"

"And leave people to make shitty drinks for themselves on the second biggest day of my sister's life?"

Willow pointed to where I was holding Emery in my arms. "Third biggest day."

Phil reached his finger out toward Emery and hummed when she grabbed onto it. "So, three Fantastic Phils?"

"Just two." Willow held up two fingers to emphasize. "I think Emery just needs a few more years before she can handle a Fantastic Phil."

Phil held up a cup as if he was raising a toast. "As long as we're all there when she has her first drink."

Before his words could really settle and cause me to go into a spiral, Willow squeezed my hand and gave me a knowing smile. "I can promise that I will most certainly be there. I wouldn't miss it."

I squeezed back and thanked her with my eyes. I had to believe there was life after death or else losing Willow would be too hard for me. Her constant reminders that she would be our guardian angel and always look out for us helped to get me through those dark moments when I was reminded of how much she was going to miss out on.

Clearly not taking notice of our silent interaction, Phil cackled. "Of course, because you're going to be a cool mom, right?"

Without missing a beat, Willow laughed along with him. "Obviously. The coolest."

I took a large sip of my drink to try to calm myself, then forced out a sound that somewhat resembled a chuckle. "Second coolest."

Phil looked at something behind us. "If you ladies don't mind, there is a beautiful woman walking this way who could use a drink."

"And a break from our son," Stevie said as she came up to the table and held Brody toward Phil.

Willow cooed at Brody, then took my hand. "You two have fun. It's time for Rosemary's long overdue father-daughter dance."

I hadn't even thought about the father-daughter dance, but my dad was already waiting for me on the dance floor. His lips were turned up in a slight smile and his eyes were glistening, as if he was trying his best to hold back tears. He held his hand out toward me as "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You" started to play over the speakers Willow had set up just off the dance floor.

I let go of Willow's hand and joined my dad. We were both quiet as we began to dance. I wasn't sure what to say. I never in my life thought I would get to this point with my dad. It was like he was a whole different person. It was like the man I would see hints of on very rare occasions growing up was now here all the time. Willow said she had brought something out in me that was already there. I wondered if the same was true with my dad, if this was really who he always wanted to be, but he, for some reason, thought he couldn't.

"Do you know why I chose this song?" my dad asked into the silence. When I shook my head, he twirled me around, then brought me back to face him. "I remember looking at you when you were born and thinking how perfect you were. Then I watched you grow up, and all I wanted was the absolute best for you. Unfortunately, because of how I was raised, I had a skewed perspective of what that was. I thought the only way you could be happy was if you were some bullshit cookie-cutter version of success. I was obviously so wrong. I'm so proud of the woman you've become, and so thankful for how you've changed your mother and me. Well, you and Willow." He looked away from me and I followed the direction of his stare to find Willow looking at the two of us, a wide grin on her face that lit up the whole room. "You really found a good one there. I know why you fell in love with her. She's very special."

I couldn't take it. His words and the fact that they were coming from him, my father, the one I never thought would come around, was too much. I took two heaving breaths before I broke into sobs. A soft, "Daddy," fell from my lips before I threw my head onto his shoulder.

My dad wrapped his arms more tightly around me and ran a hand over my back. After a minute, he pulled back slightly. "Those are happy tears, right?" he asked.

I took a few deep breaths and ran my hands over my face to try to clear the tears. "Of course." It was only half a lie. I was so happy about this day. So happy my parents had come around. So happy they saw what I saw in Willow. But, it also hurt so bad. *So*, *so bad*. It wasn't fair. What right did this life have to build us up just to knock us back down? What right did I have to complain when I had been so lucky? The internal battle was so strong, and I wanted to let it burst out. "It's just an emotional day."

My dad nodded his head as if he understood, and I'm sure he thought he did. "I love you, Rosemary. I kind of got off track, but that's why I chose this song. I love you more than anything else in the entire world, and I haven't told you that nearly enough. That's not going to happen anymore. I never want you to question how much I love you or how proud I am of you. It's always been the case, but I was just terrible at showing it."

"Mind if I cut in, sir?" a voice that was much lower than Willow's asked.

When I looked over, Silas was standing beside us. My dad gave me a kiss on the forehead and patted Silas on the shoulder. I put my arms over his shoulders and began to sway to the new song that had just come on.

"Just think. If you hadn't dumped me and broken my heart, we could be dancing at our wedding right now."

"Excuse me. *You* dumped *me* because you started dating your now husband."

"I fake dumped you when we were fake dating. You real dumped me when we were real dating. Who was that for again?" He pulled back slightly and tapped a finger to his chin as if he was thinking, then held one finger in the air. "Ah, I know. It was for your *wife*."

"Whatever. Can we even call what we were doing *real* dating? We barely even kissed."

Silas scrunched up his nose. "Ew. I actually forgot we kissed at all."

I removed my hands from his shoulders and playfully pushed him away from me. "Oh, come on, it wasn't that bad."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad we went through all of that together so we could get to this point. Who would have ever thought when we started dating back then that we would end up here?"

I laughed as I looked around the room. "Definitely not me."

"Speaking of where we ended up, I think I need to stop monopolizing your time so you can be with your wife and daughter."

I gave him a hug, then walked over to where Willow was kneeling down in front of Emery and holding her hands while the two of them danced, or more so, bopped up and down to the music.

"There's my girls," I said while I knelt down beside them.

Willow dropped one of Emery's hands so I could grab it. We all started to bop together and Emery let out an almost-unintelligible, "Mom."

"Was today everything you hoped it would be?" Willow asked.

"Everything and so much more."

She studied me for a few seconds, her lips straight and eyebrows furrowed. "I saw that you got really emotional when you were with your dad earlier. What was that about?" She knew exactly what it was about, but it was still sweet of her to ask.

"It's all just... a lot," I answered honestly.

Willow nodded, and I knew she understood. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. At least, not right now. Right now, I just want to enjoy this time with my two favorite girls."

A throat cleared beside us and I looked up to see Lisa and Tori standing there. "Don't you mean four favorite girls?" Lisa asked.

"Of course." I scooped Emery into my arms and Willow and I stood up so we were all on the same level. "I still can't believe the gang's back together again."

"And this time, it's going to stay that way," Tori said. "Don't worry, I won't leave you guys again."

"We wouldn't let you if you tried," Willow joked. "Do you think you and Abigail will stay around here?" she asked Lisa.

"Totally," Lisa answered quickly. "We love our jobs. Her family is here. Mine is just a few hours drive away. You all are here. What more could we ask for?"

"Looks like we're all in this for the long haul," Tori said as she threw her arms around Willow and me and motioned for Lisa to move in closer.

Lisa put her arm around Tori's waist and leaned her head on her shoulder. "There's no other bitches I'd rather be stuck with."

"You all know how much I love you, right?" Willow asked, a crack to her voice that told me this was a lot for her as well.

Tori leaned closer to Willow. "No need to get emotional, buddy. We know. We love you too."

"Seriously, though. You're the best friends a girl could ask for. I'm so lucky to have you."

We all shared a group hug that I didn't want to let go of, because how often did moments like this happen? Would we have another one with all four of us?

Luckily, I didn't have much time to harp on that question because the music picked up and soon we were all bouncing around as if we didn't have a care in the world.

The hours flew by, and soon it was time to get Emery home for bed. We had just gotten her hooked into her car seat when Willow's mom came running over to our car.

"Were you girls trying to leave without saying goodbye?" she asked when she reached us.

"Seeing as how we'll be at your house for breakfast in the morning, a drawn-out goodbye seemed unnecessary." When Mrs. Stone put her hands on her hips, Willow pulled her into a hug. "But you're right. We should have said goodbye. I love you, Mom."

Mrs. Stone pulled away and waved her hand in the air. "I'm only kidding. I just wanted to say what a nice day today was." She focused her attention on me. "It was so nice to get to do this all again with your parents. I can't even begin to tell you how happy I am that they've come so far."

This day was way too emotional and I was so tired at this point, but I was still very appreciative of her kind words. "Thank you. I'm happy too. And thanks for always being there for me when my parents weren't."

"Of course, sweetheart. You're family. You might have your parents back now, but that doesn't mean you're not my daughter." She chuckled softly and gave me a hug. It was quick but filled with so much warmth and love. "Hate to break it to you, but when you married Willow, you got the whole family. Now that you married her twice, you're really stuck with us for life."

I could tell she meant it, and even though she had no clue what was coming, I knew that wouldn't change after Willow was gone. Willow had given me so much in our time together, but one of the greatest gifts was the gift of her family.

We finished saying our goodbyes and got in the car, both of us quiet on the short drive home. We remained quiet as we did Emery's nighttime routine and put her in her crib. It was a comfortable silence. One that was needed after such a wonderful, yet emotional, day.

Willow didn't say a word as she took my hand and led me through the house and into our backyard to the blanket that we put out there for Emery to play on. We both lay down on it and snuggled close to each other, because words weren't necessary to know exactly what the other person needed.

We stared up at the night sky, only looking away when one of us kissed the other on the cheek or we turned at the same time to kiss each other. The sky was so big, and with all the stars out tonight, it was so bright as well. It made me wonder how the world could be so expansive, but in the end, all that matters to us is one person, or a small group of people. It's beautiful and tragic all at once, how the presence of one person out of millions can fill you up so much that getting by without them seems impossible.

I knew I'd make it through once Willow was gone. I didn't have a choice. We had a daughter that I was responsible for. I needed to be strong for her. The world wouldn't stop for me. But, would I ever be the same? The simple answer was no. Loving Willow and losing Willow was destined to change me. The question was how I would let it change me, if I even had any control over that.

We stayed out for about an hour before Willow stood and put her hand out to take mine once again. I took a shower, hoping I could find a way to wash away my sadness before getting into bed with Willow. I was in so long that she was asleep by the time I came out, but laying right beside her on my pillow was a note.

Rosemary,

Whenever you look up at the stars, I hope you think of me. Think of us; of how we shined so brightly even in the darkest times.

I love you. Always have and always will.

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Chapter 38

December 27, 2019

The next six months went by in a flash, but we packed so much into those months that it may as well have been years. Celebrating the last of everything together was so bittersweet. Knowing when a loved one is going to die is a blessing and a curse. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone, but also wouldn't change it if I could.

Most people don't have the advantage of knowing that the last hug, kiss, or goodbye is actually going to be the last. We look back and say we wish we had known, but why? What would we have done differently, and why didn't we do it in the first place?

As I lay in bed next to my wife on that last night together, I could tell you that being the wiser wasn't all it's cracked up to be. We had been lying in silence for who knows how long, both lost in our own thoughts, when Willow finally spoke. "I'm going to head out early tomorrow."

We had been over this so many times but hearing it still hadn't gotten easier. I knew Willow wanted to spend the day away from the house because she didn't want to drag Emery and me into whatever might happen to her, but I didn't understand why it had to be so soon. "What? Why?"

"We've talked about this. We don't know what's going to happen and when. I refuse to be around you two when it does."

Tears pricked at my eyes and I tried to hold them back, but I couldn't. Always the strong one, Willow tried to keep a straight face, but soon her bottom lip was quivering. "Please, babe, we promised no tears."

"That was a stupid promise. How am I not supposed to cry? You're the love of my life. It's my last night ever with my soulmate. What else am I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to love me with every single piece of you in the same way you have the past twelve years." Willow couldn't keep our promise either and now had tears streaming down her face.

"Twelve years. If I live to be eighty, that's only fifteen percent of my life. I hate that."

"But how was it?"

I choked on my tears. I couldn't do this. How was I supposed to do this? "Words could never describe what loving you has meant to me."

"Then show me."

"What?"

"Make love to me... one last time." Willow wiped at her cheeks, which were now covered in tears. "Please."

So, that's exactly what I did. I looked into my wife's eyes, knowing it was going to be the last time I touched her, the last time I felt her fall apart, and I made love to her as if it was the first time.

It started out slow. We each took our time removing one layer of clothes from each other at a time. I wanted to remember every touch, every moan, every little moment, so I made sure I did. I watched the way Willow's chest moved in and out as I lifted her shirt over her head. I noticed the way her legs tensed and her muscles showed as I slid her pants down her legs.

I took in how she watched me with hungry eyes while she removed my clothes as well. When my naked body connected with hers for the first time, I focused on every single spot my skin touched hers.

My shaky hands moved to her breasts, kneading one between my fingers and then the other while Willow moaned at my touch. I listened to the sound. I made a mental note of how my body felt when it rang in my ears. I appreciated how alive just one sound could make me feel.

Willow brought her mouth to my breasts, first running a tongue along them, then bringing them into her mouth one at a time. There was something magical about how she seemed to crawl inside of me while her tongue grazed my skin.

I felt her everywhere, and I hoped I always would. I wanted to sense her touch on my skin, even when she was no longer with me. I wanted to still taste her tongue on mine years from now. I closed my eyes and took it all in because what other choice did I have?

When she crawled on top of me, I knew exactly what was coming next, and I couldn't wait for it. She situated her legs between mine and we connected perfectly, just like we always had. When I felt her pleasure against mine, I moaned and pushed my body up against hers even harder. As she picked up her momentum, I was pretty sure I had never felt so connected to another person in my entire life, and I knew I never would.

We climaxed at the same time, and it was so perfectly tragic that I erupted into tears at that very moment. Willow did the same, and we held each other close as we came down from our orgasms and let all our sadness and fear break free.

We stayed up all night talking about everything—our past, my future, all the little moments in between. Except none of them were actually little moments, at least not now on the brink of Willow's death. That's how life worked though. Little moments always became big when we looked back on them.

We woke Emery an hour before the sun was scheduled to rise and danced around the kitchen together while we made breakfast. I stopped dancing to watch Willow hold our daughter and bounce her up and down as she scrambled the eggs. The two laughed together, both of their eyes lighting up in the exact same way. I let it all wash over me and burrow itself inside of me, and I knew whenever I looked into Emery's eyes, I would think of this moment.

When breakfast was ready, we all bundled up and went outside to watch the sunrise. As we draped a blanket over ourselves and snuggled close together, I thought about the first sunrise I watched with Willow, and the promise it held of how many more we had together. Now, it was our last, and all I wanted was to go back and do it all over again.

"Take care of my mom," Willow said just as the sun peeked out from behind the horizon.

"What?" I asked before I gave myself a chance to register her words.

"My mom. This is going to be so hard for her. I'm her little girl."

I put my hand on top of Willow's, a strength taking over that I never expected. "I'll take care of her. I'll take care of everyone. This world isn't going to be the same without you."

As I stared out at the sunrise, I could feel Willow's eyes on me. "I have no question that they'll take care of you too."

I turned to look at her, and those dark brown eyes pierced my soul. I had no question that Willow would always be with me in one way or another, but knowing I would never be able to look into those eyes and see them shining back at me ever again killed me. I wanted to beg her to stay, to try to fight whatever this fate was that was destined to break up this

beautiful life we created together. I knew in my heart that's not how this worked though.

The whole "Heaven needed an angel" sentiment was such bullshit. What about what I needed? What about what this world needed?

"Don't do that," Willow said quietly, still staring right at me. "Don't let anger rule over this moment. Just love."

"Just love," I repeated.

I lay my head on her shoulder and let Emery grab onto my finger from where she sat on Willow's lap. I'm not sure how long we sat like this before Willow whispered, "It's time," but I knew it wasn't long enough. It would never be long enough.

I picked Emery up and took Willow's hand that I held tightly as we walked through the house. Once we were at the front door, Willow dropped my hand.

She turned to Emery first, making soft cooing noises before kissing her on the forehead. "Take care of your mommy, kiddo. I love you."

"And you..." Willow stared at me for a minute before saying anything else, her eyes glistening with the tears I knew she wouldn't let fall. "You'll always be my greatest love story."

"And you'll always be mine."

She put a hand on my cheek and leaned in to kiss me one last time. When she pulled away, a small smile played on her lips. "I hope not."

She winked at me and walked away, and I knew. For all of my wishing that this somehow wasn't real, I knew it was the last time I would ever see her.

My heart shattered when I got the call just a few hours later. Still, I had to smile. She had lived more in thirty-one years than most people did in eighty. I had loved more in the twelve years I knew her than most people will love in their entire lives. By not being afraid of death, she had taught me how to live.

It's been exactly two years since I lost Willow, and I still miss her every single day. I miss her laugh. I miss the way she used to hold me. Most of all, I miss her zest for life.

Life hasn't been easy since her passing, but just as she promised, I know she's here with me. I see her in the morning sunrise. I hear her in Emery's laugh. And I swear, I even feel her arms wrap around me when I lay down to sleep at night.

I look up at the big framed picture above my fireplace. It's a picture of Willow laughing at who knows what. Her head is thrown back, her eyes are closed, and her smile takes up her whole face. The frame is inscribed with the words "Live Like Willow," which was a phrase Tori coined for her funeral.

Because that's what's really important here. It's not about how she died. The important part is how she lived—the way we all should, whether we get nine or ninety years on this earth. I still don't understand why she had to be taken from us so soon. I also can't comprehend how she was able to learn her fate when so many people are taken without warning every single day. These are answers I'll probably never get, but there's one thing I know for sure—the world would be a better place if everyone lived like Willow.

Just like I always do when I pass by, I blow a kiss at the picture, then put a hand over my chest and take a few deep breaths. I remind myself that I'm still alive. My heart is still beating. I'm still breathing. I owe it to Willow to live the life she no longer can.

"I love you, babe," I whisper to myself.

I feel a tug on my pants and look down to see Emery standing beside me. Her inquisitive eyes look so much like Willow's as she tilts her head to one side. "Who you talking to, Mama?"

I put my hand on her head and ruffle her hair. "Your mommy." Emery bounces up and down. "Can I do kisses?"

"Of course." I pick her up and hold her up to the picture so she can kiss it like she's done so many times before. I put her back down and ruffle her hair once more. "Let's go. Grandma and Grandpa are waiting for us."

Emery squeals in excitement, and my heart swells with love. Life isn't perfect. It's still hard not having Willow here. I'm sure it always will be. But I'm living. I'm living truly and fully, which is more than can be said for most people. And I owe that all to Willow Stone.

Live like Willow

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Discussion Questions

- 1. If you could find out when you were going to die, would you? How do you think that would change your life?
- 2. If you could find out when a loved one was going to die, would you? How do you think that would change your relationship with them?
- 3. Do your answers to the two above questions make you question your current approach to your life and relationships?
- 4. Do you agree with Willow's choice to not tell anyone she was going to die or do you find it selfish that she didn't give them a chance to say goodbye?
- 5. If you were in Rosemary's position, would you have pursued a relationship with Willow knowing what you knew?
- 6. If you knew how/when you (or a loved one) was going to die, would you do anything to try to change that fate?
- 7. What is your favorite *Willow-ism* (i.e. scene, quote, or mantra of Willow's)?
- 8. While this isn't a conventional happily ever after, did the story still make you happy or did it only make you sad? Why do you think that is?
- 9. How did you feel about the ending of this book? Were you glad Willow's death wasn't talked about or did you feel unfulfilled not knowing what happened?
- 10. What does "living like Willow" mean to you and what are you going to do to live your life more like Willow?

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