



For the LOVE *of* PRANKS *and* PUMPKINS

Can a harmless prank war lead to something more?

At twenty-six years old, Mila Stewart was too mature to get involved in a prank war. Though seeing Theo Evans spew out his drink made the juvenile act all worth it. She wasn't sure why he was at the farm this morning, but his early presence provided a convenient opportunity to switch out his spiced tea for apple cider vinegar. His dark gaze met hers over the rows of empty picnic tables, and she feigned an innocent expression.

With an amused glint in his eyes, he mouthed, *"It's on."*

Nervous excitement coursed through her. What would he plan next? Mila being the boss's daughter didn't grant her immunity.

If anything, it made her a more accessible target. Where other employees came and went during the fall festival, she was always at the farm. Either driving the tractor for the hayrides, manning the cider stand, or overseeing the petting zoo, Mila kept herself busy, which was critical for her emotional survival.

This was the first fall festival since Mom's passing.

"That wasn't very nice of you." Theo's low drawl pulled her from the grief-ridden thoughts.

When had he approached? "That's payback for mummifying my tractor." She wasn't sure how many rolls of toilet paper he'd wasted in wrapping her John Deere, but even she had to admit the large googly eyes on the front grille had been a nice touch.

His deep chuckle sent a shiver across her skin. "Yes, but no flannel was harmed in my prank." He tugged at the front of his shirt, the pungent scent of vinegar drifting her way.

A smile crept over her lips as she patted his thick shoulder. "I did you a favor. That odor is a lady repellent." Most single women flocked around Theo. He had one of those magnetic personalities. His six-foot build, dark hair, and icy blue eyes only increased his allure.

Which made Mila wonder why he'd spent his free time engaging her in silly pranks, especially when he had his own construction company to run. Over the past three years, Theo had volunteered during the festival, but this fall he'd been around a lot more, including this morning. "I didn't think you were coming today."

"I actually hadn't left."

Her brows lowered. "What do you mean?"

"I'll show you." He gently took her hand, leading her out of the pavilion, past the entrance to the corn maze, and behind the market to the lake.

And then she saw it.

The rising sun hovered over a building the size of a tall shed. A sign reading—Emmy's Pumpkin House—had been attached above the entrance, and the wooden frame had various-sized slots, each shelving a pumpkin.

Recognition struck, and she swirled, facing Theo. "This is mom's design. The plans I showed you." While recently cleaning out a desk drawer, Mila had stumbled upon her mom's notebook with a sketch inside of a charming pumpkin house. Mom had even noted she'd position the fall-themed structure beside the lake.

Mila's heart warmed, even as every coherent thought fled. "You ... built this?"



"I did."

"When?"

"I worked on it all night." His gaze skimmed his creation, then fixed on her. "I pre-cut the wood to the specifications. Just had to piece it together."

"It's perfect!" She hugged him, ignoring the stench of vinegar and burying her face into his damp shirt. "Thank you doesn't seem enough. I can't believe you did this."

His arms came around her, but he eased back to peer into her face. "I'd do anything for you." The intensity in his voice, sincerity in his eyes, and protectiveness in his touch, all confirmed his declaration.

"Why?" And why hadn't she noticed his feelings for her before? Because she'd been too wrapped up with Mom. First with her sickness, and then her passing.

He released her, only to slide a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. "I know it's been difficult moving on without your mom. The fall had always been her favorite time of year."

She nodded, a rogue tear trailing down her cheek.

Theo knuckled it away. "That's why I tried to distract you."

"The pranks?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "It was a silly idea, but those stupid pranks made you smile, laugh even. Something I've missed these past months."

Her chest squeezed. He did all this. For her.

She wove her fingers into his. Into the hand that had once dropped a fake spider onto her shoulder, nailed the boards of the pumpkin house into place, and now held a hefty chunk of her heart. A smile blooming on her lips, she met his tender gaze. "Theo, will you be my date for the Harvest Dance tonight?"

"Yes." A grin split his handsome face. "But first I need to change my shirt."