

Prologue

Willow

May 10, 2015

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 '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 what she wanted, including a husband. 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. I bet she's happy, her life being all harmonic, owning a large house in the suburbs with a big ass garden and all. Wouldn't even surprise me if they'd start building a pool here tomorrow.

And no, I'm not jealous.

Definitely not.

She worked hard for this, and now that her career in journalism has succeeded, she has definitely more than earned it. And I should be happy for her.

Yet I'm not.

I'm not a mean type of person, it's just... People who've got a perfect life make me easily frustrated, that's all. 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? Well, I guess I shouldn't have expected any less.

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

Richard strikes me as kind of an introvert, seeing him just hanging around all alone in the kitchen instead of doing literally anything else - showing the guests around the house, the garden, the neighborhood, even - but no. He prefers to be by himself, just chilling out with a slice of blueberry pie in his hands. I'm pretty sure inviting all these people here wasn't his idea either.

I don't wanna be rude, so after none of us says anything for the next two minutes, I decide to break the silence.

"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, suddenly seeming a lot more interested in who I am than he was just moments ago. "What made you move here in the first place?"

"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 MCH."

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 don't feel awkward or uncomfortable around him, quite the opposite, actually. It's refreshing to talk to somebody who isn't either squeaking in a high pitched voice at the marriage photos on the wall or laughing loudly about some inside jokes I'm not a part of. We're in our own little bubble of conversation, just enjoying each other's company.

"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, which I eventually found. It wasn't my plan to stay in this city for long, but in the end I got married - as you know - and decided to settle down and stay."

Something about his way of engaging in conversation makes me feel like he actually cares about whatever I'm saying, and not only doing it to be polite and to avoid awkward silence. Richard is definitely not like I've imagined him to be like whenever his wife talked about him. Jackie always made him seem a bit like herself, someone who was not only very social, but bursting with cheerful energy as well. I'm not saying he isn't cheerful or anything, I don't even know him at all. He just seems... reserved? Like somebody who doesn't share every little detail of his life with his entire circle of friends. And I don't think that's a bad thing at all. Maybe that's what makes it so pleasant to talk to him.

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.