

LAURA LANGA



Love Beyond
THE
DIAMOND

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Waves
BASEBALL

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For Evie and Tess,
and for anyone who has or loves someone with T1D

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CHAPTER 1



Willow

Dog hair, glitter confetti, and the Bee Gees at full blast do not an enjoyable evening make. Or rather, *it would* if I was running off more than four hours of broken sleep. I'm usually down for an impromptu after-work club crawl on a Friday night, especially if it's to celebrate my beloved boss's fiftieth birthday. Spur-of-the-moment chaos normally fuels me, but I can't shake the bone-deep exhaustion that's been hounding me the last few weeks. I also can't seem to evade the creeper who hasn't taken no for an answer the last twenty-six times.

Beelining for the bar, I wedge myself between the wall and a man in all black who doesn't look up from his glass full of clear liquid and lime wedges.

"Can I..." I tip my chin to the empty barstool, where his black boot is resting on the lowest rung.

"I don't want company."

Okay, Grumpypus.

Normally, I'd try to brighten this stranger's day, but I'm zonked...and a little irritated at his assumption. So what if he's got shoulders for days and gorgeous copper hair that flirts with the collar of his dress shirt? He shouldn't assume I'm here to talk to him. I'm here to grab a moment of much-needed rest and order something to quench the thirst I can't escape.

“Neither do I, but unfortunately, I keep getting hit on by this guy who won’t take no for an answer. Do me a favor and direct that grouchy glare at anyone who comes my way. I just need a minute’s rest.”

He doesn’t say anything, but a muscle in his jaw pops as his fingers tighten around his highball glass. The action draws my attention to his impressively sculpted and tattooed forearms.

“Shirley Temple, please,” I tell the bartender when she nods in my direction.

Folding my arms over the bar top, I nestle my face into them with an exhausted exhale. There’s a clink near my elbow, and I mumble, “Thank you,” assuming it’s my drink. I’ll suck it down in just a minute, but right now I just need to—

“Lolo! Come back to the dance floor!”

I raise my head, looking over my shoulder at my co-worker-turned-best-friend, Delilah. She’s wearing the same purple paw-print scrubs I am, even though she doesn’t work with animals as the vet clinic’s front desk coordinator.

“In a minute!”

When Delilah pouts and pantomimes pulling a rope, a bright smile overtakes my face. It stinks working three part-time jobs to barely scrape by, but at least this job has Delilah. She’s been my closest friend since moving to Virginia Beach six months ago.

I lift my drink, pointing to my mouth before clutching my hand over my throat to pantomime my ever-present thirst. My elbow accidentally bumps the guy next to me during my theatrics, and he shifts away slightly.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

Broody McGrumperson simply grunts.

When Delilah rolls her eyes and turns to dance with the rest of our veterinary practice, I chug half of the glass, forgoing the straw. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand before getting distracted by the clumps of goldendoodle hair still stuck to my scrub sleeve.

I miss being covered in flecks of paint instead of animal hair, especially since I’m allergic to cats and dogs. Thank goodness for over-the-counter antihistamines and a willingness to do *anything* to pay rent while chipping away at my staggering two-hundred-thousand-dollar art school loans.

A tickle pricks my nose halfway through brushing off the hair, and the urge to sneeze hits me so fast I don’t have time to set down my Shirley

Temple.

That seasick sensation swoops low in my belly. It always happens right before I make a giant fool of myself. The first time I felt it was as a clumsy pre-schooler when I tripped into Miss Taylor's backside with paint-covered hands. Whenever I was embarrassed after one of my *episodes*, my mom would tuck me beneath her chin, squeezing me so tight it was almost hard to breathe. She'd tell me I was absolutely perfect just the way I was—even if I occasionally lit the kitchen towels on fire or accidentally dented the hood of the car.

A noisy inhale fills my open mouth as my hand drops the glass to cover my sneeze. Tiny stars pop over my squeezed-shut eyelids at the same time a wooded scent engulfs me. I'm puzzled when there's no sound of my drink hitting the bar top. My eyes snap open just as the man's large hand sets the glass in front of me.

Wait.

Did he just catch that in midair?

I stare at the swirling ice of my Shirley Temple for two beats before glancing right. Mr. Grumpypus doesn't look like he's moved a muscle. He's still rigidly hunched over his own drink, jaw tight.

But...

I saw his hand on my glass. Didn't I?

That wasn't a hallucination.

Right?

"I need to get more sleep," I mutter, rubbing my fist against my left eye.

When my knuckles come back smeared with black, I groan. I forgot I'd painted wingtips this morning. It was the only way to relieve that tight coil in my chest from not touching a canvas in months. Using liquid eyeliner isn't the same as wielding a brush, but it's as close as I could get today.

Maybe I should fold my arms over the bar again and give up on today. Delilah can wake me when Dr. Auerbach is done doing *the worm* in the middle of our office's dance circle. A part of me wishes the man next to me didn't have whip-fast reflexes. If I was covered in sticky soda, it'd be the perfect excuse to head home without letting anyone down.

Ignoring the gnawing pit in my stomach, I draw in a shaky breath and square my shoulders. Then I do what I always do when things go sideways: I prompt myself with *This is good because...*

When my boyfriend of three years broke up with me: *This is good because it gives me a chance to be single and really get to know myself.*

When I overheard my closest art friends ruthlessly mocking my paintings: *This is good because now I know they're not true friends, and I can make new ones.*

Both of those back-to-back events led to my move to Virginia Beach.

A pitiful whine escapes me when I see the guy who won't leave me alone walking toward the bar. It's hard to miss him in that purple metallic short-sleeve button-down and jorts.

My eyes press closed as I remind myself, "This is good because you get to practice holding your boundaries. If creepy guys didn't hit on you, you wouldn't get to stand your ground."

The second the words are out of my mouth, the man next to me crowds into my space. I'm transported to a pine grove when he places his boot on the bottom rung and extends a muscled arm over the back of my chair. His scent is...familiar? Like I've smelled this particular combination of woodsy top notes with a warm spicy undertone before.

It reminds me of being snuggled into a cozy sweater, drinking a spiced cider, while staring at green-wrapped branches. Mentally, I give myself a shake. I'm probably just remembering one of the many camping spots Mom took me as a kid because we couldn't afford to stay at a motel.

"Which guy?" he practically growls.

I shiver at the sound of his deep voice so close to my ear.

"The one in purple."

When he cranes his neck over his shoulder, I catch sight of the amber stubble on his spectacular jawline. You might think I'm just ogling Mr. Grumpypus, but it's my job to notice details as a hyperrealist painter. Up until recently, my life revolved around shapes, light, and proportion. Now, I'm rushing between the vet clinic, the coffee shop, and cleaning luxury condos. Not exactly where I saw myself at twenty-four after attending one of the most prestigious art schools in the country.

His muscles tense as he focuses on the approaching man. When they lock gazes, he slowly slides his thumb across his throat.

My eyes widen as a surprised breath punches from me. "Did you just threaten to off Shiny Shirt?"

All I get is a caveman-like grunt before he takes a sip of his drink, his left arm still draped possessively over my chair. It's at this exact moment that I

realize I made a *huge mistake*. I traded an annoying man for a dangerous one. One who looks like he could snap my femur singlehandedly, who currently has me boxed into the corner.

What was I saying about this being good? Something about boundaries?

Yes, I just need to tell this mafia boss that I'd like him to remove his tattooed forearm from my chair.

Easy peasy.

"Could you..." I pause, distracted by the thrumming pulse in my neck. "Could you, um..."

When his eyes meet mine, our faces close, my words halt with a shaky exhale. He has the most gorgeous green eyes I've ever seen. Their asymmetry is the first thing I notice. The color blends unevenly between his two irises, almost like they're two entirely different landscapes. Add in the dark outer ring and a handful of golden flecks on the far-right side, and I'm already strategizing how I'd accurately capture them.

"What do you need?"

When gentle concern wisps across his forehead, the anxiety sprinting through my veins stops cold. Though the planes of his face remain sharp and foreboding, his gaze grows impossibly soft. The juxtaposition has me blinking hard.

What was it that I wanted again?

"Uh." I laugh, tugging on the edge of my bangs.

All of a sudden, his lips swoop into a deep frown. "Your breath."

I cover my mouth, mortified. "I'm sorry."

He shakes his head, some of his longish hair bouncing off his temples. "It's sweet. Like you just had a bowl of Fruity Pebbles." He shifts even closer, his gaze darting all over my face. "You said you were tired?"

My brows crash together, not following his train of thought.

"Yes. Constantly. I work three jobs."

He draws in a nasally inhale. "And you're thirsty?"

"Yes," I say slowly, gaze narrowing.

How does he know that?

"Are you using the restroom more than normal?"

"What?"

I rear back so quickly I almost hit my head on the wall. The blow is cushioned by his hand gently cradling the back of my head. Though I'm

grateful for his whip-fast reflexes, this line of questioning is creeping me out.

“Where’s your insulin?” His focus bounces between the pulse point in my neck and my eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, standing.

Mafia boss or not, I’m out of here. It’s been too long of a day—month, really.

“No.” His fingers curl around my wrist. “You can’t go home.”

My pulse thrums in my throat as I tilt my chin up. “Just try and stop me.”

He grunts, tossing a stack of bills on the bar, grabbing a black motorcycle helmet I hadn’t seen to the right of his chair, and then scooping me up until I’m pressed tight across his chest.

I struggle against his firm hold, but my slim frame and dexterous fingers are no match for his brute strength as he stomps toward the exit.

“Great. Now, I’m getting kidnapped.”

CHAPTER 2



Shane

“I’m not kidnapping you,” I say through gritted teeth, pushing out of the noisy club toward the parking lot. “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

All night, I’ve been irritated at our first baseman, Tenny Jackson, for two reasons. The first was for adding me back into the inane group chat he started over spring training, and the second was for dragging me out to this so-called “team-building exercise.”

After we finished tonight’s second game of our season-opening homestand, Tenny insisted we all go dancing. I’d planned on skipping this nonsense altogether, but Trevor Chapman, our team’s catcher, pulled me aside and suggested I make an appearance. Since he’s the revered unofficial leader of the Waves and a baseball legend, I begrudgingly listened.

Now, though, I’m grateful I came to this dumb dance club, subjecting my eardrums to deafening music while ruminating about how tired I was going to be at tomorrow’s game.

What if someone hadn’t noticed the signs?

She finally stops writhing in my arms. “You’re what?”

“I’m taking you to the hospital.” I set her down beside my black Ducati. “I think you’re having a diabetic crisis.”

A pout laces her distractingly full lips. “But I don’t have diabetes.”

“That’s what my childhood best friend thought, until his blood sugar was so high it almost killed him in the middle of practice. He had the same

symptoms as you: fruity breath, excessive thirst, exhaustion, the need to use the—”

“I get the idea,” she interrupts with an outstretched palm.

A beat passes, and I feel the weight of time like the tick of a doomsday clock. When this happened to Bryce, he passed out, forcing the coach to call 911. That was when they discovered he had type 1 diabetes.

She crosses her arms over her scrub top. “There’s no way to know if you’re telling the truth. You could be telling me lies in order to harvest my kidneys.”

Resisting the urge to fist my hands because we’re wasting precious time, I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Here’s my contact information. Send it and your location to a friend, or your parents, or your...boyfriend.”

I don’t know why the last word comes out rougher than the rest.

She taps her phone to mine, reading aloud. “Shane Seaver. That name sounds familiar.”

I grind my molars, not really wanting to get into the ins and outs of being traded to the Virginia Beach Waves. I was supposed to finish out my five-year contract with the Atlanta Stallions. Instead, I was traded right before the league cutoff last season. And if that wasn’t enough of a gut punch, I was sent to the team where my cheating ex-fiancée and her new boyfriend had secured jobs months earlier. The last fastball to the throat is that the guy she cheated with—and got pregnant by—is one of my coaches.

“Do you sound familiar because I’ve heard your name on the news?” The woman’s brown eyes narrow beneath her black bangs, the rest of her chin-length hair flitting in the late-night breeze.

My chin tilts skyward, looking for patience when I’m always in short supply.

“I knew it!” she says, entirely too excited. “You *are* a mafia boss. The motorcycle was just the icing on the tattooed, all-black, talk-to-me-and-die cake.”

Something about her overjoyed tone makes my lips quirk, but I firm them into a line before I level her with a stern look.

“I’m not with the mafia. I’m just trying to get you to the nearest hospital. If you’d stop yapping and get on the bike, we could be having this conversation while you’re getting checked out.” A hard swallow works my throat as I thrust my helmet toward her. “Where you’d be *safe*.”

She surveys me for two long seconds. “You really think something’s wrong?”

“Yes.”

She purses her lips. “The thing is, I can’t really afford a trip to the emergency room right now.”

“I’ll cover it.”

“You’d pay for a stranger’s visit to the ER?”

I don’t answer, just shake the outstretched helmet. She accepts it with a sigh. I have no idea why the sight of her tucking it over her hair makes my chest flip. Probably nerves about getting her to the hospital in time.

I also shove my riding jacket at her. Since it’s late March and hovering around fifty degrees, she doesn’t argue with me about taking it and zipping it up to her chin.

“Have you ridden before?” I ask, straddling my bike.

“No.” Her voice is a little muffled, but I can still see her eyes with the visor tilted up.

“Keep your feet up, try to lean with me, and hang on.” I start the engine, unexpectedly pleased when she doesn’t jump at the deep rumble. “It won’t take us long to get there.”

“But you were drinking.” Her hand raises to adjust her bangs before she realizes they’re trapped in my helmet.

I shake my head. “Club soda and lime. I don’t drink.”

Not during baseball season, anyway. I’ve been known to enjoy a carefully aged Bordeaux at Christmas, but not while I’m demanding my body to operate at its peak.

Her shoulders rise and fall with a deeply drawn breath before she juts her hand in my direction. Even in the wan lamplight, I can see that each of her nails are painted a different color.

“Willow.” When I don’t move, she adds, “I figure you should know the name of your latest organ donor.”

I fight against the tic in my cheek.

“Again, just trying to get you to the hospital,” I say, briefly wrapping my hand around hers while trying not to notice how soft her skin is. “Can we go now?”

“You really *are* a grumpypus.”

You would be too if you’ve been through what I have.

“Get on the bike, Willow.” It’s a growling command, and I’m surprised when she doesn’t cower. Most people do when I bark at them.

She meets my gaze head-on before holding up an impertinent finger. “Let me send your info, my location, and tell my friend where we’re going first.”

Her thumbs fly over the screen before she tucks her phone into her pants pocket with a sigh. “Here goes everything.”

I face forward, feeling her hand on my shoulder as she swings a leg over the bike. Then she settles behind me, gingerly gripping the fabric of my dress shirt.

“Hang on.”

“I *am*.” Her answer has a bit of an edge to it, and this time, I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

Instead of arguing with her, I jolt the bike forward and then clamp down on the brakes. Willow gasps, her arms tightening around my torso.

Better.

Much better.

I ease into the throttle, even though I want to gun it for time’s sake, turning out of the parking lot as a group of scrub-clad people spill out of the back door.

“It only looks like a kidnapping!” Willow shouts at the blonde woman waving her arms in the air.

My head shakes on its own before I realize my mouth has curled at the edges.

It only takes four short minutes and a few broken traffic laws before I’m pulling in front of the ER, parking my bike illegally, closest to the doors, and cutting the engine.

“Sir, you can’t—

“Ticket me,” I bark at the hospital employee before looking over my shoulder at Willow. “You need to get off first. I have to balance the bike.”

Her eyes are wide through the eye port, making me wince internally. She would have been more comfortable during that breakneck ride with the visor down. I shift my weight, but Willow doesn’t move, her arms snug around my waist.

“You have to let go,” I try again, tone softer.

The slight shake of her head is almost imperceptible.

“Willow.”

“I don’t want any of this.”

The way her voice cracks does me in.

My hand settles over her knee with a gentle squeeze. “I know, honey, but you need to go inside.”

Honey? Where did that come from?

I only ever called my former fiancée, Brielle, by her first name. Though...maybe if I’d used a pet name, she wouldn’t have left me for another man.

My eyes press closed as I settle myself with a controlled inhale. The whole reason Willow is on the back of my bike—a spot Brielle refused to take because it was too dangerous—was to get her here. Now, we’re within feet of the ER’s fluorescent lights, and she won’t dismount.

I open my mouth, but Willow speaks first, her voice a whisper.

“Stay with me?”

The urge to say no, to maintain my rigid boundaries, rears like a savage beast, but even *I’m* not that heartless.

I nod, mentally telling myself that I’ll only stay until her friends get here. Though Willow hasn’t noticed, her phone has been glowing in her pants pocket since we’ve arrived. I’m sure someone else—someone *better equipped* to take care of her—is on their way.

Willow exhales against me, her shoulders shuddering, before shifting until her shoe touches the cement. Once she’s safely on the ground and tugging off my helmet, I dismount.

“What do I get if you’re wrong?” Willow asks, her voice upbeat as we stride toward the hospital doors.

“Excuse me?” I ask, genuinely baffled by how Willow swung from terrified to cheery in a matter of seconds.

If I’m in a bad mood, it sticks to me for hours. Days.

My incredulous tone only makes her smile widen. “When you’re wrong, and we made this dramatic entrance for nothing.”

“I’m not wrong.”

“But if you *are*...” She points that snarky finger in my direction. “What do I get?”

“Why should you get anything?”

Her shoulders bounce. “Inconvenience fee.”

“Not dying is a great perk.”

Her head tilts to the side as she squints playfully. “Are you always this dark?”

I grunt before pushing toward the nurse's desk, giving the man behind the counter a quick rundown of Willow's symptoms. As expected, he pulls her straight back.

Willow's eyes flicker with fear as she glances back at me.

"Mafia members aren't known for being light and fluffy," I tell her, following closely.

The relief wisping over her tense brow shouldn't affect me the way it does. It feels like something inside my chest twists or...unlatches? I rub my knuckles against my sternum to push away the odd sensation.

The next few minutes are a whirlwind of people and activity. I've never been inside an ER before. I've been taken care of by team docs over the years, but never with this much staff around. It's unnerving, and I'm not even at the center of it. An ER tech asks me to step outside at one point, but I respond with a gruff, "I'm not going anywhere."

They shout out normal-sounding vitals and then 510 for her blood sugar. From years of watching Bryce balance his blood sugar, I know that's incredibly high. The air punches out of my lungs as I reposition myself at the head of Willow's bed, out of the way from the healthcare workers.

Another ER tech holds a rapid-result device, measuring Willow's blood ketones.

"Negative," he says, quickly moving to the next task.

"The good news is you're not in DKA, but we still need to get your blood sugar down," an older doctor tells Willow.

IV fluids are already running when a nurse steps forward with an insulin injection.

A myriad of overlapping beeps pepper the room as I crouch beside Willow. "I'm glad they're getting your kidneys in tip-top shape before I remove them."

It's a *terrible* joke, but I'm not known for my humor. I'm not known for much, other than being reliable with a bat and quick in the outfield.

She lets out an amused snort, and the sound eases some of the tension in my shoulders.

"Your friend"—Willow pauses, swallowing hard—"that this happened to. He's okay?"

"Yes," I reassure her. "He's still a bit of a goofball, but he's fine. Healthy. Married. Kids. Stable job. The whole nine."

Willow's lips soften into a small smile.

“What position did he play?”

“Goalie.”

Her dark brows scrunch before a magenta-painted fingernail slides up my wrist toward the baseball diamond tattoo on my left forearm. It seamlessly flows into the expanded checkerboard wrapping my elbow.

“There are goalies in baseball?”

A tendon in my neck jumps, like it always does when thinking about my childhood. How my father’s and older brother’s choices and opinions dominated my life until I finally had something of my own.

“I used to be a hockey player.”

“Lolo!” The blonde woman from earlier rushes into the room, all but jumping on the stretcher to give Willow a hug. “Are you okay?” Her head snaps toward the closest nurse. “Tell me she’s going to be okay.”

As her friend and nurse engage in a lively back and forth, I stand.

“I should...”

“You’re leaving?”

I don’t know what to do with the disappointment in Willow’s voice.

“It’s better this way. I was only going to use you for your body anyway.”

When her brows shoot up, I grimace.

“That’s not what I—” I rake a hand over my face. “This is why I don’t make jokes.”

Or rescue people. Or get involved.

Things are better if I stay in my lane—focusing on baseball.

A few beats pass before my mouth speaks without permission. “I’m glad you’re safe, Willow.”

What is *with me* tonight?

I should be giving her a curt nod and storming out of this room now that her friend is here, not...being honest.

“Thank you.”

Something about her wobbly voice makes me feel like an exposed nerve.

Gritting my teeth, I turn to leave, pausing at the doorway to add, “I’ll talk to registration on the way out and make sure the bill is sent to me.”

“I don’t want your blood money.”

Willow’s cheeky response on the heels of her transparent vulnerability almost makes me turn around just to see the smirk on her face.

“Too bad.” My own lips twitch, but I don’t let it show in my tone.

“You’re getting it.”

I think I hear her friend ask, “Was that Shane Seaver from the Waves?”
over Willow’s guffaw, but it doesn’t matter.

I’m never going to see Willow again.

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CHAPTER 3



Willow

A week later, and I've *really* gotten the hang of this diabetes thing. Just kidding. I'm barely hanging on by the skin of my teeth. The overwhelm from thinking about every carbohydrate I consume is exhausting.

I grew up in a household where my mom would say things like, "Be sure you thank your feet for carrying you through the day," and only wore makeup to church. Counting calories was *not* a part of my upbringing. She was more concerned that I was living a happy and fulfilled life than what size jeans I wore.

Though I'm eternally grateful for my grounded upbringing, it means I know nothing about nutritional values. For example, do you know a banana has twenty-seven grams of carbs? That's almost as much as two slices of bread!

Maybe you do.

Maybe you were raised by an almond mom or are an athlete and keep track of your macros and how much protein you need for muscle growth.

Thinking of muscles, my mind automatically slips back to the memory of tight athletic shoulders as Shane walked out of my hospital room, his hands fisted at his sides as if leaving was difficult.

To be honest, I've been thinking of my tattooed rescuer far more than I should. It'd be easier to be grateful for Shane's quick thinking and write him off if he wasn't such an enigma. Delilah quickly identified him as the

right fielder for our local MLB team, but I'd been too preoccupied by small details to consider big-picture concepts like Shane's profession.

Like how he could be gruff and then tender in the same breath. Or how the inked flames licking down his right forearm were utterly distracting, tempting me to fill their empty spaces with paint. Or how mystified I was when I hopped on the back of a racing motorcycle, feeling completely safe the entire time, when I'm not much of a thrill seeker.

The need to properly thank Shane thrums like an incessant drumbeat against my skull, but I keep getting stuck on one important question: what's the right thank-you gift for the man who literally saved my life and then footed the bill?

A fruit basket, maybe?

Balloons?

The idea of Shane grimacing at bobbing mylar balloons pushes a barking laugh from my mouth.

Maybe I could up the ante and include a singing telegram?

He'd probably *hate* that.

The idea of poking my grumpy protector sends bubbly joy zipping to the tips of my toes. The only setback to this train of thought is that I'd want to see Shane's reaction in person. I'd want to witness that tight flex of his neck muscles, the bunch of his copper eyebrows. My mind swan dives into what it would be like to talk to him again, to reexperience the playful back and forth that seemed effortless.

I shake my head at the ridiculous thought. Shane's actions that night couldn't have been clearer. Even through the haze of high blood sugar, it's clear he was there to render aid.

That's it.

Squashing my girlish delusions, I focus on scouring the bathroom sink at the third property I've cleaned today. This place is always so tidy I barely have anything to do, but I still give it the same thorough scrub down. All three are located in a luxury condo building in downtown Virginia Beach. Unlike the other properties—one classically chic, the other borderline gaudy—this one almost lacks personality, like the owner hasn't made it a home yet.

Another major difference is that this property is a breathtaking penthouse. Sitting on the top floor of the tallest building in the city, the entire unit is wrapped with unadorned floor-to-ceiling windows.

Because who's going to look in at you when you live in the sky?

I whimpered when I first saw it, the light is *that* spectacular. It bends through the space as the sun shifts in an almost playful way. Add in the fourteen-foot ceilings and I had to physically stop myself from salivating.

My favorite medium is oil, but my favorite canvas size is monumental—larger than eight feet. It's something I almost never get to work on due to its large scope. What I wouldn't give to be able to set a wall-sized canvas inside this home and paint to my heart's content.

My phone beeping in my back pocket distracts me from my delightful daydream. My continuous glucose monitor—or CGM—screams at me via its app. The upside of learning to give myself insulin and keeping my blood sugar out of dangerously high ranges is that I've felt so much better this week. My thirst is curbed, I feel less foggy, and I have the energy of a brand-new puppy.

The downside is I feel like I'm latched to a rollercoaster against my will. I'm hyper-aware of the ups and downs of my blood sugar, overanalyzing every sensation. My shaky hands pull out my phone to see what I already suspected—low blood sugar.

After hours of working on my feet—and sometimes, my hands and knees—it's no wonder. I cleaned the first two units during daylight hours but didn't get to this one until early evening. Though it's almost eleven now, with the city lights fighting the stars for attention, the owner isn't here. The company I work for has strict rules that employees can only clean when homeowners are absent. I guess rich people don't like knowing who's scrubbing their toilets.

I give the counter one final sweep with my cleaning cloth and take my supplies to the kitchen where I left my purse. Setting the spray bottle and cloth next to my mop bucket, I rifle through my bag. Anxiety pistons through my veins when the tube of grape glucose tablets feels suspiciously light.

"Shoot," I mutter, finding it empty.

I meant to buy more tabs on my drive over but got distracted by a dramatic rendition of "One Day More," belting all the lines with my windows open.

"Maybe..."—I glance around the palatial kitchen—"maybe the gazillionaire who's on a business trip won't mind if I borrow a little juice?"

After swinging open the refrigerator door, I survey the contents. The doors are covered with protein shakes and bottles of water. Tidy storage containers filled with prepared meals cover the left side, while the right side looks more like my fridge—random bags of veggies, fruits, eggs, jars of condiments, and...bingo! Orange juice.

It only takes a few minutes of digging in the cabinets to find a Pyrex measuring cup. After pouring four ounces of juice, I chug it straight from the glass.

My phone rings as I'm setting a timer for fifteen minutes—the time I'll need to reevaluate if I need more juice.

"Hey there, Delilah," I answer with a smile, quoting the song title as often as I can.

"How's my favorite insulin-dependent legend?" she asks, not skipping a beat.

"Should you be saying that? Your husband has T1D."

The unexpected blessing of having Adam available for questions—when I don't want to pester my endocrinologist more than I already have—makes me deeply grateful. Delilah is also incredibly knowledgeable, having been there when Adam was diagnosed two years into their marriage. She offered to follow me on my CGM app, but I drew the line at having my best friend worrying about my health when she also has a full-time job and an eight-year-old daughter to take care of.

Sometimes I lie awake thinking about how if I'd told Delilah how I'd been feeling these last few weeks, I could have avoided rushing to the emergency room.

But then, I wouldn't have met Shane.

Delilah makes a *psssh* sound. "Adam knows you're my favorite. He's not jealous—not that much, anyway."

I laugh, fishing for my earbuds and popping in the working one so I can keep cleaning while we chat. My bucket is already filled with water and the lemon cleaner I prefer for hardwoods.

"My defunct pancreas appreciates your affection. What were you up to tonight?"

"Disney movie sing-along. You?"

"Hot date with a mop."

"You *know*..." Delilah starts, but I cut her off.

"No. We're not going there."

“If you asked out the sexy baseball player, you wouldn’t be alone on a Friday night. There, I said it,” she tells me in a rush.

“I already told you we’re not entertaining that thought, and besides, he’s busy tonight.” The second the words are out of my mouth, I wince, squeezing my eyes shut.

My friend has been *relentless* about insisting I reach out to the man who swooped in to save me, swearing she felt “a connection” between the two of us. Even if there was, I’m in no place—emotionally or physically—for a new relationship.

Regardless, I saved a screenshot of the Waves game schedule. You never know when that information could come in handy. Maybe I’ll use it at a trivia night in my non-existent free time.

Delilah titters, delighted. “Is he? Home or away?”

Home, my mind replies automatically, but I force myself to say, “I don’t know.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

“How was Piper’s dance recital?”

It still makes my stomach sick that I wasn’t able to attend my unofficial niece’s performance because my boss at the coffee shop wouldn’t let me switch shifts. Indy, a nice college student who also works there, was willing to trade, but Gus wouldn’t allow it because it interrupted the ‘consistency of customer experience.’ Like the baristas are cast members in a theme park or something.

Patrons don’t even pay attention to us. Most of the time, they use the mobile pickup option and don’t even look up when they snatch it from the counter by the door.

“Nice diversion, but we’re circling back to Shane after I answer.”

I hum, noncommittal.

While Delilah gushes over Piper’s ballet and jazz routines before retelling the hilarious, yet adorable, hijinks from the five-year-old class, I finish mopping. I’d usually be done and home in flannel pajamas by now, but taking breaks to calculate insulin for my meals instead of carelessly choking down a granola bar while I vacuum has slowed the process.

“Back to Shane,” Delilah announces after finishing her story.

I groan. “It’s not going to happen. You need to let it go.”

“Willow, I’m married with a kid. You have to let me live vicariously through you.”

“Hey,” I hear Adam grumble from the background.

Muffled sounds come over my earbud like Delilah put the phone to her chest before I hear a distinct kissing sound.

“As I was saying...”

Clearly, it’s time to nip this in the bud once and for all.

“It doesn’t matter if Shane was incredibly caring despite having honey badger energy, that kind of man is out of my reach.”

“What kind of man?” Delilah asks.

I blow my bangs out of my face, frustrated. “Ridiculously hot. Talented. Successful.”

“You’re adorable and immensely talented. I don’t see the problem.”

My eyes press closed, trying to think of a way to convince Delilah that things just don’t work out that way. Or at least, they don’t for me. Though I’ve always tried to look on the bright side of every situation, lately...all I see is failure.

My failed attempts to gain recognition as an artist.

My failed relationship with my ex-boyfriend.

My failing pancreas.

I’m a sinking ship, and based on my light internet stalking, at twenty-eight, Shane has already had a successful ten-year baseball career with a bright future ahead of him. I wouldn’t want to drag him down—and that was if he was even interested in me.

Which *he’s not*.

I drop the mop in the bucket. “Can we just let this—”

My skin prickles with goosebumps as I hear the slide of elevator doors opening in the background.

Shoooooot.

The homeowner is here, and I still have the juice bottle open on the counter, the contents of my purse scattered beside the dirty Pyrex cup. Stooping to pick up the bucket, I hustle to the kitchen as fast as I can without sloshing dirty water everywhere. A faint thud comes from the entry, like the homeowner dropped a bag on the floor.

“What’s going on?” Delilah asks, but I ignore her, shoving the juice back in the fridge and hastily washing and drying the measuring cup.

I slide across the floor before opening the cabinet. A rush of victory coats my skin because I’m almost in the clear. But then, I freeze, fingers still wrapped around the glass handle.

It suddenly smells like pine and spice and...the main bedroom.

My chin twitches right, finding black-sweats-clad legs, hoodie-covered arms, and strong hands holding a stack of letters beneath the open cabinet door. Even with his face obscured, I *know*.

“Willow?” His voice is as familiar as his scent.

“Shane?” I lean backward, peeking around the wood dividing us.

When his focused gaze crashes with mine, I gasp, dropping the cup. Without taking his eyes off me, Shane catches it before it hits the counter.

Then, the strangest thing happens.

The corner of his mouth twitches like...like he’s happy I almost shattered a glass measuring cup all over his freshly cleaned kitchen. Or maybe it’s just an involuntary facial tic? His lips quickly firm into a hard line, his free hand clenching his mail.

“You’re my maid?”

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CHAPTER 4



Shane

“We’re called house cleaners,” Willow tells me, taking out an earbud. Whoever is on the line cackles like an unhinged person before Willow pulls her phone out of her back pocket and hangs up on them. The phone immediately pings with two rapid-fire texts before she silences it with a frown.

“Right,” I grit out, unable to think of anything else to say because the person I’ve been thinking about nonstop over the last week is standing in my kitchen.

I want to ask her a million questions. How is she feeling? Is she adjusting to her diagnosis? Can I do anything to help? Does she ever think about that moment outside the ER, with my hand on her knee?

Forcing myself to create distance, I turn toward the large center island and set the measuring cup and the stack of envelopes on it. I usually pitch my fan mail straight into the trash, but for some reason, I don’t want to do that in front of Willow.

“You clean houses?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

I’m hoping that holding my body rigid will stop the spinning sensation careening through my veins. It’s just...

This is *really* weird.

I’ve spent the last week thinking about Willow, and—poof—here she is.

What's that thing my teammate Colton is always gibbering about? Manifesting? That doesn't apply outside of optimizing your at-bat, right?

The urge to check on Willow this past week had been stalker-level creepy, but I'd refrained, reminding myself that Willow was capable. She'd stood up to me, hadn't she? Also, her coworkers obviously loved her, so she had a great support system. More importantly, she hadn't shared her information when I gave her mine. Me looking her up after learning her full name—Willow Huntley—in an emergency would be sketchy as heck.

Willow tugs at the collar of her tie-dye shirt, blinking. "It's one of my jobs."

"Besides being a vet tech."

Her brows pinch.

"Shoreline Veterinary Center was embroidered on your scrub pocket."

"Oh." She gives her head a little shake. "Right."

The silence stretching between us is more painful than missing every pop fly during the World Series.

"This is great," she says in a breathy rush.

"How?" I don't mean for my question to be a biting growl.

"Well..." Willow uses a knuckle to push her bangs aside before visibly gathering her courage.

Brave, beautiful woman, my mind fires off before I tell it to shut up.

"I wanted to formally thank you...for your quick thinking and"—the corner of her mouth curls up—"for kidnapping me."

My scowl deepens.

"For my own good," she quickly adds with raised palms, her smile morphing into something dazzling. "I'm feeling better than I have in weeks because you recognized signs I didn't even know to look for. I'm just... thank you. I'm lucky to have met you."

I hold perfectly still, telling myself I don't feel sparks shooting to the soles of my feet.

I'm only off balance because I'm tired. The Admirals gave us a run for our money tonight—though we eventually came out on top, securing our seven-game winning streak. We've got two more against the Admirals before a series with the Pioneers. At least this six-game stretch is at home, so I get to sleep on my Hästens mattress. It's the only thing—besides my clothes and gear—that I took with me when I moved.

Despite the wins, it's been a crap week. The rest of the season opener was fine, but Monday, we flew to Atlanta so I could play against the team that tossed me aside like a spoiled tuna sandwich. It was nice to knock two home runs into the stands during two separate games, but even that didn't dull the ache sitting just below the surface.

Instead of concentrating on that sensation, I hit the gym harder than I usually would. Then I went above and beyond in practice, all while getting broken sleep from worrying about the woman in front of me—who's clearly doing just fine.

I push my fist into my eye, rubbing until I see stars.

"Okay, well, with that out of the way, I should..." I hear rather than see her hastily gathering her things.

Keeping my eyes closed, I count to five.

Just stay put. She's fine. There's nothing to do now that you know that.

With my exhausted body at its limits, that little voice every athlete keeps stuffed deep down rears its ugly head.

You'd never be enough anyway.

One would think that, as a professional baseball player, I'd have a handle on insidious thoughts like this, but unfortunately, that nasty voice has history on its side. Mom left because my brothers and I weren't worth staying for. Even with all the expensive gifts and grand gestures, Brielle chose someone else.

It's just...I'm only good at one thing, and relationships aren't it.

I drag in a slow inhale as spikes prick down my arms, forcing my hands into fists.

There's a sudden pause in the shuffling.

Willow is probably giving me a judgy look or something. Whatever. It doesn't matter because, in a second, she'll walk out of my life. Now that I know she's okay, I can go back to sleeping well and putting all my focus into baseball while—

My breath puffs out when Willow wraps her arms around me and squeezes.

"What— What are you doing?" I ask, my lashes fluttering.

"You needed a hug," she says simply, gripping me even tighter.

With my arms trapped at my sides, it's almost as if I'm her captive. The idea makes this weird sensation bubble in my chest, like a laugh wanting to escape.

Pushing it down, I say, “No. I’m fine.”

“Sure you are,” Willow singsongs, patting my back like I’m a freaking toddler.

Does she not notice our size difference? *She’s* the one who barely comes up to my shoulder.

“Did you lose your sportsball game tonight? Is that why you’re extra grumpy?”

What the heck? Is she *trying* to make me snap at her?

“No. And it’s called baseball.”

Willow hums, her fingertips sliding up between my shoulder blades, idly stroking back and forth. You’d have to be skilled at torture for me to admit how that feels, and even then, I wouldn’t break.

“The loudest, gruffest dogs at the clinic are usually the ones that need the most cuddles.”

I lift my head, not realizing I’d been curling toward her raven hair. “Did you just call me a dog?”

Willow’s chin raises until she rests it directly over my heart, peering up at me. “Kinda.”

There’s a mischievous gleam in her eyes that I don’t know how to respond to. I don’t know how to process any of this.

“Get out.”

Willow giggles.

She *laughs* at me demanding she leave my residence, my sternest expression on my face. I’ve scared away countless people with this exact scowl, but Willow only chuckles at me.

“Okay, Grumpypus.” Her multicolored fingernails pat my sleeve twice before she releases me. “I’ll wear you down eventually.”

I almost lose my balance, the emotional whiplash is so jarring. “No, you won’t. We’re never going to see each other again.”

Willow picks up her supplies, walking backward. “But I’ll be in your house, moving things around.”

She extends the O sounds, like she’s talking about a spooky ghost. I get the distinct impression that if Willow’s fingers weren’t clenched around bottles, a bucket handle, and a mop, she’d be wiggling them in my direction.

I fight against the urge to snatch everything from her hands. Willow has been carrying her supplies to and from my penthouse for who knows how

long. She doesn't need help now.

"This isn't funny."

One of her eyes squints shut as she tilts her head to the side. "Debatable."

It takes everything in me not to growl.

"I could get you fired."

That stops her in her tracks, her bucket sloshing a little as it drops to her side.

"For what?" Willow asks, jaw tight as she takes a step forward. "This place is spotless every week. Granted, there's not much mess to clean up, but I'm good at this job. You'd have no grounds for dismissal."

There's something about Willow challenging me that feels like a sparkler ignited between my ribs. Instead of pushing the sensation away, I lean into it.

Brushing an invisible piece of lint from my shoulder, I say, "I never consented to hugging. That's illegal touching."

I watch my failed attempt at humor spread like a sunrise over Willow's face. It starts as a glimmer over her tense brow before her lip quivers in the beginnings of a smile, and by the time it's reached her eyes, I almost have to shield my own, her face is so luminescent.

"You." She frees one finger from the spray bottle to point at me. "An enigma. That's what you are."

Before I can ask for clarification, Willow spins on her heel, marching toward the elevator doors.

"See you next—"

But Willow doesn't finish her sentence. Her right foot slips from beneath her, the bottle in her hand dropping first as she tries to catch her balance on a hall table. But that only juts the mop handle into the wall, pushing the wet end against her stomach until her breath leaves in a wheeze. Willow's knees hit the floor as the mop water bounces up, drenching her clothes before she tumbles in a calamitous heap in the hallway.

"Willow."

I rush over, sliding beside her and checking for injuries.

"This is good," she starts as I squeeze various spots on her arms, searching for fracture points.

"How is any of this good?" I bark. "You could have been seriously hurt."

Her brilliant smile nearly knocks the wind out of me. "This is good because if we're going to be friends, you should know I'm a complete

trainwreck.”

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CHAPTER 5



Shane

The next afternoon, when Tenny Jackson sits in the chair beside me, I barely stifle a groan. Eighty percent of the chairs in our team meeting room are empty, yet he's practically on top of me. A frustrated exhale huffs from my mouth. I really don't need Tenny's frenetic energy when I'm already struggling to stay calm.

"We missed you last night." He slaps me on the shoulder like we're best buddies. "It would have been a lot more fun if you'd come with us."

Slowly drawing a deep breath through my nose is the only thing keeping me from giving him a snappy answer. Fortunately, Rhett Wells, our shortstop and Tenny's *actual* best friend, plunks down beside him.

"Last night was unreal. I can't believe we ended up on stage with Dylan Hargees. Colton is so jealous he missed out. He won't stop sending me dramatic voice notes." When Rhett laughs, I clench my hands beneath the table.

Even though every inch of my skin feels itchy and hot, I'm not really irritated with Rhett or Tenny.

I'm angry with myself, my agent, and Mike Ellison.

In that order.

Myself because of how much I enjoyed bantering with Willow last night. Her bright smile, unpredictable commentary, and chaotic energy should exhaust me, yet I find myself almost eager to see what happens next. If that

wasn't enough, the way she's not afraid to challenge me keeps knocking me sideways. If anything, Willow seems to enjoy chipping away at my grumpy armor like a tiny tenacious tornado.

I shouldn't like it as much as I do.

I should be focusing on my job and being the best player possible.

And that brings me to why I'm ticked at my agent. Carter called me in the middle of my home workout this morning. I had sweat dripping in my eyes when he mentioned that giving Alex Stevens—the new beat reporter for *Diamond Breakdown*—monosyllabic answers during interviews wasn't doing me any favors.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but media, fans, and being social is part of the job. More importantly, being liked is how you get sponsorships. Eventually, your body is going to wear out, and when it does, you're going to want a nice financial cushion to fall back on."

I don't say anything, just grit my teeth. Though we're not on a video call, I can almost see Carter rolling his neck in frustration.

"Maybe it's time you start dating again."

"What?"

Carter knows the gruesome details of how my last relationship ended—something he's worked diligently to keep out of the press. My agent has been so successful that none of my new teammates even know about my previous engagement. Of course, I'd been deeply private about my relationship with Brielle even before it imploded.

"Being with someone makes you less of an unfeeling automaton. Not exactly passing as human, but close."

He pauses for laughter that he'll never get from me.

"More importantly, it would help your image to be seen with someone. You know, be social, interact with others, little things that prove you're not a robot."

Carter takes my grunt as encouragement.

"If you don't want to have a real relationship, I can create one for you. There are loads of hopeful actresses who'd happily sign an NDA. It's unconventional, but trust me, it's worked for other clients of mine."

I should have shut the idea down immediately.

No way. No how.

End of story.

Instead, I told my agent I'd think about it. Having someone to take to my brother Dustin's wedding in a little over a month would definitely make the event less soul sucking. Both my dad and my oldest brother, Cody, keep harassing me about attending solo, as if being single is worse than getting sent to the penalty box in the final minute of a tied game.

But the real reason I said I'd consider Carter's suggestion is because I could imagine a certain raven-haired woman finding that kind of subterfuge entertaining—*fun*, even.

I shake my head, dismissing the thought.

Even considering something like that is foaming-at-the-mouth bonkers. Maybe after this meeting, I should drop in to see Dr. Ramirez, our team doc, and get my head examined.

Buzzing conversations fall to a hush as Mike Ellison, the Waves' new game-planning coach, dims the lights and sends a scouting report to the screen in front of us.

My hands grip my knees as fury flares in my chest. I keep waiting for this—for having to listen to the man Brielle cheated with and got pregnant with while we were engaged—to get easier, but it's still a kick to the teeth.

"Today's starter is Mendoza. Four-seam at ninety-six, cutter, splitter. He'll pound the top of the zone early then bury the splitter once he gets two strikes." He clicks to the next slide, showing a heatmap glowing red above the belt. "If it's thigh-high or lower, let it travel. Don't help him by chasing."

Mike glances around the room until he finds Trevor Chapman, our catcher and one of the best hitters on the team. "Trevor, he's going to challenge you inside."

Trevor simply nods.

"Rhett, no first-pitch hero swings unless it's middle-middle."

My teammate holds up his hands. "I've changed. I swear."

"Sure you have."

Chuckles ripple through the room, but my jaw hardens when Mike's gaze finds mine.

"Shane, they've figured you out." He clicks to display my less-than-stellar at-bats from last night's game.

A hush settles over the room. Rhett and Kai Sato had a tougher night at the plate yesterday, but Mike is singling *me* out—again. Ever since he's taken this position, he can't help but point out every mistake I make.

I stare at the screen, expression unchanged.

"They know you won't swing until you've seen a strike. They're stealing strike one every at-bat."

"I'll adjust," I grit out.

"Why haven't you already? We played the Admirals at camp, and it was the same story then."

Beside me, Tenny sucks in a reactionary breath. A part of me wants to shoulder-check Tenny for the theatrics, but he isn't the one on my last nerve. Instead, I lean back in my chair, lifting one eyebrow as I maintain eye contact with Mike.

"You finished?"

"You can disagree with me, but the numbers don't."

My jaw ticks, but I cross my arms casually. "I think I'd rather take advice from someone who's *actually been* in an MLB batter's box."

DJ Rivera, our centerfielder, smothers his laugh with his fist. Then, he coughs for good measure. "Sorry. Spring cold."

I almost crack a smile but focus on burning holes into Mike's face instead. When he glances away first, victory sprints through my veins. Another click resonates through the silent room as Mike finally moves on.

"They're carrying eight relievers today. If we knock Mendoza out by the fifth, expect Dawson..."

Hours later, we're down an embarrassing eight to nothing at the bottom of the seventh. Mendoza has been dominating with nine strikeouts, and we still haven't gotten a baserunner. Meanwhile, the Admirals have knocked a grand slam, a two-run homer, and a single.

Our first base coach, Lenny Almer, might as well be picking daisies; he's useless out there. It actually looks like he's pouting, arms crossed. Of course, that might be because he hasn't gotten to do any of the silly, personalized handshakes he has with the other players.

DJ and him high five and then bump hips. Colton and him do the *I Dream of Jeannie* head nod. Though Larry keeps bugging me to pick something, I'm only interested in playing baseball, not goofy rituals.

I tighten my grip around the bat while taking a deep inhale, stepping into the batter's box. As much as I'd like to ignore Mike's advice on principle, I can't afford to now. When the first pitch comes fast and high, I put everything into my swing. The crack reverberates through my hands, and I

don't bother watching. I sprint toward first base like my career depends on it.

"Go two!" Lenny shouts as I catch two outfielders rushing toward the left-center gap.

The centerfielder fires the ball off to the cutoff man just as I slide into second.

Waves Stadium explodes in a deafening roar. I don't think I've heard it this loud all night, unless you count the boos aimed at the Admirals. My chin dips in a curt nod toward the stands before I dust off my pants. As Trevor steps up to the plate, I lead off, only to be stranded at second like a man marooned on an island. Mendoza shuts out Trevor and then Tenny.

Patrick, the team's manager, claps me on the shoulder as I rush into the dugout to drop my helmet and grab my glove. "Nice work."

My reflexive grimace makes his salt-and-pepper mustache twitch.

"Have I told you what my goal for you is this season?" he asks, holding me back while my teammates rush onto the field.

"No, sir."

I imagine Patrick has a laundry list. I'd performed well with the Atlanta Stallions last season, but obviously not as good as I'd thought if they traded me without a second thought.

His hand, scarred from years of baseball, gives my shoulder a squeeze. "I want you to accept a compliment without looking like you're passing a kidney stone."

My brows scrunch, but Patrick only grins, thumping my back in a silent dismissal.

Once in position, I put everything into the remaining innings. I race all over right field, capturing an out by vaulting halfway up the back wall and another with a dive so forceful I end up tumbling into a somersault after catching the ball. Even with the entire Waves defense playing flawlessly, the Admirals score another two runs.

We're holding them at the top of the ninth—two outs, nobody on—when a ball pops into foul territory along the right-field wall. My legs feel like they're seconds from giving out, but I make it just in time. Placing one hand on the wall, I leverage myself up. But before my glove can close around the ball, a fan in a Yankees jersey shoves his glove atop mine, catching it.

"What are you doing?"

The fan sneers at me, waving the ball. "Oh, did you want this?"

I'm tempted to do something reckless, like fist the collar of his jersey and acquaint his patchy facial hair with the cement wall. A familiar part of me quietly prepares, my muscles twitching in anticipation, adrenaline and liquid fire braiding down my spine. But I made a decision not to fight anymore when I left hockey, and this bozo isn't worth the consequences.

I drop to the dirt just as the surrounding Waves fans shove him into the aisle.

Tony, the first base umpire, runs up beside me, giving the man the ejection signal.

The crowd roars their approval as they toss popcorn, half-eaten hot dogs, and even a full can of beer at the man as he's escorted up the stairs by security.

"You okay?" Tony asks.

Gritting my teeth, I nod.

My pride is definitely battered, but what else is new? By this point, I'm used to things going from bad to worse. The only thing that can top this crappy night is if my Ducati breaks down on the way to discovering that my beloved mattress is on fire.

Once I've jogged back onto the field, I crouch in preparation for whatever nonsense life will inevitably throw at me next.

CHAPTER 6



Willow

“Oatmilk matcha latte, extra ice, for Stan,” I call out, setting the green to-go cup on the mobile-orders counter.

There’s only a middle-aged woman typing furiously on a laptop at one of our bistro tables, but Gus insists we sing out every order. I seriously think that if mobile orders didn’t significantly improve his bottom line, he’d do away with them altogether. He’s often lamenting about the ‘good old days’ when people actually chatted with each other while they got their morning motivation.

As if I conjured him out of the ether, my cantankerous boss flings open the front door, his comb-over trembling with the action.

“Wilma.” He nods to me.

At this point, I answer to anything he calls me. He’s never once gotten my name correct, calling me either Wilma or Wendy.

“Good morning, Gus,” I say, smiling, though I feel my blood pressure rising with his arrival.

My boss frowns like my cheerful greeting personally offended his mother before glancing at my coworkers. “Leo, I’ve told you a dozen times that you have to wear a Deja Brew-logoed hat while on shift.”

“And hide this fresh fade?” Leo’s fingers slide over his hair. “Naw, Mr. P. That’d be a crime.”

A ruddy red flushes Gus's cheeks as he clenches his jaw. "My office. Now."

Leo clicks his teeth, slumping off toward the back.

"There goes another one," Indy whispers while dolloping a to-go cup with foam.

"I liked Leo," I whine, grinding espresso for the next drink. "He was the least incompetent of the teen boys. Good sense of humor too."

"I know." Indy shakes her head, her box braids shifting over her shoulders. "The only upside is now Gus has something to be mad about, so he can't *invent* something."

My boss doesn't come into the shop often, but when he does, he throws a tantrum, usually over something innocuous. We're talking a screaming, slamming-pots-around, kicking-trash-cans kind of meltdown. The glass from the pastry display case had to be replaced after he pounded it with his fist while berating us over a sloppy cup stack. I'm pretty sure the only reason any of us still work here is because Gus pays us three dollars an hour *more* than any coffee shop in the area.

"Hopefully, his hissy fit will be contained to the office," I mutter.

Indy hums in agreement. "Poor Leo."

Though I feel for my coworker, I'm grateful I'm not on the chopping block. I need this job—all of my jobs, actually. Not having health insurance didn't seem like a big deal a week ago. After being diagnosed with a medical condition that requires expensive equipment and medication to, you know, *stay alive*, I've been rethinking its necessity. The problem is, I can't even afford the cheapest plan.

Indy and I both flinch, hearing a crashing sound.

A second later, Leo storms out sans apron. "This stinks."

"I know," Indy and I say at the same time.

"I made you your favorite," I tell him, pushing a white chocolate mocha his way.

Indy grabs a cinnamon roll from the pastry display and drops it in a bag. "It's not much, but..."

"Thanks." Leo accepts both, shoots daggers at the back office, and walks out.

The next hour passes quickly and peacefully. A few groups of people arrive, cluttering our small shop. Sunday mornings can be busy, but not in the same way as the weekday rush. There are more kids, which always

makes me smile because I get to top hot chocolates with whipped cream and rainbow sprinkles.

I'm topping three mugs with delightful bits of color when a dark shadow looms on the other side of the pickup counter.

"How?"

At the sound of Shane's voice, my chin jerks up so quickly my neck pinches.

His green eyes are slanted beneath bunched brows. "How are you everywhere?"

"Uh..."

I close my mouth then open it again but, unfortunately, lack a helpful answer. It doesn't help that Shane is soaked in sweat, his large chest heaving like he's just finished twenty cartwheels back to back. A black workout shirt clings to distracting muscle definition, his toned thighs prominent in his black joggers. The playful way his hair curls around the edges of a black baseball cap is in direct opposition to his rigid stance.

"Why..." My index finger circles in his direction.

"I ran here."

My lashes flutter in confusion. This coffee shop isn't anywhere close to his penthouse. There's a small city park nearby with a walking path. He must have meant he was running there.

"Oh," I manage, my throat coated in sand.

His arms cross over his chest, flashing his body art at me. "Is this job number three?"

I raise my palms like *you've got me*, still shaken by his sudden arrival.

When Shane simply frowns, I tap my fingers on the countertop.

"Is those ours?" A preschool-age girl with messy pigtails bounds up to the counter.

Ah. That's right. I'm supposed to be working.

Not withering under the unrelenting stare of my...

What is Shane?

Though I'd jokingly declared us friends two nights ago, he doesn't seem to want that. It's more like he's my one-time rescuer/kinda boss/stalker maybe?

"They are," I gush at the cherub in front of me. "But let me carry them to your table, okay?"

Before I can round the counter, Shane wordlessly picks up the three mugs with one hand.

The little girl's eyes widen as she tilts her head back, back, back to see his grumpy face. Emitting a squeak, she rushes toward her mother.

Shane grunts, following after her and delicately placing the sprinkle-covered mugs at the center of the table. He accepts thanks from the harried mom with a silent nod. Then he squats, picking up a doll the middle sister dropped and placing it in front of her. She hugs it to her chest while avoiding eye contact. The oldest of the three girls—obviously braver than her sisters—shows him a crayon drawing. Shane listens, still crouched, as she uses wild hand gestures to explain why her smiling avocado has wings and a unicorn horn.

I'm watching the exchange, entranced, when Gus comes barreling out of the back holding an inventory sheet.

"Wendy, what's the meaning of this?"

My shoulders climb toward my ears. "Of what?"

"You placed duplicate orders of cold brew concentrate when you know our fridge can only handle one."

"I did?" I wince, wracking my brain.

That must have been two weeks ago, when everything had been a hazy blur.

"This is your signature." He shoves the paper in my face, a vein popping in his forehead.

"I'm—"

I don't even get to finish that sentence because Shane presses one hand onto the countertop and vaults over it, effortlessly sliding between me and my irate boss. The movement is so quick and graceful I have to blink a few times to confirm it happened. Gus's gaping mouth and Indy's shocked expression tell me I'm not imagining things.

"Step back." Shane's rough command is barely audible over the boppy music pumping through the speakers.

"You—" Gus sputters. "You can't—"

"Step back."

This time, everyone in the shop hears it, the room falling silent. The guitar cover of "As It Was" fades, drowned out by the roar of blood in my ears. I want to say something, to somehow play peacemaker, but I'm as stunned as anyone.

Gus reluctantly retreats, crossing his arms and leaning to the side to try to see around Shane's hulking frame.

"You can't—"

"It was clearly a mistake," Shane interrupts. "Are your employees not allowed to make mistakes?"

"Nope," Indy mutters under her breath.

Gus doesn't answer, just stares up at an unmoving Shane. Both look like they'd love nothing more than to continue this standoff until the end of time. They might as well be wearing chaps and gun holsters as circling buzzards caw overhead.

Meanwhile, the line is only getting longer, and we're down a barista.

Licking my lips, I tentatively set my fingertips on Shane's firm back. "It's okay."

His eyes snap over his shoulder, finding mine. "How often does this happen? That he yells at you like that?"

"What?"

"Both of you tensed up when he walked out."

Shane saw that? My forehead wrinkles as I lean to catch Indy's gaze. She glances down, busying herself with filling a pitcher with almond milk.

"Your manager should be able to communicate without yelling," Shane says.

When I snort, Shane turns halfway toward me.

"Pot meet Kettle." I gesture between him and my boss.

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "I don't yell, Willow."

"Fine." I flop my hands to my sides. "You speak curtly, but it's just as menacing as—"

"I am the owner," Gus interrupts, puffing out his rotund belly. "And you are in an employee-only area. Leave at once, or I'll call the police."

The glare Shane gives my boss would send most people whimpering. Gus blinks, visibly reconsidering his life's choices before doubling down and setting his hands on his hips.

I try again. "Really, we're—"

My words cut off when my low-blood-sugar alarm sounds. I bite back a groan. This thing is always going off at the *worst* times. I fish in my apron pocket for my phone, glancing at my number.

Shane fully turns, his body instantly softening. "Do you need me to get you some juice?"

“No.” I pull grape glucose tabs from my shorts pocket and pop three in my mouth. “I’m good.”

“No phones while on shift!” Gus bellows.

I flinch and then immediately regret it. The slow way Shane surveys my face before rising to his full height might as well be layered with tense horror-film music.

He’s going to kill Gus.

That’s the thought that fires in my brain as Shane rotates to face my boss. Call me crazy, but I don’t want my one-time rescuer/kinda boss/maybe stalker going down for homicide. No matter how much Gus deserves a swift kick in the pants.

“She uses her phone to monitor her blood sugar, you idiot.”

“I— I didn’t—” Gus swallows. “Wilma never mentioned—”

“Willow. Her name is Willow. The fact that you don’t know that—” Shane snaps his mouth closed, releasing a nasally exhale. “It doesn’t matter.”

When Shane tilts his head to the side until it pops, three people in the café gasp.

“Don’t.” I rush forward, fisting the back of his shirt as he leans forward to say, “She quits.”

My chin juts up just as Shane glances back at me. “I quit? I can’t quit. I *need* this job.”

“Not if you’re putting up with verbal abuse.”

A sputtering sound escapes me. “Gus is hardly ever here. It’s not that bad, and—”

“No.”

The short, single-syllable word brooks no argument.

“But—”

He turns to face me. “No, Willow.”

“You can’t quit for me,” I say in a rush.

Shane inhales slowly, his gaze not leaving mine. “You’re right. I can’t. But you shouldn’t have to deal with a scumbag like him.” His voice drops to a murmur. “You deserve better.”

I struggle to swallow over the palette knife stuck in my throat.

Shane opens his mouth, closes it, and when he speaks again, my insides turn into ooey-gooney icing.

“This is good because if you quit, you’ll be able to find another coffee shop where you can cover drinks with gratuitous amounts of whipped cream and sprinkles *while also* not being yelled at.”

My heartbeat thumps against the underside of my chin as I struggle to catch my breath. I’ve never had a man support my need to find the upside of any situation. My ex used to groan whenever I tried to put a positive spin on anything, and the handful of guys I dated before him used to encourage me to ‘be more realistic.’ But here stands the grumpiest man I’ve ever met, vibrating with I’ll-leave-you-bleeding-in-a-ditch energy, encouraging me to demand fair treatment by using my own words.

When a smile blooms on my face, the corner of Shane’s lip lifts into a barely there grin.

A part of me wants to revel in that slight quirk for the rest of the day, but we’re on a roll here. Actions need to be taken.

Titling my head left, I catch my boss’s pinched gaze. “Gus, I quit.”

The way Shane’s shoulders sag in relief sends unexpected energy ping-ponging between my ribs. That is, until I notice the massive line stretching out the door.

“Right after I finish this shift.”

Shane drops his head back with a groan.

Before I can turn back toward the espresso machine, he bends at the knees, tossing me over his shoulder with one arm.

“What are you— Stop it!”

Shane ignores me, saying his favorite word again while storming toward the exit. Halfway through being carted away, I notice two teens filming from the corner of the room.

Great.

Just *great*.

Because going viral for being manhandled is what I need on top of everything else today.

CHAPTER 7



Shane

“Put me down!”

“Fine.” I growl the word but gently set Willow beside an outdoor table.

Her coworker races through the glass double doors, carrying an oversized purse. “Thought you’d need this.”

“Thank you.” Willow takes the bag and then smacks me in the chest with it. “What were you thinking, dragging me out of there like that?”

My jaw clenches, but her coworker speaks before I can answer.

“I quit too. Let’s see how Gus does holding the shop on his own. I’m also going to tell my sorority sister, who’s majoring in journalism, about this place. Maybe she can write an exposé.” She unlaces her apron, tossing it on the metal table. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Willow sighs, taking off her Deja Brew hat and apron and flicking them on top of the pile.

Her coworker glances between us, hesitating a beat.

“Good luck with whatever this is,” she says before unlocking a car and sliding into the driver’s seat.

Willow rubs the bridge of her nose for several seconds before she veers left, continuing down the complex’s covered walkway. I find myself following a few steps behind—just to make sure she gets to her car safely. Willow walks through the parking lot and continues toward a small neighborhood park before glancing over her shoulder.

“Oh, good. At least that’s cleared up.”

“What’s cleared up?”

She looks exhausted as she says, “You’re a stalker.”

I jog to catch up. “I’m not a stalker.”

“Really?” She digs in her bag for a pair of orange jewel-shaped sunglasses. “Because you keep showing up where I work and manhandling me whenever you feel like it. You were probably tracking me at the bar too, just waiting to strike.”

“You sat down next to *me*.”

Willow makes a dismissive noise in her throat, stepping onto the walking path.

“And I walked out of the ER, expecting to never see you again. In fact, I reiterated that two nights ago when you were in my condo.” I’m never this defensive, or talkative in general, but something about Willow gets under my skin. “So maybe *you’re* the stalker.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

She stops in the middle of the path, almost getting sideswiped by an oncoming runner. I place a hand at the small of her back, tugging her closer so she doesn’t get hit. The action causes her to stumble, her fingers fanning my chest to brace her impact.

When her palm settles over my heart, the air hisses out of my lungs.

“Sorry,” she whispers, nervously tugging on her bangs before her eyes narrow. “Wait, no. I’m not sorry.”

Willow steps back, and my reluctance to let her go is as strange as this conversation. I shove my hands into my pockets, mentally telling myself to get a grip.

“I’m mad at you.” Then she turns her perfect little nose in the air and stomps off.

I should watch her leave. I should let Willow march out of my life. Instead, I follow her like the stalker I apparently am.

“I understand,” I tell her once I’ve fallen back in step. “In the end, I cost you a job. I’ll cover your severance fee while you search for another one. Would five thousand be enough?”

When Willow trips again, I steady her elbow with my palm.

“How much do you think baristas make?”

I shrug. I don’t honestly know.

Even before I had my own multi-million-dollar contract, I grew up on my father’s NHL contract. My only job had been the same as my older brothers’,

excelling at hockey in order to follow in my father's illustrious footsteps. I did just that, hating every minute, until I finally put my foot down and switched to baseball my junior year of high school.

Dad humored me at the time, thinking it was a short-lived rebellious phase, but he never understood that I didn't want to be like him. I know there are good men who play hockey, just none from my family. The three of them poisoned the sport for me.

It came as a complete shock to my father when I wasn't just good at baseball; I was excellent. So much so that I was drafted to four teams right out of high school with only two years of experience.

Willow stops, blinking.

The sunlight bends through her glasses, creating little tangerine pockets over her lightly freckled cheeks. My brow furrows because, generally, I don't notice these kinds of details about another person. I'm usually focused on bigger-picture things, like a batter's tendency to slice one into right field.

She shakes her head, her hair bouncing around her chin. "I can't take money from you."

"Why not?"

"It's not right. I didn't earn it."

"You can give me a ride home. I ran from my condo, and I need to get back before I'm supposed to report to the stadium this afternoon."

Willow levels me with a *Be serious* glare. "That's a twenty-dollar ride. Twenty-five with tip."

"Maybe I'm a generous tipper."

"You are."

She surveys my puzzled face before saying, "You overpaid our bill the night you kidnapped me."

Something about the word *our* hits me in weird places—my left shoulder, my ribs, the pit of my stomach.

I glance at my running shoes, drawing in a deep breath. "I thought we agreed that I *didn't* kidnap you."

When I lift my head, Willow is scrutinizing me. An adorable pinch forms between her dark eyebrows before her low-blood-sugar alarm goes off again.

"Should you eat something?"

"Yeah." Her shoulders sag as she frowns at her phone screen. "I had breakfast before my shift started, but that was at five."

I glance at the timestamp on her phone—10:45 a.m. Willow has already been up for hours, working for that bloated jackweed. A strange pressure

builds in my chest until my mouth opens on its own.

“Let me take you to lunch.” When she squints up at me, I add, “It’s the least I can do after all the manhandling.”

My bad attempt at a joke causes the corner of her lips to twitch, and darned if it doesn’t feel like I just hit a grand slam.

“There’s a sandwich shop on the other side of the park. We can stop there before I take you to your condo.”

“You’re going to drive me home?” I don’t know why I sound winded.

Willow lifts one shoulder as she chews a few glucose tabs. “I could use twenty-five dollars.”

After a fifteen-minute walk, we’re standing in a thick line at a noisy sub shop.

“Look at that,” she says, showing me the normal-range number with a flat arrow on her phone screen. “I’m getting pretty good at this.”

On the way over here, Willow talked about how different this week has been because of her diagnosis. Anyone else would have been overwhelmed and maybe a little bit angry, but Willow kept framing it in a positive light, saying things like, “It’s good because now I know what I’m putting in my body” or “It’s kind of cool to understand the science behind eating.”

Normally, I’d grunt or simply nod, but I find myself saying, “It’s a lot to process. I don’t know how you’re so upbeat about it.”

Willow casually blows her bangs out of her face, stepping forward in line. “A lot of things are out of your control, but how you respond is always up to you.”

After dropping that mind-bending truth bomb, Willow pulls up the shop’s nutritional page to calculate the carbs in the sub she wants.

Once we’re at the counter, Willow orders her sandwich before I tell the cashier my order. I reach into my pocket, suddenly remembering that I have no way of paying. When I woke up this morning, I was still ticked about last night’s loss and that obnoxious fan. Without thinking, I laced up my shoes and blindly ran for miles, trying to burn off steam. I don’t even have my phone, which was why I went into the coffee shop. I’d planned on asking to use the shop’s landline to call my personal assistant to order me a rideshare.

“I—” My neck flares with embarrassment. “I don’t have my wallet.”

“Girl, he’s hot, but...” The cashier shakes her head at Willow.

A part of me wants to growl that I’ve got several million in the bank, that I live in the highest penthouse in the city, but I grit my teeth.

Willow laughs, the bubbly sound sailing over the din, before handing the judgy cashier a battered credit card.

“Don’t worry. He’s good for it,” she says while patting my bicep.

The cashier’s unconvinced *uh-huh* makes me scowl, but Willow just accepts our order number tent and drags me to a nearby table.

Once seated, she picks at her multicolored nail polish. “I wanted to say thanks for earlier. I know I tend to babble, and you didn’t seem annoyed—or rather, more annoyed than usual—and I appreciate that. This diagnosis has been a huge adjustment and”—she bites her lip—“I think I’m doing an okay job of handling it.”

“You’re doing incredible.”

Willow looks as surprised by my compliment as I am.

“I, um...thanks. But I just wanted you to know I appreciated you listening.”

Over the past months, I’ve spent a lot of time wondering what I did to make Brielle cheat on me. The truth is, I can think of plenty of ways I fell short, but one thing I didn’t fail at was listening. I’m a good listener. When you’re not much of a talker, you get plenty of practice.

“Anytime.” My answer sounds like a washing machine loaded with bricks.

The corner of her mouth tips up again, drawing my attention to her full lips. When I realize I’m staring, I force my gaze away, where it, unfortunately, crashes with a toddler’s. His wide blue eyes instantly burst into tears before he flings himself at his mother.

A low groan leaves my throat as I press a fist into my eye, trying to push down unease spiking through my veins.

As much as I can’t *exactly* pinpoint why Brielle left me, there’s one thing we often argued about—my inability to have children.

There’s no medical reason why I can’t have kids, but the wailing toddler is proof that I’m no good with children. I’ve never been. If given the chance, I’d probably follow in my dad’s footsteps and become a crappy father. I’m already ‘emotionally detached’ as it is.

Meat hooks feel like they’re dragging my shoulders forward as heaviness drops in my stomach. My oldest brother, Cody, sent me Brielle’s birth announcement late last night. It seems that baby Talullah was born five days ago on April 1st. That birthdate has got to be some sort of cosmic retribution, right? Like the kid will be forever cursed?

Not that I’d want that for little Talullah.

It’s not her fault that her parents are cheating jerks.

I don't realize I've clenched my hand on the table until Willow's fingers slide over it. There's a question in her brown eyes, but she's interrupted by a staff member dropping off our sandwiches.

"Oh." Her cheeks pink slightly. "I need to give myself insulin, but I'm not brave enough to do it in public yet. I'll be right back."

Willow slipping off to the bathroom to give herself vital medication is just the smack in the face I need. She's dealing with real issues while I'm having a pathetic pity party.

After Willow returns, she keeps up a chipper one-sided conversation as she inhales her sandwich. She's warm and welcoming and...distractingly charismatic. The way I feel lighter listening to her ramble is dangerous. I can't let another person in only to have them walk away.

On the drive to my condo, I'm polite as I learn about a random assortment of her favorite things, her job at the vet clinic, and her new best friend, grateful to discover that Willow has a solid support system. When she tells me about her mom and how it was just the two of them growing up, I have the strangest urge to share about my messed-up childhood. The fact that I'd be happy to spend the rest of the day talking to Willow makes reactionary caution tighten my teeth.

I don't fully exhale until the private elevator to my penthouse swallows me whole. My forehead rests on the cool metal paneling as I tell myself to reset.

I need to shower, change, and report to Waves Stadium.

How I feel inexplicably drawn to someone I just met doesn't matter. Whatever this is with Willow ends today.

My phone pings from its discarded position on my bed as I enter my bedroom. Though I'd normally ignore it, Willow said she'd send me her payment information. I glance at the first of three texts.

Willow

Thanks for a fun lunch. It more than made up for the manhandling.

A breath puffs out of my lips. She had fun? Not because of me. But Willow could probably have a delightful time dining with a salt shaker.

Willow

You owe me \$12.36 for the sandwich. Friends ride free.

Her third text is a link to her profile on a popular e-payment app.

I click on it, send Willow five thousand dollars, and then delete her text messages. A hand feels like it's pressing down on the back of my neck, but I

ignore it. Just like I ignore the rapid-fire messages coming from my teammates in the stupid group chat.

When I catch my haggard expression in my bathroom mirror, I stare straight into my eyes. “You don’t need anything but baseball.”

There’s a sharp pinch in the center of my chest, but I ignore it too.

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Waves Group Chat

Colton

Did anyone else see that viral video of a man, who looks suspiciously like Shane, hauling a barista out of a coffee shop?

Rhett

I saw it. Might not be him, though.

Colton

If not Shane? Why Shane-shaped?

Trevor

You guys know better than to buy into online drama. Most of the time, it's completely made up. And if that was Shane, I'm sure he had a good reason.

Colton

For lugging that poor woman around like a caveman?

Rhett

Shane, set them straight. Was that you?

Tenny

Hellllllooooo, Shane.

Rhett

Maybe he doesn't have his phone on him.

Tenny

Yeah, right. More like he's ignoring us like usual.

Colton

Maybe he got arrested.

Tenny

If Shane got arrested, he'd find a way to make the cops apologize to him.

Trevor

That's not funny.

Rhett

It's a little funny.

Colton

Should we send him the video?

Tenny

I feel like that would only encourage violence.

Trevor

Don't.

Colton

Sent.

Trevor

We need to focus on maintaining our winning streak, not viral videos. The Admirals are going to be aggressive tonight.

Tenny

Aye, aye, Captain.

Trevor

There are no captains in baseball.

Rhett

O Captain! My Captain!

Trevor

Maybe Shane has the right idea by ignoring the group chat.

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CHAPTER 8



Willow

“Just keep your head up. Something will work out,” I mutter the following Tuesday while washing a finicky cocker spaniel at the vet clinic.

The last few days have felt like I’m on the receiving end of a cosmic beatdown. Either that, or I’m the epicenter of a very unfunny joke. The assistance program I applied for to help with medical supplies and insulin fell through because of some obscure technicality. My twelve applications to other coffee shops have gone unanswered. And I was evicted from my adorable studio apartment because the historic building was sold to a developer who plans to gut it and build garish condos. I have until Friday to move out.

But, upside, I won’t have to pay rent if I’m sleeping in my car.

All day, I’ve been avoiding Delilah because I know if she finds out about any of this, she’ll insist I live with her. Having more time to spend with my bestie and her incredible family would be great, but she’s in the middle of a dual kitchen and bathroom renovation. Having one more person living in her active-jobsite-of-a-home would only add undue stress to her life.

And then there’s the issue of the money—Shane’s money. I’d choked on my own spit seeing that many zeros in my banking app. Since then, I’ve been wrestling with what to do with it. Keep it? Return it? Consider it a loan and pay him back later?

I’m deep in thought when Maria, the office manager, pokes her head into the wash room. “Hey, Willow. When you’re done with this pup, can you talk

to me?”

My stomach clenches at the apologetic tone of her voice, already knowing what's coming. I was initially hired to cover for an employee who was on sick leave. Though I've always known this was a temporary position, I'd hoped to get my footing elsewhere before leaving the clinic.

“Sure thing.” I manage a wobbly smile.

As I return the clean dog to a kennel until his owner picks him up, my phone rings. My knees nearly buckle, seeing it's the manager for the cleaning company I work for. It's cowardly to let it go to voicemail, but I don't trust my voice right now. Tucking into a corner, I numbly listen to her message, only hearing half of it.

“...understood the rules...” “...keycard access showed you were there when he came home...” “...vacating before the homeowner arrives is nonnegotiable...” “...terminated...”

I blink away unshed tears as a text lights up the screen.

Delilah

I'm going to lunch with Adam and then taking Piper to a dentist appointment. Call you later.

My shoulders slump. I don't even have the energy to heart the message.

“Okay, universe, I get the hint.”

Hint? More like a blaring neon sign visible from space.

Clearly, I'm not meant to stay in Virginia Beach.

Ever since I was diagnosed, I've been thinking about moving back home. My mom gently suggested it once I told her the news. Though I know there's no shame in moving back home when life keeps kicking you in the teeth, I'd really wanted to make it on my own. I love this quirky city and being able to head to the beach whenever I have a free moment—which is never. I've been here six months and still haven't wiggled my toes in the sand.

There's no denying that things would be so much easier if I moved back to my small Texas town. A year ago, my mom left her soul-sucking job for the county and bought a small diner with her best friend. They've transformed the dingy place to somewhere locals want to idle for hours.

If I lived at home and worked for Mom, I'd have time to paint again. Mom and Kelly would probably insist on displaying a few of my pieces on the walls. It wouldn't be the acclaim I'd hope to earn as an artist, but it would be better than working myself to the bone and never touching a brush.

I set my palm over my aching heart, drawing in a deep breath. “This is good.”

By the time I speak with Maria and confirm that Friday will be my last shift, a sense of calm settles in my bones. Since the schedule is light today, I ask if I can take the rest of the afternoon off, and Maria happily agrees.

It’s past time to go to the beach.

But first...I want to run a quick errand.

Tonight, I’ll surprise Delilah with an impromptu pizza dinner before explaining the situation. It stinks that we’ll soon be living in different cities, but that’s what video chat and road trips are for. Our friendship might be new, but I’m certain we can make long-distance work.

I break into the early afternoon sunshine with a smile on my face. “Maybe after the beach, I’ll paint the wall in my living room. They’re going to tear it down, anyway.”

A zip of energy surges toward the tips of my fingertips at the thought.

“But first”—I blow out a breath while heading toward my car—“to the bank.”

Twenty minutes later, after stopping at a thrift store and the bank, I’m standing in front of Waves Stadium. My fingers squeeze the handle of the briefcase I bought to store the money. I nearly fainted as the bank teller gave me four thousand dollars in hundreds and the rest of the \$987.64 in smaller bills and coins. It was also surprisingly underwhelming when all of it fit in an unassuming white envelope.

How was I supposed to know that kind of money wouldn’t require an empty briefcase?

“Hi, there. How can I help you?” a woman asks with a smile as I enter the reception area.

“I have something for Shane Seaver,” I say, lifting the briefcase.

“Oh.” Her brow wrinkles slightly. “Okay. You can leave it here, and I’ll be sure it gets to him.”

I yank back the case as sweat trickles down my neck. I’ve been jumpy ever since the bank teller handed me the envelope, but can you blame me? Never in my life have I held this much money. I even buckled the briefcase into the passenger seat, just in case.

“I need to hand it to him—in person.”

“I can’t connect visitors directly with players, but the clubhouse manager can accept the item on their behalf.” She picks up the receiver on the desk. “Let me just call—”

“No,” I say, more forcefully than intended. Pausing, I clear my throat. “I can’t leave this with anyone else. It needs to go to Shane. Directly.”

“Okay.” Her smile wavers as her hand slides beneath the desk.

“I’m not crazy,” I say, surging forward like an unhinged person. “It’s just... there’s money in the case. *A lot* of money. It belongs to Shane, and I’m trying to return it.”

A security guard enters the vestibule with a click of a door.

“Wait.” I put a hand out toward him, using my body as a barrier between him and the cold hard cash. “You don’t understand. Shane gave this to me, but I don’t need it anymore. I’m leaving.”

“That’s a good idea. Why don’t I escort you out?” The guard takes a step toward me.

I shuffle backward. “Hold on. Just let me call him. I have his cell phone number.”

He stops, crossing his meaty arms across his chest. “Sure you do.”

“I *do*.” My free hand pats my scrubs, but it seems my phone slipped out of my pants pocket while I was driving.

An uneasy chuckle escapes my lips. “You’re not going to believe this...”

“Alright, miss. Time to leave.”

Without thinking, I juke to the side, trying to get past him. Not surprisingly—since I have zero athletic ability—I don’t succeed. One of his massive hands lands on my forearm, twisting it behind my back.

“Stop. That hurts.”

“You should have thought of that before you tried to get past me.”

A shocked breath punches from my lungs. Though Shane has ‘manhandled’ me twice, he held me like a pink fluffy cloud compared to how I’m being shoved toward the door now.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice almost breaking. “I’m not a troublemaker. I swear.”

“You can prove that by exiting the premises.” As soon as I’m back outside in the crisp spring air, he releases me. “Go on. Leave.”

I turn toward my car, blinking furiously as my eyes mist. At least I can blame it on the ever-present ocean breeze since Waves Stadium is practically seaside.

“You should have just sent the money back electronically,” I mutter to myself as I walk away, rubbing my sore arm. “You didn’t need to bring it to him in person.”

My chiding words sound surprisingly similar to the ones my ex used to use when I wanted to push all the furniture against the walls and have an indoor picnic, or wear fake fur and a floor-length gown to a fellow artist's opening. Sometimes my ideas are a little kooky, but that makes life fun. And maybe I wanted to see Shane's brows rise when I presented him the case—maybe catch a hint of a smile.

I'm so lost in self-loathing that I don't even hear the roar of a motorcycle until it stops behind my parked car.

"Willow?" Shane pushes up his helmet's visor.

I want to scream. Frustration clings to every inch of my skin. If he'd arrived moments earlier, I wouldn't feel so ashamed. But even as that thought pings in my brain, I know this isn't Shane's fault.

It's mine.

"I have your change," I say limply, extending the briefcase. "\$4,987.64. The teller even had to look in the back for the pennies since they don't make them anymore."

Shane sets the bike on its kickstand. "What are you—"

His sentence snaps off in a curse when I finally burst into tears. Honestly, I'm proud of myself for holding it in this long. With the day I've had, I should get a medal for mental fortitude—something garish with a bedazzled neck ribbon.

Shane dismounts, drops his helmet on the ground, and gathers me into his arms with dizzying speed.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, my chin quivering as moisture streaks down my cheeks. "It's been a rough few days."

"Tell me what happened," he says, easing the case from my fingers and setting it on top of my car.

I burrow my face in his chest, finally giving in.

"I lost my jobs. My best friend doesn't live in Texas. I've never been to the beach even though that's why I moved here. And then I had this brilliant idea to put all your money in a briefcase. It felt fun, but also important to return it to you that way. I know you have a gazillion dollars, so it doesn't matter to you, but I *cared*." A hiccup briefly interrupts me. "I had no idea all that money would fit in a single envelope. Five grand is just pinging around in that case like a pinball."

A strange noise puffs out of him as Shane's hand cradles the back of my neck.

Wait. That wasn't...

Was that a stifled laugh?

"If you care about something, then it matters," he says, giving my neck a gentle squeeze. "You lost your other jobs?"

I nod, breathing in his calming scent. If I pinch my eyes tightly, I can imagine I'm in a forest with ample insulin, a fat bank account, and all the time in the world to paint.

"You should have kept the money. You need it."

"I've already explained this," I tell him. "I didn't earn it, so I can't keep it. It doesn't matter that everything is ridiculously expensive without insurance."

Shane's fingers still in my hair. When had they slid up to massage my scalp? And why does it feel better than finding the exact shade of chartreuse after trying to mix it for days?

"You don't have health insurance?"

When I lean back to catch his gaze, the arm around my back tightens. "Might I remind you that, until recently, I was an otherwise healthy person."

"Willow."

An annoyed huff leaves my mouth. "Don't lecture me. I'm already having a terrible day."

Shane surveys my face for two heartbeats before pulling me back to his chest. "Okay, honey."

Something about the casual endearment melts the tension in my shoulders. Shane holds me for several long moments, his callused fingers rubbing my back, before he clears his throat.

"I asked around to see if there were any part-time jobs available with the team, to make up for the one I cost you. There weren't any, but maybe there's a full-time opening."

"You did?"

Shane avoids my gaze as his jaw flexes, warring with something. "Yeah."

"That was really sweet of you, but you don't have to worry about me anymore."

His eyes snap to mine. "I don't?"

A sad smile lifts my lips. "You're finally getting your wish."

"What wish?"

"To never see me again. I'm moving back home."

Shane blinks, something in his expression shuddering.

And am I hallucinating or did he just tug me closer?

"You're leaving?"

I'm confused by the broken quality of his question, by why he's suddenly breathing like air is in short supply.

"Um...yeah."

Shane presses his eyes closed, holding perfectly still.

Through all of our strange interactions, he's always been this aloof pillar of strength and protectiveness, but Shane suddenly looks like I could knock him over with my pinky finger.

It doesn't make any sense.

He's been rejecting my friendship since the moment we met. Even the five grand felt like a payoff, which is another reason why I couldn't keep it. But what if this gruff, stoic man *really is* like those dogs at the clinic? All bark and no bite? What if his all-black, I'll-murder-you-if-you-talk-to-me persona is a defense mechanism so no one gets close to him?

"Shane?"

But I'm not the only one saying his name. A woman stands on the other side of Shane's motorcycle, a sleeping infant strapped to her chest.

Her brows crinkle, looking straight at me. "Who's this?"

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CHAPTER 9



Shane

“Brielle.”

I barely recognize my startled voice, but I haven’t seen my ex in person since she told me about her affair with Mike and that she was pregnant with his baby. The same baby that is currently sleeping in a gauzy wrap thingy.

“Brielle. That’s a pretty name,” Willow says, voice chipper like her face isn’t streaked with mascara.

Willow moves to pull away, but I don’t let her budge. I can’t. Something inside me revolts like an unruly toddler at the idea of Willow’s warmth leaving my arms while my ex scrutinizes me.

Since joining the Waves, I’ve taken great care to avoid the front office where Brielle works. It might as well be a pit of doom with a molten lava floor as far as I’m concerned.

My ex isn’t supposed to be *anywhere near* the ballpark for the next three months anyway. She’s supposed to be on maternity leave, but I guess she’s meeting with Mike or showing off her new bundle of joy to her coworkers.

“Thanks.” Brielle’s blonde brows crinkle. “And you are?”

“Willow.”

She wiggles the fingers resting on my chest since she can’t pull back enough for a full wave. The action tickles, and when I twitch, Willow’s eyes flash with excitement.

“Are you ticklish?” she asks in a low whisper.

“No,” I mutter back, jaw tight.

“You *are*.”

Her dazzling smile almost makes me forget that my cheating ex is steps away.

Almost.

Brielle clears her throat. “Are you okay, Willow?”

“Oh, yeah. Never better.” Willow moves to flop a dismissive hand but can’t because I’m holding her captive like a barbarian.

A grumble sounds in my throat as I loosen my arms, finally letting her go. Willow sways a little, and I steady her with a palm before she nervously tucks her hair behind her ears. When goosebumps spread down her bare arms, I take off my motorcycle jacket and drape it over her shoulders. Willow immediately tucks her arms through my jacket sleeves with a giddiness that I shouldn’t find endearing.

Brielle watches us, lips in a firm line.

“It’s good to see you, Shane,” Brielle continues, mindlessly fingering the four-carat diamond solitaire necklace I bought her after we started dating.

My chin drops to my chest as pain rakes down my spine. Some nights, I lie awake in bed, wondering when this feeling will fade. That bone-breaking sensation of rejection combined with the knowledge that, even after trying to do the right things, it wasn’t enough.

Clearly, though, Brielle got what she wanted from me—that necklace, along with many other jewelry pieces, a whole closet of designer clothes, and a new car. Then she found herself a man who would willingly father a child. At least Brielle had the decency to return her eight-carat engagement ring so I could sell it back to the jeweler.

“And it’s nice to see you with someone.” My ex’s overly sweet voice snaps me back to the parking lot.

“Oh, we’re...” Willow looks from Brielle to me, her eyes narrowing.

It’s almost comical, how easy it is to read Willow’s emotions. It’s as if they’re projected onto a screen—surprise morphing into understanding before settling on determination.

She steps in front of me, using her body as a shield. As if her lithe frame could protect me when I can see clearly over her head.

“We’re actually...” She pauses, glancing back. Willow searches for a defining label before her expression brightens like someone handed her a

basket of baby bunnies. “We’re getting married. Yup. That’s why I’m crying. Tears of joy. Overabundant tears of pure delight. I cried so hard when Shane asked me that I’ll probably need to eat a jar of pickles after this to replenish my sodium.”

A startled sound chokes out of me.

“I know you didn’t want to tell anyone yet.” Willow leans into me. “But we can let our old friend Brielle in on our happiness, can’t we?”

When I don’t say anything, Willow collects my limp hands, wraps them around her stomach, and smiles brightly at Brielle. “You know the feeling when your chest feels like it’s full of helium? Take that happiness and put it on steroids. But not, like, real steroids, because Shane would never do that. That’s super illegal, and even though Shane looks like a mafia boss, he’s—”

“Willow,” I bend down, murmuring her name over her ear.

“Yeah?”

When she turns her face, my breath hitches. With her back pressed against my front and her head tilted up, her lips are mere millimeters from mine.

“She gets the idea,” I say, voice gruff.

“Are you sure?”

I tighten my arms, splaying one hand over her rib cage. “I’m sure.”

“Oh, okay.” Her breathy words poke tiny pinholes in my common sense.

It’s obvious that Willow has no idea who Brielle is, or that by pretending to be my fake fiancée, she’s just dug her multicolored nails into an old bruise. But...by doing so, Willow is also making this first interaction with Brielle exponentially easier. My ex will eventually find out that we’re lying, but hopefully, I won’t be present when she does. It’s been so long since I’ve seen Brielle—maybe I can make it another year...or two.

My stomach twists into an uncomfortable knot as I grind my teeth.

Willow’s eyes tick to my jaw before returning to mine, narrowing in concentration. Then her lips lift into a mischievous smile.

“Sorry for rambling, but I just can’t wait to be *your wife*.”

A breath puffs out of me as I instinctively tighten my grip. “My wife?”

I expect the descriptor to taste like ash with Brielle standing nearby, but it rolls off my tongue.

Willow nods, one corner of her mouth tipping higher.

I feel like I’m two days late to a complex game of chess, but I finally understand that selling Willow’s lie is a vital means to an end.

Which is...insane.

All of this is absolute madness.

Since playing a part in this farce is completely out of character for me, I need to approach this like I do baseball—one hundred percent, full effort, no exceptions.

“I can’t imagine a greater honor than becoming your husband.” Though I hadn’t meant to, my voice comes out in a heartfelt rasp.

Willow’s eyes widen, like I’ve stunned her, before that little smirk returns. “What should our first step as husband and wife be?”

I dip my chin until our noses almost brush. “Whatever my beautiful bride wants.”

Willow’s excited grin makes my heart thrash against my ribs.

While I wait for whatever wild card Willow will throw at me, my mind tumbles down an unexpected rabbit hole. What would it be like to have someone this bright and beautiful in my life? Someone who went through the trouble of buying a briefcase and cashing out five grand just to show me that I mean more to her than money?

“I’m happy for you, Shane.”

Though I’m vaguely aware of Brielle speaking, I’m too dialed in to Willow now.

She spins in my arms, her fingers lacing behind my neck. “First, we have to decide on our couple name. Off the top of my head, there’s Shanelow, Shillow, or Willane. Then I’ll design a monogram so we can put that sucker on *everything*. I’m talking pillowcases, flip-flops, cloth napkins, the works.” She gasps, lighting up. “You could get it tattooed over that empty space beyond your baseball diamond.”

“Willane feels like the obvious choice,” I say, the corner of my mouth twitching. “And I’m always up for new ink. What would the design look like?”

Her gaze drifts over my shoulder as she thinks. “I’d intertwine the W and S. Play with feminine and masculine script styles. Filigree details, maybe? I’d want to sketch a few options.”

“We should all get together some—” Brielle starts.

“Oh! I’ve got a sketchbook in the passenger seat,” Willow says, wiggling out of my arms.

She fumbles her key fob, hitting the panic button. The horn honks incessantly as a continuous alarm sounds over the flashing of her hazard

lights. Baby Talullah wakes with a wail, not to be outdone.

“Sorry!” Willow shouts, dropping the keys and kicking them under the car.

When her head tilts back with an award-winning groan, I can’t subdue the grin lifting my lips.

Dropping to my knees, I reach beneath Willow’s car. But by the time I retrieve the keys and turn off the alarm, Brielle is long gone.

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CHAPTER 10



Shane

“That was genius,” I tell Willow, still kneeling as I hold her keys in my upturned palm.

“What was?”

“Setting off the car alarm to get her to leave.”

Brielle sounded like she was a millisecond away from suggesting a double date—something that would be as enjoyable as an ice pick to the eardrum. I’m glad Brielle bought our little charade, but under no circumstances would I want to spend any extended time with her. It’s bad enough I have to interact with Mike on a regular basis.

“That was an accident. I warned you that I’m a trainwreck.” Pink splotches dot Willow’s cheeks as she picks at her nail polish. “Are you disappointed?”

“Not in the least.”

“Really?”

I feel my lips tug upward. “Really.”

Willow gasps, covering her mouth with her hands. “Are you...*smiling*?”

An unexpected snicker leaves my lips at Willow’s teasing tone.

“And I got a chuckle?” Her fingers frame my face, and the air whooshes from my lungs. It feels like a giant vacuum is stealing all the oxygen. “Is this real, or am I in a coma?”

“It’s real?”

I don't know why it comes out as a question. Or why it sounds like I'm gargling a quarry's worth of boulders. Probably because I haven't cracked a full smile in months.

The way Willow's delighted gaze slides from my mouth to my cheeks to linger on my eyes makes warmth flood my veins. It's only then that I realize I'm still kneeling like one would in an *actual* proposal, her keys extended like a ring box.

Suddenly, our ruse doesn't seem like the worst idea. It would solve a lot of problems—for me, but more importantly, for Willow. Before I can mentally unpack my curveball idea, “Hey There Delilah” blasts from inside her car.

“Oh, shoot.” She snatches her keys and unlocks the door. “I was hoping to have more time before things fully descended into chaos.”

Springing to my feet, I get out of the way so Willow can open the car door and silence her ringtone. The second she sends the call to voicemail, the song starts up again.

Willow presses her eyes shut. “She's going to keep calling.”

“Answer it.” My words are harsher than I meant them to be.

“Good to know Grumpypus is still alive and well.” Willow playfully sticks out her tongue at me before answering her phone. “Hey there, Delilah.”

“When were you going to tell me that we're no longer coworkers?!”

I can easily hear the other side of the conversation because Delilah is screaming into the receiver.

“I'll just give you some privacy,” I murmur.

When I move to step away, Willow fists the fabric of my shirt over my stomach, casually stopping me while leaning against her car. I could easily rip out of her grip, but strangely, I don't want to. Instead, I stand there, trapped in some weird Willow-induced vortex.

“I'm not done with you,” she whispers to me before speaking into the phone. “I was going to tell you tonight when I brought over Little Caesars since you don't have a functioning kitchen.”

“Oh...well, that's very thoughtful of you.”

Willow looks at me, her fingers tightening on the fabric as if it were a lifeline. “It was also meant to soften the blow of the news that I'm moving.”

“You're what?!” Delilah is back to yelling.

She winces, pulling the phone away from her ear and placing the call on speakerphone. “I want to stay. Trust me, I’d give anything to stay, but there’s nothing I can do about it. You know I’ve worked myself into the ground for months. And with this diagnosis...” She pauses, swallowing hard. “I will miss you like crazy. We’ll FaceTime twice a day, every day. I promise.”

It’s so weird to me that Willow is just casually having this very private conversation in front of me. She has more unbridled openness in her pinky toenail than I have in my whole body.

“The upside of moving back home is I’ll be able to...” Her words trail off as her gaze slides back to me. “Hey, I’m tying up some loose strings right now. Can we finish this later?”

It doesn’t make sense that ‘loose strings’ sounds worse to me than the worst swear word I can think of. A slighted shortstop could string six of them in a row, and I’d barely flinch, yet my abs clench in preparation of whatever Willow is about to say.

Delilah grumbles but hangs up.

“Sorry about that,” Willow says with a tired smile. “I didn’t want you to leave without this.”

She releases my shirt, rotating to pick up the briefcase. The loss of contact feels like tumbling headfirst into an ice bath. Why is everything so intense with Willow? Like I’m under a technicolor spotlight after years of living in a cave.

My hands feel numb as they take the brown faux-leather case. “You really don’t want the money?”

Willow shakes her head, some of the light returning to her eyes. “I’d love to stay friends, though. You probably hate talking on the phone, but we could text. You can tell me about all your sportsball victories.”

“Baseball. I play baseball.” I gesture to the mammoth building beside us. “We’re standing beside Waves Stadium.”

“I know.” Her smile morphs into something sad, and I want to punch myself for correcting her. “I just like to mess with you.” After a beat, she adds, softer, “We don’t have to text.”

“That’s not what I—” I don’t even register that I’ve dropped the case and pulled Willow against me until she exhales against my chest. “I’m not good at this.”

“Being friends?”

“Talking. Saying the right thing. Not hurting your feelings.” I sigh into her hair. “I’m only good at baseball.”

“You’re good at *this*,” she says, snuggling against me.

I huff, still frustrated with myself.

“It’s okay, Shane.”

My only answer is an annoyed grunt.

Willow laughs. Then she wiggles until her arms are wrapped around me, hugging me back. I stand completely rigid for a handful of beats until she gives me an encouraging squeeze. When I finally relax, bending until my chin rests on the top of her head, Willow makes this soft, happy sound.

Energy zips backward through my body until it singes my scalp. Willow’s blatant contentment makes me feel like I just played all nine positions and won single-handedly.

As the minutes stretch on, my thought from earlier pushes forward like a marching band crashing through a plate-glass window. There’s no way I should even be entertaining this crazy idea, but what if...

With my self-preservation skills temporarily offline, I find myself asking, “What would your ideal life look like?”

“Can I have a unicorn?” she asks, not missing a beat.

“No. Real-life options only.”

Willow laughs, looking up at me. “I wouldn’t want a unicorn, anyway. I’m allergic to animals.”

I blink. “But you worked for a vet clinic.”

“A girl’s gotta pay rent,” she says with a shrug.

“But if you *didn’t*. If you didn’t have to pay rent or worry about bills or medical supplies, what would you do?”

Willow tucks the corner of her lip between her teeth, hesitating. “I’d finally put my expensive, private-school degree to good use.”

“Doing what?”

For someone who went into specifics about which cereal became her favorite after her tastebuds changed in puberty, Willow is being oddly cagey now.

She draws in a steadying breath. “I’m a hyperrealist painter. I create detailed paintings that capture subjects with near-photographic precision. My favorite pieces include a person, usually close-up, and something natural, like water, flowers, or foliage.”

“That sounds...breathtaking,” I rasp.

What is *with me*? I'm not the kind of man who uses words like breathtaking. Something about Willow being shy about what she's so obviously passionate about has jumbled my brain.

A half-smile graces her lips.

"Thanks. Most of the time when I tell people what I do, they ask if I'm any good at it. Or they ask to see pictures to judge if my art measures up." Her jaw tightens. "If I was a NASA engineer, you'd be impressed without me having to show you a rocket launch, but when I say I'm an artist, no one believes I have any worth until they see my work. It's..."

Willow puffs out her cheeks with a noisy exhale.

"Frustrating and demeaning?"

The smile she sends me is so radiant I almost have to sit down. "Yeah."

"Your ideal day would be spent painting?" I ask, trying to clarify while also getting my bearings.

"That's the dream." She releases me with a bashful smile.

"What if..."

I rub at the ache behind my breastbone while telling the screaming warning bells in my brain to quiet the heck down. My agent wanted me to fake a relationship. I can't imagine anyone buying that, yet we just convinced Brielle that we were steps from walking down the aisle. What if I could offer Willow something she desperately needs in exchange for helping me out. It would get my family off my back while also rehabbing my public image.

"What if there was a way for you to stay and do that?"

CHAPTER 11



Willow

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Delilah says for the millionth time while biting into another cheesy slice of pizza.

Since their kitchen is a tarped-off construction zone, we’ve settled on one half of their dining table. The other side is covered in a hot plate, an electric kettle, a makeshift coffee station, and a dozen loose kitchen utensils. Boxes line the walls while a dorm-style mini fridge holds essentials like milk and eggs.

“You’re sure he’s willing to sign something stating that you don’t owe him anything other than friendly companionship over the next year?”

Adam is far more skeptical than his star-struck wife—which I appreciate. I’ve never been particularly level-headed. With my reach-for-the-stars upbringing, I had successfully deluded myself into thinking I could have a prosperous art career. That’s why I took out almost a quarter of a million dollars in loans. To be fair, every teacher growing up spoke about my work as if I was the next Chuck Close—but with a healthy dollop of whimsy.

“That was the proposal.” I pause, blowing my bangs out of my face. “I pretend to be his loving wife at his brother’s wedding and in front of the press, and he bankrolls my life. I’d have to sign a prenup, but we’d both sign a separate, private document agreeing that our fake marriage would only last a year. After that, we’d amicably part ways.”

“And you feel safe around him?” Adam presses. “Shane seems like a decent guy, standoffish mostly. I’ve never seen him in the news for bad behavior.”

I think about the way Shane took care of me in the ER when I was a stranger he never expected to see again. How, after I fell in his penthouse, he tenderly checked me for wounds and wrapped me in a plush towel. The way he encouraged me to quit the coffee shop because it was a bad environment. Shane might act like he’s aloof and grouchy, but he’s a tender caregiver at heart.

“I do. I trust him.”

“Okay, then.”

“You can’t tell, but I’m screaming inside,” Delilah says.

I believe it. I’ve never seen my best friend this fidgety. She hasn’t sat down since I arrived, snatching bites of pizza while flitting around the table or checking on Piper, who’s enjoying the box of pepperoni pizza and a Disney movie in the living room.

“Shocking,” I deadpan. “Seeing as how you shrieked for three minutes straight when I told you.”

Not that I can blame her. To say today has been surreal is a drastic understatement. So much so that I have a nice fat bruise on my thigh from pinching myself so many times. After all, it’s not every day that a smoking-hot MLB player offers you a marriage of convenience.

The craziest part is I’m leaning toward saying yes.

First and foremost, I’d have primo health insurance while adjusting to my diagnosis. I’m giving myself a gold star thus far, but I also haven’t been sick or had to travel while balancing my blood sugar. It’d be nice to not have to think about rationing insulin due to its cost. That and my endocrinologist mentioned that I’d be a good candidate for a tubeless insulin pump. That device would otherwise be out of my price range.

Secondly, I could paint again. I could finally get my supplies out of moving boxes and work without worrying about getting evicted. Given an invaluable year, I could create two, maybe three pieces. If I was able to sell even one of those, it could float me for a while.

The only downside—besides legally binding myself to an essential stranger—is that this agreement is unbalanced. Something about that feels like being force-fed wet garbage. Me smiling and holding Shane’s hand

during *one wedding* and a few Waves events isn't a fair exchange for a place to live, food to eat, and the freedom to finally create.

There's also a quiet, wishful part of me that wanted to marry for love. Once upon a time, I'd thought my long-term boyfriend and I would end up starting a life together, but that obviously didn't pan out. Unintentionally embodying the starving-artist stereotype is one thing. Entering a contractual marriage feels like giving up on being loved for my kooky, occasionally messy self, like no one would want to keep me forever.

My fingers rub at my side, trying to displace the hollowness settling between my ribs.

"I'm going to say no."

Delilah pops my arm with a twisted dish towel.

"Ow. What was that for?"

My best friend holds her hands up with an expression like *Duh*.

"I think what Delilah is trying to say," Adam says while relieving his wife of her weapon, "is that, even though this is highly unorthodox, it seems like a good opportunity."

Delilah crosses her arms as Piper's laugh echoes from the other room. "Are you forgetting that agreeing means you get to stay here with us? You'd have so much free time we could hang out whenever. And you'd finally get that beach day."

Though I'd planned on heading toward the sand immediately after leaving the ballpark, I'd driven to my apartment in a daze. After numbly sitting on the floor in the middle of my living/dining/bedroom for hours, I scrounged up enough cash to buy pizza. Me having a freeze-state mini-meltdown on my stained linoleum was good because it really was too chilly for the beach today anyway.

"Think of it this way. You've had a lousy year, right? Your jerk boyfriend dumped you. Your trash friends were obnoxious. You moved to a new city and worked your tail off to barely make ends meet. It's been rough. What if this is...cosmic retribution?"

Even though I appreciate Delilah's thought, my lips twist with uncertainty.

"Think about what Shane will gain." She plunks down in the empty chair next to me. "You're kind and considerate. You won't trash his penthouse, because you spent the last six months cleaning it. And you'll be *way better* company than Shane's nightmare of an ex-fiancée."

Fiancée? Was that who Brielle had been? I sensed some former-flame tension between them, but I didn't realize they'd been engaged. My stomach bottoms out. Had I known, I *never* would have pretended he'd just asked me to marry him.

He must have been miserable as I rambled on about monograms and couple names. Though...hadn't it been Shane who wrapped his large hands around me like it was second nature, who'd reverently told me it would be *an honor* to be my husband? My cheeks flush, remembering the rumble timbre of those words, how his eyes flashed with something like honesty.

"Poor guy." Adam's sympathetic voice brings me back to the table. "Cheated on and then traded mid-contract."

"And traded to the team where his ex and her new boyfriend got new jobs after the breakup."

"Don't forget that Mike Ellison is one of Shane's coaches. He's contractually forced to listen to that dirtbag."

My head swims as they volley this information back and forth. Resting my elbows on the nicked hardwood, I rub my temples.

"And the baby?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

Delilah's dramatic gasp borders on camp. "Please tell me you saw the baby."

I nod and shove away my paper plate, my appetite vanishing.

"Then you've seen living, breathing proof that Shane has had a dumpster fire of a year too. Honestly"—Delilah reaches out to gather both of my hands in hers, her elbow knocking a whisk on the floor—"your sunshiney personality and upbeat attitude is just what he needs right now."

"That and to keep putting up quality at-bats," Adam adds, picking up the utensil. "Everyone wants the Waves in the series again this year."

I release a nasally sigh. "I knew you two were big baseball fans, but how do you know all these personal details?"

I'd done a cursory internet search on Shane after getting home from the ER, but only found information about his career—nothing about his relationships.

"Waves subreddit. A few dedicated fans scour the dark web for information players try to keep hidden." My best friend reaches for her phone and almost takes down a tower of plastic cups. "I'll send you the link."

“I don’t need the link.” I hold up a hand, closing my eyes and drawing in a deep breath. “I need...actually, I need a minute.”

Leaving the table, I round past the stairs to get to the living room. Normally, I’d be able to cut through the kitchen, but it’s nothing but a dusty husk.

Piper doesn’t even look up when I plop down beside her on the couch, just offers the pizza box to me. Since I’ve babysat her for all of Delilah and Adam’s date nights since Delilah and I became fast friends, she’s used to having me around. I’ve even been given the honorary title of Aunt Willow.

“No, thanks.”

She shrugs, picking up another slice. For as tiny as Piper is, she can sure put away some pizza. A third of the box is already gone.

I stare blankly at the screen, watching one of the best action scenes in animated history as Flynn Rider wields a frying pan to his advantage. Piper and I have watched this movie together no less than eleven times. It’s her current fixation. Delilah says before she fell in love with fairy tales, she’d had a healthy dinosaur fascination.

My shoulders finally slide away from my ears as I nestle further into the comfy sectional, the familiar scent of Piper’s bubble gum bodywash wafting over me.

“This is my favorite part,” Piper whispers a few minutes later when Rapunzel uses her magical hair to heal Flynn’s hand.

“Why?”

“Because Flynn doesn’t know he needs help. He thinks all he needs is money to be happy, but he’s wrong. You need people.” Piper gives me a gap-tooth smile, her shoulder resting against mine.

“You’re right,” I tell her, wrapping an arm around her small frame. “I’m glad I have you.”

Her head slips onto my shoulder, her blonde hair damp from her evening shower. “Me too.”

“Why didn’t I think of this?” Delilah whispers to Adam from the doorway. “I should have used the kid as motivation from the start.”

I toss a pillow at my meddling friend without looking up from the screen. Delilah chuckles before Adam pulls her back to the dining room.

“What was Mama screaming about?” Piper asks after a beat.

“I might be moving into a fancy-pants new condo. Like the kind I kept clean for other people.”

If I say yes to Shane's paper-only marriage, I'd be living in the exact penthouse I used to clean, though Piper doesn't need to know that. Come to think of it, there's no reason that I can't continue to clean for him. Though I did my best with the time I had before, if I lived there, I could scour the baseboards and take a toothbrush to the air vents. Really get that place sparkling. The idea eases the yawning pit in my stomach, if only slightly.

"Like a castle?"

"Kind of."

"Can I come visit?"

I hesitate. According to the Waves game schedule saved to my phone, Shane travels for long stretches of time. Surely, there's no harm in having Piper over when he's gone.

"Sure. Maybe we can even have a sleepover."

"Really?" she asks, bouncing a little.

When she gets excited like this, Piper looks exactly like her mom.

I boop her on the nose. "Really."

"Mama! I get to have a sleepover in a castle."

I wince as my honorary niece shouts directly in my ear.

"Glad to hear Willow has come to her senses," Delilah calls back.

Piper wrinkles her nose, the colorful light from the screen splashing across her cheek. I've often thought that she'd be a perfect candidate for a painting, with Adam's unruly curls and dark eyes contrasting with Delilah's delicate facial features.

"What does she mean?"

"Who knows?" I throw my palms up with an exasperated eye roll.

My niece blows out a noisy breath, shaking her head. "Mama's crazy."

"She is," I say, tucking Piper against me again. "But in the *best possible* way."

Now, I just need to decide if I'm going to hop on the crazy train and go through with this fake marriage or give all this up. My heart seizes at the idea of leaving the life I've built on my own, of walking away from the people that made me part of their family without hesitation.

When Piper squeezes me back, I realize there was never really a decision to make.

A zing of giddy nervousness blooms in my belly.

Looks like I'm wifey material after all.

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CHAPTER 12



Shane

With the amount of noise coming from behind Willow's apartment door two days later, it sounds like she's having a rousing house party, not getting ready for a fake wedding. Beyonce's "Single Ladies" is competing with a replay of last night's Waves game. I glance down the hall, double-checking I have the right apartment: 6G. All the doors have the same orange eviction notices, but Willow's also has a fake floral wreath with a hand-painted placard that says *Misfits Welcome*.

I knock, but it's clear it wasn't heard.

A voice I've come to recognize as Delilah's starts singing about rings at top volume, making me wince at her off-key rendition. Willow mentioned at yesterday morning's rushed preup signing at my lawyer's office that Delilah was going to help her get ready for today.

My hands brace the doorframe as my forehead rests on the door with a clunk. I'd hoped, by showing up two hours early, I'd beat Delilah here.

It's important that I speak to Willow *alone*.

Pressing my eyes closed, I mentally regroup. Then the door swings open so suddenly I don't have time to move.

"Shane?"

Willow's gaze sweeps my three-piece suit as I glance at her—what is that thing? It looks like a robe, but the satiny fabric cascades all the way to the floor, the hem and oversized sleeves trimmed with faux fur. With her hair

curled and pinned and her makeup flawless, the ensemble makes Willow look like an Old Hollywood movie star.

“What are you wearing?”

Per usual, my tone sounds like death warmed over by a malfunctioning microwave.

“My widow’s robe?” Willow does a little shimmy as a mischievous smile blooms over her lips. “It’s the perfect thing to wear before I get dressed. Why? What do you wear while you’re getting ready?”

“Nothing.”

Willow blinks, obviously caught off guard by my honest answer.

“I need to talk to you,” I tell her, releasing my grip on the door.

“Come on in.” She swings her arm wide, and the giant sleeve almost knocks over a lamp.

When I step into her tight entryway, Delilah pops out of the bathroom.

“What are you doing here?” She tsks at me with a makeup brush. “You’re not supposed to see each other before the wedding.”

“I don’t think that counts for fake weddings,” Willow says breezily as she continues toward the tiny galley kitchen.

Delilah grumbles, disappearing into the bathroom, while Willow yanks a lime-green kettle off the stove and fills it at the sink. I almost want to rubberneck at her eclectic and colorful decor, marveling at how Willow managed to pack mismatched furniture and tchotchkes into such a cramped space without making it feel cluttered, but my gaze is fixed on the constellation of daisy pins in her hair.

Did Willow notice my matching daisy boutonniere? I had it made, hoping it would make her smile. Her favorite flower wrapped in her favorite color ribbon—a joyful tangerine that matches her robe.

Realizing I’m being ridiculous, I run a hand through my hair, only to remember I styled it with pomade this morning after finally giving up on sleep. Afterward, I’d spent entirely too long shaving and fussing with my suit until it was just right.

Tugging at my cuffs, I glance up to catch Willow’s unfocused gaze raking down my chest.

“You look...” She clears her throat. “Groom-like.” Willow tilts her head to the side in that analytical way of hers, as if she’s memorizing the contours of my face to recreate later. “I miss your tattoos, though.”

“Really?”

Brielle always hated my tattoos. She used to send me passive-aggressive infographics for tattoo removal services from the medspa she liked to frequent.

“Yeah. They’re beautiful. One of these days, will you let me paint them?”

I’ve never thought about having anyone capture them on canvas, but if Willow wanted to use my tattoo artist’s work as inspiration, why not?

Though my lawyer insisted on doing a thorough background check on Willow, I was more interested in searching for photos of her work. The prestigious art school in Philadelphia posted several on their website from various student showcases. Each piece had been more incredible than the last. The fact that Willow was holding down three part-time jobs instead of having an exhibit in the Guggenheim is baffling, but I don’t know anything about the complexities of the art world.

“Sure.”

She bounces on her toes, and it’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.

Willow turns toward a cabinet, pulling down a box of tea. “I’d start with the flames because they look like the most fun to color in.”

“Oh. I thought...”

My words drop off thinking about Willow painting *on me*. I imagine her focused gaze trained on my arm, small intentional brush strokes layering color between the black lines. Then my vision hazes, considering all of my tattoos—the ones on my back, my chest...my abs.

“I’m going to grab something from my car,” Delilah says, pulling me from my thoughts and saving me from myself.

The front door slams behind her just as the kettle whistles. Willow ignores it, reaching above the range in search of mugs. Her fingertips graze the handle of a hot-pink mug covered in flamingos as one of her faux-fur sleeves brushes the burner.

The fabric ignites instantly, but Willow’s too focused on retrieving the mug. With one large step, I wrap an arm around her waist, lifting her away from the burner while my other hand closes over her smoldering sleeve, extinguishing the flame. My palm stings from the melted plastic, but it’s not much worse than catching a line drive out of the pocket.

“What was that for?” she asks, breathless.

“You were on fire.” I lift her singed sleeve.

She groans, tilting her head back against me. “I promise I’m not always a catastrophe.”

I chuckle, even though I know Willow is immensely capable. Not only did she excel at three jobs, working long hours, she built a home and made friends in a new city. Even now, she's processing a life-changing medical diagnosis with positivity most don't possess, all while sitting on incredible artistic talent.

But since I don't know how to articulate all of that, I step forward to nudge the screaming kettle off the hot burner. Then I pull down the pink mug, drop in a bag of green tea, and pour hot water over it. It's only after seeing the tea bag swirl that I realize I haven't let Willow go. She's still banded against me like my own personal shield.

The whole reason I'm here early is to give Willow another opportunity to back out. Yet, here I am, holding her hostage, inexplicably drawn to her charming chaos.

"Why is last night's game on?" It's not the question I should be asking.

"Delilah put it on. She and her husband are big fans."

I hum.

"Is it..." She pauses, smoothing down her bangs. "Is it okay that I don't know anything about sportsball?"

A broad grin lifts my lips, though Willow can't see since she's facing the kitschy wall covered in antique colanders and framed graphic prints.

"I honestly prefer it."

I've dated far too many women who were only interested in me because of my status as an MLB player. I thought Brielle had loved me for who I was and not what I did, but clearly, I'd been wrong about that.

"Really?" Willow spins, her fingertips lightly resting on my lapels. Her nails are all painted pale pink, and the drop of disappointment that they're not multicolored is jarring.

I nod, frowning now that she's turned around, because I really should let her go.

Why can't I let her go?

Man up, Seaver.

The voice in my head isn't my own, but at the moment, I'm grateful for it. Gritting my teeth, I release Willow, handing her the mug of tea just to put something physical between us. Then I reach into my left breast pocket for the folded piece of paper.

I clear my throat. "I came here this morning because I wanted to give you another option."

“You...what?” Her dark brows furrow at the swift change in topic.

“I have more than enough money, Willow. There are private insurances—good ones. I looked up several options for you. You can stay here. You can still paint. We’ll just figure out a payment system or—”

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

She snatches the paper, crumpling it into a ball. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Pushing away the people that care about you?”

The air puffs out of me. Willow might as well have sucker punched me in the gut. Her eyes narrow, and it’s as if she’s using her perceptive gaze to cut through all my barbed layers. The sudden sensation of nakedness makes me squirm because I know Willow won’t like what she finds.

I close my mouth, licking my lips. “You don’t—”

“Don’t tell me how I feel,” she says, voice sharp. “We might *just barely* be friends, but I care about you.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

Willow just threw an emotional bomb in the center of her cozy kitchen.

Unfortunately for her, I only know one way to respond.

CHAPTER 13



Shane

We stare at each other for a few beats while every cell in my body screams to withdraw, to go monosyllabic. Self-preservation dictates that I not let Willow know how much her words mean to me. So, I'm more shocked than anyone when I step forward, when I try to get her to see reason instead of making myself emotionally unavailable.

"Willow—"

"Nope." She holds up that impertinent finger.

The rest of her hand is balled around the insurance information I spent way too long researching. It's not as good as my medical insurance from the Waves, but it's as close as I could get without forcing Willow to legally bind herself to me.

"I was ready to move to Texas. I was mentally *prepared*. But you swooped in with this crazy plan—"

"I know."

"And upended everything—"

"I shouldn't have intervened."

"And I've done my makeup so nice. Delilah did wonders with my hair..."

My fingers itch to touch her, so I fist them at my sides. "I should have said something the minute I walked in."

Willow closes her eyes with a loud exhale, her fingertips rubbing her temples.

I simply wait.

Wait for her to ask me to leave.

Wait for her to survey all the sticky, vulnerable parts of me and find them lacking.

Wait for her to show me she's exactly the same as every woman who came before.

"Where's the contract?" she asks, her gaze snapping to mine.

"The prenup? It's at—"

"No. The other one about this only lasting a year."

My throat tightens, but I reach into my other breast pocket, pulling out the paperwork I drafted myself. It didn't seem like a good idea to bring my lawyer in on this one, though it's technically not illegal for two US citizens to marry for convenience.

"Thanks." Willow snatches the document and then rips it into little pieces, letting them flutter to the ground.

I blink, my mouth falling open before she grabs my hand and pulls me toward the two-person table.

"Sit."

Though it's usually me barking orders, I fold myself onto the impossibly small chair without a word.

Willow grabs a napkin from the smiling starfish holder, leans to pluck a pen from a junk drawer, and then begins writing furiously. Meanwhile, my heartbeat feels permanently lodged in my throat, my blood thick and sloshing in my ears. I can barely hear the replay of the walk-off home run I hit last night. Willow turns the napkin in my direction, sliding it across the table.

My eyes flick to hers before she gestures impatiently at her impromptu document.

Drawing in a deep breath, I start reading.

I promise to give you the benefit of the doubt.

I promise to communicate in more than grunts and growls.

I promise to give friendship a try, even though I obviously hate the word.

The corner of my mouth twitches.

I promise to accept your support so you don't feel like an unworthy leech.

My lips dive into a frown. "You're not unworthy."

"Keep reading." Willow leans over to tap the napkin.

I promise not to sell myself short, especially since I'm a ridiculously talented, secretly kindhearted sportsball player.

And in return, Willow will provide hours of endless—occasionally chaotic—entertainment, immaculate house-cleaning services, the best banana bread I've ever tasted, and one custom painting.

"You'll paint for me?"

Her cheek jumps, but she doesn't fully smile. "Anything you want."

A bloom of satisfaction warms me, knowing one of Willow's pieces will be mine. I'm under no illusion that our arrangement will last beyond a year, so being able to keep a part of her after all this goes away is comforting.

"I don't want you cleaning, though."

Willow groans, glancing at the water-stained ceiling tiles and giving me a glimpse of her delicate neck. I have the sudden impulse to lean over the table and brush my lips over her pulse point.

Mentally, I give myself a firm shake.

There will be no yearning for my soon-to-be bride.

"You *have to* let me clean. Otherwise, it's too one-sided. Me smiling on your arm at a few public appearances and during one wedding isn't enough."

I snort. "You haven't met my family."

"Hockey royalty." She waves a hand. "Big deal."

My eyebrows lift.

"Don't pretend you didn't research me. Entering a marriage without some internet sleuthing would be reckless, even with an iron-clad prenup."

Except, nowhere in the multitude of articles about my famous NHL father and the two eldest sons who followed him into the league does it mention how they'll throw you against the boards in real life just as swiftly as they would in the rink.

Willow eyes me a moment before adding, "Do you agree to my terms?"

I quickly reread her handwritten contract, pick up the pen, and sign it.

"I'm surprised you didn't put something in here about me not wearing all black," I say, dropping the pink glitter pen on the table.

Her face lights up. "That's a great idea! Give it back."

When Willow scrambles for the napkin, I hold it aloft.

"No takebacks."

She huffs, folding herself over the table. "That's what addendums are for."

“Addendums aren’t allowed on napkin contracts. It’s in the paper-goods bylaws. Section forty-nine, line seven.”

When Willow rushes to stand in front of me, I shift the napkin behind my back.

“Give it back, Shane. I want to see you in blue. No, green. Something that really highlights your eyes. Or maybe a complementary color, like bronze. That would bring out those golden flecks.”

Willow practically plasters herself against me, trying and failing to snatch it back. I keep shifting the napkin from hand to hand to keep it beyond her reach. Then Willow blows out a frustrated breath and climbs on my lap, straddling me. I squeeze my eyes shut when her robe gapes open, only to realize that playful polka-dot pajamas are layered beneath.

“Give. Me. The contract.” Each word is growled through tight teeth as she struggles to reach the napkin.

“No.”

“That’s your favorite word, isn’t it?”

“No.”

I drop the napkin beneath the chair, framing her ribs with my hands. The plan was to keep her from reaching, but with warm satin beneath my palms, I freeze. Willow sucks in an unsteady breath as my fingers flex on their own.

I should let go. I *need* to let go.

It would be easy to stand and set Willow on her feet. Then there wouldn’t be all this...touching, making it hard to remember what position I play. Decision made, I flex my quads only for them to turn into limp noodles when Willow’s hands slowly trace up my chest.

She gently fingers the petals of my daisy boutonniere. “Did you do this on purpose?”

I nod.

“Kindhearted man wrapped in a coat of burs,” she murmurs, barely audible over the blaring Ke\$ha song and the post-game recap.

My mouth opens, but I don’t have words. Though I don’t usually talk much, I suddenly want to explain to Willow why I’m this way, why it’s better if I block everyone out.

But then Willow’s gaze ticks up and stalls on my lips, and all thoughts leave my brain. She draws in a shaky breath, drifting closer. I find myself

leaning in as my life distills down to this chair, in this apartment, and the woman who's more vibrant than every color ever recorded.

When the front door flies open, we both startle.

Delilah immediately covers her eyes with a hand. "Do you want to text me when it's safe to come back?"

"No. Stay," Willow says, hopping off me.

I rocket to my feet. "I should—"

"Yes." She pushes me toward the door with a nervous laugh. "You need to go. Get on out. But, um, we're still meeting at the courthouse at ten?"

I nod, stepping through the threshold.

"Okay, great. Everything about this is totally normal and not weird at all. And we're fine. Right? This is fine? You're fine?" Her cheeks grow pink. "I mean, obviously you are, in general—and especially in that suit. It looks like you were poured into that thing." She swallows hard, putting her hand on her hip then fussing with the robe tie before placing her fingers back on her hip. "What I mean to say is—"

"Everything's okay, Willow," I tell her, leaning forward and placing a quick kiss over her temple. "I'll see you soon."

Willow doesn't answer, just stands there, blinking, like I short-circuited her brain. To be honest, I'm just as shocked at the casual show of affection as she is.

"M'kay. See you then." Delilah tucks her friend behind her and closes the door in my face.

I spend way longer than I should staring at the orange eviction sign.

What the heck was that?

I've never been a fan of public displays of affection, which is why I knew Willow pretending to be my wife wouldn't be difficult. Her just being in the same room with me would be proof enough. I barely held Brielle's hand in public, let alone kissed her in front of anyone besides my family.

Numbly, I turn toward the stairwell. I make it three steps before the whispered squeals coming from behind Willow's door bring a wild smile to my lips. Instead of forcing it away, I let my mouth stay curled all the way to the parking lot.

CHAPTER 14



Willow

I punch Delilah's car console with an unsteady finger, silencing "Chapel of Love." Since I spent most of yesterday in an eerily calm haze, even after meeting Shane's terrifying lawyer, my nerves are finally catching up to me. I'm hovering on the verge of throwing up while also fending off a full-blown panic attack.

Add in the fact that I almost kissed my groom before an officiant instructed me to do so, and my skin feels like it's been electrified. It's just that Shane's small gestures, how he quietly pays attention while perpetually protecting me, are *so unbearably* sweet.

I hadn't planned on leaning in. I hadn't planned on any of this.

My life imploding. A T1D diagnosis. Shane.

All of it came out of left field.

Or right field?

That's where Shane stands when he plays. I kept calling it *upstage left* until Delilah corrected me. Having more familiarity with the theater than I do with baseball made me nervous until Shane chuckled while holding me against him. Maybe it's refreshing that I know nothing about the game he's dedicated his life to. After all, he doesn't know anything about art, and that doesn't bother me.

Probably because none of this is real, I remind myself.

We're just two people helping each other out...while also wearing full wedding regalia. And, *good gracious*, sonnets should be written about how Shane looked in his suit. My heart still hasn't figured out how to beat properly after seeing that masterpiece. I want to meet his tailor, take them to lunch, and fully express the depth of my gratitude.

My fingers fiddle with the lace overlay on my gown until Delilah stills it with her own.

"Pre-wedding jitters are completely normal," she says, pulling into the courthouse parking lot.

"Even when it's a fake wedding?"

She pats my hand before shifting into park. "Especially then."

"Do you think Shane will like the dress?"

Through a friend of a friend of Delilah's, my gown came from a bridal consultant who could definitely lose her job for letting me borrow it. The glamorous fit-and-flare silhouette is embellished with beaded lace motifs over soft tulle. A sweetheart bodice, keyhole back, and long lace sleeves give it a timeless feel.

"Lolo, he's going to swallow his tongue."

A shimmer of excitement ribbons through my ribs. I like the idea of Shane's steadfast control splintering, of seeing him lose himself over something as simple as a dress.

Before I can think about it too much, Delilah urges me from the car and up the front steps. I half expected Shane to be waiting outside for us, but maybe he's checking in for our appointment? Since it's a Thursday and the city center also hosts a variety of other legal services, a mix of people crowd the area. Everyone we pass turns and glances my way, smiles lighting their faces. Some of the unease eating at my stomach dissipates as I grin back.

Except, when we finally find Shane, there's no trace of the man who playfully joked with me about paper-good bylaws. His expression vacillates between *I just had an unmedicated root canal* and *my car's been impounded* as his gaze searches the crowded lobby. When his eyes finally land on me, I expect the tension in his jaw to soften. If anything, his stony gaze hardens.

I freeze, causing Delilah to slam into my back.

Then it feels like everything is moving in slow motion. Shane cuts through the room, flinty eyes trained on me. His graceful movements are better suited to a highly trained assassin than a man headed for the altar.

“He’s not swallowing his tongue,” I murmur to my best friend.

“It kind of looks like he wants to murder you.”

“You see it too?”

When I face forward again, Shane is in front of me, jumbling my senses.

“*Willow*.” My name sounds like a bitten-off curse.

I lift my fingers in a little wave, words trapped in my throat.

“Good to see you again,” Delilah says, but Shane doesn’t take his gaze off me.

His focus slides from my hair to my cheekbones to my twitchy hands. Though he’s usually quiet, *this silence* makes me jumpier than the time I accidentally sat on a fire-ant nest.

“Beautiful day for a wedding,” my best friend says, obviously trying to break the tension. “Morning ceremonies are so romantic because—”

“Del, can you give us a minute,” I interrupt, not taking my eyes off Shane.

She gives my arm a reassuring squeeze before stepping away.

“It’s not too late to walk away,” I whisper, “if you’re having second thoughts.”

His reaction is so subtle most people wouldn’t notice it, but I see the exact moment when my words wound him.

My fingers curl around his before he can storm away. “That’s not how I’m feeling, but you seem...angry to see me.”

The silence stretches so long that I don’t think he’ll answer.

Then Shane dips his head, shifting closer and lowering his voice. “You’re trembling.”

“I’m nervous,” I say with a breathless laugh. “I’ve never gotten married before.”

Instantly, the tension in his shoulders drops. His thumb slides over my knuckles, sweeping back and forth with such delicateness that tingles sprint up my arm.

“I’m nervous too.”

It’s the last possible thing I expected him to say.

“Really? Because you look like you’re two seconds from morphing into James Bond and backflipping out of here while firing a few targeted bullets into the bad guys’ skulls.”

When the corner of his mouth kicks up, a buzzing resonates behind my breastbone.

“Now I’m an international spy? I thought I was a mafia boss.”

I huff. “I can’t keep things straight when you’re turning my brain into scrambled eggs.”

Shane’s grip tightens on my fingers. “I’m glad it’s not just me. That dress almost made me break our napkin contract.”

“It...what?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “It’s hard to string words together when I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my life.”

Every bone in my body liquifies as I struggle to breathe.

What is air again? And why is it important?

As Shane’s sweet words swirl in my mind, I realize my mistake. I’d written that clause into our impromptu contract because I’d wanted Shane to communicate with me over basic things, but I never considered that his words would knock me sideways. Sentiments from a taciturn man are bound to have more impact than someone who jabbers all the time.

I should have seen this coming. The weak knees, racing pulse, and scratchy throat are natural consequences from hearing something so lovely from such a reserved man.

Then, like a life preserver thrown to a drowning woman, my brain reminds me that—technically—Shane didn’t say *that I* looked beautiful. He complimented the dress, which undoubtedly deserves a little commotion. This thing is a work of art.

Deep inside, I know I’m fooling myself, but this distinction helps me draw in a breath, and then another.

I smile, and Shane’s returning grin threatens to knock me off my narrowly gained equilibrium.

Then something beeps, and Shane releases me to fish his phone out of his breast pocket and silence an alarm.

“It’s almost time.”

A familiar shape catches my eye when he tucks his phone back into his pocket. With all the tact of a rabid raccoon, my fingers dive into the silk and pull out a tube of grape glucose tablets.

“Why are your pockets like Mary Poppins’ carpet bag?” I ask, shaking the container at him.

“They’re standard pockets.”

“No. You pulled out two sets of paperwork, your phone, and...and *this*.” I give the tube another jostle.

I don't know why my mind is melting over my soon-to-be fake husband carrying my preferred flavor of fast-acting sugar. Maybe because my ex couldn't be bothered to remember my coffee order after three years—an order that's incredibly easy since I only drink green tea.

How hard is it to remember a tea bag?

Apparently, monumental.

Yet, here stands a man, who's known me less than a week, carting around a medical necessity on my behalf like it's no big deal.

Without being asked.

"What are you going to pull out next? A pineapple? A pair of nunchucks?"

"Technically, you pulled those out."

"*Shane*." I grit my teeth.

"Willow."

The careless way he rebuttons his jacket puts me over the edge.

"You—you can't do things like this." This time, my words are a broken whisper.

Shane inhales as his hands come to frame my elbows. "Respectfully, Willow. You can't tell me what to do. If I want to take care of you, I will."

Then he turns me toward the security line, places a hand on the small of my back, and guides me forward without another word.

CHAPTER 15



Willow

I parrot the standard wedding vows in a daze, focusing on the knot in Shane's black tie. Our officiant, Allen, has a substantial mustache, and even bushier eyebrows, but his kind eyes feel like my last tether to sanity as they lead me through the ceremony. I know I'm fixating on the retired judge, but every time I look at Shane, my heart lodges in my throat.

His decisive words from the lobby paired with the breathless wonder laced through his earlier compliment are still jumbling my common sense. Shane being commanding shouldn't have been a surprise. I can even rationalize him caring for me because providing me with medical insurance is part of our contract.

But *wanting* to do so?

Wanting is a whole different story.

Delilah surging forward with a pair of rings shakes me from my fog. My best friend has taken her ring duties very seriously since her role as photographer went up in smoke when security took our phones. I thought Shane was going to pummel the guard over making me hand over mine.

After showing Shane my stable blood sugar, I reassured him that I shouldn't dip low. Earlier this week, I had a virtual meeting with the nurse at my endocrinologist's office and have been adjusting my insulin per her advice. Delilah also reminded my frustrated groom that twenty years ago,

blood sugar was only monitored with finger sticks before meals, at bedtime, and as needed. Begrudgingly, he agreed but has been scowling ever since.

Shane's throat works as he collects my ring from Delilah's upturned palm.

He'd asked for my ring size yesterday and if I had any preferences. I'd told him nothing flashy because the idea of something expensive on my finger made me more nervous than when I'd had the briefcase full of money. Shane's lip had twitched before he nodded once.

Now, as he sets a gold band on my ring finger, my breath hitches. Tiny multi-shade stones are scattered throughout, forming colorful constellations. When Shane's thumb rests over the ring, pressing slightly, my eyes fly to his.

All traces of his grouchy self are gone, replaced with a vulnerability that makes my ribs ache. I see the question Shane isn't asking in his gorgeous green irises.

"It's perfect," I whisper, my eyes misting.

The smile I receive is one I want to capture over and over. In oil. In charcoal. In clay. In every medium possible.

Allen directing me to place Shane's black band on his hand is exactly what I need to not fall apart. I almost want to rib Shane over choosing the thick, dark ring, but it's so perfectly *him* that only a wistful sigh escapes my mouth.

When Shane clasps my fingers again, the lingering tension in my shoulders disappears.

"These rings are an unbroken circle," Allen continues, "symbolizing a love that has no beginning and no end. With these vows and rings exchanged, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Shane simply stares at me, jaw tensing. Then his free hand frames my face, his thumb gentle on my cheek while long fingers curl into my hair. The halting way he brings his face to mine is maddening. Even Allen shifts his weight, obviously not used to waiting this long for a post-ceremony kiss.

Our noses brush, and I suck in a shaky inhale. But when Shane's breath ghosts my lips, he stalls, fingers tightening in my hair like he's fighting a battle with himself. Something in me plummets and shatters as realization dawns.

Shane was supposed to marry another woman.

He'd wanted to start a life with Brielle, and now he's marrying me.

This isn't what he pictured for his future, and clearly, it's just hitting him.

Delilah's right. Shane has had a garbage year. But at least I can make this easy for him, especially since he's going to make the next twelve months effortless for me.

"I'm going to kiss you," I murmur.

He nods with a hard swallow.

When I fist his tie and tug his lips to mine, a masculine grunt leaves his throat, as if I caught him off guard, even though I warned him. I expect Shane to lean back, for our first and final kiss as a fake-married couple to end as swiftly as it started, but then his arm bands around my waist, tugging me against him. The hand in my hair expertly shifts as his lips slant over mine, pushing deeper, taking for the first time since I've met him.

Bliss licks down my spine as a resounding *yes* reverberates through my skull. I kiss Shane with everything I have, like this will be the last kiss of my life. When his hand shifts until his possessive fingers spread wide over my exposed upper back, my knees give out. I feel his appreciative hum in unexpected places—behind my earlobes, the insides of my wrists, low in my stomach.

My antsy fingers slip over his shoulders to dive into his hair, gripping and twisting slightly. Shane's breath puffs out in a surprised exhale as every nerve ending in my body overloads. I barely register Allen loudly clearing his throat, almost as if it wasn't the first time.

We break apart, breathing hard. Shane's unfocused gaze remains trained on my mouth, and I can't look away from his swollen lips.

"Well." Allen chuckles.

"Indeed," Delilah says, fanning herself.

Heat crawls up my neck and ignites my cheeks, but I can't look away from Shane, not when a soft smile grazes his mouth as his thumb tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

He looks so different, so utterly...content? Mere moments ago, I thought Shane was going to crack his molars, his jaw was so tight.

A part of me wants to laugh then rewind time and experience that earth-shifting kiss again. Because, yeah, it was *that good*. That kiss was undoubtedly the best one I've ever had. A part of me whines that I wasn't smart enough to write mind-blowing kisses into our napkin contract.

I exit the office and head toward security in a bubbly trance. Delilah keeps up a one-sided conversation as Shane and I sneak glances at each other. I feel hyperaware of the light brush of his thumb over the small of my back as he guides me through the crowd, of his presence at my side.

But when we get our phones back, Shane's demeanor swings back to grumpy as he checks multiple missed messages.

"I have to go."

"What?"

After our short ceremony, we were going to meet with his doorman and get a keycard for me before Shane, Delilah, and Adam helped me move. Delilah used one of her precious PTO days for today, insisting it was worth it. Since Adam works from home, he agreed to help with the heavy lifting until Piper got off the bus. Then Shane was scheduled to fly out this afternoon for his next stint of six away games, starting in Phoenix.

Shane exhales through his nose. "The team plane is leaving early. I need to leave now if I'm going to make it."

"Okay." I blink, ignoring the disappointment bursting in my chest. "I'll move in when you get back."

"Lolo, you have to be out of your apartment by tomorrow night," Delilah gently reminds me. "Demo starts Saturday."

"Oh, right." My fingertips pinch the bridge of my nose.

Shane presses his keycard into my free palm. "Use my key. I'll call Richard and let him know you have it. I already told the security team you'd be moving in."

My cheeks flame again but for an entirely different reason. I used to joke with Richard, Kyle, and the rest of the security crew when I was Shane's house cleaner. But now I'll be entering Shane's penthouse as his guest.

No, as *his wife*.

I sway a little as the finality of the word hits me. With our signatures scrawled on a filed marriage certificate, there's no going back now.

Shane tucks me against his side, murmuring over my ear. "Are you okay?"

Not trusting my voice, I nod...and then keep nodding because maybe if I can convince him, I can convince myself.

This is no big deal. I'm not really Shane's wife anyway. I'm his contractual arm candy against his ruthless family, and he's my insurance benefactor.

It's just...*that kiss*.

That kiss felt like something else entirely.

It existed beyond the rigid lines of mutually beneficial plans and prenups—even beyond the confines of cheeky napkin contracts.

Shane's utilitarian ringtone sounds. He silences it, but it immediately starts up again.

"Go." I push him away, setting a convincing smile on my lips. "We'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

Shane steps in front of me, gently gripping my chin until I meet his gaze. I've never felt so solely possessed by another person than when Shane looks at me like this, like he can see right through me.

"Yeppers." I give him a double thumbs up. "Enjoy your sportsball games, and I'll see you in a week."

Shane hesitates, his fingers flexing as his gaze ticks to my lips. I feel rather than see the rampant desire in that quick glance. It's like being hit by an electromagnetic pulse, an earthquake, and a freight train all at once.

But then his phone rings again, and the spell breaks.

After murmuring a quiet thank you to Delilah, Shane gives me a tight nod, turns, and strides out of the courthouse.

"Shoot," Delilah says after he's gone. "I didn't get any pictures of you two."

"That's okay." I drag my eyes from the antique doors, giving my head a little shake. "This was all f-a-k-e anyway." I letter-spell the last part just in case the marriage police are listening, ready to haul me away.

"Oh, Willow." Delilah links her arm through mine, tugging me toward the bright spring sunshine and my new life—for the next twelve months, anyway. "Delusional, delusional Willow."

Waves Group Chat

Sha

Who handles health insurance? I can't find it in the team app.

Tenny

Shane started a conversation. Everyone stay calm.

Rhett

This has to be an accident. Should I call the hotel's front desk for assistance?

Tenny

Screenshotting for historical purposes.

Sha

Don't make me regret asking you bozos.

DJ

Rebecca Kingstead is the benefits administrator. You could always email her if you want to avoid going into the front office when we get back.

Rhett

Why would Shane want to avoid the front office?

Colton

Ix-nay on the office-ay.

Rhett

I don't get it.

Tenny

Rebecca's phone number is also listed on the team app.

Rhett

Is there something wrong with the front office?

DJ

Rhett, remind me when I see you later to knock you upside the head.

Sha

I'll call. I'd rather take care of this today.

Rhett

I have a better question, which nightclub are we hitting tonight? We need to get our mojo back.

Trevor

Explain to me how bottle service translates into RBIs.

Colton

It's a highly scientific equation: vibes + gyrating = wins.

Tenny

I'm out. Need to rest and reset.

Rhett

But you're our cruise director.

Sha

I'm out too.

Rhett

Since when were you ever in?

Sha

Last time I went out with you idiots, my life changed.

Colton

Changed how? Be unnecessarily specific.

Trevor

I vote tacos instead.

DJ

Seconded.

Kai

Third. I know the best little spot.

Colton

Perfect. We'll interrogate Shane over chips and queso.

Sha

Not happening. Nice try, though.

CHAPTER 16



Shane

After six days on the road, the last thing I want to hear is the guitar intro to AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" blasting from my penthouse while I'm still in the private elevator. I'm exhausted from a grueling midday game, air travel, and the drizzly motorcycle ride home. If I hadn't been in such a rush getting to the airport after our courthouse wedding, I would have looked at the projected weather for today and driven my truck.

I try to control my rising irritation with a deeply drawn breath. Though I texted with Willow almost every day, it was mostly about logistical necessities. Had she connected with Sally, my personal assistant, and received her American Express Black Card? Did she meet with the courier to accept the expedited paperwork for her health insurance? Was my personal chef, Gabriel, creating nutritionally sound meals to her liking?

We never talked about midweek house parties.

The rush of annoyance pricking down my forearms is a welcome sensation. Every moment I wasn't on the field, I spent thinking about Willow. Though I tried to keep my thoughts centered on ensuring that Willow was safe and comfortable in my penthouse, my mind would invariably end up replaying our wedding kiss.

I don't think I've ever kissed someone like that, especially with an audience. I don't even know what happened. I just...lost myself. In the

moment. In her. Something about Willow just cracks me open, revealing parts of myself I wasn't even aware of.

It's a bit like tumbling headfirst down a very steep cliff.

It's terrifying.

And it can't happen again.

Not under *any* circumstances.

I rub at my chest as the elevator doors open, ignoring the dull ache that's been there all week.

Setting aside my duffel bag, jacket, and helmet, I continue toward the living room as a wall of sound assaults me. A custom sectional anchors the room while the floor-to-ceiling windows are bookended by two marble fireplaces. Like all the furnishings left by the previous owner, the couch is minimalist with a modern edge.

Instead of finding dozens of people, there's only Willow, jumping on the far end of the sofa while performing an air-guitar solo. Her eyes are squeezed tight in concentration, a bandana tied around her hair.

I lean against the mantel of the unlit fireplace, crossing my arms over my chest.

With her tank, athletic shorts, and knee pads, she looks like a volleyball—or maybe a roller-derby—player? But when Willow falls to her knees, really hamming it up, I realize there's a *very real* possibility that she's wearing the pads for this exact reason: to rock out at maximum capacity while protecting her kneecaps.

Despite my resolve to remain detached, my mouth curls upward.

"Only Willow," I mutter.

Then she opens her eyes to switch from guitar to drums, swinging wildly and finally catching a glimpse of me.

The scream coming from Willow's mouth is ten times louder than the blasting music. Eyes wide, she vaults herself backward, nearly tripping over the edge of the couch. I lunge forward, but she catches herself just in time. Then she dives flat onto the couch cushions, like she's sliding headfirst into home.

The music clicks off, though my ears continue to ring.

With the room silent, I expect Willow to pop up from the couch and babble an explanation, but she stays face-down on the microfiber fabric.

I place both hands on the back of the couch. "Willow?"

"Mm-huh?"

My plan had been to ask what she'd been doing, but it's clear Willow was crushing her air-guitar solo.

"Are the knee pads so you can slide across the stage?"

Willow tilts her head toward me, peeking one eye open. "That's an unexpected bonus."

"What are they for, then?"

She pushes up with an inhale, scrubbing her face with her hands. "I get tired of crouching when I'm cleaning baseboards. Kneeling with pads is easier."

My eyes follow her gaze toward a bucket and what looks like an oversized toothbrush against an interior wall.

I frown, all the levity from finding Willow being...well, Willow, vanishing.

"No."

My word is so sharp it could break the plate glass in front of us.

She groans. "I knew you were going to be like this."

I can't look away from the bucket. I want to simultaneously crush it between my palms and throw it off the balcony. I'm still staring when Willow climbs over the back of the couch, grabs me by the elbow, and drags me toward the kitchen.

"Here." She shoves a pan of banana bread beneath my nose. "This will take the edge off."

When I only glare, jaw tight, Willow sighs, breaking off a piece and lifting it toward my mouth. The scents of bananas, cinnamon, and chocolate swirl in my nose, but I don't give in. It's only when Willow raises her brows in a challenge that I let her feed me the tasty morsel. The sensation of her thumb brushing my lip is almost as blissful as the taste of the decadent bread.

Despite my efforts to remain stoic, a rapturous moan leaves my throat.

"Right?" she says, delighted. "Remember, both are part of our contract. Me cleaning and you getting delicious banana bread."

"I don't like it," I tell her, picking the whole loaf out of the pan and taking a huge bite from the end.

"I know, but you'll learn to live with it," she says, patting my shoulder.

Willow lets me eat half of the loaf in silence, hoisting herself onto the kitchen counter and kicking her bare feet while she waits.

"Better?" Her knowing smirk shouldn't be this adorable.

I simply grunt.

Willow's smile doubles in size. "I've been waiting for you to get home."

"You have?" Warmth billows between my ribs.

"Yes. I want a first-hand account of the Phoenix game. All of America heard Tenny's hot-mic love confession, but I want to know what it was like to be there in person."

Shoving down my stupid hope, I chastise myself for even thinking Willow would be excited to see me. She's more interested in when Tenny tried to start a fight with the opposing first baseman during our first game of three against the Phoenix Rattlers.

Apparently, Tenny has been having a clandestine relationship with *Diamond Breakdown's* sideline reporter, Alex Stevens, since spring training. When the Rattlers' first baseman talked trash about Alex, Tenny lost his cool. He shoved the guy, but before he could take a swing, Rhett and I held him back.

Everything afterward, including Tenny professing his love for Alex, was caught on Trevor's hot mic. The network has been mic'ing up different players with lavaliers to give live reactions to different plays—everyone except me, that is.

"It's not as romantic as it sounds."

I'm lying. Even a stone wall like me can admit it was incredibly romantic. The part of the whole ordeal that I can't get out of my head was when Tenny told us that Alex was "his person." I'd gone silent in that moment because the second my teammate said those words, Willow sprung to mind.

Which has got to be crazy, right?

We barely know each other.

Willow hums, her lips twitching like she's holding back a smile.

"So you're telling me you weren't at all affected by what your teammate said?"

I don't dignify that with an answer.

"You're telling me that giving an extended interview with Alex Stevens at the end of that game didn't have anything to do with what happened on the field?"

"No."

The back of my neck heats. Even though I hate being on camera, I tried to be more charismatic than lukewarm oatmeal at the end of that game

because I was worried Alex would lose her job. At least she could go out with good footage. Apparently, though, the network likes the drama of their reporter dating a player, so she's still working with the Waves.

"Uh-huh," Willow says, unconvinced.

"Sometimes you've got to talk to the press. It's part of the job."

"Speaking of the media, when do you want to show these off?" Willow waggles her wedding ring at me.

The sight of it on her delicate finger sends an enigmatic emotion shooting in odd directions. That is, until Willow notices that I'm not wearing mine. The way her face falls sends my stomach careening toward the building's lobby.

"Oh."

Willow's single-syllable word sounds more painful than a line drive to the shins.

"Right. Why would we be wearing our rings?" Willow tugs at the multi-stoned circle, but it doesn't budge. "Shoot. My hands are all swollen from all the air guitar," she says, frantically pulling at the ring like it's burning her. "It won't—" Her voice almost cracks. "I'll ice it. Then it will come off."

Before Willow can hop off the counter, I step between her knees. "Don't."

She lets me cage her. Willow doesn't look at me, though, just keeps twisting the ring.

"Willow, stop."

Her hands still, but her chest continues to heave with short inefficient breaths. Willow's look of defeat sends pain scratching down my spine. After a second of indecision, I give in, letting my thumb brush across her splotched cheek before I tilt her face up.

"I'm not wearing mine because I wanted to talk to you and get our stories straight. If we want to convince my family, I need to tell my teammates the same story we'll eventually tell them. With rushing off to catch the plane, we didn't get to discuss any of that. And I didn't want to have that conversation over the phone."

Willow doesn't say anything, her eyes darting around my face. Her silence is more powerful than most people's words.

Sighing, I dip my fingers beneath my black long-sleeve Henley to pull my ring out. I'd placed it on my gold chain after boarding the plane to

Phoenix. I hadn't liked the idea of it bouncing around in my duffel bag. If I'm being honest with myself, I've enjoyed the weight of it next to my heart.

Willow watches me free the ring from the chain and slide it on my finger.

After a few beats, she asks, "Our story?"

The relief over Willow speaking to me again feels like a deluge after being trapped in the outfield on a scorching summer day.

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"Can it be fun?" The slight twinkle in Willow's eyes makes my entire week.

"Within reason. I'm part of the equation, after all."

She wrinkles her nose, thinking. "Our truth actually makes a pretty good story."

There's too much I like about that sentence—truth, good, *our*.

Willow continues, oblivious to my internal distress. "Why don't we stick to the facts but just move the timeline back. That way, neither of us will slip up on any details when pressed."

"Okay."

"Let's say we met two months earlier—at the end of January."

I frown. "That's pretty quick."

"Not really." Willow gives me a cheeky wink. "You fell for me fast and hard and decided you couldn't live without me."

Willow has no idea how right she might be about that.

"End of January. Got it."

I allow a few seconds to pass before I ask the question that's been niggling me since I walked in the door.

CHAPTER 17



Willow

“Where’s your painting?”
“My what?”

Shane’s question catches me off guard. I half expected him to want to spend the next hour creating an infallible strategy for our relationship so we’d be prepared for every possible question thrown at us. I didn’t think we’d pick a start date, and voilà, our fake marriage is solidified.

“You spent five minutes waxing poetic over the light in my living room while we ate at the sandwich shop, but there aren’t any art supplies anywhere.” He pauses, glancing around the kitchen. “And where are the colanders? And the framed rooster print? I thought you said you unpacked?”

I pick at my nail polish; the pale-pink color is hanging on by a thread. “I did unpack.”

“Then where is everything?”

Biting my lip, I sneak a glance at Shane’s gorgeous green eyes. They’re so intense today, like deep pools of mossy determination.

My fake husband seems to understand my answer with just that look, because before I can say another word, he storms out of the kitchen toward the bedrooms.

“Wait!” I shuffle off the counter, trying to keep up, but one of his strides is like three of mine. “I was just being courteous. Not everyone likes my

particular brand of eclectic, and I didn't—"

My words cut off when I run into Shane's back as he stops dead in my open doorway. After silently checking that I'm okay, he steps aside.

"May I go in?"

I chuckle. "You don't have to be so formal."

A tendon in his neck jumps. "This is your home now. I want you to feel safe and to know that you'll always have your privacy."

Something about how Shane is always so careful with me feels like a hot poker pressed between my ribs. It's impossibly sweet and yet, at the same time, heartbreaking—especially since I trespassed in his room while he was gone.

"Oh, well." I glance at my bare feet, swallowing hard. "Then I should apologize to you."

"For what?"

I wince. "While you were gone, I stole one of your sweatshirts."

When Shane doesn't say anything, just stares, I ramble on.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stolen it. Or gone into your room. It's just, when I clean, I kinda have to go into your room. And I was in there, cleaning, and felt a bit chilly. I can give it back once I wash it." I bite my bottom lip. "Actually, would you prefer that I not go in there anymore? I could stop if—"

"It's fine. You can go in my room." After a beat, he adds, "You can also keep my sweatshirt if you need it."

Need is a strong word. Want is more accurate. The delightfully cozy crewneck sweatshirt feels like being nestled in a cloud. A storm cloud. Because surprise, surprise, it's black.

"Thanks. And you can go in my room whenever you want too," I say, gesturing for him to go in first.

Though my new bedroom is ginormous—twice the size of my studio apartment—Shane looks massive as he marches around, evaluating everything. The best part of my new living space, besides the floor-to-ceiling windows, is the luxurious tub in the attached bath. The walk-in shower is larger than my old galley kitchen.

It took me four days before I even felt comfortable brushing my teeth at the marbled sink. Sure, I'd cleaned all these surfaces, so I knew the layout of every inch of this penthouse, but living here? It still feels like an odd fever dream. Add in the limitless credit card, full-coverage health insurance,

and the nice man who came on Monday to make me a week's worth of delectable meals, and I can't quite believe my luck.

Part of me feels like I'm living on borrowed time, but Delilah encouraged me—over a dozen times that first day—to enjoy the unexpected windfall. Instead of foreboding the future, I'm choosing to focus on gratitude... especially for the man standing in front of me.

"This won't work," Shane says, hands on his hips while staring at the colanders I hung over the bed.

"I'm pretending they're dreamcatchers," I say, stepping beside him. "The good dreams flow through, but the bad ones get caught like spaghetti."

The corner of his mouth quirks as he glances down at me. "Has it been working?"

I shrug. "Couldn't tell you. The mattress is so comfortable I drop into a deep, dreamless sleep the second my head hits the pillow."

Shane nods, looking satisfied. "I updated the mattress before you moved in. I'm glad you like it."

"Like is too simple for how I feel about that mattress."

I'm awarded with one of Shane's rare grins.

"Could we put some of this in the shared areas?" he asks, spreading his arm wide to encompass all my knickknacks.

"You'd want that?"

"I bought this property sight-unseen. Sally toured it and mentioned that I might want to use an interior decorator, but"—he turns, giving me all his attention—"I'd rather see what you could do with it. I liked your apartment. I like this room. Can you do this out there?"

I stare, mouth gaping.

Shane—Mr. All-Black Grumpypus—wants me to give his penthouse the kitschy rainbow treatment? This man keeps surprising me at every turn.

"You're sure?"

Shane nods, serious as a heart attack.

My eyes widen as I shake my head. "Okay. Yeah. I guess."

"Can that be relocated to the living room?" Shane moves toward my painting.

Right now, it's just a red wash over my sketch. I decided to finally give in to the impulse of painting Piper. That's what this agreement allows me, after all: the freedom to do exactly what my creative soul desires. There'll be plenty of time to create pieces for sale after this one. Then I'll worry about

approaching galleries, entering juried art shows, and building an online following. Right now, I just want to feel the joy of holding a brush again.

Piper is sketched in profile, a delicate crown on her head while a chest plate of armor covers her torso. Her shoulders are covered by dainty cap sleeves with girlish ruffles, and her hair tumbles down her back in unruly curls. A Tyrannosaurus rex's face is also in profile, acting as her sentinel, her family crest adorning his metal collar.

Though I really wanted to use a museum canvas, I knew this would end up in Piper's room, so I scaled it back to a more manageable five-by-six-foot canvas. It's still massive by most artists' standards, but it's on the small side for me. I know the exact wall in her bedroom where it will fit perfectly.

"It's going to take up a lot of space," I hedge. "The painting is just part of it. I'll have to create dozens of palettes. I'll leave those out as I work because once I mix a color, I'll reuse it in different places. There will be hundreds of variations on each hue. Then there are the paints themselves, jars of brushes, rags, solv—"

"Are you telling me my penthouse is too small for your art?"

The slight quirk of Shane's lip sends a blush of warmth over my collarbones. I love when his dry humor comes out, especially if I'm in the middle of a verbal tailspin.

"Your penthouse is adequately sized."

"Only adequate?" When a teasing eyebrow lifts, I nearly choke on my own spit.

Is my fake husband *flirting* with me?

Shane has already been protective, caring, and cavity-inducingly sweet, but flirty? I don't know if I can handle flirty on top of everything else.

"Is that your friend's daughter?" he asks, turning toward the canvas again.

I swallow, trying to regain my composure. "Piper. She'd like to meet you."

"Really?" The confusion in his tone makes my heart contort.

"Yeah," I say, moving until we're side by side in front of Piper and her pet.

"I'm not—" He blows out a breath. "I'm not really good with kids."

"Sure, you are."

When Shane's puzzled gaze snaps to mine, a tiny spark pings between my ribs.

“You were helpful, attentive, and patient with the girls at the coffee shop. That’s all most kids need. Someone who’s willing to be there and listen.” I tilt my head to the side. “And maybe go along with their kooky ideas occasionally.”

“Willow, you don’t understand. I’m not—”

“Could you move the canvas for me?” I cut Shane off, unwilling to let him tear himself down. “It’s a bit bigger than my wingspan.”

I spread my arms wide to demonstrate.

Shane grunts but picks up the dry canvas. “How did you get it in here?”

“I didn’t. Sally coordinated the delivery for me,” I tell him, following him to the living room with the drop cloth.

Since my paintings are so large and I’m kind of tiny, I prefer to set them on the floor until I need to work on the bottom edge. Otherwise, I have to paint for hours on a ladder, and that gets old fast. It’s inevitable, but I try to avoid it for as long as I can.

“Would it be weird if I started calling Sally my fairy godmother? You’ve got to admit she even looks a little bit like the character from *Cinderella*.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen it.”

After placing the drop cloth on the floor, Shane carefully leans the canvas against the wall. Before he can kick the bucket I’d been using to scrub the baseboards earlier, I scoop it up and take it to the laundry room. When I return, Shane is nearly finished moving all the rest of the art supplies I had in my room. I guess when you have giant hands, you can carry a ton more brushes.

“Thanks.”

He nods.

I don’t think he’ll say anything else, but then he adds, “Can we put the rooster print in the kitchen? The bathroom feels like a weird place for a bird with that much confidence.”

When a laugh barks out of me, Shane ducks his chin, hiding his grin as he marches back toward my bedroom.

CHAPTER 18



Shane

I grunt, rolling my stiff right shoulder, knowing I can't delay the inevitable any longer. I tasked Sally with informing Dustin that my RSVP to his wedding would now include a plus-one, but I need to call Carter myself. Ironically, my relationship with my sports agent is closer than the one I have with either of my brothers.

Stalling for another minute, I rack the weights I'd been using and stare at the gray cloud wrapped around the windows. Willow's door had been closed when I rolled out of bed at ten, so I stuck to my routine of a morning workout before breakfast. Though I hadn't seen Willow, there had been progress on the painting.

She must have worked on it after we'd said goodnight or maybe early this morning. Piper's cheekbone has the beginnings of color and definition. Beside the canvas, a large glass slab is covered in various shades of beige with a paper-sized pad with smaller bits of color nearby.

The little flip I felt in my throat when I saw Willow's progress is problematic.

I want her to feel at home, which is why I pushed the decorating issue last night. I don't want Willow to feel like her room is an isolated apartment within my penthouse. If she's going to be here for a year, she should have full range of the space, especially since I'll be gone more than half the time.

I've never cared about what my place looks like because I'm hardly ever here. What's important is a good home gym, a chef's kitchen for Gabriel, my mattress, and the automated blackout curtains that cover the bedroom windows with a click of a button. Recovery sleep is arguably more important than another hour in the gym when it comes to performance and longevity. It is hands-down the most underrated training technique.

Running a towel over my sweat-damp hair, I finally dial Carter's number.

"I solved the robot issue," I tell him when he picks up.

"This, I gotta hear." A creak sounds in the background, like Carter is stretching out in his office chair.

"I..."

Though I know I could tell Carter the truth, that Willow and I married for convenience, a part of me doesn't want to voice that this is fake. Even when I'd been working with my lawyer, I'd simply mentioned that I was getting married and I needed him to prepare documents.

"I'm married."

"And Kylie Jenner is my girlfriend. Now that we've got those nonsense statements out of the way, what's your solution?"

I press my fist against my forehead with a slow exhale. "Feel free to check with the Circuit Court Clerk's Office."

Carter mutters a muffled curse as keyboard clicks resonate over the line. "You're serious?"

"When have I ever joked about anything?"

Except with Willow, but she seems to be the exception to everything.

"You got married a week ago, and you're only telling me now?" The pitch of my agent's voice skyrockets.

"If it makes you feel better, you're the first person I've told."

Carter makes a noise in his throat. "That does, actually."

After giving Carter Willow's basic information, I listen to his pitch about having me endorse an off-off brand of turf shoes before shutting it down.

"Fine," he sighs. "I'll see if I can find something else. Do me a favor and crack a smile during a game, or maybe rescue a baby from falling over the outfield wall or something. I'm good at my job, but I'm not a miracle worker."

After ending the call, I find Willow in the kitchen, her hair still mussed from sleep. A '70s rock ballad whispers in the background about missed opportunities as she putters around. When Willow opens the refrigerator,

her oversized cardigan slips off one shoulder, exposing a white tank over plaid pajama pants, and the desire to wrap her in my arms snaps the breath from my lungs.

“Morning,” she says while rubbing one eye. “I’m going to heat up a breakfast burrito. You want one?”

I nod, sitting on one of the stools at the large center island.

While the microwave whirs, Willow shoves a stack of envelopes toward me. “Sally delivered these while you were gone.”

I debate lying, telling Willow I’ll get to them later, even going so far as to take them into my room, but what comes out of my mouth is an unfeeling, “You can throw them out.”

She frowns, sifting through the pile. “Some of these look like they were addressed by children.”

“All the better for them to understand disappointment early.”

Willow looks at me like I just suggested drowning a puppy for funsies.

“*Shane.*”

Standing, I snatch the envelopes from her and throw them in the trash. “This is who I am, Willow. I don’t do fan mail, charity signings, or kids’ baseball clinics.”

I do donate large sums of money to various charities, but never so it’ll be traced back to me. Most of them support children who want to play baseball but can’t afford it and, ironically, T1D research focusing on regenerating insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas. Bryce sent me information about the research institute a few years ago, and I’ve been one of their premiere donors ever since.

Willow’s mouth pops open in disbelief, and I simply wait.

Any second now, she’ll tell me I’m a heartless jerk with the emotional intelligence of a thumb tack. Then, she’ll want nothing to do with me.

My chest squeezes, but I brush it aside.

On some level, I know I’m burning things down. I just don’t know why.

Actually, I know exactly why.

Telling Carter the details of our marriage, like Willow is actually mine, like she would ever choose me in the first place...

It was too much. I need to remind myself—remind her—that this is just an arrangement. I’m not the kind of man who’d be good for her. She needs someone energetic and creative and who isn’t routinely compared to an automaton.

Willow's gaze flits from my eyes to my jaw to my clenched hands. I stand absolutely still as she pads closer. When her fingers slide over mine until they wiggle their way to the center of my palm, I don't so much as blink.

"Today," she whispers, not breaking eye contact.

My brows twitch in confusion.

"That's who you are today." Her bare shoulder lifts in a shrug. "Who knows who you'll be tomorrow?"

My hand flexes, but she doesn't let me go.

"Willow, please."

I don't know what I'm asking for.

Mercy? Forgiveness? A combination of both?

When the microwave pings, she gives my fingers a squeeze before spinning to retrieve our breakfast. She slides mine onto a plate, setting it next to me before hunting in the fridge for hot sauce. I don't move while Willow sits down, happily tucking into her burrito.

"You know what we should do today?" she asks over a very full bite.

I don't answer. I don't even think I'm breathing at this point.

"We should go to my favorite antique store. The living room could use a credenza along the empty wall. Maybe some plants in different pots. A few statement pieces."

"What are statement pieces?" I ask, finally joining the living and picking up my breakfast.

"You know, like a ceramic horse bust or a giant bronze banana."

I choke on my bite of burrito.

Willow's grin is just this side of wicked. "I take it that's a no for the banana. Maybe something nautical since we live by the ocean? A model ship? An oversized jar of seashells?"

I shake my head, swallowing with difficulty. "I hate the beach."

"You do?" Willow pouts. "That's the whole reason I moved here."

Yet another reason why we'd never work out.

"There was also a career opportunity, but it fell apart after I'd relocated."

"What kind of opportunity?"

My knowledge gap about her world suddenly feels larger than a nine-run deficit in the bottom of the eighth. If I'd been smart, I'd have spent the plane ride home yesterday researching how to get Willow's paintings into galleries or museums or wherever fine art goes.

I take another large bite, determined to spend every spare minute learning what I can.

“It was an artist residency with a local hyperrealist painter. Her work is primarily of waves and water, but unfortunately, she received a cancer diagnosis right before I was to start with her.” Willow’s expression softens. “But don’t worry, Nina is doing great. The chemo seems to be working.”

“That’s good,” I say, actually meaning it.

Willow grins at me before startling like she forgot something.

She pulls her insulin pen out of the cardigan’s pocket and then freezes. “Oh, I’ll go to the—”

“It’s fine.”

“It won’t gross you out?”

“Nothing about you grosses me out.”

The husky sentence escapes before I remember I’m trying to keep my distance.

Willow blinks, stunned for a second.

“Do you want me to look up the carbs?” I ask to distract her.

In addition to having Gabriel create delectable meals this past week, I had him provide nutritional information for each serving in a shared e-doc. It’s a pretty standard request, especially for athletes tracking macros, but I wanted Willow to be certain of each carbohydrate she ate.

“No. I looked it up before you came in. I just forgot to give myself insulin.”

My chin dips in a nod. I should look away, give her privacy perhaps, but I’m oddly curious. As a kid, I never saw this side of Bryce’s T1D. At first, he had to go to the school nurse for his insulin. Later, he handled it himself, always ducking into a private spot so the jackwads in our grade couldn’t turn it into a joke—or worse, accuse him of being weak.

Willow blows her bangs out of the way before dialing her insulin pen to the right number and lifting her shirt. The narrow band of exposed skin over her belly button snags my attention and holds it in a vise grip.

Stop staring, I tell myself. She’s giving herself vital medicine.

When Willow pinches her skin and inserts the needle, I want nothing more than the hundreds of thousands of dollars I’ve sent to the research institute to yield immediate results. Beautiful, charismatic, hopeful Willow shouldn’t have to stab herself multiple times a day in order to live.

“Does that hurt?”

It's a stupid question. Of course it hurts. And it's not like I've never felt a needle stick before.

She shrugs. "You get used to it. My endocrinologist says I can transition to a tubeless insulin pump after a few months."

"Is that something you'd want?"

"Maybe." She smiles, but it wobbles at the edges. "I'm still figuring things out."

I draw in a deep breath, telling myself not to say anything.

"What can I do?"

My question is too low and earnest...too *vulnerable*.

"You're doing it."

The soft grin she offers me feels more impactful than hitting a walk-off at the World Series.

Something about the moment hums with its own vibrational resonance before Willow breaks the trance by tucking her burrito to her chest and backing out of the room with a playful wink.

"Meet you at the elevator in twenty minutes. We've got a long day of shopping ahead of us."

I groan for Willow's benefit, but internally, my heart is skipping like a darned schoolgirl.

CHAPTER 19



Willow

I keep up a one-sided conversation while Shane drives us to my favorite strip mall in his truck. After seeing the way Shane white-knuckled the steering wheel while receiving a succession of rapid-fire texts from someone named Cody, there's a purpose to my babbling.

Would I like to ask who Cody is? Absolutely. Should I wait until Shane isn't operating heavy machinery in the rain? You betcha.

It has been pouring in sheets from the moment we pulled out of the private garage. The heavy-duty windshield wipers look like they're about to launch themselves into space. Fortunately, traffic is light, and before I know it, Shane whips his black truck into a parking spot.

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I tuck my legs beneath me and turn to face Shane. It's unspoken yet obvious that we're going to wait until the deluge eases before getting out. I can barely read the cheerful script on the window of my favorite spot to find previously loved knickknacks.

"Who's Cody?"

Apparently, I'm choosing violence today.

One would think I'd tread lightly after Shane's display of mean-dog barking in the kitchen earlier, but I'm not about to live on eggshells for the rest of the year. Also, it's as obvious as a crooked frame in a gallery that Shane is not only testing me but he *expects* me to fail.

Little does he know, stubborn determination is one of my better qualities. That kind of grit is necessary when you create art like mine. The hours of

patience and minute precision required to capture photo-real details are often painstaking. My back, neck, and fingers usually ache after a full day's session.

Not to mention my vision crosses to where I can't see straight anymore. At that point, it's wise to take a break, but I'm usually so engaged in accurately recreating a person's eyelashes or capturing the curve of a leaf vein that I tend to push myself too far.

"My jerk brother."

"What makes him a jerk?"

This question gets the cold shoulder.

"And you have another brother?"

Shane's sigh is so exaggerated I wonder if he was secretly a theater kid.

"Dustin."

I rest my chin in my palm. "He's the one getting married, right? Where are the happy nuptials?"

"Nantucket."

"Oooh, Nantucket. The land of limericks."

Shane side-eyes me but doesn't say anything.

"Okay, I didn't want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice."

Digging in my purse, I toss aside my wallet and car keys before grabbing my sketchbook. Flipping the book to the last page, I brandish our napkin contract like it's the solution to all our problems.

Which, in this case, it is.

"You're carrying that around?"

"Yes, for emergencies such as this."

Shane closes his eyes, rubbing a knuckle between his brows, before opening his phone screen and wordlessly passing it to me.

I'm not quite sure what's going on, but I snatch his phone like a seagull dive-bombing unattended French fries. The fact that Mr. Closed-Off just handed me his phone makes buzzy energy two-step down my spine. My eyes scan the screen, quickly reading Cody's texts.

Cody

What's this about you bringing someone to Dustin's wedding?

Cody

That's a punk move with it being so close.

Two things to note here: Cody used a word *way worse* than ‘punk,’ and he has a fair point. But before I mention that Cody saying we’re inconveniencing Dustin doesn’t exactly make him a jerk, I read on.

Cody

She better not be a piece of trash.

My eyes fly wide. The word he used instead of ‘piece of trash’ is not fit to repeat.

Cody

There’s no way you could do better than Brielle. What a smokeshow.

Cody

How’d you screw that up again?

Cody

Oh, that’s right, because you suck.

The woman-shaming, followed by glorifying Shane’s ex-fiancée, then diving right into insults makes my head swim. I push the phone onto the center console like it’s covered in mucus then wipe my hands on my paint-splotched overalls.

Shane tips his chin expectantly.

“Fine. Your brother’s a jerk.” I puff a defeated breath, sending my bangs fluttering off my forehead. “Are they...” I hesitate, already knowing the answer. “Are they all like that?”

He nods.

A barrage of questions fights to be the first out of my mouth. Why is his family so terrible? Did they mistake basic kindness for a contagious disease? Was showing empathy punishable by fingernail removal? Also, how did Shane—who’s a complete marshmallow at his core—survive being surrounded by wolves?

“Cody has been divorced three times and has four kids from two different marriages, but he acts like it’s *my* failed engagement that brings shame to the Seaver name.” His focus shifts to the sluicing rain. “Dad didn’t even try to get remarried after Mom left, just paraded a revolving cast of women in front of us. Dustin is on wife number five.”

“Five?” I gasp.

“Yup.”

“And how old is he?”

“Thirty-one.”

“That’s...” I struggle to find the right adjective. “I don’t know if I should say persistent or—”

“Let’s just say Seavers aren’t known for lasting relationships.”

The implication lands with all the subtlety of an airhorn in a library.

For once, I don’t know what to say, so I just tuck my knees against my chest and watch the rain.

“They’re going to be terrible to you at the wedding,” Shane says after a long moment, apology in his voice.

I nod, hugging my legs. “When is it again?”

“Three weeks.”

I allow myself one sinking exhale before I push my shoulders back and send Shane a sly look. “That’s good because it gives me a chance to practice verbally outwitting bullies. I’m going to look up some kill-‘em-with-kindness comebacks that’ll keep their heads spinning.”

A shuddered breath parts Shane’s lips as his entire body goes slack. I’d been too busy processing everything that I hadn’t noticed how tightly he’d been holding himself.

“And if that doesn’t work, I’ve got years of pent-up only-child longing. If they start talking trash, I’m not above dishing out some sibling mischief.”

His brows slide together as a smile flirts with his lips. “I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“They better be ready for the gambit.” I tick off my fingers. “I’m talking wet willies, noogies, ear flicking, and if necessary, a good old-fashioned pantsing.”

Shane’s eyes grow large.

“You’ll pants my brother at his own wedding?”

“If he’s messing with you? Yes.”

Shane shakes his head in disbelief. “You’re...”

“Scrappier than you expected? Little but fierce? Not afraid to put up my dukes?” I thumb my nose before playfully putting up my fists.

The wide smile overtaking Shane’s face hits me square in the chest.

“Absolutely wonderful.”

My heart vaults into my throat as my brain short circuits. It crashes hard, sputters for two seconds, and struggles to reboot. Shane smiling at me like that before calling me *wonderful* is simply too much to process.

Add in the fact that he looks ridiculously gorgeous in his black jeans and another one of those fitted Henleys with the sleeves pushed up just enough that his tattoos almost feel like a tease. Also, did I mention the top button is undone?

It's *maddening*.

All I want is to dip my fingers into the slight notch between his collarbones. But if I do that, I'll end up climbing over the center console and kissing him. The last thing Shane needs after opening up about his family is me mauling him.

Like a cosmic gift, the rain clears, and a beam of sunshine refracts through the windshield.

"Oh, look at that. The rain stopped."

Before Shane can say anything, I launch myself at the passenger door, flinging it open and barely getting my feet beneath me before I splatter on the soaked pavement.

"You coming?"

After grabbing my purse out of the footwell, I force a smile and bolt toward the store.

CHAPTER 20



Shane

My palm runs down my face, watching Willow race inside the quaint shop. She was in such a hurry to get away from me that she left the passenger door gaping open. Willow practically levitated into the antique store; she was moving *that fast*. Sparse raindrops hit my head as I step out, shut her door, and wrestle with the disappointment clogging my veins.

I did the wrong thing somehow.

I was trying to...I don't know, be less of an impenetrable fortress. Tell the truth, maybe? I wanted Willow to know how unbelievably incredible she is, but I botched it. If I'd gotten it right, she wouldn't have bolted.

My lips twist in a scowl, and then, as a bell tinkles while I open the door to the store, I can't hold back my groan.

This place is a hoarder's fever dream. Everything is stacked on top of everything else, like the owner is playing a dangerous game of antique Jenga. Hoards of chipped porcelain lean against yellowed books while old clocks and faded paintings cover every square inch of wall space. The aisles are so narrow I have to shuffle through sideways so I don't knock anything over.

Meanwhile, Willow practically skips up to a counter buried halfway to the back.

"Hello, Mr. Fields. How are you doing?"

I don't see anyone, but knowing Willow, she could be speaking to the frog figurine beside the ancient cash register. Meanwhile, scents of mildew and dust jockey for position in my nostrils.

"Better now that you're here," a scratchy voice sounds from behind a bookshelf.

"There's no way this place is fire marshal approved," I mutter, squeezing between a dollhouse and a line of illuminated floor lamps.

Willow ventures off to the left, looking at a taxidermied squirrel wearing a tiny top hat, as I find Mr. Fields in a wingback chair. He stares at the floor, rocking forward before slowly straightening to his feet. When his legs shake ominously, I catch him by the elbow of his tweed suit, using my free hand to collect his cane from beside the chair and hand it to him.

"Oh," he says, surprised. "You're new. Did he come with you?"

"Yup," Willow says, playfully popping the P as she turns around. "This is Shane. Shane, meet my good friend, Mr. Fields."

I nod in greeting.

"Willow comes in almost every week," he tells me, finally gaining his balance.

"You have the best selection in town, and the company's not bad either." She beams at him before glancing at me. "Shane needs a credenza. I was thinking the shaker one."

"A lovely piece," Mr. Fields agrees.

I release him but stay close just in case.

"We also need a few statement pieces like this." She picks up a giant ceramic cat wearing a bowtie.

When my lips dive into a frown, Willow giggles. It's then that I realize she's teasing me by intentionally picking something garish. That knowledge loosens the chains wound around my ribs.

"Perhaps the bronze goose would be more to his liking?"

"Yes!" Willow disappears into the bowels of the store before returning just as quickly, triumphantly holding the small sculpture over her head. With its wings spread wide, it looks as if it's about to take flight. It's almost...regal.

When they both stare expectantly, I sigh.

"That means he likes it." Willow sets the bird beside the register.

"How can you tell?"

“It’s like learning a new language. Fortunately, I’m a quick study,” she tells Mr. Fields with a wink.

“Can he speak?” Mr. Fields whispers to Willow while I’m standing directly beside him.

Willow nods solemnly. “But only if you’re *really* good.”

“This is ridiculous.”

Mr. Fields lets out a delighted hoot. “It worked!”

I groan, crossing my arms.

“What does that mean?” Mr. Fields whispers like they’re in their own little world.

“That we better stop poking the bear.” She grins at me before wrapping her fingers around my sleeve.

I let Willow tug me by the elbow into another claustrophobic section until we lose sight of Mr. Fields.

“Wait. We can’t leave him standing by himself. What if he falls?”

Willow’s gaze slides from where her fingers are wrapped around my arm to my eyes. Hesitation wisps across her gaze before she reaches to brush a strand of hair off my forehead. “He’ll be okay.”

I try not to react to the blissful contact.

“You’re sure?”

She nods. “I thought the same thing at first. That’s why I kept coming back and checking on him, but Mr. Fields has an incredible family who helps him open and close the store. He’s also more stable than he looks and really likes his independence. It’s sweet of you to worry, though.”

When Willow presses her palm to my cheek, it takes everything in me not to lean into it.

She murmurs, almost to herself. “Grumpy, kindhearted man.”

Then Willow’s thumb sweeps over my cheekbone, and I can’t help it. My eyes fall closed with a shuddered exhale.

After hours of rigorous training—my whole life, really—ever since my father put me on skates at two, I’ve taught my body what it can and shouldn’t do. When to react. When to wait. When to push harder. All of that and I can’t resist a simple caress.

“Let’s find some planters you don’t hate.”

My lashes fly open at Willow’s breathy voice, but she’s already striding away. After a few steps, she glances over her shoulder, almost helplessly, almost as if she feels this incessant pull too. My knuckles rub the center of

my chest when our gazes lock, my heart suddenly too big for my body. Willow's focus slides down to my hand, her lips parting slightly...

And that's when everything goes sideways.

Willow careens straight into a shelved rack of cut glassware.

I surge forward, steadying the rack with one hand and catching a large pitcher before it crashes to the floor. Willow gasps, jerking sideways and unintentionally dropping her large purse. It skitters across the floor, smacking into a stack of old newspapers topped with a rusty typewriter.

We glance at each other. The tarnished keys teeter for two halting breaths before they miraculously stop. Willow makes a relieved sound, smiling like she just made off with a dozen contraband cookies. A snort leaves my nose, my lips slowly tugging upward.

We grin at each other for a heartbeat before the energy between us shifts.

Intense buzzing careens down my spine when Willow's gaze slides to my mouth, her smile fading. It's only then that I realize how close we are. With her sandwiched between me and the rack, I've unintentionally boxed her in, one arm over her head.

Before I can shift away, Willow's fingertips raise to trace the collar of my shirt, stalling on the undone button. It's impossible to breathe, to swallow, to *think* with her fingers at the hollow of my throat. Willow's lashes flutter, but I command myself not to move.

I don't want to get things wrong again.

Willow needs to show me she wants this as much as I do.

She drifts closer, raising on her tiptoes, just as the stack of newspapers shifts.

Our necks snap in the direction of the movement a second before the typewriter loses its battle with gravity.

"Here." I hand Willow the glass pitcher before diving to catch the typewriter.

Unfortunately, my momentum nudges the boots of the human-sized nutcracker, sending it toppling. I have just enough time to set down the typewriter and roll to the left to catch the tights-wearing behemoth. Elbows bracing the ground, I stop the nutcracker before its bearded face smacks me in the nose.

I wait for more mayhem to ensue, but all I can hear is Willow's boisterous laughter.

"I'm sorry." Willow's apology escapes between guffaws.

Looking over, I find her bent halfway over in a fit of giggles, her phone pointed in my direction.

“Are you filming me?”

“Yes.” Her answer is barely a squeak. “It’s too funny not to.”

A groan escapes me before I glance at the black soulless eyes of the wooden figure three inches from my face. With his jaw slightly ajar, it almost looks like he’s leaning in for a kiss. Make that *gunning for a real make-out session* with the way he’s draped over me, chest to toes.

Whoa, buddy. Buy me dinner first.

I grunt.

None of this is what I had planned for my day off. I don’t like antiquing in claustrophobic stores or rescuing over-amorous figurines. A harsh exhale leaves my nose before the most unexpected thing happens.

A snicker bubbles up my throat.

It’s almost like the first spurt of water breaching a dam. The snicker shifts into a chuckle which cascades into a genuine laugh. Then I’m cracking up, my abs clenching as I momentarily lose my breath. Meanwhile, all my laughter causes the nutcracker to bounce, which only sets Willow off again.

“You can’t—”

“It’s like—”

Her half-broken, mirth-filled sentences only make me laugh more. I roll the nutcracker to the side, stabilizing him with one hand while I wheeze. Our noise draws Mr. Fields, who surveys the scene with a severe, “Oh my!”

Willow and I lock eyes. She looks like a helium balloon about to explode. When Willow breaks first, I quickly follow her, cackling. We laugh until tears leak out of my eyes, and Willow snorts so loud even Mr. Fields chuckles.

When we eventually calm down, Willow glances at me with a contented sigh.

The way she’s looking at me...*smiling* at me...

I don’t think anyone has ever looked at me like that.

“You should really do that more often.”

“Get attacked by predatory Christmas decorations?”

“No.” Willow snorts, shaking her head. “Laugh.”

I want to tell her that I haven’t laughed like this in years—haven’t had a *reason* to—but Mr. Fields speaks first.

“Does this mean you’ll be taking the nutcracker home with you?”

“No,” Willow and I say in unison.

We share another look before my heart can’t take any more of her casual affection. I avert my gaze, hop up, and right the nutcracker. I also straighten the stack of newspapers and move the typewriter to a steadier location.

Beyond the shelf with the glassware, a framed set of three baseball cards leans against a gramophone. I move closer to investigate. All three players are from the 1982 Waves lineup—not famous but definitely leaders in their day.

“Can we find a place for this?” I ask, glancing back at Willow.

Her grin softens. “You can have anything you want.”

I want you. I want to keep you, but I don’t know if I deserve to.

My hands fist at the thought, and Willow catches it. I force my fingers to loosen as she walks over. A quiet sigh leaves her as she leans past me to pick up the frame. She pats my shoulder twice with it before disappearing behind another mountain of clutter.

“Charming, isn’t she?”

I jolt. I’d completely forgotten the older gentleman was standing nearby.

A gruff agreement comes from my throat.

“I’m glad to know she’s in such good hands.”

The man sends me a knowing smile before shuffling off. I stand stock-still, wrestling with the gnawing sensation eating my bones. Could there *even be* a scenario in which I’d be good for Willow?

But before I can fully tumble down that rabbit hole, I hear a crash accompanied by Willow’s bright “I’m fine!” from another corner of the store and take off in that direction.

CHAPTER 21



Willow

I'm still riding the high of Shane's laughter long after we leave the antique store. Add in the fact that I have the footage of the rare event, and I feel luckier than a hiker who stumbled upon Bigfoot. Without evidence, no one might have believed that Shane's laugh is the perfect combination of rough and warm, like the slight burn of stubble sliding down your neck.

When I shiver at the thought, Shane's large hand raises to increase the cabin heat of his truck.

"Thanks," I manage, clearing my throat when it comes out hoarse.

Oookay, then. In the most predictable, unsurprising turn of events, I've developed a massive crush on my paper-only husband. But can you blame a girl? At this point, I'm beginning to seriously question the sanity of Shane's ex. Is this Mike Ellison guy also Superman or something? Otherwise, I don't understand why you'd walk away from all of this.

I adjust the bronze goose in my lap. The rest of our haul is in the back of his cab, minus the credenza. Before we left, Shane scheduled a date with Mr. Fields's delivery service. Then he offered to move a few heavy pieces closer toward the walls so that Mr. Fields could better navigate the space with his cane. If I hadn't already been crushing on my fake husband, seeing his muscles strain as he moved furniture for an elderly man did me in.

"Just so you know," I say, shifting the goose so his wing isn't jabbing my thigh. "The last three times I went to that store, I didn't knock over a single

thing.”

Shane eyes me but doesn’t say anything.

“I didn’t!”

When the corner of his mouth kicks up, I want to sigh like a schoolgirl.

“I’m serious,” I tell him, rotating to place the goose in the backseat before turning sideways.

His smile dives into a frown. “Sit back. Your seatbelt doesn’t work as well when you’re like that.”

“But I want to see your face.” I poke him in the cheek.

“*Willow.*” The growly way he says my name sends goosebumps sprinting down my arms.

I harrumph, sitting straight and crossing my arms. The pleased grin on Shane’s lips is absolutely worth not being able to study him fully.

“Also, I’m not always a trainwreck.”

Shane nods like he believes me, but I feel the need to elaborate.

“For example, I have never—not once—knocked over a bottle of linseed oil or accidentally mixed up my brushes. When I’m painting...”

My sentence trails off as I think of how to describe the sensation.

“Do you know that feeling when it seems like every cell in your body is aligned? Like your skeletal structure, your muscles, even your vision are fine-tuned just so you can accomplish this *one thing*?”

When Shane doesn’t fill the pause I leave open, I continue.

“It’s like that every time. Sure, different parts are hard. You have to make hundreds of tiny decisions that no one else will notice individually but everyone will notice collectively. You have to commit months—even a year—to a single image, which can easily lead to burnout. You find yourself adjusting, perfecting, softening, to the point where it’s almost obsessive, but”—I release a contented breath—“there’s nothing else I’d rather do.”

Shane’s fingers tap against the steering wheel.

“That’s how I feel about baseball.”

“Really?”

Shane scowls when I rotate in my seat again.

“Ugh, fine.” I make a show of pushing my shoulders as far back as they’ll go before lolling my head to the side to glare at him.

He nods, satisfied, before tapping the wheel again.

“Hockey was always...”

The silence stretches so long a whole song finishes on the radio.

“Challenging.”

When a DJ talks excitedly over an obnoxious airhorn, Shane punches the controls, plunging us into quiet. Only the hush of tires on damp pavement lingers as we drive home.

“I thought that was how it was supposed to be. I mean, no kid wants to get up at four in the morning for drills before school, to spend every waking hour training or studying plays. Except, my brothers did. They loved it. Couldn’t get enough.”

He falls silent again, his jaw working.

“It was always like...”

This pause stretches longer than the previous ones.

When it doesn’t seem like Shane will continue, I slide my hand over the center console. I’d like to snatch his fingers off the steering wheel but don’t want to force him.

His hand squeezes the wheel four times before—hesitantly—it comes to rest beside mine. My heart contorts as our pinkies brush, as if Shane’s not sure if it’s okay to take my proffered hand. Even though I want to gather his fingers and hug them to my chest, I force myself to gently slide my hand into his and wait.

A swallow works his throat before he intertwines our fingers. My heartbeat suddenly feels like it originates from the center of my palm.

“It seemed like I was the odd one out, like the hospital mixed me up at birth or something. There was Dad and his good little soldiers, and I... It never felt like I fit in hockey, like my pads were always a size too small. I wasn’t as naturally agile on skates as my brothers were. There were aspects of the game I didn’t like too, but none of that mattered.”

“I worked twice as hard to prove to everyone I belonged, knowing I didn’t. I followed every order and did every workout. Afterward, I kept training. I taught myself to be a machine. Then, one summer, Dad and I had it out over—” He blows out a breath. “I don’t even remember. He was always yelling at us about something, nitpicking every move. We were never good enough. Even though I had practice that afternoon, I texted Bryce that I was going to skip it.”

“That was the friend you told me about?”

He nods.

“Bryce missed practice with me, and we ended up meeting some of his friends for a pickup baseball game. It wasn’t *exactly* a casual game since the

rest of Bryce's friend group played travel ball. I got up to the plate that first time, having absolutely no idea what I was doing, and knocked it out of the park. Then, I did it again. By my third at-bat, the pitcher walked me to a chorus of boos."

Shane smiles, soft and tender, and warmth ribbons through my ribs.

"Afterward, we went to get pizza like normal teenagers, something Dad wouldn't have allowed because of the"—his voice takes on a mock-stern tone—"high fat and insufficient protein content."

Shane shakes his head.

"The rest snowballed. The guys told their coach. He sought me out. Without telling my dad, I guest-played a game, borrowing gear. It felt like I'd been walking against gale-force winds my whole life, then suddenly, everything was calm. Baseball felt like breathing. It still does. Going against my father was tough, but it was also the easiest choice I've ever made. When everything else fails me, baseball is always there."

I want to simultaneously hug Shane and beat up his brothers, bake him four pizzas, and force him to do a series of 'I am worthy' affirmations. My brain swirls like a chaotic hornets' nest caught in a tornado, until I blurt, "I want to see you play."

Shane immediately shuts down.

There's no better way to describe it. His shoulders and jaw tighten, and his hand flexes as he tries to pull away. All the softness is replaced by armored walls slamming into place.

I want to whine at the swift change in Shane's demeanor, but I tighten my grip on his fingers instead.

"It'd be good for me to make an appearance at Waves Stadium. If you want your family to think I'm your loving wife, I'd be at your games."

At this point, I'm burning a hole in the side of his face with how closely I'm watching each micro-expression.

"Plus, you wanted the media to see you as less murderous." I give him my cheesiest grin. "If they see us together, you'll be a *ray of freaking sunshine* by proxy."

Shane glances at me, obviously fighting a smile. I don't think I've ever been so happy to see a lip twitch.

"You're incredibly capable, Willow, but that's pushing it."

"Oh, you *did not* just do that," I say, raising my brows.

"Do what?"

“Challenge me to sparkle at my brightest setting. Because I don’t think your retinas can handle it, my friend.”

Shane chuckles, and it makes my entire week.

“I’ll call Carter so he can arrange a press release announcing our marriage, and I’ll have a ticket set aside for you at will call for tomorrow’s game.”

“Would it be possible to have four tickets? I know Delilah and Adam would love to come too. They can tell me what’s going on so I’m not lost the whole time. And if *I do* get lost, Piper and I can finally settle our ongoing debate over who’s the best Disney princess.”

That lip twitches again. “Four tickets it is.”

I release a happy sigh.

“It’s settled.” My free hand pats our joined fingers. “Tomorrow I’ll attend my first sportsball game. When we get home, we’ll order pizza for lunch, extra cheese and bacon. Afterward, I’ll get some painting in, and then we can play Hungry Hungry Hippos, Uno, and Exploding Kittens.”

“I can’t tell if you’re stringing random words together or if you’re having a stroke.”

I glance over as Shane rolls to a stop at a red light. When our eyes meet, I want nothing more than to capture this moment.

Portrait of a mistreated man on the crux of hope.

Shane is so heart-wrenchingly beautiful right now. His uneven-colored eyes look lighter than I’ve ever seen them. With the world still gray and muddled behind him, his copper hair and the slight lift of his lips shine brighter by contrast.

I know, deep in my bones, that Shane has never told anyone that story. He’s been carrying the weight of his affectionless childhood like a rucksack of stones, bearing it in silence.

The only thing more obvious than his dad and brothers being massive dirtbags is that Shane grew up without any fun. The fact that he doesn’t know the names of some of the most iconic childhood games is proof enough. I bet Shane never got to ride bikes, or play mermaids, or swing until his feet touched the sky.

No wonder he’s such a grumpypus.

A wad of emotion gets stuck in my throat before I set a dazzling smile on my lips.

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to kidnap me and take me to the hospital again.”

Shane groans. “I thought we *agreed*—”

“Drive, silly goose. The light’s green.”

He turns the radio back on before accelerating through the intersection, softly squeezing our joined fingers.

“The silly goose is behind you.”

I grin at his joke, but my mind is busy plotting how to recreate some of the best parts of childhood. Dozens of ideas flood my brain as a bubble of excitement fizzes down my spine.

Shane “Murder Vibes” Seaver has no idea what’s in store for him.

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CHAPTER 22



Shane

“I should have expected this,” I grumble, fouling off another ball from the high-speed pitching machine.

“What did you think would happen after dropping a bomb like that and ignoring the group chat all morning?” Colton asks from outside the netting surrounding the batting cage.

The rest of the Waves lineup crowds around him instead of handling their own pregame prep like they’re supposed to. The other cages should be filled, the reassuring crack of bats sounding over coaches calling out adjustments. The scent of pine tar slips into my nose as I roll my shoulders back and prepare for another pitch.

“We’re just happy for you,” Tenny adds, holding an oversized *Congratulations* card that looks like it was signed by the whole franchise. He’s also got a newlywed gift basket filled with champagne, his-and-hers flutes, and various snacks, including my favorite flavor of sunflower seeds. “We wanted you to know that.”

“It’s pretty hard to not talk about major life events with the guys you spend the majority of your time with,” DJ adds, “especially after a press release.”

Instead of answering, I keep swinging.

Deep down, I know it’s not my teammates’ fault that I’m stuck in a DEFCON-1-level mood. It’s just...yesterday was nothing like I expected.

Antiquing, greasy pizza, and goofy childhood games were more fun than I could've imagined. The way Willow threw herself into each activity with zeal and enthusiasm kept making me smile.

Plus, I've never opened up to anyone about my family before. Brielle was so starstruck by my famous father and brothers that I felt like I could never be honest about how unhappy I'd been growing up. Coming clean felt like someone took an overloaded barbell off my chest.

Then came the clincher.

If there'd been any chance of keeping a level head during this fake marriage, I lost hope after seeing Willow paint. Ostensibly, I was in the living room, watching video on today's pitching lineup, but I couldn't focus for more than a few seconds before my attention drifted to Willow.

The patient way she layered different colors to bring Piper to life was hypnotic. She spent two hours on the arch of Piper's brow alone, making tiny adjustments with quiet concentration. It was captivating and—honestly, there's no better way to describe it—breathtaking.

Every time she switched brushes, I found myself fascinated. I ended up researching techniques and brush uses because I wanted to understand Willow's work without bombarding her with a thousand questions.

If I hadn't already felt like Willow was carrying my heart around in her pocket, the way she looked at me when I brought dinner to her easel so she could eat while painting wiggled its way into my bones.

Later, as I tossed and turned on my incredibly comfortable mattress, I realized *why* I was in a cold sweat.

I don't want to disappoint her.

I want to finally *be enough* this time.

In the quiet midnight hours, I promised myself I wouldn't hold back today. When Willow teased me, I'd banter with her. I'd smile and laugh and give her my left kidney if she asked for it.

Whatever Willow wants from me, she can have.

Except, when I woke up late this morning, a glitter-penned note sat beside a fresh loaf of banana bread.

Out with Indy. Won't be back before you head to work. Saw the press release! Carter made us sound like a real couple. I'll be sure to keep up the ruse in the stands tonight! Go sportsball!

I'd fisted the note before flattening it back out because, even if it confirmed that Willow isn't feeling the connection I am, it was still *from*

her.

I know. I know.

I can't seem to pull myself together.

Spending every second I'm not at Waves Stadium with Willow suddenly feels like my life's purpose—even if, for her, it's all fake.

A growl rips from my throat as I smash the ball.

"We want to support Willow too." Trevor's voice makes me hesitate and miss the next pitch.

"And Mallory will want to introduce her to the rest of the WAGs," Kai adds. "To make her feel welcome."

Our third baseman's wife is the unofficial leader of the Waves Wives and Girlfriends. A former model with a flair for making everyone feel included, she takes every newcomer under her wing. With Willow coming to tonight's game, I should've thought to connect her with the rest of the Waves family members.

I step out of the box, leaving the machine to fire the remaining balls into the net as my shoulders drop in surrender. "Okay."

"Okay what?" Colton coaxes, as annoying as ever.

A coach turns off the machine as I duck under the net, dropping my bat and helmet.

My teammates wait expectantly.

It's so quiet you could hear a baseball rolling across the turf.

"Okay to"—I gesture vaguely in a circle—"all of that."

"So we're celebrating?" Tenny clarifies, looking a half a second from exploding with glee.

I tilt my chin toward the large industrial ceiling fans, drawing in a deep breath to gather strength, before nodding.

Tenny rushes me first, leaving his gifts behind. Then Colton's arms snake around my shoulders before DJ practically strangles me with his hug. Somehow, there's also glitter confetti in the air? Rhett shouts, "Mazel tov!" right before the rest of the team pushes forward. There's jostling and shoving, but it's good-natured.

A small smile springs to my lips as I struggle to keep my balance.

I'd been told the Waves were a happy team without too much infighting, but after the trade, I was too distracted with having to deal with Mike and the fallout of Brielle leaving me that I hadn't given these guys a chance.

Maybe it'd be okay to trust these goofballs. Even though I've tried my best to keep my distance, they've been annoyingly persistent.

I suppose it wouldn't be *the worst thing* to have someone to lean on—if only for emergencies.

Just as I'm starting to feel claustrophobic, my phone rings in my pocket.

But instead of my usual utilitarian ringtone, Natasha Bedingfield's "Pocketful of Sunshine" blares. I'd forgotten that, after playing the slightly chaotic yet oddly satisfying game of Hungry Hungry Hippos, Willow changed her ringtone so I'd always know it was her.

"I need to get that," I tell my team, using my elbows when they don't immediately release me.

Colton rubs his ribs like a whiny baby as I dig the phone from my uniform pants pocket.

"Hey, Willow." I should be embarrassed by how out of breath I sound, but the guys mobbing me makes for a pretty solid excuse.

"Oh, hey. Um...are you busy?"

Just hearing her voice sends a rush of warmth flooding my veins.

"Dude, look at his face," Rhett says with a cackle. "Bro is down bad."

"Put him on the injured list—he's got love sickness," Tenny agrees.

I shove the two of them, pressing my phone tighter to my ear to answer Willow. "What do you need?"

"It's not a big deal. Just a tiny misunderstanding. You don't need to freak out and get all mafia boss on anyone. The last thing we need is—"

"What's wrong?" My jagged words silence the batting cages, sending my teammates on alert.

A hand squeezes my windpipe as Willow hesitates.

Then she releases a defeated breath. "I'm being detained by Waves security."

CHAPTER 23



Willow

“Tell me where you are, then explain.” Shane’s growly demand sends a pleasant shiver down my spine. Apparently, I *like it* when he gets all mafia boss on me.

I glance around the gray, windowless room. “I don’t know where I am. It looks like a dungeony holding cell.”

“A holding cell?” Shane sounds like he’s two seconds from completely losing it.

“I know where she is,” another man’s voice says in the background. “Follow me.”

“How did this happen?” Shane asks, footsteps sounding like he’s running through a corridor.

I tug at my bangs, turning away from the metal bars to face Delilah and Adam, who’s holding a *very nervous* Piper. I send my niece a wink while sticking my tongue out, like being pulled aside and gruffly escorted to this tiny cell is a barrel of laughs. As long as I keep up the sparkling positivity, maybe I can also convince *myself*. Then I might stop feeling like I’m on the verge of tears.

We’d gotten our tickets and entered the park without issue, but since it’s two hours before the first pitch, only the diehard fans were in the stands. The guard from the briefcase incident recognized me before we’d even left the concourse and brought us to this pit of despair. A fluorescent bulb

flickers overhead as the scents of stale coffee and bad decisions permeate the small space.

“It’s a funny story, really,” I say, infusing my voice with jokey warmth. “Remember when I tried to give you back all that money in a briefcase? Before you saw me, I might have had a small, teeny-tiny run-in with one of the security members. Would you believe it, he remembered me.” I spin to wave at the burly security guard like we’re old friends. “I guess I made an impression.”

“No one could forget you.”

Shane’s words fill the itchy, nervous hole at the base of my throat.

“Thanks.” I want to pinch myself when my voice cracks.

I *really* need to keep it together right now. Plus, I don’t want to ruin my Waves-themed makeup with unnecessary waterworks. After blending a subtle, iridescent blue over my eyelids, I drew tiny white-capped waves at the corners of my lashes.

Shane swears, the pace of his footsteps increasing. “I’m almost there, honey. Just hold on.”

“M’kay.” I nod to myself before turning and giving everyone an enthusiastic thumbs up.

Less than a second later, Shane bursts into the security area, sprinting toward us. “Get them out of there!”

Shane once told me he doesn’t yell, and now I understand why—he’s borderline terrifying.

Still, the security guard holds his ground. “Sir, this woman had been here before, insisting on seeing you without credentials. We’re concerned that she might be a stalker.”

Shane rounds on him, his expression lethal. “She’s not a stalker. She’s *my wife*.”

“He just *my-wifed* her,” another player gasps, clutching his tennis necklace.

It’s then that I notice the whole team is behind Shane, shoulders heaving like they all raced here.

Delilah leans toward Adam, whispering, “I’m going to need you to *my-wife* me when we get home later.”

A different player puts his hands on his hips, his dark brows furrowing. “My wife? Is that from one of your books?”

“Oh my gosh, it’s Trevor Chapman.” Delilah rushes forward, hands clutching the bars.

My forehead pinches before I remember that Chapman is the name on both Adam’s and Delilah’s jerseys. The plan had been to buy myself a Seaver jersey to go over my tank, cut-offs, and trusty Doc Martins, but we’d been swooped up by security before we made it to the team store. Piper, meanwhile, is sporting an adorable Pascal-print shirt and pink shorts, not the least interested in sportsball.

“Mr. Chapman, sir,” Adam says, hiking Piper higher on his hip. “This is an honor. We’re huge fans.”

Shane all but shoves the security guard forward, hovering menacingly until he opens the cell door. While the rest of the team ambles forward to chat with a now free Delilah and Adam, Shane tugs me to his chest, pulling us to the side.

“Are you okay?” His words are whispered over my temple as one of his hands slides to grip the back of my neck.

I can hear Shane’s heart pounding against my ear, his breathing still ragged. A part of me knows I should crack a joke or make light of the situation, but I burrow deeper, letting Shane hold me like I’m something precious.

Being slightly inconvenienced by an overzealous security guard isn’t a life-or-death situation, but I’ve always been the good kid. I’ve never been sent to the principal’s office or been pulled over for speeding. Hearing the clank of the metal bars locking shut is a sound I’ll never forget.

Not trusting my voice, I nod, banding my arms around Shane’s waist.

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

His hands roam everywhere—over my back, my shoulders, my arms—almost as if he’s checking for broken bones again.

I lean back with a giggle when he accidentally tickles my ribs. “He didn’t touch me.”

Shane catches my gaze, his eyes thunderous. “Good thing, or he’d be a dead man.”

When my lips part with a surprised breath, Shane’s expression softens. Then his thumb traces my jaw, my temple, like he can’t stop searching for injuries.

“Really, I’m fine.”

His head shakes. “I don’t like you in this windowless room. You should be in the sunshine. I’m going to make sure you’re on the VIP list so this never happens again. Delilah, Adam, and Piper too. Next time, you’ll be escorted directly to the Waves family area. I’m sorry I didn’t do that already. I’m sorry”—a tendon pops in his jaw—“I’m sorry I failed you, Willow.”

My fingers slide up to band around his neck. “You didn’t fail me.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but Shane’s lips dive into a deeper frown.

“We’re going to laugh about this later.” I seal my promise with a cheesy grin. “You’re going to cackle harder than you did when that nutcracker was trying to make a move on you.”

When Shane’s hard expression doesn’t waver, I frame his face with my palm. “Trust me.”

After three halting seconds, he nods, gently gripping my wrist. Then my entire world narrows to a pinpoint when Shane kisses my palm and then settles my hand over his heart.

In the background, I’m vaguely aware of my overjoyed best friend yanking a permanent marker from her clear purse so the Waves lineup can sign her and Adam’s jerseys. There are exuberant selfies. Delilah shrieks when someone pushes their hat on her head. Even Piper looks like she’s having fun, bouncing from player to player for high fives.

But all I can see is Shane, his gaze more open and vulnerable than it’s ever been.

That is...until I hear his teammates’ comments.

“Did you see the way he placed her hand over his heart?”

“Our boy is double-P *whipped*.”

“You know what they say: ‘Happy wife. Happy life.’”

I’d taken every one of Shane’s actions as genuine, but maybe they were all for the benefit of his teammates. There was a man’s voice right after Shane answered, so he must have been close to everyone when the call came through. Maybe the running, the growling, the looking like he was going to rip the security guard’s arms off was all for show.

An itchy sensation scratches down my back as my gaze falls to my hand. My wedding band glints back at me like a prop in a bad play. Then a chorus of *This is Fake, Oh so Fa-ke* sung to the tune of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” sounds in my mind, reminding me that’s the whole reason I’m here—to sell our fake marriage.

Nevermind that I *genuinely wanted* to see Shane play.

This was the only way I could convince him to let me come today.

My mind tries to spin *This is good* scenarios out of Shane rushing to free me from a holding cell. With how he cradled me in his arms, every teammate now believes our marriage is as perfect as described in this morning's press release. But a sour taste remains in my mouth no matter how many times I swallow.

Telling myself to get a grip, my fingers twitch beneath Shane's warm palm. It's only then that I notice he's in a Waves jersey.

"You're not wearing black."

Shane's small smirk settles some of the unease that's taken residence in my stomach.

"I'm in uniform."

"Yeah, but..." I can't help that my fingertips roam, that I reverently trace the buttons of his jersey. "It's blue."

"Waves blue. Do you like it?"

There's something in the scratch of Shane's voice that sends my focus back to his face.

"It's my new favorite color."

The broad grin stretching his lips should come with sweeping orchestra music. Something turns over inside me as we smile at each other. This has to be for me, right? This part, our banter...it isn't fake. It's been like this since I sat next to him in a noisy bar.

"So this is where my players have been hiding." A man with a salt-and-pepper mustache leans against the doorway to the security room, his hands in his pockets.

All the merriment dies instantly as the players stand a little straighter.

Trevor nods to who I'm assuming is a coach—or the owner maybe? I'd expect an MLB owner to wear a suit, and this man is wearing joggers and a lightweight Waves hoodie, so probably a coach.

"There was an incident."

The older man glances around. "Is it sorted?"

"Yes, sir," says a player with *Wells* across his back.

The man pushes off the door with a nod, turning to leave. "Let's get to it, then."

Most of the team follows him, but Trevor hangs back with Shane as they talk to the head of security. Then Adam, Delilah, Piper, and I are being

escorted upstairs by a different guard. Shane stays with me until the last stairwell before the concourse, his hand interlaced with mine.

“I have to get back,” he says, pulling me to a stop and squeezing my fingers. The action presses my wedding band against my palm.

“Oh. Sure.” I cringe when disappointment creeps into my tone.

Being overly sentimental isn’t what Shane needs right now. He needs a chipper wife who’s cheering for him in the stands. Because let’s not forget that I’m the one who’s truly benefiting from this fake marriage, with incredible health insurance, a palace to live in, and hours and hours to paint with unlimited supplies.

“Get out there and take ‘em by the horns.” I free my fingers and gamely punch Shane in the shoulder.

His brows slide up as his lip quirks. “The horns? We’re playing the Founders.”

“The Flounders?” My head tilts to the side. “Like the fish?”

Shane chuckles as he brushes a lock of hair behind my ear. “No, as in the Founding Fathers. The team is from D.C.”

“Ah.” I nod, pretending Shane’s casual touch didn’t send sparks shooting down my bare legs. “Then take ‘em by their powdered wigs.”

When he laughs, rich and unguarded, my heart gives a heavy thump.

And as Shane heads downstairs, glancing back at me every few steps with a boyish grin, I force myself to mentally hum the lyrics of my new favorite song.

CHAPTER 24



Willow

“I want you to teach me everything about baseball,” I tell Delilah after two and a half switchy things, which my best friend informs me are called innings.

“Really?” Delilah sends me a sly grin, adjusting her new Waves hat. “I wonder why.”

I know she’s teasing me, but I’m too focused on Shane’s practice swings to care. Even though I don’t fully understand the game, I can tell you with ten-thousand percent accuracy that I love watching Shane bat.

The measured way his muscles bunch as he focuses on the guy throwing the ball is nothing short of revelatory. Before each swing, there’s a slight shoulder roll, a shift of his back foot, and his jaw tightens like he’s going to crack a diamond with his teeth. Then he uncoils, swift and fluid, like he’s made of pure energy.

The first time he hit the ball deep into the outfield, an appreciative ‘Oh’ left my mouth wide open.

Delilah had simply patted my knee.

I might be a little late to the game—quite literally—but where has baseball been my whole life?

Not only is it fun to watch, but the players on both teams seem to like each other. No one is trying to tackle each other or beat anyone up. The

Waves' first baseman keeps joking with every player that comes through his position. It's genuinely wholesome.

And when they don't hit the ball correctly—it's called a foul, by the way—the ball zips into the stands like a free souvenir. Who doesn't love a freebie? No wonder so many fans are wearing baseball gloves.

But my favorite part is how everyone on the field does a cute little hop whenever the guy on the hill throws the ball. Shane's hop is by far the cutest—not that I'm biased or anything.

"Why don't you ask your husband?" Delilah bounces her blonde eyebrows. "He knows a lot about baseball."

"He's a bit busy right now," I mumble, mesmerized by the way Shane's thighs bunch before he rotates into his swing. "And you won't mind if I ask the same question a hundred times."

Delilah laughs, probably remembering how I had dozens of questions about different animal breeds when I started at the vet clinic.

"Whatever It Takes" by Imagine Dragons blares over the speakers, and I perk up. That song means it's Shane's turn.

Or, wait, not his turn...his *at-bat*.

"Plus, I want to keep calling it 'sportsball' at home to mess with him."

Delilah chuckles as we watch Shane foul two into the net that separates us from the field before it slices toward third. The third baseman snags the ball and fires it to the player on first before Shane can make it there.

"Darn," I grumble.

"It's okay. They're still up by two."

Four innings of intensive baseball instruction later, and I'm getting a little restless in the Waves family section. Don't get me wrong, meeting the rest of the WAGS—or Wives and Girlfriends—has been better than I expected. I figured being an outsider would earn me a stiletto attack or, at the very least, some light mean-girling, but nope, everyone has been *incredibly* nice. They're regular people, not anything like you've seen on the reality shows.

Mallory, Kai Sato's wife, made sure that Delilah, Adam, Piper, and I were completely taken care of. Popcorn, hot dogs, and cotton candy abounded. Since Shane sent me an e-file with the carbohydrates for every item in the ballpark while I'd been catching up with Indy earlier, it made calculating my insulin easy.

Then Kenzie, Trevor Chapman's wife, and I bonded over the fact that we've both been unintentionally detained by security. Apparently, there had

been a mishap last season where she'd fallen off the top of the dugout and then had to dress as a grandpa in order to get back into the stadium.

The problem isn't the people—or that my brain feels like it's half a second from bursting from baseball terminology—it's that I'm too far away from Shane.

He's like a tiny speck from here.

"I'm going to head down that way." I thumb over my shoulder.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Delilah asks, even though Piper is firmly seated in her lap, braiding her mother's hair.

My pint-size friend is sadly not as enamored with baseball as I am.

"No. I'll be fine."

As I pick my way toward the outfield, I keep hearing jeers like, "You picked the wrong player" or "I wouldn't cheer for that guy." It's not until someone yells, "Seaver stinks!" that I understand it's because of the jersey I have unbuttoned over my tank and shorts.

A sinking sensation drops low in my stomach. Shane mentioned that his agent wanted to rehab his image, but I had no idea he was getting this much heat from Waves fans.

Eventually, I find an open seat five rows back, in line with where Shane is standing. A middle-aged man—with what I can only describe as Three Musketeers facial hair—sits next to his wife, the unoccupied chair, and then two elderly couples.

"May I sit there?"

"Oh, sure. It's our daughter's, but she's out with friends tonight."

The man picks his baseball glove off the seat as I scoot past.

We watch the Waves pitcher strike out two players before the man leans over to me. "You're a Seaver fan? There's not many of those in the ballpark."

"Why is that?"

His wife snorts, tossing her pretty Dutch braids over her shoulder. "That man would rather die than smile."

A wash of protectiveness slides over my forearms. "Surely you can't dislike him because he's reserved. Doesn't his skill as a player count?"

D'Artagnan's doppelganger hums, rubbing his short beard. "He *has* been a good addition to the lineup. He just doesn't..."

"He doesn't have Waves spirit," the elderly woman to my right says.

"That's it!" D'Artagnan agrees, pointing.

“What’s Waves spirit?”

“Enjoying the game, not just playing it.”

When my forehead bunches, he tries again, “It’s like...you know how all the players have a fun handshake they do with the first-base coach when they make it on base? Like Chapman plays rock, paper, scissors, or Jackson does a little shuffle dance. Seaver never does anything but scowl once he’s on base.”

I pick at my nail polish. “Oh.”

“And he never throws his catches in the stands, just rolls them to the ball boy like we don’t exist.”

My gaze slides to Shane’s stoic face, half crouched in preparation for whatever will come his way. If only they could see the version of him who’s sweetly protective. How he can tease and joke and how his hard-won laughter can shift your perspective on the world.

I swallow over the knot in my throat. “He’s had a really hard year.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the elderly woman waves a hand. “Players get traded all the time. There’s no need to be so salty about it.”

Her husband scoffs. “Salty? More like he’s got a stick up his—”

“Franklin!” she interrupts. “There’s a young lady present.”

I tuck my hair behind my ears, thinking of ways I can help Shane win over the crowd. That’s supposed to be my half of this marriage of convenience, after all.

A loud crack sounds from the plate, and we watch the ball sail high. Shane runs past the white line toward us, catching the ball while continuing his stride.

Without hesitation, I launch myself over the couple to my left, catching myself before I faceplant onto the concrete stairs. After muttering a quick apology, I race toward the outfield wall, waving my hands over my head and shouting Shane’s name.

His copper brows bunch as he jogs over to me. “Willow, why aren’t you in the family area? Has there been a problem?” He glowers at home plate, taking a step in that direction.

“No!” I extend my palms, leaning halfway over the wall. “Mallory and everyone have been incredible. It’s just...really far from here, and I wanted to see you better.”

He blinks, stunned for two seconds before the sweetest half-smile lifts his lips. I almost want to holler at the fans I’d been sitting beside to take a

gander at my adorable husband, but there's no time. Because Shane is transferring the ball from his glove to his throwing hand.

"Wait! Don't give it to the baseball kid."

The corner of his mouth hikes even higher. "The baseball kid?"

"Or ball wrangler or whatever they're called."

"Ballperson," he says, fully grinning now.

The organ in my chest does an artful backroll into a handstand, but I remind it that we've got other hearts to win right now.

"Right. Ballperson. Don't give it to them. Throw it into the stands. Actually"—I turn, pointing—"could you throw it at my 17th-century friend?"

"Your who?"

"The guy who looks like the fourth musketeer. It would make his day."

Shane makes eye contact with the man, gives him an upward nod, then lobs the ball directly into his awaiting glove. The stands erupt like Shane just threw them a nugget of pure gold. D'Artagnan lifts his glove in victory, his beer belly peeking out from beneath his Waves shirt.

"Thank you," I say, grinning like a loon.

Shane holds my gaze for a heady beat. "Anything for you, Willow."

Before I can say anything, Shane is called to the dugout. I watch him sprint back, absolutely entranced, until D'Artagnan jostles me into a side hug.

"How'd you get him to do that?"

I bounce my shoulders. "I just asked."

"Incredible. Do you want a hot dog or something? I feel like I owe you."

"Oh, no." I grin. "That's not necessary."

When Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" blasts through the speaker system, I startle. That means Tenny is up, and he's before Shane in the list—er, lineup. I'll need to run if I want to get back to the family section before Shane bats again.

"I've got to go. Nice meeting you, though." After racing up three steps, I stop. "Actually, if you and everyone else could cheer Shane on, I'd appreciate it. Go sportsball!"

The man gives me a funny look, but I don't have time to correct my mistake.

I barely have time to get back to my assigned seat.

When Shane searches for me in the crowd as he walks up to the plate, sending me the biggest smile I've ever seen, I realize I've got two problems.

One, I've instantly become a diehard Waves fan.

And two, I've got it bad for my fake husband.

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Waves Group Chat

Rhett

After further review, the woman Shane freed from baseball jail and the barista he hauled from the coffee shop are the same person.

Colton

So Willow likes to collect emergencies, or Shane has a savior complex?

Rhett

I'd guess the latter.

Sha

No comment.

Tenny

I tried to 'my girlfriend' Alex, but it didn't have the same ring. She laughed at me.

DJ

Then wife her up, man.

Tenny

Trust me. As soon as humanly possible.

Trevor

Kenzie and I want to invite everyone over next Thursday for a BBQ. It'll be a team get-together, but also to celebrate the new couples.

Colton

Relationships we needed a security clearance to know about.

Tenny

I would have told everyone but didn't want to jeopardize Alex's career. Who knew I'd get to kiss my gorgeous girlfriend and also have her interview me after games?

Rhett

Ugh, your smug face is getting annoying.

Tenny

We'll find you someone, buddy. Don't lose hope.

DJ

Thursday works for me. Kids welcome?

Trevor

Always.

Kai

I make excellent burgers.

Colton

That's exactly what someone about to burn down Trevor's patio would say.

DJ

Never touch another man's meat.

Rhett

That got weird fast.

Sha

I'll ask Willow, but Thursday should work.

Colton

What did I tell you? Whipped.

Sha

Married.

Rhett

Same thing. Just with paperwork.

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CHAPTER 25



Shane

I'm about to tuck my phone into my jacket pocket when Carter's call lights up over the group chat. Swiping the call on, I press the phone to my ear and wave my keycard over the elevator sensor.

"*Ten years.* Ten years of pulling teeth to elevate your career and all I needed was to get you a wife?"

I grumble a nonanswer.

My agent laughs, loud and boisterous. "Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

Since that feels like a rhetorical question, I don't respond.

"Did you see the post-game analysis? What am I talking about? You never look at that. The takeaways are along the lines of 'the love of a good woman will change a man,'" Carter says with annoying giddiness. "My favorite catchphrases are 'properly domesticated,' 'humanity unlocked,' and 'The Willow Effect.'"

The Willow Effect isn't entirely inaccurate. I don't think I would have grinned while running the bases if Willow hadn't been singlehandedly trying to start the wave. I certainly wouldn't have been as open in my post-game interview if Willow hadn't told me through the netting that Alex was 'a complete sweetheart.' And don't get me started on how it felt seeing Willow in my jersey.

I'd heard other guys talk about it, but there was something primal about seeing my name across Willow's shoulders. Her Waves eye makeup had already made my chest throb, but when she turned to point out the guy in the stands, a base possessiveness overtook me. I wanted to simultaneously shout my gratitude to the universe and gather Willow in my arms, never letting go.

"And when she blew you a kiss at the top of the ninth and you caught it before putting your glove over your heart? Forty grandmas fainted, seeing that exchange."

My jaw tightens.

Willow had slid me a sly thumbs up afterward, and I almost missed an easy pop fly.

I hadn't realized it'd all been for show.

But of course it had.

Isn't that what Willow wrote in her note? That we were to keep up the ruse of this sham marriage?

A knife stabs me in the gut before someone twists the handle.

"I know you're tired, so I'll let you go, but keep this up. And if possible, get Willow in the stands for another game."

I mutter a goodbye before ending the call with a noisy exhale. I'm used to feeling irritated and restless, but this new ache feels etched into my bones.

As the elevator ascends and Van Morrison spills into the shaft, my chin drops to my chest. With Willow awake, I won't be able to slink off to my room to lick my wounds. Except, when I enter the penthouse, there's no air-guitar session. Willow sits on a short stepladder in front of her easel, all of her studio lights on, still wearing my jersey.

The puff of breath leaving my mouth hurts more than a fastball to the ribs.

My beautiful wife continues to paint, oblivious to my presence. Yesterday, I learned that Willow gets so wrapped up in her work that the world falls away. I could blow an airhorn, and she wouldn't flinch.

Before I can think better of it, I snap a few pictures of Willow. There's a streak of white paint in her bangs, a smudge of purple along her jaw, and the most serene yet focused expression on her face.

Forget the painting, *she's* breathtaking.

Willow told me she'd paint me anything I wanted after this arrangement ended. At the time, I had no idea what that would be, but now I know what I

want—Willow in my jersey, doing the thing she loves.

I watch for what is probably a creepy amount of time until Willow's fingers begin to tremble. When her low-blood-sugar alarm sounds, she groans and sets down her brush.

"I just want to refine values in peace."

"Here." I step forward, pulling her glucose tabs from the duffel bag I forgot to take off.

With Willow seated on the stepladder, we're eye to eye. She blinks, recognition brightening her face.

"Oh, hey. When did you get home?"

I slam my walls down, not letting Willow's happy expression or her casual use of *home* deter me from the task at hand. There are no cameras here, but her delighted smile doesn't mean anything. Willow is always smiling.

After handing her the tabs, I take off my duffel and jacket, pushing back the sleeves of my Henley. "Why are you running low? I thought your doctor was trying to keep you in the normal to upper levels."

"I don't know!"

When Willow snaps at me, I realize my mistake. In my spare time, I've been reading ebooks on T1D management, including a few memoirs, to gain a better understanding. By this point, I should know that sometimes her blood sugar will do its own thing, despite her best efforts.

"I can do everything right and this"—she waves her shaky hands at nothing in particular—"will still happen."

Without thinking, I scoop Willow up and carry her to the kitchen. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'll make you a snack to have after your fifteen minutes are up. Would you like peanut butter toast, Greek yogurt with granola, or cheese and crackers?"

After setting Willow on the counter, I smooth my hands down her arms until I grip her quivering fingers.

Willow shrugs, her forehead bunching. "Nothing sounds good right now."

I almost lean forward to kiss her temple but manage to keep my distance.

"You're foggy because you're low. Once the glucose hits your system, you'll feel better."

Willow is unusually quiet as I toast bread and get the peanut butter out of the cabinet, opting for something warm and comforting for her snack. I also fill a large glass with filtered water, assuming she probably hasn't had

anything to drink either. When I set the cup next to her, Willow grabs my wrist.

“Thank you.”

My sternum caves in when her voice cracks.

“*Honey.*” I sweep her hair behind her ears. “It’ll be okay.”

When Willow shakes her head, I let my palms fall to her knees.

She doesn’t say anything for a long moment, alternating between blinking at the ceiling and chewing on her lip.

“This is hard.”

Instead of filling the silence with useless platitudes, I wait.

Willow glances at her trembling hands before picking at her nails. I hadn’t noticed before that they’re painted alternating blues, matching our uniforms. My ribs tighten as I slow my next exhale.

“Everything’s changed. It’s like I’m buckled into a roller coaster that I’ll never be able to get off. There are no days off, no breaks. I want to sit and paint for hours, or run back and forth in the stands, or just wake up and not have to worry about my malfunctioning pancreas.”

Willow blows out a breath, ruffling her bangs. “And it feels like the rules change every day. I can eat the same thing, but if my activity is different, or if I don’t sleep well, my blood sugar varies. Nothing is stable. Nothing is constant.”

A tear streaks down her cheek, and I wordlessly swipe it away.

“I used to be so easy going. You could stick me in any situation, and I’d adapt. I wouldn’t just make do; I’d make *the best* of it. But now I come with all this...this mandatory equipment. It isn’t just ‘Let’s grab ice cream.’ I have to check my CGM, calculate carbs, and then figure out insulin.”

When she sags with defeat, I give her knees a gentle squeeze. “All of this is hard. You’re juggling so much at once. It may not feel like it, but you’re doing an incredible job of managing everything.”

Willow looks at her lap, quiet for a long time.

I’m about to ask if there’s a better way to support her when she glances up as if just remembering something.

“I meant to tell you that it was super helpful that Waves Stadium has nutritional information available for fans.”

My jaw twitches, but I don’t say anything.

Willow’s eyes widen as she searches my face. “They do, right? That was a public file?”

When I avert my gaze, Willow groans. “*Shane.*”

“I already told you, if I want to take care of you, I *will.*”

So much for being supportive.

I sound like a bear two seconds from devouring a kitten.

Clearing my throat, I regroup. “I want to be there for you. If that means compiling information for easy access, then that’s what needs to be done. But I also asked Sally to coordinate getting the file added to the Waves website so anyone else who needs that information can easily find it.”

Willow shakes her head, her lips curling into a soft smile. “You’re an enigma, you know that?”

I frown.

I wasn’t trying to be difficult.

I was trying to be the kind of man Willow could rely on, someone she might come to need...and maybe even *want.*

Spikes sprint along my shoulders as I drop my gaze, moving to get the bread from the toaster.

“Shane.” Willow catches me by the waist, her hand fisting my shirt.

“Thank you. For the file. For making me food.” Her lip quivers as she takes an unsteady breath. “For everything. Going through this would be impossible without you, and I— It’s just...I want to be there for you too. Did it help at all that I came tonight?”

Honestly?

I had my best game of my career.

Not statistically—in that regard, it was pretty level—but in how much I *enjoyed* being on the field. I joked with my teammates in the dugout—or rather, tolerated their jokes. I felt something loosen in my chest when I threw another inning-ending catch to a young girl in pigtails with a purple glove. There was even a moment when I appreciated the scent of the grass and the chaotic noise from the stands.

It was the first time baseball became something to experience instead of conquer. My father always expected us to be the best. There wasn’t room for error or something as frivolous as fun. Only hard work, dedication, and determination mattered.

But with Willow there, the game didn’t feel like a grind.

I lift my chin until our gazes catch. “You make everything better.”

It’s too honest, but I can’t make myself walk it back.

“Oh.” Her breathing accelerates as she fists my shirt even tighter, drawing me closer.

I tell myself it’s just because I surprised her, not because Willow is freefalling like I am. When her knees hug my hips, a shudder runs down my spine. Willow’s eyes dart everywhere—from my jaw, to my tattoos, to where my hands are crushing the counter beside her bare legs.

Her phone sounds, breaking the tense moment, but it takes me a second to realize that it’s not pinging with a blood-sugar alert.

“It’s my mom.” Her cheeks turn pink. “I should answer. She wanted to talk earlier, but I was at the game.”

I lean back, not realizing how close I’d drifted. Three more seconds and I would have skirted my nose down Willow’s before capturing her lips with mine.

“Yeah.” My hands flex, but my feet refuse to move.

Even though her mother knows the truth of our situation, and—according to Willow—has been ‘super supportive of us helping each other out,’ I should probably let them speak privately.

“Would you...” The vulnerability in her gaze shreds what’s left of my heart. “Would you like to meet her?”

“Yes. Of course.” I sound like I just legged out a triple.

Willow’s unabashed grin settles the buzzing at the base of my skull.

When she slides on the video call, I wait quietly until she introduces me. I manage not to sound like a monosyllabic caveman while meeting Michelle. But when it becomes evident that their conversation will be longer than a quick hello, I grab Willow’s snack, encouraging her to eat while her mom recounts how a mischievous raccoon snuck into her diner.

The two of them crack each other up so much that I find myself smiling as I eat my own snack, refill Willow’s water, and then clean our plates. As Willow shares tidbits from our lives, occasionally asking me questions that only require one-word answers, my jaw loosens.

It feels wonderfully ordinary. Almost as if we’re truly married and I’m casually joining in on a chat with my mother-in-law. Michelle seems happy to hear from me, even with how little I contribute.

Eventually, Willow yawns, and Michelle remembers the time difference. We say our goodbyes, but just as I turn to head to my room, Willow calls after me.

“Wait! I forgot to tell you about my master plan.”

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CHAPTER 26



Willow

Operation Everyone Love Shane is a resounding success—at least so far. It's only been a week, but there's been a noticeable shift in popular opinion. It's almost been as successful as my personal mission to recreate the wonder of childhood for Shane. That initiative doesn't have an official title, but I'm workshopping a few: Childhood 2.0, Project Wonder Revival, and The Extremely Serious Fun Plan.

This last week, I've spent the mornings giving Shane a taste of what he missed as a kid, the afternoons painting, and the evenings cheering him on at Waves Stadium. Afterward, I get sucked into painting again until Shane comes home. Then he carries me into the kitchen for a break and, if needed, a late-night snack.

The first step in Op ELS—for short—was for Shane to pick a first-base handshake. I'd broached the subject the morning after my first game while drawing a hopscotch grid in the private garage. Shane had watched me demonstrate the jumping game, arms crossed, his deepest scowl etching his handsome face. After twenty minutes of resistance, he agreed to give Larry a simple knuckle tap-forearm bump combo.

The next morning, I had him watch Piper's favorite movie with me. Snuggling on the couch with Shane had been so comfortable that I'd accidentally fallen asleep in the crook of his shoulder. I also drooled on him, but as embarrassed as I was, Shane didn't seem to mind. That night's

homework was to find a kid in the stands to throw his catches to, because he'd mentioned enjoying it.

And so it went: riding bikes then not looking like he was at a funeral in the outfield; pillow fights then agreeing to sign baseballs before a game; flying a kite then answering fan mail, and then, the *pièce de résistance*...

Yesterday morning, Kenzie and I coordinated for the players to do an awareness campaign for Fur-Ever Homes, our local animal shelter. It turns out, Trevor rescuing a sweet calico cat with medical needs was actually how he and Kenzie met. Then they rescued a stray kitten named Jet.

Let me tell you, there is *nothing* more wholesome than a bunch of professional athletes covered in animal kisses. Half the team went to the area with the dog kennels, while the other half stayed in Kitty Korner. Liv, the Waves' social media manager, bounced between the two sections, filming video.

Since Shane said he preferred feline companionship, I put four kittens in his lap. The goal was to get the fans to like him, so why not go full tilt? Liv captured the way his brow furrowed with concentration as Shane ensured every tiny cat was nestled safely in his arms.

If I hadn't already caught feelings for my fake husband, that sweet tableau would've put me over the edge. And it *certainly* won over online fans. Shane had the comment section in a chokehold, followed by Rhett playing with a darling senior dog named Genevieve.

This last week, I've gotten used to Shane's slight smiles and his quiet companionship. Whenever we don't have a 'rediscovering childhood' activity, he busies himself in the living room, doing sportsball stuff while I paint, occasionally insisting, in that gruff way, to take breaks.

I've gotten so used to our routine that I'm quietly dreading next week when Shane will be gone for six long days. That's why when Trevor texted that Kenzie wasn't feeling well and rescheduled the team BBQ to next week, I mentally cheered. With the team flying to Charlotte tomorrow morning, that means I have a full day with Shane.

That is...if he ever wakes up.

It's probably rude to bang around as much as I am, but it's almost eleven. The clock is ticking, people!

When Shane eventually stumbles into the kitchen, shirt halfway twisted and black sleep shorts barely hanging onto his trim hips, I choke on my own

spit. Normally, he enters the common areas after a workout or getting fully dressed.

I've never seen him in pajamas.

His shirt is hiked up on the right, giving me a teasing glimpse of inked vines over rippling abs and that deep muscular groove over his hip. I'm simultaneously trying to memorize the glorious sight and chiding myself for staring like a creeper.

The second thing making my eyes bug out is that the shirt is a gloriously soft-looking shade of heather green. It's also a bit too large. All of Shane's black clothes hug him to a distracting degree, but he looks positively snugly in the oversized shirt.

"Good morning," I chirp, my voice coming out too squeaky.

Shane rubs his eyes with a fist, grumbling a greeting.

Then he does something completely out of character. Shane shuffles over and pulls me into his arms, releasing a sleepy yawn into my hair. Mint toothpaste and his delectable cologne overwhelm my senses before I catch our reflection in the double oven door. The sweetest smile curves Shane's lips as his lashes drift closed.

My heartbeat upticks, seeing him this happy.

"What do I have to do today?" His sleep-husky voice is simply delicious. "Play leapfrog? Tattle on someone?"

I huff playfully. "You don't *have to* do anything. If you're not having fun, we can stop."

Shane chuckles, squeezing me tighter. "I like your plans."

"Good, because I'm taking you to the beach."

It's too cold for the beach today since Mother Nature decided to rescind on spring, but I like to mess with my grouchy husband as often as I can.

Shane growls, his scruffy jaw scratching my neck. "I hate the beach."

"*Fine*. I guess we'll go to the arcade instead."

He makes an agreeable grunt before dropping a kiss below my ear and releasing me. I have to grab the counter for balance because *what just happened?*

"Have you eaten?"

"Uh...um..."

The more important question is, did I just hallucinate this whole interaction? Out of habit, I check my CGM app to see if my blood sugar is out of whack, but nope, I'm in the green.

“I ate,” I say, squinting at the screen.

Shane slides three slices of crustless quiche on a plate before putting it into the microwave. “Did you really?”

When I glance up, his lips are in a flat line, and it feels like I can breathe again. This version of Shane I know how to deal with. I’m not sure what to do with Casually Affectionate Shane.

I suck in a breath. “A breakfast burrito at nine.”

Shane nods, satisfied. “Can we take the bike to the arcade? It seems like a nice day for a ride.”

“I was hoping we would.”

A moment of indecision skirts across his brow before Shane glances up to meet my gaze. “I like that you enjoy riding with me.”

It’s one of my favorite modes of transportation. I get to wrap my arms around Shane’s muscular body as we zip through town. It’s exhilarating, and undeniably sexy, and probably not good for my tender heart.

“It’s fun, and you know how I feel about fun.” I wink.

The corner of his mouth lifts before he takes a gulp of black coffee.

Hoisting myself up on the counter, I kick my jeans-covered legs. “I’d enjoy the ride if I were you, because afterward, I’m going to crush you in skee-ball.”

“Are you now?”

“Not to brag, but I was the skee-ball champion of our small town. WAH sat at the top of the leaderboard for nine straight months.”

Shane hums as the microwave dings, and his phone rings at the same time.

“It’s Carter,” he says. “I’ll let it go to voicemail.”

“No, answer it.”

He scowls but slides the call onto speaker mode, setting the phone in the center of the island before rotating to grab his food. “Hey.”

“People are eating up that kitten video. It was great for the whole team but you especially. All the changes you’ve made this week are stacking up. The rep for New Balance is actually taking my calls now.”

“That’s great,” I say, leaning toward the phone.

“Oh, hey. Willow, I presume?”

“That’s me,” I beam.

“Can I just say thank you for turning my client from a human popsicle into a real boy? You’ve made my life infinitely easier.”

“You’re welcome?” My brows crash together.

I glance from the phone to Shane, but he avoids my gaze.

“You have no idea how tedious it’s been. It’s like pulling teeth just to get him to do basic press.”

I watch Shane’s shoulders tighten as Carter jokes along.

“He was so robotic it was almost like, whose skin did you steal, because no *living person* would behave—”

“Carter, I’m going to stop you right there,” I say, voice as hard as the granite countertop I’m perched on. “Last I checked, you work *for* my husband, correct?”

I don’t wait for him to answer, steaming right along. “I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to bad-mouth Shane, even jokingly.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You absolutely were, and that’s no way to treat a client whose salary pays *yours*.”

A stunned beat settles over the kitchen.

“If you don’t adjust your attitude toward Shane, then he’ll find different representation. I’m sure someone else would be happy to support him.”

Carter stammers, but I don’t let him get a word in. “He’ll call you back tomorrow—*if* you still have a job.”

Then I punch the *call end* button with an indignant finger.

Shane’s plate drops with a clatter before he rounds the island to stand in front of me. The severity of his expression makes me realize what I’ve just done.

My fingertips fly to my lips. “Oh my gosh, Shane. I’m sorry. I just threatened to quit for you, and that’s such a double standard because I wouldn’t let you quit for me.”

Shane doesn’t say anything, just exhales long and hard, his jaw ticking.

“I didn’t mean to cause you trouble. We can call Carter back right now. In fact, why don’t I—”

But I don’t get to finish my rambling sentence because Shane’s hands frame my face as he crushes his lips to mine.

CHAPTER 27



Shane

Willow stills, frozen for an agonizing second, before melting into me. A gruff sound rips from my throat as I immediately deepen the kiss. Willow's fingers, gripping the fabric of my shirt and tugging me closer, help soothe some of the manic buzzing behind my sternum.

Every cell in my body feels like it's vibrating too fast. My blood rushes at a speed that can't be sustainable, but I can't stop. I slide one hand into her hair, moving my other to band around her waist. When Willow hooks her ankles at the small of my back, heady gratitude sings in my veins.

I've never *needed* a person like this.

I've never felt like my lungs would give out if I didn't pour myself into her. If I didn't *show Willow* how much her standing up for me means. I'm terrible at saying the right thing, but hopefully, she'll understand with my actions what she means to me. Because I don't know how to verbalize the gratefulness coating me like a second skin.

I angle my head, feathering kisses over the soft skin along her jaw. When Willow makes a low, sweet sound, I have to pause to catch my breath. My forehead rocks into her temple as a shuddered exhale leaves my mouth. Pinpricks shoot over my arms when Willow's fingers frame my jaw, gently directing my lips back to hers.

Then the kiss shifts.

What started as a mad rush eases into something deeper, slower. Willow takes her time, nipping and savoring, and I'm helpless to do anything but return each touch in kind. All my chaotic thoughts hush into a lulling hum.

I don't think I've ever felt cherished, like I was *worth* the effort Willow put in this week. I've always excelled at whatever I was tasked, but it was expected. It wasn't something to praise as much as was required. When there were setbacks, I shouldered them alone.

There's never been someone in my corner.

But hasn't Willow been there from the start? Refusing to accept my gruffness at face value. Demanding friendship. Ensuring that I was equally valued in this marriage. Even when I kept trying to push her away, Willow tenaciously challenged me.

When she eventually breaks the kiss, bringing her forehead to mine with a happy sigh, I feel like I've just played a bruising double header. My fingers tremble in her hair; my legs shake. Still, I can't stop myself from sucking her bottom lip between mine and giving her one last thorough kiss.

"Thank you," I murmur, my voice rough.

"For what?"

I gently straighten her ruffled bangs. "For being on my team."

Willow's dazzling smile lights up the kitchen, our penthouse, the entire city.

"I am ten thousand percent Team Shane." She playfully tugs at the collar of her red polka-dotted blouse. "One might even say I'm the president of the fan club."

My lips brush the shell of her ear, my voice a hard rasp. "My eternal gratitude, Madam President."

When her hands curl into fists atop her jeans, I grin inwardly. As tempting as it is to stay here and kiss her all day, Willow has an adventure planned for us.

"If you give me twenty minutes, I'll be ready to go," I tell her while leaning back.

"Oh, um..." She swallows, absently rubbing a knuckle over her lips. "Sure."

Though I could grab my breakfast without touching Willow, I place one hand between her shoulder blades, bracing her as I lean across the counter to snatch my plate. She turns her face into me as we move, her uneven

exhale tickling my neck. When I release her, Willow blinks hard, almost as if her brain is overheating.

I understand her confusion.

I've never allowed myself to be this free around her. This last week, I bantered and went along with every idea Willow threw at me, but I kept my hands to myself. After waking to Willow clanging around in the kitchen, I stared at the ceiling and wondered, "What if I just did what I wanted?"

Now, as a delicate flush pinks Willow's lightly freckled cheeks, one thought hits me square in the chest.

I'm in love with Willow.

Instead of fighting this realization, instead of coming up with a dozen reasons why I should guard myself against this exact scenario, I allow the sensation of loving Willow to sift into my bones. Certainty tumbles around my body, settling in various places—behind my ears, low in my ribs, deep in my gut. There is no doubt in my mind that everything I've been through—everything I've endured—was so I could be here with her...now.

My hand helplessly frames Willow's face as I bring her lips to mine once more.

I love you more than I know how to say. More than I ever thought possible.

When Willow releases a satiated sigh, her lashes resting closed like she's savoring the moment, the corner of my mouth hitches.

Maybe—just maybe—there's a possibility that my wife could fall for me too.



Forty minutes later, I'm losing miserably at skee-ball, and my mood has drastically soured.

"This doesn't make sense," I say, frowning at the ball in my hand.

It's roughly the size of a baseball, albeit heavier. There's no good reason that someone who makes his living *throwing a ball* should be this terrible at a simple arcade game.

Willow laughs, picking up the token cup to feed her machine. "You're throwing too hard. The goal isn't to get it from the outfield to home. It's a gentle movement—with finesse."

She demonstrates again, sinking her ball into the one-hundred-point pocket like she's tossing a gum wrapper into a dumpster. The machine flashes in delight, and I get it. Anytime Willow directs her attention at me, I feel lit from within too.

"I have finesse," I grumble, lobbing another ball at the machine.

It crashes into the backboard and ricochets back at me.

Even though I'm severely annoyed, Willow's giggle feels like champagne bubbles tickling up my spine.

"You're still being too strong with it. You need to be gentle, like you were with the kittens yesterday. Here, let me show you."

She crowds behind me, putting her hand over mine and swinging my arm gently back and forth. "It's a loose motion. The ball is only going a few feet."

"I'm a professional athlete," I remind her—or maybe myself?

"I know." She gives the sleeve of my black Henley a patronizing pat.

I noticed that Willow likes these shirts, especially if I undo the top button. Today, I unbuttoned two. With the way my wife's attention keeps stalling at the hollow of my throat, my quiet flirtation tactic is paying off.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find Willow's gaze isn't on the skee-ball targets; it's zeroed in on me.

The corner of her mouth tilts into a devastating grin. "Sink it in the ten-point pocket, and I'll let you kiss me."

My abs clench so hard I almost wheeze.

"Only one kiss?" I ask with a roguish smirk. "Can't I negotiate?"

Willow releases a skittered breath, her focus dropping to my mouth. Looks like my wife wasn't prepared for me to flirt back. My smile deepens as I shift until we're standing chest to chest.

"Fifty-point pocket, and we get takeout from Saigon Kitchen and build a pillow fort in the living room."

Willow gasps. "Really?"

I nod.

She tilts her head to the side, giving me a skeptical look. "What about your kiss?"

My shoulders bounce. "Once you've seen my superior fort-building skills, you won't be able to keep your hands off me."

Willow shakes her head in disbelief before reaching out and pinching my bicep.

“What was that for?” I growl.

My surly response dials her smile up to maximum brightness. “Just making sure you’re still my husband and not a bodysnatching imposter.”

I grunt, crossing my arms, even though hearing *my husband* from Willow’s lips without an audience present feels better than denying a home run by robbing it at the wall.

Willow stifles a squeal but can’t stop herself from bouncing slightly. The action is so adorable it takes everything in me not to wrap one arm around her and crush my mouth to hers.

Turning toward the skee-ball target, I force myself to focus.

In baseball, you fail most of the time.

Even players with excellent batting averages are only hitting thirty percent of what’s thrown at them. Teams only ever win half of their games—the good teams, slightly more than half. Strikeouts. Errors. Bad swings. Accepting failure is part of the process.

If I mess this up, I’ll still have the pleasure of Willow’s company for the rest of the day.

That in itself is a win.

As I pull my arm back to swing, Willow snatches the ball from my fingers. Then she walks up the lane, ducks down, and slips her hand beneath the divider to toss the ball in the fifty-point pocket. The machine beeps and illuminates with my total score: fifty.

I’m laughing by the time my wife struts back down the lane, sending me a wink before picking up her helmet. It’s a joyful tangerine, matching the D30-armor motorcycle jacket I got for her. When she flicks her leather jacket over her shoulder, not even glancing back on her way to the exit, an exhale punches from me.

My wife confidently striding toward my motorcycle has to be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

I take an appreciative sweep from her raven hair to her black Docs before jolting into action.

Looks like we’re spending the rest of the day at my favorite place.

Home.

CHAPTER 28



Shane

Seven grueling days later, and I'm irritated that we're standing in front of Trevor's front door instead of snuggling on the couch or kissing in the kitchen. Turns out, I hate away games now. They never bothered me before, but after being gone all week, I just want to spend my precious day off in Willow's company.

Alone.

In the case of 'I don't want to be here,' I'd like the record to reflect that Willow is wearing a sundress. Yes, you heard me right. *A sundress*. It's Waves blue with tiny white flowers and cascades effortlessly to her knees. The most maddening parts of the garment are the thin blue straps.

How am I expected to be social when Willow's lovely shoulders are on display?

She pauses before ringing the doorbell, adjusting the aluminum foil over the tray of diabetic-friendly chocolate cookies I'm carrying.

"I think I'm coming down with something."

Willow clicks her teeth, tired of my nonsense. To her credit, I've been trying to get out of this team get-together since I walked on the tarmac last Friday and realized I left my heart at home.

A part of me knows that we should probably talk about what we're doing now that we've kissed, but I've been following her lead. Willow seems

happy with our current situation, and I'm perfectly content to keep her that way.

"We're not staying that long. Cabin check-in starts at four."

While I've been playing in various cities, Willow has been productive. She kept our pillow fort up, hosting Piper for an epic weekend sleepover. Delilah and Adam were beyond grateful for extended solo couple time. Willow and Piper FaceTimed me before my games. Piper is now convinced that I'm secretly a prince, pretending to be a baseball player.

Willow also logged valuable hours on her piece, making astonishing progress. After returning home late last night, I spent entirely too long visually tracing the scales of the dinosaur's snout.

And if that wasn't enough, Willow planned our next adventure—staying the night in a cabin. She's particularly excited to share this 'must-have childhood experience' with me. Roasting marshmallows beneath winking stars is something Willow often did with her mom growing up.

Since I have less than twenty-four hours off before I have to report to Waves Stadium for tomorrow's home game, we're keeping it local. Fortunately, First Landing State Park is less than fifteen minutes from the ballpark. After this, we'll head to the cabin, and tomorrow, I'll go straight to the stadium where I'll have an in-person meeting with Carter before practice.

Though he's spent the last week groveling like a champ, assuring me that he's close to landing both a New Balance and Rawlings deal, I wanted time to think about keeping him as my agent. In the end, Carter isn't a bad person; he just takes jokes too far. With some new expectations, I'm sure we can continue working together.

I grunt, prepared to make another bid for Willow's attention, when the door flies open. Kenzie's red hair swings back with the motion.

"Willow! Shane! I'm so glad you could make it." A calico cat rests in a cross-body sling thingy, pawing at her shoulder. "Come on in."

When Kenzie turns, leading the way, I give Willow one last pleading glance. She frames my face, her thumb giving my cheek an affectionate caress.

"An hour, tops."

I straighten, renewed energy zipping to the soles of my feet as I follow Willow into my teammate's house.

It looks like everyone is here, children racing between groups of adults. Large glass doors are flung open to Trevor's expansive yard and garden area. Soft-pink peonies peek from organized greenery vignettes while mature magnolias stretch toward the sky. Even I have to admit—begrudgingly—that it's the perfect day for a cookout.

After setting Willow's cookies on the oversized kitchen island with the rest of the covered dishes, Tenny grabs me by the shoulders. I glance to Willow for help, but she's quickly absorbed into a WAG circle with Mallory, Alex, and Dulce, DJ's wife.

I groan, letting my teammate lead me away.

"I'm so jealous." He jostles me. "You're on every network—not just the baseball ones. Your hug-out from last night was on *The Today Show*!"

In yesterday's day game against the Memphis Monarchs, I was halfway between first and second when their second baseman, Oscar Morales, caught a grounder. Instead of tagging me out, he opened his arms and motioned for me to come over.

Normally, I would have jogged to the dugout and ignored him altogether, but Willow told me she's been watching game highlights from *Diamond Breakdown*. I knew walking into Oscar's arms for a hug would make the highlight reel and delight Willow. I just didn't expect it to be *this big* of a deal.

"Hey look, it's the league's first designated hugger," Rhett jokes, bringing an artisanal water bottle to his lips.

"You gonna start greeting us with embraces now?" Colton opens his arms wide.

I shrug off Tenny then shove Colton in the chest before he can get too close.

"Knock it off."

The three of them laugh at my growly command.

"I've got to know. What was the thought process?" Rhett asks.

"I was ambushed."

"Didn't look like it."

He whips out his phone, playing the clip everyone is unnecessarily obsessed with. In this edit, the video freezes as I lean into a hug, angelic choir music bursting from the phone speakers.

My teammates *lose it*.

Tenny looks like he's half a second from crying he's laughing so hard. Colton is half-snorting, half-cackling. Rhett wheezes like he's got a three-pack-a-day habit.

"I hate every single one of you."

"No, you don't," Tenny says, clapping me on the shoulder. "Not anymore."

I grunt, crossing my arms and waiting for these idiots to calm the heck down. In the distance, I catch Willow looking at me, a sweet smile on her lips.

"Save me," I mouth.

Willow shakes her head, giggling.

"Not yet," she mouths back.

When my scowl deepens, Willow's smile doubles.

Then a loud slam at the front door draws our attention.

"Someone, lead me to the grill." A short brunette walks in with paper grocery bags hoisted over her head. "I brought Wagyu."

Kai almost trips over a toddler rushing to the woman's side. He immediately ushers her toward the patio where Trevor is grilling, Colton and Tenny following close behind.

Normally, I'd be relieved to get a little peace and quiet, but I can't help but notice how Rhett's eyes follow the woman as she's led outside. He squeezes the neck of the water bottle as she laughs with everyone surrounding her. When she and Tenny share a long hug, Rhett runs his fingers through his blond hair and glances at his shoes.

"Who's that?"

Normally, I wouldn't care, but Rhett looks like he's two seconds from passing out.

And maybe...maybe I don't hate my teammates anymore.

I might even...ugh, never make me admit this out loud, but I might *like* them.

"Ari—" He clears his throat, thumping his chest with his fist. "That's Arizona, Tenny's younger sister."

I glance at the two of them, noting the similarities. Same dark-brown hair. Blue eyes. Same wide smile. But while Tenny is tall and lean, Arizona is short and curvy. She's also wearing a sundress, though hers is bright red and much snuggier than Willow's whimsical style.

My focus shifts to my teammate as he rubs the back of his neck, his gaze still locked on Arizona. I glance between Rhett and Tenny's sister, wondering if this is what I look like whenever Willow enters a room.

"If you keep staring like that, she's going to catch on fire."

"I'm not staring." Rhett coughs, drops his gaze to the ground, and then helplessly looks back at Arizona.

I grunt. "I assume Tenny doesn't know."

"I liked you better when you didn't talk."

My shoulders bounce like, *Yeah, me too.*

"Nothing is going on. Tenny is like a brother to me. He treated me like family when mine..."

The sentence drops off before Rhett takes a long drink of water.

"Anyway, nothing can happen. Tenny's my best friend. He's very protective of Arizona, just like she is with him." The corner of his mouth kicks up. "You won't believe the crazy things she's done to enact vengeance on his behalf. Most of it, he doesn't even know about. Ari once tanked an ex-girlfriend's stock value."

"With other people?"

"No. Literally. On Wall Street. Tenny's ex is a makeup mogul." Rhett rubs at his five o'clock shadow, his blatant admiration shining through. "Though she be but little, she is fierce."

The old me would tell Rhett to snap out of it, but this is exactly how I behave whenever Willow paints or laughs...or even breathes.

Arizona glances up, giving us both a jovial wave. After handing the tongs to a grateful Kai, she jogs over. Rhett mutters something about mercy before plastering on a smile.

"Hey, Ari."

"Rhett." Arizona's gaze tangles with my teammate's as she tucks her hair behind her ear.

By the looks of it, Rhett's crush might not be one-sided.

Then Arizona turns to me, holding out her hand for a hearty shake. "Hugster, I presume. I heard your wife is looking to level up her art career. I've been told you have a web designer in mind, but if Willow needs a social media manager, I'm your girl."

A choking sound escapes me. "How did you know that?"

I haven't even told Willow that I've established an LLC in her name and completed the paperwork for a business license. I've also coordinated with

several website designers and a few graphic designers for potential logos, business cards, etc. The plan was to tell Willow tonight while heating marshmallows over an open flame. Willow can have complete control over her business, but I have a feeling she'd rather paint and let a business manager who specializes in luxury artwork worry about the rest.

"Colton saw your laptop open to designers specializing in artist websites. He told Tenny. Tenny told me." She taps open a spreadsheet on her phone and shows it to me. "I've created a list of content ideas and a sample posting schedule for launching a brand account on every major platform. I also asked Mallory if she's open to sharing Willow's portfolio with her celebrity friends. Word of mouth and personal recommendations are still king. Mallory, of course, is happy to help when Willow's ready for a hard launch."

I stare, open-mouthed, before glancing at Rhett.

My teammate just raises his brows like, *Told ya*.

"Nothing is truly private among the Waves, and I make it my business to know everything." Arizona leans in, lowering her voice. "Dulce's pregnant with their third."

"Ari," Rhett chides.

She rolls her eyes. "They're making the announcement once the meat is off the grill."

I grunt, rubbing my chin. "Would it help if I have video of Willow painting? She's mesmerizing to watch."

Arizona stifles a girlish *aww*, snapping back into business mode. "Yes, viewers love seeing the process even more than the finished product. Any B-roll you have would be incredibly valuable."

"B-roll?"

She squeezes my arm, and Rhett looks like he wants to decapitate me. "We'll have a full media briefing with both of you once Willow signs on."

"Okay. Let me talk to my wife first."

Man, I like saying that.

"Of course." Arizona leans back with a broad smile. "I'll give you my direct number so you can get in touch when you're ready. I have finals next week, but after that, I'm open to meet whenever."

That's right. I vaguely remember Tenny mentioning that Arizona is still in college. With the professional way she conducts herself, I would have easily mistaken her for much older.

After saving Arizona's contact information, I glance up, looking for Willow. She's in the middle of an animated story, using her whole body. I'm not quite sure what would entail her to look like she's climbing and then falling off a mountain, but it brings a smile to my face, nonetheless.

That is, until Willow flails her arms as she stumbles backward, knocking over a nearby cat tower. A black cat yowls, jumping from the top of the tower, over Alex's head, and onto Mallory's shoulders before skittering along the back of the couch. Mallory whips around, accidentally popping Dulce in the stomach.

"Oh no, the baby!"

Mallory's alarmed cry has everyone looking at a doubled-over Dulce.

Willow's shoulders hitch around her ears. "I'm so sorry."

I vault over the back of the couch to get to the four women, followed quickly by DJ coming in from outside.

"I'm fine," Dulce reassures her husband. "The baby isn't up by my ribs anyway."

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I'm kind of a..." Willow's voice quivers, but before she can finish with her well-worn explanation about being a trainwreck, I interject.

"Perfect. You're perfect, honey. It was just an accident."

Willow's watery eyes find mine before she focuses on Dulce. "Are you okay?"

She laughs. "*Please*, I have two boys. I get body slammed daily."

"And..." DJ pauses, glancing at his wife for confirmation to continue.

When she nods, DJ's grin could power the stadium lights. I've never seen my teammate look happier.

"We're having a girl!"

CHAPTER 29



Willow

We end up staying longer than an hour, but Shane doesn't seem to mind. He actually relaxes as the party progresses but stays close. I can't tell if it's for his comfort or to keep me from causing any more disasters.

An added bonus to him staying near is his hand keeps finding my waist or the dip between my shoulder blades. His thumb is always on the move, sweeping my upper back or the sensitive spot inside my wrist when we hold hands. I can't say I'm mad about it, but all of Shane's casual touches are stringing me tighter than canvas pulled over a frame.

When we eventually leave, our bellies and hearts are full. Dinner was hands-down one of the best meals I've ever eaten. That steak was absolutely divine. Dulce showed everyone the ultrasound pictures of their new arrival to a chorus of *oohs* and *aahs*. And Mallory coordinated to get a baby shower on everyone's schedules.

It's dark, and the ranger's station is closed by the time we enter the park. Fortunately, there's an envelope with the four-digit code to open our cabin and an emergency number if we need it. The only thing *I need* is marshmallows and a change of clothes. The air is crisp now that the sun has set, and I plan on slipping into jeans and stealing one of Shane's crewneck sweatshirts.

Shane grumbles when I try to grab my overnight bag, literally picking me up and moving me out of the way so he can get it himself. Instead of

fighting him, I take a deep breath of woodsmoke-tinged air and let my gaze tilt skyward. Stars sparkle in the inky sky, just like I remember from when I was little.

I grin at them before following him into the small cabin. There's a tiny kitchen, a table, and a small loveseat in the main room. A bundle of firewood sits beside the back door leading to a picnic table and fire ring.

"This place is so cute," I say, glancing at the door to the bathroom before halting.

My gaze zeros in on Shane's wide shoulders taking up the entire door frame at the end of the very short hall.

Frame.

As in singular.

There are supposed to be *two* doors. I rented a *two-bedroom* cabin.

Though we shared some sizzling kisses last week and this morning before getting dressed for the BBQ, we still haven't had the adult conversation about where our relationship is headed.

Selfishly, I haven't wanted to.

I know we're technically married, but I don't think either of us expected things to turn out like they have. Saying sticky, vulnerable feelings out loud might burst the very magical bubble I find myself living in.

And I really, *really* like this bubble.

Since Shane isn't exactly known for his conversational skills, I figure he won't be the one to bring up *the talk*. That means I can stay in this blissful state for as long as I need to.

"There's only one room."

Shane grunts.

I push past him to find that, yep, there's only one bed. And by the looks of it, it's a full—*maybe* a queen. There was a little flare of hope that I'd find bunk beds or something. Though, Shane contorting his large body onto a bottom or top bunk would be ridiculous.

A maniacal laugh bursts from me. "There's only one bed."

Shane makes a growly noise in response to me stating very obvious things. Next, I should say, 'The sky is dark' or 'It's the month of May.'

He slips past me, tossing his duffel bag onto the loveseat.

"Shane, come on." I pivot back into the main room, setting my hands on my hips. "You can't sleep there. You won't fit."

"It's fine," he grumbles.

“No.” I pull on his arm when he unzips his bag. “You have a game tomorrow, and you’ll be exhausted.”

Shane stops, rising to his full height. “If you don’t sleep well, your blood sugar will go high. Then you’ll feel terrible and spend the whole day trying to get back in balance.”

“Highs happen,” I tell him, defiantly lifting my chin.

“Being tired during a game happens,” he says, not backing down.

My head tilts to the side. “Is this our first fight?”

“No,” Shane growls, pulling a sweatshirt out of his bag and holding it out to me. “Our first fight was when you resisted going to the hospital.”

My greedy fingers snatch up the soft fabric and hug it to my chest. “How did you know I wanted this?”

His gaze slowly traces the curves of my face, almost reverently. “I know you, Willow.”

I’m trapped between the impulse to kiss him and scream at him for being so stubborn. I decide on option three: getting changed so we can argue about this after marshmallows. Maybe sweet, gooey deliciousness will help Shane see reason.

We set up the two camp chairs I bought around the fire pit.

“These will be good for our beach day too,” I tell him, absolutely poking the bear.

When he groans, a delighted shimmy dances down my spine.

Though I’d expected to build the fire, the same way my mom taught me so many years ago, Shane takes over, crouching to expertly coax kindling into a steady flame.

“I thought you’ve never done this before,” I say, sitting in my chair and opening a water bottle.

“I haven’t.”

“Then why are you so good at it?” I ask, irrationally annoyed. “Why are you good at everything?”

“I suck at skee-ball.”

A laugh rips from deep in my belly.

Shane looks over his shoulder, the corner of his mouth twitching.

I grin as a thought pops into my head. “What if we shared the bed?”

Shane turns his focus toward the growing flame, not answering.

Tension coils in my body, my skin growing tight and uncomfortable.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he says after a long moment.

“Why?” My question is barely a rasp.

Would it be so bad to spend a few hours close to me?

I don’t kick in my sleep—that much, anyway. And I can direct my morning breath toward the wall so it doesn’t make him want to gag first thing.

The look Shane gives me is almost painful. “I’m going to want to hold you. I’m going to want to curl you against my chest and kiss you instead of letting you sleep.”

His shaky exhale makes goosebumps break out beneath my borrowed sweatshirt.

Our gazes lock for a few thudding beats before Shane’s jaw tightens. “No.”

Then he mutters something to the flames that sounds suspiciously like “I don’t want to be bad for you.”

I’m barely breathing when he finally settles in the chair next to me, extending a roasting skewer my way. I take it wordlessly, trying to understand what would make Shane think that he’d be bad for me.

He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

Shiny luminescence spreads from beneath my breastbone, over my collarbones, and slides down my arms. Then—in the same breath—someone hits me with that medieval spiky thingy that swings on a chain.

Wait. Do I love Shane?

It’s odd to have an epiphany as someone hands you a bag of marshmallows. My fingers feel numb as I skewer two marshmallows and extend them over the flame.

“No. That’s your favorite word, isn’t it?”

I have no earthly idea why I’m messing with him right now, but it’s like my brain needs to check my heart’s math.

“No.” Shane glances at me, the sharp planes of his face contrasting with his adoring gaze. “I don’t have a favorite word, but if I had to pick one, it’d be Willow.”

“Oh.” A whimper almost leaves my throat, but I tamp it down.

The urge to slay all Shane’s dragons—starting with the nasty ones in his mind—suddenly feels essential. After that, I’m going to drag his chair closer to mine and cradle his face in my hands until his lashes fall closed and all the tension he always carries in his shoulders eases.

My heart and mind are in enthusiastic agreement.

I love Shane.

Of course I love him.

He's so perfectly imperfect. Raw and real. Flawed and grouchy while having the sweetest soul. And for a man who doesn't talk much, he always seems to say the right thing.

No doubt about it. I'm undeniably, helplessly, catastrophically in love with him.

Which...

Is an issue now that I'm aware of it.

You're thinking, *Willow, what's the problem? That sounds kind of nice.*

The problem is I can't keep a secret to save my life.

Which means I'm going to end up spilling the beans in a rambling mess if I don't *lock this down*. Because, surely, it's too early for love confessions. If I told Shane and he didn't feel the same, I would wither into a tiny lifeless blob.

No. The best thing is to bide my time.

Maybe, eventually, he might love me back.

That's when we'll have the adult conversation.

Because right now, I'd rather set my canvas on fire than ruin what Shane and I have.

"Bubble. Just keep it in the bubble," I mutter.

And then, in what feels like a poetic gesture from the universe, my marshmallows burst into flames.

When I don't do anything to save them, because I'm trapped in a frozen state, Shane leans over, taking my roasting stick and wiping the burnt sugar against a log. He even goes so far as to clean the tines, ensuring they're not too hot before skewering new marshmallows. The handle appears in front of me, but I blink at it like he's offering me a wet toad.

"Willow, what's wrong?"

The worry in Shane's voice snaps me back to reality. I draw in a noisy breath, sounding like I just surfaced from the bottom of the ocean.

"Me? I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?"

When he eyes me dubiously, the perfect answer pings in my brain.

"Actually, I'm mad." I set my skewer on the table, cross my arms, and tilt my chin away.

"Mad?"

“Yep. I’m mad that you don’t think I can keep my hands to myself if we share the bed.”

“I’m not worried about you.”

His words are laced with so much growly heat I can practically feel my pupils dilating.

I tug at the collar of my sweatshirt. “Then I’m mad at you for not having more restraint. Aren’t you taught to not swing at every ball and whatnot.”

Shane exhales long and hard. “That’s not the same—”

“I’m telling you no,” I interrupt, my mind on a roll now. “I’m telling you there will be no kissing, only peaceful sleeping—well, not *exactly* peaceful. You should expect a few kidney punches.”

When the corner of his mouth kicks up, it feels like warm sunshine after being trapped in a cave.

“You wake up swinging?”

I nod. “One time, I accidentally gave Mom a black eye when we shared an air mattress while camping.”

His lips tip over into a smile. “Your poor mom.”

“Hey.” I shove him, grinning like a lunatic. “She got me in the ribs. We both flail a lot. Vivid dreamers. It’s all part of being a creative.”

Shane shakes his head, but his smile doesn’t waver.

“Do we have a deal?” I ask, picking up my skewer and getting to work roasting.

He’s quiet for a long moment, but I don’t fill the space. Instead, I listen to the crickets chirping and the rustling of leaves in the slight evening breeze.

“Yes.”

Instead of victoriously punching the air, I take a giant bite of perfectly roasted marshmallow. After thoroughly enjoying both fluffy morsels, I rise to stand in front of Shane.

“I’m glad you agreed, because now I can tell you the second part of the deal.”

“The second part?”

Shane’s eyes flash when I sit across his lap.

I nod, hovering my lips over his. “You’re only allowed to kiss me out here.”

Shane tugs me closer with a hand over my hip while the other frames my face. His lips taste like sugar and something deeper...something enigmatic

yet essential. And let me tell you, my husband makes good on the second part of our deal.

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CHAPTER 30



Willow

This is infinitely better than any camping trip I've ever been on.
Sorry, not sorry, Mom.

Tell me who wouldn't want to wake up tucked against Shane's warm chest. Bonus: I don't think I wiggled an inch after he wrapped me in his arms. Not a single kidney has been punched. No eyes blackened.

And who would have guessed that Mr. Grumpypus was also a competitive snuggler?

Shane's skin still holds the delectable scent of woodsmoke. Paired with his lingering cologne, it's downright diabolical. How am I supposed to think straight when my nose is pressed into the hollow of his throat?

The answer is, I don't. I simply allow the expanding sensation within my ribs to grow and relish in the privilege of being held by this complicated, still-slumbering man.

Until...my bladder tells me cherishing-the-moment time is up.

It's now sprint-to-the-bathroom time.

Except, when I try to slip from beneath the covers, Shane tightens his arms with a grumble.

I manage to pivot away, but my stealthy escape moves are thwarted by inked muscles. His baseball tattoo bands around my stomach, flames draping carelessly over my shoulders.

I'm about to pat his arm to wake him up when Shane burrows his scruffy jaw into the crook of my neck with the sweetest sigh.

My heart squeezes at about the same time my bladder gives me a thirty-second warning.

Picking up his right arm, I carefully slide it over my head before freeing his fingers from my rib cage one by one. Holding his left hand, I slide ever so quietly out of the bed until I'm kneeling in my flannel pants. Muffling my triumphant squeal, I crawl backward a few feet and then ease to standing.

A heavy pulse radiates through me watching Shane sleep, his full lips slightly parted.

Those lips kissed me to within an inch of my life last night. Shane savored me like he was never going to see me again, like he was being sent to another country, to war, to space. I'll admit, I also felt a bone-deep need to show Shane how important he is to me, especially since I have to keep my feelings bubble-bound for now.

I'm so distracted by my handsome husband, with how the wan light streaming through the blinds creates playful lines across his strong cheekbones, that I misjudge the distance to the door. To be fair, I'm used to the palatial size of my room and not a tiny cabin bedroom.

Bumping into the door, it slams shut with a bang. Shane bolts upright in bed, and that's when I notice—for the first time—that he's not wearing his soft sleepshirt. It's bunched beside his pillow in a messy heap.

My sleep-addled brain hiccups, struggling to process the artistry on display. All the lines are slightly softened, like they've been there a long time. The tattooed vines I'd glimpsed last week climb up his defined abs until they tangle around the spray of chrysanthemums and lilies across his flawless chest. A mockingbird, wings raised in a gentle arch toward his right shoulder, watches me with one curious eye. Tiny asters and milkweed fill out the all-black design as well as...

My breath hitches as I find my favorite flower within the tattoo—by his left collarbone, beneath the bird's beak, and right in the center of his chest.

Over his heart.

"Willow?"

"You're beautiful," I breathe, grateful I said that and not *I love you*.

Both were tumbling free in my skull, so there was a fifty-fifty chance.

When Shane dips his chin with a bashful look, his hair falling over his eyes, I want nothing more than to dive back into bed and hold him for the rest of the day.

But my body reminds me that we were on a mission.

“Bathroom,” I blurt, swinging open the door and bolting through.

His soft, warm chuckle follows me into the hall.

After all the necessary things, including brushing my teeth, I find Shane sitting up in the bed.

“Hey,” he says, a subtle pink slipping across his cheeks.

His shirt is still off. Have mercy.

Have I mentioned that my husband is the most adorable and attractive human on the planet?

I waste no time climbing up the mattress until I’m settled on his lap, my fingers tracing the ink over his shoulders. Shane exhales a minty breath. Apparently, he visited the kitchen sink while I was in the bathroom.

“The deal,” he says, his voice deliciously gruff as his hands squeeze my waist.

I wrinkle my nose, angry at last-night me for insisting on such a shortsighted plan.

Shane chuckles again, and liquid energy pools at the base of my spine.

He tilts his chin up, the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen brightening his multi-shade eyes. Seeing Shane like this, so relaxed and calm, rearranges the way I view everything. Even the various colors in the room seem more vibrant, alive. The sharp black of his tattoos contrasting against the tiny freckles arching over his shoulders is a perfect study in unexpected composition.

“How about we come up with a new deal? Instead of going outside, kitchen kisses are allowed. This morning only. A statute of limitations applies.”

I grumble, not wanting to leave the warm cocoon of blankets. “It’s cold outside the covers.”

Even with Shane’s warmth beneath me, I’m chilly in my sleep tank. He traces the goosebumps on my arms and then gathers his shirt to put over my head. I gleefully punch my arms through the sleeves.

His grin is achingly sweet. “We’ll get you a sweatshirt too.”

“What about you?”

When Shane's smile morphs into something wicked, it yanks the breath from my lungs. "I'm comfortable as is."

"In that case..."

I should be classified as a professional athlete for my technique vaulting off the bed before racing to the kitchen. Shane's laugh tumbles after me before he casually strides through the doorway, finger-combing his hair. The bicep pop alone is enough to make my knees wobble.

That sense of drastic miscalculation sweeps my stomach, forcing me to lean against the counter for stability. How did I not realize how sexy my husband is?

Shane takes his time, his gaze sweeping from my head to my bare feet. When he's close enough that I can feel the heat of him, he drops his lips over my ear.

"Please hold."

It's impossible to stifle my whimper as Shane bolts back to the bedroom, returning with my sweatshirt and a pair of socks.

"Okay, I'm covered," I tell him, after shoving on the clothes. "Let's get to kissing."

He chuckles, effortlessly lifting me onto the countertop. "I like when you're impatient."

My hands make little grabby motions. I want to taste the devious little smirk curling his mouth more than I want to finish my work in progress.

When Shane sets his warm palms on my knees, purposefully keeping himself at arm's length, I pout.

"I want to talk to you about something."

"Right now?"

His smile should be illegal.

"I'll be quick about it."

I cross my arms with a harrumph.

"It's about your business."

"I don't have a business."

Shane's lips twist before he explains, using words like limited liability company and S corp and telling me that he's in final interviews with an accomplished business manager. Then he talks about website development with private gallery options for collectors, and how Tenny's sister, Arizona, would be interested in running social media accounts for the brand.

“Brand? I don’t have a brand. I’m just a slightly eclectic woman with a great work ethic.”

“Don’t do that.” His lips dive into a frown. “You know how talented you are.”

When I shrug, Shane releases a long exhale.

“How would you feel if I said I wasn’t good at sportsball?”

My forehead scrunches. “That’s not the same thing. You’re incredibly talented.”

“So are you.”

We stare at each other for a handful of heartbeats before I groan. “Fine, I’ll admit I’m moderately talented, but only because you used the word sportsball in a sentence.”

“Immensely. Say, ‘I’m immensely talented.’” Shane crosses his arms over his bare chest, and, *good gracious*, how am I supposed to focus when he’s doing that?

When he clears his throat, I finally drag my gaze upward.

What was I saying? Oh, right.

“I’m immensely talented.”

Shane’s jaw softens. “I want you to have complete creative control. If you want to interview web designers or see which portfolios—”

I hold up a hand. “I don’t want any of that.”

Shane blinks. “I’ve overstepped. I just—”

“No.” I laugh, giddiness washing over me.

Only my mother and a few teachers have ever believed in me this much. And none of them had the means to set up an entire empire on my behalf. It’s mindboggling, yet so in line with Shane’s character for him to go through all this trouble for me. The last thing I’d want to do is refuse such a generous gift.

“I just...” I squint one eye, tilting my head to the side. “I just want to paint. I’d prefer the experts take care of the rest.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up in a confident little smirk. “That’s what I figured.”

“How do you know me so well?” I ask, playfully narrowing my eyes.

His shoulders bounce. “It’s the quiet ones who pay attention.”

Since there’s no shirt to fist, I tug him closer by the waistband of his shorts until my fingers can slide up his back. Shane’s smile drops the

second I touch him, his focus shifting to my mouth. Our exhales tangle as electricity runs backward through my body.

“Thank you, Shane. For everything.”

He nods, watching me carefully as he drifts closer. Our lips brush, and Shane’s soft grunt unfurls something deep within my soul. Before I can even process that first touch, his hand is on my jaw, tilting me with expert precision. I give in to the needy kiss, letting my Shane take and take.

In short order, we’re breathless and scrambling for more connection. My hands are in his hair, and his arms are banded tight around my sweatshirt. I’ve never felt so blissfully in sync and devastatingly lost at the same time.

Shane breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine to collect his breath.

“I never thought it could be like this.”

Though his murmured words set my heart ablaze, I simply tug his lips back to mine. Because I know that if I speak, I’ll end up telling my husband that I love him.

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CHAPTER 31



Shane

“It’s official. I’m Cinderella,” Willow says a week later, accepting a crystal champagne flute from a flight attendant.

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Actually, it’s not a perfect comparison, because my mom is alive and awesome, and I don’t have any siblings, but they’ve got the rags-to-riches part right.”

“Who’s they?”

Willow simply shrugs before gasping. “Your brothers can be the evil stepsisters!”

I set the protein shake I was handed on the table in front of us, no longer hungry. A generous spread of fruit, nuts, and artisanal cheeses litter a silver platter. Willow eyes the aged manchego before taking a generous bite. Her delighted food moan should squash the tension mounting in my chest, but now that we’re underway to Dustin’s wedding, dread seeps into my skin.

“It’s not too late to turn back.”

Willow splays her hand over her heart. “You wound me, good sir.”

My brows bunch.

“I already told you I can handle my own.”

I grumble.

Just because Willow is incredibly strong doesn’t mean I want to send her into the lion’s den.

“Is this always how you fly?” She runs her palm over the leather armrest with an appreciative caress.

This private plane is a lot nicer than the one the team takes to games, but I wanted to flex a little. The warm wood paneling, live plants, and cozy touches like plush pillows and cashmere throws make it feel more like a living room than a metal tube hurtling through the sky.

“Not this nice, generally, but yes.”

She lets out a low whistle, taking in the luxurious plane. I can only imagine what her artist’s eye catches, probably things I don’t even notice. Since this is Willow’s first flight experience, I wanted to make it a good one.

“How long until we get there?”

I check my Cartier watch. Though I don’t usually wear such an expensive piece, it’ll be expected tonight. “About an hour and a half.”

“Perfect.” Willow digs through her purse, retrieving her phone and tapping open a movie app. “Our childhood experience for the day can be watching *Cinderella*.”

Wordlessly, I pick up a remote from the side of my chair, clicking buttons to descend a full-size screen from the ceiling, cue up the movie, and dim the cabin lights before lifting the armrest dividing us. When I gesture for Willow to nestle into the crook of my arm, she just stares, mouth agape.

“Okay, Bruce Wayne.”

I grin. “Now, I’m Batman? I thought I was a mafia boss. Or maybe an international spy.”

“You’re a lot of things,” she mutters, setting down her glass, folding her legs up on the seat, and snuggling against me.

I flick a cashmere throw over her, knowing she’ll get chilly, before starting the movie.

About an hour in, I can’t help but pause it.

“You’re telling me that he’s smitten but doesn’t go looking for her himself. Instead, he sends his henchman to bring back athlete’s foot by having everyone try on her slipper. And no one considers that another woman in their village could have the same shoe size?”

Her nose wrinkles. “There are some major plot flaws, but it’s an old movie. You have to give it some grace.”

A half-grunt/half-scoff leaves my mouth, but I press play.

The good thing is the movie distracts me from the anticipatory doom of seeing my family. The bad thing is, as soon as we land, anger flares in my chest like an old friend. My phone pings with a litany of texts from my brothers—calling me names and asking why I’m not already there, drinking with them.

Sally sent my itinerary weeks ago, but apparently, my brothers can’t read. Since Dustin didn’t want me standing up with him—saying something along the lines of no losers allowed in the wedding party—I figured we could attend like any other guest. Minimizing the time spent trapped on an island with my father and brothers, we’re arriving just in time to get ready for the ceremony. I also set our return flight for eight tomorrow morning.

In my mind, this is a tactical event—get in, get out.

Crisp sea air blasts us the second the doors open to the tarmac. As we descend the stairs, I catch sight of the driver I hired, waiting beside a black Alfa Romeo Giulia while holding a bouquet of daisies.

“Ms. Huntley.” He extends the flowers toward Willow with a nod of his chauffeur’s hat.

“You can call me Willow,” she says, taking an appreciative inhale of her favorite blooms. “What’s your name?”

“Joaquin, miss.”

Willow envelops the older man in a hug. “Nice to meet you.”

He meets my eyes over her shoulder, puzzled. I simply pull our carry-ons toward the trunk, feeling very much the grump.

Willow’s chatter with Joaquin is the only thing keeping me from breaking the door handle off of this very expensive car. Halfway through the short ride, Willow settles a reassuring hand on my tense knee, but it doesn’t help. Irritation continues to course through me as we meet the concierge at the sumptuous hotel and are escorted to our room.

Lucian, a renowned stylist from New York, waits for us with two assistants and three racks of dresses, shoes, and accessories for Willow to choose from. Beside him, Brittany, a famed hair stylist, leans against her mobile kit. I didn’t hire a makeup artist, knowing Willow would want to do her own.

As the concierge leads everyone into our room, Willow leans into my side. “All I need now is a pumpkin carriage.”

“The ceremony and reception are downstairs,” I tell her with all the personality of a rock.

Willow tugs me to a stop in the middle of the hallway, her brown eyes etched with concern before cradling my cheek in her palm.

“We’ve got this.”

I shake my head, my hands clenching and unclenching. “This was a bad idea. If anyone so much as looks at you the wrong way, I’m going to murder them.”

“Nothing like a murder to kick off a couple’s nuptials.” She gives me a cheeky wink.

When all I do is growl, Willow’s affectionate smile softens. Then she places her hand directly over my heart, stepping so close I have to tip my chin down to maintain eye contact.

“Trust me, Shane.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly the size of a straw. The way Willow is gazing at me, her full lips curled up at the corners, is nothing short of breathtaking. My next exhale tumbles from my tight lungs almost helplessly.

I love you.

I love you so much, and I don’t want them to hurt you.

None of those words escape my tight jaw, but with the way Willow’s eyes mist, it’s almost as if she heard my thoughts.

“Mr. Seaver, we need to start now, or you’ll be late to the ceremony.”

I grunt at the voice behind me before sliding my fingers beneath Willow’s hair and giving her one last all-consuming kiss. When she sways forward as I lean back, I find myself smiling for the first time today. Then her hazy gaze finds mine, and she gives me that classic Willow grin.

“Don’t forget. Ten thousand percent Team Shane,” she tells me, skipping backward toward the room while giving me goofy finger guns.

I can’t help myself.

A laugh escapes me as I follow her into the suite.

Ninety minutes later—but what feels like two years—Lucian announces that Willow is ready.

I pause in destroying the carpet in the main area with my pacing and adjust my cufflinks. Like my brothers, I’m wearing a designer tuxedo, but with a black shirt and satin tie instead of a white shirt and frilly bowtie. I checked in with them briefly, but since both them and my father were already three sheets to the wind and kept taking cheap shots at me, I excused myself as quickly as possible.

When Willow walks into the room, a gruff noise leaves me. It feels like I've just taken a sucker-punch to the gut. I thought I'd never see my wife look more beautiful than she did in her lace wedding dress, but I was woefully wrong.

The glamorous, form-fitting gown gives off a distinct Old Hollywood feel with beaded black and silvery floral motifs cascading down glimmering dusty-rose fabric. Every curve catches the light as Willow glides closer. One glittering strap over her shoulder draws my eyes to her unadorned neck and her black-stoned chandelier earrings.

Willow's lips tug up when I swallow hard.

But when she stumbles at the last step, my hands fly to her waist, steadying her.

"Almost nailed it," she mumbles.

"Trust me. You nailed it."

My voice is a hard scrape as I slide one hand up her back until my fingers frame her neck. With her hair fastened in dozens of elegant swirls, my thumb rests lightly over her jumping pulse point.

"I chose this one because the beading reminded me of your tattoos," she tells me, glancing up from underneath dark lashes.

Willow's whispered confession makes my fingers tense, pulling a shuddered breath from her. I can't help that I drift closer, that I can't drag my focus away from her glossy lips.

"I almost put Zendaya in this Vivienne Westwood, but I'm glad I saved it. It was meant for you, Willow-baby."

Lucian's casual endearment does two things: it reminds me that we're not alone and makes me scowl so hard my molars grind.

Willow's hand comes to my chest, steadying me as I shoot daggers at the stylist.

"Easy, tiger," she whispers.

I smirk. "Now I'm a tiger?"

Willow rolls her eyes at me before turning to face Lucian and Brittany. "Thank you both for such beautiful work."

"It's easy when the client is already gorgeous."

I nearly growl at Lucian's comment before reminding myself that this man isn't the enemy. "Yes, thank you."

Brittany checks her watch. "You two better head downstairs if you don't want to make a dramatic entrance."

I thank the stylists again before offering Willow my elbow to escort her to the indoor ceremony. The grand staircase of the historic hotel will act as the altar before guests are ushered into the nearby ballroom for the reception. By the time we enter the throng of well-dressed, well-heeled attendees, hotel employees are encouraging people to take their seats.

Am I being a little dramatic by positioning us toward the back and near the exit? Maybe. Do I consider this necessary strategic planning? Absolutely.

Willow grips my suit sleeve, leaning to whisper in my ear. “Is that a senator?”

“Probably,” I grumble, not even looking up. “Dad likes to stay connected, not just within hockey.”

It’s another way I’ve always failed my father, because I’d rather have my teeth extracted than network.

“She’s wearing the heck out of that dress.”

I meet Willow’s eye. “No one here is as stunning as you.”

Her cheeks flush the sweetest shade of pink before we quiet as the processional starts.

By the time my brother and his teammates align themselves on the stairs, Dustin is swaying noticeably. His best man tries to steady him as the bridesmaids file in one by one. Finally, the officiant asks everyone to stand. As Dustin’s bride, Layla, walks down the aisle with her unsmiling father, Willow releases a wistful sigh.

Though Layla looks beautiful, there’s so much wrong about this wedding—from how the groomsmen can’t stop shoving each other to Dustin’s audible belch as Layla arrives at his side. I can’t stop thinking about what I’d do differently if I got the chance to marry Willow again.

I’m so lost in thought—in the realization that I’d like nothing more than to shift our *mutually beneficial arrangement turned fledgling relationship* into something permanent—that I stop paying attention.

I’m aware that, *legally*, we’re already solidified.

But I want us to acknowledge it publicly.

I want to say handwritten vows while looking into Willow’s eyes so she knows I mean every word. I want Michelle there, standing beside her incredible daughter. And Delilah and Adam. Piper would make the cutest flower girl. And for my side...if I could have the entire Waves lineup beside me, that would be—

A chorus of gasps draws my attention back to the room just in time to catch my brother leaning away from their first kiss. Instead of pressing his lips to his new bride's, Dustin jerks back, shoving his fist over his mouth and stumbling down a few stairs toward an oversized planter.

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CHAPTER 32



Willow

“That was so sad,” I say, feeling like a broken record for repeating myself. “Layla deserved better.”

“She did.” Though Shane’s words are growly, his lips gently brush my temple.

He’s been incredibly affectionate, keeping me tucked close with a hand on my waist or between my shoulder blades. It’s like we’re at home—*alone*—not in a room filled with three hundred wedding guests.

When a server comes by with a tray of cocktails, we both politely decline.

“I think your brother has drunk enough for the rest of us.”

Shane grunts in agreement.

I spin into him, smiling and tugging on his closed jacket. “This is good because things can only go up from here.”

He winces. “Did you have to say that out loud? That feels like tempting fate.”

“Mr. Grumpypus Mafia Boss believes in fate?”

Shane’s gaze grows impossibly soft as he brushes my bangs out of my eyes. “I didn’t used to.”

My throat suddenly feels drier than an overworked paintbrush.

Fortunately, I’m saved by another stranger. Over the last twenty minutes, a variety of who’s whos in sports have come to say hello to Shane. He introduces me, nods along with whatever they have to say, allows me to

monopolize the conversation, and then steers us in a different direction after a few minutes. At this point, we've explored all the nooks and crannies of this elaborately decorated ballroom.

"You're running out of places to hide," I tease.

I don't get to relish in Shane's disgruntled hum because his father barges into the ballroom with Cody on his heels. Cody breaks off, joking with a few gigantic men who are probably hockey players, while Rick marches straight toward us with a scowl. Shane's grip on my waist moves from possessive to protective, shifting me slightly behind him.

"Enjoying yourself?" Rick asks, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Shane doesn't answer, his jaw tightening.

His father's gaze hardens. "You should have helped Dustin earlier."

"Last I checked, he was a grown man, capable of dealing with the consequences of his own actions."

"I suppose being his brother is a responsibility you can't handle," Rick scoffs.

When Shane doesn't answer, just continues their stare-down, his father finally looks at me. The sardonic glance he sends my way has the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

"Just like you couldn't handle keeping a woman of substance on your arm. Brielle came from one of the best families in Atlanta. How'd you screw that up?"

Wait. What?

How is that in *any* way Shane's fault?

"She cheated on *him*."

"Indiscretions happen in powerful marriages." The way his gaze rakes my dress makes me feel slimy. "At least Brielle wasn't a nobody from Texas, playing dress-up in a world she doesn't belong."

Wow. Just...wow.

The wild swing from praising a cheater to attacking me has my head spinning. Shane had warned me, but *Jeez Louise*, the rest of the Seaver men are awful. No wonder Shane wears more armor than a medieval knight. He's been putting up with abuse his whole life.

I blink, stunned for a second before I feel Shane jolt forward like he's about to punch his father in the face.

In one quick motion, I slide between the men, glancing over my shoulder at Shane while fisting the jacket over his stomach with the hand behind my

back.

Trust me, my eyes beg.

Shane hesitates, obviously torn before giving me a miniscule nod.

My grin grows slowly before I shine my full-wattage smile at Rick. It's a gamble, but I'm betting a man like him won't back down from a fight.

"That was a good start, but you'll have to dig deeper if you really want to make an impact." I make a show of shaking out my shoulders before twitching my fingers in a universal *come at me* gesture.

"What?" He runs a hand through his short copper hair, confused.

"If you're going to attack me, you'll have to do better than that. Let's see what you've got." I tilt my head to the side, pushing with my knuckles to pop my neck.

The sneer settling over Rick's mouth can only be described as curdled.

"Though you're a lovely little thing, that's the extent of your usefulness. Why don't you keep quiet while the men are talking?"

Shane quietly seethes behind me while I release a low whistle.

"Someone's sipping hard from the patriarchal punch bowl. What are you going to do next? Tell me to get in the kitchen?"

When Rick's hands fist, I reflexively lean into Shane. One of his arms bands around my stomach with a comforting weight.

"Shouldn't you be in the studio? You're an artist, apparently?"

I rub my palms together. "Here we go. Give me your best 'art isn't a real career' comment, and I'll let you know if I've heard it before."

The way Rick's face lights up makes a ribbon of unease braid down my spine.

"It doesn't really matter, right? Who needs a career when you obviously married for money."

The gleam of victory in his eyes should make me queasy, but I know something Rick doesn't—the truth.

"I married Shane because I wanted to take care of him, because, obviously, no one had ever done it before."

The arm around my waist tugs me closer as I feel Shane's surprised exhale against my neck.

Though I'd intended on keeping my side of this verbal squabble mostly deflective—I'm rubber, you're glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you—I suddenly want to berate this man for not doing better by Shane. How dare he have such a tender soul in his care and mistreat him. A

cutting barb sits on the edge of my tongue, but then I remind myself that hurt people *hurt* people.

Even though his behavior is rotten, Rick probably has demons I know nothing about.

A bloom of compassion fills my ribs as I exhale slowly.

“I’m sure you did the best you could.” My multicolored wedding ring gleams in ambient light as my fingertips brush Rick’s jacket sleeve.

He flinches like I burned him.

“Don’t patronize me. I made Shane the athlete he is today. I taught him dedication and hard work. I taught him how *to win*.” He practically growls the last sentence. “You wouldn’t be enjoying your cushy life without the time and effort I invested.”

“You’re right.”

Of all the things I’ve said, this simple statement catches Rick off guard. His lashes flutter, and his chin tips up like I just planted one against his jaw. Then a smug smile spreads over his face, highlighting an uneven scar just below his bottom lip. He clearly thinks he’s just won.

“And I’m right,” I continue. “You taught him how to survive, and I’m showing him what it’s like to be loved just as he is. A person needs both.”

“*Willow*.”

Shane’s awed voice in my hair makes my heart give a heavy thump, but I’m not done yet.

“I wish that for you someday,” I tell his father, genuinely meaning it.

Rick sputters, scowls, and then mutters an excuse before storming off in Cody’s direction.

I give myself a mental high five, combined with an imagined running man-style happy dance, before remembering that I just dropped the L-word in front of my husband.

Right.

Time to face the music now that I’ve burst my delightful little bubble.

Except, before I can turn around, the string quintet stops playing as the wedding coordinator announces the happy couple. Dustin looks markedly better, if not a bit sheepish, and Layla remains impossibly stunning. Shane doesn’t let go of me as I clap and cheer for them. When an instrumental version of “Unchained Melody” begins from the jazz band set up on the low-lying stage, he sways me in tiny increments.

When the music seamlessly shifts into “The Way You Look Tonight” and other couples crowd around Dustin and Layla, Shane spins me to face him. One hand presses against the small of my back as his knuckles tip my chin up. The careful sweep of Shane’s eyes over my face draws a string tight around my heart.

Then his thumb traces over my bottom lip, and a whimper staggers out of me. Shane’s responding smile is the perfect mix of adoring deviousness. I want to capture the essence of that grin on my palette and cover an entire canvas with it. My skin flashes hot as Shane lowers his lips to hover above mine, close but not touching.

“I’m going to be bad at this,” he says, his warm breath tickling me before he places a chaste kiss at the corner of my mouth. “Like skee-ball.”

My lashes flutter closed. “Bad at what?”

Shane’s forehead presses to mine as he releases a long, slow exhale.

“Telling you I love you.”

My eyes fly open, catching Shane’s furrowed brows.

“I don’t know how to tell you how much. I don’t have the words. It’s like seven stadiums stacked end to end.” He frowns. “I’m getting this wrong. I shouldn’t be using sports analogies. I just—” A gusting sigh escapes him. “You mean so much to me, Willow. And you take such good care of me, and I...I want to be good for you too.”

My fingertips tremble as they frame his face. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I feel the tick of his jaw but don’t let him duck away. I keep my touch and my gaze steady.

“I love you, Shane. Not for what you’ve accomplished, not for what you have, but for who you are.” I drop one hand to his heart, pressing lightly.

His head shakes, almost imperceptibly, almost like he can’t believe what I’m telling him, but that’s fine. I have the rest of my life to convince this grumpy yet kindhearted man that he’s absolutely worthy of my love. In fact, I look forward to the process.

Painting is like that—a process.

Hours of dedication layer into one final image. The action of building, bit by bit, has always been my favorite part. Slowly chipping away at Shane’s defenses until he fully understands what he means to me will be an *absolute privilege*.

“You’ll get there,” I tell him, patting his chest with a wink. “I’m nothing if not tenacious.”

His smile relaxes into something bright and beautiful.

After a few beats, he nods toward the dance floor. “Should we dance?”

My mouth drops open. “You dance?”

“Who’s to say I’m not an Argentinian tango instructor?”

With the smooth way Shane glides me to the dance floor, he very well might be. When he effortlessly twirls me into a perfect dance embrace, I burst into disbelieving laughter. Several couples watch us, but Shane’s eyes are on me, a secret smile on his lips.

“You, sir, are an enigma.”

I lean into the hand framing my back and allow him to lead me around the room.

“As long as you call me yours, you can give me whatever label you like.”

This time, when I go to pinch him to make sure he’s truly my husband, Shane grabs my hand and brings my knuckles to his lips.

“Enjoy the dance. Who knows what disasters await us afterward? Cody looks like he’s trying to find an excuse to hit something.”

I glance at his eldest brother, who’s growing more agitated by the minute, and sigh.

“How long do we have to stay?”

Shane stops abruptly, almost causing me to trip in my heels. The hand on my back splays between my shoulder blades as the corner of his mouth kicks up.

“If you want to leave, I’ll call the jet right now.”

My eyes widen. “You can do that?”

When he shrugs, all casual and powerful, I want to wrap my fingers around his lapels and drag his lips to mine.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go home.”

“We can’t go home. Not with you in that dress. Not when you deserve a perfect night out.” Shane frowns so deeply I worry his eyebrows will merge. “You deserve a real date. I’m sorry I haven’t asked you before now.”

A chuckle escapes me. “I just like spending time with you. It doesn’t have to be official.”

“Yes, it does.”

Before I can argue, Shane takes me by the hand and leads me to the elevators. He punches the up button and then presses his phone to his ear. I

only catch his side of the conversation—something about an estimated ETA, Blade transfer, and a French-sounding name. When we're outside our suite door, he slides his phone into his breast pocket and runs his hands down my bare arms.

"Willow, may I please take you on a proper date?"

"Only if you tell me where we're going."

Shane doesn't hesitate. "In ten minutes, Joaquin will meet us out front. He'll take us to the private airport where we'll fly to the city for dinner at one of my favorite restaurants."

"The city?"

His lip twitches. "New York."

"As in Manhattan?" I try and fail to keep my eyes from bugging out. "To be clear, you're whisking me away on your private plane for a swanky dinner in New York City."

"It's not my plane. I just chartered it for—"

"Same thing," I interrupt, pushing his shoulder.

Shane's smile turns wicked. "Should I tell you about the helicopter transfer required to make our reservation?"

My legs suddenly feel like jelly. "It's... This is too much."

The loving way Shane grips my chin, keeping my attention purely on him, sends goosebumps down my neck.

"Nothing is too much for you, Willow. I know you'd rather be cozy at home, or antiquing, or playing arcade games, but just this once, let me spoil my wife."

My mouth goes dry as I manage a wobbly, "Okay."

Who am I to say no to that?

CHAPTER 33



Shane

A month later

“I hate this.”

“I know.” Willow gives my black long-sleeve rash guard a patronizing pat. “But you’ll survive.”

“I thought you loved me,” I grumble as she hands me the beach chairs we took to the cabin.

Willow pauses, rising on her tiptoes to kiss me. “I do love you.”

Her lips on mine slightly brighten my sour mood from being at one of my most detested locations after being gone all week. But then Willow moves to lift the cooler out of the back of my truck, and I practically growl as I nudge her out of the way. She can carry her iced green tea and that’s it.

“I’ve just been dragging my feet this morning because I missed you,” I tell her, voicing the thoughts inside my head instead of staying silent.

It’s something I’ve been working on since my brother’s wedding, ever since Willow accepted my bumbling excuse for telling her how I felt.

Her eyes meet mine from behind her jewel-shaped sunglasses. “I missed you too.”

A grunt escapes me.

Old habits die hard, I guess.

If anything, my monosyllabic response makes Willow brighten. Of course, that could just be the oppressive sun reflecting off the sand.

As Delilah, Adam, and Piper meander down the wooden beach path toward the ocean, I resign myself to my fate, sliding two beach bags over my shoulders and stacking the chairs atop the cooler.

“What don’t you like about the beach?”

“Sand. It gets everywhere and then follows you home like a stalker. Wet towels. Jellyfish. Crabs. Aggressive seagulls. Did you know my teammate got attacked a couple months ago? Drew blood and everything.”

Willow stops short between the dunes. “Really?”

I nod.

“Maybe I should rethink this.”

“You’ve been looking forward to this for too long.” Bad weather, early summer colds, and scheduling issues have thwarted us until now. “We’re going to have a great day doing all the quintessential beach things.”

The corner of her mouth kicks up. “Like what?”

“Building sandcastles, jumping waves, and flying a kite to start.”

I’d insisted on preparing all the items for today, telling Willow she just needed to pick out a swimsuit. I’m also carrying a Velcro-catch game, a beach football, and a frisbee, though I doubt Willow would be interested in any of those. My wife is a self-proclaimed anti-athlete—skee-ball notwithstanding. She admits to enjoying watching ‘sportsball’ but *only if* I’m playing.

Willow beams at me before trying to give me a kiss, but with everything I’m carrying, she can’t quite reach me.

“To be continued.” She giggles, tugging me along.

We crest the walkway, catching sight of the waves rushing toward the shore. Piper is already getting sunscreened, impatient to run into the water. Adam sets up two umbrellas for us all to share. Container ships drift slowly in the distance toward the harbor while two pelicans skim just beyond the wave break.

It’s delightfully warm, not too breezy, and thankfully, not crowded.

The perfect beach day.

Piper is off splashing while the rest of us set up chairs. Delilah takes pictures of Adam and their daughter playing in the shallows while Willow takes off her swim coverup.

The color-blocked one-shoulder suit has a large cutout over her waist, giving it the illusion of two pieces. The thick forest-green, deep-purple, and teal sections highlight Willow's gorgeous skin perfectly. When she holds up a sunscreen bottle and asks me to do her back for her, I practically knock over the umbrella rushing over.

Willow snickers, turning to face the water as I diligently complete my task.

"I think I'm good," she says through a laugh when I go for a second coat.

"Melanoma is one of the deadliest forms of skin cancers," I say, massaging sunscreen over her delicate neck.

"Is that why you're wearing a long-sleeve shirt at the beach?"

"Yes. I burn easily, and it's easier than sunscreen."

Willow snorts. "Me too. Our kids will need to be dipped into a vat of *SPF 10,000* before playing outside."

My hand freezes over her midback. Of all the conversations we've had over the last month, we haven't discussed children. We've simply settled into a blissful routine of spending every second I'm not playing baseball together.

I rotate Willow, my heart climbing my windpipe. "Do you see us having kids?"

The idea used to terrify me because I was certain that I'd be the same as my father and ruin their lives. No child should be willingly subjected to the upbringing I had. Over these last few months, though, I've realized I'm nothing like my father. More importantly, Willow isn't like the women who came before her. She wouldn't give up on me or our children, even if we were occasionally obstinate and grumpy.

Being responsible for a tiny fragile person seems scary as heck, but Delilah and Adam have fun with it. So do my teammates who are proud fathers. Though I'm not ready now, I could see that future with Willow...*if* it was something she wanted.

She bites her lip, looking down. "It was just an offhanded comment."

Nope. No way I'm buying that.

I lift her chin with my knuckle. "Answer the question, honey."

Willow fidgets for two seconds before her shoulders drop. "Yes, because you'd make the *best dad*. You're protective and observant and caretake in the sweetest, most unobtrusive way. I could see you staying up late to finish science projects, or quietly reorganizing their closets, or terrifying their

bullies with your award-winning scowl.” She releases a wistful sigh. “I just didn’t want to bring it up because...”

Her sentence drops off as her gaze drifts out over the ocean.

“Because...” I prompt.

Willow groans, dropping her head back.

I lean forward to kiss the pulse point in her neck and immediately regret it. Darn sunscreen tastes terrible. Add that to the list of why I hate the beach. I can’t kiss my wife properly.

“Because things are good in our bubble.”

My brows bunch. “Our bubble?”

“I didn’t know if you wanted this to be forever. Yes, we’ve said ‘I love you,’ and yes, we’re legally married, but does that mean we’re endgame?”

The corner of my mouth kicks up.

“What? Why are you giving me your sexy half-smile?”

I simply chuckle, tugging her against my chest.

“Shane, this isn’t funny.”

“Of course it is,” I say before pulling back to catch her gaze. “You thinking that I wouldn’t want you with me every second of every day for the rest of my life is laughable.”

So much so that I asked for her mother’s blessing shortly after returning from Nantucket. I just haven’t asked Willow to re-marry me because I’ve been trying to come up with the perfect proposal.

So far, every one of my ideas has fallen short.

Nothing I’ve come up with seems grand enough, worthy of what Willow means to me.

A low chuckle escapes me as realization dawns.

Hasn’t our relationship flourished in the small moments? Kitchen confessions and tucked-away glances. Wordless caring and lingering touches.

Nothing about our relationship has been loud or showy. We’ve fallen in love during the everyday moments.

Suddenly, an impromptu beach proposal feels more perfect than anything I could have planned.

“I want forever with you.”

Willow blinks, her mouth falling open on a shaky exhale.

“You were the curveball I never saw coming. I couldn’t imagine a future where I could have...where someone like you...” My hands grip her waist,

reminding myself that this is real—*she's* real. “I just want you. Every day, in every situation. Whether it be at a crowded party or quietly watching you paint at home. I just want to breathe your air, to have the privilege of being next to you.”

Willow's fingertips tremble as they slide up my arms to twine around my neck.

“I want you to tease me and encourage me to be a better man. And more than anything, I want you to help me plan a wedding where everyone we care about can watch us take real vows, knowing that I'm probably going to grumble over planning details along the way.”

Her eyes mist as she laughs. “I'd love nothing more.”

My wild smile feels like it has its own life force before I remember one important detail. If we're starting from scratch...

“Wait.” I step back to drop to one knee.

My beautiful wife laughs again. “Shane, you don't have to—”

“The heck I don't. Let me do this properly this time.”

Willow bites her smiling lip at my grouchy tone.

I gather both her hands in mine. “Willow, would you do me the immense honor of being my wife? Will you marry me again?”

“Yes! Of course.”

I surge to standing, swinging Willow in a circle.

Her joyful laughter is suddenly overshadowed by Delilah's squealing. Piper is on Adam's hip, deep in the water, but Delilah has her phone directed at us.

“I got the whole thing on video!” she says, jogging over. “Hopefully, this will make up for not getting any courthouse pictures.”

Willow glances at me, adoration in her gaze, before turning to her best friend. “Turns out, you'll be getting a second chance at wedding pictures—or rather, a photographer will do that because you'll be too busy being a bridesmaid.”

Delilah squeals again and squeezes us both. “This is all I've ever wanted for you two.”

When her best friend demands details we don't yet have, Willow distracts her by opening one of the bags and pulling out the sandcastle buckets.

“Let's build a castle for Piper to wreck.”

Apparently, Willow's niece has a penchant for dinosaur-inspired destruction when at the beach. It's something she's been doing since she

was five.

I drop to my knees, temporarily submitting to the sand, and pack buckets for Willow. After a few minutes of work, we have a respectable structure. That's about the time a sopping-wet Piper tumbles out of the sea with Adam in tow. Piper's eyes as she sees the castle can only be described as gleefully wicked.

"Want to help me stomp it, Uncle Shane?"

"Are you sure?"

Piper nods. "But you have to growl at the same time."

"Shane's good at growling," Willow says, leaning against me with a teasing wink.

"Let's do this!" Piper's voice dropping two octaves pulls a surprised chuckle from me.

I stand, following her lead in bending my arms to look like a reptilian predator before we annihilate the structure. On some level, it feels like vengeance on the sand itself, so I really get into it. Then, when it's completely flat, Adam taps his elbow and then falls upon the decimated castle like a wrestler going in for the kill.

The five of us laugh until our sides hurt.

While our friends argue over which activity to do next, playing catch or kite flying, Willow glances at me.

"I love you," she mouths.

I smile, mouthing, "I love you too."

As the ocean breeze ruffles her hair, something turns over in my chest. Being with Willow has helped me realize that, deep down, I'd always been enough. I'd just spent my entire life surrounded by people who convinced me otherwise.

Then this vivacious, incredibly determined woman came along and refused to take no for an answer.

This woman who I'd very much like to kiss.

Almost as if she can read my mind, Willow strides over, sliding her hands into my hair and dragging my lips to hers.

I hear general grumbling in the background but can't seem to care. When we both come up from the passionate kiss, the family of three are on a walk along the shoreline.

Willow's cheeks flush the perfect shade of pink. "Should we join them?"

"Sure," I say, intertwining her fingers with mine.

I'm half a second from kissing her knuckles before I remember. "Stupid sunscreen."

Her laugh feels like it's brightening every dark crevice left in my soul. As we rush to catch up, there's no doubt that Willow's first beach day will be one I'll remember forever.

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Epilogue - Willow

Five years later

My widow's robe shushes over the hardwood as I walk from the kitchen to the bedroom I recently repainted. One side of the large room has scattered stars and a gibbous moon among the fluffy night clouds while the other has the very beginnings of a sunrise—pinks, oranges, and gentle purples.

I pause in the doorway, a smile lighting my face.

Shane rests in the oversized recliner that used to be my mother's, his head tilted back and eyes closed. Since he's only wearing a pair of black joggers, his tattoos are on display—well...mostly. Two tiny bodies hide Shane's artwork, getting some much-needed skin-to-skin time with Daddy.

After nursing our daughters and handing them to my husband, I stole away for a quick shower and to refill the reusable water bottle which is my constant companion—besides our twins, of course.

"I'm not asleep," he grumbles.

"I know." I cross the room to run my fingers through his hair. "You'd never let down your guard enough to fall asleep while they were in your care."

Unable to help myself, I bend down to place a gentle kiss on Iris's and Daisy's small heads. Iris releases a shuddered huff, and my heart darn near

explodes. Both of them have a light dusting of copper hair, just like their father.

When I snuffle, Shane glances up at me, shifting our babies into one arm to interlace his fingers with mine.

"I don't know why I'm crying," I say, chasing the streaming tears away from my cheeks.

"Hormones. Lack of sleep. Absolute mind-blowing joy. Take your pick."

A watery chuckle leaves my mouth as I squeeze his fingers.

I glance at the tattoo spanning the inside of his left wrist. Though our couple name never took off, Shane insisted I design our monogram and had it inked before our wedding. I still remember sliding his wedding band back on his finger during the ceremony and seeing our initials peeking out beneath his cuff. Shane has asked me to create a monogram with the girls' initials to have tattooed beside it.

"Do you want to paint a little while they nap?"

"Honestly?" I sit on a nearby footstool and stretch my back. "Not really."

After finishing my commission two months before the girls' scheduled c-section, I went into hardcore nesting mode. I haven't felt the urge to create after giving birth six weeks ago, though I'm sure it will come back once I'm not sleep deprived and hungry all the time. Nowadays, I'm more interested in what delectable concoctions Gabriel makes than mixing colors.

The painting I finished when we discovered the happy-yet-shocking news that we were pregnant with twins was a companion piece to the one I made of Piper years ago. That first piece ended up in Jennifer Aniston's collection after she learned about it while having coffee with Mallory. I'd expected Delilah to be upset about the megastar wanting the painting of her daughter, but my best friend acted like I was crazy.

"If Jennifer Aniston wants your painting, you freaking sell it to Jennifer Aniston!"

If I thought carrying five grand around in a briefcase was ludicrous, when fifty thousand hit my bank account, I nearly fainted. After that, I've had a steady stream of commissions, creating pieces I'm truly excited about. With the team of business professionals coordinating everything behind the scenes, all I had to worry about was which brush to use.

Occasionally, I painted something just for me.

Or in the case of the painting hanging in our living room, of me wearing my husband's jersey, for Shane.

“Do you want to nap before our company gets here?”

I shake my head.

“I know they say to sleep while the babies sleep, but I don’t feel like it. I think I’d like to do my makeup, though.”

Shane tilts his chin up for a kiss before I leave him with the girls. On my way out, I glance at the two baseballs with our daughters’ newborn footprints on them. The nurse gave us a strange look when we asked to press their tiny feet in between the red stitching instead of onto a piece of paper. To us, they’re the perfect keepsake.

“I’m not kidding,” Delilah says, hours later, while pinning up my hair. “Piper had a full breakdown. Door slamming. Screaming. The whole nine. Over me washing her favorite hoodie.”

My best friend takes one look at my *Yeesh* face and apologizes. “I shouldn’t be scaring you with teen drama. Just...just be sure to snuggle those sweet innocent babies while you still can, okay?”

“To be fair, mine scream *and* throw up on you.”

Delilah laughs, placing the last crystal bobby pin in my hair. The deep-navy pins match my loose-fitting sequined dress perfectly. I’ve paired both with my favorite Doc Martins because I’m six weeks postpartum and hosting a New Year’s Eve party. I get to wear whatever the heck I want.

Shane knocks on the bathroom door frame before catching sight of us and stopping short. A muttered curse escapes his mouth. Then he rises to his full height, adjusting the cuffs to his suit jacket.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Delilah whispers to me before crossing to the doorway. “Big Papa,” she says, heartily patting Shane on the back.

“I thought you told her I don’t want to be called that.”

I shrug. “Delilah is going to do whatever she wants to do. You know this.”

My husband grunts before setting his hands on my shoulders and catching my gaze in the mirror.

“How do you keep getting more beautiful?”

I roll my eyes at him.

“It’s a serious question. I really thought there would be nothing better than seeing you pregnant with my children, but no, seeing you hold them nearly undoes me every time. I don’t know what I’m going to do in February when I have to report to spring training camp. I feel like a doomsday clock is ticking in my chest.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I say, standing and turning. Shane’s hands skirt down my arms, his fingers careful not to knock my tubeless insulin pump. “What if we went with you?”

Shane doesn’t answer me, just wraps his arms around me.

“You and the girls...” His voice sounds like twisted metal. “You’re my whole world, Willow. I love you so much. I can’t—”

When his words crack, I wrap my arms around Shane, hugging him back. “I love you too.”

We stand there for a long time, subtly rocking, before Colton’s voice rings out in our penthouse.

“Who’s ready to party?”

Shane groans. “I regret this decision.”

“I like that you wanted to have everyone here for the New Year,” I say, leaning back to catch his gaze. “Very benevolent grump of you.”

“I’m going to be a murder grump if Colton wakes the babies.”

I wave a hand. “That’s what the very capable nannies are for.”

After Shane’s uncharacteristic suggestion to invite everyone over for a New Year’s Eve party, he went into overdrive, organizing everything. We have an entire kitchen staff at Gabriel’s command, multiple servers, two bartenders, and the aforementioned nannies—plural, because one wasn’t enough. Our home was cleaned by our housecleaning service earlier this week, and a professional decorator gave every surface a bedazzle treatment yesterday.

“I also moved furniture around so that you could sit in a comfortable armchair in every room. I don’t want you on your feet for too long.”

“Yes, sir.” I give him a playful wink.

His responding growl sends shivers down my spine before we go to meet our guests.

In addition to our Waves family, Mr. Fields and his adult children join us. A few of my artist friends also come, including Nina, the painter whom I was supposed to work with when I first moved here. Over the years, we’ve become colleagues, getting together once a month to complain about spending six hours shading something that no one will ever notice.

When our daughters wake from their nap, Shane and I bring them to see the guests. Everyone gushes over their matching *New Baby, New Year* onesies paired with sparkly black leggings.

Shane makes sure I rest and that I eat enough while gruffly engaging with his teammates and politely chatting with Mr. Fields.

After being parked on the couch for the better part of an hour, surrounded by Delilah, Kenzie, Alex, and Mallory, I notice Shane is missing.

“I’ll be right back.”

The music follows me into the babies’ room before I shut the door. All the lights are off except for the warm-toned night light scattering stars across the far wall. My husband stands in front of Iris’s crib, elbows on the top railing.

“I was tired of people.”

My hand slides up his muscled back before I massage his neck. “They’re people.”

Both our girls are in one crib, swaddled separately but nestled together.

“My favorite people.”

My exhale is long and peaceful. “It’s such a simple thing—sleep. Nothing is happening beside their lungs filtering air, yet I could watch them for hours.”

“The ordinary moments are the most important ones.”

The music changes to Frank Sinatra’s “The Way You Look Tonight,” and Shane straightens, slowly sweeping me into a dance frame.

“This was playing when I first told you I loved you.”

My lips lift as Shane gently leads me around the room. “I remember.”

Our shared smile only lasts a second before the shoelace to my boot comes undone, causing me to trip. I stumble sideways, and though Shane’s hold takes the brunt of my clumsiness, I still end up hip-checking the changing table. The lamp beyond the diaper caddy teeters precariously as I gasp.

Though my MLB husband tries his best to catch it, the ceramic crashes to the hardwood, waking both children. Immediately, the nannies barge through the door, an illuminated baby monitor in hand. Tenny and Colton peek through the open door, investigating the commotion.

“Whoa. Are we smashing things?” Colton asks. “I didn’t think it was that kind of party, but I’m down.”

In the distance, Mr. Fields’s son is doing the running man to Frank Sinatra for some unknown reason. Beyond that, a rookie pitcher and the backup catcher are in a pushup contest. And someone is flickering the lights to give the living room a more nightclub vibe.

It's official: this party has gone off the rails.
I want to laugh and scream and cry all at once.
"It was an accident. You guys know I'm a—"
Shane's thumb rests over my lips, silencing me.
"Get the heck out of my daughters' room."

When both nannies backstep, he pinches the bridge of his nose. "No, not you. Those numbskulls."

Tenny pulls Colton away while two servers rush forward to clean up the broken lamp. Meanwhile, the nannies pick up our daughters, soothing them. I move to help, but Shane holds me in place.

"You're the only person I want to spend all my moments with—be them tender and soft or chaotic and unpredictable. Please stop apologizing for being who you are, Willow. I love you."

A watery laugh escapes me.

It looks like I've settled on a combination of crying and laughing.

At least I'm not screaming.

Both our daughters are doing an excellent job of that.

Shane's jaw tightens. "I'm telling everyone to leave."

"No. Don't. Let them stay until midnight."

He hesitates, muscles tense. "Okay, but not a second longer."

Exhausted hysteria bubbles out of me in cackling waves. "What were we thinking, hosting a party with newborns?"

Shane smiles, bright and beautiful. "We must have been deliriously happy and wanted to share it with everyone."

"Must have." I grin, memorizing everything about this crazy, absolutely perfect moment.

After a beat, Shane and I turn in tandem, taking our daughters into our arms and kicking everyone out of the bedroom.

It still amazes me that between the fake vows and the real feelings, we accidentally found forever. If this is what happily ever after looks like—me, him, and a healthy dose of chaos—I'll take it.

All day, every day, for the rest of our lives.



Want a little more happily ever after? This heartwarming **bonus scene** gives you a peek at Willow and Shane's forever—and is sure to have you smiling long after the last page. [CLICK HERE](#) to see what's next for their love story!

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Thank you so much for reading!

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LAURA LANGA

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My Heart Before You

After everything Emilie's lived through, she doubts she can open her heart again—even to a man who fixes them for a living.

Feel the heart wrenching emotion of this medical romance between a heart surgeon and a cardiac nurse as they move from co-workers to friends to so much more. (closed-door/fade-to-black)

A Guarded Heart

Elaine's turbulent past has taught her one thing—to protect her heart at all costs. But now that a flirtatious photojournalist has entered her life, she'll have to decide not only what she truly wants, but if she'll allow herself to have it.

Relish in the twists and turns of this friends to lovers, single mom, single dad, he falls first closed-door/fade-to-black romance.

Between Our Hearts

Sadie and Clark fell hard for each other from the first breathtaking kiss of their whirlwind relationship. But when their hopes for a second child result in loss after devastating loss, grief pulls them apart.

Experience Sadie and Clark's bravery and enduring love as they work to restore their marriage in this gut-wrenching yet beautiful closed-door/fade-to-black romance.

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About the Author

Laura Langa is an award-winning sweet romance and romcom author, receiving the HOLT Medallion Award and Booksellers' Best Award. Laura strives to write stories that make readers laugh while tugging at their heartstrings, and to create relatable characters you'd want to befriend. Laura loves trees and all things green, hates flossing but forces herself to do it every night, and believes that salt air can often cure a bad mood.

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