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The Seven-Day Marriage Pact

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Introduction

If you ask anyone in Willow Creek what they think of Ava Sinclair, you'll likely get some variation of "she's unstoppable." And it's true: no one in this small, bustling town plans a party quite like Ava. Her color-coded spreadsheets are the stuff of legend, her signature floral arrangements front-page news in the local paper. But beneath the Pinterest-perfect centerpieces and poised phone voice, Ava's life is stuck on "single" and the ache of a very public heartbreak lingers stubbornly in the background, along with the humiliation of seeing it unfold in glossy magazine pages.

Enter Lucas Grant: celebrity chef, food truck magnate, and the prodigal son nobody expected to see at the annual Willow Creek Summer Festival. He's all charm and six-foot-something of sun-dappled, TV-ready bravado. But for Ava, Lucas is more than just a tabloid cover—he's the childhood friend who once made her laugh until lemonade shot out her nose, and the one who, years ago, left without saying goodbye after an epic fallout.

Ava and Lucas's paths are destined to collide when Lucas returns for his little sister's wedding. The whole town is abuzz, eager for rekindled rivalries and maybe, just maybe, a hint of reconciliation. But neither Ava nor Lucas expects a tipsy dare at a rehearsal dinner to upend their meticulously choreographed lives—a dare that, in front of an audience of old friends and nosey neighbors, binds them to the most outrageous seven-day challenge either has ever faced.

What starts as a joke—a pact to marry each other at the festival's final gala if neither finds true love before week's end—quickly becomes something neither can laugh off. With festival chaos, attempted matchmaking, and a series of hilarious misadventures at every turn, both Ava and Lucas find themselves forced into close proximity and even closer scrutiny. Each day brings an unexpected dose of heart, humor, and the kind of vulnerability that neither has ever allowed themselves to feel.

Beneath the banter and the bright lights of the festival lies something deeper: a reckoning with old wounds and a chance to find out if love can really conquer past mistakes. Surrounded by meddling relatives, hopeful matchmakers, and a town that believes happily ever after is only seven days (and one pact) away, Ava and Lucas must decide if what they're playing at is just a game—or if it just might be the real thing.

Welcome to Willow Creek, where second chances come with a side of laughter, love is always on the menu, and sometimes the best "forever" starts with a leap of faith...and a little bit of festival magic.

CHAPTER ONE: Return to Willow Creek

Ava Sinclair adjusted the final peony in the sprawling floral arch, a faint smudge of pollen dusting her cheek. The late afternoon sun, golden and benevolent, filtered through the leaves, casting dappled shadows across the manicured lawn of Willow Creek's historic town hall. Tomorrow, this very spot would host the opening ceremony of the annual Summer Festival, a meticulously orchestrated symphony of local crafts, questionable food truck concoctions, and enough small-town gossip to fuel a year of ladies' luncheons. And Ava, in her tailored linen dress and sensible block heels, was the conductor of it all.

"Perfect, Ava! Absolutely perfect!" The voice belonged to Bethany Miller, Willow Creek's unofficial town crier and the festival's most enthusiastic volunteer. Bethany, a woman whose energy could power a small village, beamed, clutching a clipboard adorned with no less than three different colored highlighters. "The Mayor's going to be absolutely thrilled. The whole town is buzzing, especially with... well, you know."

Ava knew. Everyone knew. The buzz wasn't just about her expertly curated festival décor, nor the artisanal cheese stand making its debut. It was about Lucas Grant. His name hung in the air like a sweet, persistent melody—or perhaps, a forgotten, slightly out-of-tune jingle from a past life.

"The buzz is for the festival, Bethany," Ava said, forcing a bright smile that felt a little too tight around the edges. She plucked a stray leaf from the arch. "People are excited for the parade, the pie-eating contest, the usual."

Bethany, however, was not so easily swayed from her chosen topic. "Oh, darling, don't be coy. Everyone's talking about Lucas. Lucas Grant! Our Lucas! Back in Willow Creek after all these years. And for his sister, Sophie's, wedding, no less. Imagine the reunion! The stories! The... drama!" She practically squealed the last word, fanning herself with her clipboard.

Ava's smile faltered. Drama was exactly what she didn't need. Her professional life, as Bethany had so effusively declared, was thriving. Sinclair Events was the most sought-after planning service in three counties. But her personal life? A dumpster fire, recently and spectacularly extinguished in the public eye after her former fiancé, a man whose blandness only truly revealed itself in the harsh glare of a hundred paparazzi flashes, had decided their engagement was better suited to a press release than an actual wedding. The memory still stung, a phantom ache behind her ribs.

"I'm sure Lucas is just here for Sophie's wedding, Bethany. As he should be," Ava

stated, perhaps a touch too coolly. She'd heard the whispers, seen the local paper's breathless headlines: *Willow Creek's Own Lucas Grant Returns Home! Celebrity Chef Back for Sister's Nuptials!* Each mention was a subtle jab, a reminder of a past she'd meticulously packed away like out-of-season decorations.

Lucas Grant. Even the name tasted like bittersweet chocolate and a hint of old betrayal. They'd been inseparable as kids, two mischievous peas in a pod, their laughter echoing through these very streets. But then came the teenage years, the unspoken crushes, the one catastrophic fight, and then... silence. A gaping, years-long chasm that Ava had filled with ambition and an almost pathological need for control.

"Well, you two were quite the pair back in the day," Bethany mused, oblivious to the storm brewing beneath Ava's calm exterior. "Always causing trouble. And now, him a big-shot chef, you the queen of events. It's like a Hallmark movie waiting to happen!"

Ava's jaw tightened. A Hallmark movie? No, this was more like a cautionary tale, with a side of deeply buried regret. She focused on the task at hand, making small, unnecessary adjustments to the arch. "Speaking of events, Bethany, have the catering trucks confirmed their arrival times for the festival kick-off tomorrow? I still haven't received a final manifest from 'Mama Stella's Meatball Haven.'"

Bethany, easily distracted by the practicalities, immediately flipped through her clipboard, muttering about meatballs and health permits. Ava let out a silent sigh of relief. Averted crisis. For now.

She walked towards her meticulously organized toolkit, the floral scent of peonies mingling with the faint, earthy smell of the freshly watered lawn. Her phone buzzed. It was her assistant, Chloe, a whirlwind of efficiency and TikTok trends.

"Ava, you won't believe it," Chloe's voice chirped through the speaker. "Sophie Grant just called. Her brother, Lucas, wants to meet you before the rehearsal dinner tonight. Said something about wanting to 'catch up' and 'smooth things over.' He's at The Daily Grind right now."

Ava froze, her hand hovering over a roll of floral tape. Lucas. Already. It felt too soon, too... inevitable. The Daily Grind, the very coffee shop where they'd once spent countless afternoons planning elaborate pranks and dreaming up futures that felt miles away from Willow Creek.

"He wants to meet *me*?" Ava asked, her voice betraying a hint of the surprise she felt. She hadn't seen him in over a decade. Not since that argument, the details of which were still a thorny thicket in her memory, had ripped their friendship apart.

"That's what Sophie said. Apparently, he's feeling a little 'nostalgic.' She even implied

he might be feeling a bit guilty about... you know." Chloe paused, clearly referring to their dramatic falling out. "Anyway, she practically begged me to tell you. Said it would mean the world to her if you two could bury the hatchet before her big day."

Bury the hatchet. Ava stared out at the quiet street, a flash of a younger Lucas, all messy hair and a mischievous grin, flickering in her mind. He was a ghost she hadn't realized still haunted the corners of her carefully constructed world. His return wasn't just a local news story; it was a disruption. And a personal one, at that.

"The Daily Grind, you said?" Ava finally replied, her voice a little steadier than she felt. A simple meeting, a quick "hello" and "goodbye" for Sophie's sake. That's all it would be. No drama. No resurfaced feelings. Just two adults, amicably acknowledging a shared, if fractured, past. What could possibly go wrong?

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