

The Gift



RILZY ADAMS

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To Rafiq – thanks for pushing me when I'd all but given up.

I love you!

CHAPTER ONE

Jaxon Johnson tipped his head back and grimaced as the amber liquid in his tumbler scorched its way down his sore throat. He tried to avoid the eager gazes of the sea of people milling around his living room but sometimes failed. Those who managed to catch his eye offered him solemn smiles before they went back to chattering amongst themselves or filling their plates with the *hor d'oeuvres* his mother's favorite catering company provided. Bradley Catering was indeed skilled at any occasion. They'd catered Johnson business dinners, weddings, baby showers and now, funerals.

Anger was acid in his stomach. These people enjoyed themselves much in the same way they enjoyed a company dinner. Even the faces were damned familiar. He spotted Daryl Hodges from the litigation department standing too close to Bonnie, the paralegal Daryl attempted to take home after each office party. She was being politely dismissive to him, as usual. Across the room stood Michael Samuels, a District judge his father played golf with at least three times per year. He ticked the familiar faces off in his mind – the lawyers, the judges, business colleagues and the odd aspiring politician most likely trying to line their campaign coffers with Johnson money. He took another sip of scotch and noticed Raymond Sheppard, one of Johnson and Associates' most prominent clients, looking in his direction. The man popped a dainty sandwich into his mouth then wove his way through the sea of black towards him. Jaxon muttered a curse under his breath. He scanned the room looking for an escape but when he found none, he stood straighter and stiffened his back.

The burly man brought his hand to Jaxon as if he were going to pat him on his back but seemed to rethink it. He let his hand to drop to his side.

“My deepest and sincerest condolences,” he said. “I can’t begin to imagine how rough this is for you.”

You’re not making it any easier, Jaxon thought. Instead he said, “Thanks for coming.”

The seconds ticked by with tense silence before Jaxon spoke. He muttered the words he knew the man wanted to hear. “Your support means a lot.”

It didn’t. Jaxon would gladly boot everyone from his townhouse if he half thought he could get away with it. He’d put Charlotte in the ground less than three hours before and the last thing he wanted was to be surrounded by a group of people. He didn’t want to make small talk. He didn’t want to restrain himself. He wanted to be drunk out of his mind and numb to the aching pain in the middle of his chest. In the end it was easier to allow his mother and grandmother to plan Charlotte’s reception than it was to fight them. He just wished he had known they would invite everyone he knew. Most of these people had never even met Charlotte but came along to the reception, as they had the funeral, to pay their respects to his family. None of them could begin to understand the depth of the pain losing Charlotte caused. God, he envied them. When they finished paying their respects they’d walk out of his townhouse and back to their tidy lives. He would remain trapped in the hell where he spent every night lying in his darkened room watching shadows dance on his ceiling while bargaining with God or any deity to bring his sweet girl back. He would continue to spend his mornings being jolted awake in cold sweat when he reached for his wife and found an empty, cold bed. Jaxon’s chest tightened. Nothing was bringing Charlotte back. Nothing could. His family connections couldn’t. His wealth would never be enough and neither would his pleadings with God. His wife was dead. A bullet to the chest, a quarter of an inch thick, shattered his life into pieces he wasn’t sure he’d be able to put back together.

The sea of people swam before Jaxon so he took two steps backwards until he felt the wall behind him. He tried to anchor himself, suddenly feeling like he didn’t have the strength to

stand upright. He divided his life into two parts. The life he lived before he received *that* phone call and the fragmented pieces of the life he lived now.

His life with Charlotte seemed so foreign and so distant that at his worst Jaxon wondered if he dreamt up their time together. Grief washed over him, sudden and thick, when he remembered the last time he'd seen his wife.

Six weeks. Five days. Fifteen hours.

The images flashed through his mind punctuated with fresh stabs of pain. They were curled up in bed with the first stirrings of sunlight peaking through the floor to ceiling windows. Charlotte lay with the cotton sheets pulled around her body and her tightly coiled, thick, black hair spread out on the white sheets, damp from their early morning love making. He'd been running late for an early pre-trial meeting but wasn't ready to leave his warm bed or his lovely wife. Charlotte smiled up at him, "Your last name might be on the firm's letterhead but your dad could still fire your ass."

When he finally dragged himself out of bed she grinned and said, "Maya and I are running a special errand today."

She stretched, feline like, before propping herself up against the ornate oak headboard, "I'll tell you all about it over dinner."

Jaxon crawled over the plush sheets and planted a kiss on her upturned lips, "I don't give a damn about anything Maya gets up to."

Hurt flashed across Charlotte's face but was quickly replaced by a warm smile as she reached in for another kiss. Jaxon was relieved his comment didn't start an argument. He and Charlotte didn't argue much but whenever they did, the fights were usually about Maya. He didn't get along with her best friend and he didn't think he ever would or ever wished to.

"This errand is all about us," Charlotte promised.

Jaxon spent most of his day looking forward to Charlotte's surprise. But dinner never came. Two hours before *that* phone call Charlotte sent him a short text: *Gonna be late. Maya's dragging me to the bank and won't take no for an answer. Let's meet an hour later? I love you.*

Jaxon was working on some important commercial transaction so he casually read the text and returned to work. He didn't think twice about not responding. He figured he'd see Charlotte at dinner, albeit late, and tell her off, for the millionth time, about the extent she allowed Maya to control her life.

Had Jaxon known that less than an hour later Charlotte would lie on the floor of a bank with her blood pooling around her on the dark carpet he'd have done everything in his power to make her stand up to her bully of a best friend. As it was, Jaxon had to live with knowing his wife died without him being able to say goodbye or tell her that she was the most important thing in his universe.

If the phone call telling him Charlotte died in a botched robbery tilted his world off its axis, identifying her body at the morgue shattered it. The memory of Charlotte lying on the cold, sterile table still haunted him each night.

It wasn't the small drop of blood contrasting against the white sheet wrapped around her that caused the most pain. No, it was the silence. It was the stillness. Charlotte had always been a bundle of energy. It was what caught his interest and what kept him falling in love with her over and over again. He traced his finger along her mouth despairing that her lips would never curve into a smile again, laughter would never spill forth from her tongue and the secret she was so excited to share at dinner died with her. Jaxon tensed. That wasn't strictly the truth.

Maya and I are going on a special errand today.

At least one person knew what his wife wanted to share with him but Jaxon would rather come face to face with the Devil

than talk to Charlotte's best friend. If that were the price for finding out Charlotte's surprise he'd allow curiosity to kill him over and over again.

"You good?"

Jaxon tried to blink away the memories and focus on his younger brother who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

"I'm fine."

JT raised a pierced eyebrow and shook his head, "Don't bullshit me Jax. You should've followed my plan."

JT, the proverbial black sheep of the family, had suggested Jaxon went straight from the funeral to a hotel where he could hide out for the night. Jaxon wished he'd listened to him much in the same way he wished he'd listened to JT's suggestion that one of their siblings identify Charlotte's body instead of him.

"I'll be fine."

"No you won't. None of these idiots look like they're in a hurry to leave. Let me take you back to my apartment. You don't need this fucking circus right now."

That was something they could both easily agree on and Jaxon was about to take JT up on his offer when he glimpsed someone else walking towards him. She was wearing a loosely fitted black dress and her hair fell around her shoulders. Anger; red and hot, replaced the grief which had been so close to drowning him. He embraced it. It was a relief to feel something other than crippling pain.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked when she was close to him. Those nearest to them stopped talking abruptly and observed the scene set up before them without bothering to hide the curious stares. JT held Jaxon's shoulder and whispered fiercely, "Not here Jax."

Jaxon ignored him.

"Get the hell out of my house Maya."

Maya's face tightened but Jaxon didn't back down. He'd caught glimpses of her at the funeral but tried his best to

ignore her. He didn't have the power to ban Charlotte's best friend from her funeral but he could sure as hell boot the cause of his wife's death from his house. He hadn't come face to face with Maya since a week after Charlotte's death and the depth of his anger surprised him. He'd always believed a man should never hit a woman but his hands curled into a fist at his side all the same.

"Get out." Jaxon clenched his jaw in a last ditch effort to remain in control. Maya surprised him by staying in place. It was almost as if she'd dug her ballet flats into the forest green carpet and grew roots there.

"We need to talk Jaxon."

Her voice added fuel to the already raging fire and it was only JT's tightening grip on Jaxon's shoulder that prevented him from doing something he'd regret bitterly in the morning.

"I don't have anything else to say to you Maya. Just leave."

She stiffened. "Too bad. I've got a lot to say to you."

"I know listening to what other people want isn't your strong point," he spat. Jaxon paused, feeling pleased with himself when he saw the guilt flash across her face. He clenched his fist more tightly. "Thanks to you Charlotte is gone. There isn't a damn thing linking us now. I don't have to pretend to like you and I sure as hell do not have listen to anything you have to say."

The words burned like venom on his tongue. Jaxon imagined Charlotte would crinkle her forehead as she playfully punched him in the arm and urged him to be nice to Maya. She'd be very disappointed but Jaxon didn't care. He was running low on hope and patience. Maya led Charlotte to her death that day because she couldn't, for once in her life, think of someone other than herself.

"You're wrong," she said softly. "Can we please go somewhere and talk?"

Her voice broke but Jaxon ignored it. Fine. If she wouldn't leave, he would. He flicked his head towards JT ignoring the

confusion etched on his brother's face, "Let's go."

Jaxon forced his feet forward and began to walk past Maya. He'd barely taken three steps when she spoke. Her voice was soft and firm but it shook like hell around the edges.

Her words shattered what was left of Jaxon's world.

"We're still linked Jaxon. I'm having your baby."

CHAPTER TWO

Maya Jenkins' heart thumped hard against her ribcage. Finally saying the words she'd kept locked inside for six and a half weeks felt like a boulder was lifted off her shoulder. Only, Maya was finding that the boulder had been holding her upright. Maya didn't think a black man could go pale but Jaxon's deep chestnut complexion turned ashen before her eyes. In the end it was his brother who reacted first. JT caught up with Jaxon in one long stride and whispered something into his ear. Her best friend's widower visibly deflated and walked out of the living room.

The people milling around the living room, in their expensive, black suits, all paused to observe the scene playing out in front of them. Some stole glances from behind wine glasses while others looked on with unabashed fascination. Maya wanted to sink into the floor, even more so when she saw the other three Johnson siblings begin to close in ranks. JT held his hand up with his palms facing out towards them. Jasmine nodded her head and the three of them stood there together by the fireplace waiting for the tiniest signal from JT so that they could spring into action. The panic Maya tried to keep at bay came rushing back. She took deep breaths to steady herself but the room continued to spin.

"Come with me."

JT stood mere inches away with his neat dreadlocks pulled into a ponytail and his lips set into a grim line. She didn't resist when he held her arm and led her from the sitting room into the foyer.

"What the hell is going on Maya?" he asked. Of all of Jaxon's siblings, Maya was closest to JT. She did business with one of his friends and spent more than enough time in his presence to know he was sweet and levelheaded. For a split second she wondered if she could just tell JT everything instead. Surely he'd be better able to handle his brother than she could. The

words were on the tip of her tongue but she swallowed them with the huge gasps of air she'd been taking.

"He's in his room," JT said eventually. "I figured that you guys needed to be away from the crowd for this conversation. Do you need me to come?"

Maya shook her head, "It's not what you think."

Her stomach clenched. She knew what JT must have been thinking but when she tried to set him straight, he gave her arm a soft squeeze and said, "It's none of my business. You know the way to the room."

Without giving her a chance to respond, JT slipped back into the living room leaving her standing in the quiet foyer alone. Maya stood rooted in place for several seconds trying to find the courage to move. She didn't want to have this conversation with Jaxon even though she knew it was one they had to have. She placed her hand to her already slightly swollen stomach.

"Oh Charlotte," she whispered. "What the hell am I going to do?"

Grief was a lump in her throat when she realized, not for the first time, that Charlotte would never give her advice again. They'd never have mid-morning coffee breaks at their favorite Starbucks. She'd never open a message with her friend's favorite winking emoji. Maya held her chest hoping the action would force air through her lungs. She took in the little knickknacks in the foyer – a photo of them hanging next to a bronze vase, Charlotte's favorite forest green coat hanging on the metal rack and barely swallowed a whimper of pain. She was standing here and Charlotte wasn't. And, it was all her fault. Images of Charlotte lying in her arms as blood poured from gunshot wounds blindsided Maya but she took several deep breaths until the room righted itself. She would return to her private hell, where she couldn't do anything to save her best friend, later. She needed her energy to face what lay ahead.

She walked the short distance to the kitchen and then up the stairs before stalling in front of the door to Jaxon and Charlotte's room. She was about to have the second most difficult conversation of her adult life but she couldn't find the words. She rapped softly and waited three seconds before pushing it open. Jaxon stood with his back facing her as he gazed out the floor to ceiling windows. She spent some time observing him. At six-three he still towered over her but she couldn't help but notice his suit fit him too loosely. The Johnsons had enough money so that all their suits were custom made so Jaxon was either too overwhelmed or too indifferent to hide his weight loss. She glanced down at her own loose fitting dress. She may have plucked it off the racks at Macy's but it also reminded her of just how much weight she'd lost. She made a mental note to be better about eating. She had a baby depending on her. Thoughts of the baby jolted her back to the present. She cleared her throat and after a couple of seconds Jaxon turned to face her. He looked like a bull trapped in a cage and she seemed to be waving a red flag. Maya took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through her mouth but it didn't calm her. Her heart continued beating erratically in her chest. Jaxon stood there gazing at her for nearly a full minute with his body tense, jaw tight and eyes hard while Maya struggled to find something to say. In the end, he spoke first, "How far along are you?"

"Nearly three months," she said softly.

"Three months?" he echoed. He was like a balloon she'd just pricked with a pin. Maya almost wished she could have the anger back.

"Charlotte was pretty devastated about the last time and she wanted to be sure the embryo took before she shared it with anyone... even you. We finished the three-week waiting period and had just come back from confirming..."

Maya allowed her voice to trail off not wanting to finish the sentence. When she'd finally agreed to be Charlotte's gestational surrogate she never imagined they'd find themselves in this position. Their first attempt at IVF had been a disaster. Although the pregnancy test showed a positive

result, shortly before the three-week mark Maya miscarried. The rollercoaster of emotions she felt had been brutal. She'd spun between feeling like she'd let her friend down and feeling damned relieved. Half the time she wasn't sure she was ready for pregnancy, even though she would hand over the baby at the end. When the doctor gave them the all clear, Charlotte's happy excitement was infectious and Maya knew giving up nine months of her life so that her best friend could have what she wanted the most in this world was the smallest price to pay. She squeezed her eyes shut knowing her desperate desire to be sick had nothing to do with the early stages of pregnancy. Charlotte had known she was about to be a mother for all of three hours before she was dead. Maya imagined the wide, happy grin that was suddenly permanently glued to her best friend's face as she chattered excitedly about baby names, nursery designs and the 'baby box' she had stashed in her walk in closet. Charlotte had been debating whether she should go with lobster or steak for the fancy dinner she would surprise Jaxon with when the gunmen stormed in. Maya's eyes burned. She would give anything to take those hours back.

"She was so happy Jaxon," Maya said softly. "I don't think I'd ever seen her so excited about anything. She was going to surprise you at dinner."

He smiled grimly. "She would've had a chance to if for once in your life you'd listened to what Charlotte wanted. She didn't want to go to the bank and you knew it. She texted me to say that you were *dragging* her there."

He spat the words out so fiercely that Maya cringed.

"I didn't kill Charlotte. I didn't pull that trigger," she said. She sighed. Her voice sounded feeble to her own ears. She'd been the reason Charlotte had been in the bank that day and she couldn't outrun the guilt gnawing at her soul. She looked up at Jaxon and almost recoiled at the look she saw in his eyes. She'd halfheartedly wished to have his anger back instead of the sad, broken man standing before her but now the anger was burning with full force she wanted to turn and run. Her stomach cramped violently when she wondered what he'd do

to her if he knew the role she actually played in Charlotte's death. Maya shook away the fear. No one knew what really happened in that bank and no one would. She would take it to her grave. Maya was so busy trying to keep the panicked guilt at bay that she almost missed when Jaxon spoke.

"Get rid of it."

Her widened eyes met his, "You can't mean that."

"Don't tell me what I mean," he said. "I'll set up an appointment for you."

"No," she said. There was a new type of panic coursing through her veins and it made her frantic. "This is the only bit of Charlotte you'll have left."

As soon as the words left her mouth Maya knew she'd said the wrong thing. Jaxon's face became a macabre slideshow of pain, anger, grief and then more pain. Maya recognized those emotions. She saw them each time she looked into the mirror. She stared out the windows so that she didn't lose her resolve. Six weeks ago she held her best friend in her arms as she died and promised her she would be a good mother to Charlotte's unborn child. She'd go to battle with Jaxon to fulfill that promise.

"You don't get a say in this," Jaxon said. His voice had gone hard and he fixed his gaze on her as if he were daring her to challenge him.

Maya kept her voice calm, "It's my body. You can't *force* me to have an abortion."

The off-white walls seemed to contract under the force of the tension in the room. Maya bit her lip until she tasted the metallic sting of blood.

"Get rid of it," Jaxon said again. He spoke like he could command it to be so. Maya wondered if it was this firm, demanding voice that won him so many cases in the courtroom.

"*It is your child,*" she shouted. She took a deep breath knowing nothing could be gained from losing her temper. She tried to empathize with Jaxon's point of view. In the weeks

after Charlotte's death, Maya often thought about abortion. If she were completely honest with herself it was one of the reasons she'd taken so long to work up the courage to tell Jaxon about the pregnancy. The thoughts were, however, as fleeting as they were usually fuelled by grief. Logically Maya knew Jaxon deserved more time to process the news. Yet, logic didn't make his demand sting any less and she found it hard to fight the anger.

"I'll have my assistant set up an appointment..."

"Jaxon," she said softly. She reigned the anger in and held it deep in her belly, "Charlotte wanted..."

"Don't you dare talk about what Charlotte wanted," he said. "Charlotte wanted to come straight home to me. You didn't give a fuck about her wishes then so don't pretend to care about them now."

Maya tried to respond but the words stuck to the roof of her mouth. Jaxon didn't give her a chance speak instead he said, "You forced Charlotte into the bank that day and you didn't even have the decency to be the one to die."

You didn't even have the decency to be the one to die.

It was like he punched the breaths from her body. She hadn't died but she spent many hours wanting to. There were moments when all she wanted to do was wash a handful of painkillers down with vodka and the pain that had become too much to bear. But she still had this little being growing inside her - the thing Charlotte wanted more than anything in the world, and that kept her going. She'd promised her best friend she'd be a mother to her child and Maya was determined to protect it at all costs. It didn't matter if that meant going head to head against Jaxon and his family. She grimaced. What would it be like trying to take on the Johnsons in court? His family didn't run one of the most successful law firms in New York and Atlanta due to luck. They employed legal hawks and Maya knew one of their sharpest minds stood in front of her shaking with anger. Still, she was determined to fight him to

the end of the earth and she opened her mouth to tell him this when he caught her eyes and said, "Please go Maya. Just go."

The pleading in his voice was her undoing. The arrogant man she'd loved to despise would have quicker died before he begged her for anything. He stumbled to the bed and sat there staring straight ahead as if she'd already left. Her heart hurt. Maya wanted to reach out to him, wipe the deep wrinkles in his forehead away before pulling him into her embrace. She wanted to promise him that they would find some way to work through this. But Maya hated telling lies. So, instead, she walked slowly towards the door. She wrapped her hand around the doorknob and whispered, "You know where to find me when you're ready to talk."

Maya's legs shook so much on the way down the stairs she was afraid they'd give out on her. She found JT and the rest of Jaxon's siblings huddled together in the expansive kitchen.

"Shit," she mumbled under her breath trying to make it to the door before they noticed her. She was almost there when JT called for her to wait up. The other three flashed her curious glances when she reluctantly stopped and turned around. She steeled herself for the questions she knew they had. Jasmine, who stood with her back against the island and a glass of water in her hand, looked ready to fire off questions. The youngest brother whispered something into his sister's ear and with another glance at Maya, Jasmine followed her siblings from the kitchen. Maya wilted with relief. Talking to JT was one thing but she wasn't ready to face anyone else.

"Maya," he said softly. She waited for the questions to come but they didn't. Instead JT hugged her tightly. Maya surprised herself by sinking against him unable to stop the flood of tears. He didn't say anything as she cried but handed her a handkerchief when she finally composed herself.

"I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be," he said as if he had hysterical women crying all over him each day of the week.

“Wanna tell me what’s going on with you and Jaxon?” he asked. Although his forehead was creased his eyes were surprisingly warm. She was tempted to tell him everything but for the second time, Maya stopped herself.

“It’s Jaxon’s story to tell.”

JT seemed to accept this, “It’s Jaxon’s baby?”

She nodded and bit back the explanation hovering on her tongue.

“Do you need a ride home?”

Maya shook her head and promised him she would be okay even though she felt furthest from it.

“Just go talk to your brother,” she said quietly.

Then Maya walked away into the cold, winter evening feeling more alone than she ever had in her life.

CHAPTER THREE

Time didn't ebb and flow while Jaxon sat on his bed staring into space. It passed in sharp staccatos, which matched his heart's erratic beating. Three sharp knocks against his door startled him. Jaxon grimaced. He didn't have the energy to go another round with the woman who'd just torn his life apart again. Life wasn't just ironic but sometimes it reveled in its cruelty. The baby he and Charlotte wanted so desperately had finally been conceived but under the worst possible circumstances. He squeezed his eyes shut against a new wave of pain. Charlotte wouldn't be around to hold the baby she dreamed of for so long. The knocks continued until he shouted, "Go away Maya. I don't have anything else to say to you."

The door swung and JT sauntered in like he didn't have a care in the world, "It's a good thing I'm not Maya then cause I'm hoping you got a lot to say to me."

The tension slowly seeped out of Jaxon when his brother sat next to him on the bed. "What's going on Jax?"

He spoke in the same nonchalant way he moved through life but Jaxon could hear gentle concern in his voice.

"Maya's pregnant," Jaxon said hating the way the words felt on his lips. He was glad he was sitting down because the fresh kick of pain would've been enough to knock him off his feet.

"So I heard," JT said dryly. "How the hell did that happen? I thought you two couldn't stand each other."

Just thinking of being intimate with Maya brought bile to Jaxon's throat.

"It isn't her baby. She was, well, *is* our surrogate. We would've told everyone after the IVF took." Jaxon paused and tried to catch his breath. "Apparently Charlotte and Maya were coming back from the clinic with the good news when they stopped at the bank."

"Jesus. I'm so sorry Jax," JT whispered.

Silence stretched between them for several minutes as Jaxon tried to find his footing. When he awoke that morning to the cold, raining winter day he thought it was a fitting backdrop for what he knew would be the worst day of his life. He laughed without humor. The day exceeded his expectations by miles.

“What are you going to do?”

Jaxon’s shoulders drooped, “I asked Maya to have an abortion but she refused. I can’t...”

His brother cut him short, “Hey. Don’t make any decisions now. You’re still grieving.”

Sorrow balled up in the walls of his chest, “I can’t do this without her. I won’t live the life we were meant to live without her in it.”

JT placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell Orlando to get one his interns to research all the relevant case law on forcing a surrogate to terminate.”

Then after a few moments he said, “But I need you to let this news sink in before you make any decisions.”

He promised JT he would think things through even though he knew his mind was already made up. His shrink would call it survivor’s guilt and Jaxon could feel it settle deep within him. What right did he have to go on to raise the baby Charlotte wanted while she lay dead in the hole they sunk her into not even five hours ago?

JT left the room and returned a few minutes later with a tumbler filled with a finger of scotch. “This will do you good.”

Jaxon took the tumbler with a slight nod and swallowed the amber liquid in one gulp.

It wasn’t until later, when the drowsiness overtook him, that Jaxon realized his brother drugged him.

“How did it go?”

Maya glanced up from her sewing machine and made a face at her roommate. Kasi ran her hands down the front of her nursing uniform and pulled her curly, brown hair from its rubber band. She crossed the living room, grabbed a seat next to Maya's small sewing station and said, "That great huh?"

"He asked me to get rid of it. Told me he'd have his secretary set up an appointment."

Kasi's honeyed eyes filled with sympathy but she said, "Don't hate me Maya but maybe he has a point."

Maya felt like she'd been slapped. She hadn't expected Jaxon to welcome her with open arms but neither did she expect his reaction. He'd been brutal and while she was licking her wounds the last thing she needed was to feel like Kasi was taking his side.

"I'm having this baby," Maya said. She focused more intently on the romper coming to life under her fingertips. "I promised Charlotte..."

"Maya," Kasi said in the same wary tone she'd started the conversation, "Charlotte is dead. You don't owe her anything. I know it sounds cruel but I'm not trying to be. You need to do what's best for you and Jaxon. If Jaxon doesn't want this kid, I don't think you should have it."

Maya massaged the back of her neck trying, but failing, to keep the tension headache at bay. She wanted to explain to Kasi that caring for this baby had become more than a promise she made to her dying best friend. With Charlotte gone the child growing inside her was the only family she had left in the world. She couldn't blindly listen to Jaxon's demand. Maya pictured him standing in the middle of his large, master bedroom in his too-big suit while holding on to that tumbler like it would sprout angel wings and save him. She wasn't sure *Jaxon* knew what he wanted but she was damn sure of herself.

"I won't abort the baby Kasi."

Kasi started to talk but stopped herself before she finished her sentence. Her friend sunk back into the couch but after a couple minutes edged her way closer to Maya. Whatever she

wanted to say seemed to burn her tongue so Maya told her to spit it out and be done with it.

“Did you think about this *at all*? How will you support this kid financially? You don’t even know where you will be living next month.”

Maya began to respond but Kasi wasn’t through. Her roommate gestured to the small sewing station and the few pieces Maya had piled up on the table by the fire escape, “You’re so close to making it. You ready to give up all of this for a kid that isn’t even yours?”

Annoyance rose in Maya but she pushed it back down. She’d had enough emotionally fraught conversations to last a lifetime and wasn’t in the mood to fight with Kasi. She looked at her friend’s furrowed forehead and pinched lips and felt the annoyance evaporate. Kasi was just worried about her. Maya didn’t blame her. She was worried too. Those questions *had* to be asked. She was currently a part time barista while she worked on getting her clothing design business off the ground. She’d been on the verge of cutting back her hours so she could focus more on her sewing. It would’ve been a huge financial hit when she had to worry about herself but could she even conceivably do it with a baby in tow?

“I’ll take him to court,” she said eventually. “He’s still the father and has to have responsibilities.” It was something she thought about on the journey home from the Upper East Side to the Bronx. The thought of trying to take on a Johnson in court terrified her but she pushed the fear down with all of her other insecurities. She would do what she needed to do. It would work out because it *had* to. Kasi was never good at hiding emotions and although she said nothing Maya could see her friend thought she was being a fool.

“So what are you working on?” Kasi asked after a while. She tucked one leg under the other and peered over at the sewing machine. Maya breathed a sigh of gratitude – happy Kasi chose to abandon the argument. She had too many doubts floating around in her head to listen to someone else confirm them.

She handed Kasi a copy of the sketches she'd been working on for most of the week. Everyone who knew Maya always teased her about her obsession with designing clothing for babies and toddlers since she'd never expressed a desire for children. When Charlotte first pleaded with her to be her surrogate, Maya had said no even before her best friend finished the question. A baby was some mythical, far away thing she hadn't wanted to deal with at twenty-six. It hadn't mattered to her that she'd hand over the baby at the end of the pregnancy. Yet, when she saw how much it meant to Charlotte, Maya had been unable to maintain her position.

"These are awesome."

Kasi handed Maya the sketches. "Your kid's going to be the envy of the playground."

Your kid.

Maya tried to ignore the resurfacing panic and instead focused on showing Kasi the progress she was making on the outfit she currently sewed. It was a hot pink romper with purple lace and a matching crocheted headband. Later she'd crochet a large flower to rest over the toddler's left hip.

"This is gorgeous!"

Maya grinned allowing herself a few minutes of pride. She'd already made it a lot further than she thought possible. Charlotte had dragged Maya to JT's sculpting studio armed with copies of her designs and a few outfits two months before she died.

"JT has to know someone," Charlotte said. "These are too amazing to be moth-food in your closet."

JT had joked about being allergic to baby wear but placed a call to three of his friends who owned specialized children stores in lower Manhattan. Only one of them took the bait but Megan Jean had been stocking small quantities of her designs for weeks now and reported steady sales. Three weeks ago one of the owners of the two stores that rejected her pitch requested a small consignment. Her teenage dream seemed to

be right within reach. Maya's happy bubble burst so quickly she felt a bit disoriented when she thought of what Kasi warned. Could choosing to raise this child put an end to her dreams? Just as quickly as the thought came, it disappeared. She would honor Charlotte's final wish. She couldn't get the image of her best friend cradled in her arms with her blood soaking through to Maya's light blue dress from her mind. Nor could she forget watching helplessly as her breathing became more and more shallow until stopped completely. Jaxon had no idea just how much she wished she could redo that day. She wished she'd listened to Charlotte and put off going to the bank. Her friend had been so excited to get back home so she could prepare the dinner over which she planned to give Jaxon the news they'd waited on for nearly eight months.

Why hadn't she just let her go?

"Don't go there."

Kasi's small voice jarred her from the memories.

"How could it have gone so wrong?" she asked although she knew Kasi didn't have an answer. Her friend wrapped her arms around her and squeezed her tightly. "You need to give yourself a break. You're a victim in this too."

"Jaxon thinks it's all my fault."

Kasi edged Maya half way off the small chair so they could share it. "Jaxon needs someone to blame. You're an easy target. Ignore him."

"He wishes I died instead."

"No he doesn't."

Maya smiled weakly. "He basically told me that then he kicked me out his house."

Kasi's eyes widened. "That's horrible. He isn't the only one grieving here."

Maya sighed. "I'm just hoping that when the dust settles we'll be able to talk about it rationally."

And then, Maya realized, came the hard part. That she and Jaxon didn't like each other was no secret. They could barely stand being in the same room during those once monthly dinners Charlotte used to insist they had. How would he react when she told him she didn't intend to hand over the baby and walk out of their lives forever?

There's nothing linking us together now.

Oh, how wrong he'd been. Maya placed her hand to the gentle swelling of her stomach. They were linked together for a very, very long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jaxon blinked against the sunlight streaming through his windows. He stretched his arms above his head and for a split second all seemed right in his world. Then, everything came crashing back; Charlotte smiling up at him in bed, her text message, the phone call, Charlotte in the morgue, Charlotte being lowered in the ground and finally – Maya standing in his room telling him she was pregnant with the child he and Charlotte had been so excited about.

The headache brewing behind his eyes promised to be fierce so Jaxon swung his feet off the side of the bed and rummaged through the bedside table until he found a packet of pain relievers. He swallowed two without water as he tried to get a grip on his emotions.

Jaxon didn't consider himself to be a cruel man but he'd been cruel to Maya. Those words had been knocking around his head since the shooting and he wouldn't pretend he hadn't been relieved to finally say them. But, not all things needed to be said.

He remembered the way she'd looked up at him, wide eyes glassy with unshed tears and felt like an ass. Jaxon massaged his forehead. They needed to talk but he still wasn't sure he was ready to face her. He was looking for his cell phone when his door swung open.

"I see you're up."

His baby sister, Jasmine, stood in the doorway with one hand on her hip and a cup of coffee in the other.

"Not happily," he admitted. She still wore the black shift dress she'd worn to the funeral and her once perfect twist outs were pulled back carelessly. Jasmine handed him the coffee mug

and as he took a sip he asked, “They all sent you to scope out behind enemy lines didn’t they?”

“I volunteered as tribute,” she replied with a small grin. “The others are downstairs. We’re ready and willing to go through a plan of action with you.”

Separately the Johnsons were formidable but together they were a force to be reckoned with. He’d have been stupid if he thought he would have to face down this nightmare on his own. Yet, he wasn’t sure he had the emotional reserves to deal with them even though they were trying to help him. Until Charlotte’s murder the biggest crisis his family had to deal with was JT’s decision to forgo the family business and become a sculptor instead. Yet, they all fit seamlessly into their role of dealing with someone whose life had exploded as if they had dealt with men who lost their wives after less than a year of marriage every day. His family was the personification of *all for one, one for all* and for a couple seconds Jaxon tried to find comfort in that.

“Mom and dad down there as well?”

Jasmine shook her head, “We haven’t told them anything. Jasper figured you might want to do that yourself.”

Jasper, his youngest brother, had always been a pacifist. He thanked his lucky stars for the trait that made Jasper a horrible courtroom lawyer but excellent mediator. He wasn’t up to talking to his mother, father or grandmother about this predicament until he made up his mind.

“We’re having breakfast when you’re ready.”

Job done, Jasmine sauntered from the room and left him with his thoughts.

He joined them half of an hour later in the kitchen Charlotte redesigned, with Maya’s help, soon after she moved in. The multiple espresso cabinets and white granite on the countertops and island seemed to be more of Maya’s style than Charlotte’s and he and his wife had an epic fight when he confronted her about it. Charlotte called him illogical and he’d

put it down to just another instance of Maya exerting too much control over his wife. He made a mental note to get the kitchen changed even though he never stayed in it longer than to brew coffee.

JT looked up from his newspaper and gave him an encouraging smile, "I've assembled the logic brigade."

JT often referred to his siblings as the logic brigade. He teased that he was the only one born with a creative bone in his body. The logic brigade was currently huddled around the large center island. Orlando stepped forward with a sheet of paper which Jaxon was sure contained every piece of case law and statute he would be able to use if Maya stood her ground. Orlando was about three shades too light, half a foot too tall and possessed a name with a first letter that betrayed the fact he wasn't an original member of the Johnson clan. But, as their father continuously pointed out, he had more Johnson traits in his little finger than JT had in his entire body.

"This is all you need," Orlando said handing him the paper. "But we all know that this isn't something you can decide with logic."

"I can't raise the family she wanted without her," he said. The ugly guilt threatened to raise its head again.

Jasper rested his forearms on the kitchen island, "Charlotte was the sweetest woman I've ever met. She wouldn't want you to punish yourself for something you couldn't control. You've been talking about kids for so long now that I find it hard to believe you don't want this baby."

Of course he did. He'd been just as excited as Charlotte had been about starting a family as soon as they could even though they knew it would be a complicated process. Endometriosis had rendered her infertile and surrogacy was their only option at having a biological child. The fight they'd had when Charlotte suggested that Maya be their surrogate had been their most bitter. Charlotte considered Maya to be more than a best friend but a sister since Maya was fostered with Charlotte's family for all of her teenage years. She argued that

she wanted someone she could trust and who would allow her to be actively involved in each stage. He and Maya didn't get along. He considered her to be bossy, selfish and always trying to butt her way into his marriage and Charlotte once confided in him that Maya thought he was arrogant and entitled. But they both loved Charlotte and for that they played nice with each other. Not nice enough that he wanted to involve her in something as intimate as the birth of his first child though. Eventually, he conceded to Charlotte's wish when he saw how happy she would be. Now, if he decided to continue with the surrogacy, Charlotte wouldn't be around for any of it. Charlotte wouldn't be around to hold her son or daughter in her arms. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of a little girl running around the house with Charlotte's sass and big brown eyes. He thought of holding a little boy to his chest knowing he was made of all the good parts of Charlotte and himself. He imagined kissing a little girl with Charlotte's endlessly frizzy hair goodnight. He imagined his wife, his lovely, sweet wife living on through the miracle they'd created. The choice should've been simple but it wasn't. He couldn't get over the guilt he felt.

“Jaxon.”

This was from Jasmine who'd taken to preparing a plate of scrambled eggs for him. He looked up at her, “Yeah?”

“Charlotte would want you and Maya to raise the baby.”

“How do you know that?”

She pushed the plate in front of him and paused for several seconds. “It's in her will. I handled her will.”

“Her will?”

Jasmine nodded, “A couple months ago me, Hallie and Charlotte had a spa day. She invited Maya along. She was talking about wanting to ensure everything would be taken care of if she died. That's the first time she told me about the surrogacy and how she wanted to name Maya as guardian in case anything happened to you and her. Hallie and I assured her that it was as simple as a clause put into her will but I told her that if she died before you, you'd raise the kid and would

eventually name your own guardian. I cracked a joke about imagining you raising a baby alone and she kind of sipped her wine, smiled at me and said you'd never have to raise the baby alone because Maya would help you." Jasmine paused and took a sip of tea, "She said, "What would make more sense than the two people I love most in the world raising my baby." I think Maya made a noise in her throat and said you would both have to learn to get along first and then the conversation turned to something else. Three days after that she came into my office and had me put the clause in her will."

Jasmine's face was pinched with pain, "It was just routine. We had no idea that..."

Jaxon tried to process the information his sister just laid on him. This was a nightmare that kept on giving, he realized. As the child's surviving parent he was under no obligation to involve Maya in raising it but now he couldn't pretend he didn't know what Charlotte wanted.

"Why hasn't the will been read yet?" he asked. It was the one thing he could focus on to keep his thoughts from spinning out of control.

"Dad thought you needed some time. The life insurance policy will be held in trust for any children, her personal belongings are to be split between you and Maya."

You and Maya.

He'd been linked to Maya more often in the past twenty-four hours than he'd been in the entirety of the two years he knew her. Jaxon didn't like the feeling.

"Just don't make a rash decision," JT said. "That's all we're saying. Spend some time getting over the shock before you talk to Maya again. We're here if you need us."

They ate the rest of breakfast in silence and then his siblings all hugged him and left him in the haunting stillness of his townhouse. He switched on the TV and took a deep breath as the inane chitchat from the infomercial streamed into the room. He didn't give a damn about the miracle working shampoo the various glossy haired, blonde women raved about

but was grateful for the sound. Ridiculously so. Despite that, he switched the TV off before the segment was through.

Jaxon never thought hell on earth could take the form of a quiet house, but it did. His soul languished in the absence of Charlotte's heels clicking softly against the hardwood floor and pots and pans knocking against each other in the kitchen.

God, he longed to hear her off-key singing in the shower and he'd put up with the soap operas she was always so engrossed in. Jaxon glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace and winced. He didn't recognize the man looking back at him. He thought he'd known grief. He'd thought he understood the depth of its blackness but nothing could have prepared him for this.

Several hours later, Jaxon forced himself to go into Charlotte's closet. Sitting on her vanity was the large, turquoise box she'd dubbed 'the baby box'. She hadn't allowed him to see the contents. She told him she'd share them all soon enough... once they had an IVF round that took. He laid the snippets of pictures of bassinets, strollers and useful tips on managing newborns on the bed. He could imagine how excited she was as she carefully compiled the contents of the box.

"We should be doing this together," he whispered. When he stumbled across a short list of baby names, he realized he'd already made his decision. He delayed for several seconds before he made the phone call he didn't want to make.

Maya answered on the second ring, "Hello."

"It's Jaxon," he said and after seconds passed without response he continued, "Can we meet to talk?"

"I'm just about to finish my shift at *Espresso'ed*. I can be at your house in about two hours."

"I'd prefer to meet you there," he said.

The words were out of his mouth before he could take them back but Jaxon didn't want to. A part of him couldn't stand the thought of having another strained conversation in his personal

space. He glanced out at the sun sending weak rays into the room. Maybe it would do him good to be outside.

He spent a few more minutes going through the baby box before he let himself out of the townhouse. He'd spent so much of the past six weeks holed up inside that it felt weird being out in the open. He watched the postman wander up his Upper East Side neighborhood while a woman walked passed him chatting into a cell phone while her toy dog yapped under her arm. It amazed him that life went on as usual around him when his was in shatters. Jaxon regretted the decision to meet Maya at *Espresso'ed* when he realized how crowded it was. Still, he forced his feet to move towards her.

Maya stood behind the counter with her relaxed hair pulled up and wearing a dark purple apron over a white shirt. She raised her index finger when she saw him and motioned for him to grab a seat. He slid into a booth in the farthest corner of the brightly colored coffee shop and waited. Ten minutes later, Maya sat in the seat opposite him and placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

"I didn't know how you took it so I got it black."

He thanked her and noticing she didn't bring a cup for herself he asked, "What about you?"

She shook her head. "Caffeine isn't good for the baby."

And just like that the elephant came stalking into the room and sat in the empty space in their booth.

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?" he asked.

"I didn't tell anyone. I guess I didn't want it to be true," she said. "I was scared. That's probably more the way a sixteen year old should react than a grown woman but there you have it."

She tried to smile but it was tight. "Last week the clinic called me to remind me that I still needed to be monitored and I

realized I was being an idiot. This is happening whether I'm ready to face it or not."

Although Maya spoke calmly, her gaze was guarded and both palms were formed into fists on the table. Jaxon knew it was time to extend the olive branch.

"I'm sorry. I was an asshole to you. I shouldn't have told you I wished you had died. That was unforgiveable. I also don't want you to abort the baby. The kid's innocent in all of this."

Maya's posture softened. "What do we do now?"

Jaxon laughed but there was no humor in it. "I was hoping you'd know."

Maya curled her hand around the green mug filled to the brim with peppermint tea and allowed the warmth to wash over her. She and Jaxon spent nearly three hours trying to hammer out the boundaries of their arrangement. It seemed, almost as if by silent agreement, talking about what would happen after she gave birth was off limits. They spoke about doctor's appointments and prenatal care. They tried to figure out just how much of a role Jaxon would play in the pregnancy and eventually decided to play it by ear. There were still too many feelings to deal with - too much hurt, too much pain and too much of a risk that they'd make decisions now they'd want to renege on in the future.

Maya hoped the fragile truce she and Jaxon seemed to have called during their meeting held up. She'd left *Espresso'ed* knowing that they were each as scared and panicked as the other even though neither of them voiced it. No one on the face of the planet could understand the emotions she felt, except for Jaxon. She couldn't get over the irony of it all. The man she couldn't stand the most in this world shared with her something so profoundly intimate and painful that they were bonded to each other in ways that would be hard for others to understand.

When she returned to the small, two-bedroom apartment she shared with Kasi in the Bronx, she found her friend knee deep in piles of clothes.

“I never thought packing could be so annoying.”

Maya dropped her handbag in the chair and joined Kasi on the floor. Her friend threw a sweater into a box and said, “I found two places you may want to check out.”

She sighed. Kasi was moving out of their apartment in three weeks, leaving her without a roommate and unable to afford rent. She should’ve been more proactive in trying to find another place to live but she was barely treading water as it was.

“Thanks. I’ll try to check them out tomorrow.”

She helped Kasi fill boxes as she updated her on her meeting with Jaxon.

“Maybe you should tell him you need somewhere to live,” Kasi suggested. Maya shook her head. She wasn’t going to take Jaxon’s money.

“Don’t be stubborn Maya,” Kasi said. “Surrogates get help don’t they? It won’t do you or the kid any good if you’re homeless in three weeks.”

Maya bristled at the suggestion. She and Jaxon may have turned a very small corner but she’d rather swim the Antarctic naked than ask him for charity.

“I’ll work something out,” she said.

Kasi flashed her that look she’d become accustomed to but put her head down and continued packing her bags. Maya asked her little questions about the new apartment Kasi planned to rent with her fiancé and they filled the time with chatter. Maya wished she could fully embrace what should have been a light-hearted conversation but she was unable to. The therapist she’d seen for the first few weeks after Charlotte’s death promised her that the large, black hole she felt would lessen in

time. She just wished it would be more quickly. She was tired of feeling like there was an anvil sitting on her chest.

“... do you need anything?”

Maya apologized to Kasi for zoning out of their conversation and asked her to repeat what she'd said.

“Marc is taking me out for pizza. I was asking if you needed anything.”

“Nah. I'm good,” she said. “I'm going to microwave something and read until I fall asleep.”

She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep before she felt a gentle squeeze on her shoulder. Maya stretched in the couch and sat up expecting to see Kasi sitting at the foot of it. Instead, she saw Charlotte. She wore her favorite yellow Maxi dress and her thick, curly hair was pulled away from her face with a green band.

Maya wiped her face, “You aren't real.”

Her friend smiled, revealing the dimple on the left side of her cheek, before she plopped on the couch and said, “Of course I'm not silly. I'm dead, remember?”

The pain was instant and sharp, “Don't remind me.”

Charlotte smiled that same easy smile again. “It won't change Maya-Baya.”

Hot tears spilled from Maya's eyes and she cried harder when she felt Charlotte's arms around her. Her best friend's favorite lavender perfume wafted in the air around them and Maya couldn't remember ever feeling so sad.

“It's all my fault,” she sobbed. “I wish I could take it back. I wish I could make it right again. I wish it were me instead Charls.”

Charlotte hugged Maya more tightly. “Don't you dare say anything stupid like that again. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time Maya. It was my time to go.”

She began to protest but Charlotte silenced her.

“I want to talk about the peanut,” she said. “How’s it doing?”

Maya gazed at her tummy before launching into tales of morning sickness, her appointment for her first scan and the fact *the peanut* may have already started moving but the internet was positive that it was likely gas. She watched the enrapt longing on Charlotte’s face and felt her soul crack.

“I wish you were here,” she said. “I can’t do this without you.”

Charlotte smiled, placed a hand to Maya’s cheek and said, “Of course you can. You and Jaxon will be great parents but please, for the sake of the peanut, learn to play nicely with each other.”

And then just like that Charlotte was gone.

Maya shifted in the couch trying, but failing, to get comfortable. She pulled the cushion from under her head barely flinching when she realized it was soaked with tears. When she finally settled into her room for the night, Maya prayed to God for a few more stolen minutes with her best friend. But, Charlotte never came.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sunday dinner at the Johnson family home in upstate New York was always a boisterous affair. The two Shiatsu puppies his mother, Jacqueline, bought two years ago when Jasmine moved out to help deal with her empty nest syndrome ran laps around the living room as JT and his father argued about some new TV show Jaxon was neither interested in nor aware of. He'd been waiting for a lull in the action to tell his parents and grandmother about Maya's surrogacy since he stepped through the door three hours before but still couldn't find the right time.

He finally got an opening when the family sat down for drinks after dinner. They were sitting in the large living room, which overlooked his grandmother's rosebushes during the summer time. When he explained that Maya was pregnant his little slip of a grandmother looked up from the scarf she was knitting and said, "I didn't know you and your wife's best friend were so close."

It wasn't until he explained that Maya was carrying Charlotte's child that Grams Nona stopped glaring at him. Their grandmother had one of the biggest moral compasses he'd ever come across. He wasn't quite sure she'd recovered from JT's dreadlocks, tattoos, piercings or the fact he sketched and sculpted naked women for a living so the thought of adding an adulterous grandson into the mix could've given her a stroke.

"Are you sure you want this?" his father asked. The man had listened carefully as Jaxon talked about his first confrontation with Maya and then his eventual decision to see the surrogacy through. He nodded even though he varied between wanting the baby more than anything on the planet to wondering if he was making the biggest mistake of his life.

"Then we'll support you," his mother said. She uncrossed one of her linen clad legs, pushed herself up off the chair and hugged Jaxon. For the minutes she hugged him, Jaxon allowed

himself to fall into the comfortable familiarity. In those minutes all of the chaos surrounding his life slowed and he began to think that maybe things could be okay.

Slowly the vibrancy of Sunday afternoon lunches returned and Jaxon used the time to slip away from the family room. He sat on the back porch overlooking the yard he grew up in hoping he would be able to give his child the kind of happy, secure childhood he had. JT and Orlando joined him after a while. Orlando handed him an opened beer and sat in the large, porch swing while JT leaned against the railing.

“How you doing?” Orlando asked. Jaxon started to answer but stopped. He knew his family still worried about him. They seemed constantly afraid that maybe one day he’d crumble under the weight of the pain.

“Surviving,” he said honestly. His life still felt like it was in freefall but he was determined to put one foot in front of the other until he didn’t have to think about it anymore. He just wished he had a clue about how long that would take.

“How is Maya doing?”

JT’s question caught him off guard. Although he and Maya spoke for hours the week before they hadn’t focused much on feelings. They focused on the things they could control like doctor’s appointments and pre-natal care.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “We didn’t exactly bare our souls to each other.”

“Maybe you should,” Orlando said at the same time JT asked if he was sure he and Maya would be able to handle things. Jaxon ignored Orlando’s quip and focused on JT instead, “We don’t have a choice.”

This was no longer about his feelings for Maya. Everything he did going forward had to be in the best interests of the baby.

“I’m going to start interviewing for nannies in a month or two,” he said.

“What about Maya?” Orlando asked. Jaxon glared at his brother. Orlando seemed to be aiming for a punch to the face. When Orlando didn’t back down from his angry stare, Jaxon realized his brother was actually serious.

“I heard what Jasmine said Charlotte told her but I’m not insane,” he said and then added silently *like you obviously are*. He sipped his beer, “I’m already counting down the days ‘til I can boot Maya Jenkins from my life.”

JT smirked, “You really think it’s going to be that easy? She’s not going to hand over that kid and leave. Come on... Charlotte may not have been her biological sister but she was in every other way. This baby will be her family... her *only* family.”

“Why not just hire her?” Orlando suggested again. His tone of voice dared Jaxon to challenge him. He raised his hands in an effort to have Jaxon just hear him out so Jaxon shut up and allowed him to continue. “I mean if we’re looking for the best thing for the baby it will be hard to get better than Maya. She’d have carried it for nine months; given birth to it... there will be an undeniable bond. You won’t have to worry about true affection. There’ll be no need for nanny-cams in teddy bears and whatever the hell else parents get up to nowadays to be sure their kids aren’t ill-treated.”

“He has a point,” JT said.

“No nanny-cams,” Jaxon replied dryly, “but lots of Valium and vodka.”

“What *is* your problem with Maya anyway? I’ve been around her a lot cause she retails in Megan’s boutique and I don’t see the she-Devil you’re painting her as.”

Jaxon sighed, “It’s complicated.”

The response was a cop out but Jaxon didn’t want to go through the list of issues he had with Maya. There were other things he wanted to focus on. Like the fact that, as much as he hated to admit it, Orlando might be right about hiring Maya as a nanny.

“You do know it wasn’t her fault right?” Orlando asked eventually.

“Charlotte...”

“We know. We know,” JT said raising his hand to stop Jaxon from speaking, “But *you* know that Maya would never do anything to deliberately put Charlotte in harms way.”

JT looked at him expectantly but Jaxon didn’t respond. Whether or not Maya deliberately put Charlotte in harms way, Charlotte was dead because of her decision. Instead he turned to Orlando. “I hear what you’re saying. I’ll talk your suggestion over with Maya.”

Orlando nodded once before gesturing to the house. “Let’s go before Grams Nona starts feeling slighted that we’re not eating enough food.”

Jaxon opted to stay behind when his brothers ambled into the kitchen. He watched as the sky turned deep shades of pink and purple and thought of Orlando’s idea. He hated to admit it but his brothers were right. Maya wasn’t going anywhere. When he decided he would welcome this baby into the world with open arms and try to give it the life he and Charlotte had imagined, he realized he had to put the child first. The child had to come before the grief that still skirted around the edges of his consciousness and threatened to drown him in despair. The child had to come before his ego. Jaxon reached for his phone before he could change his mind.

“I’ve got a proposition for you,” he said when Maya picked up the call. And then, Jaxon laid out for Maya Jenkins the idea that would change their lives.

“The *nanny*?”

Maya and Kasi were sprawled on their living room couch rewarding themselves with iced drinks after a full day of packing boxes when Maya got the call. Her friend took a sip of her iced tea and raised an eyebrow. Her face held stark surprise and Maya couldn’t blame her – she felt the same way.

When she first received Jaxon's phone call she couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth. The suggestion seemed so reasonable and so simple that she couldn't believe she hadn't thought about it in the hours she agonized over how she would tell Jaxon she wanted to be in the baby's life.

"What did you tell him?" Kasi asked.

"I told him yes," she said. "I get to fulfill the promise I made to Charlotte."

"But you'll also have to live with Jaxon."

The thought of living in Jaxon's house and having to see him every day made her stomach cramp. Wariness pummeled into her. Had she made the wrong decision? Surely there could be other ways to be in the baby's life without condemning herself to constant contact with Jaxon.

"Pull up your big girl panties," Maya whispered. Whether she liked it or not, her feelings were her second priority now.

"So are you still going to look at that place I found for you?"

Maya nodded. She and Jaxon agreed that she would move into his townhouse during the latter stages of her pregnancy.

"I think you should talk to him about moving in with him at the end of the month," Kasi started. Maya began to respond but dropped her shoulder and allowed Kasi to speak,

"You guys need to see if you can possibly get along before the baby comes into the mix."

"We can be adults about it," she argued. "It's not about us."

Kasi shrugged before she switched on the TV. "I'm not going to put any money on that."

Although she said it with a smile on her face, Maya knew her friend wasn't joking. She took a sip of her iced tea and tried to focus on the sitcom playing out before them on the TV, wishing Kasi's statement didn't make her feel worse.

CHAPTER SIX

Three weeks later

The waiting room was filled with couples and women in various stages of pregnancy. Maya checked the clock above the TV – *15 minutes late*. She tapped her feet against the stark, white tiled floors. Was Jaxon going to stand her up? She checked her phone hoping to see a message explaining why he was running late but found none. Maya took a deep breath, trying to keep the anger at bay. This was the first time either of them had a chance to prove they would put their all into the commitment they made. She thumbed absently through a magazine while she mocked herself for thinking this could be an easy road. Life wasn't easy and she'd known from experience that Jaxon was an equally difficult man. Maya checked her phone once again but the empty screen only confirmed that Jaxon was now nearly thirty minutes late for their appointment.

“Jenkins?”

The questioning edge to the receptionist's voice was increasing each time she called Maya's name and she asked for more time to wait for Jaxon. She shook her head slowly, pushed herself up to her feet and began walking towards the doctor's room. Her hand curled around the knob when she heard her name. She glanced up to see Jaxon stalking down the hall as if the office belonged to him and he wasn't particularly short on time. She pressed her lips into a tight line wondering if he'd even acknowledge his lateness.

“I'm sorry,” he said as soon as he stood. He shocked her by looking genuinely contrite.

“I wasn't sure I wanted to come,” he continued. “Hell, I *wasn't* going to come. There's no going back from today, is there? Today makes it real.”

Maya began to reach out to him but pulled back at the last moment. She hoped he saw the understanding in her eyes. She

flashed him a small smile and grabbed on to the doorknob. "Let's go. The doctor's waiting."

Cold beads of sweat ran down Jaxon's back as he took the bright blue seat next to Maya's. The woman sitting behind the large, teak desk opposite their chairs greeted them with a warm smile before consulting her file, "Good afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, I'm Dr. Gupta."

Jaxon shifted in his seat, stuck out his hand and tried for his most genuine smile, "I'm Jaxon Johnson."

Dr. Gupta flushed slightly. She glanced back down on the file and then said to Maya, "I'm sorry Ms. Jenkins, I shouldn't have assumed you were married."

Maya brushed off the apology. The appointment flew by in a frenzied pace of questions, concerns and reassurances. Maya had come prepared with a list of things she read in one baby book or another and needed clarification. She spoke to the doctor about eating habits, exercise, how to deal with her continued morning sickness and a host of other things. Jaxon was worrying that he looked more than slightly uninterested when Dr. Gupta asked him if he had any questions.

"I think Maya's covered them all."

Dr. Gupta jotted some notes in her file. When she looked up at them her eyes were sparkling, "Most people are quite shy to ask the question most on their minds during their first appointment so I'll answer it for you. Sex is completely safe since this pregnancy isn't considered high risk. As she progresses you may have to adjust positions for the sake of comfort..."

The woman's voice trailed off when she caught the look on Jaxon's face. Maya shifted in her seat, "Useful, but unnecessary, information."

If their reactions confused the doctor, she didn't show it. Dr. Gupta smiled again, "I will see you guys next month. Speak to the receptionist about scheduling your sonogram."

They were halfway out the door when Maya whispered to him, “Shouldn’t we just tell her what’s really going on?”

He waited until they were outside the office before he turned to her. “Are we going to explain what’s going on to every single person who seems curious?”

“I don’t want anyone to think this is actually my baby,” Maya said.

He swallowed the bitter retort on his tongue knowing they would get nowhere if they kept fighting with each other.

“If it’ll make you feel more comfortable we can tell her at the next appointment,” he conceded. “I just wasn’t in the mood to explain that my wife was shot to death within hours of finding out she was going to be a mom.”

She sighed but there were nearly a thousand words wrapped into the resignation he heard in her voice. He pushed his hands into his pocket “Just say it Maya.”

“There are worse things than telling people Charlotte is dead,” she said softly and carefully as if she was handling broken glass. When he didn’t acknowledge her, she continued, “I don’t want people to think that we were fooling around on Charlotte.”

He started to tell her that no idiot would think he’d cheat on Charlotte with her of all people but stopped when he remembered the doubt in JT’s eyes when he first confronted him.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” he promised. His answer was weak but Jaxon wanted to have that conversation even less than he wanted to be standing at an obstetrician’s office with Maya.

They stood in the hallway neither of them knowing where to go with the conversation. He’d have laughed at how much it reminded him of deciding whether you wanted to kiss someone after the first date if he wasn’t so damn miserable.

He glanced at his watch. He didn't need to be back to the office for the rest of the day. "Do you want to grab lunch or something?" he asked. He didn't miss the slight widening of her eyes before she agreed. Jaxon loathed admitting it but he and Maya were going to have to become quick friends. He just had no idea where the hell they could possibly start.

Maya watched Jaxon push his rice and peas around his plate as she sipped her extra large lemonade. They had been sitting in the Chipotle three blocks from Dr. Gupta's office for nearly twenty minutes but barely spoke ten words to each other. She wondered why he bothered asking her to grab something to eat if he wasn't going to say anything.

"How was your day?" she asked hoping to push them into conversation even if the topic was just a bit more interesting than the weather.

"Long," he said.

Maya thought the abrupt answer was the end of it but after another minute of pushing food around his plate Jaxon spoke again, "It's been my first week out to work. Everyone handles me like they think I'm going to break or something."

She took small bites from her burrito bowl. She could relate to his frustration having dealt with it when she finally stumbled back out to work two weeks after the shooting. For the first three weeks every loud sound almost had her running for cover under the counter. Jaxon was lucky his family was able to insist he got the time he needed to properly grieve.

"They'll all get back to their lives soon enough," she suggested. "Just smile and keep telling them you won't throw yourself off the Empire State building."

"How was your day?"

"Not bad. I worked the early shift so that I'd have time to check out an apartment before the doctor's appointment."

Jaxon paused putting a fork filled with food into his mouth, "An apartment."

Maya told him about Kasi finally moving in with her fiancé in Brooklyn and her inability to afford to stay on without a roommate. The place she'd seen wasn't perfect but she agreed to take it.

"You don't need to find an apartment," Jaxon said.

She nodded, "I do. Our arrangement is that I'll move in just before the baby's born."

Maya looked down at her stomach. "We've got some ways yet."

Jaxon shocked her by smiling, even if slightly so, at her corny line. "It's not like the room is being used for the next six months. Tell me when you need to move out by and I'll have someone help you with your stuff."

The refusal hovered on her tongue but Kasi's gentle warnings about pushing her pride aside made her hesitate.

"I'll pay you rent," she said.

Jaxon nodded. "It isn't required but if you want to we'll work it out when you move in."

His response surprised her and she was grudgingly impressed. She'd expected him to remind her that whatever she could afford to pay for renting a room in his house would hardly make a difference. But he seemed to understand why it was important she paid him. She was so caught up in her thoughts that Maya didn't realize Jaxon was still speaking.

"I know this is new, strange and scary but we'll make it work," he said.

He raised his Heineken. "To Charlotte."

With a catch in her breath, Maya raised her lemonade to his bottle. "To Charlotte."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The aroma of spicy tomato sauce hit Maya's nose when she walked into her nearly empty apartment later that afternoon. Kasi stood in front of the stove with a glass of red wine resting on the countertop beside her.

"I was about to file a missing persons report," Kasi joked without turning from the stove.

Maya grinned. "Things ran longer than expected. Jaxon took me out to dinner."

Kasi spun around quickly before reaching out to steady her wine glass, "Jaxon did what? He shared a meal with you without Charlotte putting a gun to his back?"

Maya fought off the jolt of pain at the mention of Charlotte's name. She unbuttoned her coat and began to tell Kasi about the doctor's visit. While they spoke she took plates from the counter and helped Kasi serve the food making sure she didn't pile her plate high with the spaghetti and spicy minced beef. She wasn't hungry but appreciated the effort Kasi went through to prepare her favorite meal because she'd been anxious about the doctor's visit. Maya waited until they were seated around the dining room table before she dropped the biggest bombshell.

"He suggested I move in early instead of looking for another apartment."

Kasi smiled. "That was kind of him."

"I'll pay rent until the baby is born," Maya said.

Kasi rolled her eyes and reacted the way Maya thought Jaxon would have.

"He doesn't need your money Maya. What did I tell you about your pride? You could've put it into buying stuff for your business."

Maya thought about that during the train home but eventually shook away the feeling that she could've used the money for

better things. The salary Jaxon agreed to pay her to be a nanny was far more than she worked for at *Espresso'ed*. In fact, she'd protested that it was too much when Orlando pointed out she was being paid what an agency would've charged. In six months she'd be able to pump more money into her business than she'd ever thought possible. For now she needed to prove to Jaxon that she wasn't interested in being a freeloader.

"I think it's the right thing to do," Maya said and Kasi gave her one of her trademark looks before they both lapsed into silence.

When Maya realized she and Jaxon would have to live together after she agreed to be the baby's nanny, she figured she would at least have time to ease herself into the idea with living with him. Six months, she reasoned, would be more than enough time to get used to the idea of having to share space with a man she couldn't stand. Now six months had become less than six days and Maya wasn't sure how she would cope. She felt the way she always did when she was being shuffled from one foster home to another before she found a family with Charlotte and her parents. Maya sighed into her glass of water. She couldn't imagine roaming the halls Charlotte used to roam or having tea in the kitchen where they'd both once baked cookies while dancing to pop music on a rainy evening. She couldn't imagine rocking the baby growing inside her to sleep in the second room just off the library Charlotte always said would be perfect for a nursery.

"It just seems so odd," she said.

Kasi's eyes brimmed with curiosity when she looked at her, "What?"

"Everything," Maya confessed voicing the nagging thoughts she had all way home. "It's like someone yanked Charls out of this world and neatly slotted me into her life."

Kasi smiled. "You hardly deserve that statement. You may be having her baby and will be soon living in her house but you haven't married her husband."

Maya whacked Kasi with the dishtowel feeling her mouth curve upwards.

She thought of marrying Jaxon and shuddered, “Hell would freeze over before that happened.”

Kasi laughed. “Exactly! So stop beating yourself up.”

Jaxon placed his half empty tumbler of Scotch on the coffee table next to the wedding album he'd been going through for the last two hours. He returned home from his impromptu dinner with Maya feeling like he'd been run over by truck. His head pounded so hard he felt nauseas and he couldn't soothe the increasing ache in his chest. He tried to think of the next couple months without wanting to break something. His therapist assured him during the last session that his guilt was normal and would fade in time once he started forging some normalcy from his broken life. *In time*. It was fast becoming a tiring refrain. Everyone insisted time would heal his wounds but he was yet to see any evidence of that. The sleepless nights were longer. The dazed days were shorter. And, his heart still hurt in ways that made him wonder how it still pumped blood. He reached for the tumbler with shaking hands when his doorbell rang. With a small curse, he drew himself up from the couch and sauntered to the foyer. When he swung open the door he found his brothers standing on the other side.

“It's Thursday,” JT said by way of introduction before walking in with Jasper and Orlando following behind. Some seconds passed before he realized what his brother meant. For as long as Jaxon could remember he and his brothers carved Thursday nights for their own. Jasper swore it started as a way to spend some time together without Jasmine tagging along behind them. As they got older and life intruded they guarded the couple hours each Thursday fiercely. Jaxon tried to remember the last time they had one of their Thursday night sessions and realized that it had been five days before Charlotte was murdered. He ambled behind his brothers as they moved to the

kitchen, JT holding a six-pack of Heineken and Orlando carrying takeout with aromas that made his stomach pang with hunger. Jasper lagged behind them and when JT and Orlando turned into the kitchen arguing about some politician who recently got caught with his pants down, he placed his hand on Jaxon's arm. "I tried to talk them out of this. I didn't think it was time to intrude."

He mustered a genuine smile for his youngest brother. "Don't apologize for them. I knew *you* couldn't be behind this."

The likely mastermind of the set up greeted him with a bottle of beer when he and Jasper finally made their way inside the kitchen. He was sitting at the island busily pulling his dreadlocks back into a lopsided ponytail.

"Orlando and I thought it was time," he said. "Jasper did too but he's too damn politically correct to risk ruffling feathers."

Jasper glared at JT and Jaxon stepped in before an argument could erupt between them. Whereas Orlando was the middle ground, Jasper and JT were the diametric opposites of each other and rarely could stand being in the same room without an argument.

"I'm not sure I think it's time," Jaxon said. "My head's all over the place and I won't be good company."

Orlando shrugged. "You were never good company to begin with. We'll manage."

And just like that the tension wound within Jaxon loosened. He listened to JT and Orlando joke around while he picked at the Chinese food they brought and swigged his beer. He didn't have much to add but hearing Orlando tease JT about his long-term crush on his oblivious best friend, Hallie, was a better way to spend the evening than moping over his wedding album.

They were settled on the couch flicking through the TV when he decided to update them on the Maya situation. He told them about the doctor's appointment and how until the very last minute he'd decided he wasn't going to go.

“How was it?” Jasper asked.

Jaxon spent some time gathering his thoughts. He wasn't sure. He still felt no independent connection to the baby. All of his feelings were wrapped up in his emotions for Charlotte but Jaxon didn't dare admit that. He hadn't even told his therapist when she questioned him about it at their last session. Instead he said, “Neither here nor there. Maya asked a million questions about pregnancy and childbirth. Then, the doctor thought it was necessary to reassure me that we could still have sex.”

“Is that when you told the good old doc that if Maya was the last woman on earth you'd marry your fist?” JT asked.

Jaxon grinned. “Unlike you I have manners. Maybe if you learn to behave Hallie might love you back.”

JT winced and placed his hand to his stomach, “I expected better from you Jaxon. That was a kick to the gut.”

He ignored his brother's antics. “She's moving in.”

In the end it was Orlando who addressed Jaxon's revelation, “That's a logical part of the nanny agreement.”

“What nanny agreement?”

This was from Jasper. His little brother lowered the volume on the TV until the show became a backdrop. Jaxon explained Orlando's suggestion that he hired Maya to raise the child after its birth.

“I'm paying her the standard price,” Jaxon said. “Orlando had a poor intern do all the research for me. She signed an employment contract and we're taking it from there. Everyone knows I wouldn't be able to raise a baby without help and all things considered Maya seemed like the best option.”

“For the baby,” Jasper observed. “But what will you guys do?”

“Be adults about it,” JT chipped in. “He has a couple months to learn.”

Jaxon returned his Heineken to the coffee table, “I don't. Maya is moving in on Sunday.”

It wasn't often JT was shocked silent but he could see his brother struggling to find something to say. Jaxon filled the silence by explaining the situation with Maya's lease.

"Everything happens for a reason," Jasper said. "You guys get to practice living together before the baby comes."

JT laughed. "If they don't kill each other first."

The conversation tapered into silence but Jaxon couldn't get JT's teasing remark from his mind. Four months ago Jaxon's life was simple but easy. He had a job that excited him, a wife he adored and all the trappings his family's wealth brought him. He imagined Maya pattering around his house – *her* heels clicking in the hallway; *her* off-key singing in the shower, *her* favorite shows blasting through the house and felt his mood plummet. Jaxon knew then that his life was never going to be simple or easy again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maya moved quietly around Jaxon's high-tech kitchen trying to avoid waking him with the noise from the pots and pans. They'd been living together for two weeks already but Maya rarely saw her reluctant roommate. The idea of Jaxon stumbling in on her making breakfast made her stomach knot into a tight ball.

"Pull yourself together woman," she muttered as she cracked the egg into the frying pan. If she was going to keep sneaking around like she broke into the place, the arrangement wasn't going to work. A small flutter in her stomach reminded her of why she needed to ensure that it did.

"That's a low blow bub," she said massaging her stomach with an easy smile. The baby's movements could no longer be put down to her imagination or gas and Maya found that the odd squirms comforted her. Her life was chaos but this child was her one constant - her one lifeline and nothing she endured would be too much to give the little girl or boy the life they deserved. She glanced at the staircase leading to the bedrooms and felt a twinge of guilt. She couldn't pretend Jaxon hadn't made some effort. True, he usually left for the office earlier than any sane person should and returned long after she was cuddled into bed but he kept surprising her with small, considerate actions. The actions always caused her pause. Had she been wrong about him?

When Jaxon said he'd get someone to help her move, Maya thought he was going to hire someone. Instead he showed up to her door dressed more causally than she'd ever seen him in stonewashed jeans and a green polo shirt. He helped her with the boxes without complaining and then put her in the room she would stay in when she spent the night. She and Charlotte used to call it the 'yellow room'. They would joke that the yellow walls were so bright that it was impossible to be in a bad mood once you stepped inside. Maya now knew that wasn't true.

The surprises didn't end there. When Jaxon showed her he'd cleared out half of the library to make room for her sewing station, Maya wasn't sure how to react. He stood at the entrance with his hand in the pockets of his jeans as he explained that the floor to ceiling windows would give her great light to work on her designs. Maya was so dumbfounded she barely managed to say thanks. She'd expected Jaxon to merely tolerate her for the sake of the baby not try to make sure she was happy too.

Before she could stop herself, Maya reached for more ingredients and settled into her favorite routine. When she'd first moved in with Charlotte and her parents Charlotte's mother, Charlene, demanded they had 'mother-daughter' time. Charlotte hadn't been pleased about the exclusion but Maya knew right then that this foster home would be vastly different to the string of others that came before. She and Charlene settled into a routine of early morning breakfasts on weekends. Together they dreamt up recipes and made big, indulgent meals for Charlotte and Frank.

Soon their weekend cooking sessions turned into sewing lessons. There sitting at Charlene's old Singer machine, Maya discovered the one thing she was good at. Maya's hands moved automatically as she struggled against the grief and rage she felt. She was only twenty-six years old and she'd suffered enough loss to write an epistle on heartbreak.

After losing her parents at seven, Maya thought she would never feel pain like that again. She *wished* she'd never feel pain like that again. It was the reason she never allowed Charlotte's parents to formally adopt her even though they offered many times. They were not legally her parents but Maya loved the Braithwaites as if they were her own and it devastated her to lose them so suddenly. But at least then she had Charlotte and they leaned on each other while they stumbled through their grief. Things had been finally looking up for them. Maya's business was finally starting to take off. Charlotte was married to the man of her dreams and their

dream baby was about to become a reality. Then everything came crashing down.

The flashback snuck up on Maya so quickly she couldn't prepare for it. She tried to grab on to the pans but they fell from her hands and clattered to the ground. The fog wrapped around Maya so tightly she couldn't breathe. She tried to fight but quickly realized it was no use, she was already reliving the worst day of her life. Maya opened her mouth to scream but no sound came. She didn't want to have to remain with the memories. She didn't want to have to watch Charlotte die... again. The memories of the metallic tinge of blood tickled the back of her throat and her stomach convulsed. Maya could feel her best friend trembling in her arms as she tried to force words from her mouth. Maya had been sure Charlotte wanted her to promise to tell Jaxon she loved him. But instead, in those last moments, Charlotte squeezed her hand and said, "Good luck mommy."

She'd patted Charlotte's cheek frantically. "No. No. You're not going anywhere."

"Be a good mother to my baby Maya," she responded. Her voice was hoarse and labored and in those sinking seconds Maya realized her best friend was really going to die. Less than three minutes after the frantic thoughts consumed her mind, Charlotte was gone.

Holding Charlotte while she took her last breath had been the most difficult thing she'd ever done but nothing compared to when the masked man pointed the gun at her head and demanded she stopped crying and screaming. So Maya stayed there soaked in her best friend's blood willing the tears to stop falling.

"Maya."

A firm hand gripped Maya's shoulder but she was unable to stop the screams and tears the way she'd miraculously been able to at the masked man's threat.

"Maya."

The voice was closer now, pressed up against her ear as another hand rubbed her back.

“It’s not real. Come back to me. It’s not real.”

Maya struggled against the haze until she found herself on Jaxon’s tiled kitchen floor pressed against his chest. She knew she should step away from him and return to her room until the pain passed but Maya did the one thing she shouldn’t. She turned towards Jaxon, buried her head in his chest and cried.

CHAPTER NINE

Jaxon had just finished knotting his tie and was reaching for his jacket when Maya's scream pierced the still, quiet morning. It was so loud and anguished his hands stalled and his feet seemed to move towards the stairs on their own accord. He was halfway there when he heard a loud bang and so he took the stairs two at a time.

He'd seen Maya so infrequently in the past two weeks that Jaxon often forgot she was even there. The scream chilled him to the core. Was she hurt? Was the baby hurt? The panic he felt at the thought of the baby being injured shocked him. Maybe his attachment to the baby had nothing to do with Charlotte after all. He was excited for and loved the little being Maya carried and would do anything in his power to protect it.

Jaxon stopped short when he saw Maya on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chin. She was staring ahead but her eyes were glassy. Jaxon crossed the space between them, slid to the floor, placed his hand on her shoulder and tried to shake her from the trance.

"Maya," he said. He tried to keep his voice forceful, yet calm, but knew he failed when she jerked against his touch. Jaxon instinctively pulled her against his chest much in the same way he comforted Jasmine when she was growing up after she'd had a bad dream.

"It's not real," he whispered. When it didn't seem to affect her he said, "Come back to me Maya. It isn't real."

The next seconds passed slowly – too slowly – before Maya shifted in his arms. She looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time and then stiffened. He expected her to pull away but instead Maya turned into him and cried until his heart broke.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered when she finally pulled away from him. “I’ve ruined your clothes.”

Jaxon narrowly resisted wiping the tears from her cheek. It was hard for him to rebuild his anger towards Maya when he sat next to her and saw just how badly she suffered from Charlotte’s death.

“It’s fine,” he said wishing it were true. But nothing was fine and it was to be a long time until it seemed otherwise.

“Let me get you something to drink,” he said.

Maya buried her face in her hands. “I was trying to make us breakfast.” Then after a soft sigh, she glanced at the creamy batter spilled across the floor, “I just ended up making a mess.”

Jaxon pushed himself up off the floor and assured her he made bigger messes whenever he ventured too close to the kitchen and was surprised by the immense relief he felt when she gave him a small smile. He helped her up off the floor and together they worked to clear up the sticky mess from the tiles. When they were finished she pointed to the covered dishes on the kitchen island, “I finished the eggs, bacon and toast. The pancakes didn’t make it.”

“Miles better than the cup of coffee I usually have in the mornings.”

Her eyes brightened. She seemed to put the episode behind her as she walked to the kitchen island and begun to prepare a plate for him. Jaxon watched Maya as she moved around his kitchen humming slightly with her small bump visible in the white blouse she wore and wondered if he’d landed in the twilight zone. Maya handed him the plate, walked to the far end of the kitchen and tiptoed at the counter as she searched for mugs. When she tiptoed the white blouse rose up and he gazed at the firm swelling of her stomach and Jaxon was suddenly rooted in place. He remembered the panic he felt when he’d seen Maya curled on the floor and the worry he felt for the child that she carried – his child.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. “Do you want me to call my doctor to check you over?”

She paused, the mug hovering inches from the counter, “I feel fine.” Her eyes met his and then she said, “You’re worried about *bub* aren’t you?”

“*Bub*?” he asked. She gestured to her stomach and nodded.

“You’ve nicknamed the baby *bub*?” Jaxon asked struggling to keep the humor from his voice. She nodded again but this time a ghost of a smile crossed her face, “It’s better than *it*.”

“Just barely,” Jaxon laughed. “You officially have no say in baby names.”

Her eyes twinkled as she laughed along with him. Her laughter sounded like soulful wind chimes and for a couple seconds it stopped Jaxon short. It was like he’d never heard Maya laugh before. He gazed at her realizing that it was almost as if he’d never really seen her before either.

“*Bub* isn’t *that* bad,” she was saying. “The runner up was *the bump*.”

She explained she hated using the pronoun *it* to refer to the baby and decided to find something better until they found out the sex. Jaxon joined Maya around the table. He renewed his protest that *bub* was barely better but couldn’t come up with another suggestion when she challenged him to find one. Slowly the conversation shifted to unrelated things; his job, her sewing, the fact his tie didn’t go well with his shirt and it struck Jaxon for the first time how much he missed this. As quickly as the thought came, the guilt rose. Sitting there having breakfast with Maya and thinking about how much fun he was having seemed like spitting on his wife’s grave. He felt the familiar stirrings of anger at the woman who sat next to him looking increasingly confused by the abrupt shut off in conversation and tried to let it go. His therapist once told him that he refused to let go of his anger towards Maya because he had no one else to blame. The two men who attempted to rob the bank managed to make a getaway before the police came. It meant they had to leave the money behind but he figured at some point they realized their freedom was precious and they

were looking at a murder conviction. Months later the police investigation seemed to have gone cold and so they remained nameless, faceless entities. But Maya was real and easy to blame. Yet, as he thought of her curled on the floor locked in a nightmare she couldn't claw her way from, Jaxon knew she probably wished she'd never gone to the bank to begin with.

"I wanted to cash a check."

Her voice was soft and strained but she caught his eye and held his gaze.

"There was a jewelry store up the road I'd run into before the doctor's appointment. I'd picked out a charm bracelet with a charm that read 'mama'. I wanted to surprise her with the charm if we found out that I was pregnant but I'd forgotten all of my cards home. Thirty minutes before I'd collected a check for some items the boutique sold so I thought I could run into the bank, cash the check quickly so she'd have the bracelet. I was just trying to be a good friend," she paused and swiped at the tears streaming down her cheek. "I held her in my arms while she bled. I kept promising her it would be okay. It was the first lie I've ever told her. You have no idea how much I wish I could take it all back but I get that you won't forgive me."

Maya pushed her chair back, "I don't blame you. I can't forgive myself."

He was still trying to process the magnitude of what she revealed when she ran from the kitchen and up the stairs. The bedroom door slammed. *I was just trying to be a good friend.* Jaxon tried to imagine the guilt she'd been drowning in - the guilt he'd used as a weapon for the last couple weeks and felt like a colossal ass. Maya had offered to carry a baby she hadn't been ready to have because she loved Charlotte but that hadn't been a big enough gift for her. She'd unwittingly led Charlotte to her death because she loved her. Jaxon checked his watch and swore silently. He was already half an hour behind schedule but he knew he couldn't leave the townhouse

without making things right with Maya. He just didn't know how the hell he'd do it.

CHAPTER TEN

Maya paced the small length of her room desperate to burn off the ball of annoyance in the middle of her chest. She'd honestly thought she and Jaxon had turned a corner. Even though his concern for the baby still lingered below the surface breakfast had almost been pleasant. For the first time since the nightmare started Maya felt like she wasn't alone struggling to outrun her demons. But then as quickly as the moment came it passed. One second she was gently teasing him about his hideous tie and the next he was looking at her with such disgust she wanted to cower. She hated the anger in his eyes because she saw it in her own every time she looked into the mirror. She didn't know what possessed her to try to explain why she'd basically twisted Charlotte's arm to get her into the bank. She wanted to present her friend with a gift before Jaxon went ahead and blew her away with the celebrations and anything she managed to do paled in comparison. Maya knew her friend had long accepted she wouldn't carry her own child but that didn't mean Charlotte wasn't disappointed. She'd wanted Charlotte to be able to look down on her hand, see the charm bracelet and remember she was going to be a mother.

Everything suddenly felt too heavy for Maya to bear while standing so she sunk slowly down unto the bed. She was still trying to get a hold of her emotions when she heard four soft raps at the door. She considered telling him to go away but knew she'd just be delaying the inevitable so she invited Jaxon in. He stood within the doorframe but made no attempt to come further into the room. Maya was grateful for the distance.

"You're an easy target," he said. "I needed someone to blame for Charlotte's death and you are the easiest target. It's hard to let go of the anger when it's been keeping me going for so long."

He moved towards the bed and sat close enough to her for their shoulders to brush against each other and for her to smell his spicy cologne.

“This isn’t going to work is it?” he said. “If we’re going to raise a baby together we’re going to have to deal with all of this.”

Maya massaged the bridge of her nose in an attempt to fend away the headache brewing behind her eyes. She and Jaxon didn’t agree on many things but that was the one thing they agreed on. They needed to do right by *bub*.

“*How* do we deal with all of this?” she asked.

“Can we forget all the things we hate about each other and try getting to know each other instead?”

She almost laughed at the absurdity of their situation. “You mean like become friends?”

It wouldn’t be a quick process but it would be a necessary one. Jaxon nodded. It wasn’t arrogance she saw etched on his face. He seemed to feel just as displaced as she did. Maya sighed. Her world was spinning out of control and she didn’t know how to put it right again. But she’d be damned if she didn’t try. Maya pushed her worries away and turned to Jaxon with a broad smile, “Well as your friend that tie isn’t going to work.”

Jaxon grinned and for the moment the tension between them was forgotten. Maya wondered how long it would be until their fragile truce broke again.

Maya pushed through the doors of the small sandwich shop three blocks from Kasi’s workplace several hours later. Her emotions still felt raw after her morning confrontation with Jaxon and the lingering images from her flashback refused to leave her in peace. Maya started to relax a bit when Kasi looked up from the menu, smiled and waved her over.

“You’re not showing any signs of being a prisoner of war so I guess things are going better than I thought.”

Maya laughed before leaning down and planting a kiss on Kasi’s cheek, “Don’t let outward appearances fool you.”

She picked up her own menu and sat opposite her friend. Kasi was just coming off a long shift at the St. Barnabas hospital but despite looking a bit tired Maya knew she was eager to get the full run down on what living with Jaxon was like. She quickly placed the order before launching into her account of her last two weeks.

“Things *are* going well,” Kasi said once Maya finished going over that morning’s incident. Maya leaned back and took a deep breath. “That’s a very optimistic way of thinking but I don’t think we’re ever going to get along and things will get more complicated once the baby gets here.”

Kasi shrugged, “Well at least you both recognize you need to work on it. I feel better now he’s ‘fessed up to being an asshole to you.”

Maya didn’t argue although she didn’t really feel better. Jaxon accepting his anger was unwarranted was one thing but whether he’d really be able to let it go was another ballgame. Maya struggled with her own irrational fears and angers each day. She took a sip of water and tuned back into the conversation.

“I know you have some strong opinions on Jaxon but I think he’s right. Without Charlotte to play mediator maybe it’s time you both actually got to know each other.”

Arguing that she already knew more about Jaxon than she wanted to know was on the tip of her tongue but she couldn’t say the words. She remembered how he’d shown up to help her move and how he’d cleared out a part of his library to make a good sewing station for her and realized she’d never tried to get to know him at all.

“*How* do we even go about doing that?” she asked more of herself than the friend sitting next to her digging into a large

omelet. Kasi raised an eyebrow, “I’m not positively sure but it could be something as simple as talking to each other.”

Despite herself Maya grinned. “Cut the sarcasm and let’s talk about shacking up with that fiancé of yours.”

Kasi didn’t need any further encouragement. Her eyes melted into puddles of chocolate as she started chronicling her last two weeks living with Marc. Seeing her friend so utterly and unabashedly happy made her smile but she couldn’t fight the *déjà vu*. Two years ago she sat on Charlotte’s couch with a cup of coffee in her hand as she listened to Charlotte rave about the man she met while reading in Central Park. Charlotte had been wound so tightly with happy energy that Maya’s skin tingled with it. Maya realized two things in that moment; she’d never felt that way about anyone and that she’d now have to compete for Charlotte’s love. Charlotte kept gushing about how she couldn’t wait for Maya to meet her new boyfriend but as she sat on the couch Maya had already decided she didn’t like him. And so, Maya realized, began her rivalry with Jaxon Johnson.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jaxon's fifth floor office overlooked the heart of Manhattan and he often loved gazing out the windows as he worked. Today, he could barely keep his thoughts together. He couldn't even focus on the contracts spread out on his large, mahogany desk.

His meeting with Nelson Thomas, one of their most established clients, was a hit and miss at best. Jaxon couldn't remember the last time he felt this frustrated at work. It didn't help that his family members kept hovering around him and breathing down his neck. During the month since he'd returned to work his family kept dropping not so subtle hints that maybe he should take more time off. He'd be stupid and hypocritical if he didn't acknowledge being a Johnson gave him a huge leg up in his career but he refused to accept special treatment. He'd already used up most of his vacation days while attempting to come to terms with Charlotte's death and didn't want to be handed any extra time because his father and uncle were scared for him. Jaxon tapped his pen against his desk. The pain was still there, yes – the raw, gaping wound still hurt, but it wasn't thoughts of Charlotte that shot his concentration to pieces today. It was Maya. When he'd suggested the week before that they tried to be friends, Jaxon hadn't expected her to take it seriously. After all, everything he'd known about Maya suggested she was selfish and refused to see things any other way than her own. She'd surprised him as much as he was sure he'd surprised her. They'd continued their breakfast routine over the past couple days chipping slowly away at the walls of ice they'd built up against each other. They bartered childhood stories. He had a whole host of hilarious memories about getting into trouble with Orlando and JT while being ratted out by Jasper or manipulated by Jasmine. She shared with him funny stories about growing up with Charlotte. In those moments they didn't remember his

dead wife in sorrow. They were able to laugh at a fourteen year old Charlotte who paid Maya to help her sneak out only to be caught before she made it out of the house. He'd almost choked on his coffee when Maya recounted when Charlotte volunteered to help her make a cake for their parents' wedding anniversary but mistook the salt for sugar. He noticed Maya steered clear of her life before the Braithwaites but he didn't push it. Jaxon hadn't realized how much he looked forward to these sessions until he strode downstairs to his breakfast plate wrapped in foil and a note in her elegant writing telling him about her early shift. It took a split second for him to recognize what he felt was disappointment.

Jaxon glanced at the clock on the far end of his desk before he started packing away the papers. Maya chose to work the early shift at *Espresso 'ed* because they had an appointment with the sonographer later that afternoon. He was halfway out the office when his secretary, Ivalee, told him there was an important call for him. He checked the time again and promised himself that he could fit in a quick call and still show up to the appointment early.

"Johnson," he said by way of introduction. It took all of three seconds for Jaxon to realize that Raymond Shepard's problem wouldn't be solved in fifteen minutes. An hour later he was gathered in the conference room with Orlando, three associates, two paralegals and several interns handing out assignments trying to ensure they could file the necessary emergency documents in the morning. He was going over legal precedents when Ivalee stepped into the conference room and signaled for him to come.

"There's a woman on the phone for you," Ivalee said.

"I'm busy. Tell her to leave a message," Jaxon picked back up the stack of papers and continued shifting through them.

"I tried telling her that but she insisted she needed to talk to you."

"Tell her to leave a number and I'll call back," Jaxon said unable to keep the impatience from his voice. Ivalee stood

rooted in place for several seconds before she nodded sharply and quietly exited the conference room. Less than two minutes passed before she returned with her forehead furrowed and shoulders tense.

“I have that message for you,” she said. The change in the tone of her voice wasn’t lost on Jaxon or on Orlando who glanced up from his stack of files and shot an inquiring look his way.

“What was it?”

Ivalee hesitated and leaned close to him. Then in the softest whisper she said, “She wanted to know if you planned on missing the baby’s gender ultrasound without even calling.”

Jaxon glanced at his watch and swallowed a curse. He’d forgotten. He’d completely forgotten about Maya and the baby. Jesus, what kind of father was he going to be? One look at the lawyers frantically working around him and Jaxon knew he couldn’t leave. He thanked Ivalee who looked at him with even more confusion in her eyes before excusing himself. He glanced at his cell-phone and noted the thirteen missed calls from Maya and with a wince he returned the call. She answered on the third ring.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “A client needs an emergency motion filed and called just as I was leaving the office. I got caught up. I should’ve called but...”

“... you can’t make it.”

“I’m sorry Maya.”

There was a brief pause, “It’s ok. I’ll head in now.”

She didn’t sound upset with him but she didn’t sound pleased either. Jaxon tried apologizing again but Maya cut him off, “Should I still find out the gender?”

He hesitated. Two days ago Jaxon would’ve said he didn’t care but he couldn’t deny the wave of disappointment he felt. He wanted to tell her to wait but he couldn’t bring himself to. Instead, he told Maya it was fine for her to go ahead and text him the results. She’d been looking forward to finding out so much that he refused to punish her for his own mistake.

“I’ll see you later,” she said. “Good luck with the client stuff.”

He sat there for several seconds after Maya rang off trying to sort through his emotions but a quick rap at his door reminded him that this wasn’t the time.

Orlando walked into the office. His hazel eyes were filled with concern, “What’s going on? Do you need some time off?”

Jaxon straightened up in the chair. If he’d doubted he made the right decision by deciding to stay at work, he now knew that it was. Leaving to deal with another personal emergency would only solidify his family’s belief that he needed to take further leave.

“I’m missing a doctor’s appointment,” he admitted. “I felt bad that I forgot to call her but it’s sorted now. Let’s get back to work.”

Orlando stood there for a long second as if he was trying to determine what JT loved to call ‘the bullshit quotient’.

“We’re finding out the sex today,” he said to fill the silence. “Maybe then she’ll stop calling the baby *bub*.”

“Wow,” Orlando said.

Jaxon chuckled. “I know right. Isn’t it the most horrendous nickname you’ve heard?”

Orlando placed his hand on the doorknob, “Not the name Jaxon. You’ve just spoken about Maya and I swear I heard fondness in your voice.”

“We’re becoming friends,” Jaxon admitted. Orlando made a joke about checking the temperatures in hell as they made their way back into the conference room. He returned to his files with his cellular phone in his hand anxiously waiting on Maya’s text. Maybe they’d be able to do this. Jaxon smiled. For the first time in a long time he felt something like hope.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maya shoved the cell phone back into her bag, made her way to the receptionist's desk and told the chubby woman with the tortoise glasses and shocking purple hair she would be alone for the appointment. She'd expected the woman to at least be a little bit annoyed that after pushing back her appointment by nearly an hour Jaxon was still a no-show but the woman just nodded. She scribbled something on her clipboard and told Maya she'd send her in as soon as a slot became available.

Maya settled back into the chair and allowed the anger she'd been feeling to seep out. When Jaxon failed to show up for the appointment she'd been pissed off and disappointed all at once. Little beads of panic began to form on her brow when she finally got in contact with him and she'd been prepared to let him have it. However, the regret in his voice stopped her in her tracks. Maya couldn't begin to describe the relief she felt when she realized he'd just got caught up in work. He should've given her the heads up but it was just a mistake. A mistake she could handle. A direct slight to her and the baby would've shattered any progress they made. Maya tried to read the pregnancy magazine she'd taken from the table but couldn't stop thinking about the situation. Her truce with Jaxon felt like the largest pendulum in the world and Maya constantly held her breath waiting for things to swing to the other side.

Less than five minutes passed before the receptionist called her name and guided her to a small radiology room. The radiologist was a tall woman with kind eyes who gently assured her that everything was going well with the pregnancy and that the baby was growing nicely.

"The baby is giving us a full view of its bits. Do you want to do it now or are you planning to be surprised?"

Maya hesitated. Although Jaxon gave her the go ahead she could tell he was a little bit disappointed he wouldn't be present. In the end her own curiosity won out and she grabbed for her phone as soon as her appointment was over. Her fingers hovered over the send button for several seconds before she tucked the phone into her coat. There was someone else who deserved to know before Jaxon did.

Half an hour later Maya stood at the gates of the cemetery where they'd buried Charlotte nearly two months before. She walked the narrow trail with small, precise steps. Now, in the heart of winter, the cemetery was even more desolate than she'd remembered. The one time she and Jaxon saw each other between the shooting and the actual funeral had been an explosive fight about where Charlotte should be buried. Instead of bonding over all the things they would miss about the woman they both loved or comforting each other they shouted and traded insults. Jaxon wanted her nearby but Maya thought Charlotte belonged buried in Florida next to both of her parents who'd died seven years ago. *Seven years*. Maya tried to swipe the tears from her eyes. When Charlotte's parents died in a boating accident she'd thought it was the last time she'd have to deal with the sudden death of someone she loved. She placed her hand to her stomach and tried to resist the urge to vomit. She'd been so wrong. Jaxon won the battle but when Maya finally found Charlotte's final resting place she felt grateful. Six weeks ago she'd stood at the very spot and watched Jaxon throw the first handful of dust on the sleek, expensive casket he'd purchased for her best friend. She knew returning to the grave didn't bring her any closer to Charlotte but it felt that way. She knew Charlotte wouldn't hear what she had to say but she needed to come all the same. Maya's heart ached as she sunk to her knees and trailed her glove-covered finger over the elegant writing on Charlotte's headstone: *wife and loving friend*.

"You're going to have a little girl," she said softly. The wind rustled in response and Maya sighed. She tried to imagine how

excited Charlotte would've been when the sonographer pointed out the distinct lack of a penis on the screen. She had been excited about the thought of a baby – any baby but Maya knew Charlotte had always longed for a *mini-me*. Maya still struggled to come to terms with how seemingly small actions had the power to completely alter the course of life. If she and Charlotte arrived at the bank fifteen minutes earlier, she'd have finished cashing the check before the men stormed in. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of pain when she remembered how much it took to convince Charlotte to come with her in the first place. All of this could've been avoided if she'd just let Charlotte go home and had gone to the bank alone. She hadn't been exaggerating when she told Jaxon she found it hard to forgive herself. The guilt was a well-deserved albatross around her neck. The tears came when she couldn't block out the real reason Charlotte died and the role she played in it.

“Don't go there,” she urged herself. Instead, she placed the bright pink flower she'd picked up alongside the headstone and left the cemetery. Maya pulled out her phone and began to compose Jaxon's text message but stopped herself again. She wasn't sure if it was because she couldn't see Charlotte's reaction but Maya desperately wanted to see Jaxon's face when she told him he was having a little girl. Yes, she decided, some news was better delivered in person.

Jaxon was bone weary and cold by the time he walked into the foyer much later that night. He and Orlando just about managed to complete the documents to be filed the next morning in order to get the emergency injunction granted. He'd kept his phone close all through the night but was yet to receive a text from Maya. Jaxon was about halfway home when he wondered if maybe Maya was more upset than she'd let on. He dismissed the thought. Maybe the baby was lying in a position that made it impossible to determine the gender. He expected to feel excited at a possible second chance but he wasn't. After spending most of the night looking out for

Maya's text Jaxon found he was excited to know if Maya was carrying a little boy or girl.

He found Maya in the living room curled into a tight ball on the couch while the TV blared around her. She looked so vulnerable in sleep that he couldn't glance away. He wondered if he should wake her up or find some sheets to tuck her in when he noticed the ultrasound photos spread out on the coffee table. Careful not to wake her, Jaxon picked them up and glanced through the photos. He was flooded with foreign emotions.

"Don't worry. She'll grow into her looks."

"She?"

Maya sat up in the couch, stretched and with a sad smile said, "Charlotte's mini-me."

He couldn't find the words to express the way his heart beat too fast against his chest, the happiness that seemed to creep into him or the overwhelming panic he felt so they stayed there for several minutes lost in their own thoughts.

"I think I'm going to head up," she said eventually. "I'm almost sleeping with my eyes open."

Maya began gathering up her things but stopped when she was halfway off the couch and asked, "How did work stuff go?"

"We got it done," he said. "Just barely."

"Wanna talk about it?"

Jaxon started to say no but then he realized that he actually did. He joined her on the couch, loosened his tie and launched into his last seven hours at work. Jaxon learned in those moments that Maya was an excellent listener. She was sympathetic when he explained they had to rush to complete deadlines at least four times per month for that particular client because he always waited until the last minute to get his affairs in order. She didn't try to hold back amused laughter when he told her about the intern who was so eager to please that she accidentally spilled coffee all over Orlando.

“I thought she was either going to cry or have a heart attack,” he said.

Maya grinned. “With the pressure you guys put on those poor kids maybe you should make it a safety requirement that a defibrillator is in every conference room.”

They spoke until it was hard for him to keep his eyes open. He glanced at Maya and saw the weariness in her eyes.

“Maybe we should call it a night,” he said after a quick glance at his watch. She shifted in the couch, stretched her arms above her head interlocking her fingers and stifled a yawn. “I didn’t realize how late it was.”

He was stunned he didn’t want to call it a night even though he knew he would be useless to himself if he stayed up any longer. Jaxon never vented about his workday to Charlotte. In fact, he very rarely spoke about his job with anyone outside of his family. Most people were surprised when they realized that law was not as glamorous as depicted on *Suits* or *Law and Order* and tended to get bored when he tried to go into the details. Maya surprised him by not only paying attention but also making small, witty remarks that made him chuckle out loud. He wanted to pull stories from years ago in order to keep the conversation going but instead he helped her up off the couch and walked with her up the stairs in silence.

“See you tomorrow,” he said as they turned towards their separate rooms. She rewarded him with a bright smile, “I’m looking forward to it.”

When Jaxon settled into bed he realized he was looking forward to it too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You need to suck it up and bring Maya over for next Sunday lunch,” Jasmine said. She hoisted her leg over Jaxon’s and stuffed a spoonful of yoghurt into her mouth. Jaxon turned up the volume on the sitcom blasting through the TV. His sister made a face at him before hitting him with the throw pillow nearest to her.

“Grams Nona won’t rest until she meets Maya,” she continued. “Believe you me.”

Jaxon muted the TV and turned so that he could face his baby sister. She’d always been the most persistent of his siblings and he knew the longer he put off having the conversation, the longer it would be until he could enjoy his favorite TV show.

“It’s only been six weeks Jas,” he said. “I’m not sure I’m ready to subject Maya to you lot.”

“Maya and I get on just fine,” Jasmine protested. “And Grams Nona has a point. She’ll be a part of the family now and you can’t run away from that.”

His grandmother first suggested he brought Maya over to their weekly family dinners three weeks before but he immediately told her it was too soon. He and Maya had just started to find their footing and he didn’t want to throw her into the whirlwind that was the Johnson family. At least that was what he kept telling himself. In the moments when he couldn’t lie to himself anymore he had to admit that the thought of introducing Maya to the rest of his family made him feel uncomfortable as hell. He felt disloyal to Charlotte. Over the past couple weeks he and Maya settled into a routine. They usually ate breakfast together and chatted about the previous day. They spoke about everything from her new designs to interesting conversations she overheard at the coffee shop. He would tell her about office politics or quirky clients. He kept picking up little things about Maya, like the fact she woke up way too early for someone who went to sleep as late as she

did. Or that the thing she missed the most during pregnancy was her inability to drink coffee so Jaxon started stocking decaf in the townhouse. She also liked pop music and put ketchup, of all things, on her eggs. She laughed from her soul even though life had given her many things to frown about. He couldn't deny his respect for her anymore. He'd all but come to terms with the fact he genuinely enjoyed being around her. Jaxon grimaced at the irony. Charlotte had nagged him time and time again telling him he and Maya would get along if they gave each other a chance. It'd taken her death for them to finally listen to her.

A soft thud to his face pulled him back to the present.

"Where'd you disappear to?" Jasmine asked. Her face was no longer filled with mischievous humor but concern.

"I'm fine," he assured her. He tried to infuse lightness into his voice. "I was just wondering if I should agree to ask Maya if she wanted to come along on Sunday just to shut you up."

Jasmine laughed, "You do that and I promise I'll let you enjoy the Big Bang Theory in peace. Besides, Maya would enjoy it."

He eyed his sister suspiciously, "How do you know that?"

Jasmine flashed him one of those smiles he'd become accustomed to as she grew up. Those smiles always signaled she'd eaten the expensive chocolate bar he'd bought to impress one of his ex-girlfriends on their first date or scratched one of his favorite CDs.

"You already invited her didn't you?" he asked as the penny dropped.

"Before you get angry remember she's my friend too."

Jaxon rolled his eyes. "Can't you go interfere with somebody else's life?"

His scolding didn't bother Jasmine. She flashed him another big smile, unfolded her legs and kissed his cheek, "Nope. I can't. You seem to need my services more than anyone else right now."

As he stared at his Jasmine's impish face, Jaxon realized he was fighting a losing battle. He tugged on her hair much like he used to when they were younger.

"Fine. I'll ask her when she gets home from work," he said. And then after a couple of seconds, "Stay out of my damn life."

Jasmine just laughed.

Maya returned home not long after the ball of energy that was his little sister left. She stuck her head into the sitting room, "Hey. Thought you were at the office."

When she'd left that morning he'd been running into the office to deal with another unexpected legal issue. Jaxon hated working on Saturdays which was why he bundled up most of the documents he needed and hightailed out of the office as soon as he could. He'd run into Jasmine as he left the building and she cajoled him into hanging for a bit. He pointed to the files on the coffee table. "I brought work home with me."

She grinned. "So did I."

She held up a brown paper bag with *Espresso 'ed's* deep purple emblem on the front and small spots of grease around the bottom edges.

"Is that what I think it is?"

Maya nodded and laughed, "Why do I think you're more excited about this paper bag than seeing us."

She gestured to her swollen tummy and with a final chuckle she crossed the distance between them and handed him the bag. He grinned appreciatively when the delicious scents of butter and cheese hit him. *Espresso 'ed* sold what had to be about the best croissants he'd ever tasted. A couple Saturdays before, Maya returned home with a large, buttery croissant stuffed with ham, Brie and strawberry jam. He'd been very skeptical but after lots of prodding he finally agreed to at least give it a try. He'd been hooked from that day and Maya had

gladly supported his habit by bringing home the stuffed croissant at least twice per week. She sunk into the couch next to him, accepted a piece of the croissant and chatted to him about her day between chews.

“My parents want to meet you,” he said as soon as he could get a word in. “We don’t have to but my grandmother and *certain siblings* of mine are becoming insistent.”

Maya laughed. “Lay off Jasmine. She only mentioned it once for like three seconds during lunch the other day.”

“Jasmine likes butting in,” he said.

Maya shrugged with laughter dancing in her eyes. “Much in the same way you guys threatened that older guy she liked in high school to leave her alone?”

Jaxon grinned. He wasn’t sure if Maya came by that tidbit of information from his stories about his childhood or from Jasmine herself.

“How did you guys become so close anyway?”

Although Jasmine and Charlotte used to spend time together on occasion, Jaxon didn’t remember his sister hanging out with Maya much.

“We’re not really,” Maya explained. “She just figured we should start developing a friendship because of the baby. I guess it’s the same as us.”

She said it in the same easy-going manner as before but Jaxon couldn’t help but wonder how she really felt. He bit into the croissant but didn’t pay any attention to the rich flavor. Instead he worried about Maya. There were many people interested in forming attachments to her but when you pulled everything away it was because of the child she carried. He grimaced. That definitely wasn’t *strictly* true. He enjoyed spending time with Maya and looked forward to the parts of his day when they could hang out and that had nothing to do with the fact that in four months she’d give birth to his daughter.

“... it’s really up to you.”

Jaxon returned his focus to Maya. “Sorry what were you saying?”

“Whether or not I choose to go to dinner on Sunday is up to you. I mean if you’d hired another nanny would your grandmother want to meet her too?”

Jaxon laughed. Finally a question he could answer.

“Grams Nona would definitely want to meet her too. Besides we both know you won’t be *just* a nanny.”

He felt a shift in the conversation but just as Maya was about to respond his cell phone rang. One glance at it told him that their conversation would have to be jettisoned at least for the time being.

“It’s the office,” he said. “I’ve got to take this.”

Maya had already begun to curl herself into the couch and was reaching for the remote control when he slipped out of the sitting room. Jaxon couldn’t help but notice just how much she looked like she belonged there. Grief zapped through him. He’d give anything to have Charlotte flicking through channels on the couch during a lazy Saturday afternoon. For once Jaxon embraced the grief, he wrapped himself up in it because only then he could escape the guilt he’d begun to feel about his changing feelings towards his dead wife’s best friend.

Maya kept her eyes fixed on the large television mounted above the fireplace until she was sure Jaxon was gone. She rubbed her stomach trying to soothe the unsettling feelings she had. She sighed. Maya couldn’t blame the feelings on the baby who’d become increasingly fond of squirming inside her. She’d been so worried that living with Jaxon would be an unmitigated disaster she’d never stopped to think about what would happen if things went well. She liked him and the thought was enough to make her feel a little sick. It wasn’t just that she enjoyed spending time with Jaxon that made her feel queasy. No, it was the odd ways she noticed him that gave her

pause. Earlier that week she'd waited up for him and Jaxon surprised her with a box of her favorite pizza. As they sat shoulder to shoulder on the couch, Maya suddenly noticed how nice he smelled. His cologne was some woody, spicy mixture and she was moving closer to him until she realized, abruptly, what she was doing. She'd called time on their impromptu movie night blaming exhaustion but it was already too late. She was disgusted with herself. Thinking of Jaxon in that way, no matter how fleeting was the ultimate betrayal to her best friend. Maya managed to place those feelings firmly back into the box during the days that followed but those odd, foreign feelings tried to claw their way back to the surface during their conversation.

... *we both know that you won't be just a nanny*, he'd said and for a split second she'd wondered if he felt as torn as she did. Reality slammed back when his phone rang. Of course he wasn't. Jaxon just meant she was Charlotte's best friend. Maya sunk further in the couch resolving to remember that before anything else she was Charlotte's best friend. She owed her loyalty and nothing would shake that, especially not a hormone induced crush on a man she hated just a few months ago.

Half an hour later Jaxon stuck his head into the sitting room, made some quip about the file he was working on and smiled. She noticed for the first time that one of his dimples was a little deeper than the other and her stomach did a small somersault. Maya bit her bottom lip until she tasted blood. This little complication needed to be nipped in the bud before her entire world imploded around her. *Again.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Maya sat in the large, plushy couch in the middle of Jaxon's parents' living room trying to get over the hurricane that was the Johnson family. Dinner was a boisterously loud affair with everyone talking at once while they tucked into some of the most delicious food Maya ever tasted. Between the hearty mashed potatoes, grilled lobster, steak and collard greens Maya found it hard to resist seconds. It didn't help that Grams Nona kept reminding her that she was eating for two while piling her plate high enough to comfortably feed four. Jaxon's family peppered her with questions about her and the pregnancy while managing to make her feel comfortable. The anxious feelings she'd harbored during the long drive to upstate New York slowly melted away as the afternoon progressed. The Johnsons were terribly nice, supportive and close. She smiled when she thought of all the love Charlotte's little girl would receive growing up in a family as close knit as this. Maya sipped on her lemonade and felt a surge of sadness alongside her happiness for the unborn child. The Johnsons' loud, teasing warmth was a stark reminder of just how alone she was. She couldn't imagine four other siblings, parents still in love and a grandmother with more sass than a diva half her age. She recognized and accepted the envy she felt. Jaxon was blessed and probably didn't even realize it. She caught his eye and he smiled at her before gracefully jerking his head towards the door behind him. Jaxon pushed back his chair, reached for his glass of lemonade.

“Okay guys Maya needs a time out from the crazy.”

JT threw a spoon at him from across the table and Grams Nona did a good job of being outraged but the large grin on her face gave her away. Jaxon placed his hand on the small of Maya's back to guide her towards the verandah. She felt herself getting caught up in the warm, comforting pressure on her back when the baby kicked her so hard and unexpectedly she winced.

“Good looking out *bub*,” she said softly.

“What’s that?” Jaxon asked.

“Nothing.”

She stepped with him out onto the large verandah overlooking an equally large yard. Jaxon bypassed the porch swing and guided her to a set of wicker chairs tucked in the corner. They sat and looked out at the family’s two toy dogs running up and down at break neck speeds.

“I bet you anything Delphine will trip and fall into the pool.”

Maya laughed. “That’s an oddly human name for a dog.”

“All the same I guess,” Jaxon said with a quick smile. “I’m not sure Delphine or Bert realize they aren’t my youngest siblings.”

They settled into small talk and the conversation eventually lulled into comfortable silence as Maya watched the sky turn vibrant shades of pink and purple. She started to point out the beauty of the sunset when the baby kicked her again.

“Jesus *bub*,” she exclaimed. She explained that the baby’s kicks were becoming stronger when Jaxon flashed her a curious glance.

“That’s amazing,” he whispered. She couldn’t miss the longing under the amazement in his voice. She reached for Jaxon’s hand when the baby kicked her tentatively. Two seconds later she kicked again with more force. Jaxon’s eyes widened. “Does that hurt?”

She shook her head, “It just feels a bit weird. I’ve seen videos of footprints against pregnant women’s stomachs on YouTube. Now that looked painful! It reminded me why I was so scared to do this.”

“Charlotte told me you took some coming around.”

Maya laughed gently. “That’s putting it mega lightly. Pregnancy and childbirth scared the heck out of me.”

“How about now?” he asked.

“A bit,” she said. And then after a few minutes, “It’s what comes after that keeps me up at night.”

Gentle spring breezes caressed his skin and above his head the sky burst into a myriad of warm colors as the sun set but Jaxon’s attention was focused solely on the woman sitting across from him. Her hair was styled in back length braid extensions and her stomach swelled against her yellow maxi dress. His gaze dipped to her stomach amazed at the fact his little girl grew there. He hadn’t paused to think of just how much Maya’s life was changing. He saw the vulnerability in her eyes when she confided that she was worried about what would happen after the baby was born. He was too. There were no handbooks on how to be parents. *Parents*. The thought caught him off guard but he knew instantly that it was the truth. Although they used the word nanny and Orlando ensured Maya’s contract paid her fairly she would be more than *just* a nanny. Maya was going to be the only mother his little girl would ever know. Maya would be the one to rock her to sleep, to kiss scrapes in order to make them better and breastfeed her when she woke crying in the middle of the night. His gaze dropped to the hint of cleavage in her dress. Her breasts had started to swell along with her stomach and Jaxon was annoyed at himself for noticing. When she smiled up at him and teased that hopefully the baby would escape unscathed while they tried to learn to take care of her Jaxon couldn’t help but notice how gorgeous her smile was. He shut the thought down almost as quickly as he shut down their conversation. He stood and stalked back into the house mumbling something about getting another drink. He didn’t miss the bewildered and then hurt expression on Maya’s face but he ignored it. He couldn’t allow himself to think of Maya in that way. He bypassed the kitchen and the curious gazes his family shot at him and went straight to his father’s office. Jaxon paced the length of the office trying to sift through the emotions he felt. He was nowhere near control of those emotions when he emerged from the office twenty minutes later. He spotted Maya on the couch with a blanket over her

legs in deep conversation with his sister and his mother. She looked so much at ease with his family in his family home it was almost as if she'd always been there. That she handled the chaos that came with a Johnson Sunday dinner without missing much of a step made him feel lost. The world was moving on without Charlotte. Each day the sun rose and the seasons were quickly changing just as they had when she'd been here. He tried to remember Charlotte sitting in the same room laughing with his family during their weekly trek to upstate New York but kept glancing back at Maya. Charlotte wasn't there and never would be. Maya took her place. *Maya took her place.* The thought echoed in his mind until his head hurt from it. He turned to the kitchen when Maya's melodic laughter rang out and in those minutes Jaxon was sure he still hated her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maya sat around the kitchen island picking at crispy bacon and sipping on peppermint tea increasingly frustrated with the way things were going between her and Jaxon. He left for work extra early that morning just as he had the morning before. Maya wondered yet again what went wrong while they sat on his parents' verandah on Sunday evening. The shift in Jaxon was so sudden and so severe Maya figured she should try to take time off work to deal with the whiplash. She was still lost in thought when the doorbell pulled her back to reality. She glanced down at the stretched out white T-Shirt she wore over black leggings and grimaced. She would look a hot mess answering the door but she swung her feet over the stool and padded through to the door. She was surprised to find Kasi on the other side.

"I brought chocolate and red velvet cupcakes," her friend said shoving a medium-sized pink box at her. Maya grinned knowing Kasi stopped at her favorite midtown bakery. She stepped aside and allowed Kasi to step into the foyer. Her friend glanced around and grinned. "Your gilded cage is sparkling."

Maya ignored the teasing comment and led Kasi to the small nook in the corner of kitchen. She placed the box on the circular, white wooden table before moving to the fridge and getting some milk for her and red wine for Kasi. They settled into comfortable silence as Maya unpacked the cupcakes.

"What's the latest?" Kasi asked as she pulled the glass of wine towards her. Maya finally had the perfect opportunity to voice the concerns barreling around in her head but hesitated. Would she say too much? Would Kasi be able to tell from the way she held herself or the tone of her voice that maybe she'd begun to feel things for Jaxon that she didn't want to face let alone explain.

"Nothing to tell," she lied. "The baby is using my uterus as her dance floor and I'm slowly starting to look like I've swallowed two basketballs."

Kasi grinned, “You look fine and you damn well know I’m talking about things with you and Jaxon.”

“We’re right back where we started,” she said eventually. Kasi raised an eyebrow – pausing with a cupcake inches from her mouth. “Right back where you started as in hating each other.”

Maya nodded. She explained that Jaxon had started ignoring her again and making up excuses to avoid spending too much time with her. They had another appointment scheduled for later that day and for the first time in months Maya was worried Jaxon wouldn’t show up.

“What went wrong?”

Maya shrugged and attempted to shake off the sting of betrayal she felt at Jaxon’s behavior. “I thought things were going well. We were literally laughing and talking one moment and then the next moment he was cold as ice.”

Kasi looked just about as confused as Maya felt. After several seconds Kasi said, “It was bound to happen.”

“Come again?”

Her friend pulled her hair from its band and gulped her wine. “It was about to get overwhelming at some point right? Give him some space, I guess.”

Maya stared into her glass of milk wondering if she should voice the fear ballooning in the pit of her stomach, “What if things just get worse?”

“They won’t Maya,” Kasi encouraged. She sauntered around to Maya’s end of the table and pulled her into a hug. “I think this is normal. I’m surprised you haven’t started feeling overwhelmed too.”

Kasi didn’t know the half of it, Maya thought. She was more than just overwhelmed. She’d begun to wonder if she made the biggest mistake of her life. The baby squirmed and Maya immediately felt guilty. No. The baby would never be a mistake. She sighed. But her confusing feelings for Jaxon certainly were.

“Give him some space for a couple days and then confront him about it,” Kasi suggested. She turned around the idea in her head for a couple minutes before she decided Kasi was right.

Slowly she turned the conversation to less complicated things and by the time she saw Kasi out the door she felt lighter than she had in two days. This may be her first rough patch with Jaxon but she’d be stupid if she thought it would be their last.

Jaxon surprised her by being early for their appointment with Dr. Gupta. When she walked into the waiting room and saw him sitting there sifting through a magazine looking bored she almost tripped over her feet.

“My meetings finished early,” he said by way of introduction when she found the chair next to his.

“Okay.”

Maya felt more self-conscious around him than she ever had before. Jaxon didn’t make an effort to continue the conversation so she reached forward and grabbed a magazine. She was halfway through an article praising a new diet fad when she heard her name.

She looked up and found Morgan Spencer, her and Charlotte’s former roommate, looking at her with an odd expression on her face.

“Morgan,” she said. “How are you?”

The woman glanced at Jaxon, “You’re Charlotte’s husband. I was at your wedding.”

Jaxon outstretched his hand but Morgan made no move to shake it.

“How far along are you?” Morgan asked turning her gaze back to Maya. She smiled at her sweetly but her eyes were steel. When Maya didn’t respond right away she said, “You look about six months. That means you’d have been screwing him when Charlotte was alive.”

“I...”

“Jesus Maya. I know you’ve always been jealous of Charlotte but this is low. When I heard the rumors I couldn’t believe it although most people weren’t shocked. Charlotte and her parents must be turning in their graves.”

Maya’s throat tightened. “Rumors?”

Morgan laughed. It was a shrieking, ugly sound that rang out in the quiet waiting room. “What do you expect moving in with him and almost ready to pop before your ‘best friend’ is cold in her grave?”

“I’ve never...”

Jaxon placed his hand on her arm. “It is none of her business.”

Maya ignored him and took a deep breath. “I told you that people would think...”

He tightened her grip on his arm. “You do not owe her an explanation.”

She looked up at Morgan. “I loved Charlotte more than anything in the world...”

Morgan scoffed but Maya stiffened her back, “... that’s why I agreed to be her surrogate. No one expected Charlotte to die before her baby was born.”

The woman had the grace to look embarrassed. “I didn’t...”

“You’ve said enough,” Jaxon said. He had that tone Maya had started to dub his ‘big, bad, lawyer’ voice and Morgan didn’t try to challenge it. She muttered a few apologies and stumbled away but Maya couldn’t stop the words from looping in her mind. She tried to not think about what her mutual friends with Charlotte thought of her. Was that what they were thinking when they waved hi to her on the street? Was that why all the invites to lunches and movies had dried up? Did everyone think she was some home-wrecking slut who would betray her best friend like that?

But wasn’t she?

She thought of the fleeting moments of attraction she felt for Jaxon and felt sick to her stomach. She wasn’t any better than Morgan accused. She stifled the sob threatening to escape her

throat suddenly wanting to be anywhere but sitting next to Jaxon. If she didn't get a grip on her emotions it wouldn't be long until he was able to see her for the horrible person she was.

"Maya?"

Concern laced the edges of Jaxon's voice. He wrapped his hand around her shoulder and she struggled to not jerk away.

"I'm fine," she lied.

"No you're not," he said. "I know her words stung but she doesn't mean anything. Neither does anyone speaking shit about you. We know the truth and that's all that matters."

"I guess I've finally found out why all my friends have ditched me," she laughed bitterly. "My entire life has fallen apart."

"At least you have one."

He'd said it so softly she almost missed it. He removed his hand from her shoulder and picked back up the magazine he'd been reading.

His barb hit her right where he intended it to and suddenly everything became too much. Maya tried to keep the tears at bay but her eyes still burned with them. She stole a glance at Jaxon who still stared into the magazine before she hugged herself around her swollen stomach and cried.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jaxon tried to focus on the magazine but the words made no sense. The frustration swirling around him was only second to his feelings of helplessness. Morgan's face had been filled with glee when she went in for the kill. The woman had been out of this world happy to say those hateful things to Maya and he didn't defend her. Instead, he'd made things worse with his unnecessarily cruel retort to her fear that her life was falling apart. She was right, he realized. He felt ridiculous. How could he not know she'd been having a hard time with her and Charlotte's mutual friends? How did he not foresee that this would be a problem? He could hear JT casually teasing him about being too stubborn for his own good. JT warned him people would automatically think the worst. Hell, JT and his grandmother had seconds of hesitation when he first told them. Even his usual mild-mannered secretary had been livid when she'd delivered Maya's message when he'd missed their last ultrasound.

He turned to apologize when he noticed that Maya was silently crying. Pain slashed in his gut knowing he was partially responsible for her tears.

"Please don't cry," he said reaching out for her. He hesitated for a second but relaxed when she allowed him to pull her into a hug, "It'll be okay."

She shook her head against his chest. "No, it won't. She's never coming back."

Jaxon stroked her back as she cried trying to avoid the curious stares of the other people in the waiting room. Finally, it was their turn to go in with the doctor.

The visit was short and tense. Not even the rapid *tha-thump-tha-thump* of his daughter's heart could lift his spirits. The truce he and Maya had formed was fast spiraling out of control and he had no idea what could be done to fix it. Maya didn't

speak to him when they made their next appointment with Dr. Gupta or as they made their way from the office. She maintained the strained silence as they drove back to the townhouse and he didn't dare try to interrupt her thoughts.

"Do you want me to order dinner?" he asked when they settled into the living room. He knew she was partial to the Thai place they'd ordered from a couple times before and he was just about to suggest it when she shook her head.

"I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat for the baby."

"Of course," she said with enough anger in her voice to make him pause.

"What?"

He put the menu down on the coffee table while he waited for her to answer. The silence stretched until he was certain she wouldn't respond but eventually she said, "For two seconds I thought you were concerned about *me* but of course it was the baby."

"That's not true Maya," he said.

She shook her head and laughed but there was no humor there. "Of course it is. You tolerate me *because of the baby*. Your family wants to get to know me *because of the baby*. I don't exist in your world without this little girl."

The statement was so untrue he almost laughed at the absurdity of it. Things stopped being *just* about the baby for longer than he cared to admit. His wanting to come home at night to share funny moments from his day had nothing to do with the baby. Neither did wanting to order in food from her favorite restaurant. That was purely so he could see her smile.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said softly and evenly. He wished she'd just drop it. She didn't. She took three steps towards him and tilted her chin up so she could stare him in the face. "I'm not stupid."

"If you think I *tolerate* you *because of the baby* then you clearly are," he snapped. "I don't rush to get home early every

night *because of the baby.*”

As soon as the words spilled from his mouth he regretted them but he still tethered on the precipice of loss of control. Maya's chocolate, brown eyes widened slightly as she chewed on her bottom lip - an action he'd come to associate with nervousness. When she flicked out her tongue and licked her bottom lip, Jaxon lost it. He lowered his head and crashed his mouth against hers. She sighed into the kiss. He lost himself in the feel of her plump lips moving sweetly against his before reality crashed in. He pulled away from her as if she burned. Maya stared up at him, breathing hard.

“I'm so sorry,” he said. “I shouldn't have done that.”

“I shouldn't have kissed you back,” she said. Her forehead was crinkled and there was so much guilt in her eyes that Jaxon wanted to wipe it away. He knew what she was thinking. They'd just disrespected Charlotte's memory and she'd betrayed her best friend. The thoughts should've doused the fire building in him but it didn't. As much as he knew he shouldn't, Jaxon wanted to pull Maya into his arms and feel her lips against his one more time. Instead he apologized again and didn't try to stop her when she brushed past him and stormed from the room.

“You did what?”

Jaxon took another sip of his beer deliberately refusing to respond to JT's question. He knew his brother heard him the first three times he told him he'd kissed Maya. He left the house shortly after Maya disappeared upstairs to her room. He hadn't had any idea where he planned on ending up when he first stepped out into the Spring evening but eventually ended up at his brother's loft.

JT was busy painting on a large canvas positioned in front of his windows when he buzzed Jaxon in. Jaxon wandered to the fridge, retrieved a beer and waited for JT to pause his painting.

About half an hour passed before JT finally grabbed his own beer and sat across from his brother.

As he watched the slightly amused look on his brother's face Jaxon already regretted spilling his guts to JT.

"Stop beating yourself up," JT said. "It was bound to happen."

"You expected this?" he asked.

JT shrugged. "I didn't *expect* it but Orlando and I thought that it was a possibility."

He put the beer down. "Wait. You and Orlando discussed this."

His brother grinned. "We may have bet on it."

Jaxon briefly contemplated throwing his Heineken bottle at JT's head.

"Look," JT said. "You guys were either going to be at each other's throats so bad that you'd have to call the whole thing off or you'd fall for the forced intimacy."

His brother looked at him like if he was the stupid one for not contemplating that he'd fall for the woman he once hated. He tried to shake away the idea that he'd fallen for Maya.

"Maya is the last person on this planet I should fall for."

"Don't worry you haven't fallen for her," JT said. The teasing edge to his voice was gone, "That's what I mean by forced intimacy. You guys are suddenly sharing a house and a kid. What did you think would happen?"

When he didn't answer JT continued, "It will pass."

"And what if it doesn't?"

"Maya's smart, beautiful and technically the mother of your child. You could do a lot worse."

"This is Charlotte's best friend we're talking about here," he said.

"Charlotte is dead."

JT didn't back down from the anger in Jaxon's eyes.

“I’m not trying to be an asshole,” JT said. “I can’t tell you how long you need to grieve. If you told me it was too soon, I’d get it. But Maya *was* Charlotte’s best friend. Your wife is dead and you wouldn’t look at Maya twice if she was still alive. You’re not betraying Charlotte.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jaxon said angrily.

JT wasn’t fazed. “Sometimes some objectivity goes a long way. At least that’s what *you* always tell me when you give me advice about Hallie.”

“My wife is barely cold in her grave and I’m lusting after her best friend. What kind of person does that make me?”

“Who knows?” JT’s voice was soft and sad. “It’s complicated.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Maya's stomach grumbled. She checked the clock next to her bed and frowned at the big, bold, red digits: 7:10 AM. Jaxon usually left before seven in the morning so she had no idea what his delay was today. Maya had been able to avoid him in the three days since their kiss by only going down for breakfast when she heard him leave for work. She didn't want to talk to him about what had happened. She grimaced. Hell, who was she trying to fool? She didn't trust herself to be around him. She should've backed away when he tried to kiss her but instead she'd all but curled around him. Maya tried to not think about the way her stomach tightened and legs trembled. She'd thought pregnancy had put her right off the thought of sex but she couldn't run from the fact that if Jaxon hadn't pulled away from her things may have gone a lot further. Familiar guilt snaked its way into the pit of her stomach.

"I'm so sorry Charlotte," she whispered.

She glanced at the clock again: 7:20 AM. She sighed. Why wasn't he leaving? She couldn't ignore her hunger any more so she slowly got out of bed. The kitchen was clear when she got downstairs and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her relief was short lived. A couple of minutes later Jaxon came strolling into the kitchen in a pair of steel grey pants and a fitted white, dress shirt with a tie hanging around his neck.

She stopped pouring hot water into her mug and gazed at him, "Morning."

He smiled. "I was wondering how long it'd take before you gave up and came downstairs."

"That obvious huh?"

He took a couple steps towards her and Maya narrowly resisted the urge to back away. "No more obvious than I was when I kept leaving ridiculously early for work."

"Are you leaving right now?" she asked. She hoped his nearly being completely dressed meant that he was on his way out the

door but he shook his head.

“We need to talk Maya.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Can we just forget the kiss happened?”

“Okay. The kiss never happened,” he said. “We still need to discuss other things.”

“Like?”

“The nursery, the items we need to buy, a name.”

“You can call a designer, Jasmine will help me and I really shouldn’t be the one to help pick out a name. That’s just too...”

“I want you to have a say in it,” he said softly.

“I can’t take her place,” she said suddenly. “I can’t take over her life.”

She could’ve kicked herself for walking right into the conversation she’d been so desperate to avoid.

“I’m sorry for kissing you Maya,” he said. “I overstepped my boundaries.”

“It isn’t about the kiss.”

That wasn’t strictly true. The kiss had been the tipping point but the fears that bubbled inside her had been around for a long time. She took a deep breath and tried to articulate them to Jaxon. “Sometimes I feel like Charls has just been plucked out of the world and I’ve just been slotted in her place. I’m living in her house with her husband and having the kid she wanted. How’s that fair? It was my idea to go to the bank that day. I should’ve been the one to die. Instead, I’m here with her life.”

She couldn’t breathe. She tried to take deep, slow breaths like her therapist advised her to do whenever she felt a panic attack coming on but none of the tactics helped.

“I don’t want to have feelings for you,” she said but her voice sounded like a whine. “I want to go back to hating you.”

Hurt flashed in his eyes and Maya refused to try to think about what it meant. He walked to her until she could reach out and touch him, “I don’t want you to go back to hating me.”

He brushed his thumb against her cheek. “I don’t want you to hurt either.”

She wished he wouldn’t touch her or look at her with so much concern in his eyes that she could feel the icy wall she tried to build melting.

“None of this is fair Maya,” he said softly. “Especially for you. You’ve been stronger than anyone has had any right to expect from you. You already love this baby as much as I do. I can see it in your eyes every time you talk about her. You’re not *just* her nanny, Maya. You’re family.”

She couldn’t stop the tears from coming when he continued, “If Charlotte was still alive you’d be the most involved and doting aunty a little girl could hope for. But we can’t get Charlotte back no matter how much we both wish we could. So now you’re going to be something more to my little girl. You’re going to be the only mother she’ll ever know.”

The seconds ticked by agonizingly.

“I’m scared Jaxon,” she confessed. “I’m so scared.”

He wiped the tears away. “Me too.”

He glanced at her lips and for a split second Maya thought he would kiss her again. Her stomach dropped when she realized she’d welcome the kiss. He didn’t kiss her. Instead he pulled her into a warm, comforting hug. Then he placed a light kiss on her cheek. “I’ll order in dinner and we can talk after work.”

She nodded, completely out of strength to fight him.

“Have fun working on your designs today.”

And with that, Jaxon left her standing leaning against the kitchen counter feeling more confused than ever.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jaxon spent most of the day at the office alternating between wanting to go home and dreading it.

He wasn't quite sure if his early morning conversation with Maya served any purpose other than making things more frustrating and weird between them but he'd meant every word he said. Maya wasn't an employee and would never be. It didn't matter how hard he tried to put distance between them. The interns and his secretary steered clear of him and even Orlando seemed to give him space.

His brother caught up with him in the foyer at the end of the day. "I spoke to JT."

Jaxon shook his head, "No such thing as privacy in this family, then?"

Orlando didn't even pretend to be sorry. Instead he said, "He needed someone to keep an eye on you. It was either me or Jasmine so count your ass lucky."

Despite everything Jaxon chuckled. "You guys are a trip."

"Things any better between you two?"

He gave Orlando a quick run down of the incident in the kitchen but was careful to gloss over his increasingly tender feelings towards Maya.

"Things are weird as hell, I'm not surprised that you feel attached to her."

"But you don't think my feelings are real," Jaxon said. Orlando had the same tone JT had taken when he told him the feelings would pass.

"I can't tell you that bro," he said. "I guess time will tell."

"I won't act on them," Jaxon said so adamantly he was almost able to convince himself. Almost.

“Well then there’s nothing to worry about,” Orlando responded matter-of-factly. He was about to answer when an intern rushed into the foyer with a clipboard and caught Orlando’s attention. He promised his brother they’d continue the conversation and made his way from the firm and onto the Manhattan streets.

Jaxon picked up takeout from Maya’s favorite place and impulsively bought cake from what she once told him was her favorite bakery. He found her in the living room when he returned home. Her braids hung loosely around her and one hand was rested on her swollen belly. She smiled shyly when she saw him. Relief snaked through him. He’d half worried she might have left the house to avoid the conversation.

“Let’s eat in the kitchen,” she suggested. They grabbed seats around the small, mahogany table in the corner of the kitchen. The conversation flowed easily for most of dinner. Then, when they could no longer find things to talk about Jaxon ventured awkwardly into the talk they *needed* to have.

“I’ve thought about naming her Charlotte,” he said. “But when I looked at Charls’ list all of the names started with J.”

Maya nodded, “They all started with J and A actually. She wanted to follow the Johnson tradition. You could always go with one of the names Charls picked out and give her Charlotte as a middle name.”

Jaxon thought about it. “That could work.”

He handed Maya the list of names he’d found in Charlotte’s baby box and watched as she scanned the list. She made a face as she read some of the names and after some minutes returned the list to him.

“I like Jade,” Maya said. She pushed the food around in her plate before she met his eyes, “Jacintha’s too long, Jane is too plain and green was Charlotte’s favorite color.”

The tone of her voice made him think she’d given it a lot more thought than she let on.

“Jade Charlotte Johnson.”

Jaxon turned the name over on his tongue and found that he liked it. “That took a lot less time than I thought it would.”

She laughed half-heartedly. “You’re just desperate to get it over with.”

He grinned, “Hey! This will be the name I’ll be shouting for the next eighteen years when she gets into trouble. It had to be a name I liked.”

Maya laughed again and this time Jaxon was happy it no longer carried tense awkwardness. She rubbed her tummy. “Hey Jade. I bet you like that name more than *bub* don’t you?”

Desperate to keep the mood Jaxon asked her about her sewing. It was the one topic, he realized, Maya could talk about non-stop with bright eyed enthusiasm. She chatted to him about the new sketches she’d drawn and the piece she was halfway through stitching together.

“Kasi thinks Jade is going to be the best dressed kid on the playground.”

He grinned. “Kasi’s right. As always.”

Maya’s work was exceptional and he could tell that with enough time and support she would be one of the most sought after designers. Jaxon often wondered if there was something he could do to help her launch out.

JT helped to get her into some of his friends’ stores with small consignments but Jaxon figured he could help on the other side of things. He may not have a creative bone in his body or creative friends but he knew who to talk to for start up funding. He started to ask her if she wanted him to introduce her to his contacts but stopped himself. He remembered the way she doggedly paid him rent for her room even though it wasn’t necessary. No, Maya would want to secure things on her own merit. Jaxon put the thoughts to the back of his mind and refocused on the conversation with Maya. Her brown eyes twinkled with excitement and he was caught, once again, with how beautiful she was. Jaxon brushed the thoughts away. Thinking of Maya as anything else but a friend helping him raise his daughter was off limits. He took a sip of his beer as

she laughed over one of her own jokes and sighed. He was screwed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Maya ran her hand along the edges of Jade's crib before she turned and surveyed the work the interior designer had done on the nursery. The room was in its final stages and Maya's heart was filled with joy when she thought of how much Charlotte would have loved it. The walls were painted in pale jade with rows of baby pink and Jade's initials monogrammed in white above the crib. Another wall contained mounted photos of Charlotte from birth to her wedding day. Maya glanced at her friend smiling into the camera with dazzling happiness and felt her heart break. She took in every inch of the nursery, from the rocking chair tucked into a corner to the changing station and other knickknacks. She'd already begun to fill the dresser with outfits she'd sewn and the outfits Jasmine kept dropping off, in increasing quantities, almost like clockwork. It was all so close, so real. Charlotte should've been there with her.

Over the past weeks Maya and Jaxon seemed to dance around each other. Whatever feelings or attractions he may have felt had all but disappeared. The thought should have thrilled her but Maya wasn't sure how it made her feel. She knew, however, that somewhere in the swirl of emotions was disappointment but she refused to think too long or too hard about what that meant.

They still had breakfast together and sometimes dinner, but an invisible wall had been built up between them. She missed the way things used to be but Maya had to admit that she much preferred the disappointment to the guilt she'd felt before.

She glanced around the nursery one more time before she was satisfied that she and Jasmine had managed to do Charlotte proud.

Maya made her way down the hall to the library and settled into her sewing station and began sketching several designs. She'd had her last shift at Espresso'd the week before and was excited for the time she would be able to spend focusing solely on her designs before the baby came. Maya glanced down at her protruding stomach. Her due date was fast approaching and with it was a truckload of anxieties that seemed to replenish no matter how hard she tried to shovel them away. *Could she really be a good mother to Jade?* That she could fall short of what was necessary to keep the baby safe and happy was enough to keep her up at night. When she'd shared her concerns with Jasmine her friend had given her a small smile and assured her that she wouldn't be alone.

"I know I'll have Jaxon," she'd started but Jasmine stopped her with an unruly laugh.

"Jaxon'll be struggling right the hell along with you. I'm talking about the rest of the logic brigade but more importantly Grams Nona and mom. They'll be the ones you guys will call at midnight when Jade won't settle down."

In those moments the demons were quieted but three days later they were back in full force. She didn't have the natural nurturing instincts her best friend had. Was it something you could learn or was Jade going to suffer because of it?

Maya wasn't sure how long she sat there watching the sun fall low in the sky as she fretted about whether she was prepared for childbirth or raising a child but when Jaxon stuck his head into the library she jumped.

"You scared me," she said. Before Jaxon could respond Jade moved and with a smile she amended, "You scared us."

He laughed, begun loosening his tie and took a couple steps into the library, "Sorry Maya. Sorry Jade. What you up to?"

She handed him a copy of the unfinished sketch. "Should've been sketching and sewing but I've done more worrying than anything else."

He leaned against the table opposite her chair. "Worrying?"

“Jade will be here in less than two months,” she said. “I’ve got no clue what to expect.”

Jaxon smiled, “Oldest of four remember. Orlando may have come to us fully grown but I’ve babysat Jasper and Jasmine a fair bit.”

Maya couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought about that.

“So you’ll take over diaper changing duties then?” she teased. He smoothly avoided the question by telling her he had picked up dinner on the way home.

“If you’re really anxious maybe we can take a class or something,” he suggested as they walked to the kitchen. Dr. Gupta suggested on more than one occasion that they took classes but Maya had resisted until now. She didn’t want to surround herself with couples whose stories were so much more straightforward than theirs would be.

She couldn’t imagine constantly repeating what got them to this stage. It would be like cracking open the wounds over and over again. Now she realized it would do her some good to get some instructions.

“Why do you look like I’ve asked you to shoot a puppy?” Jaxon asked. His voice was teasing but his face was filled with concern.

“I’m trying to gear up for all the well meaning but hurtful questions,” she said. She’d come to learn over the past couple months that she could be honest with Jaxon. They didn’t always see eye to eye on things but he always listened to her concerns even when they were arguing about something.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’ll have my secretary book out a class.”

The glass of water stalled at her lips. “Book out?”

“Yea,” he said. “Then we won’t have to deal with anyone but the instructor.”

He said it as if he was about to run down to the supermarket to get one of the flavors of Ben & Jerry’s she’d become so in love with over the past couple months.

He looked up from his plate and when he saw her face he placed a hand over hers, “It’s no big deal Maya. It’s just money.”

Just money.

Sometimes Maya found it hard to comprehend Jaxon’s casual way with money but she supposed it was because he’d never had to worry about money in his life. Even without his trust, Jaxon made a lot of money from work. His clients were all mega rich and his billable hours rate was insane. She wanted to tell him she couldn’t possibly allow him to spend so much money just because she wanted to avoid an uncomfortable situation but stopped short. *Just let him do it*, her mind urged.

“Okay,” she said. “I’d like that.”

He squeezed her hand and for two seconds she forgot how to breathe. Then he was back to his food like he didn’t feel the electrical surge she felt. Maya sucked in a huge breath and asked him about his day. She spent the next fifteen minutes listening to funny stories about interns and clients trying her best to pretend her skin didn’t still sizzle where his hand had touched hers.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Two months. Jade would be in his arms in just two months. Jaxon tried, but failed, to wrap his head around knowing his life was set to change. His emotions were a kaleidoscope. He was anxious, nervous, excited and racked with guilt. He'd begun to wonder if the guilt was something he'd just have to live with. And then, there was Maya. The small seed of attraction he felt for the woman who carried his child seemed desperate to blossom despite his efforts to suffocate them. The night before over beers and Mexican food he'd confessed to JT that he couldn't seem to fight his feelings for his dead wife's best friend.

"Well stop fighting it," JT suggested. He'd put off JT's comment to his brother's favorite hobby: *stirring up trouble*. Now he wondered if JT had a point. Was it fighting his feelings for Maya that was driving him crazy? He glanced at the object of his discomfort. Maya was currently digging into a pint of Ben and Jerry ice-cream while Jasmine, his mother and Grams Nona fussed over the pile of clothes Maya had sewed for Jade over the past couple weeks. Grams Nona made some wiseass remark and Maya laughed out loud spilling some ice cream on her swollen belly. She reached down to wipe away the spill when she stalled and smiled fondly. She glanced over, caught his eye and grinned. He returned her smile with his heart thudding against his chest knowing she was signaling to him that Jade just kicked her. When he glanced away from Maya he noticed Jasmine looking at him with mild interest. His sister started to speak when his mother said, "These are really precious Maya. You've got a real talent."

He watched with amusement as Jasmine's mouth snapped shut and thanked God for his mother's sense of timing. Jaxon didn't think he would appreciate whatever Jasmine was about to say even though he'd probably get an earful later.

"Lots of room for improvement," Maya replied. Jaxon chuckled. Maya hated compliments and didn't know how to

receive them. He doubted she was ready to handle his mother and grandmother tag teaming her with praise.

“You know quite a few of my friends are about to be grandmothers too,” his mother said. “Could I commission a few pieces?”

“This would look amazing on the dogs,” Grams Nona piped in. “Ever thought of branching out to animal wear?”

Maya chuckled. “I can’t say I have.”

Grams Nona sipped her iced-tea. “You should.”

The conversation slowly turned to Maya’s hopes for expanding her business and Jaxon decided it was time to head to work.

“Chinese or Thai?” he asked as he started leaving the room. Maya turned her attention from the funny story his mother regaled her with and said, “Are you seriously asking that?”

He grinned. “Fair enough. Thai, it is.”

He noticed Jasmine still looking at him as he hugged his mother and grandmother goodbye. He didn’t need to win an award for precognition when Jasmine cornered him at the base of the stairs.

“What was that?” she asked when he finally acknowledged her. Jaxon quickly fixed his tie. “What was what?”

His sister raised an eyebrow. “Oh come on. Don’t try. You guys were sending each other knowing looks and having inside jokes. What’s with *that*?”

Before he could formulate a retort she grinned. “You like her.”

“Drop it Jas,” he said. Although his voice was stern Jasmine, as she usually did, ignored him.

“She is sweet you know,” she continued. “And you two get along...”

“Drop it Jas. Charlotte’s not even cold in her grave yet.”

His sister moved two steps closer to him, cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips. “Who you trying to convince big

bro – me or you?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Maya ushered Jaxon's family to the front door about three hours after he left. Grams Nona and Jacqueline planned to do some shopping in Manhattan and Jasmine was running into the office to deal with a case brief. Grams Nona pulled her into a hug and made her promise to come to the next Sunday dinner. Maya agreed and with more hugs and kisses Jaxon's family left.

Later that evening she and Jaxon would have their first session with the prenatal coach he hired. In the end there was no need for Jaxon to buy out all the slots in a class. Catherine, the coach, conducted private classes and was willing to swing by the townhouse so that they could have their lessons in the comfort of their home. *Home*. Maya realized that that was exactly what Jaxon's townhouse had become. She wandered into the kitchen as she thought of just how much her life changed in the past months and how many changes were still to come.

She'd noticed Jasmine flash Jaxon weird looks during her conversation with his mother and she wondered if maybe she wasn't doing a good job at hiding her increasingly confusing feelings.

Maya pushed the thoughts away when she finally settled into her sewing station and began to work on her new pieces. Since she'd left *Espresso'ed* her days followed a similar routine. She'd sketch in the mornings and sew in the early afternoons. In the evenings she'd either prepare small dinners for herself and Jaxon or hang out with Kasi. Her life, she found, was regaining some semblance of normalcy. She still missed Charlotte terribly but it no longer felt like her world was spinning off its axis. Instead, it found a new one.

She was sprawled across the couch watching TV when she heard the door click shut softly. Her traitor heart raced knowing Jaxon was home. He appeared in the sitting room minutes later barefoot, tie gone and with a plate of Thai food. Her stomach rumbled at the aroma.

“I swear this thing must be laced with crack or something,” she teased when he returned with two plates.

“We should look into it.” He rewarded her teasing comment with a smile. He sat next to her on the couch and they chatted as they flicked through the channels.

Maya glanced at her watch when the doorbell jolted them from their show. It was 7:00 PM. Catharine was right on time. The woman wore a large Afro and rocked an Aztec print maxi dress. She was as far away from the image Maya had had in her mind as possible. She greeted them with the warmest smile when Jaxon ushered her into the living room. She followed him to the large armchair by the fireplace while Maya and Jaxon sat on the couch. Catharine started with the simple questions like the progression of Maya’s pregnancy and her due date. Maya sat stiffly waiting for the questions about Charlotte and the shooting to start. She was surprised when Catharine moved on from the simple questions to finer details. Did Maya plan a home birth? Would Jaxon be present in the delivery room? Did she want an epidural? The questions required little thought – no, they both would prefer if Jade was born in the hospital; Jaxon was only allowed to look on from the waist up and she wanted an epidural more than anything she’d ever wanted in her life. Catharine chuckled at Maya’s responses and Maya was happy with how much ease she felt in the presence of the older woman. She glanced at Jaxon and smiled – a wordless ‘thank you’ for once again intuitively knowing how to make her happy. The session progressed quickly from there. Catharine answered all their questions and suggested things they hadn’t thought of.

“I think I can do this,” she told Jaxon when they excused themselves to make a pot of tea.

“I never doubted you could.”

His voice was so solemn and filled with so much trust Maya wondered why she ever doubted herself.

“Thanks,” she said as she handed him the sugar. Their fingers brushed against each other and she saw in the seconds that followed the conflicting feelings in his eyes. Maybe Jaxon wasn’t as unaffected as she thought he was. She filed it away to think about later. Catharine didn’t bring up the reality of Maya and Jaxon’s situation until the very end of the session. Even then, it wasn’t what Maya expected.

“So tell me more about Charlotte,” the woman asked. Catharine leaned back into the chair and tapped her pen against the book she’d been jotting notes in for most of the session. Maya and Jaxon spoke haltingly at first but within a few minutes the stories about Charlotte flowed. They joked about the personality traits they hoped Jade would inherit and the ones that may make raising her more eventful. It felt good to tell small funny tales about Charlotte and one glance at Jaxon showed he felt the same. His posture relaxed visibly the longer they shared memories.

“Charlotte was lucky to have had people like you in her life,” Catharine observed. “Especially you Maya. As unexpected as this whole thing is you and Jaxon embraced it in order to give Charlotte’s little girl the best life possible.”

Maya accepted the compliment with a small smile and nod of her head but as she caught Jaxon’s eyes she wondered what Catharine would think if she knew about her growing feelings for Charlotte’s husband.

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

JT and Orlando were wrong. Jaxon's feelings for Maya weren't disappearing. They were getting stronger. He'd spent most of Sunday dinner watching her when he thought no one was paying attention.

He noticed little things like the elegant curve of her neck, the small beauty spots that dusted the inside of her collar bone and the fact she always squinted slightly before she laughed.

Living with her wasn't getting any easier, either. As much as he tried to fight it, there were many times over breakfast when he wondered what would happen if he just leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. He figured it would be a little bit of heaven that'd land him in hell. *You can't cheat on your dead wife.* The mantra pounded in his head constantly each day while he tried to put Maya from his mind. Life was ironic as hell. He would've been willing to take things slowly with any other woman. But Maya? Maya was off-limits. She was his dead wife's best friend and the surrogate mother of his child. Nothing good could come out of dancing with their attraction for each other. Yet, even as he watched the radiologist spread clear gunk on her enlarged stomach to prepare for the ultrasound, he realized dancing around them could be just as bad.

Jade's heartbeat filled the small radiology room with a steady *tha-thump, tha-thump* that pulled him from the dismal thoughts he'd been having. It didn't matter how many of these he came to, Jaxon couldn't get over hearing his daughter's heartbeat. He considered himself to be a great music lover. He was just as partial to old-school hip-hop and reggae as he was to some depressing country song or classical music. Despite his large, varied musical collection Jaxon was sure Jade's heartbeat was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

“Just a month to go,” the radiologist commented as she handed Maya a pile of tissue paper. The woman chuckled, “Well that’s if she cooperates. Babies have minds of their own sometimes.”

After the appointment Jaxon suggested they grabbed something to eat before he went back to the office but Maya declined. She’d been complaining more frequently about an aching back and swollen feet. He checked his watch and shifted around his day in his mind. Maybe he didn’t need to get back to work straight away. Jaxon threw his hand around Maya’s shoulder. The move was intended to be friendly encouragement but as soon as he pulled her close, he felt the tension increase between them. He tried to ignore the shift in his heart rate and the slight tightening of his pants.

“You know what you need?” he said. “A foot rub, a warm bath and enough Thai curry to drown in.”

Maya made a mewling sound in her throat. The sound did nothing to help Jaxon’s situation.

“That sounds like heaven,” she said.

In those seconds she looked so excited Jaxon knew he’d made the right choice.

When they got to the townhouse he sent her to her room to get ready for her bubble bath. He decided that the bathroom in the master suite would be best because the large tub had jets. Jaxon ran the water, tested the heat and threw in the coconut bath-bomb Charlotte loved. He hoped Maya found it as relaxing as his wife used to. *Used to*. He could no longer refer to Charlotte in present tense. It ached to acknowledge that his wife wasn’t coming back but just as the water kept flowing into the tub so time had continued to flow. He heard JT’s reasoning that he wasn’t betraying Charlotte with his feelings for Maya but tried to push the confusing thoughts away.

A couple minutes later he rapped on Maya’s door. “I set you up in the master bath. Have fun relaxing. I’m going to go pick

up the food.”

“Thanks. Just let me get my towel.”

He retreated from the door trying to not wonder if she'd been lounging on her bed naked while she waited for him to finish running the bath. Something had to give. His guilt co-existed easily alongside the increasing lust and tenderness he felt for her. He welcomed the distance between the house and the Thai restaurant. He could've placed an order for delivery but Jaxon wanted to put some space between himself and Maya even if it were for just forty-five minutes. He no longer trusted that he'd be able to resist pulling her into his arms and kissing her the way he'd been wanting to for the past couple weeks. He cringed knowing Maya would never allow him to do that. He could see it in the way she stood when he was nearby. She no longer fully relaxed as if she thought she'd have to fight him off at a moment's notice. *She's more loyal to Charlotte than you've ever been.* The thought came out of nowhere and slowed his steps. That couldn't be true, could it? He hadn't known he was capable of the kind of love he had for Charlotte until he saw her sitting crossed-legged on a blanket in Central Park and she looked up at him with a huge smile. JT suggested he focused more on the fact he never would've considered any sort of relationship with Maya if Charlotte hadn't died. Hell, he wouldn't have considered a relationship with any one else either. The thought didn't help the guilt. How soon was too soon to move on? Was he *even* moving on? His phone vibrated just as he finished placing the order. Jasmine's name flashed across his caller ID.

“Yes Queen Nosy,” he said.

“This is a business call,” she said with a slight chuckle. “Are you coming back to the office? Orlando is having an aneurysm at the thought you might be playing hooky.”

He laughed. Jasmine may have chosen to drag Orlando into it but they both knew she was calling because she was wondering where he was. He started to tell her he was going to be back to the office within two hours but stopped. He wasn't in the frame of mind to work – not with the guilt and lust knocking around his head.

“Get Orlando to the nearest emergency room then,” he said and disconnected the call before any of the thousand questions Jasmine started firing at him could hit their target.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Maya slid into the bubbly, warm bath with a grateful sigh. She'd tested the water before she got in and found Jaxon had already ensured it wasn't too warm. He'd been paying attention to all of those pregnancy books after all. Hints of coconut tickled her nose and the thick, fluffy bubbles felt amazing against her skin. It was good to relax. She'd read that in the last weeks of pregnancy most women got so uncomfortable they couldn't wait for labor. She could *definitely* relate to that. Half the time she wondered if she could yank Jade out with her own hands. She glanced down at her tummy bobbing out of the water when Jade squirmed.

"Wasn't a real threat baby," she chuckled. "You've still got some baking left to do."

Maya grimaced. She wasn't sure just how much more 'baking' her back could stand.

An hour later, when the water had long gone cold, Maya slipped into yoga pants and a graphic T-Shirt with "Still Baking" stretched across the stomach area. She'd doubled over laughing when Jasmine surprised her with it a couple weeks before and wore it as often as she could. She found Jaxon sitting around the kitchen table scribbling something into a notebook. He hadn't changed out of the suit he'd been wearing to their appointment but he'd removed the jacket, rolled up the shirtsleeves and loosened his tie. Her steps faltered. Had she always been blind to how attractive he was? Or had she just banned herself from noticing? The last few months had been good to him. His clothes no longer hung off him and he'd started hitting the gym during his lunch break. Not for the first time Maya wondered how things might've been if she'd met him on the subway or served coffee to him at *Espresso'ed*. What if he was anything other than her Charlotte's husband?

When Jaxon saw her standing there he pushed his notebook to the side and crossed the distance between them.

“You good?”

He touched her arm. The action should've been comforting but suddenly Maya's discomfort had nothing to do with a growing baby resting on her bladder or the dull ache in her back. She managed to nod and just like that Jaxon was off towards the takeout spread on the kitchen island. She swallowed a huff. Predictably she was left in a puddle of arousal while he wasn't affected. She stood rooted in place until she was certain she had her body back under control before she joined him.

“Go sit and put your feet up,” he scolded pulling the container from her hand.

“I'm fine.”

She reached for the container again but he held it out of her reach.

“I'm trying to cater to you here,” he said. “Go sit in the living room.”

“You're not Destiny's Child,” she grinned.

Jaxon made a face. “Go take your corny jokes into the living room and wait for your dinner.”

His laughter followed Maya out the room.

Being taken care of felt good. Maya was happy Jaxon made the effort. He was by far the most attentive man she'd ever met. She almost smiled at the irony of that. Nothing Charlotte could tell her about Jaxon was enough to make her change her mind about him. She'd had months to make sense of her aversion to Jaxon and her total unwillingness to give him a chance before life forced her to. She'd been jealous. For the first time since they'd met she'd been forced to share Charlotte's affection with someone else. Over the past couple months she'd come to accept that she'd been very difficult with Jaxon. She regretted it now. Maybe if they'd established some sort of friendship while Charlotte was alive she wouldn't

be attracted to him now. Getting to know each other wouldn't have felt so intimate... so meaningful.

Jaxon brought two plates of steaming Thai curry into the living room a couple minutes later. They ate in comfortable silence and turned on the TV as soon as Jaxon cleared away the plates.

When he settled in next to her on the couch Maya turned to him, "Thank you."

He cocked his head to the side and gave her a lopsided smile that she could only describe as adorable. "It was nothing."

It was far from nothing but Maya didn't argue. Instead she helped him select a movie they could both enjoy to wrap up the evening.

It hit her, not for the first time, just how natural it was to be like this with him. It felt so damn right even though she knew it shouldn't. But she was tired of fighting it. She was tired of trying to make sense of it all. When she accidentally brushed her arm against his while she shifted in the chair she didn't pull away like she'd been so used to doing. Instead, she moved closer to him until she was surrounded by his warmth and the spicy, woody fragrance that was so uniquely Jaxon.

They stayed like that, pressed lightly together, as the movie played out in front of them. She wondered if Jaxon was paying any attention. She sure as hell wasn't. She was too busy wondering if she'd be able to forgive herself if she reached up to him and kissed him. Maya tried to sneak a glance at him but was startled when she found him staring at her with so much desire in his brown eyes her mouth went dry.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked softly. She barely had time to process the question before he was kissing her. The kiss was tentative and feather soft until she opened her mouth and let his tongue in. Then, there was the explosion. In seconds they became nothing but fire hot kisses and rapid heartbeats. Jaxon's hands began inching their way under her shirt and Maya arched toward him. She trembled when the

pads of his thumbs brushed against the underside of her bra. Just as quickly as his touch came it was gone.

He pressed his forehead against hers. “We can’t.”

Maya nodded. She waited for her heart rate to return to normal and for her head to stop swimming. He was right. She knew it. But that didn’t stop disappointment from settling like a rock in her stomach.

“You’re right.”

Jaxon rested his head on the back of the couch, “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to...”

She rested her hand on his forearm, “I know. Trust me. I know exactly how you feel.”

Maya turned up the volume on the TV nudging their focus back to the movie at hand. She chuckled at all the appropriate times and groaned when the characters were being stupid but Maya’s mind was as far away from the comedy flick as possible. She was trying to figure out what the hell she could’ve done to the universe to deserve the unique hell she found herself in. Looking at Jaxon, with his stiff back and clenched jaw, Maya knew he was wondering the same thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

“I didn’t realize you could be more shit at poker than you already are.”

JT grinned at Jaxon as he scooped up the chips. Jaxon reached for his beer and shrugged. His mind hadn’t been on the game. Then again for the past two days Jaxon’s mind hadn’t been on anything other than the increasing complication Maya was becoming in his life. He wasn’t a man who relinquished control lightly but with Maya he always felt out of control. They had predictably tiptoed around each other for the five days after the kiss. She looked relieved when he told her he was heading to Orlando’s apartment for the weekly meet up with his brothers.

Orlando was the only Johnson sibling who lived outside of Manhattan. He’d set up camp in a massive loft in Brooklyn. With its exposed brick and rustic spiral staircase, the loft looked like it should be a better fit for JT but it fit Orlando like a pair of well-worn jeans. Orlando looked up from his pile of chips at JT’s low jab, “What’s going on Jax?”

“Nothing.”

He pretended to be engrossed in his cards hoping they’d take the conversation elsewhere. He should’ve known better. His three brothers were worse than Jasmine when they felt like they needed to get to the bottom of things. It was tiring that for nearly a year “things” always happened to pertain to his life.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Drop it.”

“We can’t. This is a conversation you need to have,” Jasper said tapping his finger against his beer. Jaxon raised his eyebrow while Orlando smiled into his card.

JT grinned. “If this one’s willing to risk confrontation you *know* shit’s real.”

Orlando yanked at JT’s dreadlocks. “Chill.”

There was bitterness in Orlando's voice which made Jaxon wonder if JT and Jasper were feuding again. Jaxon felt out of touch. Jasper always came to him when JT was being an ass. He watched the dynamics between his brothers and realized that this time Jasper may have confided in Orlando instead. He started to confront them about keeping him out of the loop but he knew they'd say they hadn't wanted to burden him.

"I'm fine," he said. "But you two obviously are not."

"It's between me and Jasper," JT said. "I swear Jasmine got all the balls."

The acid in JT's voice surprised Jaxon. One quick look told him Orlando was just as surprised as he was. What the hell was really going on between those two? Jasper threw his cards on the table and pushed back his chair. "I'm out. See you guys at work."

"Keep running," JT shouted after him when he was almost at the door. Jasper slammed it so hard Jaxon was surprised the table didn't shake. He turned to his brother who was still glowering into his cards.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked.

"Between me and Jasper."

"Give the kid a break," Orlando chimed in.

"I'd love to give him a break," JT said. "... of his neck."

After a couple seconds he said, "Sorry for ruining the night. I'm heading out."

Then just like that their Thursday hangout was done. He eyed Orlando over the poker table. "What the hell just happened?"

Orlando shrugged. "You never know with those two."

"Yeah but it seemed more personal this time."

"Maybe it is," he said. "Let them work their shit out."

Jaxon smiled. He shouldn't have expected anything else from Orlando. He very rarely ever seemed to get worked up about anything. It was a trait he and JT shared but Jaxon couldn't grasp.

“What’s happened between you and Maya?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“As JT would say,” Orlando said with a grin. “Now that we’ve finished the bullshit segment of the conversation...”

“I don’t think it’s going to work out.”

It was a relief to finally say what had been knocking around in his head out loud.

“It as in what exactly?”

Orlando was busy pouring scotch into glasses. He returned to the table and handed one to Jaxon. “Seems like we both need more than beer.”

“I can’t continue living with her.”

“Ah.”

“Ah? What kind of response is that?”

“The kind of response a brother gives when he doesn’t know what the hell to tell you.”

Jaxon couldn’t blame him. He was no closer to figuring out what to do and it was all he thought about.

“What does she think about calling off the arrangement?”

“We haven’t spoken about it,” he said. “Hell you’re the first person I’ve said that out loud to.”

“Don’t you think it is better to try to talk to Maya about this?”

“What do I tell her? I’m having a hard time keeping it in my pants around you so maybe we should call off the agreement you rearranged your entire life for?”

“But it has nothing to do with keeping it in your pants does it?”

“Stop using your cross-examination voice on me,” Jaxon said and Orlando smiled.

“Come on Jax. You’re running more scared than I’ve ever seen you. You’re worried that it’s more than lust.”

“Didn’t you and JT tell me that my emotions were fake?”

“JT has been in love with his best friend for two years and I haven’t had a girlfriend for half a decade. Are we really the best people to take advice from?”

When Jaxon couldn’t summon a laugh at the joke Orlando asked, “Straight talk?”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

“Is it being with Maya that worries you or what people might think of you being with Maya?”

He started answering but stopped. It was probably a bit of both. It was what wanting to be with someone so soon after Charlotte’s death meant about him as a husband. He should still be grieving. But wasn’t he? There were times he’d be sitting around his desk working on a file when he’d remember that Charlotte was dead. The wave of pain was usually so much that he’d need to get up from his desk until it passed. He was still grieving for his wife. But he definitely wanted her best friend.

“Have you guys had sex yet?”

Yet. The word and its implications annoyed him. It wasn’t a foregone conclusion that he’d end up in bed with Maya. Although when he thought about it, he knew it wasn’t that he might end up in bed with Maya that scared him. It was the tender feelings that scared him shitless, not for what they were but for what they could be if he allowed them. Falling in love with Maya would be the ultimate betrayal to his wife. Jaxon swallowed his scotch in one gulp. Too bad it seemed like he was already half way there.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

“I think the couple behind us thought you were my girlfriend,” Kasi laughed while she and Maya made their way to the café across the street from her Lamaze class. She and Jaxon completed several Lamaze and guidance sessions with Catharine but Maya felt like she needed a few more to prepare for the birth. With Catharine out of New York for the next two weeks, she bit the bullet and joined a Lamaze class Kasi recommended. Jaxon was stuck in negotiations when the class rolled around so she invited Kasi since it’d been a while since she caught up with her friend other than the odd text message and short phone call.

“Spit it out,” Kasi said as soon as they settled into their booth. “You’ve been dying to tell me something since I walked into that building.”

Maya smiled. Kasi was, as usual, right on the ball. Now that Charlotte was dead she couldn’t point to anyone who knew her better than Kasi did.

“I’m confused about Jaxon,” she said. With some prodding from Kasi she updated her on everything that had happened in the last two weeks. They’d basically avoided each other after the last kiss. It was a dangerous road to be on. She was due in two weeks and if there was ever a time that they needed to be working together, this was it.

“Maybe you guys should just go out,” Kasi said after she finished.

“Okay,” Maya shrugged. “You *are* really crazy.”

Kasi chuckled. “Combine all this sexual and emotional tension with a newborn and you guys will be set for a new reality special on VH1.”

Maya ignored her friend’s teasing comment. When she first moved in with Jaxon she worried that things would be fraught with tension by the time the baby arrived but she never

imagined the cause of the tension would be that they liked each other *too much*. A couple months ago just the suggestion she'd have to fight her feelings for Jaxon would have made her laugh herself into a seizure. Maya sighed. Life was like that wasn't it? If someone had told her a year ago that she would be two weeks away from giving birth to Charlotte's baby and that Charlotte would be dead, she would've slapped them for being cruel. Kasi was itching to say something else but Maya shook her head. Kasi got the message and Maya almost sagged with relief. She and Jaxon would find a way to work through their mess. They *had* to. She knew their top priority was Jade and would always be. She smiled knowing that Jaxon would be the best daddy a little girl could hope for. Jade would be loved and that would be enough for them to stumble through.

"Two stores sold out my clothes," she said. "They doubled their orders."

Kasi clapped her hands together as she beamed with excitement. "Oh my god. That's great. Finally things are falling together."

Maya laughed along with her friend. When Megan Jean phoned her to request more of her rompers she'd danced wildly around the room until Jade got excited and started squirming too. It was the best news she'd received all week. She couldn't stop herself from sending Jaxon a text and his excited response warmed her straight through.

"But how will you complete them?" Kasi asked. "I mean that baby is coming and coming soon."

"I'm sourcing the work out. I'll pay them for their time and give them twenty-five percent of the profits."

"But you'll barely make anything."

Maya shrugged, "It isn't about profit right now. I need to capitalize on the momentum."

They spoke for a while about Maya's business plans and how she planned to work around Jade when she arrived. She'd gotten more sketches drawn and items sewed in the few weeks she'd been off from *Esspresso'ed* than she had managed to

complete in the six months before that. Maya was confident that once she and Jade developed a routine she'd be able to meet the supply demands. If Chantal, the final year design student who'd responded to her ad, proved to be dependable then she intended to keep her on as the demand increased. She'd thought that nothing on the planet could excite her more than the potential success of her business. And in the past months her business branched out further than she could've thought possible. With Jaxon's help she'd managed to deal with the legal side of MJ Designs and with JT's help her designs were in the hands of customers who apparently couldn't get enough. Yet, as excited as she was that her hard work was finally paying off, it didn't come close to what she felt when she thought of finally being able to hold Jade in her arms. She wasn't her flesh and blood but this baby was hers in every way that mattered. The thought was sobering. She had to fight her unreasonable feelings. She wouldn't do anything that could jeopardize having Jade in her life. And Maya couldn't think of anything more dangerous than hooking up with Jaxon.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

Maya went into labor one week before her due date. She'd managed through contractions to make jokes about Jade already showing her mother's aptitude for being on time. Jaxon had been in the office when he received the call. He'd stopped talking midsentence when his cell phone vibrated and Maya's name flashed across the screen. She was panting ever so slightly when he answered.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," he said before she could speak.

She panted more. "I think we should meet at the hospital. I'll get a cab."

He heard the panic and the pain in her voice and felt his insides twist. The thought of her being alone in a cab didn't sit well with him.

"Maya get on the exercise ball like Catharine taught you. I'll be there as soon as I can and then we can go to the hospital together."

"It hurts Jaxon," she said.

"I know it does," he said. Jaxon tried to muster calm but failed. Still, in an even voice he said, "Put the phone on speaker and I'll stay on the line until I get to you."

He thought she would fight him on it but she didn't.

"Just hurry."

It killed him that there was so much pain in her voice and he knew there was so much more to come. Jaxon pulled his car keys from his jacket's pocket with trembling hands.

"Mr. Bauer," he said. "I'm going to have to leave you in the hands of my brother. There is something important I need to attend to."

Orlando looked up from his files. "It's time?"

He nodded. "I'm going to meet her home and we'll head to the hospital together."

"I'll hold the fort here," Orlando said. "You'll be fine. The three of you."

Jaxon apologized to the client again and with a pat on the back from his brother, he rushed from the office.

The drive to his townhouse was maddeningly long. There was just enough time for him to regret not listening to Maya. He'd just managed to guarantee more pain until they could get her the epidural.

He found Maya pacing the foyer. She sighed with relief when she saw him. The bag containing everything Catharine suggested they needed for the hospital visit was propped against the door. He grabbed the bag and paused to pull Maya in for hug. He felt relieved just to have her safe in his arms. He felt panic he didn't think he would feel at the thought something could go wrong. What if he lost her? He didn't think he could handle losing two women he loved.

Two women he loved.

He helped Maya into the car parked out front and tried to focus on other things. Things like the fact his Audi coupe was about to become too inconvenient and he needed to find them a suitable car. He glanced over at Maya whose eyes were squeezed shut and hands tightly fisted.

"Focus on your breathing."

He placed his hand on her leg and massaged gently until the contraction passed. When it was over she told him she'd been contracting since earlier that morning but didn't want to call him until she was sure she was in labor.

"You should've told me," he said gently. "I should've been there with you."

"You're here now," she said with a smile and then two seconds later convulsed under the pain on another contraction. He

offered his hand and Maya squeezed so hard he winced. They were in for a long night.

It was worse than he imagined. Although Maya's contractions were frequent and painful, she was dilating very slowly. When Maya finally got the epidural, Jaxon was more grateful for it than she was. Then it was a waiting game. Anxiety knotted in his stomach even though he was happy Maya was finally able to get a bit of rest. During one of her brief naps he went out into the corridor so he could keep his family updated. He knew they'd descend on the hospital as soon as Jade arrived but for now it was just he, Maya and their excitement to meet the baby he, she and Charlotte created.

He returned to the room and slid quietly into the chair next to Maya's bed. She was still dozing and from what the doctor implied she'd need her energy, so he leaned his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

"I could watch you sleep forever."

Jaxon's eyes jerked open at the sound of the voice he thought he'd never hear again. He blinked when he saw Charlotte standing in front of him with a small, sad smile on her face.

"Cat got your tongue?" she teased and then laughed.

"Charlotte?"

"The one and only," she said before crossing the small distance between them and sitting on his lap. The scent of lavender tickled his nose and he buried his face in her neck.

"I miss you so much," he said, voice thick with emotion. "I love you."

She looked over to Maya lying on the bed. "I feel like I waited for this moment for my whole life."

Her voice held the sadness he felt but when she turned to him she was smiling widely. "Jade huh? You guys did good."

He chuckled along with her. He ran his finger over the oval cut ring resting on her ring finger remembering the promises he'd made on their wedding day.

"You'll be a great father Jax," she said. "Jade will be the luckiest little girl in the world."

They watched Maya in silence for a while. She twitched ever so slightly in her sleep and he wondered if she could still feel the contractions.

"Love her the way she deserves to be loved," Charlotte said softly kissing him gently on the lips.

"I already love Jade more than I thought possible."

His wife smiled that sweet smile he loved so much. "I was talking about Maya."

"I can't love Maya. I love you. *You're* my wife."

"Oh Jax," she said. "I'll always be your wife. Your *dead* wife. I don't expect you to stop living. Jade deserves parents – a real family. And you deserve someone to love."

She glanced over at Maya. "So does she."

"She's your best friend," he said.

Charlotte laughed and nudged him in the shoulder. "Yeah so I can vouch for her."

"Too soon," he said.

She shook her head slightly. "Love is a messy thing. If it *were* really too soon you wouldn't already be half way in love with her."

He began to talk but she silenced him with a soft kiss.

"There are tons of reasons not to give this thing with Maya a chance. She snores, puts ketchup on the most unholy things and has the most God awful singing voice. But I'm not one of those reasons you hear me?"

He couldn't find his voice.

"I love you Jaxon Johnson," she said. And then she was gone.

The loss Jaxon felt when he finally blinked away the last remnant of his dream was crushing. Having her in his arms – feeling her, smelling her and hearing her voice was torture when he knew that he would never get a chance like that in real life.

“Are you okay?”

This was from Maya who was struggling to sit up in bed. He nodded. He needed to be strong for her and telling her that he was almost brought to his knees by a dream of Charlotte wouldn't help.

“Do you want me to get the doctor?”

She winced and nodded, “I think it may be time.”

Maya was right and after just twenty minutes of pushing he held a warm, squiggly bundle with Charlotte's eyes in his arm. He'd thought Jade's heartbeat was the most beautiful sound in the world but nothing could compare to her cries. He placed Jade back into Maya's arms unable to take his eyes off the little human who was the sum total of all the good parts of he and Charlotte. Maya looked down at Jade with so much love, devotion and wonder in her eyes he couldn't help but think about what Charlotte said about Jade needing a real family.

She already does, he thought. Although Charlotte's name was going to be put on her birth certificate he knew Maya would be an amazing mother to his little girl.

But could she be more to him?

He shook away the thought. He had no business thinking about loving Maya. They would be good friends raising a child together. That was the best thing for everyone, Charlotte's memory included. Yet it was Charlotte's voice ringing in his ears as he stepped outside to tell his family Jade had arrived.

There are tons of reasons not to give this thing with Maya a chance... But I'm not one of those reasons...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mornings were Maya's favorite. Long before the winter sun peaked its way into the sky, the birds woke up to begin their songs or Jaxon roused for his first cup of coffee, Maya brought Jade into her work room. While watching her rapidly growing baby sleep, wriggle or gurgle in her bassinet, Maya worked on sketches or put finishing touches on pieces.

The past three months were more than Maya could've imagined. Yes, they were tiring, frustrating and sometimes downright scary but she'd never thought she could love anyone the way she did Jade. She used to make snarky comments about parents who couldn't shut up about their babies but the sun rose and set on Jade's smile. Maya felt that way from the first time she looked into those big, brown eyes when the nurse placed her in her arms.

She curled up in the couch, sketchbook and a large mug of tea in hand, stealing peeks at Jade every couple of minutes. Maya smiled. She couldn't believe just how much the little *bub* had grown. The happy, chubby cheeked monkey was quite different from the tiny, little thing who'd almost driven she and Jaxon crazy in the first few weeks. It didn't matter that his family was very supportive with Grams Nona and Jacqueline basically setting up camp in one of the spare bedrooms for the first week. Once they were gone she and Jaxon had no one to depend on but themselves. They were forced to push the sexual tension and frustrating emotions to a safer place – a place not occupied by squirming, screaming babies needing to be tended to and loved. They didn't become something out of a VH1 reality TV show the way Kasi had predicted. Okay, maybe they were still good candidates for some demented reality show. Maya could see the tagline: *what happens when life gives you everything you ever wanted but it could never be yours?*

She knew everyone saw a happy family when they were out together and it was becoming harder for her to not wish that it were true. It didn't help that his family was so good at making her feel like she was one of them. The month before they had a low-key party for Jaxon's thirty-second birthday and Jacqueline and Grams Nona double-checked every detail with her. It was as if they thought her opinion mattered or she might know something about Jaxon they had missed.

Maya kissed Jade's forehead. Her life was complicated, frustrating, maddening and nothing like she'd have expected or planned it to be. But that was okay. Maya was slowly coming to accept that you couldn't change the past. She couldn't bring Charlotte back no matter how much she wished she could. She could only focus on making things right going forward. If that meant she would love Jaxon from afar – so be it. Her hand stalled over the sketch. *Love*. She shook her head like she wanted to shake the very thought from her mind.

Jaxon walked in, almost as if summoned, a few minutes later. He picked Jade up from her bassinet and placed a kiss on her cheek. He turned to Maya. "You nervous?"

She glanced down to her sketches before returning her gaze to Jaxon. "Nervous? Me? Never."

He laughed at her obvious lie. Maya hadn't been so nervous since the weeks before Jade's due date. People were finally starting to sit up and notice her work and later in the afternoon she had a meeting with a small clothing company who were considering carrying her designs. She'd been working overtime during the past two weeks trying to make sure everything was perfect. Now she was wondering if she'd done nearly enough.

"You'll be fine," Jaxon said. He was perched on one of the arms of the couch she lounged in. She basked in his quiet confidence in her.

“Maybe I should come along,” he continued. “I know you’re a good fit for them but they may not be a good fit for you.”

Maya grinned – now he was sounding like Kasi. When she’d told her friend that if the company made her an offer she’d accept without thinking twice, Kasi made strawberry kisses on Jade’s stomach before turning to Maya with a smirk.

“Remember Louie?” she asked.

It took a couple seconds before memories of Louie flashed before her eyes. Every single memory was an unmitigated disaster. Three years ago despite protests from both Kasi and Charlotte, Maya decided to end her dating drought by saying yes to the first guy who showed her any interest. The plan was a disaster on paper but even worse in reality. She had nothing in common with the man and realized it about ten minutes into their first date. But she’d been adamant that she needed him more than he needed her.

“Do not make the Louie mistake in business,” Kasi said. “Else you’ll be right back at that coffee shop when Jade doesn’t need a nanny anymore.”

To deny that she was *just a nanny* was on the tip of Maya’s tongue but she instead made some quip about preferring to walk through the Sahara than finding herself in another *Louie situation*, business or otherwise. Kasi’s comment stayed with her for days after. What *would* happen when Jade no longer needed a nanny? She decided she’d have the discussion with Jaxon at the right time but hadn’t managed to find one. Today wasn’t the right time either so she forced her attention to the man sitting next to her.

“Aren’t you still working on that complicated merger?” she asked. For the past three weeks the deal had Jaxon going into the office early and returning late in the evening. She couldn’t imagine that he suddenly had the afternoon free.

“I already blocked out the afternoon,” he said to her with a small smile. Her heart soared and plummeted at the same time. It was these kinds of things that made it hard for her to keep

the line drawn in the sand between them. She started to tell him she didn't want to disrupt his routine but stopped. She wanted him to be there with her and it made no sense to push him away in a sad attempt to maintain distance between them.

"Who'll be on babysitting duty?" he asked. He pushed himself up off the couch and scooped Jade up.

"JT," Maya said. "Your mom is busy and Grams Nona is still on that cruise."

"Cruise?" he asked. "What cruise?"

She took the baby from him, "Life goes on while you're stuck in conference rooms Mr. Attorney."

He grinned. "So JT will be looking after Jade?"

After a pause he said, "You think we'll have a daughter left when we get back."

Maya laughed. "Remains to be seen but I'm kicking you out now, little miss is probably hungry."

As soon as he was out of the room she unbuttoned her shirt and helped Jade latch on. She suckled happily while staring up at Maya with eyes filled with trust.

"I love you," she whispered softly. Jade reached out and tried to wrap her tiny hand around Maya's finger. Maya grinned. "I'm never letting you go."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Christmas at the Johnson family home was terrifying. Jaxon glanced over at Maya who seemed gob smacked by the chaos around her. He'd teased her on the way over that Sunday dinners and Thanksgiving would be no practice for what was to come but she didn't believe him.

"Baptism by fire," he whispered into her ear before taking Jade from her arms and nudging her into the crowded living room. His mother grabbed her by her arm and steered her towards the Atlanta side of the family and with a grin he and Jade made their way to the balcony.

He found JT and Hallie there sitting too closely together on the porch swing. He sent his brother a teasing look. One of them was going to have to confess their feelings for the other sooner rather than later. Their stalemate was becoming exhausting. He almost laughed at the irony of that. He wasn't exactly in the position to talk about being honest with feelings. His feelings for Maya were becoming more confusing by the day. Jaxon wasn't sure for how much longer he'd be able to deny them. He'd moved heaven and hell so that he could sit in on her meeting with the company wanting to carry a few of her designs. Maya was smart and would've been fine on her own but he'd wanted to be there to support her... to protect her. In the end he didn't have to lobby for many changes to the contract but when she told him how much she appreciated him being there on the drive home he felt a thousand feet tall.

"You threw Maya to the wolves?"

Hallie shook her head, walked towards him and plucked Jade from him arms. In between coos and smothering the baby with kisses she said, "You're evil. Go rescue the woman."

Demand given, Hallie walked the length of the verandah bouncing Jade in her arms. Jaxon watched JT's eyes follow her. He grabbed a seat next to his brother and sighed. How did the Johnson brothers get so unlucky in love? He'd thought

he'd found his happy ending with Charlotte. She was everything he wanted in a woman and the years he spent with her were among the best of his life. When she died he was sure that his chance at love died along with her. Now, there was Maya. She seemed to be furthest away from a woman he could see himself with until he got to know her. They worked well together in the odd way things that didn't seem like they should go together did – like strawberry jam and cheddar cheese. The thought that one day she wouldn't be puttering around his kitchen, rocking Jade to sleep or sprawled out on the couch when he came home from work wasn't one that sat well with him. The thought that she might go on to find some man and create a family of her own – a family that didn't include he or Jade made him downright sick. He couldn't solve his problems so he did the next best thing.

“You just tell her,” he said to JT.

“You first,” his brother shot back.

“It's complicated.”

JT smirked. “No shit Sherlock. Come on let's go drown our sorrows in Grams Nona's eggnog.”

But he couldn't stop thinking about it all throughout Christmas lunch. Maya fit in with his loud, boisterous family almost as well as she fit into his life.

Long after the food and conversation were finished, after the last gifts were opened and Maya and Jade were tucked into his old room Jaxon sat on the balcony swing with a beer and his thoughts.

“A hundred bucks for your thoughts.”

Grams Nona slid into the chair next to him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“A whole hundred huh?”

The older woman smiled. “You've always had very expensive thoughts Jaxon. You're the most serious and focused of all my grandbabies. Just like your father.”

“No thoughts for sale tonight Grams,” he said. He ruffled her stark, white hair in the manner that usually resulted in a scolding but she just smiled at him sadly.

“I see the way you look at her,” she said. “We all do.”

“It’s not what you think,” he said. His grandmother kissed him gently on his cheek and got off the chair. She knew he was lying but was too polite to say anything. As she pointed out on more than one occasion she knew them just as well as if she’d given birth to them. When their grandfather had died unexpectedly when Jaxon was seven, Grams Nona moved in with the family and had been there ever since. He knew better than to attempt to lie to his grandmother and the fact she seemed so willing to let it slide was the first clue she felt sorry for him.

“I could love her,” he said before she was out of earshot. “But it isn’t right. It’s too soon and it wouldn’t be fair to Charlotte.”

His grandmother sighed, “I can’t fight your heart’s battle for you Jax but I can tell you this. Don’t leave it too late honey child, the day may come when the choice is taken away from you.”

“I know she won’t be single forever,” he started but his grandmother silenced him with a shake of the head.

“I was talking about something more permanent. I learned the hard way with your granddaddy and then with that lovely wife of yours that none of us know the hour when life will be taken from us. I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

This time he allowed her to walk away without saying anything. He leaned back against the wall and grinned grimly. Maybe they should be taking Grams Nona to court with them. If that hadn’t been an ambush, he didn’t know what was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Maya waved the large, balloon shaped like the number four in front of a wriggling, giggling Jade.

“Who’s a big girl?” she cooed. “Stop growing. I can’t handle you growing up so fast.”

The baby rewarded her with a toothless grin and kicked her legs more powerfully. Maya grinned.

“Let’s get this photo taken while you’re still in a good mood.”

She’d taken to documenting each month of Jade’s life with cutesy props and a photo in one of her outfits. Maya found that nothing interested people on social media like cute babies and even though she was maybe a bit biased, she thought Jade was the cutest of them all. She shared around four snaps of Jade per week in designs easily found on her website or any of the boutiques carrying MJ Designs but Jade’s ‘monthiversary’ photos were different. In these pictures Maya always used a design she’d dreamt up for Jade and couldn’t be found anywhere else. Four months. She couldn’t believe time was flying so quickly. Already December made way to January and the Christmas decorations were slowly leaving porches and store display windows. She wished January didn’t also mean another anniversary loomed over them. Only this anniversary wouldn’t be celebrated with rompers in pastel hues and giant inflatable numbers. Maya couldn’t believe that in a few days it would be a year since Charlotte was taken from them. The date hung between she and Jaxon like a ticking bomb. One of them was going to snap eventually but it was anyone’s bet which one of them would. Her therapist told her that her feelings were normal.

“No one ever stops grieving Maya,” she’d said. “We just learn to live with it.”

She understood the point the older woman made but Maya couldn’t understand why she suddenly felt like she wasn’t even a little bit healed. Three days to the anniversary and Maya didn’t think she would leave bed if Jade didn’t need

tending to. So far the little girl currently dribbling on Maya's shoulder was the best distraction she could hope for. Yet, when she put Jade down for a nap there was no running from it. Just like there was no running from the fact Jaxon had started spending ungodly hours at work even though Jasmine assured her he wasn't working on any big files.

Her day passed in a flurry of Skype meetings, sketching and sweet stolen moments with Jade. She'd just put her down for a nap in the playpen in her work area when Kasi called.

"Just wanted to give you the heads up," her friend said in an uncharacteristically subdued voice. "News stations have started having mini-segments on the shooting."

Maya's stomach lurched.

"Please tell me you're joking. Why would they dredge it all up?"

Her friend sighed. "It's interesting news. A year has passed and the police still haven't had any breaks in the case and the only fatality was Jaxon's Johnson's wife. People are eating it up."

Maya guessed it was too much to hope that she and Jaxon would be able to grieve privately. In the weeks after the shooting there was a bit of coverage because the police were criticized for not acting fast enough and because Charlotte was Jaxon's wife. She hadn't thought they would've used the anniversary to drum up more views.

"That's not the bad part," Kasi said softly. Maya squeezed her eyes shut.

"What's the bad part?"

"There is a lot of emphasis on Charlotte, Jaxon, you..." Kasi paused for a couple seconds before continuing, "and Jade."

"Jade? What do you mean 'and Jade'?"

Kasi started to answer when noises erupted around her, "I've got to go Maya. Check out the local news. They said they would replay the segment."

Maya stared at the phone for several minutes after Kasi hung up.

Although she was curious about the broadcast she knew sometimes you were better off not knowing. Despite this, she found herself scooping Jade up out of the playpen and heading to the living room.

She didn't have to search far or wait long before she stumbled across the network insisting on rehashing the worst moment of her life for ratings. She cuddled Jade as she watched the broadcast not bothering to fight the anger, pain and helplessness she felt. Instead, she cried.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Jaxon saw the broadcast in the middle of an Associate briefing meeting on the fifty-six inch TV hanging on the conference room's wall. He looked up from his case brief and saw Charlotte's face emblazoned across the screen. The banner running across the bottom of the screen read: "Nearly a year and still no leads in attorney's wife shooting death".

He hadn't realized he was going to have to share the anniversary of Charlotte's death with the world. He was barely handling it as it was. His hand curled tightly around his pen when his photo flashed across the screen followed by Maya's and then Jade's.

"Turn up the volume," he said to the intern sitting closest to the desk with the remotes. The law student looked at him like he was insane but didn't dare disobey a direct order. The camera panned to a somber looking reporter who detailed the moments leading up to Charlotte bleeding out in that bank. Then after staring straight into the camera for a couple of seconds she said, "Less than a year into her marriage to Jackson Johnson's eldest son, Jaxon, Charlotte Braithwaite-Johnson lay dead on the floor of Colonial Mutual but as our reporters found out the heart breaking story was just beginning."

The screen switched to a man standing in front of the private hospital where Jade had been born.

"Some six months after the death of his wife Jaxon Johnson became a father for the first time," the reporter started. "The little girl, Jade Charlotte Johnson, was born here at the Liberty Memorial Hospital in September. Her birth certificate lists her mother as Johnson's deceased wife. We learned that Jade was born via a gestational surrogate, Charlotte's best friend, Maya Jenkins, and that the Johnsons may have received the happy news of the surrogate's pregnancy mere hours before she was murdered. Unfortunately conversations with the local precinct indicate that the police are no closer to closing in on the men who've left this little girl motherless than they were last year."

The broadcast broke for commercials. Jaxon beckoned for the remote, turned the TV off and tried to regain control of the conference room. It was a little bit too late. His concentration was already shot to pieces and he wanted to be anywhere but in the office.

But his feelings didn't matter right at that moment. He took a sip of coffee and turned back to the brief aware of the uncomfortable tension in the conference room. Barely three seconds passed from his handing out the last assignment on the list before Jaxon pushed his chair back and stalked from the room.

"I'm taking an early day," he said to Ivalee as he passed her station. If she wondered why he was skipping out on work at barely ten thirty she didn't show it. Instead, she asked him if she should forward calls to his cell phone. He thought about it for a while before requesting that she didn't. If he had his way he wouldn't be in a position to answer any calls for the rest of the day.

Jaxon closed the front door as quietly as he could manage. He figured Maya would be in her sewing room but didn't want to risk her hearing him get home. Jaxon wished, not for the first time in the last two weeks, that he lived alone. He didn't want to share his grief – especially not with Maya.

"Jaxon?"

Her soft voice floated from the direction of the living room. Jaxon sighed, so much for the clean break he'd hoped for. He turned off into the living room and found Maya lying on the couch with Jade fast asleep on her chest. For two seconds the heaviness in his soul felt a bit lighter. Then, he got a good look at Maya's red, swollen eyes.

"It's all over the news," she said softly. "It's been picked up by network after network like some sick virus. The last one I watched was going over her autopsy report in detail. Why is this even happening?"

Her sobs startled Jade out of sleep and before he knew it both Maya and Jade were crying so hard his heart broke all over again.

This had to be what drowning in quicksand felt like, Jaxon decided. He ignored the feelings at war within him. It didn't matter if it were wrong or right. Jaxon sat next to Maya and pulled her into a hug. As her sobs filled the air, he squeezed her tighter. He never felt more helpless in his life.

“Is it possible to love them both?”

His therapist looked at him over the edges of her frames, “You tell me.”

After Maya calmed down and they both set Jade to sleep Jaxon phoned Dr. Winslow and asked if she had any available sessions. When his mother suggested he saw a therapist shortly after Charlotte’s death he’d been resistant to it. Now his weekly sessions with Dr. Winslow felt like a lifeline. Fifteen minutes in he was wondering why he came. Dr. Winslow rarely answered any of the questions he asked and chose instead to turn them around on him.

“If I knew I wouldn’t have asked,” he said in a voice he usually reserved for JT when he was being annoying. Dr. Winslow wrote something in her notebook, hovering the pen over the page and cocking her head to the side. He’d seen this move so often in the past year he knew she was encouraging him to just say whatever was on his mind.

“I love my wife. I still reach for her at night. I shouldn’t be able to love anyone else.” Jaxon said. He massaged the bridge of his nose although he knew nothing short of a shot of Valium would keep his headache away.

“Have you been intimate with Maya as yet?”

Yet. There was the pesky word again.

“Why does everyone think that it’s just a matter of time before we sleep together?”

“Is it?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry for implying that,” she said although she seemed far from sorry. She scribbled more notes into her pad for a few maddening seconds before she asked, “Let me take you to a hypothetical place where you could be sure that Charlotte was okay with this. Let’s suppose your dream while Maya was in labor was real. What would you do then?”

He paused for a split second. “Be with Maya.”

Dr. Winslow smiled at him, closed her notebook and reached for her own cup of coffee. “You didn’t think about that very long.”

Because I know what I want, he thought but didn’t say it out loud. He didn’t want to risk that smug smile getting any wider.

“I think there is only one thing you need to resolve with yourself. You want to be with Maya and from everything you said to me, Maya more likely than not wants to be with you. Who is it that really benefits from you not giving it try?”

It was an echo of Jasmine’s unsolicited advice but he didn’t accept it anymore coming from the doctor than his pesky little sister.

“Jade. If this go south I don’t see how the arrangement can continue.”

“Maybe with everything going on the arrangement *shouldn’t* continue as it is. Unresolved tension, sexual or otherwise, may eventually blow up in both of your faces.”

Dr. Winslow stood the way she usually did to signal the end of a session. She once told him that she did this when she’d given her clients enough to think about and she was always careful to not saying anything past that point. But today as she showed him out of her office she said, “Jaxon, I think you need to stop confiding in other people and actually talk to Maya.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The days approaching the anniversary of Charlotte's death were brutal. Maya knew what to expect but nothing prepared her to deal with feeling the raw jabs of pain when she remembered that Charlotte had been gone for nearly a year. The media didn't help. What had started as a segment on a few local stations became a full blown national story. It wasn't just Jaxon and his family connections that made the story interesting but rather the details surrounding Jade. The media couldn't get enough of the idea of Maya being pregnant with her dead best friend's child and then opting to raise the baby with her husband. She'd already turned down two interviews with morning programs. Her politely spoken words were an inaccurate reflection of the anger she felt inside. Why couldn't they be allowed to grieve in peace? Not that they were grieving together. She and Jaxon had become two suns orbiting around the planet that was Jade. He seemed unwilling to let her into his private hell and she wasn't about the force herself there.

"Maybe I can take her for the night."

Maya sipped her wine and turned her attention back to the conversation she was having with Jasmine. She'd shown up about half an hour before still decked out in a sleek, black Armani suit and hair pulled back into a tight bun.

"Court," she had said as she walked into the foyer. She hopped out of her heels and then said, "Wine."

Once the wine was poured and Maya finished checking in on Jade they sat around the kitchen island. Jasmine launched into a rant about the newest associate the firm had headhunted the month before who, if Jasmine's words were anything to go by, was intent on driving her to murder. The conversation slowly shifted to the anniversary of Charlotte's death and Jasmine suggested Maya and Jaxon had some time to wallow on that day.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Jade may be the only thing keeping either of us sane right now.”

Jasmine laughed. “I’ll trade you Jade for a bottle of tequila. I have the feeling Jose Cuervo may be a bit more useful tomorrow night. I mean you have enough breast milk pumped and frozen that Jade won’t starve while we wait for the alcohol to leave your system.”

Maya smiled at Jasmine’s logic. “Fine. I’ll talk to Jaxon.”

Jasmine threw her head back and rolled her eyes. “Don’t mention the tequila.”

Jasmine changed the topic before Maya could dwell on it. And, when Jaxon walked into the kitchen forty-five minutes later he found them on the second glasses of wine while laughing their heads off.

He stopped short with a small smile on his face. “Who invited Trouble into our home?”

Jasmine slid off the stool, walked into his open arms and then stepped back and socked him on the shoulder. Maya observed them. It wasn’t the first time the bond all the Johnson siblings shared made her heart warm. She hoped Jade would have siblings to tease and fight with while knowing that they would always have her back. She thought of Jaxon finally moving on and settling down with some other woman and felt her mood darken. She wanted to be that woman.

Maya took a large sip of her wine. What she wanted didn’t change the reality of their situation. The sooner she managed to accept it, the easier things would be. She caught Jaxon’s eyes and sighed. It’d be a lot easier to accept that there would never be anything between them if she wasn’t so convinced he wanted the same thing. Desperate to focus on anything else, Maya told Jaxon about Jasmine’s idea that they had some time to wallow on the anniversary of Charlotte’s death.

He seemed hesitant but Jasmine launched into her sales pitch before he could turn her down. Five minutes later Maya could

see that he was actually considering it. She grinned. What was it with those Johnson genes that made all of them excellent negotiators?

“What do you think Maya?”

“It’s a good idea,” she admitted. “Maybe we can take flowers to her grave and then spend the rest of the day just trying to get through it.”

He turned to his sister. “Can you handle a baby for an entire night?”

“I’m not twelve,” she said. “And Jade is the sweetest little thing.”

“Ten bucks you call Grams Nona for back up,” Jaxon shot back. Maya convulsed with laughter as they argued about whether Jasmine had it in her to take care of a kid. By the time Jasmine saw herself out Maya felt lighter than she had in ages. Jaxon grabbed Jade from upstairs and brought her to the couch where he bounced her on his leg while they watched crappy TV and spoke about their day. They’d said more to each other, Maya realized, than they said all week. Maybe, just maybe, things would be okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The first year of Charlotte's death was marked by cold, damp weather and grey skies. Jaxon didn't fight his managing partner when he suggested he took the day off. Grief was an elephant sitting on his chest until it hurt to take the smallest breaths. He heard Maya moving around the house – footsteps in the hallway followed by gurgles and laughter. A year ago he thought about how quiet his townhouse was without Charlotte in it. Now his home bustled with new life but he found that it didn't matter. He still longed to hear *Charlotte's* footsteps in the hallway and her laughter teasing him from the edges of sleep.

When he finally got out of bed he found Maya downstairs nursing a cup of coffee. She lifted her eyes to meet his and the despair he saw there was enough for him to stride forward and envelope her in his arms. The sobs started as soon as her head hit his chest and he found it hard to keep down the tears clogging his own throat. Yet, he refused to cry. One of them needed to be strong today.

“Jasmine already got Jade,” she said after she composed herself. “She said they were going to have a girl's spa day. Whatever that means.”

She chuckled at that and soon he found himself laughing along with her. The laughter tapered off as guilt filled the room. Somewhere between the sadness and the anger that Charlotte was taken from him, Jaxon still struggled with being the one alive – being the one who still had a future stretched out in front of him. A future that could, quite possibly, include the woman in his arms. No matter how many psychologists tried to fit grief into tidy stages Jaxon found he either felt one thing or everything at once.

“Let's get out of here,” Maya suggested. “Let's go to all of Charls' favorite places and try to remember her the way she should be.”

He thought of the bottle of Scotch in the liquor cabinet. He'd planned to spend most of his day in bed with that bottle trying to make sense of it all. Maya's body was tight in his arms so he knew she was more invested in his answer than she was trying to let on. She relaxed when he suggested they get ready and meet in the foyer in twenty minutes. Maybe Maya had a point. Maybe remembering the happy times with Charlotte would be easier than dealing with the anger and angst surrounding the unfairness of her death. Maybe it would be good for them both. Or, maybe it would be complete hell. Jaxon poured a glass of scotch before he headed upstairs to get ready.

They were having fun.

Jaxon tried, and failed, to wrap his head around the fact he hadn't laughed so long or hard in almost three weeks. They started their *tour de Charlotte* in Central Park. He took Maya to the spot where he'd first seen her sitting on a blanket reading a Terry Pratchett novel with the most gorgeous smile on her face. Central Park was very different in the heart of winter than it was on that day in July when he'd run home and told JT he met the woman he wanted to marry but the memory still warmed him.

Maya dragged him to a nearby café and while they warmed up with coffee she gave him Charlotte's version of their fist meeting.

"She knew you'd never read a Terry Pratchett novel two minutes into the conversation," Maya laughed. "Where did you get that confidence to bullshit?"

He grinned. "Law school."

"Figured," she said. "But it wasn't your pretend Pratchett knowledge that got you in. According to Charlotte you had the cutest dimples she'd ever seen. Until she saw the one on your left butt cheek."

He tried to swallow his coffee through the laughter that gurgled in his throat. “I can’t believe she told you that.”

“Oh Jaxon,” she said with a wink. “That’s not even the worst of it.”

Before he could demand she spilled, Maya grabbed his hand and suggested she showed him the restaurant where Charlotte got into a verbal fight with the cashier for being rude to a homeless person.

And so the day went. They zigzagged through most of the city, ice-skated at Rockefeller centre -something Charlotte always wanted to do but kept putting off. He learned little tidbits about his wife that only a best friend would know and he was in turn able to share fun stories with Maya. The light mood vanished rapidly when they found themselves standing over her grave with bouquets of her favorite flowers hours later.

Maya stood stiffly beside him with her hands tucked into her coat’s pockets. The wind howled around them but he knew she was trying to protect herself from more than the shitty weather.

“Reality isn’t so nice is it?” she asked. Her voice was thick with emotion. Jaxon wanted to bundle her into his arms and hold her until the pain stopped... for both of them. He kicked at snow-dusted ground.

“It isn’t.”

Suddenly the entire day felt like a bad idea. They may have spent the day gallivanting around New York sharing funny stories about Charlotte and doing things Charlotte had wanted to do but that didn’t change the fact that she was gone. A year. Jaxon stared at the headstone. The year passed as quickly as it was agonizing. And the years would continue passing. He would continue living. His life would have to readjust to Charlotte being out of it. It would never stop hurting, he thought. But it would hurt differently.

They stayed there for half an hour – about twenty-nine minutes more than either of them wanted to be there – before they decided it would be better to head back to the townhouse. They stopped on the way back to pick up pizza neither of them had the appetite for.

Back at the townhouse the silence blanketed everything until Jaxon felt suffocated.

“It’s all my fault,” Maya said. Her voice was soft and thick with grief. She held the wine glass so tightly he thought she might crack the stem.

“No it isn’t...”

“You don’t understand...” she started but his cell phone chimed then. It was Jasmine reporting some cute story about Jade and by the time he looked up Maya was gone.

He found her curled into her pillow with her sobs echoing loudly around her room. He stalled for a couple seconds before he sat on the bed. He offered her a glass of Scotch and after a few moments she took the glass from him and swallowed the contents quickly. He followed suit.

“One more?”

She nodded as she wiped the tears away with the back of her hands. Two glasses later she lay back on the bed. The liquor had done nothing to stop the silent tears from streaming down her face.

“Can I?” he asked.

Maya nodded and despite his initial reservations Jaxon crawled into the bed and pulled her into his arms.

“We will be okay,” he whispered against her forehead. “Not today but we will be.”

She squeezed him tighter and they lay there until darkness filtered in through the windows and there was nothing existing in the world but their grief and the comfort they found in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“I think I might love her.”

Jaxon tried to focus on the final few reps of his preacher’s curl instead of the increasingly interested look on his brother’s face. He waited for the teasing questions and comments to spill from his brother’s mouth. They never came. JT, uncharacteristically, waited until they sat in the gym’s café and ordered their protein smoothies before he brought back up the words Jaxon finally found the courage to say.

Two weeks had passed since he’d woken up with a mild hangover and Maya in his arms. Jaxon noticed gentle, but profound, shifts in their dynamics. Things were no longer painfully tense between them. It wasn’t that his internal struggle had lessened, but Jaxon found it easier to cope with.

His session with Dr. Winslow stayed at the forefront of his mind. Was his dream of Charlotte an attempt to ease his conscience or was his subconscious pointing him in the direction he needed to go? He wasn’t much closer to finding an answer than he had been when he sat with the psychologist some weeks before but he was resigned.

Maybe he and Maya’s paths had been meant to collide and they were doing more harm than good by trying to deny something that just seemed to exist.

“Are you sure?” JT asked.

“Pretty much,” he said after contemplating JT’s question for several seconds. He would fully admit that both Orlando and JT had a point when they spoke about ‘forced intimacy’. Somewhere along the line Maya had become an integral part of his family. He couldn’t imagine it any other way. Jaxon tried to think of anyone else rocking Jade to sleep or humming her lullabies. His lust for Maya couldn’t be denied but he’d

spent a lot of time wondering if the fondness was in part because of her role in Jade's life.

JT started to speak but stopped when the server returned with their drinks. When the woman left – JT sipped the smoothie and said, “So where do you go from here?”

That was the question that kept him up at night. Maya's birthday was the next week and he figured it was as good of a time as any to tell her how he felt.

“I'm going to take my shrink's advice,” he admitted. “I'm going to talk to Maya. I think this conversation has been a long time coming.”

JT raised his protein smoothie to Jaxon in a mock toast. “Finally something we can agree on bro.”

Maya was in her sewing room when Jaxon returned home later that evening. She was curled up on the couch quietly sketching in a notebook with the baby monitor next to her. Jaxon watched her sketch and felt an overwhelming sense of tenderness. He wasn't sure how long he watched her before she looked up and spotted him.

“Hey you,” she said. “How was your day?”

He shifted from one foot to the other –shocked at just how nervous he felt.

“It was good. Went to the gym with JT where he promptly tried to out-workout me.”

She laughed. That JT would do something like that was no surprise. His brother was the most competitive person he knew and he didn't expect him to be less annoying during a friendly workout session.

“How about you?”

He'd moved into the room and sat next to her on the couch. Maya stretched her hands above her head.

“It was good. I got some work done and Jade and I went to Mommy-and-Me Yoga.”

“Is that really a thing?”

She laughed again and Jaxon remembered just how much he’d come to adore the sound, “It is a thing and Jade had a blast. Come let’s get something to eat before the little monster wakes up.”

He waited until they finished the meal before he launched into the conversation that weighed heavily on him.

They’d settled in on the couch in the living room as had become their routine over the past couple weeks. She’d begun flicking through the channels when he placed a hand on her forearm.

“We need to talk,” he said and instantly regretted how severe it sounded. Worry streaked across her face, “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

The seconds ticked by before he answered. This was where he crossed the line. He couldn’t unsay the words.

“I can’t stop pretending I feel nothing for you,” he started. “I don’t know what this is but I can’t continue pretending that I don’t want to try.”

Maya turned so that she was facing him. “What about Charlotte? I don’t want to betray her.”

Jaxon felt like there was a rock in his stomach.

“Neither do I.”

She looked at him for a long time, “... but sometimes I feel like I already have.”

“What do you mean?”

“I shouldn’t feel this way about my best friend’s husband,” she started. “I feel like I’m stealing her life.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d said something like that and Jaxon was nowhere nearer to finding the words needed to

comfort her. A couple minutes passed before he realized that he didn't need to comfort her nor did he need to convince her that they needed to take this risk. She needed to work things through on her own the way he did. So Jaxon, for the first time in his life, swallowed the arguments on his tongue. Instead, he shifted the conversation to recent updates on her business. The last time they'd spoken she'd been briefly considering hiring more persons. They chatted about it for a while even though his declaration hung between them in the air. After a while Maya clasped her hands together and stretched them above her head as she yawned. He suggested they called it a night and as she pushed herself up from the couch, Maya turned to him with a timid smile, "How would we even do it?"

He paused allowing the question and its implication to wash over him. "I guess I'd start by asking you out."

She smiled. "I guess I could see how that feels."

"Then it's a date."

She hugged him awkwardly before shuffling off upstairs no doubt to check on Jade before she headed to bed herself. He wondered where his confession would lead but Jaxon decided that for the first time since this situation began he would just watch things play out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Then it's a date.

Maya wasn't sure what she expected after her conversation with Jaxon but she definitely didn't expect to find a small envelope on the kitchen island with her name written on it in Jaxon's slanted handwriting. Tucked into the envelope was a glossy folded card with the words 'You're Invited' emblazoned in gold across the top. She flicked it open unable to help the smile that slowly spread across her face. The invitation contained the date, time and place of the date. Maya was surprised that Jaxon picked a swanky restaurant in the middle of Manhattan and was more than a little curious about the instructions to 'look under the couch' scribbled on the bottom of the card.

She found the white box tucked in the corner of the living room and tried to figure out what Jaxon was up to. She hadn't expected the box to contain a flowing, wisp of a dress in the most delicate shade of teal she'd ever come across. Pinned unto the box was the simple note, "Wear This."

Maya couldn't decide if the gentle flips in her stomach were down to excitement or actual fear. They couldn't go back to the way things were before once they went down this road. She couldn't decide if it was worth the risk. But at the same time she couldn't imagine what life would be in the next couple of months if they continued dancing around their feelings for each other. Maya was tired of denying the way she felt. She was tired of pretending that when she was with Jaxon things didn't seem to just click.

She was halfway through her morning chores when Jasmine came strolling into the townhouse.

“I couldn’t be bothered with the bell,” she said by way of introduction as she flopped down on the couch and flashed Maya a grin. “I need a glass of wine.”

“Is it that guy again?”

Jasmine shrugged off her jacket. “I think he answers to Lucifer.”

Maya couldn’t help the laughter that spilled from her mouth as she trekked to the kitchen to fetch two wine glasses. When she returned Jasmine launched into another story involving the new associate, Alec, and how she believed he tried to undermine her every step of the way. She was mid-rant when she noticed the open box on the couch.

“What is this?” she asked even though the grin on her face suggested that she already had a very good idea.

“You picked it out didn’t you?”

Jasmine nodded with a bashful smile. Maya enjoyed the way their relationship blossomed during the past couple months. The unannounced visits were the highlight of her homebound days.

“Do you like it?”

“Like it? I love it. I was wondering how Jax managed to pick out something like this by himself.”

Sipping her wine and curling herself into the couch, Jasmine smiled, “He did a better job than you think. I didn’t offer *that* much help.”

“I’m nervous,” Maya admitted several minutes later as they surfed through Netflix.

“Why?”

Maya tried to explain her confusing emotions. She was relieved when Jasmine told her she understood.

“It is a risk,” the youngest Johnson admitted. “But I’ve seen you guys together. It’s a risk you have to take.”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t blow up in our faces,” she said softly feeling the weight of fear in the pit of her stomach.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Stunning.

It wasn't that he didn't already know she was beautiful but to see her standing at the top of the stairs in the dress he'd been imagining her wearing for the entire day was a religious experience.

He'd spent most of the day thinking of all the ways that this *thing* between them could go wrong but he was running out of reasons to run. So, Jaxon stood in his kitchen with his feet firmly planted in place as Maya walked towards him. There was nowhere left to run. They would have to face the collision head on.

“Ready?”

He was asking much more than if she was ready to head out to the dinner he'd planned for them. She nodded and some of the tension evaporated.

They flowed easily into conversation on the way to the intimate, Italian restaurant Jaxon had chosen for the night. He got her up to date on several of the business transactions which was about all they managed to do before they fell into their favorite topic – Jade.

Over lobster bisque followed by the shrimp Alfredo and then tiramisu for dessert, they both swapped stories about their baby girl. As the months passed Jade had started to look more and more like Charlotte and he was amazed at just how much she would live through their little girl. He still missed Charlotte. Every day. He still loved her. As he looked at Maya twirling her pasta on her fork with more concentration than the simple task required he realized there was room in his heart to love Maya too. Damn it, he *already* loved Maya too. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

The hours flew by in what seemed like seconds and before Jaxon knew it he was ushering Maya back into the town house.

“You were beautiful tonight,” he said. He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her into the kitchen.

“It must be a shock to see me in something other than sweats and messy hair.”

He pulled cookies from the cupboard and grabbed a cartridge for the coffee maker, “You’re beautiful then too.”

She smiled. One of those rare shy smiles that made it obvious he affected her just as much as she affected him.

She made a comment but he was too busy watching the way her lips formed the words and how the deep red lipstick made him wonder if she tasted like strawberries.

Instead, Jaxon continued making the drinks and plated the cookies.

They munched on gingersnaps and sipped on their drinks but it was impossible to escape the tension around them. Jaxon lasted a full ten minutes longer than he thought he would before he scooted closer to Maya, tipped her chin up with his finger and brought his lips to hers. Kissing her was like breathing again after holding his breath for too long. She pressed her body as close to him as their awkward seating positions would allow and their tongues danced together. The kiss was different from the two they’d stolen before – there was no guilt pressed up between them until both their chests ached with it. No, he tasted everything he felt for her coming right back at him and Jaxon wasn’t sure he’d have the strength to pull away.

In the end it was Maya who pulled away. She looked up at him, chest-heaving trying to settle her breath. She wasn’t doing a good job at it. She also wasn’t doing a good job at

controlling the way her body contracted and the arousal that had become a slight puddle between her legs. That she wanted him was no surprise. She'd wanted him for months. Visions of Jaxon always tipped her over the edge when she pleased herself at night and now, with him in her arms, she felt for the first time that those visions could become a reality. She clenched her legs to stop herself from shaking.

Jaxon's hands moved down the length of her sides and settled on her ass before he brought his lips to hers again. The kiss was more intense, more passionate and Maya instantly knew that there was only one way that it would all end. Anticipation slid down her spine. Maya loved the way her curves fit into the hard planes of his chest and the way his desire was pressed up against her. He pushed her against the kitchen island as he continued exploring her with his mouth. Maya sighed into the kiss straining to get as close to him as possible.

"God Maya," he whispered. Then he pulled away so that he could look at her, "Shall we..."

He allowed the question to hang in the air between them but it was all the encouragement Maya needed. She held his hand in her own and walked with him up the stairs to her room. They stood in the darkened room for a few seconds without any attempt to touch each other. Maya wondered, if like her, Jaxon was contemplating the magnitude of what they were about to do. There would be no going back from this. She started to ask him if he was sure they were doing the right thing when his mouth crashed down to hers and the questions disappeared. It was time, Maya decided, to stop over thinking things. It was time to just feel. So, Maya didn't think as she and Jaxon stumbled onto the bed. She didn't think when his lips brushed against her neck sending sharp tingles down her spine. She didn't think when his hands crept under her dress, pushed her damp panties to the side and slid a finger inside her. She didn't think as he helped her take the dress off or as she watched him undress. She didn't think when he took a nipple in his mouth and sucked until her back arched and moans spilled from her mouth. She felt. She felt the electric bolts of pleasure when he

finally slid inside her. She felt the delicious knot of tension as they moved together. Maya dug her hands into Jaxon's shoulders as her body caved under the pleasure his deep thrusts brought and cried out when he began moving faster. She didn't think when his body shook above hers or when her orgasm began to build. She felt. And far later while they were curled together half asleep, Maya felt his beating heart.

Jaxon came awake in stages. He first became aware of the warmth pressed tightly against him, the hair that tickled his nose and finally scent of vanilla wafting around them. He slowly opened his eyes and gazed at the woman in his arms. He wasn't surprised that she felt like she belonged there. He placed a light kiss on the gentle arch of her neck as memories of the night before flooded back. He felt himself harden.

"I guess some parts of you are already awake," Maya mumbled into the pillow with a small laugh. She turned to face him with a grin. "Morning Jax."

He wasn't prepared for the swell of emotions he felt. It didn't matter how long he'd fought against his feelings for Maya he knew in those moments that he was right where life intended him to be – wrapped up in the arms of the woman he was lucky enough to have a second chance with.

Jaxon kissed her. "Happy Birthday sweetheart."

"Thank you."

"We've got a great day planned for you," he said. Between the brunch his mother planned and the small get together Jasmine was in charge of, Jaxon was sure Maya's twenty seventh birthday would be one she'd always remember.

Her smile widened. "Do you really?"

"Yea. We're supposed to be meeting the gang for brunch in an hour which is a shame."

"Why?"

He pulled her closer, running his hand up her body and cupping her breasts, “Because we don’t have time for this.”

She kissed him, “The birthday girl is never late. Everyone else is early.”

“When you put it that way,” he laughed before bringing his lips down to her neck. “I guess we do have time after all.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Maya propped herself up on her elbow and watched Jaxon as he slept. She didn't think it was possible for her heart to be more full of love but somehow the muscle seemed to expand to make room each day.

The last four months were a rollercoaster.

When she and Jaxon showed up to her birthday brunch late, Jasmine gave her a knowing look before she put a squirming, laughing Jade into her arms. Maya still smiled so many months later when she thought of that birthday. The Johnsons pulled her into their clan as if she were really one of them. She wondered if Jacqueline and Grams Nona saw what she and Jaxon tried to fight for months on end.

She was about to snuggle back into Jaxon when she heard babbling through the baby monitor. Maya grinned. It looked like Miss Jade was up and ready to start the day.

Jade stood in her crib on unsteady feet and giggled when she saw Maya. She extended her arms and Maya scooped her up, kissing her cheek loudly.

It was amazing to see just how much Jade grew in the last four months. Maya and Jaxon finally got around to baby proofing the townhouse because wherever trouble existed, Jade was prone to finding it.

She brought Jade back to the bedroom she and Jaxon shared. Maya wasn't sure if it was conscious but she and Jaxon didn't sleep in the master bedroom. They didn't make love in the bed he once shared with Charlotte.

As soon as she put Jade on the bed she crawled over to where Jaxon was sleeping, grabbed on to him and hoisted herself up. His eyes fluttered open and he looked at her with such adoration, Maya felt her own heart expand with love for him.

Jaxon tickled their chubby monkey until the room was filled with Jade's laughter and his chuckles. When Jade stopped

squirring and snuggled to his chest Jaxon caught Maya's eye. "Excited?"

She nodded. Today was the day she'd been waiting for since she'd sewed her first dress. 'MJ' designs would grace the hangers of at least two department stores in New York and California. Jaxon decided he would head into work late so he could celebrate the major milestone with her. If a year ago someone told Maya her clothing line would be stocked in JC Penny she'd have guided them straight to a mental hospital. Then again, she'd have kicked them in the face if they told her that she'd wake up every morning snuggled into the Jaxon or that she'd be sitting on her bed watching him place strawberry kisses on their daughter's stomach.

Their daughter.

She and Jaxon talked more and more over the past two months about making it official. He said whenever she was ready he would ask Jasmine or Jasper to start adoption proceedings. It didn't matter if this thing just blooming between them lasted, he said. She was Jade's mother in each way that counted. She'd hesitated though. The same niggling guilt she'd had in the start that she was merely taking over Charlotte's life still plagued her. It didn't matter that people were generally supportive of her and Jaxon's relationship and that Maya learned to not give a damn about what the other people had to say. Three weeks ago they ran into Morgan as they strolled through Central Park. Jaxon had Jade balanced on one hip and Maya's hand in his own. She'd spotted Morgan way before the other woman saw her and tried to direct Jaxon down another path. She didn't move quickly enough. Morgan approached them with several tentative steps before she tried, once again, to apologize for her behavior at the doctor's office.

She was mid-apology when she noticed Jaxon holding Maya's hand. Her face went from open and contrite to pinched and bitter in one fell swoop. Maya waited for the shame to wash over her and for the excuses to spill from her mouth. They didn't. She was no longer concerned with the idiots who thought she and Jaxon had been sneaking around behind Charlotte's back. They knew the truth and anyone who really

knew them also did. Yet, the guilt threatened to surface. It felt like Charlotte was plucked from the face of the planet and she was just put in her place. Maya recalled the teasing conversation she'd had with Kasi when her friend said she'd never have to worry about taking over Charlotte's life because Maya would die before she fell for Jaxon.

She still smiled with awkward embarrassment when she thought of all the nasty things she used to say about the man who'd come to mean more to her than anything in the world.

Still whenever she came close to telling Jaxon that she was ready to start the process of formally adopting Jade, she balked. After a few minutes of snuggling up to her dad Jade turned to Maya and extended her chubby arms. She picked up her sweet little girl and realized that she wanted to legally be her mother more than anything else in the world. She needed to find some way to deal with her guilt quickly. But that wouldn't be today. Between getting Jade fed and dressed, sneaking kisses with Jaxon and fielding last minute questions regarding the launch, Maya barely had time to pull on her outfit and fix her hair before they were out the door.

"You look nervous as hell," Jaxon grinned. They were parked in the underground garage waiting for her to force her legs to move out of the car.

"I am," she confessed. What if they didn't sell? What if she were moving too fast? What if her ideas dried up? She'd experienced more success over the past couple months than she'd dreamed possible and she kept waiting for life to pull it away.

"You'll be great," he said in what Maya used to dub his 'court room voice'. The tone left no room for questioning. She smiled up at him, "Thanks for your confidence."

"Let's go kick ass Ms. Jenkins."

He brought his lips to hers and Maya felt her heart take flight.

Jaxon watched on as Maya walked through the department store's baby and toddler wear section with a small smile. She'd tried to rein in her excitement for the past couple weeks but he could see it sparkling in her eyes. He had to fight off Jasmine and his mother to keep the moment just between him and Maya. They'd planned a small get together later as a trade off but he was willing to take it. He knew he'd made the right decision when Maya turned to him, tears sparkling in her eyes and asked, "Is this real?"

He shifted Jade into his other arm and slung his hand around her waist. "You better believe it baby."

There was silence and then she said, "Charlotte set this in motion you know. If she hadn't dragged me to JT..."

Jaxon kissed her forehead. "It would've happened eventually. You're that talented."

She smiled his favorite smile – shyly showing just a hint of her dimples before she reached for Jade. "Let's go shopping baby."

He walked beside them amazed at his little family. He still missed Charlotte terribly but there was no denying that he was in love with Maya. They'd spoken about her officially adopting Jade and he decided to move off his butt and take Grams Nona's advice. He'd told her so that even if things didn't work out between them she would always be Jade's mother. What he *hadn't* told her was just how much he wanted things to work. She had no clue there was an engagement ring burning a hole in the master bedroom's safe for over a month now. Jaxon didn't just want Maya to be Jade's mom forever... he wanted her to be his forever. He was still waiting for the right time but Jaxon Johnson knew one thing. Life gave him a second shot at love and nothing was going to take it away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“I think Mom’s already planning your wedding.”

Jaxon looked up from the file he’d been thumbing through for the past fifteen minutes while JT, for reasons yet to be known, sat across the room throwing a tennis ball into the air and catching it.

“I’m not surprised,” he said.

JT threw the tennis ball again but this time allowed it to drop to the floor, “I expected you to blow a fuse.”

“I want to marry her,” Jaxon said carefully. If JT was surprised he didn’t show it.

“When are you going to ask?”

Jaxon shrugged. Each day he searched for signs that asking Maya to marry him so soon wouldn’t blow up in his face and decided he would know when the time was right.

“Not sure,” he said. “I’ve got the engagement ring already though.”

“Wow. You’ve *really* made up your mind.”

He nodded. “I try to picture my life without her in it. I can’t. If that’s not a sign I’m not sure what is.”

JT’s forehead crinkled as he went back to throwing the ball about. Jaxon pushed his file to the side knowing that it could only mean one thing.

“Am I being insensitive?” he asked.

His brother shook his head, forced a smile and said, “I’m really happy for you.”

“She’s blind if she can’t see how good you are together.”

“She’s blind then,” JT said with a wry smile.

“Well maybe you should tell her.”

“Somehow I’m not sure telling Hallie I’m in love with her will work out as well as you ‘fessing up to Maya did.”

He wanted to argue with his brother but before he could say anything JT murmured something about being late for a shoot and started to the door.

“Any chance you’ll keep this conversation between us?” Jaxon asked.

His brother laughed, sounding more like himself. “Sure.”

He was halfway out the door when he grinned, “And Orlando.”

Jaxon rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

It was six before Jaxon was able to close off meetings and conference calls and head home. He found Maya in the living room, feet tucked under her and reading a book.

“Rough day?” she asked.

Rough was an understatement. It was one of those days where everything that could possibly go wrong seemed to go wrong five times over. He and Orlando barely managed to dig themselves out of the mess they’d inadvertently created. He’d stressed about just how much damage control they’d have to do in the morning but as soon as he spotted Maya the stress seemed to melt away.

“Not anymore,” he said.

She grinned. “So you don’t need that shoulder rub I was about to offer you then?”

“I never turn down shoulder rubs.”

He was sitting next to her by then and Maya knelt in the couch and begun to gently massage his shoulder. He moved his neck from side to side trying to undo some of the tension. After a few minutes of gentle massages Maya kissed his neck. He was instantly hard. At first Jaxon was embarrassed about the impact she had on his body. But now he relished the loss of self-control.

“My massages come with a guaranteed happy ending,” she whispered. Before he had any time to process it, Maya started nibbling on his ear lobe sending shots of pleasure through him.

He gripped at her waist needing to pull her close. He loved the way she felt against him – all warmth, softness and curves. When their lips met again they became an angry tap dance. They undressed each other without breaking the kiss. Maya ran her hand down his stomach until she cupped him in her hands and stroked. He closed his eyes. He tried hard not to groan but it slipped out when she replaced her hand with her mouth. Maya licked her way from his base to his tip before making soft circles that made him jerk. Then, she took him all the way in her mouth again until he was fighting for self-control. He reached out to touch her but she edged out of the way with a grin.

“Your happy ending, remember?”

She kissed him again pressing herself against his chest. And then, she was straddling him – guiding him into her hot, slick warmth.

“Maya,” he whispered against her cheek as she developed a rhythm sure to drive them both to destruction. She leaned back, palms on his thighs as she rode him. He watched her transfixed – every so often cupping her breasts as they bounced to her rhythm. Jaxon lost it when she leaned forward panting, pressed her forehead to his and whispered, “Help me.”

He gripped her waist tightly and thrust into her hard and fast until the world crumbled around them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

You look happier every time I see you.

The random observation Kasi made when they went out for movies and wine the night before popped into Maya's mind as she strolled through the mall with Jaxon. Her friend had no idea.

There was happiness even in the smallest things; preparing dinner together, snuggling up to a movie or sharing Jade's bedtime routine. Just the thought of their little family was enough to make her break out in song and dance – but Maya wasn't a song and dance person, that was more Charlotte's alley. She missed Charlotte terribly and lived for the nights when her impish best friend would invade her dreams and make her chuckle and cry at the same time when she woke up. The week before Jade finally managed to form her babbling into a coherent word, *mama*. She'd been looking right at her when she said it with her chubby cheeks spread into a smile and that was when Maya decided that it was time to make it legal.

They'd decided to spend a lazy Saturday afternoon checking out the new Indian restaurant that opened in a nearby mall. She and Jaxon shared stories about their week at work. She was knee deep in designs while he was, as usual, buried under paperwork. They chatted over Samosas and Guan Curry. She ate with Jade fast asleep on her lap watching Jaxon as he told her another funny intern story when both their cell-phones rang at the same time.

Unwilling to shift the sleeping baby she allowed Jaxon to answer his. She couldn't tell what was being said on the other end but her stomach clenched at the way Jaxon's body and his voice became short and clipped. She half expected him to tell her that there'd been a terrible accident when he turned to her

with a far away look in his eyes but nothing could prepare her for the words that actually came out of his mouth.

“They’ve found one of the guys Maya. The Detective handling the case wants you to come down and try to pick him out of a line up.”

Her fork clattered on her plate jarring Jade out of sleep. As she cuddled the crying baby to her chest, Maya tried to fight the sinking feeling that the life she’d just managed to put back together would blow open.

Maya sat with her hands folded in her lap wishing her body shook because of the air conditioning unit whizzing behind her. The Detective looked at her with kind eyes. “Ms. Jenkins. I know this is hard for you. Can I get you anything? Some water, coffee?”

Maya shook her head. The things she figured she’d need to get through the ID parade would be frowned on by police officers.

She wished Jaxon were close enough to hold her hands or massage her back and promise her that things would be okay but she knew that this was something she needed to do on her own.

The police officer explained that the man may or may not be among the nine men standing behind the glass but Maya wasn’t paying much attention. She was trying to stay above the nightmare.

She scanned through the men, her gaze resting on the man who’d changed the course of her life. Recognition punched her so hard in the gut, Maya almost sunk into the chair.

“Number five,” she said in a soft, shaking voice. “Number five.”

The officers led the men out of the room while giving instructions to the others in the room but Maya didn’t pay attention to anything that was going on. She sunk into the chair and unscrewed the bottle of water that seemed to have

appeared. She was happy the Detective didn't listen to her when she said she didn't want anything. The cool water soothed her throat but didn't do anything to make her feel less like she was burning up inside.

"We just have one more to go," he said to her. "Are you up for it?"

Maya nodded. The sooner she got this nightmare over with, the sooner she could get back to her life. The officer guided her to a spot where she couldn't view the men and asked them all to repeat a phrase. The words made her blood turn to icy slush.

"Move. Get the fuck away."

The phrase was repeated six times before Maya heard *his* voice. She could see herself in the bank, bent over her best friend's body with blood seeping through her dress.

"Move. Get the fuck away," the man had screamed at her before pointing the gun to her when she didn't move fast enough.

A firm grip on her shoulder brought her back to the present. She looked at the Detective with tears swimming in her eyes, "Number seven."

The Detective tried to guide her into the seat but she shook her head.

"I just want to go home."

Grief, anger and pain ripped at her but when she swung open the door and saw Jaxon sitting on one of the uncomfortable, hard chairs in the waiting room she felt her first sliver of peace. When he pulled her into a hug she felt the helplessness and hopelessness drift away.

"Do you want anything?"

It was the third time Jaxon checked in on her since they'd arrived back at the townhouse two hours before... just barely.

Maya was shocked to see the amount of reporters standing outside the Precinct when she'd emerged after making the identification. They'd thrust microphones into her face while Jaxon tried to push them away from her and held a crying Jade. They arrived at the townhouse to find JT, Orlando and a couple of Orlando's police buddies waiting and that was how they finally managed to get inside. She hoped the interest died down soon because she didn't think she could handle it. Seeing *him* was like quicksand and Maya found it hard to not drown in the nightmares. Jaxon explained that the increased coverage around the anniversary of Charlotte's death sparked something in the man's girlfriend who decided she had to clear her conscience. Ironically, the thing that annoyed them so badly was the one key to finally getting Charlotte the justice she deserved. The thought filled her with foreboding. Would he confess? If he did, what would he tell the police? Would Jaxon finally know what really happened that afternoon? How would he look at her when he finally knew the truth?

"We need to talk," she said softly. Jaxon crawled into bed with her and rested his palm against her cheek, "I wish I could wipe the worry from your eyes."

She started to speak but tripped on each word until Jaxon pulled her close and told her she didn't have to say anything.

"I understand," he said. He kissed her on the forehead and held her as the tears finally came. You don't understand, Maya wanted to say, but she couldn't make the words come because once the truth was out nothing would ever be the same. Maya fell asleep in Jaxon's arms wishing that the man had never been caught. She woke up hating herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

It felt like his first day back at work after Charlotte's death all over again. People watched him with unabashed curiosity and approached him like he was a temperamental cat prone to striking at any given time.

"Why are you here?"

He'd answered the question so many times now he had begun to get irritated. He was at work because he couldn't allow his life to be derailed again. He'd slept fitfully once Maya finally drifted off with one ear trained for any sounds coming from the baby monitor. Jade didn't budge during the night, though, and he wondered if all of the excitement wore her out.

Maya had that haunted look in her eyes that he hadn't seen since the first couple weeks of her moving in with him when that horrible day in the kitchen bonded them together.

He wondered what horrible scenes replayed in her mind. God, he wished he could stop all of this. He wished they could go back to the way they were as they dined on Indian food and doted on their daughter. Did it make him selfish? What did it say that Charlotte finally got her shot at justice and he was unhappy because it threw a monkey wrench into his life.

Maya woke that morning crying. When the tears finally stopped, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He couldn't erase the bad memories but for those moments he could help her create new ones. He made love to her with the type of fervent tenderness that could only be described as worship. In those moments their worries stayed suspended above them.

At breakfast he told her he would be going to work. Kasi volunteered to come spend some time with Maya so Jaxon at least didn't have to worry about her being alone. It seemed like such a good idea at the time. Now as he sat behind his big desk piled high with files and tried to dodge the curious stares of everyone around him, Jaxon wondered if he should've stayed home and licked his wounds like everyone expected him to.

He was angry, that much was sure. He wanted to look the bastard in his eyes and then put a bullet right there. But, he knew better than that. The case would be tried and if Maya was convincing enough on the stand, the monster would be made to pay. He tried to not think of the stress Maya would face in the coming months. He tucked the ever-present possibility that the jurors would not be convinced aside. He'd give anything for a few minutes alone with the man. Mingling there with the anger was the desperate desire to know. Why? Why Charlotte? Why anyone? Why couldn't they have left without firing those guns?

He had just had a meeting with a client when Orlando strode into his office. Jaxon took one look at his brother's tense body and pinched face and felt a lurch of panic.

"Is Maya okay? Jade?"

"They are fine," his brother assured him. "But we need to talk."

He knew that he wouldn't like the news.

"Callahan phoned me about twenty minutes ago," he explained. "He said he had something he thought you needed to see before some shrewd reporter got their hands on it."

Jaxon's heart pummeled against his ribcage. "What is it?"

"May I?"

He nodded. Orlando made his way around the credenza and pushed a small flash drive into Jaxon's computer.

A tall, dark man was crouched in a chair, cigarette hanging off of his lips. Jaxon realized then that he was looking at his wife's killer for the first time. Anger made his saliva dry up.

He listened to the man talk about how he and his buddy planned to rob the small bank and how their intention was never to hurt anyone. In the tenth minute of his confession Amarie Nanton said the words that shattered his world, "It was the other one I shot at. The stupid bitch was trying to call someone on her cell phone even though we'd told everyone to

throw them on the floor. The dead one tried shoving her out the way and got hit instead. It was an accident ”

The rest of the interrogation passed in a blur.

The stupid bitch was trying to call someone on her cell phone even though we'd told everyone to throw them on the floor.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Orlando asked once the screen blacked out. He shook his head and told his brother that he needed a few minutes alone to process things. Orlando surprised him by leaving the office without much fuss. As soon as his brother was gone, Jaxon dialed a number more familiar to him than his own. She answered on the second ring. He took a deep breath and in a soft, even voice said, “It was you they were shooting at.”

“I tried telling you last night.”

He laughed harshly, “You had a year.”

His statement was met by a void of silence.

“Why didn’t you just dump the phone?” he asked.

There was silence, followed by a sniff and then, “I wish I had.”

“We need to talk Maya. I’ll leave work early.”

He didn’t wait for her to respond before he disconnected the call. Anger simmered and bubbled within him until Jaxon couldn’t run from it anymore. Hurt lingered under it so swift and deep that he buried his face in his hands and cried.

CHAPTER FORTY

Anguish was a living thing. It ripped open Maya's chest and she just couldn't seem to get enough air.

"Are you okay?" Kasi asked. She'd appeared in the archway of the living room with Jade balanced on one hip without Maya realizing. Then again the entire house could fall down around them without Maya realizing.

"He knows," she said softly.

Her friend looked back at her blankly. "Who knows what?"

"Jaxon knows that I'm the reason Charlotte's dead."

Kasi sighed and with a voice filled with tired patience said, "Darling. You didn't murder Charlotte. All you did was choose to go to the bank at the wrong time."

Maya shook her head. It was time to come clean to Kasi. She led the woman who'd become her best friend to the couch. Jade reached out for her and Maya placed a kiss on her forehead but didn't take her into her arms. If she held that sweet child she wouldn't have the courage to do what she knew she needed to do.

"I was trying to call the police," she said softly, slowly, haltingly, "they turned around and fired two shots off in my direction to get me to drop the phone. Early on they'd told us to all drop our phones in a pile but I didn't. I thought I could pull one over their heads. She tried to push me out the way but ended up getting shot in the chest instead."

"You didn't pull that trigger Maya," Kasi said. "You were trying to help."

The tears flowed in earnest then. It was easy for Kasi to say but she knew that Jaxon wasn't going to be so understanding. The anger was barely disguised when he called. It was why she would do what she was about to do.

"I need to leave," she said to Kasi. "I need to get out of here before Jax comes home."

She cried even harder then. She got the same sickening feeling in her gut the way she used to when her time at foster homes came to an end... as she started to wear out her welcome.

“Leave?” Kasi asked. “Where the hell are you going to go?”

“I’ll text you when I get there,” she said. “Just hang on to Jade until Jaxon gets here. Please.”

“Maya,” Kasi said.

But Maya was already on her feet walking towards the stairs. She’d shoved as many things into a duffel bag as she could. She’d collect the rest later. She wouldn’t give him the chance to push her out. She couldn’t handle it. Twenty minutes later she was climbing into a taxi with the things she’d managed to pack up. She tried to not look up at Kasi who stood on the stoop with Jade gurgling in her arms. The tears came anyway. She’d packed everything she could put her hand on but Maya was leaving her heart behind.

“What do you mean by gone?”

Jaxon was trying hard to not blow up on the woman who sat around his kitchen island staring morosely into a mug of something when he walked in.

“Gone as in she packed her shit and hightailed out of here before I could smack her silly.”

Jaxon was sure he’d combust before the day ended. The headache that formed behind his pupils since he watched the video was now raging.

“Where is she?” he asked.

Kasi looked at him as if she was contemplating whether or not she should give him the information. He wasn’t surprised. The woman owed her loyalty to Maya and not to him. Yet, that wouldn’t stop him from shaking her until she gave him the information he needed.

“She’s at the Marriott,” she said with a sigh. “Room 101.”

“Thanks.”

“Look,” she said. “Try not to trip out on her too much. Maya loved Charlotte too much to deliberately do anything to put her in harms way. She’s completely torn up about it. Don’t bite her head off.”

“Would you mind watching Jade a bit longer?”

Kasi sipped from the mug. “Just don’t do anything you’re gonna regret Johnson.”

And with that she left the kitchen leaving him standing shaking in the middle of it. He looked around the kitchen where he and Maya would cook meals together; joke and half way during one baking session make love. He headed to the master bedroom for the one thing he needed other than a glass of scotch.

Anger roused strong and fierce in his belly and settled alongside the hurt. He would still do what he had to do. He would deal with his feelings later.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Maya was expecting room service when she swung the door open.

Instead she found Jaxon standing there with a level of anger blazing in his eyes that she'd never seen. Not even when he told her he wished she'd died.

He looked like he was ready and willing to have a show down in the hallway so she reluctantly stepped aside and let him in. Together they were quite a sight. Her eyes were red and swollen and Jaxon looked like he could shoot bullets with his tongue.

If she'd harbored hopes that he could possibly forgive her, she knew now that she was wrong.

He stared at her for several moments before he spoke, "How the fuck could you Maya?"

"I was just trying to help," she said but her words sounded hollow to her own ears. "I never..."

He shook his head. "No Maya. I felt a lot of things when I watched that interrogation. Anger, shock and then more anger - I also felt stupid. I watched him sit there trying to pass off his guilt to you... something I'd tried doing for months but there is only one person to blame for Charl's death - him. I wish you'd trusted me enough to tell me before. I wish I didn't have to find out the way I did but..."

"I'm sorry," she said cutting him off.

"... I can understand that. But how the hell could you just run away?"

She tried to gather words on her tongue but it wasn't fast enough for Jaxon.

“You handed Jade off, packed your bags and left without saying anything.”

“I was scared. I thought you’d send me packing...”

“You owed it to Jade to wait,” he said. He was trying to control the anger in his voice, Maya realized, but he was doing a poor job at it. She sunk down on the bed trying to stop the sob in her throat. She’d really fucked up. She knew what he was thinking: how much could she love Jade, how much could she love him if she was so ready to run?

“I couldn’t...”

“We’re not something you can toss aside when things get rough Maya.”

How she could explain to him that the only time her heart broke the way it did at the thought of being without them was when Charlotte’s breathing stopped while she held her? How could she explain that she didn’t think her heart could withstand him sending her away so she left before he could... and that was the depth of love she had for them both?

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I was...”

“A coward.”

She accepted it because it was true. He sat next to her on the bed, the blazing anger he’d stormed into the room with now gone.

“I love you,” he said softly. “I wish Life chose another way to bring us together but we can’t change how things panned out.”

Emotion lodged in her throat. “I love you too. You and Jade have my entire heart. I shouldn’t have run. I’m sorry...”

He pulled her into his arms. “The way I treated you at the start didn’t inspire confidence did it?”

She shook her head. “I was so sure you’d kick me out and ban me from seeing Jade ever again.”

“You are her mother Maya. You’ve always been. We don’t need signed adoption papers to prove that.”

He wiped the tears from her face, “I definitely planned this better in my head.”

“Planned what?”

He pulled a box from his pocket. “I’ve had this ring for two months now. I didn’t plan on you Maya Jenkins but I can’t imagine a life without you in it.”

“Yes,” she whispered through tears.

He smiled that smile she’d grown to love so dearly, “I haven’t asked yet.”

“I love you,” she said and she kissed him.

It was hours later while wrapped up in bed that Jaxon was finally able to flick open the box and ask Maya to become his wife.

EPILOGUE

Sunday dinners at the Johnson household were always crazy. This Sunday was crazier than usual. Jade, his niece, toddled around with the dogs while everyone talked and laughed over each other. Across the living room Orlando and Jasper playfully argued about basketball. Normally he'd join in but things had become so tense between him and Jasper that JT stood rooted in place. It was a special Sunday for the Johnsons. Two months before Jade had turned one and Amarie Nanton, Charlotte's killer, was found guilty of first degree murder just that week. Jaxon and his family were finally free of the painful past and were looking forward to the future.

Jaxon leaned into his fiancée and kissed her. Most people weren't lucky in love once in their lifetimes but Jax managed to be lucky twice. JT sipped at his beer. He wasn't being bitter. Was he?

"Stop looking at Jax like you want to sock him in the mouth. There's a girl out there for you."

His best friend Hallie cornered him with a grin, sipping on her own beer. He grinned at her. "I'm that obvious?"

"Transparent as glass," she said. "There must be something in the air. I never thought I'd see you look at a couple with longing, Mr. Confirmed Bachelor."

"Is that so?"

He managed to keep the gentle teasing in his voice although the broken pieces of his heart beat madly against his ribcage. Could she really be that clueless? There'd been bets between his siblings and closest friends about whether Hallie could *really* be that clueless about his feelings or if she was maintaining a safe distance so that he couldn't jeopardize things.

As much as JT knew he saw his future in Hallie's deep, brown eyes every time he thought he was ready to take the plunge

and confess his feelings for her, their friendship stopped him.

Was he really willing to risk something as comfortable, familiar and solid as they had? So he'd always remained silent – bitten his tongue in a move that seemed more in line with their coward brother than himself. Yet, as time flowed on JT wondered if they were destined to break no matter how you turned it. His silence had become a tourniquet around his neck and his feelings an albatross. JT figured he might lose Hallie's friendship if he confessed his love for her but he could lose his mind if he continued to keep quiet. He watched her saunter over to the table and whisper something to Grams Nona. The elderly woman chuckled. JT was going to have to potentially sacrifice Hallie or his sanity. Only, he didn't know which one he'd rather lose.

THE END

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SAIL WITH ME

Chapter One

Emerson Crane tapped her fingers against her wine glass in the rhythm of her favorite song as she adjusted the phone she held in her other hand. The rhythm was meant to soothe her frazzled nerves but didn't distract her from the two pairs of eyes she knew bore into her back. Her best friends, Aoife and Hannah, meant to offer support but Emmy wanted to squirm under their curious gazes even though she couldn't actually see them. She took a deep breath and focused her full attention on the conversation she was having. Unfortunately, that conversation was going straight to hell.

"Yes," she said trying to sound more confident than she felt. "You understood correctly the first time. Would the trip still be available if my boyfriend couldn't come with me?"

"Did you break up before the results were announced?" Joan Sheldon asked in the brisk, no-nonsense voice Emmy already thought to be her trademark. Her voice was tinged with the incredulity and annoyance she didn't bother to mask.

"No," Emmy said. Her already non-existent confidence in her plan slipped further as she spoke, "He can't make the trip because of work commitments."

Emmy tried to cross her fingers, the way she usually did when she lied, but couldn't do it without dropping the phone or the wine glass. She couldn't part with either so she made a mental sign of the cross to assuage her guilt.

"You *are* aware that the trip is a couple escape, yes?" Joan asked after a brief pause. The woman's deep, raspy voice reminded Emmy of a six to seven pack per day smoking habit.

"I know," Emmy murmured.

“It’s not rocket science dear. If your boyfriend can’t make the trip then we’ll move on to the next couple on the list.”

Joan managed to convey an eye roll and a condescending pat on the shoulder merely with the tone of her voice. Emmy felt her cheeks go hot. She’d been stupid to enter the competition in the first place but even more so to think she would’ve been able to claim the prize Life handed to her with a heavy dollop of Irony. Images of the cruise ship’s penthouse stateroom and the nine Caribbean islands on the itinerary flashed through her mind and an involuntary sigh escaped her lips. It was, indeed, the prize of a lifetime but she seemed fated to lose it just as she’d lost her pride, self-esteem and trust when her ex-boyfriend shot their three-year relationship to hell.

“Is there something you want to tell me Ms. Crane?” Joan Sheldon asked, her voice piercing the thick, dark fog of Emmy’s memories. It was a welcome relief even though something in the woman’s tone made Emmy feel like the jig was up.

She wrapped her hand more tightly around the glass of wine and feigned ignorance, “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Look, if you and...” the sound of shuffling papers pierced the brief silence, “... Jonathan are no longer together or Jonathan never *actually* existed you should do yourself and the radio station a favor and not waste our time. I’ve been heading this competition long enough to have heard it all before. No, you won’t be allowed to take one of your girlfriends on the cruise. No, you won’t be able to substitute the man you claimed to be your boyfriend with a new boyfriend. You get the drift?”

The reasonable, rational part of Emmy’s brain screamed that it was best she took Joan’s reasonable, rational advice. She *should* stop wasting everyone’s time and admit she was a fraud.

Unfortunately, the other part of her brain was larger, louder and it was fixated on white sand and turquoise oceans.

“I understand,” she said.

“So we’ll pop by your apartment in the next two weeks to take photos for the magazine and do the interview?”

The questioning edge to Joan’s voice was Emmy’s last chance to confess. She chose not to accept it.

“Okay,” she said but there was a slight crack in her voice which, Emmy was sure, betrayed that it definitely wasn’t okay.

“And Emerson,” Joan said seconds before Emmy disconnected the call. “Remember to have both your and Jonathan’s birth certificates and social security numbers handy. We’ll need them to verify your identities.”

Emmy almost came clean then but Joan was gone before she could squeeze the words from her panic filled throat.

Chapter Two

Emmy placed the phone gingerly into its cradle as though it would break if she put too much pressure on it. Surely, she thought with a sad smile, it was her nerves at risk of breaking and not the phone. She turned to her two best friends sprawled on their couch, wine glasses in hand and interested gazes now locked directly on her.

“It’s not going to work,” she announced before taking a huge gulp of her Merlot. “Why the heck did I think it would again?”

Her friend, Hannah, fixed her dancing baby blue eyes on Aoife and arched an eyebrow.

“What?” Aoife said with a laugh adjusting the straps on the coral dress, which perfectly complemented her toffee skin. “It seemed reasonable to claim *Jonathan* had a work related conference or something.”

Emmy squeezed between her friends, “Well that didn’t work. She saw right through it! Besides listen to this, when they come for the interview and photo shoot they want to see our *birth certificates*.”

Hannah pulled her blonde curls from her ponytail and set her wine glass down on the wicker coffee table, “There goes my plan for asking Mitchell to go along with pretending to be your boyfriend.”

Emmy sighed. That would’ve been a perfect compromise. She and Mitchell got on splendidly so spending twelve days with him would be nothing short of an absolute riot.

“Hate to be the one to point out the obvious but I’m not sure Mitchell would sell being straight very well,” Aoife interjected.

Emmy grinned. They would’ve had to find a way to get around that particular issue but now it didn’t matter. Even if Mitchell might’ve been able to fake being attracted to her,

they'd still need a birth certificate to prove that he was Jonathan Smith.

“What’s the black market for birth certificates like?” Emmy joked. Then in a soft voice she said, “I’m going to call her back and tell her I lied.”

She’d look like a desperate idiot, especially after Joan had given her so many chances to come clean, but it was better to face the humiliation now instead of when Joan showed up to her front door with a camera crew tow.

Emmy reached for the phone but Aoife placed her hand over hers, “What if we got them a Jonathan Smith?”

Her friend got up from the couch and began to pace the length of their small living room. Emmy and Hannah exchanged looks. Aoife McCalla was Trouble with a British accent.

“And how do you suggest we do this?” Hannah asked. Her voice was calm and measured as it usually was when she tried to figure out just *how much* trouble Aoife would get them into. Emmy laughed. The three of them shared a room during their first year of NYU and quickly became friends. Their friendship survived four years of University and they moved in together when they decided to stay in New York and take on the world. She always thought the strength of their friendship was down to the fact their personalities complemented each other. If it weren’t for Hannah’s voice of reason, Aoife would coax her into a lot more trouble than she already did. Emmy wondered if that was even possible.

“Well thanks to Emmy and her Pocahontas complex she chose a pretty damn common name. All we need to do is find one.”

Aoife spoke as if they were about to head down to Fifth Avenue to pick up a pair of heels. She knew Aoife well enough to know that her friend probably thought it would be *that* simple.

As she talked, Aoife pulled open her laptop and sat at the small, study desk tucked into the corner of the living room.

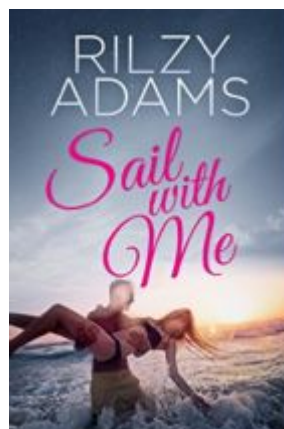
She turned to them and grinned, “Someone order pizza and crack open another bottle of wine. We’ve got work to do.”

“I think I should just let it go,” Emmy said looking at Hannah knowing she would agree with her. Hannah was the balanced one, the reasonable one. Hannah was that voice in her head preventing her from doing things she’d regret in the morning. But Hannah didn’t offer any words of wisdom this time. Instead, she started moving towards the small cabinet beside the TV set where they kept their bottles of wine.

“Let’s make this happen,” Hannah said. When she saw the dubious look on Emmy’s face, she flashed her a bright smile, “Never say never. It’s worth a shot.”

Emmy grumbled, reached for her phone and ordered a large pizza from the pizza place on the corner they used so frequently each delivery guy knew their names and orders. Emmy padded across the living room to where her friends gathered. She was willing to try if they were. After all, what was the worst thing that could happen?

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TO THE READER

Thank you so much for taking this journey with Maya and Jaxon. I really hope you enjoyed the read. Help 'The Gift' find its way to more readers by leaving a rating or review on Amazon and Goodreads!

Also, don't forget to join my [mailing list](#) for updates on new releases, promotions and so much more!

Much Love.

Rilzy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rilzy Adams believes that all you need is love. Or, at least it should. She may, or may not, be a huge Beatles fan.

She spends too much time living in her head watching the romantic lives of her 'imaginary friends' play out and then being the chatty friend to tell the world about them.

When she isn't living in her head, she must show up to work every day and be a lawyer.

She resides on an island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, which is amazing for her sun addiction, love affair with Prosecco and sushi worship.

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