



# Living For You

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**Description:** Most times, we don't see the big days in our life coming. The life-changing moments creep up on us. We don't wake up knowing that today will be the day something happens that completely alters the trajectory of our lives. I did, of course. I knew the exact date my wife was going to die. From the moment I met Willow Stone, I knew December 27, 2019, would be the day my world came crashing down. That wasn't a surprise. What I didn't expect was to kiss my dead wife's best friend on the anniversary of her death.

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## Chapter 1

December 27, 2021

“Grandma! Grandpa! We here!” my daughter, Emery, yelled as soon as we entered their house.

Visiting them was nothing new. Since their neighborhood was right around the corner from our house, we were there practically every day at some point. Today, there was a heavy feeling in my heart though. It had been over two years since I walked through this door with Willow by my side. Two years since I lost the love of my life. As if the grief wasn’t enough to carry on my back, there was also the constant feeling of guilt that seemed to double in size on the anniversary of Willow’s death. Because I was the only person (still living) who had known that day was coming. Her family, her friends, her own daughter. None of them knew that the last time they saw Willow would be the last time ever.

Watching them grapple over what they would have done differently if they knew they only had limited time with her practically killed me. Because I knew. I didn’t have to live with any regrets. I loved Willow fully and unwaveringly for the twelve years that she was in my life. Of course, that didn’t help to ease the pain of losing her. Even two years later, it felt like I was walking around with a missing limb. There was a part of me—a huge part—that I would never get back. Willow was my soulmate. Even though our love story only lasted twelve years, those twelve years were filled with more love and memories than most people get in an entire lifetime. Willow changed my life in more ways than I could count, and all I wanted to do was hold her one more time. I wanted to watch her laugh while she held our daughter. I wanted her to

stare into my soul as we made love. But I couldn't do any of that anymore, because she was gone. Sure, I knew it was coming, but that didn't make the loss hurt any less.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't even realize my mother-in-law was now standing in front of me, struggling to hold my wiggling daughter in her arms. She hoisted Emery higher on her hip, then reached out a hand and squeezed my arm. "How are you doing, dear?" she asked, her small smile doing nothing to mask the sadness in her eyes.

I shrugged. "As well as can be expected. How are you?"

"We're getting by."

"We're just happy we'll have the whole family together tonight," my father-in-law said as he walked into the hallway and wrapped me in a hug. When he pulled away, he kept his hands on my arms and flashed me a smile that was far from convincing. "Willow wouldn't be very happy about all of these sad faces, you know. If she was here, she would definitely yell at us for wasting a perfectly good day."

I laughed even as a stab of pain hit my heart. If she was here. Because she's not. Even after two years, I still can't adjust to not having her here by my side. "Hey, at least we're having the barn party tonight. You know she'd love that."

"Willow always did love a good barn party," Willow's brother, Phil, said as he walked down the stairs with his toddler son, Brody, clinging onto his leg, and his newborn son, Will (named after his aunt), in his arms. "If I remember correctly, you really loved those barn parties too."

I laughed and shook my head. "You're really never going to let me live that down, are you?"

“You mean the fact that you confessed your love for my sister to me at one of those parties?” Phil smiled and wrinkled his nose. “Not a chance.”

The abandoned barn, which was no longer abandoned since a few years earlier, my wife had bought it and turned it into an event space, played a crucial part in so much of our love story. It was where we fell in love, the place I confessed to Willow I wanted... correction—needed to be with her. It was where we got married and the house we were living in when our daughter was born. Now, it was the location of Stone Barn Events, owned and operated by Willow’s best friend, Tori Fittery. Every event held there was the perfect celebration of Willow’s life, but tonight was special. Last year, Tori had suggested that we throw a party at the barn together rather than all mourning Willow’s death separately. All I wanted to do on the one-year anniversary of my wife’s death was lock myself in a room and never come out, but Tori was right. I needed that party. We all did. That’s why, as soon as it was over, we all decided it needed to become a yearly tradition.

I had told Tori I would help her set up for the party, which was exactly why I was at my in-laws’ house right now. They had volunteered to watch Emery and Tori’s daughter, Bella, while we set everything up.

I looked around the house for any signs of Tori and Bella, and my mother-in-law laughed. “Oh, sweetie, did you really think those two would get here before you? I’ve known Tori since she was a kid. She was never on time before having her mini-me. The more that girl becomes like her, the more late the two of them are for... well, everything.” My mother-in-law laughed once again, shaking her head as she did.

Tori’s five-year-old daughter really was her mini-me, and that wasn’t just because of her blonde hair and blue eyes. She had Tori’s attitude, along with all of her sassiness. It was no wonder she and Emery were instant besties even at this young age, given that Emery was just like Willow.

Another hour passed before Tori came running into the house with Bella under one of her arms and her hair completely disheveled. “I’m so sorry I’m late. This one couldn’t find an outfit she liked.” She nodded toward Bella as she sat her down.

I couldn’t help but smile as I took in Bella’s princess dress that was paired with a backwards baseball cap and muddy sneakers. “Well, you look great,” I told her.

“Thanks.” Bella spun around as if she was a model showing off the latest fashion trend. “Do you think Auntie Willow would like it?”

“Auntie Willow would love it,” I answered, trying my best to hide the crack in my voice just from the mention of her name.

Any memories Bella and Emery had of Willow were from pictures and stories that we shared with the two of them. It broke my heart that my daughter wouldn’t have any real memories of her mom, but I also knew that Willow wanted it that way. She had planned everything out perfectly, down to the date our daughter should be born.

Bella ran over to where Emery was sitting on my mother-in-law’s lap and reached out her hand. “Come on, Em. Let’s go play.”

Emery jumped off her grandma’s lap and took Bella’s hand before the two of them skipped out of the room, giggling like crazy.

Tori smiled as she watched them leave, but that smile dropped as soon as she looked at me. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good.” I nodded slowly and bit my quivering lip. “Seriously. I’m okay. I’m going to be okay.”

“Okay,” Tori repeated, the tone of her voice telling me that she didn’t believe me at

all.

The amount of love and care everyone showed toward me only made me feel more guilty. We'd all lost someone, but since I lost my wife, they all believed I needed the most support. It's not that the support wasn't appreciated, but I couldn't help but feel like I was tricking them somehow.

"Want to get going?" I asked her as I blinked back tears.

She nodded, then followed me out the door wordlessly after we said our goodbyes. "So, how are you really?" she asked when we got in the car.

## Page 2

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It was such a hard question, because I really wasn't sure how I was doing. The past two years were filled with tons of ups and downs. Some of my best and worst times followed Willow's death. I made it a point to feel everything, to not allow myself to get stuck. Willow had taught me so much, but the most important thing was that I needed to live my life. I couldn't let myself get complacent, because any day could be my last. I knew I owed it to her to live my life to the fullest, but some days it was almost impossible. Today was one of those days. "I'm trying really hard to actually mean it when I say I'm okay."

Tori pursed her lips as she started her car. "I get it. Can I be completely honest and a bit of a downer though?"

I reached out and squeezed her arm. "Of course you can."

"The day Willow died was by far the worst day of my life, and as much as I love celebrating her, this also all reminds me how much this fucking sucks."

"Want to run away?" I asked with a laugh, only partially joking.

"Kind of, but where would we go?"

I smiled when an idea popped into my head. "I have an idea. Switch me spots."

Without hesitation, Tori opened her door and walked over to the passenger side of the car. When she opened the door, I got out and took her place in the driver's seat.

"So, where are we going?" Tori asked once I started to drive.

“You’ll see.” I wasn’t sure why I was going to this particular location, but whenever I had an inkling like this, I assumed Willow had something to do with it. Who was I to mess with whatever plan she had come up with for me?

It took less than fifteen minutes to get where we were going, and a sincere smile came onto Tori’s face when we pulled into the parking lot. “Our old apartment? God, I can’t remember the last time I was here.”

“Probably when we lived here, honestly.” I pointed toward a picnic table that sat a few feet from the apartment I had shared with Tori, Willow, and my best friend, Lisa. “I know we can’t go inside, but want to sit over there for a few minutes?”

“And completely freeze our asses off?” Tori shrugged while she laughed. “Why not? Let’s do it!”

I shut off the car, zipped up my jacket, then followed Tori to the picnic table. I watched as Tori sat down, tilted her head back and took a deep breath, a small smile parting her lips that made her look absolutely beautiful. Not that she wasn’t always beautiful. If it wasn’t for the fact that I was already falling for her best friend, I’m sure Tori would have caught my eye when I first met her. Her natural beauty has a way of turning heads. But this beauty was different. She looked sincerely happy, which was a sight I didn’t see often enough these past two years.

“So, how was Christmas with your mom and Rick?”

Clearly, that was the wrong question because the smile immediately left Tori’s face. “Oh, it was just peachy. I loved listening to them both put me down about the fact that I’m still not married and how it would really benefit Bella to have a man in her life. I honestly don’t know why I keep putting up with them other than the fact that Bella adores them for some reason.”



I cringed at her words. I wasn't even sure why I had asked. Of course it hadn't gone well. From what I'd learned from both Willow and Tori, Tori spent most of her childhood taking care of her mom due to her drinking habits. Her mom had luckily become sober, but in the process she also found God, and it wasn't the love everyone God that I believed in. This was the fire and brimstone God who judged everything and everyone, so in turn, Tori's mom did as well. She married the pastor of her church, and the two of them seemed to make a game out of telling Tori everything she did wrong with her life. It broke my heart to see, especially since I understood parents that can't be impressed. That was my parents for most of my life. Fortunately, thanks to my wife, they came around. They were changed before her death, but losing Willow put things in perspective for them even more. They worked less and traveled to see us at least one to two long weekends a month. They were even talking about moving to Melsborough once they retired, which was something I never thought would happen (the retirement or the move).

Unfortunately, it appeared there was no hope for Tori's mom and stepdad, and that fact broke my heart. I reached my hand across the table and squeezed Tori's. "I'm sorry."

Tori waved her hand and smiled, but this time it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm used to it by now. That's honestly the least of my worries these days."

"Anything on your mind?" I cringed once again. I'm sure there was a lot on her mind today. "Aside from the obvious. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. I know how hard today is for you. You lost your wife two years ago. The mother of your child. I can't even imagine."

I squeezed Tori's hand once again. "Of course you can. You lost your best friend. Family, really. Willow was like a sister to you, Tor. Don't downplay your pain. We're in this together."

“Thank you. But even so, I’m sure you don’t want to hear my dumb complaints.”

I lifted an eyebrow at her and smiled. “Try me.”

“Fine.” Tori let out a long sigh. “Living at the house on the barn property isn’t working anymore. I know we had three adults living there at one point, but somehow it doesn’t seem big enough for one rambunctious five-year-old. Plus, living where I work is a terrible idea. Two months ago, Bella ran out of the house in nothing but underwear in the middle of a wedding.”

I laughed in spite of the heaviness in my heart. “Eh, that’s not so bad. I’m sure it’s nothing they haven’t seen.”

Tori looked me dead in the eye, her smile a straight line, then subtly lifted one eyebrow. “The underwear was on her head.”

I laughed even harder now. “I can’t believe you’re just telling me this.”

Tori shrugged. “I hate complaining to you.”

“First of all, you can complain to me whenever you want. Second, it’s not complaining when the story is that hilarious.”

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After a few seconds, Tori finally cracked a smile. “Okay. I guess it is pretty funny. And luckily, the bride and groom thought so as well. But not everyone would. Hence, needing a new place. The problem is money is a bit tight right now.”

“Is the venue not doing well?” More guilt overtook me. I had been working at the venue when Willow died and stayed for a little bit after, but went back to teaching in the fall of last year when a first-grade position opened at Melsborough Elementary.

“It’s doing great now. We’re finally really getting into things again, but you know how much of a hit we took during COVID. I lost my business partner and a few months later, the whole world shut down. I’m still trying to come back from that. It’s not like I’m drowning, but not having rent to pay has been very helpful. I’m not sure how to work that into my budget, but we also can’t stay there much longer.” Tori sighed and rubbed her head. “I keep trying to ask myself what Willow would tell me to do, because you know she’d have a solution, but I’ve got nothing.” Tori looked up toward the sky and held out her arms. “Now would be a great time to send me a sign, bestie.”

The solution hit me like a ton of bricks. I knew exactly what Willow would do. There was no question in my mind. “You and Bella should move in with me and Emery. It will give you two more space while you save up money to get your own place.”

Tori looked at me as though I was crazy, and honestly, maybe I was. “I can’t do that. I already imposed on you and Willow once. I’m not going to do it again. Especially not with how crazy Bella is right now.”

“You’re not imposing. I promise. It’d actually be nice to have another adult in the

house. I know it's been two years, but I still get lonely without Willow there." I felt Willow with me everywhere I went, but that still didn't compare to her physical presence. Even with Emery, the house still felt so quiet when it was just the two of us. I squeezed my eyes shut to try to wipe these thoughts from my head. If I kept thinking like this, I was going to break into tears, and today was supposed to be about celebrating Willow's life, not grieving that she was gone. I knew for a fact that she wouldn't want me crying at a picnic table by our old apartment two years after she died. "Plus, just think about how much Bella and Emery would love it. They'd get to spend even more time together."

Tori chuckled. "Yes, because the three days of preschool and afternoons with Mrs. Stone aren't nearly enough for them."

"Hey, next year Bella is moving on to kindergarten without Emery. They have to get all of their time together while they still can." Since Emery was a year and a half younger than Bella, she would be a year behind her in school.

Tori laughed. "That's true. How will they ever survive?" After a few seconds, she became serious again. "I don't know, though. Do you really mean it? I feel like you're just trying to be nice, and the last thing I want to be to you is a charity case."

I hated that Tori felt that way. That wasn't how I saw her at all. I honestly didn't know how I would have gotten through these past two years without her. She was there for me more than anyone else, and that wasn't due to lack of effort from all the other people in my life. Tori just went above and beyond. "You're one of my best friends and honestly part of the reason I'm still breathing. It's the least I can do."

"I don't know." Tori looked down and ran her gloved hand along the top of the picnic table. After a moment, her eyes went wide and she started to laugh. "Are you fucking kidding me? Did you know she did this?" Tori pointed to the spot she was staring at.

I leaned across the table to see what she was talking about and found Willow Stone was here carved into the top of the table. It was so small that I never would have noticed it if Tori hadn't pointed it out. I looked up at the sky and whispered, "Thanks, babe," as an unseasonably warm breeze lightly blew over my skin. When I looked back at Tori, she was still staring down at the words on the table. "You asked her for a sign. I think you found it. I'm pretty sure that's her telling you that you should listen to me."

"Fine. We'll run it past Bella and Emery and if they agree, we'll move in at some point over the next few months."

I smiled because I knew I had won. "So, that's a yes."

"I'd say we can count on it." Tori smiled back at me, and it warmed me up from the inside out. "Now let's get out of here. We have a party to set up."

## Chapter 2

Even with our pit stop, Tori and I were able to have the barn set up just in time for the start of Willow's memorial party. Not that it took much. In Willow's honor, we set it up to look like the barn parties we went to in college, which weren't very pretty. There was a table filled with alcohol and another filled with food. There were also big speakers since Willow would never accept a party without dancing. A banner hung on the wall that said Live Like Willow, a saying that Tori had coined and we all embraced.

The first people to arrive were of course my parents, since not arriving early is as good as being late. Some things never change. Even though I had just been at their house two days earlier for Christmas, my mom still wrapped me in a tight hug. "How are you, sweetie? Are you doing okay?"

Instead of saying anything, my dad put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it tightly. I could tell by the face he was making that he was trying his best not to cry. He had taken Willow's death much harder than I expected. The man who barely ever sheds a tear sobbed at Willow's funeral. I think he actually cried more than me, but then again, I had already cried so much by that point, I was numb by the time her funeral was held.

"I'm doing okay. Thank you." I nodded as I looked around the barn where I first fell in love with my soulmate. "Willow would have loved this. She would use any excuse to throw a party." I smiled when I thought of her contagious laugh. Sometimes, I swore I could still hear it.

"She certainly would." My dad smiled, but his body remained stiff.

A few minutes later, Willow's parents and Phil's family arrived. Phil set himself up by the bar, assigning himself the duty of making everyone Fantastic Phils, partially because Willow loved them so much and partially to help us forget the real reason we were all getting together. Next to arrive was Lisa and her fiancée, Abigail, as well as Lisa's parents. I was still greeting all of them when Silas, my fake boyfriend turned best friend, arrived with his husband, Aaron, and their ten-year-old son, Marcus, whom they adopted a month ago after fostering him for a year. After that, the rest of the guests filtered in, including a lot of Willow's friends from high school and college, as well as her colleagues from when she worked as an Admissions Counselor at East Pine University.

The party was exhausting, so I was happy when the night ended the same way it had the year before, with just me, Tori, Lisa, and Abigail. My parents took both Emery and Bella back to my house for a sleepover and insisted that I crash at the barn for the night instead of trying to walk home.

"So, who's up for a drinking game?" Lisa asked.

I groaned. That was the last thing I wanted to do right now. “Aren’t we a little old for drinking games?”

Lisa scoffed as if she couldn’t even believe I would ask that. “Come on. That’s ridiculous. You’re thirty-two. You’re not—” Lisa quickly cut herself off and put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide as she stared at me. “Shit. I’m so sorry. I’ve been drinking, and it’s just a saying, but I would never—”

I put my hand up to cut Lisa off. “It’s okay. I get it. I know you didn’t mean anything by it. Plus, we all know Willow would think that slip-up was hilarious.”

Luckily, that comment eased the tension from the room and everyone laughed, Tori’s laugh louder than everyone else. “You’re so right,” she said in between laughter, “That’s totally the type of shit she would have said. God, I miss that girl.”

I clenched my eyes shut to try to keep myself from crying. With the alcohol in my system, I knew if I started I wouldn’t be able to stop. “I miss her, too.”

A hand landed on my back and when I opened my eyes I saw Tori looking at me with a knowing smile. “No tears tonight. Remember? Willow wouldn’t want any of that.”

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I took in a long shaky breath and let it out. “I know.”

“You know what she would want?” Tori wiggled her eyebrows. “For us to do shots.”

I groaned once again. “You’re all crazy, and I hate you.”

“Don’t kid yourself. You love us.” Tori grabbed a bottle of vodka and four shot glasses, then filled them up and passed one to each of us.

It looks like we’re doing this.

Lisa held her shot glass high in the air. “To Willow.”

“To Willow,” we all repeated before tapping our glasses together.

I cringed as the liquid burned its way down my throat. Definitely too old for this.

We were all quiet for a few minutes, clearly lost in our own thoughts, before Tori broke the silence. “We need to do something to honor Willow. Something big.”

I figured it was just the alcohol talking, so I giggled, but once I started, I couldn’t stop. Clearly, that shot had tipped me over the edge from buzzed to drunk. “What did you have in mind, drunkie?” I asked between giggles.

Tori shrugged. “Beats me. You’re the smart one.”

I shook my head. “The rest of you are the fun ones.”



“Aww, don’t sell yourself short,” Lisa said, slurring her words as she spoke. “I think you’re really fun. I wouldn’t have been your best friend for all these years if you weren’t.”

A throat cleared beside me and when I looked over, I noticed Tori blinking back tears while she watched the interaction between me and Lisa. I pointed a finger at her. “No tears. Remember?”

The fake smile Tori gave me when she nodded in response broke my heart, so I wrapped her up in a tight hug. “I get it. Trust me.”

Tori squeezed me even tighter as she brought her lips close to my ear. “I know you do. Thank you.”

Something about the tone of her voice as she whispered those words caused a chill to run down my spine that was in stark contrast to the warmth I felt from her hug. I leaned into the feeling, because it was comforting. Ever since Willow’s death, Tori had become my safe space. No one truly knew what I was going through as much as Tori did. Willow was my person, but she was also Tori’s. Tori didn’t have a significant other to lean on. We only had each other.

I almost forgot we weren’t the only two in the room until I felt Lisa’s arms wrap around both of us. “We all get it. Willow was one of a kind. She was special.”

“She really was,” I agreed as we pulled away from each other.

“That’s why we need to do something big for her.” Tori’s face suddenly lit up, and I swore I could see the lightbulb go on above her head as if she was in a cartoon. “Pride! We should throw a Pride event in her memory.”

I laughed, because Tori couldn’t be serious. “A Pride event? Where?”

Tori rolled her eyes as if it was a stupid question. “Here, of course. In Melsborough. It’s about damn time this town showed a little pride. Willow would fucking love it.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “She really would.” A small smile parted my lips and a warmth settled in my heart, as if Willow was giving me a hug from the inside out. “Let’s do it.”

“Really?” The excitement on Tori’s face doubled, and I knew there was no way I could back out now. Not that I wanted to. Because she was right. I didn’t know the first thing about planning a big event like Pride, but Willow really would love it. I had no doubt about that.

“Really.” I elbowed Tori in the side. “And now that you’re moving in with me, we’ll have plenty of time to plan it.”

Lisa’s eyebrows shot up as she pointed between the two of us. “You two are moving in together? Is there something you haven’t told us?”

“What?” My heartbeat picked up at the realization of what she was saying. Me and Tori? Tori and I? Never. We wouldn’t. We couldn’t. Why the hell was I suddenly sweating? “No, that’s not... it’s not like... we’re not...”

“Chill, girl.” Lisa reached out and squeezed my arm. “I’m kidding. Obviously you two aren’t boning. How weird would that be?”

“So weird,” Tori said before I could think of a response. “No offense, Rosemary.”

“None taken,” I said with a laugh, but the pit in my gut said otherwise.

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I didn't want to overthink my reaction, but overthinking was what I did best, especially when I was drunk. Why did the fact that Tori said it would be weird to bone me make my stomach hurt? She wasn't wrong. It would be so weird. So why was I even thinking about it right now?

Then it hit me. The reaction wasn't in response to what she said. It was the fact that she called me Rosemary. Almost everyone in my life called me Mary, mostly because at one point, that's what I preferred. But Willow always called me Rosemary, and hearing the way it sounded rolling off her lips had made it grow on me, so much so that now that she was gone I missed hearing it.

"You called me Rosemary," I said softly.

"Yeah. Earlier when we were telling stories about Willow, you mentioned that you loved how she always called you Rosemary instead of Mary." Tori shrugged nonchalantly, as if it wasn't incredibly sweet that she picked up on such a tiny detail. "If that was a special Willow thing though, I'll stick to calling you Mary. I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "My parents call me Rosemary. I like it. Thank you. It just took me by surprise. But seriously, thank you."

"So, Rosemary it is from now on," Lisa said. She wrapped an arm around my waist before looking between me and Tori once again. "But seriously. What's the deal with you two living together?"

As Tori explained the details of our future living arrangement, I let myself zone out as I looked around the barn. It looked much different than the junk pile we used to

party in, but I could still picture those days perfectly. I pictured Willow walking toward me the first time I went to a party at the barn, and the way her eyes lit up when she saw me. That sparkle that was reserved just for me never disappeared from that night in the barn until the last time I saw her walk out our front door.

My eyes drifted to the dance floor, and I thought about Willow dancing with someone else when we were attempting not to be together. I remembered thinking about how I might never get the chance to dance with her, but, man, was I wrong. And thank god for that. No matter what type of music we were dancing to, all those moments spent wrapped in Willow's arms live in my memories forever. Even in this moment, I can still feel those strong arms wrapped around me. I wished more than anything it wasn't just a figment of my imagination, a memory that I was desperately clinging on to. I wanted to open my eyes and find that Willow's death was nothing but a nightmare and that we still laughed about the fact that we actually believed it was going to happen.

When I opened my eyes again, I found that it wasn't a nightmare. At least not the kind that you had at night. This was a nightmare that I was living and still trying to recover from two years later, even though I had twelve years to prepare.

I sprung to my feet when I felt the tears burning my eyes. I quickly wiped them away before looking at my friends. "I'm going to go to sleep, sorry. I don't mean to run out, but this... I'm just... yeah. I need some time alone. I'm sorry." I practically ran out of the barn before my friends could say or do anything. It definitely wasn't my finest moment, but I knew they would understand.

I only stopped for a moment to look out at the vast field in front of me. I pictured the time Willow and I fought over whether or not we should be together before she dragged me to her car where we made love. Sloppy, drunken love, but that didn't mean it wasn't special, especially since the next day was when we officially became a couple. That thought made me remember the note I had shoved deep into my pocket

hours ago. I quickly walked into the house, while I put my hand inside my pocket to make sure it was still there. It was. Thank God. I don't know how I would explain these notes if anyone ever found them, since most of them alluded to the fact that Willow knew she was going to die.

I locked myself in the bathroom just to be safe and finally pulled the note out of my pocket. I couldn't stop the tears that flowed from my eyes as I read the words, and I didn't bother trying.

01/14/2011

Dear Rosemary,

I can truly say I never thought this day would come, but you're officially my girlfriend now. Thank you for yelling at me and finally knocking some sense into me. Because of you (and that amazing speech you made in our kitchen this morning), I get to officially call you mine for 3,629 days. I feel like the luckiest girl in the whole world. I think I've already pinched myself about a million times to make sure this isn't a dream.

Whenever you get sad, I hope you read this note and remember how happy we were today. Whenever you miss me, I hope these words remind you how much I love you today, tomorrow, and forever. Even when we're not together, you'll always be my girl. Don't forget that. Please.

I could go on forever, but I think I'll stop now. You're asleep in the bed that we now share (thank you, Tori and Lisa) and as much as I want to let you sleep so I can keep listening to those cute little snores, I think I'm going to wake you up so I can make love to you again.

I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!

Your girlfriend (Aaaaah love it),

Willow

In spite of how sad I felt, the note still made me smile. It was crazy how Willow could still do that even without being physically near me.

I crushed the note to my chest and closed my eyes as I lifted them toward the Heavens (i.e. the ceiling of Tori's bathroom). "You'll always be my girl too, Willow. I love you so much, babe."

I stood from where I was sitting on the edge of the tub and took a deep breath that I slowly blew out. I had made it through another year without the other half of my heart, and although it wasn't always easy, I had kept my promise to Willow to keep living my life. That was something worth celebrating.

### Chapter 3

March 18, 2022

"I think that's the last of it," I said as I placed a heavy box on top of Tori's bed.

Tori looked around her new bedroom and smiled. "I can't believe we're officially housemates again. This is now the third place we've lived together."

Much to my surprise, that reminder made me feel sad instead of happy. I expected to feel good about Tori moving in, but that was like a stab to the chest. This was the first place that belonged to just me and Willow. With Tori moving in, it was no longer just ours. I had now lived with Tori in the same number of homes that I lived with Willow. Even though I knew it was irrational, a part of me felt like I was betraying Willow. It was crazy for me to feel that way, since I knew for a fact this was exactly

what Willow would want, but I couldn't shake it no matter how hard I tried.

I hadn't even noticed Tori walking over to me until I felt her hands on my arms. "What's up? And don't tell me it's nothing, because I can tell something is wrong."

"It's..." I paused as I tried to think of a word to say other than nothing. "Dumb. It's honestly really stupid. So stupid that it's not worth sharing it with you and getting you upset as well."

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Tori ran her hands up and down my arms, and the move was surprisingly comforting. “Nothing you have to say is dumb, and if it upsets me, who cares? You’re the wife of my best friend, which means in her absence, you officially take the title of best friend. And best friends tell each other everything. Even the hard stuff.”

“I just...” I hesitated as I tried to put it into words. My head and my heart were so jumbled that I wasn’t even sure how to explain it, especially since I didn’t want to hurt Tori’s feelings or give her the wrong idea about our arrangement. “I guess I’m just realizing more and more as time moves on that there’s less and less things that are mine and Willow’s. I know it’s stupid, but this house felt like one of the last things we had left that was ours. I don’t know. Like I said, it’s really dumb. It’s just a house.”

I threw myself onto the bed and Tori immediately sat down next to me. “It’s not just a house. It’s the house you bought with your wife—the one who was unjustly taken from you way too early in life. It’s sacred, and I’m sorry if my words made it sound like this was mine in any way. It’s still yours and Willow’s. I’m just stopping by along the way.” She pointed her thumb toward the door. “And if you tell me you changed your mind and don’t want us here anymore, I will pack up all of our things and get right out of here without a fight. I’m not sure that I can say the same for my daughter, but we’ll figure it out. I completely understand. No hard feelings at all. Just tell me what to do.”

The warmth of Tori’s words spread through my body. I had always loved her as Willow’s best friend who became one of mine, but ever since losing Willow, she was also my rock. She deserved the world. The least I could do was share my house with her. It’s not like I didn’t have the space. “I don’t want to fight a five-year-old, so I



think you two should stay.”

Tori smirked at my joke. “I think we could take them.”

“Oh yeah, totally. We did so well when it came to the room situation.”

One of the many reasons Tori and Bella’s move was delayed was because we spent a whole day putting together a bedroom for Bella while she and Emery were with Willow’s parents, only to have Bella break into tears when we showed it to her. I wish I could say they were happy tears, but they were actually angry tears. Why? Because she was in a different room than Emery. Apparently, when we told the two of them they would be living together, they assumed that meant they would not only be living in the same house, but also in the same room. After much foot-stomping and a whole lot of sass, we agreed to let them share a room, but that involved another two days of rearranging Emery’s room into a room for both of them.

Tori pointed a finger at me. “If I remember correctly, you were the one who caved first.”

“What can I say? Your daughter is very convincing.”

“I know. She gets that from her mom.”

I rolled my eyes as I thought about my own daughter. “I understand that all too well. Emery gets her stubbornness from Willow.”

“Oh, trust me, I know. She’s Willow through and through.” Tori laughed for a few seconds before her face suddenly became serious again. “And that’s something that you and Willow will always share. Willow will always be her mom, no matter how long she’s gone. No one can take that away from you.”

I sighed because her words made me both happy and sad. “And that’s also one of the many reasons I need to stay single for the rest of my life. If I ever met someone, I would want them to treat Emery as one of their own but also not. I think I would resent them if they ended up being too motherly. I would feel like they were trying to take Willow’s place, and that wouldn’t be fair to anyone involved.”

“I think the right person would understand all of that.”

I scoffed, because I wasn’t so sure that was true. “I’m not sure anyone could possibly understand that.”

“I would.” Tori cleared her throat. “You know, if I was in a situation where I was dating someone in your situation. If that makes sense.”

I couldn’t get myself to form words because my throat was suddenly dry. I wanted to stand to get a drink of water, but my legs felt wobbly as well. Why the hell was I reacting this way? Maybe the thought of being with someone other than Willow had my body going haywire. Except, the reaction I was having wasn’t necessarily an uncomfortable one. It was almost as if I was excited about the prospect of finding someone else. My stomach dropped as soon as that entered my mind and I thought I might throw up. I was obviously young, and Willow had told me multiple times in the years we were together that I needed to find love after she was gone, but even thinking about it made me overcome with guilt. Willow was my world. We were two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. How was I supposed to replace her with another one? It would never fit. Then an even worse thought hit me. What if it did?

“Shit. What did I say now? I lost you again. I’m totally striking out today.”

Luckily, Tori’s voice was able to pull me out of my spiral. “Nothing big,” I said with a chuckle. “Just having a mild panic attack as I think about what it would be like to be with anyone other than Willow, then chastising myself over the fact that I was

even having those thoughts.”

Tori studied my face for a long time before she spoke again. “You do know Willow would want you to be happy, right?”

I’m very aware. “I know. It’s really not worth harping on right now though. It’s not like women are beating down my door to get with me.”

Tori opened her mouth, then immediately closed it once again. This happened a few more times before words finally came out. “Speaking of doors, do you want me to head back out that one or—?”

“Absolutely not,” I said, not even allowing Tori to finish that thought. “You’re staying. This is going to be great. Contrary to how I’ve been acting, I’m actually very excited to have you and Bella here. I think this is going to be good for all of us.”

A sweet smile parted Tori’s lips. “I think so too.” Her face lit up even more. “Plus, now we can really deep dive into planning Pride since we have the date worked out and everything set up with the township.”

I cringed because nothing that had been done for Pride was my doing. “Yes! And I promise to help more now. I’m sorry I’ve been slacking. You’re just much better at schmoozing people than me.”

“I own a wedding venue and am the lead event planner. It’s literally my job to schmooze people. Plus, it’s not like I can cancel the wedding that was already scheduled for the same day as Pride, so I’ll be back and forth between the two events, which means you’re in charge that day.”

I laughed as I cringed once again. Willow may have changed me immensely in the time I had with her, but I was definitely not a take-charge sort of woman. “I will

make sure everything runs smoothly from beginning to end from behind the scenes, but I'll leave the schmoozing that day to Lisa and Silas."

"Fair enough. They are very good at it." Tori looked around the room and sighed, but I couldn't tell if it was one of content or stress. "I guess we should go pick up the girls, huh?"

I tapped the box sitting next to me. "Or we could very slowly unpack the rest of your things. It's not like Willow's mom is going to care how long she has them. I honestly think she'd prefer to have them longer."

"That's true. With how much time she spends with those two, I'm shocked she's not sick of them by now."

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“I know, right? She loves it though. I honestly think she would steal them from us if she could.”

Tori smirked as she shrugged. “I’m sure as hell not stopping her.”

I laughed and nodded in agreement. “Same. I adore Emery, but being a single mom is exhausting.”

“And lonely,” Tori said softly as she stared off into space.

I understood that feeling way too well. Spending all my time with my daughter filled my heart with so much joy, but also reminded me of what was missing, or who was missing to be exact. I looked over at Tori who was still looking straight ahead, and I didn’t feel so lonely anymore. “At least we have each other now.”

My words finally caused Tori to look over at me, and when she did, the amount of care and understanding written all over her face took my breath away. For a long time, she didn’t say anything. She simply looked into my eyes, her own eyes wide and unblinking. Then, without a word, she moved closer to me and leaned her head on my shoulder. I put mine on top of hers, and we stayed like this for a few minutes. Normally, extended silences made me feel awkward, but there was nothing awkward about this moment. There was an understanding between us that didn’t need to be spoken.

“We’ve always had each other,” Tori finally whispered, so softly that if there was any noise at all in the house, I never would have heard her words. “I know what you mean though. Having someone around to help me get through the rough moments with

Bella is going to be really nice.” Tori chuckled softly. “Careful, though. If this goes well, I might never move out.”

“I don’t think I’d mind that,” I answered honestly. “We can become old spinsters together.”

“Perfect. Should we go buy our rocking chairs now?”

“Nah. Let’s at least wait until Bella and Emery move out.” I hesitated for only a moment, because I wondered if I would end up regretting the suggestion I was about to make. “You know what? This conversation has actually made me feel rejuvenated. What do you say we go get our daughters so all four of us can celebrate our first day of officially living together?”

“That sounds great to me!”

After searching through Tori’s things to find two blindfolds (which she told me I was better off not asking about), we walked to the Stones’ house to get our daughters. Once we got back to our house, we had them put on the blindfolds. Since we still had some finishing touches to put on Emery and Bella’s room, Emery had been sleeping in my room for the past two weeks. Neither she nor Bella had seen their finished room, so we were excited (and maybe a little bit scared, if I was being honest) to show it to them.

They giggled and held hands as we directed them up the stairs and down the hallway. As soon as we opened the door to the room, they both pulled off their blindfolds without any prompting.

Bella ran right for the new bunk beds Tori and I had bought together. She pointed to the top bunk. “That one’s mine, since I’m a big girl and Emery is still a baby.”

Emery put her hands on her hips and scowled. “I’m not baby. I’m tree.”

I covered my mouth so Emery didn’t notice me laughing about the way she said three. When my giggles went away, I knelt down next to Emery and put a hand on her shoulder. “You’re right. You are a big girl. That means you understand that living somewhere new is going to be scary for Bella, so you need to let her choose where she sleeps. If she wants the top bed, that’s the one she should have.”

“Fine.” Emery looked at Bella once again, the scowl still on her face. “But I’m not baby, okay?”

Stubborn just like her mom, Bella put her hands on her hips. “Okay, but you’re still just three. I’m five.” She held up five fingers to really make her point.

Tori looked at her wrist, as if she was checking a watch that wasn’t actually there, then leaned closer to whisper to me. “Great. They haven’t even been living together for five minutes, and they’re already fighting like sisters.”

“I have an idea.” I clapped my hands together to get their attention and try to ease some of the tension in the room. “What do you say we order pizza and watch a movie while we eat it?”

A smile quickly surfaced on Bella’s face. “Can we make a blanket fort and watch the movie in there?”

Emery giggled and bounced up and down. “Yeah! Fort!”

Bella put an arm around Emery’s shoulder and pulled her close. “You’re my bestest friend, Emery, even if you are little.”

I held my breath while I waited to see what Emery would say in response to the little

comment, but was happy when she giggled even harder. “You’re my best friend.”

“But you were my best friend first.”

“Well, guess what?” Tori asked, most likely trying to stop another fight before it started. “I was best friends with Emery’s mama and mommy before either of you were even born.”

Bella’s eyes went wide as if Tori had just blown her mind. “No way.”

“Yes way. So, I guess that means, I win.”

Tori scooped Bella up in her arms and tickled her, both of them laughing together as they left the room.

Emery watched them leave then held her arms out toward me. “Carry me, Mama.” As soon as I picked her up, Emery snuggled into me and kissed my cheek. “I’m happy, Mama.”



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My heart swelled as I smiled wider than I had in a very long time. “I’m happy too, sweetie.” As I listened to Tori and Bella continue to laugh together in the other room, I realized just how much I meant those words.

### Chapter 4

June 4, 2022

I breathed a sigh of relief mixed with a lot of tiredness. The day was finally here. After months of work, we were hosting the first annual Live Like Willow Pride Festival in Melsborough. Thanks to word of mouth around our town and at East Pine University where Willow and I went to college and where she worked after we graduated, we had filled up all of our vendor spots for the event. I hoped having a lot of vendors would help to bring in a big crowd, but only time would tell.

I walked around to each stand, greeting the vendors as they set up. “How’s everything going here?” I asked as I came to a stand where a young girl was setting up very provocative, but also ridiculously beautiful, artwork.

The girl with shoulder-length black hair flashed me a wide grin. “It’s going great. I’m so excited to be here. I love that there is finally a Pride event so close to where I live.”

“Are you from Melsborough?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “I’m originally from a small town in Maryland, but now I live in East Pine. That’s where I went to college, and I loved it so much, I stayed after I

graduated.”

“No way.” I raised one hand in the air. “I’m an East Pine alumni, too.”

“Oh yeah? What year did you graduate?”

“Way before you, I’m sure,” I said with a chuckle. “2011.”

The girl shrugged. “Just a few years. I graduated in 2019.”

I wanted to laugh because eight years wasn’t exactly just a few years. Before I could say that, the girl’s face became serious and she spoke once again.

“Wasn’t that around the time the girl that this festival was named after graduated?”

My heart clenched, but I managed to keep the smile on my face. “Yeah, it was. She was actually my wife.”

The look on the girl’s face told me she wanted to hide inside her own skin. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. We had a lot of really amazing years together.” I motioned my arms around the festival. “And she would love this, so I’m really happy we’re able to do it for her.”

“In that case, I’m even happier to be here.” The girl stuck her hand out toward me. “I’m Dakota, by the way. Let me give you my card. If you ever want me to do a painting for you, I’d be happy to. Free of charge. And not one of a naked woman.” She laughed and rubbed the back of her neck. “I’d be happy to paint one of you and your wife at some point. All I need’s a picture. Just let me know.”

“Wow. That’s really sweet of you. I might actually take you up on that offer. Thank you so much.”

“Thank you for doing this. It’s amazing.”

“I can’t take much of the credit. Most of the work was done by my wife’s childhood best friend. She’s pretty amazing.” My whole body warmed at the thought of how much work Tori had put into this. I felt like she had spent every waking hour over the past few months making sure this event would go flawlessly, and even though it hadn’t technically even started yet, I had a feeling that was going to happen.

“Well, tell her thank you as well. And the same goes for her. If either of you want a portrait painted, I’m happy to do it free of charge.”

“That’s incredibly sweet. Thank you.” I pointed down the row of vendors. “I better keep moving, but it was really great to meet you, Dakota.”

“It was great to meet you, too...”

“Rosemary. Sorry. My head is all over the place today.”

“I get it. Don’t worry about it.” Dakota winked at me, and I flashed her one more smile before walking away.

That conversation left me feeling rejuvenated, and even though I knew my social battery would need a very big recharge at the end of the day, I made it my mission to talk to as many people as possible. There was something very special about the LGBTQ+ community, and I was so lucky to be part of it. I still couldn’t believe there was ever a time I actually believed I would live my life in the closet.

As if my thoughts of trying to be straight had summoned him, I spotted Silas as he

and Andrew turned the corner onto the block hand in hand. I waved my arms in the air to make sure they saw me. “Silas! Andrew! Over here!”

Both of their eyes lit up when they noticed me, and they quickly made their way to where I was standing. “Rosemary! How are you?” Silas asked as he pulled me into a tight hug.

“I’m good. How are you two? I’m still so surprised you didn’t want to have a booth here today.” Since Silas and Andrew owned a law office together, I had assumed they would have been the first to sign up.

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“We’re good,” Andrew answered. “We’ll worry about doing a booth next year. We just wanted to enjoy the day this time.”

“Plus, as one of the event’s biggest sponsors, I think our name is getting out there enough,” Silas added.

I looked around to see if anyone was lagging behind them, but didn’t see anyone. “Where is Marcus today?”

Silas smiled at Andrew then back at me. It was a look that told me he still couldn’t believe this was his life even after all these years. “He’ll be here later. Andrew’s mom and my mom are both in town, so they are letting him sleep in and then they’ll all come by.”

“So, things are still going well with your mom?” I asked Silas. He and I had a lot in common since neither of our sets of parents were happy when we came out. Luckily, most of them had come around.

“Things are going great. My mom finally leaving my dad last year was the best thing ever for our relationship.”

It took a while, but after Silas came out, his mom eventually came around. The same couldn’t be said about his dad, so there was a long time his mom kept her support a secret from him. When she finally told Silas’s dad, it didn’t go over well and added a lot of strain to their relationship until things blew up and she told him if he refused to have a relationship with their son, then she refused to stay with him, which brought on the divorce.

“Is your dad still living in the same place? I wasn’t sure since he and my dad essentially divorced too and don’t work together anymore.” After my dad realized the error of his ways, he also didn’t have anything in common with Silas’s asshole father anymore, which led to Silas’s dad leaving the firm they worked at together, after pretty much being exiled.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. That man is an asshole.”

“You’re definitely not telling me anything I don’t know,” I said with a laugh. “But anyway, let’s talk about something positive. Have you seen the crowd that’s gathering already? I can’t believe it.”

“You can’t?” Andrew asked with a chuckle. “I can. You girls did an amazing job with it. Speaking of which...” He nodded his head behind me, and when I turned around, I found Lisa and Abigail walking toward us holding hands.

“My favorite bitches,” Lisa shouted as she waved her free hand at us.

As soon as they reached us, Lisa dropped Abigail’s hand and wrapped me in a tight hug. “How are you doing, babe? Holding up okay?”

“As well as can be expected,” I answered honestly. There was no use in lying to my best friend since she could see right through me. One of the benefits of being friends forever.

“Do you have plans next weekend?” Lisa asked, still not letting go of me. “I thought maybe just me, you, and Emery could do something since I know this is a tough week for you.”

I swore Lisa must have my wedding anniversary marked on her calendar because she made sure she never missed it, especially since I lost Willow. “That sounds

wonderful. Thank you so much.”

Our moment was interrupted by the sound of my phone going off. I pulled it out of my pocket to find that it was my mom calling. I waved my phone in the air. “It’s my mom. That probably means that she and Mrs. Stone just arrived with the girls, so I better go. I’ll catch up with all of you later. Have fun, and make sure there are no fires or any other disasters.” I walked a few feet away from them and picked up my phone. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

“Just calling to let you know we’re here,” my mom said cheerfully. “If you have more to do to get set up we can walk around and meet up with you later, though.”

I could hear Emery screaming “Mama” in the background, which made my heart melt. Even if I had more to do, I would have dropped it all to go see her. Obviously, I saw her all the time, but she was still asleep when I left the house this morning, so I missed her already. “Silas, Aaron, Lisa, and Abigail are here, so I’m good. They can take care of things. Where are you?”

“We’re actually parked behind Silas and Aaron’s office.”

I could see their office from where I was standing, which meant I didn’t have too far to go. “Perfect. Stay there. I’ll be right over.”

A few minutes later, I found them all waiting beside my mother-in-law’s mini-van. Emery dropped my mom’s hand and ran over to me, wrapping her arms around my legs as soon as she reached me. “Mama! Grandma and Meemaw made us pam-pakes! They had chocolate chips.”

“Wow, that sounds amazing,” I said as I scooped her into my arms. “Were they as good as Mama’s pancakes?”

A wide, almost malicious, grin spread across Emery's face. "They were better."

"Ouch. That hurts."

Emery looked at me with wide eyes and a pouty bottom lip. "I make you sad?" she asked before giving me a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"No, sweetie. You always make me happy."

I held her out in front of me so I could take in her outfit. She was wearing the same shirt as me, which was a white T-shirt with the words "Live Like Willow Pride Fest" written with a rainbow going over the words. Floating above the rainbow was an angel meant to represent Willow. She had on bright pink shorts and sparkly, rainbow-colored shoes. It was the type of outfit my mother would have scoffed at when I was Emery's age, so it made me happy that it was what she picked out for her.

"Ride me on your shoulders, Mama," Emery said as she attempted to crawl up my body.

I did as she asked and hoisted her onto my shoulders. With how big she was getting already, I didn't know how much longer I'd actually be able to do this.



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“Hey, I want to ride on your shoulders too,” Bella said as she put her hands on her hips and glared up at me.

“No. Me!” Emery shouted, causing multiple people to turn toward us to see what the commotion was.

These two really did become more like sisters every single day. I had to work hard not to roll my eyes at them and instead smiled down at Bella. “I’ll tell you what. Since Emery is already on my shoulders, I’ll let her ride first, but in a few minutes, it will be your turn.”

“Deal.” Bella stuck out her hand, so I had to bend down while trying to keep Emery balanced on my shoulders to shake it.

When I stood back up, I caught my mom staring at me with a proud smile on her face. “I can’t believe this is my first ever Pride event. I’m so excited.”

I couldn’t believe my mother was actually at a Pride event. Even after all of these years, I still had to pinch myself whenever I was around my parents because it was hard to believe they had changed so much. These were the same people who used to laugh at my dreams and at one point had told their next-door neighbor that Willow was their niece. Now my mom was attending a Pride event that I had helped to organize and proudly wearing the “Live Like Willow Pride Fest” shirt.

“It’s definitely not as elaborate as other Pride festivals, but I think it’s a good one to start with.”

“It’s in memory of my beautiful daughter-in-law. It’s the perfect one to start with.”

When my mom reached her hand out toward Willow’s mom, she accepted it and smiled at her as tears came to her eyes. When she focused her attention on me, the tears started to run down her cheeks. “I can’t thank you and Tori enough for putting this all together. It truly is perfect.”

“We had a lot of help. When people heard we were doing this in memory of Willow, everyone wanted to chip in. She touched so many lives.”

“She did much more than touch lives,” my mom said. She squeezed Mrs. Stone’s hand as tears started to flow down her cheeks as well. “She changed lives. I can personally attest to how true that is. You raised an amazing young woman.”

Mrs. Stone slowly nodded, and I could tell she was trying to keep herself from crying even harder. “I wish I could take credit for that, but Willow was special from the moment she was born. All I did was bring her into this world. She did the rest all on her own.”

Emery wiggled around on my shoulders until her face was hanging in front of mine. “Why is everyone sad?” she asked, her eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“We just miss your Mommy, sweetie.” I worked hard to bite back my tears, because I wanted to stay strong for Emery.

“But Mommy is right here.” She bent down and touched my chest right above my heart. “We don’t have to miss her.”

My eyes burned and a lump formed in my throat as it became even more difficult to hold back my tears. “You’re exactly right, sweetie.” I was somehow able to get the words out with only a slight crack to my voice. “Mommy is here with us. That’s why

it's going to be the best day ever.”

Luckily, I was able to stick to my promise. The day really was amazing. Tori was able to pass most of the wedding responsibilities off to one of her employees so she could spend most of the day at Pride, which meant all of us who loved Willow the most were able to enjoy the day together. It really did feel like she was there, and I had to believe that's because her spirit really was. If I didn't believe in that, I wouldn't have been able to get through all of this time without her.

By the end of the day, I was completely exhausted, but the girls insisted we make a blanket fort in the family room to have a sleepover in there, and Tori and I couldn't say no after they had gotten through the day with minimal meltdowns.

It was only a few minutes into the movie before both of them were passed out, and I finally felt like I could take a breath. After working so hard to keep my emotions in check all day, the deep breath I took was shaky.

I was telling myself not to cry when a hand landed on my arm. “What's up?” Tori asked from beside me, her eyes full of love as she studied my face. “Everything okay?”

I nodded. “I'm good. It was just a very emotionally taxing day. Don't get me wrong, it was great, but I just...” I let my voice trail off because I didn't know how to put what I was feeling into words.

“Wish Willow could have been there with us?”

Of course Tori understood. She always understood. “Exactly. I felt her presence the whole time, but, god, I would have given anything to actually see her standing there right beside me.” I squeezed my eyes shut once again.

I heard rustling beside me and when I opened my eyes, Tori was standing over me with her hand stretched out toward me. “Come with me?”

I accepted her hand and pulled myself up onto my feet. “Where are we going?”

Tori nodded down the hall. “Back to my room so we don’t wake these two.”

She kept a hold of my hand and I followed her down the hallway. Once we were in the room, she pulled me over to the bed, where we sat down next to each other. She removed her hand from mine and put it on my leg instead, causing a comfortable warmth to spread throughout my body as if she had just wrapped me in a blanket. “We have a problem.”

That definitely was not what I expected Tori to say, so now I was extremely confused. “We do?”

“We do. You’re trying so hard to stay strong for everyone else in your life that I think in the process you’re making yourself weaker.”

“I’m not doing that.” I wrapped my arms around myself. “At least, I don’t think so.”

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“Then why is it that you go to bed with a smile on your face every night but a few times a week, I hear you crying in your bedroom?”

She heard that? Crap. “I didn’t realize you could hear me. You don’t think Emery can, do you?” Tori’s bedroom was next to mine while Emery and Bella’s was across the hall, and I hoped that little bit of extra space was enough to make a difference.

“I highly doubt it. If Emery heard it, she would have said something by now. She’s a toddler. They don’t have filters.”

That was a good point. Emery definitely hadn’t heard me. I let out a sigh of relief, and when I did, Tori squeezed my leg, causing my body to warm up even more. “I know you’re trying to stay strong for her, and as a mom, I completely get it. But the rest of us aren’t kids. You don’t have to stay strong for us. Especially not me.”

“It’s so ridiculous though. Willow has been gone for two and a half years. I shouldn’t still be crying myself to sleep at night.” Especially when I had so much time to prepare for this.

“I don’t think it’s ridiculous. Just the other day, something funny happened at work, and I picked up my phone to text Willow about it. Two and a half years, and I still instinctively try to talk to her whenever anything big or small happens. It’s normal. None of us ever expected to be living without her.”

I had, but I obviously couldn’t tell Tori that. “Did you cry?” I asked her instead. “When you remembered you couldn’t text Willow?”

“Cry?” Tori laughed loudly. “I sobbed like a baby.”

My heart hurt for her. I couldn't bear to think about her crying alone in her office. “You could have called me.”

“You were working. I wasn't going to call and interrupt while you were in the middle of class. Plus, that was unusual for me. If it was something that was happening often, like, let's say, a few nights a week, I would definitely come to you.”

Point taken. “Nights are just really hard for me. I know you understand what I'm going through, and I'm not trying to take away from that, but nights are different. I got so used to Willow holding me, it's weird being in bed alone.”

“Why don't you sleep in here tonight? I know it's not the same as laying next to the love of your life, but it was a long day. I'm sure tonight will be an emotional one. Maybe it will be good to have someone next to you, even if it is just me.”

“Are you sure?” I wasn't sure if Tori was just offering to be nice since she probably figured I would say no, but I even surprised myself with how much I wanted to say yes. Something about having a warm body next to me, even if it wasn't the body I wished it was, sounded great.

“Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't have offered it if I wasn't.”

I could tell by the sincerity in her voice that she meant it, so I moved up the bed and crawled under the covers, making sure to place myself right at the edge of the bed so Tori would have plenty of space. Tori got under the covers as well and said a quick goodnight before turning off her bedside lamp and shutting her eyes. I closed mine as well and listened as Tori's breathing slowly leveled out.

Even though it was comforting being beside her, it didn't stop the tears. “I still miss

you every day,” I whispered quietly enough to make sure I didn’t wake Tori.

It must not have worked, because a few seconds later, warm arms wrapped around me as Tori’s body pushed up against mine from behind. “I miss her every day, too,” Tori whispered into my ear, causing a chill to run down my spine. “Is this okay, by the way?”

It was the first time anyone other than Willow had held me like this and if it was anyone other than Tori, I’m sure it would have made me feel uncomfortable. But it was the opposite with her. Maybe it was because I had known Tori for so long. Maybe it was because I knew there wasn’t any hidden meaning or feelings behind her cuddles. But something about being in her arms just felt right. “It’s perfect. Thank you, Tori.”

Instead of saying anything, Tori burrowed her head into my neck, and for the first time since I lost Willow, I drifted off to sleep, feeling like I was whole again.

## Chapter 5

August 2022

“Happy birthday,” Tori whispered from where she was laying beside me in bed.

Ever since the night of Pride, anytime I started to cry at night, Tori would wordlessly crawl into my bed and hold me tight until I fell asleep. This was the first time I had ever woken up with her still in my bed though. “You’re still here,” I whispered back as I took in her messy blonde hair and tired blue eyes. Tori really was beautiful. I couldn’t stop that thought from popping into my head as I stared at her. It was a wonder she was still single.

“Yeah.” Tori’s cheeks turned the slightest bit red, which only served to make her look

even cuter. My stomach did a weird flip at the sight, which I immediately blew off as hunger pangs. “Sorry. I normally set an alarm so I can head back to my own room once I know you’re asleep for the night, but I fell asleep before I thought to do it this time.”

“You don’t need to apologize.” I put my hand on her cheek, and her face was so warm, my hand burned where it touched her skin. “It’s really sweet of you to take care of me when I’m sad. You know you don’t have to.”

“I know. I want to. I like taking care of you. Of course, if you want me to stop, you can always just tell me. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You’re one of the most important people in my life, Tori. You could never make me uncomfortable.”

Tori watched me for a long time without saying a word, her eyes so focused that I thought I might have to take back my previous statement. That amount of attention was making me a little uncomfortable. Not in a bad way though. It was a discomfort that, weirdly enough, I wanted to feel.

“You are the most important person in my life, Rosemary,” Tori said when she finally spoke again. “Well, you and Bella. And Emery, of course.” She cleared her throat as she continued to stare into my eyes as if she was searching for something. “But you’re the most important fully functional person in my life.”

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit, calling me fully functional,” I teased. I had to do anything to ease some of the tension building up around us. At least, it felt tense to me. Again, not in a bad way, but in a way that was starting to make me squirm a little bit.



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Tori's serious face finally broke into a smirk, and she lifted one perfect eyebrow. "You can make it through a whole week without pissing the bed. In my world, that is fully functional. My expectations are very low."

"Well, it's good to know I meet your low expectations," I said with a laugh.

"I know." Tori put a hand on her chest. "You should feel very special," she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"I do. Don't worry."

All of the heaviness from just a moment before drifted away as we both laughed together.

"So, I was thinking," Tori said, as she jumped out of the bed. "How 'bout you let me take the girls for a few hours this morning while you take some time for yourself? Do whatever you want to. Go see a movie, get your nails done. Hell, just stay in bed, if that's what you want."

Staying in bed actually sounded excellent, but I felt bad making Tori take care of both girls. Plus, I obviously wanted to spend time with Emery on my birthday. And Tori and Bella. "Are you sure? You know how much of a handful they can be."

"Oh, yes, I'm completely aware of that, which is why I'm going to take them over to the Stones' house. I have no question Mama Stone would be happy to help me out while you get some well-deserved R and R."

“In that case,” I buried myself deeper in the covers, “I think I’ll shut my eyes for a few more minutes.”

“You should shut them for a few more hours.” Tori walked to the bedroom door then stopped before opening it. She kept her hand on the doorknob as she turned to face me. “Maybe plan on meeting me at their house around 12:30, if that’s okay. That way, we can either have lunch at their house or go out and grab something.”

I picked up my phone and read the time. 7:03. Even if I slept for four more hours, I would still have enough time to get ready and be at my in-laws’ house by 12:30. So amazing.

Tori gave me one last big smile before leaving my room. As soon as she was out, I shut my eyes without even turning on an alarm.

I slept so soundly that when I woke up, I was convinced I must have slept through lunch. When I looked at my phone, I was relieved (and surprised) to find it was only a few minutes after ten.

Instead of getting out of bed, I reached underneath it and pulled out the box that had a large safe inside that held all of Willow’s notes. I put in the combination, opened the box, and pulled out the envelope marked birthdays. I took out the note on top and read it slowly, trying my best to let every single word soak in.

August 20, 2019

Rosemary,

Happy 30th birthday, my love! Today was such an amazing day. I love anytime I have an excuse to completely celebrate you. I can’t believe this is the last birthday I get to physically be with you though. You know I try really hard not to think about

what's coming, but it definitely wasn't easy to do that today. I love getting to spend the day spoiling you.

I hope more than anything that you find someone else to spoil you. I hope they find a way to spoil you even more than I do (if that's possible). Since I know you and can guarantee you only read these birthday notes on your actual birthday, my wish is that this is the year you find someone to fill that spot in your heart that used to belong to me. I know what you're thinking, and don't worry—there's room for two of us there.

You deserve all of the love in the world, Rosemary Stone. Don't shut yourself off from it. And never forget that even though I might not be physically present for your birthday, I'm still there. I can't wait to spend every single birthday (and every day in between) watching over you until we can finally celebrate together again (after you live to one hundred twenty-five, of course).

I love you more than anything in the world. I hope every year keeps getting better for you. Give Emery a big kiss and an extra squeeze for me. I'm not even gone yet and I miss you two already.

All my love,

Willow

I cried as I held the note against my chest, but these weren't tears of sadness. They were tears of joy for all of the time I had with Willow. They were tears of appreciation for the fact that I had these letters to help me feel like she was right here with me. The only sadness was over the fact that I didn't think I would ever be able to fulfill her wish to find someone else to spoil me the way she did. I didn't know if it would ever be possible for me to open my heart to someone else, and even if it was, would I actually want to? My biggest fear was that I would somehow lose Willow by letting someone else in.

I shook these thoughts from my head because there was no reason for me to be worrying about that now. It's not like I had any prospects.

I placed Willow's letter back into the envelope, locked the safe, and made sure the box was stored far under my bed where no one would find it and try to ask about what was inside. Of course, I already had a plan in case that ever happened. I would just tell them that it was where I stored things that were sacred to me and Willow. It's not like that would be a complete lie. These notes were definitely sacred.

After a few more minutes, I was able to drag myself out of bed. Since I had more time than I originally planned for, I ran myself a bubble bath. I took a picture of the bubble-filled tub and sent it to Tori. Less than a minute later, she sent a text back. Yesss! So happy to see you listened to me and are actually relaxing. You deserve it

Her response caused a huge smile to spread across my face and my heart to beat a little faster, but I couldn't think of what to say back, so instead I sat my phone by the sink and sank into the bathtub. I shut my eyes and did my best to turn off my thoughts completely so I could fully relax—a feat that was very rare for me.

When it was time for me to meet up with everyone at my in-laws' house, I was feeling much more relaxed than I had in a very long time. Thank you, Tori.

I walked in the door like I always did and was surprised to find it was dark and quiet. That was very unusual, especially when both Emery and Bella were at the house. I hit the light switch by the door and looked around, assuming they must have gone somewhere and not gotten back yet. "Hello? Anyone home?"

When no one answered, I took out my phone to text Tori and started walking down the hall so I could sit in the family room while I waited for them to get back. I jumped in the air when suddenly a very loud, "Surprise!" echoed all around me. I was so caught off guard that I dropped my phone, and when I did, I noticed all of the most

important people in my life gathered around the family room. My parents were there, as well as Willow's whole family. Silas, Andrew, and Marcus were also there, as well as Lisa and Abigail. Of course, Tori, Bella, and Emery were standing front and center.

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“What is going on here?” I asked, still unable to fully comprehend what was happening.

Tori rolled her eyes as if I had just asked the dumbest question in the world. “It’s a party for you, obviously.”

“For me?” I pointed to myself like an idiot. “What? How? Why?”

“It is your birthday, right? I didn’t get the wrong day, did I?” Tori asked sarcastically. “Because if I did, someone really should have corrected me.”

“It is my birthday. Don’t worry.” I pointed around the room but kept my eyes on Tori. “Did you do all of this?”

“We all did. Everyone chipped in, because you deserve it.”

Lisa walked up beside Tori and put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t listen to her. As much as I’d love to take the credit for that smile on your face, it was all this girl. She put in all the work. We just got ourselves here.”

“Well, thank you for all coming.” I looked around at everyone, then back at Tori, and when I did, my stomach did that weird flipping thing again. I swore I hadn’t felt something like that since... Well, no. I shook those thoughts right out of my head. This was completely different than anything I ever felt with Willow. Obviously. Willow was my soulmate. Tori was just my friend. An incredibly sweet friend who knows how to make me smile, which was probably why my body was acting strange. “And you.” I reached out and squeezed Tori’s hand, quickly dropping it when I felt

like I had been burnt by her touch. “Thank you for doing all of this. I truly can’t believe it. I can honestly say I’m shocked.”

Tori waved her hand as if it was no big deal. “You do so much for all of us, I just thought it was only right that we spoiled you for once.”

I didn’t have time to harp on her words because Emery jumped into my arms at that very moment. “Happy birthday, Mama,” she said as I lifted her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck and placed a kiss on my cheek.

Soon, everyone else was greeting me with warm hugs as well. There were so many people to talk to that the day went by in a flash. I couldn’t believe it when my parents told me they had to head out so they didn’t get home too late, and I looked at the clock to find it was already past 7 o’clock.

“Wow, we’re going to have to head out soon too if we want to give these two a bath before it’s time to get in bed.”

“Why don’t you let them stay here tonight?” Mrs. Stone asked. “That way you two can relax, and these two can stay up late and eat ice cream.” She put her hand over her mouth as if she didn’t actually mean to say that. “Oops. Did I say that out loud?”

“Can we, Mama?” Emery asked as she bounced up and down.

“Yeah, Mommy, please,” Bella said as she pulled at the bottom of Tori’s shirt.

Tori looked at me and scrunched up her face as if she actually had to think about it. “I don’t know. Do you think we should let them?”

I tapped my chin as if I was considering it as well. “Hm. Great question.” I looked down at Emery and Bella who were wiggling around, eyes wide with anticipation. “If

we say yes, do you promise to be good for Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Yes! So good!” Emery shouted.

Bella’s head bobbed up and down as if she was a bobblehead doll. “We’ll be the best ever!”

I looked at Tori and we both nodded at each other. “Then I guess it’s a yes.”

As the girls ran upstairs giggling and talking about everything they were going to do, Tori raised her hand. “Grown-up party at our place if anyone wants to come.”

Phil shook his head. “I wish I could, but since my mom didn’t offer to watch my kids, we need to get them home and into bed.” He walked over to me and gave me a kiss on the forehead. “Happy birthday though, Mary. I hope you had a great day.”

“Thanks, Phil. I really did. Today was amazing.”

“We’re so glad to hear that,” Phil’s wife, Stevie, said as she leaned in to give me a hug. “I hope the rest of your kid-free night is fun.”

“I’m sure it will be,” I said with a laugh.

Silas held his arms out toward me as he walked over to me as well. “I wish we could come to the grown-up party, but we’ve kind of passed the grown-up phase and gone right to the grandpa phase. We’re too zonked to do anything else tonight.”

I pulled Silas into a tight embrace. “All right, grandpa, get home safe.”

After Silas, Aaron and Marcus both gave me hugs as well.



After they all walked away, Lisa stood from the couch and sighed, then grabbed Abigail's hand to pull her up beside her. "We actually have an early morning tomorrow, so unfortunately, we won't be able to come over either." Lisa pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm really sorry. I hope you can find a way to have fun without us. I know it will be hard."

Tori scoffed. "Definitely not. I am the fun one in our group."

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Lisa laughed and pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “That used to be me before this one came along.”

Abigail put her hand on her chest as if she was offended, but the smile on her face told me she wasn’t. “Excuse me. I resent that. I’m super fun.”

“Sure you are, babe.” Lisa grabbed Abigail’s hand and dragged her out of the house, whispering something about how Abigail could prove how fun she was once they got home.

I sighed as I watched them giggle together. I didn’t think about sex much since most of the time I was too busy to think about that. When my mind did have the chance to wander, it always went to Willow. My thoughts were always more focused on the innocence of being wrapped up in her arms, but now that my mind was going to sex, it reminded me how much I missed it. It was enough to almost make me consider finding a hookup. That wasn’t what I wanted though. If I was going to have sex with someone other than Willow, I wanted it to be someone I really cared about. The problem was if I cared about someone enough to have sex with them, I would most likely feel like I was betraying Willow by having sex with them. Maybe my toys and my hand would be my only partners for the rest of my life. I guess it could be worse. Right now, I couldn’t really think how it could be worse, but I was sure it could be.

“What are you thinking about?” Tori whispered in my ear, shocking me back into the current moment.

“Nothing,” I lied.

“Mmhmm, sure. You can tell me later.”

I hoped by the time “later” came, Tori would forget all about it, but as soon as we walked into our house, she jumped right back into it. “So, now that it’s just the two of us, tell me what you were thinking about back at the house.”

I shook my head. “It was seriously nothing. At least nothing important, and I truly mean it this time.”

“Sure you do.” Tori walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. “You know I’m not going to let it drop.”

She stared me down as she took a sip of her water. After a few seconds, I couldn’t take it anymore. “Okay, fine I was thinking about sex!”

I happened to speak at the same time Tori was taking another sip of her water and she immediately spit it out of her mouth. She laughed as she wiped her face with the back of her arm. “Okay. Definitely not what I was expecting.”

“Yeah. Kind of strange, I know.”

Tori shook her head. “Not at all. I think about sex all the time.”

“And when was the last time you had sex?”

“Pretty long. Probably about two months ago.”

“Oh yeah.” I scoffed. “So long.”

Tori furrowed her eyebrows. “Have you... you know... since Willow...? We’ve talked about so much, but we’ve surprisingly never talked about that.”

I shrugged. “That’s because there’s nothing to talk about. There hasn’t been anyone since Willow. My last time was December 26, 2019.” It was probably technically December 27, but that night flowed into the next morning so much that I had no idea when one became the other.

“At least you two weren’t in a dry spell.”

Of course not. We wouldn’t have been in a dry spell because we knew what was coming. The words I couldn’t say. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“Sorry, you probably don’t want to talk about this right now. Let’s do something fun. It is still your birthday.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Tori tapped on her chin, then suddenly stopped as her eyes became wide. “I know something that’s much better than sex. Come with me.”

I followed her up to her bedroom and waited as she looked under the bed. A few seconds later, she pulled out a tattered box. “Want to play?” she asked as she held the original Nintendo entertainment system out to me.

I shook my head and started to laugh. “You never cease to surprise me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’ve known each other for how many years? 14? 15? In all that time, you’ve never struck me as a girl that would be into the original Nintendo.”

“No. You’re right about that.” Tori’s face turned the slightest bit red. “But you strike me as the type of girl who would be into it.” She handed the box to me. “Happy

birthday.”

“This is for me?” I ran my hand over the box as if it were pure gold, and to me, it might as well have been. I’d wanted one of these for as long as I could remember, but it was hard to find an authentic original that was still in working condition. “But how did you know?”

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“A few years ago when we were all hanging out, you were trying to find one.”

“And you remember that?”

“Of course. I’ve been trying to find one ever since. Of course, I got a little sidetracked for a while, but when I finally started looking again, it only took a few months to find one.”

“That might be the sweete—” I quickly cut myself off. Willow did many sweet things for me that no one would ever be able to match. “One of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.”

Tori’s smile got even wider. “I’m glad to hear that. You deserve to be spoiled every once in a while.”

My thoughts immediately went to Willow’s note and how she said I needed to find someone to spoil me. I decided not to think about that right now because I only wanted to have happy thoughts. “So, what are we waiting for? Are we going to play or not?”

After fumbling around with the wires for a little bit, we were finally able to get the console hooked up to the TV in Tori’s room. Tori blew on the cartridge that was the classic game that contained Mario Brothers and Duck Hunt. After playing both of those, we went on to play PaperBoy as well.

“You know,” I said as we played, “I never owned a video game system until I bought myself a Wii at the end of high school.”

Tori's eyes bulged out as if she couldn't believe this was true. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yep. My parents thought video games were a waste of time. Luckily, Lisa always had stuff for us to play. We played Nintendo 64 more than anything else, but her parents also had a Super Nintendo and this original Nintendo because her dad really liked video games." I laughed as I thought back on those times. "Sometimes, I would go over to Lisa's just to play video games with her dad because she wasn't actually that into them."

Tori laughed along with me. "Honestly, nothing about that story surprises me."

We continued to play until we were too tired to keep our eyes open anymore. Tori pointed back toward her bed then cleared her throat a few times before she spoke. "Do you want to just stay here tonight? I know tonight is probably one of the extra hard ones and thought it might be easier if we just start out together. I hate the thought of you being alone and sad for even a few minutes on your birthday."

She was exactly right. The last thing I wanted was to be alone tonight. So, I nodded in agreement. "That's a good idea. Thank you."

"Of course."

After we both took the time to brush our teeth and put on our pajamas, we met back in Tori's room. We wasted no time crawling into bed and taking the position that had now become so normal to us—Tori holding onto me from behind. I had just snuggled into her when she jumped away. "I forgot," she said as she rolled over. She took an envelope out of the drawer of her bedside table and handed it to me. "Nothing special. Just your birthday card. I know you're tired. You can wait and read it in the morning."

"That sounds good." We had stayed up so long playing Nintendo that I could barely

keep my eyes open. I took the envelope and put it on the nightstand by my side of the bed. Well, the side that was mine tonight. “Thanks, Tor. You made this an amazing birthday.”

We returned to our positions from a few minutes before, and I shut my eyes. I could tell by Tori’s breathing that it was only a few minutes before she fell asleep. For some reason, even though I was exhausted, I was having trouble. I slowly reached for the table so I wouldn’t wake Tori and pulled off the envelope. I opened it up to find a card with a unicorn standing under a rainbow. The inside of the card said I hope your birthday is all rainbows and unicorns. Underneath that was a note written in black ink.

Rosemary,

I hope you have the best birthday ever. You do so much for everyone else, and I hope you let us do a little for you this year. I hope this is your best year yet.

Love you!

Tori

Underneath that were more words, but these were written with blue ink as if they were an afterthought.

Ps—Even if I had the highest expectations, you would still meet them.

My heart swelled as I read the words. I knew that was in reference to our talk from this morning, and it was so sweet, I thought I might burst. Tori really did spoil me. Maybe I didn’t actually need a significant other. Maybe Tori was all I needed. I didn’t allow myself to overthink this as I melted back into her warm embrace and just enjoyed the moment.



## Chapter 6

October 2022

I paced around the house as I tried to think of what to do for Halloween, which was only a week away. It wasn't actually Halloween I was concerned about though. It was the fact that Tori's birthday was on Halloween. She had made mine so special, and I wanted to do the same for her. The problem was that I had no idea how to do that.

"Okay, I give up," I said as I walked from the kitchen into the family room, where Tori was sitting and watching a movie with the girls.

Tori looked over at me and raised an eyebrow. "Give up on what?"

"Trying to figure out what to do for you for your birthday." I threw my hands in the air. "I admit defeat. I can't possibly make it as good as you made mine."

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Tori chuckled. “First of all, it’s not a competition. Second, my birthday’s on Halloween. I kind of assumed that meant we would spend that night trick-or-treating, as is the case on every Halloween.”

Emery glared over at me as if I had said that wasn’t happening. “Yeah, Mama. We need to go trick-or-treating.”

“Together,” Bella added as she pointed between her and Emery. “We never see each other.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “You girls live together and share a room.”

Bella crossed her arms in front of her chest and scowled just like Emery. “Yeah, but we don’t go to the same school. We don’t have a Halloween parade together.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. That must be very hard for you girls.” I had to work hard to hold back my smile. The problems of toddlers were comical.

Emery nodded, luckily missing my sarcasm. “So hard.”

“Yes. Trick or treating on your actual birthday is a must, but that’s a Monday. What should we do the weekend before?”

“The weekend before, I will be working. People love Halloween weddings.”

“Okay.” She really wasn’t going to make this easy on me, was she? “But that’s why you have employees. Surely, someone else can do the bulk of the work so you can

have some time to celebrate your birthday.”

“Marley has been taking on more responsibilities at Stone Barn Events. Speaking of which, that’s something I wanted to talk to you about.” Tori stood from the couch. “You girls okay if we go out to talk in the kitchen?”

Now that the Halloween debacle was solved, all of their attention was back on the movie they were watching. Emery nodded and Bella gave a thumbs up, neither of them moving their eyes from the screen.

“That appears to be a yes,” Tori said with a laugh. She motioned toward the kitchen. “Shall we?”

As soon as we were in the kitchen, I leaned against the counter. “So, what’s up?”

“I’m thinking about bringing Marley on as a co-owner of the barn. It’s hard to keep up so much work with Bella getting older. Soon, she’s going to be playing sports on weekends, and I don’t want to miss that. I know I was just complaining about money, and co-ownership is going to cut down on that, but time with my little girl is definitely more important.”

“Plus, the barn is doing great now. Even with splitting ownership, you’ll still make a lot more money than you did during COVID, and you made it through that.”

Tori rolled her eyes. “Barely. But seriously, you’d be okay with that?”

Why was she asking me? “That’s not up to me. It’s your business, and I support any decision you make. If you’re asking me because that means you two will have to stay here longer, that’s totally fine. You can stay as long as you want. Emery and I love having you both here.”

Tori furrowed her eyebrows. “I actually hadn’t thought about that, but that’s good to know. I was asking because it was you and Willow who bought the place together. You’re the whole reason it was renovated in the first place. I know it’s sacred to you. I don’t want to do anything without making sure it’s okay with you first.”

“Tori, the barn is yours. That was always your and Willow’s dream, not mine. You’ve done an amazing job with it, and I trust that whatever you decide to do moving forward is going to be perfect.”

Tori’s body visibly relaxed and her smile became more sincere. “Great. I’m so happy to hear that.”

“Okay. Now that that’s taken care of, let’s talk about your birthday.”

Tori’s eyes lit up as if she suddenly had an idea. “What if we took the girls to a pumpkin patch on Sunday afternoon then crashed a wedding on Sunday night?”

“Crash a wedding? Is this wedding taking place at your wedding venue?”

“It is! It’s going to be awesome. All of the guests are coming in costumes and the decorations I picked out with the bride are amazing. The perfect mix of scary yet chic.” She brought her hands together in a praying motion and stuck out her bottom lip. “Please tell me you’ll crash with me.”

“Is it really crashing if it’s a wedding that you’re hosting? Are you trying to get free labor?” I asked, the tone of my voice light so Tori knew I was joking.

“Absolutely not.” She squinted her eyes and brought her thumb and forefinger close together. “Okay, maybe I’ll ask for a little bit of help, but then we’re going to put on costumes and sneak in to dance and party. No one will ever know since everyone will be dressed up and most likely very drunk.”

“So, crashing a wedding?” A nervous excitement shot through me, even though there was nothing to actually be nervous about since Tori literally had every right to be at the wedding being hosted by her venue. “It’s something to check off my bucket list, I guess. Let’s do it.”

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A week later, we woke up early to take the girls to a farm that had a pumpkin patch, plus a lot of other fall activities, including a corn maze. After doing pumpkin rolling and apple shooting, we decided to try to take on the corn maze.

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It only took a few minutes to realize none of us actually knew what we were doing. That wasn't very surprising for the toddlers in the group, but Tori and I weren't any more help than they were.

After our third wrong turn, Tori threw up her hands in frustration. "That's it. It looks like we're stuck in here forever." She sat down right where she was standing and let out a long sigh.

"Forever?" Emery looked up at me with wide eyes. "If we're here forever, we'll miss trick-or-treating!"

"Don't worry. Your Aunt Tori is just being dramatic." I tried to glare at Tori, but couldn't stop myself from smiling. "We'll find our way out of here. I promise."

As if things couldn't get worse, it started to sprinkle. The little bit of warm rain didn't feel bad to me, but Bella screamed as soon as the first drop hit her.

"Well, this is going great," I whispered under my breath.

I was about to lose all hope as well, when I saw a rainbow form out in the distance. Words that Willow said years ago immediately popped into my head. "I'll be the rainbow that shows up after the storm." This wasn't exactly a storm, but I still had no question that was Willow trying to lead the way for us. Willow—the woman who actually happened to be very good at corn mazes.

I pointed to the rainbow and laughed as I looked down at Emery. "I think your mommy is trying to help show us the way out." I focused on Tori next. "I know it

sounds crazy, but I think we need to follow the rainbow.”

Tori jumped to her feet and wiped off her pants. “You heard the woman. Let’s follow the rainbow.”

I guess I wasn’t actually that crazy, because following the rainbow worked. Five minutes later, we were out of the corn maze. Sure, we went back out the entrance, but at least we were out.

“I’m beat,” Emery said as soon as she walked out. “Can we go home?”

“Of course.” I scooped Emery into my arms. “And do you know who’s going to be at the house soon?”

“Who?” Emery wiggled around in my arms.

“Meemaw and Peepaw.” It still made me laugh that my parents were actually okay with those ridiculous names.

“Yay!” Emery wiggled around even more now. “Let’s go!”

Less than a half hour after we got back to the house, my parents arrived. After catching up for a few minutes, Tori asked if I was ready to get my things together and head to the barn.

“You girls should just stay there tonight,” my mom said as I went to stand from the couch. “We can get the girls to school tomorrow.”

“Oh no. That’s fine. I have to get up for work tomorrow, so I’m not planning on doing anything crazy tonight.”

“Still. No sense walking back here after dark. There’s more than enough space for you two to stay at the barn, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Then stay. Please. I need some time with my granddaughter without her old mama around.”

Emery jumped off of my mom’s lap and stared up at me with her hands on her hips.

“Yeah, Mama, stay. I want Meemaw to take me to school.”

I put my hands in the air as if I was surrendering. “Fine. We will stay at the barn.”

“Are you sure?” Tori asked my mom. “I feel bad making you take responsibility for my daughter too.”

“It’s nothing. Bella is just as much of a granddaughter to me as Emery is.”

“That’s really sweet of you to say.” There was a crack in Tori’s voice, and I could tell she was trying not to cry.

“Do you think your mom really meant that?” Tori asked as soon as we loaded our bags into her car. “You know, about considering Bella her granddaughter.”

I opened my door and took my spot behind the wheel of my car. “Seeing as how I have never heard my mom say something just to be nice, I’d say she definitely meant it. Emery and Bella are practically sisters. It makes sense my mom would see her as a granddaughter. She’s definitely more than just your daughter to me.”

Tori blinked her eyes rapidly as she stared straight ahead. “So, was this your plan? Make me cry on my birthday weekend?”



“I promise it wasn’t, but crying isn’t a bad thing. Especially when they’re happy tears.”

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Tori laughed as a few tears fell from her eyes. “That sounds like something Willow would have said.”

“What can I say? She did rub off on me a little bit during our time together.”

“She had a way of doing that.”

“Oh, I know. No one came in contact with Willow Stone and walked away without being changed in one way or another.” I smiled as I thought about her. I valued the times when thinking about her made me happy rather than sad, and now was one of those times.

“She really understood how to live her life, didn’t she?”

“Of course she did. That’s where the phrase Live like Willow came from.”

“It’s almost as if...” Tori shook her head. “This is going to sound crazy, but it’s like subconsciously she knew she didn’t have as much time, and that’s why she lived the way she did.”

You have no idea. Guilt coursed through my body once again. I hated having this secret. “We never know when our last day is.” At least most of us. “That’s why we need to live every day as if it was our last.”

“Like, by sneaking into weddings? I don’t think that’d be a terrible way to spend your last day. Do you?”

Her question made me laugh. Sometimes, Tori was so much like Willow that hanging out with her made me feel like Willow was still around. At the same time, there were enough differences between them for Tori to keep me on my toes, even after being friends for all this time. “Definitely a pretty good way to spend my last day. You know, as long as we don’t get sent to jail for crashing.”

“Don’t worry. I know the owner.” Tori looked over at me and winked, and my stomach did somersaults once again. That had happened a lot around her these past few months, and I had no idea what it was about. Sure, Tori was good looking, but I was close enough to her that her charms didn’t work on me the same way they did on other girls. Obviously. Because she was Willow’s best friend, practically her sister.

Once we were at the barn, we got our bags out of the car and took them into the house that used to belong to Tori. She was slowly trying to renovate it to make it into a nicer space for wedding parties to get ready, but luckily, there was still a bed in the guest room, which just so happened to be the room that used to belong to me and Willow. I sighed as I laid my bag down on the bed and looked around. I had completely avoided this room since losing Willow. Even when I spent the night here in December, I had slept on the couch so I didn’t have to be in the space where so many memories lived. It actually made the most sense for me to do that again. I’m not sure why I had even assumed that Tori and I would share the bed tonight. It was probably because we ended up sleeping together so much at my house, but it wasn’t like that was our thing. Sleeping separately was what made the most sense.

“You can have the bed tonight. I’ll take the couch.”

Tori furrowed her eyebrows and pursed her lips as she looked over at me. “Really? I just assumed we’d both sleep in here. It’s not like we’re not used to sharing a bed.”

“I’d rather sleep on the couch.” I attempted to smile, but it was no use.

“But wh—” Tori’s eyes went wide when the realization hit her. “Oh, duh. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry, Rosemary. Honestly, I completely understand if you don’t even want me to sleep in here. I can just sleep on the floor or something. I don’t work tomorrow so I’m not planning on holding back on the drinking tonight. I’m sure I’ll have no problem passing out anywhere.”

“Tori. It’s fine. It’s just a bed. You should sleep in it. I’m okay. I promise.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t mind.”

“I’m positive. Don’t give it another thought.”

Tori took a deep breath and blew it out. “Okay. Just as long as you’re okay. That’s all I care about.”

“I’m great.” I grabbed Tori’s hand, but dropped it when a shock ran through my body. “Plus, this is your birthday weekend. I should be making sure that you’re happy.”

“I’m extremely happy. Don’t worry about that.” Tori pointed out the bedroom door. “Want to see how the festivities are going and then once we make sure Marley has everything under control, we’ll enact the plan?”

“You mean the plan to crash a wedding at your own venue?”

Tori wiggled her eyebrows. “Exactly.”

It didn’t take long for us to realize that Marley had everything under control. She was actually a wizard at making sure things went smoothly, so it was clear she would have no trouble handling the rest of the night, especially since Tori and I would be right there just in case anything went wrong. When Tori told Marley the plan to crash

the wedding, Marley simply shook her head and smiled. All Tori ever had to do to get her way was flash that perfect grin of hers and people were putty in her hands. Of course, Marley wouldn't be any different, even if she was straight and married. Tori whispered in Marley's ear to tell her what we would be dressed as since she still hadn't told me.

When we got into the bedroom, Tori finally took the costumes out of her bag to reveal them to me. "Which one do you want? Abominable Snowman or Sasquatch?"

I took in the big wooly costumes. The night was cool, but definitely not cool enough for either of those costumes to keep me from sweating my ass off on the dance floor. "I'll take the Sasquatch, but I hope you don't expect me to dance in that."

Tori scoffed and brought her hand to her chest. "How could you even say that? Of course I expect you to dance in it."

Instead of arguing with her, I grabbed the Sasquatch costume and took it to the bathroom to change into it. I was able to get into it by myself, but couldn't get the zipper all the way up, so I walked back to the bedroom so Tori could hopefully zip it before she put her Abominable Snowman hands on.

"Hey, Tor, do you think you could—?" I stopped dead in my tracks when I realized Tori wasn't even close to having her costume on. In fact, all she was wearing was a bra and a thong. My mind blanked as I looked at her body, which was arguably perfect. Once my thoughts caught up with my eyes, I stopped them from moving across her skin and looked toward the wall instead. "Shit. I'm so sorry."

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Tori laughed. “No big deal. We lived together for years. I’m sure this isn’t anything you haven’t seen before.”

That was true. Tori was far from shy. She had changed in front of me multiple times throughout our friendship. The only difference was that this time, it was difficult for me to look away. And, in reality, that was a huge difference. Because why couldn’t I look away? Was it because I had gone so long without seeing another woman’s body? That was still no excuse for checking out my friend. Willow’s best friend, I reminded myself.

“I need a drink.”

I didn’t even realize I had said the words out loud until Tori stood right in the path of my gaze and gave me an incredulous look. “I realize I’ve let myself go a bit over these past few years, but surely, it can’t be so bad that you need a drink to forget about what you saw.”

I could feel my face turning red and was happy I had already put on my Sasquatch head so Tori didn’t notice. “Let yourself go? Really?” I asked. “Tori, your body is perfect. If anything, I need to drink to forget how much I’m lacking.” Not a complete lie.

Tori stepped into her Abominable Snowman costume and finally pulled it up over her body. Her eyes took in my costume from top to bottom. “Trust me, you are in no way lacking.”

I held my arms out to the side, because I was sure she was referring to my costume.

“Oh yes, I know. The fur really does something for me.”

“You do pull off that costume really well, but that’s not what I was referring to.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” My throat went dry.

“Good god, Rosemary, are you really going to make me say it? You’re hot, okay? I’m scared Willow might strike me down for saying that, but it’s true.” Tori looked toward the ceiling and waved her hand. “Not trying to steal your girl, I promise.”

“Willow would probably tell you to go ahead and steal me.” It was supposed to be a joke about how laidback Willow always was, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wondered what the hell I was thinking. I wanted to swallow them up in hopes that Tori somehow wouldn’t realize what I said. Really, I just wanted the floor to swallow me up at this point. Because why would I say that? Why would I make any sort of reference to Tori stealing me as if that was a possibility at all? Smooth, Rosemary. Real smooth.

Tori just stared at me. Her eyes didn’t blink. Her lips didn’t curl into a smile. She honestly looked like she would rather be anywhere else other than standing in front of me at that moment. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, as if she couldn’t possibly figure out what to say in response to my idiotic comment. And I honestly didn’t blame her.

“Let’s go drink!” she said before pulling the Abominable Snowman head over her own.

I followed her out of the room without saying another word. I wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

Three mixed drinks later, Tori and I were finally acting normal around each other

again. The power of alcohol and good music.

“Dance with me,” Tori said as she took my hand.

As we made our way onto the dance floor, no one questioned who the Abominable Snowman and Sasquatch were. Tori took my hand and spun me around as we danced to Taylor Swift. I laughed as she attempted, and failed, to dip me, but luckily, she was at least able to hold me tight enough to make sure I didn’t land on the ground.

We threw our hands in the air as the song switched to something techno I’d never heard before.

“Jump!” Tori shouted as the beat hit, and I followed her lead. It didn’t matter that I could barely see as my Sasquatch mask bounced up and down. It didn’t matter that, just as I suspected, I was sweating to death under all this fur. All that mattered was me and Tori and this moment. I couldn’t remember the last time I had let myself enjoy a moment as fully as this one. If I was being honest, it was probably when Willow was still alive.

The music came to an abrupt stop as the DJ spoke over the microphone. “Since tonight is all about celebrating love, I’m going to end the night by slowing it down for all the couples out there.”

As soon as the slow music started, I turned to walk off of the dance floor. I had only taken one step when I was pulled back.

“Absolutely not,” Tori said as she wrapped her hand tighter around my arm and pulled me over to her. “We’re going to see this thing out to the end.”

Alarm bells went off in my head as I thought about the fact that the last person I had ever slow danced with was Willow. But that wasn’t the alarming part. The alarming



part was how much I wanted to dance with Tori. I brushed it off as a combination of the alcohol and the fact that I felt comfortable with Tori. It would have been crazy to believe that with all of the years I (hopefully) had left on earth that I would never slow dance with anyone again. Who better to share this first dance with than Tori—the woman who understood everything I had been through?

I clasped my furry hands together behind her neck as her hands came to rest on my hips. Even with all of the fur between her hands and my skin, it felt like I was naked beneath her touch. Without thinking about what I was doing, I laid my head on Tori's shoulder as if it was something I did all the time.

"This is the happiest I've been in a really long time," I whispered against her neck. "Thanks for bringing me."

"Thank you. I think this might be the best birthday I've ever had, and it's not even my birthday yet."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I burrowed my head deeper into Tori's neck. The whole room disappeared around me as we swayed to the music. The music eventually faded out, but I wasn't ready to let go. Tori must have felt the same way because she kept holding on to me as well. I'm sure it was quite a sight—a Sasquatch and an Abominable Snowman dancing to no music. Luckily, the wedding guests seemed too drunk to think anything of it, and I was too drunk to overthink it too. Because what were we doing? Why were we clinging onto each other as if our lives depended on it? Was it because of the safety we found in each other's arms or was it something more than that?

I quickly pulled away because obviously it wasn't more than that. God, I drank way too much tonight. I put my hand on my head. "Sorry. The room is spinning."

"Shit." Tori looked all around the room as if she was searching for something. "Let's

go inside and get you some water and Tylenol, then I'll help you get changed and get you settled on the couch. I don't want you to be sick all day tomorrow while you're trying to teach."

I followed her into the house where she quickly helped me out of my costume and into the pajamas I had brought along. Then she grabbed two blankets and a pillow and set them down on the couch. "You make yourself comfortable, and I'll get the water and medicine."

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I crawled underneath the blankets and wrapped them tightly around my body as if they could keep me safe from all of the feelings that were creeping into me. Feelings I couldn't even acknowledge, because they were feelings I wasn't able to have. That I wouldn't have. That I can't have. Instead, I would just drink my water, take some medicine, and wake up with a sober mind—a mind that didn't let touches and words get under my skin.

“Here you go.” Tori held out both hands. One held a bottle of water and the other held two Tylenol. I put the Tylenol in my mouth then took the top off the water bottle and took a big sip.

Tori stared down at me as I continued to take big gulps of water. She tilted her head and bit her lip as if she was considering what to say or maybe if she wanted to say whatever she was thinking. Part of me hoped she wouldn't, but that part didn't win, because soon she opened her mouth to speak. “I'm sorry I got so weird earlier.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as if I didn't know the exact moment she was talking about. The truth was that I hoped my question might get her to change her mind about whatever she was about to say, mostly because I was worried about what I might say back.

“When you made the joke about Willow not caring if I stole you. I guess... Well, I... I don't know. I'm drunk and I'm just being weird. I'm sorry.” Tori pointed her thumb toward the door. “I'm going to go help Marley clean up a bit so there isn't as much to do tomorrow. Sleep tight, Rosemary.”

“Yeah, uh, you too.” I squeezed my eyes shut. Idiot.

Sleep was not happening, no matter how hard I tried. I kept my eyes shut, hoping it would take over eventually, so when Tori walked back into the house, I had no idea what time it was.

I listened as she rustled around, opening and closing cabinets, and running from one room to another. After a little bit, things became quiet, so I assumed that meant she went to bed. That was until I heard the light sound of footsteps walking toward me. “Rosemary?” Tori whispered into the dark room.

Even though I was wide awake, I didn’t make a sound in response. I thought Tori would walk away, but instead, she lifted my blankets and crawled onto the couch, squeezing herself in behind me. “Rosemary?” she whispered once again. When I didn’t answer, she spoke again, but this time, her voice was even more hushed. “I lied earlier. I know exactly why I was weird. I know you were only joking about Willow being okay with me stealing you, but I kind of wish I could.”

My body tensed up under Tori’s touch, but I still didn’t say anything, because what was I supposed to say to that? There was no way Tori meant that in the way it sounded like she did.

For a moment, I thought about asking her what she meant, but before I could, she stood up off the couch and walked back out of the room. When I opened my eyes a minute later, there was nothing but a dark room.

I closed my eyes once again, hoping to wake up and find that this was nothing but a very strange dream.

## Chapter 7

November 24, 2022

Almost a month had passed since Tori and I crashed the wedding, and I still had no idea if I had dreamed up the confession she'd made into the dark room that night.

She hadn't mentioned it since, and was acting normal. Kind of. She was acting like Tori, but not the Tori I had come to know recently. She hadn't slept next to me since that night, but was that really that strange? In actuality, it was probably more strange that we had been in the habit of sleeping with each other almost every night. It obviously wasn't going to last forever. Maybe I did something to give her the impression that I didn't need it anymore, which wasn't the case. The truth was, every night when I crawled into bed, I wished she would end up in my room. I was lonely without her arms around me. I missed her. I could barely sleep this past month, but that was a combination of missing her and then chastising myself over the fact that she was the one I was missing, rather than my deceased wife. Of course, I missed Willow every day, but it was Tori's arms I was waiting for at night.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, Tori showed up at my doorway at that very moment. "Happy Thanksgiving, babe. When are you heading over to the Stones' house?"

I looked at my watch and saw that it was just past ten. "Probably about an hour or so. Are the girls still playing nicely in their room?"

Tori smirked. "Believe it or not, they are. I haven't heard a peep from them in almost a half hour."

My stomach dropped, because it was normally a bad sign if you didn't hear toddlers. I pictured the wall of their room covered in drawings and the two of them covered in whatever they could find to make a mess with.

Tori put her hand in the air. "I guess I should add that I checked on them before coming over here, and they weren't doing anything bad. They were watching

something on Bella's tablet, hence the quiet."

I put my hand on my chest and blew out a long breath. "You really should have led with that."

Tori's smile grew even bigger. "What can I say? I like to watch you squirm."

"What time are you two leaving?"

Tori shrugged. "Who knows. My mother said lunch would be ready at noon, but I'm really not in any hurry to get over there. Both of Rick's kids are coming with their families. I'm sure my mom will make a bunch of backhanded comments about how much better they are than me. Can't wait for that."

I was still surprised Tori was going to their house for Thanksgiving. Normally, she spent the day with Willow's family as well. I couldn't help but wonder if maybe she was going there to avoid me, but that really didn't make any sense. We lived together. Avoidance was pretty much impossible.

"There's always a place for you at the Stones' house. Don't forget that. If things get too unbearable, you should just leave and come join us."

"I'll keep that in mind." Tori flashed me her trademark smile, but the tone of her voice told me there was no way she was actually going to do that. "I'll leave you alone so you can keep getting ready. Have a good day."

"Thanks. You, too." When Tori turned to leave, I immediately felt the loss. "Hey, Tori?"

Tori immediately turned back around and tilted her head as she waited to hear what I had to say.

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I miss you. That's what I wanted to say. I knew I couldn't though, because I saw her every day. If she asked how I could miss her when she's always around, I'd have to explain that what I actually miss is our nights together, and I couldn't do that. "Don't let your mom get inside your head. You're an amazing woman, and the world's greatest mother. She would realize that if she actually took the time to see it."

The smile immediately returned to Tori's face, this time even bigger than it had been before. "Thanks, Rosemary. That seriously means more than you know. Especially coming from you. You're actually the best mom in the world. Not just to your daughter, but also to mine. I guess this is my way of saying thank you for giving me something to be thankful for this year."

I couldn't stop the wide smile that spread across my face. Tori's words made me feel like I could do anything. There was so much I wanted to say in response, but I couldn't put it all into words. "No. Thank you, Tori." That would have to do for now.

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I sat back in my chair and rubbed my stomach after eating way too much food. "You outdid yourselves this time, Mr. and Mrs. Stone. Everything was amazing."

My mother-in-law gave me a look that I knew all too well. It was the look she gave me whenever I called them Mr. And Mrs. Stone. They'd told me multiple times to call them by their first names, but some things never changed. Calling older adults by their first name would never feel natural after my parents had ingrained it in my head that I needed to respect my elders (even if they were family). My mother-in-law grabbed my plate and put her hand on my shoulder. "Well, I hope you saved a little

bit of room. We still haven't had dessert."

I groaned, because I didn't know how I could possibly fit anything else in my stomach, but I also couldn't turn down my mother-in-law's Apple Pie. "Give me a few minutes, then I should be good to go again."

My dad, who was sitting next to me, stood from the table and reached out his hands to take some of the dishes Mrs. Stone was holding. "Let me help you with that."

"Don't let him fool you," I said with a laugh. "He's only helping so he can be the first one to get his hands on the dessert."

My dad chuckled as he followed Mrs. Stone out of the room. My parents seemed extra happy today. If this was a few years ago, I would have thought I was in the Twilight Zone. Now I was wondering if my mother-in-law put a little something extra into her stuffing this year.

I smiled as I pulled my phone out to text Tori. I hadn't heard from her since we both left the house, and I was itching to talk to her. How is everything going over there?

I didn't even have time to put my phone back in my pocket before a response came through from Tori. It's going.

My smile immediately dropped. That didn't sound good. That bad? I'm sorry :(

Not your fault.

We haven't had dessert here yet :) if you sneak out of there now, you can still get a piece of Mrs. Stone's pie before my dad eats it all.

I wish.



Want me to steal a piece for you? ;)

Okay.

This wasn't good at all. Normally, Tori would have had at least one witty thing to say. The short, concise texts told me things were probably going even worse than she'd expected, which was saying a lot since she expected it to be terrible. Let me know if you need anything

When five minutes passed without a response, I turned on my ringer and shoved my phone back into my pocket. As the hours continued to pass by, no sound came from my phone.

"We gotta get you home and into bed, little girl," I said to Emery as I scooped her into my arms.

"We should be going, too," my dad said as he stood up beside me. "Before we go, though, could we talk to you, sweetie?"

My stomach immediately dropped as I thought about all the talks I had with my parents in the past. Even after all this time, I still expected every talk with them to go badly.

My mom squeezed my arm. "Don't look so scared. This is good news."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Okay. What is it?"

My mom looked over at my dad who smiled at her and winked. When she focused back on me, the smile on her face was even bigger. "Your father and I are both retiring at the end of the year."

My heart leapt into my throat with excitement. I was now the girl who got excited over more time with her parents. Thanks again, Willow. “Wait. Seriously? Both of you?”

My mom nodded her head up and down so fast, I was worried it might fly off. “Yep. So you better start looking at houses. We’re hoping to be official residents of Melsborough by the end of 2023.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. I would offer to let you stay with me until you find a place, but I don’t know if we have room for two more people.” And hopefully Tori and Bella aren’t planning to leave anytime soon.

My father waved his hand and scoffed. “Don’t worry about it. Even if you had the space, I’m sure you wouldn’t want your old folks to intrude.”

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A few years ago, I would have hated the thought of being close to my parents. Now I would be counting down the days until they got here. Of course, it helped that having them here meant more readily available babysitters for Emery and Bella. Bella. Thinking of her of course made my brain pinball right to Tori, who I still had yet to hear back from.

I hoisted Emery up higher on my waist, trying to redistribute her weight, since she was getting way too big to be held like this constantly. “We better go. It’s past Emery’s bedtime.”

“I’m not even tired,” Emery whined, but the big yawn that followed her words told me that was a lie. “Is Bella home yet? I want to hang out with her before I go to sleep.”

“I’m not sure if they’re home yet, but if they are, I’d say Bella is probably already sleeping.”

“Then I’ll wake her up.” Emery flashed me a sly grin that was really hard not to laugh at.

I was somehow able to keep a straight face when I told her she absolutely would not be doing that. We said our goodbyes to my in-laws, then walked outside with my parents and exchanged hugs before getting into our separate cars. I had thought about walking earlier, but now that it was dark and cold, I was happy I had decided to drive instead.

Even though the drive took less than a minute, by the time we pulled into the

driveway, Emery was already passed out. I carefully took her out of her carseat then slowly walked inside to try to keep her from waking up. I cringed when I felt her start to wiggle around in my arms, but then she snuggled into me even more and yawned.

“I’m tired, Mama.”

“I know, sweetie.” I kissed her forehead, then opened the front door.

The hallway light was on, but all other lights in the house were turned off and the doors to both Bella and Emery’s room and Tori’s room were shut.

“We have to be very quiet when we go into your room,” I whispered to Emery. “I think Bella is sleeping in there.”

Emery brought her finger to her lips and let out a quiet, “Sh.”

When I opened the door to the room, I was surprised to see a small light shining from the top bunk. I could hear a little body fumbling around, then Bella held her tablet up to her face and gave me a guilty smile. “Don’t tell my mommy, okay?”

I made a zipping motion in front of my lips, and Bella went back to watching whatever show she had on. I quickly got Emery changed and tucked her into bed. I shook my head when I walked out of the room and immediately heard the girls start to talk and giggle.

I thought about going right across the hall to my room, but Tori’s closed door seemed to be calling for me. I knocked softly on the door and listened for any sign that Tori was awake on the other side. I was about to walk away when I heard what sounded like crying.

“Tori?” I didn’t even wait for her to answer before opening the door.

Tori's back was to the door, but even in the dark room, I could tell by the way she was shaking that she was definitely crying. I ran over to the bed and didn't think twice before jumping in and wrapping my arms around Tori. "It's okay. I'm here. It's okay."

"Rosemary?" Tori asked as if there was any possibility of it being anyone else.

"It's me. What's wrong?"

Tori turned around and wiped at her eyes as she tried to focus on me. "My mom," she said softly.

I let out a long sigh. Of course. That bitch. "What did she say to you?"

"Oh, she said a whole lot of really rude shit to me, but that's not what I'm upset over. I'm used to that by now."

"Then what happened?" I asked as I ran a hand up and down her arm.

"Bella was playing some stupid game with Rick's devil grandchildren, and they started making comments about how much smarter they were than Bella. Which, no shit, Sherlock, you're both over three years older than her. That's a lifetime in kid years. But whatever. Little shits will be little shits. But then my mom started joining in with them. My mom. Bella's grandma. As soon as I saw that little lip start to quiver, I snatched her up and took her right out of the house. She cried for at least an hour after we got home. It broke my fucking heart, Rosemary."

"Wow." I wasn't sure what else to say, because even coming from Tori's mom, that story was shocking. I couldn't believe anyone would ever do anything to hurt that sweet little girl. "I don't know what to say. That's terrible. But, hey, if it makes you feel any better, Bella is currently sneaking videos in bed and giggling about who

knows what with Emery.”

“Thanks. That definitely helps.” Her sad eyes and drooping lips didn’t tell the same story though.

“Then why do you look so sad?”

“I always told myself I could deal with everything my mom put me through as long as she made Bella happy. I promised if she ever treated Bella the way she treats me, that would be it. She’s cut off. So, that’s what I need to do. And I know that shouldn’t make me sad, but for some reason, it really does.”

“Aw, Tor. Take it from someone who thought she was losing her parents for good multiple times. I know how much it sucks. I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“I’m sure when, or if, she calls me, she’s going to have some choice words for me.”

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“And you can give her some choice words right back. I saw the way you stuck up for Bella at the playground when that little boy was being an ass. You have no trouble putting someone in their place, no matter who it is.”

As I had hoped, my words caused Tori to finally crack a smile. “You’re right. Telling her exactly what I think and where she can shove it will be a pretty great feeling.”

“There’s my Tori.” I playfully shoved her shoulder. “Glad to have you back.”

Tori smiled at me as she wiped the remaining tears from her eyes. “Sorry. It’s just been a really lonely day. Plus, it was exhausting trying to hold myself together around Bella for hours.”

“Hours? When did you two get back here?”

Tori’s cheeks turned the slightest bit red as she flashed me a guilty smile. “Around two?”

“Tor. You should have told me. You could have come over to the Stones’ house.”

Tori shook her head. “I wasn’t feeling up to being around a bunch of people.”

“Well, you still should have told me. Emery and I would have come right home.”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you. I knew you would. One of us deserved to have a good day.”

My lips instinctively turned down into a pout. “But I hate the thought of you being here alone and sad for hours.”

“I survived.”

“Well, I’m here now. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing.” Tori let out an exaggerated yawn. “I think I’m just going to try to get some sleep. Thank you though. You helped a lot just by coming in here.”

“Sounds good.” I had to admit that I was a little disappointed that Tori didn’t suggest I stay with her, but I reluctantly stood from the bed and headed toward the door.

When I was about to turn the doorknob, Tori’s voice stopped me. “Rosemary, wait.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Ask me to stay.

“I’m actually not as tired as I thought. Maybe we could watch a movie together or something?”

I looked from Tori to her TV and back. “In here or down in the family room?”

Tori shrugged. “I’m already in here. Why don’t you go get changed, then come join me?”

“Sounds good.” I hoped Tori didn’t notice how I practically skipped out of the room because of her invitation.

A few minutes later, I was changed and back under her covers. Tori put her arm out and motioned for me to snuggle with her. Finally. We picked a movie neither of us had seen, but that didn’t help me to keep my eyes open. The warmth of Tori’s arms



and the safe feeling it gave me to be wrapped in them again, caused me to drift right to sleep.

“Rosemary? Hey, Rosemary.” Tori poked me in the side and I opened my eyes to find a completely dark room, with nothing playing on the TV anymore. “You fell asleep. The movie’s over.”

“Oh, okay.” It took me a few seconds to realize that was her polite way of trying to get rid of me. “Oh. I’m sorry.” I stumbled as I tried to get out of the bed that I clearly wasn’t wanted in anymore. “Goodnight, Tori.”

“Goodnight, Rosemary. Thanks for everything tonight.”

“Yeah, um, you too.” Thanks for the massive amount of confusion you’ve now caused me.

## Chapter 8

December 18, 2022

“No, Mom, I told you. We will not be coming over for Christmas or Bella’s birthday. Or anything else for that matter.”

I stopped dead in my tracks when I heard Tori on the phone with her mom. I didn’t want to walk into the kitchen and interrupt, but I also wasn’t able to get my feet to walk away.

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“I’m not being irrational. Maybe if you actually apologized, things could be different at some point in the future, but you couldn’t even do that.” There was a long pause, and then Tori laughed, but it was far from being a happy laugh. “Nothing to apologize for? You made your own granddaughter cry on Thanksgiving.” Another short pause. “No, she doesn’t need to grow up. You do.”

When there was an extended silence, I figured that meant Tori must have ended the call. I waited a few more seconds then walked into the kitchen.

Tori cringed when she saw me. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough to know that your mom’s an asshole.”

Tori rolled her eyes, but a small smile parted her lips. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I think you’re an amazing mom. Did you know that?”

“Nope. Totally didn’t know that. It’s not like you remind me every single day.”

“Speaking of children...” I looked down at my phone that read 8:42 a.m. “I can’t believe ours are still asleep.”

“I’m not surprised. I heard them giggling together for a long time after we put them to bed last night.”

“You heard them? I thought you went to bed right after they did.” I tried my best to

hide the hurt in my voice. It really felt like Tori was avoiding me, at least at night time.

Tori shrugged. "I tried. I couldn't sleep."

I wanted to tell her that she could have come to my room if she couldn't sleep, but apparently, that wasn't something we were doing anymore. "So, I was thinking about Bella's birthday. I know you're obviously having that party for her at the barn in January, but I thought maybe the four of us could do something this week for her actual birthday. Maybe go on a little trip or something?"

"The four of us?"

I didn't know if Tori was honestly confused or if she was playing dumb to try to avoid the question. I had a bad feeling it was the second option. "Yeah. Me, you, Emery, and Bella. The barn is already closed down for the holidays. We have a half day on Wednesday then I'm off until after New Year's. I could even see if they can find a last minute sub for Wednesday morning for me. Then we could leave on the night of Bella's birthday."

Much to my disappointment, Tori shook her head. "I don't think that's the best idea since we're hosting Christmas on Sunday, then have Willow's party at the barn two days later."

Coming from anyone else, you might have believed they actually thought that was too much to pack into a short amount of time, but with Tori I knew it was a lie. She was always up for an adventure. Whenever she came up with a crazy idea when we were younger, she would say, "Come on. We can sleep when we're dead." After Willow died, she changed it to, "Let's go. We need to live like Willow."

"All right. No worries. Just thought I'd ask. I'm going to go make sure the girls are

actually breathing.” I turned to walk away, but after only a few steps, I thought better of it. A voice inside my head (which sounded a lot like Willow’s) was telling me that if there was something on my mind, I needed to just say it, so I turned back around. “This might be a silly question, but you’re not avoiding me, are you?”

“I see you every day. If I was trying to avoid you, I’d say I’m pretty bad at it, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I smiled to try to make it seem like I believed that, but I didn’t. Not one bit.

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By the time Christmas Eve came, I was fully convinced Tori had lied to me. She insisted on shopping for the long list of items we needed to host Christmas on Wednesday morning when she knew I could have gone with her if she just waited until the afternoon. When I offered to stay home with her and Bella on Christmas Eve rather than going to the Christmas Eve Service at the Stones’ church, she insisted that I go. At first, I assumed she was just trying to be nice since she probably thought I wanted to go, but when Emery and I got home from the service (which wasn’t that late), Tori and Bella were already asleep.

When I woke up on Christmas morning to both Emery and Bella jumping on my bed and screaming about presents, I assumed Tori was probably hiding in her room. I was surprised when I noticed the smell of bacon then found her in the kitchen making breakfast for all of us.

“Merry Christmas, everyone,” she said as we entered the room. “Did you see that Santa came?”

I wanted to be annoyed at Tori for the fact that I was the reason Santa had come, but

she looked unfairly cute in her dinosaur Christmas onesie. Any residual anger melted away with one look at her. So unfair.

When I walked over to see what she was cooking, Tori leaned in to whisper to me. “Thanks for setting out the presents. Please accept all of this food as an apology for how weird I’ve been acting lately.”

There it was. “Ah, so you’re finally admitting that you’ve been weird. Care to admit why that is?”

Much to my chagrin, Tori shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Just know that it’s going to change. I promise. No more weirdness.”

I guess that was going to have to be good enough. I didn’t want to push it. Plus, it’s not like I had time to. As soon as the girls took two bites of their breakfast, they both shouted that they were done and ran into the family room to open presents. By the time that was over, we had less than two hours to get ready and start cooking before everyone arrived. Everyone was actually just my parents and Willow’s parents. Phil had spent last night with his parents so he was with his in-laws, and obviously, Tori hadn’t invited anyone from her family.

Both sets of parents arrived within five minutes of each other and immediately took over in the kitchen, which I was more than okay with. Once Tori and I were sure they had everything under control in there, we went to the family room to check on the girls. It must have been a Christmas miracle because the two of them were playing nicely with all of their new toys. I threw myself onto the couch and Tori followed my lead, plopping down right beside me. When her leg bumped into mine (something I was acutely aware of), I realized it was actually the closest she had been to me in a really long time.

I expected her to quickly move away, but instead, she stayed sitting pressed up

against me. “Would it be weird if I said that I missed you this week?”

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“Nope.” I playfully shoved my shoulder into Tori’s. “What’s weird is how much you were avoiding me this week after you told me you weren’t.”

“I really am sorry about that. I’ve been going through some stuff recently, but I’m all good now. For real.”

I wondered if that “stuff” Tori was going through had anything to do with the drunk confession she had made after we crashed the wedding. If that was what was bothering her, what did it all mean? What was she trying to admit when she said that sometimes she wished she could steal me? Did she see me as more than a friend? Did she wish she could be with me in that capacity? More importantly, why did it feel like my heart was going to beat out of my chest just at the thought of that? I couldn’t possibly feel the same way. Sure, if I was really looking for them, there were signs that I did. But I couldn’t. So I wouldn’t. And since Tori was apparently now “all good,” it appeared that she wouldn’t either. Why did that feel like a stab to my rapidly beating heart?

Get it together, Rosemary. I patted Tori’s knee and ignored the way my hand burned and my fingers itched for more. “If you ever want to talk about anything, I’m here. Nothing you confess could ever get rid of me.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Tori said with a laugh. “But thank you. I seriously don’t know what I would have done without you these past few years.”

Without overthinking it (because why should I?) I leaned my head against Tori’s. “The feeling is mutual. Trust me.”

We sat like this for a few minutes before my mom shouted to let us know that lunch was ready. I reluctantly pulled myself away from Tori and followed her into the kitchen. After eating and watching Bella and Emery open even more presents, we all settled into the family room and told our favorite Willow stories.

“One time when we were like ten years old she convinced me it would be an adventure to climb that one mountain that was like a block from my house. As soon as we got to the top, I fell and scraped my knee on a rock. Always one for the dramatics, I was convinced I couldn’t possibly move, so Willow put me on her back and carried me down. She was my hero that day.” Tori laughed but that didn’t mask the tears that were running down her cheeks. “She still is my hero. God, I miss her so much.”

I couldn’t find the right words to say so I put my hand on Tori’s knee and squeezed it to show my support. I was about to move my hand when she put hers on top of mine and held it in place.

I swore I saw my mother-in-law’s eyes land on our interlocked fingers, but I couldn’t be sure because soon her focus was on Tori. “You were her hero, too. She adored you, sweetheart. I am confused though. Where is this mountain at?”

Tori laughed even harder now, but her hand remained on top of mine. “Okay. Mountain might be an exaggeration. More like a large hill. It felt like a mountain back then though.”

We continued to tell more stories until everyone’s eyes started to glaze over from tiredness. “We better get going,” my mom said as she stood from the couch and let out an exaggerated yawn. “We wanted to get right over here so we still haven’t checked into our hotel.”

“You know you two are welcome to stay here,” I told her for about the billionth time.



Now it was my mother's eyes that seemed to graze over me and Tori's hands. "We don't want to intrude. You'll get enough of us over these next few days. Don't worry."

I stood up, reluctantly pulling away from Tori's grasp in the process, and hugged both of my parents. "Good. I can't wait."

"And now that your mother is officially retired and I'm almost there, soon you'll be sick of us."

"I don't think that's possible," Tori said as she stood to hug my parents as well. After hugging both of them, her hand came to rest on my lower back as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"You're only saying that because we entertain those kids of yours," my mother said as if Bella and Emery belonged to both of us. I had to admit that it almost did feel that way at this point. "Speaking of which, where are they?"

Tori pointed upstairs. "They asked me if they could watch a movie in my room. That was a while ago though, so I should probably check on them."

After saying our final goodbyes to everyone, Tori offered to check on the girls while I started to clean up. A few minutes later, she joined me back downstairs. "So, I have some good news and some bad news."

I cringed. "Oh no. Let's start with the good."

"Don't worry. The bad is only bad for me. The good news is the girls are fine and they aren't getting into any trouble. The bad news is that the reason they aren't causing trouble is because they are both completely passed out in my bed. I don't have the heart to wake them up and make them move, so it looks like I'm taking the

couch tonight.”

“Why would you sleep on the couch? Just sleep in my bed. It’s not like we haven’t done it before.”

“I don’t know.” Tori rubbed the back of her neck and stared at the floor. “I was just doing that to help you get some sleep when you were sad.”

I couldn’t explain why, but her words got under my skin and pissed me off. She was the one who had crawled into bed with me all those nights, and now she was acting like I made her do it. Like holding me in her arms meant absolutely nothing to her. I shouldn’t want it to mean something to her, but I did. Damnit, I really did. “Well, I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience to you.”

Tori cringed as if my words had hurt her somehow, then she reached out to take my hand, but I pulled it away before she could. “I’m sorry, Rosemary. That didn’t come out the way I meant it to. You’re the farthest thing from an inconvenience. I’m the one who’s an inconvenience. I was getting into bed with you every night without even asking. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m trying to be respectful by not intruding now.”

All of the anger I had been feeling a moment before quickly vanished, and it was replaced with feelings I didn’t want to acknowledge. “Tori, if I didn’t want you there, I would have just told you that. I liked it when you held me. I’ve actually really missed it. I don’t know if that’s okay for me to say, but I can’t keep lying about it.”

“I’ve missed it, too,” Tori said quietly.

“What the hell is going on with us?” Even though I asked the question, I wasn’t sure if I actually wanted to hear the answer. At least not an answer that had any bit of truth to it. Because I had a feeling the truth could ruin everything.

Tori sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “Honestly? Not anything that should be happening. Which is why, as much as I want to say yes and sleep in your bed tonight, I think I have to sleep on the couch.”

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Even though it hurt like hell, I couldn't disagree. "I think you're right. Do you need anything from me?"

Tori shook her head. "Not anything that you can give me. Go get some rest. I'll see you in the morning. Oh, and Rosemary, Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too, Tori."

I turned around and made a beeline up to my room, my head spinning from what had just happened. How did Tori and I just have one of the biggest conversations of our lives without saying anything at all?

## Chapter 9

December 27, 2022

"We should play a drinking game," Lisa suggested as soon as my in-laws left with Emery and Bella, leaving me, Tori, Lisa, and Abigail as the last ones left at Willow's party once again.

"All right. Let's do it." Normally, playing a drinking game was the last thing I wanted to do, but I wasn't nearly as drunk as I wanted to be, and a drinking game would help me get there more quickly.

"Whoa." Lisa put her hand on my forehead as if she was checking to see if I had a fever. "Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?"

“It was a very long holiday season and I need to be much more drunk than I am.”

“Oh shit. There goes my idea to play Never Have I Ever. God knows compared to the rest of us, you won’t be drinking anything if we play that.” Lisa’s face lit up. “We can play beer pong instead, but we’ll change the rules a bit. Every time you miss a shot, you have to take a shot.”

I choked on the drink I had just taken a sip of. “I said I wanted to get drunk, not that I wanted to wake up in a pile of my own vomit and remember nothing about the night before.”

“Fine. Every time you miss a shot, you have to take a big sip of your drink. No shots.” Lisa pointed between me and Tori. “You two versus us.”

“Let’s do this.” Tori put her hand up to give me a high five, and I realized that was the most physical contact we had made since our “talk” on Christmas.

As Tori and Lisa set up a table, I poured myself a new drink and drank it as quickly as possible, as if the alcohol was somehow going to wash Tori out of my system. As if it would stop the current that was running through my body from one stupid high five.

A few minutes later, when everything was set up, I stood at one end of the beer pong table, doing my best to put as much distance between me and Tori as possible, which was a hard task when playing beer pong.

After five rounds, everyone had made at least one shot except for me. Luckily, it looked like the game hopefully wouldn’t last very long since Tori had made all of her shots so far.

After Lisa had to jump out of the way because of how much I overthrew my ball, Tori

held hers out toward me. “Here, let me show you.”

Before I could comprehend what was happening, Tori was standing behind me with her body pressed up against mine and her hand wrapped around my hand that was holding the ball. As she directed my hand back to show me the best way to throw the ball, I could barely even remember my name. I loved the feeling but also hated it, because I couldn’t deny it anymore. This feeling could only mean one thing. I had a crush on Willow’s best friend. A crush was the perfect way to describe it since it was sure to wreck me.

I refused to look anywhere other than straight ahead, so I watched the path of the ball as it traveled from my hands and into one of the remaining cups.

“Holy shit,” Tori said in a breathless whisper that made me wonder whether it was actually in response to the ball going in. She suddenly jumped away from me and held up her hand for a high five. “Awesome job.”

Okay. Maybe it was in response to the shot.

Lisa pointed to the drink I was holding. “That was cheating. You need to take another drink.”

“Hey!” Tori said, clearly ready to jump to my defense, but I put a hand up to stop her.

“She’s right. I definitely didn’t earn that one.” Plus, I need this. I finished what was in my glass then poured myself another mixed drink.

Tori leaned over to whisper in my ear as Lisa and Abigail took their turns. “Are you okay? You’ve had a lot to drink tonight.”

“I’m doing awesome!” I answered much too enthusiastically. At the same time, the

floor felt like it started to move beneath my feet and I wobbled into Tori, giggling as her strong arms grabbed ahold of me and kept me from falling to the ground. “On second thought, maybe I have had enough.”

“I hate to cut this game short, but I think I need to get this one home.” Tori nodded her head toward me, then focused back on Lisa and Abigail. “Are you two okay to get home? You’re taking a rideshare, right? I know I already said it, but you’re welcome to stay at our place if you want. There’s plenty of room since the girls are staying with Mama and Papa Stone tonight.”

A big shit-eating grin came on to Lisa’s face as she waved off Tori’s offer. “No. We’re good. We both have to work tomorrow. Plus, we wouldn’t want to intrude at your place.”

By the way she said the words, I could tell she was making fun of the fact that Tori called it our place. But that’s exactly what it was. Tori hadn’t mentioned leaving, and I honestly didn’t want her to. Although, the reason why was getting more obvious to me, and that reason currently had me on the edge of throwing up.

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“Sounds good.” Tori put a hand around my waist and while I was pretty sure it was just so I wouldn’t fall over, it still made me want to jump out of my own skin. But in a good way... if that was possible. “Don’t worry about cleaning anything up here. I’ll come back tomorrow morning and take care of it.”

After saying goodbye to Lisa and Abigail, Tori locked up the barn and we started the walk back to our house, which luckily wasn’t very far. Just like before, Tori’s arm was around my waist as we walked. I wasn’t sure if it was helping or hurting, because it was definitely helping me to stay on my feet, but was also making me feel weak at the knees. Damn. This alcohol had me admitting things to myself that I really shouldn’t be.

“I think I know why you’ve been so weird lately.” Oh no. It was one thing to tell myself things I didn’t want to hear. I couldn’t word vomit all my thoughts on Tori.

I felt Tori tense up beside me. “I thought we weren’t talking about that.”

“But what if what I’m not talking about is different from what you’re not talking about?” Why can’t I just stop talking? Good lord. “I heard you on Halloween by the way. I wasn’t actually asleep.”

Tori’s arm fell from my waist and she took a step away from me. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know what I mean.”

Tori shook her head back and forth. “We can’t talk about this. Not out here.”



It only took a few more minutes to get home, which was good since those were some of the most awkward minutes of my life. Tori walked in front of me the whole time and didn't say one word. Great. I must have pissed her off really badly. Why the hell did I have to open my big mouth?

As soon as I closed the front door. I grabbed Tori's jacket to keep her from walking away from me. "I'm really sorry for bringing that up. I shouldn't have said anything. I honestly don't know why I did. I want to blame the alcohol, but I'm just an idiot."

When Tori turned around to face me, I hated what I saw. Her lips were turned down into a frown and her cheeks were streaked with tears. I wanted to apologize again, but Tori spoke before I could. "You're not the idiot. I am."

"You're not an idiot, Tori. I promise."

Tori threw her hands up and groaned. "Maybe I'm not an idiot, but I am a terrible person."

Okay, now she was really talking crazy. "You are definitely not a terrible person."

Tori scoffed as if my words were complete bullshit. "I am. Who says they want to steal their dead best friend's wife? I've been beating myself up every day since I said it."

"You have?"

"Of course I have! I don't even know why I said it."

"Did you...?" I hesitated for a moment, because I knew there was no turning back after I asked this question. "Did you mean it?"

Tori looked like she was in physical pain when she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “Please don’t make me answer that.”

When she started to cry, I couldn’t take it anymore. I closed the space between us and ran my hands over her cheeks. “Sh. You’re okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed it. You don’t need to say anything.”

“Rosemary.” Tori’s voice was choked and her eyes were burning into mine, and if she wasn’t holding me in place, that look alone would have knocked me over. “You need to move away from me, or I’m going to do something we’re both going to regret.”

Between the alcohol and the way Tori’s breath hit my lips as she spoke, I couldn’t think straight anymore. I only had one thing on my mind, and no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn’t shake it. “What if I want you to do it?”

“Y-you do?”

I have no idea who moved in first, but within seconds, our lips met in a searing kiss. I felt the kiss throughout my whole body, but I was desperate to feel even more. I grabbed onto Tori’s shirt and brought her body tight up against mine as my tongue slipped into her mouth. We both moaned as our tongues touched for the first time, and my body reacted in a way it hadn’t in a very long time. I had forgotten how good it felt to be on the edge of something big and feel like you were about to burst. It made me wonder how I had gone so long without this.

That’s when the crushing reality hit me. I had gone so long without this because I lost the love of my life three years ago. My soulmate. My one true love. The person whose life I was supposed to be celebrating tonight. Oh my god. What did I just do?

I pulled my lips from Tori’s and pushed her away from me. She stumbled back

slightly, but I think that was more from shock than anything else.

“Shit.” Tori’s eyes were wide as they looked around the room, and she ran her hand over her mouth as if she was trying to erase all traces of what had just happened. “Fuck.”

I brought my fingers to my still-quivering lips. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry.”

Tori’s chest moved up and down as she breathed rapidly, her eyes still wide when she looked at me. “It-it’s not your fault. We both definitely just did that. Together.”

“Together,” I repeated, the knot in my stomach growing from the sound of that word. How could one word feel so incredibly wrong, yet so right all at once? Shit. I’m going to be sick. “Holy shit.”

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Tori ran a hand through her hair then blew out a long breath. “Fuck,” she whispered once again. “What the hell did we just do? What do we do now? Shit.”

“I think maybe...” God, I don’t know what I’m thinking. All I know is that I’d rather be anywhere but here right now. “Maybe we should sleep this off. Let ourselves sober up before we say or do anything else that we regret.”

“So, you regret it? You regret kissing me?”

I couldn’t handle Tori’s puppy dog eyes and her lips that were now curved into a frown. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, but what was I supposed to say? “We shouldn’t have done that.”

Tori looked to the ground, the same expression plastered on her face, except now she couldn’t look at me. “I know. It was wrong. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I was only thinking about one thing.” I reflexively licked my lips as I thought about the kiss once again, even though I knew that was the last thing I should be thinking about right now. It was so good though. Ugh. Why did it have to be so good?

“You can’t look at me like that, or I might make the same mistake all over again.” Tori looked at me with hungry eyes, and I was pretty sure if I gave her the okay in that moment, she would have pounced. And as much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn’t. We couldn’t do this.

“That’s why I think we need to go into our own bedrooms. We’re both drunk and confused. We shouldn’t be around each other right now.”

Tori nodded slowly. “You’re right.” She turned around and walked up the stairs without another word.

I waited a minute before I headed upstairs as well. Once I was laying in my bed, I brought my fingers to my lips once again. Just the thought of Tori’s lips against mine sent a shockwave throughout my whole body. I needed to shake this feeling. What we had just done shouldn’t have ever happened. It didn’t matter that it felt like I had been waiting for those lips for a lifetime. Shit. Why was I thinking like that? This was Tori. I had known Tori for years. Until recently, I had never once seen her as anything more than a friend. Sure, I could appreciate that she was good looking, but so could everyone else in this world. I had no idea when she had gone from that person to someone I was dying to kiss (and do more with, to be completely honest), but maybe that was a good thing. If it could change so quickly in that direction, maybe I could just as easily go back to seeing her as only a friend.

If that was going to happen, though, I needed to make sure Tori and I were on the same page. I didn’t want to twist the knife even more, but I worried if I didn’t say this tonight, I might not be able to. I typed out the words and sent the text before I could overthink it. We can’t let that happen again. I’m sorry.

At the exact same time I sent my text, a text came through to me from Tori. I know you said we should wait to talk about this until morning, but I need to get this out right now. We shouldn’t do that again.

It should have made me feel better that we were on the same page, but for some reason, reading words from Tori that literally matched my own, made me feel like my heart was cracking in two. I had no idea what to say back to that, so I set my phone on my nightstand and closed my eyes.

Of course, sleep was not happening. As I lay in the dark room, I talked to the one person who was always there for me, no matter what. Even now, I knew she would

listen to me with no judgment, even though what I had done to her was unforgivable.

“Hey, Willow. Three years. God, I can’t believe it. I miss you so much, babe. I’m sorry if it doesn’t seem that way. I really hope you don’t hate me.” I laughed at myself. “Of course you don’t hate me. Because you’re you and you’re perfect. I’m a mess though. I’m so confused. Out of all the people in the world for me to fall for, why the hell did it have to be your best friend?”

## Chapter 10

When I awoke the next day, the house was eerily quiet. That tended to be the case when the girls weren’t home, but it was even quieter this morning. Normally, I could hear the faint sounds of Tori rustling around in bed or using the bathroom, but there wasn’t any of that.

Even though I was dreading our talk, I still wanted to see Tori. I had to make sure she was okay after last night. Was I even okay though? I honestly had no idea

“Tori?” I said softly as I left my bedroom. I knocked on her bedroom door, then slowly pushed it open when a minute passed with no answer. Inside, there was nothing but a perfectly made bed.

The bathroom was also empty, so I headed downstairs. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I looked out the front window and realized Tori’s car wasn’t in the driveway. She never left the house this early, which meant she was definitely avoiding me. Great.

I looked at my phone and saw that it was only 7:45. I was pretty sure Lisa was going into work later today, so I decided to give her a call. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I needed to talk to someone.

“Hey, babe,” Lisa said when she picked up the phone after only two rings. “What’s up?”

“Not too much. What’s up with you?”

“Just getting ready for work. Is everything okay?”

“Oh yeah. Everything is great. How are you?”

“Aside from being extremely hungover, I’m wonderful.” Lisa laughed. “Do you really expect me to believe you just called to chat and see how I’m doing? I might believe that if it wasn’t a Wednesday morning before eight.”

“No. I’m good. Sorry to bother you.”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m going to come over before I go to work. You’re clearly freaking out about something.”

“How do you know that?”

Lisa laughed once again. “I’ve known you since we were kids. You pick up on a few things when you’ve known someone for that long.”

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“You really don’t have to.” Because, really, when did I become the person who made everyone’s life harder?

“I know I don’t, but I want to. I’ll see you soon, Buttercup.”

Lisa hung up before I could say anything else, probably because she knew I would argue that she didn’t have to come. Since she obviously was, I paced back and forth through the kitchen until I heard my front door open.

“Honey, I’m home,” Lisa shouted as she walked in the door.

“I’m in the kitchen.” The way my voice shook did nothing to give the impression that I was actually okay.

Lisa walked into the kitchen and immediately hoisted herself up onto the counter next to the sink. “So, what’s up?”

I paced back and forth as I tried to think of how to put this into words. How did I say that I did the one thing that I shouldn’t do? How did I admit that all I could think about, aside from how guilty I felt, was how much I wished I could do it again?

After another minute, I stopped walking and forced myself to look at Lisa. “I did something really bad last night.”

Lisa waved her hand in a go on motion. “Are you going to tell me or do I have to guess? Because if I’m guessing, I’m going to say you kissed Tori.”



How the hell did she always do that? I opened and closed my mouth a few times, but I couldn't get any words to come out.

Lisa smirked. "I knew it. So, how was it?"

"It was..." Amazing. Spectacular. Earth-shattering (literally). "A mistake. We shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" I scoffed at her question. "Tori was Willow's best friend. It would be weird. You said that yourself."

Lisa furrowed her eyebrows. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Last year at Willow's party, you said it would be weird if me and Tori boned. I assume kissing falls in the same weirdness column."

"First of all, you have a very good memory. I don't remember saying that at all. Which brings me to my second point. I was also very drunk. Plus, after seeing you guys together the past few months, I realized that it works."

"What works?"

"You and Tori. You're good together."

"We're not together."

Lisa smirked and wiggled her eyebrows. "Not yet."

I shook my head. "Not ever. We both agreed that could never happen."

“But you want it to?”

I put my face in my hands and groaned. Why was Lisa asking all the hard questions?

“I don’t know what I want.”

Lisa pulled my hands away from my face and smiled at me. “You know what I think?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” I teased.

“I think you know exactly what you want. You’re just afraid to admit it.”

“I can’t, Lisa.”

“So, I’m going to ask you again. Why not?”

I shrugged because I was struggling to come up with reasons. “She’s not Willow.”

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“No one will ever be Willow. The perfect thing about Tori is that she understands that.”

“Yeah, she understands it because Willow was her best friend. It feels wrong for us to be together. It’s like we’re betraying her. If I end up with someone that I knew when Willow was alive, it’s like...” I let my voice trail off because I didn’t know how to put it into words. Honestly, I didn’t know exactly what I was trying to put into words.

“You feel like it looks like you were always harboring a flame for Tori.”

“Exactly!” How did Lisa know my thoughts better than me?

“Well, were you?”

“Of course not. This just started over the past year, pretty much since she moved in with me.”

“See. I obviously knew that, by the way. I asked to prove a point.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but stopped at the sound of the front door opening. Tori walked into the kitchen holding two coffees, her eyes going wide when she saw Lisa. “Lisa, hey! I didn’t know you were coming over. What were you two talking about?”

“You.”

I glared at my best friend and clenched my teeth together. “Thanks, Lisa.”

Lisa shrugged as if it was no big deal. “What? If you two are going to get into a relationship, you can’t start it out with lies.”

“You told her we were getting into a relationship?” Tori’s face scrunched up as if she was either concerned or disgusted (or maybe both).

“I didn’t. I told her what happened last night, because I was super confused about it.”

“You do know that you could talk to me about it, right?” Tori looked from me over to Lisa. “Not that I care that she told you. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not.” Lisa jumped out of her seat and flashed both me and Tori a big toothy grin. “It appears you two have a lot to talk about. I’m going to let you get to that.”

Before I could say anything else, Lisa slipped out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, I heard the front door open and close.

Tori held one of the coffees out toward me. “And then there were two.”

“I’m really sorry about that. I wasn’t trying to go behind your back by talking to Lisa. I just woke up and you were gone, and I started freaking out, so I called her.

Tori chuckled. “I completely understand. You’re not going to believe this, but when I left the house today, I instinctively grabbed my phone to call Willow.” She put her hand on her head and shook it. “It’s such a mess. I wanted to call my dead best friend to tell her how guilty I felt about kissing said best friend’s wife. And, of course, to ask what the hell I’m supposed to do now since I can’t stop thinking about that kiss.”

My heart beat picked up. “Y-you can’t?”

“Of course not. It was the best kiss of my whole damn life. And I’m not just saying

that because I was drunk.”

A thought popped into my mind. “What if it was though? What if we’re blowing up the kiss in our minds because we were drunk? Who knows. Maybe sober it would actually suck.” Doubt it.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Tori bit her bottom lip, and it appeared as though she was trying not to smile, but her lips still curved into the cutest smirk.

“Maybe we should kiss one more time just to make sure. If it sucks, then we know we’re not missing out on anything.” All of this was bullshit, of course. Tori’s glistening lips were so appetizing, even looking at them had me turned on.

Tori took two steps to close the little bit of space between us and put her hand on my hip. “And what happens when it doesn’t suck?” Tori licked her lips and looked deep into my eyes, and I honestly thought I might pass out. “What happens when it’s even better than we remembered?”

I shrugged, because I had no idea. All I knew was that I had to taste those lips one more time. It wasn’t a want. It was a need. “I guess we’ll have to face that when the time comes. For now, all I want is—”

“This?” Tori pulled my body tight up against hers and brought her lips onto mine, fireworks erupting throughout my body as soon as they met.

This wasn’t like last night’s kiss. It was so much better. Our mouths immediately found a rhythm, as if they had been doing this for years. As our tongues brushed against each other, I put my hands on Tori’s hips. The deeper our kiss became, the more I wanted to run my hands underneath her shirt and feel that smooth skin. I wanted so much more than just this kiss, which was exactly why I needed to stop.

I reluctantly removed my mouth from Tori's and took a step away from her. I brought my fingers to my trembling lips and could still feel Tori's there. All I wanted to do was close the space between us and kiss her again. I wanted to forget every reason why this was a bad idea, but I couldn't. Willow was the reason this couldn't happen. Her name flitted through my mind, and I could see her face right in front of me. My stomach ached. What the hell did I just do? Why don't I want to stop? God, Willow, I'm so sorry. "I'm so sorry," I repeated out loud

"Huh?" Tori tilted her head and furrowed her eyebrows.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Tori asked as if she hadn’t just been in the same room as me for the past five minutes

“For doing that with you. For doing that to Willow. I shouldn’t have put you in that situation. I shouldn’t have suggested we do it again.”

“That bad, huh?” Tori asked with a strained laugh. I could tell she was trying her best to keep the moment light and playful, but this moment was far from either of those things.

Still, I couldn’t help but smile. Tori always had that effect on me. She was the one who made me smile when all I wanted to do was cry. She was the one who always kept me going. “I think you know the answer to that.” I put my hand on my head and groaned. “Shit, Tori. What the hell are we going to do?”

“We’re definitely not going to test out your ‘Maybe we were just really drunk’ theory again.”

“Could you please be serious for one second?” Even though I meant what I was saying and needed Tori to stop the jokes so we could actually figure out what to do, the smile didn’t leave my face.

“See, here’s the thing.” Tori’s smile dropped into a frown as she stared down at the carpet. “I’m afraid if I don’t laugh, I’m going to cry, because the truth is, I don’t know what the hell we’re supposed to do now either.” Tori continued to stare at her

feet as she moved one across the floor. “I meant what I said last night. Willow is my best friend. I know she isn’t here, but it still feels like I betrayed her. When I’m not with you, I can rationalize all the reasons this is a terrible idea, then I’m around you and all I can think about is... well... you.”

I understood that feeling all too well. “I get it. Trust me. Which brings me back to the question of what we’re going to do. You’re one of my best friends, Tori. You’re the only reason I get through some days. I can’t lose you. I want to move on from these feelings, but I can’t do that by keeping my distance. I need you.”

Tori looked up at me, and now there were tears in her eyes. “I need you, too.”

I closed the distance between us and put a hand on Tori’s arm. That clearly wasn’t going to help our situation, but I couldn’t let her cry without doing anything. “I’m not going anywhere. I just wish I knew what to do.” I chuckled at the first thought that popped into my head. “You know who would know what to do?”

Tori smiled despite the tears running down her cheeks. “Willow. I know.” She looked toward the ceiling as if she was trying to see through it straight to Heaven. “Maybe we need to be together without being alone.”

“Together, but not alone.” It sounded so simple, but I was sure it wouldn’t be.

“Yeah, it shouldn’t be too hard given those two kids who keep showing up at our house,” Tori joked.

“Speaking of which, maybe we should go get them.” I missed both of them even though they were only gone for the night. Plus, with Tori staring at me with those big blue eyes and that perfect hair, it seemed like a great time to not be alone.

“Yeah, we probably should. Any idea what we should do with them today?”



The first idea that popped into my head was absolutely ridiculous, so I knew exactly who it was from. “Let’s go to the beach.”

“The beach?” As expected, Tori looked at me as if I was crazy. “It’s the middle of winter.”

I shrugged. “I know, but you asked earlier what Willow would do. She would say we need to feel the sand between our toes.”

A knowing smile came onto Tori’s face. “Let’s do it.”

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A few hours later, we arrived at the beach with both little girls nicely bundled up so they wouldn’t get sick. It wasn’t hard to find parking close to the beach since no one wanted to go to a beach in New Jersey in the middle of winter, so before long, we were hitting the sand.

Emery tugged on my hand. “Can we go in?”

Before I had the chance to answer, Bella put her hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. “No, silly, it’s too cold to go in right now.”

Emery put both hands on her hips and glared at Bella, then looked up at me with the same expression. “Then why are we here?”

Honestly? To keep me from kissing Tori. Instead of telling the truth, I simply shrugged. “We wanted to do something special and different with you girls.”

Emery continued to glare at me. “What are we ’posed to do here?”

That was a great question. I hadn't really thought that one through too much.

"I have an idea." Tori opened her backpack and revealed a bunch of sand toys. "Let's make a castle and you two can pretend you're the princesses of the castle."

"Yay!" Emery and Bella yelled in unison as they jumped up and down and started to claw at Tori's backpack like rabid animals.

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I mouthed Thank you to Tori as Emery and Bella plopped right down in the sand as if they no longer noticed the frigid air surrounding us. We sat with them and made a giant sandcastle together.

“Now we’re real princesses!” Bella said as she stared proudly at our work.

I smiled at Bella then looked out at the water, and my mind flashed back to a memory from so many years ago. I was going through one of the hardest times in my life, and Willow brought me to the beach in the middle of winter and convinced me to dig my toes into the sand. “Do you know what sand princesses wear on their feet?”

When Bella and Emery shook their heads, I looked over at Tori and winked as if to tell her to please trust me on this one. “They don’t wear anything. They’re sand princesses. If they wore shoes, they would get sand in them.”

Bella and Emery wasted no time ripping off their socks and shoes. They both giggled as they dug their feet into the cold sand.

“I don’t think you should—”

I put up a hand to stop Tori. “It’s just for a few minutes. We’ll be okay.”

“We?” Tori smiled and lifted an eyebrow at me.

I lifted one back in a silent dare as I took my own socks and shoes off. Tori laughed and followed my lead.

I sat down in the sand and dug my toes in, and Tori sighed as she sat right next to me and did the same. Her pinkie reached out and wrapped around mine. I thought about moving my hand away, but the moment was too perfect to ruin.

Bella sat down on Tori's lap, and since Emery did everything Bella did, she sat down on mine. Emery giggled as I wrapped my free arm around her and held her close to me. "This is fun," she said between giggles.

I looked out at the water and noticed a small rainbow hue where the sun was hitting it. I was filled with warmth because I knew exactly what that meant.

Thanks for still being here, Willow.

## Chapter 11

June 2023

In the months following "The Slip Up," Tori and I kept to our plan of being together without being alone. We went on special trips with the girls to keep them from running off to their room to play on their own, and went to our own rooms whenever they went to bed at night. Each night as we put them to bed, we would say a number to each other to describe how big our crush was. One meant we were completely over it, five meant it was staying exactly as it was when we first kissed, and ten pretty much meant we needed to think of a different plan because our feelings were way too strong. It was our way of keeping an open communication without diving into our feelings too much and making things harder. The problem was, both of our numbers kept going up. My number had been at an eight for two months, but that was only because I didn't want to give up my time with Tori, and I was afraid that would happen if my feelings were too strong.

The thing with Tori was that we didn't have to be intimate or physical for the

romantic feelings to be there. Seeing her interact with our daughters, watching her make breakfast, listening to her tell a bedtime story... Those were the things that made me fall for her. The ache in my heart was growing as my feelings did, but I wasn't willing to give up any of my time with her. I loved these moments together. Who needed more when our friendship was so great to begin with?

The past two months had been a little easier since so much focus was on making sure everything came together for the second annual Live Like Willow Pride Fest. Some of the pain over not knowing what to do about my feelings for Tori was replaced by the pain of constantly being reminded that we were having this festival in Willow's memory because she was gone. For good. Even after three and a half years, sometimes I still expected her to walk through that door. Things like this Pride event reminded me that it would never actually happen. Still, hearing the passion in Tori's voice when she spoke about how important it was to make the event perfect and seeing the way her eyes lit up as things came together for the parade, brought me right back to my crushing reality. I really liked Tori. She was smart and beautiful and funny and the way she squinted her eyes when she laughed was the most adorable thing in the whole world.

"Earth to Rosemary."

I was pulled from my thoughts by none other than the woman occupying them. Tori, Emery, and Bella all stared at me as if they also realized my mind was elsewhere. All three of them looked so adorable with their glitter-covered skin and matching Live Like Willow Pride shirts that had a picture of Willow dressed for a Pride event we went to together many years ago.

I shook my head to try to bring myself back to the current moment. "I'm sorry. Are we ready to go?"

"We've been ready. You've been daydreaming," Bella said in her sassy voice that

always reminded me so much of Tori.

“Be nice to my mama,” Emery scolded her as she wrapped her arms around my legs. “She’s sad.”

“Aw, honey, I’m not sad.”

Emery nodded her head up and down rapidly. “Yes, you are. You’re sad because my mommy isn’t here.”

A feeling of guilt coursed through my body. I tried so hard to be strong, so I didn’t upset Emery. Apparently, I hadn’t been doing a very good job lately. I bent down so I could be on Emery’s level. “We might not be able to see her, but Mommy is here, sweetie. What do I always tell you? Where is she?”

Emery tapped her chest. “She’s right here. In my heart.”

I couldn’t help but smile when I put my hand over hers. “Exactly. She’s right here with us, so we don’t have to be sad.” I thought about what I was saying and decided to add onto it. “Of course, it’s also okay to be sad at times. I miss your mommy every day, and you’re right. Sometimes, that makes me sad. But we have to keep living our lives for her.”

When Emery tilted her head and shot me a big toothy grin, it looked like a small version of Willow standing in front of me. I pushed a piece of hair behind her ear. “Your mommy would be so proud of you. You’re so much like her. You know what helps make me less sad?” When Emery shook her head, I wrapped her in a tight hug. “You. You always make me happy. I love you so much.”

Emery giggled and wiggled out of my arms. “I love you too, Mama, but can we go?”

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

The girls walked out of the door first, but before I could follow them, Tori’s hand landed on my arm. “Hey, are you doing okay?” she asked as those big blue eyes stared into my soul as if her whole livelihood depended on me being okay.

My stomach flipped, and my eyes instinctively traveled from her eyes down to her lips. I quickly brought them back up. “I’m okay, I promise. But if you keep looking at me like that, I might tip over to a nine.”

Tori chuckled, and it was too late. I was already there. “I’ll try my best not to be so charming.”

She went to turn around and without her luscious lips teasing me, I could finally think straight. “Hey, wait.”

When Tori spun back around, her expression was more serious but still just as adorable. “What’s up?”

“Are you okay?”

“That’s a very loaded question. On one hand, it’s Pride and I get to celebrate it with some of my favorite people in the whole world. On the other hand, it’s in memory of my best friend who I still miss every single goddamn day, and it just reminds me how unfair it is that we have to miss her.” Tori threw a hand over her eyes as if she was shielding them. “You’re also looking at me like you want to kiss me right now, and I honestly don’t know what’s worse—the guilt over how much I want you to or the

agony of how much it sucks that you won't."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I pointed out of the door to where the girls were impatiently waiting by the car. "We should probably go before one of them decides to drive."

The first thing we did when we got to Pride was walk around and talk to all of the vendors as they set up for the day. The girls loved it since everyone gave them so much attention. As we came up to a booth with multiple paintings of naked women, my first instinct was to cover Emery's eyes, but I didn't want her to think that the female body was anything to be ashamed of, so I let her look.

As expected, her eyes practically bulged out of her head when she noticed the paintings. She looked from the paintings to me, eyes still wide. "Why don't they have clothes?"

The girl behind the booth laughed at the question, but looked at me to answer, clearly trying to avoid saying anything I might not approve of.

I shrugged, because I wasn't sure how to answer either. "It's art. It shows us that all bodies are beautiful."

Emery looked from me over to the girl behind the booth. "Did you make these?"

"I didn't. It was my girlfriend." She pointed to someone walking toward the booth. "Speak of the devil, there she is."

Bella turned and tilted her head at the dark-haired girl who was now standing beside us. "Why do you paint people without clothes?"

"That's a great question." The dark-haired girl knelt down in front of Bella. "I don't



know. I guess I like showing the body through art, because it's so beautiful."

Emery squeezed my hand and bounced up and down. "That's the same thing my mama said."

"Well, your mom is very smart." The girl stood up and held her hand out toward me. "I believe we met last year. My name is Dakota. Rosemary, right?"

"Impressive," I said with a laugh. I thought her face looked vaguely familiar, but I never would have remembered her name.

Dakota put her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "I'm sure you have talked to so many people here. I only had to remember a handful of you. By the way," she motioned behind the booth. "I'm not sure if you were introduced yet, but this is my gorgeous girlfriend, Ashton."

Tori smiled over at me, and I could tell by the look on her face that she was thinking the same thing I was. That desperate pull to have what these two clearly had. A lump formed in my throat as I watched Dakota put her arm around Ashton and kiss her cheek. It made me miss Willow so much, but also made me miss what I would never have with Tori. Life was so unfair. Why did my heart have to open itself up again just for me to fall for someone I could never have?

A hand landed on my back, and I looked over to see that Tori was now standing beside me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good. Thanks." I put on my best fake smile, and even though I knew I wasn't fooling Tori at all, she nodded in return and removed her hand from my back as if it would catch on fire if she left it there too long.

We spent a few more minutes talking to Ashton and Dakota, most of that time

dedicated to the girls asking them a million questions that they graciously answered. We continued to walk from booth to booth until it came close to the time the parade was starting. We went to where all of the floats and parade walkers were gathering and found Silas and Aaron already over there, helping them get organized. Thank god for beards turned into best friends.

“How is everything over here?” I asked Silas after giving him a hug.

Silas answered with a thumbs up. “All good to go.”

I walked down the long row of awaiting parade participants and confirmed that there were no last-minute issues. Emery followed behind me and gave everyone high fives.

When it was time for the parade to start, we stood at the beginning of the parade route to watch. Since this was the first time doing the parade and it was pretty small, it only took twenty minutes for the last float to pass us.

Emery clawed at my leg while repeating, “Mama,” over and over again.

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“What is it, sweetie?”

She pointed out at the road. “I want to be in the parade.”

Before I could say anything, Bella tugged on Tori’s hand. “Mommy, I want to be in the parade, too.”

Tori lifted her eyebrows at me. “What do you say? We are in charge here. If we want to be in the parade, no one can stop us.”

Emery bounced up and down. “Please, Mama. Please.”

I acted as if I was contemplating it, even though there was no way I could say no to these three humans. “All right. Fine. Let’s do it.”

“Yay!” Emery and Bella yelled in unison.

Once we were on the road, Bella threw herself at Tori’s back. “Shoulders! Shoulders!”

Tori groaned and rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You are getting way too big for this.” She still swooped Bella into her arms and put her on her shoulders as if it was nothing at all.

I cringed, because I knew exactly what was coming.

“Me too!” Emery screamed just as I suspected.

I couldn't remember the last time I put her on my shoulders, and I had no idea how I was supposed to do it with how big she had gotten. Sure, she was smaller than Bella, but I wasn't nearly as strong as Tori.

"I'm not sure if I can, sweetie. I'm sorry."

When Emery stuck her bottom lip out at me, it just about broke my heart, so I was determined to at least try. I tried to lift her up and when that didn't work, I bent down and let her get herself up onto them. Unfortunately, when I tried to stand, the extra weight was too much, and I couldn't get up.

Willow would be able to. My heart shattered even more as that thought came into my mind. I was about to break down into tears when Tori cut in.

"I'll tell you what. How about I carry Bella on my shoulders for half of the parade route and you on my shoulders for the other half? And whoever isn't on my shoulders can give high fives to everyone sitting on the sidewalks."

Emery's eyes lit up. "Yes! I'm going to give the best high fives!"

"Nuh-uh," Bella said from up on Tori's shoulders. "I'm the best high-fiver."

"I bet you're both amazing high-fivers," I said before looking over at Tori and mouthing Thank you.

Tori winked at me, and it was like the pieces of my heart that had cracked apart just a minute ago were suddenly glued back together. I would have kissed her if that was something that was okay for me to do. Trying not to fall for Tori was impossible when she always knew exactly what to say and do to make me happy.

And just when I thought it had to be impossible for me to like her more, she hoisted

my daughter onto her shoulders and carried her through the second half of the parade route while Emery waved as if she was the queen. Tori didn't only take care of me. She had stepped up and taken on a guardian role for Emery as well, and I truly didn't think I could have done the single parenting thing without her. How was I ever supposed to look at this extraordinary woman and see her as just a friend when my heart had already decided she was so much more than that?

I shook these thoughts from my head because I didn't want to ruin such a perfect moment worrying about something I couldn't change. So, I watched the two of them laugh together. I ran alongside Bella while she high-fived every person we passed. I took in every smiling face and listened to the chatter of happy families, because I knew that's what Willow would want. This was the way she wanted me to live—exactly as she had.

When we got to the end of the parade route, my parents and Willow's were standing together, watching with proud smiles on their faces. My mother-in-law had a tissue in her hand and was dabbing at her eyes while waving us over with her other hand.

When we got closer, she knelt down and reached out her arms. "There's my two favorite girls! Come give Grandma a hug."

Both Emery and Bella ran over and dove into Mrs. Stone's arms. When they were done giving her a hug, they gave hugs to their other three grandparents as well. By this point, Bella referred to them all in the exact same way Emery did, which made me happy since she no longer had a relationship with Tori's mom or stepdad.

"When do I finally get to have a sleepover with these two again?" Mrs. Stone asked when all of the hugs were complete. "I can't remember the last time they spent the night at our house."

Emery put her hands on her hips and glared up at me. "Yeah, Mama, why don't we

ever stay at Grandma and Grandpa's anymore?"

My mom put her hands on her hips and mimicked the face Emery was making. "And Meemaw's house. We've been living here for two months now and still haven't had our two favorite little girls over to stay."

That's because I can't be trusted to be alone with the woman beside me. I forced a smile at all of the adults. "I promise you will all get the chance soon. We've been spending a lot of time together, just the four of us."

My mom smirked at me, as if she could somehow hear what I wasn't saying. "We know you have, and that's wonderful. We just don't think it's fair for you to hog the world's greatest little girls all the time."

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“Yeah. Stop hogging us,” Bella said with a huff. “Can we stay with Meemaw or Grandma tonight?”

“Not tonight,” I answered much too quickly.

“Why not?” Emery whined.

“Because...” I let my voice trail off because I couldn’t think of a logical excuse.

“Because,” Tori continued for me, “it was supposed to be a surprise, but we’re going to build a blanket fort in the living room tonight. We can eat dinner and watch a movie in there, and you two can even sleep in it if you want to!”

Both girls cheered and jumped around. Phew. Disaster averted. Thank you, Tori. Again.

“Well, if we can’t have them tonight, can you at least let them hang out with us here for a few hours?” my dad asked. “I’m sure you two can find a way to keep yourselves entertained without them, right?”

“Can we please, Mama?” Emery asked, those big puppy dog eyes impossible to say no to. Not that I needed to. Pride was safe. There were plenty of people around to keep me from being alone with Tori and doing something I shouldn’t.

“Of course. You all have fun. We’ll meet back up with you later.”

Once they all walked away, I looked over at Tori who was already staring at me with

a huge shit-eating grin on her face that I suddenly had the urge to kiss off of her. Ugh. “So, what should we do?” I asked, keeping my hands placed firmly to my sides and my lips far from hers.

“Wanna get some food then walk around the vendor tables again? There was definitely some stuff I might want to buy. It might be cool to take a closer look at Dakota’s art now that the girls aren’t with us asking a million questions about why the women she paints don’t have clothes on.”

I laughed at Tori’s very accurate description of our time at that booth. “That sounds good to me. How would you feel about pizza?”

Tori’s smile grew even bigger. “I always feel good about pizza.”

After eating two slices of pizza each and sharing an ice cream sundae with more rainbow sprinkles than should ever be consumed in someone’s lifetime, we revisited the booths.

After studying Dakota’s paintings for a very long time, Tori decided on one of two women, both naked, embracing under a rainbow. It was gorgeous, but I had no clue where she was going to put it.

“Maybe once I finally get my own place, I’ll put this in my office,” Tori said as if she had heard my unspoken question.

I tried to ignore the way my heart clenched in my chest, but it was impossible when it hurt so bad. I hated the thought of Tori not being right down the hall from me. I had gotten so used to it, I forgot the arrangement was only temporary. “Is that something you’re planning to do soon?” I asked as nonchalantly as possible, even though all I wanted to do was break into tears.



“Is it something you want me to do?”

“No!” I answered much more intensely than I intended to. “I mean, not if you don’t want to. If you want your own space, I completely get it, but I’m happy for you and Bella to stay as long as you want. If that’s what you want. It’s up to you.” I knew I was rambling at this point, and I was sure my face was beet red, but I couldn’t help it. The thought of Tori not living with me had me way too overwhelmed to act normal.

“Hey, Rosemary...” Tori put her hand on my arm and shot me a crooked smile that was unfairly adorable. “Just breathe. I’m not planning on going anywhere. If you want us to stay, I’m happy to. I just don’t want to intrude.”

I looked at the spot where Tori’s hand was burning into my arm, then back at those lips that had somehow appeared even more kissable now than they had just a moment ago. “You could never intrude.”

“Good.” Tori licked her lips then bit down on the bottom one. “Now please look me in the eyes. You’re making me crazy right now.”

I snapped my eyes away from her lips and looked all around us to make sure no one was paying attention to what was happening. Luckily, Dakota’s booth was the one we were closest to, and she and her girlfriend were in their own world. “Sorry,” I said as my face turned red once again.

“All good. Want to keep walking?”

I nodded, but as we started to walk, I could have sworn I felt eyes on me. I looked at Tori, but she was staring straight ahead. As I searched around us, I noticed a girl who appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen with her eyes laser-focused on me. When my eyes met hers, she quickly looked away, but a moment later, she locked her eyes with mine once again. I smiled just in case she was someone I was supposed to know, then

looked down at my feet as I continued to walk. A moment later, I stopped suddenly when I bumped into something. Or someone. It was the very same girl that had been staring at me before. What the hell?

“I’m so sorry,” the girl apologized. “Ugh. I’m being so weird right now. I’m sorry.” Instead of moving out of the way, she stayed rooted in place and did an awkward half wave. “Hi, um, yeah... I’m not sure how to say this, so I’m just going to go ahead and do it. I’m Fern Hytha. I’m the girl—”

I didn’t have to listen anymore to know exactly who she was. I could never forget that name, no matter how much I tried not to think of the events of that awful day. How did you ever forget the person that your spouse died while saving?

## Chapter 12

I looked over at Tori, who was already staring at me with wide eyes. When I looked back at the girl, I tried to form words but my mouth was so dry, I couldn’t. As if reading my mind, Tori handed me the water bottle she was holding. I chugged almost the whole bottle then handed it back to her.

“Yeah, I, umm... I know who you are.”

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Fern looked like she wanted to either cry or run away, but her feet didn't move. "I know this is weird. I'm sorry. It's been three and a half years, and, well, I didn't even know about what happened to your wife until last year when I found an article online. My parents..." Fern cleared her throat. "They didn't want me to know what happened. They were afraid I would beat myself up over it, and they were right. I've had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that hasn't gone away since I found out. I'm not here because I expect you to make me feel better. I just wanted to... I don't know... I guess say I'm sorry. Obviously, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. It was so cold and the roads were frozen and there was—"

I put my hand up to stop her. "I know what happened. You don't have to tell me."

Tears came to Fern's eyes as she took a long shaky breath and blew it out. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I'm really messing this up. I don't know what I'm doing. I guess I just wanted to tell you that your wife saved my life in more ways than one. I was going through a really bad time in my life. I had a crush on one of my female classmates and I told someone who I thought was my friend about it and she told my crush, and the whole thing blew up. My parents found out, and they weren't accepting of it, and I... I didn't want to live anymore. I didn't try to... the accident... I wasn't... it really was an accident. Your wife gave me a second chance at life, but reading about her, also taught me how to live. I'm not just out, but I'm also proud. I want to live my life fully for her since she can't." A sob escaped as she shut her eyes and shook her head, and as much as it hurt me to be reminded of this horrific time in my life, it hurt more to see this girl beating herself up over it, because that's not what Willow would want. "I'm the reason she can't, and I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around Fern and pulled her into a tight

embrace. “You don’t need to apologize. This isn’t your fault.”

Both of us cried as we held each other, and it was oddly comforting. I never met this girl before and up until today, the thought of her turned my stomach because it reminded me of losing Willow. But maybe seeing her face to face was actually exactly what I needed. Maybe this was another part of my healing—seeing another life that Willow saved.

Normally, I hated when people focused on how she died, because that wasn’t important. Sure, she died a hero, but the important part was that was exactly how she lived. She might have physically saved Fern’s life, but that wasn’t the only life she saved. She saved my life. She saved my parents’ lives. I’m sure Tori would say she saved hers. Countless people I don’t even know wouldn’t be the same without Willow. That’s what I wished people would focus on. Not the day she was born, the day she died, or how few years she had in between. I wanted people to focus on how she lived those years, because, really, that’s what was important.

Fern wiped her eyes as she pulled away from me. “Thank you for saying that. I wish I could do something for you. I realize I’m only sixteen and can’t do much, but I’d do anything to repay your family for what your wife did for me.” She looked to the ground and kicked a small stone. “Unfortunately, nothing I do could ever be enough. You lost something you’ll never get back.”

“There’s one thing you could do.” My words not only surprised Fern who looked up at me with wide, yet eager, eyes, but they also surprised me. I knew what I needed to tell her though. Willow had put it on my heart. I had no question about that. “You can live.” I motioned around the festival. “We didn’t make the slogan for Pride ‘Live Like Willow’ for no reason. Willow lived every moment of her life to the fullest, and I have absolutely no question that she would want you to do the same.”

Fern’s body thudded against mine as she wrapped me in another tight hug. “Thank

you. I will. I promise. I hope you're able to do the same."

I'm not sure what other words passed between us as we said our goodbyes because I was in such a haze.

A hand landed on my lower back, and I looked over to find Tori staring at me intently. "Are you okay?"

What a question. Maybe I'd be able to answer it when my world stopped spinning. "Yes? No? I honestly don't know."

"Let's head home. I think you need some space from all of this."

"We can't. We're in charge."

Tori chuckled. "The day's almost over. I'll text Silas and Lisa to explain why we had to leave. With all of the volunteers we have this year, they'll have no problem with teardown."

"But what about the girls? What about the rule of not being alone?" I knew I was spiraling, but I couldn't stop.

"We'll ask your parents to bring them over in a little bit. You know they won't mind the extra time."

Tori took my keys and drove us home. I stared out the window but didn't notice anything that passed us by. Flashing before my eyes were the events of the day we lost Willow. The last time I saw her smiling face. The call that I knew was coming but still wasn't prepared for. My initial anger over how she risked her life for someone she didn't even know. My anger at myself for getting mad at Willow for something I knew she had no control over. The days that followed. Complete

strangers talking about what a hero she was. The anger that returned, because they didn't really understand. They didn't see the heroic things Willow did every single day of her life. They didn't see what I saw—the woman who could make my whole day better with one smile.

“We're home,” Tori said softly when she pulled in the driveway.

I tried to move, but I felt like I was rooted in place. When I didn't budge, Tori got out of the car and came to my side to open the door for me. She took my hand and helped me out then kept her hand on my back as we walked into the house. Once we were inside, she led me into the family room and directed me to sit down on the couch.

She left the room and hurried back in a minute later with a glass of water. She handed it to me as she sat down beside me. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I took a big sip of the water and shook my head. “I'm still trying to process it all.” I wasn't trying to be dramatic. My emotions were all very jumbled, and at this point, I didn't even know if I was happy or sad.

Tori rubbed circles along my back that felt unfairly perfect. “Can I tell you how I feel?”

Shit. Of course. I've been so overwhelmed, I never even thought of the fact that Tori was affected too. “Yes. Please. I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Tori sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “Can I be honest about something?”

“Of course. Always.”

“I used to be so angry at that girl. I blamed her for the death of my best friend,

because it was easier to be mad than sad. Even after all this time, I still think, deep down, I was a little mad. But now that I've looked in her eyes and seen that she really is human, I can't be angry anymore. And I guess that's a good thing. It should be. But I'm always looking for people to blame in situations like this, and if I can't blame her, then my gut reaction is to be pissed at Willow. Because why would she do it? Why would she put her life on the line for someone else?"

"Because that's Willow. It's just how she was. It was never about her. It was always about everyone else."

"But what about me? I needed her. I feel so selfish saying it, but it's true. She gave me a family. She was my sister. Why didn't she think of me?"

Because she was going to die no matter what, so she probably figured she might as well help someone else live. I couldn't say that, of course. "I wish I had the answers for you." Even with everything I knew, there was so much more I didn't understand.

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I put my hand on Tori's knee and laid my head on her shoulder, because I needed that closeness right now. I also needed her to know that I was there for her. After Willow died, everyone's focus was on me because I was her wife. I loved Willow with my whole heart for ten years, but Tori loved her from the time they were kids. "I'm sorry if I wasn't there for you enough after everything happened."

Tori's hand stopped making patterns on my back. "What? How could you say that? You've helped me more than anyone else. We both experienced a horrible tragedy that neither of us saw coming. We've each done the best we could."

A knot tied in my stomach, because I did know it was coming, and the guilt over that still tore me apart. Especially when it came to Tori. "I think I needed to see Fern today," I said when I finally found the words. "It was healing to see her. After the accident, everyone wanted to focus on 'Willow the hero' and that one day, but Willow was a hero her whole life. I thought it was so unfair that her whole life got condensed into one day, one moment. But seeing Fern, I don't know. It put things into a sharper perspective. She's still changing that girl's life, just like she's still changing mine."

Tori tilted her head and smiled sweetly at me, her lips only inches from mine, a fact I wasn't going to think about. "She's still changing mine, too. I don't think Willow came into anyone's life and didn't change it."

Before I could say anything else, there was a knock at the front door. I stood to answer and as I got closer, I could already hear the little girls chattering about the fort. I took a deep breath when I put my hand on the doorknob. Time to put on my brave mom face. "Who's ready for a blanket fort?" I shouted with as much



excitement as I could muster.

Both Emery and Bella bounced up and down while shouting, “Me, me, me!”

They pushed past me, leaving me and my mom. I moved off to the side. “Do you want to come in?”

My mom shook her head. “I know the four of you have a special night planned. I don’t want to interfere. Plus, I should get home to your father. I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

I smiled at my mom’s worry. My relationship with my parents was the greatest gift Willow left me with. Well, after the gift that was currently in the family room giggling with her best friend. “I’m good. Thanks. I think I needed to just get away, but Tori took care of that.”

My mom subtly lifted both eyebrows and smiled in a way that I would classify more like a smirk, as if she knew something I didn’t. “I really like Tori.”

I chose to ignore the tone of her voice, because there’s no way she meant that in the way it sounded like she did. My mom had no idea anything happened between us, and she definitely wasn’t trying to secretly tell me she approved. “I do too,” I answered as nonchalantly as possible.

“I know you do.” There was that smile again. What the hell? Before I could question it, my mom pulled me into a hug. “I’m just glad you’re okay. I love you, sweetie. Have a good night.”

When I shut the door, my head spun with even more confusing thoughts. I decided not to think about that though, because that’s not what tonight was about. Tonight was about time with three of my favorite girls, which I was desperately in need of.

When I walked into the family room, there was already a pile of blankets on the ground. Tori and I rearranged the furniture and set up the blankets while Emery and Bella mostly just gave us orders. After the fort was set up, Tori helped the girls pick out a movie while I made us all mac and cheese.

Emery patted the spot on the floor next to her when I came in with the food. “Mama, lay next to me.”

I did as directed and took my spot next to her while Tori laid on the opposite side next to Bella. We all laughed together as we ate and watched the movie. When Emery was done eating, she snuggled close to me and shut her eyes. I looked over at Tori, and Bella was doing the same. It was the perfect ending to a very emotional day. When Tori looked over at me and smiled, I was hit square in the chest with the realization that this was all I wanted every day for the rest of my life. Holy shit. I needed to go to bed before I did something I would regret like asking Tori to come with me.

I slowly moved away from Emery and stood up. I stretched my arms above my head and yawned to emphasize that I was tired and totally not running away. When I looked back at Tori, she was already staring at me with wide, unblinking eyes. She swallowed hard as our eyes met. It looked like she wanted to say something, but when a few seconds passed without a word, I turned to leave.

“Goodnight, Tori.” I didn’t dare look at her again as I started to walk out of the room. “Thanks for everything today.”

“Um, Rosemary?” I stopped and slowly turned around, my breath catching in my throat from how Tori was looking at me. It was even more intense than before and had my body on edge in the most uncomfortable, yet exhilarating way. “I’m at a ten, so yeah. I guess we’ll have to figure that out tomorrow.”

Her words would have made me anxious if my initial reaction wasn't giddiness over the fact that Tori felt the same way as me. If only my body knew that didn't change anything for us (unfortunately). "Or we could just pretend we aren't at ten, right? That way things don't have to change." I flashed Tori my best puppy dog eyes, even though I was sure it wouldn't actually work.

"We?"

"Obviously. Did you really think I didn't feel the same way? How couldn't I?"

Tori took a deep breath through her nose then blew it out. "We do need to talk about this."

My stomach plummeted as all of my giddiness melted away. "I can't lose you, Tori. Today proved that even more. You know me better than anyone else. I need you."

"You're not going to lose me. I need you too. We'll figure this out. I promise." Tori nodded her head down the hall and flashed me a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Get some sleep. This was a long day."

I wasn't sure if sleep was going to be a possibility given my impending conversation with Tori, but as soon as my head hit the pillow, the tiredness of the day took over and I drifted off to sleep.

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A bright light shined into my bedroom, and I assumed it was the morning sun until I realized it was coming from beside me in bed rather than through the window. I shielded my eyes, then rubbed them once I noticed who was sitting beside me. I knew she wasn't actually there, so when I opened them once again, I expected her to be gone, but she wasn't. She was sitting right beside me with that big beautiful smile on

her face. “Willow? What? How? Am I dreaming?”

Willow shrugged. “Maybe it’s a dream. Maybe an apparition. Perhaps I’m an angel or even a ghost. Who knows. Either way, I’ll be gone in the morning.” Willow continued to smile as if that wasn’t the most heartbreaking thing in the whole world.

“But I don’t want you to go.” Tears immediately sprung to my eyes. I reached out, but there was nothing to touch. She wasn’t really there (at least not physically), no matter how much I wanted her to be. “I need you. I miss you. Stay with me.”

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Willow put her hand on mine, and it felt more like a warm breeze than a solid object. “I wish I could. Trust me. I really do. More than anything, I want to be here with you and Emery. But we both know I can’t. You know who is here with you though? Tori.”

What was she trying to say right now? I shook my head to make sure there was no confusion about what Tori was to me. “Tori is just my friend.”

Willow threw her head back in laughter, and it was such a Willow thing to do that it made my heart burst and break all at once. “You seem to have forgotten that I’m always with you, Rosemary. I see everything. Plus,” My heart warmed when Willow put her hand on my chest. “I’m in here. Because of that, I happen to know that someone else is too.”

I shook my head once again. “I can’t do that to you. Not with Tori. I’m not sure how I could be with anyone after you, but it definitely can’t be Tori.”

“Why not?”

I scoffed, because really, how could she even ask me that? The answer was so obvious. “She’s your best friend, Willow.”

“You know, people used to always think Tori and I were sisters. It obviously wasn’t because of looks. It was because our personalities are so similar. You have a type. That’s okay.”

“But it’s Tori.”

Willow laughed once again. “Exactly. It’s perfect. You two know each other so well. You have daughters who are like sisters already. Plus, you’re already living together! You can avoid all of those big, awkward conversations. House—done. Kids—done.”

Now I laughed too. Willow always had that effect on me. “You act like it’s all so simple.”

“Maybe it is. You and Tori complement each other in the same way we did. And most importantly—you bring back that spark in each other that you both lost when you lost me.”

“But what would people say? What would your family say?”

“They’d say all they care about is the two of you being happy. And if they don’t, I’ll haunt them.”

I went to playfully shove Willow, then remembered I couldn’t and withdrew my hand. “Come on. Be serious.”

“I am being serious, Rosemary. Do you remember one of the last things I said to you?”

Looking back on that day brought me both joy and pain, but I would never forget one detail even if I tried. “That I’ll always be your greatest love story.”

“What about after that?”

Of course, I remembered what she said after that. They were the last words she ever spoke to me. “You said ‘I hope not’ after I told you that you’d always be mine.”

“Exactly. You deserve your happy ending, Rosemary.”

“You were my happy ending.”

Willow smiled and shook her head. “No, sweetie. You were mine. But you’re still here. Please don’t make the end of me be the end of you.”

“But what about us?” I didn’t want there to be an ending for me and Willow.

“There will always be an us, no matter where you are or who you’re with. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I just...” I couldn’t put into words what I was feeling, because in all honesty, I didn’t know what I was feeling. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m giving you my blessing, Rosemary. What you and Tori have is special. When you find something like that, you don’t let it slip away, no matter how scary it is.” Willow stood from the bed and walked over to my door as if she actually had to use it to leave, but stopped before she did. “By the way, take care of Fern. It took a lot for her to talk to you today. She’s a good kid. She deserves the best life.”

Before I could say anything else, Willow disappeared. I brought my hand to my cheek when the sensation of a kiss touched it, and when I did, I heard whispers of “I love you” floating through the air.

I had no idea what had just happened, but there was one thing I knew. That wasn’t a dream.

## Chapter 13

I shot out of bed when I heard a knock on my door. It was really just a light tap, but since I wasn’t expecting it, it shocked me awake. I opened the door to find Tori standing there with a look I couldn’t read. Concern? Trepidation? Confusion? I really

had no clue.

She walked right past me as if I wasn't even there and sat on the edge of my bed. She put her head in her hands and took a few deep breaths as if she was pumping herself up for something. She looked at the ceiling, then down toward her feet, before finally looking at me. "Something really strange happened to me last night. I don't even know how to say it because you're going to think I'm completely insane." She looked back down at her feet as her voice trailed off.



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Suddenly, all of the events from the night before came rushing into my mind. Willow was on my bed. She was right in front of me but also wasn't. She told me to date Tori. Willow (or some form of her) showed up in my room to give me and Tori her blessing. The way Tori was acting could only mean one thing. "Did Willow visit you?"

Tori's face shot up and wide eyes met mine. "How did you know that? I... I figured it was some very illusive dream. Did you have it too?"

I nodded and sat down beside her. "I did, but I don't think it was a dream. I think she was really here somehow, even if it was just in our imaginations."

"Has that happened to you before? Have you seen her?"

I took Tori's hand in mine and sat it on my lap. "No. I've felt her presence, but I've never actually talked to her the way I did last night."

"What did she say to you?"

"That we should be together."

"Do you think... Does this mean...?" Tori stood from the bed and threw her hands in the air as she began pacing the floor. "I want to believe this really happened and that it means we have Willow's blessing. But is that even possible? Did we both just imagine it because it's what we wish could be true?" Tori looked toward the ceiling. "All right. Come on, Willow. Come out one more time. Prove that you really meant it. Show us that it wasn't all just a weird dream."

At that moment, I looked out my window and couldn't believe what I saw. I jumped from the bed and ran over to make sure I wasn't imagining it. "Did it rain this morning?"

Tori scrunched up her face in confusion. "I don't know. Why?"

I pointed out the window at what had caught my attention. "There's a rainbow. I swear, whenever I feel Willow's presence, a rainbow appears. I think it's her way of telling me she's here. You asked for a sign, and a rainbow shows up. That has to mean something, right?"

Tori stood next to me by the window and put her hand on my back. "I want it to."

All of my questions, every hesitation, from before slipped away as I stared at the rainbow while Tori stood beside me. All of Willow's words from the night before repeated in my head like a soundtrack to my life. "Willow loved us, Tori. All she wants is for us to be happy. I think we've been looking for all of the reasons this shouldn't happen when maybe we should have been looking for the reasons it should."

"So, what are you saying? Are you saying—?"

I nodded my head. I couldn't believe what I was saying, especially since it was a complete 180 from the night before, but everything inside of me was telling me that we weren't just imagining this. Willow really gave us her blessing. "I think we should give this a try. It's still a lot to take in, so we should probably take it slow."

"Coming from the girl I live with who has already met my daughter," Tori said with a laugh.

I couldn't help but laugh along with her, and some of the tension surrounding us

seemed to melt away. “Okay, so maybe taking it slow looks a little different for us. Take it easy on me. I don’t know how any of this works. I haven’t dated anyone since I was in my early twenties, and it was one person.”

The cutest shy smile spread across Tori’s face and her cheeks turned the slightest bit red. “Would you, you know, wanna go on a date with me?”

I shrugged nonchalantly, as if it didn’t feel like there was a little man doing back handsprings in my stomach. “It’s a good place to start. Maybe we’ll go and find out we’re not that compatible anyway.”

“Oh yeah, because that worked so well with our second kiss,” Tori said sarcastically. Her face became more serious and she took both of my hands in hers. “How does Saturday sound?”

“It sounds like it’s almost a week away.”

Tori laughed, and the sound was like music to my ears. “You said you wanted to take it slow. I’m respecting your wishes. Plus, I have a busy week at work. I’m working weddings on Thursday and Friday, then doing prep and set-up on Saturday, but Marley is taking over for the wedding. Then I’m completely off on Sunday. I’m slowly trying to wean myself off actually working events and into all the preliminary planning instead. With most weddings being on weekends, I can’t do it. Not enough time with Bella. Also, I can’t keep pawning her off on you or Willow’s parents. I feel bad.”

I wrapped my arms around Tori’s neck and thought about kissing her, but decided against it since we hadn’t even been on our first date yet. Instead, I kept them there and held her close to me. “I was only messing with you, but for what it’s worth, I never feel like your pawning Bella off on me. I love her as if she’s my own daughter.”

“You know, if I hadn’t already hit ten, that comment would have done it.” Tori threw her head back and groaned. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

I playfully pushed Tori away. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but I don’t kiss before a first date.”

“Speaking of which, what are we going to tell the girls when we go on our date?

“That they are spending the night with their grandparents? I don’t think we need to explain things. I assume you haven’t given any details when you were out with your lady friends in the past.”

“That’s different. That was for a night. You... well... I hope it’s much more than that.”

My heart leapt in my chest. “I hope so too, but let’s just see how this first date goes first. Deal?”

Tori smiled wider than I had ever seen before. “Deal.”

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“Thanks again for taking the girls for the night,” I told my mom after dropping them off. I listened to Bella and Emery laughing in the other room with my dad and smiled. It was so great to have my parents living just a few minutes away from me now.

“I’m not sure why you’re thanking me,” my mom said with a laugh. “I’ve been begging you to let them stay with us for months. I’m just happy you finally are.”

“Well, I still appreciate it, so thank you.”

“What are you and Tori doing tonight?”

I moved my eyes around the house to look at anything but my mom. “Nothing really. I don’t really know. I think we’re going to get dinner or something. Maybe. Maybe not.” Very smooth. I could have slapped myself.

“Mhm.” My mom smirked and lifted both eyebrows. “That’s what I thought.”

“I don’t know what you think you thought, but it’s not what you think.” Yep. That jumbled mess of words was definitely convincing.

“That’s too bad. I really like Tori.”

Since she clearly knew what was going on, I figured I might as well use this opportunity to test the waters. “So, you don’t think it’s weird? The two of us?”

“If having a gay daughter has taught me anything throughout the years, it’s that you can’t help who you fall for. I’m also a big fan of whatever has brought that sparkle back in your eyes, and I think I know exactly what that is. Or maybe I should say who.”

Instead of saying anything, I wrapped my mom in a tight hug. She hugged me back, then gently pushed me away. “No more wasting time. I have two little girls to hang out with, and you have a date.”

I skipped to my car because I was so happy about how things had gone with my mom, but even more excited about what was to come with Tori. She had planned the whole night for us so I had no idea what was coming. All I knew was that it was starting as soon as I got back home and dressing up wasn’t necessary.

When I pulled into the driveway, I took out my phone to text Tori just like she told me to. I’m here. Should I come in or are you coming out?

Come in :)

I skipped toward the house and swung the door open, surprised when Tori was nowhere to be found. For some reason, I half expected her to be waiting at the door for me.

“I’m up in the extra room,” Tori shouted as if she could read my mind. It was strange she was in that room since it had been empty ever since Bella decided she didn’t want it to be her room, but I was too excited to overthink it.

When I got upstairs, the door to the room was closed, so I knocked and waited for Tori to answer. I couldn’t believe my eyes when she opened the door for me. Somehow, in the time I had been gone, the room had been completely repurposed. There was a small table in the middle of the room with a white table cloth on it, two

chairs on either side, and a candle in the middle. There were also two plates, which were currently covered by those fancy warming things I had only ever seen in movies. Tori lifted one as if we were in a movie and revealed a mouthwatering pasta dish.

“I thought about taking you to your favorite restaurant, but I figured it would be loud, and we’d end up waiting forever for a table. So, instead, I brought your favorite restaurant to you.”

Tori looked at me with a nervous smile. “Don’t worry. We are going out tonight. I just thought an intimate dinner with just the two of us was a better way to start.”

“It’s perfect, Tori. Truly.” And it really was. I couldn’t think of a better first date. It combined two of my favorite things—eating out, but also staying home.

“In that case,” Tori pulled out my chair for me, “would you like to have a seat?”

I accepted her offer and once I was sitting, she pushed my chair back in, then ran to the other side of the table and took a seat in her own chair. I looked around the room and smiled as I thought about how hard the two of us had worked on it only to have Bella decide she wanted to share a room with Emery. “The bright pink walls really add to the ambiance,” I joked.

Tori cringed. “If I had the time, I would have painted them.”

I thought she was joking until I noticed her pursed lips and reddening cheeks. I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. “Tori, I’m only kidding. I meant what I said. It’s perfect. I can’t believe you did all of this for me.”

The smile returned to Tori’s face and she waved her hand. “It was nothing compared to what you deserve. You deserve the whole world and all of the happiness it has to

offer, Rosemary.”

My face warmed, and I knew it was probably the brightest red at the moment, but I didn't care. My heart was more full than it had been in a very long time. I had no idea what to say, so I made a joke to keep the mood light. “Really laying it on thick for the first date, huh?”

Tori tilted her head and brushed her fingers back and forth against mine, that simple motion making my stomach do somersaults. “I'm just saying and doing all of the things I've been holding in for months. I felt like I was going to burst from all of the feelings I was keeping locked up inside of myself. It feels good to finally let it out. I want to tell you exactly what's in my heart.”

I swallowed hard as my throat went dry. I had never seen Tori so serious before, and it took my breath away that it was all because of me. “Let it out. I definitely won't stop you.”

Tori stared at me for a long time before saying anything, those gorgeous blue eyes burning into mine with a passion that only Tori Fittery was capable of. “This is going to sound crazy, and I know it's not the same for you since you had Willow, and she was clearly your soulmate, but I think you were made for me. I've known you so long, but it was like one day I woke up, looked at you, and realized you were the one my heart had always been waiting on. You were the reason it never worked with anyone else. You were just... it.”



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My heart thudded in my chest as I looked across the table at the woman who had become my world at some point. This might be a first date, but it certainly didn't feel like that. These feelings had been building between us for much longer than either of us were able to admit. "Tori, I..."

Tori put up her hand. "You don't need to say anything. I know it's different for you. You're the only person I've ever felt this way about."

"Just because I've loved someone else, and still very much do obviously, doesn't mean my feelings for you are any less real or strong. I didn't want this. I tried with all of my might to ignore it and fight it, but it's no use. I'm in just as deep as you are. Willow might have been my soulmate, but I'm starting to believe it's possible to have more than one."

Tori just stared at me once again, and I thought she might start to cry. Instead, she chuckled and shook her head. "Look at us being a huge lesbian stereotype. It's our first date, and we're already confessing all of our feelings for each other."

I laughed along with her. "Hey, at least I'm not going to ask you to move in with me at the end of it."

"Yeah, that'd be absolutely crazy, wouldn't it?"

This was one of the things I loved about Tori—the fact that we could be so serious one moment and so silly the next. It was the perfect balance and always kept me on my toes.

The conversation was light throughout the rest of dinner, and once we were done, Tori took the dishes downstairs and put them in the dishwasher while I sat and waited (at her insistence). Once she was done, she walked up to the couch where I was sitting and held out her hand. “Ready for the next part of the date?”

“I was born ready.”

We left the house hand-in-hand, which would have worried me if it wasn’t dark out already. Even if someone looked out their window and saw two dark figures holding hands, they wouldn’t necessarily realize it was us. At least, I hoped not since word traveled around this small town very fast, and we needed the most important people in our lives to hear about this from us, not Miss Sally at the grocery store.

Much to my surprise, Tori walked right past both of our cars in the driveway. When we reached the road, I pointed my thumb over my shoulder. “Forgetting something?”

Tori shook her head and smirked. “We’re walking.”

I hoped we weren’t walking anywhere too fancy since I’d probably be sweating by the time we got there. Even with the sun down, the hot summer heat was still intense. We walked for about ten minutes before we got to the playground we often took our daughters to.

“I know this is just a playground that we’ve been to multiple times together, but I thought it would be romantic to hang out here under the stars. Sorry if that’s lame, but I wanted to bring you somewhere that we come a lot to show you that I want to take everything ordinary and make it extraordinary for you.” Tori chuckled. “I might be giving myself a little too much credit though.”

“You’re not.” If she could feel the rapid beat of my heart right now, she would know that wasn’t a lie. “You’re the literal definition of extraordinary, Tori. When I’m with

you, it makes me forget all about how cruel and unfair life can be at times. All I see is the beauty—the same way I always did with Willow. When I lost her, I worried that wouldn't be possible anymore, but with you, it is.”

To other people, it might seem weird to talk about my dead wife on a first date, but I knew Tori would understand. That's why, even though I tried to fight it for so long, my heart gave itself away to her. She knew what I had been through. She not only understood it, but she was the person who was there to get me through my darkest days. She'd seen me at my worst, and somehow still saw the best in me. It was extremely beautiful.

“I'm so happy I could be that light for you.” Tori pointed to the sky. “Or should I say the stars in your darkest night.”

I laughed and pushed my hip against hers. “Okay, that was incredibly cheesy.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I happen to love cheese.”

“Perfect, because I'm sure there will be a lot more of that.” Tori motioned around the playground. “Where should we start?”

“Swings?”

Tori squeezed my hand extra hard as she bounced up and down and dragged me toward the swingset. “That would have been my choice, too. I knew I liked you.”

Tori dropped my hand when we got to the swings and took one swing while I took the other. She began swinging and put her head back to look up at the sky. Her joy reminded me of a child, and it was so contagious, it made me feel like one too.

“Willow and I used to come to this playground growing up, and we would pump our legs to get the swings to go as high as possible then have a contest to see who could kick their shoes the farthest.”

For once, hearing Willow’s name didn’t feel like a stab to the heart. I pictured little Willow and Tori being ridiculously competitive and fighting over which one of them won and laughed at the thought. “Who normally won?”

Tori scoffed. “Me, of course.”

“Would Willow agree with that?”

“Willow? Admit that she lost? Never.”

“Since she’s not here to defend herself, I guess there’s only one way to settle this. I will compete in her place.”

Tori laughed as if I had just said something ridiculous. “Are you sure Willow would want that? I mean, come on.”

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I put my hand over my chest in mock offense. “Are you doubting my abilities?” Sure, I wasn’t the most athletic person in the world, but how much athletic ability did it really take to kick a shoe off?

“I wouldn’t say I’m doubting you, per se. I’m just very confident in my own abilities.”

I raised an eyebrow at Tori. “Confident or cocky?”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see, huh?” Tori raised an eyebrow back at me, and we both burst into laughter.

I loosened my shoes then started pumping my legs to get my swing going. Unfortunately, I must have loosened them too much because one fell off as I was trying to get my swing into the air and it fell onto the ground right in front of me.

Tori stared at the shoe, then smirked at me. “This is going to be even easier than I thought.”

I stopped my swing and crossed my arms over my chest like an actual child. “That’s not fair. That was an accident. It shouldn’t count.”

“You’re really taking this playing for Willow thing seriously, huh? You sound just like her right now.”

“Whatever.” I picked my shoe up off the ground and put it back on, then made sure both of them were on just tight enough that they wouldn’t fall off again. Tori hadn’t

said anything else, but I highly doubted that she was going to give me another do-over.

“Let me show you how it’s done,” Tori shouted as her swing went high into the air.

When it hit the highest spot, she kicked out her leg and her shoe flew through the air, landing practically on the other side of the playground. Shit. There’s no way I can beat that.

I kicked my legs to get as high as I possibly could, which still wasn’t nearly as high as Tori had gotten herself, then tried my best to mimic what I had just seen her do. Unfortunately, this time, my shoe didn’t land much farther than it did when it accidentally fell off. “What the hell?”

Tori threw her head back in laughter as she continued to swing, then kicked her other shoe off, which landed right beside the first one. She then proceeded to jump from the swing and land flawlessly on her socked feet.

“Show off,” I sneered as I continued to swing. Okay, Rosemary, focus. You got this. I swung my foot back and forth until it felt like just the right moment, then kicked my shoe off. “This one’s for Willow,” I shouted as it left my foot.

Much to my surprise, this shoe actually flew through the air. It flew so far that when it landed I couldn’t tell if me or Tori won. I tried to slow down my swing, then very ungracefully tumbled off of it. Tori must have had the same idea as me because we both took off in a sprint toward our shoes.

Of course, Tori got there first. She stared down at our shoes and shook her head. “I can’t believe it. You beat me by a fucking shoe lace.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. One of my shoelaces was literally stretched out along the

grass and a few inches in front of the farthest part of Tori's shoe. "Told ya you were underestimating me."

"I suppose you're right." Tori bowed down to me. "I apologize, my queen."

"So, what's next?"

"That depends. Do you get motion sickness?"

"Should I be scared to say no?"

"Of course not." Tori grabbed my hand and pulled me away from our shoes.

I pointed behind us as she brought me to the merry-go-round. "Shouldn't we put those back on?"

"Nah. Shoes are overrated. I thought you would agree since you were the one who had us take our shoes off in the middle of winter."

"That was different. That was at the beach."

"Nonsense." Tori pointed toward the merry-go-round. "Lay down. We're going to stargaze."

Once Tori and I were both lying down, fingers still interlocked, she used her feet to get us spinning. "To me, this is the perfect way to stargaze. As you know, I don't like to stop moving, but I also know it's good to slow down once in a while. Which brings me to the perfect combo—spinning while stargazing."

"The perfect combo if you don't get motion sickness."

“Hence why I asked.”

“So, I take it you’ve done this before?”



“I have.”

“Is this where you take all your first dates?” I asked, somewhat joking but also curious to know the answer.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I don’t really date. I honestly never had much interest until recently.”

“Oh yeah? What changed your mind?” I teased.

I watched as Tori smiled up at the sky, and the way the stars reflected in her eyes somehow made them look even more beautiful than usual. “You see, there’s this girl. I kind of like her. I didn’t know if I should, but I couldn’t help myself.”

A tingle ran through my whole body and caused me to wiggle my toes because I couldn’t contain my giddiness. “I don’t get it. I’ve known you for so long, and I obviously always knew you were beautiful, but it was like one day I woke up and I saw you in a whole different light.”

“I think we had to wait for it to be our time.”

“But now it is? Our time?” I didn’t want to question it, especially after all of the signs from Willow, but it was hard not to.

Tori looked over at me and her smile dropped for the first time since leaving the house. “Are you second-guessing things?”

I rolled onto my side and put my hand on her cheek. “My heart isn’t. It’s just my head messing with me. But I promise I’m all in.”

“Good, because I’m in so deep already.” Tori brought her face closer to mine and my heart drummed in my chest, because I was sure she was going to kiss me.

I closed my eyes, but instead of Tori’s lips, a cool breeze hit them. When I opened them back up, I realized Tori had moved away from me.

She sat up and looked out into the distance. “Sorry. I’m not trying to play hot and cold. I really want to kiss you. Trust me. But I think we need to do something first.” Tori let out a long sigh. “I can’t get even deeper into this without knowing that Willow’s family is going to be okay with it. I know this is only our first date, but this has been building for a long time, and I already like you so much, but if they’re not okay with it...” Tori’s voice drifted off, and her next words were spoken just above a whisper. “They’re my family, Rosemary.”

She didn’t have to say anything else. I knew exactly what she was saying, and I felt the same way. Without the blessing of Willow’s family, this couldn’t go anywhere. It didn’t matter how much we liked each other. “I understand. Let’s enjoy this perfect date for now, and tomorrow we’ll worry about that.”

The smile returned to Tori’s face as she laid back down and snuggled into me. “It is pretty perfect, isn’t it?”

## Chapter 14

“So, we’re actually doing this, huh?” Tori asked as we pulled into the Stones’ driveway.

We figured since my parents had the girls, now would be the best time to do this. Just

rip the bandaid off, I reminded myself. “Yep. We’re doing this.”

Tori closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “What if they hate us? Willow’s family is the only family I have. I can’t lose them.”

I reached my hand out and squeezed Tori’s knee. “I know that, and don’t worry, they’re not going to hate us. We’re asking for their blessing. If they don’t give it to us, then we’ll find a way to both move on. Our relationship with the Stones comes first. Just like we agreed on last night.”

Tori put her hand on top of mine and stared over at me, her eyebrows furrowed in concern. “But I don’t want to lose you either.”

“No matter what happens, you’re never going to lose me, Tori. I’ll always need you, and I’m willing to have you in whatever capacity is possible.”

Tori nodded slowly. “Okay. I think I’m ready.”

When we got out of the car, I instinctively went to take Tori’s hand, because I had gotten so used to it the night before. When I realized what I was doing, I quickly moved it away. We were here to talk about a potential relationship, not rub it in their faces.

I knocked on the door since I didn’t actually know if anyone was home, and Mrs. Stone opened it up a few seconds later. A confused smile came to her face when she realized it was me and Tori. “Girls, what a nice surprise.” She craned her neck to look behind us. “Where are Emery and Bella?”

“They stayed at my parents’ house last night.”

“That’s so great. I’m sure both girls are very happy to have them here.” My mother-

in-law moved to the side and motioned for us to walk past her. “Come in. Come in.”

I looked around as soon as we were in for any signs of anyone else in the house. “Is Mr. Stone home right now?”

“He’s over at Phil’s house right now helping him with some painting, but they are all planning on coming back here for lunch in about an hour or so. If you girls aren’t doing anything, you should stay and eat with us.”

I looked at Tori to see if that was okay and she nodded in response. “We would love to. We actually wanted to talk to your whole family about something so that’s perfect.” I looked at Tori one more time to try to secretly ask her if we should tell Mrs. Stone first, and she must have understood because she nodded once again. “If it’s okay though, we’d like to talk to you first. Right now.”

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“Of course. Let’s go into the family room.” Mrs. Stone led us down the hallway, and she sat on the loveseat while Tori and I took a seat on the couch. Mrs. Stone sat on the edge of the love seat and studied us both with loving eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. We’re okay, don’t worry. We just need to ask for your blessing about something.” I took a deep breath and blew it out. “You and Mr. Stone have made it very clear since Willow’s passing that you want me to be happy. I know you said that I would always be your daughter, but you hope that I find love with someone else at some point. I hope you really do feel that way.” I reached out and grabbed Tori’s shaky hand. “We never meant for this to happen, and we’ve tried to fight it, but Tori and I have actually fallen for each other. It’s very new, but with your blessing, we’d like to move forward with our relationship. Only if we have your blessing though. If this is too much for you or anyone else in your family to handle, we won’t do it. We understand how hard it is. It’s hard for us, too.”

My mother-in-law pursed her lips and nodded slowly, then stood from the loveseat and held up a finger. “I just need one moment.”

Shit. Maybe Tori was right. Maybe she does hate us.

Tori removed her sweaty hand from mine and wiped it on her shorts. “Okay, I’m officially freaking out now.”

“Me, too,” I whispered as I stared across the room waiting for Mrs. Stone to come back.

After a few more grueling minutes, Mrs. Stone finally came back into the room. Her

eyes were rimmed with red, giving away exactly what she had been doing when she left the room. “I’m sorry, girls. Even after all these years, I still wait for Willow to walk through that front door. Reminders that she is gone are very hard on me. With that said, I love both of you as if you were my own children. Tori, I’ve watched you grow from a rambunctious little kid to the most amazing mom in the world. It made me so happy. The only thing missing was the person to love you the way you deserved to be loved. I have no doubt that Rosemary can love you that way. I know that because I saw the way she loved my daughter.” My mother-in-law focused her attention on me. “The way you still love my daughter. I meant what I said. I know Willow would want you to be happy, and so do I.”

“Are-you sure?” I asked tentatively. “Because if this is going to hurt you at all, we don’t want to do it.”

“What would hurt me more than anything is knowing that I’m keeping you two from finding happiness. Like I said before, any reminder that Willow isn’t coming back is very hard on me, and this will be a reminder of that. But that’s on me, not the two of you. Just be patient with me while I adjust.”

Tori nodded and let out a long breath. “Of course. This is a big adjustment for us as well. We’re not even sure if we can make it work, but we had to try. You know, as long as we get the blessings of your whole family.”

Mrs. Stone smiled her trademark warm smile. “For what it’s worth, I’m rooting for you two. Like I said, I love you girls more than anything, and I’ve watched both of you suffer so much these past few years. What more could I wish for than the two of you finding that happiness you both deserve. I’m glad you could find it in each other.”

We all stood and exchanged hugs, and Mrs. Stone reassured us once again that we had her blessing. We had just pulled apart when the door opened and Phil’s family

and Mr. Stone walked into the house.

“What did I miss?” Phil asked as he walked into the room with a big smile on his face. Our faces must have been flushed from the stress of the conversation, because his smile immediately dropped. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

I felt guilty about the panic that was clear in his voice. After living through a shocking tragedy, a mind had a way of always going to the worst case scenario.

Before I could say anything, Mrs. Stone walked over to Phil and put a hand on his arm. “Everyone is fine, honey. Don’t worry.”

“Then what’s going on?” Phil looked right at me, probably because he knew I was the easiest to break down.

Which he was right about. I cleared my throat and stood up straight to seem more confident than I actually felt. “It turns out, Tori and I have developed feelings for each other. We want to... umm... move forward with those feelings, but didn’t want to do that without all of your blessings.”

Much to my surprise, Phil started to laugh. Eventually, he bent over because he was laughing so hard.

Stevie entered the room and gave Phil a confused smile. “What’s so funny?”

Phil stood back up and pointed between me and Tori. “These two just scared the shit out of me. I thought one of them was dying, but it turns out they just want to make sure it’s okay to date.” Phil held his arms out, and Tori and I both accepted his embrace. “You two are family. I don’t care what the hell you do as long as you never leave me. I need you two knuckleheads.”

I felt a hand on my back and looked over to find it was Stevie. “We love you two. All we want is for you to be happy.”

I couldn’t stop the happy tears from flowing. I never expected it to go this well. I just hoped my father-in-law supported us as well.

Speaking of which, he walked into the room at that very moment holding both of Phil’s kids. “Before you say anything, I want you to know I heard your speech. All Willow ever wanted was for you two to be happy. That’s all I want, too.” He looked over at me. “It might be weird for me to see you with anyone other than my little girl, but I have no doubt that my other little girl is going to make you very happy.”

Tori was also crying, but a big smile broke through her tears in response to Mr. Stone’s words. She wrapped him in a big hug. “Thanks for always making me feel like part of the family.”

“You are part of the family,” Mrs. Stone said.

After a few more hugs, we all sat down to eat lunch. It would be a lie to say it was completely normal, but it was as close to normal as it could have gotten given what we had shared with them.

When we walked into our house hand-in-hand later in the afternoon, my heart felt more full than it had in a very long time. I looked at Tori, and it felt like it burst open. There were so many feelings that I didn’t know how to put into words. She was beautiful inside and out, and all I wanted to do was express that to her. “Tori?”

“Yeah?” When Tori looked over at me, she swallowed hard, because she must have noticed the desire in my eyes.

“I want you.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “All of you. I know I said I wanted



to take things slow, but I don't think that's possible with you. I feel like I've been waiting for this forever. I can't wait anymore."

Tori's eyes went wide, and she stared at me unblinking for what felt like a very long time. "Are-are you sure?"

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“I can’t remember the last time I felt more sure of anything.”

“Your room or mine?”

“Yours.” I had no question that I was ready for this, but having our first time in a room I shared with Willow didn’t sit right with me.

Tori nodded as if she understood completely. And I was sure she did. That’s why I was so happy to be doing this with her rather than anyone else. I was glad I had waited for this moment.

Tori led me up the stairs and into her room. We sat on the edge of her bed, and she put her hand on my cheek and kissed me softly. It was the first kiss we had shared like this, and it was by far the best.

Clearly, neither one of us was in a hurry because we stayed like this for a long time. I savored the way it felt to finally have her lips against mine like this. I took in every sweep of Tori’s tongue and every little noise she made.

After a few minutes, Tori pulled back to look at me, and it was the most beautiful she had ever looked. Her lips were swollen, her eyes laser-focused, and her hair the slightest bit tousled even though I hadn’t touched it yet. God, I wanted to touch it. I wanted to run my hands through her hair before I touched every other part of her body. I thought touching someone else would scare me, but right now, all I felt was desire.

“Should we lay down?” Tori asked.

I nodded, but thought better of it a second later. “Wait. First...” I brought my hand to the bottom of her shirt. “May I?”

Tori took in a long, shaky breath. “Yes, please.”

My hands shook as I pulled the shirt over her head, but I didn’t let that stop me. I wasn’t sure of much at the moment, but I was sure I needed this. It wasn’t the first time I had seen Tori’s body, but given the heat of the moment, it felt like I was seeing it all for the very first time. I ran my fingers across her stomach, up her sides, and over her chest. I wanted to map out every part of her body so I would never forget it.

As my hands dipped closer to Tori’s bra, she let out an almost inaudible gasp, then quickly moved her hands to her back. “Here.” She unclasped her bra and let it drop off her.

For a minute, all I could do was stare. Then my hands started to tingle, so I brought them where they wanted to be. Tori’s head flew back as I took her breasts in my hands. She was so vocal when I touched her that all I wanted to do was elicit more sounds from her. I took her nipples between my fingers and smiled when she let out a long moan.

“Rosemary... I... your shirt... off.”

I removed my hands from her body just long enough to lift my own shirt over my head. I was ready for so much more, so I immediately removed my bra as well. The look of desire Tori gave me as she took in my body sent a shockwave straight to my core.

When Tori finally touched me, I felt it everywhere. Her fingers were delicate as they ran across my body, as if she was afraid she might hurt me.

When her hands landed on my breasts, I forgot how to breathe. I wanted those hands everywhere. But, much too quickly, she removed them, causing me to groan in frustration. Tori laughed lightly, but her laughter died off when she leaned forward and swirled her tongue over my nipple. I held her against me and she sucked it into her mouth. I threw my head back as I screamed out in pleasure. It had been so long since I let someone do this to me that I had forgotten how good it felt.

After a moment, Tori pulled away from me, but only so she could move her mouth to my other breast. The more she licked and tugged at my nipple, the more wet I could feel myself becoming. If she kept doing this, I was going to come before she was able to touch me anywhere else, and I needed that touch.

“Tori,” I said between loud gasping breaths. “Clothes off, now.”

I wish I could say the process of removing the rest of our clothes was smooth and sensual, but we were both past the point of no return, so it was far from it. I flopped like a fish out of water as I tried to get my shorts and underwear off as quickly as possible, but I was relieved when I looked at Tori and found she was having the same struggle.

Once we were both undressed, we crawled higher onto the bed and lay on our sides, our mouths finding each other immediately as if they were magnets forced together. I wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point Tori maneuvered her body so she was on top of me. Her body flush against mine caused a moan to escape from my mouth into Tori's. That moan must have spurred her on, because she immediately brought her hand down in between us and ran her fingers through my folds.

My hips instinctively raised to push against her hand, and I could feel the tension building throughout my body. “Tori, I'm not going to last very long.” I was embarrassed to admit it since I was sure Tori had a lot more sexual endurance than me after the way the past three years had gone for each of us.

“Me either.” Tori took my hand and guided it down to her center, which I was surprised to find was very wet. “Let’s go together.”

I touched Tori in a way I never thought I would touch another person again. I touched her without fear or reservations. I moved my fingers inside of her without thinking about what this all meant. When her fingers went inside me as well, my body began to spasm. I moved my fingers in and out as she did the same, and soon I was coming so hard that I actually saw stars. Tori groaned as her body stiffened on top of mine, then after a few seconds she rolled off me.

For a few minutes, we both lay staring up at the ceiling, not saying a word until Tori rolled onto her side and looked deep into my eyes, the care in her expression taking my breath away.

“Was that okay? Are you okay?” she asked, running her hand through my hair as she waited for my answer.

“It was great. Perfect, actually.” As soon as I said the word perfect reality hit me, and I came crashing back down to earth. I put my hand over my mouth. “Oh, no. It was perfect.”

Tori grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. I’m honestly not sure.” I tried to catch my breath, but couldn’t. It felt like the walls were closing in around me, and I was running out of air.

“Hey, it’s okay. Just breathe. In and out. You can do it.”

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I tried to follow her instructions, but breathing was suddenly the hardest task in the world.

Tori let go of my hand and ran her hands up and down my arms. “Tell me what you need, Rosemary. If you need me to go, I’ll go. If you want me to stay, I’ll stay. I’m not going to be offended either way. I just want to help.”

Run. Leave. Dig a hole and hide in it, so you never have to face what you just did or how it made you feel. “Everything inside of me is telling me to ask you to go, but I think that means what I really need is for you to stay.”

Tori nodded slowly, her eyebrows furrowed as if she was trying to calculate exactly what I was asking for. “Do you want to talk about it?”

When I shook my head, Tori motioned for me to lay on my side. As soon as I did, she wrapped her arms around me and spooned me from behind. She placed a kiss on my temple, then started to whisper as if she thought if she spoke too loud, I might break. And, honestly, she might have been right about that. “We can just lay here, but if and when you want to say anything, I want you to know that you can tell me whatever.”

There was so much I wanted to say, but I wasn’t sure how to put it into words. “I meant what I said. Being with you was absolutely perfect, but it feels so wrong to admit that. I know Willow wants me to be happy, and given everything that’s happened these past few months, I don’t doubt that she would love that we found that happiness in each other. But, I don’t know. I know it’s not rational, but I feel like if things get too good with you, I’m losing a part of Willow. It’s like, if I’m able to find this with someone else, it takes away from what we had.”

Tori was quiet for a minute, most likely trying to process everything I had just said. “What you and Willow had was special. I’ve honestly never seen a relationship that compares to the one you two had. I want you to know that I would never try to take away from that. I think it’s possible to fall for more than one person, and that doesn’t mean that you loved that other person any less. It just means, there’s space in your heart for the two of us.” She tapped my chest where my heart was beating rapidly. “And I know for a fact that you have a very big heart in there.”

It was Tori. I had no question in my mind. If I was meant to love again, it was meant to be with her. It couldn’t be anyone else. No one understood me the way she did. No one knew what I had been through. But she did. Because she was there. She went through it, too. That’s when it hit me. That word that had just so naturally flitted through my mind without another thought. Love.

“Hey, Tori?”

Tori burrowed her face deeper into my neck and kissed my pulse point, causing my whole body to hum. “Hm?”

I took a deep breath to prepare myself to say these words. Words that I would never be able to take back once they were spoken into existence. Words that I didn’t want to take back, even if saying them was one of the most terrifying things I had ever done. “It scares me to death to say this, but I love you. I’m in love with you.”

Tori loosened her grip around my body, then slowly ran her fingers down my arm. “Look at me.”

When I turned around and looked at Tori, there was no question what she was going to say. Her eyes were glistening with love. Her smile was small, but brighter than I had ever seen it before. I didn’t say anything because I wanted to hear those words spoken out loud.

“I’m in love with you too, Rosemary Stone. I’m pretty sure I could love you for the rest of my life if you’ll let me.”

## Chapter 15

“So, what do we tell the girls?” Tori asked when we pulled into the driveway at my parents’ house.

That was a great question. I was on such a high from everything that happened today, I hadn’t even thought of that. “Maybe we don’t tell them anything. It’s not like a ton has changed from their point of view. We already live together. They’ve met each of us. Maybe we just take things as they come. Of course, if they ask us, we’ll tell them the truth.”

“So, what if I want to kiss you?”

I leaned closer to her and put my hand on her leg. I’m not sure how I ever thought I was going to be able to resist this. “I wouldn’t stop you.”

Tori gave me a kiss that was much too quick, then pulled back. “Go on a date with me again tonight.”

“And just leave the girls here with my parents?” I laughed and playfully pushed her shoulder. “As much as I would love to see what amazing date you would plan this time, I miss the girls. It’s actually killing me to sit here knowing they’re right inside. The only reason I haven’t hopped out of the car yet is because you look so cute.”

“You don’t need to worry about not seeing the girls, because I was actually hoping to take all three of you on a date.”

My heart felt like it might burst from all the love I felt for this woman. Now that I had



been honest with myself about what I was feeling, I could clearly see that this had been building for a very long time. Every tear she wiped away, every time she held me, all of the words of comfort she offered—they all led to this love I couldn't hold in anymore. Even though I wasn't willing to see it before, it really was inevitable. "I would love to go on a date with all of us."

"Good." Tori turned off the car. "Let's go get our daughters. I have a big night planned for us."

"You already have it planned?" I asked as I got out of the car.

"Of course." She shut her car door and tapped her head. "I have a ton of ideas stored up here. Just wait."

I looked up at my parents' house and smiled. The one-story, ranch-style home was much different than the large three-story house I lived in growing up, and I loved it. It was the perfect representation of how much they had changed. There was a time my parents would have thought living in a house like this was below them, but not anymore. I smiled up at the sky. Thank you, Willow.

As soon as I opened the door to the house, both Bella and Emery ran down the hallway. Emery jumped into my arms and Bella jumped into Tori's.

I held Emery tight up against me. "We missed you, too."

Bella leaned backward in Tori's arms so she was hanging upside down. "Were you so bored without us?"

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“We found ways to entertain ourselves.” Tori winked at me, and my whole body heated at the thought of our form of entertainment from just a few hours ago.

Emery tilted her head at me. “Did you play games?”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing at their innocence. “Something like that.”

My mom walked into the hallway and gave me and Tori hugs. “These two are little angels. I’d keep them here for a week if I could.”

“Don’t tempt us,” Tori said with a laugh.

“Hey!” Bella glared at her mom. “Not nice.”

Tori hugged her even tighter. “Calm down. I’m just kidding. I obviously missed you like crazy. And guess what? I have a surprise planned for the three of you, so we have to get going.”

Emery’s eyes went wide as she wiggled out of my arms. “A surprise?”

Bella wiggled out of Tori’s arms as well. “What’s the surprise?”

“If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?” Tori motioned toward my mom. “Give Meemaw a hug and then we can go.”

Emery and Bella both gave my mom a quick hug then opened the door and ran down the sidewalk. Tori ran out after them, but before I could follow, my mom put a hand

on my arm. When I turned around, she had the same smile on her face. “So, how was your date?”

When I was in high school (or even college), if someone had told me my mom would be the type of mom I discussed my dating life with, I would have thought they were crazy. If they told me we would be talking about the girl I was dating, I definitely would have been convinced they had the wrong person. But now, it didn’t even seem strange for my mom to be asking me about this, aside from the fact that I was so surprised over how chill she was about the news that Tori was the one I fell for.

“It was honestly perfect. We went to the playground, and I don’t know. It was so nice to feel like a kid again.”

My mom squeezed my arm as she beamed at me. “I’m so happy to hear that. You deserve the world after everything you’ve been through. It still makes me so sad that I contributed to so many of your hardships when you were growing up. I’d like to think if I knew everything you were going to go through, maybe I would have been there for you sooner.”

Tears burned my eyes as I tried to keep myself from crying. “You were there when it mattered. I wouldn’t have been able to get through these past few years without you and Dad.” I couldn’t hold them back anymore so I wiped my tear-filled eyes with the back of my arm.

My mom reached out and ran her thumb along the few tears that were left on my cheeks. “No tears. This should be a happy time for you. I’m happy for the two of you.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I pointed outside where Tori was chasing Emery and Bella in circles around the car. “I better go help with that.”

“Of course. Have fun with your surprise tonight.” My mom winked then closed the door behind her.

I ran over to the car and swept Emery into my arms. She giggled as she tried to wiggle away from me. With a little bit of struggle, I was able to get her into her car seat that she was soon going to grow out of. Where did my little girl go?

By the time I was done with my battle, Tori had completed her battle as well. Just like she did every time we got in the car since Bella was switched to a booster seat, Emery glared at her friend. “Why do I have a baby seat, and she gets a big kid seat?”

“Because I’m a big kid and you’re a baby.” Bella stuck her tongue out at Emery as Emery continued to glare at her.

Tori smiled at me when she got into the car. “How would you feel about doing something a little wild tonight?”

I looked at the two little girls who were still bickering in the back of the car. “Isn’t anything we try to do with those two wild?”

“Do you trust me?” Tori asked instead of answering my question.

I trusted Tori with my life, but what I didn’t trust was the mischievous smile on her face. “Right now? I’m honestly not sure.”

“You’ll be okay. I promise.” Tori winked at me, and with the way the butterflies fluttered through my stomach, I knew I would follow her anywhere.

“I might regret this, but okay, let’s do it.”

“Perfect. Let me just check one thing.” She tapped a few buttons on her phone then

smiled in satisfaction. “There. Reservation made.”

“Reservation? Do I want to know what this reservation is for?”

Tori simply wiggled her eyebrows at me and started the car. “Let’s go home and get packed.”

“And what are we packing?”

“Comfortable clothes. Something warm for the night. Sleeping bags. Not too much since it all has to fit in a tent.”

“A tent?”

I had to have misheard her, because if there was one thing I wasn't, it was a girl who sleeps in tents. I feel like that's something liked only by people who did it as kids, and Curtis and Louise Burns would never. Even with how far they had come, I knew they would never sleep in a tent. The thought was actually comical. What wasn't comical was the thought of me having to sleep in one.

“Don't act so surprised. I can be a nature girl sometimes.”

“Maybe you can, but I can't.”

“I have a feeling that after tonight, you'll change your mind.” Tori winked at me, and even though I wanted to fight her, I couldn't. She was so beautiful that I would follow her anywhere—even into the woods apparently.

When we got back to the house, Tori instructed all of us to get ready as quickly as possible. By the time I had a bag packed for me and Emery, Tori had barely started on theirs, which wasn't surprising. Since Emery and Bella were occupied with something on Bella's iPad, I took the few minutes I had to go into my room and pull the box of notes from under my bed. I grabbed the first one I found, which just so happened to be from the last Thanksgiving I had with Willow.

11/28/2019

My Dearest Rosemary,

Happy Thanksgiving! I can't believe this was the last one I'll ever spend with you. We have so many great holiday memories that I hope you keep in your heart forever. My favorite memory from today was definitely Emery spitting up the mashed potatoes and stuffing you gave her. Sorry about how hard I laughed at your expense, but you have to admit that it was pretty damn funny.

I'm so so so thankful for you and Emery and this life the three of us have made together. I hate that I'll be physically leaving you two next month, but don't forget that I'll always be with you.

Next Thanksgiving, don't forget to laugh as much as we did today. Since I know you, I know you'll feel guilty being happy without me, but please don't let that stop you from living your life. I'll always be with you, even when you can't see me. When you laugh, you're not laughing without me. I'll be right there beside you, laughing along with you. Always.

I can't wait to have the best month of our whole lives this next month. Let's make memories that last you a lifetime.

I love you so much, Rosemary Stone. I will always love you. Don't ever forget how thankful I am for you this day and always.

Forever yours,

Willow

I crushed the note to my chest and smiled. I was so lucky to have these letters from

her. It was the perfect reminder that she was always with me, no matter what. I always seemed to pick the perfect one even when it was random. Willow's words reminded me that just because I was happy didn't mean I was losing her. I had no doubt she was here smiling with me right now.

I jumped when there was a light knock on my door. "Rosemary?" Tori called from the other side. "Are you almost ready?"

Even though I knew Tori wasn't the type of person to barge into my room, I still panicked over the fact that I hadn't locked the door. I pushed the box of notes under my bed and threw the one I was currently reading into the drawer on my nightstand, right underneath my favorite vibrator. I could take care of putting that back where it belonged later. Emery knew not to snoop in this drawer since I told her it had "boring grown-up things" so I didn't have to worry about her pulling it out before I had the chance to hide it away.

"Coming!" I shouted, trying to keep my voice as level as possible.

I picked up the bag I had packed for me and Emery and pulled our sleeping bags out of my closet. When I swung my door open, there was a thud followed by a groan. I shut it to find Tori standing close to it, rubbing her head.

I reached out and put my hand on top of hers. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were standing right there."

Tori laughed. "Not your fault. That will teach me not to stand so close." She brought my hand down to her lips and placed a kiss on my knuckles, then stared at me with those deep blue eyes. "Are you okay? You look flushed."

"I'm good. I promise. I think I just feel a little overwhelmed about this whole camping thing."



Tori's smile dropped into a slight frown. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you hated it that much. I can scrap the whole idea if you want."

"No!" I answered quickly as guilt coursed through my body. Not only had I lied to Tori about why I was overwhelmed, but now I had her second-guessing the date that she was clearly excited about. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her closer to me, relishing in the way her warmth encompassed me. "Sorry. I don't hate the idea. I'm just flushed from trying to get ready and figure out what to pack since I've never done this before."

"Don't worry. I haven't gone in forever, but I went to this exact campground a few times when I was little. I'll show you the ropes." Tori wrapped her arms around me as well and pulled our bodies even closer together.

Maybe a tent won't be so bad if I get to be wrapped in these arms. "You're full of surprises. I didn't even know you owned a tent."

"I actually don't. They rent them out at this place, so I got us two."

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I put my head against Tori's chest and listened to her heart beat. It was so nice, I honestly could have stayed like this all night. "I'm sure Emery and Bella will want to be in the same tent."

"That's kind of what I was banking on," Tori said with a laugh. She smiled the same mischievous smile as earlier. "This is a date after all."

My body heated up even more at the implications of what she was saying. "In that case, what are we waiting for? Let's get out of here."

It took an hour of driving, one dinner break, two bathroom breaks, and a lot of whining from the girls to get to the campsite, but it was worth it for the breathtaking view. The campsite was up on a mountain and overlooked the cutest little town. We set up our tents as the sun was setting, and between that and the warm breeze blowing over my skin, I swore I could feel Willow there with us.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Tori asked as she wrapped an arm around my waist and watched the sunset with me.

"It's gorgeous. You said you came here as a kid?"

Tori nodded, but kept her gaze in front of us. "A few times. I think the handful of times we came here are the only good memories I have with my mom, which is probably why it's always held such a special place in my heart."

My heart hurt thinking about all the pain Tori had to deal with growing up only to have the one person who got her through it all leave this world way too early. "Tori,

I'm so sorry."

Tori pulled me even tighter up against her and I leaned into her embrace. "It's not your fault. You're not my mom."

"No, but I'm sorry I made a big deal about coming here. I would have never said anything if I knew it was such an important place for you."

Tori laughed. "I get it. Camping isn't everyone's thing. I'm honestly not even sure if it's my thing, or if I'm just convinced I liked it because my mom actually didn't get drunk when we came here. Anything that kept my mom sober was like heaven to me. Well, except Rick and the church, which is pretty ironic."

"I hate how much she hurt you."

"It's my own fault. I let it go on for way too long."

I put my hand on Tori's chin to force her to look at me. "She's your mom. You didn't do anything wrong. And finally cutting her off, because of your daughter just proves what a good mom you are. You are nothing like her and you did nothing wrong, so please stop thinking like that."

"Thank you. That means so much to me, especially coming from you." Tori leaned even closer to me so her lips were just inches from mine.

My body hummed at the thought of everything we had done together just hours earlier, and I longed to be connected to her in any way I could. Unfortunately, our daughters had other ideas.

"Mama!" Emery screamed, causing me and Tori to jump apart.

When I turned around, both Emery and Bella had their hands on their hips and were giving us sassy looks. My mind immediately started running through what to say to explain my change in relationship with Tori, but it turned out I didn't have to say anything.

"Can you two puh-lease start the fire already?" Bella asked. "We are ready for s'mores."

Tori looked over at me and we both burst into laughter, then Tori ran over to Bella and scooped her into her arms, holding her upside down while Bella giggled uncontrollably. "Some more of what? Some more tickles? Some more shakes?"

When Tori put Bella back onto the ground, Bella rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide the big smile on her face. "That's such a lame joke."

Tori looked at me and stuck out her bottom lip in the cutest pout. "Do you think my jokes are lame?"

"Eh." I squinted my eyes and moved my hand in a so-so motion.

Tori crossed her arms in front of her chest, and she looked just like Bella whenever she pouted. "You all need to be nice to me. Need I remind you that I am the only one here who knows how to build a fire?" She looked over at me and smirked. "Amongst other things."

Is she really threatening what I think she is? I put my hands in the air as if I was surrendering. "I take back what I said. Your jokes are very funny."

"Mama, you must love s'mores, too." The innocent smile on my daughter's face made my heart swell with love not just for her but for everyone I was here with.

I shared a secret smile with Tori then smiled back at Emery. “I do. I’m head over heels for s’mores.”

That became even more true as I watched Tori start the fire. Who knew it could be so sexy? I certainly didn’t. Maybe camping wasn’t so bad after all.

Once the fire was burning bright, we all sat close together and roasted marshmallows. I helped Emery put together her s’more then made one for myself as well. I tried to eat it as carefully as possible, but it was no use. There was no way to eat a s’more without looking like a complete mess.

After I took a particularly big, messy bite, Tori smiled at me and motioned toward the side of my mouth. “You got a little something right there.”

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I grabbed a napkin and tried to wipe it, but I must not have done a very good job because Tori laughed once I was done. “Here. Let me help you.”

She poured some water onto a napkin and leaned in close to wipe my face. The delicate touch of her fingers took me back to our time together earlier in the day, and all I wanted was to feel that touch once again.

“After we finish these s’mores, I think it’s time for all of us to go to bed.” Tori directed her attention at Bella and Emery. “Do you two want to share a tent or does one of you want to sleep with me and the other with Rosemary?”

Emery took Bella’s hand and lifted them high in the air. “We are sharing!”

“Yeah. No grown-ups allowed,” Bella added, the comment sending her and Emery into another fit of giggles.

“That’s too bad, isn’t it?” Tori smirked at me, and all I wanted to do was pull her into the tent and have my way with her, but I’d have to be patient.

“The worst, but I guess we’ll be okay.”

We finished our s’mores, then walked the girls to the communal bathroom to get ready for bed. After spending much too long there, we came back to our campsite and each read them a book as they laid in their sleeping bags and began to drift off to sleep. When we zipped up their tent, I could still hear them whispering and laughing together, but that was fine. One late night wasn’t going to hurt them. I had other things on my mind right now.

I took Tori's hand and we walked the few feet to our tent. As soon as it was zippered shut, I laid down and pulled her on top of me, immediately connecting my lips with hers.

Tori's eyes initially went wide in surprise, but she quickly melted into the kiss. I thought I would be ravenous by the time I got Tori alone, but right now, feeling her on top of me while she kissed me slowly and gently was more than enough.

After a few minutes, Tori pulled away from the kiss. She smiled down at me and moved a piece of hair behind my ear. "I love you so much. I've been denying it for so long, and I have no idea how. My heart is completely yours."

My body tingled from my toes all the way up to my nose. It was a feeling I hadn't experienced in so long and honestly thought I never would again. I loved it. I wanted to bask in this feeling forever. "I love you too, Tori."

"So, I know I've been teasing you all night, but now that I have you alone, all I want to do is hold you. Is it okay if I just hold you tonight?"

"That sounds perfect." And it really did. That's all I needed from Tori, no matter how amazing everything else was.

Tori rolled off me, and we opened up our sleeping bags so we could lay on mine and cover with hers. Once we were covered, Tori wrapped her arms around me from behind, and even though we were out in the middle of nowhere, it felt like I was finally home.

"I've missed this," Tori said as she buried her head into my neck.

"Me too." I wiggled back against her in an attempt to get as close as possible. "Will you watch the sunrise with me tomorrow? Willow always loved watching it and I

haven't done it in so long. I finally feel ready to."

"Of course. I'd do anything for you."

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Tori and I were met with many complaints and groans when we woke Emery and Bella up the next day, but we were somehow able to convince them to sit and watch the sunrise with us.

Tori and I sat next to each other, and Emery and Bella sat on either side of us. As the sun rose in front of us, showing off beautiful hues of orange and yellow, I knew someone else was there with us too.

"Have you ever seen anything so gorgeous?" I whispered to myself more than anyone else.

Tori stared over at me with so much love in her eyes that if I hadn't been sitting, it would have knocked me over. "No, I really haven't."

Her words were so perfect, I didn't even think twice when she leaned in and placed a quick, but perfect, kiss on my lips.

"Did you just kiss my mama?" Emery asked as soon as I pulled away.

Tori's face immediately turned the cutest shade of red. "I did. Is that okay?"

Emery simply shrugged in response. "I don't care. You're the grown-up. Do what you want."

Everything was so simple for kids. They didn't overthink it. They didn't get stuck on



what everything meant. They just lived. And that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to live these days with Tori, and for once, not get stuck on every little thing.

So, that's what I did. The two months that followed were some of the best of my life, because I allowed my heart to be open, and opening my heart to Tori made every day more beautiful. It made me feel like a kid again.

"Happy birthday," Tori said as she woke up and gave me a kiss on the cheek, the same way she did every morning.

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We were in her bed, because that's where we always slept together. I naturally gravitated there and Tori never questioned it, which I was very appreciative of.

Tori pulled her phone off her nightstand and blinked her eyes as she focused on the screen. "Two hours until we told your parents we'd be picking up the girls. Anything in particular you want to do?"

"I could go for a bubble bath." I ran a finger down Tori's cheek. "I'd love it if you'd join me."

"Hell yeah." Tori licked her lips. "Is this your birthday or mine?"

I took her hand and pulled her out of the bed, then led her through the master bedroom and into the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the tub and watched as Tori got the water to the perfect temperature and added the bubbles.

Tori took off her clothes then slowly took off mine as well. "What can I do for you this morning?" she asked as she kissed my neck. "It's your birthday. I want to make sure I make it extra special."

We had done so much together at this point, there wasn't really anything "new" for us to try. Well, except one thing. I licked my lips as I thought about the vibrator that hadn't been getting any love lately for obvious reasons.

"Actually, now that you mention it, I do have a waterproof vibrator that feels fucking amazing on my clit. Do you think you could use that on me?"

“Again, I ask... is this your birthday or mine?”

“Perfect. I’ll go get it.”

Tori held me tighter as I tried to pull away from her. “Absolutely not. It’s your birthday. Get in the tub and relax. I’ll go get it. Where do you keep it?”

“In the top drawer of the nightstand by my bed.” If I hadn’t been so turned on, I might have been thinking more clearly and remembered what else was in that drawer. If I had been thinking clearly at all these past two months, that note wouldn’t be there anymore because I would have thought to put it away.

But I wasn’t thinking clearly, so when it took Tori much too long to come back to the bathroom, I didn’t think anything of it. That is, until she walked in holding Willow’s note in the air, her cheeks more red than I had ever seen them before and her face twisted in a way that I couldn’t tell if she was about to cry or scream. When she spoke, her voice was level, but firm. “What the fuck is this?”

## Chapter 16

I hopped out of the tub and ran over to Tori. “Tori, I can explain.” But could I? How did I explain years and years of secrets and lies?

“This note...” Tori waved the paper in the air as she pulled away from my grasp and began pacing through the bathroom. “It... she’s talking like... what the hell... did she... the accident... Was it on purpose?”

I threw my hands on my head as I tried to think of what to say. “No. Not at all. I promise. Willow didn’t want to die. She just knew she was going to.”

Tori shook her head and laughed, but it was far from joyful. “That doesn’t make

sense. You're not making sense. None of this... people don't know when they're going to die, Rosemary."

"I know. I know how crazy it sounds. I thought so too when I first found out, but it's true. Let's get dressed and go into the family room to talk about this. You need to sit down."

Tori left the bathroom without saying another word, and it took everything inside of me not to burst into tears. This definitely was not the birthday I was expecting. I got myself dressed and when I came out of my room, Tori's door was shut, so I headed downstairs and made us each a cup of coffee. We were definitely going to need it.

I carried the coffee mugs into the family room and set them on the coffee table, then sat down on the couch. A few minutes later, Tori came into the room, but instead of sitting next to me on the couch as usual, she sat down on the loveseat.

I pointed to the coffee. "I made that for you."

"I'm not thirsty." Tori stared straight ahead, and her eyes looked distant and cold. It sent a shiver down my spine because I had honestly never seen her like this. It made me want to wrap myself in my winter jacket to hide from the freeze out I was experiencing from Tori.

"I understand. You can ask me anything you want."

Tori laughed as tears fell from her eyes. "What am I supposed to ask? Where would I even start? People don't know when they're going to die."

It was the same thing she had said just a few minutes ago, but I didn't blame her for being stuck on it. It was true. People didn't know when they were going to die. Except Willow. She did. Somehow.

“I know. Trust me, when Willow first told me, I didn’t believe it either.”

“When?” Tori finally brought her eyes to mine and the pain in them broke my heart.

“When did Willow tell you?”

“Freshman year of college.”

Tori scoffed and shook her head once again. “Nope. No way. You want me to believe that my best friend from childhood didn’t tell me she was going to die, but she told some girl she barely knew at the time? Willow wouldn’t do that. I don’t get it. What made her think she was going to die?”

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I cringed because I knew how insane this was about to sound coming out of my mouth. “Two different psychics told her, apparently.”

Tori laughed once again. “Now I know this is a sick joke. Willow didn’t even believe in that stuff. When we were teenagers, we went just to—” Tori stopped suddenly and brought her hand to her mouth. “She acted so weird when we went that day. I still remember, because she acted like I’ve never seen her act before. After we left, she said how stupid it was, but she seemed angry about it, which as you know, is so unlike her. She refused to talk about it ever again after that day.”

“That’s because of what she found out.”

“No.” Tori practically jumped from her seat. “It’s not... it can’t be. She would have told me. She should have told me. She wouldn’t.”

I stood and once again tried to reach out for Tori, but she jerked away from me as if my touch would burn her. “I’m sorry. I know this is a lot to take in, but...”

“No, I’m sorry. I know it’s your birthday, but I can’t be around you right now. It’s too much. I’m too confused. I’m sorry.”

It felt like I had taken a punch right to the gut, and I didn’t know whether to cry or throw up. I kind of felt like both could happen at any moment. “I... umm... I guess I’ll go.”

I waited a moment in the hopes that Tori would ask me to stay, but when she didn’t, I grabbed my keys and went out to my car. I sat in it for a long time before turning it

on, because I had no idea where to go. It still wasn't time to get the girls from my parents' house, and I wanted to avoid my mother's questions about where Tori was for as long as possible. I drove aimlessly for over an hour, my whole body numb as I fought to hold in my tears, because I knew once I started to cry I wouldn't be able to stop.

When I pulled into my parents' driveway, I looked at myself in the rearview mirror to make sure my sadness wasn't completely obvious. I practiced my smiles until I was able to get myself to just look tired instead of completely miserable.

I took a deep breath before shutting off my car and heading into my parents' house. As usual, as soon as I opened the front door, Emery and Bella came sprinting down the hallway.

"Happy birthday, Mama!" Emery shouted before jumping into my arms and showering me with kisses.

"Thanks, sweetie." I was thankful for more than just her birthday wish. Even though I was still sad, being with her had taken some of the sting away.

Bella tilted her head as if she was looking for something behind me. "Where's my mom?"

"Your mom actually isn't feeling too well, so I thought maybe the three of us could go see Auntie Lisa, so she can have some time alone to rest." I had no clue where that idea came from, but apparently I had decided that's what we were doing today.

"Auntie Lisa?" Emery asked as she excitedly wiggled out of my arms.

"Yay!" Bella yelled as the two of them high-fived.

My mom gave me a questioning look as she walked into the hallway. “Tori isn’t feeling well?” She turned around and shouted to my dad. “Curtis, could you get the girls into Rosemary’s car? I need to talk to her for a second.”

“Of course.” My dad walked into the hallway with a big smile on his face and kissed my cheek. “Happy birthday, sweetie. Where’s Tori?”

“Sick,” I lied once again.

“That’s too bad. I’ll go get these two in the car.”

After my dad ushered Emery and Bella out the front door and shut it behind him, my mom crossed her arms in front of her chest and lifted both eyebrows at me. “So, what’s actually going on?”

I shrugged. “Tori isn’t feeling up to doing anything.” That wasn’t actually a lie. It just wasn’t the full truth.

“Hmm. That’s funny, because I’ve seen the way Tori acts around you, especially these past few months. I can’t imagine any sickness keeping her from celebrating your birthday.” My mom waved her hand. “It’s none of my business though. I just want you to know if you ever need to talk about anything I’m here.”

Don’t cry. Please don’t cry. “I know, Mom. I appreciate that.” I can’t talk about this, though. I wish I could. “Everything will be fine. Don’t worry.” Except, I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince of that—her or myself.

“I know, sweetie. Couples fight. I know you’ve been without Willow for a while now and probably only like to remember the good times, but I’m sure you two fought as well. These things happen. Just make sure you spend more time fighting for each other than with each other.”



“I know. Thanks, Mom.” I placed a kiss on my mom’s cheek then walked out to my car where my dad had the girls ready for me.

I decided to send a quick text to Tori before starting to drive, because I hated where we left things. Hey. I just wanted to apologize again. I'm going to take the girls to Lisa's to give you some time, but I hope we can talk later.

I waited for a few minutes, but when I didn't get a reply, I put my phone down and drove to Lisa's house. As we got out of the car and the girls ran toward Lisa and Abigail's house, I realized I probably should have warned her that we were coming. I didn't even know if she was home. Her car was in the driveway, but Abigail's wasn't, so they easily could have been out together. Luckily, a few seconds after Emery and Bella began banging on the door, Lisa opened it up.

She gave both of them hugs then smiled up at me. “To what do I owe the pleasure, birthday girl?” Once I reached the front porch, Lisa wrapped me in a tight hug. “Everything okay?” she whispered in my ear. “Where's Tori?”

Was I really that obvious? How did everyone know something was wrong? “She's at home. Not feeling well.”

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Lisa lifted an eyebrow at me. “Hm. Interesting.”

Lisa knew Tori and I were officially together. She figured it out before we even told her. We came to visit her and Abigail a few weeks after getting together and after taking one look at us, Lisa said, “It’s about fucking time.” And that was that. We didn’t have to say anything. We all just went on as if nothing had changed. But clearly things had changed, and the way Lisa was currently looking at me made me want to crawl out of my own skin.

Lisa bent back down in front of Emery and Bella as if she was about to tell them a secret. “I have some ice cream in my freezer. Want Auntie Lisa to get it for you?” she asked in a whisper as if I couldn’t hear.

The girls obviously accepted and followed Lisa into her kitchen where she prepared two bowls of ice cream with chocolate syrup and whipped cream. After situating them at her kitchen table, Lisa looked at me and pointed toward her living room. “And you... birthday girl... Come with me.”

I followed her into the living room and flopped next to her on the couch. There was no need to fake a smile anymore since Lisa could clearly see right through me. “Since I know you’re going to ask, Tori and I are fighting. Or, I don’t know. I’m not really fighting, but she’s mad at me.”

“Mad enough to keep her from spending your birthday with you?” Lisa cringed. “What the hell did you do?”

“I lied about something involving Willow.”

“Ah,” Lisa said as if she actually understood (which she couldn’t possibly). She put a hand on my knee and squeezed it. “Listen... the way you and Tori got together wasn’t conventional. Things like this are going to happen. I wish I had perfect advice to give you, but unfortunately, I don’t have experience dating the best friend of a dead spouse. All I know is that you and Tori work. You fit together perfectly, and I can’t remember the last time I saw either of you as happy as you’ve been these past few months. Don’t run away from the hard stuff. Stay and fight. It’s worth it.”

“I know.” She was right. As soon as I left her house, I needed to go home and talk to Tori. Or at least try. “Speaking of relationships, have you and Abigail started planning your wedding yet? You’ve been engaged forever.”

Lisa shrugged off my question the same way she always did. “We’ve discussed ideas, but haven’t figured out a date or anything yet. It will happen eventually.”

“But why hasn’t it? You always used to talk about how you wanted to be married with kids by now. You have the fiancée. I guess I’m trying to figure out why you’re dragging your feet.” I stared down Lisa. “The truth.”

Lisa groaned. “I feel bad telling you the real reason.”

“Well, now you definitely have to.” I was intrigued. What was it that Lisa possibly thought she couldn’t tell me? I was her oldest friend. She should know she could tell me anything.

“Please don’t overthink this or feel bad, but I did it for you. I didn’t want to get married too soon after you lost Willow. I worried it would be too hard on you. You’re my best friend. I don’t want to do anything that could hurt you.”

“Lisa.” When Lisa looked at me with wide, attentive eyes, I reached out and shook her shoulder. “Marry that damn girl immediately. I insist. Abigail is your soulmate.

You deserve your happy ending with her. Don't mess it up."

Lisa playfully pushed me back. "I should be telling you the same thing. You found your soulmate in Willow and then were lucky enough to find a second soulmate in Tori. You need to make things right." Lisa smiled toward the kitchen. "After I get some time with my nieces, of course."

We spent a few hours at Lisa's house before I finally got the courage to go home. When we arrived, Tori's car was in the driveway, but she was nowhere to be found. Since her door was shut, I assumed she was still in there. I got the girls occupied with coloring books and a movie, then headed upstairs.

When I reached Tori's door, I knocked gently. "Tori? Can I come in?"

Tori responded with a grunt that somewhat resembled the word yes, so I let myself in. Tori was laying face down on her bed and didn't move at all as I walked over. I sat down beside her and ran my fingers across her back. I was happy to find that this time she didn't pull away. "Can we talk?"

Tori rolled from her stomach to her back and the sight of her tear-soaked face ripped my heart in two. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say," Tori said as she wiped at her tears. "I'm so confused. I don't even know what to believe anymore."

"I get that. I really do. If I was in your position, I wouldn't believe me either."

"But... the note. It was in Willow's handwriting, and she said she would be gone in a month, and it was dated the month before she died, and it doesn't make any rational sense, but it has to be true, right? I mean, I don't know why you would lie to me about that. I didn't think you would lie to me about anything."

"I didn't want to lie to you. Or anyone else for that matter. But this wasn't my secret

to tell, Tori. Willow asked me to keep it for her.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense. How did those psychics know? Why did Willow believe them? Why didn’t she try to stop it?”

I wished more than anything that I had the answers to all of her questions, but I didn’t. “I don’t know. I’ve wondered the exact same thing. All I do know is that Willow saw it as a gift. She didn’t let one moment in her life go to waste. When her time came, she was ready. At least as ready as anyone can be for that.”

A long silence stretched between us until Tori released a choked sob. “She might have been ready, but I wasn’t.” She pounded on her chest as she said the words. “I wasn’t ready. She was my family. My sister. Sometimes, she was all I had. I wasn’t ready to lose her. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

I held Tori tightly as she sobbed into my shoulder. I didn’t say a word because I knew nothing I said would make this better. There was nothing that could take away the pain and betrayal she was feeling right now. So, I continued to hold her. I held her as the seconds turned into minutes and as her sobs turned to quiet tears.

“I don’t know what to do, Rosemary,” Tori said when she finally spoke. Her voice was shaky but her words were clear.

“What do you mean?” I was scared to ask the question, but I had to know where we stood.

“I love you so much. Sometimes, you’re the only person that can make me smile. I need you. But, right now, it also hurts to look at you. Knowing that you knew this. That you and Willow kept it from me. From all of us. I just... I don’t know how to get past that. I need some time and space.”

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“Of course. I get it. What can I do? Whatever you want, however much time you need, I’ll give it to you, no matter how much it hurts.”

“I don’t know how much time I need. It could take a day. It could take forever. I honestly wish I knew. All I do know is that we have to act as normal as possible around the girls. I don’t want to worry them. But, aside from that, I need to figure all of this out on my own.” Tori’s eyes were puffy and her face was flushed as she stared up at me. “I’m really sorry I ruined your birthday. I never wanted to hurt you.”

I pulled her up against me once again. I had no idea how I ever thought I could keep myself from falling for this woman. She was in so much pain and still was thinking of me. She was perfect, and I might have completely ruined it. “I never wanted to hurt you either, Tori.”

“I know you didn’t.” Tori looked down at her bed. “I just need time.”

“Of course.” I gave her a kiss on the forehead then stood from the bed. “Take as long as you need. I love you, Tori. I’d wait forever for you.”

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Over the next two weeks, Tori kept her promise to act normal around the girls. We ate meals together and sat in the same room while the girls played, but everything had changed. When the girls went to bed, Tori locked herself in her room. When they were at daycare or with my parents or the Stones, Tori went to the barn to work. The only thing getting me by was the fact that school was starting on Monday so I would finally have work to occupy my time. The problem was I didn’t know how I was

going to make it through the whole school day without having a breakdown since I couldn't go more than a few hours without crying.

The worst part was that I had no one I could talk to. My mom and Lisa both tried to ask me about the situation with Tori multiple times, but what was I supposed to tell them? It's not like I could tell them the truth. That had caused enough trouble already. No one else needed to know.

There was only one person I could turn to, and even though she couldn't talk back, I knew she would be there to listen. After setting up my classroom, I took a detour on the way to pick up the girls from my parents' house. A knot formed in my stomach as soon as I saw the sign for the cemetery. I didn't come here very often, because seeing Willow's name on that headstone made me sick to my stomach. Plus, I normally didn't have to be by her grave to feel her presence, but today I was desperate. I needed to be as close to her as possible so I could figure out what the hell I was supposed to do.

I parked in the lot then slowly made my way to the area where she was buried. As I approached the grave, I noticed that I wasn't alone. When I saw who was standing there, I thought about turning around, but I couldn't. I needed Willow just as much as Tori did right now.

## Chapter 17

"I'm so mad at you," Tori said as she stared down at the grave. "I don't want to be. I've tried to fight it. I've been trying for two weeks, but there's no point. I'm fucking pissed, Willow." She ran the back of her arm over her face, which I was pretty sure meant she was crying. I wanted to reach out and hold her, but I could tell she needed to let this out.

"How could you do this to me? You knew. All this time, you knew, and you never

said a word. You let me move across the fucking country. If you just would have told me, I wouldn't have gone. I never would have left you."

I couldn't hold myself back anymore. I had to say something. "That's why she didn't tell you."

Tori spun around, her red-rimmed eyes going wide when she saw me. I closed the space between us and put my hand on her arm. "When you said you were moving, I tried to convince Willow to tell you the truth so you two didn't lose that time together, but she refused. She wanted you to live your life the way you wanted to. She didn't want you to give something up just for her. And I'm so glad she didn't tell you. You know why?"

Tori quickly shook her head back and forth, but didn't say a word.

"Because she was right. If she told you the truth, you never would have left, and if you hadn't moved to Las Vegas, we wouldn't have Bella. I'm sure you'd agree that life wouldn't be nearly as good without that beautiful little girl of yours."

Tori brought her hand to her mouth as it dropped open. "You're right. I've been so emotional, I didn't even think of that. Why didn't I think of that?" Tori's shoulders began to shake, and she squeezed her eyes shut as more tears poured out of them. "I'm so scared, Rosemary."

I tried to be respectful of Tori's request for space, but I couldn't take it anymore. There was no way I could watch her breaking and not step in, so I wrapped my arms tightly around her and placed a kiss on her temple. "Aww, sweetie. What are you scared of?"

"Everything. I'm scared that I'm not a good enough mom. I'm scared that I was capable of getting so angry at someone who isn't even here to defend herself. I'm so



scared of letting you back in after everything I learned, but I'm even more scared of losing you."

I squeezed Tori even tighter in the hopes that I could convey everything I was feeling. "Oh, baby, you'll never lose me. I promise. No matter what happens between us, I'll always be here for you. And it's okay to be angry. Willow would want you to be angry."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. I used to try to hold in my feelings, because I didn't want to fight with Willow knowing what I knew, but she would tell me to yell at her. She wanted me to get mad. Our emotions are what makes us feel alive. You shouldn't hold them inside. Not even the bad ones."

Tori nuzzled her face into my neck and took a deep breath as if she was completely taking me in. "I'm mad at you. I can't even figure out exactly what I'm the most mad about. I'm mad you kept this secret from me, but I'm also mad you made a dumb mistake that caused me to figure it out. I'm mad you would have kept this from me forever if you could have, but I'm also mad that you didn't. And I'm mad because I love you so much, but I also resent you. I don't want to resent you, especially after everything you've done for me, but I do. I resent the fact that Willow decided to share this with you instead of me."

Tori pulled away from me but moved her hands to my cheeks. "Do you know what else I'm fucking pissed about? No matter how much I try not to, all I can think about is kissing you."

If I want to kiss the pretty girl sitting beside me, I'll kiss the pretty girl sitting beside me. Those were some of the first words Willow ever said to me. I could remember the moment perfectly. She had just explained that she knew when she was going to

die, but she was excited to know because she wasn't going to waste any time. Kissing pretty girls was one of the ways Willow was living her life to the fullest. If I was going to live like Willow, I needed to listen to that advice. "Then kiss me, Tori. We'll figure the rest of that out, I promise. But for now, kiss me."

I would be lying if I said I wasn't surprised when Tori did as I asked. We both let out a little yelp as her lips quickly descended onto mine. Even though it had only been two weeks since our last kiss, it felt like years. Having her lips on mine and her tongue against my tongue was like coming home. It was all I wanted for the rest of my life, and I knew at that moment that I would do anything to make that happen.

"I'm so sorry, Tori," I said between kisses.

Tori only pulled back for a moment as she continued to kiss me back. "I know you are. It's okay." She kissed me for a few more seconds before she pulled back again. "At least, it will be. We'll work together to make it okay, because I can't live without you. I can't live without this."

My heart burst open from her confession. "I can't live without this either. I love you so much."

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After a few more minutes, Tori pulled away more fully and wiped her eyes. “I’m still so worried that I won’t be able to stop resenting you; that I’ll never understand why Willow decided to tell you instead of me. I obviously know how much you meant to her, but it still hurts.”

“I get that. I really do.” I took both of Tori’s hands in mine and squeezed them tightly. “But you need to understand that Willow loved you more than anything or anyone in this world, Tori. Seriously. She was so proud to be your friend. You should have seen the way her eyes lit up anytime she talked about you. But I think the difference between you and I was that she knew you before she learned about any of this. I’m honestly not sure if this will make it better or worse, but Willow told me about this on the first day she met me. I guarantee you it wasn’t because she trusted or valued a random stranger more than you. I think she was desperate to tell someone, and it was easier to tell a person she hadn’t established a relationship with yet. That way, things couldn’t change between us. The reason she didn’t tell you was because she valued your relationship so much. If things had changed, even the slightest bit, it would have broken her heart.”

“But wouldn’t it have only changed things for the better? I would have tried harder. I would have been a better friend.”

“You were a great friend to her. Never doubt that. It’s why she loved you so much. You thought you had forever with her, but you still valued every moment you had together.”

Tori nodded as more tears fell from her eyes. “I really did. It didn’t take Willow dying to realize how important she was. I always knew.”

“Exactly. Because that’s the kind of person you are, and that’s why, even though I tried to fight it with all of my might, I couldn’t help but fall in love with you.” I kicked my foot against Tori’s as I continued to hold her hands. “Also, I’ve said this a million times, but it looks like I need to say it a million and one—you are the best mom in the entire world. Bella is so lucky to have you. So is Emery.”

“Do you really mean it?”

I nodded furiously. How could she doubt that at all? How did this amazing woman not see what I saw? “Of course I do.”

Tori laughed and wiped at her eyes once again. “I guess I can’t be too mad at Willow. You were right. I wouldn’t have gone to Vegas if I knew what was coming, and I can’t imagine if I didn’t. Bella is my whole world. Along with you and Emery, of course.”

“I know. We’re a family.”

“Family.” Tori’s face lit up as if the sun was rising behind her smile. Except not, because she was more beautiful than the most perfect sunrise.

I removed my hands from Tori’s and put an arm around her waist, pulling her close to me and leaning my head on her shoulder. “Let’s go get our daughters. I’m in need of some much overdue family time with my three favorite people.” I hesitated for a moment because I realized Tori hadn’t actually said whether or not things were okay with us. “That is, if that’s what you want.”

I held my breath as I waited for Tori’s answer, but luckily, she didn’t leave me breathless for long. “Of course that’s what I want. It might take me a while to be able to fully wrap my head around this, and I can’t guarantee that I won’t ever let my emotions get the best of me and get angry about it again, but I can’t live without you. I want to wake up next to you every morning and fall asleep next to you every night. I

don't want to waste a moment of our time together, because we don't know how much we have. I'm going to love you as if every day is my last day with you."

"Good, because I plan to do the exact same."

The sun set behind me as we stood together in front of Willow's grave, and as a warm breeze tickled my skin, I had no question that this was exactly where I was supposed to be.

## Epilogue

It's been exactly two years since I first kissed Tori, and I still get butterflies every time I look at her. Both of us continue to miss Willow every single day. We miss her laugh. We miss her zest for life. But we have no question that she is here with us. We see her when we watch our daughters play together. We hear her in the way they laugh. We even feel her in the love we have for each other.

After wrangling our daughters, we all gather around the big framed picture above the fireplace. A lot has changed since this house officially became Tori and Bella's as well, but this spot will always remain the same. I take in the picture of Willow—how her head is thrown back while she laughs at something I can no longer remember. It's so very Willow, it makes me smile every time I look at it. I run my fingers along the words inscribed on the frame—"Live Like Willow." Then I place my hand into Tori's, close my eyes, and take a deep breath.

I think about the last words Willow and I said to each other. Some people never get their great love story. I was lucky enough to have two. I lived one Happily Ever After with Willow and now I am living another Happily Ever After with Tori. I've learned that loving Tori doesn't mean that I love Willow any less. It just means that I was able to keep living a life that was taken from Willow much too soon. I owe it to her to get up every day and live my life with a smile on my face and a happy heart. Tori gives me both of those things and so much more.

I squeeze Tori's hand and lay my head on her shoulder. "We love you, Willow," I whisper.

"Miss you every day," Tori adds before placing a kiss on top of my head.

We stay like this for a moment, then Tori drops my hand so she can lift up Emery then Bella so each of them can kiss the picture.

Emery leans against my side and says, "Love you, Mommy."

I look over and Bella is leaning against Tori in the same way. We naturally lean into each other and let the moment overtake us once again.

Soon, we will meet up with the rest of our friends and family to celebrate Willow's life and the difference she made in all of our lives, but this moment right here is reserved for the people who hold the biggest place in my heart—the ones who kept me breathing when I didn't think I could.

Our life isn't perfect. The four of us fight. We cry. We miss Willow endlessly. But thanks to her, we appreciate every moment—even the hard ones or the most mundane. We kiss after every fight. We dry each other's tears. We make sure that no matter what, we never stop living.

Live like Willow