

# Prologue

**Willow**

*May 10, 2014*

I feel really out of place at this whole shindig.

Jackie has invited me to celebrate her moving in with her husband, even though I had never attended the wedding. She was never a close friend of mine, we just happened to meet up for lunch sometimes back in my university days, but even that had always been her idea of strengthening our so-called friendship. Honestly, I never even liked her at all. She has always kind of been somebody who was extremely outgoing and loved to be in big social groups. I mean, in the end, she got a career in journalism. And she's now got a husband as well. Meanwhile I'm here standing around in a stranger's house with other strangers all around me and waiting on life to get interesting. How ironic, Willow.

I take a sip of my rosé and run a finger along the embroidery on my blouse, while eyeing Jackie's excited face as she shows a framed picture hanging above the fireplace to a bearded guy. My eyes drift across the room. We aren't many people, only a couple of Jackie's female friends, who she tried to introduce me to at the beginning of the get-together, two older men and a brunette dude.

The smell of fresh pie hits my nose and lures me into the kitchen, where, to my surprise, I find Jackie's husband.

"Oh, hi. I thought you'd be upstairs with the rest of the guests."

He scoffs. "No, I'd rather stay here. I'm not really keen on being the tour guide tonight."

"I get it." I can't help but smile at his statement. "Richard, right?" He nods, while stuffing another slice of pie into his mouth. "I'm Willow. But I'm guessin' you already know that."

"Yeah. Jackie talks a lot about her friends, you know."

His words catch me by surprise and I don't know why, but this makes me slightly shift my posture. Jackie talks a lot about her friends? An uncomfortableness invades my brain. If she's talking a lot about her friends, does she talk about me in particular? And if she does, in what way? I hope not in a negative one. Not like it seems that way - or matters at all anyways - but still.

I chuckle lightly. "Ha. Just like the Jacqueline I know."

Our conversation suddenly turns into awkward silence, and I notice that this bugs him as well, so I try to lead the topic to another direction.

"Say, can I have a slice of that pie? It looks delish."

"Knock yourself out."

As I take a slice of the blueberry pie on the kitchen counter, I can feel Richard's gaze on me. He's leaning against the old-fashioned wooden counter, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything, your accent is just... unlike anything I've heard before. Do you mind me asking where you're from?"

Okay, I was not expecting that.

"Oh, I'm from the northern part of Texas. Canton, to be exact."

"Well, that's not exactly from around this area." He chuckles.

"What made you move here in the first place?"

I'm flattered by the attention he gives me. I know it's probably just out of politeness, but darn, it feels good to be listened to.

"I started university in Leyridge, but then moved here cause of my residency."

Richard raises a brow. "Sorry, did you say residency?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You don't happen to be a doctor, right?"

"No, I'm a biochemist." Then it hits me. "But YOU are a doctor, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged. I work at MGH."

A laugh escapes me. "Mercy Hospital? Oh my gosh. No way."

I notice him smiling too, and the whole vibe of our conversation is way warmer than it was before. I stare into his piercing

greenish eyes, when I suddenly feel heat creeping up my cheeks.

Nope.

He. Is. Married. Willow.

What are you even doing?

“I never would’ve suspected, but I can kinda see it now.” A light silence settles in before I finally continue. “Speaking of which, are *you* from around here though? Like, originally.”

“No, not originally. I grew up near Tampa, but moved here after college looking for a job. At first I only had a five year contract with the hospital, but then I got married, so in the end I extended it and stayed.”

Our conversation flows on for maybe five more minutes, but it feels like we’ve been chatting for hours already. It’s so natural talking to him - he’s calm but intrigued at the same time about what I have to say. I don’t remember the last time I had such a pleasant chitchat with a so-called stranger. I know that this perfect little moment will probably soon be interrupted by somebody, but I’m completely soaking in it while it lasts. Jackie is lucky to have married a guy like Richard.

And I’m pretty sure this won’t be the last ever conversation I’ll have with him.