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ALI PARKER



*The
Bridesmaid*

*And The
Bestman*

YOU'VE GOT TO BE
KIDDING

A Not You Again Novel

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING



ALI PARKER

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DESCRIPTION



The last time I saw my baby daddy, we were in the backseat of a limo at his brother's wedding.

Making magic—or a kiddo.

No judging. There was a lot of liquor involved and the man is a god.

He passed out before I could tell him my name, but payback is hell.

I stole his pants for good measure. I'm sure he enjoyed that.

It was supposed to be one night of fun.

Just one night of being the crazy, free girl I was before I took over my dad's company. And it was that.

Until I saw those two lines pop up on an innocuous-looking stick.

No way I could tell him.

Fast forward a year, and he walks into my father's company as my new construction partner.

His wicked smile has me swooning.

I'm ready for love, but he's still the same playboy bachelor he's always been.

Of all the men in the world to have to work beside day after day, how did I end up with him?

I love him. I hate him. I love that I hate him.

Any way you look at it, my luck blows.
And all I can think about is our one night.
You've got to be kidding me.

Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders

Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

[Join the fam Here!](#)

CHAPTER 1



MAVERICK

Lucerne was a beautiful city, with the lights reflecting off the lake at night and snow-capped mountains in the distance. However, when my brother and his fiancée decided to get married here, I was skeptical.

Karson had told me that I'd understand as soon as we got here, and with the wedding in full swing around me and the large windows offering a view of the famed Chapel Bridge, I finally got it. The place was romantic as shit and Karson and Payton deserved to have their fairy tale begin someplace as magical as this.

I caught glimpses of the view beyond the windows as I strode across the reception hall, but unlike my brother and his wife, I wasn't after romance or a fairy tale tonight. I was after Allison, Payton's best friend and maid of honor.

The two women were dancing in the center of the intimate space, their hands in the air as they laughed and swayed and twirled. Karson had warned me about going for it with Allison tonight, reminding me that he and Payton had once hooked up at a wedding and that this was where it had led them, but I wasn't worried.

I loved my brother and my brand new sister-in-law, but Karson had always chased the dream of the wife, the kids, and the picket fence. Payton might not have felt the same way, and she would smack me for even thinking this, but the girl had never stood a chance.

As soon as he'd set his sights on his best friend's little sister, that had been it. My brother was nothing if not persuasive, tenacious, and determined. He'd given her time, taken it slowly, and even let her push him around a little bit while they'd been working on a project together, and in doing so, he'd won her over.

Their story might've started with them hooking up at her brother's wedding, but that wasn't how they'd ended up here. They'd ended up here solely on account of the fact that Karson wasn't going to give up until they did.

Which was why this story, my story, wasn't starting tonight. I had zero intention of winning anyone over or making her mine for keeps. She would simply be mine for a little while tonight. Mine to please and mine to derive pleasure from, but that was where it would end. None of this "mine to protect and hold, love and cherish" bullshit.

As I pushed my way toward Allison through a crowd, a small hand landed on my bicep.

"Come have a drink with me," a feminine voice insisted happily from somewhere at my side, and although she wasn't slurring, the voice definitely had that tipsy, carefree quality to it.

As I turned to face her, I grinned. "Sure. What's your poison?"

Full lips painted cherry red parted. Then a dainty pink tongue darted out to swipe across them before she shrugged. "Uh, it doesn't really matter anymore. I started with wine, but I'm tired of that now. Let's go see what they've got."

Her grip on my arm tightened. Then she was dragging me through the crowd toward the bar. I'd zeroed in on her lips at first because that color she'd painted them had demanded it, but as she pulled me along to her intended target, I took a good look at the rest of her.

Flaming mahogany red hair, loose and cascading in ringlet curls just past her shoulders, bounced as she moved, the ends brushing against creamy skin between the shoulders. She was

wearing a shimmering wine-red , bridesmaid dress that hugged her full, luscious curves, and when she glanced up at me to make sure I was still following her, I found myself looking into slightly hazy but still sparkling glacier blue eyes.

Between her lips, hair, and dress, the woman reminded me of a fire hydrant, but a sexy one. I grunted at the thought. *A sexy fire hydrant? Maybe I shouldn't have another drink after all.*

But fuck it. My brother only got married once and we were celebrating. With one last look over my shoulder at Allison, I let go of the idea of making her mine for tonight and kept following the walking red flag beside me instead.

Perhaps the universe was trying to warn me about something. I'd never seen a more literal representation of a red flag, but the alcohol and the joy infusing the air numbed any tingling that might've warned me there was trouble ahead.

I grinned at her again when we finally reached the bar and she turned to face me, her eyes alight with mischief when they met mine. "Have you decided what you're going to have yet?"

"Ouzo," I said as I spotted a bottle of the Greek liqueur standing on one of the glass shelves behind the counter. "I've never had it before, but I've heard good things. Our beloved bride and groom allegedly guzzled this stuff one night in Mykonos and it worked out pretty well for them."

She laughed, her head tilting slowly to one side as she gave me an assessing look. "I grabbed the closest person to come take a shot with me, but it looks like I grabbed the right guy by happy accident. Ouzo it is."

My gaze dropped down to take her in now that she was in front of me. One of my brows arched when I realized she was barefoot. Her feet were tiny, her toes adorned with thin little rings and her nails painted yet another shade of red.

"Did you lose your shoes?" I asked.

She laughed again, leaning across the counter to shout our order to the bartender before turning back to me. "I've been

told I'm that crazy girl at the wedding. You know, the one whose shoes are always off by eight thirty?"

If I wasn't mistaken, that girl's panties often came off by nine, but that definitely worked for me. "Hey, as long as you're comfortable. I wouldn't be able to keep those portable torture chambers women refer to as shoes on my feet for too long either."

The bartender lined up our short, stubby glasses and filled them up, and she moved her amused eyes away from mine to glance at the liquid, waiting on us to toss it down. As she picked up her glass and looked back at me, she shrugged.

"My shoes are actually pretty comfortable. I don't buy anything that's going to torture me. I refuse to pay good money for pain. There are people who will give me that for free if I ask."

My eyes widened, but then I let out a burst of laughter. "Wow. Okay. You're not wrong. Just for the record, you're barking up the wrong tree if that's what you're after. I'm not really in the business of providing pain."

A coy smile spread on her lips. "I'm not barking up any tree. All I wanted was a shot, mister. Although you're the one who chose the ouzo and I'm pretty sure it's going to have me in a world of pain tomorrow morning, but I can take it. If we worry too much about tomorrow, we'll only be letting today pass us by."

"You're pretty sharp and pretty wise for a drunk person." I picked up my glass and clinked it against hers. "Here's to not letting today pass us by."

Shiny blue eyes locked on mine, she brought her shot to those full lips and drank it down without wincing, but then she shuddered and laughed as she smacked the glass back down on the counter. "Holy shit. That stuff isn't playing around. You want another one?"

I was so surprised that I snorted as I tried not to laugh. "Why not? We're going to be in a world of pain tomorrow

already, and since we're not worrying about it, I suppose we might as well do it properly."

"Go big or go home," she agreed, signaling for the bartender to bring us another round.

I stared at her for a beat, marveling over the fact that she'd literally grabbed me away from the girl I'd been planning on spending the night with and now, I couldn't even remember that girl's name. This woman was hot, curvy, fast with a comeback, and a definite good time. She was something else, alright, and I was here for it.

After we took our next shot, I held my hand out toward her. "Do you want to dance?"

"Does anyone ever say no to that question?" she shot back without even having to think about it, taking my offered hand and following me to the dance floor.

It was loud everywhere, but since the speakers were all facing this way, it was even louder here. I didn't try to talk, simply raising her arm and spinning her into me as I led her onto the floor. Her warm, soft body pressed up against mine, her head tilting back as she wound her arms around my neck.

Those blue eyes were still filled with amusement as she stared up at me, but there was definitely heat creeping into them now too. As we danced, I held her to me, my leg between hers and our bodies as close as they could get with clothes on.

She moved like a dream come true, loose and uninhibited as she gave me her full attention song after song after song. It was fun, but the longer I held her and kept looking at her, the longer my hands were on those delicious curves, and the longer she moved her body against mine, the more sexually charged the air between us became.

It'd been late by the time I'd spoken to my brother before she'd grabbed me, and I was pretty sure that I only had a little bit of time left if I was going to hook up at his wedding. Plus, I was horny as hell after dancing with her for so long, and by the glazed look in her eyes, I was confident she felt the same.

Bending my head, I murmured into her ear. “I want to get out of here. Come with me?”

She pulled away to look at my face, then caught her lower lip between her teeth as she nodded and slid her hand into mine. Without hesitating, I took her outside to the limousine, planning on telling the driver to take us around the old town, but when we got there, he was nowhere in sight.

The valet spoke up from behind us. “He went to get something to eat. I can call him if you’re ready to leave?”

I shook my head, sending the man a grateful smile for sharing the information. “No, that’s fine. We’re good here.”

After squeezing her hand, I released it and opened the door, motioning her in ahead of me. “Your chariot awaits, m’lady.”

She shivered in the cold night air, smiling up at me before she practically dove into the heated backseat. I chuckled, shaking my head before I climbed in after her and closed the door behind me. The night had taken an interesting turn when she’d grabbed me for that shot. That was for sure.

I wasn’t complaining about it, though. Especially not when I turned to find her sitting only inches away from me. She hadn’t moved all the way to the other side of the seat after she’d gotten in, and I was barely seated before she slid closer to me, her head tilting as she smiled and looked right into my eyes.

“A limousine?” she asked. “That’s creative. What’s wrong with the janitor’s closet?”

I took her hands and pulled her into me until her tits were pushing up against my chest again. “If I know my brother, he’s going to be pulling his bride away to somewhere inside soon, and call me crazy, but since they’re the bride and groom, I thought we could leave the janitor’s closet to them. I’m not particularly into four-ways.”

She giggled, letting go of my hands to place hers at the nape of my neck. “How very considerate of you, but I’m sure they’ll go someplace better than a janitor’s closet to

consummate their marriage. This is nice, though. I guess the only question is now that you've gotten me out of there, what are you planning on doing with me?"

"Oh, I have a few ideas." I grinned as I took her face in my palm, moving forward until my mouth met hers and I kissed her hard.

As I did, I wrapped my free hand around her knee and tugged at it, lifting my weight off the seat for a moment so I could lay her down before covering her body with my own. She let out a peal of laughter, speaking against my lips without breaking the kiss.

"That was a smooth move," she murmured. "Got any more of them?"

I chuckled. "Why, yes. I do. I'm so glad you asked. Hang onto the seat and let me hear you, baby. We're not leaving here until I've shown you every last one of those ideas I've had."

And that was exactly what I proceeded to do.

CHAPTER 2



PENELOPE

Maverick was drunk, but dear Lord, the man could kiss. If it felt like this when he'd had a few, I couldn't even begin to imagine how great it would be when he was sober. His lips were soft, but the kiss itself was hard and passionate.

He tasted like ouzo and scotch, but there was a deeper element to the flavor. A unique complexity that was all him. The faint, masculine scent of sandalwood and leather enveloped me, and I melted even further into him.

There was nothing quite as sexy to me as a man who smelled good, and this one's fragrance was divine. As was the feeling of his hot, hard body pressed against every inch of mine.

He positively dwarfed me with his massive frame, and I had no idea why he'd chosen a limousine when there was no way it could ever be comfortable for him, but he had and I was happy. We were alone, and I finally had his delectable lips devouring mine.

I'd spotted him for the first time at the rehearsal dinner last night and I'd been unable to keep my eyes off him all through dinner and then again once I saw him earlier.. As Karson's best man, Maverick had been front and center for the whole service, and as I'd walked down the aisle ahead of Payton, I hadn't been able to stop staring at him. Payton's new husband was something to look at, for sure, but his brother was in a league all of his own.

I knew my friend had grown up next door to them and that her hubs was her brother's best friend, but I honestly didn't know how she'd ever had eyes for Karson with Maverick *right there*. Payton and I had met through work a few years ago, and we'd gotten close, but I'd never met her brother-in-law before tonight.

Hell, I only knew his name because we were both part of the bridal party, but if I were Payton, I'd have gone for him instead. Her loss was my gain, though.

With his luxurious, thick, jet-black hair and vivid green eyes, the man was a tall drink of water and it just so happened that I was parched. It didn't hurt that he was huge. I'd always had a thing for the big guys, and he was one of the biggest I'd come across in a long time.

I didn't know quite how tall he was, but my best guess would be close to seven feet. With broad, proud shoulders, a wide, strong chest, and arms like tree trunks, he wasn't just tall either. He really was just big.

All that remained to be seen now was whether what he was packing in his undies matched the rest of him, or whether he was one of those unfortunate men who was big everywhere but where it mattered. From what I'd felt while we'd been dancing, that wasn't the case, but the proof would be in the pudding—or the touching, rather.

As his hands glided up under my dress, running along the outsides of my thighs, I shivered underneath him, letting my own hands wander across the expanse of his back and down the ropes of muscle in his arm under his shirt.

Surprisingly, he moaned when I rocked my hips against his as I felt him up, and the sound was like a lightning bolt striking right between my legs. The big, burly guys were hardly ever loud, but this one didn't seem shy about it when he liked something and I *loved* that.

On a mission to make him moan again and again, I touched him everywhere I could reach and my frenzy sparked his own. Or perhaps it just made him realize that I wasn't a doll he was going to break if he didn't hold back.

Maverick had been an incredibly sexy man standing at the front of that chapel in his tailored suit, but as his self-control snapped in the back of the limo, he was a fucking god. Within seconds, my dress was bunched up around my hips and he snapped my panties off in his bare hands, his fingers seeking out the heat of me and a primal growl spilling from his lips when he found what he was searching for.

I trembled when those long, strong fingers slid between my folds, stroking every slick, sensitive part of me until I was writhing beneath him. His voice was a low command in my ear when his mouth finally broke away from mine.

“Didn’t I tell you I wanted to hear you?”

I sucked in a breath when he flicked a fingertip across my clit. Then I let out the loud moan I’d been holding back. Feeling rather than seeing his responding grin as he kissed a path down my throat, I realized that he’d been serious. He really did want to hear me, and since it wasn’t often that I completely let loose, I decided then and there to give him what he wanted.

It wasn’t long before I figured out that he’d have gotten it anyway. The man’s fingers were talented, his touch soft and teasing at first but his speed and pressure increasing exactly when I needed it to. The first time he pushed me over the edge, he drove me right there like a professional driver hell bent on reaching the finish line, and he sent me hurtling past it at full speed.

The orgasm crashed into me so hard and so fast that I cried out, clinging to his shoulders as I came apart underneath him and feeling like he was the only thing keeping me on this plane of existence. I was still reeling in the aftermath, totally surprised by the force of the sudden climax, when his fingers were replaced by his mouth.

My eyes flew open, and I had no idea when he’d done it, but he was now kneeling on the floor of the fancy car, his head between my legs and those big hands keeping them spread with a firm grip on my knees. Borderline powerless to the onslaught of sensation, I considered asking him to stop to give

me a minute, but then he sucked my clit between his lips and that traitorous little bundles of nerves reignited.

Pleasure sped through me all over again, and although I wasn't quite there yet, I would be soon if he kept that up. Threading my fingers into his hair, I toyed with it, tugging and pulling but making it clear that I didn't want him to stop.

The interior of the limo was filled with loud moans, but it took me a moment to realize they were all mine. Until he slid a thick finger into me again and I felt my muscles milking him, and then his sounds of pleasure joined my own.

I didn't think I'd ever been as absorbed in the moment, as lost in the heat of passion as I was right now. Hovering somewhere between earth and *orgasmlandia*, I couldn't seem to stop staring at the man who was eating me out like he hadn't had a four-course meal just a little over an hour ago.

He seemed insatiable, and when those vibrant eyes suddenly opened and snapped up to meet mine, the raw need I saw in them sent me rocketing headfirst into another earth-shattering climax. This had never happened to me before. I'd had multiple orgasms, sure, but never this close together and never this intense.

Maverick saw me through quickly, and by the time I was able to focus on the real world around me again, he was seated beside me, his pants and underwear off and his giant cock in his fist as he looked at me lying there, boneless and sated.

I wasn't done yet, though. Especially not now that I knew that what he was packing matched the rest of him. Smirking as his gaze met mine, he held his free hand out to me and I took it. "You had enough yet?"

I shook my head lazily but pushed myself up off my back and slung one of my legs over both of his, not stopping until I was straddling him. "I definitely haven't had enough yet. Why? Have you?"

He let out a dark chuckle, his features tight with restraint as I positioned myself above him. "Tell me if I hurt you. I

don't think I'm going to be able to take it slow once I get inside you."

My palms were on his chest and his heart was hammering beneath one of them, letting me know that he was probably serious. He was massively turned on, and it just turned me on all over again to know it.

"Do your worst, Maverick. I can take it."

Another dark chuckle rumbled out of him, but then he moved his hands to my hips and held me steady before bringing me down on him. I might've screamed his name as he filled me up in one powerful thrust, and I swore I'd never felt as full before. He stretched me out in all the right ways, and he started moving, touching me in places I hadn't even known I had places. Tingles ran through me and I already knew that the pleasure he'd already given me was nothing in comparison to what was to come.

An indeterminate amount of time later, I moaned in protest when he pulled all the way out of me, but then my eyes rounded when he mumbled something about needing a condom. When I sent him a panicked look, his eyes smoldered into mine as he shook his head.

"Don't worry. I haven't come yet."

"Yeah, I know," I managed between labored breaths. "It's not just that, though."

He got a condom out of his pocket and quickly rolled it on before resuming the position we'd been in before. "I'm clean. I work too hard to get it on often enough to have caught something."

Before I could remind him that it only took once to catch a disease, he was inside me and making me lose my mind all over again. *Later. We'll talk about it later.*

Surrendering to the almost overwhelming sensation of having him inside me, thrusting, and rocking, and grinding, I let go of my worries for now and focused instead on his gorgeous face, when it was all scrunched up in pleasure, and the low sounds he was making. It didn't take either of us long

to get there, and when we did, I was pretty sure the world exploded around us.

It'd been hot, fast, and perfect, and I wanted to do it again and again, but first, we needed to talk. *After I catch my breath.*

“Hey, Maverick?” I said once the feeling returned to my limbs and my heartrate was back to normal. “Are you sure you're clean? Have you been tested recently?”

The big man didn't respond and I frowned where I lay with my head on his shoulder. When I looked up, his eyes were closed and his mouth half open, and it was only then that I noticed how even his breathing had become.

He's asleep? He's asleep! Crap. What a dick.

Surely, he knew we'd have to talk after, but it didn't look like he was too concerned about it at all. He hadn't even asked me yet if I was clean. For all he knew, he was ridden with every disease known to man and yet, he was just taking a little nap first.

I scoffed, pulling off him and climbing out of his lap. I winced slightly, knowing I was going to feel him inside me for at least the next day or so, but to hell with him. I wasn't hanging around to reassure him when he'd just gone and passed out on me.

My panties were a ruined scrap of material on the floor, but as I pulled my dress back into place and smoothed out my hair, I saw his pants and underwear lying beside them and I smiled. I didn't have to see this guy again, and since he was the asshole who hadn't even been able to keep his eyes open for long enough to have a simple, necessary conversation, I decided I might as well have some fun with it.

As I opened the door and climbed out of the luxury vehicle, I took his clothes with me. I was tempted to go back to the reception hall, but I didn't. I knew I looked a mess, and frankly, I was ready to hit the hay myself.

I was just going to do it safely ensconced in my bed at the hotel rather than in the back of a limousine with a stranger. What we'd done tonight had been a touch irresponsible—

maybe more than a touch—but I'd get tested soon just to be on the safe side. Other than that, it'd also been fun.

A lot of fun. Fun I wouldn't have minded repeating, but I already knew it wasn't going to happen and I was okay with it. I didn't have a lot of one-night stands, but this had been one for the books. Best man Maverick in Lucerne.

I wouldn't be forgetting it anytime soon. At the time, I just didn't know what exactly I would come to remember this night for, and I wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told me.

CHAPTER 3



MAVERICK

I started coming to slowly, at first only aware of the pounding in my head and the fact that my mouth tasted like crap. As I realized I was sitting up and that I seemed to be naked, I wrenched my eyes open and squinted around the semi-dark interior of the limousine.

It all came trickling back in then. The sexy fire hydrant. The hum of arousal in my veins while we danced. Bringing her out here and then completely losing myself between her thighs. *Damn, that was hot.*

As I looked around, though, I realized I was alone now. The last thing I remembered was coming so hard that I blacked out and then this. Now.

Was she even real? Was it all a dream?

Groaning when even moving my eyes made my head hurt even more, I squeezed them shut and slowly wriggled my ass on the seat. *Yep. There's a reason my junk is cold. I'm definitely naked.*

When I carefully opened my eyes again and checked the time on the digital clock in the car, I realized that I couldn't have been out for very long. It'd been a cat nap at best, but it'd allowed the alcohol to catch up with me in a big way.

With the girl gone, the hookup done, and the hangover already setting in, it seemed like a good time to call it a night. Not wanting to offend my head again, I moved slowly as I looked for pants—only to realize that they weren't here.

My eyes flew wide open at the realization, and I groaned again, but the fucking fire hydrant—whose name I didn't even know—had taken my damn pants. And my boxer-briefs. My heart lurched into my chest when it dawned on me what this meant.

My phone was in my jacket pocket—along with my hotel room key—and my jacket was hanging over the back of my chair inside the reception hall. So while the sex hadn't been a dream, it was definitely turning into a fucking nightmare.

I was going to have to go back inside without any pants on and hope that everyone who was left was too drunk themselves by now to notice. Another groan tore out of me. Thankfully, my parents and Payton's had left shortly after dinner, but this was still going to suck.

I shuffled out of the limousine into the frosty night air, cursing when the ice-cold breeze cupped my previously toasty balls. The valet who had told me about the driver earlier was gone, so I couldn't even bribe him to go grab my phone for me, and there were no other people from the reception loitering around outside that I could ask either.

It didn't surprise me. Not even the most hardcore smoker would be this desperate for a fix. So close to midnight and right next to the lake, the weather was *not* balmy. All hope of avoiding the inevitable died a slow, painful death in my chest, but since I wanted to hang onto my testicles instead of losing them to frostbite, I didn't have much of a choice.

I had to get in there. I planted one hand over my ass and the other at my front to keep people from seeing the goods. Then I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and pasted a cocky smirk on my face. I never let people see me sweat, and I wasn't about to start now.

The table where I'd been sitting with my brother and his bride was right in the center of the reception hall, and as soon as I walked in and started striding to it as confidently as I could, the hooting and hollering started. At this point, my only saving grace was that it was only the younger, drunker crowd left.

All the family, coworkers, and older people had retired for the evening. *Grandma Daisy is probably turning over in her grave right now.*

But I acknowledged the cheering and applause with little bows as I walked. Karson was laughing so hard he was bent over double, but his messy hair, missing tie, and Payton's lack of lipstick told me I wasn't the only one who'd *enjoyed* their wedding.

He stood up immediately despite his laughter and grabbed my jacket from where it was hanging. He bent over to whisper something into Payton's ear before he took pity on me and met me halfway. "What are you doing, bro? I know the formalities are over, but don't you think this is taking it a bit too far?"

I slung the jacket over my arms to hide my swinging dick. "I don't have any pants."

He snorted. "No shit. Come on. Our room is the closest."

I followed him out of the reception hall after turning around to give one last bow. I asked the obvious question. "Why are you taking me back to your suite instead of your bride?"

"My bride hasn't lost her pants."

"She's not wearing any."

He laughed, winking at me as we walked down a long corridor leading to an elevator. "She's not wearing any panties anymore, either. Speaking of which, how exactly did you lose your pants?"

I shrugged. "Same way Payton lost her panties."

"Uh, no. I don't think so, because I know for a fact that I didn't rip your pants off with my bare hands."

"You wouldn't be able to either. My pants are good quality," I joked. "They wouldn't tear just like that."

He rolled his eyes. "Those are fighting words for a man who has all of God's good work visible right now. Seriously, what happened?"

We got off the elevator and walked to a suite at the end of another corridor, and he swiped his keycard over the reader while I explained. “I’m not too sure, but I think I pissed off a sexy fire hydrant by falling asleep after we had sex. She retaliated by turning me into Donald fucking Duck.”

Karson laughed, tossing me a towel to cover up as I collapsed on the bed in the room where we’d gotten ready earlier. “A sexy fire hydrant, huh? I know for a fact it wasn’t Allison because I saw her leave with one of their other friends earlier.”

“Nah, I got over Allison after the first shot of ouzo.” I groaned, my head spinning again now that all the excitement was over. “I got sidetracked and then ended up blowing her mind in the limo. On a side note, you may want to get another limo to take you to the honeymoon suite, chalet thing that you booked.”

He sighed. “That’s only for tomorrow night. We’ve got the honeymoon suite here for tonight.”

“What was the limo still doing here, then?” I asked groggily, then took the towel off my lap as I jiggled my hips. “I’d recommend its backseat. This guy sure liked it.”

Karson grunted and tossed a pair of sweats at me. “Are you really referring to your dick as *this guy*? You’re hammered, Mav. I think you need to get some sleep.”

“Like you’ve never referred to your dick as anything other than your dick.” I scoffed, flicking the sweats off my lap too. “Why do you keep trying to cover me up? It’s not like you haven’t seen me naked before.”

“The better question is why you don’t want to be covered up,” he retorted. “Look, there are some clothes in the bags that were left behind here. We’ve got the room for tonight and I’m pretty sure the other guys are all only going to come back to get their shit in the morning, so help yourself to whatever you need, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, then rolled my eyes. “The fire hydrant was so sexy, dude.”

“You said that already.”

“No, but seriously. It was insane.” I smirked, then nearly fell over on the mattress when I tried to sit up again. “She was so into it, and then I was so into it, and then she came, and came, and—”

“Yeah, I think I got the picture. Funny how you seem way more proud of yourself about that than you are embarrassed about Donald-Ducking it at my wedding.”

I chuckled. “Don’t pretend to care. I saw you laughing and I saw Payton cracking up. You’re glad people are going to have a story to tell about this shindig.”

When he prompted me to cover up again, I shook my head. “No, bro. Don’t hide him. He did magical things tonight. He deserves to do a freedom victory lap.”

Karson groaned, turning his back on me as he rummaged through one of the bags on the floor. “I’m going to find you some toothpaste. There are extra, complimentary toothbrushes in the bathroom. Since this was the groom’s suite, there are some drinks in the fridge that are included in what we’ve already paid for. Just drink the water and the sodas and leave the alcohol alone, okay? I don’t want you making another drunken appearance at the reception. Payton and I were just about to leave, so I won’t be there to help you if you do, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it,” I muttered, laying my head back on the pillow when I realized trying to get up was only going to result in me falling down. “I think I might just sleep here tonight.”

“That’s a good idea, bud,” he said, his voice now coming from somewhere near the door. I didn’t bother lifting my head back up to check. “Sleep it off, Mav. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I tossed my hand up in a wave and hit myself in the face when I lowered it down again after I heard him shutting the door. Laughter bubbled out of me as I shook my head. I knew the toothpaste was here somewhere and that I should probably

grab a bottle of water before I fell asleep, but I was just so comfortable and it seemed so much safer to just stay put.

“What a wedding,” I muttered, still laughing as I finally closed my eyes again and drifted back to sleep.

CHAPTER 4



PENELOPE

Hungover as hell, I flinched when my phone started ringing as I left the bathroom the next morning. In only the hotel robe after my shower, I moved gingerly toward the nightstand where I'd left the screeching device, but then I smiled when I saw Payton's name on the screen.

"Good morning, Mrs. Neidum," I said lightly after taking the call. "This a surprise. I wasn't expecting to hear from you until you got back after your honeymoon."

She laughed. "I just had to call to thank you. It sounds like you were responsible for the best thing about the wedding."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the great and cocky Maverick Neidum stumbling back into the reception hall with his ass out and only his hands to cover what God gave him."

I stilled. "How did you know I was responsible for that?"

"Karson said he kept rambling about a sexy fire hydrant. I put two and two together when I remembered you were wearing the red bridesmaid dress. I actually thought he was going to hit on Allison, but then I remembered she chose the pinker shade of red for her dress. Seriously, thank you. I've been waiting for someone to cut him down to size my whole life. Women are always throwing themselves at his feet and no one has ever pulled one over on him like that. It was brilliant. Totally the best part of the day."

"You mean other than the getting married part, right?"

She laughed. “Welllllll, the two are pretty close in comparison. I’ve been waiting for a girl to put Mav in his place for much longer than I’ve been waiting to get married, but sure. The second best part of the day, then.”

Despite the hangover and the humiliation, I smiled. “Happy to be of service. As long as you enjoyed it, I’m glad. I was afraid you might be a little pissed off at me about it.”

“Nah. Whatever he did, I’m sure he deserved it,” she said. “That boy has been getting away with doing whatever he wants for much too long. It was about time there were some consequences for his actions.”

He was hardly a boy anymore, but I supposed that in her mind, he probably always would be. When she talked about the brothers, there was a certain fondness in her voice that only came with remembered childhood memories.

Before she and Karson had finally gotten together, she’d never spoken about them to me. Then she hadn’t been able to stop speaking about him when he came back into her life on that project they’d both been on, but she hadn’t had particularly nice things to say.

“What do you and Sienna have planned for the day?” she asked. “We’ve got the bridal party breakfast if you’re still planning on joining us. After that, we take off for the first leg of our honeymoon.”

That was a hard no from me. Maverick was part of the bridal party too and I did not want to see him this morning. “Thanks for the reminder, but we’ve got a sightseeing tour booked and paid for a little later. Until then, I’m going to nurse my hangover, swear off alcohol for the rest of my life, and take a good look at the decisions I’ve been making.”

I was joking, but maybe I shouldn’t have been. Payton laughed. “Sure thing. I get it. Karson’s head is pretty sore this morning, too. Send my love to Sienna, and thanks again to both of you for being here for me.”

“Of course,” I said. “Thanks again for letting me bring her as a plus-one even though I’m single.”

“Hey, the best date to bring to weddings is your best friend. I get it. Besides, at least this way, you guys got to make a nice girls’ trip of it. Enjoy your sightseeing tour. Lucerne is great. You’re going to love it once you’ve had the chance to explore a little.”

“I love it already,” I said, and I meant it.

My best friend and I had only landed the night before the wedding and we only had a couple of days here before we’d be heading home, but we were absolutely planning on making the best of it. From what we’d seen so far, the city was pure romance and magic, and since those were two of my favorite things, I was happier than ever that I hadn’t turned down her request to be a bridesmaid when I’d realized there would be international travel involved.

Never one to miss out, Sienna had agreed to join me immediately and thankfully, Payton had been more than happy for her to come with me. *I wonder what she got up to last night.*

All I knew was that one minute we’d been at the bar together, and then some guy had started talking to her, and then I’d lost track of her after he’d taken her to the dance floor. Which was how I’d found myself in need of a new drinking partner and stumbled into the so-called *great and cocky Maverick*.

“I’d better go,” Payton said, her voice easing me out of my thoughts. “Karson is pouting because I’m not paying enough attention to my new husband. I just wanted to say thank you again and thanks for the entertainment. See you soon.”

“Don’t you mean see you next month after you get back from the honeymoon?” I teased. “Good luck, Pay. I have a feeling you’re going to need it if he’s already pouting just because you’re on the phone.”

“Husbands have needs,” Karson joked, and I laughed when I realized she must’ve put me on speaker at some point. “This husband definitely has needs. Love ya, Penny. I’m going to take her phone now. Speak to you later.”

Just before the call cut off, I heard a squeal of laughter coming out of her and then the line went dead. I smiled. Those two were so perfect for each other.

As I saw the time, I realized that I still had a couple of hours before the sightseeing tour. Joy spiraled through me. As much as I loved a good wedding and a good party—and last night had been both of those—I desperately needed a nap. Now that I was clean, I was realizing how exhausted I still was, and frankly, I wasn't surprised.

A night spent drinking at twenty-nine certainly hit a lot harder than the same thing at twenty-one. Gratefully sinking back into my glorious, wonderfully soft, and massive bed, I was just closing my eyes when there was a knock at my door.

For fuck's sake. Can I just sleep?

As if whoever was on the other side had heard the thought, they knocked again and I groaned but sat up. "I'll be right there."

"Move that tight ass, Penny. The coffee's getting cold and I've heard there's nothing like it."

I sighed, but Sienna had said the magic word. *Coffee.*

As I opened the door for my friend, I realized she looked much too rested and bright-eyed. "What happened to you last night? You look like you were tucked into bed by eight."

She giggled, giving me a sidelong look as she brushed past me, carrying a tray with two takeout coffees in one hand and a brown paper bag with the most delicious scents wafting out of it in the other. "You look like you threw yourself under a train. Here. Have a breakfast pastry and some caffeine. I wanted to find out if you wanted to go for a walk before the tour, but it doesn't really look like you're in a state to go anywhere."

When she handed over the cardboard cup, I nearly fucking kissed her. "Thank you. You're the best friend in the entire world, and if you have a croissant in that bag, I'll marry you."

She laughed, wagging her brows at me as she pulled out the best breakfast of them all. And it had chocolate chips in it. "Do you want to give me a ring now or later?"

“Later,” I said, holding out my free hand. “I need to devour that first, but seriously. Thank you. You’re saving my life right now.”

“You’re welcome.” She pulled out another croissant for herself, then walked over to the small sitting area in my room and looked me over again as she sat down. “Do you want to talk about it? I haven’t seen you looking this rough in a long time.”

I sighed. “That’s because crazy Penny has had to move over for Penelope more often than not recently. I can’t be that girl all the time anymore. It was fun to see her, but my head, heart, liver, and kidneys are thankful she won’t be back for a while.”

Sienna chuckled and dipped her head in a nod. “If it’s any consolation, I’ve seen a few of the guests around the hotel this morning and they all look as banged up as you do. I would’ve been too, but Tatum, that guy I met? It turns out he can’t sit still. We danced until I was ready to drop, then we went for a walk, then he brought me back to my room, kissed me goodnight like the sweetest gentleman ever, and left me to go to sleep.”

“Your night sounds a lot more like what I had in mind for a romantic night at a wedding in Switzerland. I guzzled ouzo with the best man and had my panties ripped off in the back of a limousine, and then he fell asleep before we could have an important conversation about safe sex.”

Her lips parted in surprise, and I didn’t blame her. “Penny? Do we need to get you to a doctor?”

“No.” I groaned, swiping a hand over my face as I sat down across from her. “I don’t think so. I’ll make an appointment once we get home, but he said he was clean.”

“This is *not* like you,” she commented after a beat, her brown eyes dark with concern. “A drunken one-night stand in the back of a limousine? How did that happen?”

“I don’t know,” I moaned, sinking back into the soft cushions and taking a huge bite of my buttery croissant. It

melted in my mouth and I focused on the gloriousness of that and sweetness of the chocolate instead of the bitter regret churning in my stomach. Once I'd swallowed, I shrugged at her. "He's so hot, and we were drinking, and then we were dancing, and boy, can he move. But I mean, like, really move. It just happened."

She chuckled when I stopped rambling. "You definitely don't need to justify it to me, girl. I feel you. That boy is sex on a stick. He's built to be part of the bad decisions women make. It's just not like you to have a one-night stand instead of trying to build a relationship with someone."

"I know, but I'm always chasing love. I'm not going to stop. I just took the night off."

She grinned. "Well, this definitely isn't going to get you love, but if it got you a few orgasms, that's the next best thing."

"It *so* got me those," I said. "So, so many of those. He is sex on a stick, but he also really knows what he's doing with his stick, so it was worth it. Even if I never see him again and even if I know that he's not the love of my life."

"You'll meet Mr. Right soon enough. As long as Mr. Right Now made it worth your while, you're all good."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "We were really irresponsible about it, though. That, and like you said, doing this kind of thing definitely isn't going to get me love. Was it wrong? Should I not have done it?"

"Look, it sounds like you had a wild night and I definitely wouldn't encourage being irresponsible about it if you want to do it again, but you didn't do anything wrong. You're single, and young, and there's nothing to feel bad about."

I sighed, scrubbing both of my hands over my face as I nodded. Sienna was right. Besides, Maverick had realized pretty quickly that we'd forgotten a condom. It also wasn't like he was some random I'd met in a bar.

He was Payton's brother-in-law and he'd said he was clean. I'd get a test when we got home just in case, but for

now, I was going to enjoy what Lucerne had to offer. Once we were back in New York, I'd get the test *and* resume the search for love, and last night would soon be nothing more than a distant memory.

A funny, embarrassing story I'd tell my girlfriends and giggle about over drinks. Honestly, it wasn't my proudest moment, but we weren't the first people who'd gotten so caught up that we'd slipped up, and we'd rectified the situation.

As for the fact that I'd strayed from my mission of finding my happily ever after, I decided to forgive myself for it on the spot. I hadn't cheated on anyone or done anything atrocious. I simply stopped looking for love for just one night, and who knew? Maybe it would even help to find just that in the end.

CHAPTER 5



MAVERICK

One Month Later

Karson and Payton were finally back from their honeymoon, and as I watched my brother's truck pull up outside of my house, I grinned. They'd definitely deserved the time off and I was glad they'd taken it, but I was relieved as hell that they were home.

Neidum Brothers Construction was bigger than ever, and it'd been nearly impossible getting to everything myself. I liked giving Karson shit about not pulling his weight, but the truth was that we both worked damn hard and the company definitely needed both the Neidum brothers to survive.

The newlyweds climbed out of the truck, linking hands and exchanging a dopey smile before they walked up to my door, and I sighed. I was happy for them. Really. But did they have to be so damn in love all the time?

"Stop glaring at us." Karson laughed as he stuck his hand out toward me. "How is that a warm welcome to your brother that you haven't seen for a month?"

I shook his hand but then tugged him into me and gave him a quick hug, thumping him on the back before pulling his wife into the hug with us. "I wasn't glaring at you. That's just how I say hello after keeping the company afloat by myself for so long."

He laughed. “At least you now know that you’d be screwed without me. How are you doing, bro?”

“Other than being overworked and exhausted, I’m fine,” I joked. “Just glad you guys made it home safe. How was the trip?”

Payton let out a dreamy-sounding sigh. “It was so great. We finally got around to visiting some of the other cities we wanted to go to when we were doing the romance hotel, and we got to take it slow, sleep in, and stay where we wanted to stay for as long as we wanted to stay there.”

When Karson had first told me that they were planning on doing a backpacking-style honeymoon that entailed him not pre-booking accommodations and making all the arrangements, I thought he was being stupid. I thought for sure that it would turn into a disaster, but it didn’t look like it had, and considering the blissed-out look on both their faces, it was exactly what they’d needed.

“We went wherever the wind blew us,” Karson agreed. “Then we stayed there until we’d seen everything we wanted to see before we moved on. We’re definitely going to be doing another trip like that sometime soon.”

“Maybe I’ll join you next time,” I said.

Payton winked at me. “If you do, you should probably pack some extra pairs of pants. Just in case you lose yours again.”

I groaned. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Nope.” She shot me a big grin as she walked ahead of my brother and me into the house. “It was glorious. The best thing ever.”

The smile disappeared from her face suddenly and she clapped a hand over her mouth, breaking into a run as she raced to the bathroom. My brows twitched up as I glanced at my brother. “What’s that all about?”

His gaze darted in the direction she’d disappeared to before he sighed and shrugged one of his shoulders. “She’s

been feeling sick the last few days. We think she might've caught a bug before we came home."

I shut my front door behind us, then arched my eyebrows even higher. "A bug or a baby?"

He chuckled, but I saw the flare of hope in his eyes when he shrugged again. "We don't know yet. It could be either, but she wants to wait a little while longer before we do a test."

"May the Force be with you," I said. "Beer?"

"Sure. Payton will have water. She hasn't been drinking since she started feeling sick. Just the scent of alcohol is getting to her at the moment, but she's also decided to stop for now just in case."

"Seems like a wise decision." We walked into my kitchen and I got two beers out of the fridge, popped the tops, and handed one over.

After that, I grabbed a bottle of water for Payton, and Karson and I went to the lounge to talk while we waited for her. I got him caught up on everything that was going on at work and the contracts we'd gotten in while he was gone.

When Payton finally joined us, she shrank into his side and gratefully accepted the water, but she quickly seemed to feel better while they told me all about their honeymoon. It sounded like they'd had a great time, and I'd definitely added a few destinations to my bucket list before the subject came to a natural end.

"Did you hear Flynn is coming back to town for a few days?" I asked, smiling as excitement coursed through me. "I got a text from him last week saying he'll be here by the weekend."

"That's great." My brother's grin rivaled my own, and when Payton gave him a questioning look, he explained. "Shit. I forgot that you probably don't know him. Flynn Bryant. He's Maverick's best friend."

"The Flynn Bryant with the baseball cap?" she asked after thinking it over for a moment. "He was that guy who was

always at your house when we were kids, right? I never really got to know him, but the name rings a bell.”

“You never got to know him because you were just a baby back then,” I teased.

Payton was six years younger than me, which seemed like nothing now, but back in the day when she’d been our neighbor, it had seemed like decades. When Flynn and I had been graduating, fucking around, and dating every girl in town, Payton had still been in that awkward pre-teen stage when she hadn’t known if she should’ve been playing with her dolls in front of us or pretending to be cool.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Now I remember why I never spent much time with you or Flynn. You’re ageist assholes who think you’re better than me, even though you’ll always just be the old timers who wish they were my age again.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said before smiling at her. “If you were closer to me right now, I’d have bopped your nose. You kids think you’re so smart and cute.”

She tried to hide it when she started giggling but eventually shook her head. “So, where is this Flynn at the moment? Why is it so exciting to both of you that he’s coming to town? Did he move away?”

“He works in the oil field,” I told her. “The last few years, he hasn’t been back very often, so it’s always great to see him when he comes home.”

“He’s a good time,” Karson agreed before turning to his wife. “The life of the party. He’s got no filter, though. He always says exactly what’s on his mind, but he’s hilarious. As long as you don’t get offended by all the shit he can come up with, I think you’re going to like him.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting him properly,” she said earnestly. “It looks like he means a lot to you guys.”

“He does,” I said. “We may have to borrow your husband for a few nights while he’s here, though.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “Why do you have to borrow him? I’ve been of legal drinking age for a while now,

Mav. I'm sure I could keep up with you."

Karson laughed but didn't remind her of the fact that she'd stopped drinking or why, and I didn't say anything either. I knew how much my brother wanted a family and I also knew how close Payton was with her nephew.

After she'd come to the realization that love wasn't a crock of shit meant to destroy lives if you let it in, she'd admitted to me one night in the run-up to the wedding that she couldn't wait to become a mother. I couldn't wait to become an uncle frankly.

Payton had been spoiling Cameron, her nephew, rotten from the day he was born, but I was planning on giving her a run for her money. Any kid of theirs was going to love his or her cool uncle Mav.

"Did you ever talk to Penny again?" Karson asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I gave him a blank look. "Penny? Who's that? Is that the chick that peddles those Italian tiles? Because I told you she was too expensive for the Haversham project."

"Uh, no." My brother sighed, shaking his head at me and barely managing to stop himself from laughing. "Did you really sleep with a girl without even getting her name?"

"I haven't slept with anyone since—" I cut myself off. "Oh. Penny. The bridesmaid. Right. I forgot all about that, but now that you mention it, I don't think I ever did get her name. That whole trip for the wedding is kind of a blur. If I heard her name at any point, it didn't register."

"Does that mean that she still has your pants?" Payton teased. "Also, you know that a lot of troubled people block out bad memories, right?"

I groaned, letting my head hang as I shook it before piercing both of them with an exasperated look. "Let's just move on with our lives, shall we? Your wedding day was supposed to have been the best day of your lives, and yet, that part of it is all we ever talk about."

“All the better to give you shit about, my dear,” Karson joked. “We talk about all the other parts to other people all the time, but you were definitely one of the highlights.”

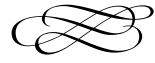
I sighed, but I knew they weren’t just going to let me forget it. “No, I haven’t talked to her again and I’m not going to. Can we drop it now?”

“I don’t know,” Karson said. “Have you got anything better to talk about?”

“Always.” I launched into the details of a new project I’d gotten in while they’d been gone, and since this one was right up Payton’s alley too, I managed to distract them sufficiently that they didn’t bring *Penny* up again.

I knew it was only a matter of time, though. On the other hand, I really didn’t blame them. If Karson had Donald-Ducked it at my wedding, I wouldn’t have let him live it down either. At this point, the best thing I could do was to lean into it. When it came up again, that was exactly what I would do.

CHAPTER 6



PENELOPE

“Whose idea was it for me to become a first-grade teacher?” Sienna complained as she rifled through a rack of clothes on sale at a boutique in our local mall. “I mean, one of the little shits in my class touched my ass the other day. On purpose.”

My nose wrinkled. “Are you sure? Maybe it was an accident.”

“It wasn’t,” she said without a single shred of doubt in her tone. “Trust me, I looked him in the eyes after. He thought it was so funny.”

“A true little shit, then,” I agreed, but I couldn’t muster up much emotion about it. Pulling a black dress off the discount rail, I winced when I saw how short it was and instantly let go of it. “You used to love teaching, though. What happened?”

Sienna sighed, glancing at me as she shrugged and added a shirt to the pile of clothes hanging over her arm. “I don’t know. I think I’ve just grown to hate kids. Everyone has this idea in their heads that tiny humans are so cute, but in reality, they’re entitled assholes who are way too big for their britches.”

“They can’t be that bad.” I clenched my jaw and swallowed past another wave of nausea. “I distinctly remember you saying that you had the best job in the world.”

“That was years ago,” she protested, rolling her eyes as she shook her head. “These days, it takes everything I’ve got just

to get through each day. I've definitely had to learn how to fake it."

"So does that mean you don't want at least four kids of your own anymore?" I asked, referring to a conversation we'd had shortly after she'd started teaching. "I thought you loved kids so much that you wanted an entire football team if your baby daddy could afford it. Wasn't four the bare minimum?"

She snorted. "Unless there's a screening process for the child before you have to decide if you're having it, I'm out. If it doesn't work like that, then I'm not interested in rolling the dice. Kids are mean and horrible."

"I'm sure some are better than others," I reasoned, swallowing again when my breakfast threatened to make a reappearance. "From what I've heard, good manners and behavior start at home. If you teach a kid right, they won't be mean and horrible."

"You'd be surprised at the amount of parents who believe their kids are the sweetest things ever. When we call them in, they start fighting with *us* about the incident we called them in over. Like it's *our* fault they raised little shitheads, but no. I'm convinced they corrupt each other." She looked at me again, a thin crease appearing between her brows as her gaze swept over my face. "Are you okay, Penny? Don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look so hot right now."

"I don't feel so hot right now, so I'm not surprised I don't look it." I groaned, shaking my head. "I think I ate something bad a few days ago and it's taking me a while to get over it. I've been feeling so sick, but it's like this low-grade nausea that's not going away instead of just a regular tummy bug that knocks you down for a day or two before it goes away."

Worry flickered in her eyes, but then she blinked it away and smiled. "Maybe you're pregnant. I've heard low-grade nausea comes with the territory in the early days."

I knew she was joking, but my blood suddenly ran cold. The last time I'd had sex had been at Payton's wedding, and that had been about a month ago. After doing a quick mental

calculation, I realized that I'd had my last period about two weeks before that.

All the blood drained from my face as I thought it over, leaving me dizzy and lightheaded in the aftermath. *I can't be pregnant, can I? We used a condom.*

I'd been working hard to put Maverick and our night behind me. As Sienna had suggested, it'd been one night of fun and I'd forgiven myself for venturing off course in my search for love. Now, however, I let the memories of that night back into my mind, and they arrived with all the force of a freight train hitting a wall.

We had used a condom, but not at first. Feeling like a haze was creeping into my brain, I hung all the clothes I'd had over my arm across the top of the railing and ignored the guilt about leaving them for someone else to pack away.

"We need to get to a drug store," I whispered urgently, seemingly having lost my voice to the shock ricocheting through me.

Sienna blinked, tossed the clothes she'd wanted to try on over mine, and then took my arm, mercifully taking the lead as she dragged me out of the boutique. My legs were numb, my heart racing, and the ever-present nausea worse than ever before.

We raced toward the drug store at the other end of the mall as fast as my faulty limbs would allow, then headed directly for the aisle with the feminine products in it. I'd never had to buy a pregnancy test before, but I came to this drug store all the time since it was the closest one to my place.

I knew where the pregnancy tests were, and evidently, so did Sienna. We stopped in front of the shelves carrying the items, and my eyes bulged at the price of them. The decent ones cost about the same as a beer at the local bar Sienna and I frequented after work.

There were some less expensive options and some more expensive options, but I didn't know the first thing about

pregnancy tests. *How am I supposed to know which one to pick?*

I did alright financially, so I didn't have to choose the cheapest one, but was it really worth spending more? My mind raced and I found myself completely unable to choose. Staring numbly at the boxes containing the unassuming-looking tests that had the power to completely toss my life upside down, I sighed and glanced at my friend.

"Do you have any idea which one of these is the best?" I asked softly.

She shook her head gently from side to side, then squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes, her jaw set in determination as her gaze scanned the available options. "This one says *Early Detection*. Six days earlier than all the others. Let's take it."

I nodded, feeling the numbness spread from my extremities to the very core of my being. I started heading to the checkout counter, but Sienna grabbed my arm and led me to the back of the store instead. "They've got bathrooms for customers back here. Do you really want to wait until you get home to find out?"

"Oh, right. No." I blinked hard, feeling like my throat was closing up.

Following her into the ladies' room, I walked directly into the cubicle and left the door open since she'd locked the main door and was standing against it for good measure. There was only one toilet in here anyway, so whoever else might need to use it would have to wait for us to finish whether they came into the bathroom or had to wait outside.

After peeling the protective covering off the box, I dropped it into the tiny trashcan beside the toilet, then opened the box and handed it to Sienna instead of chucking it away, too. We'd need it to pay, and although my mind was still lost in a haze of disbelief, I didn't want to add getting arrested for stealing a pregnancy test to the events of the day.

After tearing open the foil packaging, I pulled out the innocent white stick and stared at it for a beat, wondering if it was about to change my life. I was so scared that my bladder didn't want to cooperate at first, but eventually Sienna opened the faucet at the basin and nature took its course.

I set the stick down with trembling hands, on autopilot as I did everything I had to do, and was standing with my hands under the drier when she nodded at me. "Time's up."

"Did I really move that slowly?" I asked. "I thought we were meant to wait a couple of minutes."

She smiled, arching a brow as she nodded at me. "Dude, you're moving like an injured geriatric. Want me to look first?"

I swallowed and closed my eyes but reached for the stick myself. If my entire future was about to be thrown on its head, I wanted to be the first to know. Before I'd even turned the stick all the way around or opened my eyes, my stomach plummeted and my heart felt like it was caving in on itself.

Deep down inside, I already knew what the test was going to say. My period was late, even if I had been so busy lately that I hadn't noticed it, and I was feeling sick. Usually, I paid my monthly dues right on time and I generally had a stomach of steel. I didn't get nauseated at the drop of a hat.

As I opened my eyes and saw the result, a sob tore out of me. It was true. My instinct had been right. *Holy shit. I'm pregnant.*

Sienna craned her neck to see the result, and then I vaguely heard the sound of her voice but my blood was pounding in my ears and I couldn't make out what she was saying. Another beat later, I felt her warm arms enveloping me and I lowered my head to her shoulder, crying into the fruity-scented hair as I tried to come to terms with the fact that I had a tiny baby growing inside me.

It was unbelievable, and yet, it was true. Neither of us said anything as we stood there, my best friend holding me as I fell apart in her arms.

For a long time, we didn't move. Not until a sudden banging yanked us back to reality and I realized we'd been hogging the toilet for much longer than acceptable. As we left, Sienna kept a tight hold on my arm and leaned in close to my ear.

“Do you want to buy another one just to be sure?”

I exhaled deeply through my nostrils but gave my head a firm shake. “No, it's not necessary. The test was right. I can feel it. I'll make an appointment with the doctor to get checked out, but another test isn't going to change anything.”

Still feeling numb, I dropped the used pregnancy test inside the open box on the checkout counter. The clerk reeled back like I'd slapped him. Clearly speechless, he just stared at the box like it was going to bite him.

“Oh, get over it,” I snapped. “Just ring the shit up. It's got its cap back on and everything. It's not like I peed all over the box.”

I knew I was being unreasonable, but anger was suddenly churning through me and the man was being ridiculous. “Typically, people purchase these before they take them.”

“Obviously,” I muttered. “Happy to be the story you tell your friends over drinks tonight, but I'd like to get out of here before then.”

Instead of touching the box, he brought the handheld scanner to it and finally rang me up, then gingerly took my money and dropped it in the cash register. I blew out a frustrated breath. “I washed my hands, asshole.”

He shrugged. “You can never be too sure these days.”

After he handed over my change, he even squirted some hand sanitizer onto his palms and rubbed it in, and it annoyed me so much that I nearly flung myself over the counter to wring his neck for being a douchebag. I had no idea why my emotions were so intense, but they really, really were.

Also, I might have some idea. This baby is already changing me. Fuck.

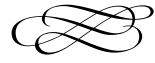
Sienna grabbed hold of me, steering me away from the clerk after dropping the box in my purse, and I released a heavy sigh. At least I had her in my corner. For now.

Considering how much she suddenly hated kids, I didn't know how long her support was going to last, but while I had it, I was grateful. Without her, I didn't even know how I would've gotten home that day, let alone how I would've gotten through the next eight months.

With Sienna steadfastly by my side, I did get through it, though. One emotional, disbelieving day after the next, I got through it. More than once, I considered looking up the man I'd conceived her with, but I never did.

Brea was mine. My baby and my life. It turned out I'd found love that night after all, just not quite in the way I was expecting.

CHAPTER 7



MAVERICK

One Year After the Wedding

“We’re going to have to bring in another roofing and insulation contractor if you’re serious about taking on this project,” Karson said after looking through the paperwork I’d just handed him. He was lounging in the chair opposite my desk, his legs spread and his posture relaxed as he looked up at me. “Our own guys are overcommitted as is, and Barry’s company has bowed out of taking on any new subcontracts until they finish up with a few things they’ve got going on.”

“Barry’s company is Hogans Supplies, right?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Yes, Mav. Hogans Supplies. We’ve only been working with them for half a decade now. Why should you know who they are?”

I flipped him off, smirking as I leaned back in my chair. “You know I prefer having you handle the subbies. You’re the guy who has to work with them on ground level, so why should I get involved?”

“Well, you’re the guy who has to deal with the admin of actually contracting them.” He sat up. “You’ve also got to keep them in line and make sure they’re doing their jobs, so I’ll get you some names of other people we’ve worked with in the past, but then I’m leaving it to you.”

I sighed. “You’ve really been slacking since you’ve become a father. Have I mentioned that before?”

He flipped me off this time, dragging his hands over his tired-looking face before he stood up. “Just because I’ve been doing the lion’s share of the work when it comes to hiring the subcontractors we need so far doesn’t make it my job. I just had time to help you out in the past, but I don’t have it anymore. So I’ll get you the names.”

“Sure,” I said. “Bring it on. Just pile the work onto me while you take care of the twins, why don’t you?”

He laughed. “Again, bro, this was never really my wheelhouse. Hiring the people we work with is solidly your responsibility. I just work with them when they get onsite. Besides, you’re the one who wants to take on yet another project when we’re already overextended.”

“We’re not overextended,” I protested. “We’re busy. Growing. How is that a bad thing?”

“It’s not, but we still don’t have to take on every project that comes our way. Have you already agreed to this development?”

I nodded. “It’s a good client to have, so obviously I said yes. Some of us want to keep making the big bucks, and I don’t hear you complaining so much once those checks start coming in. Especially not these days.”

“Have you got any idea how much money it takes to raise one child? We’ve got all those expenses times two. Why would I complain?”

“Exactly, so then stop pretending like I’m the only one who wants the company to keep doing well and send me those names. I’ll reach out.”

“Sure thing,” he said, then tipped his head at me and walked out of my office, already scrolling through his phone to send me the contacts.

When my phone started beeping as he sent them, I sighed and started rifling through the names. Some of them were familiar, but some weren’t. If my brother trusted these people and thought they’d be up to the challenge after he’d seen the project specifications though, then I trusted them too.

Since he was the one who was physically onsite every day, he'd made a lot of connections that I hadn't. More often than not, it was onsite when we realized we'd need another subcontractor, and so he was the one who reached out to the people he'd been referred to either by the guys onsite or by the other people he knew.

Technically, he was right about it being my job, but I usually only hired the first subcontractors we needed and he made a series of handshake deals with the people it turned out we needed after that. The first call I made was to the first company he'd sent through.

A guy called Terry Nichols. When the female voice came from the other end of the line, I frowned. "I'm looking for Nichols Buildings Supplies. Is this the right number?"

The woman chuckled. "Indeed it is. If you're looking for Terry, though, you're out of luck. My father retired at the end of last year, so these days, *I* am Nichols Buildings Supplies. How can I help you?"

"Do you still do roofing and insulation?" I asked, not too concerned if Terri's daughter had taken over. As long as she knew what she was doing, her company had still been at the top of Karson's list. "We're trying to find a vendor for a new project we're taking, but it's a big one and we're breaking ground as soon as next week, so we need someone who'll have a team available immediately."

"You're breaking ground next week?" She whistled low under her breath. "You've got balls to be looking for someone on such short notice. How did that happen?"

Since she sounded friendly and curious instead of judgmental, I laughed. "The client dropped the original contractors when they started welching on their promises before the project had even really started. I just closed the deal myself, but that means rounding up a few other cowboys who are willing to take it on last minute."

"Well, sign me up, partner," she joked. "Yee-haw."

I laughed again, surprised by how well I was hitting it off with her. “Giddy up. How soon can you meet with me so we can get this show on the road?”

“Well, uh, let me just check,” she murmured distractedly, like she was already looking through her calendar. “I’m full up until three today, but I’ll be able to move some things around so I can show you around personally anytime from then on. I’m assuming you’ll want to take a look at our operations to make sure we’ll be able to meet the demand?”

“Definitely,” I said. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, obviously. We just need to hire someone big enough to keep up.”

She chuckled again, and the sound was rich and melodic. Almost warm even though she didn’t know me. Honestly, it made me like her. I thought we’d work well together and she obviously had a pair of balls herself if she was willing to do this no questions asked. I enjoyed working with people who took risks and got the job done.

Now I just needed to see if she’d be able to put her money—or supplies, rather—where her mouth was. “Great. I understand completely. I’d have thought you were a newbie or just plain stupid if you didn’t want to see our operation before we put any pens to paper. I’ll see you at three?”

“I’ll be there,” I said without hesitating.

I already had a meeting then, but this was more important. Even as I spoke to her, I typed out an email to reschedule my other appointment. “Okay, we’re all set. I’ll see you at three.”

“You’ve got our address?” she asked, and I checked the contact card Karson had sent me before I nodded.

“I sure do. Thanks for making time for me today.”

“Thank you for thinking of us,” she said. “I’m looking forward to meeting you.”

“Same here.” It was only after we hung up that I realized I hadn’t even gotten her name or given her my own, but that wasn’t the end of the world. We’d get to all that later. For now, all that mattered was that I’d set up a meeting with a potential

subcontractor and that it was with someone Karson had put at the top of his list.

I'd barely set my phone back down on my desk when it rang, and I grinned when I saw the name on the screen. "Flynn! This is a surprise. How are you doing, bro?"

"I'm good," he said, sounding a lot more relaxed than he usually did when he called while he was on the job. "Actually, that's not true. I'm not just good. I'm fuckin' great. I've finally decided to take some time off work, so I'm back in town for the foreseeable future as of tonight."

As he said it, I heard a familiar dinging tune in the background and I frowned. "Are you at an airport?"

"Sure am," he said happily. "My flight is boarding in a few, but I wanted to call to let you know I'm on my way home."

"That's great, man," I said sincerely. "I can't wait to see you. Do you want to meet up for drinks tomorrow afternoon?"

"Sure. I'll call you once I've landed and we can work out the details."

"Have a safe flight," I said, and then he had to run.

I was still grinning when I tossed the phone down. It'd been months since I'd seen my best friend in the flesh, and I couldn't wait to have him home for longer than the couple weeks he usually managed between jobs. I was curious to know how he'd swung it that he was going to be home for the foreseeable future, but I'd find out soon enough.

For now, I had a meeting starting in ten and I still had to prep for it. The day raced by, and before I knew it, I was gathering up my stuff for my meeting with Nichols. Karson had sent me a thumbs-up emoji and another of a big grin when I told him I was meeting with them, so I was satisfied that he was happy I was seeing them first.

Hopefully, I'd be able to lock them in, and then I wouldn't even have to call anybody else. On my way over to their offices, I prayed that it would be this easy to find an available subcontractor that would be up to the task.

If I got there and they were running some shady, shoddy operation, I was going to be mighty disappointed. As I pulled up to their address, though, a ripple of relief traveled through me. Their offices were situated in a respectable district within our industry and they had a sizable warehouse and yard leading off the building.

Once I walked in, I was quickly shown to the waiting area outside the corner office by an efficient receptionist, and even that boded well for this alliance. I couldn't stand dealing with people who had incompetent staff.

The office door opened at exactly one minute to three, and a woman walked out behind a group of three men. As soon as I saw her, I was hit by wave of recognition. I knew the gorgeous redhead from somewhere. I just couldn't put my finger on where I might've met her before.

Dressed in a black suit with a loose blue camisole underneath it, natural makeup, and all that red hair in a thick braid hanging over her shoulder, she looked as beautiful as she did professional, and I wondered how the hell I'd forgotten where I'd met someone like her.

My mind raced as I watched her shaking hands with the men she'd obviously just finished meeting with, and then my heart stuttered when she slowly turned toward me. Electricity shot through me when a pair of stunning blue eyes locked on mine. I definitely knew this woman. I just really, honestly couldn't remember where I knew her from.

CHAPTER 8



PENELOPE

My stomach dropped to the floor when I walked out of my office to find Maverick Neidum waiting for me. *Ah, shit. Not you again.*

It'd only occurred to me after I'd put down the phone earlier that I'd never even taken the name of the man who wanted to hire us, but I hadn't for one second expected it to be him.

For starters, my father had always dealt with Karson, not Maverick, when we'd worked with the Neidum Brothers in the past. Moreover, it'd been well over a year since I'd seen this man. Although we were in the same industry in the same city, our paths had never crossed before and I'd had no reason to think they would do so anytime soon.

If anything, it'd been comforting to know that when we worked with the Neidum Brothers, it would be Karson who was our point of contact. As it was, I worked with Payton a lot more often than with Karson, and the last time I'd spoken to her, she hadn't even mentioned them having another project in the pipeline they'd possibly approach us about.

In the past, even when I'd been working under my father, she'd always warned me when Karson was looking for someone. She'd often tipped me off that he'd be contacting me and what it would be about so that I was able to talk to him having already done a little bit of homework on the project.

This time, I'd had no warning and I hadn't been able to prepare for our meeting. Which was fine. I was used to that

being the case for first meetings, but the Neidum Brothers had become big players in this town over the last few years.

I could only assume Payton hadn't known he was going to call me. Shooting from the hip was a strong point of mine ordinarily, but I didn't want to come across incompetent to Maverick Neidum, and more than that, I really would've appreciated a heads-up about seeing Brea's father for the first time since she'd been conceived.

My mouth dried up and my head spun and I couldn't think straight, but as I stared back at him, I realized he didn't know who I was. He clearly recognized me, but it was obvious he didn't know where he'd met me before. His eyes were slightly narrowed, his head tilted, and I could practically see him trying to work out where he knew me from.

This may be to my advantage.

At the very least, it put me one step ahead of them. For now anyway.

"Maverick Neidum," I said, sounding as surprised as I was as I stepped forward and held out my hand for him to shake. "Penelope Nichols. It's nice to see you again."

I could see the flare of victory in his eyes when he realized he'd been right about having met me somewhere before, but hearing my name hadn't sparked any further recognition. I couldn't remember if I'd ever told him my name, though. All I remembered was Payton telling me that next morning that Maverick had been rambling on about a sexy fire hydrant.

Thank God I'm not wearing red today. That might've jogged his memory.

"It's nice to see you, too," he said, giving me a charming smile.

As soon as he slid his hand into mine, I felt tingles shooting through me. Honestly, the man was just as good looking as he had been that night. The last year certainly hadn't aged him in any way that was bad.

His black hair was just as lustrous and thick as I remembered it being, his face still as square-jawed and

handsome. There wasn't even a single new line around those vividly green eyes. *Why is it that men only become more handsome as they get older?*

Internally, I rolled my eyes at the unfairness of it all, but then I waved him into my office and fixed a friendly smile on my face to hide how out of sorts it was making me feel to see him unexpectedly. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you," his deep voice said from behind me as he followed me into my private office. "Please don't think I'm an asshole because of this, but I'm really shit at names. Faces, not so much, so I know I've met you before, but I just really can't put my finger on where it was."

Crap. So much for having time to figure out how to break the news to him. My cheeks flushed as I turned to face him, waving for him to take a seat as I did.

Ultimately, though, I decided to come clean with him because I knew that keeping it a secret would be a bigger issue if it came out once we were doing business together. Plus, I was already keeping a much bigger secret from him. It was better to fess up about this than to start digging an even bigger hole to bury myself in once the contracts were signed.

"Well, uh, I don't blame you for not remembering. We both had a few too many that night." I swiped my tongue across my lips, averting my gaze as I sat down on the sofa across from the one he'd chosen to take a seat on. "It was at Karson and Payton's wedding. I'm, uh, I was a bridesmaid and also, the girl who stole your pants."

A light went on his eyes, and for a moment, I held my breath. He'd had a sense of humor that night, but whether he had one when he was sober and had been humiliated was an entirely different story. It was possible that in attempting to move forward for the sake of the deal, I'd just blown every chance at actually getting it.

Thankfully, the next thing I knew, the man cracked up laughing. "You know, I should probably commend you for what you did. It turned out to be the highlight of the wedding when I walked back in like Donald Duck."

Relief shot through me when I realized he wasn't mad about it. *He may not be as welcoming or gracious if he knew the baggage that came along with that night, though.*

“Penny, right?” he said, green eyes twinkling with humor as he settled back in his seat and nodded slowly. “God, what a blast from the past. I heard after that you worked with Payton and that Karson had worked with you before, too, but I honestly wasn't expecting to run into you like this.”

“Same here,” I said. “Are you really not pissed off at me, though? It might make it difficult for us to work together if you're suppressing some hostility over what I did.”

Those full lips cracked into a grin and he shook his head. “I'm not pissed off, I promise. I might not have been your greatest fan when I realized my pants were missing, but I got over it pretty fast. Just a little fun and games. Let me guess, revenge for me passing out after?”

I hesitated before I nodded. Then my cheeks flushed some more when I found myself ogling those muscular arms as he spread them out across the back of my sofa. Since he was wearing a crisp, white, button-down shirt, I couldn't exactly see the muscles rippling beneath his skin, but I could see the way they filled out his shirt, stretching and bulging in all the right places.

Also, I remembered what it'd felt like being in those strong arms, being held against that broad chest. With everything that happened after, it'd been a long time since I'd let myself relive those memories, but now that I was facing him, it was impossible not to let them in—however fleetingly I allowed it before I cleared my throat.

“So, uh, is it safe to assume that you're not opposed to working with me now that you know who I am?” I asked.

He chuckled, his chin lifting a little as he looked right into my eyes. “It's going to take more than that to scare me off working with someone Karson and Payton obviously hold in such high esteem.”

Breaking off the intense eye contact, he looked around my office with blatant interest, taking in the pockmarked conference table and large wooden partner's desk I'd inherited from my father. I'd also inherited the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covering two of the walls from him, but the white leather sofas, plants, flowers, ergonomic chair behind the desk, and the massive screens on top of it were all mine.

"You've done a good job incorporating the old with the new," he commented lightly. "Have we worked with your company after your father retired?"

I arched a brow at him. "Shouldn't you know the answer to that?"

"Nope." He chuckled. "It's only recently been brought to my attention that I should've been managing the subcontractors all along. It seems Karson's too busy to keep doing it now that he has kids. Speaking of which, that's a cute baby you've got there. Yours?"

My heart started pounding when I realized he'd noticed the pictures of Brea on my desk. "Uh, yes. She is mine. Thank you. I'm pretty proud of her. Your nephews are adorable, by the way."

The distraction worked, and he spent the next few minutes telling me about the twins and completely forgetting about Brea. Relieved as hell that he hadn't asked how old she was or that he seemed to have any inclination that she might be his, I listened patiently and asked for more details about them as I tried to keep steering the topic away from my daughter.

Eventually, I got up and fetched the portfolio I always used to showcase some of the company's work. "I know I promised to show you around, and I will, but I thought you might want to see this first. It's examples of what we've done under my leadership along with testimonials from clients. I've been careful not to include anything that was done before my father retired. I know people liked and trusted him, and I'm aware that I need to prove myself now even if you've worked with the company before."

Brows raising, he took the portfolio from me. “I’m impressed. A lot of people would’ve just kept riding on his coattails and banking on his good name to bring in the clients.”

“Well, I learned a lot from him, but I’m also changing the way we do business and bringing the company into the twenty-first century. My father certainly made a mark on the industry and I’m proud to be his daughter. I’m respecting his legacy, but at the same time, I’ve been modernizing a lot. It seems prudent to let people know from the outset that they’ll be dealing with me and the way I do things instead of the way they might’ve been used to working with him.”

He flipped through the folder I’d handed him. He studied the contents closely before he nodded, closed it, and set it down on the sofa beside him. “All of that looks pretty good to me. I’ve got to hand it to you. What you’re doing can’t be easy, taking over from a legend and keeping his legacy while also trying to lead the company into the future, but you seem to be doing a pretty good job.”

High praise coming from a guy like him. My face grew hot all over again. “Thank you.”

He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and looking back at me again. “That being said, you already know that we’re all coming into this project at the last minute. How do I know you’re up to the task and that your team is ready to jump in?”

For the next few minutes, I explained our company structure as well as telling him about the resources at my disposal. Next, I took him through our yard and warehouses, and by the end, he was smiling from ear to ear.

“Welcome to the team, Penny,” he said, extending his hand toward me.

I shook with him again, once more feeling those tingles when his skin touched mine. “Thank you. We’re happy to be in business with you.”

After that, I walked him out and we said our goodbyes, and I sagged against my office door as soon as I'd shut it behind me. It took me a long time to catch my breath after he left. I hadn't told him about Brea, and I wasn't sure if I should've.

I'd done everything on my own so far, though. I didn't need to complicate our lives, and Maverick had sure seemed perfectly content not even thinking for a moment that Brea could be his. But still.

For the next few months, we were going to be working together. If it went well, he could even include us in some of the other projects they had going on. Consistently doing business with the Neidum Brothers would be very beneficial to the reputation I was trying to build for myself in this industry, but on the other hand, consistently doing business with my daughter's father without him finding out about her was going to be tricky.

Once I finally managed to walk back to my desk, I had a feeling I might've made a mistake in not telling him right off the bat, but what was done, was done. I would have to take things as they came, and in the meantime, I was just going to have to pray that Maverick didn't start doing any mental calculations after he left my office today.

CHAPTER 9



MAVERICK

Pumped to be meeting up with Flynn for drinks, I left the office early the day after my meeting with Penelope Nichols. I was still kind of reeling about her being the vendor Karson had preferred to work with, but now that I'd seen her work and heard her pitch, I wasn't surprised.

When I'd met her at the wedding, she'd definitely struck me as the crazy friend, but in real life at her job and meeting with a potential client, she'd been as professional as they came. I'd been impressed by her, and while I was definitely looking forward to getting to know her better, I also already had a feeling that we'd chosen the best subcontractor for the job.

With that sorted, it'd been easy to fill in the few other holes we'd had on our team, and we were pretty much ready to get going next week. Penny and I would be working closely together since she'd be managing the project from her company's side and I'd be overseeing it all from ours, and it was definitely going to be fun working with her.

It also definitely wasn't going to be difficult to have to stare at that face during all the meetings we'd inevitably have. The woman somehow just kept becoming more gorgeous the longer I'd spent in her company. I'd started noticing the little things about her, like the light dusting of freckles on her cheeks and nose or the way her brow furrowed when she was being serious.

She was a little curvier than I remembered her being, with her hips seeming a little broader and her breasts a little fuller,

but damn if that didn't just make her sexier to me. Penny was like a siren, drawing me now just as she had that night.

While she'd been right about us both having had a few too many at the wedding, I hadn't forgotten about how she'd stolen my attention when I'd gone after Allison or how she'd enraptured me so completely that I hadn't even remembered about the other woman I'd wanted to hit on.

Penny was just one of those women who turned heads and affected cocks—and she had a great personality to go with her good looks. It was amazing how easily she made me laugh and how well we'd hit it off even over the phone yesterday.

All things considered, it was going to be difficult to work with her without constantly thinking about hooking up with her. For now, though, I was on my way to meet Flynn for drinks and I put all thoughts of Penelope and the project out of my mind.

It'd been much too long since I'd seen him and I didn't want to come across as distracted or like I had something better to do. Flynn was the only friend I'd stayed close to from my childhood and the only person I had that kind of friendship with that always made it feel like we hadn't spent a day apart even if it had been months.

We always managed to pick up right where we left off, and because of that, I was never apprehensive about seeing him when it'd been a while. He was already at the bar we'd agreed to meet at when I arrived, his shaggy brown hair tucked into a low bun at the nape of his neck and his five o'clock shadow of a beard still present on his jaw.

Payton had described Flynn as *ruggedly handsome* after she'd met him last year, and while it'd thrown Karson into a fit of jealousy that'd only receded once he'd found out she was pregnant with not one, but two of his babies, I'd thought it was hilarious. I'd never really thought of Flynn that way, but once she'd said it, I'd seen it.

The dude really was ruggedly handsome, with his golden tanned skin, the shaggy hair, and the callused hands. I grinned

when I came up behind him, clapping my hand on his shoulder as I sank into the stool beside the one he was one.

“Hey, man. How the hell are you?”

Flynn grinned back at me, showing off pearly white teeth that seemed to shine in contrast to his tanned skin. “I’m good, bro. You?”

“All good.” I signaled to the bartender that I’d have one of the same beers he was having, then turned to face my friend. “How was your flight?”

He gave an exaggerated shudder. “The same as any commercial flight. The food was bad, the people were too rushed, and the air hostesses are too stingy with the whiskey, but the plane brought me home safe, so I can’t complain too much.”

“That’s all that counts in the end, right?” I laughed. “It’s good to have you back. Are you really taking a break from the oil field? You’re seriously in town for the time being without a ticket out in a few weeks?”

He nodded, taking a big sip of his drink before he turned his light brown eyes back to mine. “It was time for a break. Actually, it was time for a break at least three years ago, but better late than never, I guess.”

“Definitely. Catch me up. Why did you finally decide to take a break now?”

He told me all about everything that’d happened in the last few months, and he looked a little exhausted just talking about it. I’d learned a lot about the oil industry since he’d started, but every time I talked to him, I realized what it took to travel as much as he did and to be away from home for such large chunks of time.

When he was finally done catching me up, he asked about our company and I laughed. “Well, we’re still growing, getting offered bigger and bigger projects just about every month, but get this. Do you remember that bridesmaid I slept with at Karson’s wedding?”

He frowned. “The one who stole your pants and made you walk back in butt naked?”

I nodded, grinning at the memory. “That’s the one. I just signed her company as a subcontractor for our latest project.”

“Why?” His features twisted into a mask of confusion. “It’s nice of you not to be holding it against her, but I’d have been pissed as hell and out for revenge.”

I laughed. “Nah, I like her more for what she did. It fits with what I’m learning about her. The chick has balls and she doesn’t pretend not to. At the same time, she’s still feminine and she’s not one of those powerhouse women who acts like she’s made of iron. It’s refreshing, seeing a businesswoman who’s transforming her company and doing a damn good job of it while maintaining her femininity in this industry.”

“She sounds interesting,” he said. “It’s definitely not something you see often enough, a woman who’s driven and career-focused but who doesn’t act like she’s got a dick. The same goes for men, though. The more career-focused we are, the bigger the ego and the asshole. It’s nice that some people hang onto their humanity instead of turning into corporate robots.”

“I’ve hung onto my humanity,” I said, but Flynn rolled his eyes at me.

“You sure did, big guy. Only sometimes, though. Maybe on days that don’t end with a Y.”

I let out a bark of laughter and showed him my middle finger as I picked up my freshly poured beer. “That’s rich coming from you, man. You’re so focused on your career that you took off over a decade ago and this is the first time you’ve been back for any significant amount of time.”

He shrugged, but then he chuckled and eventually started nodding. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. At least I’ve seen the error of my ways, though.”

“What are you going to do while you’re here?” I asked. “Karson and I could definitely use some help if you’re open to

joining a construction company. We always need more hands and we'd be happy to have you."

"Just because it's you guys, I'd be willing to help you out," he said. "I was planning on chilling for a bit before I started looking for work, but if you need me, I'm there. Just point me in the right direction."

I laughed. "I'll talk it over with Karson, but I'm sure he'd be good with it. Especially if there's someone else he can trust that can take some stuff off his hands at the moment."

Flynn's gaze softened. "Those two tiny gremlins of his sure are cute, though. The last time I spoke to him, he said they were giving him a hell of a time, but it looks like it's worth it for him and Payton. He can't stop talking about them."

"It's nauseating, I know, but once you meet them, you'll understand why we're all so damn in love with those two. They've got everyone wrapped around their minuscule fingers."

"Yeah, that's kind of what I thought." He gave me an assessing look. "What about you? Are you changing now that you've got them in your life? Looking to settle down yet?"

I snorted, answering his question by buying another round of beers and adding a few shots. "I'm not getting held down by anyone anytime soon. I love those kids, but the best part about them is that I can spoil them rotten, get my baby cuddles in, and then give them back to their parents. Are you going to try to settle down now that you're home?"

He picked up the shot of tequila the bartender had just put down in front of him. Then he chuckled as he raised it between us. "Not on your life, bro. Marriage is a sham for society to pair people up to get more taxes from them. There's no way I'm buying into that scheme. I hand over enough of my hard-earned cash as is."

I didn't quite agree with his view on marriage, but I clinked my glass against his anyway. It didn't matter why I didn't want to get married right now. The only thing that

mattered was that I wasn't even almost ready to settle and I had no intentions of doing it anytime soon.

CHAPTER 10



PENELOPE

Cradling Brea in my arms, I cooed to her as I went to open our front door for Sienna. We were all going to have a girls' day, and after my run-in with Maverick this week, I was damn lucky my best friend had been available to come spend some time with us.

I desperately needed someone to talk to, and since Sienna was still the only person who knew the secret of Brea's paternity, that made her the only person I could really talk to about it. As soon as the door swung open, Sienna reached for the pink bundle in my arms and cooed to her the same way I had just been.

"There's Auntie Sienna's favorite little baby in the whole wide world," she said, immediately giving her a gentle hug and smiling at her beautiful, tiny face. "Look at you, you're getting bigger by the day now, aren't you? Please stop growing, baby angel. You're the only child I like. I need you to stay small."

I chuckled, but I'd already known that Brea was the only child Sienna claimed to like. She'd only been saying it since the first time she'd held her before we'd even been discharged from the hospital.

At only two and a half months old, there wasn't much not to like about Brea, though. She was a model baby, sleeping as well as she could be and not at all fussy about the way she got her milk. When she was with me, she breastfed, but when she was with my mother or her babysitter, she took the bottle with my expressed milk without any problems.

With a tuft of thick black hair—just like her father’s—and my blue eyes, for now anyway, a little button of a nose, and heart-shaped lips, she really was beautiful. It wasn’t just because she was mine. Objectively, she was a seriously pretty baby.

Screw anyone who said she was ugly or just another baby. She was my baby, and as far as I was concerned, she was awesome. “Have you told Auntie Sienna how much you’re smiling nowadays?”

I glanced at my friend. “I’ve read up about it, and they definitely count as smiles now. It’s not just gas anymore.”

She chuckled and cooed at Brea some more as she finally made her way into our house. “Aren’t you just the friendliest little baby? Just save all those gorgeous smiles for mommy and me. No boys, okay? Never smile at boys.”

I almost let my eyes roll until I realized I was one hundred percent in support of that advice. “Listen to Auntie Sienna. She’s smart.”

As she followed me into our kitchen, still chatting softly to Brea, I smiled and grabbed my phone, taking a quick picture of the two of them together. Honestly, in the last two and a half months, I’d probably taken more pictures than I ever had before.

The gallery of my phone was chock full of photographs of Brea, and it still never felt like I had enough. Sienna grinned when she saw me putting the device back down. “Will you send that to me?”

“Of course.” I beamed at her. “Don’t I always? You’re her godmother. You deserve all the pictures you want.”

She glanced down at Brea again, then lowered her voice when she realized the baby had already fallen asleep again. “Should I go lay her down?”

I nodded. “In the nursery.”

She left the kitchen and headed down the hall to Brea’s bedroom while I fixed our coffee—decaf for me—and then came back in just as I was stirring some cream into our mugs.

“How have you been? You sounded stressed yesterday when we spoke.”

“I was stressed,” I admitted. “Guess who I crossed paths with this week?”

She frowned. “Uh, Santa Claus? The tooth fairy? How am I supposed to know?”

I laughed softly, handing over her mug and then picking up my own to carry it to the lounge where I had the monitor to be able to watch Brea sleeping. I nodded at the screen when we walked in. “Even the Grinch would’ve been preferable to who it was, but no. It was her father.”

“Maverick Neidum?” Her eyes flew wide open and her voice rose a few octaves. “How the hell are you only telling me about this now?”

“Well, I haven’t seen you yet, so there’s that.”

She shook her head at me, her eyes still wider than I’d have thought was possible. “It’s called a phone. Or a carrier pigeon. You should’ve told me. How are you holding up? Are you okay?”

“You look like you’re in shock,” I said, smiling as I took a deep breath before I continued. “To be honest, I wasn’t expecting to see him, so I was in shock myself, which is another reason I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“I bet. How the fuck, though? You’ve managed to avoid him for the last twelve and a half months, and now suddenly he walks back into your life?”

“I know, and I don’t know how it happened or why, but he called me out of the blue to set up a meeting with my father. He didn’t even know the old man had retired, but even if he had, I don’t think he realized I had anything to do with the company.”

“Shit, my friend. Seriously, are you okay?”

I thought it over for a minute before I shrugged. “I don’t really know. It went better than I thought it might. At least he’s not angry at me for taking his clothes and embarrassing him.”

In fact, he said it was the highlight of the wedding when he walked in like Donald Duck.”

She cocked her head at me. “That’s nice, but is he angry about the fact that he’s a father?”

When I winced, her eyes somehow went wider.

“What? You didn’t tell him? Please tell me I misinterpreted that and you did, in fact, tell him that he was the father of the most beautiful, incredible baby girl who has ever been born? You told him, right?”

“I, uh, no. I didn’t.” For a long minute, she just kept staring at me, and eventually, I averted my gaze and looked at the monitor instead of my friend. “I thought about it, okay? I did. I considered it, but ultimately, I wasn’t expecting to see him. I wasn’t prepared at all when he walked into my office.”

“How the hell did that happen?”

“I got a call from a number I don’t have in my phonebook. When I picked up, the guy was looking for my father and he seemed pretty confused to hear a girl’s voice. I told him Dad had retired and that I was Nichols Supplies now, then we got to talking and we never really made it to the part where we exchanged names before we set up a meeting.”

“You guys have the weirdest way of communicating,” she muttered.

I shrugged. “We just always seem to hit it off so well that we just keep building on what the other said before and some of the basics fall by the wayside. It’s not that weird.”

She arched a brow at me. “It’s weird, babe. So what now? Are you actually going to work with him?”

“I am.” When she made her eyes big at me again, I explained hurriedly before she had to ask. “Look, I know what you’re thinking, but it’s going to be fine. Maverick’s company is too big for me to turn him down, no matter what our history or what I may be keeping from him. That, and the profit we’d be making on this job is amazing. Since that translates into better bonuses for my people for my first year at the helm, it seemed like a no brainer.”

“Okay, sure. I get that and I know you’re still trying to win the hearts and minds of your industry colleagues as well as your own people, but why didn’t you just tell the guy?”

I glanced at the baby monitor again, sighing as I watched my tiny baby sleeping so soundly in her crib. “I know it’s difficult to understand, but I didn’t want to complicate things for her, or for me, for that matter. Think of all the potential legal action that could come along with me telling him the truth about her. He could even sue me for custody. I can’t out-litigate Maverick fucking Neidum. My company is doing well, but not nearly as well as his. Dad kept us at a respectable, medium size while Neidum Brothers is growing into a behemoth. If he sues me, he’d win just because he has more money to throw at it.”

“You’re her mother, though,” Sienna said softly, eyes softer now as understanding started to dawn in them. “I know that it’s scary, but don’t you think he’d want to know? Also, he may not sue you. You have no idea what he’s going to do, but he may not even want visitation. The other thing to consider is that if you tell him, he might offer to pay child support, and if he’s really doing that well, isn’t it in her best interest to get some of that money coming her way?”

“No,” I said immediately, my stomach tightening at the mere thought of it. “I’m providing for her and I’m doing a damn good job of it. I don’t need his money and neither does she.”

Sienna raised her palms, showing me that she meant no offense, and I pressed my hand to my racing heart in a useless and yet natural instinct to attempt to calm it. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s just that I don’t want to tell him just to get money out of him. I’m doing fine.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t mean that she shouldn’t be getting any of his money as well. It’s not fair that you have to cover all her expenses by yourself, but that set aside, what about him deserving to know about her? He’s her father, after all. I’m not saying he’d be a good one, but shouldn’t it be his choice what kind of father he wants to be?”

I shook my head, thinking back to how easily I'd distracted him by bringing up his nephews. "That man isn't looking for a family or for a relationship. In fact, he didn't even stop for long enough to ask about Brea's age, even if she is clearly a very young child and considering the fact that he knew by then that I was the bridesmaid who'd slept with him at his brother's wedding."

"That doesn't mean anything, though," she said gently. "If you don't want to tell him, that's your decision."

"If he was even remotely curious about her and whether she could be his, he'd have asked."

Her eyes appeared troubled as she shook her head. "I don't think so. He doesn't know how old she is, like you said, and he probably wasn't even thinking that she could be his or else he'd probably have expected you to contact him."

"How? It's not like we exchanged phone numbers at the wedding. He passed out before we could even exchange vital health information."

"Sure, but you were in his brother's wedding. You could've reached out to Karson or to Payton for his phone number, so why would he suspect that you wouldn't have done that?"

At this point, I realized I was being stubborn, but I shook my head anyway. "Trust me, he didn't do the math because he didn't want to. It's not such a leap to make that, if you slept with some woman a year ago and she suddenly has a newborn baby, it might be yours. If he didn't put two and two together, it was because he didn't want to."

"Okay, I hear you, and to an extent, that may be true, but I do think you need to at least consider telling him. I honestly think that he didn't do the math because he'd have expected a call from you shortly after you found out, not a year down the line."

"I'll think about it," I said, but even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew they were a lie. I probably wasn't going

to tell him, and as I glanced at my sleeping cherub again, that probably turned into a definitely.

One day, if it came down to it, I'd take the hit. But right now, I wasn't risking a massively expensive lawsuit or losing my baby if I couldn't match him dollar for dollar. There was no way I was taking that chance. If it meant lying to his face every time I saw him and shouldering the guilt for doing it, then I was fine with that.

As long as no one took my baby from me, I'd fight tooth and nail every day for the rest of my damn life. A bit of guilt over a father who didn't want her anyway was the least of my worries, and I would stand by my decision no matter what anyone threw at me—Sienna included.

CHAPTER 11



MAVERICK

My office door opened and Karson popped his head around the corner. “I’m on my way to the Cow Shed Development. Will you check in with all the vendors for the project today? We need to get ready if we want to hit the ground running. Review the mat—”

“Review the materials. Make sure they’ve got enough of everything either on hand or on order. Talk scheduling and timeline. Confirm team sizes and capabilities. I’ve got this. You go build us a cow shed.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s a pretty good concept for a strip mall. Trendy.”

“It’s a crock of shit that’s going to go out of business within months of opening. There’s a reason malls have anchor tenants and only so much space for pop-up businesses. This whole idea of pop-ups being free to do their thing in a cow shed might’ve worked for a weekend market, but not for an entire strip mall.”

“Well, they’re paying us well and it’s all green energy, organic vibes. It suits the neighborhood they’re in to a tee. Plus, the pop-ups are going to be selling affordable, high-quality goods and the owners have been in the vetting process for months. It might just work.”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. Like you said, they’re paying us well and this is what they want. We’ve given them our advice and they didn’t take it. Personally, I think they’re

making a mistake, but if they want to throw millions of dollars after it, then at least we're getting a piece of the pie."

Karson grinned. "Spoken like a true CEO. You're growing up so fast."

I huffed out a breath, but then I smirked at him and arched a brow as I leaned back in my chair. "One of us has to grow up, considering that your babies often have more common sense than you."

"Ryder has been sucking on his hand," Karson said proudly. "On purpose. Say what you will, but I've got me some smart kids there. You're not going to insult me by bringing them up. Riley even tried to do a little pushup during tummy time yesterday."

Contrary to how I might've felt about getting information like that just a few months ago, a little rush of excitement passed through me now when he told me about it. My chest even puffed out a bit. "They take after their uncle. Smashing through their milestones one tiny fist at a time."

My brother snorted as he tried to hold back a bark of laughter, but then he stopped trying to hide it and let it free as he shook his head at me. "You do know you could just have kids of your own, right? You don't have to live vicariously through me and mine."

It was my turn to snort and shake my head. "I'm perfectly happy to hand them back when their diapers are dirty or I want to go to sleep. Thank you very much. Are you going to build us a cow shed or what?"

He raised his hands and showed me his palms. "I'm going. I'm going. Remember to check in with the vendors. If even one of them isn't ready to go or hasn't at least ordered the materials we need, we're screwed."

I picked up my phone. "I'm on it. If I run into any trouble, I'll replace the vendor on the spot. I'm over dealing with excuses and people who can't deliver on their promises."

"Ruthless." Karson gave an exaggerated shudder and then tipped his head at me. "Later, bro."

After he closed my door, I got right to calling the vendors. I was all about it, but only because I was happy to have an excuse to speak to Penny again. The woman had been on my mind since our last meeting, and now I finally had a reason to see her again.

I left the best for last, making my way through the list of other vendors first before finally calling her office. When she picked up, I smiled. “Penny, it’s Maverick. How are you?”

“Oh.” It sounded like I’d caught her off guard for a beat before she recovered, and I swore I could hear a smile in her voice when she spoke again. “Hey, Maverick. What’s up? I was actually just thinking about you.”

Color me intrigued. “You were?”

“Yes.” She chuckled. “Oh, gosh. I just realized how that sounded. I didn’t mean it in *that* way. I was on the phone to one of my suppliers and I was thinking that I should call you to talk materials.”

Well, that’s a disappointment. I’d have preferred if she’d been thinking of me in *that* way, but no matter. “Great minds think alike. I’m calling to ask if you want to have lunch so we can discuss the materials and their specifications, as well as the dimensions we’re looking at. Are you free?”

“For lunch?” She seemed surprised. “Sure. How’s Harry’s at noon?”

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll see you there.”

After chatting with her for a few more minutes, we hung up and I got to work, making sure that I went over everything urgent before lunch. If it went well, I didn’t want to have to rush to get back here.

When the time finally came, I headed off to meet her at the bistro she’d suggested. It wasn’t far from my offices or too much out of her way either. The place was simple, serving good old-fashioned home-cooked favorites and with tablecloths and furniture that looked like it’d come from the owner’s grandmother’s house.

It said something about Penny that she'd suggested meeting here, and I liked that it meant she probably preferred comfort to glitz and glamour. It might also just have meant that she was in the mood for good food without any frills, but even that told me she was as down to earth as I'd clocked her to be.

She wasn't there yet when I arrived, and I snagged a table overlooking the street before I settled in to wait for her. At noon on the dot, the door opened and she practically stumbled in, then straightened up, composed herself quickly, and smoothed out her pencil skirt as she looked around.

When her gaze met mine, she smiled radiantly and strode confidently to our table, pulling out her chair and gracefully lowering herself into it before I could even think of getting it for her. On the other hand, this was supposed to be a business lunch, not a date, so maybe it was better that I hadn't jumped up.

"Maverick," she said. "It's good to see you. I was starting to wonder if you'd found another subcontractor to go with when I didn't hear from you. Choosing a humble outfit like ours for a job this size is a little unbelievable to me."

I chuckled. "You came highly recommended. Besides, it's hardly a humble little outfit. You guys have been in business longer than we have."

"Sure, but we're not nearly as big as some of the other players out there. I'm just relieved you haven't changed your mind." She paused for a moment. "Look, I know a lot of people are used to doing business based on handshake deals, but I..."

When she trailed off, I suddenly understood her concern. "My lawyers should have sent the contracts over for you to sign already. I'll follow up with them today if you haven't received it yet. Handshake deals are all well and fine, but contracts are better."

Relief played across her features, softening them at the same time as her eyes lit up, her posture relaxed, and her smile widened. "I'm so glad you feel the same way. You wouldn't

believe the amount of pushback I've gotten over this. It's like people are allergic to contracts."

I laughed. "That's very true. I've had a lot of pushback too, but good fences make good neighbors. Contracts are the legal equivalent of fences, to my mind."

She tapped her temple. "In that case, great minds really do think alike. I was expecting to meet with Karson about the materials, though. Doesn't he usually handle this kind of thing?"

"He used to, but these days, if it's not happening onsite, it's not his problem. I line up the ducks, he shoots them. Or uses them to build with rather, but you get my point."

"I do." She settled in as the waitress came to take our drink order, and as soon as she brought them over, we placed our orders for food.

In the meantime, we talked a bit more about business, but mostly, I was just enjoying my time with her. Once our food was on the table, I steered the conversation to more personal topics. "How did you like Lucerne?"

She flushed. "Well, uh, it was good. It really is a beautiful place. I understand why Karson and Payton wanted to get married there. My only regret is not having more time to explore the city."

"I would say you can just go back, but I guess you can't really. Not right now, anyway. Taking over for your father has to be keeping you pretty busy."

A flicker of something appeared in her eyes, like she was waiting for me to add another reason for her not to be able to go, but then she blinked it away and nodded. "Yeah, it's definitely keeping me busy. Especially because of all the changes I've been making."

"They'll be worth it in the end. Besides, it'll probably be easier for you to travel with your daughter once she's a bit older."

"I'm sure it will." She seemed more satisfied with that sentence than my previous one, but before I could ask about it,

she started inquiring about the company and the other projects we were on.

Before I knew it, our plates were empty and it was time to leave. Realizing that I didn't want to let her go before knowing when I would see her again, I saw an opportunity and I took it. "Hey, do you want to hang out sometime? This was fun."

She nodded. "It was fun, but things are a little complicated for me right now. I'll let you know if that changes, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." I smiled, but deep down inside, I was wondering if she'd turned me down because she already had someone in her life.

Perhaps the baby's father.

The fact of the matter was that she should have someone in her life. She was awesome, and although she'd been single at the wedding, it was entirely possible that I'd missed my chance with her when I'd passed out.

I didn't pry, though, walking her to the door and giving her a handshake instead of a hug before we went our separate ways.

I didn't want to settle down with anyone right now, but I wasn't opposed to casual dating. Unfortunately, it looked like the only woman I wanted to be doing it with was already taken. I sighed as I walked back to my car, but I wasn't completely dejected about it.

Things were a little complicated for her right now, but she'd let me know if that changed. There was definitely hope for me yet, and until she told me otherwise, that was what I was going to hang onto.

CHAPTER 12



PENELOPE

Roofing and insulation weren't the only work we did at Nichols, but we were definitely specialists in the field. Having our name associated with a big-ticket project like the one we were now locked into working on with Neidum Brothers was definitely going to be good for us.

We did just fine, but I was after more than just fine. I wanted to be known for being able to take on any project—big and small—and knock it out of the park. Growth was the way of the future, and with costs always on the rise, we needed to start making some serious strides if we wanted to survive long term. And that was if we only just wanted to survive.

I didn't want to be the biggest player in the game, nor was I after global expansion or world domination. All I wanted was for the company to make a name for itself that was big enough and good enough that we could thrive instead of just survive.

We'd worked with a few of the other bigger names in the game, on par with the reputation the Neidum brothers were building for themselves, and so far, all those projects had gone well. This was the next one on our roster, and if we did it well, we not only had a shot at more projects with them, but also at being trusted by more and more firms like them.

I was careful not to take on too much at any one time, but it felt like I was getting to where I wanted to be. Slowly but surely.

It meant making the most of every minute at work, though. I didn't do overtime unless it really couldn't be avoided. I

figured I'd paid my dues with obscene hours while Dad had still been here and I'd been bringing up the rear end when he'd already been tired of leading from the front.

These days, spending time with Brea was absolutely my number one priority. I didn't have the luxury of staying home with her for any kind of extended maternity leave—I'd taken a month—and I couldn't spend weekdays with her, but I made sure I got home at a respectable hour and I never worked weekends if I could help it.

As it was, I'd also made a nursery of sorts for her here at the office and I'd hired a babysitter to watch her there. At least it meant I could pop in to see her for little chunks of time during the day. Late in the afternoons, the babysitter took her home and got her settled, and I tried to arrive before bath time so that I could perform her evening routine myself.

I was definitely burning the candle at both ends, though, and that meant some things slipped through the cracks. As I stared at my computer screen and studied the materials and specifications for Maverick's project, I realized we'd never talked about how much of everything they needed. So while I knew what they needed, I had no idea whether we'd be able to meet the demand with our current stock or whether I'd have to order more.

And that was a problem. A big one.

Shit, how did I forget to ask about that when we had lunch?

Feeling stupid as heck, I picked up my phone to call him, but his mobile rang through to his office and then his assistant told me he was in the field today. Apparently, he and Karson were doing a walkthrough of the new site and they would be out all day.

Crap on crabsticks.

“I can take a message for him, but they left instructions that if they needed to be reached urgently, that it could be done at the construction site,” the assistant said primly. “Would you like to leave a message?”

“No, thank you. Have a great day.” I hung up the phone, knowing what I needed to do but realizing what they were going to think of me if I had to do it in front of everyone onsite.

It was going to look extremely disorganized and unprofessional of me, but I didn't have a choice. I needed these numbers to get the ball rolling, and I needed them yesterday. We had enough of all the materials on hand to get started, but I had no clue how far our stock would get us or how soon they would need more.

The only way to get those answers and to avoid the penalties that might fall to us if we were unable to deliver was to go down to the construction site and speak to Maverick. My only consolation was that he'd clearly forgotten as well.

At least I'd picked up on our oversight today, but he hadn't just yet. If I was going to look stupid, then so was he.

On the other hand, he seemed to think it was hilarious that he'd waltzed into his brother's wedding with the family jewels on full display, so maybe he wasn't so sensitive to feeling humiliated. Either way, I had to do this.

Gathering up my things, I told my assistant I needed to go out. Then I went down to the nursery and gave Brea a quick cuddle before I left. I'd already expressed milk for her this morning, so at least my boobs wouldn't explode while I was out.

Taking the win, I headed to the site and almost immediately spotted Karson and Maverick talking to each other near the entrance. They were both so tall that they were impossible to miss, standing at least half a head taller than anyone else in their immediate vicinity.

My heartbeat picked up speed in my chest, but I was becoming accustomed to that happening whenever I saw Maverick. That big, hard body, the green eyes, the black hair, the suits, and the easygoing nature? It did things to me. All the things. Even though I knew that was exactly how I'd ended up knocked up in the first place.

I couldn't help it, though. He'd passed out after, but while it'd been annoying, it wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. I'd known how much he'd had to drink and I hadn't exactly been sober myself. It'd happened, and since I couldn't really be pissed at him about it, it made it so much harder now not to be affected by him all over again.

Karson spotted me first as I walked up to him, and a sudden, surprised smile spread on his lips. "Penny? How the hell are you? It's been too long, girl." He pulled me into a bear hug as soon as I got to them. Then he stepped back to look at me. "Not that it's not great to see you, but where's Terry?"

"Oh, he retired," I said, glancing at Maverick. "You didn't tell him?"

"Nope, why should I have? He's been clear that the subcontractors are my domain now, and besides, you guys know each other. I didn't think he'd have a problem."

Karson grinned. "I definitely don't have problem, but I'm surprised you two are working together after what happened at the wedding."

"Do you mean because she stole my pants?" Maverick said lightly, laughter shining from his eyes and crinkling the corners of them. "Nah, we're all good on that front. It was just a little prank that I may or may not have deserved."

"You definitely deserved it," I teased before I could stop myself. Since I hadn't come here to joke around with the brothers, though, I cleared my throat and glanced at Maverick again. "We, uh, we never got around to talking about the numbers at lunch. I was looking over everything this morning and I realized we had no quantities yet."

Karson stared at his brother for a beat, then bent over, laughing so much that it looked like he might stop breathing. "You forgot to discuss quantities? Dude, how? That's possibly even more important than what we need."

Maverick didn't miss a beat, rolling his eyes at his brother before he looked back at me. "You're right. Sorry, my mistake. Let me get those for you."

He opened the folder he was holding and pulled out a few printed sheets of paper, looking them over before he held them out toward me. “Here we go. I had it ready for you. I guess I just forgot to actually hand them over. Didn’t my assistant email this with the other stuff anyway, though?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Not unless I missed something.”

“Well, at least you’ve got it now,” he said. “We’ve just been getting caught up on a few things, but we’re about to do the walkthrough. Would you like to join us?”

I really had to get back to the office, but it would definitely help to see the site to know what we were in for. “Sure. That’d be great.”

“Hey, how’s Brea?” Karson asked as I fell into step between them, feeling rather like a celebrity sandwiched between two big, bulking bodyguards.

His question jerked me out of the fantasy and dropped me straight back into reality, though. I gave my head a little shake to clear it, then smiled when I thought about my daughter. “She’s so good. I didn’t know it was possible to feel like your heart really is beating in someone else’s chest. I thought people were just making that up before, but it’s so true. How about your boys?”

“They’re great.” Karson beamed at me. “Payton’s been a real rock star even though she’s outnumbered when she’s alone with them, but she’s loving it. She’s mentioned you a few times. I know she misses you.”

“I miss her, too. I’ll give her a call sometime. Maybe we can arrange a play date that will mostly involve the babies sleeping next to each other.”

He nodded. “That would be awesome.”

“In sixteen years’ time, this is going to be an entirely different conversation,” Maverick joked. “All of your heads will literally explode if they just think about sleeping together, and now you’re facilitating it for them.”

Karson punched his brother in the arm, and from the dull thud, I assumed my entire arm would’ve been dead if he’d

done it to me, but Maverick hardly seemed to notice. “Way to pervert something so sweet and innocent.”

Maverick shrugged. “Tell me it’s not true, then.”

Karson sighed but then focused on showing me around instead, explaining the client’s vision for what they wanted here. “The idea is to have a full-circle living development but with a twist.”

“What’s the twist?” I asked.

“They want it to have the illusion of space instead of just being another high-rise with cool amenities. In essence, they’ve asked us to make it feel like you’re not in the city.”

“Can you do that?” I doubted it, but I didn’t want to say it in so many words.

Maverick winked at me with a slight smile on his face. “We can do anything we put our minds to.”

After the tour, he walked me back to my car and then leaned against it. “Let me know if you need anything else. I’m sorry again about forgetting the numbers. Thank God, you realized it before the entire development got held up.”

I chuckled. “Next time, maybe we should focus more on the actual project when we meet instead of just talking.”

“Nah, we’re building a friendship. I like it.” He locked those sparkling deep greens on me. “I know things are complicated right now, but do you want to get dinner tonight? We could go over everything again and make sure we haven’t missed anything else.”

“I can’t tonight, but I could see about Saturday,” I said cautiously, wondering if I was making yet another huge mistake.

“Great. I’ll take Saturday.” And just like that, we had a date.

Maverick grinned at me as he walked away backward, his eyes still on mine until the very last second before he spun around and headed back to Karson. I stood next to my car, my

heart racing and my mind very much questioning how I was feeling about this, but I'd already said yes.

Besides, it was just one date and it wasn't even really a date. It was dinner to comb over the details of the project we were working on. *I mean, really, what's the worst that can happen? It's not like I'm going to sleep with him again.*

CHAPTER 13



MAVERICK

I stopped in front of Penny's place, surprised when she came out before I even went up to knock on her door. Climbing out of the car, I walked up the path to meet her halfway, smiling as I motioned toward the house.

"I was coming, you know. You didn't have to rush out before I could have the obligatory heart palpitations about knocking on your door."

She blinked a few times, but then she laughed and shook her head. "I know, but my daughter doesn't need to see me leave. She'll freak out and start screaming her head off. It's better that I leave while she's settled."

"Ah, okay. Well, I understand." I took a step back and looked her over, not making any secret of the fact that I was checking her out.

She looked hot as hell, though. I wouldn't apologize for it. In a black, strapless dress that hit just below the knee and hugged her curves while still being loose enough to look comfortable, she was a damn bombshell.

Paired with her hair hanging in a fiery wave down her back, low-slung heels, natural makeup, and simple gold jewelry, she looked incredible. But in an effortless way.

In fact, she looked like the kind of girl you took home to meet your parents and then couldn't keep your hands off of for long enough that you ended up screwing her in your childhood bedroom, but I was getting ahead of myself. I was also getting

hard, and since that wouldn't do, I swept my gaze back up to hers.

“You look beautiful.”

Her cheeks flushed a rosy shade of pink, and then she nodded at me while hiding a smile behind some of her hair. “You look quite handsome. Should we go?”

“Yes.” I held out my arm and she took it, and I felt something of a thrill over her acceptance of the gesture. “I hope you like Mexican food. There's this little hole in the wall place Karson and I found that's amazing. I thought we could go there, but if you'd prefer Italian, I know the perfect place for that as well.”

“Mexican is great,” she said. “It's been ages since I've had it, so it'll be a nice change of scenery for my taste buds.”

I laughed. “Well, then let me make your taste buds happy and get us there as soon as possible.”

“Sounds good.” She smiled when I opened the car door for her. Then she let me close it again behind her after she climbed in.

Mom would be so proud of me tonight. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd taken a woman on a date, but it was good to know the old gentlemanly behavior our mother had drilled into us was still there.

Usually, I met women at a bar or a club, took them home—or not—and that was the end of it. A few times, I'd seen them again after, but then I'd still meet them wherever we were going. Picking up a woman from her house and driving her to our destination was something I hadn't done in a while.

It seemed right to do it this way with Penny, though. First, I got the idea she didn't get out much these days. I'd asked Karson about her after she'd left the site, and he'd told me that being a single mother had severely clipped the wings of the social butterfly part of her personality.

Second, we were building something of a friendship, and since she was already friends with my brother and his wife, I figured it was better to do things right. And then lastly, neither

of us had made any overt moves on each other or flirted too much, which made what we were building seem more like a friendship, but I still felt like there could be more there.

Friends with benefits, perhaps. I didn't quite know yet, but we got along well and I wasn't afraid to see where it went. One didn't have to want to settle down to enjoy spending time with someone you enjoyed spending time with.

I guessed that came with age, though. In my late twenties, I probably would've freaked the hell out over realizing that I liked a girl enough to want to spend time with her outside of the bedroom or the bar. Now, almost in my mid-thirties, I liked to think I was mature enough not to freak out and potentially screw up a good thing by acting out or tugging at a girl's pigtails just because I kind of liked her.

On our way to the restaurant, she asked about my day and I asked about hers. When I did, she giggled and blew out a heavy breath. "My Saturdays aren't really anything to write home about anymore. Don't get me wrong, I love my life right now, but if you don't want to hear about the color and consistency of Brea's poop or all about how well she's following a rattle with her eyes, you really don't want to ask me about my day."

Surprised laughter tore out of me as I pulled into a parking spot in front of the restaurant. "I hear all about that from Karson already, so bring it on. I never thought I would be one of those people who knows anything about baby poop, but then my brother had twins and what do you know? I'm learning."

She giggled again as I shut off the engine, then took my arm once more as I led her toward the front door. "That's funny. I really wouldn't have taken you for the type. Not even for your brother's kids."

"What can I say? I love those two. It helps that I'm not the one who has to wake up for them at night or touch the poop in question, though."

I grinned as we went inside, then exchanged a quick handshake with the host, who I'd gotten to know a bit since

Karson and I came here for lunch so often. He was the owner's son, and he was an excellent host, friendly and chatting to us as he showed us to our table and told us he'd be back with drinks soon.

Penny smiled when he was gone. "What drink is he going to bring us? I don't remember asking for anything."

"Don't worry. It's nothing too out there. He's started his own little craft brewery and he enjoys letting us taste his creations. Karson and I encouraged him when he first wanted to start it, and now he feels like he has to give us complimentary beer whenever we're here. We always add a few extra dollars to the tip to cover it anyway, but that's not really the point."

Leaning back in her chair, she made a point of looking around. "So this is, like, your go-to place where everyone knows you and treats you like a friend? Sienna and I have one of those places, but we don't get to go there too often these days."

"Yeah, I guess you could say this is our regular hangout," I agreed after thinking it over for a minute. "One of them, anyway. We mix it up. Now that my friend Flynn is back in town, I've been frequenting bars more often than restaurants, though."

When she asked, I told her a little bit about Flynn and she told me about her best friend, Sienna. As always, our conversation came easily, not even feeling a little bit forced. She eventually started telling me more about her daughter, and I hesitated before I asked her the question that'd been on my mind since I'd found out she had a child.

"What's it like being a parent now?" I asked. "Back when we first met at the wedding, you seemed to enjoy having your freedom."

"I did enjoy it," she said, her voice sounding earnest and open. "There's a time for everything, though, and I guess this is my time to be a mom instead of getting to jet off for weekends in Europe to be part of a wedding."

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess so. Is it hard saying goodbye to that life, though? According to Karson, he waved goodbye to it with both hands and then told it to kiss his ass, but he’s basically been in training to be a husband and a father his whole life, so he’s not really a good person to ask.”

Thankfully, she didn’t seem offended by this line of questioning. Frankly, I wasn’t trying to sound like an asshole. I really was curious about it all.

Penny toyed with the ends of her red hair, thinking before she answered my question. “Uh, it was hard to say goodbye to it, but only until I heard her little heart beating for the first time. As soon as I did, something changed in me and I realized that I’d had enough of that kind of freedom. Being a single mother is rough as hell, but I wouldn’t trade it for the world. Honestly.”

So, she is a single mother, then. Maybe she doesn’t have someone else in her life after all. “I hear you. It’s got to be real difficult being responsible for another person all by yourself. According to Karson, it’s hard enough doing it with someone else. Obviously, I don’t know this for myself just yet, but maybe one day, I will.”

Or maybe not, but it didn’t feel right to say it out loud to her right now.

Penny smirked, then dropped her gaze away from mine for a moment before she shook her head. “Maybe you will. For now, you’ve got the twins to spoil, though. You seem like a good uncle. I spoke to Payton after I was onsite with you guys that day and she said you’ve surprised her.”

I scoffed before I grinned at her. “People are always underestimating me. They think that just because I’m the brains of the operations, I’m afraid to dig in and get my hands dirty, but that’s not true.”

She laughed, her eyes alive with a mischievous glint as she stared back at me. “Is that so? Does that mean you’ve been changing diapers, then?”

“Nope. No. Just nope. I don’t mind getting my hands dirty in other ways, but not that way.” I widened my eyes at her and she laughed again, then asked me to explain.

While I tried to stammer my way through it without coming across as a dick, Penny kept looking at me like she thought this was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. When our food came, I laughed as I watched her trying to pretend like the spicier dishes weren’t getting to her—until she eventually grabbed the milk our server had brought her when she’d decided to try the few dishes they’d brought out that were on the hotter end of things.

Overall, we had a blast and even made sure we had all the possible work questions answered this time, but then she checked her watch and announced it was time for her to get home. Her babysitter had to leave soon, which meant our evening together was already over.

I drove her home without complaint and even walked her up to her door this time, but instead of inviting me in, she turned to face me after unlocking it. “Maybe one day I’ll ask you to come in, but that day isn’t today.”

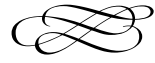
I nodded. “I figured as much. Good night, Penny. Thank you for agreeing to come to dinner with me.”

As I said it, I leaned in and gave her the barest brush of a kiss on her cheek. Then I turned around and walked away before I was tempted to try anything more than that. I felt her eyes burning into my back as she watched me walk away, but I didn’t turn around.

I wanted to, but I didn’t. Penny had already turned me down once because things were too complicated for her. The last thing I wanted was to give her a reason to do it again, so I conceded the battle in order to win the war.

Although I didn’t even know what the war was yet, I was going to win it, even if I didn’t know what the prize would be at the end. As long as it meant more time with Penny, I was in it to win it, and that was why I got in my car and drove off, wondering how long it would be before she finally invited me in.

CHAPTER 14



PENELOPE

I knew I hadn't invited Maverick in with me, and yet suddenly, he was in my bed, on top of me, and kissing me like he would have a cardiac episode if he had to stop. Instead of questioning how he'd gotten here, I wrapped my arms and legs around him like a baby sloth clinging to its mother, at peace with the fact that this was probably a dream.

Actually, it was definitely a dream. It was even one I'd had before, but that had been a long time ago. After we'd hooked up that night, during all the long lonely nights that had followed and with pregnancy hormones surging through my body, I'd often found myself dreaming about being with him again even though my conscious mind forced me to shut all thoughts of him out.

Once I drifted off to sleep, though, it'd been a whole different ballgame. Just like it was now, it seemed.

I didn't fight it, letting those familiar fantasies back in without hesitation. Maverick was the last man I'd been with, but he'd also been the best. Even dreaming about being with him was better than really being with most of the other men I'd been with.

Maybe it was just because I'd been so very tipsy that night, but to my mind, the man was seriously talented in the bedroom—and in the limousine, obviously. Desire coursed through my blood like a drug as I kissed him back, wondering if he'd ever live up to my dreams if I ever got to kiss him for real again.

I had a feeling that he would, but at the same time, I wasn't planning on finding out. Since this was a dream, though, I didn't have to deal with any of that pesky guilt about not telling him he was a father. In fact, in this dream, when I linked my fingers together behind his neck, there was a ring on the ring finger of my left hand.

A quick glance at my nightstand when we broke apart also told me we were a family now, me, him, and Brea. There was a picture of us all together there, and for just a moment, I felt sad—even in my dream.

I knew this particular fantasy would never become a reality, even if I did somehow wind up sleeping with him again, and that made me cling to him so much harder here in my dreamworld. While I had him here and before I lost him again in the morning, I was going to make the best of every last moment we had together.

Maverick had never been shirtless in front of me, but when I peeled his shirt off in my dream, he was every bit as ripped as he appeared to be with his clothes on. His skin was smooth and peppered with tattoos I'd seen hints of when he was wearing a white shirt, and every one of his muscles had purposeful definition to it.

My mouth watered when he sat back on his knees to look at me, his gaze devouring my body like mine was doing to his. Reaching forward, he undid the buttons on the front of my nightgown—one I'd purchased for easy access for Brea before her birth.

He didn't seem to be turned off by the decidedly unsexy sleeping gear, though. In fact, heat flickered behind his eyes like plumes of green fire in a dragon movie. Once the buttons were undone, he wasted no time pushing the fabric off my shoulders and leaving it to fall to the mattress while he reached around me to undo my bra.

The hook came free just a second later, and my breasts spilled out of the fabric before he tossed the garment aside. Down to only my panties, I decided to even the score a little

bit, hooking my fingers into the waistband of the boxers he'd worn to bed.

After lifting the material over his raging erection—and at least I knew that part of his body was accurate—I grinned when I found him naked beneath the boxers. He hadn't worn briefs or anything underneath them, which I supposed wasn't exactly surprising, but I still got a rush now that he was suddenly in the buff.

A soft moan slid out of me when I focused on the rock-hard length proudly reaching for the ceiling from between his legs, as perfectly thick as I remembered it being and with a shiny bead of moisture sitting right at the very top. He chuckled when he saw me looking at it so intently, then pulled me closer until my chest was pressed up against his.

Without removing my panties, his hand slid down into them as his mouth sealed back over mine, and he let out a sharp hiss when he found me wet and wanting as his fingers sank into me. I moaned again, unable to resist as my hips rocked into his hand.

Powerful arm banding around my waist to keep me standing on my knees, straddling him still sitting back on his, he held me tight while he explored all the magical, sensitive parts of me in a way no one ever had.

While he hadn't done exactly that when we'd really been together, he had seemed to derive pleasure from finding all the hidden spots that sent it hurtling through me. Honestly, that had always been part of my fantasy as something I'd like in a partner.

A man who truly cared about his girl's pleasure. I knew sex was only one part of any relationship, but I'd always thought of it as a pretty important part. If intimacy wasn't going to become a chore even after a decade or two together, it would have to be because both parties knew how to make the other really enjoy it. *Right?*

Maybe finding that in a man would always remain a fantasy, but since this was my fantasy, I enjoyed having found it. I writhed against him when he touched all the parts that

made me moan, then trembled in his arms as he drove me toward the brink before backing down once, making me just that tiny bit more desperate for it.

As if he knew exactly what I needed when I needed it, which I supposed made sense since this Maverick was a figment of my very own imagination, he gave it to me without hesitation. A crazy intense orgasm washed over me, making my toes curl. I rode out the pleasure, made so much more exquisite because he'd denied it to me for only a few seconds.

Panting in the aftermath, I came to with him gently laying me back on the bed and then burying his head between my legs. I hadn't even caught my breath yet when he started guiding me slowly back to the edge, but then I remembered the other part of my fantasy.

Knowing my partner's body as well as he knew mine. The mutual pleasure part. The part where it wasn't ever only about one person.

Threading my fingers into his hair, I sat up and smiled at him when he looked at me, shaking my head as I whispered to him. "Nope, not yet. You first."

He sighed like I was denying him his favorite snack but then flopped onto his back on our mattress and moaned when I closed my palm around his shaft. In my dream, there was an ease to all of this. A familiarity that just made it so much better.

Nothing felt rushed or forced, and there was absolutely no pressure on either of us as we focused simply on making the best of the time we had to be intimate. I stroked him up and down, reveling in every low hum of pleasure and every sharp intake of breath until neither of us could take it anymore.

The next thing I knew, he was on top of me, sinking into me without anything between us. His hands held mine as he stretched me open, his eyes intent on mine until he finally lowered his head to claim my mouth in another searing kiss.

We made love fast first, then slow, then with him behind me and me up on all fours, and then, when it was finally over

and we'd both had more orgasms than would've been possible if this hadn't been a dream, I fell asleep in his arms.

Unfortunately, at that exact moment, a very real squeal from Brea's room woke me up and I bolted upright in bed, panting and so slick between my legs that I realized my dream had actually gotten me off. *Jeez, you've got to know how starved I've been for an orgasm for that to have happened.*

When another cry came from Brea's bedroom, I rolled off my bed and composed myself, wondering if I'd have to take another pregnancy test just because the dream had been *that* good. I didn't have time to think about him too much after, though.

Hurrying to settle my baby, I scooped her up in my arms and remembered the most important reason why I couldn't let him live in my head like that. She was right here, her crying quieted just by having me with her.

I cradled her closer as I moved to the rocking chair I'd set up for myself in the corner. It didn't matter how good Maverick and I had been on our one drunken night together. There was nothing that could ever even come close to what I felt when I held Brea, and for her, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do.

Including swearing off her father, and I knew that was exactly what I had to do.

CHAPTER 15



MAVERICK

Karson called me in a panic from the construction site, speaking so fast that I almost couldn't make out what he was saying. "Fucking Henry didn't show up today. I told you he was a wildcard, bro. I know you wanted to help him, but we can't work like this. We're down a welder, and if we don't get another one in today, that puts us a day behind schedule on Henry's side of things."

I took a deep breath, rolling my chair out from under my desk and walking to my door. "I'm on my way, but it's going to be fine. Flynn can weld and he said he'd be happy to help us out. I'll give him a call, but he's already been helping me with some stuff on this project so I'm sure he's available to give us a hand."

"You better hope so," my brother snapped. "We need to stop hiring people just because they've begged you for fourth chances."

The line went dead a moment later, and I sighed but kept going. Karson wasn't wrong. Henry had screwed us on several occasions, and whenever he came to me with the sob story of the day, I agreed to give him another chance.

No more, though.

It wasn't in my nature to just cut people off. No matter what they'd done, I tended to lean more toward forgive and forget rather than the hold-a-fucking-grudge-forever side of things. There was far less angst and drama in my life because of it, but it was time to cut Henry off.

On my way to the site to calm Karson down and to see what actually had to be done by Henry today, I called Flynn. He agreed to meet me there right away, and I breathed out a sigh of relief. Crisis averted, I eased up on the gas pedal and held my hands in the air when Karson stormed over to me as soon as I walked onto the property.

“Flynn is on his way. Calm down. Just show me what Henry was supposed to have done, then you can get back to doing your thing and I’ll make sure Flynn knows what he’s supposed to do.”

Karson inhaled deeply, visible relief on his features as he relaxed, nodded, and then waved for me to follow him. We didn’t speak much except for him to explain what Henry hadn’t done yesterday and obviously hadn’t continued with today. Then he went off to do whatever he was doing and I shook my head as I watched him leave.

My brother really wasn’t any fun when we were in the thick of things onsite. He lost his sense of humor completely. It was a wonder Payton had fallen for him while they’d been working together. I sure as hell wouldn’t have.

As soon as Flynn arrived, I got him set up with safety equipment and he picked up his tools. Then I explained to him what he needed to do and he frowned at me. “Is that it?”

“Yep. Why? Karson made it seem like it was the end of the world if we didn’t get it done today, though. Is it going to be a problem?”

“Nah,” he said. “Give me an hour.”

Taking a step back, he surveyed the site before he turned back to me. “Well, Karson’s not wrong. If this doesn’t get done today, then the rest of the teams can’t carry on, but it won’t take long. If you didn’t have me, you’d have been fucked, but since you do, you can relax. Go braid your hair or something. You’re buying me a beer after I’m done.”

I chuckled but nodded. Leaving him to get started, I decided to take a walk around the site to get caught up with where we were instead of braiding my hair. *Honestly, if I didn’t*

know any better, I'd have thought they think I'm useless just because I'm not down here in the dust all day, every day.

Without me, none of them would even have been on this site because we'd never have signed the deal. Sometimes, being the brains of the operation seemed like an incredibly thankless job, but I supposed those were the breaks.

Laughing quietly at my thoughts, I drifted over to where Karson was talking to the architect. As soon as they saw me approach, my brother grinned, once again seeming relieved to see me. "Oh, good. You're still here. We're going to need more beams. Brando thinks about another four. Could you speak to Penny and find out how soon they can deliver?"

"Sure." I'd speak to Penny anytime, and this way, I had a good reason for doing it.

After killing the rest of the hour with Karson and the architect, letting them show me the minor improvements they'd made to the plans, I ambled back to Flynn. True to his word, he was done almost exactly an hour after I'd left him, and as he flipped up the shade on the welding helmet, he smirked at me.

"First three rounds are on you, bro."

I groaned but nodded. "Sure thing. I owe you at least that after you saved our asses today."

"You do," he replied happily, then returned the tools and safety gear and assured Karson he'd be back anytime we needed him.

There was a small pub down the block from the site, and we went there instead of driving to one of our regular spots. After we got our first beers, I took my phone out of my pocket and pointed at it. "Before we have the second round, I need to call Penny to get her to deliver more materials. Karson's on edge, so if I forget to do it, I'm afraid something bad is going to happen to him."

"Penny," Flynn said thoughtfully, then snapped his fingers. "The bridesmaid who stole your pants at Karson's wedding, right? Or am I remembering this wrong?"

“Nope, that’s the one. We need four more roof beams for the phase they’re working on now, and even though it’ll be a while before they’ll need to fit them, I have to find out if she’s got them and make sure she orders them if she doesn’t.”

He gave me a knowing look, smirking again as he shook his head. “Mav, I’ve known you for most of my life and you’ve never been so excited to order materials. Is there something going on between you and this chick that I should know about?”

“Nothing for you to know about, but we’re becoming friends.”

Head cocking, he snorted in disbelief and then made his eyebrows dance at me. “Friends, huh? I call bullshit.”

I laughed. “Fine. I’m starting to like her. That’s not a crime, is it?”

Flynn chuckled and shook his head, but then his expression became serious. “Doesn’t she have a baby? Again, I could be thinking of the wrong person, but I remember something about her having a child.”

“She does,” I said. “A baby girl around the same age as Karson’s boys.”

“Okay,” he replied slowly, dragging the word out a bit as he stared at me much more intensely than he had in a long time. “I get that you’re starting to like her, but you need to really think about it before you go after her, man. You’re putting yourself in a position where, if it works out, you might end up becoming a stepfather. I thought you weren’t looking to settle down.”

“I’m not,” I said firmly. “I’m definitely not actively looking for a serious, long-term relationship, but if it happens, then I’m not going to run from it either. We’re not kids anymore. That means we have to be mature about certain things.”

He snorted. “Just certain things.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, we have to be mature about most things, and this time, that means that I have to be mature about

the fact that I've reconnected with someone I'm growing to like very much."

"Does that mean you'll be okay with becoming a stepfather, then?" he asked, and I could see he wasn't just trying to be a stubborn asshole. He was genuinely worried about this, and considering the last conversations we'd had, I didn't blame him.

"I think I would be okay with it," I said honestly. "It's not like I'd be stepping on anyone's toes. It's the father's fault for not being in Penny's life or his daughter's. I wouldn't be getting between them or anything, and plus, I don't mind children."

He scoffed. "Since when? Since Karson had them? That's a long way off from having your own, man."

"Sure, it's a long way off from having my own, but yes. Since he's had them, I've realized that I do want my own someday. I haven't been thinking of having them anytime soon, to be fair, but if it happens and things go that well with Penny, then I'll just have to grab my balls and do it."

"Somehow, I don't think raising a kid is a grab your balls and do it kind of endeavor. From what I hear, it can be pretty all-consuming."

I shrugged. "Well, at least I'd have you to babysit, you absolute ray of sunshine."

He laughed, then pushed to his feet. "Okay, I'll give you a few to make your call privately. I need to go make a quick call of my own before we drink more beer anyhow."

Without giving me any more of an explanation about the call he had to make, he took off and went to make it outside. I looked around, noting that since it was early afternoon, there wasn't much of a crowd in here and the music was pretty low, so I decided to stay put.

Penny answered on the third ring, and I couldn't deny that I smiled when I heard her voice. "Hey, Mav. What's up?"

"Well, uh, Karson and the architect have been talking, and they're going to need four more of those beams we ordered for

the atrium. Do you think you can order those for me?”

“Sure,” she said. “I’d be happy to. Let me just check. I think we’ve got two more in the warehouse, but I’d definitely need to order the other two anyway.”

“Great. Thank you. I’ll let him know you’ve got it under control,” I said. “Hey, uh, while I’ve got you, would you like to do dinner again sometime soon?”

What I didn’t say was how I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her since our last date and how I’d been itching to ask her out again since before I’d even gotten home that night. She didn’t say anything for a long minute, and just before I could ask if she was even still on the line, she let out a soft sigh.

“I’d have loved to, but my babysitter would kill me for two weekends in a row. The babysitter I’ve got for Brea during the week isn’t available on weekends. Sienna is out of town this weekend, and I’m already working late on Friday, so my parents are going to have to watch her for me then.”

“I understand,” I said, then talked to her for a few more seconds before we hung up.

Everything she’d said before turning me down had made sense, so I wasn’t offended, but I really, badly wanted to see her. Which meant I had to make a plan to do it. I just had to figure out what kind of plan that would be.

CHAPTER 16



PENELOPE

This week had been one of those ones that had made me want to go back to the first grade. I'd even texted Sienna to see if she had a chair available for me in her class because all I wanted to do was play, learn about happy things, and maybe mold some playdough or draw with crayons.

Seriously, it'd reminded me that adulthood was no joke and that growing up, while having its perks, had most definitely been a trap. The worst thing of all was that the week wasn't over yet. For everyone else, the most precious hour of the week had arrived.

It was five o'clock and Friday afternoon, and that meant they were taking to the streets in their masses to blow off some steam while others would just go blow other people. Regardless, five o'clock on this particular Friday afternoon didn't mean a thing to me.

I had a ton of paperwork to catch up on and it was going to take me hours. As I clicked through my emails, I smiled when I saw one confirming that we'd received those extra materials Maverick had ordered.

Since Karson had already called me twice to make sure they were on order and would be arriving soon, I picked up my phone immediately to call his brother. To my surprise, he answered almost before the first ring had even ended, his tone friendly and relaxed.

"Hello, Penelope," he said, using my full name for some reason. "How are you doing?"

“Urgh, honestly? I’m wishing I could end my trial subscription to adulthood right about now, but I do have good news for you.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Those beams of yours have come in. My people will deliver them first thing on Monday morning. How are you doing?”

“Much better now,” he said sincerely. “Karson has been annoying the shit out of me about those beams. I don’t really get it since they won’t be going up soon, but he said the architect needed to see them as soon as possible for some reason. I’m not sure I trust what those two are up to, but at the same time, they’ve done amazing work together in the past. Why are you turning in your subscription to adulthood?”

“It’s just been one of those weeks.” I shrugged, leaning back in my chair and kicking off my shoes. My staff was leaving for the day and heels were not meant to stay on feet for any longer than strictly necessary. “Plus, my parents bailed on me at the last minute for watching Brea tonight. Apparently, they booked a fishing weekend with friends ages ago and didn’t realize it was this weekend.”

“Ouch,” he said sympathetically. “Are you all set? Do you need help with her? I could come watch her at your office if you need me to.”

“No, thank you. That’s sweet, but I’m already burning a bridge with my regular babysitter by asking her to watch Brea again this weekend and for warning her that she might want to stay late. She’s got a big math test every second Tuesday, which is why I can never ask her two weekends in a row. If she flunks Tuesday’s test, she may never speak to me again.”

“Well, is there anything else I can do for you?” he asked, once again surprising me by how genuine the offer sounded.

I shook my head, groaning as I massaged one of my feet. “No, but thanks so much for asking. I just need to get through what I need to get through so I can go home.”

He let out a low chuckle. “Have you thought about dinner yet? I know it’s only five, but you need to eat at some point.”

“Nah, I’ll probably just have some toast when I get home. I don’t really have time to think about it and as of right now, I’m not hungry. I’ll be okay.”

“Trust me, I get it. When you’re in the zone, the last thing you want to think about doing is eating. I understand.”

I smiled. “Have a happy Friday night, Mav.”

“Yeah, you too, Penny.”

We hung up after that and I spent a solid minute after, staring into space, wondering if things might somehow have been different between us if I hadn’t gotten pregnant that first night.

Since I had gotten pregnant and was now hiding the truth from him, however, I knew I’d never find out what might have been. I also didn’t have time for daydreams or speculation. I refocused work and gave myself a stern, very grownup talking-to about why it didn’t matter what might’ve happened between Mav and me anyway, and then I put my head down and did my job.

A few hours later, even the last stragglers had left the office and I was finally all alone. I’d gotten through a decent chunk of my work, but my eyes were burning and my head felt woozy. I had to manage at least a little longer, but I needed a break.

Just as I was rubbing my tired eyes, I heard the door behind me open. “We’re closed. I’m sorry, I should’ve locked up.”

“Yes, you should have.” Maverick’s amused voice came from the doorway. “Honestly, Penelope. What were you thinking, leaving the door open after nine on a Friday night when obviously anyone who walked past in urgent need of building supplies could just pop in and demand to be helped?”

Despite my exhaustion, I giggled before I turned to face him. “I know. Rookie mistake, right? What are you doing here?”

He raised a brown paper bag that I hadn't noticed he was carrying before. "I brought you dinner. I heard what you said about not having time and I really do understand, but I also understand that our brains can't function properly without food, so you still need to eat."

Something inside me melted over the fact that he cared, but I blamed it on the exhaustion and immediately moved on instead of dwelling on what that something might be. "Well, thank you. I appreciate it. Come on in."

He looked like a dream come true—which he kind of was, in a way—wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt under a black leather jacket. His hair was damp, though I wasn't sure if it was from a recent shower or if it was raining outside, and those green eyes of his were just so damn awake and sparkling that I wondered if I wasn't dreaming after all.

"I hope you like Thai," he said as he walked in, holding the takeout out to me. The scent of chicken, vegetables, and steamed rice wafted to my nostrils and I hummed happily.

"I love Thai. Thank you."

Standing up, I took the bag from him and carried it to my sitting area. As I opened the bag and realized he wasn't with me, I turned to look for him over my shoulder, finding him still standing in front of my desk.

His hands were in his pockets now, his stance confident and casual but somehow wary at the same time. "How's your work coming along?"

I shrugged, pulling out the containers from inside the bag and setting them out on my coffee table. "It's coming along, but not nearly as fast or as well as I was hoping. Who knew admin could take so damn long?"

He chuckled. "I did, actually. You should tell Karson that, though. He and Flynn have been working together onsite every so often this week, and they keep making it sound like I don't really do anything because I'm in the office every day."

"If they give you shit about it again, tell them to come talk to me." I waved a hand at the stacks of paperwork piled in

places around my office. “This is my idea of organized chaos, and it’s taken me hours just to get this far. About an hour ago, I seriously considered hiring someone to help with all this stuff.”

“You should,” he suggested lightly. “God knows, my assistant makes things a lot easier and the team of people he’s got backing him up makes things easier for him in turn. You’d also be creating job opportunities, which is great. Something to feel good about.”

I smiled. “Sure, if you can afford it. My assistant helps me out more than I can ever possibly describe, but this is all stuff I need to deal with myself. So the only person I’d be able to hire is me, so unless I can clone myself, hiring someone is out of the question. I also can’t afford to hire the equivalent of me, so I’m well and truly up the creek without a paddle even having been invented yet.”

Gaze moving from one pile to the next, he finally looked back at me. “I would say you could put me to work, but it’d probably take you longer to catch me up tonight than it would to finish here by yourself.”

“True,” I agreed, sighing before straightening up and running my hands through my hair. “A break and proper food is the next best thing, though. You’re a real life saver.”

“You’re very welcome,” he said, giving me the kind of smile people gave each other before they said goodbye. “So, uh, I don’t want to keep you. I just wanted to make sure you ate something.”

“You mean you’re not staying?” I frowned. “I was just about to take a break anyway, so you’re welcome to eat with me. You wouldn’t be keeping me from anything.”

Warning sirens went off in my head. *Tread carefully, Penny.*

Of course, I ignored those sirens. I shouldn’t have, but I did. The man had brought me dinner just to make sure I ate something. I’d be rude not to invite him to join me, and also,

even though I knew very well that I shouldn't be, I enjoyed spending time with him.

The more I got to know him, the more I wanted to get to know him. I knew it was dangerous and I knew why. I'd given myself more pep talks these last couple of weeks than the rest of my life combined, but I couldn't help myself.

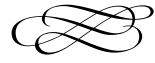
When I'd first heard his voice speaking up from the doorway earlier, my heart had skipped and I'd had to fight a smile. It'd been a heck of a surprise, but it sure hadn't been a bad one. I wished he didn't affect me this way and that I didn't like him as much as I did, but wishing didn't make it true.

The only thing I could think of doing right now was to ask him to join me and not to blame myself for it after. Maverick and I were in each other's lives for now. No good would come of me trying to push him away.

"Join me, please?" I said when he still seemed unsure, but as his face split into a big smile and he nodded, I was as afraid of what was going to happen as I'd ever been before.

Fear had never held me back, though. There was no reason for it to start doing so now.

CHAPTER 17



MAVERICK

“You’re sure you were going to take a break?” I asked, joining her at the small sitting area in her office. “I didn’t come here expecting to stay, so if you asked because you felt too guilty to let me leave, you can just tell me and I’ll go.”

“No,” she said after considering it for a moment. “Stay. Really. My brain crashed into a brick wall a few minutes ago and I was honestly about to take a break. I’ve tried pushing through the wall, but at a certain point, I just have to accept that my body needs a timeout.”

Penny drew the plastic cutlery out of the bag next and motioned for me to take a seat, and I did, but not before looking her over on my way to the sofa. From the remnants of makeup on her face, I could tell she’d been wearing the stuff earlier, but it was mostly gone now.

Save for a few small smudges around her eyes and a vague tint remaining on her lips, her face was bare and it was beautiful. All that flaming hair was pulled up into a messy half-ponytail thing right on top of her head, and if she had been wearing jewelry earlier, she’d taken it all off by now.

She had also kicked off her shoes, shucked her jacket, and unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. The effect of it all was that she looked more comfortable and natural than I’d ever seen her, and while she was always beautiful, she was breathtaking like this.

I didn't know why women always seemed to feel like their appearance had to be absolutely impeccable. I appreciated the effort they made, and I knew it took a lot of it, but honestly? They usually looked better to me when the war paint and the extra garments came off.

No one—not even me—wanted to be in a suit jacket any longer than necessary, and while I didn't have personal experience with heels, there was no way they were comfortable. Even if I did have a vague recollection of her telling me at the wedding that she didn't pay good money for uncomfortable shoes.

“So, uh, not that I'm not happy to see you—I am—but why are you here?” she asked as she settled in beside me on the sofa closest to the food. “It's nice of you and all, but my wellbeing isn't your responsibility. Do you worry about all of your suppliers, or is it just me?”

I laughed softly, turning my head to face her instead of focusing on dishing up some food like I'd been about to. Curiosity burned bright behind those blue eyes, but so did confusion. “Don't overthink it, Penny. You told me you were working late and that you probably weren't going to get around to eating while you were here, and since I'm a good friend, I didn't want you to starve.”

“Okay, and again, thank you so, so much, but help me out here. Surely, you've got better things to do on a Friday night than to deliver food to your friends.”

I shrugged, but I couldn't quite keep the corners of my lips from kicking up. “I turned down a few offers to go out, but I wasn't in the mood anyway. You're not the only one who had a long week. I'm doing exactly what I want to be doing right now.”

Her gaze caught on mine. “Why do I get the feeling you're always doing exactly what you want to be doing?”

“Because you've got impeccable gut instincts and you've gotten to know me well?” I suggested jokingly.

She laughed, her head shaking as she finally helped herself to some food and leaned back on the sofa to eat it. I did the same thing, and when I turned my head back to her, I found her already looking at me, eyes full of questions so loud she might as well have been screaming them at me.

“What now?” I smiled as I took my first bite.

The column of her neck moved up and down as she swallowed. Then she shrugged. “You’re just a bit of an enigma. Has anyone ever told you that? You come across as this smooth, confident guy who’s above things like friendship with vendors and really above any attachment whatsoever. You’re all suave and businesslike, but then you make friends with wannabe beer brewers and pay them for drinks that are supposed to be complimentary. You dote on your brother’s babies. You show up with takeout for me just because I’m working late. It’s confusing.”

“Nah.” I waved my hand dismissively. “I only come across as businesslike and aloof when I’m doing business. I have to come across that way. People would walk all over me in this industry if they think I’m a teddy bear.”

“Okay, but you weren’t doing business at your brother’s wedding, and yet, I watched you for a while. Your speech made you seem like that cool guy no one can ever touch and you were definitely networking.”

I let out a surprised burst of laughter. “You were watching me, huh? That’s good to know. Karson and Payton invited half the damn people we work with, though. Obviously, I was networking. As for me being the cool brother, I definitely am that, but I think you know better than anyone just how touchable I am.”

Penny’s eyes flared open just a little bit wider. “We’re talking about that now, are we?”

“Why not?” I frowned. “Were we ever *not* talking about it?”

“No, I guess not. It just hasn’t come up for a while, so I thought we were putting the past behind us.” She took another

bite of her food, averting her gaze to stare at the dark windows as she chewed.

We settled into a comfortable silence while we ate, and once we were finished, she grabbed us each a water from the fridge in their breakroom. Once she was back, she fixed me with another look. “We do need to put the past behind us, Mav. If we’re going to be able to move forward as friends who are also working together, we can’t look back.”

“Why not?” I asked, and it was a genuine question. “We didn’t do anything wrong that night. We’re working together just fine now and we’re becoming friends without that night getting in the way of anything. There’s no reason to ignore it.”

She seemed thoughtful for a minute before she nodded. “I guess you’re right. Isn’t it weird that we’ve slept together, though?”

“I don’t think so,” I said honestly. Then I nudged her in the ribs and smirked. “At least you already know what I’m packing, so you don’t constantly have to be distracted by wondering.”

She’d just taken a sip of water. When she started laughing at what I’d said, she sputtered and winced when she finally caught her breath. “Can you not say stuff like that when my mouth is full? I think I just got water up the back of my nose.”

I shrugged, still smirking. “What? It’s true. Don’t even try to lie to me. You’d have spent a good chunk of our time together wondering what was going on underneath all this and whether I was as good in bed as I appear to be.”

Lightning fast, she reached out and playfully smacked my shoulder. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“Sure.”

She smirked right back at me, laughter shining from her eyes as she made them big at me. “I think you’re projecting. I think you would’ve been wondering about me all the time, and that’s why you’re saying it.”

I didn’t even have to think it over before I nodded enthusiastically. “Was there supposed to be a question in there

somewhere? I mean, have you seen yourself recently? Obviously, I would've been wondering about all that."

As it was, I'd been wondering about all the parts of her I'd missed that night. We hadn't gotten completely naked and there hadn't exactly been space or enough light to explore her properly.

She cocked her head at me. "What are you thinking right now?"

"Why?" I teased.

"Because I saw that look in your eye. It looked like you were thinking about sex." She narrowed her eyes. "Were you?"

"Obviously." I spread my arms out to my sides, lowering my chin to give her an incredulous look. "We're talking about sex. How am I not supposed to be thinking about it?"

She sighed, her mouth pressing into a thin line as she shook her head, but that laughter was still sitting shallow in her eyes when she brought them back to mine. "Do you want to talk about the materials you might still need for the project? I was just going over the list we made before you got here, and I think we've missed a few things."

"We should probably talk about that at some point but not right now. It's Friday night and you're taking a break."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean we can't talk about work," she said. "We haven't really talked about work since you got here and it feels like a wasted opportunity."

"It's not," I insisted. "What would qualify as a wasted opportunity is if I don't ask you whether you were thinking about sex just now."

"Are you asking, or merely stating that it would be a wasted opportunity?"

I chuckled, shrugging one of my shoulders as I held her gaze. "I'm not one to waste opportunities, so I'm definitely asking."

“Okay.” Her tongue darted out to swipe across her lips. “In that case, I was thinking about sex. Briefly. I shouldn’t have been, though, so I apologize. Can we move on?”

“If you really want to, but I don’t think you do.” I searched her gaze, seeing the heat suddenly simmering behind it. “Why are you apologizing for it?”

She blew out a long breath, one of her hands going up to fidget with the hairs behind her neck that’d come loose from her ponytail. “Look, Maverick. I won’t deny that I’m attracted to you. What’s the point of trying to hide it from you when you already know? I just don’t think it’s a good idea for it to happen again.”

“Why not? We’ve already had sex, so it shouldn’t make things awkward between us. If you don’t want to, that’s an entirely different story, but that’s not what you said. You said you don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she blurted, then immediately looked like she wanted to stuff the words right back into her mouth. Since she couldn’t, she settled for dragging in a deep breath and then looked deep into my eyes. “It’s just...”

“Complicated for you right now?” I finished for her, and she nodded.

“Sex always seems to only complicate things more,” she murmured. “I can’t deal with any more complications than I already have in my life.”

I smiled, slowly reaching for her hand in her lap. The other one that had still been toying with her hair stopped moving when my skin connected with hers, but even though she had time to pull away and I wasn’t holding her hand particularly tightly, she kept it in mine.

“It doesn’t have to be complicated. We’re two adults who are attracted to one another and who get along well. It doesn’t have to be a complication if we don’t let it be one.”

Penny tugged her lower lip into her mouth and bit it, her gaze intent on mine. “How do I know we won’t let it be a

complication?”

“You trust me,” I said. “Sex can just be sex, Penny. It can just be a way for people to blow off steam rather than meaning that we’re making a life-long commitment.”

For a long minute, she didn’t do or say anything, and then, miraculously, she dipped her head in a nod. “You’re right. Okay, Maverick. Want to blow off some steam with me?”

Fuck yes!

Instead of answering her question verbally, I used my hold on her hand to tug her to me. Then I brought my free hand up to the nape of her neck and sealed my mouth over hers.

CHAPTER 18



PENELOPE

This is the way my world ends. Not with a bang but with a kiss.

Well, a kiss that was most likely going to lead to a bang, but still.

I couldn't even try to claim that my body was betraying me. Sure, I didn't think I could stop myself from kissing Maverick right now, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that I didn't want to stop him.

All the reasons why this was a bad idea drifted around in my head. My fears about him finding out about Brea were right there, and so were the ones about what he was going to do if and when he found out I'd been hiding this secret from him.

I couldn't claim to be lost in his fervent, passionate kisses or that all the reasons why I shouldn't have been doing this had fled from my head as soon as his lips had touched mine. None of that was true.

What was true was that I wanted this. I wanted to kiss him and for him to be kissing me. I'd been trying to deny that it was inevitable for too long and I was tired of trying to fight it.

I also needed to blow off steam. He'd been right about that, too. What better way to do it than with a man who would uphold his side of the bargain?

Maverick was fantastic in bed—unless my fantasies had built him up into something he wasn't—but I'd find out soon

enough. More importantly, he didn't want the sex to complicate anything. He'd as good as said that he didn't want it leading to lifelong commitment.

This was about attraction and release to him, not making love and learning all my secrets—thank God. Attraction and release, I could handle. Telling him most of my secrets? Sure. Hooking up with him again didn't mean I was suddenly going to tell him about Brea, though.

More than ever before, I was convinced he was happier not knowing about her. What he didn't know couldn't hurt either of us or our daughter.

As all these thoughts kept racing through my mind, I picked up a mental stick and beat them away with it. If we were really going to do this, I wanted to be in the here and now for it. I wouldn't presume to know if we'd ever end up here again, so I refused to go thinking along the lines of *if this is the last time* or anything like that.

All I knew for sure was that this was the first time in a long time, and if I was going to do it, I was going to do it properly. My postpartum body was much softer than it'd been before, and it wasn't like I'd ever been a skinny girl or one with lots of hard muscles.

That was the thought that tripped me up. Physically, I'd been given the all-clear for sex by my doctor. I'd also laughed in her face when she'd said it, but the point was that it was that she'd said I *could*, however unlikely the prospect had been when she'd said it.

The fact that Maverick was about to see my body for the very first time in a brightly lit environment and that he was about to see it in all its softer glory? I wasn't so sure about that.

As his hands roamed across my sides and his firm lips molded to mine, his tongue delving into my mouth and exploring as he held me against his torso, I decided that I wouldn't let my insecurities trip me up.

If I did it now, it would become a thing. Not just with him. There were easily a dozen things I could say to stop him without making him suspicious, but this wasn't about him. It was about me, my body, and my insecurities.

I didn't want it becoming a thing in my own head. I wanted to get back up on the proverbial horse—named Maverick, since he was also the last person I'd been with—and I wanted to learn to love my body exactly the way it was now.

Although I'd admit that it was a little harder to beat those thoughts back, Maverick's groans and expert-level kisses, along with those warm huge hands on my body, eventually coaxed me out of my head.

I melted into him, looping my arms around his neck and holding him to me, letting him devour me while I did the same to him. He responded immediately when he felt me giving in properly, getting up on his knees and laying me back on the sofa without even breaking the kiss for as much as a minute.

Focusing on the sensations he was eliciting to keep me in the here and now, I took stock of my body and how it was reacting to all this post childbirth. And that was where things got interesting for me.

Maybe it was just because it had been so long rather than having anything to do with the fact that I'd had a baby, but I certainly felt more responsive. My breasts and nipples were definitely a lot more sensitive, aching to be touched as they grew heavier—and not only with milk, but with desire.

Thankfully, I'd expressed just before he'd arrived, so that shouldn't be a problem, and besides, he knew I had a baby. He just didn't know she was his, too.

Not only that, but as he moved his mouth away from mine, kissing a path down my neck and eventually my torso after he'd slowly unbuttoned all my buttons to give himself the access he wanted, it was like his lips were starting hundreds of little fires all over the surface of my skin.

My back arched and a loud moan escaped me, my fingers tugging at his hair as I writhed beneath him. Running his hands up and down the insides of my thighs under my skirt, he kept bringing them just a little bit higher before they skated down again.

It wasn't lost on me that he was doing everything I'd fantasized about and then some. It also wasn't lost on me that he was really taking his time, touching lots of little parts of me before going for gold. Meanwhile, as much as I'd have liked to be reciprocating, I just couldn't do it right now. Call it selfishness or just plain being too scared he was going to stop if I so much as breathed wrong, but for now, I was staying put.

Squirming, moaning, rolling my hips, and arching my back, but staying put. Maverick didn't seem to have any problems with it, though, seeming perfectly content to rid me of my clothes before I finally helped him get out of his. We ended up getting naked at around the same time, and seeing his body before me in real life was enough to distract me from the thought that he was seeing mine as well.

Maverick Neidum in the flesh was as perfectly sculpted as I remembered him being and as mind-blowingly sexy as he had been in all my fantasies. With all his clothes off this time and the light in my office being very much on—and way too bright to be romantic or flattering—he was still a work of art. Truly.

When I finally managed to force my gaze away from all that lightly tanned skin, the rippled muscles, and the huge, surprisingly handsome dick, I looked back up at him and found him staring at me with the same sense of awe and wonderment as I felt right now. It seemed impossible that he hadn't noticed the pudge, the stretchmarks, or the extra helping of cellulite on my thighs, but if he had, it didn't appear to have turned him off.

If anything, those vivid green eyes of his were blazing with heat, and then his mouth was back on mine and he was moaning as he kissed me with renewed fervor. As much as I loved Brea, I definitely wasn't after a repeat performance of the aftermath of our last tryst.

At my request, my doctor had prescribed the mini-pill and I'd been taking it religiously, but the word mini was right there in the name. Since Maverick and I had a proven track record when it came to conception, I wasn't about to take any chances.

"Condom," I murmured between kisses, making sure to keep my lower body angled so that his naughty bits were nowhere near mine despite how much I wanted them there.

He broke the kiss to smirk at me, then shook his head. "We're nowhere near needing that just yet."

After giving me another chaste kiss on the lips, he resumed the path he'd been on earlier, kissing his way back down my torso until he was kissing an entirely different part of me—not so chastely. It was embarrassing how fast he pushed me to the brink, and when he suddenly backed off a little, I was as relieved as I was outraged.

Maverick chuckled in response to my mewl of either approval or protest, but then he spread my legs apart even wider and sent me careening over the edge not a minute later. I screamed at the intensity of the orgasm that crashed into me, writhing and bucking underneath him as he saw me through it.

Before I'd even fully recovered, he did it all over again, and when he went to go back after I lay boneless in the wake of orgasm number two, I shook my head and pulled him up by his shoulders. I didn't need to say anything before he nodded, reached for his pants, and got a condom out of his wallet.

After making quick work of sheathing himself, he sat up with his back against the sofa and then pulled me into his lap, his eyes never leaving mine as I got situated and lowered myself down on him. His features were tight with restraint, dots of sweat on his brow as his throat worked and his Adam's apple bobbed.

Taking his face in my hands, I kissed him deeply as I started moving, and it didn't take me nearly as long as I'd thought it would before I was moaning his name and trembling on top of him. At least he followed me over the edge this time, roaring as he found his release deep inside me.

Sated to the point of sleepiness, I lifted my head out of the crook of his neck and just asked the first question that popped into my mind. “What are we doing, Mav? I know you said things didn’t have to be complicated, but what does that mean? What are we doing with each other?”

“We’re having fun,” he said, looking straight into my eyes and letting me see that he wasn’t trying to sound glib or to bullshit me. This was really how he felt. “I like you, Penelope, but I don’t want to complicate things for you or with you. We’re just having fun.”

“That was what I wanted to hear,” I replied truthfully. “I like you, too.”

I closed my eyes, suddenly realizing that there was a possibility I was being a fool for keeping this secret from him. After my conversation with Sienna, it’d been in the back of my mind that I should just tell him, and as I looked into those eyes now, seeing that he meant it when he said that he liked me and knowing that I liked him too, I understood where she’d been coming from.

It was a snap decision and perhaps it shouldn’t have been, but I made it anyway. Before I lost my nerves. “Actually, there’s something I need to—”

I was cut off by the sound of the cleaning crew entering my assistant’s office, which was right outside mine. Their laughter and the sound of a cart being pushed filtered in from outside and I scrambled off Maverick’s lap, wondering if that was fate intervening with what I’d been about to tell him.

Accepting it for what it was—an interruption that meant I couldn’t tell him right now anyway—I realized I was just going to have to wait. Maybe that wasn’t the worst thing in the world. I hadn’t wanted to lose my nerve, but I also really didn’t want to lose custody of my baby, and while I was doubting more and more that he’d even try to take her from me, it wasn’t impossible.

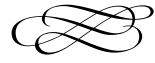
This wasn’t something I should’ve come clean about while I’d still been naked on top of him, with him still inside me. It

required careful thought, deliberation, and perhaps even a legal opinion.

The seed had taken root in my mind, though. I had to tell Maverick about Brea. It was the right thing to do.

Now it was just a matter of when.

CHAPTER 19



MAVERICK

“Look at this, huh? The old crew is finally back together again.” Karson grinned at Flynn before he looked at me. “Why are we doing this now? We should’ve done it sooner.”

“Well, other than me wanting to childproof my house for you two,” I motioned at my brother and my best friend, “I had to wait for Flynn to get back and settled before forcing him to spend the day with you and the tiny terrors.”

Karson laughed. “That’s not a bad point, actually. The tiny terrors are adorable, though. When they’re sleeping, that is.”

“Like now.” I sighed. “They haven’t been to my house for weeks and now they’re sleeping when they get here. They haven’t even seen the baby gym play mat thing I got them.”

“Just check your expectations of them with that thing,” he warned me. “The boys are only a few months old. They’re not going to be incredibly impressed by it.”

I glanced at the colorful mat with the soft bars hooked diagonally across it that I’d set up on my terrace outside where we’d be having our barbecue. “What’s not to be impressed by? I even got extra toys that have spinning lights in them and some that squeak.”

“Again, bro. They’re not even half a year old yet. The only thing they’re impressed by is their mother.”

I sighed. “Damn it.”

Flynn chuckled and gave me a pointed look that told me he was about to say something I wasn’t sure I wanted Karson to

hear just yet, but before I could stop him, he was already talking. “Well, at least you’ll have the baby gym thing already by the time your future stepchild starts coming around.”

Inwardly, I groaned and planted my face in my hand, but on the outside, I simply shrugged. “I’ll have it for any kids who come to visit, including yours.”

Flynn laughed, but Karson’s eyes nearly dropped clean out of his head. “What fucking future stepchild?”

“He’s joking,” I said conversationally, like it didn’t mean anything at all. “Penny and I have been seeing a bit of each other and Flynn is convinced that I’m going to become a stepfather as a result.”

“So wait,” my brother said slowly. “You’re dating the girl who made you look like a complete idiot at my wedding? That’s classic. What happened to not even knowing her name?”

I shrugged. “I learned her name.”

“She did make him look like an idiot,” Flynn agreed, holding up his beer in Karson’s direction and chuckling when my brother clinked his against it. “Maybe our boy here is a sucker for punishment, or maybe humiliation is his thing.”

I scoffed. “Humiliation is not my thing.”

Karson tilted his head at me. “Are you sure? Because that’s kind of the only way this makes any sense. She made a fool out of you and now you’re dating her.”

“Like I’ve never made a fool out of you,” Payton said, humor in her voice as she walked out onto the terrace carrying another six-pack of beer. “Or have you forgotten that I did the same thing to you at my brother’s wedding? I sure seem to remember something about the priest finding you the next morning with no pants on.”

Flynn let out a loud bark of laughter and stared at my brother. “How have I never heard this story before? Holy shit, guys. Does this run in the family, then? Is humiliation and pantlessness a Neidum thing?”

“No, it’s not,” Karson and I said in unison, and Payton arched a brow at Flynn before she shrugged and gave him what I assumed was supposed to be a discreet nod.

He doubled over, barely able to breathe, and Karson and I exchanged a look before I jumped in to save us. “I don’t like Penny because she humiliated me. We get along really well and I’ve forgiven her for that. We’ve put the past in the past. Where it belongs.”

Payton smiled at me, not getting hung up on the teasing part of the proceedings. *Bless my amazing sister-in-law.*

“She’s a nice girl,” she offered. “I, for one, love her and it’s why I chose her to be a bridesmaid. We hit it off as soon as we started working together and that hasn’t changed. She even called me the other day to set up a playdate for the babies. I’m looking forward to it.”

She turned to me. “Have you met little Brea yet? I haven’t seen her in person, but I’ve gotten a few pictures of her and she’s gorgeous. She looks like a little angel.”

“Does that mean you want to try for a girl yet?” Karson asked hopefully.

Payton speared him with a look that meant business as she motioned vaguely at his crotch. “Keep that thing away from me for at least a few more months before you ask again. You’re not the one who just squeezed two humans out of your hooaha. It might be fun putting them in there, but getting them out isn’t nearly as enjoyable. I’m going to need a little bit more time before I’m willing to go through that or the months of suffering between getting pregnant and giving birth again.”

“Go, sis,” I cheered jokingly, and Karson narrowed his eyes at me.

“You’re supposed to be on my side, future stepfather.”

I grinned at him. “I’m always going to be on Payton’s side, bro. Sorry, but I know what’s good for me.”

Payton chuckled and nodded her agreement, her expression thoughtful as he looked back at me. “You might just know what’s good for you after all. Penny really could be

good for you, you know. Penny and Brea. I know you haven't been fantasizing about the day you become a dad like your brother here has, but that doesn't mean you wouldn't be a good one."

"Thank you," I said. "I think I could be good at it, too, but we're a very long way away from it even mattering. I haven't even met the baby yet, and Penny and I are just having fun and taking things slow."

I blew out a breath, but then I decided to just go ahead and ask Payton the question that'd been burning up my brain since Penny and I hooked up the other night. "Where's Brea's father? Do you know? She's never mentioned him to me, and I guess I just don't want to start something with her when she's secretly dreaming of forming a happy little family with him."

"He's not in the picture at all," Payton said without any hesitation whatsoever. "A lot of people have asked about him, but as soon as it comes up, she tends to change the subject. I don't think anyone knows who he is."

"Maybe she doesn't know, either," Flynn suggested. "Or maybe it was just somebody she didn't know."

"Maybe," I agreed.

Both of those theories made sense, but at the end of the day, I didn't really care who he was. As long as he wasn't around to cause any drama, I was happy.

When I'd told her the other night that I liked her, I meant it, but at the same time, I didn't want to get involved with someone who was already involved with someone else. At least this meant I didn't have to worry about that if I did get with her.

Payton looked back at me, intrigue and curiosity in her eyes. "Are you guys really dating, or were they just giving you shit about seeing someone who'd humiliated you?"

"They were just giving me shit, but if things keep going the way they are at the moment, we might end up dating."

She pursed her lips at me. "People don't *end up* dating, Maverick. At least not if they're doing it right."

“Well, that’s not really true,” Karson said. “We just ended up dating. You just didn’t know about it.”

He waggled his brows at her and she sighed but slid in under his arm when he motioned her to him. “No, we didn’t *end up* dating. We ended up sleeping together a bunch of times and you caught feelings. We only started dating after that.”

“Potato, potahto.” He smacked a kiss to her temple and winked at me. “See? That’s how it’s done. I caught her along with the feelings, didn’t I? If you need any tips, let me know.”

Payton snorted. “Please don’t. He got lucky, is all. Besides, it’s a different ballgame now. Penny is a mom. She’s not going to mess around with some guy on overseas trips—”

Karson cut her off. “Or in the hotel they’re renovating, or —”

Payton interrupted him this time. “Or you’d better stop talking unless you want to stop messing around *period*.”

She tickled his ribs and he laughed, dancing out of her reach and tossing his empty beer bottle in the bin outside. He headed over to the table where Payton had set the rest of the beers in an ice bucket outside, grabbed another for himself, then held one out toward his wife.

“You need one yet?”

She shook her head. “One of us has to stay sober, or else Maverick and Flynn will have to take care of the boys for the rest of the day.”

“Bring it on,” I said.

At the same time, Flynn literally backed a few feet away from her and showed her his hands. “No offense, I love you all and I have no problem holding those boys while you go pee, but that’s about as far as it goes.”

She let out a long-suffering sigh. “Well, I suppose I can’t blame you. I wasn’t mad about kids either until my brother had one, and even then, I never imagined having any of my own.”

“Until she reconnected with me.” Karson batted his lashes at her, then uncapped his next beer and handed a fresh one to Flynn and another to me.

Once we were ready, we fired up the grill and Karson had just started regaling Flynn with tales of his travels with Payton when an almighty wail came from inside. My brother jumped to his feet, practically tackling Flynn out of the way in his haste to get to his boy.

When he came out with a much happier Ryder now that he was in his father’s arms, Payton smiled at them but spoke to me. “Are you ready for that, Mav? I know you were curious about Brea’s father and I know you said you get along well with Penny, but that right there is what you have to be willing to get yourself into if you want to take this thing with her any further.”

“I know,” I said, and I meant it.

Ultimately, Penny was responsible for a tiny, defenseless, vulnerable human being and she would prioritize her needs above all else. Even just a week ago, I might’ve felt differently about this, but the more time I spent with my brother, his wife, their kids, and with Penny, the more I was realizing that I might just be readier than I’d ever thought before.

CHAPTER 20



PENELOPE

“Thank God the cleaning team came in when they did,” I said to Sienna as we walked through aisles of baby clothes. “I came this close to telling him about her.” I held my thumb and index finger less than an inch apart. “This close, I swear. It was a moment of temporary insanity that nearly ruined everything.”

Sienna sighed. “The way I see it, it would’ve been a moment of temporary sanity rather than insanity. What size are we looking for again?”

“Technically, three to six months, but she’s growing like a weed. I’m seriously wondering whether to just skip ahead to six to twelve months. She’s not mobile yet, so if her clothes are a little big, it shouldn’t bother her too much.”

“Let’s get a few things in both those sizes. At least that way, you’ll know she always has something to wear.”

“That seems fair.” I turned toward the shelves and picked out a few onesies, smiling at how darn cute everything was. “So you still think I should’ve told him, huh?”

“My answer to that is always going to be yes,” she replied evenly. “He’s going to find out about Brea eventually. If you tell him now, it’ll soften the blow and make it less likely he’ll be so angry and you’d be faced with that lawsuit you’re so afraid of.”

“Logically, I know all this, and like I said, I was so close to telling him, but then the cleaning crew came and he left. There just wasn’t time.”

Sienna shook her head at me. “You could’ve made time, babe. You’re playing with fire by working with him, sleeping with him, and keeping this secret. You need to let him know the truth before it goes any further. It’s a ticking time bomb. The longer you hold on to it, the more likely it’s going to explode before you have time to dismantle it carefully.”

“You’re not wrong,” I grumbled after thinking it over for a beat. “That’s a pretty perfect way of describing it, actually. I mean, you’re the only one who knows the truth, but that doesn’t mean that he won’t eventually put two and two together.”

“Exactly. From what I’ve heard, he’s a smart guy. Eventually, he’s going to start doing the math. It’s one thing to know your girlfriend has a baby a certain age. It’s another thing entirely to see that baby and then realize you slept with her mother around the same time she would’ve been conceived.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just need to figure out how and when to tell him. The other night wasn’t the right time. I was still on top of him, for God’s sake. I have no idea what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking that you had to come clean with the father of your child.” She shot me a look as she added a few more outfits to the cart. “Also, what happens if you get pregnant from this sex you’re having with him? You two got it right with just one slip-up the last time, and you said he did put a condom on before he finished then, too. It’s not impossible that you could have another slip-up at some point. Your eggs seem to like his sperm.”

“I’ve thought of that already, and it’s not going to happen. I made sure his *business* didn’t come anywhere close to mine until he was covered. Plus, I’m on that pill, so we’re doubly protected right now.”

“First,” she said. “God has a sense of humor and second, what the hell did you just call his dick?”

She laughed, then gestured her apologies to a rather appalled-looking lady who walked past us and heard her say

the d-word. “His *business*?”

I lowered my voice just in case Mrs. Nosy Judgment was still listening. The woman was shopping for baby clothes, though. It wasn't like she'd never heard of a dick before or didn't know how the baby she was shopping for had been made. She was in no position to judge, but I was learning that parenthood was strange that way.

A lot of people stared at you with big eyes when they heard certain things, pretending that they themselves had never done the horizontal mambo and that they were so sweet and innocent. It was like they expected people to believe they were doe-eyed virgins when, in fact, regardless of how their child had been conceived or born, there had been sperm and horror involved.

Honestly, it was ridiculous, but as I watched Mrs. Nosy Judgment send us another dirty look over her shoulder as she kept plucking every poofy dress off the shelves, I decided to attempt not to offend anyone else today.

“His business,” I repeated quietly, then gave the other woman a pointed look before rolling my eyes. “You need to speak in code in these places, or otherwise, they'll boot me out of the mom club.”

“There's a mom club?”

I sighed. “No, I meant the club of mothers who give each other understanding looks at the mall, but who will publicly shun and shame you if you dare say a bad word in front of them.”

“Well, to be fair, I wouldn't have said dick in front of a baby,” Sienna replied.

“That's the point, though. It's not the babies getting offended by it. It's their mothers. God, I can't wait to see Payton. At least she's one other mom I know who seems to have gotten through it with her sense of humor and her sanity intact.”

“Well, she's got twins, so I'm not sure how long she's going to be able to hang onto her sanity, but we're kind of

venturing off course here. We were talking about how you were sure that Maverick's business wasn't going to impregnate you again."

"Oh, right." I snapped my fingers, but the truth was that I'd been hoping she'd forgotten about that.

Sienna was my best friend and she had been for a long time. We spoke openly and honestly about everything and she'd always given me good advice. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to her about this. It was just that I didn't even really want to put the possibility of another unexpected pregnancy out into the universe.

Either way, my friend seemed to be intent on turning our shopping trip into a lecture about the birds, the bees, and connecting the two safely. "I realize that you're on the pill now and it's great that you still made him put on a condom anyway, but let's be honest. Birth control is not infallible. What happens if next time, you guys get caught up in the moment and you forgot to take just one pill?"

"Well, I'm not sure the protection they provide is quite that fragile, but I won't forget and trust me, I'm never getting that caught up in the moment again."

"That's what you say now, but things happen," she argued. "You know that better than most."

"Okay, so you're saying I should just never have sex with him again?" Even just the thought was strangely depressing.

Sienna rolled her eyes at me before she smirked. "No, what I'm saying is that you need to sit him down and have a real conversation with him. During said conversation, you need to tell him that your quick slip-up during your limousine encounter resulted in a baby and then, you need to impress upon him the importance of being really, really careful if he wants to keep hooking up with you."

"Why are you suddenly using words like *impress upon him*?" I asked, frowning at her as we moved to the fluffy pajama section of the babywear department.

She looked right into my eyes. “I’m hoping that using more serious language will let you know just how serious this is. If you don’t want to talk to him about it just yet, at least think about it yourself. What will you do if he knocks you up again? Raising and hiding one child from him is going to be difficult, but two? That’s impossible.”

Exasperation coursed through me. “I know, okay? I know. I know I need to talk to him and I will. I also know that you’re trying to protect me, but I’m okay for now.”

“For now,” she muttered but then started pulling adorable, cuddly pajamas off the shelves that made my ovaries cry out to hold that little body in my arms. “We’re almost done here, right?”

“Almost,” she said. “You also need diapers, though. Don’t you?”

“I do.”

Sienna and I added a few more items of clothing to the cart before we headed over to the consumable items I needed for Brea. My phone buzzed in my pocket. My heart lurched into my throat until I saw Maverick’s name on the screen instead of the babysitter’s.

I hated being away from Brea, and even though I was away from her more often than I was with her, I still nearly had a heart attack every time my phone went off. Part of parenthood, it seemed, was worrying. Constantly. About everything. Even when there was no reason to worry. In fact, maybe even especially when there was no reason to worry.

On the other hand, when I saw what he’d texted me, I almost had a heart attack anyway. It was such a shock that I stopped walking and couldn’t do anything other than stare at my phone for a beat as I tried to process it.

Maverick: Hey, you. What are your plans this weekend? I was wondering if I could take you and Brea out on a date. I’d like to meet her :-)

I blinked at my screen, only snapping out of my surprised, trance-like state when Sienna suddenly poked me. “What’s

going on? Who is it? What's wrong?"

"Oh, uh. It's Maverick," I said a little numbly. "He wants to meet Brea this weekend."

"Fuck," Sienna cursed beside me, drawing the attention—and the glare—of yet another Nosy Nelly. My friend looked dangerously close to flipping the woman off before she sighed and turned her attention back to me. "What are you going to do?"

"Uh, I'm going to say no," I said like it should've been obvious. When I saw the look she gave me, I quickly explained. "I'm not going to bring him into her life just like that if I'm not sure he's going to stay in it. It's not a good idea to let him meet her right now."

I saw the disagreement and disapproval in my friend's eyes, but I was grateful when she didn't voice her concerns. Although I knew how she felt about all this, I also knew how I felt and Brea was my daughter. I had to do what I thought was best for her. Always.

Me: That's not a good idea right now. I'll let you know when it's a possibility, though. Sorry:-(

After hitting send, I slid my phone back into my pocket. I hoped he'd understand my hesitation, but even if he didn't, it was Brea I had to protect. Not him.

No matter how he felt about it, she was and always would be my first priority. Now I just needed to figure out how exactly to go about prioritizing her when her father wanted to meet her and I didn't trust his motivations. Or how long he'd stay once he found out the truth.

Crap. Well, despite his promises, this just got one whole hell of a lot more complicated. Damn it.

CHAPTER 21



MAVERICK

Flynn walked into my office unexpected and unannounced, probably the only person other than Karson who could get away with it—and that was only because it was Karson’s company, too. If it hadn’t been, I wouldn’t even have let him come and go as he pleased.

There was a thoughtful expression on my friend’s face when he entered, but by the time I’d hit send on the email I’d been typing and looked back at him, he was grinning. “Hey, Mav. Do you have time to go grab a beer?”

I raised my brows at him. “Uh, it’s nine thirty on a Wednesday morning, so as much as I’d like to go get one, I’m going to have to say no.”

He pouted for a moment as he strode across my office and settled in on the chair opposite my desk. Then he released a heavy breath and nodded. “So, uh, I just got word. I’m headed back to the oil fields soon.”

“What?” My disbelief rang loud and clear from my tone. “Why? I thought you said you were home indefinitely.”

“That’s what I thought, but my company is down a man so they’re putting me back in. They made me an offer that definitely makes it worth my while.”

I slammed back in my chair, blinking fast as I stared across the top of my desk at my friend. Flynn always dressed like he was going to work on a farm. Jeans. Hardy boots. Worn shirts. His shaggy hair was pulled back in a short low ponytail.

Today, he looked the same as he always did with no sign that anything untoward was going on, but this seemed too sudden.

“What’s going on, Flynn?” I asked. “Do you need a permanent job here? Is that it? If that’s what this is about, you know Karson and I will—”

“Thanks.” He chuckled and shook his head, speaking over me as he shrugged. “That’s not it. Sure, I’ve been bored when I haven’t been helping you guys out, but it’s not just that. My guys need me and I miss being out there.”

“What happened to just wanting to be at home for a while?” I asked after pausing briefly to think about what he’d said.

He lifted a shoulder in another shrug, giving me that restless grin I knew so well. “Home is a little overrated, as it turns out. For now, anyway. I shouldn’t be gone too long, but I want a big sendoff this time. A party. Are you down?”

“I’m always down for that,” I said. “I’m just a little confused by your sudden change of heart. Are you sure everything is okay?”

“Everything is fine, bro. I promise. Honestly, it’s all good. I just wasn’t made to sit still this long. Helping you guys out is the only thing that has been keeping me sane.”

“It’s only been a few weeks, though.”

He laughed. “It’s been over a month, actually. Trust me, I’ve been counting the days. Look, I know this is sudden, but I’ve been thinking about what to do and then I got the call. It’s fate. The universe wants me back on the fields and I want to be there.”

“Okay,” I said eventually. “As long as you’re sure this is really what you want. Just remember that you’ve always got a job with us if you need it.”

“I appreciate that, man.” He leaned back in his chair, his expression morphing from serious to excited. “Can we talk about the party now?”

“Sure. What have you got in mind?”

As I asked the question, my phone started ringing. I picked it up to send the call to voicemail, but then I saw Penny's name on the screen and shot him an apologetic grin. "I'm sorry. I need to take this. It's Penelope."

He rolled his eyes, smirking as he motioned for me to go ahead. I sighed, but then I spun my chair around to face the windows and give myself the illusion of privacy as I took her call. "Hey, Penny. This is a surprise. What's up?"

"I just wanted to check if your latest shipment got to you. I haven't received confirmation and I can't reach anyone at the damn delivery company."

I cocked my head, staring out the tinted window at the city below as I considered how to approach this. "What would you do if I haven't received it?"

"Make someone's life hell," she said darkly. "Do I need to make someone's life hell?"

I chuckled. I wanted to keep her on the phone a little bit longer, but not if she was this nervous about the shipment. "No, we're all good. It was on time. Just like it always is from you. Thank you. How are you?"

She let out a relieved sigh. "You had me going there for a minute, so thanks for that. I was already wondering just how strongly to word my strongly worded email. If it won't be necessary to send one, I'm doing better than I was just a minute ago. How about you?"

I was also doing better than I had been just a minute ago, but it was because I was talking to her. "I'm good. How was your weekend?"

"Not too exciting," she said before hesitating. "I'm sorry that I said you couldn't meet Brea. It's just that I'm careful about who I let into her life. Maybe I'm overprotective, but I'm the only person she's got to protect her, so it's a job I take pretty seriously."

"Of course," I said. "To be honest, I didn't really think you were going to say yes. I just wanted to put it out there that I

would like to meet her and that I wouldn't mind her coming out with us."

"Thank you," she murmured. "It says a lot about you that you're willing to accept her so easily and include her. Dating the single mother of a young child isn't for everyone. Thank you for not being pissed off about me turning you down. It's not that I don't want you to meet her. I just..."

When she trailed off, I smiled. "You just don't want to introduce her to some random guy who might not stick around?"

"Exactly," she said quietly. "Are you some random guy who's not going to stick around?"

"No. I'm not, but you don't have to take my word for it. I'll prove it to you over time. I get that you want to protect her, and for the record, I don't think you're being overprotective, but I'm not going anywhere, Penny."

"Are you sure about that?" she asked after pausing for a beat. "Babies are challenging, Maverick. They don't wait for you to finish brushing your teeth or eating your sandwich before they ask for something, and they don't just ask for it. They wail for it. They push the relationships of even well-established couples who have been together for years to breaking point."

I smiled. "I'm still not going anywhere, Penny. I know all that and I'm seeing Karson and Payton go through it, so I've got a better idea of what it's like than you may think. I work with my brother. We're together a lot, and Karson is a talker. He hasn't been shy about giving me the details."

"I didn't think about that, but still, it's not easy on any relationship. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to scare you away. I'm just being honest. You can't just say that you're sure you're not going anywhere and have it be so."

"I know," I replied patiently, hearing the nerves in her voice and hoping I wasn't screwing it up by sounding too nonchalant. "Like I said, though, I'm going to prove it to you

that I'm not going anywhere. I realize it will take time, but I've got as much of that as it takes."

"You talk a good game, Maverick Neidum. A great game, actually. If only it was as simple as you're making it sound, but it's not."

I frowned. "Why not? Nothing has to be more complicated than we make it, Penny. I'm here for you, okay? For both of you, and I'm not scared. I'm not one of those people who runs as soon as things get hard. If anything, that's when I double down."

She chuckled. "You are an incredibly smooth talker, do you know that?"

"I've been told," I said, my brow easing as I smiled. "I'll speak to you soon, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed softly. "Have a good day, Maverick."

"You too, Penny." I didn't end the call immediately and neither did she.

Like two teenagers, we played hang-up chicken until I finally heard someone say her name on the other end of the line, and then it went dead. As I sighed and turned around again, I realized that I'd forgotten Flynn was still here.

And that he'd heard every word I'd just said

When I was facing him again, he lowered his chin and raised his eyebrows at me, giving me an incredulous look. "Jesus. I feel like I just witnessed something huge."

"You didn't," I said dismissively. "Should we plan your party now?"

He chuckled, shaking his head as he kept staring at me with wide eyes. "Oh, hell no. We'll get to that."

Leaning forward, he propped his elbows on his knees and stared at me some more. "You know, not so long ago, you told me you weren't looking to settle down at all. Then we drank like there was no tomorrow. Since then, you've told me you're okay with possibly becoming a stepfather and now, you're assuring this woman that you're going to be sticking around."

“So?” I asked, setting my phone back down on my desk and shrugging. “I’ve gotten to know her a lot better since you first asked me that question and besides, what’s the use of a mind if you can’t change it?”

“Holy shit,” he breathed, then started laughing. “You’ve fallen for this girl. It’s obvious, man. You can deny it as much as you want, but you’ve in love, Mav.”

“I don’t know if I would go that far.” I also wouldn’t say for sure that I wasn’t, but I didn’t want to give him any more ammunition. “Calm down, would you? We had a conversation, that’s all. Nothing exciting happened. It’s not like you just heard me propose to her.”

“No, but I did just hear you telling her that you were in it for the long haul and that you’d prove it to her. You might not have proposed, but you did take the first step toward a serious relationship with this woman.”

“Maybe, but it’s still nothing to get excited about. Please can we get back to talking about your party now? When are you leaving? What kind of party do you want?”

It looked like he had more to the say on the Penelope subject, but eventually, he let it go with just one last warning. “I hope you know what you’re doing with her, man. You might be falling in love with her, but how much do you really know about her? Have you even asked her about the baby daddy and whether he might pop back into the picture at some point? Just think carefully here, Maverick. If you don’t, there’s a baby who might eventually suffer the consequences of your decisions.”

After that, he sat up straight again and changed the subject, happily getting to the party planning now that he’d spoken his mind. Since that was exactly how I knew him to be, I took his opinions to heart, but ultimately, this was my decision to make.

What I’d told her had been true. I wasn’t scared and I wasn’t about to run at the first wail. At that moment, I was fully committed to proving to Penny that I wasn’t just some random guy who was going to flake on her and her daughter.

Life, however, tended to be what happened when you were making other plans, and that was especially true in this case. I just hadn't known it quite yet.

CHAPTER 22



PENELOPE

Brea and I sat in our lounge after getting home from the office. I half sat, half lay on the sofa with her lying against my bent knees, her tiny fingers curled around my own as she smiled while I told her about my day.

Honestly, this part of it right here was my favorite. Spending uninterrupted time with my daughter and just unwinding together was what I lived for these days. As she stared at me, so alert and attentive, I marveled at her, once again wondering how *she* had come out of *me*.

I'd made this little person, grown and protected her for almost ten months until she'd made her way into this world. It was still a complete mindfuck to think that several unprotected seconds in the back of a limousine next to Lake Lucerne had produced this.

Brea was perfect in every way, from her thick head of hair to her tiniest little toe. I'd started believing in miracles after I'd had her because she was nothing if not that.

As I spoke to her, I understood that she didn't know what I was saying and that she couldn't give me any input, but I spoke to her anyway.

It made me feel better to know that I was being honest with her—even if I wasn't doing the same thing with her father. "I spoke to your daddy today, you know? He wants to meet you. He says he's not going anywhere, but I'm not so sure about that. Maybe if I'd told him about you back when he first came into our lives again, it would've been better, but I

didn't. I honestly don't know what he's going to do when he finds out."

She cooed, and I smiled. "Yeah, I know we have to tell him eventually, but it's a matter of timing. No matter what happens, though, you and I will be fine. We were fine before he suddenly appeared in our lives and we'll be fine if he decides to leave again. Sure, Mommy will be a little heartbroken if that happens and it's going to be tough to explain it all to you one day, but I knew the risks going into this."

Brea burped, a little bit of milk dribbling out of her mouth as she did. I grabbed the nearest piece of fabric I could find to wipe it away and ended up using my recently discarded scarf. Sighing as I tossed it back onto the coffee table when I was done, I wondered if Maverick really had any idea about how gross the day-to-day life of a parent was.

There were more bodily fluids involved than I'd realized, that was for sure, and it wasn't like one could hose her down every time some of it leaked out somewhere it shouldn't have. Like the spit up, for instance.

I was months into this gig and still almost never had the proper paraphernalia on hand to deal with it every time. It was a huge adjustment to be responsible for a helpless human, and I just didn't know if anyone could do it if it was just dropped in their laps.

"Either way," I murmured. "She doesn't know it yet, but Payton is your aunt. She's bringing your cousins by to meet you in just a little while, and we're going to have to tell her the truth, aren't we? You have cousins who are just a couple weeks older than you and a loving aunt and uncle that I never even considered before. That is what they are, though. I'm starting to realize that I'm hiding you from an entire family, not just a father who may not be ready."

Which made it so much harder.

These last few days, a lot of realities had dawned on me. One of which was that Brea had cousins, the twins, who she would be missing out on growing up with as family if I kept

my mouth shut. It also dawned on me that Karson and Payton would want to help and support me with her if they knew she was related to them.

I'd met Karson's parents at the wedding briefly, but they were lovely people and Brea was their grandchild. How all of this was only occurring to me now, I didn't know. The only excuse I had was that it'd taken me weeks to get used to the idea that I was pregnant.

After that, it'd been a blur of trying to get everything setup for Brea's arrival, work, fielding questions from my own family and my friends, more work, and then she'd been born. The newborn phase was commonly referred to as the fourth trimester, and I finally understood why.

The blur hadn't ended when she'd been born. It'd only gotten more intense. My days had been a rollercoaster ride of hormones, adjustment, breastfeeding, expressing, changing diapers, trying to settle Brea into a routine and finding my own.

Then, just when I'd thought I had a handle on it, I'd gone back to work and Maverick had waltzed into my office shortly after. It was almost like my brain was only coming back online now, a year and a bit since I'd bickered with the clerk over purchasing an already used pregnancy test.

Frankly, I almost wished the damn thing had stayed offline. At least then, the truth and the reality it brought with it had felt like something I'd only have to deal with in the faraway future.

Now that said faraway future was here, not having been so faraway after all, it was a bit of a clusterfuck. On that note, there was a knock at our door and I sighed, my heart pounding in my chest as I got up to let Payton in.

Carefully cradling Brea to me, I held on to her like a lifeline as I opened the door and forced a smile to my lips. "Payton! Hi, it's great to see you."

She grinned back at me, then huffed out a breath as she maneuvered her double stroller inside. "It's good to see you

too, Penny, and you, little angel. Auntie Pay-Pay can't wait to give you a cuddle, but for now, I need to learn to be a better driver."

Laughing as she narrowly avoided running into the table in my foyer, she shook her head at herself and nodded when I reached out with my free hand to help her with the stroller. "Thank you. I seriously think people need to retake their driving test before they should be allowed to buy this thing. It's huge."

Mentally comparing it to the size of Brea's stroller, I nodded. "It really is big. You should've just told me and I would've come to you instead."

"Nope," she said immediately. "I'll take any excuse I can get to get out of the house at the moment. I'm not back at work full-time yet and I'm driving myself and the twins absolutely insane with my cabin fever."

"When are you going back?" I asked, feeling a pang of jealousy in my gut.

She shrugged. "If Karson gets his way, never. I've been working a little, but mostly from home. Karson offered to stay home with them instead for now, but Maverick would've killed me if I'd accepted the offer. He was so beat after we got back from our honeymoon, and that was after he'd only been managing the company by himself for a month. Can you imagine his reaction if we'd told him Karson was out for the foreseeable future? He'd have gone bonkers."

"What about daycare?" I asked.

She eyed the two semi-sleeping babies in the stroller and shook her head. "Soon, sure, but not yet. They're still so little. Besides, I'm just venting. I love being at home with them almost all the time and Karson spends as much time there with us as he can, so I don't really have anything to complain about. Plus, it's not like I'm not getting any mental stimulation at all. I've got a few projects I'm working on. I'm really just venting."

“I get it.” I laughed, helping her guide the stroller to my lounge before offering to get her a drink. She accepted, and I went to grab us some waters while she got the boys settled.

As soon we were both seated with all the babies happy for now, she grinned at me. “So, what’s new with you? I feel like we haven’t seen each other for ages, but we’ve obviously both had our hands full with our children. Catch me up. What’s going on?”

“Maverick is Brea’s father,” I blurted immediately, doing exactly what I’d been telling myself not to do since I’d realized I was going to have to tell her today. I’d been planning on easing her into it, but now that it was done, I was just glad the words were out.

Payton, on the other hand, looked like I’d just whacked her upside the head with a cast-iron pan. She sat shockingly still, her lips parted as she blinked like she’d just poured a whole bunch of stinging eyedrops into her.

“Excuse me?” she finally managed to say, her voice hoarse. “I think I was hallucinating due to lack of sleep for a second there. Did you just say that Maverick, as in my brother-in-law, Maverick Neidum, is Brea’s father?”

I nodded, my heart beating a mile a minute and my palms sweaty, but I’d been prepared for this. “Yes, I did say that, and he is. No one knows, though. Only Sienna.”

Payton stared at me for at least another full minute before she finally recovered. “Well, that explains why Maverick hasn’t said anything. You have to tell him, Penny. You do realize that if you don’t, I’m going to have to tell him, right? I can’t keep something like this from him. From both of them. God, Karson is going to be ecstatic.”

“You can’t tell them,” I said, ready to beg if I had to. “Please don’t tell them yet. I want to tell Maverick myself. I just need to figure out how and when.”

Payton dragged both of her hands through her hair, tugging it back and holding it up between her fingers until she finally nodded. “Yeah, okay. I get that. I won’t say anything, but you

need to tell him soon, Penny. I mean it. I can't sit on this for too long."

"I know. I understand. I will tell him soon. I almost told him the other night, but then we were interrupted and it just felt like the universe telling me to wait, you know?"

Her gaze moved to Brea, now settled in her little swinging chair and examining the mobile of stuffed teddy bears hanging above her. "Has he even seen her yet?"

I shook my head. "Nope. He asked, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to let him meet her before I'd figured out what to do."

"It needs to happen, Penny," she murmured gently, moving her eyes back to mine. "You know it does. We're having a get-together for Maverick's best friend. You should come and bring Brea with you. It's a great opportunity for the two of them to at least meet."

I let out a long, slow breath through my nostrils, giving it some thought before I finally agreed. "Okay. We'll be there. Just send me the details and I'll bring her."

It was time. Sienna and Payton were both right. I needed to just start listening to my two closest friends and put on my big girl panties. Whatever happened, I'd have brought on myself, but if I left it any longer, things were only going to start getting exponentially worse.

Unintentionally, I'd dragged this out for as long as I could and now it was time to face the music. However dreary the tune might end up being.

CHAPTER 23



MAVERICK

Karson finished his update on our latest project, then frowned at me and kicked his feet up on my desk. “What’s going on with you? You look distracted.”

“I’m not distracted.” I bent over and shoved his feet back to where they belonged—the floor. “I heard everything you said. I just don’t have anything to add. We’re on track and that’s all that matters, right?”

“Right,” he said cautiously. “Usually, though, you have twenty million questions about our next steps. What are you thinking about?”

“Honestly? I’m thinking that we should go get stuff for Flynn’s party this weekend,” I said, running my fingers through my hair as I stood up. “Yeah, we should definitely do that.”

“It’s a good idea,” Karson agreed before pulling the plug. “We’re working, though. We should probably keep doing that instead of going shopping for party supplies.”

“Are you serious?” I arched a brow at him as I walked out from around my desk. “The one time you’d rather work than plan a party is the time I suggest we should plan a party?”

He laughed, then shrugged and got up. “Consider my arm twisted. Let’s go do this.”

“Wow. That was easy. You’ve got a rubber arm there, man. Since when is it so easy to change your mind?”

“Probably since you just reminded me that planning a party is considerably more fun than working. Besides, we’re on track with everything and we do work for ourselves. That gives us a certain level of flexibility we don’t take advantage of often enough.”

“The way you’re talking, you’re going to suggest we go out for a late lunch next,” I said as we left my office. “I was just thinking that we go get the stuff we need and then come back.”

“Nah. If we’re going to blow off work, we might as well do it properly. Let’s go get lunch after. It’s a good idea. What do we need to get for the party anyhow?”

“Food,” I said. “Probably some decorations, too. The food is the most important thing, though. Whatever else we get will just be an added bonus.”

“Well, if we’re getting food, then we’re definitely going for lunch after. There’s nothing that sucks as bad as buying nice food, knowing you have to wait to eat it, and then going home and making a boring sandwich.”

I laughed. “Well, it looks like having a rubber arm runs in the family. There are a few things that suck worse than that, though. Like possibly being in love with a girl who doesn’t seem to think you’re capable of sticking around.”

Karson gave me an apologetic look as we climbed into his truck. “Penny doesn’t think you’re serious about her?”

“Nope,” I said. “She seems to think that I won’t be able to handle the fact that she has a baby and that she won’t let me meet said baby until I prove that I will hang around regardless. It’s a catch-22. I’ll need to meet the baby to prove she won’t scare me away, but Penny won’t let me meet her until I’ve already proven it.”

“Well, to be fair, I’ve never seen you with a real, serious girlfriend. Is that how you feel about her, though? Do you want her to be an actual girlfriend rather than just a girl you fuck occasionally?”

“She’s never just been a girl that I fuck occasionally,” I said. “We’ve only slept together twice, but what I feel for her is real. I’ve never met anyone I get along with as easily as I do with her. Being with her just feels good, you know? It feels right.”

“I do know, but I’m surprised you do.” He made a left turn out of our parking lot, driving to our local mall without even asking me where I’d wanted to go.

Karson and I were both creatures of habit, though. Sure, we took a lot of risks, but when it came to our day-to-day, we were dependable. Loyal. It was just the way we’d been raised.

Which was another reason why I didn’t understand why no one seemed to think that I’d be able to stick around for Penelope. I wasn’t a runner. I didn’t quit. When I made up my mind about something, whether it was my favorite grocery store or going after a single mother, then that was it. I’d made up my mind and I committed.

“What do you want from her, Mav?” Karson asked, breaking into my thoughts. “Do you even know? Do you have any idea what it would take to be in a serious relationship with her at this point? It’s not going to be all rainbows, and daisies, and perfectly posed family pictures of you with an adorable baby on your lap.”

“I know that, asshole. If even you don’t seem to think I’ll be able to handle it, then I guess it shouldn’t come as a surprise that Penny doesn’t believe it either.”

He scoffed. “I didn’t say you couldn’t handle it. All I said was that I understand her reservations. You met her at our wedding, had a one-night stand, didn’t see her for over a year, and now she has a baby, you approach her for a project, and suddenly, you’ve decided you want to be with her. This is the same woman whose name you didn’t even know after you slept with her.”

“A year ago, things were different. I wasn’t ready for a relationship then, but I am now. I want something real and she’s the woman I want it with.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Why her, though? What is it about her that makes you want something with her that you’ve never wanted before?”

I shrugged. “She’s different.”

He snorted. “Yeah, that’s the easy answer. Why is she different? What makes her so different from the legion of women you’ve slept with and dated before?”

“It’s not a legion,” I protested. “I’ve never been that bad, but if you must know, then fine. Penny is different because of the way she makes me feel. She’s fun to be around. She’s strong. She’s funny. She stands on her own two feet, and when I’m with her, I feel like a better version of myself. Or at least like I want to be a better version of myself.”

A few long seconds later, Karson blew out a breath and grinned at me. “That’s a better answer than I was expecting. Shit, man. You may just be falling in love with her after all. Where does Brea fit into all of this?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” I admitted. “I’ve asked if I could take her and Penny out a couple weekends ago, but she turned me down. At this rate, I’m not sure if she’s ever going to let me meet her daughter. She’s hiding that child like it’s not real.”

Karson laughed. “That’s funny, but you have to look at it from her point of view, man. She can’t just be letting every Tom, Dick, and Harry she gets along with into her child’s life. Brea may be a baby now, but she’s not going to be one forever and this sets a precedent for how things are going to be in the future. Plus, Penny’s still adapting to motherhood and having to do it all by herself, and I’m pretty sure you’re the first guy she’s even been interested in since she found out she was pregnant. It’s got to be intimidating as hell figuring out how to date and when to introduce the person you’re dating to your child.”

“Like you just said, though, Brea’s still a baby. It’s not like she’s even going to remember me an hour after I leave.”

“Sure, but did you ignore the part where I said this could set a precedent? Penny is a single mom. If things don’t work out with you, it’s not beyond the realm of possibility that she’ll eventually date other men. I mean, fine, she also wouldn’t have to introduce them to Brea within the same amount of time that she did you, but I understand why it’s a daunting prospect. I sure wouldn’t know when the right time was.”

“Is the father really not in her life?” I asked, glancing at him after he parked in front of the store. “I just can’t help but feel like there’s another reason for her hesitation. I understand that all of this is really new and that she’s still figuring out motherhood. I also realize that I have no clue how hard all that is, but shouldn’t that be another reason to let me in?”

“No, the father really isn’t in her life, but what do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m here and I’m telling her to let me in. To let me help. That I’m here and that I’m not going anywhere. Wouldn’t it be useful for her to date someone who’s willing to support her now, at just about the beginning of this journey?”

He shrugged. “Maybe, but allow me to play devil’s advocate for a minute.” We climbed out of the truck, grabbed a cart, and walked into the store. “What happens if she does let you in, trusts you, learns to lean on you, and then you walk out on her a few weeks or months in? That would mean losing a big part of her support system and being heartbroken, and still having to raise a baby and go to work every morning.”

“I hear you,” I mused. “I haven’t really thought about it like that yet, but at the same time, I’m not planning on leaving her, Karson. I’m all in.”

“How do you know that? You’ve only been on a few dates with her and you haven’t even met her child yet.”

“I don’t know how I know, but I do. I click with Penny in a way I’ve never clicked with anyone, and maybe it is just a matter of her being the right girl at the right time, but whatever it is, I don’t want to lose her. I really do want to do this with her.”

Karson paused once we were inside the store, giving me a long look with worry darkening his eyes the longer he stared at me. “You’re saying all the right things, Maverick. It’s admirable. Really, but is it true? Are you really going to be able to handle everything as well as you seem to think you’ll be able to?”

“I think so. I’m willing to carry any baggage for that girl. All I need from her is to hand it over and let me carry it.”

My brother chuckled, then reached out and patted me on the back. “In that case, I hope she hands it over, Mav. I really hope she does, but I also really hope that this isn’t a matter of ‘be careful what you wish for because you just might get it.’”

I sighed. At least I seemed to have won Karson over and Flynn seemed more convinced after speaking to me the other day, too. Ultimately, however, the only person who really needed to believe me still didn’t—and that was something I needed to work on. Pronto.

CHAPTER 24



PENELOPE

Nichols Building Supplies wasn't a multibillion-dollar company. If the billion was a million and there was no *multi* in front of it, then sure. We were in that ballpark.

With Maverick's project, our quarterly profits were going to be better than they had been in years, but we were still a relatively small operation. Regardless, I was a woman in charge of a successful company within the construction industry.

I wasn't afraid of much, nor did I get nervous too often. I could stand my ground in meetings with brash, intimidating men. I'd regularly had to call out my burly warehouse workers when they were slacking, especially just after I'd taken over. I'd gone toe-to-toe with executives, and developers, and clients, and I'd often come out on top.

All of which was to say that I didn't scare easily. Having grown up as an only child, I'd been raised to run this company if I wanted to, and I'd always wanted to. So I'd learned early on how to own my shit. It had felt like a necessary evil if I was ever going to succeed here.

Today, however, I was scared. As I looked out my office windows and made a call to Sienna, I was as afraid as I'd ever been.

"Hey, girl," she said cheerfully when she picked up. "How are you? Are you ready for Maverick's party tomorrow?"

My eyes closed and I took a deep breath. "I'm okay, thanks. You? That's why I'm calling you, actually. I am ready,

but I need to see Maverick before the party. I need to break the news to him when he's not surrounded by all of his friends."

She was so quiet for so long that I had to make sure the call hadn't dropped. "The party is tomorrow, though. That means you want to break the news to him today?"

"Tonight," I said quietly. "I haven't asked him if he's available yet, but I wanted to check to see if you'd be able to watch Brea for me overnight while I go tell him?"

"Overnight, huh?" She chuckled. "Does that mean you think it's going to go well?"

"No, it means I think I'm going to need some time after to lick my wounds. Plus, I have no idea how long it's going to take. He's probably going to have a million questions for me and just explaining everything from my side is going to be slow going if I want to do it right."

"I get it," she said. "That's okay. I'll leave my job of watching kids to come watch your kid. No problem."

"You're really going to give me shit about it?"

"Lovingly and jokingly." She laughed. "Seriously, though. It's not a problem. I'll be there. Of course. I love Brea. She's my favorite."

"Thank you," I said emphatically. "She's lucky to have you as her godmother. I have no idea what I would've done without you."

"You'll never have to find out," she said, repeating the words for about the millionth time since I found out I was pregnant. "Are you sure you want to do it tonight? I thought the idea was to let him meet Brea at the party and then tell him after."

I swallowed past all the dry spots in my throat. There were so many of them that my entire throat felt like the desert. There weren't only spots. It was just dry. Everywhere. *Damn it.*

"I've been thinking about it and I think it's going to be better to tell him before he meets her. It's also not impossible

that he's suddenly going to do the math when he sees her, and then we're going to have to have the conversation surrounded by his friends and family, which is *not* ideal."

"That's true." She sighed. "Are you okay? Are you ready?"

"No," I said honestly. "I'm not ready or okay, but I need to do this. When I spoke to Payton the other day, I begged her not to tell them yet, but I can't expect her to keep the secret forever. It's time."

"It's been time for a while, but are you actually going to go through with it this time?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. Obviously, I'm not just going to walk in and drop the bomb, but as soon as I find an opening, I'm going to tell him."

She let out an exasperated breath. "There's never going to be an opening for this conversation. You just need to make it happen."

"I will. I just need to do it the right way. It's not like I'm telling him I killed his goldfish and replaced it with an identical one. This is serious, Sienna. It's going to change his life."

"Yes, it is, which is why you need to tell him before it changes Brea's too. She's still young enough that she won't even remember him not being in her life and she's way too young to be pissed at you for not telling him sooner."

"That's if he even wants to be in her life," I reasoned. "He might not want to be."

"That's his decision, though," she said firmly. "Why am I getting the feeling that you're backing out already? From everything you've told me about him, he's going to want to be in her life. You need to give him that opportunity. That choice. And you know it."

"Which is exactly why I'm going to tell him tonight," I said. "I'm not backing out. All I'm saying is that I need to find the right time to do it the right way. There will be an opening, though. I'm sure of it."

She sighed again, heavily this time. “Okay, Penny. Do it your way. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks again for agreeing to watch her.”

Sienna’s tone softened. “Of course. That’s my god daughter you’re talking about. I’m always going to be there when she needs me, and for you. Even if you do frustrate me sometimes.”

I chuckled. “You frustrate me too, but I still love you. I even appreciate you more for giving it to me straight rather than just leaving me to wade through it all by myself.”

“Always,” she said. Then she had to go and we hung up.

Now that Brea was taken care of tonight, I needed to reach out to Maverick. Instead of putting it off, I ripped off the band-aid and sent him a text right now.

Me: Any chance you’re free for dinner tonight? My treat.

I’d hardly hit send before he replied.

Maverick: It’s been a week, but I’m free. Motives at 8? My treat. No arguments.

I smiled at his response, agreed to meet him at the restaurant he’d suggested, and then went back to work. Concentrating wasn’t easy, and eventually, I just gave up. Instead of doing stuff I’d just have to redo on Monday morning, I packed it in for the day and headed home to get ready.

After spending time with Brea, telling her that Auntie Sienna was going to be with her tonight and then giving her a bath, I finally carried her with me to my bedroom. While she lay on the play mat and sucked on a chew toy, I selected a blue dress I knew looked good on me and got dressed.

Sienna arrived while I was doing my makeup, and she scooped Brea immediately, giving her cuddles and murmuring about how excited she was about spending the night with her. I was pretty sure she was going to feel differently in a few hours, but on the other hand, Brea wasn’t a bad sleeper.

As long as Sienna stuck to our routine and was there to give her the bottles she'd want during the night, they should have a good time. Once I was ready, I took a deep breath and held my arm out to my sides as I did a little twirl.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked nervously. "Am I pretty enough to be forgiven?"

She laughed. "If there is such a thing as being pretty enough to be forgiven, then you are most certainly that. Unfortunately, I don't think it's going to be quite that simple."

I crossed my fingers and held them up. "A girl can hope."

"Get out of here, babe," she said. "I would tell you to knock him dead, but I don't want to jinx it. What you're going to tell him might just kill him for real if he's got a heart defect."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Maybe I should find out about that before I say anything."

"Nope. No more excuses," she said laughingly. "Just go. We'll be fine here."

"Okay," I agreed hesitantly. "You're sure you're going to be okay with her? Just call me if you need me. Any time. Don't even think twice. Just call."

She waved me off. "Seriously, get out of here, Penny. I'll call you, but we're going to have fun. She won't even miss you."

"Now there's a depressing thought," I said.

Sienna got up and walked me to the door like she was afraid I was never going to leave if she didn't make me. "I know her routine, and if there are any issues whatsoever, I'll let you know immediately. Now go. Have fun and try not to kill the guy, okay?"

"You got it," I said softly as I took Brea from her and hugged her tightly, breathing in her sweet scent before tearing up as I handed her back.

Before either of them could see me fall to pieces, I said a quick goodbye to Sienna, then hightailed it out of there. I had

never been this nervous in my life and I'd never asked anyone to watch Brea overnight. I wasn't sure how this was going to go, though, which was why I'd done it.

Everything could come up roses and Maverick could make love to me all night after I told him—if he accepted my explanation and understood things from my point of view—but it was way more likely that I'd end up spending the night at a hotel to collect myself after. I had a small overnight bag in the back of my car just in case that happened.

I definitely didn't want to come home heartbroken, crying and waking up my best friend and my baby. That wasn't an option.

As I pulled up in front of the restaurant and parked, I dragged in a few deep breaths and then climbed out of the car before I could race away again. When I walked into the restaurant, I was relieved to find that Maverick wasn't here yet.

At least that gave me time to settle in before I had to face him. He'd texted earlier to let me know he'd reserved a table, and when I gave his name to the hostess, she smiled. "Right this way. Follow me please."

"Thank you," I mumbled, my palms sweating all over again and my entire being vibrating with nervous energy.

I needed to get a grip on myself, so I ordered a shot of tequila and a sparkling water, and once I'd taken the shot and a few sips of the water, I sat back and focused on my breathing. The next thing I knew, the door opened and Maverick walked in.

Six and a half-ish feet of handsome, green-eyed deliciousness that grinned as soon as he saw me. My heart fluttered in my chest.

There was no point in denying that I was falling for him anymore. It'd happened, and all I could do now was hope that the feeling was mutual.

Because if it wasn't, I was screwed—and possibly sued.

CHAPTER 25



MAVERICK

Penny was absolutely breathtaking in a simple blue dress and with her hair in a messy braid running halfway down her back. Once again, she'd chosen to keep her makeup natural and I loved it.

I smiled as I sat down across from her, then eyed the shot glass sitting next to her water. "What was in there?"

"Tequila," she replied, then giggled before dipping her head to hide her face. "I needed something to take the edge off."

"Well, tequila can generally be trusted to do that." I placed an order for one of my own, but I also got water with it. "Why did you need to take the edge off?"

She shrugged. "It's, uh, it's just been a long week. Lots to think about."

"I hear you," I agreed. "It's been one of those weeks that has made me feel like it needs to be next month already. I'm exhausted."

Her brow furrowed. "Are you sure you want to be here, then? We could just have a drink, get takeout, and then go our separate ways?"

I shook my head. "Not on your life. There's nowhere else I'd rather be. Trust me. I was surprised to hear from you, though. We haven't spoken much this week."

"No, I know. It's just flown by, is all. I thought it might be nice to speak before the party tomorrow, though. Is it still okay

if I bring Brea?”

“Of course.” I grinned. “I’m ready for her and the twins. I’ve even got a gift for her. Is it appropriate to bribe a baby to like me by plying her with presents?”

Penelope swallowed visibly, then dropped her chin in a nod. “I don’t know if it’s appropriate, but I’m okay with it. Just don’t expect too much from her. She’s not going to know you’re bribing her just yet.”

“Oh, I know. It’s more about creating the feeling that I’m someone she can trust.”

Penelope lowered her head to one side, staring at me intently. “Are you someone she can trust?”

“Absolutely,” I said without any hesitation whatsoever. “I’m looking forward to finally meeting her.”

As I looked at her across the table, it was easy to see that there was something on Penny’s mind. She seemed more nervous than usual and there was this odd, faraway look in her eyes that told me she was a million miles away. It seemed to be bothering her, which meant I wanted to try to distract her. Get her mind off of whatever was occupying it so thoroughly.

“Do you like cats?” I asked.

At the same time, she took a deep breath and said, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.” She frowned. “I do like cats, why?”

I shrugged. “I realized the other day that I don’t know if you’re a cat person or a dog person.”

“Oh, well, I like cats, but I’m a dog person. Definitely. I grew up with two amazing German Shepherds, so there’s no contest to me. You?”

“I don’t mind cats, but I wouldn’t say I like them. I’m a dog person through and through. What did you want to talk about?”

As I asked the question, my phone started ringing and I pulled it out to silence it. When I saw it was Flynn calling, I

sighed. “This is my friend. Flynn? The party tomorrow is his farewell. I have no idea why he’s calling me now, though.”

“Take it,” she said encouragingly, seeming resigned to something. “If the party is for him and he’s calling, it’s probably got something to do with the festivities. If there’s been some kind of change of plans, it’s better for you to know about it right away.”

“True. Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m sure. I don’t mind.”

I hit the dial button to call him back since the ringing had stopped while we’d been talking. Penny took a sip of her water and I noticed that her hand was trembling. *Weird.*

“Mav?” Flynn said as soon as he answered. “I know you’ve got a hot date, but you’re going to need to cut it short.”

“What? Why?” My heart jumped. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing earth-shattering, but I’m at your place. I came to drop off that stuff for the party and you’ve got a busted sprinkler pipe. I can’t get in to shut off the water and your front lawn is turning into a swimming pool.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “It’s that bad?”

“Yep,” he said. “I hate to do this to you, but I’m almost up to my ankles already. If you’ve got a key stashed somewhere, I can take care of it for you, but if not, you’d better get back here. Fast. Unless you want a natural pool in your front yard. I’ve heard natural pools are all the rage now, so it could be cool.”

“Not when I’ve got so many people coming over tomorrow.” I screwed my eyes shut, tossing back my tequila when the server put it down in front of me. “There’s no key stashed outside. I’m on my way, bro. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Do you want me to wait for you?”

“Nah, it’s okay. If the neighbors are going to yell at anyone, let it be me. You don’t want to be there if old Mrs. Buckridge across the street wakes up and realizes what’s going

on. She's all about maintaining the properties on our street and making sure there are no eyesores. I'm pretty sure an impromptu swimming pool that's going to turn into a giant puddle of mud is going to qualify as an eyesore."

He laughed. "You better step on it, then. No one else seems to have noticed yet, but they will. It's not exactly inconspicuous."

"Yeah, I'll be there as soon as I can." After I hung up, I shot Penny an apologetic look. "I'm really sorry about this, but I've got to go. There's a busted pipe at my house and Flynn says it's in the process of turning my lawn into a pool. If you want to come with me, we can order pizza at my place once I've got it under control?"

She hesitated, but then she nodded. "Sure. Okay. I'll follow you there."

She drained the rest of the water as I tossed a few bills on the table, and though I'd rather have had her drive with me, I understood why she'd want her own car there. If she needed to make a quick getaway to get to Brea, she'd hardly want to wait for a cab.

Karson was pedantic about having his own transportation in case he had to get to the boys fast. Penny followed me outside, and I waited for her to drive up behind me before I headed home, cursing my bad luck all the way there.

This was the first time she'd asked me out, and we'd barely even sat down before this had happened. Right when she'd been about to tell me something, too. Frustration coursed through me, but I breathed through it.

Shit happened, and home ownership was no joke. Why I'd wanted my own place so bad when I'd been a kid, only God knew. I'd give anything to move back in with my parents and have them deal with all the shit that went wrong with our house again.

Thankfully, we got to my place in record time, and as soon as I screeched to a halt in front of it, I saw why Flynn had called. Patches of water were already shimmering on the grass,

kind of making it look like a swamp lit up by the outside lights on my porch.

“Can I help?” Penny asked once we were both out of our cars, her feet already bare and her shoes nowhere in sight.

“Depends,” I said. “Do you know how to fix a broken sprinkler pipe?”

She laughed. “I’ve done it before. We’ll need to shut the water off first, though.”

“Right. Let me go do that.” I waded through the water, getting drenched before I finally reached the mains.

To her credit, Penny was right beside me, getting soaked herself as we worked together to shut off the water and then get the leaky sprinkler under control. By the time we were done, we were both laughing, muddy, and drenched to the bone.

I glanced at her, happy to see her smiling even though her hair was now plastered to her head and her beautiful dress was wet. “I’m sorry about this. It’s not really how I saw tonight going.”

“Me either,” she agreed, but some of the earlier tension seemed to have melted away from her and her eyes were sparkling with laughter now. “It was fun, though. Kind of like a couple’s challenge on one of those reality dating shows.”

“Do you think we’d have won?” I asked as I led her around the back and to the door. “I think we worked together well enough to have won.”

“I agree,” she said. “We kicked ass. I’m sure we’d have won the private date or whatever else they give away as prizes.”

“Unfortunately, your prize this evening is stripping down and letting me wash that for you.” I nodded at her dress, then grinned. “Actually, you stripping down is probably part of my prize, not yours. Let me just grab a shirt for you to wear before we do that.”

“We’re already in your kitchen,” she said as we walked in. “Do you really want to track mud through your whole house the day before the big party?”

I sighed. “Probably not. Okay, so we’ll strip down first, then I’ll go grab some towels and dry clothes, and after that, we can order the pizza.”

“Sounds good,” she said, giggling when she glanced down and saw I hadn’t even taken the time to take off my shoes. “Those are probably ruined now.”

I let out a long-suffering sigh, looking at her gorgeous, shapely legs all splattered with mud. “You definitely made the right call.”

Bending over, I started with my shoes, wondering if they were ruined or if there was any hope of saving them. After getting rid of them and my sodden socks, I straightened back up to take off my clothes, but then the air fled right out of my lungs when I saw Penny getting a head start.

She’d unzipped the side of her dress already, and as I watched, she pulled her arms out of her sleeves and let the fabric fall to a pool around her feet. Just like that, she was standing in front of me in nothing but a matching pair of lacy underwear that didn’t do much to hide what they were covering.

The effect was immediate. My mouth dried up, my cock swelled, and I forgot everything else I was supposed to have been doing as I took a step closer to her. “You know what? I’m good without you having clothes on while we wash that.”

Sliding my arms around her waist, I pulled her into me and lowered my head at the same time, sealing my mouth over hers and ignoring the fact that I was still sopping wet. Penny squealed when her warm body met with my ice-cold shirt, but instead of wriggling out of my grip, she kissed me back and then helped me get rid of my soaked clothes.

As it turned out, having to rush out of the restaurant and skip out on dinner to fix a busted sprinkler pipe might’ve just been the best thing that ever happened to me. When I picked

her up and carried her to my bedroom, I decided that it was, for sure.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered her saying something about needing to talk to me, but talking could happen later. Right now, I was finally kissing her again after what felt like years, and I had absolutely no intention of stopping.

CHAPTER 26



PENELOPE

Maverick's kisses were fast and furious, his mouth hungry and demanding on mine. I knew I hadn't spoken to him yet, but I wrapped my arms around his neck anyway, kissing him back just as intently.

I'd missed him and I'd missed feeling his mouth on mine. Surely, I could kiss him one last time before I ruined it all. Well, possibly ruined it all.

Once I told him, I had no idea if he was ever going to kiss me again, and I felt like I needed to show him how I felt about him before I blew up both of our lives. Perhaps if he felt how deeply I cared about him, he'd realize that I hadn't kept this from him with the intention of hurting him.

It wasn't like that at all. The last thing I'd ever wanted was to hurt him. Even back when he'd just been the guy I'd had a one-night stand with, I hadn't wanted to turn his life upside down.

Instead, I'd taken everything about Brea upon myself and I'd intended on contacting him once the dust had settled. Not to ruin his life or to hurt him, but simply to tell him about her and to give him the option to be involved in her life if he was interested in doing so.

I hadn't for one minute expected him to be interested, though.

When he'd contacted me about that project long before the dust had even started settling, all my carefully laid plans had

gone awry and my best intentions had suddenly been paving the way to hell. It was great.

Not.

Either way, right here and right now, Maverick's kiss was intoxicating, making my head spin with its intensity. I clung to him, hating that this time, it very well could be the last time I got to be with him like this.

Deciding to savor the moment just in case, I put a stop to all the screaming in my head telling me to talk to him instead and moaned into his mouth, hooking my legs around his hips when he lifted me against him. *Screw it. I've waited this long. What's another hour or two?*

Maverick didn't stop kissing me as he carried me somewhere, presumably to his bedroom. Then he laid me down gently on a soft mattress and followed me onto it. We were both down to our underwear, but he didn't seem to mind that those were still wet and I sure didn't.

Slowing the kiss now that we were horizontal, he rested most of his weight on me and the rest of it on his forearms, settling between my legs as I stroked my hands into his hair. More familiar with each other than ever before, we took our time, stoking fires and putting them out with our lips and our hands.

The room was quiet, the air filled only with our moans and sighs as we kissed and explored. Once again, I wondered if he somehow knew exactly what I'd always wanted in a man in this department.

He was patient and caring, making me feel worshiped while teasing me in all the right ways. Nipping my lips and my skin. Kissing me everywhere and letting me do the same to him. He looked into my eyes, smiled, and then brushed the hair out of my face. "What are you thinking?"

"Just about how perfect you are," I whispered against his lips, already feeling my heart fracture at the possibility that I was about to lose him. "I need you to promise me something."

"Yeah? What's that?"

“I need you to promise me that you’ll give me another chance.”

He chuckled, smoothing the crease that appeared between my eyebrows with a soft kiss. “Stop worrying so much. I know you’re nervous about me meeting Brea tomorrow, but everything is going to be fine.”

Oh, if only you knew. “I’m a bit like a lioness protecting my cub with her.”

“I know,” he murmured, those greens locked on mine in the semi-darkness of the room. We hadn’t turned any lights on in here, but there was enough ambient light coming in from the rest of the house and outside that I could see the soft expression in his eyes as he looked at me. “No one would ever blame for you that, Penny. If they do, let them come talk to me.”

I sighed. “How do you always make things sound so simple?”

He shrugged. “They are simple. People overcomplicate shit all the time. Nothing in life needs to be that hard.”

“Maybe,” I whispered, kissing him again when I felt tears pricking at the backs of my eyes. *This is definitely going to hurt.*

As I poured all of my emotions into the kiss, Maverick seemed to be doing the same. He undressed me slowly after that, my bra and panties finally coming all the way off. His underwear was long gone, and as I pushed my hand in between our bodies to stroke his length, I committed every inch of his silky skin to memory.

He moaned out loud, then rested his forehead between mine. “I need to grab a condom.”

I nodded, letting go of him and watching. He rolled off me, dug around in his nightstand, and came back with a brand-new box. His body was carved to perfection as he leaned over me, unwrapping the plastic and finally extracting a foil square.

I still hadn’t told him I was on the mini-pill. I figured that was a conversation to have after we’d settled everything else,

but until then, I wouldn't put any pressure on us that would also result in me being worried about getting pregnant all over again.

Maverick smiled at me as he rolled the condom on, then kissed me deeply as he settled back over me. I wound my arms around his neck again as he sank into me, holding him close as he slowly pushed inside.

When he was fully seated, he stopped for a moment so I could adjust, and he gave me these playful kisses while he waited. I moaned when he finally started moving, wishing that none of this would ever end.

It did, though. Not soon, but eventually, my toes curled and I breathed his name as I came apart underneath him. He followed me over the edge, peppering my face with kisses when he came to again. This whole night had been incredible so far, and since I wanted to bask in it just a little while longer, I didn't break the moment by saying anything after he got off the bed to dispose of the condom.

When he came back to bed, I crawled into his arms when he opened them to me, feeling closer to him than ever. As our breathing slowed down, I lay with my head on Maverick's chest and wondered how to broach the subject I needed to broach. In case things went wrong, it was probably best not to do it naked, but my clothes were still lying in a soaked pile in the kitchen.

I thought it over, my heart hammering in my chest as I cuddled into Maverick's side. *When did things get so complicated between us?*

I knew it was my fault and I knew that I wouldn't have been feeling this way if I'd just told him earlier, but I also didn't know if I'd have been here if I had. All I wanted to do was relax, fall asleep in his strong arms, and wake up tomorrow morning knowing everything was okay.

"Do you need to get home?" Maverick murmured lazily, his voice thick with sleep.

“Is that your way of trying to get me out?” I asked, realizing that my window of opportunity was rapidly closing. Naked or not, I had to get this over with.

“Not at all,” he said. “I just wanted to check. I’m not going to lie, I’m about to crash. If you need anything, just wake me up.”

“Mav, I—”

“I’d be a great stepfather,” he muttered suddenly, cutting me off as he buried his nose into my hair. The very next second, before I could say another word, his breathing evened out, and when I pulled away a little bit to look up at his face, he was out.

Shit. Fuck. He really must’ve been as exhausted as he said he was back at the restaurant. Crap.

“You wouldn’t be a stepfather,” I murmured as I stroked my fingertips along the sharp lines of his jaw. “You’re going to be a good *father*, Maverick. The universe just needs to give me a damn minute to tell you.”

Honestly, it was starting to feel like something or someone didn’t want me to tell him. Every time I came close, something happened to delay the conversation. Twice now, the words had been right at the very tip of my tongue before we’d been robbed of the moment.

First with the cleaners arriving and now with Flynn’s phone call. The only reason I’d told him to take it was because I hadn’t wanted him to worry about why his friend had called when I had something so important to tell him.

It’d turned out for the best that he’d taken it since it wouldn’t have been fair to Flynn if he’d had to try to fix the problem, but still, once again, I’d been right about to say it when the bomb had dropped.

At this stage, it didn’t feel like I was ever going to get around to telling him, but in my defense, the night had taken a very sudden turn. I’d honestly thought we’d be able to speak now, but if he was so tired that he’d conked out less than a

minute after, it wouldn't be great to wake him up to tell him. Not after this long.

Maybe to other people, it would sound like an excuse, but that was just the way I felt in the moment. The man ran a huge company with dozens of projects big and small. He'd told me from the outset this evening that he was exhausted, and it'd been proven by just how fast he'd fallen asleep.

I'd been sitting on this nugget for so long that it hardly seemed fair to wake him up to tell him now. So instead, I laid my head back on his chest and planned my next move before I finally let myself drift off, too.

The original plan had been to let him meet Brea at the party tomorrow and then to tell him the truth after. Back to plan A.

I eventually shut my eyes and prayed that one day, we'd be able to laugh together at the series of unfortunate events that seemed to keep delaying the most important conversation I'd ever had to have.

CHAPTER 27



MAVERICK

I woke up with a start and I had no idea why. It was still pitch dark outside and it didn't feel like I'd been asleep for particularly long.

As I blink the sleep out of my eyes, I realized Penny was sitting up too, blindly feeling around for a ringing phone. I reached out and flicked on the lamp on the nightstand, wincing as the room suddenly got way too bright.

Penny only had one eye open, but as soon as she finally located her phone, the other eye opened wide along with the first one and her face drained of color. "Sienna? What's wrong?"

The room was so quiet that I heard the reply coming from the other end of the line. "It's Brea. I'm sorry to bother you, but I think you need to come home. I just checked her temperature and she hasn't quite got a fever, but she's getting there. She's also crying a lot. I think she's getting sick."

"I'll be right there," Penny said, immediately wide awake.

The news had the same effect on me, and I got out of bed to track down some dry clothes she could wear. She ended the call with Sienna, already coming over to me with fear flashing in her eyes and her jaw tight.

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked. "I don't mind."

"No, it's okay. I'm good. It'll be best not to disrupt her any more than she has been already," she murmured, her voice

thick with worry. “Are you sure it’s okay if I borrow these?”

She didn’t waste any time dressing in the clothes I gave her, and I wondered what she would do if I suddenly told her it wouldn’t be okay if she borrowed them, but this hardly seemed like the time to make a joke. “It’s no problem at all. Keep them for as long as you like. I’ve got plenty more sweats and T-shirts. They’re going to be huge on you, though.”

“That’s okay. I’m not trying to be a fashion model.” She bent over and jerked up the hem of the pants just far enough that her feet managed to stick out of the ends. Then she tightened the drawstring and tied a knot in it. “Thanks for this. I’ll have them back to you as soon as possible and I might even return your pants too. I won’t start stealing your clothes. It seems like too much of a slippery slope.”

She gave me a quick smile, but she was on her way to the door already and she seemed so jittery that I was worried about her driving. “Are you sure you don’t just want me to go drop you off? I don’t need to come inside.”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll be okay.”

“Okay. Let me know as soon as you can that you got home safely.”

She nodded, giving me a quick peck on my lips. “I’ll see you later at the party. I’m sorry about this.”

“It’s really not a problem. I understand. Brea needs you,” I said as I unlocked the front door, and then she was gone.

Knowing that I had a long day ahead of me, I tried going back to sleep but I didn’t manage to drift off until I got a text from her telling me she was safe. Even then, it felt like I woke up every five minutes after that to check for news, but not surprisingly, there was nothing else from her.

By the time the sun rose, I was up and making breakfast. Then I hit the gym for a while. It only occurred to me as I was working out that we’d never gotten around to talking about whatever it’d been that she’d wanted to talk about last night.

At least she would be coming to the party—if Brea was well enough—and I was sure we’d find a minute to talk there.

While I wondered what she'd been about to tell me, I wasn't too concerned. I hoped it was that she'd given it some more thought and that she was okay with me getting to know Brea.

Once I was done with my workout, I was feeling marginally more awake after my lack of sleep, and after I'd showered, I called Flynn.

"What's up, buddy? Did you get that sprinkler sorted out, or are we having a pool party?"

I chuckled. "We're not having a pool party. It was slightly more complicated than I thought it would be getting it under control, but we managed."

"We?" he asked curiously. "Your date came with you?"

"She did, and it was a good thing, too. It turns out she knows more about sprinkler systems than I do."

He laughed. "I just keep liking this girl more and more. How's that going, by the way? Have you told her you want to be a stepfather yet?"

"Yeah, I think I might've said something about it in a post-orgasmic haze last night, but I fell asleep before she could tell me how she felt about it and then we got woken up with a phone call that her baby was sick. Needless to say, we didn't stop to talk about it then, either."

"Shit, is the child okay?"

I shrugged. "Last I heard, Penny's friend was just concerned because her temperature was climbing and she was fussy. I sent her a text this morning to find out how she was, but I haven't heard back yet. I'm not surprised, though. She's probably entirely focused on Brea right now. Fuck her phone."

"Absolutely," Flynn replied. "I don't know anything about kids, but I can't imagine you would be too worried about what's happening on your phone when you're dealing with a sick baby."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. I'm just happy her friend caught it before Brea became too feverish. I think Penelope

might've cried if her baby had been spiking a massive fever without her being there."

"Maybe just check in with her again," he suggested. "Let her know you're thinking about her. It seems like the least her future stepfather could be expected to do."

"You're not going to let me forget I said that, are you?"

He snorted. "Never. Anyway, why'd you call? I doubt it was just to update me on your pool situation and your girlfriend's sick baby."

"No, it wasn't. I called to ask you to meet me at the Costume Castle on Frederick Street. We need to get your outfit for the party."

Laughter sputtered out of him. "My outfit? I was planning on wearing jeans."

"Nope. Karson and I have an outfit planned for you. It's fit for a king. Just meet me there, would you?"

"Yeah. Okay. Now?"

"Preferably," I said. "If you need some time to get ready, I can give you about an hour."

"Nah, that's okay. I'm ready to leave now if you're already on your way."

I checked my watch. "I should be there in about ten minutes."

"I'll meet you there," he promised. Then we hung up just as I was getting in my car.

Not surprisingly, I got to the costume shop a little bit sooner than he did, and while I waited for him, I looked around, wondering if I'd ever be able to convince Penny to dress up in some of these for me. Either way, I gathered a few ideas that I'd be using when I was alone at night, and then I heard Flynn laughing behind me.

"Slutty nurse's outfit? There's no way I'm fitting into that."

I spun around and smirked at him. “Actually, we ordered a slutty fireman’s outfit for you.”

Surprise flickered behind his eyes, but then he shrugged. “I can get behind that idea. Were you thinking of being a slutty nurse then, or do you have some plans for your lady friend?”

“None of the above,” I said, winking as I led him to the counter. A young guy stood behind it, but he straightened up when he saw us coming. “I’m Maverick Neidum. I ordered something for my friend here.”

The guy nodded, then went to check his computer as I turned back to Flynn. “How are you feeling about leaving?”

“I’m good.” He grinned, but it was a little dimmer than usual. “I’m going to miss being home while I’m gone. I always do, but this is the job, you know? Until I figure out what to do with myself when I’m here, this is how it’s got to be.”

“We’ll miss you, too,” I said, then spotted the guy coming out from their back room with a robe draped over his shoulder and a crown in his hand. “Hopefully, the party should help you to have something to remember us by when you’re gone.”

As the guy handed over the items, Flynn’s brows shot up and he laughed. “I’m the king tonight, huh?”

“You sure are. The king of the party, which means you can hand out shots to whoever you want. We’re playing a game where we are all going to pretend to be your loyal subjects and you can dare us to do whatever you want, within reason, of course.”

“Of course.” He smirked as he put the crown slightly off-center on his head and then draped the robe over his shoulders. “Onward, loyal servant. Let’s go get our drink on.”

“The party isn’t starting for hours.” I gave the costume shop guy my card and watched as he performed the transaction. Then Flynn and I left with his crown and robe still on him.

He grinned at me when we hit the sidewalk. “I thought you said I was the king for the day, which means that if I say it’s

time to drink, then it's time to drink.”

I chuckled, but he was right. He was the king for the day and there was no reason for us not to. “Sure thing, my liege. Let's go drop our cars off at my place and then we grab a cab to Rooster's? The only thing we're not doing is messing up my place before the party even starts.”

“Rooster's, it is,” he replied happily as we reached the small parking lot out back. “Hey, man, thank you for all of this. I appreciate the effort you and Karson have gone through. When I suggested a party, I kind of thought it'd just be three of us and maybe some of the other guys kicking back and having a few.”

“Go big or go home, right?” I clasped my hand on his shoulder, then decided to get the deep stuff over with before we went to the pub down the block from my place. “Are you sure you don't want a permanent job with us? We could use your help and it would mean not having to leave again.”

Flynn smiled, then scratched his nose with his middle finger. “Thanks for the offer, but again, no thank you. I need to do this for now. The oil fields are my life, bro. Now, could you please stop making me feel like a charity case and get back to me being the king?”

I groaned as my arm dropped back to my side. “I'm going to regret making you the king, aren't I?”

“Absolutely.” He wagged his brows at me. “You had to have known that, though, and you still did it. I'm taking that to mean that you're absolutely okay with making choices you're going to regret.”

I rocked my head from side to side, then shrugged. “You're not wrong, but if all we've got is now, then all we have is now. The way I see it, that means making the decisions that feel right for now. When I made the decision to make you the king for the day, it felt right. There's no point in regretting it, even if I already know I'm going to anyway.”

“Look at that, ladies and gentlemen. Maverick Neidum does still know how to roll with the punches. I thought you'd

lost that ability when you started riding a desk and being a boss.”

I laughed, then flipped him off and unlocked my car. “Let’s just go to Rooster’s. I’ll meet you at my place?”

“See you there,” he said, climbing into his truck that his mother used when he wasn’t here.

It was surreal to me that he was really leaving again so soon. Just when I’d gotten my head wrapped around the fact that he’d be back for a while, he was going again. It sucked, but it was what it was.

Flynn had always been restless. He was one of those risk-taking adventure seekers that had problems sitting still. I didn’t know if that would ever change, but at least we still had tonight.

Once we got to Rooster’s and had our first beers in front of us, food ordered to line our stomachs, I lifted my glass and held it out to his. “To a night that neither of us will forget.”

He clinked his beer against mine and grinned. “Or to one we’ll never remember. You put me in charge of handing out shots, which might’ve been a mistake on your part.”

I laughed. “We can take it. Bring it on, Flynn. Do your worst. Just remember that my girl is bringing her baby and I’m going to be meeting her for the very first time, so save my shots for later.”

He sighed but nodded. “I can do that, but then you better be ready for it once she leaves.”

“My liver is going to hate you in the morning,” I said. “It’s your night, though. So here’s to one we’ll never remember, then.”

Flynn chuckled and clinked with me again, but it turned out my first toast had been the more accurate one. It would be a night I would never forget, just not for the reasons I was thinking at the time.

CHAPTER 28



PENELOPE

I got home in a state, in the middle of the night, and raced straight to Brea's nursery. Sienna seemed to have gotten her settled, and was sitting in the rocking chair while holding my wide-awake daughter tight to her chest.

She looked up when I ran in, then smiled and kept her voice soothing and low. Only the lamp in the far corner was on in the nursery, but my heart slowed as I took in the scene. Obviously, nothing catastrophic was going on, but I was still glad to be home.

"She's okay now," Sienna said. "Getting snottier by the minute but still no fever. She's also had some milk, and since she's stopped crying, I'm taking it as a good sign."

"Thank you for calling me," I murmured as I moved into the room and cradled Brea to my chest after Sienna lifted her up for me to take. "I'm so sorry about this. I should never have left her overnight."

Sienna stood and offered me the rocking chair. Brea squirmed and gurgled in my arms, and I glanced at her. She definitely wasn't feeling well, her nose wet and her eyes watery and red. Her little cheeks were also a bit flushed, so I gently tugged on the blanket Sienna had her wrapped in and opened her up a bit.

She was still too young for most medicine, so I headed to the small collection of stuff I had and picked up some nasal drops. Careful not to jostle her too much, I moved her into one arm and prepared for the crying that was about to happen.

My hand shook as I raised the dropper and gently slid it into her nostril. Then I squeezed quickly and tried not to feel too guilty about it when she squealed in response and craned her head away from me when I raised the dropper again. “Just one more, baby girl. Just one more, then you can go back to sleep.”

She screeched when I slid the dropper into the other nostril, and I felt tears burning the backs of my eyes. I got the drop in, though, then moved back to the rocking chair and pulled one of my breasts out for her if she wanted it.

At first, she was too angry with me, but after a bit of coaxing, she took it and started relaxing soon after. My entire being breathed a sigh of relief as she nursed. I knew that as long as she was still drinking milk, she wouldn't dehydrate. She also didn't have a fever—I checked with a fancy thermometer from my drawer—but her temperature was higher than usual.

Slowly pulling the blanket away from her front so she was just lying on it instead of in it, I glanced at Sienna. “Thanks again for helping me out tonight, but you don't have to stay. Or, at the very least, you should go get some more sleep.”

“I might go back to bed in a bit, but I'm okay for now. How did it go?” my friend asked softly, leaning against Brea's crib. “You shouldn't feel bad for leaving her, by the way. You did for a good reason and she was fine when you left. She's still fine. I just thought it was better to call you because she was starting to look more and more miserable.”

“You were right to call,” I said immediately. “I would never have forgiven myself if I'd spent the night at Maverick's while you were here, dealing with my sick baby.”

Her eyes widened as she looked back at me. Then she gave me a soft smile. “I'm taking it that it went well, then? You wouldn't have been at his place this late if it didn't go well.”

“I, uh, I never got around to telling him,” I admitted, chewing on the inside of my cheek as her face fell.

“Penny,” she groaned. “When are you planning on doing this, then? Brea’s graduation? What the hell did you do all night if you didn’t *get around* to telling him?”

“Telling him at Brea’s graduation might not be a bad idea,” I hedged, but then I saw the look on her face and I sighed, keeping my voice down as I watched Brea’s lids fluttering closed. “I was going to. I promise I found my in and I was just about to, but then he got a call about a problem at his house.”

“What problem could be more important than what you were about to tell him?” she asked quietly but disbelievingly. “He didn’t know what you were about to say, but you did. Why let him go before you just got the words out, at least?”

“It was a busted sprinkler pipe that would’ve turned his whole neighborhood into a pool if we didn’t go,” I protested softly. “His friend couldn’t shut off the water and he said it was bad, so we hightailed it out of there.”

“Okay,” she said, finally nodding. “I get how that’s an emergency, but then what? It couldn’t have taken you until now to sort that out. I know you know how to fix a busted sprinkler pipe. I literally saw you do it at the church hall last spring.”

“It didn’t take us until now.” My cheeks grew hot and I drew in a deep breath. “We, uh, we got sidetracked. I was going to tell him after, but then he fell asleep. Before you tear me a new one, you should know that I was really going to tell him. We just got interrupted, things happened, and then he was too tired.”

“Okay, I hear you, but you still need to tell him,” she said, but then she sighed as she looked at Brea. “Is there anything else we can do for her? She seems a lot better now that you’re home.”

I stroked my daughter’s hair tenderly as I watched her sleeping in my arms, her mouth open but her nose seeming a bit dryer now after the drops. “No, there’s not really anything else we can do at this point. She’s obviously come down with a bit of a cold, but there’s not much she can have yet. When

she wakes up, I'll get some medicine into her, but for now, sleep and milk are probably the best thing."

Sienna nodded, dragging her hands through her hair as she released a deep breath. "I'm sorry you didn't get to tell him, babe. Maybe if I hadn't called, you could've talked to him in the morning but now, you're going to have to wait at least until tonight if you still want to do it face to face."

"I need to do it in person," I said. "The least I can do is look him in the eyes when I tell him. I wish I could take the easy way out and shoot him a quick text, but that doesn't feel right."

"At least he'd know," she reasoned softly. "Isn't that more important than how he finds out?"

I considered it for a moment, but then I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. I owe it to him to be there to take whatever comes my way. Especially now that I know I might've been wrong to keep it from him when I found out I was pregnant."

"What do you mean? I thought you said he wouldn't want to be a father anyway."

"That's what I thought, and I'm pretty sure I was right at the time, but then last night, before he fell asleep, he told me he'd be a good stepfather. I told him he wouldn't be a stepfather, but he'd already drifted off. I'm starting to suspect that he might be ready to settle down and have kids now, even if he wasn't then."

"Do you think it has anything to do with Karson and his boys?" she asked thoughtfully, and I shrugged one of my shoulders just slightly so the movement wouldn't wake Brea.

"I think it does, to a certain extent at least. We haven't really talked about it, but I think that being around babies so much and watching his brother go through all of this has made him realize that it might be something he wants for himself as well. Not even just in some abstract, one-day way, but now."

"That's good news." She smiled as she drew in a breath through her nostrils and raked her eyes over Brea and me.

“He’d be lucky to have you two, you know. It might get a bit bumpy after you tell him, but she’s only a few months old. You guys can still work this out.”

“I hope so,” I said honestly. “It’s going to be a hell of a shock for him, though. I’m still a bit scared of what he’s going to do when he finds out, but I’m hoping that once he’s had some time to process and calm down, we’ll be able to talk.”

She nodded slowly. “If he is who you think he is, he’ll eventually agree to hear you out. Maybe once he understands how shocked you were yourself and what you went through after finding out, he’ll forgive you for not calling him up. He needs to understand that you guys weren’t what you are now back then, right?”

“That’s what I’m praying for,” I admitted. “Back then, we’d met while drunk, had sex in the backseat of a limousine, and then we hadn’t seen each other again. We’d had a one-night stand, not even a little bit of a relationship. I didn’t even have his number and I doubt he so much as knew my name. If I’d called him up after getting his number from someone, I don’t think he’d have known who I was.”

“That’s all true, and it’s not like your one-night stand is the first person you’re going to run to when you’ve just found out your whole life is about to change, but he may not see it that way at first.”

“I know, but I’m hopeful that he’ll come around eventually.” I sighed, stroking Brea’s hair some more as I looked down at her. “The biggest question now is whether we should still go to the party if she’s feeling miserable.”

“You need to go,” Sienna said firmly, but still quietly. “Even if you don’t stay long and you just go for a little while, you do need to go and you do need to tell him.”

Brea’s long lashes fanned across the tops of her cheeks, her chest rising and falling steadily as she slept with her little mouth—his mouth—still slightly open. No matter how much I knew that I had to tell Maverick the truth, Brea was still my first priority. If she got worse, he’d have to wait, but if she

didn't, then tonight was the night and nothing was going to stop me.

Mind made up, I looked back at Sienna and nodded. "I'm going to tell him at the party. Come hell or high water, busted sprinklers pipes or cleaning crews, I'm going to find time to tell him the truth."

"Atta girl." She smiled. "It looks like she's down for the count, so I'm going to go grab some more sleep. You should do the same."

"I will, but you go ahead. I'm going to lay her down and then get myself a blanket. I'll sleep here tonight. Just in case she needs me."

Thankfully, my mother had had the presence of mind to make sure I shelled out the extra cash for a reclining rocking chair instead of just a normal one. This wasn't the first night I'd be spending in it and it wouldn't be the last, but since I'd walk over hot coals for Brea, sleeping in a chair wasn't so bad.

Besides, barring her illness taking a turn for the worse, this would be the last night that she was just mine. She needed to know that I was here for her and that I always would be—no matter what happened tomorrow.

CHAPTER 29



MAVERICK

Thanks to the busted water pipe, my house was a mess and my front yard was trashed. I'd put extra towels at the door and people had tried their best, but my floors were covered in mud and more of the stuff just kept being tracked in.

It wasn't the end of the world, though. I had some people coming in tomorrow to help me with the cleanup, and as long as Flynn was having a good time, I was happy.

Karson slid in beside me as I watched the groups of people milling around the house, talking, laughing, and dancing to the music pounding over the sound system. It was loud in the main living area, but we'd closed the doors to the corridor where the bedrooms were.

Payton and some of the other moms were hanging out on the terrace with the kids for now, but when bedtime rolled around, the bedrooms were ready and available. I'd felt like a bit of an idiot buying a place this big just for myself, but tonight, I was happy I'd done it.

It was a house where one day, I'd be able to raise a family of my own and, until then, where stuff like this could happen and the parties were still child friendly. Moderately anyway.

At least the kids were outside, so they didn't see Flynn lining up a girl on the bar to do a body shot off her stomach. I'd closed the roll-down sides of the terrace and put the space heater on just in case, even though it wasn't really cold.

"It looks like he's having a good time," Karson said above the drone of the music, grinning as he watched Flynn do the

shot and then throw his hands into the air. “Do you think he’ll be back anytime soon?”

“It’s impossible to tell with him,” I mused. “He could call us in a few weeks when the shift he’s covering ends and tell us that he’s on his way home again, or it could be months before he comes back.”

My brother sighed as he nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. At least we’re giving him a proper sendoff this time. It’s been a while since we’ve done this for him. I’m glad we’re doing it again. It’s nice to be able to say goodbye and to know that he’s still just the same old party animal he’s always been.”

I chuckled. “I don’t think that’s ever going to change. Are Payton and the boys okay?”

He nodded. “She switched off the space heater and said to tell you thanks for the thought, but you were grilling them out there. Between all the bodies on the terrace and shields down for the wind, it was getting pretty hot.”

“Are they having a good time, though? I tried to think of everything they might need and have it out there for them, but I’m wondering if I should’ve set them up somewhere inside.”

“Nah, they’re fine. It was a good idea to put them out there where they’ve got all that space and where the older kids can run around the backyard. Besides, it’s too loud in here right now. Trust me, they’re fine. They’ve got wine and that’s pretty much all they need for themselves.”

“Okay, well, just let me know if there’s anything else,” I said, then glanced at the door for probably the tenth time in as many minutes. “Hey, did you guys hear anything from Penny today? I saw her last night, but she had to leave because Brea wasn’t feeling too well. I don’t even know if she’s coming anymore.”

“We didn’t hear anything, but I hope Brea’s okay,” he said, and I nodded my agreement before he gave me a pointed look. “There is such a thing as a phone, you know? If you want to find out if they’re still coming, just give her a call. If Brea’s

sick, I think it's a safe bet they're not going to show but they might pop in for a bit if it's not bad."

"Thanks, asshole. I know I have a phone and I know how to use it. I just didn't want to bother her about a party when she's got a sick kid. Do you think I should call her?"

He looked into my eyes for a long moment, his getting bigger with every second that passed. "Wait a second, are you actually nervous about this? You're seriously asking me if you should call a girl you're into? Hold the presses, people."

"Don't be a dick," I bit out. "Obviously, I'm nervous. I really care about this woman and she might finally be letting me meet her daughter. It's a big deal."

"Sure it is," he said, holding up his hands to show he meant no harm. "I just didn't realize you were really so serious about her."

"After everything we've talked about, you're only realizing it now?"

He shrugged. "I never know with you. It's taking me some time to come to terms with my big brother finally growing up, okay?"

"I'm going to call her," I said, making the decision on the spot and pulling my phone out of my pocket. "I'll have to do it from my bedroom, though. See you later."

"See you later," he called after me as I walked away. "Good luck! I hope she shows."

So did I, but I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. As nervous and excited as I was about meeting Brea, I'd understand if Penny didn't want to bring her to a party if she wasn't well. The best I could hope for, selfishly and for both of them, was that it wasn't anything bad and that they'd still be able to come around even if it was just for an hour.

Striding into my bedroom, I closed the door behind me and sat down on the bed as I scrolled to her number. My heart slammed unevenly in my chest as I pressed call, and then I hit the speaker button and stared intently at the screen as I waited for her to pick up.

“Hey, Maverick,” she said when she answered. “I’m so sorry we’re late.”

“That’s okay. It’s fine. How’s Brea?”

There was a brief pause. “She’s doing okay. Much better than I expected, actually. She had a bit of a runny nose last night and she looked miserable, but she started looking better shortly after I gave her the first dose of her medicine and it seems to have done the trick. I’ve been giving her the medicine as often as she’s allowed to have it, but it doesn’t even look like she’ll need the next dose.”

“That’s great,” I said, feeling so relieved that my chest ached. “Does that mean you guys are still coming?”

“Yeah, we are. We’re just running late because I wanted to wait until she could have her next dose before we leave. She’s just had it and we’re all packed, so we’ll be there soon.”

My heart lurched into my throat. “Okay, we’ll see you soon. Drive safe.”

“We will,” she promised, then said goodbye.

I stayed on my bed for another long minute before I finally got up.

They were on their way and I was about to meet Penny’s daughter. My nerves jolted and raced right back to high, and my palms got sweaty as I walked to my dresser and picked up the blanket I’d gotten her.

I’d wanted to give her a gift to commemorate the night we met, and while I’d considered a stuffed animal or a chew toy—which Karson insisted on calling a teether instead of a chew toy—I’d settled on a blanket instead. As far as I knew, kids often grew attached to their blankies and I didn’t know if she had a special one she was attached to just yet, but I was kind of hoping this one would be it.

Nervously running my hand over the soft material, I glanced down at it and wondered if the elephants holding heart-shaped balloons with their trunks had been the right print to go with. The others hadn’t been nearly as cute, though.

Eventually, I squared my shoulders and gave myself a pep talk as I headed out to wait for them on the porch. I was a grown-ass man and she was a baby. Her mother already liked me and she probably wouldn't, but only until she got used to me.

Once she'd seen me a few times, as long as I was smiley, kind, and attentive, she'd grow to love me. That was how it worked. *Right? Is it? Fuck. I have no idea.*

Shaking my hands out at my sides, I clutched the blanket and stepped out my front door, closing it behind me to give us some privacy for when they arrived. I cursed under my breath when I realized Penny was going to have to wade through the mud to get inside. I hadn't cared so much about anyone else getting their shoes ruined, but I suddenly decided to wait for her at the curb and lead them in around the back instead.

I'd demarcated a parking spot for her in front of the garage, and as I reached it, she pulled in. My heart leaped into my throat when she gave me a nervous smile through the window as she pulled up her emergency brake, and it made my own nerves slightly better to know that we were both feeling nervous.

At least we were in this together.

As soon as she got out, she smiled and came over to give me a hug. "Hi. Sorry again about being late."

"It's not a problem," I murmured into her soft, sweet-scented hair. "Can I help you with anything?"

"In a minute," she said as she released me, her blue eyes bright as she glanced up into mine. "Let me just get Brea out first, then we'll get all her stuff out of the back."

"You got it," I agreed, waiting with bated breath as she opened the door and lifted the most beautiful baby girl I'd ever seen out of a padded car seat.

As she picked her up, the baby peered curiously over her mother's shoulder, her eyes connecting with mine. I swore I melted on the spot, but I definitely melted when Penny turned back to me while still holding Brea.

The most beautiful woman holding the most beautiful baby. I'd never felt anything like I did in that moment, and I couldn't help the awed smile that spread on my lips. It seemed I couldn't control much right now, since my hand shot out and held the blanket toward them.

"I got her this," I said lamely. "She does like blankets, right?"

Penny smiled. "She sure does."

After hesitating for a beat, I saw her take a deep breath before she took a few steps closer to me. "Do you want to hold her for a minute while I get her stuff out of the back?"

"Of course." Slinging the blanket over my shoulder, I held out my arms and accepted the baby she passed me like she was the most precious thing I'd ever held.

She might well have been. Although I'd never tell my brother that since I'd held his boys tons of times by now. Brea stared up at me, her face contorting like she was about to cry until I smiled at her.

Like magic, she dropped her head into the crook of my neck in what I assumed was the baby version of a hug, and I was so surprised that I laughed. "Hey, little girl. It's nice to meet you, too. Is she always this friendly?"

Penny got tears in her eyes as she spun around and saw us. Then she shrugged. "Sometimes. Not always, though. Only with really special people."

And that was it for me, the moment I fell in love with a tiny little human I'd only been holding for less than a minute. I knew I was being ridiculous since she wasn't mine, but I briefly wondered if this was how parents felt in the delivery room.

So many times, I'd heard people say that they fell in love, hook, line, and sinker, as soon as they saw or held their babies for the first time. I'd never believed it was true until now, and it didn't even matter that she wasn't mine.

Clearly, she and I had a bond. Somewhere inside me, the sarcastic part of my brain snorted at the thought, but it was

true. I might not have fathered her, but she was meant to be mine. I felt it all the way down to my bones. The only problem was that now that I had her, I didn't really want to let her go.

Obviously, I did. I gave her back to Penny in favor of carrying Brea's stroller and bag instead, but I'd lost a part of my heart to that little girl already, and I didn't ever want it back.

CHAPTER 30



PENELOPE

The party was raging inside, but since Payton and most of the other moms with kids were outside, I stopped on the terrace with them and didn't even bother going any further. Maverick surprised me by helping me set up Brea's stroller, unpacking some toys from her bag, and then grabbing me a soda before he came to sit with us.

After paying some attention to Karson's boys, making them both giggle and hold their little arms to him, he gave them some cuddles and then turned back to Brea. "Hello, gorgeous. Look at you! It's so nice to finally meet you."

He took her little hand and shook it gently, eliciting a little giggle from her as well. "Oh, you like that, do you? Let's do it again, then."

When he gave her hand another careful, wiggly shake, she giggled some more and cooed at him. Maverick's expression was softer than I'd ever seen it, and while he was ignoring all the eyes on him, I definitely wasn't the only one around the table who noticed how good he was with her. With all kids, probably, but seeing him like this with her made my heart constrict in my chest.

"How are you feeling, little one?" he asked, his focus entirely on her. "Uncle Mav heard you were a bit sick this morning. That's not nice, right? It sucks to be sick."

She gave him a gummy smile, but since he was staring adoringly at her, I wasn't too surprised. Brea loved smiles and

having people look at her like that, but she'd never taken to anyone quite this fast before.

From an outsider's point of view, it would probably be interesting. Even I briefly wondered if it was because she felt some kind of connection with him, but that was probably silly. It was probably just because he was trying so hard with her and was such a natural at it.

He chatted to her for a few more minutes before he finally glanced at me. "She's the cutest. Thank you for bringing her tonight."

I noticed that he'd draped the blanket he'd given her over her legs, and that one of her hands kept stroking the soft, fluffy material. "You're really good with her. Thanks again for the blanket. She seems to love it."

He smiled, those green eyes practically glowing in the low light out here as he looked back at me. "Yeah, well. I often joke like a child and I've been accused of being pretty immature, so interacting with them isn't such a stretch from my normal personality."

"Maverick!" a guy wearing a crown and a robe called from the doorway. "We need you, bro."

"I'm assuming that's Flynn?" I said as Maverick sighed and got up.

He nodded at me, then bent over to press a kiss to my forehead. "The king himself, yes. I'll be right back."

"You got it," I replied, leaning into his touch for just another second before he straightened up and went to join his friend.

Once he was gone, Payton turned to me, and since she was sitting kitty corner from me at the table, my leg was in easy reach of her hand as she squeezed it. "That was the most adorable thing I've ever seen. You told him, right? That's why he's being like this with her? It took him ages to warm up to the boys like that."

"No, uh, I haven't actually told him yet." I frowned. "I kind of thought he was just always like this with babies. He

seems like a natural. Are you really saying that he's not?"

"He's definitely not," she said, then leaned forward and leveled a serious stare at me. "Why haven't you told him? You need to tell him, Penny. I can't keep this from Karson much longer. He already knows there's something I'm not telling him and I know it's only been a few days, but I can't keep dodging his questions."

"You won't have to," I promised, reaching for her hand and giving it a grateful squeeze. "I'm going to tell him soon. Tonight, if I can. I just haven't been able to find the time or the words, and I'm still scared. I can't lose Brea and so, I think I've been taking any little excuse I've been able to get to avoid it, but I do know that I need to tell him the truth and I'm going to."

"You won't be losing her, Penny," she said gently. "You'll be giving her something she deserves. A father who loves her and who already adores her even if he doesn't know that she's his yet. Think of it as gaining someone rather than losing something or someone, because that's what it's going to be."

"He's going to be so mad," I murmured, my gaze moving to the windows to watch as he laughed with Flynn, Karson, and some other guys. "Do you think he's ever going to be able to forgive me?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "Maybe not on the spot, but eventually? Sure. It hasn't been that long and I'm sure you've had a lot going on. Just don't hold anything back when you do talk to him. Tell him everything, be honest, be real, and make sure you've said your piece before you walk away."

I nodded, my heart thrumming. I took a deep breath and picked Brea up out of her stroller when she moaned a little bit. After draping the blanket over her again, I looked back at Payton. "Thanks for the advice. I'll let you know how it went once I've spoken to him."

"Karson and I will be here for you," she said. "No matter what. Okay?"

“Okay. Thank you.” Tears stung my eyes again, but then Payton introduced me to a few of the other women around the table, and talking to them for a bit distracted me from the inevitable.

I was only halfway done with my soda when Brea started getting unsettled and rubbing her eyes, grunting softly no matter how I held her. Payton gave me a sympathetic look. “My two are going to start any minute now. Maverick’s cleared out all the bedrooms if you want to go put her to sleep. Did you bring a monitor?”

“Yes, but I’d rather keep her close,” I said. “Excuse me for a few. I’ll just go put her to sleep and then I’ll lay her down here. Thankfully, she loves her stroller. As long as I put up the top and drape a blanket over it, she should be fine in there until it’s time for us to head home.”

Payton nodded. “Take all the time you need. If I’m not here when you get back, it’s because my sirens have gone off as well. I’ll be back, though. Karson and I are sleeping over with the boys, so I’ve got everything ready for them in the guest room. I shouldn’t be gone too long.”

A pang traveled through me at the thought that they were so comfortable here that she’d already gotten everything set up for her boys in one of the bedrooms when Brea and I would be making the great trek back home later. Since I only had myself to blame, though, and since I knew that things might’ve been different if I’d grown a pair earlier, I carried Brea around the house to a small balcony where it was darker and quieter. I knew I shouldn’t be feeling sorry for myself, but as I nestled her in the blanket, I did feel a little sorry for myself—and for her.

As I swayed her from side to side in my arms, humming *You Are My Sunshine* under my breath, I wondered if we’d even have been here tonight if Mav had known the truth. Brea had just fallen asleep when a noise off to one side made me startled, but I relaxed again when I saw Maverick’s tall frame moving toward us.

Without stopping the swaying movement just in case my fright had jostled her a bit, I smiled at him and spoke softly. “I’ll be back at the party in a few minutes. I just want to make sure she’s fast asleep before I stand up. Otherwise, I’ll have to start all over again.”

“It’s not a problem, babe,” he said softly, picking up a chair and putting it down quietly beside mine. “I just wanted to make sure you had everything you need.”

“We do. Thank you. What was happening inside earlier? Is everything okay?”

“Yep.” He smiled as he blew out a breath and shook his head. “Just the king exercising the rights I stupidly gave him. He dared me to have a dance-off with my brother and I wasn’t allowed to refuse. Since I made up the rules of this game, I suppose I have to stick to them. Are you having a good time?”

“I am,” I said. “It’s nice not being the only one with a baby here. Sometimes, it feels like I’m a bit of drag to people when I bring her with me.”

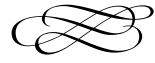
“Nah,” he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he watched Brea sleeping on my lap. “You’re a lucky woman, Penny. People might make you feel like a drag, but it’s probably just because you’ve got what they want.”

He hesitated, but then he brought his gaze back to mine and I saw the sincerity shining in his eyes. “Look, I know we haven’t talked about this before, but whoever her father is didn’t deserve the two of you if he didn’t stick around. I’m amazed by you and how you’re raising her all by yourself while running the company at the same time. Never let anyone make you feel like a drag, okay? You’re definitely not.”

My heart suddenly slammed itself against my ribs so hard that it hurt and I felt my cheeks heating before all the blood drained from my face, but this was it. This was the moment I’d been waiting for. I couldn’t put it off any longer, and since he’d just brought up her father, I knew I had to tell him now or lie to him outright, which I couldn’t do.

“Uh, about that.” I started without any idea what to say next. All I knew was that I had to say something, and I had to do it right now.

CHAPTER 31



MAVERICK

“U h, about that,” Penny said, and the expression on her face was so weird that my stomach suddenly hurt. “We’ve never talked about who Brea’s father is because I haven’t told anyone other than Sienna.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, but somewhere deep down inside, it was like I already knew what she was going to say. “Who is it, Penelope? Who is her father?”

She looked right into my eyes, her face drained of blood and her eyes wide and frightened. “You are.”

And there it was. Confirmation of the suspicion that had just started taking root in the deepest recesses of my soul.

Honestly, I probably should’ve done the math earlier. Brea was around the same age as the twins, though they’d been born a couple weeks earlier because they’d been twins, and I had it on good authority that they’d probably been conceived on Karson and Payton’s wedding night.

I didn’t really know why it hadn’t occurred to me sooner. Or maybe it had and I’d ignored the instinct. Right now, though, it was all I could do to keep breathing.

So many emotions raced through me that I didn’t know where to start. So I just sat there. Breathing, and blinking, and staring at the woman who had been hiding my *fucking* baby from me for over a *fucking* year.

Okay, so she hasn’t been hiding my baby from me for that long. She’s hidden the existence of the baby from me for that

long.

In truth, she'd only been hiding the actual baby for a few months, but still. Pain sliced through me when I thought about everything I'd already missed. The ultrasounds. Hearing her heartbeat for the first time. Her birth.

Fuck.

"Are you sure?" I didn't even know why I'd asked. It made sense. The timing made sense. "How do you know, Penny? We used a condom."

She jerked her head in a shallow nod. "We did, but not at first. Do you remember?"

As I thought back to that night in the limousine, I finally did remember. "Shit."

"Yeah," she breathed, keeping her voice down so we didn't wake Brea.

I was more surprised than anyone that I was managing to keep my own volume under control, but as upset as I was, I felt weirdly protective of her. It was then that I realized that somewhere in the corners of my heart, I'd known as soon as I'd seen her that she was mine. That was where all these weird fucking feelings were coming from for a baby I'd never even met before tonight.

"Am I just supposed to believe you?" I asked in a harsh whisper as I narrowed my eyes at her. "It's been over a fucking year since that night and this is the first I'm hearing of it. How do I know you didn't screw anyone else in Lucerne?"

"I didn't," she said, and I could see that she was being honest since it was written all over her face, but fuck that. I'd thought she was being honest all along, and clearly, she hadn't been. "I hadn't slept with anyone for a long time before you and I hooked up in that limousine, and I haven't slept with anyone other than you since."

"You're lying," I hissed. "You have to be lying. There's no way—"

“My father was about to retire and I was working practically around the clock before the wedding,” she said quickly, urgently. “I almost didn’t even go, to be honest, but I ultimately did go because I said I would be a bridesmaid and I met you. It was just a one-night stand, though. You fell asleep and I split, and I didn’t think I’d ever see you again except for maybe at some future event Karson and Payton might host.”

“So you decided I didn’t deserve to know about my child just because it was a one-night stand?” I seethed, incredulity rendering me completely numb. “That’s some fucked-up reasoning right there.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s not like I knew immediately that I was pregnant,” she explained, still in that urgent, almost pleading whisper. “I didn’t feel it the moment it happened. It caught me completely off guard. You need to understand that I didn’t know what to do, Maverick. You were a total stranger to me. A stranger who hadn’t exactly struck me as the type to want a baby, so I kept quiet. I was reeling. In shock myself.”

“Why are you doing this now?” I asked suddenly as another suspicion crept into me. I was being malicious and I knew it, but I just didn’t understand. “Are you trying to rope me into a relationship? Do you want money? What the fuck do you expect from me right now?”

“No, it’s not that,” she stammered through the words, her eyes so wide and brimming with tears, but in that moment, I couldn’t give a shit how she was feeling. “I don’t want or need your money. I just wanted you to know, Maverick. I’ve tried tel—”

I snorted, then waited a minute before I continued because I saw Brea wriggling in Penelope’s arms. Why I gave a damn if I woke her up, I didn’t know, but I did. I cared more about her comfort right now than I did about her mother’s.

“Are you seriously about to say that you tried telling me?” It hit me like a freight train. “That night in your office, I was still inside you when you started saying something before the cleaning crew came.”

“Exactly. We were interrupted then.”

“Yeah, and it didn’t occur to you, as their boss, to just tell them to give us a moment so you could tell me the fucking truth? It didn’t occur to you to stop me before I fucked you so you could tell me I had a baby instead? Jesus, Penelope. This isn’t the kind of thing you just put off telling someone, so I’ll ask you again, why now?”

“Because this is the first time nothing has gotten in the way when the opportunity presented itself,” she blurted, then Brea stirred again. “Last night, Flynn called about the pipe and —”

“And nothing,” I spat, standing up just as the baby’s eyes opened. “This is bullshit and you know it. I don’t know what you want from me, but I don’t believe that it’s nothing. You should’ve told me earlier. Hell, you should’ve called me the minute you found out you were pregnant whether it was a one-night stand or not. You could’ve gotten my number from Payton. You could’ve looked me up on the fucking internet, so don’t tell me you didn’t know how to reach me.”

“I didn’t say that, Maverick. I know I could’ve reached you, but I was scared. I was terrified. I—”

“You should take her home.” I inclined my head toward Brea. “Go now, Penny. Leave. I’ll go get her stuff and meet you at your car.”

She blinked rapidly. “You’d do that for me right now?”

“I’m not doing it for you,” I said, not giving a damn if I hurt her. What I was saying was entirely true. “It’s her stuff and I’m getting it for her. Part of me believes you. Part of me doesn’t, but whether or not she’s mine, I do know that she doesn’t deserve this. You shouldn’t be here.”

Without waiting for her to respond, I turned around and stormed back to the terrace, carefully packing up Brea’s stuff and not talking to anyone or answering their questions about where Penny was. I hadn’t been lying when I’d said she shouldn’t be here.

She wasn’t Flynn’s friend and I’d invited her because I’d thought we had something, but obviously, we never had. Well,

we didn't have anything except for a fucking baby together, but I hadn't even begun to process that just yet and I needed her gone before I'd be able to.

There was no way I'd think straight with her still right here. With my baby sleeping in Penny's arms somewhere fucking outside while she was sick. *Why did she even come?*

Just a moment, I judged her. I did. I wouldn't even pretend it hadn't happened. She'd brought my baby to a party. At night. Where people were drinking. While she was sick.

Almost as soon as the thought hit, though, so did the first ripples of guilt. My emotions were so messed up that I didn't even really know what I was feeling right now. I knew I had the right to be pissed at her, but at the same time, regardless of how fucking angry I was, I also knew I couldn't judge her.

Especially not since she was here because I'd begged to meet her baby. My baby. *Shit, what a mindfuck.*

Rage swirled through me as I realized I could've met her weeks ago if Penny had taken me up on that date with the two of them. Instead, she'd said it wasn't a good idea. It would've given me a couple of extra weeks with my daughter, though.

She'd told me it was because she was protective of who she let into her daughter's life—and I sure as hell understood that next level protectiveness right now—but it wasn't just *her* daughter. It was mine, too, and she should've told me.

Penny stared at me with tears streaming down her cheeks as I emerged with all their stuff. Then she took it from me and moved backward toward the trunk. "She's in her seat already, but I've left the door open in case you wanted to say goodbye."

"Gee, thanks," I snapped, but then I saw Brea looking at me, and for just a moment, it was like the entire world stood still.

That's my baby. That's my daughter.

Without looking at her lying mother, I strode toward her, stroking my knuckles across her little cheek as I gave her a

softer kiss than I'd thought I'd be capable of right now on the top of her head. "I'll see you soon, kiddo."

As I straightened up, I saw Penny's mouth opening, but I'd done my part. I'd gotten their stuff and I'd brought it out to them. Right now, I didn't want to hear anything else from her.

As my gaze clashed with hers, I simply shook my head, ground my teeth to keep from saying anything else, and then I spun around and marched back into my house. Once I got inside, I didn't look back, slamming the front door behind me and striding straight to the bar.

Flynn and Karson both tried to flag me down, but I ignored them, grabbed a full bottle of tequila, and then kept right on walking until I got to my bedroom. After slamming that door behind me, I cracked open the bottle and slid down with my back against the door, taking long sips of the earthy, sweetish liquid as my chest heaved and my mind raced.

The party was still going on outside and I had no doubt that it would keep going whether or not I was there, but I didn't care about that right now, either. I doubted anyone would blame me if they found out that I'd just learned I was a father.

Me, Maverick Neidum, a father. It was insane, and yet, as much as I knew she might've been lying about not having slept with anyone else, I was pretty sure that I was, in fact, a father. Penny might not have said anything before, a lie of omission if not outright deceit, but she wouldn't have lied about this.

Which means I have a daughter. A little girl called Brea. My head banged against the door as I groaned. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Where am I supposed to go from here? I'm a father. I have a daughter. And I only just fucking met her.

CHAPTER 32



PENELOPE

I'd never cried as much as I had in the last fourteen hours. After Brea and I had left Maverick's party because he'd kicked us out, I'd managed to keep the tears at bay for long enough to get her home safely.

Thankfully, as babies did, she'd fallen asleep in the car and she'd stayed that way as I'd taken her to her bed. Once I'd settled her, though, all bets had been off and I'd spent the rest of the night sobbing.

Go me.

At this point, I felt drained. Exhausted. Emotionally spent. I didn't think I could cry anymore, but as soon as I thought about the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice after I'd told him the truth, more tears managed to squeeze themselves out of me.

A hundred times throughout the night, I'd considered calling him. Texting him. Throwing a sheep at him on social media. Anything I could just to let him know that I was sorry, but that I really didn't have any ulterior motives.

I shouldn't have been shocked when he'd asked if I was trying to rope him into a relationship or if I wanted money, but I'd been so focused on my own fears that I hadn't quite considered that he'd accuse me of something like that. Especially when, if it had been money I was after, I'd have gone after it a long time ago.

On the other hand, it wasn't like I could blame him for being suspicious. I probably would've been, too. If he ever

spoke to me again, I'd have to try to set his mind at ease. I'd have to find some way to convince him that I told him the truth so that he knew the truth—and for no other reason.

If he didn't want to be in Brea's life, then that was his choice now. I didn't expect financial support from him at this point. He could really keep his damn money. I wouldn't take it anyway if he was only paying it because he thought that was what I wanted.

As for trying to rope him into a relationship, I was hoping that once the shock faded, he'd realize that it wasn't true. He was the one who'd been pursuing me, not the other way around. He'd contacted me for the project. He'd asked me out. He'd brought me food.

I hadn't done anything that might've made him believe that I was trying to trap him in a relationship he didn't want. The only time I'd asked him out had been to tell him the truth on Friday night. I just hoped he saw things a little more clearly once he calmed down.

While it was true that I was hoping for a relationship with him, I'd never want to trap him. I'd never want him to feel like he didn't have a choice in the matter. That just wasn't me, and I was pretty sure he knew that and he'd only spewed that at me because he'd been in shock.

If that was true, I could forgive him for it. Obviously, I was the one who'd been in the wrong for keeping it from him. I could definitely handle a few harsh words spat in anger. It was the other consequences I was afraid of.

Him not wanting to know Brea and me having to explain to her one day that her father knew about her but hadn't wanted to be a part of her life. Or the worst of the possible consequences, that he was going to try to take her from me.

I'd fight him tooth and nail, obviously, and while I was as sure that I had a good case as I was that he would be able to afford to litigate much longer than me, I just didn't really think he would go that far. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I liked to think he wouldn't try something as vile as trying to take my baby girl from me just because he was angry.

If he wanted to see her, he could see her. That was a given—though we hadn't quite gotten that far last night. I sighed as I watched her having a nap from where I was sitting in the rocking chair in the nursery, silent tears once more streaming down my cheeks like I was the busted sprinkler pipe now.

When a sudden knock sounded from our front door, I jumped, my heart doing a flip-flop before it started to race. Was that him? Was Maverick here? If he was, was he here to try to take her or to talk to me?

I got up slowly, trying to brace myself for the worst. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect from him now—or from Karson for that matter. It could be him and Payton, too. While I doubted he'd try to take her from me, I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted to try to build a relationship with her.

Deciding against being surprised, I peered through the peephole first and almost fainted with relief when I saw Sienna was at the door. Jerking it open, I threw my arms around my best friend and practically collapsed into her.

“Oh, thank God it's you. I was so scared. I thought it might be the Neidums. I thought they'd come for Brea. I thought I was about to have to fight them just to keep her.”

Sienna's arms closed around me and she held me tight, just squeezing me for a few moments as she stroked my back and murmured soothingly to me. “I'm assuming you finally told him then, huh?”

“I did.” I sobbed into her hair, so relieved to see her that my knees were weak. “It was horrible. He's so angry at me. I don't know what to do. What if he comes for her?”

My friend didn't say anything at first, simply holding me until I could finally feel my legs again. Once she released me, she took my arm and led me inside, then started making tea after telling me to sit. “I wish I could tell you that he wasn't going to come for her, but I can't. Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell me what happened, babe.”

“What happened is that I've made the worst decisions any person can make recently and it's coming back to bite me in

the ass. The chickens are coming home to roost and now I'm screwed. He's going to take her, isn't he?"

"Just breathe, Penny," she said soothingly. "I know you're scared right now, but it's not going to help to beat yourself up over your decisions. What's done is done. Just breathe."

"I can't breathe," I muttered, feeling like there were fingers around my throat and they were squeezing tighter and tighter. Now that I was finally talking about it out loud, it felt like I was having a panic attack.

Maybe I was. Maybe—

"Stop it, Penelope," Sienna demanded, and I had to admit that the tone of her voice yanked me back down to earth a little bit. She smiled when I blinked at her. "Oh, good. You're breathing again. I was pretty sure you were about to turn blue. Now, slowly, tell me about last night. You told him the truth and then?"

I sighed, rubbing my tired eyes before propping my chin on my palm and sighing again. "Pretty much the only thing I'm not regretting right now is Brea. Everything else is up for consideration, starting with me not being open with Maverick the minute I found out I was pregnant. He's right, isn't he? I should've told him."

She thought it over before she shook her head. "No. Maybe. I don't know. I've never been in that position, Penny. Neither has he. It's easy to tell someone what they should've done after the fact, but you're the one who lived it and I was right there. I saw you struggling with everything and I saw how you moved like a zombie through those few months after you found out."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that and I'm not sure he's going to care once he finds out. *If* he finds out, which is doubtful considering that I'm pretty sure I've lost him completely. Brea probably has, too. You should've seen him last night, he was furious."

"You knew he was going to be, though," she reasoned calmly as the kettle started whistling. "Here. Tea will make

you feel better. I have no idea why, but my mother used to say that there's nothing a good cup of tea can't make you feel better about. I'm going to add a bunch of sugar for you. It might help with the panic, and if not, then maybe it'll just be so sweet that you'll be distracted from everything else just because of how horrible syrupy tea is."

To my surprise, I managed a soft chuckle before I groaned. "Don't make me laugh. I don't deserve it."

"You do," she said firmly as I watched her add way more sugar than was necessary to my cup. "You need to be kinder to yourself here, Penny. Sure, you should've told him earlier, but it's not like you were expecting him to pop back into your life. It's not like you planned any of this. You needed time to get your head wrapped around everything and to figure out what to do. Did he tell you he was going to take her from you? Did he threaten you? Is that why you're so scared?"

"No, he didn't do any of that. I don't think he would. I'm just scared. I've lost him and probably the business deal with them, but I can deal with all of that. My worst fear is that he's going to sue me for custody. I don't know if he'll win. I doubt it, but he could try and it'll be awful if he does."

"Yes, it will be, but you did the right thing, honey. Sooner or later, he'll calm down enough to realize that you did the right thing. Besides, you don't know that you've lost him just yet. You knew he was going to be pissed. Give him some time to come around."

I sucked in a deep breath and tried my best to remind myself that she was right. Getting hysterical about things wasn't going to help and I had known he wasn't going to be happy with me. I just needed to give him time.

As for having done the right thing, I wasn't so sure that I had. On the one hand, I felt like it'd absolutely been the right thing to do, and on the other, I'd never doubted anything so much in my life. I'd taken a huge risk by telling him the truth, and if it backfired on me, I only stood to lose everything I had and the most important person in my life in one fell swoop.

And all I could do now, before I would know if I was about to face the possibility of losing her, was wait. So while I understood why Sienna thought I'd done the right thing, I just really wasn't so sure. The waiting was going to be the most painful thing that'd ever happened to me, and yet, all I had in the meantime to comfort me was sickeningly sweet tea—and the knowledge that I had Sienna in my corner and Brea sleeping in her own bed.

For now, that was enough. It had to be. Unfortunately.

CHAPTER 33



MAVERICK

When I woke up for the second time that morning, my head was pounding and my brother was cursing somewhere outside my room. I'd been up earlier, but only for a few minutes to open up for the cleaning crew, and now, I wished I was still asleep.

I felt like shit, and the still open, quarter bottle of tequila on my nightstand explained why. As I groggily came to, everything that had happened last night came tumbling back into my head and I groaned, screwing my eyes shut in an attempt to block out the light and the memories.

It was no good, though. A complete waste of time. I felt like shit and closing my eyes wasn't going to help, nor was going to erase the fact that I had a kid who had been hidden from me. Groaning again when Karson cursed some more, I rolled out of bed and hit the bathroom.

After I'd drained the faucet, I headed out of my room to check out the reason for Karson's sudden angst. As soon as I hit the main living area, I saw exactly why he was so upset. The place was a disaster and he was trying to help the crew clean up, but he was green around the gills himself and his eyes were bloodshot.

When he saw me, he winced. "You look worse than I feel. What happened to you last night, bro? You disappeared."

"Yeah, but I need coffee before I tell you about it. Have they finished in the kitchen yet?"

He nodded. “They’re working their way back here. The terrace, kitchen, backyard, and all the bedrooms have been cleaned and tidied so far. So has the bar and the dining room. This was ground zero, though.”

It looked it, but I was glad people had had fun by the looks of things. I glanced at him as he followed me to the coffeemaker like a lost, hopeful puppy in search of a new owner. “Do we have any stragglers?”

“Nah, Flynn and I stayed up until the last people left. I think he’s still sleeping, but he could have gotten up before me. I think I’m still drunk.”

I chuckled, then flinched when it made my head ache even worse. “Payton and the boys?”

“They went home early this morning. She said she was clearing out before we stuck her with cleanup duty.”

“Good call,” I said. “I wish I could leave, too.”

“You can,” he said, shrugging when I glanced at him over my shoulder. “What? You’ve got this amazing crew for a reason, right? We could go out to breakfast or something.”

“Yeah, I guess, but going out to breakfast means leaving the house and I might throw up if I even tried to shower right now, so it’s a no from me.”

“Okay, seriously,” he said. “What happened to you? I thought you passed out early. Why do you look so bad?”

“Because I only passed out after making a decent dent in a bottle of tequila all by myself,” I murmured, keeping my voice down in the hopes that it would somehow help my head feel better. “I’ll tell you about it in a minute. We just need caffeine before we have this conversation. Trust me.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” he murmured, and he wasn’t wrong.

It wasn’t good. Actually, it might be good. I honestly didn’t know right now. I still didn’t know what to think and my alcohol-soaked brain wasn’t making it any easier to figure out.

Once Karson and I each had a mug of strong, steaming coffee, we sat down at the table in my kitchen and I got my first taste of how difficult it was to find these particular words. I didn't have a clue how to say it, but my brother was staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to just come out with it.

"You know Penny's daughter, Brea?" I said eventually, and when he nodded, I blurted the rest out. "Turns out she's my daughter, too. Evidently, she's the product of us hooking up in the limo at your wedding."

Karson's lips parted, but no sound came out of his mouth. He sat stock still, staring at me and looking like I'd be able to knock him over with a feather. Big as he was, I was pretty sure even the lightest brush of the tip of a feather would've done him in.

"Karson?" I prompted eventually. "Are you there? Have you had a stroke or something?"

He suddenly blinked hard, swallowed, shook his head, nodded, and then blinked again. "What did you just say?"

"I said that Brea's my daughter. Or so Penelope says."

As if that comment had woken him up, he sat up a little straighter and frowned at me. "So Penelope says? You don't believe her? I mean, I've wondered. I knew you guys hooked up and the timing was bang on, but I figured if it was true, she'd have said something."

"You've wondered?" I echoed disbelievingly. "Why the fuck didn't you say anything if you were wondering about it?"

He looked taken aback for the second time this morning. "Are you seriously telling me that you haven't wondered? That there hasn't been any question about her paternity to you? I mean, you guys slept together and the next thing we heard, she was pregnant and her due date was close to Payton's. The timing was suspicious, bro."

I shook my head, my mouth dry for a reason other than the hangover now. "I haven't thought about it. At least not consciously. I knew she had to have gotten pregnant around the same time as Payton, obviously, considering how close the

kids' birthdays are, but I guess I just didn't have any reason to think Brea could be mine."

"Do you think she is, though?" he asked. "It didn't sound like it a minute ago."

I sighed, taking a big sip of my coffee and burning the shit out of my mouth before I cursed and nearly smashed the mug on the floor. *God, I'm a mess.*

"I don't know what to believe at this point," I said eventually, staring at him like he might know even though he clearly hadn't known about this before either. "Do you think she's trying to get at me because she doesn't know the father? Does she, like, need money or something?"

"She's not like that," he said immediately and decisively before he swiped his tongue across his lips and narrowed his eyes. "I thought you'd at least have learned that about her by now. Has she lied to you before? Is there a reason you don't believe her? Like did she tell you that there was someone else?"

"No, she swears that she didn't sleep with anyone for a long time before me and that she hasn't slept with anyone else since. I also don't think she's lied to me before, but hiding my fucking daughter from me is a lie by omission, isn't it? Keeping that secret might as well have been a lie."

Karson leaned back in his seat, his features smoothing out as he shook his head. "If she says she didn't sleep with anyone else. I believe her. As for it being the same as her lying to you, I don't quite agree with you on that. I think there's a lot more to it than it just being as simple as you're trying to make it sound."

"Like what?" I scoffed. "There isn't, bro. She got pregnant, allegedly by me, and then just didn't say anything until last night? That's bullshit."

"It may be bullshit, but I'm trying to see things from her point of view here just for a minute. As far as your point of view, I agree. Total bullshit and she should've told you as soon as she found out. From her point of view, though, I don't

know. I saw Payton reeling when she found out she was pregnant and we were married by then. She'd also gone off her birth control and she knew it was a possibility."

"So what are you saying?"

He shrugged, chewing on his lower lip before he finally spat it out. "I'm saying that I don't think it's easy to find out you're pregnant, but especially not for the first time. I think it's always going to be a shock and at least a little bit of an adjustment. It would've been much worse for Penny. I know you don't want to hear this right now, but you didn't even know her name when you hooked up with her, man."

"You're right. I don't want to hear it."

He smirked at me. "Well, you're going to hear it anyway. You need to talk to her, Mav. You need to set up a meeting with her and talk to her about all this. Hear her out, let her explain things to you, and then you need to start building a relationship with your kid."

"I don't want to talk to Penny," I said, knowing I was being stubborn. "What would I even say to her?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe don't say anything. Let her do the talking, but the point is that I saw how fatherly you were with Brea at the party. In fact, I'm even pretty sure I saw you carry her things to the car and that must've been after you found out. I wasn't sure I knew you had that side to you, but you obviously do. Even Payton was talking about it last night."

"She was?" I frowned. "I wasn't being fatherly. I was just trying to be nice to her. I wanted her to like me and for Penny to trust me to be in her life."

"Has that changed? Do you not want her to like you anymore? Do you not want Penny to trust you to be in her life?"

His questions threw me for a loop because I honestly didn't know the answers. I hadn't quite gotten that far yet. Leaving my coffee behind, I shoved my hair back. "I need some fresh air."

As if the morning had needed to get any more painful, when I walked out onto the terrace, Flynn was getting out of my pool, as naked as the fucking day he'd been born. He tossed me a friendly wave, looking fresh as a damn daisy as he cocked his head and frowned at me. "What's up, bro? Why are you so pale?"

Now that I'd told Karson, I found telling Flynn the truth much easier. "You know that little girl last night? Penny's kid?"

"Yeah?"

"She's mine."

Flynn didn't seem too surprised, rocking his head back and forth before he shrugged his shoulders and grabbed a towel he must've brought out for himself. He was honestly acting like it was just another piece of news, and I didn't know whether I wanted to hug or punch him for it.

"Sounds about right," he said when he finally spoke and wrapped the towel around his hips. "Do the right thing, bro. Thanks again for the party. I'll see y'all when I get back."

With that, he strode into my house, gave us another wave, and a few minutes later, I heard his motorcycle roaring to life on the other side of the house. *Fucker. I can't believe he just left like that.*

I didn't even know if he'd put on any clothes before he'd gone, but logically, I was sure he had. It wasn't like even Flynn Bryant would get on a motorbike naked on a Sunday morning.

Karson came up behind me and smacked me on the shoulder, holding his coffee like he'd come to terms with the news as well and was now just hanging out. "Well, you heard the man. Do the right thing, bro. I'll be here if you need me. Okay?"

"Okay," I muttered, but the truth was that I had no idea what they were talking about. They were both telling me to do the right thing, but what the hell was the right thing to do? It wasn't like there was a manual for this shit.

I had a daughter. A baby one, sure, but she was already over three months old—I didn't even know how old, exactly—and I'd only just found out about it. It wasn't like I could just show up and tell her to come to daddy, was it?

God, is there a manual for this shit? I doubted it, but if there wasn't one, maybe someone had to write one. And maybe that someone would be me. Just as soon as I figured out what the hell I was supposed to do next.

CHAPTER 34



PENELOPE

“How is the Neidum project going?” I asked Cara, one of my employees and the woman I’d passed over all of the responsibilities to for Maverick’s job.

I knew he didn’t want to talk to me, and I wasn’t going to force it. Cara was capable, efficient, and hungry to prove herself. She was going to kick ass for him and hopefully, assigning the project to her meant that we got to keep it.

I desperately didn’t want the company to suffer for my decisions and this was the best way I could think of to ensure he didn’t take his disdain for me out on it. Letting go, however, was proving to be harder than I thought it would be.

Not only did my inner control freak crave to be in charge of a project this size, but on a much more personal level, staying close to the project felt like the only way to stay close to *him*. Unfortunately, despite how messed up things were between us right now, I still wanted to feel close to him. I craved it as much as I craved the control.

Cara cocked her head at me, sitting ramrod straight as she rambled off her update. “Everything is on track. They’re ahead of schedule and right on budget, but they’ve ordered more materials from us and Karson is nervous to get it. It seems like they’re running a very tight ship on this one.”

“From what I’ve heard, they always do,” I said wistfully. “Have you checked whether we’ve got the materials they need in the warehouse? If we don’t, you’ll need to put a rush order in on it.”

“We do have it and I’ve scheduled the delivery for first thing tomorrow morning.”

I frowned. “If we’ve got it, why is it only going out tomorrow morning?”

“Well, uh.” She fidgeted a bit, glancing down at her hands on her lap before looking back at me. “Our delivery vans are all fully booked until morning. I took the first slot I could get. Did I make a mistake?”

My chest rose as I dragged in a deep breath and held it, torn between being a mentor and being a boss under pressure. I was both of those things to Cara, and since I wanted to be able to start passing more responsibility to her if she handled this project well, I needed to tread carefully.

Cara was becoming something of a protege to me and she didn’t know it yet, but I was grooming her to be my second in command. I needed someone I could trust at the office by the time Brea went to school.

I had a few years, but Cara was young and I knew it was better to start putting the pieces in place now. That way, when Brea started needing me to help her with homework or if there were extracurricular activities at school, I would be able to free up some time for all things mom-related.

Since Cara was, at this point, vital to that plan, I released the breath I’d taken and smiled. “No, you didn’t make a mistake. You did exactly what you were supposed to do. We only have so many delivery vehicles and they receive their loads in accordance with when an order was placed.”

Some of the stress melted off her features and her brow smoothed out, but I wasn’t done yet. “However, when we have a priority order that needs to go out, you need to be able to make a judgment call. In this case, you could have reshuffled some of the other deliveries to free up a van for the Neidums.”

Her face fell. “So I did make a mistake?”

“No, you didn’t. You just went with our usual operating procedure instead of the priority procedure. When orders are

urgent, we follow the priority procedure, but it wasn't a mistake, Cara. Just remember next time, okay?"

I tried to keep my tone even and gentle, but realistically, if she was ever going to be able to stand in for me when I wasn't here, she was going to have to grow some thick skin. Interested in seeing how she was going to react, I leaned back in my chair and watched her closely.

Her expression was blank for a moment, but then she squared her shoulders and sat up straighter again as she nodded. "Priority procedure. I got it. Next time, I'll review the deliveries and bump some. How do I know which ones to bump?"

Atta girl.

I felt like cheering for her, but I didn't. "When we're done here, go down to deliveries and talk to Steven. He'll guide you through it. It's too late now to deliver the Neidums' materials today, but call them and assure them that they will have their full order by tomorrow. Knowing they'll be getting everything and that they won't need to wait for us to place an order from our side will give them some peace of mind."

She nodded curtly. "I'll call them and I'll go talk to Steven. It won't happen again, but just so I'm clear on this, are the Neidums a priority client or is this a priority order?"

"Both," I said honestly. "I'm sure you know how well they've been establishing themselves in the industry. They're getting more large projects in by the month and the projects themselves keep getting bigger. Karson and Maverick are ambitious, driven, and determined. They're going places and I'm hoping that by impressing them with our service on this project, they'll consider us for more in the future."

Of course, that would very much depend on Maverick's feelings toward me going forward, but I wasn't giving up on either front. As Cara left my office, pain pricked at my heart that she was about to speak to Mav and I wasn't. I breathed through it, telling myself for the umpteenth time that I was trying to give him space to process.

It'd been nearly a week since I'd told him about Brea, and I hadn't heard a single word from him. I also hadn't heard from any lawyers acting on his behalf, so either it was because they were preparing their case or it was because he hadn't contacted any.

The wait was killing me, but so was the separation. I'd gotten used to hearing from him at least a couple times a day, even if it was just a quick text checking in. We'd also been seeing more and more of each other and now I didn't know if I'd ever see him again outside of perhaps a chance run-in. I doubted I'd be invited to anything at Karson and Payton's house if Maverick was going to be there, so I wasn't counting on seeing him in a social setting.

It was a little surreal how fast he'd worked his way into my life and under my skin. I supposed falling in love was the easy part. Falling out of it? Not so much.

Maverick had very much made himself feel like that missing part of me. I didn't know how he'd done it or if it'd been intentional, but now that he was gone, I just kept feeling like something important was missing.

I even felt a little like a tiny ship adrift at sea during a massive storm, just waiting on that one huge wave that was going to capsize me. Shoving both my hands into my hair, I tugged at the strands and took a few deep, calming breaths.

After how long it'd taken me to tell Maverick the truth, I knew it was my turn now to give him time to figure things out. It was just a lot more difficult being on this side of things.

As I checked my watch, I realized that yet another day without him had come and gone. It was time for me to head home to Brea and to get on with my life like it had been before he'd suddenly landed in it.

Sighing as I got up, I collected my things and headed out. I gave my daughter the biggest cuddle once I got home. For her sake, if not for mine, I really did hope that Maverick came around. She truly was a bundle of joy and I knew that if he gave it a chance, he could be an incredible dad to her—even if he never wanted to even look at me again.

If it went down that way, I would be in a world of pain every time I had to see him, but since I only had myself to blame, I swallowed back my tears and smiled at Brea instead. “What do you say, baby girl? Should we go for a walk?”

Obviously, she didn’t really respond, but she did let out a happy gurgle that I took to be her agreement. We said goodbye to her caregiver, and then I set her down on her play mat while I got her stroller ready.

Brea was my whole world, and I laughed when she giggled and squealed with excitement as I buckled her into the stroller. When she gave an unhappy shout as I started pushing her, I groaned. I knew what she wanted.

The blanket Maverick had given her was hanging right there across the back of a chair, and she’d taken a huge liking to it. Whenever I took it away to wash it, she made her discontent known, and when I gave it back, her face lit up in a way I rarely saw otherwise.

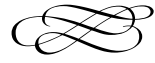
As I draped it over her now, she cooed and smiled, and it shattered my heart just a little bit more than it had been before. It might’ve been just because the blanket was so colorful and soft that she loved it so much, but deep within me, I suspected it was about more than that.

Brea didn’t know who he was, but that night when she’d met him, the way they’d interacted had made me wonder if somehow, perhaps instinctively, there was something more there. Since she’d now become so attached to the blanket, I even wondered if there was a part of her that was missing him.

Or maybe that was just me. Maybe I missed him so much that I was seeing things that weren’t there. Honestly, I didn’t know if Brea missed him or if he’d even been thinking about her. All I knew was that as the days passed, it started feeling less and less likely that Maverick, Brea, and I would get a happy ending.

It’d been a long shot and I’d known it since the day he’d walked into my office, but dear Lord would it have been great if things had worked out that way.

CHAPTER 35



MAVERICK

My head was all over the place these days. This past week had been possibly the most unproductive one I'd ever had and it didn't look like that would be changing anytime soon. I seemed to have lost my ability to concentrate. I zoned out during phone calls and meetings. At least half the time, I had no clue what was going on around me.

The only thing I seemed to be able to focus on was my conversation with Penny last Saturday night. It'd been almost a week and I was no closer to figuring out what to do than I had been when she'd dropped that bomb on my head.

I kept going around in circles, at times sitting with my phone in my hand about to call her and at others convinced that there was nothing in the world that would make me speak to her again. When I closed my eyes, I saw Brea's little face and my heart burned whenever I remembered those few smiles I'd gotten from her.

It was the strangest sensation, but it honestly felt like someone was holding a Zippo inside my chest cavity, blistering my heart in an attempt to brand her on it forevermore. The thing was that I strongly suspected she'd already been branded onto my heart. Into my soul.

I had no idea if it was possible for it to happen that fast, but I couldn't deny the way I felt. It would've been complicated enough without the guilt, longing, and anger that came along with it.

From a practical standpoint, I felt guilty for not having contributed financially to her needs. Babies cost a lot of money, according to my brother, and although I knew it wasn't my fault that I hadn't contributed a single cent, I still felt guilty about it.

I also felt guilty for all the time I'd missed with her since I'd found out she was mine. A week was just a week, but it was still a whole week that I could've been spending time with her and getting to know her, and yet, I just hadn't been able to get quite that far emotionally.

The longing I felt was for her, sure, but it was for her mother, too. As fucking angry as I was with her, I missed her just as much.

Ever since Karson had brought it up, I'd been trying to think about things from her point of view. It wasn't easy to remove my own feelings from the equation, but I tried, and when I did, I often found some shreds of understanding deep within myself.

Not enough to actually understand or to forgive her, but there were shreds. Then I'd remember that it was me she'd been keeping it from and those shreds disappeared.

Karson and Payton had been supporting me, but both of them were of the opinion that I should speak to her—and so was Flynn. He'd left, obviously, but he'd checked in a few times this week and had even asked for her address so he could send her a gift from her cool Uncle Flynn.

It was infuriating how onboard they all were with this, and at the same time, it was comforting. It reassured me that if I decided to be a dad and not just a biological father, that I'd have the support I needed to not fuck it up completely.

I was nowhere near making that decision, but it was also entirely inconceivable to me that I wouldn't be involved in her life if she was mine. As I stared at my computer screen, I groaned and grabbed my water bottle, taking a long sip and hoping it did something to calm the turmoil bubbling inside me.

It didn't. Nothing did.

"Knock knock," Karson said as he walked into my office, his jaw tight and his eyes shining with stress. "We've got a problem."

My heart sank and my stomach tightened. I'd known I was going to drop the ball at some point, given the state I'd been in this week, and now it seemed like it'd happened. "What's wrong?"

"We didn't get the insulation we ordered from Penny," he said, bracing his hands on the back of the chair opposite my desk and gripping it so hard that his knuckles turned white. "I've been talking to some other chick at her office since you've decided not to deal with them anymore, and she promised me yesterday that we'd get it this morning, but it never arrived."

"Fuck. Have you called her?"

"Yep," he said, rolling his eyes at me. "She's not answering, and apparently, Penny is in a meeting. You need to go over there and find out what's going on. We used the last of the insulation we had today, so we need those materials delivered by, like, dawn tomorrow morning or we're going to start falling behind."

"I'll send her an email," I said, grinding my teeth as my shoulders went rigid and my muscles tensed. "That's the best I can do."

"No, it's not," he argued, frustration dripping from his voice as he glared at me. "Feelings aside, this is your job, Maverick. My guys and I have been busting our asses to stay on schedule, but we're cutting it close. You need to go over there and plant your ass in her waiting room until she can give us an ETA for our materials."

"I am *not* going over there," I said firmly, narrowing my eyes on his. "If you're so desperate, you can go."

"This is your bed, Mav. You made it and now you have to sleep in it. I get that things are up in the air between you two, but this is business. You've been wandering around in a daze

all week and I haven't heard anything directly from her. I don't know who this Cara girl is, but Penny seems to have passed the baton to her and she seems to have lost the fucking thing."

More guilt stabbed at my gut. This time because I'd left my brother to sink or swim on our project all week, and I didn't do that normally. I knew he was more than capable of handling things, but I was a team player.

I didn't just sit back and twiddle my thumbs while he did all the work, but that was exactly what I'd been doing all week. As bad as I felt about it, though, I couldn't do what he was asking me to. "Please, Karson. Just go? I can't right now. Okay? I just can't."

"You can and you're going to." He released the chair and folded his arms across his chest. "This isn't you, Mav. I know you got the shock of your life, but you don't run away and you sure as hell don't hide."

"I'm not hiding. I—" I cut myself off when I realized that was what I was doing. If I didn't go over there and do my damn job, then I would be hiding. Although the thought of seeing her killed me, I wouldn't hide. I refused to.

"Yeah. Okay," I said finally, rolling my chair back. "I'm going. I'll let you know what she says as soon as I've spoken to her. If, by any chance, the delivery shows up before I get there, you'll tell me?"

"Sure," he said noncommittally, his chest puffing out as he gave me a proud smile. "Go get her, bro. Good luck."

"I'm not going to get her," I objected immediately. "I'm going over there to see what's happening with our delivery and that's it. Also, keep calling them. You might reach this Cara person before I have to walk into my own personal nightmare."

"Yeah. Sure. I'll keep trying."

He wasn't going to. I could tell from the way his gaze suddenly darted away from mine and how the corners of his mouth were still hitched up with that smile. "You're an asshole."

“I might be,” he agreed. “I’m an asshole who loves you, though. I’m also an asshole who knows that if we fall behind schedule, we’re going to be inviting even more drama into our lives. The client has been onsite twice this week. He’s watching us like a hawk and I doubt you’re in the right frame of mind to deal with him right now, so off you go.”

My eyes closed, but I nodded. While I knew he was pushing me to go see Penny in the hopes we’d work it out, he was also right about this being my job. And about our client. The man had been breathing down our necks all this time, and if we fell behind, there would be hell to pay. Plus penalties. There would be plenty of those to pay, too.

As I grabbed my phone, keys, and wallet, I wished that I was going anywhere other than where I was going. I wished that Karson would call me back and decide to take pity on me. Hell, I even wished for a traffic jam that might keep me from arriving while Penny was still at the office.

None of those things happened. Much sooner than I’d expected, I was parking outside their building and walking inside. Penny’s assistant smiled when she saw me. “Mr. Neidum, this is a surprise. Penny just finished up with a meeting. Let me just check, but I’m sure she’ll be able to see you right away.”

All of that and I hadn’t even said a word. I dropped my chin in a nod, then slid my hands into my pockets and rocked back on my heels. Waiting for her assistant to get back was awkward as shit, but not nearly as awkward as when she finally came out of Penny’s office and waved me in.

“She’ll see you now, Mr. Neidum.”

I nodded again, dragged in a deep breath, and then pulled back my shoulders and strode into Penny’s office like I’d been told to do. Seeing her again for the first time in a week hit me like a bolt of lightning to the heart, and although I was sure I kept it quiet enough that she wouldn’t have heard it, I sucked in a sharp breath.

Penny was just as beautiful as ever, her fiery hair in a knot on top of her head and those blue eyes crystalline and clear.

Her dress clung to her curves, but it looked a little looser than it had the last time I'd seen her in it. There were also darkish circles around her eyes that she'd tried to cover with makeup but that were still visible and she was definitely pale.

“Maverick?” Her eyes widened. “When she said Mr. Neidum was here to see me, I was sure she was talking about Karson.”

“Nope. It's me,” I said lamely, my heart thundering in my chest and everything inside me strung so tight that it felt like I might puke. “Obviously, it's me. Where are our materials, Penny? Karson said they were supposed to have been delivered today, but they weren't.”

“I, uh, I,” she stammered, but then she stopped talking and tilted her head back so she was facing the ceiling, closed her eyes, and dragged in a deep breath. “Have a seat. Let me look into it.”

Before she could even open her eyes, though, let alone look into what had happened to our delivery, I couldn't hold back any longer. “Is Brea really my daughter, Penny?”

Her chin lowered and she looked at me. Then she walked out from behind her desk and crossed her office to close the door. If she didn't answer me soon, my heart might actually climb out of my mouth. I hadn't come over here intending to say anything about our personal stuff, but there it was.

It seemed like all it had taken to break my resolve had been one look at her. I was sure this was what Karson had been hoping for, but fuck it. Fuck everything. I was here, she was here, and maybe, if I got some answers, I would finally be able to do something other than obsess about them once I left here.

CHAPTER 36



PENELOPE

My legs felt like my bones had been replaced with jello. I barely made it to my sitting area before I collapsed, my knees a thing of the past and my lungs about to give out. Seeing Maverick so completely unexpectedly had knocked the air right out of me and it had stolen several beats of my heart to boot.

I'd never been so surprised before, and it made me wonder if this was how he'd felt when I'd told him the truth. If so, it made sense that it'd taken him a week to talk to me. I, on the other hand, didn't have the luxury of taking a week to recover.

Maverick strode over, sat down on the sofa directly opposite from the one I was on, and lifted his gaze to mine. Droplets of sweat suddenly appeared at the nape of my neck and probably on my brow, where he'd be able to see them, but I couldn't worry about what I looked like right now. I had bigger fish to fry.

"We're doing this?" I asked, but I had to clear my throat before I could get the words out, and even so, they came out breathy. "You want to talk?"

"I want to know if Brea is really mine," he said stonily. "I'll level with you about where I'm at right now. A part of me wants to believe that it's not true, but I think it is. I just need to hear you say it again and I need you to assure me that you're telling the truth."

"You're not going to insist on a paternity test?" I asked, frowning. "I've been thinking about it, and if you want one,

we can have it done. According to the internet, it's minimally invasive to her and I'm willing to give my consent."

Those green eyes burned into mine, his jaw tight and his posture tense. "Thank you. Let's just talk first, okay?"

"Okay," I said slowly, swallowing past a lump the size of the Atlantic Ocean in my throat. "Can I start at the beginning?"

"Please." He was still staring at me just as stonily as before, but at least he was giving me a chance. It was what I had been hoping, wishing, and praying for, and now that I had it, I didn't want to leave anything out.

"You may not have realized this about me considering what happened just after we met, but I'm not really the type of girl who has one-night stands. I used to be that fun girl at the wedding, but I also used to be the one who'd watch other people pair off while I broke it down on the dance floor."

A crease appeared between his brows, but before he could ask me what that had to do with him, I rushed out the next part. "Before the wedding, I hadn't been with anyone for a really long time. It might even have been close to a year. Possibly more. I don't keep a diary or anything, but it'd been a really long time. I don't often do one-night stands because I tend to get emotionally involved. I've always struggled to separate sex from *more*."

Maverick's head jerked, but he let me keep talking.

"So, uh, when we hooked up, I was angry at you for passing out, which was why I stole your pants, but I was also glad. It meant that there was no way of getting to know you better and, therefore, no way I could get emotionally involved."

I took a deep breath. "The post-party guilt was still terrible, though. I felt like I'd done something horribly wrong and it took Sienna to remind me that both of us had been free to sleep with whomever we wanted and that hooking up hadn't been some kind of crime."

Maverick let out a soft sigh. “Can we get to the pregnancy part? This is enlightening and all, but it doesn’t mean much to me right now. It doesn’t mean you didn’t sleep with anyone else while you were away or just after you got back.”

“I didn’t,” I said honestly, pleading with him to believe me. “Dad was retiring soon and I was working all the time. I wasn’t dating anyone and there just wasn’t time to go out and find the love I was looking for. I know it might sound like I’m making it up, but you asked me for the truth and that’s what this is.”

He leveled me with a serious look. “You’re absolutely sure there’s not even a little bit of doubt in your mind that I’m her father?”

“There never has been,” I murmured honestly. “I hadn’t slept with anyone for a long time before you and I haven’t been with anyone else since. Once I found out I was pregnant, there was no way I was going to try dating. It’s been all about Brea for me since the day I got the positive result in the drug store.”

“The drug store?” He frowned. “Did you do a blood test at a drug store instead of a doctor or something?”

“No.” The tip of my ears burst into flames. “I couldn’t wait to take the test, so Sienna and I just went into the bathroom inside the store. The clerk gave me shit when I had to pay for a used pregnancy test, but, uh, I guess that’s not really relevant either.”

He leaned back on the sofa, but he didn’t interrupt me again. “I should’ve told you once I found out. At the very least, I should’ve told you after the doctor confirmed it. I don’t expect you to understand and I realize that this is going to sound like an excuse, but finding out I was pregnant changed *everything* for me. I was terrified. I was excited. I couldn’t believe it was really happening, and I had no idea how I was going to do it alone.”

My eyes closed, my heart racing as I thought back to that time. “Back then, though, we’d been nothing but a one-night stand. I didn’t think you’d want to know, and more than that, I

was afraid that you might try to put pressure on me to terminate the pregnancy.”

When I opened my eyes and saw the revulsion on his face, my stomach turned. “I’m sorry, Maverick. I really am, but I didn’t know you then. I didn’t know anything about you other than your name, who your brother was, and that you were good in bed. I didn’t know how you were going to react, what you were going to do, or what you might want me to do.”

“At the same time,” I said. “I was in shock. I was scared that something would go wrong in the pregnancy and I was so scared of what was going to happen after she was born. Now that I know you, I realize that I made a mistake and it’s not one I can fix by saying that I’m sorry, but I truly am.”

When I looked at him again, he seemed agonized about something, but I couldn’t stop now. I needed to get the rest out. “After she was born, my entire world changed all over again. She’s everything to me, Maverick. Absolutely everything and I can’t lose her. I’m still adjusting to being a mother and a single one at that, but all I know is that I wouldn’t survive losing her.”

My voice got thick with emotion and I had to swallow back tears. As I did, Maverick’s eyes suddenly flew wide open. “What? You think I’m going to take her from you?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly, choking back a sob. “It’s my greatest fear and I know I’ve made so many mistakes. I know you’re angry at me. Rightfully so. I also know this isn’t about me, but please, Maverick, I—”

“Jesus,” he muttered, and then he was on his feet, closing the distance between us in one long stride before he sank down on his knees in front of me. “Listen to me, Penny. I would never, ever take Brea away from you. I’ve had a lot of thoughts this week, but that one has never even crossed my mind. Look, we’ve got a lot to work out, but that is the one thing you can forget about right now. No matter what happens with us, you’re her mother. I would never take her from you.”

Tears leaked out of my eyes and flowed in hot rivers down my cheeks as I stared into the depths of his eyes and found

nothing but sincerity in them. “You won’t?”

“No.” He scoffed, shaking his head. “Fuck, Penny. Of course not, and if that’s what you’ve been thinking, then I can’t even imagine how hard it must’ve been for you to tell me.”

“It was hard,” I admitted, my voice smaller than I was proud of. “Enough about me, though. This isn’t about me. I just wanted you to understand why it took me so long.”

He reached for my hands and folded his fingers over mine, giving them a squeeze as he exhaled loudly. “I’ll be honest with you. I am still angry, and I think I’m going to be for a while, but at least I understand it a bit better now. If you really were terrified about what I might expect from you during the pregnancy and that I might try to take her from you after, both of which are things that are probably legitimate worries if I was someone else, then I get it. As much as I hate to say it, I think I might’ve done the same thing if I was in your shoes, but I’m not anyone else, Penelope. I’m me, and I’m not going to try to take her from you. If anything, I want to be a part of her life.”

I blinked through the tears. “You do?”

He dragged in a big breath through his nostrils. “Yeah, I think I do. Actually, no. I know I do. It’s been, uh, a lot to take in and I’m not proud of some of the thoughts I’ve had since you told me, but yes. I want to be a part of her life.”

“Okay,” I agreed immediately. “Yes. Definitely. Of course.”

Maverick’s eyes closed as he released my hands and went down on his butt on the floor instead of staying on his knees. “Shit. This meeting did not go the way I thought it was going to go. I was planning on finding out what was going on with our order and getting in and out in less than two minutes.”

A surprised chuckle tore out of me and I hiccupped on another sob. “You didn’t come over to talk about this?”

“Nope.” He managed to send me a small grin before he hung his head and scrubbed his hands over his face. “When I

walked in here, the only thing I expected to leave with was confirmation of the ETA on our order. Instead, I'm leaving with a daughter. Not physically, obviously, but well. You know what I mean."

"I do," I said softly. "So what now?"

He looked up at me again. "Can I come over tonight for dinner with you two? We can all spend some time together and take it from there?"

"Okay," I agreed, swiping the tears from my cheeks, and I rubbed the tops of my thighs. "I'll check on that delivery for you. It should've gone out this morning. I spoke to Cara about it personally yesterday and I have no idea why it wasn't done, but I'll find out and it doesn't matter what I have to do, you'll have it before the end of business today."

His brows twitched as he checked the clock above my door. "That's less than two hours from now."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "You'll have it. Brea needs to be in the bath by six thirty or she's a terror. She's not eating yet, but if you'd like to come by at five forty-five, that's usually when I eat and she watches me. I've heard it's good for them to be involved in family mealtimes."

"I'll be there," he promised before he pushed to his feet. "We're going to work this out, Penny. I don't know how yet, but we will."

With that, he turned around and left my office. The strong, independent woman that I was spent the next twenty minutes sobbing before I managed to sort out their delivery. *What a freaking day.*

When I finally left the office, though, I felt better than I had since I'd first found out I was pregnant. Maverick wasn't going to try to take her from me. He wanted to be in Brea's life—and maybe even in mine. He hadn't said as much, but he had said that we'd work things out and until he told me otherwise, I was going to keep hoping that maybe we'd get that happily ever after in the end after all.

CHAPTER 37



MAVERICK

Once again, I was so nervous that my palms were sweaty. For a guy who'd spent most of his life never really struggling with nerves, this was starting to get ridiculous.

On the other hand, I was about to knock on Penny's door to meet Brea as my daughter for the first time, so I figured I could cut myself some slack. This was as big a deal as deals got, and so I took a minute to breathe before pressing their doorbell.

If someone had told me this morning that I was going to be here right now, feeling the way I was, I'd have sent them to a head doctor. As things were, however, a lot had changed for me today.

It turned out that Flynn and Karson had been right. I had needed to talk to Penny and to hear her out. While I'd nearly been sick over what she'd said, it definitely had helped to hear it. The worst thing of all was that I'd been honest when I'd told her that her concerns might've been legitimate if someone else had fathered her child.

Personally, while I might not have been happy about the circumstances, I would never have pressured her to terminate the pregnancy. Unfortunately, I knew there were many guys—and girls—out there who might have.

Thank God, Sienna obviously hadn't been one of those gals who'd have encouraged it, but even if she had been, I knew Penny wouldn't have done it. Obviously, I respected

every person's own opinions and rights, but it depressed me to know that Penny had been so worried about it with me.

The same held true for her thinking that I might try to take Brea from her. Again, circumstances differed as much as the people in them, but it just wasn't something I'd ever consider. Even if she tried to keep Brea away from me, I'd ask for visitation. Not custody.

Ultimately, though, it'd become clear to me after I'd heard her out that not telling me the truth hadn't been malicious. Penny had been alone and terrified. She'd thought things through, weighed up the risks, and had come to the conclusion that I was a wildcard.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't even blame her for it. At the time, I'd been a stranger, and while I was still struggling with the fact that she hadn't told me sooner after we'd reunited, I even understood that a little better now. Penny hadn't had any guarantees about me.

The only thing she'd done was to do whatever she could to protect our daughter, and I could hardly fault her for that. I shook my hands out at my sides, wondering how the hell a day could've made so much of a difference.

Not even a whole day. A few hours. One conversation.

It seemed impossible, but it'd happened. Life was complicated. As were people. Shit happened and everyone dealt with it in the way they thought was best.

I still hadn't forgiven Penny. I wasn't sure how I would ever get there, but I was willing to try. I was here to try.

Finally feeling collected enough to just do it, I raised my hand and pressed the doorbell, and Penny opened up so fast that I had a feeling she'd been waiting right on the other side of the door. Neither of us mentioned it, though.

I didn't know about her, but I didn't ask because my attention was immediately stolen by the beautiful baby in her arms. Brea peered at me, not smiling, but also not frowning or crying. She burrowed the side of her head into Penny's shoulder but her gaze was on mine.

“Hello, baby girl,” I murmured, suddenly overwhelmed by the knowledge that Penny and I had created her. *How the fuck does that even happen?*

I knew how the birds and bees worked, obviously, but this? *How did forgetting a condom for a minute result in such perfection?*

Penny smiled nervously at me, stepping aside and waving me in. “I’m glad you made it. I was hoping you would but was trying to prepare myself for you having a change of heart.”

“No such luck,” I said lightly, not quite at the point where I could joke with her but also not wanting the mood to get too somber.

Brea craned her neck to keep looking at me when Penny turned to close the door, and while I didn’t know what the hell I was supposed to do, I knew what I wanted to do. As soon as Penny was facing me again, I glanced at Brea and held out my arms.

“May I?” I asked.

She hesitated, but then she nodded. “Of course. Don’t take it personally if she cries, though. It might take her a minute to get used to you.”

Smiling at Brea as she moved to hand her over, she cooed softly to her. “What do you say, baby? Are you ready to go to Daddy?”

My heart slammed to a near stop at the word, but when it started again, it raced like it was in the home stretch of Formula One. “Daddy, huh?”

Penny looked into my eyes as she placed Brea gently in my arms. “Uh. That’s what you are, but we don’t need to call you that if—”

“No. It’s fine. I’m just surprised, is all.” When Brea’s face started crumbling like she was about to scream, I quickly changed my tone and smiled at her. “I am your daddy. Hi, Brea. It’s me. It’s Daddy. Did you miss me? I sure missed you.”

I said it all in a sing-song voice and her expression turned to one of interest rather than distress. “Are you ready for our first family meal, baby? Soon, you’ll be able to eat too.”

I glanced at Penny. “That’s true, right? She’ll be able to start eating soon?”

“Yep, she will. Another month or so before we can start her on certain foods.” She led us to a small, square dining table she’d already set with a highchair on the one side. “That’s Brea’s place for now. There are some toys for her in the basket underneath it. Just be sure to buckle her in.”

I nodded. “I don’t really want to put her down just yet. Do you think I could hold her while you eat?”

“Sure,” she said softly. “I’ll go get our food, and if you’d like, you can try eating with her on your lap or you can have dinner while I bathe her.”

“No. I want to be there for that, too.” I paused. “If that’s okay.”

Penny hesitated for an awkward beat. Then her lips spread in a slow smile and she dragged a hand through her hair. “We’re making this weird. It doesn’t have to be weird. It’s just us and Brea doesn’t understand what we’re saying just yet, so I’m just going to put this out there. I know that it’s going to take a lot of adjusting for both of us, but she’s your daughter. What I mean is that you don’t need to keep asking me if it’s okay for you to do anything. I’m sure we’ll find our rhythm, but you’re here to spend time with her, so spend time with her.”

Brea burrowed into my chest like I’d just seen her do with Penny a few minutes ago, and everything in me warmed. Penny got tears in her eyes before she ducked behind her hair and muttered about going to get the food.

I stayed behind with our daughter, and I didn’t let go of her again for more than the few minutes she spent in the bath until it was time to put her to bed. Honestly, the whole ninety minutes between my arrival and her bedtime was like a whirlwind.

I got her little hands in my food and then worried about drowning her in a tiny plastic bath. I nearly dropped her while applying her body lotion and then had Penny in stitches while I was trying to put on her diaper. We managed to get through it all without any terrible incidents, though, and then I got to watch Penny feed her before bedtime.

All in all, it was like a hurricane of baby-scented stuff and small, squirming bodies—and there was only one of her. God only knew how Karson and Payton managed this every night with two. Let alone how people did it with more than that. *I mean, you only have so many hands.*

Once it was all over, I was fucking exhausted and I said as much to Penny as she poured us each a glass of wine in her kitchen later. “How the hell have you been doing all that by yourself?”

She chuckled as she shrugged and handed over my wine. “You do what you have to do, you know?”

“I guess, but it’s a lot. It’s a lot more difficult than it looks,” I admitted. “I, uh, noticed she has my blanket with her. Does she really like it, or did you just keep it close because you knew I was coming?”

“She loves it. It’s becoming a problem how attached she’s grown to it. I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve wanted to ask you where you bought it so I could go get another one. Not that I’d ever take the one you brought her away. It just needs to be washed sometimes.”

I laughed softly. “I’ll go get a few more.”

Penny picked up her wine and sipped it when we got to their lounge. We sat down side by side on her sofa and she turned to me. “So, um, what are you thinking now? Do you still want to be a part of her life?”

“Yes,” I said emphatically. “More so now than ever.”

She arched a brow at me, taking another sip of her wine before she put the glass down on the coffee table. “Are you sure? You looked pretty panicked there at times.”

I smiled, setting my glass down too and moving closer to her. She watched me do it, but she didn't move away, and when I reached for her hands, she gave them to me. "Yes, Penny. I'm sure. I don't have to like how all this happened to want it. I want to be a part of this. Of all of it."

My heart went berserk over what I was going to say next, but it was true and right now, I was done with us hiding things from each other. I could've waited. I should've waited, but I didn't. There had been enough waiting. Enough uncertainty.

If we were going to do this, I was all in and she needed to know it. "I love Brea, Penny. I love both of you, and I was panicked, but like you said earlier, we will find our rhythm, but I want to be here to find it with you."

CHAPTER 38



PENELOPE

My heart skipped more beats than could be healthy, but I'd heard him correctly. I had to have heard him correctly. He was sitting right in front of me, his face less than a foot away from mine. Blinking rapidly, I wondered if I was dreaming.

Since there was no way to pinch myself without releasing his hands—and I wasn't willing to do that right now—I simply blinked hard and then stared at him some more. "I'm sorry. I thought I just heard you saying that you love both of us. Did I? Or am I dreaming? I'm dreaming, right? That's the—"

He interrupted my rambling sentence by smirking and then leaning forward to press his lips against mine. My entire body froze and then melted in response, and then I finally let go of his hands to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer to me.

"You heard me," he murmured between kisses. "I do love both of you. I love you, Penny."

Fireworks erupted inside me and joy unlike anything I'd ever felt exploded through my veins, filling me with warmth, excitement, and just such an overwhelming feeling of rightness that I started crying again.

My tears mingled with our lips and Maverick pulled away to frown at me. "Are you okay? Hey, what did I say? Did I hurt you somehow?"

"No." I hiccupped, pulling him back to me and finishing my sentence against his lips. "I'm just so happy. These are happy tears, Maverick. I didn't think we'd ever get here. I

didn't think this would ever happen, and to hear you say that you love us is like..." I closed my eyes and held his face in my hands. "Are you sure I'm not dreaming?"

He chuckled, stroking my hair and pulling me into his lap. "You're not dreaming, baby. God, you really are a romantic, aren't you?"

"I am." I opened my eyes again to look into his, then peppered his face with kisses. "I can't believe this is really happening. You were so mad at me. I was so scared. Just this morning, my heart was broken and now..."

"Now we're setting things right," he murmured decisively, a fierce kind of determination creeping into his eyes. "You don't have to be scared anymore, Penny. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere, and neither is Brea. I'm right here."

"Yeah, you really are." More tears streamed down my cheeks, but there was no way of stopping them and I had better things to do anyway. Like to kiss the man I loved with every ounce of gratitude and appreciation I had for him.

As I slanted my lips over his again, he moaned and tightened his grip on me, deepening the kiss until it felt like our souls were being fused together by the strength of it. I gave my soul up freely for the fusing, though. I wasn't about to fight it.

This was everything I'd ever wanted. *He* was everything I'd ever wanted and so much more, and while I knew it was going to take time and much more talking before we were in the clear, I didn't want to talk tonight and it didn't feel like he wanted to, either.

In fact, as his hips rolled into mine, stoking a fire in me that I knew only he could put out, I shoved my thoughts away and focused only on him. I kissed him like I'd never kissed anyone before. I kissed his mouth, his eyelids, his nose, and even his eyebrows.

He laughed when I nibbled on his earlobe and then he groaned when my tongue darted out. In return, he kissed me in

all those same places and then some, but when he reached for my zipper to take off my dress, I stopped him.

“We should go to my bedroom,” I whispered. “We’ll be more comfortable there and the baby monitor in here isn’t on.”

A low hum of protest rumbled out of him, but then he rested his forehead against mine. “Okay. Let’s go.”

I scooted off his lap, took his hand, and guided him to my bedroom. It was much smaller than his, my bed a simple double he probably wouldn’t even fit on, but he hardly seemed to notice.

Neither of us bothered to turn on any lights in here, but since my bedroom faced the street, there was enough ambient light in the room that I could see him getting undressed after I lay down on the bed. He removed his clothing slowly, and for a moment, I could only watch as pieces of him were revealed to me.

His broad, powerful chest came first, then his shoulders, and his arms. As the shirt dropped to the floor, he undid his belt, his gaze on mine as I drank him in. “Are you going to make me do all the work?”

I chuckled, giving him a coy smile that he rewarded by stopping. As soon as I noticed what he was doing, though, I tugged at the zipper on the side of my dress and shook my head. “No, you’re not doing all the work. I was just enjoying the view.”

He grinned wickedly. “Want to race? Whoever is naked first gets to decide what we do first.”

With that, he pulled off his pants and his boxers and I squealed as I wiggled out of my dress. Maverick nearly fell over since he’d forgotten he still needed to take off his shoes, and at the end, we were naked at almost the exact same time.

Instead of arguing about who had won, Maverick crawled onto the bed with me and claimed my lips with his own, making me moan as I hooked my legs around his hips and held him close. Our kisses quickly became as deep and as meaningful as they had been on the sofa. *Which reminds me.*

“I love you, too, Maverick,” I said, breaking off our kiss to look into his eyes. “I do. I love you. I know you haven’t fully forgiven me, but it means everything to me that you’re here anyway. I love you and I’m never going to stop trying to make it up to you.”

It might have been a trick of the light, but I swore I saw moisture glimmering in his eyes before he kissed me again. Neither of us broke the kiss after that, saying everything we needed to with our bodies instead.

We only spoke verbally again when Maverick pushed the tip of his cock between my folds and then groaned. “Fuck. We need a condom. We can talk about having more babies someday, but we probably shouldn’t tempt fate right now.”

“I’m on the mini-pill,” I murmured. “I’m also breastfeeding, so between the two, we should be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be,” I replied, pulling him back to me and rolling my pelvis up to meet his.

A low hiss came out of him. Then he kissed me harder than he ever had before and thrust into me like he just couldn’t wait any longer. I didn’t blame him. I’d been about to flip him onto his back so I could do the same thing he’d just done.

Both of us moaned and I writhed underneath him, already needing him to move even if I hadn’t adjusted to having him inside me just yet. He started giving me exactly what I needed, hard and fast, but then he slowed down, and although I’d been so damn close, I didn’t want to rush him.

The pace of his movement was just as good. In fact, I soon realized it was even better. Because he wasn’t fucking me. He was making love to me, and it was amazing. So amazing that when my orgasm finally came, it was the best, most intense one I’d ever had.

True to what I’d come to learn about him, though, he wasn’t done with me yet. Instead of chasing his own release, he just kept going, building me up all over again until both of

our bodies were slick with sweat and I'd fallen apart once more.

Kissing me hard, he finally went over the edge himself, roaring into my mouth and shuddering in a way that made me think his orgasm had been every bit as intense as my own.

We were just catching our breath when an anguished cry from Brea's room made Maverick stiffen beside me. I chuckled, turning my head to press a kiss to his shoulder. "She's fine. Just alone. This is your moment, baby daddy. Why don't you go get her?"

"I'm naked," he said, still panting and sounding horrified.

I laughed, feeling boneless and still panting myself. "She's not going to know. Go on. Go get her. Let her know you're here for her."

Shooting me a wide-eyed look full of doubt, he rolled over and rushed out of the room when Brea cried again. I chuckled, lying back against the pillows as I marveled over the events of the day. A few minutes later, Maverick came back, holding Brea who was crying even more than she had been before.

"I'm going to have to work on this," he murmured, bouncing her up and down and looking terrified when she didn't stop crying.

I laughed softly, then sat up and arranged the pillows behind my back as I beckoned them to me. "Come on over here. She'll love us being in bed together. She's probably just crying because she can feel how anxious you are."

His expression softened when he handed her over, and then he watched me as I cradled her in my arms without speaking to her at all. My doctor had told me once that the biggest mistake I could make was to talk to her at night.

Nights were for sleeping, he'd said. Avoid eye contact. Avoid switching on lights if you can help it.

So far, his advice had gone well for me. When Maverick shifted on his feet beside the bed, looking mighty uncomfortable, I smiled at him and jerked my head for him to

join us. He did, slinging his arm around my shoulders and pulling us closer as I put our baby back to sleep.

CHAPTER 39



MAVERICK

“Just go, Mav,” Karson said, laughing as he shook his head at me. “You’ve checked your watch ten times in the last minute, and if your knee starts bouncing any faster, you might just take off. Just go.”

“We’re in a meeting.” I frowned at him from across the conference table. “Don’t you want to know about the next projects in the pipeline?”

“Sure, but not right now. I can’t take it. That bouncing is terrible. I can’t concentrate for shit while you’re doing it.”

I sighed. “It’s just that today is the first time I’m picking Brea up from daycare. Penny was nervous about her going as is. I can’t be late. She’ll kill me. Unalive me. Whatever the PC term is these days.”

My brother chuckled and pointed at the door. “That’s why I’m telling you to go. You can catch me up on developments tomorrow. Neither of us is very focused right now, anyway. So just go.”

I stared at him for another beat, but then I shrugged and pushed my chair back. Before I got up, I grinned and wagged my eyebrows at him. “Want to race to the daycare center? First one there has diaper-changing duty at every Sunday lunch this month.”

Karson’s face contorted as he shook his head. “No. Nope. I’m not taking that bait. Besides, I’m not the one itching to go pick up my kids, and also, we can’t race to a daycare center. I’m pretty sure there are rules against it.”

“There are only rules about not racing or driving fast around the actual center. No rules about getting there.”

My brother laughed, pushing his chair back but still not looking like he was going to take the bait. “We’re not racing. Payton and Penny would *not* be impressed if we do. I’m not risking my wife’s happiness with me just to race you.”

“Your wife is happy with you because I convinced you to put your tiny humans in a daycare center with my tiny human. Surely, that means I should get to upset the balance I created.”

“Nope. Payton is happy with me because she’s back at work after making the decision to go back all by herself and I supported her. All you did was toss the name of a good center into the mix.”

I huffed out an exasperated breath. “You’re really not going to give me any credit? Come on, man. I went to look at a dozen daycare centers in one day. I also spoke to Payton about them for two hours that night.”

Both of those things were true. About a week after Penny and I had made up, the caregiver she’d hired to look after Brea during the day had quit on short notice. She’d gone off to work on a yacht somewhere and we’d had to face our first real crisis as parents and as a couple.

I was pretty proud of how well we’d gotten through it. For seventy-two hours, it’d been chaos. Pandemonium. Most of the daycare centers Penny had liked before Brea’s birth had been full and we hadn’t been able to find another full-time caregiver we liked in the time we had.

Eventually, I’d managed to convince some daycare center to let me take a tour and then, after some begging, pleading, and a generous donation to the charity of the owner’s choice, I’d gotten Brea into the center Penny had been eyeing for her all along. They’d been full, but when Karson had offered to make a generous donation of his own to the same charity, the owner had suddenly found space for the twins as well.

Oh, and we also went to go paint some walls and do a bit of maintenance at the charity’s premises. Neither of us

mindful, though. The organization she'd selected was a childcare center and temporary housing facility for children and youths in trouble or on the streets.

Anyway, good deeds done, the cousins were now all at daycare together and Penny was thrilled. As soon as Payton had heard Brea was going to a center, she'd made the call for her own kids as well. She'd sat down with us, asked a million questions about the place, and had told Karson to get the boys in there with Brea.

As Karson and I headed out to go pick up the kids, I found myself once again marveling about the fact that we were doing this together. Our kids were growing up together. Same age. Same daycare center, and we were all looking at the same school for when the time came.

We had lunch together every Sunday and we often took the kids out together on Saturdays. In my wildest dreams, I wouldn't have thought we'd ever be raising our first kids together. It still blew my mind whenever I really thought about it.

Karson shoved my shoulder as we walked into the parking lot. "Stop smiling, Mav. It's weird. You're smiling way too much these days."

I scoffed. "I'm smiling too much? Have you seen yourself? You've been smiling way too much since Payton finally agreed to be your girlfriend and you don't hear me complaining about it."

"Yeah, but I'm a friendly, smiley person." He winked at me. "You're not. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy you're happy, but be less happy."

I laughed, flipping him off when we reached our cars. "No, thanks. I'm happy being happy. You're just going to have to get used to seeing me smile this much."

Karson's eyes crinkled at the corners as he grinned when he opened his door. "Diaper duty, you say?"

Without waiting for me to respond, he dropped into his seat and slammed his door, his engine turning over before I

could even process what was happening. “Oh, you colossal fucker.”

My heartrate spiked as I rushed to catch up with him, but then I laughed when he scowled as I beat him out of the parking lot. Since we were both now driving sensible SUVs, complete with *Baby On Board* stickers in our windows, there were no tires squealing and no revving at red lights. Frankly, it was probably the most boring race that had ever been raced, but I loved it.

I loved every part of my life these days.

It was sometimes difficult to believe how far I’d come in just a month. Penny and I had made up—over and over again. We were still making up at least twice a day, which was great even if it probably wasn’t sustainable.

I’d asked her to move in with me and she was considering it. She hadn’t said yes yet, but I had a feeling it was coming. My house looked completely different these days. Although they weren’t formally living there, there was baby paraphernalia everywhere and I’d converted the guest room next to my bedroom into a nursery. The baby-proofing had been installed, and since they spent most nights at my place, Brea was comfortable there now.

No longer party central, my place was now the family home it’d always been meant to be and I couldn’t have been happier about it. I didn’t even mind that my bathroom had been taken over by bath toys and baby products or that there was now a travel crib next to my bed.

For as much making up as we’d done, Penny and I had also talked *a lot*. There was definitely a part of me that still wanted to blame her for everything I’d missed in Brea’s life, but that part was small. It also didn’t feature much.

For the most part, I’d forgiven her and I was doing my best to make up for lost time. Thanks to Sienna, there were tons of pictures of Penny when she’d been pregnant and so many videos of Brea’s birth and time in the hospital that I felt like I’d been there some days.

It'd taken me some time but eventually I'd realized that I had a choice. I could dwell on the past or focus on the future, and I'd chosen the latter option. Brea wouldn't even remember that there had been a time of her life when I hadn't been part of it and we'd bonded so much that I even felt like I was already starting to forget that there had been life before her.

As Karson and I stopped at the center—at exactly the same time, unfortunately—he laughed and raked a hand through his hair. “Better luck next time, huh?”

“Yep,” I said. “We’ll have a rematch tomorrow.”

I pressed the buzzer outside the gate and waited for it to open, then grinned from ear to ear when the assistant carried Brea to me. She was smiling just as wide as I was and she opened her arms for me to take her as soon as she saw me.

As her little body melted into mine, I kissed the top of her sweet-scented head and released a sigh of relief. “Hey, baby girl. Are you ready to go home? We need to go pick up Mommy first, so what do you say? Should we go bother her and cause some trouble so she’ll say we can go home earlier?”

Technically, it was only just after lunch time, but I was hoping that Penny would cave. Karson laughed at something the assistant told him about the boys, then waved goodbye when Brea and I left while he was still strapping them in.

Penny frowned when I walked into her office with our daughter in my arms. Then she sighed and shook her head, a tiny smile appearing at the corners of her lips as she looked into my eyes. “You just couldn’t wait, could you?”

“Nope. I didn’t want to be late.”

“It’s just past two,” she said, taking Brea from me to say hello before passing her back. “I can’t leave yet, Mav. I’m jam-packed this afternoon.”

“So was I, but I canceled my appointments. Karson went to get the twins as well. We’re all playing hooky today.”

“I’m not a hooky player,” she said stubbornly, but when I carried Brea to Penny’s sitting area and started playing with

her there, she blew out a heavy breath. “You’re going to stay right there until I say we can leave, aren’t you?”

“Yep. I think we should go get some ice cream.” I glanced at Brea. “How do you feel about that, baby? Ice cream? It’ll be so nice and cold on your *owie* gums.”

“She can’t have ice cream yet,” Penny said, but then she laughed when I rolled my eyes. “I’ll look it up when we’re on our way, but we’ve only just started her on solids. I doubt ice cream is anywhere close to the top of the introduction list.”

“It should be,” I argued as she packed up her stuff. “It’s easy to eat, it’s just milk, and it actually tastes good unlike so many of the other things we’ve fed the poor girl.”

“The poor girl needs nutritious food.” Penny came over to us with her purse slung over her shoulder. As she did, she lifted her arms and looped them around my neck, pressing up on her tiptoes to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “Hello, lover. You haven’t greeted me properly yet.”

I snaked one arm around her waist and pulled her into my chest, grinning as I lowered my mouth to hers. “I can’t greet you properly right here and right now. It’s daytime and your assistant can come in at any moment. Plus, Brea’s awake and I don’t want to have to pay for her therapy bills when she’s a teenager if she sees how I want to be greeting you.”

Penny chuckled. “I wasn’t talking about *that*, but I think we’ve got a few years before we have to start worrying about racking up therapy bills.”

“Trust me, she’ll be scarred for life if she sees what I’ve got in mind for you,” I murmured, then lowered one of my hands to smack her ass. “Are you ready to get out of here yet?”

“I am.” She kissed me again, toying with the short hair at the nape of my neck as she pulled her head back just a little but kept her gaze on mine. “I love you, Mav.”

“I love you, too, Penny,” I replied, sliding my fingers between hers and leading her to the door with our daughter still on my hip. “Does that mean we’re going to go get that ice

cream, or are you really going to insist that we have to work our way down the whole list of foods we're supposed to introduce first before we finally let her taste the good stuff?"

As we walked out of her office, she told her assistant to rearrange her schedule for this afternoon and I unashamedly ogled her ass while she did it. With Brea cooing and resting her little head on my shoulder and my girlfriend agreeing to play hooky with me, I was suddenly overwhelmed by how much things had changed.

Overwhelmed by the love I felt for them both and by how obscenely happy I was that I'd forgotten to put on a condom that one time. I didn't know how my life would've played out if I'd remembered, and right now, I didn't want to know.

These girls were my life now. My everything, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

EPILOGUE



PENELOPE

One Year Later

Brea's small fingers were entwined with mine as we walked around the corner and waited outside the large double doors. The first strands on the wedding march started playing and I sucked in a breath, closing my eyes as a smile spread on my lips.

The last few months had been a whirlwind right down to our engagement. Maverick just popped the question right after Brea and I had moved in and the simpleness of the proposal couldn't have been more perfect. This was it. The moment I'd been waiting for all my life.

My father tightened his grip on my arm, and when I opened my eyes to look at him, he arched a brow at me but he was already grinning. "You're sure about this guy, right? If you're not, just say the word and I'll have my two best girls out of here and on a plane to Hawaii in no time."

"Can I still have the ride to Hawaii but without running out on Maverick?"

He chuckled and patted my hand. "Sure, but he's paying for his own plane ticket."

I laughed and then caught my breath again when the doors swung open to reveal the church beyond. A red carpet had been rolled down the aisle and white roses dotted the edges of the wooden pews. Sienna and my other bridesmaids had

already made their walk to the stairs at the end of the aisle, and now it was my turn.

Nerves raced through me, but then Maverick stepped into my field of vision and my breath rushed out of my lungs for a whole different reason. Tears pricked the backs of my eyes when I saw him, all dressed up in a custom-made tux that fit him like it'd been painted on and that black hair styled all perfectly for once.

His eyes were bright and shiny when they met mine, glittering like the rarest of emeralds in the early morning sun. A love so intense that it made my heart squeeze passed between us as my dad and I started moving forward, but then Brea suddenly let go of my hand and I dropped my gaze away from his immediately to see what she was up to now.

An adorable, ever-on-the-move toddler these days, she grabbed a fistful of rose petals from the carpet and held them out to me. Then she spun around and toddled off to her daddy, laughing when he dropped to his haunches and held his arms open for her.

Since I'd had a feeling it was going to go like this when he'd suggested that she walk down the aisle with me, I wasn't upset and I didn't try to call her back. Instead, I laughed and squeezed my father's arm, lowering my head to rest it on his shoulder.

"You did good, baby," he murmured as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head over my veil. "Maverick Neidum is a great man. Mom and I are so happy for you."

"Thank you, Daddy," I whispered my response, and then we were at the top of the aisle and I realized I hadn't even paused for a moment to take it all in.

Frankly, I hadn't even looked away from Mav for long enough to know if the congregation was standing or not. I didn't really care, though. I only had eyes for my groom and my daughter. I'd catch up with everybody else later.

My mother stepped forward to take Brea from Maverick, but she squealed and shook her head hard and fast, pouting at

her grandmother and clinging to her dad. She wouldn't even come to me, but that wasn't much of a surprise. She was a total Daddy's girl at the moment, a phase I was enjoying the heck out of.

Eventually, Maverick chuckled and shook his head at my mom. "It's okay. Let her stay with us. She'll get bored and come to you in a minute."

My mom dropped her chin in a nod, beamed at me with tears in her eyes, and then went back to her seat in the front row. Mav moved Brea to his other hip, then took my hand and tugged me into him, planting a chaste kiss on my lips even though the pastor was clearly ready to get our show on the road.

"You look beautiful, Penny," he murmured. "Breathtaking, stunning, radiant. I don't even have the right words, but you do. You look incredible."

"Thank you," I replied, squeezing his fingers as he turned toward the podium. "So do you, by the way."

A quiet chuckle slid out of him, and the pastor gave us an indulgent smile before he spread open his arms and started the ceremony. True to what Maverick had predicted, it didn't take long before Brea wriggled out of his arms and walked to Flynn instead, tugging on the leg of his pants until he grinned and picked her up.

Karson was standing on Flynn's other side. He chuckled when Brea held out her arms to him instead. Flynn passed her over and she shot us a smug look, but she knew she had both those men—all three of them up there, actually—wrapped around her tiny finger.

As surprised as I'd been when Maverick had told me Flynn was going to be his best man instead of Karson, it'd made sense when he'd explained his reasoning. Karson was going to have his hands full with the boys tonight as it was, and he'd been more than happy to pass the responsibilities of being the best man to Flynn so that he could kick back and enjoy the wedding—after the kids went to sleep.

Until then, he and Payton were the chiefs in charge of the Terrible Trio. All of our parents had been enlisted to help, but while it might've sounded like six adults on three toddlers would be an easy job, it wouldn't.

Those kids were fast. And determined.

When Brea tugged on Karson's hair, I smothered a giggle and squeezed Maverick's hand again. Before I even knew what was happening, it was time for our vows and Mav turned to face me.

"Penny," he said, his eyes glistening with tears I knew he would deny later on. "We've, uh, we've had an interesting journey so far. Our relationship started in a pretty unconventional way, but I won't go into the details here."

My heart fluttered and a ripple of laughter passed over the congregation. Most everyone here knew what he was talking about, though—even if he hadn't gone into the details. Once it'd come out that he was Brea's father, it'd hadn't been a difficult calculation to make.

Mav raised my hands and pressed soft kisses to my knuckles. "I didn't know then that I was going to fall in love with you or that you were going to give me the greatest gift I never even knew I wanted, but I did know that you were different. That you were someone I would never be able to just ignore. From the very first moment I saw you, I was captivated by you, my sexy fire hydrant."

Another ripple of laughter drifted to my ears, but I was so focused on Mav that I almost didn't even hear it. "I was captivated by your easygoing smile and your witty comebacks. I was lured in by your friendly banter and the way you made me feel like I knew you even though I didn't even know your name. You captured my attention so completely and so immediately that I should've known you were the love of my life. I'm sorry it took me so long to catch on. Penny, you've become my home. You hold my heart. I'm more in love with you every single day and I'm still just as captivated by your smile as I was the first time I saw it. Can we get married now?"

“That’s what we’re here for.” I smiled through my tears, taking a deep breath before I glanced at the pastor. “Am I really expected to follow that?”

The pastor chuckled. “You are, my dear.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, then took another breath and looked back into Maverick’s eyes. “You are, without a doubt, the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

His brows shot up in surprise, but then he shrugged. “I’ll take it.”

I squeezed his hands and laughed. “Let me finish before you get excited.”

“Damn it. I thought that was it.” He winked at me, then took a step closer and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I breathed him in, holding on to him tight as I continued. “You are the hottest guy I’ve ever seen, but—”

“I knew there was going to be a *but*.” He sighed and I giggled.

“But that’s not why I love you. I love you because I love just being with you. I love talking to you. I love laughing with you, and I really love how easy it is to do both of those things with you. When I first saw you at Karson’s wedding, I was convinced that a guy who looked like you was going to be a cocky asshole, but then I started talking to you and you were cocky, but you weren’t an asshole.”

Our friends and family laughed, and I looked up into Maverick’s vibrant eyes again. “You have the biggest heart I’ve ever seen. The way you love me and the way you love Brea take my breath away. Somehow, your inside is even more beautiful than what’s on the outside, and I never would’ve expected it, but it’s true. I love your heart. I love your mind. I love your determination and the way you never take no for an answer once you’ve set your mind to something. I love you for forgiving me and for powering through those first few months we were together with so much grace and understanding. I love you, Maverick Neidum. All of you. Even the cocky parts.”

Before I could even turn away from him again, Maverick pulled me into his arms and kissed me as the pastor pronounced us husband and wife. We only exchanged rings after, but I didn't care. All I cared about was leaving here as his wife. The rest was only window dressing.

The day sped by in a whirlwind of hugs, laughter, love, more laughter, and about a billion pictures being taken. My cheeks hurt by the time Maverick, Karson, Payton, Flynn, and I finally got a minute to talk at the reception. At least my feet didn't hurt—my shoes had come off well before eight thirty again.

The kids were in bed, the party was in full swing, and I held my husband's hand, wondering if we had any shot at getting my panties off before midnight. But all my thoughts stopped in their tracks when Flynn swung his gaze toward my bridesmaids dancing together in the center of the room.

"No," Maverick, Karson, Payton, and I all said simultaneously when we noticed where his eyes had gone.

Flynn shrugged, pushing his chair back and waggling his brows at us. "Ah, come on, guys. It'll be alright."

"It's your funeral, bro," Karson muttered, shaking his head when his friend got up.

Maverick exchanged a glance with his brother. "What you meant to say was that it was his wedding, right? Because if he goes up to them, then that's what's coming next."

Karson raised his fist and bumped it against Maverick's as he nodded, but Flynn rolled his eyes at both of them and then walked away from us backward, his eyes still on all of ours for a beat before he winked and turned around.

"I wonder what I'll wear to his wedding," Payton mused beside me, a smile on her lips as she watched him go.

I laughed, but none of them were wrong. If Flynn hooked up with someone tonight, I was pretty sure it would be his love story we'd be celebrating next. *I guess the only thing left to do now is to see if he gets lucky or if he strikes out.*

With those sparkling eyes of his and that adventurous, grabs-life-by-the-balls attitude, though, I was convinced he wasn't going to strike out. *So really, it's just a matter of finding out which one of my friends is going to be next.*

Good luck, ladies. You're going to need it. He's a handful, that one.

After I watched Flynn slide into the circle my friends had made on the dance floor, I looked up at my husband and smiled. "You didn't happen to see a limo outside, did you?"

"As it happens, I have one waiting for us." He smiled right back at me and leaned forward to press his hot, firm lips against mine. "What do you say, Mrs. Neidum? Do you want to go see if the driver has gone to grab something to eat?"

Do I ever. I slid in under his arm after we stood up, and as we tried to sneak out of our own wedding reception, I glanced up at Maverick as I smirked. "You've got spare pants in our suite. Just in case you need them."

And so, as we laughed and slid into the back of the limousine—which was conveniently driverless *and* parked right outside—we'd come full circle. We just wouldn't be making another baby tonight. Not yet anyway.

Maybe we would at Flynn's wedding. But I'd worry about his wedding later. For now, my parents were with the baby we already had and I had my husband in my arms, hungrily devouring me just like he had the first night we'd been together.

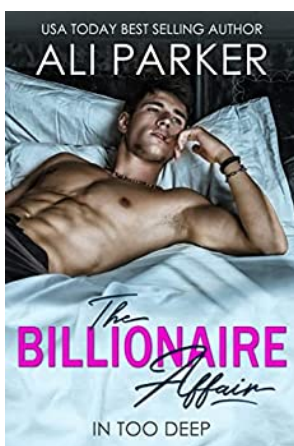
And just like he did every night after that.

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He can find someone else to take notes and get his coffee.

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You've Got To Be Kidding

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