

Knocked Up

BY MY **RIVAL**

JOSIE HART

Knocked Up by my Rival

An Enemies to Lovers Surprise Pregnancy Romance

Josie Hart

Copyright © 2023 by Josie Hart.

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organization and events portrayed in this story are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

1. MACKENZIE
2. MACKENZIE
3. TROY
4. MACKENZIE
5. TROY
6. MACKENZIE
7. TROY
8. MACKENZIE
9. TROY
10. MACKENZIE
11. TROY
12. MACKENZIE
13. TROY

14. MACKENZIE
15. TROY
16. MACKENZIE
17. TROY
18. MACKENZIE
19. TROY
20. MACKENZIE
21. TROY
22. MACKENZIE
23. TROY
24. MACKENZIE
25. TROY
26. MACKENZIE
27. TROY
28. MACKENZIE
29. TROY
30. MACKENZIE
31. TROY
32. MACKENZIE
33. TROY
34. MACKENZIE

35. MACKENZIE

EPILOGUE - MACKENZIE

Baby for my Brother's Best Friend Sneak Peek

ALLY

LEVI

MACKENZIE

“**T**his is it,” I said and got out of the cab. Hailey followed me. “You’re going to love it.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never been here,” she said when we walked into the bar just a couple of blocks from where I used to work.

We took a seat in a booth toward the back. Someone stood with a guitar on the platform that doubled as a stage when guest artists showed up to strut their stuff, and a tech guy worked on the plugs behind him.

“Have you met your new boss?” Hailey asked.

“Not yet. He has a full schedule, but I heard from the others he’s an ass.”

A server came to us to take our order.

“Vodka tonic,” Hailey said.

“I’ll have a beer,” I said. “Whichever one you have on tap, and two shots of tequila to start off with.”

Hailey crinkled her nose. “I don’t know how you drink that stuff.”

“Tequila?”

“Beer. It’s so gross.”

I laughed. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“Yeah, you see... if you have to acquire a taste for something, it’s already a problem. There’s a lot of stuff that’s nice right off the bat. Like pizza. The first time I tasted it, I already loved it.”

I laughed and shook my head. “It’s great seeing you again.”

Hailey and I had grown up together, but when I’d gone to college, she’d taken a gap year to backpack in Europe, and we’d fallen out of touch. We’d only just recently connected again, and we’d hit it off like we’d never been apart.

That had to be the true definition of friendship.

“He’s going to like you just fine,” Hailey said, waving her hand.

“They don’t usually, but it’s okay. I’ll *make* him like me. I know what I’m doing.”

“And you’re so modest.” Hailey laughed.

“What have you been up to?” I asked, changing the topic with a chuckle. “Aside from studying, of course.”

Hailey had told me that she’d decided to go back to school to change her direction away from the corporate world where she’d *been controlled by mindless drones*. Her words.

I loved the corporate world. In fact, I liked to think I dominated it.

“Studying took up most of my time,” she said. “I’m so glad it’s done. The amount of work I had to cover... child psychology is no joke.”

I nodded. “I believe you. Rachel has three kids now, and they’re a handful.”

“I can’t believe your sister has three kids!” Hailey cried out. “I thought she would never marry that guy.”

I shrugged. *That guy* had been great... until the moment he hadn’t, and he’d dumped my sister and left her with three kids and a piss-poor maintenance

order that barely got them by. It was just proof that relationships were bullshit and having kids wasn't for just everyone.

"I can't imagine dealing with three kids," I said. "All her time goes to them. They're really great, I love my nieces and nephew, but they're really hard work, and I don't know if I would want to dedicate that much time to having kids."

"Maybe you'll change your mind one day," Hailey suggested.

"Gotta find a man first," I said with a laugh. "And that's not happening anytime soon."

"Come on, you're not even remotely looking?"

Our drinks arrived. We took our shots—I avoided the lemon-and-salt routine when Hailey licked her hand, threw back her shot and bit into the lemon wedge.

"It's so vile," she said. "I love it."

I laughed.

"Well, I'm not *not* looking," I said. "It's just hard to find a man who isn't as goal-oriented as I am."

Hailey giggled and sipped her vodka. "Yeah, well, most guys are intimidated by you."

"I can't see why."

"You're hot, funny, smart, and you don't take anyone's shit. Most guys can't deal with that."

"Because all they have is shit," I pointed out.

Hailey and I laughed and clinked our glasses together before we both took a sip. The beer they'd brought me was good.

The door opened, and a couple of guys walked into the bar as if on cue. We watched them saunter over to the bar, laughing and bantering back and forth.

They were both drop-dead *gorgeous*. One was much older than the other, but the way they talked and laughed, it looked like they were close.

“I would take either one of those home,” Hailey said.

I laughed. “Go for it.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m not doing anything like that. I can’t just walk up to them and introduce myself. I know times have changed, but it’s not that simple.”

“Of course it is,” I said.

“No, no.” Hailey shook her head. “If they’re interested, they’ll come to us.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll go get them for you.”

I got up before Hailey could stop me, and I listened to her protests all the way to the bar.

“Four shots of tequila,” I ordered, standing right next to one of them. “And another beer.” I glanced at the two guys, who had fallen silent. I knew they were looking and listening. Guys at bars were tuned into the girls who walked around without a man on their arm, and these were no different.

“That sounds like quite a party,” one of them said. The younger of the two. He had a mop of dark hair, stylishly messy, and gray eyes that bore into mine. The older one looked almost the same, save for his hair graying at the temples and his eyes almost onyx.

“Oh, it’s just me and my girlfriend,” I said, nodding toward the table where Hailey watched us, worrying her lower lip.

“Four tequilas and beer?” he asked.

“Oh, the other two are for you guys, if you want to join us.” I smiled at them.

The guys looked at each other and laughed.

“We’re celebrating tonight,” I said when I didn’t get an answer. “You’re

going to let us celebrate alone?”

“What are you celebrating?”

“My friend just graduated, and I got a new job.”

“Can’t let that slide,” the older brother said and nudged the younger one in the ribs.

“Yeah, okay,” the younger one said with a glint in his eye. He was so hot. “Troy.” He held out his hand, and I took it.

“Mackenzie.”

“This is my brother, Scott,” Troy said.

When the tequilas and beer arrived, we carried them to the table. Hailey blushed bright red when we all walked over, and I slid into the booth. Scott sat down next to her, and Troy slid into the booth next to me.

“This is my friend, Hailey,” I said. “Troy and Scott.” I lifted my shot glass into the air. “To new beginnings.”

“And new connections,” Troy said.

“And bullshit toasts,” Scott added, and we laughed before throwing our shots back.

The guys were fun. They drank with us, and Troy and Scott joked with each other with an ease that only brothers could have. I’d seen the same with my brothers, all much older than me. I was the only one who hadn’t been so close to my siblings. I’d been close to Rachel, of course, but that was because she’d raised me when Mom passed away.

“They look like they’re hitting it off,” Troy said when we sat back and watched Scott and Hailey talk.

“Looks like it,” I said, nodding. “Do you hang out with your brother often?”

“All the time,” Troy said. “He’s my best friend. It’s supposed to be like

that, no?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Only child?”

“Might as well have been,” I said. “My siblings are all much older than I am, so it’s just been me, you know?”

“I get it,” Troy said. “I know what it can be like to be isolated.”

I glanced at Scott. “Doesn’t seem like it.”

Troy grinned. “So, what do you do?”

“I just started working for a new company, actually. I’m in advertising.”

“Oh, really? For who?”

“Griffin Solutions,” I said.

Troy snorted. “If you want to work for a *real* company, give me a call.”

“You don’t like them?”

“The guy who owns it is a pompous ass,” Troy said with a roll of his eyes.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I said with a grin. “I know what I’m doing. He needs help, and I’m there to help him.”

Troy laughed. “You sound like a shark in the business world.”

“Oh, I am. You don’t want to be the one to come against me, I’ll tell you that.”

“And you’re so modest, too,” Troy joked.

“Why does everyone say that?” I asked, laughing. “I just think people should normalize talking themselves up instead of putting themselves down, you know? Blowing their own horn.”

“It’s hot when you talk about blowing.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re missing the point completely.”

“Am I?” Troy asked, and he waggled his eyebrows at me.

I laughed again and shook my head. He was so damn attractive and he was

confident. So much so that it bordered on arrogant. I didn't usually go for that kind of thing but it was refreshing when someone didn't cower away from me because I was confident—somewhat arrogant—too. Guys didn't usually like it when a female could be a little alpha, sometimes.

“I think I'm going to go,” Hailey said.

“What?” I asked. “Already? It's barely midnight.”

“My head is killing me,” she said. “The alcohol didn't help like we thought it might.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. “You thought you could drink away a headache?”

I shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

He shook his head. “It's the worst thing you can do when you have a headache. Who gave you that advice?”

I swallowed hard. That might have been me.

“Let me walk you,” Scott offered. “I'm headed out, too.”

“Come on,” Troy complained. “You too? You're just going to strand me?”

“You're a big boy,” Scott said with a laugh. “No one's telling you to go home.”

Troy groaned. “You're getting old.”

“I think the word you're looking for is *responsible*,” he said. “It was nice meeting you, Mackenzie. We'll talk later, bro.”

We all got up and I hugged Hailey while the two guys talked.

“Are you going home with him?”

Hailey laughed. “I really have a headache, you know.”

“That's never stopped me.”

She snorted. “I'll talk to you in the morning. I'm not getting laid, but you should.” She gave me a pointed look before she glanced at Troy.

“I’ll call you,” I laughed.

When they left, we slid into the booth again. Despite the other seat being open now, we sat next to each other.

“So, what now?” I asked. “It’s just the two of us. What do you want to do?”

“I can think of something,” Troy said, and his gray eyes turned darker. “My place or yours?”

“Oh, God, you did *not* just say we’re going to go home and have sex like we have nothing else to do.”

Troy shrugged, and his eyes stayed dark. My body tightened in all the right places. He *was* fucking hot. I was drunk. He wanted me, and the truth was, I wanted him, too. Match made in heaven.

“Yeah, okay,” I said.

Troy chuckled, and he pulled me closer, kissing me. His kiss tasted like beer and tequila, and lust and heat washed over my body and pooled between my legs. Yeah, this was a good idea.

Troy took my hand, slid out of the booth, and we headed toward the door together.

“Aren’t we getting the bill?” I asked.

“Scott got it.

“Oh. Did he know we were going to leave?” I asked.

Troy only grinned at me, which made me think this was his normal MO. That was fine—it meant he wouldn’t get attached, and this would be just sex. I had way too much going on in my life for anything more, and Troy looked like a fun time.

A really fun time.

MACKENZIE

Outside, Troy put his arm around me and pulled me against him, lifting his other hand to summon a cab.

It pulled up as if it had been waiting just for us.

Troy opened the door for me like a perfect gentleman.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Your place,” I said. I didn’t want him to know where I lived. This wasn’t going to be serious.

He nodded and gave the driver an address a short way out of town.

I frowned. “You don’t live close.”

Troy shook his head. “No good bars in my area.”

I nodded, but Troy didn’t give me time to digest the information. The cab pulled away, and he pulled into me, kissing me again. I got lost in the taste of him—his lips were hot on mine, and his hands knew their way around a woman’s body.

Troy’s hand slid up my leg while we kissed, his finger pushing against my crotch. My skin was on fire, every nerve ending alive, and I was hyper-aware

of how close he was. His five o'clock shadow scraped against my chin as he kissed me, his hands were large, and when he cupped my ass and pulled me against him, my hand fell onto his cock, hard and thick in his jeans, his lust echoing my own.

I'd had enough to drink to be drunk, but I buzzed with a high that had nothing to do with alcohol. Troy worked me up into a frenzy, and my body hummed with need.

The cab took us out of LA and toward the suburbs where houses became infinitely larger. The height of the walls and gates was directly proportional to the homes, getting taller and taller as we drove until the cab pulled up in front of a large cast iron gate.

I understood his statement about the bars in his area now. They would probably just have fancy cigar lounges here or something. This place was *huge*.

Troy had undone my bra underneath my top, and my breasts were free, jiggling as I moved. I tried to reach under my shirt to do it up again but it wasn't that easy.

I was going to get rid of it soon, anyway.

Troy opened the door and got out first before offering me a hand.

He paid the driver and took my hand, leading us in through the tall gate and down a long driveway that led to a house that looked like it came out of a movie. It had a Tuscan vibe to it, with plants climbing against the Terracotta walls and an immaculate lawn stretched on either side of the driveway.

"This is... nice," I said. It was more than just *nice*. This place had all the extravagance and opulence that I could only dream of. It wasn't a must-have, of course. Everything about this place was nice-to-haves, but God... it would have been *really* nice to have.

“I like to get away from the city, but not so far that I can’t do business. This is sort of a middle ground, you know? It reminds me of the Italian countryside while it’s just around the corner from the office.”

“Practical,” I said.

Troy chuckled, and we reached a tall door.

After opening it, Troy pulled me inside.

He pushed me against the entrance hallway wall and nuzzled my neck, nipping at the skin. His large hand found my breast, and he massaged it before pushing his hand underneath my shirt and my loose bra.

I stopped thinking about money and this house and everything else and lost myself in Troy.

His fingers were hot, branding my skin, and he left goosebumps in his wake.

He pulled me through an archway that led into an entertainment room, and we collapsed together on a large leather couch. His tongue snaked into my mouth, and I relished the taste of him, laced with the beer we’d had.

He grinded himself against me, his hard cock against my crotch. He rolled off me to the side, undoing my jeans with one hand before he pushed his hand between my legs. He pressed his fingers against my clit and rubbed me through the lace.

I moaned at the sensation of the rough material against my clit, the friction he created.

“You’re soaking,” he murmured against my lips.

“It’s all you,” I said between gasps as his attention to my clit sent waves of pleasure through my body.

When Troy pushed his fingers into my panties, I cried out. His fingers were slippery right away, and he drew circles around my clit. Slowly, at first,

teasing me, and then he picked up his pace.

His hand was wedged between my pants and my crotch, and I wanted him to have more access.

I wanted to be naked for him.

“Wait,” I said, breaking the kiss.

“What is it?” Troy asked.

I wriggled out from underneath him and pushed my jeans over my ass. I dropped them to the floor, removed my top, getting rid of that and the loose bra, too. I stood before Troy in my lace panties only, and his eyes roamed my body.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he said.

I smiled at him, and a blush crept onto my cheeks despite myself. I loved the way his eyes filled with hunger when he looked at me.

“Come here,” Troy said, sitting up.

He took my hand and pulled me forward so that I climbed onto the couch and straddled his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me, and I poured myself into the kiss.

I sat down on his cock, grinding myself against it through my panties, through his pants. He pushed up against my clit, and the friction was delicious. If this was what it was like, just on top of each other, still semi-dressed, then I was so ready for whatever would follow. I ran my fingers down his chest, undoing the top two buttons of his button-up before I pushed my fingers onto his warm chest. He was chiseled and sculpted like a god.

“Do you work out?” I asked through our kisses.

Troy chuckled. “What a line.”

“Hmm,” I said, but I’d been serious. His muscles rippled under my fingertips, and I wanted more of him. I wanted to taste every inch of him.

Every. Inch.

Troy's hands were on my hips, riding the undulating flow with me as I grinded myself against him. I gasped, the friction on my clit sending shock waves through my body, charging me with electricity that would explode into an orgasm.

"You're still wearing your underwear," Troy murmured against my lips.

"You're still dressed," I replied.

"A gross mistake," Troy said. He reached behind his neck and pulled his shirt over his head in one movement without unbuttoning it any further.

"Getting there," he said.

He cupped my breasts. His hands were large and warm, his fingers strong as he kneaded my breasts. My nipples grew erect in his hands, pressing against his palms.

He cupped my ass and leaned forward, standing up. He lifted me with ease, and I squealed, but Troy swallowed it when he kissed me again.

He carried me through his mansion, kissing me all the way, and it was a miracle he didn't stumble.

When we reached his bedroom—I was aware of dark brown wood and beige sheets and carpets—he dropped me on the mattress. He pulled off his clothes and dumped them on the floor until he stood only in his boxers. His cock strained against his boxers, and I yearned to set it free from its confines.

I sat up. "Much better," I said. I pulled his boxers back, and his cock sprung up. It was impressive—large and thick and hard, smooth skin stretching along the shaft, and his head slick with lust.

I leaned forward and sucked his head into my mouth.

Troy groaned.

I bobbed my head up and down, stroking him in and out of my mouth, and

Troy groaned and gasped, his breath shallow. I reached into his boxers and cupped his balls. Troy pushed his boxers down his ass to give me room, and I massaged him as I sucked on him, stimulating every part of him.

“Mackenzie,” he said in a hoarse voice, and I rolled my eyes up to him. “Fuck.”

He squeezed his eyes shut before he pulled back.

“Not yet,” he said in a low voice and kicked off his boxers before he crawled over me. His skin was hot against mine when he lay on top of me. He kissed me again, his tongue sliding into my mouth, and his hand found my breast. He tweaked my hard nipple, rolling it between his fingers, and I moaned as it sent a shock of pure pleasure to my pussy.

Troy kissed me slowly, sensually. He gyrated his hips against mine, his cock thick and hot on my lower stomach. I moaned at the feel of him. I wanted him inside of me.

Troy broke the kiss and worked his way down my neck, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. He nibbled on the skin on my shoulder, and I shivered. Goosebumps ran over my arm, and warmth flooded my body, pooling between my legs. My panties were getting soaked by now, and I wanted Troy to take them off.

He moved onto the delicate skin of my breasts, and my skin tingled in anticipation of his touch. Troy sucked one nipple into his mouth, and I moaned. The feel of his mouth, his hot tongue running circles, made tingles run down my spine, and explosions of pure pleasure erupted in my body—not only from the nipple he was sucking but also in my pussy, in my fingers and toes.

While he paid attention to my nipple, licking and sucking, Troy pushed his free hand into my pants, and his fingers found my clit again.

He groaned against my breast and muttered a muffled curse word that he couldn't enunciate with my nipple in his mouth.

He pushed his hand further into my panties, his fingers finding my entrance, and when he pushed into me, I cried out. My pussy clamped down on his fingers, starved for his attention.

"This is in the way," Troy said, tugging at my panties.

"Get rid of them."

"They're hot as fuck," Troy said. "You're a vision in these panties." He pulled them off. "You're a vision without them," he added in a hoarse voice.

He leaned forward and kissed me on my pubic bone. My thighs fell open for him, and Troy closed his mouth over my pussy. I moaned at the same time he groaned, and when he flicked his tongue over my clit, it sent jolts of ecstasy through my body.

I cried out and squirmed as Troy coaxed the flame at my core into a roaring furnace. He licked and sucked my clit, and I writhed on the bed, the pleasure taking over.

Holy *shit*, he was good at that. His tongue was hot and soft on my clit, and when his fingers found my entrance again, I wasn't sure anything could feel better than this. His fingers were long, thick, and strong, and he curled them in a come-hither motion against my G-spot that I couldn't resist.

The orgasm that had been building at my core was suddenly at its peak, ready to erupt.

As if Troy knew, he pumped his fingers hard and fast and sucked on my clit, and that was what did it. I toppled over the edge, heat washing over my body, pleasure following on its heels. My body turned into a beam of light that poured through me, spilling into all the corners of me before it leaked out of my extremities. It took my breath away, and I curled on the bed,

whimpering and moaning through the bouts of pleasure that made me gasp for air.

When I finally came down from my sexual bliss, Troy chuckled against me.

“Wow,” he said.

“Yeah.” I gasped. The orgasm had been so intense; my whole body felt like pins and needles. I was lightheaded after breathing so shallowly, and every nerve ending was alive, humming in the aftermath of my pleasure.

Troy chuckled again, his eyes filled with a primal hunger, and he shimmied off the bed. He found his pants, opened his wallet, and took out a condom.

“You come prepared,” I said in a breathy voice.

“Rather safe than sorry.”

I smiled at him, and he rolled the condom over his cock with practiced ease.

Troy crawled over me again, pressing his cock against my entrance. I held my breath in anticipation. When he slid into me, my body stretched to accommodate his size. He buried himself inside of me, and I trembled around him. He filled me to the brim.

“Fuck, you feel fantastic,” he said.

I kissed him, and he nibbled my lower lip for just a moment before he slid out of me almost all the way. When he pushed back into me, I cried out. The friction was even better than anything he'd done with his fingers, and my body tightened in all the right places, holding onto him. As he pulled back and thrust into me again and again, I moaned.

Troy picked up his pace, pounding into me harder and harder, and I held onto his shoulders, thick and muscular. He clenched his jaw, and his brows were knitted together as he pounded into me. My breasts jiggled against his chest, and he tangled his fingers into my hair, holding onto me as he pushed me closer and closer to another orgasm.

His cock stroked all the right places, the friction setting me on fire. In no time, I felt transparent, the orgasm engulfing everything that I was.

When I came undone, I cried out, and my body squeezed tightly around Troy's cock.

"Fuck, babe," he bit out, slowing down to preserve himself while the pleasure rocked through me, turning my muscles into jelly. My nipples tightened, and a hot flush ran over my body. I squeezed my eyes shut and let the orgasm take over.

Troy was still inside of me, slowly moving in and out, and it only prolonged my orgasm, making it more intense.

I gasped for air and opened my eyes to look into his. His gray eyes were drowning deep and filled with lust. It echoed the pleasure I already felt unfurling inside me, taking over my body so that it consumed me.

When the orgasm slowly faded away, Troy brushed my hair out of my face, his eyes studying my features as if he was committing them to memory.

He pulled out of me and lay next to me.

"Roll over," he said.

I rolled onto my side, still catching my breath. Troy pressed his chest to my back and ran his hand up and down my body, tracing the dip of my waist, the rise of my hip. His cock pushed against my ass, and I pulled up one leg to allow him space. Troy found my entrance, and I tilted forward. When he slid into me, I moaned softly. It felt so good to have him inside of me.

Troy wrapped an arm around me and cupped my breast. He rocked his hips back and forth, fucking me from behind. He spooned me while he slid in and out of me, and the same heat that had spread through my body before started anew at my core.

Troy pumped into me harder and harder. He let go of my breast and put one

hand on my hip. The other, he put on my shoulder, crossing his arm over my back. I curled my body forward, and Troy fucked me harder and harder. I cried out as I lay on the bed, Troy pounding into me from behind. His hand on my shoulder was reassuring, the hand on my hip demanding, holding me in place.

His breath grew ragged as he pumped into me, and his strokes shortened. His cries told me he was getting closer, and my body grew hotter and hotter as if I was on fire. My nerve endings were alive, and the sounds of our sex, slapping and crying out, filled the room.

Another orgasm flooded me. It had come on so fast, and it took my breath away. I lay on the bed, writhing and squirming, but this time, Troy didn't slow down when I cried out. He rolled me over so that I was on my stomach, one leg pulled up, and he was on top of me, behind me, fucking me. He bucked his hips faster and faster, and his cries reached a crescendo before he pushed into me as deep as he could.

I felt his cock pulsate as he released, and his orgasm rolled through his body. It made his voice tremble and turned breathless. He curled his hands closed, his fingers digging into my hip where he still held onto me, and it only pushed my orgasm further, translating into another wave of pleasure.

When we came down from our sexual highs, Troy rolled back, pulling out of me. I lay on the bed, gasping for air. When I rolled onto my back, he grinned at me.

“I'll be right back.” He got up and walked to the bathroom adjacent to his bedroom, his ass in perfect view for me to stare at.

I was suddenly exhausted. I'd had too much to drink, and after the orgasms, my body started shutting down. I didn't usually stay over, but when Troy

came out of the bathroom and got into bed next to me, it was easier to roll against him and put my head on his shoulder.

Somewhere at the back of my mind, a small voice screamed at me not to, but then I was asleep, and the small voice was silent.

When I jerked awake the next morning, it took me a moment to figure out where I was.

I looked over my shoulder and found Troy sleeping next to me.

My head pounded with the aftermath of all our drinking, and gray light fell through a crack in the drawn curtains.

Shit, I'd stayed over. I *never* stayed over.

I grabbed my phone and checked the time. It was an ungodly hour, but I had to get out of here before Troy woke up. I didn't want to do the morning routine—this wasn't supposed to be anything more than a no-strings-attached night of fun.

Carefully, I slid out from underneath the covers and tiptoed around the bed. I found my panties and left the room as quietly as I could. I hurried through the house to find the rest of my clothes, and when I was dressed—I'd found everything, by some miracle—I let myself out through the front door.

The house was more spectacular in the light of day.

I walked up the driveway to the gate. Would it open? What if I was stuck out here and I had to wake Troy—

The gate opened when I approached, and the guard in the guardhouse I hadn't noticed last night waved at me.

I lifted a hand in a wave, feeling like this was a walk of shame, before I pulled out my phone to call a cab.

The escape had been easier than I'd thought it would be.

Good.

Now I could focus on getting everything ready for my new job, and on Monday, I would meet my new boss.

I'd heard that he was an ass, but that had never scared me before. I was good at dealing with men who loved measuring dicks and believed the rest of the world was beneath them. It just took a bit of convincing I was as good as any other guy in the office, and then things went smoothly. He may have had the reputation of being an ass, but if there was one thing I was good at, it was kicking ass.

TROY

Mr. Larson,

I'm new on the team here at Griffin Solutions, and since we're going to be working together, Mr. Stein asked me to reach out and make it happen. What about a beer and a brainstorming session so we can get the ball rolling? I'm planning big things.

Regards,

Mack Frye

I had to read the name he ended the email with twice before I burst out laughing.

“What?” Scott asked.

“This guy’s name is Mack. Mack Frye.”

“As in, McFry?”

“Right?” I scoffed.

Scott chuckled, but his laughter faded when he turned his attention back to his article.

“I’m going to have to work with this clown for the next couple of months and this is how we start,” I said.

“What contract are you working on?” Scott asked absently.

“The one with Griffin.”

Scott glanced up from his article from where he sat on the couch in front of my larger-than-life television. “I thought you hated Griffin.”

“Yeah, I do,” I said. Griffin Solutions was a marketing and communications company with a bulletproof reputation, and they’d been a thorn in my side for a long time. Larson Inc, the company I’d started from scratch, was much better in name, reputation, and value, but Griffin didn’t want to accept that. Sebastian Stein was an ass, to say the least.

“Why work with them, then?”

“It’s this stupid campaign I’m working on with Elecoms.”

“The company with the fucked-up name,” Scott said, nodding.

“Yeah... I think they were going for elegant communications and squashed it together, but it failed. Johnson always tries to be innovative, but he’s just tacky.”

“Big time,” Scott said with a laugh. “Wasn’t that girl you got last weekend from Griffin?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I think so.”

“You didn’t see her again?”

“Tough when she sneaks out without leaving her number.” I was still sour about that. We’d had such a good connection, and when I’d woken up, she was gone.

“Don’t you prefer it when you walk away?” Scott asked. “I didn’t take you for someone with *feelings*.”

“Fuck off,” I said with a scowl. “I just want to be the one to walk away.” Yeah, yeah, so it had been an ego thing. I wanted to be the one to call the shots, but it wasn’t just about that. If I didn’t give a shit about what we’d shared that night, I would have been fine with the whole thing. Waking up to an empty bed was a hell of a lot better than having to explain to them that it just wasn’t going to work out, I wouldn’t call, we wouldn’t see each other again...

I just wanted to see her again. If she’d left me her number, I would have called for a change.

“Anyway,” I said, changing the topic away from the hot bombshell who’d rocked my world before she’d disappeared, “they’re doing a hell of a marketing campaign for Victor Toussaint. He’s bringing his jewelry range to the States, and I want it. Since Griffin aimed for the same thing, Elecoms thought they were being clever by getting us to both prepare for it and see who does best.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. “Sounds like a messy game to me.”

“Nah, not if I’m the one who wins it,” I said and grinned at my brother.

“Nothing if not competitive,” Scott said, shaking his head and glancing at his article. “So, what does this Happy Meal have to do with it?”

I laughed at that. “Nice. We’re going to brainstorm together. It’s supposed to be a team thing, and then one of us wins. I don’t know, it’s stupid.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Scott said. “Who works in a team just to get up

against each other?”

“Sebastian Stein.”

Scott chuckled. “I thought at our age we would have outgrown playground politics.”

“Are you kidding me?” I said with a laugh. “The same jackasses who were full of shit back then just grew up, and they’re still full of shit now. Playground politics just becomes politics at some point.”

I started drafting a response.

The truth was, I wanted to meet this guy now. Happy Meal, as my brother had dubbed him.

Perfect.

Mr. Frye,

I think getting together is the perfect way to kick off the campaign. I didn't realize someone new would be on the team. Sebastian Stein always has a trick up his sleeve, eh? It sounds good, why don't we meet after work for a drink or two and we can go through the requirements and see where we can help each other. My office or yours?

Regards,

T. Larson

I sat back and turned my attention to the game on the big TV against the wall. Before I could really get into it, my laptop pinged with a reply.

Mr. Larson,

I'm the ace up Stein's sleeve. I don't usually get so up close and personal on the first date, but let's see your digs. I'll be at your office tomorrow at five. I'm holding you to that beer—can't think clearly without a little lubrication.

Mack

I laughed. This guy was funny, I'd give him that. Maybe, since he was new, he wouldn't be so full of shit as Stein's guys usually were. Maybe we could get along. Not that it would change my plans—I was still going to kick dust in his face and take the contract. I wanted the Elecoms contract. If I could get Victor Toussaint on my side, that would be a hell of a notch on my bedpost. He was only the most famous jewelry designer on the other side of the world, and having him and his jewels on my billboards would kick my business into another gear.

It wasn't just about that, though. I liked winning.

"I gotta go," Scott said when his phone beeped; he frowned at the screen.

"Emergency?"

"Yeah, you know how it goes."

I nodded and let Scott out. He was a pediatrician, and his kids always came first. He was damn good at what he did—they all said he had magic hands,

and I had to agree.

I'd thrown myself into business when we'd lost Jake, our brother, in an accident. Scott had thrown himself into medicine. I hadn't been able to save Jake, so I turned away from the rest of the world. Scott hadn't been able to save him either, so he vowed to save all the others.

I guess we all deal with grief differently.

"I'll see you later," Scott said when I let him out. "Let me know what the Happy Meal is like."

I laughed. "You got it."

I shut the door and collapsed on my couch again, watching the rest of the game before it was time for bed. Tomorrow was going to be a big day in the office—I was wrapping up one campaign and diving headfirst into the next without taking a breath.



When the day was over and I'd taken care of all my business, I ordered up a couple of beers and bags of chips, put a game on the screen in my office for background noise, and made sure the extra workstation was ready. The bar was stocked with whatever else this guy might need. I would make a hell of an impression on him. The quicker I could get him to back off, scare him into submission, the better. It was best this guy knew what he was up against, and I had a theory—intimidate him from the start.

I waited. He was late. I checked the time twice.

Half an hour.

I was just about to call and find out what the fuck was going on when my secretary let me know my five o'clock had arrived. More like five thirty, but whatever. I was going to keep it short and sweet, anyway.

The door opened.

“Hey, man—”

“I’m sorry I’m late, traffic was a bitch getting here—”

It wasn’t a man walking into my office. It was a woman.

And it wasn’t just any woman, either.

“Mackenzie?” I asked, confused.

“Oh. Troy.” She looked around. “I... what are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” I asked. “Are you here to see me?” How had she found me?

“I’m here to see Mr. Larson.”

Fuck she looked just as hot as when I’d met her. Short blonde hair, cut in a pixie style, a slim build, and elegant as fuck. Square jaw, fuckable mouth, and eyes that were perpetually filled with mischief or laughter. Or both.

“I’m Troy Larson,” I said. “And I’m about to go into a meeting with...” My voice trailed off. She was from Griffin, too. “Mack?”

“Yeah,” she said. “My friends call me Mack.”

I shook my head. “What the fuck?”

“I’m not too keen to see you, either,” she said tightly. “I guess we’re working together on this thing?”

“You’re Mack Frye? The Happy Meal?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

I shook my head again. This had to be some practical joke, right? This had to be...

“You left,” I said.

“I didn’t realize you wanted breakfast in bed,” she answered tightly.

“You could have at least given me your number.”

“Would you have called?” she challenged.

Damn it. “Would you have wanted me to?”

“You’re fucking sensitive for the owner of a company. Usually it’s the women who want the one-night stand to become more.”

“I don’t want it to become more,” I said. I was getting angrier and angrier.

“Then what’s the issue?”

What exactly was the issue? Mackenzie was standing in front of me like some kind of apparition, hot as fuck and getting hotter the more pissed off she got. She’d made me feel like an ass by disappearing, and now she was just making me look more and more like a fool, and that pissed me off.

“Maybe we should get to work,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” she said and sat down.

She wore a pair of office slacks, a white button-up blouse, and a black waistcoat over it. Her lips were bright red, her eyes smokey, and fucked if she wasn’t the hottest businesswoman I’d ever seen. She was nothing like the women I’d met before. She wasn’t frilly and soft and in need of someone to save her—that was usually what I ran from. Most women wanted a Prince Charming, and I didn’t want a princess by my side.

Mackenzie was no princess. She could be a knight in shining armor in her full right if she wanted. She sure as shit had the attitude and the self-confidence.

That only made her hotter.

“What does Elecoms want?”

“Shouldn’t you know that?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m setting the stage for our brainstorming.”

“Right,” she said. “Well, I’ll recap for you so we’re both clear.” She gave me a pointed look that made me equally hard and pissed off. “They want elegance, they want timelessness, they want an edge.”

I sighed. "I hate it when they don't know what they want."

"Right?" Mackenzie said, shaking her head. We had a moment where we agreed on something. "Well, let's get cracking. We'll set this as a starting point. They want billboards, television ads, and an exposition that will be decorated to theme, so we'll have to figure out the advertising for that, too."

I nodded. "You've done your homework."

"Stein didn't take me on because I don't know what I'm doing," she said.

I sighed. If I'd known this firecracker was on the market, I would have stolen her from underneath Sebastian's nose. With grit like this, she could be a hell of a secret weapon on my team.

Not that it mattered now. She wasn't only Griffin's, she was also my direct competition and fucked if I was going to let her win.

"Right," I said when we'd drawn up a couple of basic ideas to use as a starting point. "We'll both use these and then we'll present in two months and see what they like."

"Sounds good," Mackenzie said. "Way to keep it fair."

"I know how to play the game," I pointed out.

"Yeah, we'll see." She packed up her things and stood. I was very aware of how close she was, the smell of her perfume. It took me back to that night in my bed, her naked body writhing beneath me, the way she'd moaned, kissed me, the way she'd let me fuck her.

My cock twitched in my pants.

"It was nice to officially meet you," I said, holding out my hand.

"Yeah, sure," she said, taking it. Electricity ran through my body at our touch. "You, too."

"May the best man win. Or, you know—"

"I plan to," she said and offered a sweet smile before she walked out of my

office.

I stayed behind in the wake of her destruction, lust humming through my body, but fuck, I was pissed off, too. Just who did she think she was, waltzing into my office, late, being who she was, and acting like she was going to take the prize?

If she thought she was going to win this campaign for Griffin, she had another thing coming. She might have been drop-dead gorgeous, sexy, a feisty woman who was damn good in bed and set me on fire, but she was still my nemesis by association, and if there was one thing I wanted more than winning, it was beating Griffin Solutions.

I cracked my knuckles. Oh, this was going to be fun.

MACKENZIE

“**Y**ou’re not going to believe who I’m working with,” I said into the phone when I drove to my sister’s house.

“Who?” Hailey asked.

“Troy.”

“What?”

“The guy I slept with a couple of weeks ago? At the bar, remember?”

“Oh, the hot one.”

I laughed. “They were both hot.”

I told her what had happened at my meeting with Mr. Larson at Larson Inc. Troy Larson. I’d never found out his last name after we’d had our one-night stand. It hadn’t come up; it wasn’t like I’d wanted to doodle it all over my notepads or anything.

“Oh, my God,” Hailey said. “So... now what?”

“Now we work together and see who gets the contract,” I said.

“I don’t get how that works. How do you work together to work against each other?”

I sighed. “We still have to get the parameters for the project right, so we brainstormed. It’s complicated.”

“It sounds like it’s not just the project that will be complicated,” Hailey said. “Are you going to sleep with him again?”

“Are you kidding me? There’s no way. He’s a rival now, you know? It’s either Larson Inc. or Griffin Solutions that’s getting the project, and best know it’s going to be Griffin.”

Hailey chuckled. “You’re so competitive.”

“Get this,” I said. “He was upset that I left early in the morning without leaving a number or something.”

“Troy?”

Who the hell else? “Yeah.”

“That’s... weird.”

“Right? Guys don’t usually do that. Well, it’s better this way, anyway. It’s not like something’s going to happen between us now. It was right to keep it at a one-night stand.”

“When are you going to settle down?” Hailey asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have time to settle down. I have a career to focus on. The last thing I want right now is a boyfriend who’s going to claim some of my time because he wants to get close or whatever. I’m happy alone.”

“That might be the start of your problems.”

I shook my head, irritated. Thank God, I arrived at my sister’s and had a reason to end the call.

“Gotta go, I’ll call you later. I’m at Rachel’s.”

“Talk later,” Hailey said, and we ended the call.

When I got out, my sister’s kids poured out of the house. It was an old colonial house with a large garden and colossal trees that had stood the test of

time. Being here was like escaping the city and being transported to a haven. I'd grown up in this house, and I was so glad Rachel had taken it over.

"Auntie Mackie!" they cried out in unison.

"If it isn't my favorite little rascals!" I cried out and kneeled to hug them. They ran into my arms together.

"You're getting so big! What's Mommy feeding you?"

"Broccoli," the eldest girl, Tammy, said and crinkled her nose. She was eight, and she had Rachel's blonde hair and her father's dark, soulful eyes. "She won't stop feeding us that."

I laughed. "Broccoli is good for you."

"You can have mine," Benjamin said. He was six, and he looked just like his father, but he had Rachel's laugh and happy disposition.

"Mine too!" Rory cried out, following in her big brother's footsteps and mimicking him. She was three and always smelled sticky-sweet when she climbed on my lap.

Rachel appeared at the door. "Come on, I have cookies and milk on the table and a movie waiting," she said.

The kids all ran inside, and Rachel came to hug me. Rachel was twenty years older than me, the first of us five kids. My three brothers were all over the place, and I barely saw them, but Rachel was like a mother to me, and I saw her as often as I could.

"You look stressed," she said, holding me at arm's length.

"You look tired," I countered.

"Three kids will do that to you," Rachel said with a laugh. "Come on, you can have cookies and milk, too."

I snorted. "Thanks." I loved that I still got cookies and milk at Rachel's house. "I'll trade milk for coffee."

I followed her in. The kids were already around the table in the kitchen, dunking cookies in their milk, but I stood with Rachel by the coffee machine while she made us each a cup.

When Rachel asked about work, I gave her a recap of the week. I didn't mention that Troy and I had slept together. I just told her that he was a pain in the ass and working together—and against each other—was going to be a fun challenge.

“Is he a nice guy?” Rachel asked.

I shrugged. “I guess so. He's on top of shi—things.” I caught myself before I swore in front of the kids. “He owns Larson Inc.”

“Oh, successful *and* rich. That's what you want in a guy, eh?” Rachel nudged me.

I shook my head. “I'm not going to date him.”

“Why not?”

“Come on, Rachel,” I said. “Why is everyone trying to get me to settle down? Did you talk to Hailey?”

Rachel laughed. “I'm not getting your friends involved, we're just all on the same page. You need someone in your life, sweetie pie. You can't be alone forever.”

“I'm not alone,” I said. “I have you and those three angels.” I watched as Benjamin and Tammy threw pieces of cookie at each other.

“Hey!” Rachel cried out. “In your mouth, or not at all.”

“Sorry,” Tammy said and stuffed a whole cookie in her mouth. Rory dunked her cookie into her glass until her whole hand was in the glass and all the milk spilled on the table.

“Oh, God,” Rachel muttered and walked to the sink to find a cloth. “Here, honey, let's wipe this up.”

She let Rory help her clean while Rory sucked on the soggy cookie with one hand.

“Having me and Hailey doesn’t mean you’re not alone,” Rachel said, talking to me again. “You need a man.”

“For what?” I asked.

Rachel hesitated. “I... actually don’t know.” She laughed. “Companionship.”

I giggled. “I’ll be fine. Really. I like my job, I work all the hours I want without someone expecting me home at a certain time, and that works for me. This whole thing...” I glanced at the kids. “Maybe it’s on the cards for me one day, but not now.”

“One day might be too late,” Rachel said.

“It’s not, though,” I said. “You got married late.” She was fifty now, and her kids weren’t even ten yet. She’d had them in a time when everyone had been sure it was dangerous, she couldn’t fall pregnant, it was a risk, all that jazz. Aside from her dickhead ex-husband, she’d gotten what she wanted.

“I got married late because someone had to look after you and keep you out of trouble,” Rachel said with a grin.

I laughed. “You failed. I still got in trouble.”

Rachel grinned at me.

“Okay, put on a movie,” Rachel ordered when the kids were just about done with their cookies. They jumped up and ran to the living room.

“Our coffee’s gone cold,” Rachel said, returning to the machine where the two cups stood cold and sad.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “I love cold coffee.”

“It’s because it’s all you get.” Rachel laughed. “I always forget about the stupid coffee.”

“It’s fine,” I said, and we took our cups, clinking them together as if they were wineglasses.

“How are you feeling?” I asked my sister now that the kids were gone.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Lately, I just feel... exhausted. And it’s not the kids and making it all happen. It’s more than that.”

“You should go see a doctor,” I said.

“Yeah, you keep saying that.”

“You don’t listen.”

“I’ll be okay,” Rachel said, but I worried about her. Something was wrong, but she wouldn’t go to the doctor to find out what.

What if it’s what Mom had? I wanted to ask Rachel that. My mom died when I was just a kid. She’d refused to go to the doctor, and it had been a pulmonary embolism that had ended up killing her.

I didn’t say it out loud. It felt like saying it out loud would jinx Rachel.

“Just get it checked out, okay?” I said. “I can’t lose another mother.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” Rachel said, determined. “The kids need me, too. I’m all they have.”

I shook my head, trying to get rid of the sense of doom that had risen around us. It would probably be fine—I was just paranoid about it because Mom died. Still, I wanted my sister to look after herself.

“When are you seeing him again?” Rachel asked, forcing the attention back to me.

“This week, I guess. I’ll have to see him a few times.”

“Sounds like fun,” Rachel said and winked.

My mind drifted to Troy despite myself. I’d told Hailey beating Troy was what it was about and it wasn’t a big deal that we saw each other again—

what were the odds that it was him and me, pitted against each other—and our night together wouldn't matter, but that wasn't true.

When I'd seen him again in the office, my heart had hammered against my chest, and the memories of our night together had flooded back.

God, he was so fucking good in bed, and even afterward, when I'd been satisfied, seeing him had made me weak in the knees all over again.

He was my enemy right now; we weren't working together on the project, so we could both benefit from it, but that didn't change the fact that he was hot as hell. I'd wanted to jump his bones again, even though he'd been snappy and grumpy.

Hell, that had only made him hotter.

Don't even go there. The last thing I needed was to get involved with the one guy that could take it all away from me if I wasn't careful. I wasn't going to be cliché and sleep with the enemy.

The fact that Troy and I had ended up on either side of the line was a coincidence, and the fact that I was wildly attracted to him shouldn't matter.

I wouldn't let it. I was more professional than that.

I could look past his hotness and deal with the heat... and still focus on work.

Really, I could.

TROY

What. The. Fuck.

Mack? What kind of woman let her friends call her Mack? It was a guy's name. Okay, okay, so she wasn't exactly the mainstream kind of woman that I saw all the time. She was hot as fuck, beautiful to boot, and she knew her shit. That made her incredibly attractive—I loved it when people knew what they were talking about, and her confidence and reassurance made her a hell of a woman to look at.

She wasn't high maintenance and a damsel in distress, either. That was pretty intimidating—fuck if she needed a man to save her.

That made her even hotter and even more beautiful, and that was what fucked me up. Because Mackenzie was working on a project with me and I was going to have to see her more often. She was good at her job, so she was a threat, possibly taking the project away from me.

I had every reason to hate her, and I totally did.

Except... I really did.

Seeing her in my office had turned me on, shocked me, bowled me over, and it had *pissed me off*.

“What’s wrong with you?” Scott asked when I stomped into his apartment.

He lived close to the hospital in a small apartment that was fancy as shit—he didn’t have the square footage but he had everything else.

“Nothing,” I snapped.

“You look like someone pissed in your coffee.”

“Mack did.”

“What?” Scott asked. “Oh, the meeting.”

“Yeah, with Mack Frye.”

“The Happy Meal.”

“Except, it’s not. It was Mackenzie.”

Scott frowned. “You lost me.”

“Mack is Mackenzie. The woman we met at the bar? The one who works for Griffin...”

I watched Scott’s face until he put all the pieces together and came to the right answer.

“Happy Meal is Mackenzie, the hottie who ran out on you?”

I bristled. “Yeah, that one.

“More like Happy Ending, eh?” Scott laughed.

“Fuck off,” I said, shaking my head irritably. “Wasn’t so fucking happy after she left, so don’t even go there.”

“You know what your problem is?” Scott asked, getting up from where he’d sat on the couch to get me something to drink. Coffee, probably, but whiskey would have been a good idea. Maybe he could add something strong to my coffee.

“Mackenzie is my rival?” I asked.

“You have one-night stands because you don’t want to commit to anything, but you wear your heart on your sleeve. That’s not how one-night stands work.”

“Thanks for your advice, maestro,” I said sarcastically.

Scott shrugged. “Hey, just telling it how it is. I can teach you my ways.”

I snorted. “Because you’re the poster child for a happily ever after, right?”

Scott laughed and poured me a glass of whiskey, bypassing the coffee altogether. He knew me.

“Hey, I’m happy. I’d rather be single and happy than in a miserable relationship. Sadie was *not* good for me, and I don’t have time for bullshit.”

My brother had dated a girl for a couple of years, and he’d slowly become more and more subdued, giving up everything about himself because she’d wanted him to change rather than loving him for who he was. She’d had kids, and it was almost as if she’d tried to mother him into being who she wanted him to be, too. I didn’t blame him for being single.

“I get it,” I said and sighed. I sipped the whiskey. “This is good shit.”

“If you’re going to drink in the day, might as well make it count,” Scott said.

“I make enough money to do whatever the fuck I want,” I pointed out at the quip about my day-drinking.

“Yeah, yeah,” Scott said with a laugh. “So, you’re going to fuck her again?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? It might give you an edge in the project.”

“That’s just playing dirty.”

“Since when are you so straight-and-narrow?” Scott said and cocked an eyebrow.

He was right. It was a dog-eat-dog world out there and playing nice wasn't what had gotten me to where I was today. Some rules could be broken, and some couldn't. I kept my nose clean, playing by the book when it came to laws and ethics, but morality was a malleable thing, and one man's morality was another man's way to beat the system.

Did I feel like shit about cheating people sometimes? Well, yeah. But life had fucked me over enough times that I'd realized it only chewed up the good ones and spat them out again. There was no reward for being the good guy; we just got hurt more because we tried to do the right thing.

It was an unhealthy way to approach life, but I'd learned to accept my flaws. I was nice to myself that way.

Only Scott had what it took to still be the golden guy, even though he'd been through the same shit I had.

"What do you think Jake would have said?" I asked softly.

Scott stilled before he grabbed the bottle of whiskey and poured himself a glass, too.

"Fuck, did you have to bring him up?" he asked.

Talking about Jake was hard, but I missed him so much. Sometimes, I wanted to know what he would have thought; I wanted to know what he would have said. We'd just been kids when we'd lost him. I didn't know who he would have been if he'd ever had the chance to grow up; I didn't know if he would have been like me or like Scott or the perfect mixture in between. I wished we could have found out.

"I don't know," Scott said, answering my question. "I think he would have told you to get over yourself."

I chuckled. "I don't think that's what he would have said. I think that's what *you're* saying."

“Then it’s settled,” Scott said. “You should listen to me.”

I burst out laughing. “Thanks for that.”

“And get laid,” Scott added.

“What?”

“Find someone else to fuck so you can get this woman out of your system because you work with her. It might keep your mind on business.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “I have to go.”

“Yeah, come here to drink my whiskey and then piss off again,” Scott said dryly.

I laughed. “I’ll see you later.”

I arrived home, put on jogging clothes, and headed out onto the streets. When my mind wouldn’t leave me alone or I had something tough to work through, the only thing that worked was going for a long run. I could do a couple of miles without even breaking a sweat—it was my go-to, and I ran almost every day if I could make the time.

My feet beat a tattoo on the tarmac, and LA rose and swelled around me, teeming with life and possibility, job opportunities, and money to be made.

Fuck, I love living here.

When I got home, my mind was full of Mackenzie despite my run. Damn it, I’d run to get rid of her. I was hot and sweaty and my muscles trembled with the effort I’d made, pushing myself harder and faster, and here we were, right where I’d started.

I didn’t want to think about her, but I couldn’t help myself. She’d looked so fucking stunning in that pants-suit she wore, the large collar, the buttons that disappeared into the waistcoat, leaving just enough to the imagination that my cock twitched thinking about it.

Find someone else to fuck so you can get this woman out of your system.

That was good advice. Maybe I just needed a release, and it had nothing to do with Mackenzie; it was just that I needed a place to put my dick.

I walked to the master bedroom and into my bathroom and turned on the hot water. I stripped my clothes and got in under the hot spray, letting it wash away the sticky sweat.

Mackenzie filled my thoughts. Her feisty attitude in my office had been such a turn-on. My cock grew hard thinking about it. She'd walked in there, demanding and challenging and confident, and I'd wanted to push her onto my desk and fuck her.

The hot water and my hard cock only increased how horny I was, and I groaned. I palmed my flesh, thick in my hand and leaned my other hand against the tiles. I closed my eyes, the hot water pouring over me as I envisioned Mackenzie in my office, that mouth set and determined, her eyes flashing.

I ripped open that shirt-waistcoat combo to show her perfect breasts in her lace bra. Her nipples were hard, poking against the material, and I ran my thumb over one. I envisioned the sound of her moan, just as she'd sounded when I brought her back here.

I pumped my hand up and down my cock, faster and faster, and in my mind, I spun Mackenzie around so her back was to my chest, reaching around her. One hand reached around to cup her breast, pulling down the cup of her bra so I could tweak her erect nipple. The other hand, I pushed into her pants, my fingers in her slit. She was so fucking wet. I grinded my cock against her ass, and she gasped. I loved the sounds she made when we fucked.

I pushed her forward and pulled her pants over her ass, taking the G-string down with them. She leaned on my desk, her perfect ass pointed at me, and my cock found her entrance.

I gritted my teeth and tugged at my cock, pumping my hand faster and faster while I imagined pounding into her, fucking her from behind so that she cried out.

My cock grew thicker and harder and my balls tightened. I groaned and let out a sharp cry as thick ropes of pleasure squirted out, falling to the ground, and it washed away with the water that swirled down the drain. I breathed hard, shuddering through the intense orgasm before I let go of my cock and straightened.

Fuck, I had to get Mackenzie off my mind if I was going to work with her. Scott had been right, I had to find someone else who could distract me, but the idea of finding another warm body to fuck left a bad taste in my mouth. I wanted Mackenzie, not some other random woman.

I wanted the one I wasn't supposed to have.

Shit.

I didn't feel like going out there and finding someone else, so I was just going to have to control myself. I could do that, right? It wasn't like I couldn't hold back. I *wanted* to fuck her over my desk, or on the couch, or in my bed, or wherever worked, but that didn't mean that I couldn't hold back.

I would just have to keep it together while I was with her.

She was the enemy, I reminded myself. She could take away the contract I wanted so badly.

Yeah, that worked. If I thought about how much I could lose when I loved to win, that changed everything. I just had to ignore how incredibly attractive she was and focus on what my goal was—to win.

That would be fine. I just had to see her as someone I was going to beat, not think about sex, just work.

Work with a woman I couldn't resist.

Work with a woman I wanted to fuck again.

And again and again and again.

Damn it, this was going to be hard.

MACKENZIE

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the light had a gloomy quality to it. When the doorbell rang, I took a deep breath and walked to open it.

It was a Saturday, and Troy and I had decided to come together to discuss a change Elecoms had sent us in the project.

“The weather is crazy,” Troy said when he saw me. The wind blew in erratic gusts. “I think it’s going to be a hell of a storm.”

“Weird time of year for it,” I said. “And it’s rougher than usual.”

Troy nodded and stepped into my apartment, looking around. It was a modest apartment, nothing incredible—nothing like his fancy mansion—but I did well enough and the apartment was in a good part of town.

“This is nice,” he said. “I expected...”

“What?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, something else.”

Right.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked.

Troy shook his head. “We should just get started.”

I nodded, and we walked to the living room, where I'd already set up my laptop and my research for the project. Troy set up his laptop, too, and it gave me a chance to study him without it looking like I was staring.

He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt—normal, casual attire—but his jeans hung from his hips like he was doing them a favor, and the T-shirt stretched across a perfectly chiseled chest and muscular arms.

I'd seen him naked—I knew what was under that shirt and that it was as drool-worthy as it looked.

He glanced up at me, his blue eyes locking on mine, and I glanced away.

Thunder rumbled again, followed by a crack of lightning and more thunder. The lights flickered for a second as the power surged. I'd switched them on when the weather had turned.

“We're in for a ride,” Troy said.

“It looks like it.” I hoped the storm wouldn't get much worse. I wasn't a fan of thunder. When I was a kid, I used to hide under the bed during storms, and Rachel had to come find me to tell me the sky wasn't falling apart.

It's a conversation, she used to say. The lightning has something to say, and the thunder talks back. It's nothing to be scared of.

“We should consider this,” Troy said, turning his attention to his laptop. He turned it to show me a proposal he'd drawn up. “I think if we take this approach, we can really turn some heads, and that's what we want.”

“Turn heads, how?” I asked, looking at the work. Troy suggested we relate diamonds to ice and snow. “It's so cliché and not within our target market at all. We're in LA.”

“To draw attention,” Troy said. “And that's the point. It's exactly our target market because here, no one gets snow and ice all the time, so it's magical, fantastical.”

“It’s unrelatable.”

“Magic isn’t supposed to be relatable. No one buys shit because they can *relate* to it.” He clenched his jaw and that only made his already-square *GQ-magazine-worthy* face more prominent.

I narrowed my eyes. “You still need to create a form of homeliness, something that’s not outside of anyone’s comfort zone. That’s the point of marketing, making someone feel at home enough that they feel they can’t live without it.”

Troy shook his head. “Haven’t you ever wanted something because it was unique or rare, because you *couldn’t* have it?”

“I don’t think we should advertise Toussaint’s jewelry as something people *can’t* have,” I said dryly.

“That’s not what this is at all. It’s not the jewelry we’re making unreachable, it’s the concept of having something fantastic.”

“I’d rather see it as something I *can* have. Isn’t that what this whole project is about? Making people feel like they can have it so they’ll come get it. Not the other way around.”

Troy groaned. “Are you always this tough to work with?”

“Stein doesn’t seem to think I’m difficult to work with.”

“That’s because Stein is a pain in the ass, he doesn’t know it any other way,” Troy clapped back.

I laughed sarcastically. “It’s a good thing you’re your own boss, but you’ve fallen out of touch with what it means to work *for* someone.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with that,” Troy pointed out.

He was so frustrating! He argued with me about anything, and he clearly thought he was the best in the business.

Granted, he was *one* of the best, but newsflash... so was I.

I glared at him, and he matched my glare. That only made him more attractive than he already was. Damn it, what was it about him that when we got stuck, I wanted him more and more? His gray eyes were piercing, and the way he set his jaw and pursed his lips when he was pissed off—which he was right now—made me want to kiss him.

“Fine,” Troy said, shaking his head. “What’s your great plan, then?”

“Well, I—”

My phone rang, and a number I didn’t know flashed on the caller ID. I frowned. I was in a business meeting, so I silenced the call. I wanted to keep talking but something tugged at my gut.

“I’m sorry, excuse me,” I said, and I grabbed the phone and answered it.

“Ms. Frye?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Yeah?”

“This is Dr. Forrester. I’m calling you from Union General Hospital. Your sister came into our ER a moment ago, struggling to breathe.”

My stomach dropped. “Is she okay?”

“We have it under control, but she’s asking for you to come in. The children are here.”

“Shit,” I said. “I’ll be right there.”

I ended the call and looked at Troy, who frowned at me.

“I’m sorry, I have to go. My sister’s in the hospital.” I closed my laptop and stood. “We’ll have to do this another time.”

“That’s okay,” Troy said. “I hope everything is okay. We have to get this sorted soon, though—”

“Yeah, fine, I know,” I said. “I’ll call you.”

Troy nodded, and I hurried to the door, grabbing my bag. I let Troy out first and ran to my car.

I made it to the hospital in record time and found my sister in an ER bed. The kids were huddled around her, wide-eyed and scared.

“What happened?” I asked.

Rachel wore an oxygen mask, and her lips were blue when she lifted it to talk.

“It’s an embolism,” she said.

I was dizzy. The room spun around me.

“It’s okay, Mackie,” Rachel said. “Really. They caught it in time. They’re just going through the motions now to admit me and get me a bed. I’m going to have to stay overnight for more tests so they can see what’s up. Can you take the kids home and stay with them until I’m back? I’m so sorry to have to ask—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said. “Of course I’ll take them home.” I smiled at my nieces and nephew. They all looked panicked. Rory was on the verge of tears, so I scooped her up. “We’re going to have a great time, right, guys? Mommy just has to stay here for a bit, but until then, you get me!”

The kids tried to look excited, but it didn’t work.

“Thank you,” Rachel said and handed me the house keys. “I have some cash for—”

“I’ve got it,” I said. “Don’t worry. Just get on top of this thing, okay?” I asked. Fear coiled tightly in my stomach. I’d lost my mom like this. Rachel couldn’t go like this, too. I wasn’t ready. She was too young. The kids needed her.

I needed her.

I led the kids out of the hospital and toward my car, making sure they were all strapped in and ready before we drove to Rachel’s house. I chatted to them

happily, trying to stay upbeat, and after a short while, the kids started to smile again and relax a little.

Rain started falling, and I glanced up through the windscreen.

Thunder cracked overhead, and Tammy covered her ears. Rory screamed.

“Hey, guys, it’s okay,” I said. “It’s nothing serious. Just a little storm.”

“It’s so loud,” Benjamin wailed.

“It’s just a conversation,” I said.

“Mommy says that all the time, too,” Tammy told me.

“I know, and she’s right. The lightning says something, and the thunder talks back. We just don’t understand the words, you see?”

Benjamin and Tammy nodded, but Rory started crying.

“It’s okay, baby,” I said, looking in the mirror. Benjamin put an arm around his little sister. “We’re almost home and then we’ll do something fun. I think pancakes.”

“Pancakes?” Tammy asked. “It’s almost supper time.”

“So? We can have breakfast for supper, right? It’s raining, and the rain says pancakes.”

“I don’t hear anything about pancakes,” Benjamin said, tilting his head when the thunder rumbled again. He was listening to the storm rather than freaking out about it. That was a step in the right direction.

“Well, I think that’s what it means,” I said.

“Yeah, me too,” Tammy decided, nodding along with me.

“Me too,” Rory mimicked, talking for the first time since we’d left the hospital. Her cheeks were wet with tears, but she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Can we add sprinkles?” Tammy asked.

“Of course! We’re going to do just what we like because tonight is pancake night.”

Tammy nodded, satisfied, and I drove the last bit home. I tried not to panic about Rachel being in the hospital. It was fine. They were just keeping her for tests. They would tell her what she needed to do, and she didn't have to die. God, I hoped she wouldn't die.

When we stopped at the house, it was pouring. The rain came down in sheets, and I ran to the front door to unlock it before I ushered the kids inside. Lightning cracked loudly, and thunder followed, and the kids all screamed, but I slammed the door shut, and we were safely inside.

"Let's get into dry clothes before we do anything," I said.

Tammy and Benjamin went to their room. They could figure out their own clothes, but Rory still needed help. While I chose her a new outfit to wear and helped her with her shoes, my phone rang.

"Yeah?" I clamped the phone between my shoulder and cheek.

"Is your sister okay?" It was Troy.

"Oh, yeah. She is. They're keeping her overnight... thanks for asking."

"Do you want to get together tonight?"

"I'm looking after her kids," I said. "We'll have to revisit after the weekend."

"Johnson wants to see us with an outline for ideas on Monday," he said. "I just got the note."

"What?" I asked. Marcus Johnson was the head of Elecoms. "He can't just jump that on us. We have no time—"

"Johnson is a dick, but he's dancing to Toussaint's tune. If I had to keep the world's most famous jewelry designer happy, I'd jump through flaming hoops, too."

I groaned. "Except it's us jumping through the hoops, not him." I swapped the phone around and helped Rory pull up her tiny leggings. "I can't leave the

kids.”

“I’ll come to you. We’ll do it after they get to bed or something.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure about letting Troy get this close to my personal life.

“Otherwise, I’ll take care of my end of it, and you could always send in your proposal when you get a chance.”

Shit. If I did that, he would have a head start, and Johnson was more likely to choose him. I wasn’t going to let him get ahead this early in the game.

“If you don’t mind coming here, we can do it,” I said tightly. “I’m at my sister’s place. I’ll send you the location.”

“That works for me,” Troy said. “What can I bring? Cupcakes?”

“Oh, God, no. The sugar high is hell, trust me.”

“Right,” Troy said. “I’ll see you later.”

We ended the call.

“Who was that?” Tammy asked. She and Benjamin had come into the room while I’d been talking. Rory had pulled a big jersey on herself, and she looked cute. Her hair was wet but we could dry that off easily.

“A work friend,” I said. “We have to work on something later.”

“Is he nice?” Benjamin asked.

“Yeah,” I said. He was *nice*. He was just a pain in my ass in some ways. Heavenly in others.

“Come on, let’s get the pancakes going,” I said. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m hungry.”

We walked to the kitchen together. Benjamin was chatty, and Rory was all over the place, bouncing off the walls like she’d had sugar already—I hoped she hadn’t—but Tammy was quiet.

In the kitchen, I put them all to work. I let Benjamin mix the dry ingredients

together with a spoon while I got the wet ingredients in a bowl with Tammy. Rory sat on a playmat in the corner, playing with dolls. She sang to herself.

“You okay?” I asked Tammy.

“Is Mommy okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re going to take good care of her and before you know it, she’ll be home.” I hoped to God that was true.

I was almost ready to get the pancake batter in the pan when the intercom went off.

“Is that your friend?” Tammy asked.

“I’ll get it!” Benjamin shouted and ran out the door to press the button for the gate.

I was grateful I didn’t have dogs to worry about, too.

When we waited at the front door, Troy ran in, laptop bag tucked to his chest.

“This is starting to look and feel like a hurricane,” he announced.

Thunder clapped loudly.

“The rain says pancakes,” Benjamin said.

“What?” Troy asked, confused.

I laughed. “We’re making pancakes because the thunder and lightning are talking about it.” That wasn’t what I’d meant at all, but here we were, talking about storms as if they ordered pancakes for us.

“Right,” Troy said. “Well, I’m Troy.”

“I’m Benjamin.” Benjamin stepped up and held out his hand like a little grownup.

“Nice to meet you,” Troy said with a smile, shaking Benjamin’s hand.

“And you are?”

“Tammy,” she said solemnly. “Are you here to work?”

“And maybe have a pancake if I’m allowed,” Troy said.

“Yeah!” Benjamin said.

“With sprinkles,” Rory added, peeking out from behind my leg. “Auntie Mackie said it’s okay.”

I smiled. “This is Rory. We’re in the kitchen.”

“Well, I have a surprise for you.”

“What is it?” Tammy asked, and the kids crowded around Troy. He pulled out a pack of cookies, and I groaned.

“Oh, we should have that with milk!”

“I thought I asked for no sugar,” I said.

Troy grinned at me. “I got a sugar-free pack. You can have fun without the evil that follows.”

I took the box from him and studied it. It was indeed sugar-free.

“It looks like a rip-off of the real deal to me,” I said. “I’d never advertise this stuff.”

Troy laughed. “Stop thinking about work. Let’s go have those pancakes, huh?”

Thunder roared so loudly it drowned out whatever the kids might have said. Rory clung to my leg so tightly I struggled to stay upright, Tammy covered her eyes, and Benjamin squeezed his eyes shut, terrified.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Troy said. “It’s just static.”

“It’s what?” Tammy asked.

“Have you ever rubbed your hands against a jersey and then when you touch something it shocks you a little bit?”

“Like down the slide?” Benjamin asked. “At the park, it always snaps me.”

“Right, like that,” Troy said. “Do you know what that is?”

They all shook their heads.

“Static electricity is like little sparkles that some things collect when they rub against each other, and when it snaps like that, it’s because the sparkles jump off one thing and go to another. If there are too many little sparkles, some of them have to escape to go somewhere else. The clouds rub together like that, too, and they collect sparkles. Then, when they touch each other, the sparkles jump between the clouds, but it’s much louder than on the playground. When the clouds rub against each other, we hear it and call it thunder, and when the sparkles jump—”

“It’s lightning!” Tammy cried out.

“Right,” Troy said with a laugh. “A storm isn’t scary, it’s beautiful. It’s the clouds working hard to make sparkles, and they share it with each other. Sometimes good things still make scary sounds.”

I watched Troy talk to the kids. He was really good at it, breaking things down simply and keeping it in a way they could understand.

“I want sparkles too,” Rory said.

“How about we add food glitter to the pancakes,” I offered, remembering my sister had edible glitter in the pantry, “and then we put sparkles on the pancakes?”

“It will be like a storm cake,” Troy said.

The kids all cheered and ran to the kitchen.

“Wow,” I said. “That was sweet. Who would have thought you could talk to kids that way.”

“I’m a man of many talents,” Troy said.

“If only you knew how to communicate with adults the same way,” I said jokingly, a smile playing around my mouth.

Troy laughed and shook his head. “Thanks for that.”

“A lot more where that came from.”

“A fountain of insults.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” I said, and we followed the kids to the kitchen.

TROY

Yeah, babysitting wasn't what I'd had in mind for a work visit, but shit happened and we had to compromise, right? I would have been just fine with Mackenzie submitting her proposal later. In fact, Johnson could just give me the contract and get it over with, as far as I was concerned, but she'd invited me over and here I was, watching her make pancakes with three kids who looked exactly like her... and not at all.

Seeing her like this was different from the business shark she could be. She was sweet and patient with the kids. I admired people like that—I could never be like that with kids.

Not because I *couldn't* but because I didn't want to be. I didn't want kids, so I'd never bothered to figure out who I should be with them and try to understand them.

These kids were adorable, though, and when they were that cute, it was hard not to just melt and get caught up in their little world of magic. The eldest one was smart and quieter than the other two. The boy tried to impress me all the time, like he didn't spend a lot of time around guys. The little one

played on her own and sang songs, except when lightning cracked, and then she'd curled into a ball like the world was going to self-destruct around her.

We ate pancakes with glitter and sprinkles, which was weird, and for dessert, the kids were allowed a glass of milk and my sugar-free cookies. I'd brought them because I couldn't arrive empty-handed, and the kids seemed to love it.

After supper, Mackenzie got them all through the bath with practiced ease and then allowed them half an hour TV time before she kicked them off to bed.

When she came out of the rooms, she let out a breath.

"They're down," she said.

"They're a handful."

"Yeah."

"Rather you than me."

"You're not a fan?"

"I think they're adorable," I said. "But I don't want kids of my own."

"Oh, me neither," Mackenzie said. "I'll babysit them, but after a couple of hours, I like to give them back."

I laughed. She was a lot more on the same page as I was, and I liked that about her. There were a lot of things I liked about her.

"Right," I said. "Let's get this thing started." We opened our laptops on the dining room table and started working. Outside, the storm raged on. The water came down so hard it was a permanent roar, accentuated by thunder and lightning that sounded like the world was going to end. I wondered how the kids—who had been terrified of the storm—slept through it.

"Did you rethink your winter wonderland idea?" Mackenzie asked.

"No," I said flatly. "It's a good idea."

She shook her head. “I don’t see it, but to each their own, right? You can run with that. It will set our projects apart more and make it easier for Elecoms to decide... and choose me.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s not going to happen, you know that, right? I’m the best in the business.”

“Then why does Griffin win most of the chain store campaigns?” she asked sweetly.

“Because chain stores are cheap and repetitive, and I like going for the stuff that’s unique and poses a challenge.”

Mackenzie laughed. I loved the sound of her voice—a little husky, a little sultry, a *lot* of a turn-on.

“You keep telling yourself that,” she said.

“What would you do, then?” I challenged. “Compare diamonds to sunshine?”

“Actually, yeah,” Mackenzie said. “Have you ever watched the ocean when the sun sets?”

I frowned. “I don’t have time to go to the beach.”

“Maybe you should make some time,” she said. “When the sun hits the water just right, it looks like it’s made of gems, the light dancing and sparkling the way diamonds do in the light.”

I looked at the way she described it in her campaign mockup.

“And the night sky, too,” she added, flipping to the next page. “The sky is littered with them, a bowl of diamonds upended. It’s not just in our everyday lives, either. It’s in your lover’s eyes. It’s in the way water beads on a woman’s skin or raindrops rest in a man’s short hair. Jewels and gems don’t only exist in what we see, but they rest in emotion, in what we feel and how we treasure memories, holding onto them like precious stones, weaving them

into necklaces of nostalgia. That's what I'm aiming for—Toussaint's jewelry should be something the world can reach for if they just focus on the way the light falls on it, the way the night brings it, the way love can be precious and the world is already beautiful."

Fuck, her approach was good. She was right about my idea, too. It was cliché in comparison.

And that pissed me off. She was upstaging me, and if Johnson saw her passion for the project, the way she described the beauty with sentimentality, he would give her the project no matter how spectacular an ice sculpture or a flurry of snow could be.

"Well, I guess as long as we get our proposals drawn up right, we'll be on the way to getting the deal sealed," I said.

"Yeah, we will be."

We worked for a while longer before we finally packed up and agreed we would do the rest in our own time. Tomorrow was another day, and that gave us a chance to finalize the concept idea for Johnson to look at on Monday.

"I better go," I said.

"Sure. Thanks for accommodating me and the kids. And bringing cookies."

"You're welcome," I said. "Good luck."

"I don't need luck," Mackenzie said with a sniff. "Best keep all that luck to yourself since you're the one who'll need it."

I laughed and shook my head. I'd never met someone as competitive as she was—as competitive as *I* was.

When Mackenzie opened the front door, the wind ripped into the house, bringing drops of rain with it. I stepped out to run to my car but stopped in my tracks.

"Oh," I said.

A large tree had fallen onto my car, squashing it. That same colossal tree—how old were these damn trees?—blocked the gate with its incredible trunk.

“Oh, shit,” Mackenzie said, pressing her fingers to her mouth. “That’s... not going to go anywhere.”

The rain still poured down, as if the sluices had been opened and the sky wasn’t ready to let up soon.

“No,” I said grimly.

“Do you think you can squeeze past and get a cab?” Mackenzie asked.

I glanced up at the sky, where lightning lit it up, the dark clouds metallic above us.

“Worth a shot,” I said, and I stepped into the rain. In no time at all, I was drenched.

Mackenzie appeared beside me.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “You’ll get soaked.”

Thunder cracked loudly, and Mackenzie ducked. It wasn’t a big movement, just the slightest reaction. Was she scared of the storm? She’d put on a hell of a face for the kids.

“I’m not letting you go out there alone, I’m supposed to be the hostess.”

“You’re crazy,” I said, and we hunched our bodies against the wind and rain that pelted against our skins. I hadn’t seen a storm like this in LA in... ever, actually.

When we reached the tree, it was much bigger than I’d expected. It had torn out of the ground, the roots sticking up like crooked fingers, and the trunk had to be at least three feet in diameter, if not more.

It was lodged right up against the gate. Never mind squeezing past, the gate itself was partially buckled. That wasn’t going anywhere.

“This isn’t going to happen!” I shouted above the storm.

Lightning snapped dangerously close, and Mackenzie yelped.

“Come on, get back inside!” I shouted, and I grabbed her hand, yanking her with me. We ran back to the house as the storm raged overhead.

When we skidded into the house, we were both drenched and breathing hard. I shut the front door, blocking off the wind that had pushed its way into the house. Mackenzie shook her hands.

“What a fuck up,” she said. “You have insurance?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine,” I said.

Mackenzie nodded. “Good.” She worried her lower lip, and I wondered if *she* had insurance.

“You’re soaked,” she said before I could ask, looking me up and down. “Let’s get dried off.” She gestured for me to follow her, and we walked through the house.

It was an old house with dark wooden floors. At first glance, it looked antique. Now that I looked around again, it looked neglected and old. The paint peeled in certain places, and water damage had made a ring against the wall of a guest bathroom. The wooden floors were scuffed up, and everything had an air of abandon to it.

There was nostalgia here, too, though. I got the feeling the house looked like this, not because they didn’t care but because money was an issue.

“I don’t want to drip on the floors,” I said.

“I’ve got you,” Mackenzie said and disappeared into the kitchen, where she retrieved towels from the mudroom. She handed me one, and I wiped my face while Mackenzie squeezed the excess water out of her hair and clothes so we could walk on the wooden floors without leaving water marks.

When we were as dry as we were going to get, I followed her down the hallway. The walls were lined with photos of a happy family—kids in various

stages of their lives, with various accomplishments and trophies. Holidays, laughter. This house knew a lot of happiness. In this house, it seemed happiness, family, memories... they all trumped a gleaming, immaculate home with the best of everything that money could buy.

I recognized Mackenzie in some of the photos when she was much younger.

“Did you grow up here?” I asked.

Mackenzie nodded. “Rachel took it over when my mom died so that she didn’t have to uproot me when everything had already changed so much.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Losing someone was tough.

We walked into the master bedroom, and Mackenzie led me to the closet. The door creaked when she opened it.

“I think some of Aaron’s old clothes might still be back here. He was in and out so much, Rachel always made sure he had a set or two.”

“Aaron?” I asked.

“One of my brothers. He doesn’t have a home of his own. He always travels, so this is home base, you know?”

She rifled through the clothes until she pulled out sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“Thanks,” I said.

Mackenzie nodded. “Come on, you can shower here, but the pipes are temperamental. Let me show you.” She led me into the bathroom and turned on the cold water first. Then, carefully, she turned the hot water the tiniest bit.

“If you do more than that, you’re going to burn yourself to a crisp. Careful with that one.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Mackenzie looked at me, and her eyes softened. “Sure. It’s a bit of a weird weekend overall. First my sister, then this storm, and now...” She offered a

tiny shrug.

“It’s okay,” I said. I lifted a hand and pushed the wet hair that clung to her cheek out of her face. “I don’t have anywhere else I need to be.” I didn’t say that I didn’t *want* to be anywhere else but here. That would have sounded cliché and stupid. I wasn’t either.

Mackenzie looked at me, and I was suddenly lost in her gaze. She drew me in. I didn’t know how—something about the way she looked at me, the way her face changed when her eyes slid to my mouth—made me ache for her.

I closed the distance between us, moving slowly so she had time to pull away.

She didn’t.

I pressed my lips against hers, and she was cold and wet, tasting like the storm.

“We shouldn’t,” Mackenzie whispered, her lips brushing against mine.

“I know,” I said.

MACKENZIE

The bathroom steamed up around us, shrouding us in a fog as the hot water poured out of the shower over the bathtub. Now that I wasn't alone and a stranger saw the belly of the house, I was painfully aware of all its flaws. I'd seen what Troy's house looked like. I doubted he would ever let it get into any kind of disrepair.

He didn't seem to notice, though. He was lost in me, and I let myself do the same. I didn't know anything but Troy. His eyes locked on mine, and they were drowning deep, the color of slate that sent a shiver down my spine. Heat washed over me, and my body tightened in all the right places, and my eyes slid down to his lips—I couldn't help myself when he brushed my hair out of my face.

He didn't hesitate, didn't let me come to my senses. He closed the distance between us and kissed me.

When he scraped his teeth over my bottom lip, tugging gently at it, a moan escaped my lips. I wanted to drown in him. Troy ran his fingers through my wet hair, pressing the length of his body against mine. The cold, wetness of

our clothes was in stark contrast to the heat of the water, the steam, the heat of our bodies pressed together.

You shouldn't do this, I told myself. *This is a bad idea.*

Fuck, a bad idea had never felt this *good*.

I didn't stop him. Instead, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed our bodies tighter together. Troy's tongue slid into my mouth, and he tasted like rain, cold and wet and laced with danger.

That was what made him so irresistible. That first night, we'd been together because we'd wanted each other. Now, we were doing this because we weren't allowed to.

What was it they said about forbidden fruit?

Troy's hand slid from my cheek, where he'd been cupping me, to my neck. His hand was large and capable, making me feel delicate. He was in charge, kissing me while he traced my collarbone with his thumb in a hypnotic motion.

He grinded his hips against me, and I was achingly aware of his erection fighting his wet jeans. His need echoed my own, and I whimpered with desire for him.

"Troy," I whispered. I didn't know what I was going to say. He didn't let me find that out, either.

He reached for the hem of my shirt and broke the kiss, staring into my eyes—a question.

I lifted my arms so he could peel the wet shirt off me. I wasn't going to stop him.

Troy worked the wet shirt slowly up my body, exposing my cold skin, and he dipped his head, planting kisses. His lips were scalding hot, and he left a trail of fire in his wake as he got rid of the wet T-shirt that clung to my body.

He dropped it on the floor with a wet plop and dove back in, kissing me again. His hands found my breasts, and he kneaded and massaged them. He tweaked my erect nipples through the sheer fabric of my bra. His attention was almost directly on my skin, sending a direct line of pure lust to my pussy as he worshipped my breasts.

The more he touched me, tasted me, the more I wanted him.

I tugged up his shirt, eager to get rid of it, too. It was hard work getting him out of the wet T-shirt material, and he had to wriggle to help me, but his shirt joined mine on the floor.

Troy spun me around so that my back was against the cold tiles. I gasped, but he kissed me once, swallowing my gasp, before he moved down my neck and worked his way down onto my chest, making me forget about everything else. His large hands wrapped around my ribs, and his stubble scraped against the delicate skin on my breasts.

When he tugged down one cup, he sucked an erect nipple into his mouth, and I sucked in a breath, moaning as I let it out through my nose.

Troy muttered something I couldn't hear against my breast and sucked harder on the nipple.

I gasped, my breath catching in my throat. Troy moved from one nipple to the other, both bra cups now under my breasts. I arched my back and undid the clasp to get rid of the damn thing—it was just in the way.

Troy cupped my breasts and squeezed them, tweaking whichever nipple he wasn't sucking on and alternated between them until I was reduced to a puddle of pure need. I was so wet for him, and I wanted him inside of me. I wanted more of the pleasure, I wanted a release.

As if Troy could read my mind, he moved down my abdomen. He planted hot kisses on my ribs, my stomach, his hands wrapped around my waist. He

kneeled before me and peeled down my leggings. I helped him get them down by scissoring my legs, allowing him to slide them off. I stepped out of them, and he tossed them to the side. We were working on a pile of wet clothes, and I wanted his pants and my underwear to join it, too.

Troy spread my thighs with his hands, and I lifted one leg, balancing it on the edge of the bath to allow him the room he needed. When he closed his mouth over my pussy, I mewled, letting out a long, slow moan when he slid his tongue from my entrance to my clit.

Everything about this moment was perfect... and perfectly surreal.

When Troy flicked his tongue over my clit, I quivered. I bit my lip, trying to hold back the sounds that escaped my mouth. I didn't want to be too loud and wake up the kids.

I let go and lost myself in the pleasure as he licked and sucked on my clit. My mewls turned into whimpers, and I pushed my hand into his dark hair.

When he glanced up at me, his eyes were the color of mercury, the hunger in them reflecting my own, and holy *shit*, it had to be the hottest view I'd had in a long, long time. A face like his from between my legs... it was the stuff of a wet dream.

Slowly, as Troy continued his onslaught on my clit, I crept closer to an orgasm. I closed my eyes and let the feel of his hot tongue on me sweep me away.

I balanced on the edge, teetering between pleasure and oblivion for a moment, and I moaned softly in complaint. I ached for a release, and Troy was keeping me there, pure, *delicious* torture.

When he moved his hand and slid two fingers into me, I cried out. I swallowed my cries, shivering and trembling with desire. Troy pumped his

fingers in and out of me and kicked into a new gear on my clit, licking me as if there was no tomorrow. Still, he kept me on the edge.

“Troy, *please*,” I begged.

He chuckled against my pussy and moved his fingers while he maintained the same rhythm with his mouth. The pleasure that had threatened to engulf me erupted at my core and washed over me. I moaned, trying my best to keep quiet as the orgasm crashed into me like waves on the sand.

The orgasm was intense and incredible, and I came apart at the seams as Troy held me between his mouth and his hand.

I curled my fingers around his hair, tightening my grip, and he groaned, and the sensation of his deep voice against my pussy only intensified the orgasm that much more so that it took my breath away.

When I came down from my sexual high, I breathed hard and sagged against the wall. It was getting harder and harder to hold myself up; my legs turned into jelly.

Troy let go of me, and when he glanced up at me, his eyes held mischief and hunger in equal measure.

“My turn,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Troy said. “I want to please you.”

“You did,” I said in a hoarse voice. I held out my hand, and when Troy took it, I pulled him up. I kissed him and tasted myself on his lips. Our tongues sparred with each other, and I fiddled with his button, peeling his jeans down his ass. It was hard, the jeans wet, and his clammy skin sticky, but I didn’t need them to go down all the way. I pulled his cock free, and he sucked a breath through his teeth when I wrapped my fingers around his shaft. His cock was searing hot like a branding iron and thick in my hand.

So many women always said it was about size, but that wasn’t true. It was

about girth, too, and Troy had everything he needed to be more than well-endowed.

I kissed Troy while I pumped my hand up and down his shaft. He responded with grunts and low moans, his breath coming in ragged gasps as we kissed.

I broke the kiss, putting my free hand on his cheek before I worked my way down his body; I planted a kiss or two on his perfectly chiseled abdomen.

When I reached his hips, I nipped the sensitive skin on his hip bone, and he hissed.

I lowered my head and sucked the tip of Troy's cock into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it. Troy was slick and salty, the proof that he was as eager for this as I was. I shivered, and Troy ran his hand down my neck and onto my shoulder, tracing his fingers up and down.

I got wetter as I licked and sucked his cock, and I bobbed my head up and down, stroking him in and out of my mouth. I cupped his balls with one hand, the other still holding onto his shaft so I could cover the distance my mouth couldn't with his size.

The sounds that escaped Troy's lips and the way his cock twitched in my mouth involuntarily from time to time suggested that he liked what I was doing just as much as I did.

Suddenly, he pulled back, and his cock slipped out of my mouth. He looked down at me, his chest rising and falling as he panted, lips parted.

"You're going to finish this before it starts," he said in a breathy, gruff voice.

Troy kicked off his wet jeans with some effort so that he was finally naked, and I stepped out of my panties. He took my hand and stepped into the

bathtub, leading me along with him. When we stepped under the hot spray, I sighed as my body slowly warmed.

Troy wrapped his arms around my naked body and pulled me tightly against him, kissing me. The hot water flowed over our faces, and his kisses tasted like the heat of the shower and our lust for each other. My naked breasts pushed up against his chest, and his thick flesh was pressed between our bodies, hot against my lower abdomen.

Troy spun me around so that I faced the wall, and he pushed me against it. I braced myself with my hands on the tiles, warmed by the water that had been running for a while, and Troy nuzzled my neck. I was trapped between the wall and his body, and I loved it.

His cock was thick and hot against my ass, and I moaned softly.

Troy moved against me, and I whimpered, pushing my hips back, my ass out to him. I widened my stance, and Troy's hand found my entrance before he guided his cock to me. I held my breath in anticipation.

"Fuck," he bit out.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't have a condom on me."

I paused. It was hard to think through the waves of lust.

"I think Rachel has some," I said and pointed to the medicine cabinet above the sink.

Troy leaned out of the bath, pushing the curtain aside a little, and opened the cabinet.

"Nice," he said when he found a small box of condoms. He ripped one open and rolled it on with ease as I leaned my head against the wall, the water cascading over my body.

In no time at all, Troy's body was behind me, pressed up against me again,

and his thick cock found my entrance as before. I moaned when he slid into me, and my body stretched to accommodate his size. He was as impressive as he'd been the first time, and I relished the feel of him buried inside of me. I shivered and trembled around him.

“You’re fucking fantastic,” Troy murmured, his lips almost against my ear, before he retreated and thrust into me again.

I could only answer with a cry that was swallowed by the rushing sound of the water from the showerhead.

Troy bucked his hips, fucking me harder and harder. He stroked in and out of me, and I got lost in the rhythm of his fucking, the pleasure of the friction he created and the way he pinned me against the wall, taking charge.

His body was large and powerful, and he nibbled my neck, his muscular form curled around me.

The pleasure built as he coaxed a furnace into being, burning bright and stretching thin between us. It grew until it felt like it would consume me before it shattered through me, starting from my core and flooding outward toward my extremities. I cried out and turned my face toward Troy’s arm, where he leaned against the wall; I pressed my mouth against his arm, muffling the sounds of pure pleasure that escaped.

Troy pulled out of me, and I moaned in protest. He turned me around, and I was careful not to slip. He kissed me again, and I leaned my back against the wall.

Troy hiked up my leg, and I wrapped it around his hip. When he pushed into me again, we were chest to chest, and it was so much more intimate than a moment ago.

His tongue slid into my mouth as his cock slid into me, and he stroked my insides. The water that washed over us had an erotic feel to it as he slid in and

out, and Troy picked up his pace so that he fucked me harder and harder.

It didn't take long before he got closer and closer to the edge. I felt his orgasm building. His cock grew harder and thicker, and he picked up his pace, kicking into a new gear. His brows knitted together, and he clenched his teeth, peeling his lips back in a primal expression.

My body echoed with the aftermath of my orgasm, and his onslaughts created a repeat. Or was it the same orgasm, prolonged? Whatever it was, it felt incredible, and I got lost in the sensation of his hips pounding against mine, his cock going deeper and deeper.

He buried his cock inside me as deep as it could go, and his cock jerked and twitched as he released. He grunted through gritted teeth, and I shivered and trembled, whimpering as our collective orgasms intensified until it felt like we were melded together as one being.

Slowly, the orgasms faded, and Troy slipped out of me. He breathed hard, his cheeks a bright red with the heat of our sex and the hot water.

I sagged against the wall, trying to keep myself upright.

Troy turned off the water.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm clean,” he said.

I giggled. “I think you're the opposite of clean.”

He rolled his eyes but grinned at me.

“Call me crazy, but I'm a cuddler. You wouldn't know that because you left the last time.”

I pinned him with a hard glare.

“Come with me.”

He took my hand, and we stepped out of the shower. He turned off the water and grabbed the closest towel, wrapping me in it before he toweled

himself off with another.

“Warm and dry, that was the idea,” he said. “Mission accomplished... and then some.”

He smirked at me before he opened the bathroom door and popped his head out.

“The coast is clear,” he said. “It sounds like they’re still asleep.”

We tiptoed out of the bathroom and to Rachel’s bed, where Troy peeled back the covers. He got in, and I got in with him. He pulled me against him, and although I wasn’t the type to cuddle after sex—that gave way to emotions, and that could be a dangerous game—I let Troy wrap his arm around me, and I put my head on his chest.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” I said after we lay in silence for a while. *Famous last words.*

“Yeah,” Troy said. “But we did.”

I nodded against his chest, and we lay in silence for a while longer. Slowly, sleep started to take over as the exhaustion of the day—and our sex—overcame us.

I forced myself to open my eyes and tilted my head up at Troy. His eyes were closed, too, and his breathing had become deeper.

“You have to go to the spare room,” I whispered.

“What?” Troy asked, blinking at me. I could trace his profile in the darkness of the room.

“We’re falling asleep. If the kids come in here tomorrow morning and find us together in bed, naked, there’s going to be a lot of explaining to do that I’m not ready for. Not to mention the fact that Rachel will skin me alive if she finds out through her tiny grapevine that we had sex.”

Troy chuckled, and the sound was deep and reverberated through his chest

against my ear.

“Yeah, okay. The last thing I want is the little ones getting a shock.”

“Too many new things already,” I said with a grin.

Troy chuckled again, and I leaned up and kissed him one more time before he got up and finally pulled on the clothes I’d taken out for him.

“I don’t know what tomorrow will look like,” I said. “But we can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?” Troy asked.

“This…” I stopped myself when he grinned at me, and I realized that was the point he was making—it was already over. My heart sank at the thought of it, but this wasn’t supposed to be serious. Troy was my rival. He was just a one-night stand.

A two-night stand, at this point.

Shit.

If I wasn’t careful, this could go the wrong way.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Troy said, and he left the room, walking down the hallway to the spare bedroom. The kids’ rooms were on either side of the spare room, and what used to be my room belonged to Tammy now.

I slid deeper into the covers and closed my eyes. My body still hummed with the feel of Troy inside of me, and I curled deliciously under the covers.

This could *not* happen again.

TROY

When I blinked my eyes open, three pairs of eyes stared at me. I frowned. The three kids all sat on the edge of my bed, watching me.

“How long have you guys been in here?” I asked in a hoarse voice, completely disoriented.

“Do you like cereal?” Benjamin asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “It does the trick in a pinch.”

“What’s a pinch?” Tammy asked.

I fell back on the pillows with a sigh.

“Auntie Mackie is making eggs. I said I wanted chocolate cereal, but I can’t because she says it’s a lot of sugar for so early on a Sunday.”

“How early is early?” I asked after Benjamin’s speech about the injustice of his life.

“I don’t know,” Tammy said. “Auntie Mackie said it’s early.”

I groaned and reached for my phone on the nightstand. It was seven in the morning.

Fucking perfect.

“Do you like coffee?” Benjamin asked.

“My life depends on it,” I said.

“Do you like milk?”

He kept asking me questions about every single thing I liked or didn't like. I assumed he listed all the things he liked.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mackenzie was standing in front of the stove, and I wanted to wrap my arms around her and nuzzle her neck. She frowned when she saw me.

“I thought you guys were watching a movie,” she said. “Did you wake Troy up?”

“The TV won't work,” Tammy said.

Mackenzie frowned and walked to the light switch, flipping it up and down.

“Shit, the power is out.”

“Auntie Mackie said a bad word,” Benjamin tattled.

“Yeah, that was bad,” Mackenzie said. “Sorry. I didn't realize the power was out, you guys.” She'd been cooking on the gas stove.

“Does that mean no coffee?” I asked, getting grumpier by the second. I could deal with a lot of things but three kids in the morning and no power or coffee was pushing even my limits.

“I put on a pot,” Mackenzie said, nodding to a full pot of coffee that had already percolated.

I could just fucking kiss her right now.

“Thank God,” I said and walked to the pot, pouring myself a cup of coffee. I added sugar from the coffee station and sipped it. I groaned as the caffeine breathed life back into me.

A smile played around Mackenzie's lips.

“How is your sister?” I asked.

“She’s doing just great,” Mackenzie said brightly.

Yeah, that had to be for the sake of the kids. Mackenzie’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“That’s good to hear,” I said.

“With the gate and the tree, she won’t be able to come home for a while, but we had a video call earlier.”

“Earlier?” I asked. Had they all been up since the crack of fucking dawn? Mackenzie looked put together and perfect—as usual. She wore jeans so tight they looked painted on and a loose blouse that made her look elegant. Her short hair was tied back as best as she could get it, and the flyaway strands that escaped made her look like I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to bed for round fucking three.

Mackenzie cleared her throat and pulled the pan off the gas.

“We can’t do toast without power, but we can have eggs and bacon, and that’s pretty damn good already,” she said.

She divided the scrambled egg up onto three small plastic plates and two ceramic plates. She added bacon and squirted ketchup over everything.

“What are you doing!?” I cried out.

Mackenzie frowned and looked at the egg. “What?”

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s zombie brains,” Benjamin said. “With fresh blood.”

I stared at the food. “Zombie brains?”

“Don’t you eat ketchup on your egg?” Mackenzie asked.

“No,” I said dryly. “I have taste.”

Mackenzie giggled. “Well, I know all about your *taste* after...” She stopped herself. “But this is pretty good. Don’t knock it until you try it.”

I shook my head. The idea of ketchup on eggs was horrifying.

Mackenzie set the kids up around the kitchen table, and we sat opposite each other. I glanced up at her, but she averted her eyes.

The atmosphere between us was a little strained, awkward. I wished the kids weren't here so that we could talk.

Or *not* talk, which was really what I wanted. My cock twitched in my pants, thinking about last night again.

"Are zombies real?" Benjamin asked before stuffing more egg into his mouth than should have been possible.

"No," Mackenzie said. "They're a story. Like Santa."

I stilled. "You think Santa is a story?"

"Yup," Benjamin said, nodding. "Mommy says she's the one who puts the presents under the tree, and she works really hard to give them to us because she loves us. She also eats the cookies and drinks the milk because it's right that she gets a treat."

I frowned. "You let them grow up without Santa?"

"I grew up without Santa," Mackenzie said.

"How does that even make sense?" I asked.

Mackenzie shrugged. "My mom never wanted us to believe in something that wasn't real. She would tell us the story and we still did the whole 'magic of Christmas' thing but she liked to keep it straight. She said that if we found out one day that she lied to us about something so big, we wouldn't trust her. It makes sense. Rachel carried on with the tradition."

I shook my head. That didn't make sense at all... except that, in some ways, I guess it did.

"Mom said trust was the most important thing there is between people, and you shouldn't find a way to break it," Mackenzie added. "Especially not

when your kids believe in everything you do. When they're young, their whole world revolves around their parents, and that's their stability, and Mom never wanted us to feel that was taken away."

"Your mom sounds like she was a very caring person," I said.

Mackenzie nodded. "She really was. Rachel is so much like her." For a moment, Mackenzie looked emotional, but in a blink, her mask slipped back into place, and her moment of weakness was gone.

I took out my phone and frowned.

"I don't have signal," I said.

"Really?" Mackenzie checked her phone, too. "Shoot."

I grinned at her attempt not to swear.

"That means we can't take care of the car or the tree, and we can't reach out to the hospital." Her voice trembled ever so slightly when she said the last part.

"It's going to be okay," I said. "I don't have anywhere I need to be until tomorrow—it's a freak accident, right? We'll just hang tight here and..." I'd wanted to say *do some work* but without power or phone lines, that wasn't going to happen. "Have fun."

"What are we going to do?" Rory asked, speaking for the first time today. She'd been silent since the moment I'd woken up.

"We should build a blanket fort," I said.

"What's that?" Tammy asked.

My jaw dropped. "Don't tell me you don't know what a blanket fort is!"

When they shook their heads, I nodded, determined.

"We'll just have to build one so you can see. I build a mean blanket fort, you know. When I was a kid, I was a top-of-the-line blanket fort architect."

Tammy and Benjamin giggled, excited.

“You sound very qualified,” Mackenzie said, her eyes dancing with laughter.

“Oh, you have no idea,” I said. “Let’s clean up the kitchen and then we’ll have to get to building so we can have lunch in the fort.”

The kids cheered and jumped up, putting their plates in the sink. They pushed their chairs in, and Tammy helped Mackenzie clear up the pans that she’d used, too.

While they did that, Benjamin and I walked to the living room to see how we could get it started.

Mackenzie and the girls appeared a moment later. Mackenzie carried a stack of blankets and sheets, and she’d found some rope, too.

“Ah, the tools of the trade,” I said and took it from her. “Thank you.”

Mackenzie laughed. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Larson. I used to build blanket forts too, so you’re going to be under scrutiny.”

“Do I smell a competition?” I asked.

Mackenzie laughed. “It’s just blankets, Troy. Not everything is about winning.”

I shrugged. “I don’t completely agree with that statement but you have redeeming qualities.” I winked at her before I turned to the living room, ready to turn this perfectly normal family room into a fantasy playground.

MACKENZIE

The situation was as follows: we had no power, no phones, and no internet.

Keeping three kids busy without those three things proved to be a hell of a lot harder than I'd thought it would be at first. We had no TV time, no oven to bake cookies, nothing that I usually did with them to keep them busy.

What made it even harder was the fact that I didn't know how long it was going to last—when something was tough, I always told myself, “You've come this far, only this much further,” but there was no indication.

If it hadn't been for Troy and the way he managed to handle the kids, I wouldn't have known what I would have done.

It turned out that Troy had been serious when he'd said he was the king of building blanket forts. In no time at all, rope was strung all over the room, with blankets and sheets back and forth, creating canopies and little rooms. The kids all loved it, claiming rooms for themselves.

When lunch rolled around, we made sandwiches and had a picnic in the blanket fort rather than in the kitchen.

After lunch, we did macaroni art in the blanket fort—it was the new playhouse, and the kids didn't want to be anywhere else. They hadn't even noticed it was still raining, and they couldn't play outside, something they would have nagged me about all day.

“Thank you for helping me with them,” I said after supper time when they were all passed out in their beds. They'd advocated to sleep in the blanket fort, too, but I had to draw the line somewhere.

“What else was I going to do?” Troy asked with a grin. “My laptop died, so work was off the table.”

I snorted. “Good thing we had the kids here as a backup, huh?”

Troy chuckled. “I would have been so bored. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Wine,” I said. “It doesn't require power.”

“Yeah, because that's the only reason you're opting for wine,” Troy said with a laugh.

I shrugged. I just needed a moment to breathe. The day had been fun, but keeping the kids busy was exhausting, and I was dead on my feet.

Troy walked to the kitchen and came back with two glasses of wine. I wasn't sure where he'd found either of those things, but I didn't mind. He'd made himself at home in the house over the weekend, and I didn't mind that, either. I was glad I wasn't here alone, even if it was Troy Larson here with me. When it wasn't about work, he could be pretty fun to be around. When we just hung out together, he was funny and easy-going—it was when work came up that he became cut-throat and competitive, with a do-or-die attitude that irritated me.

“Care to share a room in the blanket fort?” Troy asked.

I laughed. “Since we can't use the couches, we might as well.”

We crawled into the fort and made ourselves comfortable on the pile of pillows in the largest part. The sheets drooped low so that we had to lounge back, but it was strangely cozy.

I sipped my wine.

“Do you have kids?” I asked.

“God, no,” Troy said.

“You’re really good with them.”

He shrugged. “They’re just tiny humans, and we all want to be entertained, right? We just break down real life and remove the ugly bits, and boom—kiddies’ world.”

I laughed. “That’s very wise for someone who has such a strong reaction to the question about having kids. Would you ever want kids?”

Troy shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Too much can go wrong. Kids are a magnet for trouble, in every way possible. Do you have any idea what a fucked-up world we live in? We can’t control a lot of the hell that’s all around us each day, but we *can* prevent bringing more kids into this world to go through that hell.”

“That’s a pretty miserable outlook,” I said.

Troy shrugged again. “Yeah, but it’s also a realistic one.”

I nodded. He had a point, although there was beauty everywhere, too. Kids and their innocence usually brought back that beauty. That’s what I saw with my sister’s kids.

“What about you?” Troy asked. “Do you want kids?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I can’t say I’m violently against the idea, but I’m not ready for it right now, you know? I have a career I want to focus on, and when kids come into the picture, then everything else has to take a back

seat. It's not fair not to put them first, so until I'm ready to do that, I won't have any."

"Very wise," Troy said.

I smiled at him, but my smile faded again when I thought about the kids, which led to me thinking about Rachel. I checked my phone for signal but apparently the lines were still down.

"I wish I could call my sister and find out how she's doing. I'm terrified of losing her," I said.

"Is she very sick?"

"She tried to be upbeat about it, but I think she might be. They caught it early, but what if it's not early enough?" The fear of losing Rachel could choke me, it was that powerful. I'd already walked this road once—I couldn't do it again.

"If it's something they can control, her odds are better," Troy said.

"What do you mean?"

"She's sick, but sickness can be healed, or managed, at least. The doctors who know what they're doing will do what they do best. It's not the same as someone being ripped away without any way of fixing it."

I frowned. Troy's face had changed from positive and happy to grim, the corners of his mouth downturned, and his eyes dull.

"You sound like you're talking from experience," I said softly.

Troy shrugged. "We lost our brother when we were kids," he said. "It was stupid, a freak accident. Jake was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there wasn't anything that could be done. By the time they got him to the hospital, it was too late, and the only way they could help was by making him more comfortable before he died."

My blood ran cold. I knew what that pain felt like; I knew how it felt to be

completely helpless and have my whole world ripped away.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” Troy said. “I mean, it happened, so there’s not much that can be done about it.”

Was that what he meant, that the world wasn’t a place he wanted to bring kids into?

“Scott did something great with it,” Troy said. “He became a doctor to help other kids who might be saved, but that doesn’t bring Jake back. It’s better just accepting the facts and moving forward.”

I didn’t know what to say, and I hated it.

“Anyway,” Troy said and cleared his throat before he downed his wine in one go. “That’s enough gloom for one night, this is supposed to be a fortress of fun.”

I laughed. “It really was today.” I thought of something. “Do you think we’ll be out of here by tomorrow for the review with Johnson?”

“I don’t know,” Troy said. “If the phone lines are up at least, we can do the presentations online, if all else fails.”

“Let’s hope,” I said.

I wanted that contract. Troy was a great guy, and we’d spent a great weekend together, but that didn’t mean that I just wanted to roll over and show my belly when it came to the contract and getting it for either of our companies. I was serious about my job, and so was Troy. No way I would just give it to him like that. I really needed the cash, and from what I knew about him and his lifestyle, he didn’t need the cash at all. I would get a significant bonus and get closer to a promotion with this contract. What would it do for him?

“Do you know if Hailey and Scott got together?” Troy asked suddenly.

“What?”

“Your friend.”

“Oh... no. I don't think so, or she would have told me.”

“Yeah, I figured the same with my brother.”

“You're close with him, aren't you?” I asked. “Even though he's much older than you.”

“It's only nine years,” Troy said. “He's forty-five now.”

“That's a lot,” I said. “Nine years is a generation gap.”

Troy shrugged. “I guess so, but we're close and it works.” Troy looked into his empty wineglass. “I need more of this. Can I top you up?”

I nodded, and Troy got up with the glasses, leaving the fort. I sank back against the pillows.

I thought about Scott and Hailey not getting together and me and Troy ending up together that night. And now. It was funny because Hailey had been the one to see them and liked what she saw, and I'd called them over for her.

Not that I'd meant to let it go this far—Troy and I weren't supposed to see each other again.

Or maybe we *were* supposed to see each other again, and that was why things had worked out the way they had for us.

Maybe it was just coincidence. Every little girl grew up with the idea of happily ever after, of fate and destiny and all that crap, but I didn't know if I believed in it. It sounded a lot like a made-up fairy tale to me, just like a lot of other bullshit people come up with to try to make life more fantastical. I understood the need to make life beautiful, but there was a line. Hinging happiness on something like fate...

I wasn't sure about that.

If I met someone and ended up being with them, it would be because it made sense, because things worked out that way. I guess it would, in a way, be on the back of coincidence. They said that there were a whole bunch of people someone could build a life with and that it was just a matter of making it work.

That made more sense to me.

Would I be able to make something work with Troy? Maybe.

I liked him. He was such a funny, sweet guy. He was a pest in the office, but away from work, I was attracted to him. I hadn't been attracted to someone in a long, long time.

I didn't usually date for the same reason I didn't want kids—I knew what my priorities were, and I wasn't going to force someone to take a back seat when I knew what I wanted in life.

If that person had the same kind of life, the same kind of priorities, and we could meet each other halfway, that would change everything.

Would Troy be someone like that, willing to meet me halfway? Would he be willing to find a compromising balance the way I needed to make a relationship work along with my career?

Maybe he actually would.

TROY

When we woke up the next morning, the phone lines were restored. They must have worked their asses off through the night.

It didn't take long to get a contractor out to remove the tree and tow my car, and then we were back to business as usual. Mackenzie had been worried about getting someone out. I'd been right about her insurance—they didn't have any.

"I can't pay you back," Mackenzie said, swallowing hard.

"I had to get my car out, right? It's fine, don't worry about it."

Mackenzie nodded. Money was a stressor, I was starting to see that more and more. I had more cars—that wasn't an issue. I could get around while I waited for the insurance to take care of it. I was so aware of how different things were for me and how easy it was for me to get someone else to take care of something because I had the means to pay whatever it would cost.

"Thank you again for helping me out," Mackenzie said. "And taking care of it all." She glanced toward the tree.

"What about your gate?"

Mackenzie shrugged. "I guess we'll just do without for a while. We don't have pets, so it's okay for now."

I wanted to offer to pay for that, too, but it would seem too forward. Before I could say something else, Mackenzie cut me off.

"I appreciate you not just leaving me alone with the kids. You were a lifesaver."

"I wasn't going to leave," I said. "I couldn't."

Mackenzie laughed. "Yeah, that's true. Well, thanks anyway. I'll see you at Johnson's office."

I nodded and left in a cab. Mackenzie stayed behind to get the kids ready for school before she met me at the offices for our review.

My phone rang just as I got home.

"Larson," Johnson said over the phone. "I've been trying to get through all weekend."

"The phone lines were down with the storm," I said. "I hope it wasn't anything urgent."

"I figured that was what happened. Some service carriers suffered."

I agreed.

"I'm postponing the meeting to next month. I have to go out of town unexpectedly on a personal matter."

"Oh," I said. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"It's not, but it's family, and that comes above all else."

"As it should," I said. I wasn't just kissing my soon-to-be boss's ass, I really believed that. Family was everything. "We'll be ready when you are." My mind was already spinning around how I could improve what I'd done so far to make a better impression. More time to hit the bullseye was never a bad thing.

“Yeah,” Johnson said. “I want you to revise what you’re planning for the campaign. I spoke to Toussaint, and he wants to go in a different direction.”

“What direction?” I asked with a frown.

“He wants to make the whole thing a lot more personal. He says billboards and TV adverts just don’t bring the emotion of his work across or some such nonsense. I’ll email you the details. Artists are always full of it, and Toussaint... well, he’s French.”

I laughed as if I knew what he was implying by that statement. I wasn’t actually sure.

“Okay,” I said. With the extra time, changes could work just fine.

“Are you in contact with Frye?” Johnson asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I can’t reach her. Same problem, I assume. Forward the change of plan to her, will you?”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said.

We ended the call, and I plugged in my laptop so it could charge and opened my email. The message from Johnson came through almost right away. I scanned through the changes, and my stomach dropped.

This was right up Mackenzie’s alley. Bringing a personal touch to the project was exactly what was going to let her bring it home, not me. After how she’d explained the approach to me, I knew she had the emotional touch a woman would have, not the straightforward facts the way I usually did it.

Damn it! There was no way I could win this now, but I had to try. It was all about business, right? I’d surprised myself before.

I clicked the forward button and typed Mackenzie’s email address before I hit Send.

A moment later, I got a message in my inbox telling me the email was

undeliverable. Something had gone wrong. Stupid service carriers and this damn storm that fucked it all up for me.

I picked up my phone and dialed Mackenzie's number.

"I didn't think I'd hear from you before I saw you again," she said when she answered, and I didn't miss the smile in her voice. "What's up?"

"Johnson just postponed the meeting to next month without a set date," I said.

"I didn't get the call," Mackenzie said, and I could imagine her frowning. She had such an expressive face. A cute one. A hot one.

It made me think of her lips, which made me think of kissing her.

I shook off the thought.

Be professional.

"He said he couldn't get through, so he asked me to tell you."

"Oh," she said. "Stupid service is still struggling. I don't know how you got through."

"Must be my sophisticated charm," I said with a grin.

"And your modesty," she added with a laugh. "I think the storm damage was much bigger than we thought. This helps me, though. I can go see Rachel at the time the meeting would have been."

"That sounds good," I said. "Let me know how she's doing."

"I will. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Oh, Mackenzie," I started, ready to tell her about the changes.

"Yeah?"

I hesitated, reading over the points on the screen that came through in the email. They weren't drastic changes, small enough that if I didn't say something, no one would be the wiser. If she planned billboards and advertisements that were still what we'd been working on, her angle would

just look wrong. It wouldn't look like she'd never gotten the memo. Mackenzie would be just a tiny bit off—enough that Johnson wouldn't take her, but not so much that it looked like I'd sabotaged her on purpose. If she knew about the changes, she would *no doubt* get the contract.

She was better than I was at what she did.

That pissed me off, and the ugly head of my competitive nature surfaced.

I'd worked my ass off to build my company and to be upstaged by a person from Griffin Solutions, of all people...

"I hope she's okay," I said, not touching on the rest of the facts.

"Thanks," Mackenzie said before we ended the call.

Right away, I felt like an ass. What the fuck was I doing? It wasn't fair of me not to tell her what Johnson was asking for. We were both on this project for a reason.

I tried to call her again, but the call rolled over to voice mail. I decided not to leave a message.

Instead, I retyped her email address in the bar to forward the email.

If it goes through, I'd have done the right thing. If it doesn't, well... is that my fault?

I sent the email and waited.

A moment later, another message dropped into my inbox.

Message returned to sender.

I closed my laptop and took a deep breath, turning away to take a much-needed shower and get into some clean clothes.

Just the idea made my stomach twist, but I told myself this was in the name of business. All is fair in love and war.

Except this wasn't love, and if it came out, it would be war. Was that what I wanted? Not with Mackenzie, but in business...

Hell, yeah.

I wanted the contract because my business was the only thing I had. I was a winner. I didn't like losing, and that was why my business was as great as it was—I kept pushing, kept looking for more and more until I got what I wanted.

I'd poured myself into my business after Jake's death, promising myself I'd build something that would never fail, never disappear, something that could never slip through my fingers again. My company was a concrete thing, and I couldn't lose it the way I'd lost him. To give up on my game plan of winning no matter what now just because of some girl who would eventually fade into the background like the rest of them... I couldn't let that happen.

She was a shark in the business world, too. She would understand.

A small voice screamed at me that she wouldn't, but I squashed it because it didn't matter.

It was a dog-eat-dog world, right?

I just wished the dog I was trying to beat wasn't also the woman I wanted to sleep with again.

Sacrifices for the sake of my job sucked.

MACKENZIE

Rachel looked so much more like her old self when I walked into the hospital room.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see your smiling face,” I said and hugged my sister, squashing her against the hospital bed. “I really thought I was going to lose you.”

“Oh no, I’m not going anywhere,” Rachel said. “I still have way too much I want to do.”

I smiled and sat down in a chair that I pulled closer from where it stood against the wall.

“What did they say?”

“It’s the same thing Mom had,” Rachel said softly. My heart sank. “It’s different now, though. Technology has advanced so much in the last couple of years, and they caught it early. They’ve put me on a cocktail of meds and given me this ridiculous thing I need to blow on twice a day to keep my lungs strong and functioning right. It’s going to be okay, Mack.”

I sighed, trying to swallow down the lump that had risen in my throat. I blinked away the tears in my eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I whispered. “When I couldn’t contact you with the storm, I kept fearing the worst, and it killed me thinking I couldn’t even get a phone call from the doctor saying that you didn’t make it.”

Rachel shook her head. “I was perfectly safe and sound here.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, but that hadn’t made it any easier not to have contact with the only mother figure I had left.

“I won’t go,” Rachel said. “You need me, and the kids need me.”

I nodded. “You have no idea. I’m not cut out to watching them long term.” I was their godmother, but after a weekend with them, I was starting to wonder why my sister had thought that would be a good idea at all. My brothers had to be better with children in general.

“You’ll be just fine if the time comes, but it won’t,” Rachel said and squeezed my hands warmly. “Tell me about them.”

I explained to her what the weekend with them had been like, sparing no detail about the storm and the tree that fell, the power that had been out, in addition to the phone lines.

“Oh, my God.” Rachel gasped, her eyes wide while I told her everything. “I can’t believe I wasn’t there for that!”

“I got a hold of a company, and they already moved the tree. They’re scheduled to chop it up later, I’ll be there for that, and they’ll fix the gate, too. It’s all under control.”

“Who’s paying for that?” Rachel asked, panicked. “I can’t—”

“I’ve got it,” I said. I hadn’t budgeted for something like that, but I’d used some of my savings. Rachel didn’t need more stress than she already had.

Rachel let out a shaky breath. “Thank you. I can’t...” She squeezed her

eyes shut.

“It’s okay, Rach,” I said and squeezed her hand.

She nodded and cleared her throat, getting back to what she was trying to say.

“I wasn’t even thinking about the logistics,” Rachel said, shaking her head. “I was thinking about you, looking after the kids with no way to keep them busy.”

“Well, we figured something out.”

“We?” Rachel asked.

I nodded. “Troy Larson was with me.”

“What?” She looked adequately shocked. I giggled and explained to her how it had happened that Troy Larson hadn’t only been at the house but how he’d been stranded there the whole weekend. I left out the part where Troy and I had slept together. Rachel didn’t need to know about that.

“It sounds like something from a fairy tale,” Rachel said, a smile playing around her lips.

“It’s not,” I deadpanned. “He’s nothing more than a business rival.”

Rachel laughed outright at that. “Not with the way you’re talking about him, he’s not. Mack, he spent the weekend helping you look after the kids. I don’t know what kind of rival does that. It sounds more to me like he likes you... and you like him.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help smiling.

She was right—I did like him. A lot more than I should have.

“Okay, so maybe I don’t hate the guy.”

Rachel squealed with delight. “Do you have a picture of him?”

I took out my phone, and after trying to get it to connect three times, I finally managed to open his company website. I enlarged a photo of him and

showed my sister.

“Oh, I would totally do that,” she said.

I giggled. “You can’t say that!”

“What? He’s so *hot*. And clearly very successful if he owns the company.”

I lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. “I guess he is rich. He has a shit ton of money, but that’s not everything, you know.”

“Of course not,” Rachel said. “It’s about how you get along and if he’s good with kids.” She winked playfully at me when I rolled my eyes again. “He’s not even from your company, so you can date him.”

I shook my head and ran my hand through my hair. “Yeah, that’s not happening. We may be working together, but it’s me or him when it comes to the project, and that kind of competition isn’t a good basis for a relationship.”

Rachel’s grin broadened.

“What?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“You said *relationship*. You haven’t talked about dating someone in the long term in a long, long time.”

“And I’m not talking about it now,” I said. “No matter how hot and charming and sweet he is. We have so much in common, but we also have really big differences, and it’s just not going to happen.”

Rachel only stared me down until I buckled with a sigh.

“Although, I do find myself wondering what might happen if I see him outside of work.”

Rachel sighed happily and leaned back against her pillows. “You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear that you’re thinking about something like that. I worry about you, you know. You’re such a strong person, and you deserve a strong guy who can handle you.”

“Handle me!?” I laughed. “You’re making it sound like I’m a handful.”

“Oh, honey, you’re *two* hands full and that’s on a good day.”

We both laughed, and I shook my head.

“I don’t know if this is going anywhere,” I admitted. “Men are always intimidated by who I am and what my future plans are like, and I don’t know if this guy will feel differently.”

“He should. There’s no competition—you’re equals.”

“But that’s just the thing,” I said. “There *is* competition. This project and who wins it is a big deal, and Troy wants it as badly as I do.”

Rachel leaned over and squeezed my arm. “Sometimes, a little fierce competition is exactly what the doctor ordered.”

I groaned. “Don’t talk to me about doctors right now.”

Rachel laughed. “You’re not the sick one, I am, and they pulled me through with ease.”

She was right.

“I think this is good for you,” Rachel said. “You need someone who’s as serious about what they do as you are to be able to understand you at all. I think Troy could be a great match.”

“You haven’t even met him,” I pointed out.

“No, you’re right. I see what you look like when you talk about him, though. That’s more than enough for me.”

I smiled at my sister. I was so grateful she was okay, and it was so nice to be able to talk to someone about these things. She was right. I hadn’t thought about dating and relationships in a long time, but if Troy was as dedicated as I was, maybe having something going with him could work.

I just had to get this project behind me. Would he still think I was all that after I won and took the contract away from him?

Well, that would be the true measure of what kind of man he was, right?

Maybe it was the best test of all to figure out if he was dating material or if he was just like the rest of them.

Although, after what I'd seen of him over the weekend we'd spent together, he was nothing like the men I'd been with before.

That counted for something.

In fact, it counted for everything.

TROY

I stood in the supermarket with a pack of celery in one hand and a bag of chips in the other.

“How am I supposed to know what she likes?” I asked Scott, who was on the phone with me. He was working the graveyard shift for the next month, and he’d just woken up after sleeping all day.

“Come on, man, it’s not like you’ve never seen this woman before.”

“Yeah, but it was so much easier when I thought she was a guy.”

Scott snorted. “That sounds so fucked up.”

“You know what I mean.”

I did know what he meant, and I studied the bag of chips. My trolley already had fruit juice and carrots in it. The idea was to put together a platter of healthy snacks and give Mackenzie something to drink while we had our brainstorming session tonight. I hated the idea of having healthy stuff, but wasn’t that what women wanted?

“Look, just treat her like one of the guys,” Scott said. “Isn’t that how it all started?”

“So, get chips and beer for tonight?”

“You got it,” Scott said. “Come on, man, it’s not like you’re trying to impress her.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I wanted to impress Mackenzie. I couldn’t stop thinking about her, and the more I thought about her, the more I wanted to do something nice for her that she would appreciate. Scott was right about one thing, though. Celery and fruit juice was nothing like Mackenzie. Beer and chips was how we’d met. I’d liked that about her—she wasn’t insecure, she knew exactly who she was and what she wanted, and she did everything unapologetically, rather than fussing about what she looked like, her hair, her makeup.

The fact that she still had a stunning body and a gorgeous face, always looked put together and like she wasn’t even trying, was exactly for that reason. She wasn’t trying.

“Yeah, okay,” I finally said, putting back the healthy snacks and loading up on chips and beer instead. Tonight, we could order in and get pizza while we work, too.

“It sounds like the project is going well,” Scott said. “Confident?”

“That I’ll win? You bet your ass.”

Scott laughed. “Atta boy.”

There was no way I could lose the contract now that I’d started making the small changes Toussaint had asked for. Mackenzie wouldn’t make them, so I was in the clear, and I didn’t have to panic. It wasn’t a competition anymore, so I could focus on spending time with her and doing my job the way it was supposed to be done.

The small voice at the back of my mind kept telling me this was a mistake, but I refused to listen to it. It wasn’t a mistake, it wasn’t personal. It was just

business.

Keep telling yourself that.

“I have to go,” Scott said. “I’m going for a run before my next shift. Good luck for tonight. I’m sure you’ll nail it.”

“Thanks,” I said and grinned at the double meaning of that sentence. I would nail the project, sure, but Mackenzie and I had slept together more than once, too. Not that I was planning for tonight to go in that direction; we were going to focus strictly on business. I just couldn’t stop thinking about how incredible she was in bed and how I felt like I could just be my true self around her.

I pushed away all the thoughts and carried my loot to the till to pay for it before she came over later.

When I opened the door two hours later, Mackenzie stood in front of me.

“Your security doesn’t seem very secure,” she said. “He let me drive right past him.”

I laughed. “I told him to let you in.”

“Ah,” Mackenzie said. “I’m flattered.”

I let her in, and she followed me through the house, looking around.

“This place is incredible,” she said.

“You’ve been here before,” I pointed out.

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t exactly pay attention to my surroundings, then.” She offered me a mischievous smile, her eyes twinkling.

I laughed. “No, I had other things on my mind, too.”

I led her to an informal living room with plush, comfortable couches huddled around a low coffee table and bookshelves lining two walls. I had a large TV up against the third wall, and the fourth was made up of glass and

looked out over my immaculate gardens. The storm had miraculously bypassed my place for the most part, and I'd had barely any damage.

I sat down on one of the couches, and Mackenzie unpacked her laptop, sitting down on another.

The chips and beer were laid out on the coffee table.

"Oh, this is quite a spread," Mackenzie said and reached for a beer, cracking it open. "How did you know this is brain food for my brainstorming sessions?"

Scott suggested it. I shrugged. "I like to keep things simple."

She laughed and took a sip of her beer. "Simple is the best way to go. People try to complicate everything."

I cracked open a beer for myself, and we clinked our beer bottles together in a salute before we turned our attention back to our laptops.

"Okay," Mackenzie said. "So I've been thinking about how we can really draw attention to the billboards in a way that's still sensual. I imagine Toussaint wants his pieces to be very personal. They're everything but mass-produced, and I want to capture that uniqueness." She turned her laptop to show me a couple of things.

I nodded, looking at her ideas. They were great—they always were; she had an incredible mind for marketing—but it wasn't exactly what Johnson and Toussaint would be looking for.

"That looks like it could work," I said.

"What about you?" Mackenzie asked. "What did you come up with?"

"Oh," I said. "I was thinking about spreading out the message across town, you know? So that as you see the advertisements driving down the highway, for instance, it will be like a story, each building on the next so that the customers would be dying to know what the ending of that *story* will be."

“And then they’ll be forced to come in and have a look for themselves, which will seal the deal,” Mackenzie finished for me. She nodded, impressed. “That sounds like it could work. Nice idea.”

“Thanks.”

I swallowed hard and rubbed the back of my neck. I guess it *was* a good idea, but it was what I’d had in mind before. Now that I knew Toussaint wanted something a lot more personal, I’d been working on an idea where selected guests would come to a party where they had all of Toussaint’s jewelry on loan to wear so that they could feel beautiful with it already around their necks, their arms, their fingers. Toussaint would be there in person and select the pieces that, according to him, best defined the people who would wear them so that it was a celebrity moment, flattery, the ultimate compliment. What was more romantic than the designer of his own jewelry choosing out a piece that was almost seemingly custom-made just for that person?

I didn’t say any of that.

We fell silent as we worked. I glanced at Mackenzie now and then. She wore glasses when she worked on her laptop—to protect her eyes, probably—and with her short blonde hair and her deep hazel eyes, she looked incredible.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off her.

Literally.

“This is torture,” I finally said.

“What?” Mackenzie asked and looked up from her laptop with a small frown. It only made her cuter. Hotter. It made me want to kiss her.

“Working together on something when we’re supposed to be rivals. We get along far too well to be pitted against each other.”

“And yet here we are,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s ridiculous.”

“Would you rather we didn’t talk and didn’t work together?”

I shook my head. “No, then I’d just drown in work all the time and do nothing fun. Believe it or not, you’re keeping me sane.”

She giggled. “I like to think that we’re mature enough to look past that fact and still get something done.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I guess we are very mature. Especially after spending the weekend in a blanket fort.”

Her giggle turned into a laugh. “That was the best part. Everyone should spend time in a blanket fort to see life through fresh eyes.” She smiled at me, eyes dancing with laughter. “Business doesn’t have to be all about backstabbing and breaking the rules. It doesn’t have to get ugly, and so many people choose to go that route.”

I swallowed hard and forced my eyes to my screen. I wasn’t backstabbing her, right? I wasn’t breaking the rules? I’d just... not mentioned a few small facts, but that didn’t mean anything.

Mackenzie closed her laptop. We’d been at it for a couple of hours, and it had gotten dark out.

“I think that’s me for tonight. My brain feels like old sponge, and I can’t do anything more productive tonight.”

“Pizza?” I asked.

Mackenzie nodded. “I’m starving.”

I grinned and picked up the phone to order in. The pizza delivery didn’t take too long to get here—they prioritized this neighborhood because the tips were monumental—and after dishing slices onto plates, we ended up back on the couches where we’d been before.

I liked spending time with her. I liked having pizza and beer and talking shit after we'd both worked hard. Mackenzie was the most down-to-earth, straightforward person I'd met and being around her was easy. There was nothing to prove, no impressions to make, and most of all, no judgment.

Around her, I could let down my guard.

It was different from what I'd had with anyone else I'd ever been with—I'd never been able to just be myself before without feeling like I would have to put on a mask or protect myself against something.

For exactly that reason, I was falling for her. It was also for that reason that this was so incredibly dangerous.

What if I fell... and she wasn't there to catch me?

MACKENZIE

Working at Troy's place was different from anything I'd experienced before and exactly what I'd hoped it would be. He didn't treat me the way men usually treated women. He didn't try to coddle me, change everything about who he was or what his life was like for my sake, or do anything differently than if I was just another guy.

Men usually treated me so differently, it pissed me off. Either they wanted to dumb me down so that they didn't feel threatened or treated me like I wasn't capable of taking care of myself.

The more time I spent with Troy, the more I loved spending time with him. It was effortless, and that meant something. It was like hanging out with one of my three brothers... except it really wasn't like that at all.

Troy had something about him that made me instantly attracted to him, and no matter how much I told myself it wasn't a good idea, I couldn't resist.

It wasn't just his physical appearance, either. He was just a nice guy. How many *nice guys* were still out there these days? Guys who wanted nothing more than to get in my pants and then treat me like a possession?

Troy had managed the former with ease—I didn't *want* to say no to him—but he treated me like an equal, and that changed everything for me.

It made me fall for him, and although I knew logically it wasn't a good idea... I didn't really want to stop it from happening.

I thought about Rachel's words.

I don't have to know him. I see what you look like when you talk about him. That's enough for me.

The pizza arrived in record time, and Troy carried the large box to the living room where we'd been working. He retrieved two plates and another couple of beers from the kitchen, and we each dished up a slice. When I bit into it, it was the best pizza I'd had in a long time.

"Where do you order from?" I asked.

When he told me, I shook my head. "They're never this good when I order from them."

"Being this powerful comes with its perks." Troy smirked at me.

I giggled. "Yeah, you're stinking rich, so you always get great pizza."

Troy laughed. "It sounds stupid when you say it like that."

We fell silent, chewing, thinking. I glanced at Troy, who seemed just as caught up in his thoughts as I was.

"So, tell me about this business of yours," I said, talking around my pizza as I chewed.

"What about it?"

"You've always been an entrepreneur?" I asked. "Not everyone thinks about starting their own thing; most people want to work under someone else to eliminate the stress and drama of managing a whole bunch of people."

It took a lot of balls to open up a business, and it took a lot of work to become so well-known that the company name was on everyone's lips in the

right circles.

Troy shrugged and studied his slice for the next bite. “I don’t know, I never really saw myself as someone who can join a slipstream, you know? I want to make a mark on the world, and I figured the only way to do that was to carve my own path.”

“Very noble,” I said and took a swig of my beer before I returned to my pizza.

He chuckled. “I don’t know if it’s noble... it started as an escape.”

“I can understand that,” I said softly. He’d told me about his pain as a child, and I knew all about throwing myself into work to stop thinking about certain things that wouldn’t go away, like a pebble in a shoe. “It’s still a big deal to bring it this far.”

“Maybe,” Troy said. “I didn’t really see how else to do it. It was an escape but it turned into more, you know? I never dreamed of being a huge business mogul, but every time I achieved one thing, I looked for the next goal, and before I knew it, I was shooting for the moon.”

“What about family?” I asked. “If you’re that busy, you don’t get a lot of time off. Or do you have people running the business for you while you’re away?” I thought about Rachel and how she’d accepted a job with a meager salary so she could be with me when I grew up and now with her children. She’d always believed that family over business was everything.

A business can stand the tests of time but your kids aren’t in the house forever. You blink and they’re gone, so I want to do what I can with the time I have with them.

She’d told me that more times than I could count.

Troy shrugged and bit off another piece of pizza.

“I guess I *can* have people run the business for me, but I prefer to be hands-

on and take care of it myself.”

“The best way to get something done the right way is to do it yourself,” I said with a grin. “Or to tell your children *not* to do it.”

Troy burst out laughing. “That came out of nowhere.”

I tilted my head slightly. “I learned that from Rachel, she always says that. When I see her kids, I kind of get where she’s coming from.”

“They’re a handful,” Troy agreed, still grinning. “But they’re sweet.”

“They’re the reason she gets up every day,” I said softly. “And the reason she’s fighting this disease. We all need something to fight for, right?”

“Right,” Troy agreed, the mood shifting. “Although... sometimes I feel like I have so many kids working for me, even though they’re old enough to be adults now.”

“Children, all of them,” I said, waving my hand, and Troy laughed, nodding.

“That way, I’ll know what it feels like without ever having kids of my own,” Troy said. “I don’t even have to go there to know the frustrations.”

“But you won’t know the good times, either,” I pointed out.

Troy sighed. “Yeah, well, I’d rather live without the good than lose it.”

“That seems... sad,” Mackenzie said carefully. “Children change your perspective on life so much.”

“Maybe,” Troy said. “I mean, Jake changed my perspective, too.”

I stilled. “That’s not how I meant it.”

“I know, I know,” Troy said. He’d been the one to bring up the morbid subject that Jake’s death had changed everything about his life. I understood where he was coming from but it was hard to completely know what he’d been through.

“You never want to change things?” I asked, my eyes on Troy’s when he

looked up at me. “You don’t want to have a family at all, one day?”

Troy shook my head. We’d talked about this before—he’d made it clear that he didn’t want kids. This world just wasn’t fair, and it was wrong to do that, to bring a life into it without that person actually choosing it. That was how he saw it. It was tough to completely agree. Yeah, the world *could* be an awful place, but that didn’t mean it *had to* be.

“It must get lonely,” I said. After all, he lived in this giant house all by himself with no one to share it with.

Troy shrugged. “I don’t know about *lonely*. I mean, I have friends and I’m always surrounded by people, and that’s really what having a family is about, right? Not going about it all alone? Besides, I get to call the shots, make my own time, come and go as I please without having to make arrangements for a babysitter or having to explain to a wife why I wanted to go.”

“You’re making it sound like having a family is terrible,” I mused.

Troy laughed. “They don’t call a wife the ball-and-chain for nothing, you know.”

I giggled. “That concept is just as messed up as everything else. If that’s what a relationship is like, marriage should *not* be happening.”

Troy shrugged. “Most women want that ring on their finger, and that’s all it’s about. I can’t count how many women made it clear they would do *anything* to be with me, but I know it’s about the money, about getting in there and taking control rather than because we were compatible.”

I raised my eyebrows at Troy. He really had a bitter outlook on life in some ways. It sounded like he’d been through a tough life, with a lot of things going wrong. That made me sad for him—life could be so beautiful.

“I think there’s more to love and marriage and kids than that,” I said softly.

“Maybe,” Troy agreed and reached for another pizza slice when he finished

his. “It’s just not like that for me, you know? The business is predictable and safe. When something goes wrong, I can fix it or go in a new direction, no love lost. It took a lot of work, but now that it’s established, I can do what I want and I’m happy. I win every day.”

I chuckled. “Not everything is about winning, you know.”

“No?” Troy asked, feigning confusion before a grin spread across his face.

The words I’d just spoken rocked through me. I meant them when I’d said to Troy that it wasn’t just about winning, but I lived my life in exactly the same way—I treated everything as a competition, and I wanted to win, I wanted to get on top and stay there.

“I guess that’s not fair of me to say,” I admitted. “I’m like that, too.”

“It’s all about control,” Troy said.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been through things that were out of our control, so what we crave now is control, and we do whatever we can to get it and keep it. It looks different for different people. For us both, in different ways, it’s business, but everyone does it differently.”

I studied him. “That’s a lot of profound introspection you did there.”

Troy laughed. “Hey, I *know* what I’m doing isn’t always healthy, I’m just not planning to change it. Since I’m an adult, I don’t have to.”

I chuckled and nodded. I guess he was right—we didn’t have to change things in our lives if we didn’t want to because we were just fine where we were. At least, that was what I told myself all the time, too.

I worked hard because I wanted to live up to the image I’d have wanted my mom to see. I worked hard because I wanted Rachel to be proud of me after she’d given up everything to raise me.

We’d both thrown ourselves into work, letting it take over so that other

parts of our lives faded into the background.

Work isn't everything, I wanted to tell Troy, but until I lived my life accordingly, I couldn't say that to him without sounding like a hypocrite.

"The pizza was a great idea," I said when we finished eating. "And barely any dishes now."

"That was the plan," Troy said. "Work smart, not hard."

"Work smart *and* hard," I countered.

Troy laughed. "I think you're the only one who really gets it."

Warmth rushed over me when he said it. We really did understand each other in ways that no one else understood us.

That counted for a hell of a lot more than Troy realized.

TROY

“What’s this supposed to be?” Scott asked.

He’d arrived unannounced while I was getting ready to go out.

“It’s a picnic,” I said.

Scott scratched the back of his head. “What are you going on a picnic for? That’s... weird. Even for you.”

I shook my head. “I’m just taking Mackenzie out for something fun. We’ve been working really hard, and we could do with a break.

“Like, on a date?”

“It’s not a date.”

Scott snorted. “A picnic sounds like a date to me. Who else will be there besides you and her?”

I didn’t answer him because he wasn’t wrong. It pissed me off that he wasn’t wrong, but that wasn’t the point. I just wanted to spend some time with Mackenzie.

A car pulled up in the driveway.

“Hello?” We heard her voice a moment later.

“In the kitchen,” I called out.

“So, she knows your house, huh?” Scott asked with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. “She’s worked here before.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, nodding. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Oh, hi,” Mackenzie said when she walked into the kitchen and saw my brother. “It’s nice to see you again.” She had her laptop bag slung over her shoulder.

“Likewise,” Scott said. His eyes danced with laughter.

“Are you joining us?” Mackenzie asked.

Scott shook his head. “No, no, I wouldn’t dare impose.” He glanced at me. “I have work to do, anyway.”

“Doctor, right?” Mackenzie asked.

“Yeah, pediatrician,” Scott said, nodding.

“Right, I remember now.”

“Well, that’s my cue,” Scott said, still trying to hide his grin. “You kids have fun.”

He sauntered out of the kitchen, and I shook my head. “Ready to go?”

“Sure,” Mackenzie said.

“You don’t need that,” I said, nodding to her bag. “We’re not working today.”

“No?”

I shook my head. Johnson still hadn’t given us a date to work with, but I was pretty prepared at this point, and I knew Mackenzie was on top of it, too. Besides, I didn’t want to think about work. Whenever I did, I felt sick about the fact that I hadn’t told Mackenzie about the changes, but the longer I waited, the harder it became. At this point, she would be angry with me for keeping it from her since we’d put so much work into it.

“We’re going out,” I said. “Away from the office and away from work.”

“Oh,” she said and smiled. “Cool.”

I laughed and picked up the picnic basket I’d prepared. We left the house, and I led her to my garage. When she saw all my cars, her steps faltered.

“No wonder you weren’t stressed about insurance taking some time on your car,” she said. “You have... a ton.”

I laughed, glancing at the five other cars I had lined up in my garages.

“I like collecting them. It’s a nerd hobby.”

Mackenzie snorted. “Collecting *stamps* is a nerd hobby. Or action figures, or something that’s, you know, *cheap*. Collecting cars like this is...”

“What?” I asked.

“Rich,” Mackenzie said with a laugh.

I chuckled and led her to my Lamborghini Urus. It was an expensive SUV and had to be my favorite of all the cars I collected.

I opened the door for her and let her get in before I put the picnic basket in the back and slid in behind the wheel. When I turned the ignition, the car purred to life.

“It *feels* expensive,” Mackenzie said, running her hands over the leather seats and dashboard. “I’ve never been a Lamborghini fan—”

“No?” I asked.

“They’re very low to the ground and super impractical, but this... I can get behind this.”

I nodded. “Yeah, this is my favorite one, too.”

I pulled out of the garage and drove through the gate, heading toward the Old Zoo at Griffith Park. It was a beautiful picnic spot. I hadn’t been back there since Jake died, but when I’d thought about what I wanted to do with

Mackenzie, that was it. I wanted to be with her in nature, doing something simple and down-to-earth.

When we arrived, we parked the car and carried the basket and a blanket to the park. I spread it, and we sat down before I unpacked the food I'd bought from a delicatessen not too far from where I lived. Wine, a variety of cheeses, different kinds of crackers, fruit, and cold cuts of meat.

"You really went all out," Mackenzie said when I poured a glass of wine and handed it to her.

"I don't do anything halfway," I said with a grin. "I do it properly, or not at all."

"I'm beginning to see that," Mackenzie said with a laugh. "This is really great, and it's nice to get away from work."

I nodded. "I don't usually feel that way, but this time, I agree."

I didn't want to tell Mackenzie that I wanted to see her outside of work. I'd planned this day so that we didn't have to talk about the project, about Johnson and Toussaint, and who would get the contract in the end. I didn't want to think about any of that. All I wanted was to live in the now, with her. It had been years since I'd wanted to do that. The *now* was usually filled with memories that haunted me or emotions I didn't want to deal with, but with Mackenzie, it felt like the bad shit was erased and I could have a good time for a change.

It sounded pathetic to put it into so many words, but there it was. I liked hanging out with her because I liked how I *felt* around her.

Kids threw a football back and forth a short distance away, and while we chatted and drank our wine, nibbling on the snacks, the ball fell onto our blanket.

"I'm so sorry!" one of the kids cried out.

“Don’t worry,” Mackenzie called and grabbed the ball before I could react. “Here, can you catch?” She wound her arm up and threw the ball with impressive flare.

“Woah!” the kid said, catching the ball, and his friends cheered, too.

Mackenzie laughed. “You’re welcome!” she cried out when they thanked her.

“That was... pretty good,” I said, staring at her. “Beer, pizza, chips... *and* you throw like a guy?”

Mackenzie giggled. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t mean it as sexist as it came across.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sexist. I’m just surprised. Women don’t generally do stuff like that, and you’re amazing.”

“Stop it, or it’ll go right to my head.” Mackenzie laughed.

“I’m serious. You’re a regular tomboy.”

“Wow,” she said. “Regular and an insult, all in one sentence?”

I shook my head, feeling like an idiot.

“That’s really not how I mean it. You’re just... different. Incredible, don’t get me wrong. But different.”

Mackenzie laughed, and her cheeks colored a little.

“I guess that’s what happens when you only grow up with brothers.”

I frowned. “You have a sister too, though.”

“Well, yeah. I guess I do, but it wasn’t like that when I grew up. My brothers and sisters are all much older than I am. I wasn’t exactly planned. They were all out of the house, or just about, when I came along. I was pretty much raised as an only child until my mom died.”

I stilled. She’d mentioned that her mom had died early on, but the way she talked about it now, as if it was normal, showed me that it had hurt a lot. I

knew what that was like—acting like it didn't matter because it mattered more than she wanted to show.

“When that happened, Rachel took on the job of raising me. My brothers all jumped in, too. They took over the role of Dad since mine grieved so hard he couldn't see straight and do what needed to be done.”

My heart ached for that family.

“It sounds rough,” I said.

“It was,” Mackenzie said. “But I had the advantage of growing up with my brothers and sister after all, when I'd been an only child before then. My brothers taught me how to fend for myself, how to survive, how to stand up for what I believed in. They looked out for me, and Rachel took the role of my mom, making sure I was dressed and fed and educated. If it wasn't for all of them, I don't know what would have become of me.”

“They sound really great,” I said. “Family is everything.”

“Especially when it's collective grief.”

I nodded. It had been the same with me and Scott. We'd both lost Jake. Before he died, we'd always called us the three musketeers, and when he'd gone... we'd both felt the pain. Neither of us had thought we'd be able to get through it.

It was why we were so close today. Despite the nine years between us, we'd stuck together and made it through. It was a lot the same as it was with Mackenzie.

I hadn't realized just how much we had in common. When I looked at her after hearing all of this, I felt like in some ways, I was looking in a mirror.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” I said softly. “I'm glad you had people who could be there for you.”

“Thank you,” Mackenzie said and sniffed. She looked emotional, but she

had a hell of a poker face. Slowly, though, she was starting to let her guard down with me and trust me.

“I can tell how you want to keep your mother’s memory alive by teaching Rachel’s kids the things you were taught.”

“Like what?” Mackenzie asked, confused.

“Like telling them from the start that Santa isn’t real.”

“Oh, that,” Mackenzie said and laughed. “You can’t get over that, huh? It’s not about keeping my mom’s memory alive so much as it is about trust.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Trust is everything. If you can’t trust someone, then what’s the point? That’s why I don’t like April Fool’s Day, either. It’s this one day out of the whole year where you can’t trust anyone or anything, and I hate it. Without trust, we have nothing. The important things are all based on trust, and we were all taught that the words that come out of your mouth have to mean something, they have to be real. It’s not so much about my mom as it is about the fact that Rachel and I would never lie to those kids. They should be able to trust us no matter what, and it starts at a very young age.”

My stomach twisted. God, what would Mackenzie say when she learned that I’d been keeping the project details from her? If trust was that serious...

“Mackenzie,” I started. I had to tell her about the stupid project and how the rules had changed. If it was that important to her, I couldn’t keep it from her. It was wrong, not only from a moral standpoint but also because trust was clearly a big deal to Mackenzie.

When we’d started working together, it had been fine, but the more I got to know her as a person, the more I cared.

“Yeah?”

“This project we’re working on—”

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “You were the one telling me we weren’t going to talk about work today, and that’s where we’ll keep it. I’m serious. I’m having too much fun not thinking about it at all.”

“But I need to—”

“Some other time, okay?” she said.

I studied her before I finally nodded.

“Okay,” I said. I could wait one more day before I told her. It was already a bad time. I’d waited too long. She would be pissed already. What would one more day do?

MACKENZIE

The picnic was perfect. It was everything I hadn't realized I needed. Spending time with Troy, just getting to know him without thinking about work at all was the break I'd wanted without knowing it.

He was such a great guy, too. The more I got to know him, the more I felt like I could talk to him. He understood who I was in so many ways that no one else did, and I felt like we'd created a kind of bond that I hadn't had with anyone before.

It also scared me. What would happen if I fell hard for this man and he didn't feel the same way about me? This wasn't supposed to be a relationship, after all. It had been all about work, and we were still gunning for the same contract. Technically, we were still rivals.

It was just getting harder and harder to see Troy as the enemy when we spent more time together as friends. Or as lovers.

Or whatever it was that we'd become.

We watched the sun setting after we'd finished our meal. It was a giant orange orb in the sky, sinking slowly behind the horizon, and it painted the

sky with splashes of pink and purple. Troy leaned his shoulder against mine as we sat side by side, and I drank in his warmth, enjoying his company. We could talk about everything, and we could sit in silence and talk about nothing, and all of it was perfect.

With him, everything seemed to fit as if it had always been this way.

When the sky turned to an inky blue and the stars started to show, we finally packed up the basket, folded the blanket, and headed back toward the car.

We drove through the streets of LA in silence, enjoying each other's company. The day clung to me like glitter, and my heart swelled with emotion. I really liked Troy. I was falling for him more and more, and it scared me. It didn't seem like he felt something different for me, though. He seemed to be as attached to me as I was becoming to him.

Maybe, despite everything going on with work, we could still be together. It was just work, after all, right? It was just a contract...

I wasn't sure how true that was for me. I wanted it desperately. It would further my career, and I would get a good name and a solid contract on my resume. If I lost the contract to Troy, I didn't know how I would feel.

Happy for him, I guess. But I'd be pissed that I'd lost it, too.

Would this thing between us end once we got around to presenting and one of us won the contract?

I wanted to ask, but earlier, Troy had wanted to talk about work, and I'd told him we wouldn't. I wasn't going to go there tonight. We could talk about it some other time. It wasn't even set in stone where this was headed, anyway. Maybe it meant nothing, and then we would part ways, and that would be the end of it.

When we arrived at his place, Troy opened the door.

“Do you want to come in for some more wine?” he asked. “You don’t have to leave right away.”

“I should probably get going,” I said.

“Where?”

He was right, I had nowhere to be, but if I agreed to stay for a glass of wine... chances were I would stay the night.

“I want you to stay,” Troy said. His voice was deep and smooth like velvet on my skin, and his gray eyes held my gaze.

“Okay,” I said, nodding because, damn it, I wanted to stay, too.

Was I looking for trouble? Or could this work out between us and be the happy ending I hoped we could find?

Inside, Troy kissed me. He slid his hand under my hair, his fingers hot on my neck, and his tongue slid into my mouth. I moaned softly when he tasted me, and my body tightened in all the right places.

I wanted him.

I *always* wanted him, but it was getting worse and worse these days.

Maybe *worse* wasn’t the right word because there was nothing bad about it. In fact, everything about being with Troy was good, and that threw me for a loop. He was my work rival, so we shouldn’t have been getting this comfortable with each other. I was also not really looking for a relationship.

Not that I was opposed to being in one but I liked the idea of not having to make excuses or to explain myself to anyone. To be able to work as late as I wanted, to do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted... so many of the girls I’d studied with, the girls in school even, had felt trapped in their relationships, sacrificing a certain form of freedom.

I guess for every sacrifice there was a return, but I’d never been able to see how having a significant other balanced out the sacrifices a relationship

required.

Until now.

Troy changed everything, and when I thought about what I'd have to give up if I decided to be with him, they seemed much less like sacrifices than when I'd thought about it all before.

"Hey," Troy murmured against my lips.

"What?" I whispered.

"Stop thinking."

"How do you know I'm thinking?" I asked, my lips curling into a smile against his.

"I can practically hear the cogs turning. There's nothing to think about right now. Switch off and be with me, right here, right now." He kissed me again, and I did just as he asked. I threw caution to the wind and let myself get lost in the feel of his body pressing against mine, the taste of his tongue in my mouth and how his free hand traced my curves.

Troy broke the kiss.

"This won't do," he said.

"What?"

"I want you in my bed," he said. "Naked. You're dressed and upright."

I giggled, but before I could respond, Troy lifted me up and threw me over his shoulder. I squealed, giggling as he carried me through his house toward the bedroom. I had a pretty damn good view of his perfect ass, and it was hot how he took what he wanted.

In the bedroom, Troy dropped me onto the mattress and collapsed on top of me. His body pinned me down, and he kissed me again. I loved it when he pinned me down like this so that I had nowhere to go. I didn't want to go anywhere; I was happy right here.

Troy grinded his hips against me, pushing his hard cock against my lower abdomen. He slid his hand down my side, and I moaned as his fingers found the hem of my shirt and he peeled it up. His fingers were hot on my skin, and he moved his head to my neck. Goosebumps ran over my shoulders and arms when he breathed against my ear, nibbling on my earlobe.

Slowly, he worked his way down my neck, licking and sucking, gyrating his hips.

I gasped and pulled his shirt up. I scraped my nails over his back and his ribs so that he groaned, his voice deep and velvety so close to my ear.

“Fuck, Mackenzie, you drive me crazy,” Troy muttered before he nipped my shoulder. I whimpered in pleasure, and Troy pushed up my shirt. I lifted my arms and wriggled as he pulled it over my head. He tossed it to the side and dove right back in, kissing the delicate skin on the swells of my breasts.

He peeled one bra cup down and sucked my nipple into his mouth. They were erect, and the pleasure that spread through my body when he sucked sent a direct line to my sex, making me hotter and wetter.

I pushed my hands into his hair and tugged at it lightly before I pushed one hand into his collar. His back muscles moved under my fingers while he sucked one nipple, massaging the other breast.

“Wait,” I breathed.

Troy lifted his head, and I let go of him. I undid my bra and got rid of it without ceremony. It was just in the way.

I tossed it on the floor to join my shirt, and Troy leaned back.

He slid his gaze over my body, and his eyes grew darker, his pupils dilated with need. He took in the sight of me, and I blushed when pure hunger stretched across his features.

“Do you have any idea how fucking hot you are?” he asked when his eyes

found mine again. “I can’t get enough of you.”

I blushed harder, but I didn’t pull him closer to kiss me again. Instead, I undid my jeans and wriggled out of them. Troy rolled off me to allow me room to do that, and when I kicked them off, I lay naked on the bed.

“Holy shit,” he said.

I smiled at him. “You’re still dressed.”

“Not for long,” Troy said, and he pulled his shirt over his head.

I felt the same about staring at his body as Troy felt about me. He had the body of a god, every inch of him chiseled and perfect like he was a photo and not real. I reached for his chest and touched him, as if he could be some kind of vision. I knew Troy well enough by now, though, to know that every part of him was real.

I reached for the bulge in Troy’s pants and cupped his erection. He exhaled audibly and kissed me, and I rubbed my hand against him, working his cock through his jeans. He gasped and grunted into my mouth before he pulled away and cursed.

“You’re pushing me closer and closer to the point of no return,” he said, his voice almost a growl—it was so thick with need.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said in a breathy voice. “I wasn’t planning on stopping. Were you?”

Troy cocked a lopsided grin at me. “A gorgeous woman with a hot personality and incredible mind is naked on my bed. There’s no way in hell I’m stopping.”

I laughed, blushing hard at his compliments. I knew who I was, but when Troy listed qualities like that, my cheeks burned bright red. No man had been able to make me blush the way Troy did. He saw who I was, he made me feel like an equal, but at the same time, he respected me and looked after me. The

balance was perfect. There was never anything condescending about it, and he wasn't threatened by who I was, either.

"My turn to tell you to wait," Troy said.

He pushed up so that he stood next to the bed, and he undid his jeans, taking his jocks along with them, kicking it all off so that we were both naked. I let my eyes slide over his body, taking in his raw, unadulterated masculinity. He was already hard, his cock thick and standing at attention, the tip glistening with lust.

I sat up, and Troy leaned forward to kiss me. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft, and he moaned into my mouth. The kiss was deep and filled with emotion despite the lust that crackled around us in the room. Troy cupped my cheeks, holding me in his hands as if I was delicate.

When he broke the kiss, he straightened. I rolled my eyes up at him, and he slid his hand down my jaw and onto my neck, stroking me. I leaned forward, his cock thick and hard in front of me. I sucked his head into my mouth, and Troy sucked his breath through his teeth before he tipped his head back and groaned. I slid my hand to the base of his cock, covering the part I couldn't suck into my mouth.

I loved the feel of him in my mouth, his skin smooth, his shaft rock hard. I swirled my tongue around the bulbous tip before I bobbed my head back and forth, stroking him in and out of my mouth. He tasted like salt and desire, and it was erotic as hell. While I bobbed my head back and forth, eliciting moans and groans from Troy, I cupped his balls with my other hand and massaged them carefully.

"Fuck, Mackenzie," Troy moaned.

He pushed his hand into my hair and curled it into a fist. He held onto me, encouraging me to take in more of him, to suck him harder and faster, and I

did as he asked. I loved the taste of him, the feel of him, and hearing the sounds of pleasure that escaped his mouth the closer and closer I pushed to orgasm.

I didn't want him to finish. I wanted to give him pleasure, but I wanted him inside of me, and when his cock got harder, twitching once or twice in my mouth, I pulled back so that he slipped out.

"You're going to be the death of me," Troy said in a gravelly voice.

He took my hand and pulled me up so that our naked bodies were pressed against each other. My breasts pushed against his naked chest, skin on skin. He wrapped his arms around my body and held me tightly so that the length of him was pressed up against me.

Troy walked me backward, lowered me onto the bed, and he helped me shift up to where the pillows were. When I lay down, I wrapped my arms around his neck, but he slid his hands up my arms and moved them until my arms were raised over my head. He held onto my wrists, taking them together in one large hand, keeping me in that position so that my body was stretched out.

Slowly, sensually, *teasingly*, he slid his other hand down my body.

I whimpered and mewled as he cupped my breast, rubbing the nipple before he pinched it. He sucked on my nipple again, scraping his teeth against it, alternating between my breasts until my whimpers had turned into cries, and I writhed on the bed, aching for more. I was so wet I could feel the slick patch between my legs, and he was teasing me.

"Troy," I begged. "Please."

"Please, what?" he asked, feigning confusion.

"You're driving me crazy." The same words he'd used.

He chuckled, taking pleasure from my begging.

He dipped his head again, sucking a nipple into his mouth. He kissed and licked me, but he moved his hand down my body, over my hip, between my legs. My thighs fell open for him, and he dipped two fingers into me, spreading my wetness up and down my slit. I moaned when he drew circles around my clit, still holding my arms in place, still sucking on my nipple. He rendered me completely useless as I gave myself over to the undivided pleasure.

When he slid his fingers into me again, I cried out. He stroked them in and out of me, starting slow, mimicking the rhythm I'd used while I'd sucked him off. The feel of him pumping his fingers into me drove me wild with need, and I whimpered and bucked my hips against his hand.

I wanted more. I wanted all of him. I wanted him on top of me, pushing into me, and what he did now only made me ache for him that much more.

Troy knew it, and he was set on drawing it out, teasing me until I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Troy," I gasped. I was getting closer and closer to an orgasm, and Troy kept me balanced there, moving between my entrance and my clit. He pushed me toward the edge, but he didn't let me topple over before he changed his approach again. "Please," I moaned. "Let me orgasm."

Troy's throaty chuckle was delicious and filled with pleasure—he loved it that I begged and pleaded, and the truth was, I loved what he was doing to me, too.

He focused his attention on my clit, rubbing me hard and fast, and this time, he didn't try to draw it out and tease me even more. He rubbed his finger, knowing just where to press, and a moment later, I fell apart. I cried out as pleasure rocked my body and took my breath away, and I curled on the mattress in ecstasy.

I'd barely recovered from the orgasm when Troy crawled over me. His face bore a primal expression of pure hunger. He positioned himself between my legs, ready to take me.

He hesitated and scowled.

“Wait,” he said, and he shifted his body, rummaging in his nightstand drawer. He found a condom and wrapped himself up, moving quickly. I was still recovering from my orgasm and relearning how to breathe.

Troy came back to me, and this time there was nothing to wait for. He wrapped a hand around my thigh and hiked my leg up, holding it by his side. He dropped his head into my neck and nipped the skin, scraping his teeth against me. His cock found my entrance, and I held my breath in anticipation. When he slid into me, I moaned until he was buried to the hilt.

He paused when he was inside of me, and I trembled around him. He was trembling, too. His eyes locked on mine, and we stared at each other, caught up in each other, and nothing else existed, nothing else mattered.

When he started moving his hips, pulling back and pushing back in, I moaned. He thrust harder and harder, stroking in and out of me with increasing speed and with his body on top of mine, his fucking pushed the breath in and out of my lungs in the same rhythm. The room filled with the sounds of our sex—the slap of our hips together, our gasping and moaning.

In no time at all, I was on the edge of another orgasm. Troy pumped into me, not waiting to draw it out this time, and I toppled over. I cried out, my body releasing so that a powerful wave washed over me. I wrapped my legs around his body and locked my ankles, and Troy grunted as he pumped his hips harder, ramping up the intensity of my orgasm.

I arched my back, and the pleasure took my breath away. Troy planted kisses on my face and neck while I rode out the orgasm, and when I came

down from my high, gasping and moaning, he kissed me on the lips. My breathing was erratic, my lips parted as I caught my breath, and I gripped his shoulders, his back, my nails biting into the skin.

Troy groaned, lust still etched on his face.

He pulled out and lay down on his back, and I didn't need him to tell me what he wanted.

I clambered onto him, straddling his hips, and his hands slid onto my thighs and then my ass. He held onto me, his fingers gripping my ass tightly, and when I sat down on him, his cock sliding into me, he groaned through gritted teeth. His brows knitted together, and I gasped. I planted my hands on his chest, and we were frozen like that for a moment, taking in the moment.

I rocked my hips back and forth, creating a new rhythm. I slid him out of me, and back in, and repeated the motion, rocking faster and faster. I didn't take it slow; I rocked hard and rode him harder right away. He pushed deeper and deeper into me, and I cried out and gasped as I fucked him.

Troy's hands gripped my hips, and he pulled me forward and pushed me back so that his cock drove into me deeper and deeper still so that he punched right up against the end of me, and I tilted my head back in pure ecstasy.

My clit rubbed against his pubic bone, and I gasped and moaned as it pushed me closer to yet another orgasm. I cried out, leaning forward as the pleasure took over.

Troy held onto my hips, and instead of letting me ride out the pleasure, he pounded into me from beneath.

I collapsed on his chest, and he pumped into me until he let out a sharp bark and thrust into me as deep as he could go.

I felt his cock kicking as he orgasmed in time with my own pleasure, and we were connected in ways I'd never been connected to anyone before.

Finally, slowly, the pleasure faded, and I lay on Troy's chest, his heart hammering against my cheek.

When I lifted my head and looked up at him, his face was riddled with the aftermath of our pleasure, and his eyes filled with affection. Troy wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly against him. He was still inside of me, but we lay together in silence, trying to recover from the incredible sex we'd just had. Our breathing slowly calmed, and we lay like this for the longest time.

Eventually, I rolled off him.

"I'll be right back," he said and walked to his bathroom. When he came back, it was sans condom, and he got onto the bed again and pulled me tightly against him.

"Where were we?" he asked.

"We were having great sex and basking in the aftermath."

"Right," he said, planting a kiss on my temple. "Great sex indeed. Fucking fantastic."

I giggled softly.

"You're incredible, Mackenzie," Troy said. "You have no idea how glad I am that the guy I thought I was going to work with... was actually you."

"Yeah, otherwise, tonight might have gone very differently."

"Funny," Troy said, but I heard the smile in his voice.

He dropped another kiss on my temple before he stroked his fingers through my hair.

"I'm glad you're here," he said.

"I'm glad, too."

"You don't have to go anywhere. You can stay as long as you like."

I closed my eyes and sighed happily.

“How about forever?” I asked softly.

Troy only hesitated a moment before he breathed, “Yeah, how about that?”

TROY

“This is nice,” Scott said, leaning back in the boat. He pulled his cap over his eyes against the sun. “Why don’t we do this more often?”

“Because we have a lot of work all the time,” I said, checking my fishing pole to make sure it was steady against the boat in case something bit.

“We should do this more often, the way we used to.”

I nodded. Scott and I used to go fishing often when we were younger. He’d still been studying, and my company hadn’t been anything to speak of—getting away and doing something like this was easy. These days, it was getting harder and harder to break away.

There had been a time when we’d gone out to sea to do our fishing there, hiring charters to take us out and really making a sport of it. These days, we drove out to a farm where an old farmer had a private pond that he stocked, and we could sit in the boat all day. It wasn’t about fishing so much as it was about getting away.

“What’s up with you?” Scott asked from underneath his cap.

“Who says something’s up with me?” I asked.

Scott lifted his cap enough to peek through one eye at me. “You’re the one who suggested we go fishing. You haven’t done that in years, not since you broke up with your last dolly. I forget her name.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, me too.” I shook my head and checked the pole again as if it needed checking.

“You thinking about getting rid of Mackenzie? Or did she do the wise thing and get rid of you?”

“Ha, ha,” I said sarcastically.

“Seriously, man,” Scott said. “What’s eating you?”

I shrugged. “It’s going really well with her, actually. I’m starting to fall for her.”

Scott whistled through his teeth. “So, we’re not mourning the loss of a woman, we’re mourning the loss of your freedom?”

I snorted. “You’re so full of shit.”

Scott burst out laughing, pleased with his stupid jokes.

“Come on, talk to me. Falling for her isn’t a bad thing, is it?”

“Well, no,” I said hesitantly. “We have a lot in common—a lot more than I realized at first—and she could do wonders in my company if she decides to transfer—”

“You’re not seriously talking about her as an employee. If you do that, you’re going to fuck up any chance of being with her with that airtight HR you’ve got running the show.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, yeah, I know. That’s not how I meant it. I just think we could be a good team.”

“Then be a good team with her... *outside* of work, you know?”

I nodded. I knew what Scott meant; it was just hard for me to wrap my mind around dating Mackenzie in the full sense of the word. The more time I

spent with her, the more I wanted her at my side as my girlfriend, not just as someone to work with. The problem was, I'd already fucked that up before we'd even really gotten into it.

"I don't know if I should," I said. "I mean, having someone in my life like that... it wasn't the plan."

"What was the plan, then?" Scott asked. His cap was back on his head, and I had his full attention now, although he still sat slumped back in the boat, legs spread wide against the side of it.

"Creating a corporate giant and dominating the field," I said. "It's going so well, too."

Scott narrowed his eyes at me. "And you can't do anything like that with a woman at your side? Why does it have to be either or?"

I shrugged, not knowing how to answer him.

"Come on, asshole," Scott said when I wouldn't keep talking about it. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

"She's my rival, Scott. If she gets the contract for Griffin, then I won't get it."

"And?" Scott asked. "Don't tell me this contract is what's standing between you and the girl you like. Seriously, how many contracts have you gotten or lost in the past couple of years and it hasn't killed your company?"

I hesitated before I spoke. "It's not exactly about that."

"Then what is it about?"

"I think I fucked up." I glanced at Scott, who offered a level stare. He wasn't going to let this go now, so I might as well talk to him about what was going on. I told him about the contract, about Marc Johnson letting me know that there were changes to be made and that I hadn't made the effort to tell Mackenzie about it.

Scott whistled through his teeth again after I told him. I waited for him to follow up the sound of incredulity with words.

“Yeah, that’s a fuck up,” he finally said. “Why didn’t you tell her right away?”

“Because I wanted to win,” I said. The facts were pretty simple... and right now, saying it, they sounded pretty stupid. “I figured that if I didn’t tell her, she wouldn’t do what needed to be done to get the contract and I’d get it.”

“I didn’t figure you to be someone who played dirty to win the prize,” Scott said.

That made my stomach twist. Putting it that way made me sound even more pathetic.

“I just didn’t want to lose the contract,” I said. “The business is everything.”

“Why?” Scott asked.

I frowned at him. “You of all people should understand. I mean, look at what you’re doing?”

“What am I doing?” Scott asked, confused.

“You’re working your ass off as a doctor so that other kids don’t die, so that what happened to Jake...” My voice caught in my throat, and I swallowed hard. “You’re doing the same thing.”

“Oh, no, that’s not the same thing at all,” Scott said, shifting himself in the boat so he sat up straighter. The boat rocked because of it, and I shifted to balance out the weight.

“Why not?” I asked. “You’re always busy. You don’t have time for anything or anyone else... that’s exactly the same.”

“You don’t get it,” Scott said. “I don’t have anyone else to make time *for*. It’s just me, and as long as it’s just me, then work comes first. If I find

someone who really fits into my life, someone I'm serious about, best know that I won't keep putting my job first. What happened to Jake fucking sucked, okay? It hurts me a lot all the time, too. But screwing it up with Mackenzie will just mean you lose her in the end, too. That doesn't seem like whatever you think you're trying to do is worth it all."

I stared at my brother. "What the fuck, man?" I was getting angry. How could he tell me that I was making a mess of it? How could he tell me I was screwing things up, going about it the wrong way... He was right, obviously, but that just made it worse! How dare he be right!?

Scott just pinned me with a hard stare without defending his stance before, damn it... my brother was right, and he knew it. I knew it, too. That was what pissed me off so much.

"Do you want to know what I think?" Scott asked.

I shook my head. "Actually, no." It was just going to be more wisdom that made me look and feel like shit because what he was saying made so much sense it irritated me on a whole new level.

"You should talk to her as soon as you can and tell her what's going on."

I glared at Scott. "I said *no*."

"Yeah, well, I've never listened to you," Scott said with a chuckle. "I'm serious, though. If you're serious about her, and it sounds like you might actually be, then do something."

I scowled.

"You're a great businessman, Troy," Scott said. "You've built that company up from scratch, and you get almost all the contracts you shoot for." He grinned at me when he said that, putting emphasis on the word *almost* just for good measure. "But business isn't everything. In the end, if you stand

to lose the big things in your life, the business should be the first thing you let go of, not the people who are there for you.”

I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Yeah, maybe you should have kept it quiet, and I wouldn’t have known anything about this game you’re playing, but—”

“It’s not a fucking *game*,” I snapped.

“Isn’t it?” Scott asked. “Because if it’s not... why does it look like you’re about to lose?”

Fuck! He was right. Scott was always right. I hated that he was, and he always did it in such an easy way because Scott was always straightforward and to the point without rubbing my face in it. He was just... right.

About all of it.

And that meant that I was screwing this up. Not that I didn’t already know it, but a part of me had hoped that Scott would agree with me that the business was more important than Mackenzie, that I was somehow justified in what I was doing. Of course, I’d known all along that wasn’t the case. If I’d thought what I was doing was right, I wouldn’t have felt so damn guilty all the time.

“Fine,” I finally said, letting out a breath so that my cheeks billowed. “I’ll talk to her, but I can tell you now, she’ll be pretty pissed.”

“Not as pissed as when she finds out you stabbed her in the back when you actually do win the contract.”

That was true. Scott had nailed it on the head.

“It’s not easy, you know,” I said, staring at the fishing pole.

“What?” Scott asked.

I hesitated before I grinned. “Catching a fucking fish. How long have we been here?”

Scott burst out laughing. “I don’t come for the fish.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “Me either.”

We sat in silence for a moment before I said what I’d meant to say at first.

“I don’t know how to do this. I’m starting to fall for her, which means I really care, and if I lose her...”

“I know,” Scott said softly. “I get it.”

I nodded slowly. If anyone understood that inherent fear of losing someone, it was Scott. We’d both lost more than we’d been able to bear at an age where no one should have to go through that kind of pain. It was stupid that it still affected me so far into adulthood, but the truth was that I’d never opened myself up enough to get hurt like that again. Losing a woman wasn’t the same as losing a sibling to death, but it was the same concept.

Everyone I’d dated before had been easy to forget, easy to get over—I’d never opened myself up enough. Half of them had left because I didn’t open myself up. I’d told the other half off because it hadn’t been worth the effort.

Mackenzie?

She’d come out of left field and knocked me over because I hadn’t expected anything like this. I hadn’t been looking for something. Hell, she was my rival—there was no reason for me to think that I would fall head over heels in love with her.

Now, here we were. I was in love, and I was at risk of losing the one person I’d allowed myself to get attached to since Scott and I had lost what had felt like everything back then.

“It will be okay, you know,” Scott said.

“How do you know?”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t, but it has to be. We’re still here, and we owe it to Jake to live a full life when he couldn’t, you know?”

“I know,” I said softly, and we sat together on the pond again in silence while my mind ran over all the ways I could make this right so that I didn’t have to suffer the pain of losing Mackenzie. I’d already lost enough in my life, and losing her wasn’t something I was willing to go through.

I had to tell her the truth. Yeah, she’d be pissed at me, but maybe we could get past it. Maybe it was one of those things we could look back at one day and laugh about.

Together.

MACKENZIE

“I thought you were too busy with work to come around on a weekday,” Rachel said when I stopped in front of the house, arriving unannounced.

“I just happened to miss you more than usual,” I said and hugged my sister.

“Hey, don’t you dare get all emotional on me,” Rachel said against my shoulder while we held onto each other. “I’m fine. I’ve been fine for a while now.”

It had been a couple of weeks since she’d gone to the hospital, but that didn’t mean I was going to just forget and move on like nothing had happened. It had been a scare, and I’d realized that nothing in this world was finite. I’d already lost my mom, and Rachel had taken over, stepping into that role, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t lose her, too.

“I’m not emotional.” I sniffed. “It’s just so nice to be able to finish a sentence without getting interrupted.”

Rachel pulled back and laughed. “I always miss having alone time and silence, but when they’re gone, even if it’s just school, I miss them.”

I smiled at my sister, and we walked into the house together. I'd come in the morning on purpose so that I could spend time with Rachel without the kids taking over. I loved my nephew and nieces to death but it was impossible to get a word in edgewise when they were around. That was how it was with kids, and I was so happy for Rachel that she had the kids to keep her busy. She'd always wanted a big family, and although it didn't look the way she must have dreamed about it when she was in the house, and then when she had to look after me, nothing was cut-and-paste anymore these days.

"Can I make you coffee?" Rachel asked.

"Please," I said. "I'm dying for a cup." I followed her to the kitchen where she took out two cups. The dishes were stacked high.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get around to these yet."

"Oh, that's fine," I said. "I came here for you, not to judge the height of your dish stack, I know you're busy."

Rachel nodded. She pressed her fingers to the left side of her chest and winced.

"What's wrong?" I asked. My blood ran cold.

"It's nothing," Rachel said.

I studied her face for any signs that she was lying to me.

"How long have you had pains?"

"It's not a big deal, Mackie," Rachel said, but she leaned on the counter, her body double over as she gasped for air.

"I'm calling an ambulance," I said and grabbed my phone.

"No... don't..." She gasped. "It's fine, I just need to... sit down..." She sagged to the ground.

"Rachel!" I cried out and fell to my knees. I shook her shoulder, but she

didn't respond. Her body was limp, and when I managed to roll her over, her lips were blue.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" An operator's voice sounded over the phone.

"I need an ambulance," I gasped into the phone, tears rolling down my cheeks. "My sister fainted, and she's not breathing right. She's been diagnosed with pulmonary embolisms."

The rest was a blur. They took the address, and a couple of minutes later—although it felt like forever—sirens wailed in the distance.

I cradled Rachel's head in my lap and rubbed her chest, hoping that it would do something to help her breathing.

"You just stay with me," I cried, tears streaming down my cheeks. "You have to stick with me, Rach. I can't do this without you. And the kids... God, we need you."

"Ma'am?" someone said behind me, and I jerked around. A paramedic stood behind me in the doorway to the kitchen. "We took the liberty of letting ourselves in."

I nodded and shifted, and they took over. I backed away to give them room and watched as they checked Rachel's vitals, strapped an oxygen mask to her face and lifted her onto a gurney where they secured her.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"Her SATs are low, and her heart isn't as rhythmic as we'd like it, but we're going to get her to the hospital as soon as we can. You can ride with her. It will do her good to hear your voice."

I didn't know if they said that for Rachel's sake or for mine, but I ran with them to the ambulance and got in. They let me sit down next to her and hold

her hand. One paramedic checked her heart rate at regular intervals. The other made sure I was okay and kept checking machines and other equipment.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said through tears. “It’s going to be just fine, we’re getting you some help, and you’ll be okay. You don’t have to worry about the kids, I’ll go get them, and we’ll be just fine at home until you’re ready to come back, too. It’s going to be fine.”

When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, doctors and nurses took over, and I couldn’t go with her. They took her straight into intensive care, and I had to wait outside.

I sagged onto the plastic chairs in the waiting room and tried to pull myself back together, wrapping my arms around my chest as if that would help.

“Mackenzie?” someone asked.

When I looked up, I vaguely recognized the doctor who was looking at me with a concerned expression.

“It’s Scott,” he said, and the pieces fell into place.

“Oh,” I said and scrubbed my cheeks. I sniffed. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you. You’re... a doctor.” Troy had mentioned something about that.

Scott nodded. “Pediatrics. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just...” My throat closed, and my eyes welled with tears again. “I’m sorry. My sister was just brought in. She’s not doing so well, and I don’t know if she’ll make it.”

“Do you have someone I can call for you? Someone who can be with you?”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, I’ll call my brothers, but it will take them a while to get here. I have to go get the kids. I...” Shit. My car was still at Rachel’s house, and I had no transport. “I’ll call a cab to get back to the house.”

“Sit down,” Scott urged gently. “You’re in no state to drive.”

“I can’t leave the kids,” I said.

Scott glanced at his watch. “They’re at school?”

I nodded dumbly.

“They won’t be out for another couple of hours, right? It’s only eleven.”

I nodded again.

“You’ve got time.”

I took a shuddering breath, trying to keep it together. I didn’t want to break down and ugly-cry in front of Scott. I’d only met him twice, and I probably looked like crap with mascara streaks down my cheeks and a red nose.

“Wait here,” Scott said. “I’ll see if I can find someone with answers for you. And something to drink.”

“Thank you,” I said, but he was already gone.

I curled in on myself and waited. I felt lost, forgotten. I noticed others coming in with the same expression on their faces, looking like I felt—panicked, worried, terrified. We all had a world that could fall apart, pain that we had to bear, hope that could be crushed in a second.

“Mackenzie.” When I looked up, Troy was striding toward me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, blinking at him. I wasn’t crying anymore. Now, I just felt numb.

“Scott told me you’re here.” He sat down next to me and stuffed a paper cup with sweet tea in my hand. “I’m so sorry. Is she okay?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I haven’t heard from anyone.”

Troy sat down next to me and put his arm around my shoulder. He pulled me against him, and his proximity and warmth were all I needed to break down again. His being here allowed me to let go, it gave me the permission to stop being the strong one.

He stroked my back while I cried, his chest solid against my cheek, his

arms around me, keeping my world together when I just couldn't do it myself.

I didn't know how long we waited. I managed to stop crying long enough to sip the sweet tea, and the sugar helped me get over the worst of the shock.

"Ms. Frye?" a doctor asked, and I looked up.

"Yeah? How is she?"

"She's sedated and on oxygen right now, and we've started her on blood thinners again. She's stable for now."

I swallowed hard. "For now?"

"We're going to have to operate, and she'll have to undergo a few other treatments, too."

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"I'd be lying if I told you it's not serious, but it's not without hope. We'll do what we can. We're waiting to see how she responds to blood thinners and then we'll take it from there. She'll be here for a few days, at least. Do you have other family you want to call?"

I nodded. "I'll take care of it."

"Good. We'll be in touch."

"Can't I see her?"

"I'm afraid not," the doctor said. "She's sedated, like I said, and she's in the ICU. It won't help; it will just upset you even more."

A shudder ran through my body, and Troy took my hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Let's get you home," Troy said.

I shook my head. "I have to pick up the kids and call my brothers."

"Let's go get the kids together," Troy offered. "I'll drive, you make your calls, and then we'll take the kids back to the house and keep them busy for

the afternoon.”

“You’re willing to do that for me?” I asked.

Troy nodded. “Family comes first, and yours needs you. We’ll figure this out.”

“It’s not *your* family,” I pointed out.

Troy only glanced at me before he led me out of the hospital and to his car.

TROY

Shit.
I'd meant to call Mackenzie and see if I could talk to her tonight, but then Scott had called and told me what was going on, and I'd dropped everything and run.

So far, it didn't look great for Mackenzie's sister, but there was still hope. Hope was everything.

While I drove to the school—she'd programmed the address into my GPS—I listened to her call her brothers, one after the other.

She had a close relationship with all of them. It was easy to tell by the way she talked to them, the way her tears stayed close to the surface and she wasn't scared to cry when she told them what was going on.

I envied that. I had Scott and we were close, but we weren't close at all with our parents. After Jake, my dad shut down and started drinking, my parents got divorced, and my mom went on a soul-searching expedition where she always looked for inner peace and never seemed to find it.

When Mackenzie finally ended the last call, she took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Aaron can’t make it home right away, he’s in South America right now, hiking in some small town. He’ll make his way back but it could take up to a week. Tom will fly in tonight to be with her, and Randall can get away by tomorrow.”

“They all dropped everything?” I asked.

Mackenzie nodded. “Rachel is the glue that keeps this family together. They all grew up together, so they’re all practically joined at the hip. I’m not nearly as close with my brothers as I am with Rachel. They left home while Rachel stuck around to raise me, and—”

She stopped talking when her voice caught in her throat, and she let out a breath through her nose, giving up on her story.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know?” Mackenzie asked.

It sounded so much like the conversation I’d had with my brother yesterday.

“I don’t,” I admitted. “But it has to be, and as long as you have people in your corner, you’re going to make it through.”

Mackenzie pursed her lips and nodded, turning her head toward the window.

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m in your corner, too. Whatever you need, we’ll figure it out.”

She glanced at me. “This shouldn’t be your problem. They’re not your kids, and it’s not your sister.” She scoffed. “I’m not even your *friend*, I’m your rival.”

I shook my head. “It’s just work. In the grand scheme of things, work

doesn't matter."

Mackenzie didn't answer me, but I'd started to realize how serious that statement was. I'd started to understand that I'd had it wrong all these years.

I wished I could talk to her about the project. I wanted to get it off my chest as soon as I could but now wasn't the time.

Mackenzie flipped down the visor to check herself in the mirror.

"Oh, God, I look like crap," she said, scrubbing her cheeks to get rid of the trails of mascara, proof that she'd been crying a lot. "If the kids see me like this, they'll panic and think the worst."

"There are tissues in the glove compartment."

Mackenzie opened it and found the tissues. She cleaned herself up as best she could, and a short while later, we pulled up in front of the school.

"I'll be right back with the kids," she said, opening the door but she turned to me before getting out. "Thank you for doing this."

"Of course," I said. "Go on, I'll be right here." I didn't just mean physically waiting in the car. I would be here for her in any way she needed me.

She nodded and slid out of the car. I watched her walk to the school where she would collect the kids. She was beautiful in so many ways. Her walk was elegant and graceful, and she oozed self-confidence, but today her shoulders rounded like she carried the weight of the world on them, and I wished I could do more to help her through this tough time.

I willed her sister to get through this and not die. I didn't want Mackenzie to lose the one person more important to her than anything else in the world. I wasn't a stranger to pain, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone, least of all Mackenzie, who had a heart of gold and a mind I envied.

I just wanted to see her smile again.

MACKENZIE

Getting the kids home and calmed down enough so they weren't emotional all the time was a juggling act. If one of them started crying, they all got worked up, and I didn't want that. Tammy was old enough to try to control her emotions. I didn't want that for her—I always wanted them to know it was okay to feel whatever they felt—but she was trying for the sake of her siblings.

The oldest one always took the fall for the others, willing to carry them. A pang shot into my chest. Tammy was so much like Rachel in so many ways, doing what needed to be done for her brother and sister rather than putting herself first.

Benjamin was emotional, and Rory was just a mess all the time.

I ended up sitting with her on my lap for most of the afternoon while Troy kicked a ball back and forth on the lawn with Tammy and Benjamin.

I watched him as I cuddled Rory.

I didn't know what I would have done without him. I was always on top of everything in my life, in control of my world. I managed my home, I got one

promotion after the next, and I always knew what was coming and where I was headed.

Now, with Rachel in the hospital and no certainty that she was going to make it through, I felt like my control over everything was slipping. I hated not knowing what the future held; I hated not being able to keep a handle on things because they were just out of my control.

Without Troy here to help me with the kids, I would have been a blubbing mess, and the kids would have been even more upset.

I hadn't known I would find such a kind and caring man in Troy. When we'd met that first night, he'd been nothing more than a source of pleasure and attraction for the night. After that, he'd become my enemy.

He was so much more than that now.

Troy looked at me watching them, and flashed me a grin. I blushed, feeling stupid that he caught me staring at him.

"When's Mommy coming home?" Rory asked.

"I'm not sure, sweetheart," I said, stroking her hair. "But she'll be home soon. The doctors are just making sure she's okay."

"I don't like it when she's sick," Rory said.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't like it, either. But Mommy is strong. She'll always fight the hardest she can to get back to you guys. You know that, right?"

Rory nodded, satisfied by my answer, but a lump rose in my throat. Rachel would fight tooth and nail to get back to her kids, but what if something went wrong and she didn't make it through? What if this thing was bigger than she was and she just couldn't make it?

Terror clutched my heart with icy fingers, and I shivered.

Be positive, I told myself. It's going to be okay.

I just wished I knew that for a fact rather than hoping for the best without

knowing for sure that it would work out right.

“I’m hungry,” Benjamin proclaimed when the sun sank lower in the sky.

“Let’s get a snack,” I suggested. “And then we’ll have spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. How does that sound?”

“I like spaghetti and meatballs,” Troy said. “It’s my favorite.”

“It’s not better than pizza,” Benjamin stated.

“I don’t know, a good meatball can change lives, you know,” Troy said solemnly, and I laughed.

Benjamin crinkled his nose, but Tammy walked to Troy and took his hand.

“I liked spaghetti and meatballs best, too.”

Troy grinned at her. “We’ll have to stick together, you and I. Convince the rest.”

Tammy nodded in determined agreement, and I stood, putting Rory down. Her lip quivered, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, but she didn’t start crying again.

In the kitchen, I put out cookies and milk for the kids the way Rachel always did it. They sat at the kitchen table on their usual seats and ate and chatted and played. I watched them, leaning my hip against the counter.

“How are you doing?” Troy asked.

“I’m okay,” I said. “I’ll be better once I know the facts, but I’m okay for now.”

Troy nodded, hesitating before he spoke again.

“Can I talk to you later?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “Their TV time is in a minute, then I’ll get the food going and we can chat.”

Troy nodded, and my stomach twisted. What did he want to talk about? He’d asked me in such a weird way, making a thing of it.

When the kids were done with their cookies and milk, I sent them to the TV room where Tammy knew how to put on a show for them. I wiped Rory's hands with a wet cloth before she ran away, and we were left alone in the kitchen.

I sighed and rinsed the cloth, hanging it over the sink before I took spaghetti out of the pantry and put the kettle on to boil.

I found meatballs in the freezer, marinara sauce in the pantry, and Rachel's fridge was stocked with salad ingredients.

"What can I do?" Troy asked.

"If you'll put a salad together... I don't know how long I'll be here with the kids, so best get the idea of healthy food in their heads right off the bat." I tried to offer a smile but it was a wan one, my emotions getting the better of me again when I talked about how long I was going to be here.

"On it," Troy said, and he took lettuce, cucumber, cherry tomatoes, feta and avocado out of the fridge. I found a chopping board for him, and he sat down at the table to do his thing while I poured boiling water over the spaghetti to soften it.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked, focusing on the way the pasta got softer, bending in the hot water until I could submerge all of it.

"The project for Johnson and Toussaint," Troy said.

"Did he come back with a date for the presentation?" I asked, alarmed. I wasn't ready to present right now. I had it all worked out but my head wasn't in the game. "I don't know if I can do it right now, I—"

"No, no," Troy said, cutting me off in the middle of my panic. "It's not that. There's no date yet, and I think it will be a while still. You don't have to worry."

I let out a breath.

“Okay, good. I just need to get through this bit with my sister first.”

“I understand,” Troy said. “The project is—”

“Do you mind if we don’t talk about work right now?” I asked, cutting him off. “I know you want to talk about work, and I guess at some point we should get together for another run with that, but I can’t focus on work right now.”

“I really need to discuss the project with you,” Troy pressed on.

I shook my head. “If Johnson hasn’t set a date yet, then there’s no reason to talk about it now. I’m not in the mood, Troy. Everything around me is falling apart and work is the last thing I want to have to worry about right now.”

“I understand that,” Troy said. “I just want to run through the project details —”

“Troy, *please*,” I said. I’d meant to be stern, but my voice wobbled instead, and tears formed in my eyes. It irritated me that I was so close to tears all the time. Nothing had gone wrong yet and the news from the hospital so far wasn’t bad.

Troy looked like he wanted to say something more, but then he let out a breath. “Okay.”

He continued chopping up the salad, and I put the frozen meatballs in the oven to thaw before I threw it all together.

“Tell me about your childhood,” I said. I needed a distraction.

“What about it?”

I shrugged. “Anything. You and Scott are close. It’s always just the two of you? Neither of you really date?”

Troy shook his head. “I guess it’s never been a thing. I mean, if the right person comes along, Scott says he won’t turn her down, but that hasn’t happened for him yet.”

“Hmm,” I said. “It’s a noble way of looking at it. So many people want to be in a relationship for the sake of being in a relationship, and they don’t care about compatibility. It’s always this big race against time, but I don’t get what the point is if it doesn’t make you happy, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Troy said. “I think it should be about happiness, too. Time is relative, anyway. We have a lot more of it than we realize.”

“Or a lot less,” I said softly, thinking about Rachel. I cleared my throat and shook off the thoughts before I got emotional again. I really had to pull myself together. “What about you? Also waiting for the right one to come along?”

Troy hesitated. “I’ve never really been focused on starting a family. I wasn’t exactly waiting; I had other priorities.”

“Had?” I asked. “Past tense?”

Troy looked bashful. “I don’t know, sometimes things change, you know?”

I nodded, although I didn’t know exactly what he was referring to. I knew how things had changed in my own life—work had always been everything, I was serious about making it big and working hard had gotten me there so far. Now that Rachel was sick and the kids were in my care indefinitely, work didn’t matter so much. What mattered was my family and that everything would be okay.

When the spaghetti and meatballs were done, I called the kids, and we sat down for supper. Troy was still here. I hadn’t asked him to stay this long, but I was grateful he did.

We chatted and laughed, and he kept everything upbeat, telling jokes and keeping the kids’ spirits high.

After supper, it was bath time and then bedtime, and it was easier to get them down than I’d thought it would be.

“I think they’re exhausted after the emotions of the day,” I said when I pulled the last door shut and glanced at Troy.

“It’s been a tough one,” Troy said.

“You don’t have to stay this long, you know. You can go home, I’ll be okay.”

“I don’t have anywhere to rush to,” Troy said.

Before I could answer, telling him again that this wasn’t his problem, my phone rang, and Tom’s name flashed on the caller ID.

“Oh, my God, Tommy,” I said. “Are you with her?”

“Hey, squirt,” Tom said, and I heard the smile in his voice. “I just saw her. She’s still in ICU, but she’s awake and doing okay.”

“How does she look?”

“She’s wearing an oxygen mask, so she can’t talk much, but her eyes are bright and she’s serious about getting through this. Rachel is still in there and she’s not going down without a fight.”

I let go of a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“What did the doctor say?”

“She’s not responding to the blood thinners they’d way they like, so they want to take her in for an operation. I’ll sign off on that, of course. Then we’ll see what happens after that.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you think she’s strong enough to make it through an operation?”

“Come on, Mackie, you know what us Fryes are like.”

“Weeds,” I said with a grin.

“Can’t kill us off for shit. It’s going to be fine, okay? We’ll find a way to make this happen.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, ‘To make this happen’?”

Tom hesitated. “Did you know she doesn’t have health insurance?”

“No,” I said. “Why the hell doesn’t she have health insurance?” I’d known things were bad, but I hadn’t realized they were *that* bad. We were all tight on cash but Rachel had it tough having to look after the three kids, too.

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “I didn’t get a chance to talk to her about it after I found out. I spoke to the doctors after seeing her. The operation is going to be expensive, and we can’t cover that kind of cost ourselves.”

“Shit,” I said. My savings had run desperately thin the past while.

“Yeah. I’ll talk to Randall about it tonight, and when Aaron comes back to civilization, we’ll see what we can do—maybe we can all put some funds together.”

“Count me in,” I said. “Whatever it takes. I don’t have much to offer but I can help.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Tom said. “Just keep your chin up, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “Thanks, Tommy. Are you coming here? I’m at Rachel’s with the kids.”

“I booked a hotel for the night. Lydia tagged along, and she has a conference with China that will run through the night. She doesn’t want to impose.”

“You know you’re always welcome,” I said. “We can pull out the couch or something, you know?” All the rooms were taken in the large house, but we could figure it out.

“We’ll come tomorrow, and we’ll tag-team the kids,” Tom said. “Lydia doesn’t want to bother anyone with her calls.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’re doing a school run at seven.”

“We?”

“Oh…” I blushed. “A friend’s staying here with me, helping me out with

the kids.” I was scared Tom would ask more about Troy. I guess tomorrow, he’d meet him anyway.

Tom didn’t ask. Instead, he said, “I’m glad you’re not alone tonight. It’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah,” I said, and we ended the call.

I sighed.

“Everything okay?” Troy asked.

I nodded and explained to him what the doctors had said and what would happen next. I was getting emotional again.

“Everyone keeps saying that everything will be okay, but I can’t believe that as a fact.”

“You have to hold on to hope, Mackenzie,” Troy said.

I nodded. “I know. I just don’t want to keep saying everything will be fine and then crash and burn when it’s not. A part of me wants to believe it will be okay, but a part of me wants to prepare myself for the worst so that when it happens, I can try to get through it.” The more I talked, the more my throat swelled shut, and I struggled to breathe. The walls closed in on me, and I felt like I was falling apart.

“She’s going to die, Troy,” I whispered.

“Hey, she’s not there yet,” Troy said, coming to me and folding me into his arms. “The news so far is good overall. A few hiccups, but you can’t go there yet. Not to death. Wait until after the operation and see what they say before you decide what the next step will be.”

“She can’t afford the operation, and the rest of us don’t have a lot of money we can pool together. I don’t know the cost but it’s not going to be easy, and if she doesn’t get the help soon...”

Troy’s brows knitted together. “I can help you guys.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I don’t want charity.”

“It’s not charity.”

“I can’t take your money,” I said.

“I want to help.”

I shook my head, pushing away from Troy.

“Not unless it’s a loan,” I said. “And even then... I hate taking money from anyone just because we can’t figure it out ourselves. God, that contract will help so much. It will change everything if I can get it through—”

Troy stared at me, swallowed hard, and I didn’t know how to read the expression that flickered across his face.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said again, pulling me closer to him. I let him hold me, and I nodded against Troy’s chest. His arms were strong, wrapped tightly around me and right now, it felt like he could fend off everything bad that might happen.

“Thank you,” I whispered and glanced up at him.

“Of course,” Troy said. “I meant it when I said I’m in your corner.”

He looked down at me, his eyes filled with so much affection, his expression gentle. He pressed his lips against my forehead, and I closed my eyes.

Troy slowly planted kisses on my face, moving over my cheeks, my nose, and then finally, he planted a kiss on my mouth.

I moaned softly and kissed him back.

Now wasn’t the time to have sex—not when it felt like everything was falling apart. But... sex was exactly what I wanted. It was what I needed. I wanted the distraction, the comfort, and Troy had been here offering just that all the time.

When his tongue slid into my mouth, I didn’t stop him. I melted against

him and kissed him back harder, letting him know that this was exactly what I needed.

Troy's hands roved my body, his palms softly tracing every curve and line. His fingertips sent shivers through me that quickly ignited a burning desire. Heat washed through my body and pooled between my legs, and I ached for him. I threw my head back as his lips left mine to trail down my neck, sending a wave of goosebumps over my shoulders and down my arms. I gasped and moaned, panting as my need for him increased.

My hands fumbled with his shirt as I tried to tug it up. I struggled to concentrate. My neck was an erogenous zone, I realized, now that Troy paid attention to licking and nibbling his way toward my shoulder. He murmured a soft laugh against my skin before lifting his head. I pulled up his shirt, revealing his perfect body, and Troy lifted his arms. I pulled up the fabric slowly, revealing his toned chest, and he was as delicious as ever.

I would never get used to staring at him.

I ran my hands over his perfectly chiseled pecks. He was built like a god, and I wanted to taste every inch of him. I leaned my head forward and planted kisses on his chest, lightly scraping my nails over the individual packs as his muscles contracted when it tickled.

When I lifted my head, his eyes met mine—drowning deep and alive with passion and need that made me ache for him even more. Troy took my hand and led me down the long hallway laced with pictures of my childhood. There was a part where it was us together—a family, with my brothers and Rachel and my mom. I was still very young there.

Then the rest of them were all with Rachel, acting as my mom, raising me in this house, and the photos were of happy times, of times when she'd been the matriarch of this house.

A pang shot into my chest when I thought about Rachel. Troy was right—I had to hold on to hope.

I pushed away all the thoughts when we reached the main bedroom and focused just on Troy. I needed him to take all the pain and uncertainty away tonight. I needed him to just be in the moment with me.

Troy seemed to understand what I needed.

When we reached the bedroom, he lowered himself onto the bed, taking me with him as we sunk onto the mattress together. With one arm wrapped around my waist, he pulled me closer until our bodies were pressed against each other from chest to thigh. I loved his closeness. I ran my hand down his side, and he let out a shaky breath.

He kissed me again, more urgently this time, and I was kissing him back, my hands and arms exploring every part of him. His hands roamed over my body, too. We were acting like two people who had been apart for years, not people who had spent so much time together. It felt like a part of me had always been hollow, something crucial had always been missing and now that we were together... I finally felt whole again.

You can't think that way. You barely know him, and he barely knows you.

That might have been true but it didn't feel that way. It felt like we'd known each other for a lifetime and being together was just... *right*.

Troy tugged up my shirt, and I helped him get rid of it. He kissed me again, hands roaming over my bare skin. He undid my bra, tossing it aside, and when he pressed his chest against mine, there was nothing between us. I relished the sensation of his skin on mine. I drank in his closeness and wished that this moment would never end.

Our tongues sparred as we made out. Troy took his time. He moved his body against mine, but he didn't make a move to do anything else. It was like

he felt the same way I did—he drank me in, devouring the taste and the feel of me, the same way I did with him.

Slowly, Troy moved his hands down my body. His hands hooked the waistband of my pants, and he pulled them down.

I wriggled and twisted on the bed, helping him get rid of them.

When I lay only in my panties, Troy sat back on his heels and studied me. He stared at me in awe, like he'd never seen me naked before, but this wasn't our first time.

“What?” I asked and blushed.

“You have no idea how incredible you are,” Troy said, and I blushed harder.

“Not just physically. You're fucking beautiful, Mackenzie, but your heart and your mind... you really are the full package.”

“Troy...” I said, not knowing how to respond to that. Troy was so straightforward with his compliments, and I wasn't used to this kind of attention.

Sure, guys had always told me what they thought I wanted to hear to get into my pants or to get a foot in the door when it came to possibly dating, but none of it had ever really been sincere.

Troy wasn't only straightforward, he was dead honest, too.

I knew I could trust him with everything I had, and when he told me I was incredible, it made me feel like I really could be.

Wasn't that what a relationship was meant to do? It wasn't only about the other person, about Troy and how I felt about him. It was about how I felt about myself when I was around him.

I ignored the fact that I'd just referred to what was happening between us as a relationship. If I started to unpack that, it would come with a whole new

slew of questions, and I wasn't going to ruin the moment by thinking. Or *overthinking*, as I was prone to do sometimes.

Troy didn't let the silence between us become awkward. He kissed me again. While he did, he slid my panties down my legs with his fingers. I felt his bare skin against mine, and I whimpered deep in the back of my throat. I wanted him inside me so bad it was all I could think about. I also wanted to make this last, to take it slow and savor it.

I had thought about him since the last time we'd slept together, but I hadn't let myself want him. We were on opposite sides of a contract, pitted against each other, and this wasn't supposed to happen.

Then again, who said work and pleasure couldn't mix? Besides, we were adults; it wasn't like we were breaking any rules, and we could be mature about it to keep our personal lives and professional lives apart.

Troy's hand trailed down my body, sending my mind into a spin so I stopped thinking. His fingers grazed my core, and I mewled, my breath catching in my throat, before he plunged them inside me. I gasped and arched my back, my nails digging into his back as I rode the wave of pleasure.

He groaned at the sensation of my nails against his skin, his teeth gritted, and he dipped his head into my neck. He sucked my earlobe into his mouth, and I shivered.

He pumped his fingers in and out of me, his movements matching the rhythm of my moans. I was lost in the moment, in the feeling of his fingers filling me up and making me feel alive.

A sense of guilt tugged at me. I wasn't dealing with everything that was going on the right way—I drowned my sorrows and ears in sex and distraction.

Troy was attuned to my body and my reactions—I hadn't met a man so

sensitive—because he pulled his fingers out of me and looked at me with concern in his eyes. “Is everything okay?” he asked, his voice soft and gentle.

I took a deep breath and looked at him, trying to compose myself. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. I covered my face with my hands, suddenly feeling small and vulnerable.

I *hated* feeling small and vulnerable—I was always so on top of things.

Troy wrapped his fingers carefully around my wrist and pulled my hands away. My eyes fell on his, and they were filled with sympathy and care.

He maintained eye contact with me as he shifted his body so that we were lying on our sides, facing each other. He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, the touch of his fingers sending tingles down my spine.

I would never *not* react that way to his touch.

His eyes were piercing into me now, and I found myself being honest with him. “I feel guilty,” I admitted. “This is exactly what I wanted. What I needed. But... I feel like it isn’t the way I should be dealing with everything. Rachel is in the hospital, the kids are asleep down the hall, and I’m in here, doing... this.”

“Mackenzie, you needed this,” he reassured me. He leaned forward and kissed me again, letting his tongue explore my mouth. “You’ve been strong for everyone since your sister got sick. You haven’t shown any weaknesses, and I know that can’t be easy. You’ve been strong for the kids, upbeat, making sure everything is as normal as possible. It’s okay to not be okay. It’s okay to fall apart sometimes, or to need a release, or to take care of yourself once in a while.”

“I just feel like my emotions are going to overwhelm me if I don’t do something to release them,” I told him. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and I had to blink them away. I hated looking weak and pathetic, too.

“Then do it,” he said. “Lose yourself in me. In us.”

His fingers reached down between my legs and dragged along my wet slit, making me gasp. He slipped a finger inside me, and I moaned as he thrust it in and out of me slowly. His thumb brushed over my clit, and I knew I wouldn't last much longer. The orgasm had already been building, and his hands—and his support—just pushed me closer to the edge.

I leaned my head against his shoulder, and he reached up with his other hand to cup my breast. The gentle movement of his fingers inside me, coupled with the rhythm of his thumb on my clit had me quickly building toward an orgasm. He tugged at my nipple, and it was what pushed me over, letting me fall into the abyss of pure pleasure.

I cried out as the orgasm washed over me, carrying me away to a plane of pure ecstasy. I curled on the bed, gasping and moaning softly, trying to keep it down until the peak of the orgasm took my breath away.

When the orgasm subsided, I gasped for air, panting in the aftermath of pleasure.

Troy grinned at me.

“You're so hot when you orgasm.”

I blushed, and Troy undid his pants, getting rid of them so that he was naked, too. He kicked off his pants, pulled a condom from its pocket, and with ease, he wrapped himself up.

Troy rolled onto me, his body covering mine, and my legs fell open for him.

He gently pushed into me, and I groaned as he filled me up. I could tell he was taking his time. We'd done this before, but his size was still a challenge, and he gave me the time I needed to adjust. My body stretched, accommodating his size, and I let out a breath in a shudder. He gripped my

hips and began to thrust into me, and I gasped as the pleasure spread through my body, making me hotter and hotter, and pushing me toward another orgasm.

I closed my eyes and got lost in the feel of him. Troy filled me up to the brim, and the sensation of him stroking in and out of me was amazing. He hit all the right places as he pushed into me and retreated again.

It didn't take me long to climax again. Pleasure crashed into me over and over, like waves on the sea, and I cried out. I bit my lip and tried to keep it down for the kids, but it was hard to keep quiet when the pleasure was so intense.

Troy grabbed my breasts, tweaking my nipples as I writhed under his direction.

He'd slowed down his pace to draw out my orgasm, to give me time to focus on the feel of the pleasure that spread from my core, but he pushed into me again, picking up his pace. I opened my eyes, and my gaze locked on his.

Troy's face was riddled with concentration, his brows knitted together, and teeth gritted as he grunted and groaned.

I reached up, cupped his cheek, and he turned his head to plant a kiss on my palm.

He picked up his pace, moving faster still. My breasts jiggled, and his strokes shortened as he brought himself closer and closer to climax.

It drew out the orgasm that had started to fade for me, bringing it back with renewed intensity and our breaths mingled as we gasped and moaned in the throes of our pleasure.

When he was close, Troy pushed into me as deep as he could go, and I felt his orgasm roll over him. His muscles contracted, his body becoming rigid against mine, and he moaned. He came, his cock pulsating and jerking, and I

cried out, my orgasm doubling in intensity as I felt him release inside of me. As my body quivered and convulsed, he released my breast he'd been holding onto, then smoothed his hand down my body, still holding himself up with the other hand. He grabbed my ass and pulled me toward him, throwing his head back and grunting with pleasure as his cock twitched inside me with every wave of my orgasm.

The intensity faded, becoming gentler, and it allowed us to catch our breaths.

I felt a mixture of emotions, each one so intense that it was hard to differentiate between them.

I felt the familiar sting of tears at the edges of my eyes, and I squeezed them shut tightly. I didn't want to cry, but I was so ridiculously emotional. The intensity of our orgasms made me feel raw. So much had happened in the past while that I felt like I was losing myself in all of it.

Troy slipped out of me and collapsed on the bed next to me. He breathed hard, catching his breath.

When he got up, he walked to the bathroom, and it didn't take long before he came back again, getting onto the bed with me. He pulled me tightly against him, my back against his chest, and I relished the warmth that seeped into my skin.

"It's going to be okay," Troy said.

"I know," I whispered.

Troy put his hand under my chin and tilted my head so that I looked over my shoulder at him. He leaned up on one elbow. "I know it's tough, but I want to be here for you."

I opened my mouth to object, but he put a finger to my lips. "Let me," he repeated.

I kissed his finger, then wriggled and rolled around so that we were facing each other. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my head in his shoulder. He held me close, his hands running through my hair.

“I don’t know what to expect,” I whispered. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I want Rachel to make it, but I’m scared if I hope for that, it will knock me too hard if I lose her. I don’t want to think I’m going to lose her, though, because that’s not fair on her or the kids. Or me.”

I felt his body tense up, and when he spoke, his voice was firm and resolute. “Whatever happens, I know you’re going to be okay,” he said, shaking his head. “I know loss is hard, and I don’t think it will come to that, but if it does, we’ll work our way through that, too.”

I looked up and met his eyes. “How?” I asked. “How are we going to do that?”

“We’re going to do it by being honest,” he said. “By accepting that things will be hard, but we’re stronger than that.”

“I don’t know if I am,” I said quietly. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes again, and I tried to blink them away. I’d dealt with loss before, but I’d been so young then. Now, it was very different.

“You are,” he said. “You’re the strongest woman I know. And if you say you can do it, then I know you can.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. In the darkness, when we were stripped down to our rawest selves, it was easy to be honest, to say the words that had been pressing heavily on my heart. I would never admit in the light of day that I was terrified, that I doubted, that I didn’t know if I could deal with this, but with Troy... I could be open and honest with him, and I knew he would understand.

He’d gone through so much, too. If anyone understood, it was him.

“I do,” he said. He cupped my face in his hands and kissed me.

“What if it all falls apart?” I asked. “I’m so scared of that.”

“It won’t,” he said. “And even if it does, I’ll still be here to help you.”

“You will?”

He nodded. “I’m here, no matter what,” he said. “I’ll be here to catch you when you fall, to cry with you if it all goes wrong... but I’ll also be here to celebrate when it all goes right. I still believe that’s what will happen.”

“It’s a mess you’ve walked into.”

“No one is perfect,” Troy said. “Life isn’t about finding someone without a difficult life, right? It’s about finding someone you can handle a difficult life *with.*”

He pressed his lips against my head, and I closed my eyes, letting Troy’s arms be my castle, letting him fight away the darkness and the fear and everything else that plagued me.

I was always on my own, doing things without help because that was just who I was. Since I’d met Troy, I’d realized I wasn’t the only person who’d been through difficult times, and it helped so much to know that he was there for me, that he understood, and that no matter what, I could count on him.

It was ironic that everyone had always tried to be in my life, and I’d pushed them away, and now the one person I was supposed to push away had become the person I needed in my life.

Life was full of little ironies like that.

Rachel getting sick with the same thing my mom had, as if history was set on repeating itself.

The one-night stand I was set on walking away from, the guy who ended up in my life.

Troy Larson, my rival, the man I was falling in love with.

TROY

I wanted to stay with her and the kids to make sure she was okay. When I'd found her at the hospital, I'd known she'd needed my help. Not only with the kids but also so that she could keep going.

The next morning, though, her brother Tom and his wife Lydia arrived at the house to help with the kids, and I knew I wasn't needed anymore.

I'd left soon after the school run, not meeting either of them. I wasn't ready to meet the family just yet, even if the circumstances weren't exactly normal. Meeting the family, letting them know that there might be something between us was way too official. I had to figure out how I felt about her first.

I had to figure out how to talk to her about this stupid project and how I'd fucked up. There was no way I could meet any family and pose as her would-be boyfriend with this hanging over my head.

Thinking of myself as her boyfriend pulled me up short. That was where this was headed, no doubt. I couldn't keep being there for her, falling for her, and not want to take the next step. Hell, if I had Mackenzie by my side for the rest of my life, I wouldn't complain about it one bit.

I just had to figure this out first. I couldn't do any of that without talking to her, without clearing the air and making sure she was still interested in me at all after I'd effectively tried to sabotage her career.

That had all been before I'd really gotten to know her the way I did now, before I'd realized how tough things were for her. Taking away the one thing she still had that was stable in her life wouldn't just be a betrayal, it would be downright villainous.

The next two days, I argued with myself all the time. I had to tell her as soon as I could, but with how things were going for her, I didn't know how to bring it up without causing more shit. She hadn't wanted to talk to me about work when I'd been at her place.

It had sucked, but I'd also understood it.

Now, after the night we'd spent together, I was more serious than ever about clearing things between us and coming clean to her.

I sat in front of my laptop, reviewing my project. It was good—better than anything I'd done before. I liked to think it was thanks to Mackenzie. She inspired me to do things differently, to look at everything through fresh eyes, and the project had turned out incredible because of it.

My phone rang, and I grabbed it, answering before I checked the caller ID. I'd been waiting for news on Mackenzie's sister's operation status and how they were managing putting funds together, and she hadn't let me know anything yet. I hadn't wanted to push for answers while she was with her family. The idea of accepting money was hard for her but I wished she would just take it.

“Is everything okay?”

“Larson,” a male voice said, and I pulled the phone away to look at the screen.

Shit.

“Mr. Johnson,” I said with a smile. “It’s good to hear from you.”

“I need you and Frye to come in this afternoon,” Johnson said.

“What?”

“I need that presentation done. I’m flying out to France first thing in the morning, and Toussaint is coming back with me. I want to have everything taken care of before I see him so I can present our ideas right off the bat.”

“This afternoon is so soon,” I said, my stomach dropping.

“And you’ve had more than enough time to prepare, I’m sure,” Johnson snapped.

“Yeah, of course,” I said. It wasn’t the preparation that was the problem.

“I’ll see the two of you right after lunch. I trust you’ll make it work with your schedule.”

Damn it.

“We’ll see you later,” I said.

Johnson ended the call without a response.

My stomach twisted into a knot of pure panic.

I picked up the phone to call Mackenzie. I had to take care of this right now.

“Can you talk?” I asked when Mackenzie answered the phone.

“I’m headed into a meeting. Can I call you afterward? I should be out by lunch.”

“Johnson just called and bumped up the presentation to today. Just after lunch.”

“Shit,” Mackenzie said.

“I really need to talk to you—”

I heard someone talk to Mackenzie in the background before she addressed

me again.

“Sorry, Troy. I have to go. I guess I’ll see you at Johnson’s office after lunch.”

“No, Mackenzie, just—”

She ended the call before I could say anything else.

Shit. I was in trouble. A *lot* of trouble.

I dialed Scott’s number.

“Can you talk?” I asked the same question I’d asked Mackenzie.

“Yeah, I just got out of surgery. What’s up?”

Thank God someone was able to have a conversation with me.

“Mackenzie and I are presenting today.”

“Okay,” Scott said, showing me he was listening.

“I didn’t tell her.”

“What?” Scott asked, the shock clear in his voice. “Why the fuck not?”

“I couldn’t,” I said. “It’s been a really tough time, and I couldn’t find a chance to.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Present, I guess,” I said and let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do. I don’t have much of a choice.”

“You always have a choice,” Scott said.

“I can’t talk to her until the presentation; she’s in a meeting until then, and when we’re there... well, it won’t make much of a difference then, will it? There’s nothing I can do.”

“I’d let her have the contract,” Scott said simply. “Let her have your presentation, if that’s what it takes.”

“What!?” I cried out.

“What’s the alternative?” Scott asked.

I bristled, irritated with his suggestion, irritated with myself.

“I don’t know,” I said after thinking for a moment.

“Everyone has a choice,” Scott said. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I don’t get the contract!” I cried out.

“But you get the girl.”

“Relationships don’t last.”

“That’s your excuse? You’re going to let this go on because you figure it’ll fail eventually, anyway?”

“Don’t tell me that people stick around,” I snapped. “Don’t tell me that life isn’t full of heartache and pain.”

“This isn’t about Jake, Troy,” Scott said, his voice hard. “Not everything is. In fact, these days, nothing is about him anymore. You have to let that shit go.”

I was so angry, I saw red.

“If you want to let Jake go, that’s on you. I’m not going to let him slip away as if he never existed. He was our *brother*, Scott.”

“And we lost him when we were kids. At some point, Troy, you have to stop holding onto the dead and start living.”

I hung up in Scott’s ear, not letting him say anything else. I hated what he was saying, hated that he suggested I forget my brother ever existed. I couldn’t do that to Jake, and I couldn’t do that to myself.

I stood and walked to the bar in my office, pouring myself a whiskey. I threw it back, gulping all the contents without coming up for air. I poured another and did the same. By the third, I slowed down and took the glass in a couple of sips, but barely.

My head started to spin, and the alcohol burned in my veins. Good, that was what I wanted. I needed to numb the pain before I went in there and

presented the project to Johnson. Or gave the contract to Mackenzie, forfeiting from the get-go.

It didn't matter which way I went with that; I was going to lose something. Mackenzie, or the contract.

One way I could fix what was going on with Rachel, and Mackenzie needed the contract, was if I paid for that operation. They didn't need to know where the money came from, I could do it anonymously. I just had to eliminate that part of the reason she had to get the contract.

You can't buy your way out of a tough spot, thinking that throwing money at it will make it any less immoral.

I squashed the voice in my head.

Damn it, I wished it was different. I wished I'd never gunned for the project in the first place.

Or never met Mackenzie.

Or... something.

I wished a lot of things, but wishes didn't have a habit of coming true in my life, so why bother wishing at all?

MACKENZIE

I flushed the toilet and wiped my mouth, pushing up from the cubicle floor. I blew my nose with toilet paper, wiped my mouth another time, and stepped out.

When I looked at myself in the mirror, I was pasty. I felt sick to my stomach, and I'd thrown up at least four times this morning. I'd thought it was something I'd eaten at some point, but no one else who'd eaten with me was sick.

Just me.

Maybe it was nerves about this stupid project, the presentation that had come out of nowhere in the worst week of my life.

Maybe it was because none of us could put together enough cash to get Rachel that operation she needed, and without it, she was getting worse, not better. I was terrified that, in the end, we were going to lose her altogether.

Tom and Lydia were in the house with the kids this week, looking after them so that I could focus on my job. I wished I could be there with them, spending time with my family in this time of need, but I had to focus on my

career if I didn't want that to fall apart completely, too. I'd already missed a lot of days at work and if I lost my sister, I was going to need the safety net of my career to catch me, to bury myself in when I didn't cope with her death.

When I was a kid, I hadn't had anything to throw myself into this way. I'd had Rachel to look out for me, to comfort me.

If I lost her... well, at least I had healthy—or unhealthy—coping mechanisms in place.

I splashed water on my face to try to calm down the feverish feeling and reapplied my makeup that I'd wiped off after my eyes had teared up while I'd heaved over the toilet.

"This is going to be fine," I said. "I'm going to be fine."

My phone rang.

"Hails," I said when I saw who it was. "God, it's good to hear a friendly voice."

"Are you okay?" she asked right away.

"Yeah, I'm just having a rough day." It was a lot more than a rough *day*. It had been a couple of rough days in a row. I told her what had been going on. It had been a while since we'd talked, with her being busy, too.

I should have gone back to my office to eat something and prep for the presentation I had in an hour, but I couldn't even think about food, and I needed a friend now more than I needed to prep for something I'd already perfected a while ago.

"That sounds awful," Hailey said sympathetically after I'd explained it all to her. "And Troy has been there for you the whole time?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's been pretty great."

"So... what are you? Are you together?"

“I don’t know,” I admitted. He’d been such a pillar of strength the last while, and we clearly had a connection but we hadn’t at any point discussed what was going on between us. It was a topic we’d both been avoiding rather than facing head-on because we were on either side of an invisible line with this contract hanging between us. “I guess I’ll figure it out after we know what happens today. I just hope I don’t get sick in the presentation.”

“What do you mean?” Hailey asked.

“I’ve been throwing up all day,” I said. “I don’t know what I ate or what’s going on.”

“That doesn’t seem like you,” Hailey said.

“No, it’s not at all, but I’ve been stressing a lot lately, you know, with Rachel and everything.”

“Hmm,” Hailey said. “What about protection?”

“Excuse me?”

“Have you and Troy been using protection?”

“I’m on the pill,” I said.

“Yeah, but those things fail, you know. So do condoms, sometimes.”

“I’m not pregnant,” I said firmly, but my stomach clenched and twisted and I felt sick again. “I can’t be. It has been...” I wanted to say *long enough* but that wasn’t true. Since the first night we’d slept together, it was more than long enough. When I tried to calculate when my last period had been, I failed. It shouldn’t have been that long ago that I couldn’t pin a date on it.

Shit.

With everything going on with Rachel, I hadn’t stopped to notice that I was late.

“I’m not pregnant,” I said again, but my voice was thin, and I didn’t sound as convincing as the first time.

“Look, just go get a test. Maybe it’s really just something you ate and it’s a false alarm, but you can’t be too safe, you know?”

I snorted at the double meaning of her statement.

“I have to go,” I said, not answering her. “I have to prepare for this presentation and get it over with, and then I’ll worry about the rest once it’s over.”

“Good luck,” Hailey said. “And call me once you find out.”

“I will,” I said.

“About your period, too,” Hailey added. “Not just about the contract.”

We ended the call, and my stomach twisted again. I pressed my fingers to my lips and tried to breathe through the wave of nausea. I couldn’t be pregnant. I couldn’t have a baby. I had a career I wanted to build, and with Rachel so sick, I had no support network.

I pushed the thoughts away. I couldn’t think about that right now. I had to focus on the presentation and getting this contract. If I did, a promotion could be in my near future, and it would change everything for me—my reputation and my income.

If it turned out I was having a baby, I could definitely use the cash injection.

You’re not pregnant, I told myself, looking in the mirror again. I slid my hand onto my lower abdomen.

There was no way. I was just sick from something I ate or from the stress. The fact that my period was late could also be attributed to stress, and I’d really been going through it lately.

I left the ladies’ room, walking back to my office so that I could collect my things for the presentation. As soon as it was over and I knew what was next, I could focus on other things.

Like a promotion.

Like what was going between me and Troy.

Like if I was going to have a baby.

TROY

The closer it came to the presentation, the worse I felt. I pressed my hand against my neck and twisted it, trying to release some tension. My hands were clammy with sweat, and I rubbed one palm against my pants while I drove, and then the other, swapping hands on the wheel.

My mind spun. Maybe that could be attributed to the alcohol I'd just consumed. It had been stupid of me to drink at all—I was on the road now and about to deliver a presentation that would dictate the future of my company—but my emotions had been all over the show, and it had been the only way I could curb them.

Alcohol had been my crutch for a long time. Not so much that it was a problem, but it was safe to say that I didn't have a healthy way of dealing with events I couldn't control. Between drinking and work, I could balance myself out, but without it, I was lost.

I glanced at my phone against the dash in the dock where I always put it while I drove. I hadn't had a call or message from Mackenzie since we'd talked this morning. I'd hoped she would call me so that we could talk. I'd

tried to reach her twice already, but her phone had been off both times. Probably that meeting she'd been in.

I'd expected she would call me back once she powered it up and saw my missed calls, but there was nothing.

I didn't want to be that guy and call her a third time. I didn't want to seem needy or clingy. Besides, with what I felt like now, it was probably better we didn't talk. What the fuck would I even say? It was too close to the presentation to come clean.

I could either let her have the contract or carry on with the plan the way I'd had it before I'd started caring about her.

You always have a choice.

Damn it, if only it were that simple. The problem was that it really wasn't that simple at all, and I didn't know how I was supposed to give up on something that had been the only constant in my life when I hadn't been willing to turn to anyone or anything else.

Scott made it sound like giving it all up for a girl was totally worth it—and Mackenzie was worth it in so many ways—but it was hard to give up something when it was the only thing I'd ever known. My company, my work, had been the only constant thing in my life, and I'd meant it when I'd said that relationships and people were fleeting.

I parked at the Elecoms building and got out. I looked around for Mackenzie's car but didn't spot it.

Was she still on her way?

When I walked into the building and announced myself, the secretary sent me straight up to Johnson's floor, and I found him in the boardroom.

When I walked in, my steps faltered. Johnson was already there, upright and stern in his gray suit, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

Mackenzie already sat at the boardroom table. She wore a dress suit, which didn't look like her usual style but she was still sexy as hell.

And beautiful. Her beauty always struck me, especially now that I'd gotten to know her so much better. She had an inner beauty to her that shone through and added a whole new level to her already incredible looks.

When Mackenzie looked at me, her eyes were guarded. She looked like she hadn't slept well in a while, with dark circles under her eyes. They were carefully patched up with makeup, but I'd come to know her well enough to know what she looked like when she was tired.

She looked frayed.

Everything about her was perfectly in place, though, and I doubted Johnson saw through her mask the way I did.

"Ah, you made it, Larson," Johnson said.

I nodded. "I'm here and ready to rumble."

"We're just waiting on Toussaint," Johnson said, checking the time. "He should be here any moment."

We waited for a while.

"I don't know what's keeping him," Johnson said, getting more and more irritated. "I'll have to get my secretary to call him. In the meantime, why don't we just—"

Johnson's phone rang, cutting him off. When he looked at the caller ID, he cursed under his breath.

"I have to take this, if you'll excuse me a moment," he said and pressed the phone against his ear before either of us could respond. When he left the boardroom, Mackenzie and I were alone together.

"Are you okay?" I asked, stepping closer to her.

"I've been better," she admitted. "It will be good to have this out of the

way.”

I nodded and took another step closer. “Listen, about the presentation...” I leaned in. “We have to talk about this.”

“Are you... drunk?” Mackenzie asked with a frown. “God, Troy, you smell so much like booze!”

“Oh,” I said, shaking my head. “No, I’m not... well, okay, maybe I’m tipsy, but I had to talk to you.”

“About what?” she asked. She looked suspicious now.

“About the project. You can’t present.”

“Why not?” Mackenzie asked.

“Because you won’t get it.”

Mackenzie frowned. “Excuse me? Why wouldn’t I get it? I’m as good as you are.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I said. “Mine will be what Johnson wants, and you won’t get the contract, so you—”

“I thought we were in this together,” Mackenzie said. “I mean, I knew we were going for the same contract, but I thought this petty competition thing was really just about work. Why are you being like this?”

“I’m not being like anything. I’m trying to tell you—”

“That my presentation is crap and you’ll win,” she said. “Yeah, I heard you the first time.”

“I’m just saying, Johnson expects something different from what you’re going to show him. He and Toussaint both.”

“Oh, thanks for that,” Mackenzie said sarcastically. “All this time you’ve been telling me how good my presentation is, and now you change gears on me? What the hell, Troy?”

It was coming across all wrong. Damn it, I really shouldn’t have had

anything to drink.

“Just hear me out,” I said. I was getting more and more urgent. “You really just have to take my—”

“I don’t want anything from you,” Mackenzie snapped. “You may think that you’re better than me but I guess we’ll just have to see what Johnson and Toussaint think, won’t we?”

“I know what they—”

“Will you stop?” Mackenzie hissed. “I thought we were better than this. I thought we were above it. I can’t believe...” She shook her head. “I can’t believe you.” The last part she added in a soft voice, so soft that it almost broke my heart.

“Mackenzie,” I said firmly. “Please, just—”

“No,” Mackenzie said, her voice hard. “Don’t say anything else. I know that you’ve been through hell and back but to kick me when I’m already down is low, even for you. I don’t care what we are and where we’ve been; you don’t get to do that to me just because this is about work. You don’t get to break me down and get in my head, and you sure as shit don’t get to tell me that I’m not good enough.”

“That’s not what I mean at all.”

“I know work is everything to you because you lost your brother, but that doesn’t mean you get to step on everyone around you.”

“Don’t you dare bring him up,” I said, my panic turning into anger. “You have no idea—”

“I think I do,” she sneered. “You’re not the only one that’s been through a tough time. You don’t own the monopoly on heartache. The rest of the world carries on just fine without letting it affect who they are and what they do,

and if you can't get with that picture, then that makes you an asshole, no matter how hard you want to play the victim."

Her eyes widened as if she was as shocked at her words as I was. I stared at her. Her words stung like she'd physically slapped me.

Scott's words echoed in my mind.

Not everything is about Jake. You have to let that shit go.

"You don't get to minimize my pain just because you had a replacement," I hissed at her, furious now.

"What?" She paled. "Do you think losing my mom hurt less because I had Rachel to look after me? You have Scott, how is this any different!"

"Scott isn't Jake."

"Rachel isn't my mom!"

"Then why are you so twisted up about her sickness?"

When the words left my mouth, I knew how fucked up it sounded and that I was being completely unfair. Mackenzie pursed her lips, her eyes spewing fire at me, but in them there was pain, too.

"I guess we really are on opposite sides here," she said. She looked like she wanted to cry. "May the best man win."

"I plan to," I said coldly.

"Sorry about that," Johnson said, walking in. Toussaint followed behind him. "And we're all gathered now, too. Let's get started, shall we?"

I watched Toussaint. He oozed confidence, and he knew he was here because he was damn good at his job. He had a product that was highly coveted, and knowing that he had the final say gave him an air of arrogance that would have been irritating if it wasn't the big break my company needed if I got this contract.

Toussaint smiled broadly at both of us.

“I’m excited about what’s going to come of this working relationship,” Toussaint said when he shook Mackenzie’s hand first and then mine. “Monsieur Johnson has a lot of good things to say about both of you. I’m spoiled to have a choice and not forced to take something because there is nothing else.”

“I’m sure we’ll find exactly what you’re looking for,” Johnson said smoothly.

God, what a suck-up. I’d never liked the jerk, and Elecoms had been a thorn in my side. It was only now that working with them would catapult me to the next level that I saw them as an equal and not just a pain in my ass. I’d always seen them as a pretentious company that sucked up to the big guys to get somewhere rather than through sheer talent.

I guess that was still true, considering they were sourcing out the good stuff to either Mackenzie or me.

Me, in this case. I had it in the bag, and I knew it.

I glanced at Mackenzie, feeling like shit that we’d fought, but a part of me had switched off, and right now, it was all about winning. That was all I had left, anyway. It was all that fucking mattered when everything else always seemed to crumble in my life.

Mackenzie glared at me before she offered Toussaint a warm smile. I stared daggers at her, furious at her, furious at myself. This was exactly what I was scared of—that the person I had, the person I cared about, would slip away, and I’d be left with nothing. If I lost this contract, and I’d already lost her, then I had nothing. If I got the contract, I’d still have my work, and I didn’t care how everyone kept telling me I was being ridiculous for fighting on about something long gone. It was my right to feel the way I felt.

“Who’s going first?” Johnson asked.

“I’ll go first,” Mackenzie said, volunteering.

I watched her stand, turning on the projector that streamed from her laptop, and she started talking about the way the world worked, the way beauty was embedded in everything, the way we could find it if we just looked hard enough.

She had a point. I understood what she meant, and the way she looked at things was awe-inspiring, to say the least. I’d felt that way about it when she’d explained it to me the first time, too, talking about stars and dreams.

She was fucking good at her job, and she would have gotten this contract easily.

If I’d let her.

I’d felt like a dick about doing this to her, sabotaging her future, forcing her to give up the spot that she would probably have gotten... until a couple of minutes ago. Now, I was pissed off. I was so furious about what she’d said to me about Jake, and the combination of my stewing anger and the alcohol that still ran through my blood created a blend of resentment that overshadowed everything else.

“That’s why I think if we look at the bigger picture, then you’re going to get the attention you want, Mr. Toussaint,” Mackenzie said in conclusion to her presentation.

It had been spectacular. It had just been for the wrong kind of advertisement, the original brief, not what Johnson had forwarded me after that.

Johnson and Toussaint were silent, mulling over what Mackenzie had said.

“I’m not sure that is exactly what I was looking for,” Toussaint said, rubbing his chin.

“What do you mean?” Mackenzie asked, her brows knitting together.

“It isn’t exactly what I asked for,” Toussaint said.

Mackenzie looked confused. “I thought it was exactly what you asked for.”

“Let’s hear what Monsieur Larson has to say,” Toussaint said and looked at me eagerly.

I swallowed and stood, flashing a charming smile.

“Thank you for allowing me the chance to blow you away,” I said. I glanced at Mackenzie. Her glares had been replaced by confusion and uncertainty.

Toussaint nodded, and I started my presentation.

Instead of focusing on the *big picture*, looking at billboards and television ads, I focused on something a lot closer to home, something intimate and romantic—I suggested an event where we invited everyone to wear the jewelry to see how it looked on them. It was hard for people to take off something they became attached to.

Effectively, I was suggesting allowing them to test-drive the jewelry.

I didn’t once look at Mackenzie while I presented, but from the corner of my eye, I was aware of the way she paled, blood draining from her face, and her features became sallow and defeated.

“I believe the only way to the buyers’ hearts is by selling them their own emotions and their own experience,” I said, concluding.

Toussaint shook his head and slow-clapped.

“Magnifique,” he said. “That is exactly what I had in mind. You were right, Marc, telling me that these people knew what they were doing.”

I grinned at them. When I glanced at Mackenzie, she’d closed in on herself, and she looked like she wanted to disappear. A pang of guilt shot into my chest, but the damage had been done.

It was better to just own it.

“You stuck to the brief perfectly,” Toussaint said, shaking my hand. “I don’t think there’s reason to postpone the decision.”

Mackenzie was silent. I’d expected her to argue, but she didn’t say anything or show anything at all. She sat motionless, staring at the table while Toussaint lost his mind about how great the presentation was and how excited he was to hear my other ideas.

“Great show,” Johnson said and shook my hand, too. “I’ll get the paperwork drafted and we can move forward with the project.”

“I’d like that,” I said.

Johnson and Toussaint both left the boardroom, still talking.

When we were alone, Mackenzie stood and cleared her throat.

“Congratulations,” she said dully. “It was a good presentation.”

I pursed my lips together.

She shook her head. “I don’t know how I could have gotten it wrong. I really thought that I was on the right track. Well, you deserve it, clearly.” She turned toward the door. She didn’t know I’d done something wrong. She thought she’d fucked up. If I just left it at that, she would never blame me for that.

She took a step toward the door.

You’ll get off scot-free.

She took another step.

She’ll always think she was the one who got it wrong.

“Mackenzie,” I said.

If she finds out what you did, she’ll be pissed.

“If you don’t mind, Troy, I’m tired. It’s been a long day.” She sighed heavily.

Let her go and let it be.

“It was me,” I blurted out.

“What?” she asked with a frown.

“The presentation, the reason you got it wrong... it was my fault.”

“I don’t understand,” Mackenzie said, shaking her head.

Yeah, I was screwing up even more. What the hell was wrong with me? I should have just kept my mouth shut, but the idea of her blaming herself, doubting herself, on top of everything else she was going through, made me feel like shit.

I hadn’t exactly been chivalrous, or moral, for that matter. It hadn’t really mattered that much to me before—it was a dog-eat-dog world—but this wasn’t just anyone. This wasn’t a work rival, a company I hated. This was Mackenzie.

I let out a breath. “Johnson emailed me the updated brief, asking me to send it to you, and I didn’t.”

Mackenzie’s frown deepened. “What are you saying?”

I didn’t answer her, letting her put two and two together.

Her eyes widened. “You sabotaged me?”

“I didn’t know you, then. Not the way I know you, now.”

“Does that matter?” she asked, hurt and anger warring for first place on her face, her expression changing and changing again. “You didn’t at any point think to tell me when you *did* get to know me?”

“I tried.”

“When!?” she cried out.

I couldn’t answer that. I’d had so much time to tell her, but I hadn’t, and now it was too late.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Mackenzie’s face sobered, her emotions slipping away as her

expressionless mask fell into place.

“For what? You got the contract, just as you wanted it.”

“For hurting you,” I said.

Mackenzie laughed bitterly.

“Don’t lie to me, Troy. You’re not sorry, not one bit.”

“Don’t tell me what I feel.”

“Oh, now,” Mackenzie said, “to do that, I would have to assume you give a shit about me and as we just established... you don’t.”

She turned around and walked out of the boardroom, leaving me behind in the wake of my own destruction.

Yeah, I’d done it now. I’d fucked it all up.

She was wrong. I cared. I cared so much. Seeing her walk away stung like a bitch.

But that was why I didn’t do this—I didn’t get close to anyone because losing them was a special kind of hell I had no intention of revisiting time and time again. Losing her now was better, so that it was the end of it, and then I could move forward.

I had a company that would do well now, thanks to the contract I’d just gotten. Yeah, so I hadn’t won it fair and square, but winning was winning, right?

Why, then, didn’t it taste sweet?

It tasted bitter. So fucking bitter.

MACKENZIE

After everything that had gone wrong the past couple of days, it was almost expected that when I looked at the pregnancy test I'd just taken, it was positive.

I flipped down the toilet lid and sat on it, pushing my hand into my hair.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

I'd lost the contract for the Elecoms project.

Rachel was still in hospital and not showing any signs of getting better. She wasn't getting worse, either, which was something I should have been happy about, but she still wasn't out of the woods just yet.

And then there was Troy.

"Are you home?" I asked Hailey when I called her.

"I just got in," she said. "What's up?"

"Can I come over?" I asked. "I just need a friendly face."

"Of course," Hailey said. "You're always welcome."

I ended the call, grabbed my things together, and left to go to Hailey's place. When I got there and she opened the door, I burst into tears. I hadn't

meant to go there and start crying right away. I hadn't realized my tears were so close to the surface, but the moment she'd looked at me, I hadn't been able to hold back.

"Oh, no," she said, pulling me into a hug. "It's going to be okay."

"It's not," I cried into her shoulder.

Hailey rubbed my back while I sobbed until I pulled it together enough to snivel and looked up at her.

"I'll put on coffee," she said. "Unless you need something stronger."

"I can't," I said and new tears welled in my eyes.

"Oh," Hailey said softly, understanding exactly what I meant.

I followed her into the apartment and stood in her small open-plan kitchen while she made us each a cup of coffee with her new fancy machine.

"Tell me," she said.

I took a shuddering breath and told her about the presentation and what had happened. I told her about what Troy had said and that he hadn't told me about the new brief.

Hailey handed me my cup of coffee somewhere in the middle of my story, and when hers was ready, we walked to the couch together.

"I can't believe he would do that to you," Hailey said, shaking her head, incredulous.

"Yeah," I said softly. "Me either."

"So... what are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "I guess I'll go back to work, take the heat for losing the contract, and keep moving forward. There isn't much else I can do, you know?"

"I meant about the baby," Hailey said carefully.

"Oh," I said, feeling my heart sink. "I guess I'll have the baby and raise him

or her. Rachel is doing it alone, so I can too, right?”

“What about Troy?” Hailey asked.

“Fuck Troy,” I said simply. “I can’t trust him.”

“He’s been there for you through so much,” Hailey said.

“Yeah... and then he betrayed me. I’m too angry to even look at him, let alone talk to him about this. Besides, he made it very clear he doesn’t want kids, so it’s not like he’ll be missing out on something he has a burning desire for.”

Hailey hesitated. “It will still be good if he could help you out financially, if nothing else. I mean, he’s a billionaire, after all.”

“I don’t want his money. It’s worth nothing to me. I can take care of myself just fine, and I’ll do this alone. I’ve done everything alone all my life; this is no different.”

Hailey looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she sipped her coffee.

I didn’t have the energy to think anymore about what had happened. It had been a long day with a lot of revelations, and I needed time to process, time to just breathe through it before I decided what my next step would be.

“I have to go,” I said. “I still want to see Rachel before I head home.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I want her to get better without having to worry about everything. I’ll talk to her later. There’s no rush. It’s not like anything big will happen in the next few days. The baby won’t be here for months, and everything else... maybe by then everything will be better.”

Hailey nodded and took my empty cup from me, setting both cups down on the kitchen counter before she walked me to the door.

She hugged me before I left.

“Whatever you need, I’m here, okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“If I can give you one piece of advice...”

“Yeah?”

“Tell him.”

I smiled sadly at her. “Thank you for putting up with me tonight. I’ll call you sometime during the week, and we can go out...” I couldn’t drink, so that would be weird. “Or go shopping or something,” I finished my sentence.

“That will be nice,” Hailey said.

I left her apartment and walked to my car.

“Mackenzie?” she called after me, and I looked over my shoulder at her.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I guess it would be okay, eventually. Everything turned out right in the end, didn’t it?

It just didn’t feel okay now.

TROY

When I woke up the next morning, I felt like shit. My head didn't hurt, and I wasn't hungover—getting drunk in the day and sobering up well before bed had its merits.

No, everything I felt was emotional, and I felt like a complete asshole for what I'd done to Mackenzie.

That was exactly what I'd been, of course. A class-A dick for sabotaging her career and then fighting with her, saying terrible things that I hadn't even meant.

I'd gotten angry and gone for the throat, my survival instincts kicking in. I'd thrown shit in her face she hadn't deserved.

I had to tell her I was sorry, at least for what I'd said, if nothing else. I knew she hated me. I hated that she would hate me, but there wasn't much I could do about that. She deserved to hate me for what I'd done to her.

I just wanted her to know that I hadn't meant what I'd said about her sister. I knew how painful it was to lose someone, and I'd never wanted it to seem that I didn't care about her feelings, that I didn't understand how much it hurt

to lose someone. What I'd said about it not being the same as losing Jake had been a pathetic lob-blow move to get to her.

It had worked and now I felt like crap about it.

I wanted to know how Rachel was doing too.

I picked up the phone and dialed her number. She'd be in the office by now, and usually she was available to talk in the morning.

Her phone rolled over to voicemail after ringing a couple of times.

I hung up and dialed her number again.

I waited for the ringing and waited until I landed in her mailbox again.

When I dialed a third time, her phone was off, and I went to voicemail straight away.

She didn't want to talk to me.

I was suddenly furious. I knew she had every right to push me away, but how could she not even answer my call? I hadn't been the best of men but in our fight, she'd said horrible things too. I just wanted to clear the air between us.

I sent her a text. She would get that when her phone came back on.

I just want to talk about what happened. Let me explain myself.

I waited for a reply, although I knew I wasn't going to get one soon. How long would her phone be off? Not long, she had work that she had to do on it, if nothing else. And if she was waiting for a call from the hospital for her sister...

I sat back in my seat and stared at my laptop. I had so much work I had to do. Now that I'd gotten the Elecoms contract, I had a shit ton of paperwork to take care of, and then I had to send my ideas to Toussaint so he could revise them again and let me know how we were going to move forward.

The idea I'd presented had been a good one, but to realize that idea and put

it into action wasn't always that easy—a lot would go into it.

Finally, I threw myself into my work. I'd been so good at it before, dealing with loss through work. I'd started this damn company for that reason, so why would this be any different?

It wasn't the same as losing someone to death, though. Losing Mackenzie, knowing she was still out there, going through a tough time, and there was nothing I could do, was so much worse than when someone was gone for good and nothing would change.

I'd gotten used to the pain of loss that I'd felt after losing Jake. This kind of pain I wasn't used at all, and it fucking hurt.

When I couldn't focus on work anymore, I left the office and got into my car. I drove to the hospital where Scott was on duty this week. He had the day shift, so if I was lucky, I could catch him for lunch.

When I found him, he was already in the cafeteria. I stood in the line with him and we made small talk while he chose a couple of things to eat. I chose a sandwich and a soda.

“What's going on with you?” Scott asked after we'd paid and sat down at a table toward the back of the cafeteria.

A few doctors and nurses ate here, but there were hospital guests, too. And then people like me, I guess, who didn't really fit into any category.

“Nothing serious,” I said.

Scott pinned me with a hard look.

“What do you want me to say?” I asked. “I fucked up, I knew it was going to be that way, and now I have to deal with the aftermath.”

Scott unwrapped the sandwich he'd chosen, and he studied it for a bite before digging in.

“What are you going to do about it?” he asked, talking around the food

rolling around in his mouth.

“What’s there to do?” I asked. “She doesn’t want to talk to me, and I don’t blame her. I wanted to try to make it right—apologize, at least—but she doesn’t want to talk to me, and frankly, I’m not going to push it if she’s not interested.”

Scott frowned. “You’re giving up really quickly.”

“What’s the point pursuing it when it’s clearly not what she wants?” I asked.

“Who says it’s not what she wants?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pretty sure her anger at me yesterday—completely understandable—and the fact that she’s refusing to take my calls is an indicator.”

“So, you’re just letting it go?”

“Why the hell not?” I asked. “She doesn’t care, and right now, I don’t either?”

“That’s a load of bullshit,” Scott said, taking his next bite before he chewed and kept talking. “Don’t try to sell me this shit that you don’t care. I know you’re in marketing, and you can sell ice to an Eskimo, but seriously, bro, don’t fuck with me. I *know* you.”

“Good,” I said, putting down the sandwich I’d picked up without taking a bite. I wasn’t hungry; everything seemed to turn to sand in my mouth. “That means you know that I’m good at this.”

“Good at what?” Scott washed his half-chewed bite down with coffee, and I scrunched my nose at the idea of the food mixed with the coffee taste.

“Good at knowing that I’m good at dealing with losing someone.”

Scott snorted. “Good, my ass. You suck at dealing with loss.”

“Thanks, asshole,” I said, bristling.

“I’m serious,” Scott said. “I mean, look at you. You’re where you are because you can’t let go.”

I leaned back in my seat, looking around the cafeteria, exasperated.

“Will you stop with that? You keep telling me that shit, and I don’t actually care to hear it.”

“If you don’t want a dollop of good fucking advice, then don’t come to me with your problems,” Scott said simply. He finished his sandwich and balled up the wax paper it had been wrapped in before he downed the rest of his coffee.

“I always talk to you about my problems,” I pointed out.

“And I always tell you exactly what I think. That’s why this works—we tell each other what the rest of the world is scared to tell us.”

I didn’t argue with him because he was right. One of the reasons Scott and I were so close despite our age difference was because we’d always been real with each other. It was so much easier to be real with him than have him be real with me, if I had to be honest.

“Fine,” I said flatly. “Let me have it.”

“Losing someone to death is not the same as losing someone the way you lost her.”

Yeah, I was starting to realize that. I didn’t say it.

“The thing is, it might be loss either way, but you can stop one of them if you get your head out of your ass and do something about it. You can actually get her back if you try hard enough.”

“She wants nothing to do with me,” I said.

“Then keep trying. If she’s worth it, then do what you need to do to get her back. It’s really that simple.”

I shook my head. “That’s not simple at all.”

“No? If you don’t do something soon, she’ll slip through your fingers for good and then that loss is completely on you.”

“That’s not fair,” I said. I sipped the soda I’d bought but it tasted bland. Nothing tasted good anymore.

“If you don’t do something, it will be too late,” Scott said. “You should decide what you want and go for it. It’s not wrong to get attached to someone and love them, you know. You need that in your life. We all do.”

His words irritated me, but it was because he was right. Damned if I was going to admit that to him, but he was right. Scott usually was.

“I have to go,” Scott said, checking the time. “I’m going into surgery. It’s going to be a good one.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m saving a kid’s life today.” He grinned at me, and I envied him the chance to do something good that he could be proud of.

Lately, I hadn’t been able to be proud of anything.

“I’ll call you later,” Scott said and stood.

He walked away, and I sat at the table alone, feeling like an idiot. I’d had so much going for me, but I’d screwed it up. I had no idea how to make it right—I’d never been this serious about anyone. I’d either gotten rid of them because it was getting too serious, or they’d gotten rid of me because I was emotionally unavailable. It had never really hurt to lose them, it had just been disappointing in a way, but I’d always expected it all along.

This time, it was different. I’d expected I would lose her, but I hadn’t thought it would hurt this much.

I stood, leaving my untouched sandwich on the table and walked through the hospital. Before I got to the doors to find my car, I thought of something and turned back into the hospital. I made my way to the administration block.

I had to talk to someone about a certain patient at the hospital who needed an operation pretty seriously, and I had the money to help.

If I couldn't do anything else to prove to Mackenzie that I cared about her, at least I could do this.

MACKENZIE

“**T**here she is,” Rachel said with a smile when I walked into the hospital room. “I was hoping I could see you before I go into the OR.”

“I heard you were getting the operation,” I said, sitting down on a chair. I studied my sister. She’d lost a lot of weight since she’d been admitted. Machines beeped, monitoring her vitals, and the oxygen mask hung on a stand ominously close by. She wasn’t wearing it right now—she had two tubes in her nose that wrapped around her head—but I was aware that at any moment, something could go wrong and she would need to be strapped into that mask again that forced air into the lungs that wouldn’t do what they were supposed to do.

“I’m so relieved,” Rachel said. “But I’m scared, too. What if something goes wrong?”

“You can’t think that way,” I said and took my sister’s hand. “It’s going to go *right*. That’s all there is to it.” I squeezed her hand.

Rachel smiled. “You’re always so positive.”

I returned her smile, holding up the mask. I didn't want her to know that lately I hadn't been nearly as positive as I was being around her right now.

"How's work?" Rachel asked. "Did you get that contract?"

I sighed and shook my head. "No, I didn't. Troy got it."

"Really?" Rachel asked. "That's fine, then it isn't the contract you should have gotten."

"Right," I said. Rachel was a firm believer in everything happening for a reason, and if it didn't happen, no matter how much we wanted it, then it wasn't the right time. Usually, I believed in that because it was how I'd been raised. It was just tough to run everything through that filter. Like, my mom dying, for instance. How could that have been a good thing, happening for a reason? And what about Troy cheating, betraying me rather than letting us each do what we were good at and getting the contract fair and square? How did that work when humans and their greed got involved in a situation like that?

"You'll get the right contract for you," Rachel said.

"I hope so." I really needed the money now that I was going to be a mother. "It would be nice to get a bit of a raise if I do. I was hoping for that this time, but it didn't happen yet."

"It will," Rachel said firmly. "You just keep looking out for yourself."

It wasn't just going to be me. Soon, there would be another person I had to look after.

I wasn't going to tell Rachel any of that right now—she was going into the operating room soon, and I didn't want her to worry about anything other than pulling through. I would tell her about the baby after she came out, and I knew that she was out of the woods.

I didn't tell her that my boss had been a complete ass after he'd found out I

hadn't gotten the contract.

I hired you to be an asset to the team, and now you're just wasting Griffin's money! He'd shouted that at me in his office the next morning. I'd taken the abuse because what could I have done? I'd lost the contract, and that was all there was to it.

The only thing Rachel needed to know was that her kids were fine—Tom and Lydia were taking care of them—I was in an okay space, and she was getting the help she needed.

We chatted for a while longer about the kids when a nurse came to prepare Rachel for her operation.

"I'll be here when you get out," I said. "You just hang in there, and before you know it, we're going to be on the other side of this."

"I love you," Rachel said. "I don't think I've ever told you, but you're the best thing that happened to me after Mom died."

"Don't say that," I said, my eyes stinging with tears. "This isn't goodbye."

"I don't have to say goodbye to you to tell you that you're everything I've ever wanted. You might be my sister, and I have my kids now, but you'll always be my baby girl, Mack. I'm so proud of you."

The tears rolled down my cheeks even though I tried to bite them back.

"I love you, too," I said and hugged Rachel. "Come back. You're the only mother I've ever really known, and I need you more than you know." Not just because she'd been my mother for years but because when I had this baby, I couldn't do it completely alone.

"I'm not going anywhere," Rachel said and pinched my chin before the nurse rolled her away.

I took a deep breath and tried to swallow the lump in my throat. I brushed the few tears off my cheeks and pulled myself together.

My phone rang, and it was Tom.

“She just went in to prep,” I said. Tom had flown back home for a business meeting while Lydia stayed with the kids. It couldn’t be helped. “Thank you so much, Tommy.”

“For what?” Tom asked, confused.

“For figuring out how to do this operation.”

“I didn’t pay for it,” Tom said. “I thought you figured something out.”

“What?” I asked. “If you didn’t pay for it... was it the others?”

“No, I spoke to them this morning,” Tom said. “Like I said, I thought it was you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “I’ll see what I can figure out. I’ll get back to you, and I’ll call you the minute she’s out.”

“Talk then, I’m going into another session,” Tom said before he ended the call.

I shook my head, tucked my phone into my pocket and walked through the hospital toward the administration block.

“Hi,” I said when I found the secretary who sat behind the desk. “I want to settle an account.”

“Sure,” she said. “Who?”

I gave her Rachel’s details and waited while her fingers flew over the keyboard.

“The account has already been paid in full,” she said.

“What? All of it?”

“Yes.”

“The operation, too?”

“All of it. That’s what *in full* suggests.”

I shook my head, letting her snarky tone slide.

“Can you tell me who paid the account?”

“Uh...” She frowned as she studied the screen before she nodded. “A Mr. Troy Larson.”

Blood drained from my face, and my ears started ringing. He paid it all? How could he have done that when he’d hurt me so much? Did he think that it would fix it all?

It didn’t. I didn’t care that he’d given us so much money; I could never repay him. Rachel would have been in so much debt after the hospital visit. Provided she survived, she’d have had to pay down the bill for the rest of her life. Now, there was none of that—no stress, and they could give her the care she needed.

I wasn’t going to forgive him for what he’d done. It wasn’t fair. He couldn’t buy my affection right after throwing it all in my face and betraying me. That wasn’t how it worked.

“Thank you,” I said before turning away from the secretary.

I left the admin block in a daze, walking to the cafeteria. My phone rang, pulling me out of my stunned state.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“How is she doing? Is she in yet?” Hailey asked.

“She just went in,” I said. “It will be a while now.”

“I’m coming to the hospital. Let’s have lunch at the cafeteria.”

I agreed, and we ended the call. On the way to the cafeteria, I spotted Scott. He smiled at me, but I averted my eyes. I didn’t want to talk to him, I didn’t want to play nice. He’d done nothing wrong, but I couldn’t be friendly with him and be mad at Troy. I couldn’t deal with any of this. Right now, the only thing that mattered was that Rachel would come out of the operation okay. The rest, I would worry about later.

Hailey found me at one of the cafeteria tables. I'd already ordered us two coffees, and she sat down opposite me.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"I'm worried," I admitted. "No, scratch that. I'm terrified. I can't even imagine what would happen if I lost Rachel."

"Then don't even go there," Hailey suggested. "We're going to assume everything is going just fine, and when she comes out, it's settled—she's taken care of and okay again."

I nodded. "That works for me."

"And how are you otherwise?" Hailey asked.

I opened my mouth to tell her I was just fine, but instead of being able to say something, I started crying. I covered my face with my hands, but the more I tried to suck back my tears, the more I sobbed.

Hailey got up, her chair scraping, and she came around the table. She rubbed my back and held onto me, letting me cry it out. Everyone around here had someone they worried about—the hospital cafeteria was a place where people weren't always happy. This was the one place it wouldn't be out of place to cry like this.

I still felt stupid. I hadn't meant to fall apart.

"It's just one big mess," I said, sniveling. I dropped my hands and reached for a napkin to mop up my tears. When I ran my fingers underneath my eyes, they came away stained with mascara. Great—I was going to look even worse now.

"It's okay," Hailey said. "You don't look nearly as bad as you think."

"I feel worse than I think I look," I retorted.

"Is it the baby?" Hailey asked.

"I guess that's a reason I'm so emotional, but no. It's Troy."

Hailey reached for her chair and pulled it closer, sitting on my side of the table beside me. She waited patiently for me to snivel and hiccup and sob a bit more before I pulled myself together and told her what I'd just found out.

"That's so nice of him," Hailey finally said. "Wow."

"Yeah, maybe it would have been great if he hadn't cheated me out of the contract I need so badly," I said bitterly. "I'm not going to call him and thank him. It's too little too late."

"Too little?" Hailey asked skeptically. "What would it take for him to tell you he's sorry?"

"Actually telling me he's sorry," I said bitterly. "That would be a good start. I mean, it's great he's helping Rachel but it feels like such a cop-out. He won't just man up and admit what he did and tell me he was wrong."

Hailey didn't answer me. Either she didn't agree, or she didn't know what to say.

"What about the baby?" Hailey asked after we'd sat in silence for a while.

"What about the baby?" I asked.

"When are you going to tell him that you're pregnant?"

"I'm not," I said flatly.

"He has a right to know."

"I have a right to decide when I'm ready for that, if I ever will be."

Hailey didn't agree, again, and she didn't reply to that, either.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" I asked.

Hailey nodded, and we threw away our takeaway coffee cups before we joined the line to get food and pay for it. We chose sandwiches and salad.

"He can help you financially, you know," Hailey said.

"He could have let me have the contract," I answered.

"He doesn't know you're pregnant."

“That shouldn’t have to make a difference to his moral compass,” I said tightly. “He didn’t have to know I’m pregnant to do the right thing. He cheated. He stabbed me in the back. He acted like I’m really just a rival and not like I’m something more to him than he led me to believe. If anything, I don’t want that kind of man in my child’s life to look up to as a father.”

Hailey opened her mouth to say something, but the sandwich packet slipped out of her hand and fell to the ground.

Someone behind us kneeled down to grab it, and when he straightened, handing the sandwich back to Hailey, I realized it was Scott.

Blood drained from my face when our eyes locked. I knew he’d heard every word I’d said.

The look on his face said it all.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed.

“Scott?” Hailey asked. Her face ran through different expressions as she was surprised, confused, and then shocked when she put all the pieces together. “Oh. Scott.”

“Can I talk to you?” I hissed.

I stuffed my sandwich into Hailey’s hands and pulled Scott out of the line.

“You can’t tell him,” I said, dropping my voice.

“It’s not my place to get involved,” Scott said, holding his hands up.

“What is that supposed to mean, not your place? You two are closer than close.”

“I know,” Scott said. “It’s still not really my news to tell, is it?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re just going to let this go like you didn’t hear anything?”

Scott shrugged and dropped his hands, and I studied his face, trying to figure out what to say or do next.

“You should be the one to tell him,” Scott added.

I shook my head. “I’m not going to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t care,” I said hotly. “He made it pretty clear exactly what he cares about, and if you think losing to someone who chooses business over you is bad, wait until that person chooses business over it all—family and kids, too.”

“You don’t know him,” Scott said.

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t know him the way you do. Hell, I barely know him at all, so you tell me if I’m wrong about what his choice will be.”

Scott opened his mouth to speak before he shut it again.

“I thought so,” I said in a huff. My head throbbed with a painful headache that started behind my eyes. I pressed the fingers of my left hand against my temple, trying to reel it in and pull myself back together again.

“Look, you should give him a chance,” Scott said. “Everyone deserves a second chance.”

“I wasn’t the one who decided to play dirty,” I said.

Scott tucked his hands into his doctor’s coat pockets. “What happened?”

Had Troy not told him what had happened? Maybe that was true—I couldn’t imagine Troy running to his brother with pride after how he’d screwed me over.

I gave Scott a quick summary.

He cheated.

He betrayed me.

Nothing about what we had meant something to him; it was just about the contract.

Scott’s face didn’t betray anything, but his eyes widened slightly when I

talked before his expressionless mask slipped firmly into place.

“I understand,” he finally said.

I looked at him, my brows pursing together. “You do?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I get it.”

“So... you’re not going to tell him?”

“Like I said, it’s not my secret to tell,” Scott said. “But if you want to know my opinion, I think you should still let him know. He deserves that much.”

“He doesn’t deserve anything from me,” I said, and I turned on my heel, walking back to where Hailey waited. She’d already paid for our food, and I was grateful.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

That was a lie, but there was nothing else I could do but ride out this storm.

TROY

I couldn't stop thinking about her. Damn it, I *wanted* to forget all about her—she was out of my life now that the project was over and the outcome had been decided—but when I woke up in the morning, Mackenzie was on my mind, and when I went to bed at night, her face was the last thing I saw.

“Are you at the hospital?” I asked Scott when he answered the phone.

“Yeah.”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“I'm a little stuck right now with consultation, but I'm taking a break soon, then I can try. What do you need?”

I hesitated. This was going to sound like I cared a lot, which I'd been trying to convince myself that I didn't, the past couple of days.

“Could you check in on Rachel Frye, Mackenzie's sister, and let me know how the operation went? I think she went in two days ago.”

“Why don't you call Mackenzie and find out for yourself?” Scott suggested.

“Yeah, tried that,” I said. “She won’t talk to me. She’s not answering her phone, and she’s not responding to my messages. Come on, bro, it’s not a big ask, is it?”

Scott was silent for a moment. “I really think you should keep trying to reach out to her until you get through.”

“I don’t see the point,” I said. “If she wants nothing to do with me, there isn’t much I can do about it.” I couldn’t blame Mackenzie for writing me off after what I’d done to her. Hell, I’d have written me off, too. I hated myself for how I’d cheated her out of the contract. I liked winning, but at what cost had it come this time? It had been a price I’d realized far too late I hadn’t been willing to pay.

“Just keep trying,” Scott said. “Trust me on this.”

I snorted. “Yeah, because you’re the leading authority on good relationships, huh, Mr. Single Forever?”

“Hey, just because I’m not dating doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m talking about,” Scott snapped. “She needs you more than you realize.”

“How would you know what she needs?”

“She’s here all the time. Do you think I don’t see her and see what’s going on with her?”

“So tell me,” I said. “What’s going on with her?”

Scott hesitated again, and that just pissed me off. If he wanted me to be the big guy, to be a hero and swoop in to save the day, he could shove it. Mackenzie was as stubborn as I was, and I doubted she wanted to see me. I wasn’t going to be that guy, pushing in there when she didn’t want me.

“If you won’t tell me how her sister is doing, that’s fine,” I said tightly. “I was just asking.”

Scott sighed. “I’ll see what I can find out and let you know.”

“Thanks,” I said and ended the call.

Fuck, I was over this shit. I hated how I felt. I hated that I was heartbroken. I should never have gotten this attached to her, allowed myself to get this involved. It was just so damn easy to love Mackenzie. I hadn’t even noticed it was happening until I was in way over my head and in love.

Stupid heart. I much preferred using my head—it didn’t get me in nearly as much shit as my heart did. Although that stunt I’d pulled with the presentation...

I shook off the thought. I wasn’t going to keep beating myself up about it. I’d made a mistake; I was suffering the consequences and it was time to pick myself up and move on.

It wasn’t like I was looking for something serious, anyway. I’d started thinking along those lines when I’d been around Mackenzie, allowing myself to envision a life where I didn’t go through all of this alone, but now that it was gone, I could go back to business as usual. I was good on my own—always had been, always would be.

I didn’t hear from Scott for the rest of the day, and I dismissed the idea completely. If he didn’t want to help me out, then fine. I wasn’t allowed to find out information directly from the hospital since I wasn’t part of the family, but I could live without knowing, I guess. I just hoped that it had all gone well, for Mackenzie’s sake.

Stop thinking about it and put her in the past. It was the only way I would be able to move forward.

When I pulled into my driveway, I noticed Scott’s car at the end of my line of expensive collectibles. I frowned and got out, and Scott did the same.

“How long have you been sitting here?”

“About five minutes,” Scott said. “I figured you’d be here soon.”

I nodded and gestured toward the house so Scott would follow me inside.

We walked into the house, and I made a beeline for the bar.

“Rough day?” Scott asked, his eyebrows raised when I didn’t bother pouring myself one or two fingers of whiskey but filled the tumbler up to the top.

“Saves me having to refill the damn thing,” I said and sipped the whiskey.

“What can I get you?”

“I’m fine,” Scott said. “I’m not here to get wasted, I’m here to check in on you.”

I snorted. “Noble of you. As you can see, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Well, seeing that you’re fine, mind telling me what the fuck you were thinking, throwing the presentation in your favor?”

I blinked at my brother. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

“I talked to Mackenzie today.”

“Where?” I demanded, shocked. A pang of jealousy shot into my chest, too—Scott got to talk to her, and I didn’t.

“She was at the hospital. We ran into each other and the topic came up.”

“How...” I shook my head. “No, scratch that. I don’t even want to know how it came up or where that conversation went. I don’t have to justify myself to you.”

“No, you don’t,” Scott said. “You just have to be happy with yourself and the choices you’ve made.”

I bristled at that. “You sound like a fucking fortune cookie.”

Scott didn’t answer me. He just stared at me while I sipped my whiskey, feeling like a total dick.

“It was an accident, okay?” I blurted out.

“What?”

“The presentation.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know how something like that can happen by accident. I thought you were going to change things around, to give her the contract, or give her your presentation or... something.”

“I’m not like you, you know,” I retorted. “I’m not a hero.”

“Who says I’m a hero?” Scott asked.

“Look at you!” I cried out. “You’re the guy who saves lives, who swoops in when it’s well past the final hour and you pull kids back from the dead, giving them back to their parents, giving them a second lease on life. You’re doing all the right things while I’m just out for personal gain.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Isn’t that what you suggested?” I asked. “That all that matters is who I am and what’s going on in my life?”

Scott sighed and shook his head. “I never said it like that, Troy. All I said was that there are bigger things out there than your own pain, and as soon as you realize you’re not alone in this world, you can start to open up and let others in.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t ready for this conversation. I wasn’t ready for the heartbreak that had come with Mackenzie, the uncomfortable feeling that had suddenly come with my moral compass pointing in a different direction when I’d always been fine with what I did before... I wasn’t ready for any of it.

“Stay out of my business, okay?” I clapped back, my anger taking over, hiding the fact that I was getting dangerously close to falling apart. “I’m happy with my life, and I’m perfectly fine.”

“Sure, you are,” Scott said dryly, and I didn’t care for his sarcastic tone. He continued talking before I could say something about it.

“She’s doing fine, by the way.”

“Who?”

“Rachel. Mackenzie’s sister. Isn’t that what you asked for?”

Right. I also wanted to know how Mackenzie was doing, but I let Scott keep talking.

“The operation was successful, and although she still has a long road to recovery, it looks good.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least there was one thing that had gone right in that family.

“Thanks,” I said begrudgingly. Scott had just lectured me, but he was still nice, caring. I was glad Mackenzie didn’t have to deal with the loss of her sister on top of everything else.

“You can’t give up on this, Troy,” Scott said, sitting on one of the bar stools. He looked tired. Was that because he’d had a long day or because he was exhausted after having to deal with me?

“I’m not giving up on anything. I’m respecting her wishes,” I said. “I’m living my life the way I’ve always lived it. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Is the life you’ve lived until now really enough?”

I didn’t answer him.

“You’re giving up,” Scott said again. “You’re walking away when we both know that’s not what you want to do.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked. I tried to sound angry, but my emotions were starting to peek through. “It’s over, and I’m going to have to deal with that since it’s my fault. I know how to deal with losing someone, so there’s that.”

Scott shook his head. “Quite frankly, Troy, I don’t think you know how to deal with loss at all. It’s not like you’ve been very good at moving on from Jake.”

I was angry immediately, and I welcomed the rage. It was so much easier to deal with than the pain and sorrow I'd been dealing with lately. Hell, that I'd been dealing with my whole life. "Excuse me?"

"You're still holding onto his death, letting it dictate your entire life. That's not living, that's just surviving, and that's not how it should be."

"I can't believe you!" I cried out. "How are we back on this? I thought you'd already had your say about that part."

"Someone has to say it, and I'm the only one you let close enough to be honest with you. Losing Jake was tough as shit, but we were kids and he's gone, and we can't change that. You *can* change losing Mackenzie. Losing Jake is set in stone and we had to accept that a long time ago, but if you don't go after her, it will be too late. You keep punishing yourself for Jake's death when it wasn't your fault, but this thing with Mackenzie... *this is your fault*, and you can actually do something about it. Just accepting it for what it is and saying this is the way it's supposed to be is a pathetic cop-out, and I expected more of you."

"Thanks, *Dad.*"

"Yeah, well, since he fell into a bottle, someone has to step up and take the role, so here I am, telling you the shit you need to hear."

I stared at Scott. "Be brutally honest while you're at it, why don't you?" I was sarcastic, I was angry, but all that was to hide the fact that what Scott said was true, and it hurt. It ached all the way down to my soul.

"Look, Troy, I know this is hard. I know you're terrified of getting hurt again and it's why you keep pushing people away, but Mackenzie is different. *You're* different since you've met her and when something like that happens, it's worth the sacrifices to keep her in your life. Someone like Mackenzie doesn't come along more than once in a lifetime, and if you let

her slip through your fingers, you'll keep being miserable. This isn't about Jake's death, it's about your life now."

I stared into the amber liquid in my glass, not wanting to make eye contact with Scott. He was right, of course. I hated that he always was, but he was my older brother, and he'd always been wise beyond his years.

When I looked up at Scott, his eyes were gentle. He really cared about me and my happiness.

"I don't want to let him go," I finally admitted. "If I let him go, it will be like he never existed, and I can't do that."

"That's not how it works," Scott said. "Jake will always be our brother, and we'll always carry what happened around with us, but it doesn't have to define who we are. He would have wanted us to move forward and live full lives, and we owe it to him to do what he couldn't, don't you think?"

Damn it! There was so much truth to his words that it pissed me off. I didn't like losing, and I'd lost way too much as it was. What Scott was saying made sense, and to think that it was all my fault in the end just made me feel like crap about what I'd done. It was one thing to call myself a victim and let my circumstances dictate who I was and how I acted. It had been convenient, in fact. To stand up and take responsibility, to say that it was up to me to change things was scary.

"Fine," I finally said. "I hear you loud and clear."

Scott grinned at me. "I knew you'd finally admit that I'm right."

"I never said that."

"But you thought it," Scott said with a chuckle, but his smile faded. "I'm serious, though, Troy. I know I'm not one to talk because I carry a lot of baggage along with me, too, but I don't want to see you throw away the

opportunity to be really happy for something neither of us can change. At least let one of us find happiness.”

“So, now I have to be happy on your behalf too, huh?” I asked, cocking a grin. “Sure, make your little brother do everything.”

Scott burst out laughing, and I laughed along.

His laughter faded again, a frown taking its place.

“What is it?”

“How serious are you about her?”

I shrugged. How could I tell Scott how serious I was about her? I’d never felt this way around anyone, and Mackenzie brought out a side of me I’d never known. When I was around her, everything looked different, like I looked at life through different eyes. She changed everything for me, and that made me feel like she was the one I wanted to be with—nothing was the same anymore, and I wanted that. I needed the change. I wanted to see life differently, to see life the way she saw it.

“I can’t explain to you. She’s just... *everything*. I think together, we could reach for the stars. I can already see what our life together would look like, and I like it.”

“That’s what you should hold on to,” Scott said. “That, and how you feel about her.”

“I just don’t think she’ll want anything to do with me ever again. I’ve tried talking to her, but she won’t hear it.”

“And you’re just going to let it slide?”

I shrugged. “I can’t force her to be with me if that’s not what she wants. I guess I’ll just work on the project. I’d thought I was winning when I got it, but it turns out I’m ending last. Still, it’s better than nothing, right?”

Scott sighed. “I guess it’s all in the way you see it.”

I didn't know what to say to that. He didn't agree with me, but what else was I supposed to do?

Scott glanced at the whiskey bottle. "Maybe I'll have that drink after all," Scott said without giving me an answer, and I took another tumbler from the cabinet and poured my brother a glass of whiskey, too.

MACKENZIE

“E asy,” I said, helping Rachel out of the car. “Let’s just take it one step at a time, okay?”

Rachel winced when she straightened and pressed her hand to her chest. Underneath her shirt were bandages, and underneath that were her stitches. She’d been released from hospital but the doctors weren’t happy. She’d insisted she wanted to be home with her kids, and I understood. I knew what they meant to her.

They needed to see her happy and on her feet, too.

“Mommy!” Tammy cried out, and the three of them barreled through the door.

“Hey, guys, careful,” Tom said, coming out behind them. “Remember what we talked about.”

“My babies,” Rachel said and carefully kneeled, pulling Tammy and Benjamin against her before letting go of Tammy to hug Rory, too.

“I’m not a baby,” Benjamin said. “Uncle Tommy said I’m big!”

“Of course you are,” Rachel said with a smile. “I can see how much you’ve grown just in the short while I’ve been gone!”

Benjamin beamed, looking up at Tom, who ruffled his blond hair.

“Kids, go help Auntie Lydia, quickly!” Tom said. “We can’t forget the surprise!”

“Oh!” Tammy cried out and ushered the other two inside.

“A surprise?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, Lydia and the kids put something together for you,” Tom said with a grin. “Let’s get you settled. Straight to bed.”

“I’m sick of beds,” Rachel said.

“At least it’s your own,” Tom said, not buckling, and I was relieved he was being firm with her. Rachel still had some healing up to do after her operation, but as long as she took her medication, did her breathing exercises, and took care of herself, she was going to be okay.

This was the road my mom had never been able to walk. My heart constricted at the thought, and I was so grateful I hadn’t lost Rachel through all of this. I didn’t know what I would have done.

When Rachel was tucked into her own bed, Lydia came in with the kids, carrying a cake.

“Oh, what a nice cake!” Rachel cried out. “It’s so beautifully decorated, too!”

“We made it,” Rory said.

“Really?” Rachel asked. “All by yourself?”

“Auntie Lydia helped,” Tammy said.

“I did those sprinkles over there,” Benjamin said, pointing to a cluster of sprinkles that looked like he’d dumped half the bottle in one place.

“I love it,” Rachel said with a smile. I laughed, watching the scene unfold.

Rachel was such a good mother. I could only aspire to be like her one day.

One day soon—having children wasn't in my distant future anymore. I still had to tell everyone, but I would do that one of these days. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay first.

Tom and Lydia would stay with Rachel a couple of days longer to help with the kids while she got back on her feet before they went back to their lives. Aaron landed tomorrow, and Randall would pick him up and bring him through. He'd had a last-minute work emergency pop up that he hadn't been able to get out of, and we'd assured both of them we had it covered until they got here.

The family would be together again for the first time in a while, and I was excited to see my siblings all under one roof.

We cut the cake and all had a piece—even Rachel, although she didn't finish hers—before Tom announced he was taking the kids to the beach.

“Really?” I asked.

“I promised we could go when the weather was good and it's pretty good out there.”

“Beach time, beach time, beach time,” the kids started chanting.

“You two can spend some time together,” Lydia said with a grin. “We're a phone call away if you need anything. I took care of dinner, we just have to heat it up when we get back from the beach.”

“You're a saint,” I said to her. “I don't know what we would have done without you. Either of you.”

“That's what family's for,” Tom said and planted a kiss on my temple before he and Lydia left with the kids, and Rachel and I were alone.

She sank back onto her pillows, letting her mask slip away. She looked exhausted and in pain.

“What can I do?” I asked.

“You can tell me what’s going on with you,” Rachel said.

“I meant for the pain.”

“My pain will go away. What about yours?”

I frowned. “I’m not in pain.”

Rachel gave me a pointed look. “I know you, Mackie. I can see something’s up. You’re trying to be strong for me but you don’t have to anymore. I’m okay. Tell me what’s going on.”

I sighed, and a lump rose in my throat. Rachel had always been able to read me like a book. I could never hide anything from her, so I told her what was on my mind. I told her everything that had happened, all the way from Troy betraying me and the presentation going sour, ending our relationship and my chance at a future with Griffin Solutions, to the fact that I was pregnant with his baby.

Rachel listened quietly, letting me get it all out there before she responded.

Finally, she frowned.

“You’re pregnant.”

I nodded.

“Does he know?”

“No,” I said. “And I’m not going to tell him, either. I don’t need him to treat me like a charity case on top of everything else just because I have no idea how to figure out my finances after not getting the contract.”

“Sweetheart, it’s not charity if he’s helping out with the baby. It’s his job.”

I shook my head. “I don’t feel like it would be. He’s not the guy I thought he was and…” My voice cracked, and I swallowed hard before I kept going. “I’ll figure it out. I can do this myself. I don’t know how yet, but we Fries are like weeds, right?”

Rachel laughed before she winced at the pain it caused.

“Just like weeds,” she gasped.

“Sorry,” I said, feeling like crap that I’d made her laugh.

“Don’t be, honey. It’s okay. You know we’ll all be here for you, right? Whatever you decide to do.”

“You’re not going to tell me to tell him?”

Rachel shook her head. “If anyone knows what it means to be a single mother, to make it work no matter what because it’s better that way, it’s me. I wouldn’t change anything. I love my kids, and although it can be hard, they’re the light in my life. You’re the strongest person I know, Mack.”

“I get it from you,” I said softly.

“You can do this. You just need to stick to your guns, stay true to who you are, and it will all work itself out.”

I leaned over and carefully hugged my sister.

“You have no idea how much it means to me that you’re on my side,” I said, my voice muffled against her shoulder.

“I’ll always be on your side,” Rachel said. “That’s what we do. We stick together, and this is just another step in a beautiful adventure. One day when you’re old and gray, you get to look back at the picture of the life you’ve painted and marvel at all the pretty colors.”

“Mom used to say that,” I said softly.

“And she was right.” Rachel squeezed my hand. “It’s going to be okay. We all have each other, that’s how we’ve made it this far. We’ll keep doing it this way.”

TROY

“Let’s talk about your vision,” Marc Johnson said, leaning back in his huge leather armchair. Johnson wasn’t a very big man, and the chair suggested he was trying to compensate for something.

Being the owner of a business wasn’t in the size of the desk chair. I thought it, but I didn’t say it.

“I think we should figure out what Toussaint wants,” I said and glanced at Toussaint, who had said very little since I’d walked into the office. “It’s your product, after all.” He sat with his ankle over his knee, elbows on the armrests, and fingers steepled. He was on the same side of the desk as I was, but I didn’t feel like we were equals.

Toussaint shrugged, opened his hands and steepled them again as if that was all that needed to be said... or not. As the case may be.

My mind drifted to Mackenzie. She’d had such wonderful ideas for the project. To her, it hadn’t just been about the contract; she really cared about what she did. To me, it had been about winning, and only that. I loved my job but it was because I was good at it, not because it defined me in any way.

With Mackenzie, it was all different.

“Well, I think we really should get that event together,” I said. “I think that’s the one big way we’re going to spread awareness and get everyone drooling to own the pieces of jewelry.”

“Yes, yes,” Toussaint said. “Of course, that’s what we mean when we talk about your vision.”

Right.

We started talking about the event, about when and where, and how we were going to approach advertising it. It was a sound idea—I’d come up with it, so it *had* to be good—but my heart wasn’t in it.

In fact, I felt uncomfortable in the office with Johnson and Toussaint.

This wasn’t where I was supposed to be.

Mackenzie was supposed to be here, taking care of the project.

“Yes, yes,” Toussaint said, waving his hand when Johnson talked about the glitz and the glam. “I understand what you’re trying to do, but let’s talk security. Those pieces are priceless.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Toussaint’s pieces of jewelry were all unique but they weren’t priceless. They were damn expensive, but *priceless* referred to other things—things that couldn’t be replaced, couldn’t be found again in this or any other lifetime. They were the things you couldn’t put a price on, the things you ached for when you lost them because you knew you could never get them back and never replace them with someone that would ever have equal value.

Family was a good example.

Friendship when it was true.

Love with the right person.

Mackenzie.

It hit me like a ton of bricks.

What the fuck was I doing here? The contract had been the goal all along, but I'd been an idiot. I'd been blind, missing what was right in front of me all this time. I'd been chasing what I'd thought I wanted, but in the end, all I wanted was her.

I stood. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," I said, interrupting Johnson, who had been talking about the latest security trends that could stop criminals in their tracks before they even considered the job. "I don't think this is going to work."

"What do you mean?" Johnson asked. "The security company has the best track record on—"

"No, not the security," I said. "I mean the contract. This working relationship. I'm very sorry to have wasted your time, but unfortunately Larson Inc. isn't interested in the contract. I'm going to have to withdraw."

"What!?" Toussaint cried out.

"On what grounds?" Johnson demanded.

"Conflict of interest." It was the first thing that came to mind.

Johnson looked confused. "How is that valid here at all?"

"Well..." I cleared my throat. "I'm not interested, and that's going to cause conflict." Yeah, I sounded like an idiot, but whatever. I didn't give a shit what either of those men thought of me. I realized that I didn't give a shit what anyone thought of me.

What mattered to me was Mackenzie.

"You should contact Griffin Solutions and give the contract to Mackenzie Frye," I said. "I didn't give her the information she needed to know to give you exactly what you were asking for, but she's better at this than I am, and it's the right direction to go."

"You didn't tell her the presentation changed?" Johnson asked with a

frown.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t because I thought this was what I wanted. It turns out I was wrong. I’ve been wrong about a lot of things lately.”

“This is going to waste so much time, finding someone else,” Toussaint said, throwing his hands up in the air.

“Not if you contact her. She’ll be on it in a flash.” I knew Stein would jump at the opportunity to have Toussaint on the company’s resume.

“It will be okay,” Johnson said, trying to appease Toussaint. “He’s right. Griffin Solutions won’t let us down.”

I nodded and stood, holding out my hand to Johnson and then Toussaint.

“I’m sorry for leaving you in the lurch like this, but it’s the right thing to do.”

Work contracts came by every day. I could get another contract to replace this one. Hell, I could start a whole new company from scratch if I had to, but Mackenzie... a woman like her didn’t come along every day. I wouldn’t find someone like her in this lifetime, and letting her slip through my fingers was a mistake. How could I have thought that having the contract, having my company, having all the money in the world would possibly be enough?

I walked out of the Elecoms building, feeling lighter than air. I wasn’t at the finish line yet—I still had to try to win her back. Knowing that was what I wanted and that I would keep trying no matter what made me feel like more of a winner than ever.

I got into my car and drove to the building of Griffin Solutions. I hated this damn building. Stein was a prick, and we were rivals in the ugliest sense of the word—Stein didn’t know how to do business without getting personal. We couldn’t just be friends outside of the office.

That was fine. He wasn’t my favorite person, anyway. It had been a long

time since I'd been in this building.

I asked for Mackenzie Frye at the reception desk, giving her my name. I had to see her.

“Do you have an appointment?” the receptionist asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But I would appreciate it if you could see if she's free. I really need to talk to her.”

The receptionist looked skeptical, but she picked up her phone and dialed up. She spoke to one secretary and then another before she shook her head.

“I'm sorry, sir, but she won't see you.”

I groaned. I shouldn't have given my name. I should have told her I was someone else.

A delivery person came to the reception desk with a manila folder. It was labeled with Mackenzie's name. When I turned away, I heard the receptionist direct the delivery guy to her office—fifth floor, ask for marketing, the secretary would take him where he needed to be.

I hesitated, waiting for the delivery guy to walk to the elevators before I followed him. I glanced toward the receptionist, who was busy on the phone, before I hopped into the elevator just before the doors slid shut.

“What floor?” the delivery guy asked, ready to push a button for me.

“Fifth,” I said.

“Cool.”

We rode up in silence. I acted like this was exactly where I belonged.

When the doors slid open, I followed the delivery guy as he found his way to the marketing department, and finally, where he stopped at a secretary's desk. He leaned forward and flirted with the secretary, who smiled sweetly.

Just behind him, I spotted Mackenzie's name on the door.

The two of them were so caught up in each other. I walked by them and

knocked on the door before I opened it. I slipped into the office and closed it again.

“Troy?” Mackenzie asked, confused. “What are you doing here? How did you get in?” She glared at the door. “Did my secretary let you in?”

“She’s occupied, so I took the chance,” I said.

Mackenzie shook her head. “You should leave.”

“I just need to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Then hear me out—”

“I’m not interested, Troy,” she said, her voice hard, her words clipped. “You and I have nothing in common now that the competition is over. Don’t you have a campaign to work on?”

“I gave it up,” I said.

That pulled her up short. “What?”

“You should have Stein in here at any moment telling you that you got the contract after all.”

“So, you just fucked with me? You don’t even really want it?”

“I wanted it,” I said, shaking my head. “I thought I wanted it more than anything, but I was wrong.”

“You’re so damn spoiled,” she said and shook her head. “It’s not enough for you that you got the contract, you’re already bored with it. You have no idea what that contract would have done for my career.”

“No, you’re right,” I admitted. “I didn’t know, and I didn’t care, and I was an asshole. I was so set on running after business, keeping the one anchor I had in my life going, that I didn’t realize how much you started to mean to me. I didn’t realize that losing the contract wouldn’t be nearly as terrible as losing you.”

She just stared at me, her face an expressionless mask. Her jaw was clenched, though, showing her frustration.

I powered on. I needed her to know—no matter how this ended.

“I fell in love with you, Mackenzie. I fell in love with everything about you. You’re kind and funny and caring, and you’re the smartest woman I’ve ever come across. Your mind is as beautiful as your soul. Everything about you is just perfect, and I was an idiot not to realize that before. I’m in love with you, and I don’t give a shit about the contract. I want *you*.”

Mackenzie shook her head. “That’s a very sweet speech, but how do you see this working in the long run, Troy?”

I frowned at her. “You, me, together. That’s what I have. I haven’t worked out the rest because without you, this equation falls apart.”

“Your business is everything to you,” she said. “You don’t want to give that up for a woman. I know you don’t.”

“You’re wrong. I want you in my life. We can do this together, work hard, me and you. We can build the empire, and—”

“I’m pregnant,” Mackenzie said flatly.

Blood drained from my face. “What?”

“I’m going to have a baby. That means that I won’t be working all the time. I won’t be building an empire. I’m going to start a family, and since you’re so dead set against it, it won’t work.”

My ears started ringing.

“You’re having a baby?”

“That’s what I said,” she said coolly.

“I can’t have a baby,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. You don’t want kids. That’s why this will never work. It’s a nice speech and I’m flattered, Troy, but you might as well turn around and

leave. This isn't going to work."

I opened my mouth like a fish out of water, struggling to find the words.

A baby?

A family?

She was right; I couldn't do this.

"It's okay, Troy," Mackenzie said. "You should go."

I wanted to stay, to fight her, but she was right. This couldn't work. I was terrified of having children, of having a family. Having Mackenzie was one thing, but a baby...

Someone knocked on the door, and then the delivery guy appeared.

"Oh," he said when he saw me. "Delivery?"

"Yeah," Mackenzie said, walking around her desk. "I'll sign."

She took the electronic device from the delivery guy to sign for her package, and while she did, I slipped out of the office. I retraced my steps, walking back the way I'd come.

All the while, my mind was spinning. I was walking away from her again. Every time, it seemed that there was another stumbling block, another curve ball.

I'd come here, determined to have her in my life again.

Now, I walked away empty-handed yet again. I still didn't have her, and it was very clear that now, I never would.

How was this the end if it wasn't happy? Was I going to live a life without any happy endings, ever?

MACKENZIE

“Can I come over?” I asked when Rachel answered the phone.

My stomach was a knot of nerves, I was anxious, and my breathing came too fast.

“Of course,” Rachel said. “I’m about to do a school run, but if you’re okay tagging along—”

“Perfect,” I said and hung up.

I walked out of my office. At the secretary’s desk, I stopped.

“I’m taking a personal day.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You know I can’t just tell Stein that, right?”

I shrugged. “Tell him that. I’ll deal with him if it comes down to it.”

“Your funeral,” the secretary said, but right now I didn’t care.

I was panicking. I felt like I was going to faint, and if I didn’t do something, I was going to go into a panic attack which wasn’t going to be good for anyone around me. The only person who could talk me down from the ledge was Rachel.

She was already waiting for me by her car when I pulled into her driveway, and I climbed from my car into her passenger seat.

“You’re driving.”

Rachel nodded. “I couldn’t sit around a moment longer. Tom flew out for a meeting again and Lydia was asleep, so I figured I’d do it. Their help is amazing but I miss running around after my own kids.” She grinned at me.

I was so glad that she was so much better already—the operation had been completely successful, and it looked like Rachel was going to be okay. We were going to have her around for a long time, still.

I tried not to think about why that was—that Troy had paid for the operation we hadn’t been able to afford.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked, looking worried when she twisted in her seat to reverse the car out of the driveway. “You look like you’re about to faint.”

“Troy came to see me.”

Rachel looked as surprised as I’d felt.

“And?”

“I told him I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, wow,” she said. “How did he take it?”

“Exactly as I’d thought he would,” I said grimly. “He left.”

“Oh, Mackie,” Rachel said softly.

“No, no,” I said, putting on my seat belt when Rachel turned into the road. “That was the point. It was why I told him.”

“I’m not following,” Rachel said, confused.

“He kept telling me how he was in love with me and how he’d given up the contract for me, that Stein would give it to me now. He wouldn’t let me tell

him off, he wouldn't take no for an answer, so I told him the one thing I knew would send him running for the hills. It worked."

Rachel glanced at me, her eyes narrowed, before she turned her attention back to the road.

"Okay, he actually said to you that he's in love with you, in so many words, and you wanted him to leave?"

"I wanted him to stop saying the right things to me."

"Do you hear yourself when you say that?" Rachel asked.

I sighed heavily. "I'm still angry with him, Rach. He hurt me. Badly. He chose work over me, he lied to me, he betrayed me. I can't have someone like that in my life."

"What about all the things he did right?"

"Like?"

"He helped you with the kids when I was in hospital. He gave up the contract for you. He told you he's in love with you."

"He left when I told him about the baby."

Rachel shook her head, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. "Why are you so set on seeing the bad in him rather than the good? It's not wrong to have someone care for you, you know. He screwed up pretty badly, but it looks to me like he's trying to make it right."

Damn it, I hadn't come here for Rachel to take Troy's side. I'd hoped she would be there for me and tell me that I'd done the right thing by chasing him away.

"He left, Rach," I said again. "He heard about the baby and he walked away, and that's all there is to it."

Rachel glanced at me. "What would you have done if you weren't pregnant?"

“What do you mean?”

“Would you have taken him back today if you weren’t?”

“No.” I snorted. “What kind of a question is that? I’m angry with him for what he did. The baby has nothing to do with this.”

“Then why do you sound so upset that he left when that’s what you wanted?”

I wanted to argue with Rachel for not just being an understanding shoulder to cry on, but what she was saying was true. I’d wanted him to leave, but when he actually had, knowing about the baby... I felt more lost and untethered than ever.

He didn’t want me if I had the baby. He just wanted me alone.

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “I just thought my life would turn out differently. Not just now with the baby, but everything. The career I didn’t get. The guy I didn’t get. The future that just doesn’t look the way I thought it would. It looks so different from my dreams.”

“I know,” Rachel said softly. “I know what that can be like.”

I looked at my sister and realized what I was saying.

“Oh, God, Rachel, I’m sorry. You’ve given up so much more than me, and your life looks so different... I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“You weren’t,” Rachel reassured me. “I know what it’s like when things change and you wish it could be the way you wanted it to be, but what you decide to do with what you’ve got is ultimately your choice. I chose to give it all up and raise you. I could have sent you to one of our aunts or let you go into the system and only visit you, but you belonged here with us, and that’s what I chose. When I ended up being a single parent, I chose to do that the right way and be there for them, too.”

I nodded slowly. “I guess that’s true.” It didn’t make me feel that much

better, but Rachel was right. I looked out of the window, trying to get Troy's expression out of my mind when he'd found out about the baby. The shock and horror had been awful.

"I'll take the baby, if you want," Rachel said, her voice so soft I barely heard her.

"What?" I asked, blinking at her.

"The baby. If you don't want to do it, if you want the life you can have with Troy without kids... I'll raise him or her."

"Rachel, I can't let you do that."

"I want you to be happy, Mack. I know you're in love with Troy, just like he's in love with you. You're going to have a baby, and this wasn't a part of your plan. It wasn't a part of his either, and if you don't have a baby, then you two can be together." She glanced at me, her face dead serious.

She was trying to give me an out.

"Why?" I asked. "Why would you do that when you already have so much on your plate?"

"Because I want you to be happy, Mackenzie." Rachel hardly ever used my full name. "I want you to have the life you dreamed of. I want you to spread your wings and fly, and if I can help with that—"

"You already did," I said. "You raised me. You kept me at home and gave it all up for me after we lost Mom. You did everything, and I am who I am today because of you. I'm already flying." I took a deep breath, a steely resolve settling inside me. "I want this baby. It's not what I planned on doing, it's not how I thought my life would turn out, but I want to do this. If Troy can't do it with me, then he's not the man for me. Thank you, Rachel, but I'm not taking the easy way out with this."

Rachel reached over and squeezed my hand.

“You’re such a great person, Mackie. I’ll totally take credit for that if you’re saying it’s because of me.”

I giggled. “It totally is.”

Rachel smiled at me, and my heart swelled with affection. Rachel was willing to do everything for me and her kids, and it meant so much to me that she’d been willing to do this. I would never have put that on her, though; I really *did* want this baby. It was terrifying, and I knew that I would have to give up so much that I’d always thought I wanted.

I guess when a child came along, priorities changed.

“So, what now?” Rachel asked when we parked in front of the school building, earlier than they were let out, so we waited.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I guess I’ll just have to take it day by day and see how things go.”

“You know I’m always here,” Rachel said.

“I know.”

“The kids are going to be such good friends,” Rachel added. “I’ve always wanted the kids to have cousins to share all the family memories with.”

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. “Family is everything.”

“It really is,” Rachel said. “You’re going to do great, Mack.”

“Thanks, Rach,” I said. “I’m scared out of my mind.”

“I know,” Rachel said and squeezed my hands again. “But it’s because of how serious this is. The only thing I can tell you is that the reward exceeds the sacrifice every time, and when you’re this scared... you should know it’s because you’re about to get something that’s better than anything you could ever have imagined.”

When Rachel talked about parenthood and kids the way she did, it made me feel like I could do it. I didn’t know what I was doing, I had no idea how to

move forward, and I didn't know if I could afford it. What I did know was that I was going to make it work, no matter what.

It was me and the baby against the world, but I had other people in my corner too, and I didn't need Troy in the picture to be happy.

Of course, that would have helped, but I didn't *need* a man in my life.

When school let out, we watched as Tammy rounded up her brother and little sister before she looked around for Rachel's car. Rachel got out of the car and waved until they saw her.

When they ran toward the car, Rachel kneeled to hug them, and I smiled.

That was what I wanted. The love. The family.

I put my hand on my belly and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

That was what I already had.

Love.

Family.

TROY

What. The. Actual. Fuck.
She was pregnant!?

How had this happened? I mean... I knew *how* it happened, but how could this happen to me?

I was in a daze after I'd gone to see Mackenzie. I'd wanted her back but she'd bowled me over with the news that she was pregnant, and now I felt like I'd forgotten how to breathe. My chest ached, my mind spun, and I felt sweaty and uncomfortable as I drove to my home. I wasn't going back to the office—I couldn't focus on work at all, and I was my company. I could take off if that was what I needed.

A baby?

I couldn't have a baby. I couldn't look after a child, raise a child, be a father. I didn't know how to do that, and what if something went wrong and I lost that baby? It would be Jake all over again, except I wouldn't survive it. I would end up at the bottom of a bottle and that would be my only reality.

No, it was better this way. Mackenzie didn't want me in her life to raise the baby with her, and that was fine because I didn't have what it took to raise a baby. I didn't have what it took to be anything other than a businessman. I wasn't the type they put in the movies, who was a great family man *and* a great businessman. It was one or the other, and I'd chosen the latter.

"This is fine," I said when I walked into my home. "This is fine. You're going to be just fine."

"Who are you talking to?" Scott asked, coming out of my kitchen and scaring the living shit out of me.

"Jesus," I said, my heart leaping into my throat. "Sneak up on me, why don't you?"

"Sorry," Scott said and chuckled. "Jumpy, huh?"

"What are you doing here?"

Scott shrugged. "It's my day off and I got sick of my apartment. It gets lonely sometimes, you know?"

"Something smells good."

"I brought pizza," Scott said. "It's still hot—you're home earlier than I thought you'd be. There's beer, too, because what's pizza without beer?"

"You're a fucking saint."

Scott laughed. "I just brought junk food but I'll take it."

I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a slice of pizza. I took a bite and chewed while I cracked open the beer. When I swallowed down my food, I chased it with at least half the bottle of beer before I came up for air.

When I looked over my shoulder, Scott was watching me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No."

Scott nodded. "Football's on."

We took the pizza and beer to the living room and sat down, watching the screen. I threw myself into the game. I'd never been so invested in football before.

"Mackenzie's pregnant," I said in one of the ad breaks.

Scott looked at me. "When did she tell you?"

"Today," I said. I frowned. "Why don't you look shocked?"

Scott shrugged.

"Did you know?"

"Yeah..."

My jaw dropped, and I stared at my brother.

"You didn't think it was a good idea to tell me?" I asked when he didn't say anything, just sipped more of his beer and looked at the television that ran some kind of toothpaste ad.

"It wasn't my secret to tell," Scott said. "I overheard her talking to her friend at the hospital cafeteria."

I was suddenly angry. "Are you fucking kidding me? They're talking about it out loud in public and you can't just give me a heads-up that shit hit the fan?"

"Hey, man, I—"

"Was that what it was all about when you told me that I should go for her the other day? Or was that before you knew?"

"No, I knew," Scott said.

"So, you figured it's better if I step up to the plate, it had nothing to do with my emotions?"

Scott shook his head and put down his plate of food. He sipped his beer before he answered.

"It's all about your emotions," Scott said. "I know this is hard for you and

you'll probably see the baby as a curve ball but damn it, Troy, it's got nothing to do with that. If you're really serious about her, and it's actually *your* baby, does it really matter?"

"Of course it matters!" I cried out. "I can't do this. I don't want kids."

"You're scared of having kids because it will let you invest in family life and you're scared of losing it. I get you, Troy. I just think you're making a mistake giving it all up because you can't deal with what's going on here."

"And what exactly is that?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"You're in love with her, and it doesn't matter what excuses you cook up not to do this, being with her is the only thing that will make you happy."

I snorted. "And you're the love guru, huh?"

"No," Scott said. "But I'm a Troy guru. I know you, brother. I've been around long enough to know what your happiness looks like, and I haven't seen you truly happy until you met her. That counts for something. In fact, it counts for everything. It's the only thing that does."

I bristled. I was furious that Scott had hidden Mackenzie's pregnancy from me. He was my brother! I was also upset that he was lecturing me time and again about letting go, living my life, being happy... because he was right.

It pissed me off because everything he said was true.

"Then what am I supposed to do?" I asked, my anger slowly fading.

"I can't tell you that," Scott said. "You need to decide what you're willing to live with—and without—and follow that. I'm your brother, and I'll always give you the cold hard truth, even if it's tough to hear, but the decisions you make will ultimately be your own, and I can't do shit about that."

I sighed. "That's the part I wish someone else could actually do for me." I'd admitted it softly, but Scott nodded.

"I know. I just don't want you to end up like me."

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Alone,” Scott said.

“You don’t have to be, you know.”

“Hey,” Scott said sharply. “Today isn’t Lecture Scott Day. It’s all about you. We’ll touch on me and my unhealthy habits some other time.”

I laughed. “I’m holding you to that.”

Scott chuckled and shook his head. “The game’s starting again.”

We turned our eyes to the television, but Scott didn’t know exactly how right he was, and it had nothing to do with football.

The game was starting, and it was high time I got my ass back in the game and played my heart out. I’d been on the sidelines long enough. It was fine when I had nothing to lose, but now I had to do what needed to be done.

MACKENZIE

“Frye!” Sebastian Stein’s voice boomed through the office so that everyone cowered, even my secretary.

I sighed and stood. “Coming.”

He could have sent a message to the secretary the whole team shared, sent me a private message to my phone or sent me an email to get me to come to his office, but Stein loved his authority and reminding everyone of it.

As much as I loved the potential for growth here at Griffin Solutions, my boss was a total ass.

Life was like that, though. We all had to take the good with the bad. It was just the way it was. If I hadn’t thought I had a chance of making it big in this industry, working for Griffin, I wouldn’t have put up with Stein’s bullshit, but I knew I could go big around here if I played my cards right.

The fact that my carefully built house of cards had come down on me not too long ago and it would take me twice as long to work toward another promotion was a different story.

That was something I blamed on Troy, but there was no use crying about the past and everything I couldn't change.

I walked to Stein's office, nodding at his personal secretary, who eyed me dubiously. My stomach twisted—was this a bad meeting? Why did she look so worried on my behalf?

After I'd lost the contract, Stein had shouted at me so much that everyone on the floor—maybe everyone in the building—had heard it. Was this going to be a repeat? It wasn't that I couldn't take criticism, but there had to be a limit to how much was fair for one person to deal with.

"Close the door," Stein said.

His black hair was graying at his temples, and he wore a suit that didn't fit him right—as if it had been tailor made once upon a time but since then, he'd lost a lot of weight.

"Sit down," he said when I waited for the invitation. The one thing I would never do was take liberties in Stein's office. He had a reputation for being a beast, and he made sure he stuck with the program to keep that reputation going.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly so I didn't look as irritated as I felt. I was always willing to accept a tongue-lashing if it was due, but lately, things had been tough, and I wasn't in the mood for another lecture. I was emotionally drained, and I just wanted to do my work, keeping my head down until the next good thing came along.

"I just got a call from Elecoms," Stein said, sitting down behind his desk. He was a large man despite the weight he must have lost at some point and he dwarfed his desk.

"Oh?"

"It looks like they want you on the Toussaint project after all."

“Oh,” I said again.

“Is that all you have to say to that?” Stein asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

I didn’t know what he wanted me to say. I couldn’t say thank you since he wasn’t the one that had made that happen, but it looked almost like that was what he expected.

“I’m ready to get started the moment you give the go-ahead,” I said.

“You’re still interested in it?” Stein asked.

“I didn’t realize I had a choice in the matter,” I said carefully.

“You don’t,” Stein said, shaking his head and interlinking his fingers in front of him on his desk. “I just wanted to know if you’ll do a good job if I decide to put you on the project.”

“Were you going to consider someone else?” I asked.

“Since when do you ask so many questions?” Stein snapped, and I pursed my lips, knotting my fingers together in my lap. Stein was unpredictable on a good day and full of shit on a bad day.

Today was not a good day.

“You’re going to the offices tomorrow to take care of it,” Stein said with a grunt. “I’ll clear it with HR that you get what you’re due for this. Looks like you didn’t screw this up as much as you thought, eh?”

As much as you thought.

I didn’t say that. Instead, I offered a polite smile.

Stein returned it for a split-second before his scowl slipped back in place. That was the best I would ever get out of him—very few people in the office had gotten a smile from Stein.

“Get out of my office,” Stein said, waving me away as if I were a fly.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

I left his office, and when I was around the corner, I broke out into a smile.

I'd gotten the contract! This changed everything—the pay raise and promotion would help me so much with the baby, and the prospect of moving forward was amazing.

The smile faded quickly.

Had I gotten the project because I really deserved it? Or because Troy had effectively given it to me? Did it matter?

A part of me didn't want the contract if I hadn't been able to win it on my own merit. Taking the contract after Troy had pretty much stolen it from me, only to give it back, felt like some sort of charity situation.

What would have happened if I'd known all the facts of the project and was able to do the presentation the right way without Troy getting involved and ruining it for me? Would I have won fair and square, or would he still have been better than me?

Again, I wasn't sure if it mattered.

At the end of the day, what mattered was the fact that I got the project and the money I needed to figure out my future. I wasn't going to be alone anymore, and the money would help me do all the things I wouldn't have been able to do before. I could get the right help so I didn't have to stop working, and my baby could get all the care he or she needed.

Yeah, no matter which way this had gone or how I'd ended up here, I wasn't so full of myself, so proud, that I wouldn't accept this contract. I deserved it, I worked hard, and I was going to take it because it was what I needed.

When I got to my office, I wasn't nearly as excited as I thought I'd be. My mind kept drifting to Troy, and whenever I thought about him, I felt like I was going to be sick. It could have been morning sickness, or it could have been a side effect of having a broken heart.

It was tough to tell these days.

When the day ended, my phone rang, and it was Hailey on the other end of the line.

“Your timing is incredible,” I said with a smile. “I just heard I got the contract, and I needed to share it with someone!”

“I’m known for having a feeling about this, you know,” Hailey said.

I laughed. “Since when?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s go out.”

“I can’t go out to celebrate with wine or anything, but let’s do something,” I said.

“Of course! I’m totally down for a glass of milk if that’s what it takes.”

I giggled. Hailey was a great friend, and she would be there for me no matter what. Shit could go wrong in my life, I always had people who cared about me.

“Where are you?” she asked. “I’ll pick you up,” she added when I told her I was leaving the office now.

By the time I got to the parking lot, Hailey was already there.

“You’re serious about getting out there, huh?” I asked with a laugh when I saw her. “You were here in record time.”

“I was around the corner,” Hailey said happily. “It was sixth sense, you know?”

“Right,” I said and climbed in.

Hailey drove us to the usual cocktail bar we always went to.

“I phoned ahead,” she said before I could protest. “They make mocktails.”

“Cocktails without alcohol?”

“You know it,” Hailey said happily. “Then you can have all the taste without anything wrong.”

“Maybe we should do that when we’re not pregnant, too. You know, be more responsible.”

Hailey rolled her eyes. “Let’s just pretend you didn’t say that.”

I laughed, and she pulled into the parking spot that seemed to be open especially for us.

Her phone beeped. She glanced at it, typed a reply, and tucked her phone in her pocket before we walked in.

When we were seated in a booth, each with a cocktail—or mocktail—in front of us, I told Hailey how it had happened that I’d gotten the contract.

“I don’t want this to be a thing, you know?” I said after I explained to Hailey how Troy had pulled out of the contract to give it to me. “I don’t want to feel like by accepting it, I’m giving in somehow.”

“Giving in to what?” Hailey asked. “Him being nice?” Her phone pinged again, and she grabbed it, giving the screen her attention.

“I guess it’s something like that,” I said more to myself while she was busy, realizing that despite not being too proud to take the contract, I still didn’t want it to seem like Troy was winning. I had so much to be angry at him about. Not the project anymore—that ship had sailed. I didn’t hold grudges. This time, I was angry that he’d walked out on me the moment I’d told him about the baby.

“I thought that was what you wanted,” Hailey said when I voiced it, putting her phone down. The screen still faced up, and she glanced at it as if she expected another reply. “Wasn’t that why you told him about the baby in the first place?”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “But that’s not the point exactly.”

“Then what is?” Hailey asked.

I sighed and shook my head, sipping the stupid drink that didn’t taste like it

had anything going for it without the alcohol added to it.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

Hailey’s phone pinged again.

“Who are you talking to?” I asked, getting irritated that her attention was divided when I wanted to talk to her about what was bugging me.

“You can’t be mad at me, okay?” Hailey said.

I frowned. “What would I be mad at you about—” Before I could finish my sentence, Troy walked through the door and came straight toward our booth like he’d known we were right here.

“What are you doing here?” I asked before I looked at Hailey, who looked guilty. “Did you do this?”

“He asked me to,” Hailey said, as if that made it okay that she’d tricked me. My best friend and my... I didn’t even know what Troy was to me anymore.

“I’m not doing this,” I said, shaking my head. I grabbed my handbag and stood. I realized I couldn’t just run away because we’d come in Hailey’s car—was this why she’d insisted on taking me out, driving even though I wouldn’t be drinking? Troy touched his fingers to my hand.

“Just hear me out, okay?” he asked. “You don’t even have to say anything, and if you still want to leave after it all, then it’s fine, you can go. I just want to say my piece.”

I sighed and sat down again.

“You owe me big time for sabotaging my celebration,” I said, glaring at Hailey.

“I’ll be having shooters at the bar,” Hailey said with a grin, and she walked toward the bar without waiting for a reply. Troy slid into the booth where Hailey had vacated her seat.

“Right now, a shooter sounds great,” I said grimly. “Just in case you didn’t

know, being pregnant so I can't drown my sorrows totally sucks."

"I'm sorry," Troy said.

I shook my head. "It's not forever."

"I wasn't just talking about that," Troy said. "I was talking about... everything."

I looked up at him, and his face was sincere. He really did look like he was sorry about what had happened.

"It's in the past," I said.

Troy shook his head. "It shouldn't be. I was a total jerk to you. I thought I knew what I wanted, but I was wrong."

"What do you want?" I asked. My voice had dropped to almost a whisper.

Troy looked at me, his eyes boring into my soul.

"I want you, Mackenzie."

TROY

I watched Mackenzie's face as different emotions flickered across it.

"I don't know how you think this is going to work," she said. She tried very hard to keep her face an expressionless mask. "You can't just give me a work contract and think that fixes anything."

"I pulled out of the contract because you deserve to have it," I said. "Not because I'm trying to buy you over. I was a dick. I hurt you. I've always been so serious about winning that I didn't realize in winning the contract, I was really *losing*. I was losing you."

Mackenzie shook her head, turned her eyes to the mocktail in front of her.

"I'm pregnant, Troy."

"I know."

"You don't want kids."

I took a deep breath. "I know."

"That makes it very simple then, doesn't it?"

"I want you," I said again. "And everything that comes with it. It's not that I don't want kids. I meant, I *don't* want kids... at least, I didn't."

“You’re not making any sense.”

I took a deep breath. “Losing my brother was tough. It was one of the hardest things I’d ever had to do and probably ever will do, and for a long, long time, I held onto that so tightly, it started to define me. Now, I’ve realized that I can’t keep focusing on loss because then that’s all there will be for me. Loss. It’s all I see, and all I expect, and as a result, it’s all I get.”

Mackenzie watched me, her expressionless mask perfected now. I powered on.

“I didn’t want kids because I know what it feels like to lose someone, and I was terrified that having kids would just be more people in my life I could lose. I mean, Jake was just a kid, and the hole was just…” I took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. “Somewhere long ago, in my childlike mind, I figured that if I didn’t have kids, I couldn’t lose someone because Jake was a kid, and we lost him, so it was safer that way. The thing is, seeing you with your sister’s kids when we spent time together, and spending time with the kids too, I realized that it’s pretty damn great. Kids are such a breath of fresh air and they’re so full of life and that’s what’s been missing for me.”

Mackenzie blinked at me. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want you and I want the baby and I want a family. I want to have everything I never thought I could.”

“You’re not afraid of losing it all?”

“Always,” I said. “I don’t think that fear will ever fully go away, but I’d rather have you and our baby and give this a real shot than not have any of this at all.”

Mackenzie’s stared at me stoically until her eyes welled with tears and her face crumpled.

I reached over the table and took her hand as she cried.

“I want to be there for you and for the baby. I want to support you and take care of you. I’ll do that even if you decide you don’t want this with me—I’ll be there to help and look after the baby and whatever else you need but, Mackenzie, I’d rather we do this together. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Mackenzie cried, her tears steady streams over her cheeks now. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. I stood up and walked around the table, sliding into the booth next to her. I pulled her against me, and she cried against my chest.

Finally, she looked up at me, her bright eyes still shimmering with tears.

I wiped her tears away, dipped my head, and kissed her.

This was right. This was what was meant to be.

Me, Mackenzie, and the baby.

A family.

MACKENZIE

I had been ready to do it all alone. It would have been hard as hell, and I'd been terrified of that, but I'd been ready to take on the world the way I'd done with everything else. I wasn't a stranger to doing it by myself, to have to figure out life because my story was so different from everyone else's.

Who would have thought that I'd find my prince? Who would have thought that I'd get the happily ever after I hadn't even known I craved?

Every little girl dreamed of her hero coming to save her, to carry her off into the sunset, and although I hadn't needed saving, I was so glad that my hero was here.

Troy had been such an ass, but I'd fallen for him harder than I'd ever fallen for anyone, and I couldn't imagine doing any of this without him. When he told me he wanted to be with me, the panic melted away.

No matter what came at us now, we were together, and we could face it.

Hailey came from the bar, a smile on her face when she saw us huddled together in the booth, kissing.

“Well, this looks promising,” she said with a grin. Her cheeks were pink with the alcohol she’d had.

I smiled through the tears that still stained my cheeks. I wiped them with my sleeves.

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

“I go to get shooters, and when I come back, we have a whole different story, huh?”

“Should have gone for those shooters sooner,” Troy joked before he dropped a kiss in my hair.

I blushed, and Hailey grinned, sliding into the booth opposite us.

“I think we should have a drink to celebrate.”

I giggled. “You just want to drink.”

“I’m already halfway there,” Hailey said, nodding. “And since you can’t drink, I have to double up.”

“So selfless,” Troy said with a laugh. “But I don’t think we’re going to join you for the rest of the evening.”

“What?” Hailey asked. “You’re leaving me to drink alone?”

“This time, I’m afraid so,” Troy said. “We’ll make it up to you.”

Hailey sighed, but she smiled, looking happy for us.

“You better.”

When we slid out of the booth, first Troy and then me, Hailey stood and hugged me.

“I’m sorry I tricked you, but I’m so happy for you. You deserve this.”

“Thank you,” I said, holding on tightly.

“This is going to be great, you know?” Hailey let go of me and glanced at Troy.

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I think it is.”

Troy hugged Hailey too, thanking her for helping him, and then he took my hand and led me out of the cocktail bar. We got into his car, and he drove toward my apartment. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a contented sigh. It was hard to think that everything could be so bad one moment and so incredible the next.

This morning, I'd had a boss who was pissed at me, a job that wasn't going anywhere any time soon and a baby I had to raise alone without knowing how I was going to do it. Now, I had a contract that would cover all the funds I needed for this pregnancy and the baby's arrival, a man who would stand by my side, and everything I'd always wanted right here.

This was what true happiness felt like.

When Troy pulled up in front of my apartment, he leaned over and kissed me.

"Thank you for bringing me home," I said. "My car is still at the office."

"I'll send someone to get it for you," Troy said.

Right. He had a whole slew of people doing things for him. It was so nice not to have to worry for a change.

"Do you want to come up?" I asked after a moment's hesitation.

We'd just kissed and made up. Was it too soon to consummate our new arrangement?

Troy's eyes darkened, and he nodded.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

He was on the same page as I was, but that had been true about a lot of things from the start. As different as we were as people, with different backgrounds and upbringings, with different experiences and pasts, we fit together as if we had been made for each other.

I'd never really believed in fate and destiny and soul mates but now... I just

might.

Troy followed up the stairs to my apartment, and I let him in. I put down my bag, and he pulled me closer, kissing me.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, and I wished he would never let go.

Our kissing grew more urgent. I wanted Troy closer, so close I didn't know where he ended and I began. I ached for him, my need to have him inside me threatening to consume me.

As he kissed me, the atmosphere shifted and changed between us.

Troy put his hand on my chin, tilting my head up, and he moved his head to my neck. He nuzzled me, licking and nibbling the skin, and goosebumps ran down my neck and back. I shivered as the pleasure turned me on, making me hotter, wetter, making me want him that much more.

“Where's your room?” Troy murmured against my lips.

“Down there,” I gasped, pointing down the short hallway. We stumbled over each other as we kissed, walking toward the bedroom.

When we reached the bed, we collapsed onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, and I opened my legs so Troy could position himself between them.

He lay on top of me, grinding himself against me, and he was hard. I whimpered softly when he pressed up against my core.

His kiss started gently. Troy brushed his lips against mine, and I opened my mouth so he could slide his tongue between my lips. I relished the taste of him.

Troy broke the kiss and slowly moved down my body. I was wearing a button-up blouse, and he undid the buttons, kissing my skin as he exposed it. My skin broke out in goosebumps, my nipples tightened.

When my shirt was open, I pushed up, and I wriggled and squirmed, trying

to shrug out of it. Troy helped me. He unclasped my bra while he was at it and peeled it from my shoulders, tossing it aside. When I lay back, Troy cupped my breasts, planting kisses over each one before he sucked a nipple into his mouth.

I gasped and arched my back, pushing my breasts toward him. I buried my hands in his hair, and my breath caught in my throat when he scraped his teeth over my nipples, sending sparks of pure pleasure through my body like currents of electricity.

Troy was still fully dressed, and that wouldn't do. I only realized now that he wasn't wearing office clothes; he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Had he been out of the office all day?

I pulled his shirt up his back, scraping my nails along his bare skin, and he groaned against my nipple. He lifted his head long enough for me to pull his shirt over it, and Troy got rid of it, throwing it to the side the same way he'd discarded my bra. When he dipped his head again, he moved to my other nipple.

I moaned when he did.

I got lost in the way Troy worshipped my breasts, licking and sucking and increasing my need for him.

When he lifted his head and kissed me, he leaned his bare chest against my naked breasts, and there was nothing between us.

Troy didn't stay there for long. He kissed me again and moved his way down my body. He kissed a trail of fire down my neck and onto my chest. He moved between my breasts, licked a line to my belly button and paused on my lower belly. He planted kisses on my stomach, and I knew he was thinking about the baby—our baby—growing inside of me.

Troy paused only for a moment before he moved further down. He undid

my pants and pulled them down, peeling them off my legs, kissing them as he went until I was naked.

Slowly, Troy moved his way to the apex of my thighs. I let my thighs fall open for him, and he dove in. He licked a line from my entrance to my clit, and I cried out at the sudden intensity of his contact. When Troy closed his mouth over my clit and sucked, I whimpered and moaned, writhing on the bed.

While he licked and sucked on me, Troy's hands wandered over my legs, my ass, over my stomach, and up to my breasts. He tugged on my hard nipples while he sucked on my clit, and I moaned, my attention divided between the different points of pleasure so that it felt like it consumed me, swallowing me whole.

Troy pushed me closer and closer to orgasm, and heat washed over my body in a flush. I felt like my skin was on fire. A moment later, the orgasm crashed into me, and I cried out. I curled on the bed, arching my back and bucking my hips against his mouth until the peak of my orgasm took my breath away.

For a moment, pleasure was all I knew.

When I came down from my sexual high, Troy let go of me, and I gasped for air, breathing hard.

While I recovered on the bed, Troy pushed up and undid his pants. He dropped them to his ankles, and I stared at his cock, rock hard and straining.

I sat up while he kicked off his jeans and his shoes, naked now, too. I stared at his cock. Everything about Troy was a turn-on—not only was he handsome as hell with a charm that had made me melt since the first time I saw him, but he also had a way of licking and touching me that sent me over the edge every time.

Literally.

His cock was impressive, and I reached for him. His cock twitched when I touched him, and I ran my fingers around the head. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and pumped my hand up and down, and Troy sucked his breath through his teeth, following it with a groan.

I leaned forward and sucked his cock into my mouth. My body still hummed with the pleasure he'd given me, and I wanted to return the favor.

I bobbed my head up and down, stroking Troy in and out of my mouth. Troy moaned and groaned, his deep voice reverberating through his chest, and he pushed his fingers into my hair. While I sucked him off, he tugged at my hair, and I moaned as I breathed through my nose.

I cupped his balls with one hand as I bobbed my head, and that made him groan louder, his breathing becoming shallow.

"I'm going to finish if you do that," Troy said in a hoarse voice and pulled back so that his cock slipped out of my mouth. He pushed me back on the bed and crawled over me, covering my body with his. He only put his weight half on top of me and kissed me, sliding his tongue into my mouth. He cupped my cheek, and I tasted myself on him as we made out.

Slowly, while we kissed, Troy slid his hand down my body. He traced my curves, and I shivered as he left goosebumps in his wake. He reached between my legs and pushed his fingers into me. I moaned into his mouth.

Troy shifted so that he was on top of me and positioned between my legs. He didn't look for a condom the way he had before. It wasn't necessary. I wrapped my legs around his thighs. Troy caressed my face, his eyes locked on mine. He slid into me, and I moaned until he was buried to the hilt. The feel of him inside of me, completely bare, made me somehow feel even

closer to him. Maybe it was the fact that we'd figured things out between us. Maybe it was the fact that I was pregnant with his baby.

Maybe it was because he loved me and I loved him and there was nothing that said we couldn't be anything but perfect together.

I shivered around him. Troy rested his cock inside of me, his body pressed along the length of mine, and his eyes locked on mine again.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked.

I shook my head. "It feels amazing."

"It does," he agreed. He brushed his fingertips down my cheek, planted another kiss on my lips, and started moving inside of me. I gasped and moaned as Troy stroked in and out of me, slowly and sensually at first. When he picked up his pace, bucking his hips harder and faster, my cries grew louder. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. Troy braced himself on his arms, placed on either side of my head, and his face turned into a riddle of concentration.

He bucked into me harder and faster, and I let out breathy moans in rhythm with his fucking.

As he stroked in and out of me, he pushed me closer to the edge of another orgasm. My body shuddered as heat washed over me, dragging me closer, and for a moment, I teetered on the edge.

Troy bucked his hips harder still, and then I fell over the edge, and pleasure ripped through me another time.

This time, with Troy inside of me when I orgasmed, my pussy clamped tightly around him as my body convulsed with pleasure.

When I blinked my eyes open after letting the orgasm carry me away, Troy's eyes were locked on mine. His lips were parted and he looked at me with so much affection and adoration, I blushed.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” he asked. He planted a kiss on my lips. “I love when you do that.”

“What?” I breathed.

“Orgasm.” He grinned at me. “I love making you do that.”

Before I could reply, he bucked his hips into me, picking up the pace again, and I cried out instead of giving a sweet reply the way I’d wanted to.

Troy moved his hips faster and faster, pounding into me. I bucked my hips in rhythm with his. He was getting close—I could tell by the way his breathing had become erratic, and his face was serious, his teeth gritted and brows knitted together. The more he bucked into me, the more he pushed me to yet another orgasm. Now that I was pregnant, I was so much more sensitive, and it felt like the orgasms came easier than ever before.

When he pushed into me as deep as he could go, he planted a kiss on my lips and grunted.

His cock twitched and jerked inside of me, releasing, and the sensation pushed me over the edge.

I cried out and Troy let out a groan and we came in unison. Our bodies were pressed up together so that I felt his pleasure roll through his body and become mine until we were one.

This was how it was meant to be. This was what a relationship had to be like—two people who were their own persons and who fit together so perfectly that they created a new kind of whole.

I’d never thought I would have the space in my life for a man—I’d been happy alone—but now that Troy and I were together, I couldn’t imagine how I’d ever wanted a life without him.

When the orgasms faded, we lay together for a long while, still. It seemed like Troy didn’t want to end this moment, either. The great thing was that we

had the rest of our lives to have moments like this, over and over again.

Finally, he slid out of me and pulled me tightly against him. We didn't say anything—everything had already been said. We lay in silence together, each of us one half of a whole, and I couldn't wait for the rest of our lives together.

MACKENZIE

“Are you ready?” I asked Troy when we stopped in front of the doctor’s office.

“Yeah,” he said, and he grinned, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “Are you?”

I nodded, pursing my lips together. “I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be, it’s going to be just fine,” Troy said. He took my hand and kissed my knuckles. “It doesn’t matter which way this goes, we’re happy.”

I nodded, and Troy hopped out of the car and opened the door for me.

He took my hand, and we walked into the doctor’s office together.

Today, we were going to find out the sex of the baby. We’d been here for a checkup, and Troy had been so supportive. He’d been there for me every step of the way. That checkup had been a lot more about finding out if the baby was healthy, what prenatal medication I had to take, and other logistics that I hadn’t even thought of when I’d found out I was pregnant.

I was so glad Troy was with me. I’d been fully prepared to go on this journey alone, but having him by my side was so much better. Having his

support and his love changed everything.

“How are we doing today?” Dr. Hurley asked when we walked into the examination room. I was already dressed in the paper gown and on the bed, with Troy next to me, holding my hand. Dr. Hurley was my OB and committed to taking this journey with us.

“Excited,” I said. “Nervous.”

“Oh, no, this is where the fun part begins,” Dr. Hurley said with a smile. “What are we hoping for?”

“We don’t mind,” Troy said. “As long as the baby is healthy.”

Dr. Hurley smiled and nodded. “Let’s have a look.”

She squirted the jelly on my stomach and pressed the wand against it. I was already starting to show a little—my belly protruded like I’d had a big lunch.

“Here we are,” Dr. Hurley said, and the baby appeared on the black screen—a little gray outline of a body with a large head.

I teared up when I saw the baby on the screen. Troy looked emotional, too.

“Right, let’s see if we can find an angle,” Dr. Hurley said and frowned at the screen as she moved the wand around. For a moment, I couldn’t make out what we were looking at.

“There,” she said. “Look at that.” She turned the screen a bit more, and we both frowned.

“Is that…” Troy stared at the screen, and then his eyes widened, his face breaking into a smile. “Is that a boy?”

“It’s a boy,” Dr. Hurley said with a grin, nodding.

“Oh, my God,” Troy breathed. “Babe, look at that. It’s a boy.”

“It is,” I said, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

Troy kissed me, and his excitement was contagious.

“It’s a boy!” he said.

Dr. Hurley laughed. “Congratulations, you two. Now you can start decorating that nursery in the right colors, eh?” She winked at us.

I smiled and nodded, but I didn’t know how to respond. Troy and I had talked about moving in together, but we weren’t there yet. We still had quite some time before the baby would arrive, too. We had plenty of time to figure it all out and see how we were going to make it work.

She let us hear the sound of the heartbeat, and after that, she went through a couple of technical things, measuring different body parts to track the baby’s progress.

I felt like I was floating in a dream. It hadn’t been so long ago that I’d met Troy and we had a one-night stand where I’d wanted to sneak away before he woke up, and now we were having a family together. Life was so unpredictable, but if I could go back and change it... I’d do it all over again.

After the appointment, I got dressed and met Troy, where he’d been waiting for me.

Together, we walked out of the offices and into the waiting room.

The waiting room was full, and it took me a moment to realize that everyone in the chairs was someone we knew.

I stopped in my tracks and stared.

Rachel, Tom, Aaron, and Randall. Rachel’s kids. Hailey. Two people from my work I was close enough with to count as friends. Scott was there, too.

“Auntie Mackie!” Benjamin cried out, but Rachel pulled him closer and whispered something in his ear that made him cover his mouth with both hands and giggle.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

“I invited them,” Troy said with a grin. “Today is worth celebrating.”

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

“Because I’m about to declare my everlasting love to you, and I want the world to know.” He dropped onto one knee.

“Oh, my God, Troy,” I breathed, clasping my hand to my mouth. “Are you...”

“Mackenzie, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. Not only are you an amazing person, driven, hard-working and beautiful on the inside and out, you also saved me from myself. You showed me to look toward the future rather than the past, so that’s exactly what I’m doing—that future includes you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, to have our family together, keep having adventures, one after the other. Will you marry me?” He produced a velvet box and opened it to show a ring with a massive diamond shimmering in the light.

“Troy,” I said, and tears streamed down my cheeks. Again. The pregnancy hormones made me so emotional. “Of course.”

Everyone cheered. Benjamin broke away and ran to me, hugging my legs.

“Does that mean he’s going to be my uncle?” Benjamin asked, eyeing Troy dubiously.

“That’s exactly what it means,” I said with a laugh, and Troy took out the ring, sliding it onto my finger. “This diamond is huge,” I added, studying it as it sparkled and glittered.

“Oh, it’s like you’re a princess,” Tammy said, coming to me, too.

Troy stood and kissed me. “That’s exactly what she is—a princess.”

I blushed, and everyone else crowded us, hugging and congratulating and looking at the ring.

“So?” Rachel asked after everyone had had their say. “Did you find out what you’re having?”

“Oh!” Troy cried out. “It’s a boy! Our very own little Happy Meal!”

“Our what?” I asked, laughing.

“You know... Frye. As in McFry.”

I blinked at Troy. “Is that what you were saying that first day at your office?”

Scott chuckled from behind Troy, who looked like he was at a loss for words.

“He’s going to be a Larson, you know,” I pointed out, trying not to laugh at the stupid joke.

“I know,” Troy said with a shrug. “But that doesn’t mean you and this little boy won’t put the happy in Happy Meal.”

I laughed and shook my head.

“Never too soon to start the dad jokes, eh?” Scott asked and nudged Troy.

“Dad... I love the sound of that.”

Everyone laughed, and I kissed Troy.

Benjamin looked ecstatic that he was going to have a friend soon, even though Rachel tried to explain the baby would be too little to play with for a while.

When I looked at Troy, laughing, he looked at me with adoration.

“I love you,” he mouthed.

“I love you, too,” I mouthed back.

Rachel came to me and hugged me tightly.

“I’m so proud of you, Mackie,” she said. “And Mom would have been proud of you too.”

“It’s so good to know that,” I said. “But who I am today is all thanks to you. Losing Mom was horrible, but I grew up with you as my mother, and I’m so glad you’re here to see all of this.”

“I’m not going anywhere for a long while still,” Rachel said with a grin.

“We’re going to watch our kids be friends and we’re going to swap baby milestones and teen stories and all the good stuff.”

I laughed. Was it possible to die of happiness?

We were surrounded by friends and family who would be there for us, celebrating the good times and being supportive during the bad times. I had a man I loved dearly, a baby on the way, and a future that looked brighter than ever.

EPILOGUE - MACKENZIE

Five Months Later

Troy twisted in his seat and smiled at me. I sat in the back seat next to the baby car seat.

I'd chosen to ride in the back of the SUV, next to the car seat, rather than sitting in the front next to Troy.

I would sit up front later, I guess, but right now, I didn't want to leave our baby's side.

Little Jake was swaddled in blue blankets and a white fluffy onesie, his tiny pink face and closed eyes peeking out. He was so impossibly small.

"Ready?" Troy asked.

I nodded and returned his smile. "Ready."

I got out of the car, and Troy unclipped the car seat, carrying it into the house. The Tuscan villa was welcoming in the morning sun. The winter months were colder, and we were all dressed warmly, but in LA, Christmas was never white; the Christmas that lay ahead wouldn't be any less magical without snow, though. It would be our first Christmas as a family, and I was already planning something spectacular in our new home.

Inside, Troy put the carrier on the dining room table, and I unclipped the straps, lifting Jake out of his carrier. He hiccupped and squirmed, but when I settled him against my chest, he calmed down immediately.

“Welcome home, little buddy,” Troy said and cupped Jake’s head before he planted a kiss on my temple. “Well done, Mama.”

I blushed and walked to the nursery.

Troy and I had decorated the nursery a month ago. We’d gotten a painter out to paint the room in gradient shades of light blue, with white fluffy clouds close to the ceiling and Jake’s name written in full above his crib.

Everything else was ready—a change table, a rocking chair, a cubby with all the diapers and wipes we would need, the nappy bin, and the closet was lined with so many baby outfits that Jake would grow out of them before he ever wore them.

Rachel had organized a baby shower for me, and we’d been inundated with gifts—Jake had no idea how loved he’d been right from the very start.

I put Jake in his crib, and Troy and I looked down at him.

“He’s perfect,” I said.

Troy nodded. “He’s going to be a big, strong guy. The first Larson of his generation.”

“But not the last.”

“No,” Troy said and wrapped his arm around me. “Definitely not the last.”

Troy had been so against having kids when I’d met him, and when I’d fallen pregnant, I’d been sure he wouldn’t want anything to do with me and the baby.

Since he’d found out I was pregnant, everything had changed. Not only had he committed himself to being involved and supporting us, not only

financially but emotionally, too, he wanted more. More kids, a bigger family, more laughter and happiness in his life.

“Can I make you a cup of coffee?” Troy asked.

I nodded. “I’d love that. Just let me get this sorted and I’ll join you.”

Troy kissed me on the lips before he left the nursery, and I turned on the baby monitor, angling it so that it faced Jake. It was a top-of-the-range monitor with a camera, so I wouldn’t only be able to hear Jake, but I’d be able to check in on him no matter where I was, too.

Not that I would do that so much, especially at first. I had a feeling I’d spend most of my time in the nursery with Jake in the early weeks. He was so small and so precious. I hadn’t known I could ever love someone this much.

Before I’d fallen pregnant, I hadn’t planned to have kids in my immediate future. Sure, the idea had been to eventually get there, but now that Jake was here and Troy and I were parents, I could almost not imagine a different life.

I leaned down and kissed Jake on his forehead. He was asleep again. I brushed my fingers along his little cheek, and the sparkle of my engagement ring caught my eye.

I smiled and studied my ring for a moment.

Troy and I had decided not to get married until Jake was born. He wanted us to have a big wedding, with a lot of guests, the big dress, and all the moving parts of a party that everyone would remember.

Moving in together had happened shortly after he’d asked me to marry him, though. Troy had wanted to be a part of my pregnancy journey, and he’d told me this was going to be my home, so there was no use waiting.

I’d agreed with him, and within two weeks, Troy had had a moving company pack up for me and bring all my things to him.

I still had the apartment. I’d bought it with the money my mom had left me

in an account I'd only been able to access when I was twenty-one, and it was the one thing I felt I still had of hers. I'd decided to rent it out instead of selling it, and the money that it brought in went into a new account, one that Jake could access when *he* was twenty-one.

I took a deep breath and let out a contented sigh.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was on silent so that it wouldn't wake Jake, and when I pulled it out, Rachel's name flashed on the caller ID.

I left the nursery to answer, checking that the baby monitor was on before I did.

"I don't want to impose on your first day home with Jake, so I'm not going to come over, but I'm dying of curiosity. How is everything? How are you coping? Do you need anything?"

I laughed. "I think I'm okay. I'm taking this one step at a time because it's... scary."

"It is," Rachel agreed. "You're going to be so great, though."

Rachel had been with me when I'd gone into labor. She'd been the one to take me to the hospital. Troy had met us there, and Scott had been on duty at the time, too. The closest people in our lives had been there to meet baby Jake the moment he'd arrived in this world.

"I'm still learning," I said. "But Troy is making it so much easier already."

"He's a great guy, Mack," Rachel said. "You're incredibly lucky."

"I am." I beamed. "And I know I can turn to you when I get stuck with something. I know I will, more than once. More than a dozen times, I'm sure."

"You'll learn as you go along," Rachel reassured me. "You'll grow along with him, and I'm always here. Benjamin keeps talking about kicking a ball

with Jake. I keep having to remind him that it will be a few years still, but the kids are already asking when we get to babysit.”

I laughed. “I don’t think I’ll be able to leave him just yet.”

“When you’re ready, we’re here,” Rachel said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “You just do what’s right for you, and I’m here if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Rach,” I said. “Not only for being supportive and caring but for everything. Sometimes, I catch myself wanting Mom to be here to see all of this, and that won’t ever change, but I’m in the lucky position that although Mom is gone, I still have you to experience all of this with me, and that’s just as perfect.”

Rachel laughed, and I knew her cheeks were bright red.

“I’m not going anywhere. We’ve already established that I’m not going down without a fight. I’ll be here to see *all* your babies.”

I laughed at that. *All my babies* was right. Troy and I hadn’t discussed a number, but I knew that I wanted a big family with him. I’d grown up almost as an only child; my brothers had all been so much older than me, already out of the house. Troy had had Scott but they’d grown up with a hole in their lives, too.

Instead of running from the pain, we were going to embrace it and fill the holes that were in our lives with children and memories and family.

“I’m meeting with the wedding planner on Friday,” I said. “Troy wants to get the ball rolling.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear about it!”

“I’ll tell you everything when I see you,” I said. “I have a couple of ideas already.”

“It’s going to be amazing,” Rachel said, and the excitement was clear in her

voice. “This is everything you deserve, Mackie. You worked so hard to make a good life, and now you’re there.”

“I didn’t work hard to make *this* happen,” I laughed. “It was all an accident.”

“A happy accident.”

“Those are the best kind.” I giggled. “I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Rachel said.

We’d decided to have a small family day with Scott, Rachel, and the kids over the weekend. Both to celebrate Jake’s coming home, to let the kids see the baby since they hadn’t been able to come to the hospital and see him, and to spend quality time together.

Family was everything. We both felt that way, and we were going to do everything in our power to keep that idea front and center. I envisioned a life with Troy where the house always had laughter and love within these walls and family coming and going as they pleased because they were welcome here.

When I found Troy in the kitchen, he’d prepared two cups of coffee for us, and a white cake stood on the counter. It read *Welcome Home* written in beautiful blue icing.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s to spoil you,” he said. “It’s actually for Jake, but since he can’t eat it, I think we should dig in and take one for the team.”

I laughed and wrapped my arms around Troy’s neck.

“You’re incredible.”

“I love you,” Troy said.

“I love you, too. All of this... is amazing.”

Troy kissed me, and we stood melded together in the kitchen, two halves

that created a whole.

When I met Troy, he'd been nothing more than a one-night stand. Then he'd become my rival, the man who stood between me and a better future.

Now, he *was* my better future.

Could a girl be any luckier?



Thank you for reading *Knocked Up by my Rival!*

If you enjoyed this, you'll love *Baby by my Brother's Best Friend.*

It's an enemies to lovers, surprise pregnancy standalone.

Keep reading for a preview!



"This story was charming, funny, spicy and very enjoyable! A must read!"

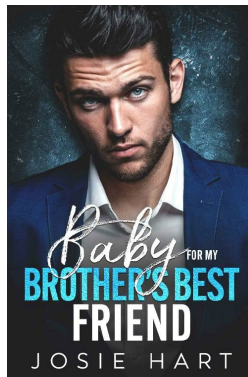


"I cannot get enough of this book! *Enemies to lovers* is my favorite and this one does not disappoint!"



"100% an enemies to lovers book. I read all morning and literally could not put it down since I woke up. Definitely recommend!"

Baby for my Brother's Best Friend Sneak Peek



**One brother's best friend + one hotel room
= two blue lines**

If “sexy” had a mascot, my brother’s best friend would be it.

Deep hazel eyes and a diamond cutting jawline.

He offers me the business deal of a lifetime,

If I play a convincing date for *his ex’s* destination wedding.

But pretending we're smitten is easier said than done.

His devilish smirk and cocky attitude work me up,

Until I can't decide if I want to punch him or kiss him.

Now sharing one room in paradise has me questioning everything.

He’s more than off-limits,

But my heart, *and his hands*, have a mind of their own.

His fingers grazing my skin sends my body humming,

His mouth has me throbbing in brand new places,

And we’re waking up tangled together, again.

At least on the island, our passion is mutual.

I don’t know if he’ll want “us” in real life.

What I *do know* is he’ll be my brother’s *ex-best friend*.

Because *I’m pregnant*.

ALLY

“**A** bso-fucking-lutely *not*,” Josh roared, throwing his hands in the air. “You’re not jetting off with my sister thousands of miles away to your *ex*’s wedding!” He was pacing around my master bedroom, his chucks squeaking on the freshly polished dark oak floors.

“Dude, relax,” I said, shoving more of my clothes into my suitcase and shaking my head. I turned to look at him. “It’s really not what you think it is. Let me explain before you give yourself a heart attack.”

Don’t get me wrong, I knew that telling my best friend was going to be a shitshow, but *this* was a little overdramatic—even for him.

“Have you slept with her?” he demanded, slamming his hand down on my suitcase, stopping me from continuing to fill it. He was *seething*, his light complexion burning crimson as his icy blue eyes bore into mine. “Because I will literally *murder* you if that’s what happened.”

“What? No.” I snorted, spinning around to grab my good blazer from the closet. “I have no desire to fuck your sister, Josh. Gross.”

Well, maybe not gross.

She did have the body of a goddess—but it was still a no. She was beyond off-limits, and annoying.

Which is why she was perfect.

He jerked back, his eyes narrowing. “Then what the hell are you doing with her, Levi? I don’t like anything that’s coming out of your mouth right now, but you better start talking, or my fist is going to.”

Again, so fucking dramatic.

“Bro, I told you about Frank selling CyberSecure. That’s all this is about. I just want to prove to him that I’ve matured so I can buy his company.”

His demeanor didn’t change. “Cool, but that doesn’t explain my sister...”

I let out a sharp breath, taking a step back from him—just in case he went swinging on me. “She agreed to be my *pretend* girlfriend.”

“*What?*” His eyes went nearly as wide as his face. “Why would she even agree to such stupidity? How will that help you buy some company? Is this about Rachel? Because—”

I shrugged and cut him off. “Their biggest complaint with me when I was dating Rachel was that I was too much of a flirt, and that I was immature when it came to handling my relationships. I mean, Rachel was a far cry from mature herself—and she *did* cheat on me with like three different guys when she went to Italy. But that’s not important,” I added quickly. “This has *nothing* to do with her. I just want that business. If I show up with a successful, charming woman—who has everything going for her, and I present myself as the perfect boyfriend. Maturity reached...”

“You think *my* sister is those things?” Josh burst into laughter. “Like, we *are* talking about Ally, right? The woman you’re talking about does *not* sound like her. Ally is a firecracker.”

“Oh, come on,” I drew out. “Your sister has her shit together more than

ninety-nine percent of the women we know. She's got her own place, makes a killer living with a steady smart-person job, and she's...you know, not ugly."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "Are you indirectly calling my sister hot?"

I rolled my eyes. "I said she's not ugly. I'm not getting off to your sister in my spare time or something."

Okay, maybe a handful of times.

That shower accident would be forever burned in my brain.

Sighing, I pushed the thought away. "The point is to just solely show that I can manage a nice, successful woman as my girlfriend. I can be the mature guy that I'm supposed to be—the kind of guy that can land a multi-million-dollar company and keep it running profitably."

Josh was quiet for a few moments, his face contorted in a mixture of amusement and disbelief. "And you don't think *lying* about a relationship is a little immature?"

"Why are you being so fucking unsupportive?" I groaned, running my fingers through my hair. "You know that I'm more than capable of running a business like that. I've been working for my dad for nearly ten years now—I've proven my business capabilities."

"No, no," Josh said quickly. "I *do* think you're capable of running the business. I just really *don't* understand why having some fake girlfriend, especially my *sister*, is going to make the deal more plausible. Everyone knows that you're a suave guy in the tech world. I don't see why that wouldn't be enough."

"Frank Lewis is all about family—he's the epitome of a family man. That's *why*. Back when I was dating Rachel, he would always pick the guy with the family over the bachelor, even if the latter was more deserving of the

position.” I folded my arms across my Rolling Stones t-shirt, ignoring the irritation burning in my chest. I *had* to convince Josh that this was a good idea...

He was the only person standing in the way of the plan. If he wasn’t on board, then there was no way in hell I would go through with it. Not even a company like CyberSecure was worth losing my friendship with him.

“And Ally *agreed*?” he finally said, letting out a sigh and rubbing his jaw.

“Yeah, for thirty percent of the company.” My jaw clenched at the mention, but it was what it was. She was a hell of a negotiator, and she was also the *only* option I had. I needed her to agree. I could give up some profit to her.

Josh laughed. “Man, I love my sister.”

“Yeah, everyone seems to—which is why she’s perfect. I just have to try and get along with her for two weeks.” I grimaced. On paper Ally really was the ideal girl, but there was never a time when the two of us had seen eye to eye.

I’ll just have to suck it up and keep my eyes on the prize.

“Okay, fine. Do it, but don’t mess with Ally—like you know,” he warned, though his expression was more weary than anything.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” I assured him, awkwardly shifting my weight. “She’s not really my type anyway.”

“She better not be,” he grunted, side-eying me. “Ally deserves better.”

Ouch. But seriously?

I tensed by jaw. “I’m not even going to go there with you—but I’ve seen your sister’s dating choices over the years, and I wouldn’t exactly call them top tier. I mean, who was that one guy she dated for like three years? He was the biggest douche.”

“Which is exactly why she deserves better. She has terrible taste.” Josh

chuckled, and my shoulders dropped with relief. “I think you’re a solid bro, but your past with women is sketchy at best. Rachel was your only relationship that lasted longer than a handful of months.”

“I was with Rachel for years,” I pointed out, furrowing my brow. “That’s a lot more than a handful of months, so I *am* capable of maintaining a long-term relationship. I just...I realized after Rachel that I like to have fun more than I like to be nailed down.”

“And so now you’re going to convince Frank Lewis that you’re ready to settle down and be serious. Genius.” Josh shook his head and reached for a pair of my designer sunglasses. “Do you want these? Because you only have like ten pairs, and I broke mine last week.”

I glanced over to the black Gucci sunglasses—they were my favorites, but... “Yeah, you can have them.”

“Dude, you’re the best.”

“Consider it payment for letting me borrow your sister for a couple of weeks, though that sounds...*weird*.”

“Really fucking weird,” he agreed, before bursting into laughter. “But anyway, I know that Ally can hold her own. The woman negotiated a thirty percent stake out of you. That’s impressive.”

“Yeah, and my mom is convinced that it’s a real relationship, so we’re going to have to just play this off as that. I had to ask off for Ally last minute, and I didn’t want to make her be the one who had to explain it. My mom had a thousand questions, and it was hard to bullshit my way through—even for me.”

“So then I guess the two of you just *don’t* work out when you get back?”

“Yeah, and I think it might break my mother’s heart.” I rolled my eyes and plopped down on the bed. “Like, I seriously had no idea that she was pining

after the two of us somehow ending up together.”

Josh’s eyes went wide. “No way? I knew Lisa loved Ally, but I thought it was just because she’s, well, *Ally*. Everyone loves Ally.”

“Which is why she’s perfect for my fake girlfriend. I know she’ll charm the shit out of Frank.”

Josh didn’t say anything, but his phone ringing interrupted the conversation. He pulled it out of his pocket and smiled at the screen. “Oh, this is perfect.”

My stomach knotted up as I saw Ally’s face on the phone. *Great*.

“Hey sis, what’s up?” He put her on speaker phone.

“Uh, well...” Her voice trailed off, and I already knew she was fishing to see what he knew. “I’m packing. What’re you up to?”

“Hanging out at home with Levi, helping him pack for the wedding. What’re you packing for?”

“Uh...”

“So you caught the feelings for Levi?” The amusement in his tone made me smile, but not as much as Ally’s reaction.

“Absolutely not. You can’t seriously tell me that he thinks he’s going to get away with lying to you about the arrangement? I swear he’s such a—”

“I’m right here,” I cut her off, chuckling. “Careful what you say. I’d hate for you to lose that thirty percent of CyberSecure before we’re ever even wheels up.”

She groaned. “You’re insufferable.”

“We all know that, and if it wasn’t for the fact that you’re going to be a millionaire once the deal is sorted, there’s no way in hell I would be letting you do this. I hope you know that,” Josh said, running a hand through his hair.

“Well, first of all, I’m a grown-ass woman and I can do whatever I want. And secondly, there’s no way in hell *I* would be doing this. But since Levi is right there, I have some questions for him.”

I cringed. “Yeah?”

“On a scale of one to black-tie affair, how formal is this wedding? It’s at the beach, right? I don’t know what I’m supposed to wear.”

“Uh, whatever women wear to a wedding—so anything but white should be fine. Just buy a nice designer dress of any color that’s a little beachy and you should be fine.”

“I hate to break it to you, Levi, but I can’t afford a dress like that—and I’m not spending thousands of dollars on a dress that I’ll only wear once.”

I shrugged. “No problem. I’ll buy you one then. Just text me your measurements.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone, and Josh and I exchanged a look.

“Ally?” Josh asked. “Are you still there?”

She let out a sigh. “Yeah. I just...yeah, I’ll send over my measurements, but *nothing* slutty, Levi—I mean it.”

I burst into laughter. “The less material, the better. I got it.”

“I’m serious,” she snapped.

“Don’t worry,” Josh spoke up, shooting me daggers. “I’ll make sure he picks something that you’d like.”

“I wish you were coming,” Ally said on the other end.

Josh smiled. “You’ll be good. If you have to take a cheap shot to keep him in line, I’ll back you up when you get back.”

“Hey!” I called out, instantly covering myself. “Not cool, man.”

Ally’s laughter echoed through the room. “Deal. This is gonna be fun.”

“So fun.” I feigned a smile, wondering what the fuck I had gotten myself into.

Keep Reading Baby for my Brother's Best Friend.

LEVI

“**A** bso-fucking-lutely *not*,” Josh roared, throwing his hands in the air. “You’re not jetting off with my sister thousands of miles away to your *ex*’s wedding!” He was pacing around my master bedroom, his chucks squeaking on the freshly polished dark oak floors.

“Dude, relax,” I said, shoving more of my clothes into my suitcase and shaking my head. I turned to look at him. “It’s really not what you think it is. Let me explain before you give yourself a heart attack.”

Don’t get me wrong, I knew that telling my best friend was going to be a shitshow, but *this* was a little overdramatic—even for him.

“Have you slept with her?” he demanded, slamming his hand down on my suitcase, stopping me from continuing to fill it. He was *seething*, his light complexion burning crimson as his icy blue eyes bore into mine. “Because I will literally *murder* you if that’s what happened.”

“What? No.” I snorted, spinning around to grab my good blazer from the closet. “I have no desire to fuck your sister, Josh. Gross.”

Well, maybe not gross.

She did have the body of a goddess—but it was still a no. She was beyond off-limits, and annoying.

Which is why she was perfect.

He jerked back, his eyes narrowing. “Then what the hell are you doing with her, Levi? I don’t like anything that’s coming out of your mouth right now, but you better start talking, or my fist is going to.”

Again, so fucking dramatic.

“Bro, I told you about Frank selling CyberSecure. That’s all this is about. I just want to prove to him that I’ve matured so I can buy his company.”

His demeanor didn’t change. “Cool, but that doesn’t explain my sister...”

I let out a sharp breath, taking a step back from him—just in case he went swinging on me. “She agreed to be my *pretend* girlfriend.”

“*What?*” His eyes went nearly as wide as his face. “Why would she even agree to such stupidity? How will that help you buy some company? Is this about Rachel? Because—”

I shrugged and cut him off. “Their biggest complaint with me when I was dating Rachel was that I was too much of a flirt, and that I was immature when it came to handling my relationships. I mean, Rachel was a far cry from mature herself—and she *did* cheat on me with like three different guys when she went to Italy. But that’s not important,” I added quickly. “This has *nothing* to do with her. I just want that business. If I show up with a successful, charming woman—who has everything going for her, and I present myself as the perfect boyfriend. Maturity reached...”

“You think *my* sister is those things?” Josh burst into laughter. “Like, we *are* talking about Ally, right? The woman you’re talking about does *not* sound like her. Ally is a firecracker.”

“Oh, come on,” I drew out. “Your sister has her shit together more than

ninety-nine percent of the women we know. She's got her own place, makes a killer living with a steady smart-person job, and she's...you know, not ugly."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "Are you indirectly calling my sister hot?"

I rolled my eyes. "I said she's not ugly. I'm not getting off to your sister in my spare time or something."

Okay, maybe a handful of times.

That shower accident would be forever burned in my brain.

Sighing, I pushed the thought away. "The point is to just solely show that I can manage a nice, successful woman as my girlfriend. I can be the mature guy that I'm supposed to be—the kind of guy that can land a multi-million-dollar company and keep it running profitably."

Josh was quiet for a few moments, his face contorted in a mixture of amusement and disbelief. "And you don't think *lying* about a relationship is a little immature?"

"Why are you being so fucking unsupportive?" I groaned, running my fingers through my hair. "You know that I'm more than capable of running a business like that. I've been working for my dad for nearly ten years now—I've proven my business capabilities."

"No, no," Josh said quickly. "I *do* think you're capable of running the business. I just really *don't* understand why having some fake girlfriend, especially my *sister*, is going to make the deal more plausible. Everyone knows that you're a suave guy in the tech world. I don't see why that wouldn't be enough."

"Frank Lewis is all about family—he's the epitome of a family man. That's *why*. Back when I was dating Rachel, he would always pick the guy with the family over the bachelor, even if the latter was more deserving of the

position.” I folded my arms across my Rolling Stones t-shirt, ignoring the irritation burning in my chest. I *had* to convince Josh that this was a good idea...

He was the only person standing in the way of the plan. If he wasn’t on board, then there was no way in hell I would go through with it. Not even a company like CyberSecure was worth losing my friendship with him.

“And Ally *agreed*?” he finally said, letting out a sigh and rubbing his jaw.

“Yeah, for thirty percent of the company.” My jaw clenched at the mention, but it was what it was. She was a hell of a negotiator, and she was also the *only* option I had. I needed her to agree. I could give up some profit to her.

Josh laughed. “Man, I love my sister.”

“Yeah, everyone seems to—which is why she’s perfect. I just have to try and get along with her for two weeks.” I grimaced. On paper Ally really was the ideal girl, but there was never a time when the two of us had seen eye to eye.

I’ll just have to suck it up and keep my eyes on the prize.

“Okay, fine. Do it, but don’t mess with Ally—like you know,” he warned, though his expression was more weary than anything.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” I assured him, awkwardly shifting my weight. “She’s not really my type anyway.”

“She better not be,” he grunted, side-eying me. “Ally deserves better.”

Ouch. But seriously?

I tensed by jaw. “I’m not even going to go there with you—but I’ve seen your sister’s dating choices over the years, and I wouldn’t exactly call them top tier. I mean, who was that one guy she dated for like three years? He was the biggest douche.”

“Which is exactly why she deserves better. She has terrible taste.” Josh

chuckled, and my shoulders dropped with relief. “I think you’re a solid bro, but your past with women is sketchy at best. Rachel was your only relationship that lasted longer than a handful of months.”

“I was with Rachel for years,” I pointed out, furrowing my brow. “That’s a lot more than a handful of months, so I *am* capable of maintaining a long-term relationship. I just...I realized after Rachel that I like to have fun more than I like to be nailed down.”

“And so now you’re going to convince Frank Lewis that you’re ready to settle down and be serious. Genius.” Josh shook his head and reached for a pair of my designer sunglasses. “Do you want these? Because you only have like ten pairs, and I broke mine last week.”

I glanced over to the black Gucci sunglasses—they were my favorites, but... “Yeah, you can have them.”

“Dude, you’re the best.”

“Consider it payment for letting me borrow your sister for a couple of weeks, though that sounds...*weird*.”

“Really fucking weird,” he agreed, before bursting into laughter. “But anyway, I know that Ally can hold her own. The woman negotiated a thirty percent stake out of you. That’s impressive.”

“Yeah, and my mom is convinced that it’s a real relationship, so we’re going to have to just play this off as that. I had to ask off for Ally last minute, and I didn’t want to make her be the one who had to explain it. My mom had a thousand questions, and it was hard to bullshit my way through—even for me.”

“So then I guess the two of you just *don’t* work out when you get back?”

“Yeah, and I think it might break my mother’s heart.” I rolled my eyes and plopped down on the bed. “Like, I seriously had no idea that she was pining

after the two of us somehow ending up together.”

Josh’s eyes went wide. “No way? I knew Lisa loved Ally, but I thought it was just because she’s, well, *Ally*. Everyone loves Ally.”

“Which is why she’s perfect for my fake girlfriend. I know she’ll charm the shit out of Frank.”

Josh didn’t say anything, but his phone ringing interrupted the conversation. He pulled it out of his pocket and smiled at the screen. “Oh, this is perfect.”

My stomach knotted up as I saw Ally’s face on the phone. *Great*.

“Hey sis, what’s up?” He put her on speaker phone.

“Uh, well...” Her voice trailed off, and I already knew she was fishing to see what he knew. “I’m packing. What’re you up to?”

“Hanging out at home with Levi, helping him pack for the wedding. What’re you packing for?”

“Uh...”

“So you caught the feelings for Levi?” The amusement in his tone made me smile, but not as much as Ally’s reaction.

“Absolutely not. You can’t seriously tell me that he thinks he’s going to get away with lying to you about the arrangement? I swear he’s such a—”

“I’m right here,” I cut her off, chuckling. “Careful what you say. I’d hate for you to lose that thirty percent of CyberSecure before we’re ever even wheels up.”

She groaned. “You’re insufferable.”

“We all know that, and if it wasn’t for the fact that you’re going to be a millionaire once the deal is sorted, there’s no way in hell I would be letting you do this. I hope you know that,” Josh said, running a hand through his hair.

“Well, first of all, I’m a grown-ass woman and I can do whatever I want. And secondly, there’s no way in hell *I* would be doing this. But since Levi is right there, I have some questions for him.”

I cringed. “Yeah?”

“On a scale of one to black-tie affair, how formal is this wedding? It’s at the beach, right? I don’t know what I’m supposed to wear.”

“Uh, whatever women wear to a wedding—so anything but white should be fine. Just buy a nice designer dress of any color that’s a little beachy and you should be fine.”

“I hate to break it to you, Levi, but I can’t afford a dress like that—and I’m not spending thousands of dollars on a dress that I’ll only wear once.”

I shrugged. “No problem. I’ll buy you one then. Just text me your measurements.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone, and Josh and I exchanged a look.

“Ally?” Josh asked. “Are you still there?”

She let out a sigh. “Yeah. I just...yeah, I’ll send over my measurements, but *nothing* slutty, Levi—I mean it.”

I burst into laughter. “The less material, the better. I got it.”

“I’m serious,” she snapped.

“Don’t worry,” Josh spoke up, shooting me daggers. “I’ll make sure he picks something that you’d like.”

“I wish you were coming,” Ally said on the other end.

Josh smiled. “You’ll be good. If you have to take a cheap shot to keep him in line, I’ll back you up when you get back.”

“Hey!” I called out, instantly covering myself. “Not cool, man.”

Ally’s laughter echoed through the room. “Deal. This is gonna be fun.”

“So fun.” I feigned a smile, wondering what the fuck I had gotten myself into.

Keep Reading Baby for my Brother's Best Friend.