



# Frozen Hearts

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Mel is living her best life. She's in a new house, and just adopted a new dog. She loves her work and her friends. True she doesn't have anyone special in her life to share it with, but who has time for love? Things in her perfect world take a turn when she runs (quite literally) into Willow. No matter what Mel tries her charms are wasted on Willow. It seems as if the woman has just decided to dislike her.

The last thing Willow wants is to fall in love again. Ever since her last girlfriend left her there's been a hole in her heart. But she won't fill it with love. To make matters worse she just met her neighbor from down the street. Mel is insufferable and every time Willow bumps into her she ends up on the ground. But underneath all of that disdain lies something far scarier for Willow... A spark. No matter how hard she tries she can't escape her growing attraction for Mel.

Can the two women get over their differences long enough to see that their attraction could lead to something real and long lasting?

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

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## Chapter 1

Melanie Stewart gave herself one last glance in the mirror. She nodded her head approvingly at her own reflection. Her outfit was a simple pair of blue jeans and a black t-shirt, but she wanted to look put together. Today was an important day. At least for her.

Three months ago, Mel had moved out of her parents' home and into her own townhome. She was one of the few people who had been born and raised in WaterColor. Most of the people she'd known growing up had long since moved on from the quiet beach town. But Mel loved it here. She'd moved into the WaterColor Beach Community and her whole world had opened up.

WaterColor Beach Community bordered the beach, and even had its own beach access. There were larger homes towards the front, and townhomes in the back. Playgrounds and three swimming pools were just some of the many features that had drawn Mel in. But now that she'd settled, it was the little dog park she could see from her living room window that Mel liked the best.

She had spent weeks watching the people come and go with their dogs. Mel had always wanted a dog, but her mom had always said no. Now that she was in her own place Mel was beyond ready. Her friend Jordan ran a local dog rescue, and a doggy daycare. She'd already filled out all of the adoption applications, so today she'd go and meet the dogs that were at the rescue.

Jordan was waiting for her up front when she arrived. As always, Jordan was perfectly composed. She wore a button-down blouse and black pants. To say that

Jordan was visually stunning to look at was an understatement. The woman was cool and crisp but somehow still managed to hold a certain amount of warmth to her.

“Do you handle all the adoptions personally?” Mel asked, genuinely curious.

“Only the special ones,” Jordan smirked. Mel felt a tiny pinch of pride inside.

Most people who met Jordan found her to be vaguely intimidating. But Mel had immediately seen how funny and intelligent she was. Perhaps it was because she knew the woman through her work at Mallie’s Cafe. People were usually pretty nice to the people bringing them food.

“Are you ready to meet our little friends?” Jordan asked.

“Yes, bring them on. I have been waiting for this day,” Mel said excitedly.

“That’s what I love to hear. Is there anything in particular that you’re looking for? Big, small, young or old. Do you have any preferences?”

Mel took in the question for a moment. Her brain sorted through her mental images of what she’d imagined her dog would look like.

“I would like a dog that is sort of athletic. I like to go for runs on the beach and I would like a dog that could keep up with me.”

“So probably medium to big, and younger. Not one of our more elderly residents,” Jordan suggested.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I think we have some dogs that will be a great fit for you,” Jordan smiled.

Jordan directed Mel down a long hallway with the wave of her hand.

“I want to start you off in our play area. This is where our residents that are dog friendly spend time during the day.”

Mel felt a warmth in her heart. Jordan had thought of everything when it came to the happiness of the animals that found themselves at the rescue. Jordan opened the door at the end of the hallway. Mel immediately felt assaulted by the mix of noises that assaulted her ears.

Inside the room Jordan’s soon to be wife, Reese, was throwing a ball for a group of dogs. When Reese saw them she gave the ball one final throw before coming over. Reese and Jordan were a perfect contrast to one another. Jordan was all business, while Reese had a casualness to her demeanor. Reese wrapped her arms around Jordan and tugged her closer. Mel watched as Jordan allowed herself to be drawn in by Reese. Mel smiled to herself, she hoped to find that kind of happiness with a partner someday.

“Hey, Mel. Are you here to volunteer?” Reese asked. Her blonde hair fell messily over her shoulders and a thin bead of sweat was over her brow from playing with the dogs.

“Not today. Mel is actually here to adopt one of our friends,” Jordan explained.

Reese clasped her hands in front of her and smiled.

“That’s terrific news. What are you looking for in a future friend?” Reese asked.

“I’m not completely sure. But I would love it if I could find a dog to take running on the beach with me every morning,” Mel smiled. Her eyes drifted along the group of dogs playing together in the room.

“Reese can probably give you some insights. She volunteers in the playroom pretty regularly,” Jordan suggested.

Reese’s smile grew wider. Mel watched as Reese scanned the room of dogs. In an instant Reese’s arm was around Mel’s shoulder leading her around the room.

“These two over here are named Toby and Kyle. They both love to swim and play ball,” Reese began.

“Kyle?” Mel asked.

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“He came with the name,” Jordan offered with a laugh.

“The big dog with the bone is Jazz,” Reese smiled. Mel took in the sight of a huge dog chewing a bone, his jowls hung loose and his head was bigger than Mel’s.

“Okay, I probably need to bring home someone smaller than that. I don’t think Jazz would fit in my townhome,” Mel chuckled.

“That’s fair,” Reese laughed. Mel watched as Reese looked over the remaining dogs.

“We have Jade. She’s over there,” Reese pointed to a furry dog in the corner.

Mel looked over and saw a large dog with thick black fur.” Mel considered internally whether she’d want to clean up all that hair when Jade started to shed. Or the amount of time grooming would likely take.

“I don’t have a lot of time for grooming,” Mel offered.

“Hmm, someone with shorter hair then,” Reese nodded her head in understanding.

“I think I have the perfect dog for you,” Reese said excitedly. Mel watched as Reese’s eyes grew wide and her smile broadened. Reese grabbed Melanie by the arm and pulled her outside.

In a patch of grass laying in the sun was a brown dog. At first he seemed rather oblivious to their arrival. Mel looked at him laying there soaking up the moment. His fur was short and he had the squishy face of a bully-type of breed.

“This is Mase. He’s a fun-loving, goofy boy. I have no doubt he would be able to keep up with you. So he’d be perfect for runs on the beach. And he’s short hair so minimum time needed for grooming. What do you think?” Reese asked.

“I think I’d love to meet him,” Mel chuckled.

Reese called out and Mase turned his head. Mase’s expression was almost serene as he met Mel’s eyes. The dog stood and stretched before making his way over to them. Mel sat on her knees and waited for the dog to approach her. When Mase came up his butt was wiggling along with his tail. Mase gave Mel’s hand a lick. His eyes were a bright caramel color.

Mel spent a couple of hours playing with Mase. She threw a ball for him, which he excitedly chased. Then she took him for a short walk on the leash. By the end of two hours Mel was completely sold. Mase was going home with her.

“Do we have a verdict?” Jordan asked.

“Yeah. I would like to move forward with adopting this guy,” Mel smiled.

“Oh, my goodness. This is so exciting,” Reese said, clapping her hands together. At Mel’s feet, Mase gave an enthusiastic bark.

“What’s the next step?” Mel asked.

“We’ll make sure he’s up to date on shots and neutered. Then I’ll do one final home assessment. Then you bring him home,” Jordan answered.

Mel sank back to her knees and gave Mase a scratch behind the ears.

“Did you hear that? You’ll be home before you know it,” Mel said to Mase. The dog

cocked his head to the side and met her eyes.

Mase seemed as if he was genuinely trying to understand her. The moment was broken a second later as Mase bounded off to play with a group of dogs with a tug toy.

“You guys seem like a great match,” Jordan suggested.

“Yeah. I feel like we’re meant for each other,” Mel laughed.

“Great. I’ll process the paperwork and let you know the timeframe you can expect,” Jordan said.

Jordan gave Reese a simple kiss on the lips, then directed Mel back towards the door. Mel followed Jordan. She was surprised by how quiet the hallway was. Jordan stopped beside the front desk and offered Mel one final hug.

“Thanks again for choosing one of our guys to give a forever home to,” Jordan beamed a smile.

“Of course, I’m so excited that I’m finally all set up and ready,” Mel laughed.

Mel spent the rest of the day gathering supplies for Mase. The Florida rain beat down on her car as she drove home.

As she pulled into her section of the community, she saw a woman walking on the sidewalk. Mel’s eyes were immediately drawn to the woman. She wore a red dress with white polka dots. Her movements were graceful even in the rain. She had a wave of red hair that hung past her shoulders. A pastel pink umbrella kept her perfectly dry. At her feet a cute beagle kept pace with her. Mel was struck by the sight of the happy little dog.



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Mel pulled into her driveway just as the woman was walking past. She grabbed her bags of dog items and exited her car.

“Sushi, stop!” The call startled Mel.

She turned in time to watch the beagle pulling the woman, leash and all, in her direction. Mel stood frozen holding her bags. Sushi had her wrapped up in her leash before Mel could move out of the way. The woman tried to step in between Mel and the dog, the move only served to ensure her own foot was also wrapped in the leash.

“Don’t move,” the woman directed.

“I can get us untangled,” Mel argued.

Mel tried to pull a foot free and lost her balance. Mel realized too late that she was falling, she angled herself to fall on the soft, muddy ground instead of the hard concrete driveway. She and the woman hit the ground with a thud, mud splashed them both. Mel glanced down and saw that one of her hands was firmly planted against the woman’s left breast. Mel’s face warmed, she was sure she was blushing bright red. She quickly yanked her hand away.

Mel sat up and untangled the leash from around her feet. Sushi looked up at her penitently. Mel stood up and wiped mud from her hands. She bent down and offered the woman her hand. Only to have the woman refuse to take it. The woman stood up and looked down at her dress. Her mouth pulled into a tight, thin line.

“I’m Mel.”

“Willow,” the woman answered, still looking stern.

“I’m sorry about your dress,” Mel offered.

“I told you not to move,” Willow accused. Mel drew back unsure what to do with the woman’s anger.

“Hey, I was just getting out of my car, minding my own business,” Mel objected.

An expression that resembled regret flashed across Willow’s face for half a second. But the look was gone almost instantly. Willow gave a loud frustrated sigh.

“Sushi, come on,” Willow directed. Sushi followed, his head hung low as if he knew that he had misbehaved.

“Nice to meet you,” Mel yelled sarcastically. She looked down at the ground where her dog supplies were now strewn. Mel gave a defeated groan as she bent down to pick up her supplies. She was more than a little annoyed that the woman hadn’t at least offered to help. She supposed for some people beauty really did only run skin deep.

## Chapter 2

Willow let the door slam closed behind her. Sushi was already sliding past her to lay in her doggy bed.

“All done with your day causing mayhem?” Willow asked wearily. Sushi offered only a subtle wagging of her tail.

Willow glanced down at her dress all covered in mud and groaned. She had bought the dress on a whim at a fancy shop downtown. She’d never had a reason to wear it

and today had felt like the perfect time. She pulled the dress off over her head and laid it across her dryer. It was probably ruined, but maybe the dry cleaner could work a miracle. Willow cringed when she thought back to her interaction with Mel. She hadn't even offered to help the woman pick up her bags. Of course, Sushi would have just eaten everything in Mel's bags. So she'd actually done Mel a favor, whether the woman realized it or not. Of course, if Mel had just followed her instructions, they would have been fine. She looked down at her dress one final time and scoffed at it.

Honestly, why couldn't Mel have just stood still? Willow sat on her couch and looked over at Sushi who was lying asleep on her doggy bed. Sushi hadn't started out as Willow's dog. Willow's mother had brought Sushi home on a whim. Her mother was prone to flights of fancy and Willow had known the puppy love wouldn't last. She had been right, of course. Once Sushi lost her puppy looks and was big enough to beg for food, her mother had lost interest. There had been talks of rehoming Sushi, but Willow couldn't bear it. Sushi had taken a liking to Willow, and the feeling was mutual. So Willow had taken Sushi into her home. And Sushi had made Willow's life a little less lonely.

Unfortunately, her mother hadn't thought to get Sushi any obedience training. Sushi was terrible on a leash, and absolutely untrustworthy around food. But Willow loved her unconditionally. Sushi lifted her head and met Willow's eyes.

"You know, I'm never going to meet a pretty girl if you keep knocking them all over before I have the chance to introduce myself," Willow said with a smile. Sushi wagged her tail.

Willow was startled by a thunderous knock on her door. Willow knew who it was before she even answered the door. She'd never met anyone with a knock like that other than her best friend, River. River was leaning against her porch railing when Willow opened the door. River's face lit up when she saw Willow.

“Hey, friend. I wasn’t expecting you. Come on in,” Willow smiled and ushered River inside.

River was one of the few people that Willow enjoyed showing up to her home unannounced. When River gave her a wide-eyed expression, Willow remembered that she was still in her underwear. River had been her friend for over a decade, and the outfit covered as much as her swimsuit. River walked inside and gave her a once-over.

“Is everything alright, friend?” River asked.

“Hold on, let me get some pants,” Willow teased.

“No reason to dress up on my account. I could take my pants off to match,” River laughed.

Willow shook her head and sighed. Flirting aside, the two of them had decided early on in their friendship that they were better as friends. Why mess with a good thing? Willow came back from her bedroom wearing a pair of faded jeans and a t-shirt.

“So what has you feeling so out of sorts today?” River asked. Her friend knew her all too well.

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“I ran into this woman,” Willow said, already frazzled before the story even began.

“I don’t understand. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Usually, meeting a pretty woman is a good thing. In this case Sushi tangled her up in the leash. I was going to get us free, but this woman wouldn’t stop moving. So, we fell in the mud. Oh, and my brand-new dress is completely covered in mud.”

“So, she was pretty?” River laughed.

“Really? That’s what you got out of that story?” Willow folded her arms across her chest.

“Well, you’re the one who mentioned it,” River smirked.

“Fine. Yes. Mel is pretty,” Willow said. The more they talked about Mel, the more flustered she became.

“I think you liked this Mel,” River accused. River’s lips curved into a smirk.

“I don’t think we’re going to find out if I would like her or not. Since I never intend to see her again,” Willow said, with a sigh. River’s face fell.

“Why not? So your dog knocked her over. Big deal. These things happen.”

“Yeah, but then I was flustered and upset about my dress. I’m pretty sure I basically bit her head off. Then I was soembarrassed that I just ran off without even offering to

help her pick up her bags.” Willow watched as River’s smirk turned into a grimace.

“Okay. I admit you could have done a little better,” River chimed in. Willow watched as her friend paused for a moment.

“You should bake her cookies and take them to her place,” River suggested.

“What?” Willow asked in confusion.

“There’s no better way to apologize for making a bad first impression than by making a good second impression. And there’s no better way to make a good second impression than by bringing that person cookies,” River explained.

Willow couldn’t stop staring at River. She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot against the floor.

“Why are you here?” Willow asked. The words came out sharper than she’d intended. She could tell because River recoiled slightly at her tone.

“Sorry. All I meant is that I wasn’t expecting you,” Willow said, evening out her tone. River’s expression softened; she was always quick to forgive a trespass.

“Everyone is wanting to get together for dinner tonight. At Autumn’s place. They sent me to see if I can coax you out of your house,” River admitted proudly.

“Oh, come on. I haven’t been that bad,” Willow scoffed.

“Friend, you haven’t hung out with us all in a month,” River said. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave Willow a hard stare. Willow could see this was one argument she wouldn’t be winning.

“But I just started a book,” Willow whined.

“I promise to get you back home at a reasonable hour so you can read before bed,” River smiled.

“Promise?” Willow held up her pinkie finger. River smirked as she hooked her own pinkie to Willow’s.

“You have my word,” River promised.

“Fine. I’ll go,” Willow said with a roll of her eyes.

It wasn’t that Willow didn’t love her friends, she did. And she knew she would have a blast at dinner with them. It was just that convincing herself to leave the comfort of her own home was never easy. What could be better than reading on her couch, with her dog right by her feet? Still dinner once a month was not an unreasonable request for her friends to be making and Willow knew that. River plopped onto the couch.

“Are you just going to wait here?” Willow asked.

“Of course. I’m a full-service operation. I’m going to drive you there and back,” River grinned. River leaned her head back on Willow’s couch.

“You’re impossible. You know that, right?”

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“Would you love me less if I were less impossible?” River asked with genuine curiosity. Willow took the seat beside her on the couch.

“I think I would love you no matter what your level of impossibility was. As long as you were still you,” Willow offered. She couldn’t tell if River found her answer satisfactory or not.

“What’s new in your life? Any success on that dating app you joined?” Willow asked. River rolled her head to the side, met Willow’s eyes and groaned loudly. Willow had always thought River had beautiful features with her long dark hair and warm brown eyes. But it was her friend’s personality that really sold her.

“Well, that doesn’t sound good. What’s going on?” Willow asked.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just going to die alone,” River sighed.

“Stop it. You’re not going to die alone. You’ll find someone. Didn’t you go out on like two dates last week?” Willow laughed.

“I did. Turns out the women I went out with were each other’s exes. They decided to get back together after going out with me.”

Willow cringed internally, but carefully arranged her facial features so that River wouldn’t see.

“Isn’t it nice that you brought two people back together?” Willow asked.



“Yeah. I’m living the dream,” River chuckled.

“Do you really think there’s someone out there for me?” River asked.

“You’re too wonderful not to find someone,” Willow assured, then immediately asked,

“Do you think I’ll ever find someone?”

“Yes, of course. You’re wonderful. But I do think in order to meet someone you’re going to have to leave your house more,” River suggested.

“You may have a point there,” Willow laughed.

The two sat talking for another hour until it was time for them to leave. Willow’s friend, Autumn was probably the most competent person she’d ever met in her life. Everything about Autumn was well put together. Autumn’s home was no exception. She greeted Willow and River warmly at her door. Autumn wore her long blonde hair tied back into a ponytail; her blue eyes studied Willow’s face.

“It’s nice to see you. I’m glad you made it,” Autumn said with a smile. There was no hint of judgment behind her words.

Their friend Piper sat at Autumn’s kitchen table. When she saw Willow her eyes widened before she wrapped her into a hug. Willow hadn’t meant to lock herself away, but the last several months hadn’t been pleasant. Willow had lost her job, and then her girlfriend of six months had broken up with her. Those two things combined had left Willow with a need to be alone and regroup. She’d found a new job fairly quickly. But what had really helped Willow find her groove again was adopting Sushi.

Looking around the room at her friends Willow felt at peace. She knew none of them would judge her. They had all made it a point to check in with her while she was trying to regain her footing in life. The thought of her friends filled Willow with warmth. No matter what else was going on in her life she had a lockdown on good friendships.

“I’m glad you’re getting to hang out with us all,” Piper grinned.

“Me too, friend,” Willow said.

### Chapter 3

Mel did one final lap around her house. She wanted to make sure that everything was in order for Mase. She had spent the two days since visiting the shelter to buy everything Mase could possibly need. She wished her fenced in backyard was bigger, but she knew that the dog park and the beach access made up for her own lack of space. Mel couldn’t believe the day had finally come.

Mel startled at the sound of a car door slamming outside. She raced to the front door and swung it open before Jordan had the chance to knock. Jordan stood with an expression of stunned surprise. Mase’s head poked out from in between Jordan’s legs. Mel gave a smile at the dog’s lopsided head movement. Mase was clearly trying to figure out where he was.

“Can I let him come in?” Jordan asked with a smile.

“Of course. I’m all ready for him,” Mel said assuredly.

Jordan gave a slight tug on the leash and, with a moment of coaxing, Mase bounded into the house. Mel was glad she had picked up as Mase ran from room to room. Jordan closed the front door.

“You have a lovely home,” Jordan said, taking in her surroundings.

“Thank you.” Mel ushered Jordan into the living room.

Mase had already found a spot on the couch and was laying on his back watching them. Jordan glanced over at the dog and smiled. Mel gave a little laugh.

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“He seems to have made himself at home,” Jordan smiled.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Mel smiled.

“While he’s busy, why don’t you take me outside and show me the yard?” Jordan suggested.

Mel led Jordan out her back door to her yard. If one could even refer to the tiny space as a yard. Jordan tapped a finger against her chin.

“Usually, I would say this isn’t big enough for a dog his size. But you have access to a dog-friendly beach, and the dog park is right across the street. So I don’t think this will be a problem.”

Mel breathed a sigh of relief. Mase poked his head through the open door and bounded outside. Mel watched as the dog sniffed every blade of grass. Jordan gave another smile.

“Do you mind showing me the rest of the house?” Jordan asked.

“Of course.”

They called Mase and he followed them inside. Mel gave Jordan a tour of the rest of the house. When they were done Jordan followed her back to the living room.

“Everything looks perfect. I think you’re all ready to go,” Jordan smiled. Mase came over and gave Jordan’s hand a lick. Jordan scratched the dog behind the ears.

“You be a good boy, Mase,” Jordan commanded. The dog tilted his head to the side as if he was trying to understand.

“And you know where to find me if there’s anything I can do to make the transition easier,” Jordan said, pointing at Mel.

“Thank you. You’ve been beyond helpful,” Mel smiled.

“Don’t forget that adopted dogs get to use the doggy daycare free for the first year,” Jordan smiled.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll get to see Mase. Especially as we figure out my work schedule.”

“Well, Mase is doubly welcome any time. He’s one of my favorites. Even though I don’t have favorites.” Jordan sent Mel a wink.

Mel walked Jordan to the door and waved goodbye. Mase seemed confused by Jordan’s absence, but not concerned. He walked back to his favorite place on the couch and laid down.

“No dog bed for you, huh?” Mel asked. She pointed at the fluffy bed on the ground. Mase wagged his tail but made no move to get up.

A knock on the door drew Mel’s attention. She glanced around the room, unsure of anything that Jordan may have left behind. When she answered the door her friend Brianna stood there with a giant dog bone in hand. Brianna came inside with a flurry of movement. Mase looked at her as if he were trying to solve a puzzle.

“Oh my gosh! Is that him?” Brianna asked excitedly.

“This is Mase,” Mel laughed.

Brianna was the type of person who was constantly evolving. When she'd met Brianna she had been working as a deejay. Back then she had gone by Bri. But recently, she'd decided that the full version of her name was better. Mel was still trying to get used to calling her Brianna. Brianna had also recently started a new job with the LezGetaway travel agency.

"HI, Mase. I'm your auntie Brianna." Brianna lay the bone on the ground. The offering was immediately accepted by Mase.

"What are you doing here?" Mel laughed.

"I took an extended lunch break to come say hello to my adopted nephew," Brianna chided.

"Oh my goodness! You will find any reason to get out of work," Mel accused.

"Not so. I love my job, because I get to do things like this."

Mel shook her head and watched as Brianna scratched Mase behind the ears.

"Okay, auntie Brianna do you want to come with me to take Mase to the dog park?" Mel asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Brianna grinned.

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Mel picked up Mase's leash and a tennis ball that she'd bought for him. Brianna practically skipped through the door.

"I had no idea you were such a dog person. You could talk to Jordan about adopting. Then your dog could be friends with Mase," Mel suggested. Brianna broke out into a fit of laughter. Mel was taken off guard.

"I'm sorry," Brianna said, holding up a hand.

"I don't want a dog of my own. But I love the idea of being able to be your dog's auntie. All of the fun with none of the responsibilities. That's something I'm more than happy to sign up for," Brianna explained. Mel giggled.

"Why do I feel like this is what I have to look forward to if I have children?" Mel asked.

"Oh, it one hundred percent is how I'll be with your kids one day. Being a professional auntie to my friend's dogs and kids is my dream," Brianna laughed.

Mel found herself scanning the dog park. For days she had been nervous about running into Willow and Sushi. So far she'd been able to avoid any other run-ins, but one couldn't be too careful. Brianna eyed her suspiciously.

"Is there a reason why you look so nervous?" Brianna asked.

Brianna had always had a protective nature, especially where Mel was concerned. A fact which Mel more than appreciated. There was something undeniably safe about

having a person who would be on her side no matter what.

“I had a run-in with some woman the other day. It has me a little on edge. You know how I dislike conflict,” Mel explained.

“What happened? And who do I need to confront for you?” Brianna asked. With her head shaved to the skin on one side, Brianna looked undeniably tough. She was tall and with her athletic frame she looked strong. Mel could see how someone who didn’t know Brianna might think she was tough. But Mel couldn’t see anything but her squishy friend who cried at sad commercials when she looked at Brianna.

“Nothing bad happened. Her dog got away from her and wrapped us both up in its leash. She was telling me not to move but I really thought I could get my foot out. We both ended up falling in the mud.”

Brianna’s laughter rang out again.

“Leave it to you to make a good first impression,” Brianna chuckled.

“Well, you’ve got that right. I definitely made an impression.”

“Oh, come on. How mad could this woman be when her dog started the trouble to begin with?” Brianna asked.

“Pretty mad. She accused me of getting her muddy. Then stormed off without even asking if she could help me with the bags her dog knocked out of my hand,” Mel complained. Sometimes it felt good to complain to a sympathetic ear.

“Well, that’s just rude,” Brianna said.

“Exactly! Thank you.”



They opened the gate to the dog park and found only a few people and dogs were there. Mase bolted as soon as she took off his leash. It didn't take him long to start playing games with a lab puppy.

"The real question about your mystery woman is, did you think she was cute?" Brianna asked. Mel flashed her a grimace.

"So that's a yes."

"Who cares if she was cute? She was intolerable in every other way," Mel teased.

"Hmm, and what did this intolerable woman look like?" Brianna pressed.

"Well, she had red hair and a pretty dress. Until she fell into the mud."

"And?" Brianna asked.

"And she was tall and graceful. She looked like she belonged on a cover of a magazine."

"Wow. All that, huh?"

"Yeah. All that. But like I said she was pretty intolerable."

The lab puppy left and Mase bounded up to them, ready for more fun. Mel threw the ball and he dashed away. Within a minute he brought it back. This time Mel raised her arm and took a big step back.

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“Hey. Watch out!” Someone exclaimed behind her.

But it was too late. Mel lost her footing and stumbled back into the person. Together they fell backwards to the ground. Mel landed with a thud on top of the other person. She glanced down and found that her hand had landed on their thigh. She yanked her hand away.

“I’m so sorry,” Mel said emphatically as she gently rose to her feet. She turned and saw none other than Willow sitting in the dirt. Willow shot her an unamused grimace. A tall woman who stood beside Willow glanced nervously between the two of them.

“Why is it that whenever you’re around I find myself in the dirt?” Willow asked.

Mel was vaguely aware of Brianna standing beside her.

“Maybe because you have a bad habit of not looking where you’re going,” Brianna bit out. Willow’s eyes snapped to Brianna for the first time.

Mel could see from the look on Willow’s face that she wasn’t ready to involve any other humans in their feud. Mel wasn’t ready either. She watched as Willow’s friend stepped protectively in front of her. Mel laid a hand on Brianna’s arm, gently holding her back.

“You’re right. We’re sorry for not paying better attention,” Willow’s friend said jovially.

“Me, too. I didn’t realize you had come in. But I could have looked behind me before

stepping backwards,” Mel offered.

“I guess I could have been paying better attention,” Willow admitted though somewhat reluctantly.

“Great. Then it’s all settled. We’re all clumsy. We’re just going to go hang out over there. It was nice to meet you both,” Willow’s friend said with a good-natured smile. Brianna gave her a nod and the woman smiled again. When they were gone Mel rounded on Brianna.

“Oh, my lands. That was her. That was the woman.”

“I figured,” Brianna chuckled.

“Wow. You really stepped in there, buddy.” Mel laughed.

“No one talks to my best friend that way,” Brianna said, her tone was serious.

“What was that head nod at the end? Between you and her friend,” Mel asked.

“The protective friends acknowledging that neither wants any trouble with the other,” Bri explained.

“I had no idea protective friends had their own language.”

“It’s mostly grunts and head nods,” Brianna teased.

Mel laughed, shaking her head at Brianna. She couldn’t help but let her gaze wander over to where Willow and her friend were standing. Or was that her girlfriend? Mel took in Willow from afar. Willow was the type of woman that was so stunning it made her eyes hurt. She wore a pair of cutoff shorts and a white tank top, which now

had a pattern of dirt across it. Mel felt herself wince. But she only allowed it for one second. Why should she be the one who kept feeling bad for these disastrous interactions? Mel knew that a large part of it was her people pleasing nature. She hated it when someone was angry with her. You don't have to feel bad. Not when Willow is the one being the jerk. She told herself.

Mel let her inner dialogue wrap around her. A moment later she was distracted by the sight of Mase and Sushi playing. She almost called Mase back, but he was so happy that she simply smiled. When she glanced back to Willow she saw that she wore a smile on her face at the spectacle as well. She couldn't help noticing that Willow had a great smile. Mel wished that she got to see that side of Willow as opposed to the irritable jerk side of her. She shook her head and looked away. Today was a happy day and no one was going to ruin that for her, especially not Willow.

## Chapter 4

"Friend, what was that over there? You were kind of mean," River stated. She was staring Willow down, obviously trying to figure her out.

"I was not mean. She knocked me down. And her friend was rude," Willow protested. In her mind she couldn't help wondering if the tall woman beside Mel was her girlfriend. She found herself hoping that wasn't the case and had to push the thoughts aside.

"Her knocking you down was clearly an accident. We were laughing and joking but we could have been better about watching where we were going. And you sassed Mel first, if I was her friend I would have said something very similar to you," River admitted. Willow drew back as if struck. River saw Willow's expression and softened.

"All I'm saying is that it wasn't like you. I've never seen you snap at anyone that

way. It kind of threw me off,” River said. River wrapped an arm around Willow and pulled her in for a hug.

“I don’t know buddy. Mel just gets me so flustered and angry.” Willow gave a long frustrated sigh. River nodded her head, considering her words for a moment.

“Have you considered that you might like this woman?” River asked.

“I don’t think that’s very likely. I can’t stand her.” Even as the words came out of her mouth Willow’s eyes fell on Mel. She was leaning against a fencepost talking to the woman who was with her. Willow could make out the curve of her body and the fullness of her breasts even from here. Her mind started to fantasize about what it might be like to press her against that fencepost and kiss her. Willow shook her head refusing to let her mind play out the fantasy any further.

“There’s a fine line between frustration and sex,” River offered as an explanation.

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Willow was vaguely aware of River studying her. River opened her mouth to say something then closed it again.

Sushi ran up and sat in front of Willow. Mel's dog came up and sat beside Sushi.

"Hello, there," Willow laughed.

She leaned forward and gave the dog a pat on the head. The dog gave her hand a lick before running off. Willow watched as he bounded up to Mel. Mel bent down to give his belly a rub. She felt a pang low in her belly. A hint of regret mixed with a touch of heat.

"Are you ready to head home, Sushi?" Willow asked. Sushi gave a howling bark.

"I think that's a yes," River laughed.

Willow hooked Sushi's leash to her collar and walked towards the exit. Similarly, Mel and her friend were taking her dog in the same direction. Willow fought with her fear to try and come up with something to say. Mel had a worried expression on her face as Willow approached. Willow supposed she deserved that. She forced her face to soften.

"What's his name?" Willow asked, directing her gaze to Mel's dog.

"His name is Mase," Mel answered, her tone low and guarded.

"He's a really good dog," Willow said as she walked through the gate.

“Thanks. So is Sushi,” Mel said following her out.

Willow breathed a sigh of relief. It was a small step towards peace. Maybe she and Mel were meant to only be cordial, but Willow would take it over open hostility. River walked quietly beside her until they got to her house. Once they stepped inside River turned to her with a smile.

“Okay. That was cute,” River swooned.

“What was cute?” Willow asked.

“You and Mel talking about her dog. You were both being so sweet,” River said with a huge grin.

“Okay, no. You stop that right now. There are no butterflies in my stomach. I was attempting to be cordial for your benefit,” Willow insisted.

“Really? You were being nice for my benefit?” River grinned.

“Of course. I heard what you said and I know that conflict makes you uncomfortable. And you’re right. There’s no reason I can’t be cordial with Mel. It certainly seems as though our dogs get along. And Sushi could use an extra doggy friend.”

River shook her head, unbelieving. Willow arranged her features into a neutral expression as River analyzed her.

“You can protest all you want but I think you’re already starting to fall,” River stated. Willow groaned inwardly but kept her reaction muted. There was no way she could fall for someone as self-righteous and haphazard as Mel.

“I don’t have to be friends with the woman to extend basic human niceties,” Willow

smiled.

“I won’t lie to you. Where Mel is concerned you definitely have some ground to make up in the charm department,” River laughed. Willow pinned her with a hard stare.

“Thanks, friend,” Willow growled. River gave her a penitent look.

“What I’m trying to say is that I don’t think you dislike her as much as you want me to believe. I think she confuses you. But I saw how she looked at you and how you looked at her. I think if you stop yelling at her long enough there’s a chance you might both be interested in each other,” River said with a hopeful smile.

Willow shrugged her friend off. She wasn’t looking to forge a profound connection with anyone. But it would be nice if she could go to the dog park without feeling awkward when Mel was around. Sushi and Mase had played really well together. Which was a rare occurrence. Sushi was frequently too much for the other dogs around him. Willow glanced over at Sushi who had promptly fallen asleep on his dog bed. It would be nice if he had a regular playmate. There was a large part of Willow that did want River’s opinion, even if she was a little afraid of it. Willow sat on her couch and watched as River sat next to her.

“Okay. You have me curious. What exactly are your thoughts? Because you obviously have some,” Willow asked. River gave her a bemused chuckle.

“Are you sure? I’m afraid it might come out a little edgier than I want it to.”

“Our friendship can handle a little bit of edginess,” Willow smiled.

“Okay then. I think that you find Mel attractive and that you like her. Or you could like her. But it has only been six months since Amy left. It’s obviously still fresh for



you. So you see this woman that you potentially find attractive and you're determined to tank every interaction with her." River splayed her hands out in front of her, resting her case.

"Well, that was a lot," Willow laughed and then asked,

“So what are you suggesting I do about it?”

“Realize where your feelings are coming from. Don’t take things out on Mel. She doesn’t seem like a bad person so there’s no reason things can’t be cordial between you two.”

Willow understood what River was saying. Whether her disliking Mel was the product of the woman being insufferable or because of her own broken heart, who could say? The simple fact was that she didn’t like Mel. But River was right, she could still be cordial. If for no other reason than to promote a happy living situation in her community.

“I’m surprised you aren’t going to tell me that I should go ask her out,” Willow laughed.

“It’s not up to me to decide when you’re ready to take that leap again. I won’t ever pressure you in that arena. You’ve been through a lot, friend. It’s okay if you need to take a little time for yourself,” River reassured her.

“You act as if coming home to find that your girlfriend moved out would be a traumatic occurrence.” Willow tried to laugh but it came out forced. River’s hand landed on her shoulder.

Six months ago, Willow had believed she was in a happy and healthy relationship. She and Amy had been dating for two years and living together for nine months. By all accounts they were headed for engagement and marriage. Then without warning Amy left. Willow went in for a job interview, and when she got home Amy, and her

stuff was gone. Amy left a note explaining that she'd felt like things were moving too fast. Easy come, easy go. Looking back now there had always been signs, but Willow never expected Amy to leave.

"You've been through a lot. It's okay if it takes you time to trust again. It would be strange if it didn't take you a little time," River smiled softly.

"Thank you for being so wonderful to me over the last six months. You really showed up for me during a very difficult time," Willow said.

"You're my best friend. Where else would I have been then other than beside you?" River asked. Willow lay her head on River's shoulder.

"You're an amazing friend. I think you're right. I don't have to like Mel to be nice," Willow said with a grin.

"There's the spirit," River laughed. She gave Willow a little kiss on the top of her head.

Willow rested her head on the back of the couch and sighed. She grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. Willow tried to forget about the heat that had spread through her heart and core when she'd looked at Mel. She wasn't interested in Mel, hell she could barely handle the idea of sharing a dog park with her. She turned her attention to the show they were watching, desperately hoping to be sucked into another world.

## Chapter 5

Mel worked her way around Mallie's Cafe. She greeted customers and made sure everything was in working order. It had been almost a year since Brynn had promoted her to manager. Today, Brynn was catching up on some paperwork. She glanced over at Mel and laughed.

“Is today your first time dropping Mase off at doggy daycare?” Brynn asked.

“What gave me away?” Mel chuckled.

“You keep checking the time,” Brynn said. Brynn, who had named the cafe Mallie’s after her own dog, was a bit of an expert when it came to puppy parenting.

At this point Brynn was more of a friend than just simply a manager. Mel knew that Brynn had taken her under her wing, much like a big sister might.

“Is it that obvious?” Mel asked, blushing.

“Only to people who know you. I doubt anyone else would think anything about it.”

“Do you still take Mallie to doggy daycare?” Mel asked, curious.

“Absolutely. At this point if I didn’t take her to doggy daycare Mallie would probably revolt.”

“Glad to know Mallie is a fan.”

“Jordan is Mallie’s favorite person. If I were standing on one side of the room, and Jordan was on the other side I would lose every time,” Brynn insisted.

“I think that’s true for most dogs,” Mel laughed.

As if on cue Jordan and Reese walked through the door. They each smiled and waved as they walked to their typical booth. Brynn left her seat behind the bar to go join her friends. A moment later Jordan waved Mel over. She smiled and walked towards the trio.

“I just wanted to let you know that Mase is doing great for his first day,” Jordan announced. Mel slid into the spot beside Brynn.

“That’s such a relief. I wasn’t really worried. But it is nice to hear that it’s going well,” Mel smiled.

“You’re a good dog momma,” Reese said with a warm smile.

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“Enough about my dog child. Have the two of you picked a day for your wedding?” Mel asked. She saw a pink blush forming across Jordan’s cheeks.

“This one keeps walking back our dates,” Reese teased.

“I can’t help it, things are so crazy with work,” Jordan complained.

“We’ve got to get you two down the aisle. At this rate Lena and I are going to beat you,” Brynn laughed.

“Did I hear my name?” Lena asked, approaching the table. Mel had been so drawn into the conversation she hadn’t even noticed Lena come through the door.

Mel moved from her seat beside Brynn so that Lena could fill the space. Then she pulled up a chair. Lena sat beside Brynn and gave her a kiss on the lips. Mel was glad that Brynn had hired a couple of servers to take care of orders. It had left Mel free to oversee the general flow of the cafe. She wasn’t above taking orders or scrubbing a table as needed. But it was nice to get to enjoy her workdays.

Mel heard the tiny bell chime over the door and gave her standard greeting before turning around.

“Welcome to Mallie’s.” The words had just left Mel’s mouth as she turned to see who had entered. When her eye fell on Willow, Mel’s eyes widened. How had Willow managed to track her down at her job?

Mel couldn’t tear her eyes away as she watched three other women enter with

Willow. One was clearly the woman who had been with Willow at the dog park. Willow glanced over to their table and caught Mel's eyes. Mel was taken aback by just how green Willow's eyes were. Eyes weren't meant to be that bright. Mel thought about her own eyes, they were an unassuming blue. Mel desperately wanted to look away, but her eyes remained fixed on Willow. She watched as Willow elbowed the woman from the dog park. The woman shot Willow a hard look. Willow nodded her head, not subtly in Mel's direction and the woman turned to look at her then looked away quickly.

Willow seemed to be committed to making their interactions as awkward as possible. Mel turned back to find her entire table staring at her. Mel could feel her cheeks turning how.

"What was that?" Brynn asked.

"What was what?" Mel returned. She desperately wanted to play things cool, but one look at her friends told her that was going to be impossible.

"The exchange of looks between you and that woman over there," Reese answered.

"Do the two of you know one another?" Jordan asked.

"Unfortunately," Mel groaned.

"Sounds like there's a story there. Tell us," Brynn demanded.

"Well for starters, her name is Willow. And she hates me," Mel explained.

"How could anyone hate you?" Jordan demanded. There was something sweet in the firmness of the statement.

“She lives in my neighborhood. The first time we met her dog tangled us up in its leash. We ended up falling into the mud. Willow blamed me for not being still long enough for her to untangle us.”

“Wait a minute. Her dog wrapped its leash around you and she blamed you for falling?” Jordan asked incredulously.

“She did. The second time we met I was throwing a ball for Mase at the dog park. I didn’t see Willow standing beside me and accidentally knocked her down.”

“There seems to be a lot of falling in the dirt involved in this story,” Reese observed.

“There is. And every time is somehow miraculously my fault,” Mel explained.

“Are you comfortable with her and her friends being here? Because I can ask them to leave if you’re not comfortable,” Brynn said. Mel watched as Lena gave Brynn’s hand a squeeze.

“No, don’t do that. I think as long as we stay in separate corners we’ll be fine,” Mel smiled.

“Okay. But you say the word and she’s gone,” Brynn directed. Mel shot her a sweet smile.

“I have to ask. Is there something else going on between you two?” Lena was always good at cutting straight through the nonsense into the heart of the matter.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Mel said, hoping to put an end to the conversation before it began. She should have known better.

“Well, for starters the two of you looked at each other like you wanted to devour one



another,” Reese suggested. She smiled unassumingly at Mel.

“I think that’s just Willow’s murder stare. I’m not sure whether she eats her victims after,” Mel laughed.

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“Oh, it wasn’t just Willow. The two of you were giving each other major bedroom eyes,” Reese chuckled. Mel drew back as if struck.

“There’s no way in this whole world that I could ever be interested in someone like Willow,” Mel announced.

Too late she realized that Willow was walking past them on her way to the bathroom. Mel met Willow’s eyes again, but Willow quickly looked away. Shit. What was worse was that everyone at the table had borne witness to the moment. Brynn gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“See what I mean? There’s no way for us to even be friends, when we keep having these disastrous interactions,” Mel explained.

“You can always choose to have a less disastrous interaction,” Jordan suggested.

“How would I go about doing that?” Mel asked.

“That’s easy, you go make peace with her,” Reese grinned.

“Why? I think it’s pretty clear that Willow doesn’t want peace.” Mel folded her arms across her chest.

“No one here is going to force you to make amends with someone. But this could be an opportunity to at least clear the air. I mean you’re both adults.” Reese offered her a reassuring smile. Mel swallowed a retort about not being sure that Willow was an adult.

“And if she still chooses to be unkind I promise I’m more intimidating than she is,” Jordan grinned.

Mel had no doubts that Jordan would be more than competent at any battle of wills she was thrown into. Mel took a moment to imagine what it must feel like to be on Jordan’s bad side. The thought made her shiver.

“I guess it is a little silly that two adult women can’t find a way to interact as adults,” Mel groaned.

“That’s the spirit,” Brynn encouraged.

Mel stood and straightened her outfit before walking to the bathroom. When she opened the door Willow was at the sink. She looked surprised to see her.

“Hey, can we talk for a minute?” Mel asked.

“Sure. Though I’m not sure why. Since there’s no way you could ever be interested in me,” Willow retorted. Mel recoiled at the feeling of having her own words levied against her.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” Mel insisted.

“Good,” Willow said almost too confidently.

Mel was almost ready to give up on the conversation. What was she even doing here? Not everyone had to be her friend or like her. Why was she so drawn to this woman who wanted nothing to do with her? These were for sure questions she needed to ask her therapist.

This close Willow was undeniably beautiful. Gorgeous in a way that was almost painful to look at. But Mel couldn't look away. In her chest her heart beat faster than it should. She realized that this was the first time she'd ever been this close to Willow, without her yelling. Mel took a steadying breath, and the scent of Willow's lavender perfume filled her nose. It wasn't fair that this woman's appearance had such an effect on her. Mel took in the perfect cupid's bow of Willow's lips. Willow's shirt rose just enough to show the perfectly smooth pale skin of her stomach. From this distance Mel could pick up the exact shade of green in Willow's eyes. Willow's eyes were green like the trees in a forest after a fresh rain. Mel closed her eyes for a moment, she had to get a grip on herself. Mel sighed out loud as she decided to try one last time to make peace.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot. I'd like it if we could start over," Mel suggested. She purposefully softened her tone.

She studied Willow's face. Mel was afraid that Willow would be gearing up for a verbal assault. Instead, Willow breathed in and heaved a large sigh.

"Yeah, we could try that," Willow said with some reluctance.

"That's a start," Mel smiled.

"But we're not friends," Willow stated.

"Of course not. Just acquaintances that don't hate each other," Mel offered with a smile. If she wasn't mistaken Mel saw the unmistakable beginnings of a smile form at the corners of Willow's mouth.

"Exactly. Acquaintances that don't hate one another," Willow nodded. This time the woman offered her a small smile.

“I’ll let you get back to your friends,” Mel smiled. She pulled open the door to the bathroom then turned back.

“Maybe we’ll bump into each other soon,” Mel laughed.

“Too soon,” Willow said with a raised eyebrow. Her face was straight but Mel could see the crinkle at the corners of her mouth.

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It wasn't the start of a lifetime friendship. But it would do. They were on speaking terms which was already an improvement. Mel moved back to her table in undeniably high spirits.

### Chapter 6

Willow hated the feeling of being torn. Give her a definite answer on either side, rather than the feeling of being torn between two. But that was exactly how she felt. She was torn between her desire to make Mel into a villain, and her desire to like Mel. For better or worse, Mel had come to her to make peace. And Willow had agreed. There was no reason why the two of them couldn't get along. No reason, except, that Willow found Mel to be a little too much. Mel was a little too attractive, a little too friendly, and a little too irresistible.

Willow's mind had been racing during her conversation with Mel. But her mind was nothing compared to the rest of her body. Her palms were still sweaty and her mouth still felt dry. Mel was tall and athletic, she obviously worked out. There was something painfully endearing about Mel. Now, she was back at the table with her friends, but her eyes continued to find Mel.

Willow was vaguely aware of her friend's conversation, but she was effectively zoned out. Mel was at her table talking to her friends. Willow was taken in by the way Mel's whole face lit up when she smiled. She wished that she had spent more time bringing out Mel's smile. Willow shook the thought away. What did Mel's smile mean to her?

"Willow. Willow." River's voice broke through Willow's thoughts, bringing her back

to the present.

“What?” Willow hissed with a little more frustration than she intended.

“If you stare any harder at Mel you’re going to make your head explode,” River retorted back. Willow knew that she had likely been too harsh with her friend. She softened her face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Willow replied. Piper twirled a strand of her dark hair on a finger.

“I think she’s saying that you’re staring that girl down like she’s the last life raft off a deserted island,” Piper teased. All of her friends laughed. Willow rolled her eyes.

“Oh please, we can barely stand one another.”

“Sure. If you say so,” Autumn laughed.

“I find her insufferable,” Willow insisted.

“Of course you do,” River laughed.

“You guys are the worst,” Willow scowled.

“We don’t mean any harm. It’s just that you’re clearly attracted to this woman,” Autumn suggested.

“Well, sure. Someone can be attractive and annoying at the same time. Two things can be true,” Willow suggested.

Her friends paused for a moment, considering her words. Willow was grateful for the

reprieve. From across the room Mel laughed at something one of her friends said, the sound traveled to Willow's ears and she looked at the woman again. This time Mel turned and met Willow's eyes. There was something soft in Mel's blue eyes, they drew Willow in. For a long moment they held their eye contact before each slowly disengaged to continue talking to their friends.

When Willow turned she found all of her friends quietly staring at her. River raised an eyebrow and nodded her head in the direction of Mel's table. Willow scoffed.

"Can I not make eye contact with someone without it being seen as sexy?" Willow asked defensively.

"Friend. In all our years of friendship you've never once looked at me that way," Piper giggled.

"Maybe I just do it when your back is turned," Willow suggested with a coy smile.

"Listen. All we're saying is that it's clear that there's more going on with your feelings for Mel than simple annoyance," River said.

"Maybe there is. But the annoyance certainly trumps whatever else might be there," Willow grinned. She glanced at her phone.

"I've got to go back to work," Willow said with a groan. She gave her friends hugs and left the table.

There was a part of her that was happy to be leaving. Willow didn't think she had it in her to handle any more of their scrutiny over her feelings for Mel. Sure Mel was beautiful but that didn't mean Willow wanted to date the woman. Mel looked up as Willow walked by and smiled. Willow felt her face turn hot. She gave Mel a small smile of her own on her way out. Willow tucked a strand of her red hair behind her



ear.

She counted herself lucky to have a job where she was able to work from home three days a week. Sushi greeted her excitedly at the door. Willow bent down to give the dog a scratch behind the ears. Sushi rolled over to his back in a bid for tummy rubs. With his cute upside down face Willow couldn't deny Sushi affection. Willow walked over to the couch and called the dog to her. Sushi curled up next to her on the couch.

"You aren't going to believe what happened during lunch," Willow began. Sushi turned his head to look at her expectantly.

"It turns out that Mel works at the cafe that Autumn suggested we meet at," Willow explained.

"It was awkward as usual but at least she didn't knock me down this time." Sushi groaned and stretched out.

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“Anyway, I think we’re going to try and be nice to one another from now on.”

Sushi had lost interest in her story. He ran to the door and waited to be let out. On days when Willow worked from home she would leave the back door open so that Sushi could come and go as he pleased. Sushi trotted happily outside and found a patch of sun to sit in. Willow smiled, it did her heart good to see Sushi so happy.

Willow stopped to make herself a mug of tea in the kitchen. There were still days when she missed Amy, but she was sliding into the comfort of being alone. Willow ate and went to bed when she wanted. If she stayed up late reading a book Willow didn’t have to worry about it annoying someone else. Willow sat at her desk and started to work.

The hours went by quickly, as was often the case. Willow knew that she tended to be single-minded sometimes to the point of detriment. Her first clue that something was amiss was the sound of heavy rain falling outside. Willow stretched and checked the time. Her workday had ended thirty minutes ago. Her boss would scold her for working over, but ultimately he’d be grateful for her dedication.

“Sushi,” Willow called. There were times when Sushi enjoyed playing in the rain. But Willow was sure that the dog would come inside when called. When she didn’t immediately hear the sound of Sushi running inside, Willow went to investigate.

To her horror the backyard was empty. Disbelief set in and Willow moved through her home calling Sushi’s name. When it was undeniable that Sushi wasn’t inside Willow ran outside. Sushi was nowhere to be found. She was terrified to find a Sushi-sized hole dug under her fence. Willow growled in frustration and ran out back inside

and through her front door.

She called for Sushi as loudly as she could manage over the sound of the pouring rain. But Sushi was nowhere to be found. Rain soaked through Willow's t-shirt and streamed down her face. She could hardly see through all the rain. Willow was grateful that at least she had her shoes on.

Willow turned and ran down the sidewalk yelling for Sushi. Surely he couldn't have gone far. A car pulled up beside her. The window rolled down and Willow saw that Mel was the driver.

"Willow, what are you doing?" Mel called through the pouring rain. Willow didn't have time to be snarky. She ran up to Mel's car and stuck her head partially inside the window.

"Sushi got out of my yard. I'm trying to find him," Willow explained.

"Get in," Mel demanded.

"What? Why?"

"Because my car is going to cover more ground than you will. And I'm going to help you."

"Why?" Willow asked, still unbelieving.

"Willow, it's pouring rain. Get in the car," Mel said, her tone firmer now. Willow gave a simple nod of her head and climbed inside the car.

Mel's car was warm and welcoming, a distinct contrast to the cold rain outside. Willow looked over at Mel and still couldn't believe it was her who offered a ride.

She felt the woman move up several notches in her mind.

“Thanks,” Willow said, her voice almost a whisper.

“For what?” Mel asked. Was this woman for real?

“For picking me up,” Willow smiled.

“Of course. We have a dog to find,” Mel smiled back.

In that moment Willow couldn't remember why she'd ever found Mel annoying. They each stared out their own car window. Mel drove slowly down the road. Every once in a while Willow would roll down her window and call to Sushi. Something about Mel's presence was oddly soothing. Willow found herself being happy it was Mel who had picked her up.

## Chapter 7

Mel stared intently out her car window. Not that she could see more than ten feet in front of her car. Florida rain was a great balance to the Florida sun, and today it was coming down in buckets. Beside her, Willow sat with her arms crossed trying to keep warm. Mel glanced in the backseat and found her old flannel shirt. She grabbed it and handed the shirt to Willow. Willow looked at it confused for a moment.

“You're cold. Put it on,” Mel demanded with a smile.

“Thanks,” Willow grinned and put the shirt on.

“Where are Sushi's favorite places to go? Where do you take him on walks?” Mel asked. So far the drive through the neighborhood was turning up nothing.

Willow stared at her for a moment, her green eyes pondering her question.

“He really likes the beach,” Willow said.

“Then let’s try the beach,” Mel suggested.

Their subdivision had beach access so it was an easy drive. Willow gave a slight nod of her head, before staring out the window again. Mel couldn’t help feeling for Willow. She couldn’t imagine what a wreck she would be if Mase got out.

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“Hey, we’re going to find him,” Mel said reassuringly. She patted Willow’s shoulder with her hand.

Willow glanced down at her hand and Mel pulled it away. She hadn’t meant to get so familiar with Willow. Willow was upset and Mel’s instinct was to comfort her. Still, she couldn’t help but feel the slight sting of electric charge from touching the woman.

“Thank you. You’re being very kind to me,” Willow smiled.

“See I’m not such a bad person,” Mel teased.

“I never said you were a bad person,” Willow protested.

They pulled up to the beach parking lot. The only way down to the beach was to get out of the car. Mel reached into the back and grabbed her umbrella. She pushed the bright pink umbrella open and headed for the wooden stairs that led down to the beach. Willow paused, the rain beating down on her. She looked like a drowned rat with her clothes clinging to her. Mel waved Willow over, inviting her under the umbrella. When Willow gave her a hesitant expression Mel gestured again more emphatically. This time Willow joined her under the umbrella.

They walked in silence. Mel scanned the beach in front of them hoping she would see a glimpse of Sushi. The rain was pouring around them. Willow pressed her body in tighter to Mel’s. Mel felt an electric wave buzzing through her at the contact. She forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

Mel looked towards the ocean and thought she saw a small figure near the waves. She

bumped her shoulder into Willow and pointed. Willow followed the direction of her finger. At first the figure was hazy. As they stepped onto the sand and moved closer the figure came into view. There was Sushi running with the waves. As they approached and Mel could make out the dog's face it was clear Sushi was having a great time.

Willow studied Sushi before shaking her head and breaking into a laugh. Mel startled at the sound. It occurred to her that this was the first time she'd ever heard Willow laugh. Willow's laugh was a pleasant light and airy sound. Mel smiled and glanced over at Willow. Willow was soaked to the bone with rain, yet somehow still gorgeous. Willow bent down and called Sushi over. Sushi turned his head and happily ran in Willow's direction. Sushi followed them back to the car.

"Thanks again for helping me. I really owe you one," Willow said. She turned to walk down the sidewalk.

"Where are you going?" Mel asked, puzzled.

"Home," Willow smiled.

"Don't you want a ride?" Mel asked.

"I don't want us to get your car wet."

"Willow, get in the car," Mel directed with a laugh. Willow's face turned into a frown.

"Please," Mel offered with a softer tone. Willow sighed, but she opened the back door for Sushi. Willow sat up front with Mel.

"Aren't you afraid your car will smell like dog," Willow argued.

“My car already smells like Mase. It’s not a big deal.” Mel laughed.

“Thanks,” Willow smiled. Mel noted that her teeth were flawless.

Sushi lay sprawled out on Mel’s backseat and fell asleep quickly. Mel smiled at the sight in her rearview mirror. She pulled up to the sidewalk in front of Willow’s home.

“Here we are,” Mel announced.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Willow said.

“You already have,” Mel smiled.

“No, I mean. Why don’t you come inside for dinner?” Willow offered.

Mel felt torn by the offer. She weighed both sides carefully before responding.

“You want me to come inside for dinner?” Mel asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have asked if that’s not what I wanted.”

“But why?”

“Mel, don’t overthink it. Just come in the house,” Willow directed. Mel gave a small chuckle.

“Okay. But only if you let me help cook,” Mel smiled.



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“I think I can abide by those terms,” Willow laughed.

Mel followed Sushi and Willow inside. In the air conditioning of Willow’s home Mel felt cold for the first time. She wrapped her arms around herself. Willow noticed the move almost immediately.

“Here. Let me get you some dry clothes,” Willow offered.

She disappeared down the hallway. When Willow came back she was carrying sweat pants and a hoodie.

“Just put your wet clothes in the dryer. It’s in the closet beside the bathroom,” Willow directed.

Willow directed Mel to the bathroom down the hallway. Mel disappeared, clothes in hand. She turned on the light in the bathroom and looked around. Pale blue walls with soft white towels and artisan hand soap greeted her eyes. There was something strangely intimate about being in Willow’s home. How had they gone from yelling at each other to Mel wearing Willow’s sweatpants over the course of the day? Life could be a funny series of events. Mel undressed and slid into the comfortable warm clothes. Mel noted that she and Willow were practically the same size. She put her wet clothes in the dryer on her way back down the hall and started it.

Willow was in the kitchen. She had changed clothes as well. Willow wore black yoga pants and a white t-shirt, neither of which left much to the imagination. Mel swallowed hard. Willow turned and gave her a wide smile.

“Oh, there you are,” Willow said simply. The statement made Mel feel strangely at home. As if there was nowhere else she should have been other than in Willow’s kitchen.

“What are we making tonight?” Mel asked with a smile.

“Well, I have the supplies needed to make spaghetti. Is that okay with you?” Willow asked.

“More than okay. I love spaghetti.”

“That’s wonderful news. The water is already boiling so why don’t you put the pasta in,” Willow directed.

Mel worked around the kitchen. Occasionally, she and Willow would bump into one another. Working in a cafe meant that Mel was adept at navigating tight kitchen spaces with multiple humans. Mel checked the noodles and found that they were done. She moved them to an eye of the stove that wasn’t turned on. Willow was finished with the sauce and handled it similarly.

“I guess that takes care of that,” Willow smiled. Mel could swear there was a fondness in her tone that hadn’t been there before.

Mel smiled at Willow. There was something about the adventure of finding Sushi that had endeared them to each other. Willow opened the cabinets above the stove and reached high to pull down a couple plates. Mel watched and appreciated the stretch of fabric tight across Willow’s chest. Willow caught her looking and blushed. Mel looked away guilty at having been caught in the act of checking Willow out. Her previous beliefs that Willow was cold and frigid seemed farther away by the second. Mel carried her plate over to the table and set it down. When she turned she was surprised to find Willow’s eyes were scanning her body. She supposed turnabout was

fair play.

There was a thrumming ache forming between Mel's thighs. Mel was determined not to listen to her body on this one. After all she and Willow had only barely moved from tolerating each other to liking one another. Now wasn't the time to throw sex into the mix. Mel turned back to the table. She was about to sit down when she heard Willow's voice behind her.

"Do you want a glass of wine?" Willow asked. Mel turned to see what she was offering and bumped hard into Willow.

Willow held an already poured glass of wine and Mel watched as the liquid sloshed in the glass. On instinct Mel reached out and cupped both of her hands around the glass keeping it steady. Not a drop spilled out.

"We really are pretty clumsy together aren't we?" Mel teased. She took the glass from Willow and set it on the table. As she turned back around she was surprised to find Willow closer to her than before.

"Yes, we are," Willow rasped the words out.

Willow's hand rose to brush a strand of auburn hair out of Mel's face, tucking it behind her ear. Together they moved forward. Two magnets drawn together by forces outside of their control. Their lips met in the middle. Willow's lips were softer and more welcoming than had expected. Mel felt a jolt of electric current run through her body as she gave herself wholly over to Willow's kiss.

## Chapter 8

Willow hadn't intended to kiss Mel. Something about the woman had drawn her in. Now she stood with Mel pressed perilously against her kitchen table kissing the life

out of her. Every alarm bell in Willow's mind was going off. But their lips were fused together and Willow saw no reason to pull away.

There was an intensity in Mel's kiss that Willow hadn't expected. They were both filled with need, taking from, and giving to one another in turn. Willow took Mel's bottom lip in between her teeth and gave it a tiny bite. Mel didn't pull away, instead she surged forward more powerfully than before. Mel's tongue slid inside Willow's mouth. Willow swallowed a groan at the heightened pleasure growing between her thighs.

Mel's hands landed on Willow's hips and pushed her gently backwards. They traveled through the kitchen and down the hallway. Willow pressed Mel against the wall. Her hands slid up Mel's shirt skimming the sensitive skin underneath. She felt Mel's body tighten then relax. Willow pulled the shirt over Mel's head and left it discarded on the floor. She did the same with her own shirt. Mel's hands slid up her torso to Willow's breasts. Willow pulled off her bra before unclasping Mel's. She watched as Mel's breasts became fully exposed. Mel's nipples stood erect already.

Willow's core ached with anticipation. She led Mel down the hallway to her bedroom. Willow gave Mel a gentle push, watching as she fell backwards onto her bed. Willow hooked her fingers under the sweatpants Mel wore, helping the woman take them off.

Willow was usually cautious to a fault. But tonight, she wanted Mel. Willow pushed Mel's thighs apart. The move earned her a moan from Mel. Willow dropped to her knees at the end of the bed. She kissed her way up Mel's thigh until she found her center. Mel was already wet as Willow spread her apart further. Mel gasped but pushed her body towards Willow's waiting mouth. Willow's lips found Mel's clit and wrapped around it. She gave a tiny suck and watched as Mel bucked her hips.

Willow's tongue encircled Mel's clit, making fast circles. Willow slid two fingers

inside Mel curling them at the end. Mel groaned as her orgasm hit her. Willow watched the gentle spasms of Mel's body and felt a sense of accomplishment. Mel lay back on the bed for a moment, arms spread wide. Willow watched the rise and fall of Mel's chest. She hadn't played with Mel's nipples nearly enough. Next time, she said to herself. Willow pushed the thought away immediately. There was no indication that there would be a next time.

After a couple of seconds Mel sat up on her elbows. She directed her gaze to Willow. Mel's lips curved into a smirk.

“Why are you still on the floor? Get up here with me,” Mel demanded.

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“You’re feeling pretty bossy. I was just giving you a chance to rest,” Willow grinned, she didn’t move. Mel held up a hand and crooked one finger into a come hither motion. Willow’s core couldn’t resist the urge to pull her forward.

Willow slid onto the bed beside Mel. She was surprised when Mel’s hands cupped her face. The gesture was almost too sweet, too intimate. Willow allowed herself to be pulled in for another kiss. She felt Mel’s efforts to pull down her pants and helped by bridging her hips. Her underwear, she took care of herself. Mel’s skin was soft against her own. It had been a long time since she’d been with someone like this. Her mind started to overthink whether she was rushing into something, but Mel’s kiss washed the thoughts away.

Mel didn’t skimp on nipple play. Her fingers toyed with Willow’s nipples, pinching them hard then loosening her grip. Mel palmed Willow’s nipples softly, almost driving her crazy. Willow took the opportunity to spend more time with Mel’s breasts. She placed a hardened nipple into her mouth and sucked. Mel cried out and positioned her body to give Willow more access. Willow gave the nipple another powerful suck.

Mel allowed her hand to glide down Willow’s torso. Mel smiled when she felt the wetness between Willow’s legs. She slid two fingers inside Willow and watched for her reaction. Willow allowed her head to hang back a bit, her mouth opened slightly. Mel thrust inside her again, harder this time. She began making the motion rhythmic curling her fingers as she went. Willow’s moans grew louder. Mel placed her thumb against Willow’s clit. Willow couldn’t stop the build up of pleasure inside of her. Willow’s body was like a coil waiting to unravel. Mel’s thumb brushed her clit one final time. The touch was so gentle that if Willow’s body hadn’t been ready to

release, she might not have felt it at all. But Mel knew what she was doing. One small soft touch and Willow plummeted off her cliff. The orgasm was so powerful she fell back onto the bed, her hips slightly in the air. Mel's fingers thrust inside her one last time, strengthening the orgasm. Her thumb continued to press against her clit, prolonging her pleasure.

It was strange laying in bed with her body pressed against Mel's. Just hours ago she'd been convinced that she could barely stand Mel as a person. Since lunch, Mel had driven her around searching for her lost dog, given her a flannel shirt to stay warm, helped her cook dinner, and given her some of the best sex Willow had ever experienced. It would seem anything could change over the course of six hours.

"I like this much better than us hating one another," Mel sighed. Her fingers stroked along the soft skin of Willow's arm.

"Mmm, me too," Willow agreed.

"You know we never ate dinner," Mel laughed.

"Are you hungry?" Willow asked.

"Aren't you?"

"I could eat. Of course, I have a lot of options as far as what I could eat." Willow wrapped her arms around Mel and pulled her closer. Mel laughed.

"You can eat me after dinner if you still want to," Mel teased.

"Ugh, have it your way," Willow laughed.

They rolled out of the bed and threw clothes back on. Willow wasn't fully invested in

eating, but she did enjoy sipping her wine and watching Mel eat. Willow watched the movement of Mel's mouth as she smiled at her across the table, and felt a pang between her legs. Willow wondered what would come next for them.

"So do you often go from hating people to having sex with them?" Mel asked with a grin.

"Of course. You wouldn't believe how many people I have to pick fights with just to keep myself satisfied," Willow smirked.

"I bet. Sounds exhausting," Mel said.

"Oh, it is. But I think the results speak for themselves," Willow laughed.

"I don't want to ruin this moment of you not hating me. But what do we do now?" Mel asked.

"We eat dinner. Then I guess we decide if we want to have sex again," Willow stated simply. She didn't want to over complicate anything. She and Mel were both adults and this could be whatever they made it.

"Okay. But I mean what is this?"

"What is what?" Willow asked. Mel simply gestured to the space between the two of them.

"I don't know this. What is this? Earlier today I had to beg you for a truce. Now we're having post-sex dinner. Is that not a little strange?"

"It's only weird if you make it weird," Willow offered with a grin. She thought better of her coyness and decided on a more upfront approach.



“I don’t know what it means. It doesn’t have to mean anything. We’re two consenting adults that had a shared moment together,” Willow said simply.

Mel nodded her head but Willow could tell she was less than pleased with the answer. She didn’t know whether she should press into Mel or give her a moment to process. Willow studied Mel from across the table. Mel slid her chair back from the table and it made a loud scraping noise. They both cringed when they heard it. Mel took her plate to the sink and washed it off. Willow would normally have told her not to bother, but she guessed it was second nature for Mel after working at the cafe.

“I think I’m going to head home. Thank you for dinner,” Mel announced politely.

“You don’t have to rush off,” Willow said, she tried her best to add some warmth to her tone.

“I need to let Mase out. And this night is going to be a lot to process,” Mel explained. Willow forced her face not to slide into a frown.

“That’s fair. Do you at least want to exchange numbers?” Willow asked.

“Of course,” Mel smiled.

They exchanged numbers and Willow pulled Mel in for a hug. The contact felt forced. Mel was stiffer than she’d been before. Willow felt her frustration growing. She wasn’t completely sure what Mel wanted, or what she had done wrong. What had she said to make Mel go so cold so fast?

“This was actually a lot of fun. And I’m glad we were able to find Sushi,” Mel said as she walked towards the door. Some of her warmth had returned to her tone and Willow was grateful for the change.

Still, as she watched Mel walk to her car Willow was filled with a sense of regret. She was uncertain how she had lost control of the night in front of her. Willow hadn’t necessarily expected Mel to spend the night. But she had thought that Mel would stay a little longer. Willow had hoped that they might even end up naked in her bed again, this time for longer. But here she was watching Mel drive away.

A growing sadness filled her. Willow had the sudden desire to text Mel, but didn’t want to come across as too clingy. She would wait a few hours and text the woman before bed. Sushi leaned against her leg and Willow looked down.

“I don’t suppose you know what happened?” Willow asked. Sushi only offered a small whine.

Willow busied herself with cleaning up. As she walked down the hallway she remembered the dryer. Willow checked the clothes, everything was dry. At the very least she’d have returning clothes as an excuse to see Mel again. Willow caught

herself smiling at the thought of seeing Mel again. She balked at herself.

## Chapter 9

Mel felt silly for fleeing Willow's home like a prisoner escaping lockup. Her own emotions about the moment were so conflicted. She knew that she'd never be able to sort everything out with Willow there beside her. Willow, who had gone from looking at her like she was an enemy, to looking at her like a lover over the course of one day. The change was too drastic. Now safely behind her own door at home Mase bounded up to greet her.

"I suppose you probably want to go out?" Mel asked.

She was grateful that Brianna had been willing to pick Mase up from doggy daycare and drop him off at home. Mase gave a low bark and Mel opened up the back door. She stepped outside and immediately searched her own fence for holes. The last thing she wanted was for Mase to figure out an escape route.

Mel pulled out her phone and sent Brianna a quick text asking her to come over. Brianna responded quickly that she was on the way. Mel had no idea how she was going to have this conversation with Brianna. How did one explain finding themselves in bed with their nemesis?

Mel loved how easy it was to get Brianna to show up at her house. Within thirty minutes Brianna was on her doorstep with two beers in hand.

"You got here so fast," Mel laughed.

"You usually just ask if I want to come over. This is the first time you've told me to come over. I figured something must be up," Brianna teased. She handed Mel one of the beers and walked inside. Mel closed the door behind Brianna and took in a deep

breath.

“You’re certainly not wrong about that,” Mel laughed. They sat at opposite ends of the couch.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“I’m not even sure where to begin,” Mel stated.

“Try the beginning,” Brianna suggested.

Mel gave a sharp inhale and tried to think. What would the beginning even be?

“For starters, Willow and all her friends happened to come into the cafe today for lunch,” Mel began.

“Shit,” Brianna said simply.

“Yeah, it was awkward to say the least,” Mel laughed.

“What ended up happening? Did she cause problems at the cafe?” Brianna asked.

“No. She was on her best behavior.”

“I guess at least there’s that,” Brianna teased.

“I sort of ended up cornering her in the bathroom.” Mel felt herself blushing. Even as she said the words it didn’t sound like she was talking about herself.

“I guess that’s one way to get rid of your enemies,” Brianna laughed.

“Relax. I went to bury the hatchet,” Mel explained.

“Into her back,” Brianna laughed.

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“Do you want to hear what happened or not?” Mel folded her arms across her chest.

“I’m sorry. Please tell me the rest of the story,” Brianna said penitently.

“I asked her if we could call a truce and she agreed. She went back to her friends and we parted ways.”

“Is that the story? Like the whole story?” Brianna asked.

“No, of course not,” Mel said.

“Good because that would have been a little bit of a let down,” Brianna admitted.

“Fast forward to the end of my shift. I’m driving home and it’s raining like crazy. I pull into the subdivision and who do I see outside in the pouring rain yelling?”

“My guess is Willow,” Brianna offered.

“Yeah. It’s Willow. Her dog had gotten out of his fence and she was trying to find him. So I offered to drive her around.”

“That was nice of you. All things considered.”

“We drive around and we find her dog. I give her a ride back to her place, and she asks me to come in for dinner.”

“Interesting,” Brianna smiled.

“We make dinner and I can feel her eyes on me. I put my plate and my glass down and when I turn around she kisses me.”

“She what? The woman who has been screaming since she met you, started kissing you?”

“Yes. And to be fair I kissed her back,” Mel explained. Brianna rubbed her face with her hands.

“We ended up in the bedroom, doing bedroom things...”

“Bedroom things? Are we kids? You two had sex,” Brianna laughed.

“Fine. We had sex.” Mel could feel her cheeks reddening to a deep shade of crimson.

“No need to be embarrassed. You’re both consenting adults. Was it good sex?”

“It might have been the best sex I’ve ever had in my life,” Mel admitted.

“Wow. I didn’t think Willow had it in her.”

“She was surprisingly passionate,” Mel laughed.

“Well, I’m glad you had a good time,” Brianna offered, with a note of confusion. Mel could tell she was waiting for the ending of the story.

“We finished our dinner. I think I was feeling a bit overwhelmed and confused by the entire encounter. I asked her what it meant for us going forward. I wasn’t looking to start anything up. I just wanted some confirmation that we weren’t going to be at each other’s throats anymore.”

“Makes sense. What did Willow say?”

“She said it didn’t have to mean anything,” Mel said, frustration slipping back into her voice.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly! What am I supposed to do with that?”

“What did you say to her?”

“Not much after that. I sort of awkwardly left,” Mel admitted.



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“What are you thinking about it now?” Brianna asked.

“I’m still really confused. I mean we’re both adults. Willow is gorgeous and smart. But I’m not interested in having sex with someone who’s going to turn around and hate me outside of that,” Mel said.

“Of course not. You don’t deserve to be treated poorly by anyone. What are you planning to do about Willow now? I mean I know you’re confused right now. But do you want the possibility of becoming more than frenemies?” Brianna asked.

“I don’t have any interest at all in being frenemies. I don’t know what I want yet. I think that’s what I need to figure out,” Mel admitted.

“It looks like you’re going to have plenty of time to figure it out,” Brianna smiled.

“You don’t think she’s going to be beating down my door?” Mel laughed.

“Probably not. If I’m being honest I think Willow is probably trying to figure all of this out as well,” Brianna said with a smile.

“Maybe,” Mel admitted.

The two of them finished their beers and started watching Netflix. A few hours later Brianna checked her phone and gasped at the time. Mel laughed at her startled expression.

“It’s later than I thought,” Brianna explained. Mel checked the time, one in the

morning.

“I’ve got to get to bed. But you should spend the night.” Mel said thoughtfully.

“Thanks, buddy,” Brianna said, pulling her in for a hug.

“Of course. My spare room is always ready for you.”

Mel let Mase run outside one final time for the night. She yelled a quick goodnight down the hall. Mel felt a sense of complete relief to finally be inside her bedroom. She closed the door. There was no need to undress, as she was still in the sweats that Willow had loaned her. With a sigh she realized that at some point they would have to do a clothing exchange. That would have to be a problem for tomorrow. Tonight all she wanted was to sleep.

The problem was all her body wanted was sleep, but all her brain wanted was to replay the night. Her encounter with Willow played over and over again in her head, like a movie on repeat. Mel groaned to herself. What had made it so easy for her to fall into bed with Willow? What had made her so willing to go there with her?

As much as she reached for the answers all she found were more questions. Mel closed her eyes and forced herself to think about anything else. She finally felt sleep come over her and gave in.

## Chapter 10

Willow stretched under her covers after a night of fitful sleep. It was far too early to be awake, but sleep seemed impossible. She reached for her phone and sent River a text. River was an avid runner. Not only would she likely be awake, she was probably in the area.

Willow: Hey are you close to my place?

River: Yeah, I'm close. What's up?

Willow: Want to take a tea break?

River: Sure. Give me fifteen minutes.

Willow's feet were cold on her wood floor. She made her way clumsily down the hallway to the kitchen. She had two mugs of tea ready by the time River made it to her door.

"Now that's service," River laughed. She walked in the front door and took an immediate assessment of Willow's face. Willow handed her a mug and tried to smile. She could tell from River's expression that this caused her friend more concern.

"Okay. What's going on?" River asked. She arched her eyebrow and gave Willow a look of suspicion.

"Plenty is going on," Willow admitted. She released the tension in her shoulders and let them fall.

"Oh no, buddy. What happened?"

Willow sighed and walked into her kitchen. She sat at the dining room table. River followed her. They usually sat on the couch, but this was the last place that things had made sense for Willow. The kitchen table was where everything had gone right and wrong last night. River didn't question the change to their usual flow, she was naturally easy going. Willow took in one more deep breath before she started.

"I slept with Mel," Willow began.

“You what? How? When?” River’s expression showed her obvious confusion.

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“Last night. Sushi got out of his fence. I was running around in the rain trying to find him when Mel pulled up. She offered to drive me around looking for him.”

“That was nice of her,” River offered.

“Yes, it was. We found him on the beach of all places.” At their feet Sushi gave an exaggerated yawn.

“I see he’s still tired from his travels,” River laughed. Willow gave Sushi a stern glance but when he licked her hand she couldn’t help but smile.

“Okay. So Mel helped you find Sushi. How does that lead to the two of you having sex?” River asked.

“I was feeling... Well, I don’t know what I was feeling. But I didn’t want her to go. So I invited her to come over for dinner.”

“Sounds nice so far.”

“It was meant to be. Then I kissed her. Which led to sex.”

“Okay. I mean you’re both consenting adults. How was it?” River asked.

“Honestly, it was pretty fantastic. I have no complaints,” Willow admitted.

“Okay. Then why don’t you seem happy?”

“Because I think I said something to offend her. But I’m not sure why it offended her. Or how to fix it,” Willow said.

“What did you say?” River asked, the worry was clear on her face.

“She asked me what our time together meant. And my mind went blank for a minute. I didn’t know what to say. I’m sure it was overwhelming for her, but it was overwhelming for me, too.”

“So what did you say?” River pressed gently.

“I said that it didn’t have to mean anything,” Willow gave a bleak smile. Now that she was removed from the interaction she could hear how the phrase sounded.

“That could have been said a little better,” River said with a slight cringe.

“I know. There’s just something about Mel. I just got so nervous,” Willow sighed.

“I think that’s kind of cute,” River admitted.

“No, it isn’t. I look like an idiot. I can only imagine what Mel must think. And now I have to deliver her clothes from last night. I have no idea what I should even say,” Willow groaned and lay her head on the kitchen table.

“Try radical honesty,” River suggested with a grin.

“What?” Willow asked. She lay her head on her arms and gave River an appraising look.

“Tell her the truth.”

“Why in the world would I do that?”

“Because you aren’t suave. And I think seeing you be vulnerable will probably be disarming.”

“Disarming?” Willow asked.

“Yeah. You’ve been kind of harsh with her in the past. So admitting that she makes you nervous and you have no idea what to say to her will probably be endearing,” River laughed.

“I hate everything about that,” Willow admitted.

“Sure. But you don’t have a better idea.”

Willow hated it when River was right about something. In truth, she didn’t have a better idea. Willow gave herself a moment to consider what was being proposed to her.

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“So, what do you think I should say to this woman?” Willow asked.

“I think you should apologize for the way you answered her last night. Then say something sweet like, you just make me so nervous. Then ask her out on a date.”

“Wait a minute. I’m not sure that I want a date.”

“As your best friend, trust me. You want a date. You just don’t realize it yet.”

“River,” Willow said, her tone wearing at the edges.

“What? You clearly do.”

“How can you know that?” Willow asked.

“Because if you were done with her you wouldn’t be obsessing over what she thinks of you,” River declared.

River was batting a thousand this morning, and Willow hated it. Willow frowned to herself. River gave her a puzzled look.

“What’s wrong?”

“It just feels too exposed,” Willow admitted.

“That’s the point,” River sighed.



“You aren’t going to win Mel over by playing hard to get,” River encouraged.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to go over there and tell Mel that I’m sorry. That I made a fool out of myself because she makes me nervous. And then ask her on a date. Is that right?” Willow asked.

She arched her eyebrow at her friend hoping she could see how ridiculous the whole thing sounded. Instead, River smiled at her pleasantly. Willow gave her a begrudging grin.

“You really think that will work?” Willow asked.

“I have no idea what will work. I think it has a really good chance. And I think getting back out there might make you happy.”

“You think so?”

“Willow, you barely get out of the house anymore. It’s time for you to open yourself back up to life. Like it or not, Mel has been the only person to bring those feelings out of you.”

Willow could only nod her head. Her thoughts swirled in her mind. She could feel the weight of her own apprehension. Willow stood from the table and stretched.

“Okay,” Willow announced.

“Okay, what?” River asked.

“Okay, I’m going to give it a try,” Willow said, she gave River a wide smile.

“That’s the spirit. I’ll stay here and wait. I want to hear everything once you get

back.”

Willow laughed and shook her head. She loved the way River wanted to see this adventure through to the very end. She had folded Mel’s clothes that morning and put them on the back of her couch. Willow grabbed the clothes and shot River one more smile as she walked out the door. The walk across the street to Mel’s place may as well have been a five-mile trek. The distance seemed to loom in front of her. There was nothing Willow hated more than awkward encounters. The idea of forcing herself into an awkward situation seemed ridiculous.

Willow knocked loudly on Mel’s door. She heard a loud scramble coming from inside Mel’s home. From the other side of the door someone cursed and it sounded as though a piece of furniture fell over. The door flew open with such force that Willow took a half step back.

The woman in the doorway was not Mel. It was the woman that Willow had seen her with in the dog park. Mel had insisted the two were just friends but the woman wore a tank top and sleep shorts. It was pretty clear she had spent the night at Mel’s place. Willow tried to keep her mind from jumping to conclusions. But Willow couldn’t help considering the worst case scenario. Maybe Mel had lied about having a girlfriend. Maybe this woman and Mel were together. Or maybe they were just friends. Willow didn’t have the mental equity to figure it out on the spot.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked. Willow simply handed her the folded clothes.

“I was bringing these back to Mel,” Willow said. She didn’t like the shaking in her own voice.

“Oh, thanks. Mel is in the shower but she’ll be back in a minute if you want to wait. I’m Brianna. We sort of met the other day at the dog park,” Brianna gave a sheepish smile as she mentioned the dog park. Willow could appreciate that none of them had

been at their best that day, with the exception of Mel. It had been Mel who had set the moment aside in favor of peace.

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“I remember. I’m Willow.” Willow extended her hand to Brianna. For half a moment Brianna simply stared at her hand before finally giving it a shake.

“Like I said, Mel should be out in a second.”

“That’s okay. Just tell her I stopped by with her clothes,” Willow smiled. She had turned and was walking away before Brianna had a chance to say another word.

Willow closed her front door and laid her forehead against it. She could feel River’s eyes on her. River waited patiently for her to speak. When she didn’t, River cleared her throat.

“I guess that means it was a success.” River laughed.

Willow turned her face and met River’s eyes. River walked up and wrapped her arms around Willow.

“What happened, friend?”

“The woman that was with Mel at the dog park opened the door. In her pajama shorts.”

“Well, now I wish I had gone with you,” River chuckled. Willow glared at River, her eyes piercing.

“What? Her friend was hot,” River chuckled.

“But I can understand how that might have thrown you off your game. What did Mel say?” River asked.

“Nothing. She was in the shower. I just handed the clothes to her friend and fled the scene.”

“You didn’t even wait to talk to Mel?” River asked.

“No,” Willow groaned.

“You live in the same neighborhood. I’m sure you’ll see her around,” River offered. But Willow didn’t find her words comforting.

“I’m going to get ready for the day,” Willow said simply. It was enough for River to catch her meaning. River offered one final hug.

“Text me if you need anything,” River smiled. Willow squeezed her a little tighter.

River opened the door and started running. Willow marveled at River’s stamina. River turned and gave her a wave before sprinting away. Willow closed the door. Sushi followed beside her as she walked back to her bedroom and plopped on her bed. Willow didn’t know what to make of Brianna opening the door that morning instead of Mel. But Willow had no desire to think about it anymore than necessary. She let her eyes close and allowed sleep to come.

## Chapter 11

Mel often gathered her thoughts for the day in the shower. After her encounter with Willow this was especially the case. She turned the water on as hot as she could stand it and stood underneath the shower head. The world around her faded blissfully away. When she was finished she got dressed and found Brianna in the kitchen. Mase was

outside running from one end of the yard to the other.

“You had a visitor while you were in the shower,” Brianna grinned.

“So early in the morning? Who was it?”

Brianna laughed and pointed to a stack of clothes on the kitchen table.

“Willow?” Mel asked. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

“Yes. But I don’t think she knew what to do when I opened the door. She seemed very thrown off,” Brianna said with her typical easy grin.

“Did you answer it in your pajamas?” Mel asked with a smirk. Brianna looked down as if noticing what she wore for the first time.

“Oh,” she laughed.

“Willow is probably trying to figure out if we’re really only friends or if you and I are together,” Mel chuckled.

“How could anyone think we’re together?”

“Well, we both prefer women and you’re at my house almost every day. It’s an easy assumption to make.”

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“Hmm, you might be right about that.”

Mel was surprised when Brianna seemed to need a minute to ponder. Surely the realization must have occurred to her at some point. Mel smiled at her friend and gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. We know we’re best friends and that’s all that matters,” Mel encouraged.

“What are you going to do about Willow?” Brianna asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you going to talk to her?”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other around,” Mel explained.

“Friend, come on.” Brianna shook her head.

“What?”

“It’s pretty clear you like Willow. So go over there and deliver her clothes to her. Then ask her out.”

“You really think I should ask her out?”

“I think it’s pretty clear that you like Willow. And let’s face it, you haven’t gone out

on a date in a while.” Brianna tried softening her words with a smile.

“First of all, ouch,” Mel teased. She covered her chest with a hand and laughed.

“I don’t mean it offensively. I’m obviously not dating much either,” Brianna laughed.

“Fine. I will take Willow her clothes. But only because I’m being polite. And if we happen to talk about seeing each other again, then so be it.”

Mel grabbed Willow’s clothes from the previous night.

“Wish me luck,” Mel teased.

“Oh, look at you. You don’t need luck,” Brianna laughed.

Brianna plopped down on Mel’s couch and watched her leave. Mel felt a pang of nerves as she approached Willow’s door. She rang the doorbell and waited. Mel could hear Sushi barking inside, and was a little surprised when Willow didn’t appear. She gave one final knock on the door and heard movement inside.

“Coming,” Willow called as she pushed the door open.

Mel caught the moment when Willow’s eyes landed on her. There was a note of surprise and excitement on her face.

“You left before I could give you back your clothes,” Mel smiled. Willow rearranged her face. Willow smiled courteously but the excitement was gone.

“I was afraid maybe I had interrupted something.”

Mel caught the subtext. Willow was wondering if she’d interrupted something



romantic between her and Brianna.

“Brianna is my best friend. She spent the night in my extra bedroom. But nothing romantic has ever happened between us,” Mel explained.

Mel wondered why she wanted Willow to believe her so badly. Was Willow’s opinion of her really that important? There was a momentary flash of a smile across Willow’s face.

“In that case, would you like to come inside for coffee?” Willow asked. Mel offered her a small smile.

“I would like that. I have a couple of hours before work.”

She followed Willow inside. Mel felt a pang when she looked down the hallway and remembered Willow’s bedroom. There was a pleasant soreness that still lingered between Mel’s thighs from the night before. Willow disappeared into the kitchen and brought back two cups of coffee.

“Thank you,” Mel said, taking one of the cups from Willow’s hand.

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Willow directed her towards the couch. They sat in awkward silence that Mel wished she could escape. She was trying desperately to think of something she could say to fill the silence when Willow beat her to it.

“I think I accidentally hurt your feelings last night. When I suggested that sleeping with you didn’t have to mean anything.”

Mel was surprised that Willow was so ready to bring the subject of last night up. If Willow was ready to lean into the moment there was no reason why she couldn’t do the same.

“It didn’t feel great to hear that,” Mel admitted. Willow glanced away frowning. When she looked back Mel offered her a genuine smile.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t find a better way to say what I was thinking. I didn’t want you to think I was putting any pressure on you. I’m not holding you to any expectations. But if you’re up for it, I would love to go out on a date sometime,” Willow offered. The sunlight through the window caught Willow’s red hair and made it look even more vibrant.

“I would like that very much,” Mel admitted.

“Do you have any plans tonight?” Willow asked.

“As it happens, I’m free tonight.” Mel smiled.

“Could I come pick you up around seven?”

“Seven works for me,” Mel laughed.

“Then I’ll see you at seven,” Willow said. Mel watched as Willow tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear.

“I should get going. I’ll see you at seven.” Mel could feel her cheeks redden with a deep blush.

Mel handed the cup back to Willow. She walked towards the door, painfully aware of the possibilities she was leaving behind. But Mel wanted to go on a date. She wanted to be romanced. On top of that Brianna was definitely still waiting for her to give an update about what had happened.

Brianna practically leaped up from the couch when Mel came through the door. Her face was lit with anticipation. Mel watched as Brianna folded her hands in her lap, desperately trying to seem calm.

“Well, what happened? You were over there for a long time,” Brianna said. Her words fell out of her mouth so fast they jumbled together.

“We had a cup of coffee together,” Mel began.

“And?” Brianna asked.

“And... Willow asked me out on a date tonight,” Mel smiled.

“Look at you getting asked out on a date,” Brianna laughed.

“Let’s not make it sound like me getting out is so far-fetched,” Mel protested.

“I mean you spend all your time at home and work, and with me. So the chances of

you getting asked out aren't great," Brianna teased. Mel hated that her friend made a good point.

"I run into new people all the time," Mel said with a frown.

"I know. This time running into someone even got you a date," Briann laughed.

"That was just rude," Mel smirked.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I am excited for you. Where are you guys going to go?"

"I don't know. We didn't really hash out logistics."

"Such rebels," Brianna grinned.

"I have a rebellious side." Even saying the words felt wrong. There was nothing Mel liked more than some well laid rules.

Brianna hopped up from her spot on the couch and stretched her arms over her head. She gave Mel a huge hug as she walked towards the door.

"I should get to work. But let me know how everything goes tonight." Brianna arched her eyebrows mischievously.

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“I want all the details,” Brianna laughed. Before Mel could reply Brianna had disappeared through the closed door. Mel shook her head.

Mel plopped onto her couch. She had a date tonight, with Willow. So much had changed in the last twenty-four hours. It was enough to make Mel’s head spin. It was enough to cause her cheeks to flush bright red. She and Willow were actually going on a real date, Mel smiled to herself. Part of her still couldn’t believe her current reality.

### Chapter 12

Willow had gone out on many dates in her past. Which was why her sense of anxiety over picking Mel up was frustrating her. Willow had spent the majority of her day focusing on work. Now it was time to get dressed for her date and she found herself at a loss. She pulled a shirt out of her closet, then remembered that had been Amy’s favorite shirt. Willow put the shirt back and sat on the bed.

It had been six months since Amy left. Some days six months felt like a lifetime had passed. Other days six months felt like only yesterday. Amy leaving had been hard on Willow. She still wasn’t sure what exactly had happened?

What was worse her home still held the remnants of Amy. Some of her clothes still hung in the closet. Amy’s toothbrush still lay unused in Willow’s bathroom drawer. Willow had finally managed to put Amy’s note to her in a drawer, but she couldn’t bring herself to throw it away. The note that had told Willow that Amy’s feelings had changed even as Willow’s remained the same. It was hard being the last one to move on.

Willow finally picked a white and navy striped tank top with a pair of cutoff shorts. She pulled out her laptop and tried to come up with places to take Mel. WaterColor had grown a lot over the years, but in many ways it still felt small. She finally decided on a restaurant with a balcony overlooking the ocean. They could enjoy dinner, drinks and then maybe a walk on the beach. The thought of taking someone out on a date filled Willow with a funny mix of anticipation and excitement.

Her phone buzzed and she knew without looking that it would be River. She had texted her friend to tell her about the date. She smiled down at a message that was mostly excited emojis.

Willow:Does that mean you approve?

River:It doesn't matter if I approve. But yes. I'm so excited for you friend.

Willow:It's just one date.

River:Sure but it's been a long time since you've found someone you want to date. I get to be excited.

Willow:Fair enough.

River:Where are you going to take her?

Willow:That new place. Olsen and Wells. It's right on the ocean.

River:Very romantic.

Willow:What should I say to her?

River:Try not yelling at her.

Willow:Ha ha

River:Just be yourself.

Willow:That's awful advice.

River:No it isn't. You're wonderful.

Willow:You're sweet. And you give me too much credit.

River:Seriously! When you aren't yelling you can be quite charming.

Willow sent River a simple eye roll emoji and went back to getting ready. She stared at the pink bottle of perfume on her bathroom counter. She hadn't used it in six months. The fragrance was one of those pricey kinds that one could only find in a boutique. Amy had bought her the perfume sometime last year. Willow used to wear the scent religiously, as it was Amy's favorite. Willow trapped her lower lip between her teeth and chewed it. You're being ridiculous, It's past time to move on. Willow picked up the bottle and sprayed the a tiny bit on her neck. The move felt strangely empowering.

The time had come to pick Mel up for their date. Willow couldn't help notice the way her heart skipped a beat at the thought of taking Mel out on a date. Was it Mel? Or was it going out on a date with someone other than Amy that had her tied up in knots. Willow couldn't be sure.

Mel came to the door wearing cargo shorts and a white tank top. Willow had never seen someone look so stylish while wearing something so simple. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and Willow had to swallow a couple of times so that she could speak.

"Hi," Willow managed to say in a too hoarse whisper.

“Hi. Are you okay?” Mel asked. The spot between her eyebrows knitted together in obvious concern.

“I’m great. I just had a frog in my throat,” Willow chuckled. She rubbed absentmindedly at the back of her neck.



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“Do you want some water before we go?” Mel offered.

“No. But thank you for asking,” Willow smiled.

Olsen and Wells was decorated with various types of mounted fish. When they sat down at their table Willow couldn't tear her eyes away from the giant swordfish mounted on the wall above Mel's head. She gave the fish a grimace. Mel gave her a puzzled look. Willow realized too late that she was directing her expression of disgust right at Mel. Willow gave a tiny laugh.

“I'm sorry. I was giving the dead fish above you a dirty look. Not you,” Willow explained.

“That's good to hear. I can't be too careful,” Mel smirked.

“Are you ever going to let me live our little feud down?” Willow laughed.

“I don't know. You're going to have to be very nice to me while we find out,” Mel said with a grin that told Willow she was being teased. Mel's lips curved upward into a crooked grin, and Willow couldn't help imagining the feel of those lips against her own.

“Out of curiosity, when did you decide you wanted to ask me out? Was it the spur of the moment?” Mel asked. Her questions brought Willow back to the moment in front of her.

“When you left my house last night, I knew that I wanted to see you again.”

“I had no idea,” Mel said with a warm smile.

“I’m not always the easiest person to read I guess,” Willow admitted.

“You? Hard to read? No.” Mel’s tone dripped with sarcasm and Willow had to laugh.

“I know. It’s hard to believe.”

“I guess at least you don’t go around knocking people over everywhere you go,” Mel said with a firm note of self-deprecation.

“I’m sorry I was such a jerk to you,” Willow sighed.

“It’s okay. Knocking a woman off her feet isn’t meant to be taken literally,” Mel laughed. Willow couldn’t help her lips curving up into their own smile.

Willow took a minute to fully appreciate Mel. She was a gorgeous woman. Her long brown hair fell silkily over her shoulders. Willow watched Mel’s mouth move as she talked to their server. She remembered those same lips sucking on her nipples.

“Are you okay?” Mel asked.

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You just look a little flushed,” Mel answered.

Willow was aware of the heat surging through her body and settling between her legs. She tried to put all thoughts of her night with Mel out of her mind. Her eyes looked up and met Mel’s, there was a burning behind the other woman’s eyes. Willow wondered if Mel was having the same kind of thoughts she was.

Willow grabbed her glass of water and took a huge sip. As she went to place the cup on the table it landed half on her fork. The cup pitched forward, water went everywhere including down the front of Mel. Willow watched in horror as Mel was drenched.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Mel answered gracefully.

“At least this time it was you and not me,” Mel chuckled.

The entire front of Mel’s shirt was covered in water. If the earth beneath her had opened up and swallowed her up, Willow would have been relieved. Instead she had to survive this awkward moment. Mel was taking it all in a stride. It somehow made their first encounters all the more embarrassing for her over reactions to them.

“I work in a cafe. This isn’t the first time I’ve had something spilled on me. Thank goodness this is only water,” Mel laughed, and the sound carried, filling the space between them.

Mel had a warmth to her that Willow had previously missed. Probably because she’d been so busy trying to find fault with Mel that she hadn’t noticed what was right about her. The server hurried back with a new glass of water, Mel thanked the man. She turned back to Willow and offered a smile.

“Tell me something about yourself,” Mel said, her lips curved upward into a grin.

“What do you want to know?” Willow asked.

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“All the typical first date things. Where you’re from? All your past relationships. You know the drill.”

“Originally, I’m from Ohio. I hated the cold winters so I moved here after college. My parents divorced when I was in high school. My Dad is an accountant. My Mom is an art teacher. They were always an unlikely couple. I’m an only child and my move hit my Mom hard. So she took a job that’s less than an hour away from here. Sushi actually used to be her dog. But my Mom gets bored easily so she was going to rehome him. I couldn’t let her do that so I took him home. But finding a local trainer has been harder than I thought,” Willow chuckled.

“I might be able to help with that,” Mel offered.

“Oh, are you a dog trainer, too?” Willow asked. She arched an eyebrow. For all she knew Mel could be half a dozen things.

“No, not me,” Mel laughed. Willow noted that she kept her laugh quieter this time. Willow missed the loudness of Mel’s full laugh.

“My friend, Jordan, just opened up a doggy daycare. There’s a trainer on staff. She can do obedience sessions with Sushi during the day. If that is of interest to you.”

Willow couldn’t help flashing Mel another warm smile.

“That is definitely of interest,” Willow laughed.

“Okay. So your mom lives close, your dad is in Ohio. What else? Tell me about your

last relationship,” Mel pressed.

There was no way for Mel to know that she was pressing up against a bruise. Memories of Amy flooded her mind. Willow had been expecting their relationship to last forever.

“Are you okay?” Mel asked.

“I am. I just. It was a rough breakup,” Willow offered.

“Oh no. I’m sorry. You don’t have to tell me anything that makes you uncomfortable,” Mel suggested.

“No, it’s okay. It’s time for me to have this moment. Her name was Amy. We were together for what felt like a long time. Long enough that we had started talking about getting married.”

“Wow. So it was a significant relationship,” Mel commented.

“Exactly. I thought it was the last relationship I would ever be in. I thought things were great. I had no clue that she had doubts. Six months ago I was let go from my job. One day after running around town applying everywhere I could think of I came home and found a note.”

“A note? She broke up with you via note?” Mel asked aghast.

“Yeah. It just said that she was feeling pressured by all the talk about a wedding and she needed to go do her own thing. I was finally able to reach her on the phone. I guess she rented an apartment on the other side of town. That’s the last time we’ve spoken to one another.”

“That’s rough. I’m so sorry,” Mel offered.

“It’s okay. I’m finally starting to re-enter polite society. So that’s a good thing.”

“For what it’s worth I’m glad you’re here re-entering polite society with me,” Mel grinned.

“Me, too,” Willow agreed.

Mel reached a hand across the table and took hold of Willow’s hand. Willow was taken aback by the sudden warmth of Mel’s touch. She allowed the warmth to spread through her, shedding light on all her dark places. Willow met Mel’s deep brown eyes across the table and was immediately drawn in by her warmth. Willow startled when the waiter brought them food. The whole restaurant had faded to black as she allowed herself to get lost in Mel.

They chatted through dinner. Occasionally, Mel would reach out and touch Willow’s hand, sending an electric current surging through Willow. She could feel a mounting ache building in her body. She desperately wanted Mel to touch her in other places as well. The check came and Willow paid, even as Mel protested.

Mel grabbed her hand as they walked back to the car. Willow couldn’t help noting that their hands fit together perfectly. Before she could over think the move she pulled Mel into her body. Then leaning in she gave Mel a soft kiss on the lips. Mel’s lips were warm and welcoming. Whatever spark Willow had started erupted into a full inferno. Mel pulled Willow deeper into the kiss. They managed to pull away long enough to get into the car. They continued to surge forward each giving and taking in turn.

Willow forced herself to pull away and start driving towards her home. She longed for the privacy of her place, where she could explore Mel over the course of hours.

Mel's hand pressed against Willow's thigh as she drove. Willow wished that Mel would move her hand to the spot between her legs. There was nothing she needed more than Mel.

As she pulled up to her townhome she noted a strange car in her driveway. Who the fuck could be swinging by at this hour? She and Mel each exchanged a look of confusion. As Willow left her car she was greeted by the singsong voice of her mother. Willow managed to suppress her groan, but only barely.

"Willow, there you are. I've been waiting for almost twenty minutes."

Angela Rose had always had a way of carrying herself. Ever since Willow was younger she'd thought that her mother glided rather than walked. Angela covered the ground between them and wrapped Willow into a hug.

"Mom, I've told you to text if you want to come see me. That way you don't have to wait and we can actually make arrangements," Willow replied firmly. Angela batted a hand at the air, as if she was pushing away Willow's words.

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Angela noticed Mel for the first time and turned her attention towards her. Willow made a silent plea for Mel to run.

“Oh no, did I interrupt something?” Angela asked.

She glided over to Mel before anyone could answer her question. She extended a hand to Mel.

“I’m Angela, Willow’s mother.” Mel took Angela’s hand and shook it.

“Now that we’re friends I wonder if you could give Willow and I a few minutes to talk? I have something important to discuss with Willow.”

Willow wished she could shout out to Mel. She wanted to beg the woman not to go. But Mel wrapped her arms around Willow in a hug.

“Text me later,” Mel demanded.

“Of course.” Willow said.

Then Mel was gone, leaving Willow alone with her mother. Angela gave her a coy smile.

“So who’s the girl? Whatever happened to...”

Angela broke off. She had never been great at keeping track of the people in her life.



“Amy,” Willow supplied when it was clear that her mother was waiting for a response.

“That’s right, Amy. Whatever happened to her? The two of you were together for a while weren’t you?” Willow forced herself to maintain a neutral face. It was hard when her eyes wanted to roll so badly.

“Amy and I were together for a couple of years. We broke up six months ago,” Willow answered.

“Mom, why are you here?” Willow asked.

Willow watched as her Mom’s lips curved up into a smile. The expression filled Willow with dread rather than comfort. She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. Willow couldn’t keep a grimace from spreading across her face. Her mother laughed at her reaction.

“Don’t make that face, dear. Your face might freeze that way,” Angela warned.

Willow gave an audible scoff. That warning hadn’t worked on her since she was a child. Willow narrowed her gaze, taking in the sight of her mother.

“Mom. Why are you here?”

“Can a mother not come to visit?” Angela asked.

“Other mothers can. But I want to know what brings you around?”

Angela gave her an expression of mock surprise.

“Fine. If you must know I need a place to stay for a while,” Angela offered.

“And you want to stay here?” Willow asked.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go,” Angela folded her arms over her chest.

“How long do you need to stay?” Willow asked. She purposefully didn’t answer Angela’s question.

“Not long. A few weeks. Maybe a month. NO more than that I promise,” Angela pleaded.

“What happened to your place?” Willow asked, still hesitant to agree to anything involving her mother.

“I’m having a little trouble renewing my lease. It won’t be a problem. Scout’s honor.”

“Okay. I’m letting you stay no longer than one month,” Willow said coolly.

“Thank you, sweetie. You won’t regret this.”

Angela ran to her car and pulled five suitcases from the back seat. Willow could feel her head starting to pound. She already regretted agreeing to let her mother stay. Angela stood on the top step waiting to be let in.

“You know, we should get a key made for me,” Angela suggested.

Willow said nothing, her smile tightened. She could be with Mel right now. But instead, she was gaining a roommate that she didn’t want. Willow swallowed a sassy remark, allowing it to die in her throat. For better or worse this would be her life for the next month.

### Chapter 13

Mel had never had a date end so abruptly before. She could still feel the lingering heat pressed between her thighs. Mel wanted to groan and cry at the same time. Willow’s mom had come in like a tornado and spun the night right out of her grasp. She should be wrapped up in Willow’s arms right now. They should be a tangle in the bedsheets. Instead she was at home with no Willow in sight. Mase offered her a friendly bark waiting on her to scratch his head before returning to his dog bed.

Mel stripped down as she walked down her hallway to the bedroom. Lying alone in bed felt like an insult to the night she and Willow had shared. Dinner had been perfect. The night had confirmed that their chemistry together wasn’t the result of a one time encounter.

Mel let her eyes slide to her bedside table. She opened the drawer and pulled out her vibrator. This may not have been how she wanted the night to end, but it was a good second choice. She turned it on and slid the device between her thighs. She allowed herself to gasp as she made contact with her core. Mel allowed herself to imagine what she wanted to be doing right now.

Her mind went to a place where she had Willow pinned underneath her body. Shock waves of pleasure rippled through her as she ground against her vibrator. When her orgasm came her body spasmed.

Mel lay staring at the ceiling. Her phone buzzed on the night stand and she reached for it. Willow's name flashed on her screen. Mel was interested in knowing what had happened after she left. Mel hated texting, she found it so cumbersome. On a whim she hit the call button and waited to see if Willow would answer.

"Hi there," Mel said, hoping to ease whatever awkward tension the phone call might have caused.

"Hello." Willow's voice sounded surprised.

"How did things go with your mom?" Mel asked. She listened as Willow gave a long sigh.

"That bad, huh?" Mel laughed.

"Worse. My Mom is going to be living with me for a while," Willow whined. Mel made a mental note that if things took off between them, they would likely be spending their time at her place. Mel took a breath and decided to go with optimism.

"Your mom is lucky to have you. Not everyone would open their home up like that," Mel smiled at the phone.

“I don’t know about that. I might as well say yes. It keeps my Mom from sneaking in through a window or something,” Willow said, her tone flat. Mel gave a chuckle.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to finish our date,” Willow offered.

“I know. Me, too. I’ve been thinking about it since I got home,” Mel said.

“Me, too. I can’t believe the night ended so differently to how I imagined it,” Willow chuckled.

Mel’s mind flashed with an idea. She felt her lips curl into a smile.

“Oh yeah. How did you imagine it going?” Mel asked coyly.

“More in the direction of the bedroom. Less in the direction of my Mom.” Willow teased.

“Sure. What I mean is, if I were there right now, what would you want to be doing?” There was a pause as Willow took in Mel’s words. Mel wasn’t entirely sure she wasn’t overstepping.

“What do you want?” Mel pressed into the silence.

“I want you to be here right now, with your hands on my bare skin.” Willow answered softly.

“I would like that, too. I could let my hands slide down your back and grab your ass while you kiss me,” Mel suggested. She heard Willow’s breath quicken.

“I want more than that,” Willow suggested.

“What if I was on my knees|?” Mel purred. She heard Willow suck in a breath.

“Yes, I want you on your knees.” Willow said finally. Mel couldn’t help noticing the strained rasp that had come into Willow’s voice.

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“Now I’m going to pull you closer until you can feel my breath.”

Willow made a tiny sound that was half sigh and half moan.

“My tongue is sliding against your clit as my fingers slip inside you.”

Willow made a strained noise and Mel realized that she had already come. Mel gave a little chuckle.

“That was easier than I expected,” Mel teased.

“To be fair I was still turned on from earlier. It wasn’t going to be hard to push me over the edge,” Willow laughed.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t be flattered?” Mel asked.

“Not at all. Please be flattered. You’re the first person I’ve ever done anything like that with before,” Willow said. Mel could imagine the blush spreading across Willow’s face.

“You mean phone sex?” Mel pushed.

“Yeah.” Willow’s voice was so soft Mel almost couldn’t hear her.

“I haven’t either,” Mel admitted.

“You know, I’m not really tired. If you think you’ll be up for a while you could come

over here,” Mel suggested.

“You really want me to come over?” Willow asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t invite you if I didn’t want you to come. We had a great night together. Besides, I live right down the road,” Mel suggested.

“Yeah. I think I will come over. Is it okay if I’m in my pajamas?”

“Wear whatever you like. I don’t think you’ll be in them long.”

“Okay, frisky,” Willow chuckled.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Mel laughed. There was a knock on her door. Mel’s lips curved up into a smile. She ran down her hallway to her door.

Willow stood on her doorstep wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a white spaghetti strap shirt.

“Are you going to let me in?” Willow asked, obviously self-conscious.

Mel reached out and grabbed Willow by the hand pulling her inside. Willow giggled but it was swallowed by Mel’s mouth crashing against hers. Willow’s lips were soft and welcoming, she parted her lips allowing Mel’s tongue to slip inside her mouth.

Willow moaned against Mel’s mouth, spurring her forward. Mel slid her hand inside Willow’s pajama pants. Willow wasn’t wearing any underwear and Mel took a moment to spare a smile.

“Someone came over here ready to go,” Mel teased.



“I always sleep commando,” Willow protested.

“That’s good to know,” Mel said. She pressed a kiss against Willow’s neck. Her fingers worked fast, finding Willow’s clit.

Willow slid her own hand inside Mel’s sleeping shorts. Mel leaned into the contact. She was hungry for Willow’s touch. As if able to sense Mel’s frustration, Willow slid two fingers inside Mel. Mel gasped as Willow pushed her against the wall. Mel kicked her door closed behind them. Willow’s fingers curled inside Mel as she thrust them in and out. Mel gave a loud sigh as her orgasm slammed against her. Mel sped her own efforts, her thumb brushing gently against Willow’s clit. Mel trapped Willow’s lower lip between her teeth and gave it a tiny bite. They each fed into one another, tongues fighting for ground. Willow’s fingers thrust harder inside of Mel. Mel could feel her walls closing around Willow’s fingers. Willow curved her fingers once more and Mel felt herself coming undone. Her body spasmed as her orgasm crushed her. Mel crumpled under the weight of her own pleasure. She smiled when Willow had to hold her upright.

Mel breathed deep for a moment before gathering herself. For the first time since Willow’s arrival Mase gave a tiny groan from his dog bed, a suggestion that they were inconveniencing him and his rest. Mel laughed and pulled Willow down the hallway towards her bedroom. Willow wrapped a hand around Mel’s waist and allowed herself to be pulled. Mel fell into her bed dragging Willow down with her.

“This night has been very unexpected,” Willow admitted.

Mel propped her head up on an elbow and flashed a smile. She reached out pushing a wayward strand of red hair from Willow’s face.

“For me too. In a million years I didn’t think I would connect this well with you,” Mel admitted.

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“To be fair I put up a lot of walls when we met,” Willow said with a slight frown. Mel brushed a hand gently across Willow’s cheek.

“I’m glad I was able to change your mind,” Mel laughed.

“I’m glad you were willing to give me a chance,” Willow suggested.

“I’m glad you were willing to change your mind,” Mel said. Willow took Mel’s hand and pressed a kiss against it.

“How could I not? You’ve been so wonderful.” Willow wrapped an arm around Mel and slid closer to her. Mel allowed herself to snuggle closer to Willow. She took the moment in, trying her best to memorize the parts that made it special. The softness of Willow’s skin, the way her shampoo smelled.

There was a certain amount of comfort in having Willow laying beside her. It had been a long time since Mel had someone to share a bed with. She breathed in the comfort of the moment. She breathed in deeply and allowed her eyes to close. She felt Willow wrap her arms around her, pressing close. Mel let the moment settle around her like a warm blanket. She had questions about what this thing with Willow was turning into. But for right now Mel just wanted to enjoy the feeling of someone’s arms wrapped around her.

## Chapter 14

Willow woke up some time in the early morning hours. The warmth from Mel’s body still surrounded her. The floral scent from Mel’s shampoo was all Willow could

smell. It had been too long since Willow had indulged in a night like this one.

She wondered what her time with Mel meant for them going forward. Their first night together had been happenstance. But the intimacy she felt laying beside Mel now felt very real. Willow turned and lay on her back looking up at the ceiling. It was strange being in someone else's home. She realized the feeling of strangeness that accompanied being in unfamiliar surroundings.

Beside her Mel stirred rolling away from the cold and towards Willow's body. Willow could feel a smile spread across her face. Mel's hand slipped around Willow's ribs, her fingertips lightly brushing the sensitive skin there. If she lived thirty more years she would never be able to manufacture another moment like this one.

"Mm, did I wake you up?" Mel purred into the darkness.

"No. I think I woke you up," Willow said. She allowed her fingers to trace the path along Mel's shoulder blade. She felt Mel shiver under her touch.

"Can I see you again?" Mel asked. Willow couldn't see her face as they were shrouded in darkness. But she could tell from her tone that there was a hint of urgency.

"I would like for us to see one another again. I'm sure I'll want to get out of the house as much as possible since my Mom is staying with me," Willow chuckled.

"Oh, so am I just your excuse to stay away from your mother?" Mel teased.

"No. I would want to see you again regardless of my living arrangements. But I will definitely take any excuse available to spend time away," Willow laughed.

“Surely your mother isn’t that bad?” Mel teased.

“She’s worse,” Willow said with all the seriousness she could muster.

“Should I be frightened? What am I about to get involved in?” Mel asked.

Willow tightened her grip, scooping Mel up to her.

“I guess you’ll just have to find out,” Willow suggested. Mel giggled into the darkness.

“Unfortunately, I should probably get home.”

“What? No. Stay the night at least,” Mel suggested.

“Believe me, I want to. But I’m sure my Mom will already have plenty of questions,” Willow said.

“Then what’s another few more questions?” Mel asked with a laugh.

“Hmm, you can be very persuasive.”

“Believe me I’m aware,” Mel whispered the words against the skin of Willow’s hips.

Mel had pretty much ensured that Willow wasn’t going anywhere. They were both adults and everything they were doing was completely consensual. If she was being honest with herself she was mostly worried about her Mom trying to interfere. Nothing could be less romantic than her Mom putting her nose where it didn’t belong.

“Mmm, you’re irresistible,” Willow sighed, she gave a small laugh under her breath.

“Does that mean I’ve convinced you to stay?” Mel asked.

“How could I say no?”

“That was the right answer,” Mel said, her hand skimmed the skin of Willow’s thigh as she moved upwards.

The next time Willow woke up it was to the harsh sound of Mel’s alarm. Willow startled at the shrillness of the alarm.

“Do you wake up like this every morning?” Willow asked, horrified.

“I never sleep in,” Mel offered as a way of explanation.

Willow grabbed her phone from the bedside table. She checked the time, it was already past eight o’clock in the morning.

“Shit,” Willow muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Mel asked.

“Nothing. I’m just running a little late,” Willow insisted.

Willow knew her Mom was an early riser. If she hadn’t realized Willow slipped out last night, she had certainly noticed by now.

“So, no time for breakfast then?”

“I’m sorry. Not this time. I have to get home before Mom rearranges my whole

kitchen.” Willow scrunched her face up in a grimace. Mel chuckled at her expression.

Willow leaned in and gave Mel one final kiss on the lips. She gathered her clothes, and went to the bathroom. Willow dressed quickly then returned to the bedroom. The whole night had gone beautifully. Willow hated that she had to leave the world they had created together for the reality that awaited her at home.

“Can I see you tonight?” Willow asked.

“I work late tonight. So why don’t you come over here for dinner?” Mel suggested.

“Sounds great,” Willow answered.

“Great. What do you like to eat?”

“Don’t worry about fixing anything. I’ve got us covered,” Willow laughed. Mel arched an eyebrow, obviously curious.

“Don’t worry. I promise you’ll like it.”

“Okay. I’m taking you at your word,” Mel teased.

Willow stood in front of her front door. She drew a silent breath before turning her doorknob. To her confusion she could hear laughter coming from her kitchen. She poked her head around the corner and saw River sitting at the kitchen table with her mother.

“Hey there. Someone had a late night,” River teased. Willow felt her face blush a deep red.

“Hey, buddy. I wasn’t expecting you,” Willow smiled. Her face was red hot. Willow

was sure she was several shades of red.

“Well, you had your first big date with Mel last night. Obviously, I was going to need a debriefing,” River offered.

“I made muffins,” Angela offered from the kitchen.

Willow’s head spun. The scene in front of her felt like she was living in a sitcom.

“Thanks,” Willow said as her Mom handed her a muffin.

Sushi had already adapted to having Angela around. Sushi lay beside the refrigerator where he could watch everything unfold.

“I’ll let you girls catch up. I’m going to go get ready for the day,” Angela smiled. Willow watched as her Mom walked back to her bedroom.

“Buddy, what have I missed?” River asked.



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“I don’t know what you mean,” Willow smirked. River gave her an unamused look.

“Fine. My mom is going to be staying with me for a while.”

“What? Why? Your mom drives you crazy,” River offered.

“Trust me I’m aware. But she needs somewhere to stay. I can’t just throw my mom out on the streets,” Willow suggested. River only shook her head.

“This sort of thing only happens to you,” River teased.

“Oh, I know.” Willow rubbed her face with her hands.

“Enough about Angela. How did things go with Mel?” River asked.

Willow’s mind flashed through her night with Mel, it was a blur of activity.

“It was nice,” Willow said. She hoped that just this once River would leave well enough alone.

“Nice?” River questioned with an arched eyebrow.

“I’m still processing,” Willow whined.

“Can’t you at least give me some highlights?” River pleaded.

“Dinner was good, my Mom is living with me now which caused a bit of a stall,

phone sex for the first time, then I went over to her place for actual sex, I'm making her dinner tonight," Willow answered nodding her head.

"That is a lot to process," River admitted with a casual grin.

"See? And you know new things put me off kilter."

"Okay. Okay. But you like her, right?" River teased.

"No, I hate her," Willow laughed. River shook her head and gave a pained sigh.

"Of course, I like her. I'm seeing her again tonight," Willow said after a pause.

"But how much do you like her?"

"I don't know yet. I'm still trying to figure out where she fits."

"That's fair, it's only the first official date," River said. She reached out and gave Willow a solid pat on the shoulder.

"You should invite her to come to Piper's place for our next dinner party," River suggested.

"Do you think Piper would mind?"

"I think we both know Piper would be overjoyed," River said, her words genuine.

Willow pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Mel. She hoped that the invitation wasn't too forward. Her phone buzzed half a minute later with a text from Mel. Willow felt her chest tighten as she clicked to read the message.

“Well, what does she say?” River asked.

“She says that she’d love to come,” Willow grinned.

“See, I told you. I think Mel is a good fit for you.”

“I hope so,” Willow admitted. River gave her another pat of the shoulder.

“I’m going to get out of here before your Mom tries to make me do yoga.” River wrinkled her nose in distaste.

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“Better escape now. Yoga time will be...”

“Right now,” Angela interrupted. She strode into the kitchen with her yoga mat in hand.

“I have to get back to my run,” River said in mock apology.

“And I have to get started on my day,” Willow yawned.

Willow set her laptop up in its usual place in the living room. Today she had the added distraction of her mother doing the sun pose right in front of her.

“Are you going to tell me about your new friend?” Angela asked.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Willow smirked.

“Now, sweetie, I’m your mother. It’s only natural for me to ask about the people in your life. Whatever happened to Amy? I thought the two of you were serious.”

The last thing Willow wanted to endure during her workday was an impromptu therapy session with her mother. Willow took in a deep steadying breath.

“I thought Amy and I were serious, too. But she and I weren’t on the same page. She left me six months ago. The thing with Mel is new. Last night was our first date,” Willow explained.

“Will there be a second date?”

“Yes. I’m going over to her place tonight,” Willow answered.

“Well, I hope the two of you have fun,” Angela offered.

Willow knew that Angela went through stages of involvement with her life. Unfortunately, those stages were either gone without a trace, or overly involved. She could tell from her mom’s tone that they were about to enter the overly involved stage.

Willow was far too tired for the back and forth. She closed her laptop and gave her mom a smile.

“I’m going to work in the bedroom today. The light is better in there,” Willow said.

That was a lie and Willow knew it. The light always came in too hot through the bedroom window. It was still better than listening to her mother give her feedback about the woman she was dating. Willow settled onto her bed. She wasn’t surprised when Sushi nudged the door open with his snout and lay on the floor beside her. Willow opened her laptop and began her day for the second time.

## Chapter 15

Mel gave her outfit a glance in the bathroom mirror. She huffed a sigh and opened the door to her bedroom. Brianna and Mase lay cuddled on her bed.

“How about this?” Mel asked. She trapped her lower lip between her teeth as she waited on Brianna’s assessment.

“I didn’t consent to this. I thought you invited me over to hangout,” Brianna whined. Mel rolled her eyes and laughed.

“You and I hangout all the time. But Willow is taking me to a play and I need to look put together,” Mel said.

Brianna let her eyes slide over to Mel. She rolled over on the bed so she could give her friend a more appraising look.

“Friend, you look great. But you’ve also looked great in the last three outfits. You look great in all your clothes.”

“Thank you. I do appreciate your compliments. But can you please just tell me what I should wear tonight?” Mel laughed.

“Wear your black dress and your heels,” Brianna sighed.

“Are you sure? I don’t know if this is a black dress occasion.”

“Mel, you’ve tried on every dress you own except the black dress. And we both know you’re a stunner in that one. I guarantee if Willow picks you up and you’re wearing that dress she’s going to have to pick her jaw up off the floor,” Brianna reassured her. Mel smirked.

“You really think I look that good in the black dress?” Mel asked.

“Stop fishing for compliments and try it on. I’m bored. And you know I hate boredom,” Brianna teased.

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“Okay. Okay. Give me a second.”

Mel grabbed her black dress and threw it on. She admired herself in the mirror. Brianna was right, but when it came to fashion she usually was. Mel came out of the bathroom and smiled. Mase had grown bored of cuddles and had run out of the room. Brianna lay on the bed, eyes closed pretending to sleep.

“Ha ha, very funny. You were right about the dress,” Mel smiled.

“I’m always right,” Brianna smirked, her eyes still closed.

“Aren’t you going to give me the thumbs up on the outfit?” Mel asked. Brianna stuck her thumb up. Mel gave her friend a few pokes in the ribs. Brianna reached out and grabbed her pulling her down on the bed with a laugh.

“Seriously, you look great. That dress is stunning,” Brianna said with a smirk. She rolled over onto an elbow so she could face Mel.

“Thank you,” Mel grinned.

“Listen, you already know you’re a stunner. You don’t need me to tell you how good you look,” Brianna flashed her best smile.

“Maybe. But it never hurts my ego to hear you say it,” Mel teased.

“Is that why you keep me around?” Brianna laughed.

“Yes, that and your unwavering loyalty. But your compliments are high on my list.”

“Good to know,” Brianna shook her head and rolled off the bed.

“I should get going before your woman shows up,” Brianna giggled.

“She’s not my woman,” Mel groaned.

“Is she not? You guys have been seeing an awful lot of each other. I would have thought you’d want to make it official,” Brianna suggested.

“True. Willow’s last break-up was pretty bad. I get the impression she wants to take things slowly.”

“Sure. But what do you want?” Brianna asked.

“To be her girlfriend, of course.”

“Then why don’t you ask her to be?”

“I don’t want to scare her off,” Mel whined.

“I think it’s unlikely that you’re going to scare her off. Just be honest about what you’re feeling. If she isn’t ready that’s fine. But at least you’ll know where you stand,” Brianna offered.

“You’re very smart,” Mel grinned.

“On that note I’m getting out of here.” Brianna gave a wave as she saw herself out.

Mel lay back on the bed. Brianna wasn’t wrong, the two of them had spent almost



every night together. Mel was doing her best not to get overly excited. Maybe Willow was just happy to get away from the house and her mother. Mel knew that her feelings for Willow had grown, and she could sense a shift in Willow as well.

A knock on her door gave Mel a funny feeling inside her chest. She walked to the front door so that she didn't trip in her heels. When her eyes fell on Willow she felt her breath catch.

"You look stunning," Willow gasped.

"So do you," Mel said. She took a step back to give Willow an appraising look.

Willow wore a red dress that somehow perfectly brought out the color red in her hair. Willow stepped through the doorway, her eyes met Mel's. Mel knew there was very little chance of them making the show on time. Not with the way they were eyeing one another, hungrily.

"We should probably get going," Mel suggested. Willow's eyes shone with amusement.

"If you insist," Willow laughed.

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Mel grabbed her jacket, knowing she was likely to get cold in the theater hall. WaterColor didn't have a huge theater scene. But there was a local theater that brought in big shows. Mel wasn't completely sure that she knew what they were saying. She knew it was something by Shakespeare, but outside of that she couldn't be sure. The theater was surprisingly busy.

"Okay. What show are we seeing?" Mel laughed.

"Macbeth. Don't worry I got us a private box," Willow said nonchalantly. Mel felt herself grow strangely dazzled.

"A private box?" Mel asked.

"I don't want to have to share you with all of these people," Willow smirked.

An attendant led them to a private box seating. There wasn't much that kept it private other than a velvet curtain. Mel glanced around enthralled by the setting. For a town without much of a theater scene, the place was pretty ornate. The lights dimmed and the curtain behind them was drawn. They were alone. As the first actors came to the stage Mel grasped Willow's hand in her own. She watched as the scene in front of her unfolded.

Willow allowed her hand to slide over Mel's hand until it rested on her thigh. Mel felt a rising heat under Willow's touch. Willow's thumb brushed slow circles along Mel's thigh. Mel swallowed hard. How was she supposed to pay attention to the show with Willow pushing all of her buttons? Mel let her eyes slide over to Willow and caught the woman smirking. She huffed realizing Willow's intention. Mel covered her lap

with her jacket and sighed as Willow's hand moved past her thighs and closer to her core. Mel felt her whole body tighten with anticipation.

Willow's hand slid under her dress. Mel allowed herself to sigh deeply, the noise gratefully drowned out by the production. Willow's thumb drew slow small circles over her underwear. Mel took in a deep breath as she reached her own hand over to Willow, sliding it beneath her dress.

She glanced over and saw Willow's lips part in a gasp. Their hands kept rhythm with each other until Mel's body exploded with an orgasm. She managed to swallow her moans. Willow's orgasm wasn't far behind her. Mel watched as Willow's head leaned back against the headrest, an expression of pure bliss hung across Willow's face.

"We should come to the theater more often," Mel teased.

"I agree this place is really starting to grow on me," Willow laughed.

They remained focused on the show for the rest of the production. Once they got back to the car Willow leaned in and gave Mel a kiss on the cheek.

"I had a great time with you tonight," Willow whispered.

"Me, too," Mel managed to respond.

As they drove home Mel had a thousand questions rushing through her mind. When she finally landed on one Mel tried to bring it up as coolly as possible.

"I hope this is okay to ask..." Mel began.

"You can always ask me anything," Willow brightened.

“I’m not sure how you define us in your head. But I was wondering if you were interested in being my girlfriend?” Mel asked. Her face heated to a deep shade of red.

“I would like that too,” Willow admitted.

Mel felt her heart soar in her chest. She looked out the window, suddenly very excited by the process they had managed to undergo in just one night. Mel was glad they were making the shift. There was no one else in her life that even began to approach the seriousness.

Later, as they lay in Mel’s bed together she felt the urge to ask all the questions she’d held back. Her biggest fear was finding out that she was more invested than Willow. But the time had come. Mel lay with her head on Willow’s chest as the woman played with her hair. The moment too intimate for Mel to consider it casual.

“Can I ask you a question?” Mel asked.

“You just did ask me a question,” Willow mused.

“It’s about something serious,” Mel said. She felt Willow straighten underneath her.

“You can always ask me anything,” Willow answered.

“Where do you see this thing between us going? Is this serious for you? Because I’m already developing strong feelings.” The words came out far more rambling than Mel would have preferred.

Willow was quiet for a long time. Mel wondered if she should make a joke to deflect from the unease she felt. But Willow cleared her throat.

“I’m developing strong feelings, too. What do you want this to be?” Willow posed

the question in such a simple way that it caught Mel off guard.

“I want you to be my girlfriend.” It sounded strange even in Mel’s ears, but there was the truth of it.

“Then I guess we’re girlfriends,” Willow smiled down at her.

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“Okay. But is that what you want? Or are you agreeing because that’s what I want?”

“I want it, too. And I want it with you. I didn’t expect to feel this way about anyone after what happened with Amy. But I want everything with you, Mel.” Mel could hear the genuineness inside Willow’s words. She reached up to brush a hand against Willow’s cheek.

Willow leaned down to kiss Mel on the lips. Mel could feel the moment etching itself in her memory. She would always remember this feeling. This moment would always be important.

### Chapter 16

Willow wasn’t quite sure how to describe what she was feeling. She’d never been prone to whirlwind romances. But that was the only way to describe her time with Mel. They had spent the better part of two weeks together. But tonight was a big night. Tonight, Mel was going to meet all of Willow’s friends for a dinner party.

They had only recently put a label on themselves. Willow knew exactly how she felt about Mel by the pounding of her heart when her name was mentioned. She knew by the electric current that ran through her anytime Mel touched her.

Willow gave her reflection an appraising glance in the mirror. Her white t-shirt hugged snugly over her breasts. She also wore her favorite black shorts along with white canvas shoes. Willow knew she looked great. She heard a tap on her bathroom door and opened it. Her Mom stepped inside and gave her a once over. Angela’s expression shifted slightly to one of disapproval.

“What?” Willow asked, a note of accusation clear in her tone.

“Nothing. You look great,” Angela said with a smile.

“Mom. Whatever it is you want to say, just say it. It’ll save us both time.”

“I just don’t understand why you’re spending so much time on this new girl. You should be finding Amy and trying to work things out with her. Two years is a long time. Don’t you think it warrants trying to fix things?”

“Amy left me, Mom. I didn’t leave. I’m in the same exact place I was when she left me. If she wanted to work something out, she could easily find me. But, to answer your question, no, I don’t think it warrants trying to fix things. If she had wanted to work things out Amy would have stayed. Clearly, she doesn’t want to work it out. Mel is the first woman I’ve dated since Amy. Things with her are going really well.”

Angela scrunched up her face. She was clearly not at peace with Willow’s answer. But Willow couldn’t concern herself with that now. Mel would be here any minute. From his dog bed Sushi watched her. There was a knock on her door, signaling Mel’s arrival. From his dog bed Sushi gave a tiny bark.

“Wish me luck, buddy,” Willow said with a chuckle. Sushi gave a wag of his tail.

“Mom, try to be nice to Mel. I’m hoping to keep her around for a long time.”

Angela plastered a smile on her face that wasn’t completely genuine. Willow supposed she was willing to accept the gesture. At least her mom was trying to make a good faith gesture. That’s more than she was expecting.

Willow opened the door and greeted Mel with a large smile. Willow caught Mel’s eyes sliding from her eyes to her breasts. The glance made Willow’s core heat, a

preamble of what she hoped would come later that night.

“You look fantastic,” Mel said, trapping her lower lip between her teeth.

“You, too,” Willow smiled. She allowed her eyes to travel down Mel’s body and then back up again, meeting her eyes. Willow’s cheeks turned a deeper shade of pink.

Mel glanced past Willow and saw Angela. Willow noticed Mel straighten and widen her smile.

“I don’t think we’ve officially met. I’m Mel.” Mel offered an extended hand to Angela who took it.

““Yes, it’s very nice to meet you finally,” Angela said. She shot Willow an unmistakable look that questioned why Mel hadn’t come around to Willow’s place more. The truth was that Willow had enjoyed spending the bulk of her nights with Mel at her place. There was no way around the awkwardness of having her Angela living with her. Going over to Mel’s had just been easier.

“Absolutely,” Mel smiled.

“Mel what do you do for a living?” Angela asked still smiling.

“I manage a cafe in town,” Mel answered.

“That sounds fun,” Angela replied. Her tone was perfectly sweet, but Willow could read the subtext of her response. She didn’t consider Mel’s job to be serious enough.

“Well, we have to run,” Willow smiled.

“Of course. Will you be back home tonight?” Angela asked. Something about the



question put Willow on edge.

“Sure. I’ll be home tonight.” Willow gave her mom a nod of the head before pushing Mel through the door and closing it behind her.

“Willow, your mom is going to think I’m so rude.”

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“Oh, trust me she knows that was me and not you,” Willow grinned. She gave Mel a tiny poke in the sides, leading her towards the car.

“Okay. I want to get along with your mom though,” Mel insisted.

The statement made Willow a little sad. Angela had always been a little unaccepting of her girlfriends. Not for any reasons of prejudice but because no one would ever be good enough for her daughter. It would be sweet if it hadn’t pushed so many good people out of Willow’s life. Willow was determined not to let this happen with Mel.

Her friend, Piper, had an upscale condo overlooking the ocean. Piper who came from a wealthy family had always been rather tight lipped when it came to her background. Not that it mattered. Piper was one of the kindest most generous people Willow had ever met. Beside her in the car Mel twirled a brunette strand of hair around a finger.

“Everything okay?” Willow asked.

“I just hope your friends like me,” Mel admitted.

“My friends are going to love you,” Willow insisted.

“Sure. They’ll tell you they love me. But I want them to actually like me.”

“Trust me. If my friends don’t like you, they’ll tell me,” Willow said. Mel’s face turned to a grimace and Willow understood her mistake.

“But that won’t happen. Because you’re amazing! And you’re funny, smart, kind, and

wildly attractive,” Willow smiled. She glanced over and caught a pretty pink blush spreading across Mel’s cheeks.

Willow knocked once on Piper’s door then pushed it open. Piper had a strict open-door policy for friends. Piper stood in the kitchen. She wore a black tank top with an oversized Hawaiian shirt. Willow thought it fit her friend’s bright and vibrant personality perfectly. Piper ran to Willow, her dark black hair flowing behind her. She wrapped her arms around Willow first before turning to hug Mel. Willow had always loved how Piper’s excitement for life shone in her bright blue eyes.

The next person to greet them was Autumn. Tonight, her blonde hair flowed freely.

“You must be Mel. River has told us so much about you.” Autumn shot Willow an accusatory glance that said she would be talking to Autumn about this new relationship soon.

“All good things I hope,” Mel laughed.

“Of course,” Autumn said. She led Mel to the kitchen where River was waiting. River gave Mel a tiny hug.

“It’s nice to see you again,” River smiled.

“It’s nice to see you, too.”

“I’m afraid that I’ve got way more food than we’re going to need. But everything is ready so let’s eat.” Piper gestured towards the table.

Willow noted that it was decorated about two levels fancier than was required. River who had never met a subtlety she didn’t want to proclaim made sure to comment on the fanciness.

“My goodness, Piper. We’re not important enough for you to bring out the good plates,” River teased.

“You, my friends, are the only people in my life who are worthy of the good plates,” Piper declared. River leaned over to give Piper a hug.

They sat, and it felt like home. Willow felt a smile tugging at the edges of her mouth. She glanced over and saw Mel talking to Piper. Everything about the moment felt natural, like Mel was meant to be there.

“Mel tell us about your family? Are you from around here?” Piper asked.

“Yes, I grew up here. My parents still live in town. Last year I bought my own place and moved out. I still go over to visit my folks. But we’ve always been really independent of one another. Even when I lived with them. They’ve always had their lives and I’ve had mine.”

“Must be nice,” Willow chuckled. The words escaped before Willow had a chance to think about them. Everyone at the table turned to look at her, except for River. At the end of the table River erupted into laughter.

Autumn and Piper had understandable expressions of confusion on their faces. River wiped tears from her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Her Mom moved in with her,” River explained between snickers.

“Oh Willow, no,” Piper said with a grimace.

Autumn gave a simple shake of her head.

“What? It isn’t like I could leave her out on the street,” Willow announced, suddenly

defensive.

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“We know,” Piper admitted reluctantly.

“It’s just that your life is never more unsettled than when Angela gets involved,” Autumn offered.

“I know. You guys aren’t wrong. But for what it’s worth, Mom has been on her best behavior. She hasn’t really tried to meddle much at all. Maybe she’s turning a corner.”

Willow saw the dubious expressions on her friend’s faces and laughed. She understood their hesitation. Her Mother had never been one to sit back as a casual observer. When it came to Willow’s life, Angela was either all in or all out. There had never been a healthy medium option where her mother was concerned.

After dinner she pulled each of her friends in for a hug. She was beyond grateful to have this group of women in her life. Willow watched as Mel also gave her friends hugs. Piper pulled Willow to the side and whispered in her ear.

“We really like this one. Good job,” Piper smiled.

“Thanks. I really like her too,” Willow admitted.

She and Mel rode in silence for a few minutes after leaving. Mel was the first to break the quiet.

“I like your friends. Tonight was so much fun,” Mel laughed.

“They liked you, too,” Willow said. She grabbed Mel’s hand and brought it to her lips.

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. That was the last thing Piper said to me before we left.”

“I’m so glad.” Mel squeezed her hand. Mel wanted her, and Willow could feel it. But in the moment, it wasn’t merely sexual.

“You know, my friends aren’t the only ones that are rather fond of you?” Willow said, her tone low.

“Oh, who else is rather fond of me?” Mel teased.

“I’m sure many people. But I. Well, I love you.” Willow said the words quickly before she could second guess them. Waiting for Mel’s response felt like it took a hundred years. In reality, Mel responded quickly, without hesitation.

“I love you, too.”

Willow knew that Mel wanted this thing between them to grow. Willow wanted the same thing. She opened her mouth to say something, but the words stopped in her throat. An unfamiliar car sat parked in her driveway. Mel met her eyes and arched her eyebrow, questioning.

“Mom must have invited someone over,” Willow suggested.

She walked into her home and heard laughing in the kitchen. There was a familiarity to the sound that Willow couldn’t place. She was about to bypass her mother and take Mel back to her room.

“Willow is that you?” Angela called out. Willow gave a silent curse under her breath. She mouthed an apology to Mel. Mel gave her a tiny smile and followed her to the kitchen.

“Sweetie, look who I found,” Angela announced proudly as Willow walked into the kitchen. Willow stopped dead in her tracks as her eyes fell on her mother’s guest. Amy sat across from Angela at the kitchen table.

Willow could feel the world spinning. Beside her Mel’s grip tightened on her hand. Her Mom was saying something, but Willow couldn’t make out the words. She began walking away.

“Willow, stop. Don’t you think we should talk?” Amy’s words cut through Willow’s fog like an arrow. Mel met her eyes with a questioning glance.

“Mel, meet Amy. My ex,” Willow gestured towards Amy. Mel’s eyes widened in realization. Her hand tightened even more around her own.

“Willow. We should talk. Alone.” Amy let her eyes slide to Mel. The gesture was not subtle, and Willow felt a heat rising inside of her.

“Mel, can I call you tomorrow? I just need to figure some things out,” Willow offered.

The way Mel’s eyes narrowed was a clear sign that Willow had made the wrong decision. But Mel gave her an obviously forced smile before turning to leave. Willow hated to watch Mel leave. Mel allowed the door to close loudly behind her. Willow sucked in a breath and turned to face Amy.

Amy stood with her arms folded, leaning casually with her back against the wall. Willow was struck with the realization that six long months ago this same sight



would have prompted her to kiss the woman. Now it filled her with a mild vexation.

“What are you doing here, Amy?” Willow sighed. Amy looked at her confused.

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“Your Mom found me and told me how much you missed me. So, I came over because...” Amy paused for a beat, she sighed loudly then continued.

“I came over because I miss you, too,” Amy said. Willow’s mind spun in a million different directions. This was clearly a conversation she and Amy would have to have tomorrow.

“Okay. I can’t have this talk tonight. Can you come back in the morning?” Willow asked. Her words came out more curt than she’d intended. A glance at Amy’s face told Willow that she was taken aback by her tone.

“I should be able to come over tomorrow morning. Is ten, okay?” Amy asked.

“Sure. Ten should be fine.”

Willow walked Amy to the door to see her out. She was surprised when Amy turned and lay a hand against her cheek.

“I really have missed you,” Amy insisted. Willow pulled her face away.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Willow closed the door and turned to find her mother in the living room, watching her.

“Why send Amy away?” Angela asked. It was the genuine confusion that got to Willow.

“What on Earth were you thinking inviting Amy here? After everything that I’ve

been through trying to move on over the last six months.

“I thought you’d be happy,” Angela said defensively.

“Why would you think that? What have I said that led you to that conclusion? I’m dating Mel. I’m in love with Mel.”

“But you still miss Amy.” Her Mom’s words stung, in part because they were true.

“I’m moving on. It takes time and it’s painful. But I’m making plans with a new person. I’m in love with Mel.” Willow hated the pain in her own voice.

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“What makes this Mel person so special? Amy is accomplished and successful,” Angela said.

“She also left me without a single conversation,” Willow demanded. She threw her arms in the air.

“She’s here now.”

“Now it’s too late.”

Her Mom gave a weary sigh. Willow had seen her mom do the same thing since childhood. Angela pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Mel seems like a nice girl. I know you like her. I’m just asking you to consider both of your options,” Angela stated. From his dog bed Sushi gave a groan. He didn’t like

the raised voices.

“I’m going to bed,” Willow announced.

“Come on, Sushi,” Willow commanded. Sushi gave a long stretch then followed her to the bedroom.

As soon as the door closed Willow’s weariness hit her like a ton of bricks. The night had started out so perfectly. Why had her mom felt compelled to ruin it? Because this was their pattern. Willow would pick something. But if what she picked wasn’t up to Angela’s standards, she would insert herself into Willow’s life. Here she was a grown woman, still struggling with her mom’s interference. Tomorrow, she’d see Amy again. Tonight, she needed to text Mel. She desperately wanted to smooth things over with the woman.

Willow stared down at her phone, unsure of what to text. Instead, she found her fingers hitting the call button. It felt like the phone rang for a long time before Mel answered. Longer than usual.

“Hello.” Mel’s voice sounded stiff to Willow’s ears.

“Hey, I’m so sorry about tonight,” Willow said apologetically.

“What did you and Amy talk about?” Mel asked, her voice lacked its usual warmth.

“She wants to get back together.” Willow knew that even though it was difficult, honesty was the best policy.

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“What do you want?” Mel’s tone took on an unfamiliar note, concern or resignation maybe.

“I don’t know what I want. I just know that I need to talk things out with her.” Her words came out more of a whisper than she’d intended.

“I don’t understand. You just told me you were falling in love with me,” Mel protested. Willow felt her heart crack a little.

“I do love you. I just need to see this through. For closure if nothing else,” Willow explained.

“I do understand the need for closure. I think it’s best if we take a break while you figure out your situation. Now if you want to explore things with Amy, you’re free to do so.” Mel’s words were emotionless, but Willow knew that was a cover. A disguise that Mel used to cover what she was actually feeling.

“Okay. If that’s what you want,” Willow managed to make her words sound bold and confident.

“No, Willow. This isn’t what I want. None of this is what I want. But if you need figure some things out about your feelings towards Amy, I won’t stand in your way.”

Mel was being more than fair, and Willow knew that.

“Thank you.” It was the only thing left to say. Mel hung up without saying goodbye. The ringtone was harsh in Willow’s ears.

Mel was right down the street, but she may as well have been a hundred miles away. Willow knew that she had put distance in their relationship. She hated herself for that. But if she didn't give herself the opportunity for closure with Amy, she would always have questions. Willow had her doubts that she would be able to sleep. But Willow closed her eyes and remembered how it felt to hold Mel in her arms. It was a struggle but after a few hours Willow fell into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 17

Mel shouldn't have turned around. She shouldn't have felt compelled to throw one more look over her shoulder. But she had. And she had seen Amy reach up to touch Willow's face. How many times had she extended the same gesture to Willow? It had hurt to watch that moment play out in front of her. Mel did what she always did when she felt herself cracking, she shut down. By the time Willow had called, Mel was practically made out of stone. Mel couldn't believe how the night had gone from magic to heartbreak.

Mel glanced down at her phone and felt a knot in her stomach. She had given Willow the freedom to explore what she needed to, but would that come back to bite her? Mel texted Brianna to ask if she wanted to come over. Brianna agreed almost immediately. Brianna arrived at her door in record time. She gave a courtesy knock and waited for Mel to yell for her to come in. The formality of it made Mel smile. Mel sat stretched out on her couch, covered in a blanket.

"Honey, what's going on here?" Brianna asked with concern.

"I had a bad night," Mel said. She let a few tears fall from her eyes.

Brianna was at her side in a moment. Mel held up one end of the blanket and Brianna scooted under it, she wrapped an arm around Mel. This is what actual safety felt like. Someone who loved her for no other reason than because she'd chosen to.

“What happened? Did meeting Willow’s friends not go well?” Brianna asked. Mel knew she had a lot to fill her friend in on.

“Actually, that went really well. I love her friends and they love me too.”

“Then what happened?” Brianna asked.

“When we got home, we discovered that Willow’s mom had tracked down her ex.”

“Okay. That’s a choice.”

“And invited her to the house,” Mel punctuated. She watched as Brianna lifted her eyebrows.

“What did Willow say?”

“She basically escorted me out so that she could talk to Amy,” Mel frowned as more tears came out.

“Is it wrong that I expected her to just tell Amy to leave?” Mel asked.

“No, it isn’t wrong. You guys have put a definition on the relationship. That doesn’t change just because her ex comes around.”

“Exactly. Tonight, she told me she was in love with me. Then less an hour later she’s asking me to leave so she can talk to ex,” Mel cried.

“Willow definitely could have handled that better. But it sounds like she was just as surprised as you were. So maybe she just needs to have a conversation with Amy for the sake of closure,” Brianna offered.

“Maybe,” Mel admitted.

“What do you need right now?”



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“Can we eat ice cream and watch a couple movies?” Mel asked.

“We can do whatever you want.” Brianna leaned in and gave Mel a kiss on the top of her head.

Brianna rose from the couch and left to grab some ice cream. She brought back one quart with two spoons. Mel flipped on the television and found their favorite romantic comedy. There was nothing more comforting than having this kind of friendship in her life.

By the second movie they were both drifting off to sleep. Brianna didn't even have to ask if she could spend the night. She simply made her way to Mel's second bedroom. Mel couldn't imagine being able to sleep after the night she'd had, but she drifted off with ease.

The next morning Mel woke up to the sound of Mase panting in the bed beside her. Since she and Willow had been dating, they had developed a schedule of taking Mase and Sushi to the dog park first thing in the morning. Mel had come to enjoy the ritual. She and Willow would drink their coffees while their dogs played together. This morning she was running late, and Mase was having none of it. Mel rolled over to face the dog who gave a concerned whine.

“Okay. I'm up,” Mel groaned. Mase hopped from the bed and ran to the bedroom door.

Mel moaned and rolled out of bed. She slid her shoes on and ventured out of her bedroom. She was surprised to see Brianna awake and drinking coffee at the kitchen

table.

“I’m taking Mase to the dog park. I’ll be back in a little bit,” Mel sighed.

“I’ll come with you,” Brianna laughed.

“You sure? You don’t have to get up.”

“Of course, I’m coming.” Brianna rolled her eyes and smiled.

Mel could see Willow’s red hair even from a distance. She smiled as she opened the gate to let Mase run inside. Mel raised her hand to wave then dropped it immediately. Willow was standing with Amy. Mel’s heart cracked even more. Brianna followed her gaze and gave a low groan.

“Are you going to go talk to her?” Brianna asked.

“I mean she’s here with her ex. That pretty much tells me everything I need to know.”

“Can I go talk to her?” Brianna asked, her tone lowered.

“No. You’re going to stay right here with me. You help me stay brave,” Mel insisted. The compliment worked, Brianna looped arms with her and walked to the other side of the park.

Mase and Sushi had found one another and began playing. Mel saw the moment that Willow noticed her arrival. Willow’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Her lips turned to a frown as she looked between Mel and Amy. It was more than enough for Mel. If this was such a difficult decision for Willow, then their love wasn’t meant to be. Mel could never accept someone who could only love her halfway.

Mel forced herself to look away first. Even though her body tingled with the desire to be close to Willow.

“Are you okay?” Brianna asked.

“I will be,” Mel admitted.

“Should we get going?”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here,” Mel said. Mel called Mase, and he came over reluctantly. Mel clipped the leash on his collar and turned to go.

“Mel, wait,” Willow called out. As much as Mel wanted to ignore Willow she couldn’t. Mel turned to greet the woman just in time for Willow to run right into her. Willow’s shoulder smashed hard against Mel’s shoulder. Apparently Willow had been expecting a chase.

“Sorry,” Willow stammered as Mel rubbed her nose. She glanced at her hand and saw a red smear. Was she bleeding? The grimace on Brianna’s face confirmed her suspicions. Brianna glanced quickly between Willow and Mel, then slid her eyes over to Amy.

“I’m going to get her home,” Brianna said with concern. She took Mase’s leash and wrapped an arm around Mel’s shoulders.

“Thank you,” Mel whispered to Brianna.

“I do need to get you home. That’s quite the nosebleed,” Brianna chuckled.

Mel forced herself not to look back at Willow. What would be the point of seeing Willow leave her and choose Amy? She could feel Willow watching her as they

walked away.

Once they got back to her place Brianna forced Mel to sit on the couch. Mel could hear Brianna rummaging around in her kitchen. Brianna brought her a wet paper towel to cover her nose with.

“This is going to make quite the impression tonight at work,” Mel whined.

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“Who knew you had such a flair for the dramatic?”

“What did you think of that little encounter with Willow?” Mel asked.

“I’m not sure. It was awkward for both of you. That much was certain,” Brianna insisted.

“I just don’t know how I could have been so wrong about her,” Mel admitted.

“What do you mean?” Brianna asked.

“Last night Willow said she was in love with me. Today she’s going to the dog park with Amy. It paints a pretty clear picture.”

“It’s just a dog park, not dinner and the movies. Besides, you said you saw Amy leave last night, right?”

“Yeah,” Mel grumbled reluctantly.

“Have you considered that maybe she is just talking to Amy?”

“Maybe,” Mel said.

“I know you’re still mad and you have every right. Just try to take a breath and let things unfold.”

Mel pulled the paper towel away from her nose. She was relieved not to see any fresh

blood. The clock above her stove said that it was eight-thirty. Mel felt a shock run through her.

“Shit. I’m running late.” Mel’s eyes fell on Mase.

“Relax. I’ll drop Mase off at doggy daycare. That way you won’t be late for work.”

Mel gave Brianna a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you. You’re the best platonic wife and stepmother ever,” Mel shouted as she ran to her bedroom to change. She put on her work uniform and bolted through the door without a minute to spare. At least the rest of her day would be mundane and predictable.

## Chapter 18

For Willow, seeing Amy standing in her kitchen brought about a complex set of emotions. It was somehow both familiar and strange. This had started out being their kitchen. Since Amy had left Willow had slowly begun the process of seeing the home as her own. Willow had demanded that Angela leave so she could have a private conversation with Amy. Her mother had protested, but eventually relented.

Willow still found Amy attractive, a cruel jest played by nature. Amy stood back, leaning against the refrigerator with her arms crossed. It was the way Amy had always stood when they were in the kitchen together. Now there was something off-putting about the familiarity. Amy was talking about her job and every other mundane topic. But it wouldn’t do.

Willow wished she could call Mel and talk to her. Or even just send her a text, but she refused to involve Mel in her personal dramas. Besides there was nothing to tell her until she and Amy talked.

“Why did you leave me with nothing but a note?” Willow finally asked. Amy inhaled a deep breath.

“I was scared,” Amy admitted.

“Scared of what?”

“I was afraid of being settled.”

Willow took a moment to absorb that truth.

“We were together for two years. Weren’t we already settled?” Willow asked.

“Yes, of course. I think in my brain an engagement and wedding just cemented it. Sort of like, no going back now,” Amy answered. She punctuated her words with an airy chuckle. A sure sign that she was nervous.

“But you did go back. You full-on ran away, from us, from me.” Willow could hear the cracking of her own voice. It didn’t bother her, let Amy hear how upset she was.

“I’m back now,” Amy offered.

“But why? After all this time. All it took was my mom finding you to convince you to come back.” Willow threw her hands in the air, confusion washing over her. She would do anything to be wrapped up in Mel’s arms right now.

“I’ve missed you the whole time.”

“Yet you never came back. Why?” Willow accused.

“The longer I was gone the harder it was to come back. I felt so ridiculous giving up on this amazing thing we had. And for what? I ended up alone in a one-bedroom apartment with noisy neighbors.” Amy gave another tiny huff of laughter.

“Sorry your life wasn’t everything you imagined after you left.” Willow spat the words.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Amy insisted.

“I don’t know much of anything anymore. I knew that I loved you and wanted a life together. And then I knew you were gone.”

“What about now? Could we try again?” Amy asked. Willow sighed.

She tried to imagine what it would be like for Amy to come back. For them to build the life together that they had planned. But her brain kept exchanging Amy’s face with Mel’s. Her heart couldn’t lie, it only had feelings for Mel.

“I’m sorry. I don’t feel the same way about you, anymore. I found someone else. She’s amazing and I want a future with her,” Willow admitted.

Amy nodded her head slowly. Willow knew Amy was trying to process her words.



“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re a catch. It was silly to think you’d stay single long,” Amy smirked. Willow gave a small smile of her own.

“I shouldn’t have left. Especially not the way I left,” Amy added. She walked towards the door. Willow made no move to stop her. Amy opened the door and then she was gone.

Willow sank down on her couch. An hour later her Mom came through the door. Angela was in particularly high spirits, all smiles.

“I brought some things for dinner. Will Amy be staying to eat with us tonight?” Willow was reminded yet again that subtlety was not her Mother’s strong suit.

“Mom, sit down,” Willow said, keeping her tone even.

Angela looked at Willow and frowned. She sat down in a chair beside the couch.

“Where’s Amy?”

“She left,” Willow said simply.

“Did something happen?” Angela asked.

“I don’t want to be with Amy. I want to be with Mel. I don’t know if it’s her job or some other mundane thing that caused you not to want me to be with her. But none of those things matter to me. Since I’m the one dating her, that’s the most important thing.”

Angela eyed her for a moment.

“I guess if that’s what you want I won’t try to change your mind,” Angela scowled.

“What could you possibly have against Mel?” Willow asked.

“I don’t have anything against her. You and I haven’t been close since the divorce. I thought that finding this woman you were in love with and helping the two of you reconnect would be a nice thing. I think I underestimated your feelings for Mel. My heart was in the right place. I just don’t always have terrific follow through.”

Willow had to laugh at her mom’s explanation. It was too perfect. Still, she felt a tender spot in her heart for all the unnecessary trouble her mom had gone to on her behalf.

“In the future all I need you to do is support whatever my current relationship is,” Willow advised.

“I guess that’s fair. I’m trying not to be so pushy. It’s hard when I think I know what you should be doing,” Angela insisted. Willow flashed her mother a withering stare.

“But you’re right. I shouldn’t meddle with your personal life,” Angela added.

“That’s all I can ask,” Willow said, allowing a hint of sarcasm to come through her tone.

“What are you going to do now?” Angela asked.

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“Text Mel. If there’s one thing talking with Amy showed me, it’s how deep my feelings for Mel truly are.”

“Can I meddle in your life one final time?”

“I guess,” Willow said, she eyed her mother suspiciously.

“Don’t text. Go see Mel in person,” Angela suggested.

Willow nodded her head. Her Mom was right. So much had happened over the last couple days that Willow knew seeing Mel in person was the only way to have the conversation with her that she needed to have. Willow longed to tell Mel how much she’d missed her while she got things sorted out with Amy.

On the way to the cafe Willow picked up some flowers. Seeing Mel at the dog park that morning had almost broken Willow. There had been a look of pain in her eyes that hurt Willow to the core. She knew that convincing Mel to hear her out would be a long shot. She saw Mel through the window of Mallie’s diner and felt her heart thud. What was she even going to say to this wonderful woman?

Willow sighed out loud, startling a couple of old women walking down the street. This was Willow’s chance to be brave. She pushed the door open and took the first step inside. Partially blinded by the sunlight Mel didn’t see Willow. She barreled right into Willow, spilling three plates of food onto her.

“I’m so sorry,” Mel gasped before realizing it was Willow.

“This is getting to be a habit for the two of us,” Willow laughed. She watched as Mel’s features hardened as she recognized Willow.

“I guess that’s true. Lucky for you Amy seems more than capable of interacting with you without any spills.” Willow grimaced. She deserved the words but that didn’t make hearing them any easier.

“Can we talk?” Willow asked. She was suddenly aware of all the people around them.

“I’m working. Besides what’s left to talk about? You told me that you wanted to be with me. You said you loved me. Then as soon as your ex was presented to you all of that went out the window.”

“No, it didn’t. My feelings for you never changed. Please, let’s talk.”

“Fine. You can come over to my place tonight. I need to give you all your stuff that you left over there anyway,” Mel said, there was a tremble in her voice that told Willow that she was more sad than angry. Willow wasn’t sure that was better.

“Okay. I’ll see you tonight,” Willow responded softly.

She left the diner feeling somewhat defeated. The flowers she bought were still in her hands, stems broken by her collision with Mel. There was only one thing she could think to do. Willow pulled out her phone and texted River. She knew her friend would come, because she always came. That was what made River such an incredible friend, she could always count on her to come when she needed her most.

## Chapter 19

“Do you think I’m being dramatic?” Mel asked. Jordan arched her eyebrow as she took a sip of coffee.

Mel watched Jordan with vested interest. The woman was probably the most competent person Mel had ever met. Jordan paused and Mel could tell she was considering her answer before she spoke. After her encounter with Willow, Mel had gone to the smartest person she knew. When it came to life there were few people whose advice Mel trusted more than Jordan's.

"Did Willow say she wanted a break?" Jordan asked.

"No. I asked for the break because I wanted her to be able to truly work everything out with her ex. I didn't want there to be any questions as far as who she wanted to be with."

Jordan nodded thoughtfully.

"But was part of you hoping Willow would say she didn't need a break? Was part of you wanting her to say that she already knew you were her choice?" Jordan gave Mel a thoughtful smile. Mel blushed. She felt as though Jordan had cut through to her soul.

"That would have been nice. I wish she could have said those things to me. Of course, part of me wanted to feel chosen right away. But I expected Willow to need to take some time to figure out her feelings. But yes, I wanted what she felt for me to be so overwhelming that she didn't have to ask any questions," Mel explained.

"I think you did the right thing. I also don't think you're being dramatic. It is a little bit of a blow to start a relationship with someone and then for them to seemingly backpedal out of the blue. At the same time if this woman really did just leave out of the blue I think it's fair that she needs some closure."

"So what should I do?" Mel asked.

"Be honest. But be open-minded as well. Willow didn't seek her ex out. She was

forced into an unexpected situation. I would listen to what Willow has to say. Ask any question you can think of to make sure none of your boundaries have been crossed then go from there.”

Mel nodded her head, it was sound advice. She looked around Jordan’s office at all of the adoption photos of dogs with their new owners. Mel found her picture with Mase and smiled at the memory.

“You’re right. I think it’s fair to have some negative feelings. But I also think I need to keep an open mind. Of course, there’s a chance that none of this matters anyway,” Mel admitted.

“What do you mean?”

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“Well, there’s always a chance that Willow will ultimately decide to stay with Amy.” Mel tried to make herself sound nonchalant. She tried to say the words as if that scenario wouldn’t rip her in half.

“That’s not going to happen,” Jordan smirked.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“For one, look at you. You’re gorgeous and you’re smart. Willow would be stupid to pick anyone else. But also, Amy left her in the worst possible way. I don’t care what anyone says, that kind of pain is never forgotten.”

“I guess you’re right. But I still can’t bring myself to be completely confident in that. If there’s one thing I know about people, it’s that they have a way of surprising you,” Mel sighed.

“You’re definitely not wrong about that,” Jordan admitted with a smirk.

Mel glanced at her cell. She was going to be late meeting Brianna. When Mel had called her, Brianna had insisted on giving her a pep talk before Willow came over.

“Thanks for talking me through everything. You’re always very helpful.” Mel meant every word. She had come to respect Jordan and her advice.

“Anytime. My door is always open for a friend,” Jordan flashed a warm smile. Mel felt a warming in her heart.

She closed the door behind her as she left. Mel took the corner at a jog and ran smack into someone. They both fell to the floor. Mel stood and extended a hand. When her eyes met the other woman's she had to stop herself from groaning out loud. Of course, she would run into Willow's mom. Angela grabbed her hand and pulled herself to her feet. She shot Mel an appraising glance on the way up.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to run you over," Mel apologized. Angela was quick to shoot her a smile.

"That's okay. I probably deserve that at the very least after everything," Angela laughed. Her words took Mel by surprise.

"I'm sorry, what?" Mel asked, confused. Angela gave a loud sigh.

"It has been brought to my attention that I probably overstepped. Apparently, tracking down your daughter's ex-girlfriend and inviting her over is considered meddling," Angela smirked. Mel laughed at Angela's self-realization.

"There are some who would say that," Mel chuckled.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry. I thought I was helping by reuniting Willow and Amy. But now I see that you were the one she wanted all along."

Mel felt a flutter in her heart.

"Why do you say that? It seems like Willow was more than considering Amy," Mel said in a half-grumble. She forced herself to smile. This was Willow's mom, after all.

"Sweetie, Willow doesn't have eyes for anyone but you. She just wanted closure with Amy so that she could move on," Angela insisted.



Mel wanted to allow Angela's words to comfort her more than anything. But she could still feel her heart holding back. Angela could see the concern on her face.

"It can be hard to give someone a second chance," Angela said.

"Yes, it can. What if she never loves me the same way she loved Amy?"

"She won't," Angela said with a shrug of her shoulders.

"What?"

"No two loves are ever the same. Willow had what she had with Amy. It can't be duplicated with you, and it shouldn't be. Because what you have with Willow will be your own special thing."

"Thank you for saying that. It means a lot to have your support," Mel admitted.

"You don't need my support. Willow loves you," Angela chuckled.

"Maybe not. But I still want your support," Mel reassured her.

"Then in that case, you have it," Angela smiled. Mel returned a smile of her own.

"What are you doing here?" Mel asked, suddenly curious.

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“Well, since I’m going to be staying in WaterColor for a while I thought I could volunteer here,” Angela explained.

“That’s wonderful. Jordan, the manager, is always looking for volunteers,” Mel smiled.

“Then I guess I’m in the right place,” Angela teased.

“You definitely are.”

Mel checked her cell and cursed silently. She was running late to catch up with Brianna. When she finally pulled into her driveway Brianna was sitting on the porch. Her friend didn’t say anything, but Mel could tell Brianna was perturbed. Shit.

“I’m so sorry. I ran into Willow’s mom,” Mel explained. She watched as Brianna’s eyebrows lifted, her frustration suddenly replaced by interest. Mel smiled as she opened the door.

“How did that come about?” Brianna asked with a smirk.

“I was rounding the corner and ran right into her. Which seems to be a bit of a theme for me lately,” Mel groaned.

Brianna laughed as she took her usual spot on Mel’s couch. For the first time, Mel noticed that there was a Brianna-sized indentation in the couch cushion where her friend usually sat. She felt an unexpected warmth radiate from her heart. That spot represented hours worth of her and Brianna hanging out.

“Are you okay?” Brianna asked.

“Yeah. I was just thinking about your spot on my couch,” Mel explained.

“Okay. Why do you look like you want to cry?”

“Because there’s a you-sized indent in my couch. And it’s because you and I have spent so many hours talking on this couch,” Mel said with a warm smile.

“Oh, my goodness. You’re equal parts weird and sweet,” Brianna laughed. She threw an arm around Mel and pulled her in for a hug.

“Now, tell me about running into Angela,” Brianna smiled.

“Well, she told me that Willow wanted me and not Amy.”

“That’s something at least.”

“Maybe,” Mel admitted.

“What do you mean, maybe?”

“It’s very reliant on Angela knowing what is going on inside Willow’s head. And I’m not sure about that.”

“I would say for her to have such a dramatic about-face, there has to be a reason,” Brianna offered.

“I guess we’ll find out tonight.”

“Everything will work out. Even if you and Willow go your separate ways it’ll all

work out.”

“I know. It’s just the anticipation that gets to me,” Mel admitted.

“That’s understandable. But you’ve got this. And whatever happens I’m happy to sink your couch in more whenever you need it,” Brianna laughed. Mel rolled her eyes but smiled.

“I should get going. I want to give you time to prepare for your talk with Willow.”

“Thanks for coming over, friend. I appreciate the pep talk.”

“Anytime,” Brianna laughed. She gave Mel one last hug and headed for the door. Before she stepped out Brianna turned back to her.

“You’ve got this, buddy,” Brianna said. Mel gave her a smile and watched as Brianna closed the door behind her.

It was strange being left here alone and waiting. Mel couldn’t help but wish the time would pass quicker. In an hour Willow would be there and Mel would have her answers one way or another.

### Chapter 20

After leaving the cafe Willow had spent her day trying to get some work done. It had ultimately been an effort in futility. She had settled for sitting on her couch texting River. Later, she would go over to Willow's house. She could only hope that Mel would see her side of things.

Amy had never been an option, not really. But she had needed to have the conversation. Willow had needed the closure. Willow's love for Mel had never lessened over the time she spent with Amy. But would Mel believe that? Willow had spent the last two hours desperately trying to tune into the show she was watching. She was finally beginning to settle in when her door shook with a thunderous knock. Willow startled, but knew immediately that it had to be River.

She opened the door and was surprised to find that River was not alone. Autumn and Piper both stood with her. Autumn and Piper's arms were crossed over their chests. They leveled stares at Willow.

"Hey guys. Why don't you come in?" Willow chuckled.

"Willow, how could you not tell us what was going on with Amy?" Autumn accused.

"I can't believe we had to hear about everything from River," Piper said sternly.

"I was a little busy actually handling the situation," Willow responded.

"You can't send like a text message or something?" Piper asked.

Despite their tones, Willow knew that her friends were here because they cared. She flashed Autumn and Piper an apologetic smile. Willow watched as the two women dropped their guards.

“You’re right, I should be better about keeping the two of you up to date,” Willow admitted. Autumn and Piper grinned.

“That’s all we ask,” Piper chuckled. Willow rolled her eyes.

“Catch us up,” Autumn said, she strolled over to Willow’s couch and sat down.

As if on cue Sushi ran in from Willow’s bedroom and plopped into his dog bed. It was as if Sushi wanted to be part of the gossip, too. They laughed at the scene of the beagle laying there, paws crossed, watching them.

“Okay, catching you up. Mom did a thing and tracked Amy down. So I come home and it’s just Mom and Amy at my kitchen table. I was thrown pretty off guard. Not at all what I was expecting. I guess I’ve been on Amy’s mind. She was hoping we could rekindle the relationship.”

“Of course, she was. You were a great girlfriend,” Piper announced. The beginnings of a smile curved up the ends of Willow’s lips.

“Thanks,” Willow said genuinely.

“I don’t think Mel would agree. Unfortunately, she got caught in the middle of this entire situation.”

“What did she say about all of this?” Autumn asked.

“She said we should go on a break while I figured everything with Amy out.”

“Which is honestly fair,” River chimed in.

“I know. It’s just hard,” Willow admitted.

“So where are things between the two of you now?” Piper asked.

“I’m supposed to go talk to her tonight.”

“What are you going to say?” River asked.

“I’m going to explain my side of things. I’m going to apologize, because this has been unfair to Mel. I know that it has. And I’m going to hope that she can forgive me.”

Her friends nodded their heads.

“Mel is the real deal. We could tell when she hung out with us. You don’t exchange something that real for something that has already run its course,” Piper admonished.

“I know. What I want with Mel is real, too. I can only hope after everything that she can see that,” Willow admitted.

Piper’s words wouldn’t have hurt so much, except that they struck a chord. Her friend was right. Willow had fallen for Mel, but she had let her go until she sorted things out with Amy. It had been a mistake; Willow could see that now. As if she could sense Willow’s inner conflict, Piper gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

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“What do you want with Mel?” Autumn asked.

“Everything. I want all of my future firsts to be with Mel,” Willow answered.

She was a little taken aback by her own confidence in the statement. From the expressions she was receiving around the room her friends were a little surprised as well. She allowed herself to enjoy the moment and settle into the certainty. It felt good to feel certain. When she looked back at her life with Amy she had never felt this certain about their relationship. As much as it had hurt when Amy left, Willow couldn't really say she'd been surprised. Amy had always been hesitant every step of the way.

Willow turned her attention back to her friends. Sushi came over for a few head scratches. They all chatted for several more minutes. Willow remained aware of what time it was. Mel should be home any minute. It was River who met Willow's eyes and read her expression. River shot Willow a warm smile.

“Well, ladies, we should probably get going. Willow has to get ready for her big talk,” River announced.

Willow groaned and shook her head. River was an amazing friend, but she wasn't at all subtle. Piper and Autumn looked at one another and laughed.

“We're glad we got to get the scoop on life events in person,” Autumn grinned.

“I'm glad you all came over. Thank you,” Willow said. Her heart swelled as she hugged each of her friends.



Reality hit Willow as soon as the door closed behind her friends. It was time for her to go talk to Mel. Willow slid on her shoes and walked towards the door. Every step down the sidewalk was heavy. She stopped frozen in front of Mel's door. Willow forced her hand to push the doorbell. She heard Mase barking then Mel's voice quieting him.

Her mind split considering both possible outcomes of their talk. Mel forgiving her and them staying together. Mel telling her to fuck off, and Willow leaving broken-hearted. There were tears in her eyes before Mel even opened the door.

Willow quickly wiped the tears away, It wasn't fair for her to show up crying. Not after everything that had happened over the last couple days. Mel opened the door and smiled at Willow. The sight of Mel's smile made Willow want to melt into a puddle on the floor.

"Hi." Willow's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Hi." Mel smiled. Mel stepped aside and allowed Willow to walk through the door.

"I missed you." The words came and left Willow's mouth before she could capture them. Mel tilted her head to the side, her smile still a little tight.

"Why don't you tell me about the last couple of days," Mel offered.

"I will. I'll tell you everything and I'll answer your questions. But I have to say something else first."

"What's that?" Mel asked.

"I have to say I'm sorry. Seeing Amy brought back so many things for me."

“I understand,” Mel offered. She opened her mouth to say more then shut it again. Willow paused, waiting for Mel to find her words.

“I understand how that probably threw you for a loop. But my biggest problem is how you handled it. You didn’t talk to me about it. You didn’t talk to me about how you were feeling. You said this was something you had to handle. We’re supposed to be partners.” Willow hated the pain that tinged Mel’s voice.

“I never meant for you to feel brushed aside. When Amy left I was broken. I wanted closure so badly, so that I could move on. So that I could move on with you,” Willow pleaded.

“I was never opposed to you getting closure. I just don’t like the way things played out between you and I. You told me you were in love with me, and then pulled away so you could talk to your ex-girlfriend. How should I feel about that?”

“You’re right. I was so focused on getting what I needed that I didn’t think about how that might look to you,” Willow admitted. Mel released a loud huff of air.

“Did you find the answers you were looking for?” Mel asked.

“I did.”

“And?”

“Amy left, and things weren’t what she’d hoped for. Now she wants to come back. But if she were with me I’m pretty sure she’d think that things were better over there. It was never really about Amy. It was about me being able to move on with you. And I didn’t ask you to be involved because I’ve never had a partner who would have wanted to be involved in a messy situation with me,” Willow explained.

Willow watched as Mel's face visibly softened. Mel unfolded her arms and reached out for her. Willow practically fell into Mel's arms, allowing the woman to fold her into an embrace.

“Well, now you do have a partner that wants to go through messy situations with you, so let me,” Mel said, her tone firm.

Now Willow allowed her tears to fall. She tried not to let them soak into Mel's shirt, but her attempts were unsuccessful.

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“I thought maybe I had pushed you away for good,” Willow admitted.

“I was thrown for a loop to be sure. But, no, I’m not going anywhere. This is exactly where I want to be,” Mel purred into Willow’s ear.

“I love you,” Willow whispered.

“I love you, too,” Mel smiled. She hooked a finger under Willow’s chin and brought her face forward into a kiss.

Willow allowed the moment between them to deepen, drawing her into it. The new and now familiar feeling of certainty flooded Willow’s mind, incapable of being ignored. She met Mel’s eyes and offered a warm smile.

“I’m so glad we found each other,” Willow smiled.

“You mean you’re glad that I knocked you to the ground so many times that you couldn’t ignore me?” Mel smirked.

“There’s no one else I’d rather have slam me to the ground than you,” Willow teased.

“Oh, I would hardly say you were slammed to the ground.” Mel laughed.

Willow pressed another kiss against Mel’s lips. This was it. The fresh start she’d been waiting for. Willow had a chance to move forward with Mel and leave the past behind her. There was nothing she wanted more than this new life with Mel.

## Chapter 21

Mel happily decorated her living room. Sushi and Mase ran around, chasing one another.

“You guys go outside,” Mel commanded.

They both looked at her before running out to the yard. It had become apparent very early on that the two of them wanted a place together. So, six months ago Willow had sold her place to her mom. Willow then moved in with Mel in her place. The whole thing had been a whirlwind ever since.

Mel and Willow had traveled together with the dogs. She looked around her home and smiled at all the pictures they had accumulated in such a short amount of time. This summer they were all set to go on a cruise for the first time. Brianna and River had fought over who would take care of the dogs, before deciding they both would.

Today was an important day. Mel had been preparing for months. She pulled a tiny box out of her back pocket and opened it. A small diamond ring twinkled back up at her. Her life and Willow’s had intertwined so quickly. Even their friend groups had combined. Brianna had been seamlessly included along with Mel. Now, Mel hoped to make it all official by proposing.

She had shown the ring to all of their friends. Now all that was left was the actual proposal. River and Brianna were coming to walk her through it any moment. Mel knew what she wanted, she didn’t need any more time. But Willow often moved slower and with more caution. There was a chance she’d be moved by the gesture but think that they were moving too fast. A knock on her door alerted Mel to River and Brianna’s arrival.

She threw open the door and her two friends threw their arms around her. It had felt

amazing to be so accepted by River.

“Okay, let’s see it,” Brianna teased.

“You’ve already seen the ring,” Mel laughed.

“But we want to see it again,” River insisted.

Mel gave them both a playful roll of her eyes. She pulled the ring out and opened the lid for them to both see.

“Willow is going to love this,” River smiled.

“I love it,” Brianna said.

“Thanks, guys,” Mel laughed.

“So what’s the plan today?” River asked.

“Nothing too extravagant. A picnic on the beach followed by a proposal. Then we’ll meet up with you guys, Piper, and Autumn. What do you guys think?” Mel asked.

“It sounds perfect for you and Willow,” River stated.

“I think it sounds amazing,” Brianna smiled.

“It isn’t too simple?” Mel asked, she crossed her arms over her chest.

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“I really think simple works for the two of you,” River replied.

“It does definitely fit the two of you,” Brianna laughed.

“Okay. Then that’s the plan,” Mel said confidently.

“What can we do to help?” Brianna asked.

“Nothing. I have everything I need and I’ll see you both after it’s over,” Mel grinned.

“Good luck, buddy,” River said, pulling Mel in for a hug.

“Everything is going to be great,” Brianna smiled, she pulled Mel in for a hug. Mel wrapped her arms around Brianna a little tighter, and waited an extra beat before letting her go.

“Love you guys,” Mel said as she walked them to the door.

“We love you, too,” River smiled.

Mel wasn’t sure what to do with her suddenly empty house. Mase and Sushi lay in their respective dog beds. It had been a blessing that the two of them had gotten along since day one. In contrast to their owners.

Mel had sent Willow out on some trivial tasks in an attempt to get her out of the house. Now she picked up her phone. Mel gave a deep sigh, then dialed Willow’s number.

“Hey, babe,” Willow rasped into the phone.

“Are you okay?” Mel asked.

“Yeah. I got the flowerpots you asked for. They were a little heavier than I was expecting,” Willow laughed. Mel felt a slight pang of guilt.

“Aww, thank you. Listen, let me make it up to you with dinner on the beach,” Mel said. She could feel her smile growing.

“Honestly, that sounds fantastic,” Willow answered.

“Great. Then meet me there.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a little bit.”

Mel couldn’t stop her smile from growing. She patted her pocket and felt her nerves dissolve. She was about to propose to the person she wanted to spend her entire life with. And she couldn’t wait.

Mel had everything laid out on the beach when Willow arrived. Mel had set the scene with a large blue towel spread across the sand and a wicker picnic basket that Mel had bought special for the occasion. The picnic basket was the sort of thing that made for beautiful photos but wasn’t terribly practical. The basket had almost spilled its contents multiple times on the trek down to the beach. Now, seeing the surprised and delighted expression on Willow’s face made it all worthwhile. Willow’s smile brightened her entire face.

“Oh my gosh. I didn’t expect you to go through so much trouble,” Willow said. She bent down to give Mel a kiss on the lips.



“It’s the least I could do after making you run around all day,” Mel laughed.

“I’m always happy to run around for you,” Willow grinned.

Mel patted the spot beside her on the blanket. Willow slid into the spot next to her and eyed the food. Mel had made sure to pack all of Willow’s favorites. In the distance over the ocean Mel could see dark clouds forming and beginning to roll in. She hoped the weather would hold until she could propose, but with Florida weather Mel knew she couldn’t be sure.

Willow had already grabbed a couple of crackers and smeared them with cheese. Mel leaned back on her elbow and let Willow enjoy the moment. She watched as the waves crashed against the shore with a bit more intensity than before. Mel felt a sense of growing dread. She willed the weather to remain calm for another hour or so.

“I have something to tell you,” Willow began. She had a crinkle in her forehead that signaled genuine concern. Mel cocked her head to the side unsure what could be going on.

“What’s going on?” Mel asked as her concern mounted.

“I think I got the wrong size of flowerpots,” Willow explained. Mel’s eyes were drawn to the growing black clouds behind Willow’s shoulder. Mel’s eyes were drawn to the spot. Willow tilted her head and gave Mel a questioning look.

“Is everything okay?” Willow asked. Mel did a double take, her attention snapping back to Willow.

“I’m sorry. What are you talking about?” Mel asked. Willow gave a tiny laugh and rolled her eyes.

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“You asked for flowerpots for an herb garden. When I was loading them into the car they seemed a little large to me. I think I got the wrong size. Sorry,” Willow said apologetically. Mel laughed, causing Willow to scrunch her face.

“I’m sorry, babe. It’s just, do you realize how adorable you are?” Mel asked. She took Willow’s chin in her hand and drew her in for a long kiss.

Mel’s eyes drifted to the now larger waves crashing against the shore. There was definitely a storm on the horizon. Mel could smell the change in the air. She was going to have to propose quicker than expected. It was either that or risk the rain ruining their big moment.

“With reactions like that I’m never buying you the right flowerpots again,” Willow teased.

“You’re perfect. I actually have something I...”

Giant raindrops began to fall from the sky. Mel and Willow grabbed up all their belongings and ran to Mel’s car. Mel jumped in the driver’s side and slammed the door. She was soaking wet, her clothes clinging to her. Mel glanced over at Willow and saw that she was in a similar condition.

“Sorry the rain ruined the picnic you planned.” Willow grabbed Mel’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

Mel glanced out at the ocean and smiled. A memory came flooding back to her. That night when she’d seen Willow out in the rain, searching for Sushi. There had been the

briefest of moments when Mel had considered not stopping. She had worked a long shift that day, and she'd wanted to get home. Now she couldn't imagine a world where she hadn't pulled over and started the series of events that had led her here.

"Are you okay?" Willow asked.

"Yes, this is actually perfect," Mel began.

"Oh, is it?" Willow asked in obvious confusion.

"Yeah. This is where everything started for us. That rainy night when Sushi got out," Mel explained. A smile tugged at the edges of Willow's mouth as she pulled up the same memory.

"You're right. This is very similar."

Mel pulled the box out of her pocket .

"I had this whole plan for today. But I think this is even more perfect."

Willow eyed Mel with suspicion, she was obviously trying to work out what Mel was talking about. Mel brought out the box and opened it in front of Willow's face. Mel watched as Willow's eyes grew even larger.

"Willow, we made an awful first impression on each other. But now I can't imagine a future without you in it. You're everything I have ever wanted in a partner. And I want to spend all the rest of my days with you. Will you marry me?" She watched Willow's face for a reaction. At first glance Willow was unreadable, but then her mouth turned upward and her eyes filled with tears.

"There is nothing I've ever wanted more than a future with you. I can't think of anything better than getting married to you," Willow answered.

Willow pulled Mel in for a long hug followed by a kiss. They both allowed the kiss to deepen. Mel remembered the ring and paused to slide it onto Willow's finger.

"Thank you for being everything I ever could have asked for and more," Mel said.

"Thank you for giving me so many first chances," Willow teased.

"You were worth the initial grumpiness," Mel laughed.

Willow pulled her in for another kiss and Mel felt her heart melt. There was nothing about Willow that didn't pull on her heartstrings. Mel, who was prone to questioning every decision, was fully convinced that Willow was exactly who she wanted in her life. Mel closed her eyes. As their lips moved together Mel closed her eyes and pictured their forever. They would have so many experiences, but the important thing was, they would have them together.