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ALI PARKER



*The
Bridesmaid*

*And The
Bestman*

TWO WRONGS MADE RIGHT

A Not You Again Novel

TWO WRONGS MADE RIGHT

A NOT YOU AGAIN NOVEL #4



ALI PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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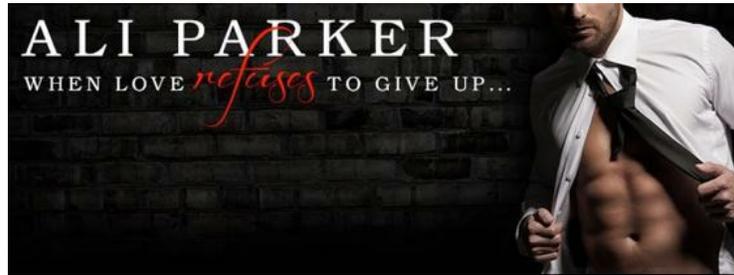
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FIND ALI PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



Just because my brother found love doesn't mean I have to.

I'd rather focus on other things.

Like money.

It never gives you sleepless nights that drive you insane.

But the single mom I hooked up with at my brother's wedding?

She's got me sweating.

I can't get her out of my head.

Those curves.

That smart mouth.

She's the right kind of trouble.

But I'm the wrong kind of guy.

Or not.

She's been wronged before.

Maybe this time, two wrongs can make a right.

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!

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CHAPTER 1



JUDE

The only thing I hated about weddings was everything. While I wasn't quite as jaded about love and relationships as say, my half-brother Flynn used to be, I also wasn't sure how just one day was supposed to be the start of a whole new life.

If anyone asked me—although they hadn't, thankfully—that was a hell of a lot of pressure on just that one day.

People always went on and on about it like the choice of napkin ring or something equally mundane would make a difference to how the marriage would turn out, but honestly, I just didn't get it.

As I loosened my tie and the collar of my shirt, I lounged near the bar, sipping my whiskey and watching Flynn dance with his baby girl and his new wife, Ariane.

Today was their wedding day and so far, it'd been incredible.

Everything had gone off without a hitch, and in their case, I knew they'd chosen the right people to spend the rest of their lives with, but I still didn't understand the hype.

Flynn and Ariane looked blissfully happy as they swayed together with Willow in Flynn's arms between them.

It was the sort of happy from movies, and books, and fairy tales, and even *I* had to admit that for the longest time, I'd thought this kind of love was bullshit.

Now that it was right in front of my face? Well, I was starting to have my doubts.

Maybe.

Flynn was the last person in the whole universe I'd expected it from, so if

he could be so happy to be wearing a suit and swaying around the dance floor with his wife, maybe it was real. Maybe it wasn't bullshit.

On the other hand, I'd always thought it *might* exist out there somewhere. Our mother had sure spent her life in pursuit of living that particular dream, but I'd kind of figured it didn't really happen for regular people.

And then my friends had started falling.

The boys next door from when we'd been growing up, Karson and Maverick Neidum, had gone down first.

It hadn't been *that* much of a surprise when I'd found out about Karson. The dude had always pretended to be all hardcore, but I'd had my suspicions. Since I was younger than them, I'd never been on the inside with them as much as Flynn had, but it still hadn't really bowled me over when I found out Karson had been slayed by the love dragon.

Then came Maverick, Flynn's best friend.

In his case, it had been something of a surprise. It'd been more likely to happen to him than to Flynn, but the chances had still been slim. Mav lived his life in the fast lane, wheeling and dealing to make himself and his brother as much money as he possibly could as fast he could.

Their construction company had reached stratospheric heights because of it, and I'd thought he wouldn't stop until he reached the moon.

Enter Penny.

He still worked damn hard, but he'd definitely slowed down. Now living in a nice mansion with his beautiful wife and their unexpected kid—courtesy of a one-night stand in a limo at Karson's wedding—he claimed to be living his best life.

And so, the Neidums had been cut down at the knees.

But that was them, and Flynn and I were Flynn and I. We were not the Neidums, and therefore, I'd thought we were safe.

At the very least, I'd thought that if one of us got married, it would be me. Flynn had been next-level jaded by both of our fathers breaking our mother's heart, and the dude used to laugh in the face of the mere prospect of marriage.

Until he'd met Ariane, who'd given birth to a romantic side of Flynn I never thought I'd see—and then she'd given birth to their daughter.

It was still unbelievable, but I was staring right at it. Believe it or not, there was a gold band on the ring finger of Flynn's left hand, and he looked *fucking* happy about it.

He smiled and rested his forehead against hers, both of them looking

down at the cutest, most amazing, smartest baby on the entire planet. My niece, Willow.

Evidently, real love existed for mere mortals and now I was wondering if perhaps they were all onto something. If maybe I had been too fast to put myself in the *out there, but probably not going to happen* category.

“I can practically see the steam coming out of your ears.” Maverick sauntered up to me at the bar, a grin on his face. He slid into the empty space beside me and ordered two shots of tequila. “Let’s see if that’ll get you out of your head. What are you thinking about so hard anyway? It’s your brother’s wedding and you’re single. You should be living it up.”

He did a half-turn to point across the dance floor where the bridesmaids were clustered together. “That’s where you should be.”

I chuckled. “Good to know, but I was strictly told to be on my best behavior tonight.”

Maverick laughed. “Flynn and Ariane are new parents. They won’t last past midnight, but if the bridesmaids are still here, you should go for it.”

“My mom is taking Willow home with her when she leaves and Ariane’s mom is babysitting tomorrow morning. I hate to break it to you, but those two aren’t going anywhere.”

Humor sparkled behind Maverick’s eyes as he lifted both eyebrows and scoffed at me. “Watch this space. I know what I’m talking about. Wedding night or not, they’re bailing early.”

The bartender set our shots down on the counter and Maverick handed one to me before raising his tiny glass into the air. “To another one biting the dust.”

“A fairy just died somewhere because you said that.” I clinked my glass against his and tossed the tequila down the hatch. A shiver sped down my spine as I swallowed the ice-cold liquid, and I winced before tapping the glass against the counter. “Damn, I hate that stuff but it’s so good.”

Maverick laughed. “Yeah, I know. It just doesn’t make good decisions, so if you do decide to go for it, take it from me. Remember the condom and call her in a few months just to make sure you don’t miss the birth of your own child.”

The tequila threatened to make a comeback, and I nearly gagged. I dropped my head and brought my hands to my hips, holding on tight while I waited for it to pass. “Dude, you’re going to make me throw up.”

Laughing again, he winked at me. “Nah, it’s not so bad. In fact, it turned

out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. There's nothing like being a dad, man."

"There's nothing like being an uncle either, and I'm already one of those."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I know. I feel the same way about Karson's kids, but I promise you, having your own is even better."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"No, not maybe. It's a fact." He dipped his head toward my brother and his little family. "Did you ever think you'd see him like that? I sure as hell didn't, but there he is."

"It's just because it's Willow. She's the best."

Maverick gave me a knowing look, still in good spirits even though he also had a kid and I supposed I shouldn't have said Flynn's was better than his. "She's got you securely wrapped around her teeny, tiny finger, huh?"

"Yep." I wouldn't even try to deny it. I adored kids in general, but I was absolutely mad for my baby niece.

While I was an alpha in every aspect of my life, I'd get down on my hands and knees and make goo-goo-gaga noises for that little girl any day of the week. The only part that made it even better was that I could give her back when she pooped or started crying.

The bartender yanked me out of my thoughts when he handed over the whiskey Mav had ordered, and my friend shot me another wise-ass grin. "Take your shot with a bridesmaid, Jude. You might just end up thanking me for this one day."

"I highly doubt it."

Chuckling once again, he shook his head at me, inclined his whiskey my way, and then took off back to his wife. They were childless this evening, and I also didn't doubt that he was going to be dragging his wife away soon.

He might've warned me that Flynn and Ariane wouldn't make it past midnight, but the fact of the matter was that Maverick and Penny wouldn't last that long either. Their daughter was older, sure, but none of them had a lot of alone time these days and I knew them both.

They were going to make it count.

It was that thought which had my gaze drifting back to the bridesmaids he'd pointed out. If Maverick and Flynn were getting lucky tonight, it was only right that the best man did as well. It was practically one of my official duties.

I zeroed in on one bridesmaid in particular. I hadn't really been paying attention to them before since I'd been so busy with my actual responsibilities for the day and I'd taken a shift with Willow earlier, but as far as I was concerned, every other bridesmaid paled in comparison to this one.

They all wore elegant, sparkly navy dresses. Ariane's mother had chosen them, so I was sure they'd been designed by someone with a name worth knowing. But one particular woman really filled hers out. With curves like a figure eight and loose, shoulder-length brown hair, delicate features, and a button of a nose, she was a little less put together than the others but I liked that in a woman.

If I wanted to fuck something with a body as hard as mine or as painted as a wall, I'd sleep with an ironing board or a can of paint. *So no, this is better. So much better.*

Turning against the bar, I knew it looked like I was simply watching the guests dancing now that the formalities were over, but my gaze never strayed far from the mystery bridesmaid. *I wonder who she is to Ariane.*

I knew she'd asked a handful of old friends and coworkers to be in the bridal party since her lifestyle hadn't afforded her the opportunity to make—or keep—many close friends. But I wondered which category this woman fell into.

Ariane was the daughter of Congresswoman Blakely, and her entire life had revolved around helping her mom get elected to office. A job she'd excelled in, since that was exactly where her mom was these days, but this girl being part of the bridal party had to mean that the Congresswoman had approved of her—which was no easy feat.

Getting more and more curious as the minutes ticked by, I was having a much harder time focusing on anyone other than her. Her cheeks were rosy from all the dancing she'd been doing with the other bridesmaids. She had a big, white smile that never seemed to leave her lips, and that voluptuous figure filled out her dress magnificently.

When her laugh rang across the dance floor again, I decided I'd had enough of hanging back. After ordering her one of the specialty cocktails on the drinks menu, I waited for the bartender to mix it before I brought it to her.

I wasn't in the habit of asking people if I could do things for them. If she wanted the drink I'd brought her, she'd take it, and if not, she could simply say no. *What's the point then of asking if I could buy her drink?*

Even if she took it, she didn't have to have it with me. I was assertive, not

aggressive.

Crossing the venue toward her, I gripped our drinks and dodged the bodies barreling toward the edge of the dance floor. The music was lively and happy and people sure seemed to be having a good time, which was great for Flynn and Ariane.

Right now, though, I was about to see if I could make a good time happen for myself as well. I strode right up to the girl, offering her the drink and flashing her a winning smile. “For you. It’s part of my duties as the best man to make sure the bridesmaids stay hydrated. I’m Jude. Jude Olson. Flynn’s brother.”

She blinked hard, like she was so surprised that she thought I was going to disappear if she didn’t look carefully. Greenish brown eyes moved up to meet mine and those pretty pink lips parted as she reached out to take the cocktail.

“I, uh, thank you.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome. I should’ve introduced myself earlier. I’m sorry. We’re both part of the bridal party. It seems almost rude to only be meeting you now.”

More surprise flickered in those hazel eyes, but then she smiled easily and held out her hand like we were in a boardroom. “McKinley, but you can call me Mickey.”

I had to stop my nose from scrunching and I cocked my head instead, looking her over slowly from head to toe. The expensive dress clung to her curves like it’d been sprayed on, her hair shining under the twinkle lights strung up above, and her makeup light and natural. This beautiful woman could be a McKinley, but why on earth she’d call herself Mickey, the gods only knew.

“Mickey? As in, Mickey Mouse?”

Her brow puckered for a moment. Then she rolled her eyes. “Like that’s the first time I’ve ever heard that. One would think you’d be able to come up with a better line than that, Jude Olson.”

A slow grin spread on my lips. “Oh, I will. As soon as I figure out why you’d willingly offer to be called a name made famous by a rodent.”

“It’s arguably the most famous rodent in the world,” she said lightly, those eyes latching on mine. “I’d say that’s something to aspire to, wouldn’t you?”

Uh, no, but right now, I was less interested in her name than I was in her

body. The longer I spoke to her, the more aware I became of her slightly fruity scent wafting to my nostrils and the more curious I got about what those curves would feel like pressed up against me.

Judging by the fact that she was now engaging me in conversation and hadn't tossed the cocktail in my face for buying it for her without asking, I had a feeling that she was curious about me too.

Maverick might have been right after all.

I was single and this was my brother's wedding, and now, maybe I could live up to the time-honored tradition of the best man having a good time with a bridesmaid. I sure as hell suddenly wanted to, and generally, I got what I wanted.

Now all I had to do was to bring it—and her—home.

CHAPTER 2



MCKINLEY

Jude Olson didn't have to introduce himself. I'd known exactly who he was all day long.

Flynn's hot half-brother. A girl couldn't miss him. Even if she tried, which I hadn't.

Ariane had warned me that he could be trouble, but maybe I deserved a little trouble tonight. This wedding had totally broken the bank. The least I could get out of it was a night of fun.

It'd been ages since I'd had that. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a night that wasn't full of cartoons and sticky apple-sauce fingers.

Moreover, I felt sexy in my bridesmaid dress, and for the first time in years, I felt confident in my power as a woman. I even felt like a woman again instead of just a mom, and the way the best man was looking at me?

I'm going to make the most of it.

Jude was one of *those* guys.

Every woman knew the type—he moved with an innate confidence, spoke without second-guessing himself. Smiled like he had the world at his feet and he knew it.

From what I'd seen of him today, he also didn't take himself too seriously, had a sense of humor, and absolutely rocked at getting things together at the last moment.

Nothing seemed to faze him. He was *that* guy.

The one who was cool under pressure, did everything with a slight smirk on his face, and walked away from the staff after what might otherwise have been an altercation with a grin and shooting finger guns back at them.

And he was really hot too.

Ariane's warnings hadn't come close to preparing me for the reality.

Standing at least six foot three, Jude filled out his suit well with broad shoulders and a tapered waist. He was clean shaven with a short and professional haircut, light brown hair, and hazel eyes that were a blue-brown to my dirty green. His had flecks of gold to my muddy smudges and a clear golden ring to my hazy brown outline.

More than any of that, the smile on his full lips seemed real. Genuine. Warm, even.

"Why Mickey?"

I frowned, and then I laughed. "McKinley isn't an easy name for preschoolers to pronounce. I was dubbed Mickey at three, and Mickey, I have remained."

An honestly puzzled frown drew his brows together. Then he shook his head and grinned. "That doesn't work for me. Do you take issue with people calling you McKinley?"

"No, uh, not really. It just doesn't happen often."

"It should," he decided out loud, raising his glass to mine. "To you, McKinley. To taking back your name now that you're no longer a preschooler."

I laughed, and as I did, I remembered another reason to live it up tonight—I was wearing my best bra and panties. The only matching set I still owned and they didn't even have one hole or threadbare patch in them. Probably because I never wore them, but now that I was?

Why not show them off?

Come Monday, I was going back to the craziness of my normal life again anyway. There was no escaping that. No avoiding it. Nor did I want to.

This was just a well-deserved break, the likes of which I never took, and I figured I owed it to myself to make some memories along the way.

If Jude wanted to help me make them, I wasn't about to say no. I'd been in a dry spell for longer than any self-respecting woman would care to admit. Hell, I didn't even have the time or the inclination to get myself off anymore.

Being a woman tonight meant more to me than just looking pretty. It meant I got to feel like there was more to me again. Like I was allowed to let myself want something—and what I wanted was Jude.

Trouble or not, here I come.

"To taking back my name." *Oh, if only he knew how much that meant to me.*

I let my glass clink against his, then took a sip of the sweet, tart cocktail he'd brought me and grimaced. "Do they not sell regular beer at this bar?"

Those eyes widened as he did a double-take and he laughed again. It seemed to come easy to him, which I liked. The sound was warm and comfortable, making me smile as he looked back at me. "Regular beer, huh? A girl after my own heart. Drink up and I'll bring you one of those next."

"Next? That's presumptuous."

"Is it?" he mused, his head tilting as his eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. "I don't know. Am I boring you already?"

I shrugged, but I couldn't quite keep the corners of my lips from tilting up. "Not yet, but you're going to have to come up with something better than *Mickey Mouse* if you want to keep it that way."

Humor sparked deep in his eyes and they crinkled at the corners. "Well, that's definitely the first time I've been told my game needs work, but I guess it was a pretty predictable line, huh?"

I nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. Got anything better?"

Bringing his long, elegant fingers to his jaw, he pretended to scratch it before tapping the side of his mouth. "I got it. Are you hurt?"

"No. I didn't get injured when I fell from heaven, and baby, I'm no angel." I wagged my eyebrows at him and took another sip of my drink. *God, it's been so long since I've flirted, I kind of feel like I need to dust my skills off.*

Jude didn't seem to mind my rusty skills, though. He shot me an appreciative grin and nodded slowly. "A challenge. I like that. Okay, so none of the usual lines?"

"Nope. You're going to have to get creative."

I saw the flare of excitement behind his eyes at the challenge. "I can do that. I didn't really know what I wanted in a woman until I met you."

My heart skipped over itself for a moment, but then I realized that was the line. "Smooth. I've got to admit, you almost had me."

He pumped his eyebrows twice, that slight smirk back on his face as he settled into the game we were now suddenly playing. "Are you an artist?"

"Why? Because I drew you in."

He laughed. "If you were a taser, you'd be set to *stun*."

"Now that's one I haven't heard in a while." Truth be told, I hadn't heard any of these for a while, but I wasn't about to admit that the last time I'd flirted had been in high school.

Uck. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have kept right on flirting instead of stopping at my high school sweetheart.

Jude was shameless, though. He delivered each line confidently and without seeming self-conscious about it at all. "Is your name Google? Because you have everything I've been searching for."

I giggled. "Okay. That's a new one."

He pumped his fist into the air before bringing it back down to his side. "He shoots, he scores!"

I laughed. "Not yet, you haven't, but it's good to know you had better lines after all."

Those blue-brown eyes locked on mine. "Not yet? That's not a no, McKinley."

"No, it's not," I said honestly, surprising even myself.

Sucking the straw back between my teeth, I took another sip of my drink and wondered if it was the alcohol making me feel so at ease with him. I didn't drink often anymore, so I was an incredibly cheap date these days, but somehow, I didn't think it was the cocktail. I was pretty sure it was just him.

Both his confidence and sense of humor were kind of infectious. He peered back at me over the rim of his tumbler as he took a sip of his own drink. "So it's not a no. Is it a maybe?"

"It's a *let's talk more, but it's looking good.*"

Dear lord. I'm going to need to fan myself if I keep going like this.

It felt good, though.

Jude smiled. "You're direct."

"So are you."

"We're a match made in heaven," he said. "Which reminds me, who's up there running things if you're here on earth?"

I waved my hand dismissively. "The other angels can handle it for now."

"Do you have time for a dance before you need to get back to heaven?" He swigged the rest of his drink and set the empty glass down on the table next to us without even looking to check where it was. Then he extended a hand toward me. "I promise to make it worth the trouble."

"Oh, what the hell? You look like a decent dancer."

The guy had game. I had to give it to him. I wasn't usually one to sweat when a guy just looked at me, but something about his hazel eyes and that slanted smirk got to me. He was too suave and good-looking for his own good, and honestly, he'd chosen the wrong bridesmaid to pick up if he was

expecting very much resistance.

“Decent?” His dry, strong fingers wrapped around mine when I placed my palm in his. “I’m the best.”

“Really? How do you know? Have you been in competitions?”

I didn’t even know why I’d asked that. I was just rambling to distract myself from the butterflies zooming through me now that his skin was touching mine. Electricity crackled between us at the point of contact, zapping up my arm and racing down my spine, making my heart flutter before it traveled further down and settled as lust between my thighs.

“No, I haven’t,” he mused, appearing to be deep in thought before he laughed. “My mom says I’m the best, though. Her opinion matters more to me than any competition.”

“Aww. If that’s true, you just won yourself another point.”

He grinned proudly, his chest puffing out a little as he led me onto the dance floor. “It’s true. Mom always said that a gentleman has to know how to dance and she was raising two.”

“Gentlemen? I don’t know about that. I think she only succeeded with one.”

He winked. “Yeah, me.”

“I was talking about Flynn.” I almost melted when he spun me in a slow circle before pulling me into his arms. My voice suddenly refused to work properly now that I fit against him like I’d found the missing piece of my puzzle. *Ha, now there’s a line for you.*

I forgot what else I’d been about to say, but it didn’t look like he was too worried about it. With his hard torso pressed to my softer one, one of his hands in mine and the other pressed firmly against the small of my back, the humor faded out of his eyes and got replaced by heat.

His pupils suddenly dilated as he held me, leading me across the dance floor expertly even though the music wasn’t really appropriate for this kind of dancing. Neither of us cared, though. I didn’t want him to let me go so we could join the rest of the crowd, jumping around energetically and not touching each other at all.

Instead, I enjoyed being in his arms. Seeing those pupils dilate and his eyelids grow hooded. We were finally alone, the other bridesmaids still standing in the loose semi-circle I’d been part of when he’d first approached.

We were still surrounded by people. The dance floor was packed, but everyone was doing their own thing and no one was paying much attention to

us.

One song ran into the next and then the next, but Jude never let go of me. Once my feet were aching and my nerve endings were on fire for him, he leaned in close and spoke against my ear. “Are we gonna dance and stand around talking all night, or are you going to come home with me?”

My heart leaped into my throat. I’d never been propositioned like that before. Then again, my ex—the only one I had—had never been much of a man. To be fair, he’d been fifteen when we’d started dating, so he hadn’t been a man yet at all, but this was something completely different.

Jude was so casual about it. So confident. So *alpha*. But if this was how he propositioned women, I was really looking forward to finding out how he did on the follow-through.

CHAPTER 3



JUDE

I opened the back door of the Uber for McKinley, who gathered up the long skirt of her dress and slid in without looking back. As I got in after her, I leaned forward to give the driver my address and then settled back, slinging my arm around her shoulders and holding her close to me.

This girl sure was something else. When I'd first approached her, I'd thought she might be a little bit shy. She'd seemed so surprised when I'd handed her that drink that it'd given me the impression she didn't get those brought to her nearly often enough.

As we'd talked though, I'd quickly realized she wasn't shy at all. She wasn't obnoxious about it, either. Her cheeks got all rosy as she blushed on every comeback, but she was fast-witted and gave as good as she got.

Banter was severely underrated in the pickup game these days. Men were expected to do all the work—which was fine but got boring after a while—and once we'd talked the woman into going home with us, there was all that pretending to be coy about what exactly it was that we were going to be doing for the rest of the night.

McKinley wasn't like that. Sitting on the backseat with her as the driver navigated to my place, the sexual tension was off the charts. She sat pressed up close to my side, and she turned to look up at me but then never looked away again.

"I've never done anything like this before."

I smirked. "Don't worry. I've got you. I've done it countless times. If you follow my lead, you'll enjoy yourself. I promise."

"Here's hoping you know how to make good on that promise," she shot right back without letting the moment drag on between us. "If not, I'm going

to be mighty disappointed.”

“I’ve never had any complaints.”

“Oh, really? Never? Not from any of the women on any of the countless occasions on which you’ve done this?” she teased. “Wow. You’re really building up my expectations here, buddy.”

“That’s okay. I’ll live up to them. Hell, I’ll exceed them.”

In the low, ambient light filtering in from outside, I saw the desire shining in her eyes. She was keeping things light for the ride, but I had a feeling I was about to discover yet another different side to her that I’d like just as much as her wit once we got to my place.

Her eyebrows hiked up at my promise. “You’ll exceed them? Playboy.”

“If I’m a playboy, you’re my new plaything.” I moved my lips closer to her ear, feeling her soft hair moving against my lips as I spoke. “I can’t wait to unwrap your packaging and figure out what makes you tick, McKinley, and I will figure it out. And I will make you tick. Over and over again.”

I glanced down, seeing her press her thighs together as her breathing hitched. “You talk a real good game, Jude, but we’ll see. What is it people say? Oh, yeah. Talk is cheap.”

I chuckled. “I’m willing to put my money where my mouth is. Care to make a little wager?”

She shook her head, playfulness softening her features as she pulled back just a little to look at me. “Nah. It’s not your money I’m interested in. I’ll tell you what, though. If you do make good on all these promises, I’ll leave a five-star review on your bedpost for the next girl.”

A surprised laugh tore out of me. “You’re really okay with that? Knowing there’s going to be a next girl?”

“Well, I mean, I guess there’s a faint possibility that I could ruin you for all other women, but that would be a pity, considering that this is going to be a one-time thing.”

Yep. She’s really something.

When I’d told her I’d done this countless times, I hadn’t been exaggerating but I’d never had quite so much fun doing it before. Not before the doing-it part of the night had even started anyway.

McKinley was a good time, though. Maybe it was a pity that this was only going to be a one-time thing and not because I suddenly wanted to marry her, but just because I kind of enjoyed her. She was a breath of fresh air.

Under different circumstances, if my cock hadn't already been painfully hard for her, she might've even become a friend. Hell, maybe she still would. I really was having fun. Hornier than I remembered being in a long time, but still having fun—which was what was getting me even hotter.

I dragged my fingertips over the exposed skin at her shoulder to the nape of her neck and she sucked in a soft gasp, her cheeks flushing as she leaned into me. Since she didn't stop me or tell me to wait until we got out of the Uber, I figured I might as well spend the time it would take us to get to my place working her up until she was as desperate for it as I was.

Besides, we had time and it seemed my McKinley—for tonight anyway—was pretty damn responsive. I was too curious to wait to find out just how responsive.

Trailing my fingertips back to her shoulder, I ran them down the strappy sleeve of her dress. I had zero intention of copping a feel in the back of our ride, but I kept moving my fingers down until just the tips of my index and middle fingers grazed the top of her dress right above her breast, and she arched her back just a little. Like she wanted me to keep going.

I brought my mouth back to her ear. "I'm going to make it worth the wait, but maybe we should've gone to your place instead."

For the first time all night, she stiffened a bit. "No, that's okay. We're already on our way to yours. Where do you live? It feels like it's taking forever to get there."

"Yeah, uh, it's out of the way. At the beach."

"Oh." Her teeth sank into her lower lip. "I like the beach. You must have amazing views."

"I do." My gaze was fixed firmly on the top of her cleavage. "Absolutely beautiful. So sexy."

Her eyes darted up and she giggled when she saw where I was looking. "I meant your house."

"Of course. Yeah. Sure," I said distractedly. "The view from there is pretty okay too."

The truth was that my views were more than pretty okay, and for what I'd paid for the sprawling, oceanfront property, it was a damn good thing they were spectacular. A lot of things had changed for me over the last year or so, and one of those things was that I could suddenly afford things like said sprawling, oceanfront property.

Flynn used to work on the oil rigs, and since he'd spent so much time

offshore and out of contact, he'd asked me to manage his money for him. A few years ago, I'd realized I had a real knack for it. I'd started small, taking only a few hundred dollars of his money and mine, investing it, and then only reinvesting some of the profit I'd made so that I didn't touch either of our initial investments.

Slowly but surely, the capital grew. I'd watched in a state of shock and disbelief as the numbers in our bank accounts rose steadily until we both had more than either of us had ever dreamed of having. About six months ago, I'd quit my day job and bought this property as an investment.

Between the money I was making as an investor and the rental income from the other properties I'd bought, I was now very fucking well off. Flynn and I had wound up filthy rich, but neither of us talked about it.

Ariane hadn't even known until long after she'd fallen in love with him. The women I brought home seemed to figure it out once they got here, but not because I told them. I didn't need to. I didn't have to rely on money for hookups and I tried not to be a jackass just because I had a nicely padded bank account now.

Even so, I had to admit it did give me a kick to see the double-take McKinley did when the Uber pulled up outside my house. She hiked her eyebrows up at me. "Did you forget to mention something?"

"Like what?"

She rolled her eyes as she got out of the car, but then she took my hand and stuck close to my side as we walked to the door. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe that you won the lottery."

I laughed. "When I decided to bring you home tonight? Sure, I did."

She bumped her shoulder into mine. "Okay, big guy. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"Well, we could talk about it, but there are other things I'd rather be doing." I unlocked the door and spun to face her, shouldering it open. I wrapped my arms around her waist and she crashed into me, kissing me passionately as we stumbled inside.

I kicked the door shut behind us, relieved as hell to finally have her here and all alone, but as I led her into the house, my tongue stroking hers, we bumped into something and she pulled away. She giggled, her arms still around my neck but whatever teasing comment she'd been about to make died on her lips when she got distracted.

I saw the moment I lost her interest as she glanced around the main room.

Her lips parted and her tongue came out to swipe across it. “This is some place, Jude.”

“Thanks.” I tightened my grip on her waist, grinning as I started walking backward, leading her down the hall. “If you like this part of it, wait until you see my bedroom.”

“I’m sure it’s stunning.”

Her gaze was still sweeping around, taking in the beauty of it all. The massive windows at the back of the house that revealed a magnificent, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the ocean. The full moon and the starry night sky.

Footsteps faltering, her breath caught and she stared openly before she finally glanced back at me. “I’m sorry, but I need to go take a look at that.”

“You’re just full of surprises,” I murmured, but I relented anyway, leading her to the window to look her fill. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No. Thank you.” She stood in front of the window, her back to me as she looked out at the white, sandy beach outside and waves lapping the shore. “I can’t believe you get to wake up to this every day. It’s incredible.”

A frisson of satisfaction snaked through me. “Thanks. If it helps, I can’t believe it either.”

I stepped up behind her, gently brushing the hair off the back of her neck and lowering my mouth to her skin. She leaned into me, letting out a soft moan as she turned her head to give me better access and rested back against my shoulder.

“You’re really lucky to have this, Jude.”

My focus was entirely on her when I replied. “Yeah, I am.”

Just for tonight, McKinley was mine and I was damn lucky to have her. Even if she was more interested in the view right now.

Thankfully, that didn’t last long. I’d figured out in the car that she liked the soft touches and roaming fingertips, and as soon as I started dragging my hands slowly over her arms while I kept kissing her neck, I got all her attention right back on me.

And that was where I planned on keeping it all night long.

CHAPTER 4



MCKINLEY

Jude really knew what he was doing. Standing in front of that window, I melted into him, my body starved for attention after so many years of getting none at all.

I was already halfway out of my mind and he hadn't even touched me yet, but he also didn't seem to be in any great rush to do it.

Lavishing my neck with kisses, he explored my body with his hands. The pads of his fingers roamed my curves, sliding from my shoulders down my arms and to my hips before moving up my sides and then back down again.

Part of me wanted to continue our banter. Pretend to be unaffected by all this, but I wasn't.

I was very much affected. In a house that looked like the modern day version of a palace with a multimillion-dollar view, I felt like I'd been mistaken for a princess. Like any minute now, someone was going to storm through those doors screaming, *Imposter!*

Jude groaned softly as his lips moved to the crook of my neck, the press of them firm but his lips soft. "You taste unnaturally sweet, my McKinley."

My heart jerked at being called his, but I knew he didn't mean it that way. This was simply for tonight, but even just for a few hours, it was nice to be his. To be kissed like I was precious in a house and a dress that made me feel like a princess.

I gave myself over to the fantasy, the illusion we were creating to anyone who was on the outside looking in. It was nothing more than an idle fantasy, though. At least I knew that.

In reality, I didn't want this to be anything other than what it was. There was no space in my life for naïve dreams of finding love as a single mother.

This was physical. A release—a release, and at most, also an opportunity for me to remind myself that I was also a person. A woman who had needs beyond just the most basic.

I could've chosen a better place to remind myself of that than right in front of the window, though.

Crap. I hope no one is out there right now.

Jude and I weren't even just in front of *a* window. We were standing right in front of an entire *wall* of windows. If anyone bothered to look, they'd see everything and not in the romantic way I'd just been thinking about it. In a very real, explicit way.

I opened my eyes, turning to look up at him. "If someone out there is watching, you'd better hope they don't take any pictures. With a house like this, they might just think you've got money. They'll try to blackmail you."

"I'd pay good money for pictures of this, but I wouldn't give them a cent to keep it quiet. They could publish far and wide for all I care. As long as I get a few prints to mount on my bedroom wall."

For a guy who made no excuses about being a player, he sure knew how to make a girl feel like she was special. I chuckled and turned in the circle of his arms, pushing my hands into his thick, light brown hair.

"You have such a silver tongue, Mr. Olson."

"Hmm." He took a step back, those hooded eyes on mine as he gracefully slid his jacket off with smooth movements. "This tongue may be silver, but it's also pretty good at what it does."

Striding over to a wide leather sofa, he slung the jacket over the back of it, then started on the buttons of his shirt. His eyes never left mine as he undid them, his fingers quick and concise.

My mouth went bone dry when the shirt joined the jacket on the sofa. Not in a crumpled heap but neatly slung across the dark brown leather.

I'd known since the first time I saw him this afternoon that he was well built, but that wasn't the half of it. He wasn't just ripped; he was sculpted. A work of art created by the gods themselves for my viewing pleasure.

Those broad shoulders were tanned a deep, golden brown that spoke of hours spent in the sun. They tapered down into a narrower waist with a perfect ladder of abs that climbed down between defined hips.

The corners of his mouth curved into another smirk when he caught me staring. He pulled his belt free of the loops and unbuttoned his pants slowly, sliding the zipper down at the same time that he looked into my eyes from

across the room.

“Move back against the window,” he said. “Hands up above your head. Keep them there.”

My insides clenched as I did what he said. I cocked my head at him. “Did you read one of those steamy romance novels that made people think all women like their men bossy?”

“Nope, but I’ve always been this way. I just know what I like.” He let his pants slide to the floor, then bent over to pick them up and sling them across the sofa with his jacket and shirt. Now left in only a pair of gray boxer briefs, he was almost on full display and my heart nearly beat out of my chest.

There was an impressive bulge beneath his underwear, but he ignored it, his eyes still burning into mine as he crossed the room toward me. “I don’t have a hidden sex room either. Just in case you were wondering.”

I regarded him as he stalked closer to me, my breathing speeding up. With every foot of distance he closed between us, my heartbeat sped up so much it started practically thrumming. I was way out of my depth here with a guy like him.

My ex was the only man I’d ever slept with, and the last time had been almost five years ago now. Both young, we’d thought we knew what we were doing in our early twenties. I now knew that we’d been so, so wrong.

My breathing hitched and Jude noticed, his head slanting to one side as he put his hands on my hips. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my gaze locking on those enchanting hazels of his as they smoldered into mine. “Just, uh, take it easy on me, okay?”

The corners of his eyes tightened and I saw the curiosity burning in his gaze, but instead of asking, he dipped his chin in a curt nod. “Let me know if I need to ease up.”

With that, he lowered his eyes to rake them across my body, looking me up and down slowly like he couldn’t decide where to start. Eventually, he took a step closer, sealing his lips over my throat again and pressing wet, hot kisses against my skin as he circled his hands around my back and began the slow, gentle work of tugging the zipper down.

One metal notch at a time, he lowered it as he pressed his body into mine, lavishing every bare inch of skin in kisses but not getting anywhere near my mouth. My lips were parted, my chest heaving, and I was aching to taste him, but he seemed to be enjoying making me wait for it.

“Relax, McKinley. It’s one-way glass. No one can see you.”

I almost laughed out loud. *So he thinks that's what I'm nervous about.*

“Thanks,” I murmured, smiling until he started lowering himself to his knees. My heart jumped into my throat when he peeled the dress down as he kneeled. “What are you doing?”

“Unwrapping you,” he said quietly, almost reverent as he exposed me to him one inch a time.

My heart felt like it was about to beat right out of my chest as I watched him looking at every part of me that had been hidden for so long. If he'd been anyone else, I might've felt like I wanted to cower and hide, but Jude was so patient, so gentle and caring, and he was looking at me with such fire burning in his eyes that I couldn't find the urge anywhere within to be shy.

My dress pooled around my feet as he tugged it down past my hips, and I drew in a sharp breath, left before him in only my lacy underwear. It was midnight blue, a set I'd bought myself a couple of years ago for Christmas.

I didn't wear it often, but I'd put it on enough for myself to know what he was looking at. Soft flesh, pudgy in places, pale for never seeing any sunshine. A few old stretchmarks I'd never managed to get rid of after the pregnancy no matter how much oil I used.

My teeth sank into my lip as I waited for a response from him, and what I got warmed me all over. A low, throaty groan before he wrapped his fingers around my thighs and spread them further apart.

After glancing up to check in with me, he moved forward, bringing his nose right to the damp front panel of my panties and breathing in deep before hooking his fingers into the waistband. When I nodded, he smirked and started pulling them down, moaning as he revealed my most intimate part.

I didn't have time or money to get waxed, or threaded, or whatever, but I kept everything down there neat enough myself. Jude sure didn't seem to mind that I wasn't as smooth as a porn star as he ran his fingers up the insides of my thighs, making me moan when he moved them back down and then up again.

I was on fire for this man, and I didn't care if he knew it anymore. My head dropped back against the glass as I threaded my fingers into his hair and pulled hard, my voice hoarse and breathy as I resorted to begging. “Jude. Please?”

He didn't call me out on having my hands buried in his hair when he'd explicitly told me to keep them up. But perhaps he knew I'd fall over if I didn't hold on to him right now.

“There we go. Now I know you’re ready.” Before I could even begin to make sense of the fact that he’d evidently been waiting for permission, he sealed his mouth over me and I cried out, my knees buckling almost instantly.

His arm came up in a flash, anchoring me against the glass as he ran his tongue through my folds and tucked into me like a man starved for his final meal. When his fingers joined his tongue, I didn’t stand a chance.

It’d been so long and this was so intense that I started shaking, holding on to his hair as his name spilled from my lips over and over again. My orgasm arrived with blinding force and thundered through my body, making me scream as pleasure suddenly overwhelmed me for the first time in a year, leaving me breathless and panting in the aftermath.

Thankfully, Jude seemed to know I wouldn’t be able to hold myself up, and before I’d even opened my eyes, he was lifting me into his arms and carrying me down a long hallway. By the time I’d recovered enough to crack open even one eye, we were in a bedroom.

Another wall of windows stretched out ahead of us as he laid me down on a four-poster bed on top of thick, luxurious bedding. My limbs felt boneless and my body sated—until he stepped up in front of the bed fully naked.

As I watched, he wrapped his palm around his cock and started stroking slowly, his eyes roaming up and down my body as his head dropped back and his lips parted. Desire slammed into me all over again and I sat up slightly, beckoning for him to join me.

Wordlessly, he crept onto the bed and grabbed a condom, then smirked devilishly and motioned for me to turn around. “On all fours, McKinley. Hold on to the sheets for me, would you?”

My heart lurched into my throat once more, but I found myself wanting to obey. Rolling over, I did what he’d asked, holding my weight on my elbows as I presented my ass to him.

I heard the soft sound of foil tearing, and when the broad tip of his cock nudged against my entrance, I realized he’d put on a condom. Thank heavens he remembered. I wouldn’t have. Not right now.

Jude plunged into me as his fingers wrapped around my hips, but when he was met with more resistance than he was obviously expecting, he pulled back. Still, he didn’t ask questions, merely adjusting the position of my legs before he tried again, moving slower this time and looping his arm around me to play with my clit as he worked his way in.

It took some time, but as he filled me up, pleasure spread through me. I’d

never felt anything like this before. This delicious fullness where he stroked me in all the right places all at once. I rocked back against him, needing more, and he obliged happily, giving me exactly what I needed and then some.

Fingers never leaving my clit, he played me like an instrument he'd mastered, thrusting into me until I was right back on that edge. I tried holding it in, but his palm came down on my ass with a light smack. Just hard enough to sting instead of hurt.

"Don't hold back, McKinley." His breath feathered across the back of my neck as he spoke. "Come for me. Now."

I exploded underneath him, once again screaming his name as white-hot pleasure raced through me, curling my toes and making me feel like I'd touched the edge of heaven. Only vaguely aware of him roaring his own release, I managed to hold myself up just long enough to feel him relax behind me, and then I collapsed face first on his mattress.

Jude fell down next to me, chuckling as he pulled me close and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my shoulder. "That was awesome. Give me a few and then we'll take it from the top. See if there are any improvements to be made."

I opened my eyes to gawk at him, but what I saw instead were the digital numbers on the clock of his nightstand. *3:05 a.m. Fuck.*

Rolling over, I sat bolt upright and shook my head, my eyes going wide as I realized that this Cinderella was about to turn into a pumpkin. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I repeated the word in my head with every loud thud of my heart against my ribs. "I'm so sorry, Jude, but I have to go. Do you mind getting me an Uber while I find my clothes?"

He frowned before giving me a playful grin. "Hey, now. You don't have to run off. I don't mind if you stay."

"Yeah, uh, thanks, but I can't. I have to go. Uber?"

"Sure." He blinked away his confusion, shrugging as he sat up and then followed me back to his living room.

Stark naked and completely unashamed about it, he headed to his jacket and pulled out his phone while I located my panties and stepped back into my dress.

"It's done. The driver is five minutes away."

Relief swept through me. "Thank you. Mind giving me a hand?"

I motioned to the zipper at my back and he inclined his head, stepping up behind me almost gallantly. Then he slid it back into place and finished with another hot kiss to the nape of my neck. “I’ll walk you out, McKinley. Thanks. That was great.”

Not really knowing what to do now that the heat of the moment had passed, I just gave him a sort of awkward shrug-nod type thing and practically dived into the back of the fancy car he’d requested. Only managing my first full, proper breath again as the car left his expansive property behind, I pulled my phone out of my purse and fired off a quick message to Tess.

Me: Wedding was a blast. Lost track of time. SO sorry! On my way to pick up Henry now.

In the end, she convinced me to crash on her couch instead of taking my sleeping four-year-old home, and as I drifted off to sleep, I could almost still feel Jude inside me. Still feeling the press of his fingertips against my skin.

It was time to forget about him now, though. It’d been fun while it lasted, but the princess was gone. This was real life, and I had to get back to it.

CHAPTER 5



JUDE

At home in my office, I inhaled a deep breath and tried to keep my temper from flaring up. “You know, Harold, I don’t usually work on Sundays, but I need an answer. Come tomorrow morning, we need to move quickly to move around those investments if you want to turn that profit we talked about.”

The client at the other end of the line hummed noncommittally, and I gripped my phone so hard, I might just have to get the screen replaced. “I don’t know, Jude. I need some time to think about it.”

“Fine. Take all the time you need. Just know that if we don’t clear this up today and I don’t have the go-ahead by tonight to do what I need to do, you’re going to lose a few thousand dollars first thing.”

Harold hummed some more, as wishy-washy and indecisive as ever. The funny thing was that he’d begged me to take on his portfolio. In the few months since I’d decided to do this on behalf of other people, I’d been very, *very* picky about my clients.

The fact of the matter was that I didn’t really need them. Flynn and I had done well enough that I’d have been just fine only working for the two of us, but ultimately, money made money. I’d put out some feelers and taken on just a small contingent of clients.

Originally, I’d turned Harold down. The man was as averse to risk as Flynn had been to marriage, and I didn’t like wasting my time—which was exactly what I was now doing. He was acting like he hadn’t practically offered me a stake in his firstborn child just to take him on.

“I don’t know, Jude,” he repeated. “Maybe I’ll let you know by tonight.”

Irritation shot through me, but as I looked up and caught sight of Flynn

through the bank of windows behind my desk, I grinned. “Okay, look. We’ll touch base tonight. Let me know how you want to move forward.”

I ended the call without saying goodbye, rolling my chair back and jumping up to get the door. Flynn was already standing on the other side with his baby girl in a carrier strapped to his chest and a diaper bag in tow.

“Hey, man,” I said as I opened the door and stepped out of the way. “Welcome back. How was the honeymoon?”

“Two interrupted weeks with my girls? It was my idea of a good time. Can you grab her stroller from the trunk?”

I nodded and helped him bring everything inside. Then I took Willow off his hands as soon he snapped open the sides of the carrier. Extending my arms, I smiled at her and pulled a funny face.

“How’s my favorite niece doing?” I cooed. “Did you like the beach, sweetheart? Look out there. Your favorite uncle Jude has the best beach in the whole world right out there. Daddy and Mommy didn’t need to take you so far away from me for that. Did you tell them you were missing me?”

Flynn laughed and then groaned when he glanced down and realized he had spit-up on his shirt. “Fuck. Eau de Vomit is my new scent. Hand me that bag, would ya?”

I passed over the cloth lying right on top of the open diaper bag and snuggled Willow in my arms as I moved over to the sofa. Sitting down carefully so I wouldn’t jostle her, I looked into her wide, bright blue eyes and smiled.

“Hello, little girl. God, I missed you.” I put my finger in her palm and nearly melted when she wrapped her tiny hand around it and made a happy, gurgling sound. “We’re never going to let them take you away from me for so long again, are we? No, we aren’t. We are not. Can you say, *Yes, Uncle Jude* yet?”

“She can’t, bro. She’s not even five months old yet.” He dabbed at the spit-up with the cloth, but I could still see the outline when he finally gave up. “Gah. I’m surrendering. I’m just going to be that gross dad now who walks around smelling like sour milk.”

“That’s okay. Because it’s sour milk brought up by the cutest baby in the galaxy.” I pulled another funny face at her, the one that almost always made her smile, but she stubbornly refused, just blinking up at me like she was telling me to try harder.

I sighed. “I’m going to make you laugh yet, young lady. Just you watch.”

“Dude, you’ve lost your edge,” Flynn teased me laughingly as he dropped into the sofa opposite mine and kicked up his feet.

I scowled at him, and that was when Willow suddenly laughed. *Predictable, but I love that sound so much that I’ll take it.*

I beamed down at her. “There. See? You know I’m funny. Yes, you do.”

Flynn watched me with an amused expression on his face. “It’s almost time for her bottle. Hold her while I make it. Can I grab you a drink while I’m at it?”

“Yeah. Sure. Beer’s in the fridge.”

He dipped his head in a curt nod, his long hair swaying in the ponytail against his neck as he took off. I still couldn’t believe he was this guy now. Married with a kid and super fucking happy about it. I glanced down at Willow again, marveling at how fascinated she was with the world around her.

Bringing her to a sitting position on my lap, I held her little hands and turned us so she could see the beach and ocean just beyond it. “How’s that for a view? It’s pretty awesome, right? You should tell your daddy that you want me to babysit more often. Imagine all the fun you and I could have out there, huh? All the sandcastles we’ll build. I’ve already bought you some beach toys. You want to see them?”

Flynn walked back into the spacious living room and smirked at me. “You’ve already bought her beach toys? You do know she still eats sand, right? She doesn’t need toys for that.”

“Maybe, but I like spoiling her. She’s my favorite niece and I’m her favorite uncle. It’s a sacred relationship and you’re not allowed to intervene.”

“I’m her dad, so I’ll intervene whenever I damn well please, but she’s also your only niece and you’re her only uncle.”

“Don’t cheapen it.”

He laughed and put his hand up after putting our beers down on the coffee table and shaking her bottle. “You ready for lunch, baby girl?”

She cooed and reached for the bottle, and I grudgingly handed her back to him to feed her. He slung the cloth effortlessly over his shoulder, cradling her in one arm as he slotted the bottle right into her mouth and then strode over to the sofa to sit down.

“I’m surprised at how much of a natural you are at all this. I didn’t expect it, Mr. Love Doesn’t Exist.”

He gave me a look that said he’d have flipped me off if he wasn’t already

using both his hands. “You’re an asshole.”

“What? All I’m saying is that you’re a surprisingly good dad. Everything seems to come so easily to you.”

He shrugged, his gaze softening as it dropped to her delicate little face. “Willow makes it easy. It’s not me, I swear. It’s her.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” I teased, but still, something ached in the deepest recesses of my soul as I watched him with his baby.

Flynn was all rough and rugged, a seasoned oil rig worker with permanent scruff on his jaw and messy long hair. Yet somehow, he’d married a congresswoman’s daughter and now had a kid of his own.

I wasn’t jealous of him. Or maybe I was, but it wasn’t like I wanted exactly what he had. Who he had. I just wanted *mine*.

Maybe.

“How’s Ariane?” I asked. “She did make it through the honeymoon, right? You didn’t screw her to death?”

He laughed and rolled his eyes at me. “We had Willow with us, so no. I might’ve tried otherwise, though.”

I chuckled and leaned back on the sofa as I sipped my beer. “How are things going with her mom? Better yet?”

“Yeah, kind of. They’re still butting heads, but what else is new? At least they’re managing some civil conversation as well nowadays. Her dad even called me *son* when we went to say hi to them yesterday.”

“Congratulations,” I joked. “You’re now officially Mr. Blakely.”

Flynn’s eyes filled with laughter that he held back since Willow’s eyelids were starting to droop as she sucked down her milk. “You say that like I’m supposed to be offended or something. I’m not. I’d happily have taken her name. As long as it meant I could be married to her.”

I scoffed. *Quietly. I’m not a monster.* “You would not have taken her name. Also, it’s a good thing her mother didn’t hear that offer. She might just have taken you up on it.”

He grinned at me. “I’d have liked to see her try. I’d do anything for Ariane, but the congresswoman and I are never going to see completely eye to eye.”

“I hear that, but at least she came around in the end. Gave you her blessing.”

He snorted softly. “After all that shit she pulled, she owed us both more than just that, but sure. She gave me her blessing.”

“Speaking of moms,” I said. “Do you remember that our mother invited us all over to her house for dinner next weekend. You guys are going, right?”

“Fuck. I forgot about that.”

“Okay, but you’re still coming?”

“I don’t know.” He got a faraway look in his eyes. “I’ll have to check with Ariane. I think she put it in the calendar, though. I really don’t know.”

I sighed. “Please, come? Even if she didn’t put it in the calendar, you have to figure out a way.”

“Why?” He frowned at me. “You’ll be fine on your own.”

I made my eyes big and round as I shook my head, hoping he realized I was begging him to be there for a damn good reason. “I don’t want to go by myself. That means I’ll be there alone. With mom, her two crazy dogs, and her boyfriend. They’re too handsy, man. I can’t do it. Not without backup. You already left me alone with them for two long weeks after the wedding.”

Flynn laughed. “I’ll see what I can do. Hey, one last thing before we move on to how you’ve been, but did you hook up with one of Ariane’s bridesmaids at the wedding?”

I slapped an innocent expression on my face and shook my head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I knew why he was asking, though. It was all about that crazy theory of theirs that if the best man hooked up with a bridesmaid at one of their weddings, they’d end up being the next couple to get married.

I wouldn’t deny that I’d thought about McKinley a lot since that night. Apart from her smart mouth and quick banter, she’d ended up having an innocence about her that had driven me completely insane.

So yeah, I’d thought about her, but she hadn’t even stayed over, and I had no intention of looking her up or even trying to date her. There was no way we were going to end up getting married, so our one night together could remain our little secret.

The last thing I wanted was for them to try to set us up just because we’d slept together. What she and I had shared had been great, but it was over, and it was better for everyone if it just stayed that way.

CHAPTER 6



MCKINLEY

My morning routine was crazy and Mondays always had a way of sneaking up on me, ramping it up to next level insanity just to remind me that another week was starting. Up at the crack of dawn, I hunted down Henry's schoolbag, which we managed to misplace every Friday afternoon.

Once I finally tracked it down, I carried it to the kitchen, unzipped it, and then started preparing his snacks and the lunch he had to take with him. I chopped fruit into cubes and carrots into strips because that was the only way he'd eat them. Then I added them to the right compartments and then made a peanut butter sandwich—cut into triangles, not squares.

I filled up his water bottle, added a few graham crackers, and then snapped the lid of the lunchbox and snack box into place, sliding them into his bag. With that done, I hurried back to his bedroom to grab a pair of indoor shoes and a change of clothes. Then I drew an elephant with doodled heart-shaped bubbles coming out of his trunk on a little note and added that too.

Drawing and creating were some of my greatest loves in my life, absolute passions I had absolutely no time for these days. The only time I really got to indulge that part of my soul was when I had a minute in the morning to do something like this for him, and thankfully, Henry was my biggest fan.

After zipping his bag up and taking it to the front door so we wouldn't leave without it—again—I headed to the bathroom to grab a shower. Then I sped through drying my hair and getting dressed so I'd be able to wake him up on time.

As I checked my watch, I realized we were already running late and it wasn't even seven a.m. yet. I groaned and picked up my speed, abandoning all pretense that today was the day I was going to start wearing proper

makeup to work again—this only made three and a half years in a row.

I brushed my hair into a ponytail to keep it out of my face, another look I rocked daily, and then headed over to his room. Henry lay peacefully sleeping in the center of his little bed, his lips slightly parted as soft snores came out of him.

Just like I did every morning, I took just a moment to take him in, standing in his doorway and wondering what I'd done right in a past life to have been blessed with him.

Our lives were not easy. They weren't perfect. We faced challenges I thanked the good Lord every night he didn't know about yet.

I was only twenty-five years old and I didn't have a village of support around me. Money was always tighter than tight and I never had any time for myself. My ex's mother made a point of lecturing me about my son because she insisted that was what grandparents did and my own parents were gone.

There was so much craziness and stress constantly surrounding me, but for only this one moment every morning, I allowed myself to bask in gratitude and peace as I watched him sleep. My little man who was growing up so fast.

With my light brown hair and the green of my hazel in his eyes, he'd inherited his features mostly from me, but there was enough of his father in his chin and jawline that I knew the questions would start again soon. He could talk the hind-leg off a donkey most days, and for the moment, he'd stopped asking why he didn't have a dad.

But it wouldn't last forever.

With every kid's birthday party we were invited to and every playdate the dad brought his friend to, we would venture back to that sad territory. Shaking myself out of my depressing thoughts, I crossed his tiny bedroom and gently shook his shoulder.

"It's time to wake up, baby boy."

"I'm not a baby," he muttered, but then he smiled and sleepily wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in for a quick hug. "Love you, Mommy."

Tears pressed at the backs of my eyes as I gathered him in my arms and hugged him back, forgetting the never-ending rush as I just held him and kissed the side of his head. "Okay, my love. Time to get out of bed. The clothes we chose last night are in the bathroom. Remember to brush your teeth."

He nodded, and I left his room to get his breakfast ready while he got

dressed. Mostly dressed, anyway. He was still having some trouble with getting all the waistbands right and the shirts on properly, but he was getting there fast these days.

When he walked into the kitchen with his toothbrush still in his mouth, I gave him a meaningful look. “Where’s that going when you’re done?”

“Back to the bathroom,” he said dutifully, and I nodded, smiling as I served him breakfast.

We ate together and giggled at silly things, like him getting peanut butter on his nose and me spilling a tiny splotch of strawberry jam on my work shirt. I planned on changing it into the only other clean shirt I owned before we left, but I lost track of time enjoying myself with my number one little man.

When the alarm telling me it was time to leave went off, I realized I’d once again gotten lost in those sparkly green eyes and I opted for sloppily filling my thermos with coffee rather than changing.

With that done, I rushed him out of the tiny one-bedroom condo we were renting close to my office and Henry’s daycare, loaded him into the car, and dropped Henry off on my way to work. It was the best school I could afford and he loved his teachers, luckily.

I greeted them with a quick flash of a smile, then pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Love you, darling boy. Have a happy day!”

“You too, Mommy.” They waved goodbye and I raced off to the office, arriving with only a couple of minutes to spare.

Just in time before my boss’s first big meeting of the day, I rushed past his massive office into my smaller one beside it, dumping my purse and tucking the locks of hair that had escaped my ponytail behind my ears.

Drawing in a deep breath, I stood behind my desk and gripped the back of my chair, just holding it while I breathed. It was difficult not to get overwhelmed sometimes, and I needed a moment to gather myself before I went out there.

Kent Brock, my boss, was a big-shot realtor in New York. He hired me as his assistant just after I had Henry and he even gave me my own office so I would have the privacy I needed to pump breast milk. It was unheard of in this city for a realtor’s assistant to have their own office, and I was sure he was going to take it away as soon as I weaned Henry off my milk, but he hadn’t.

The office was tiny, barely more than a desk and space to move around it,

but it was mine, and for that, I was grateful. I focused on the pictures of Henry on my desk to find my center as I breathed.

All of this was for him. Everything I did was to give him the best life possible, and if that meant only ever creating things for him and having to spend my life as Kent's assistant, then I would do it to the best of my ability.

Finally finding a shred of calm inside, I dragged in one more deep breath, stood, and shook my hands out at my sides. We were meeting with a client today who Kent had been excited about since the man had made the appointment last week.

Supposedly, the client was interested in buying up a string of properties instead of just one. If that was true, Kent had reason to be excited—and so did I. Doing my best to put a smile on my face, I left my office and strode over to the main entrance where my boss was already shaking hands with a polished, tall man in a tailored suit that screamed expensive.

Since Kent was standing between us with his back to me, I couldn't see the man's face yet, but judging by the shiny shoes and that suit, he could afford that string of properties he was after. As I came up behind him, Kent turned and grinned at me, always happy to see me in the mornings but more especially so at the start of the week.

Sometimes, I got the feeling that he got off on my gratitude a little. He'd done me a huge favor when he'd hired me and given me that office, and I owed him for it. But while it was possible he had a bit of a savior complex, he was a good boss.

With smooth black hair that was always slicked back, a fit frame, and vivid green eyes, he looked good on our promotional materials and in general. As he grinned at me now, those green eyes darted right to the giant dollop of jam on my shirt.

I cringed, but Kent chuckled, good-natured as always as he waved it off.

"It's just jam, I hope." Stepping aside, he introduced me to our newest client. "Mickey, this is Jude Olson, a local investor looking for some properties to scoop up."

My gaze jerked up from my shirt stain, where it had been resting since Kent spotted the jam, and I blinked hard. But I wasn't imagining things.

With Kent now standing off to one side, I finally got a good look at the man, and staring back at me was Jude Olson. Not a different Jude Olson. *My* Jude Olson.

Well, okay. Not mine, but my wedding hookup.

Our eyes met and I saw my surprise reflected in his gaze. Clearly, he hadn't known that I worked for this firm and he hadn't come looking for me, but here he was.

My face turned as red as the strawberry jam on my shirt. *Crap! Crap on a freaking cracker.*

Kent really wanted him to sign on with us, but as I stared at the surprise still shining in those pretty hazel eyes, I realized that I might've lost him an important client weeks before he'd even become one. If there had been any doubt in my mind that nothing good was ever going to come of a one-night stand, it'd just been eradicated.

Shit. So this is why it's always a better idea to keep your damn legs closed. Thanks, Karma. You really are a bitch.

CHAPTER 7



JUDE

Well, well, well, *this is a pleasant surprise.* I grinned. I didn't think I'd get to see her again, and so soon. *Maybe we'll get a repeat performance after all.*

I still didn't want to marry her—and Flynn still couldn't find out—but I sure wouldn't mind another bite at this particular apple. She'd taken off so fast that night that I hadn't quite had my fill, and this felt like the universe's way of saying, *Here you go. Have fun!*

I took a step forward, my gaze resting on her greenish brown orbs before it swept across her in her navy slacks and the stained white shirt. That shoulder-length brown hair was pulled away from her face today with a few escaped tendrils giving her an almost rushed look.

Her eyes were wide and wild, darting from one side to the other as she swallowed so hard, I could see it. A flush crept up her neck when I inclined my head at her. "McKinley."

"Jude."

Kent looked back and forth between us with a slight furrow appearing between his brows as he slid his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "You two know each other?"

"Not really," she said.

At the same time, I winked. "Intimately."

McKinley turned even redder, and it kind of turned me on. She was about the same color now as she'd been when I'd had her against my window. And in my bed.

Memories of our time together swam through my mind, clouding my thoughts as I remembered how sexy it'd been. McKinley had awoken a

hunger in me that night and it was back in full force now that I was looking at her again.

In a way, I'd gotten used to some of the women I was with putting on a bit of a show. The pleasure was real, but the noises weren't always. Neither were the exaggerated reactions. It was entirely possible to have an orgasm without screeching and shaking so violently that I worried they might be having a seizure.

It wasn't necessary. The proof was in the proverbial pudding—and I knew said pudding well enough to know I always made it real, but I didn't understand the accompanying theatrics. Or why said theatrics had escalated rapidly after I'd moved into my place at the beach.

With McKinley, there had been none of that. Her screams had been in pure abandon and her trembling had been out of her control. Everything about her that night had been so real that I was still dreaming about it.

She hadn't given a shit about the house—even though I knew she'd been impressed—or about putting on a show to keep me *happy*. From the moment I'd met her to the moment she'd fled into the back of that Uber like her ass had been on fire, she'd been true to herself.

I liked that. Respected it.

McKinley brought me back to reality when she cleared her throat and practically squeaked.

"I need to clean up and put my things away in my office." As she spun and rushed away, it was abundantly clear that she was just trying to get the hell out of here—and fast.

"Move quickly," Kent called after her with an edge to his voice that grated at me. "We've been waiting on you and I need you to pull up our listings of properties for sale on the coastline. Upstate and in the Hamptons with a starting price of five million."

She stopped moving, turned back to him, and blinked as she nodded slowly, like she couldn't quite wrap her head around what he'd said. "Five million? Uh, okay. Sure. Give me three minutes. I'll get right on it."

As she disappeared, I wondered what she was thinking right now. I had some idea, considering that not so long ago five million dollars as an amount someone could just spend had seemed astronomical to me as well. But I was still curious about her thoughts, which was odd. I didn't really ever care about what other people were thinking.

When it occurred to me that I shouldn't care about her thoughts either, I

turned my attention back to Kent. The point was that I *did* have that kind of money to spend now, and regardless of her thoughts on the matter, I wanted to spend it on property.

If Kent played his cards right, I would spend it here, with him. I'd long since learned that free money amounted to cash-spent-on-bullshit money. The smart thing to do with every dollar a person had to spare was to put it somewhere you couldn't touch it—and that was what I needed to do.

Kent Brock had come highly recommended by a few of my friends and clients, and now that I knew working with him would put me in closer proximity to McKinley, I was even more interested than I had been before. Her boss had made quite a name for himself in the real estate industry, which was how I'd ended up in their offices to begin with.

Around forty years old, he was known for having gotten his big break working on the single-mothers demographic when he first started selling in the early 2000s. He'd grown a lot since and now, he was exclusively selling glamorous properties, including vacation homes in places like the Hamptons.

Their offices were modern and trendy but with touches of elegance and class. White, glass, gold trim, and geometrically patterned tiles with lots of artificial greenery and a lot of natural light. I liked it here, even if it was a little impersonal.

Kent was staring at the door McKinley had disappeared through, his hands still in his pockets as he glanced back at me. "She's a great assistant. I know she seems a bit scatter-brained this morning, but she's not."

"Mondays, am I right?"

"Absolutely. I apologize if she made a poor first impression, but she's the best at what she does. She'll have those properties ready to take a look at in no time."

A strangely possessive, boastful look crossed his features as a smirk tugged at his lips.

"Besides, what more could I want? Not only is she beautiful with a great rack," he joked, gesturing with his hands in front of his chest. "She's also a brilliant employee and an even more brilliant mother."

My irritation about his comment and rude hand gestures died an immediate, fiery death in the face of this new information—information I tried my best not to react to. *She's a mother? I didn't know she had a kid. How did I not know that?*

"Yeah." I cleared my throat when my voice came out strained, fixing my

own smirk back on my lips as I looked around. “This place isn’t exactly child-friendly, though. How old is the kid?”

“Four, but he never comes here. Can you imagine grubby little hands on the white furniture? It would *not* go down well with clients like yourself who come here so we can take stress off your shoulders, not add to it.”

I chuckled, but my gut churned. Since I wasn’t one to just keep quiet, I shook my head as the chuckle subsided. “Nah, I wouldn’t have minded. Personally, I find children relaxing. I know they’re hard work, but they’re also a damn good distraction.”

“Fair enough,” he said easily, obviously used to pandering to clients. “I like kids too, and single mothers.”

My hackles rose at his words, but before I could ask, he swept a hand out, motioning for me to follow him as he explained. “I was raised by one, you know. A single mother. I have a great deal of respect for them, and since I also owe my career to people just like Mickey and my mom, I try to do right by them.”

“Of course. You started out selling condos to single moms. I heard about that.”

He dropped his chin in a curt nod as he led me to a coffee station with a swanky new machine on the counter. “Things are always tough when you’re trying to raise a kid all by yourself. My mom and I moved around a lot, so when I was getting into real estate, I made it a priority to help other mothers and their kids find places they could afford to make their homes in.”

“That’s admirable,” I said. “It also obviously served you well. Look at where you are now.”

He shrugged, but I saw the glimmer of pride in his eyes. “Exactly. I still do what I can, though. I’ve mentored some younger realtors to help out in that demographic and I employed Mickey at her first interview. I still feel sorry for the poor girl, but at least she’s got a job.”

My pulse spiked as something dark and acidic bled into my veins. “You feel sorry for her?”

Obviously not noticing how low my voice had dropped, he nodded again and started up the barista-level coffee machine. “Of course, I do. Cost of living is no joke, but especially not around here. She’s renting a place nearby and she got a good deal, but with a little guy to support and no man of the house to pull in the big bucks, she’s struggling to make ends meet.”

Why on God’s green earth are you sharing that about her with a

stranger? It was pretty clear to me that he was tooting his own horn, trying to sound like a hero so I'd trust him with my money, but seriously? He was only succeeding in putting me off.

I gave the barista machine a pointed look. "How much did that run you? You could always give her a raise. Help her make those ends meet and drink your coffee out of a regular pot."

"I could, couldn't I?" He clapped me on the back and chuckled, and exasperation raced through me.

For a guy who was supposed to be smooth, he was starting to come across as too slick. Brown-nosing and pandering. *Two of my least favorite qualities in a person.*

I sighed, but I left it alone when McKinley reappeared. I doubted she'd appreciate having been used as part of his self-serving sales pitch, and I also didn't want to cause any friction between them by making an issue out of it.

While I didn't like what he'd done, I didn't doubt the truth of his words. McKinley was a down-on-her-luck single mother who was struggling to make ends meet. If she lost this job because I'd made a scene about her boss, I would never forgive myself.

So I kept my mouth shut and smiled as she approached us again. The stain on her shirt was less red, but it was bigger and pale pink now, probably from having been scrubbed at. She seemed to have composed herself, her chin held slightly higher and a tablet in her hands.

She held it up as she came to stand next to me. "The listings you requested are all cued up."

I breathed in the scent of her floral perfume, remembering how it'd lingered on my bed after she'd left, and then I took the tablet from her. I didn't know how yet, but I was going to make sure she got something out of this deal if I gave Kent my business.

God knew, I'd have walked already after everything he'd said if she hadn't been the person he'd been talking about. She deserved to be compensated for being the reason I stayed—and I was going to make damn sure he knew it.

CHAPTER 8



MCKINLEY

While I'd been trying to get the damn stain out of my shirt and pull up the listings on my tablet at the same time, I'd convinced myself I could do this. I'd given myself a firm talking to, resolving to treat him like any other client and to forget we'd seen each other naked before.

Now that I was next to him, however, my resolve fizzled out and keeled over. *This cannot be happening.*

Logically, I knew it was happening, but why? I'd hooked up with Jude thinking there would be no strings attached. I'd realized even then that there was a possibility I'd see him again with Flynn and Ariane, but I hadn't thought it would really happen.

Ariane and I hadn't been close friends for years. We'd met in elementary school, stayed in touch throughout high school, and these days, we only spent a couple of hours a year on the phone catching up. I'd been flabbergasted when she'd asked me to be a bridesmaid, but then she'd explained that her mother was going to choose her bridal party if she didn't produce a few people to stand up with her.

So I'd agreed because I remembered Congresswoman Blakely from long before she'd been a congresswoman. Back then, she'd already been fierce. A mother who ruled her household with as much of an iron fist as she did her clean-energy company.

Ariane and I had never had a falling out or anything. Her mom had simply moved her to a fancy private school after we'd finished seventh grade. I'd been kind of honored that, even though we didn't see each other often, she still knew she could count on me when she needed me.

At the end of the day, though, we still weren't best friends. The

possibility that I'd ever see Jude again had seemed remote as a result. A "maybe one day at their vow renewal ceremony" kind of possibility.

Realistically, I hadn't really thought it would ever happen. I'd thought Ariane and I would go back to only catching up telephonically a couple of times a year, and that I'd never see her brother-in-law again. Now here he was, at my workplace, the only man I'd ever had a one-nighter with.

How's that for bad luck?

It was so *not* good, especially standing this close to him. An expensive, smoky-leather scent drifted to my nostrils, and I knew it was his because it triggered all kinds of memories of that night. All I could think about as he took the tablet and started paging through the listings was how he'd taken care of me better than any man ever had.

He had even re-awoken my libido. It was back in full force, and considering that I slept on a sofa bed in my so called living room because I'd let Henry have our one bedroom, it hadn't been ideal. But even so, the man had done things to me.

Not only physically, but mentally. Emotionally. He'd made me think of myself a little bit more often and he'd made me realize that *I* was still buried somewhere deep down inside. Underneath all the *mommy*, there was still a person, and a fun one at that.

And the fun we'd had? My knees pinched together at the thought, which was about when I realized he'd asked me a question about the listings. My cheeks turned hot and I gulped. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

A knowing gleam crept into his blue-brown eyes as a smile touched just one corner of his lips. "I asked—"

Kent jumped in just as Jude started speaking, cutting him off to admonish me. "You need to pay attention to Mr. Olson, Mickey. He's asking important questions about properties you've pulled. Show me which one you were referring to, Jude. I'll take it from here."

Jude didn't turn the tablet toward him, but Kent peered over his shoulder and answered the questions he'd asked anyway. "Ah yes. That one is not in the flood zone, but it does have access to the water. It's also got excellent security features as well as two separate guest cottages you could rent out."

Kent glanced at the screen again. "The other one you asked about is a penthouse condo. It's got magnificent views, and yes. It is full title."

Jude slowly lifted his gaze back to my boss's, seeming annoyed for some reason as his eyes tightened. "Excellent, thank you, but I asked McKinley."

“Yes, of course. She should’ve been paying attention, but you know how it is with assistants sometimes. Like you said, Monday morning.” Kent shot him a wide grin. “You’ll be happy to know that some of these locations have open houses today. I’ll take you around and answer any other questions that come up.”

Jude looked right into Kent’s eyes as he shook his head. “No. I’d like McKinley to take me around if it’s all the same to you.”

Kent’s eyebrows hiked up on his forehead, and I waited for his answer with bated breath. Not because I wanted to be the one to go, but because I’d never seen a client speak to him that way—or request me to go out to the locations with them.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Jude. I need Mickey here. It’s the start of a whole new week and she’s got quite a lot of admin to do. We’ve got clients waiting to hear back from banks and others waiting for feedback on offers. I wish I could, but—”

“Well, in that case, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go find myself a realtor who’s willing to put my needs above his own.”

“Excuse me?”

“McKinley shows me around, or I walk,” he said succinctly, his tone businesslike and brisk. “I know her and I trust her judgment. I also know she’ll be honest and that she won’t try to dance around the issues I point out by trying to talk them away.”

“I can assure you that you can trust me as well. I don’t try to talk around the issues. If there are any, you can trust me to be frank and direct.”

Jude stared him down. “So you say, but so does every other realtor I’ve been in contact with. This isn’t a negotiation, Mr. Brock. I want McKinley to take me to these locations, or I’m not interested.”

Slowly but surely, Kent seemed to realize that Jude wasn’t messing around about this. If my boss didn’t agree to let me take Jude to view the properties, he was walking away from the firm. Shock rattled through me, making me blink too many times in quick succession as Kent did the same.

His lips parted and his tongue darted out to slide across them. Then he narrowed his eyes and glanced at me. “Give us a minute, Jude. Mickey and I will be right back.”

I nodded when he inclined his head toward his office, and I followed dutifully after him when he stalked in that direction. Feeling Jude’s eyes on me as I walked away, I wondered why the heck he was so hellbent on this.

As Kent's assistant, I had limited experience at best in showing houses to clients. I'd been out with him a grand total of three times, and even then, it'd been to work on the go when we'd had urgent things to take care of and he had to take clients for viewings.

He was still the one who'd done the showing, though. I'd never done it myself. I just tagged along.

Shutting his door behind me, I stayed close to it as he paced to his desk, his agitation clear when he spun around and faced me. With his jaw tight and frustration in his eyes, he shook his head. "Look, Mickey, it's not that I don't trust you, but Jude could be an important client for us."

"I understand."

"Do you?" He frowned deeply. "I don't know how you two know each other, but I don't think you do understand. Jude is the kind of client who could keep coming back to buy up properties in bundles at a time."

"Bundles?"

He nodded sharply before he blew out a breath. "Word on the street is that he's just getting started. He's making millions and he wants to put some of it someplace safe, which is real estate. We keep him happy now, and he'll come back every time he needs a new property. If the information I got about him is correct, which it always is, he's going to be needing a lot of new properties."

I swallowed hard, my ears ringing a little as the shock of finding out just how rich he was finally started settling. It was a lot to process, knowing I'd slept with a man like that. Sure, when I'd seen his house, I'd known he was probably pretty well off, but this was a whole other playing field.

"I'll tell him he's better off with you taking him around," I said, my voice so small I could barely hear myself.

But Kent heard me, and he shook his head in response. "No, that won't work. For some reason, he doesn't trust me but he does seem to trust you. I'll work on it so I can take over from you later, but in the meantime, we need to keep him with the firm, which means he's your client."

My mouth went bone dry. "My client?"

"Yes, your client. It's what he wants, so it's what he's going to get." His head dropped back and his hands found his hips, smacking his jacket out of the way to squeeze them. "This is a big shot for you and for the firm. If you can secure a deal, I'll compensate you. How does a hefty bonus with your next paycheck sound?"

My heartrate skyrocketed, my hands trembling where I held them clenched behind my back. “That, uh, that sounds great.”

Palms growing sweaty, I realized that no matter how uncomfortable it would be for me to step into the role of a salesperson when I didn’t have any relevant experience whatsoever, I needed to make this happen.

The prospect of more money being added to my next paycheck motivated me to put my embarrassment and insecurities behind me. I couldn’t afford to get hung up on the fact that he’d seen my pudgy ass naked.

Henry needed new shoes. Some new clothes. He was growing like a weed and the last pants I’d bought him were already an inch too short. Okay for summer, but absolutely not okay when winter finally rolled around.

Rent was due soon, as well as utilities. All the normal stuff I was drowning in, groceries, car insurance, gas, Henry’s daycare costs. The list went on and on.

Over and above all that, I’d been operating without a washer and dryer for months. Maybe if *hefty* meant what I thought it might from a man like Kent, who spent more on a single lunch than I had on clothes for myself in a year, then I might just get enough money from a deal with Jude to have those serviced.

Maybe even enough to put some aside for a rainy day. It was a daunting prospect to have all that riding on a man who’d seen my O-face, but hey, who needed dignity when you could have a working washer and dryer instead?

Not this gal.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Let’s go tell him.”

Kent nodded. “If you need any help while you’re out there, *call me*. If you need anything at all, let me know.”

“I will.” I wouldn’t. If he felt like he’d brought the deal home after all, then he probably wouldn’t give me that bonus, but now wasn’t the time to argue.

Hope took root in my chest that for just one month, I might not feel like I was digging myself deeper in a hole I would never get out of. I followed Kent back to Jude. He was sipping his coffee next to the exorbitantly expensive machine Kent had had installed, pushing away from the counter as his gaze met my boss’s expectantly.

“Well?”

“Mickey has graciously agreed to take you to the open houses,” he said with a magnanimous smile, like he was making some great sacrifice by

offering me up to the man and had convinced me to do something I hadn't wanted to do.

"Excellent." Jude clapped and rubbed his hands together as he grinned at me. "I'll drive."

He set his cup down and made for the door, and my heart skipped in my chest. This was all happening so fast, it was making my head spin, but it was a chance at breaking a cycle I'd been stuck in for too long, and in order to do that, I would do everything in my power to keep up with him.

CHAPTER 9



JUDE

“This is going to be fun.” I pressed my foot down on the pedal of my newest luxury sports car, a Bugatti Chiron Super Sport I would never regret spending more money on than could ever be considered smart. “How’re you holding up over there, Mick?”

“McKinley or Mickey,” she corrected me, distracted. She swiped her tongue across her lips as she gripped the oh-shit handle and stared straight ahead. “Do you always drive this fast?”

“Yes. I know what I’m doing, though. Trust me. It worked out fine for you the last time, didn’t it? You don’t have to be any more nervous now than you were then.”

“The possibility of me meeting my maker wasn’t as great then as it is now. Slow down.”

“Nah. We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?” She frowned. “I haven’t even given you any addresses yet, which is also why I’m so confused about why we’re going so fast when you don’t know where we’re going.”

“I do know, and it’s not to an open house. Not yet, anyway. Have you seen the time? It’s like, nine-thirty. We’ve got the whole day ahead of us and I haven’t had breakfast yet. Priorities, McKinley.”

She glared daggers at me when we screeched to a stop in the parking lot of my favorite breakfast restaurant. “Why are we here?”

“I just told you.” I pulled up the emergency brake and shut down the engine. “Sustenance. I need it before I can talk business.”

“We’re supposed to be going to see the open houses, not having breakfast.”

I chuckled. “Relax. It’s just food. My treat, and I promise you that we are going to see the open houses. I wouldn’t dream of getting you in trouble with your boss.”

She grumbled to herself as I got out of the car and I jogged around it to open the door for her, but by the time I got to it, she’d already climbed out and was shutting it behind her. “Fine, but you’d better make this fast. Kent will be checking in soon. I guarantee it.”

“If he does, blame it on me. He heard me say that I’ll drive, so he knows you’re in a car with me. That means there’s no way you could be anywhere I’m not. I decided to stop for breakfast, so that’s where we are.”

McKinley sighed, preceding me to the café door and allowing me to push it open before we walked in. We found an open booth, and a server came over, dropped a couple of menus on our table, and took our orders for coffee.

After she left, McKinley looked around curiously. “You’re potentially about to spend five million dollars and we’re having breakfast at a diner?”

“I’m going to spend a lot more than that, but yep.” I grinned. “Their bacon is crispy and the pancakes are fluffy. It’s the best breakfast in the city.”

Her head tilted slowly as those eyes bored into mine. “You don’t live around here. How do you know that?”

I chuckled. “I don’t live around here anymore. My mom’s house is nearby. I grew up a few blocks over.”

As if on instinct, her gaze darted toward the window, like she was searching for a sign that said Jude Olson grew up here. There wasn’t one. Not yet anyway. Maybe one day, there would be. “Seriously? You grew up around here?”

I shrugged, knowing she was looking at the semi-rundown buildings across the street and the weeds growing on the sidewalk and in the parking lot. “Flynn and I both did. We’re damn proud of it, too. We had the best childhood anyone could ask for.”

Maybe that was a slight over exaggeration, but I didn’t really think so. Mom had worked hard to give us everything we needed, and we’d had each other. Getting to the part where having each other felt like a good thing took a bit longer, but eventually, we’d been happy.

“Speaking of children, I didn’t know you had a son. A four-year-old? What’s his name?”

Panic flared in her eyes. “We should talk about the open houses. Tell me more about what you’re looking for in investment properties, other than

location and price tag.”

“Nah, we can talk about that later,” I said. “I’m definitely interested in a few of those listings you pulled up for me, but for now, I want to know more about you.”

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed in curiosity as she looked back at me, but the server came to deliver our coffees and took our food order, so we hit pause in the conversation until after she was gone. “This is a business relationship, Jude. I need to know what you’re looking for in a property in order to guide you to the right one.”

“We’ll get there. Let’s eat first.” I picked up my coffee and watched the steam rise from the surface for a moment. “Okay, so you don’t want to talk to me about your son just yet. That’s fine. Tell me something else about yourself.”

“Like what?”

I shrugged. “Like anything.”

“Fine. Here’s something you need to know about me.” I leaned forward, and a mischievous gleam appeared in her eyes as she picked up her mug. “I didn’t agree to go on a date with you. We’re not going to talk about anything except business, so let’s talk about that.”

I laughed. “Well played. I thought you were going to let me in on a secret, like why you didn’t mention your son when we met at the wedding. We talked about a lot of things that night and yet somehow, he didn’t come up.”

Exhaling slowly, she arched an eyebrow at me. “Why didn’t I tell you I was a single mother with a four-year-old named Henry while you were... down there?” She leaned across the table, lowering her voice to a whisper as she pointed at her crotch. “Gosh, why didn’t I think of that?”

“So his name is Henry then.” I grinned, winking at her as I leaned back.

Just like before, I liked her sassy attitude. She was amusing. And a bit spicy. She made the air around me feel like an electrical storm was seconds away. It was exhilarating. My heart beat a little faster as I stared back at her.

“You didn’t have to mention him while I was eating you out. We did talk a lot before that.”

Her cheeks turned bright pink and she widened her eyes at me, her voice lowering again. “Do you have to say it like that? And loudly?”

“Why not? I told you before that I didn’t care if someone got pictures of us *in flagrante delicto*. Why would I be shy to talk about it when I wouldn’t

have minded it being caught on film?”

“Clever,” she muttered before a faint smile touched her lips. “If memory serves, that particular expression refers to being caught in an act of sexual misconduct. Were you misconducting yourself that night, Mr. Olson?”

I snorted as I tried to push back another laugh, shaking my head at her as I finally took a sip of my coffee. “Touché. I wasn’t misconducting myself, no. I do get the sense that you feel like that’s what you were doing, though. I just don’t understand why.”

“Really? It makes no sense to you that I might be a touch embarrassed by the man I had a one-night stand with showing up at my office? Speaking to my boss? No? Is this really not making any sense to you?”

“That depends,” I joked. “Is there a reason you don’t want Kent to know about us?”

“Yes.” Just when I felt like there was a giant boulder starting to sprout in my stomach, she rolled her eyes. “He’s my boss, Jude. I’m not in the habit of sharing the intimate details of my sex life with him.”

The boulder disappeared. “Oh, well, I guess that’s good. I’m sorry if I caught you off guard. For what it’s worth, I didn’t know you work there.”

“I assumed as much,” she said with an undercurrent of sincerity in her voice. “You seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see you, so don’t apologize. I didn’t jump to the conclusion that you’re stalking me.”

“That’s good to know, but I might just stalk you now. I meant it when I said I wanted to know more about you. I really do. For example, how do you know Ariane? We never quite got that far at the wedding.”

McKinley sipped her coffee, then pushed the cup away to make space for her plate when our food arrived. Over delicious pancakes and bacon, she finally stopped trying to steer the conversation back to business and relaxed just the tiniest bit.

“Ariane’s family and mine ran in some of the same circles growing up.”

My brows twitched in surprise. “Was your family involved in clean-energy or politics?”

If they’d run in the same circles, those were the only two options. Her family had to have been involved in one of them.

“Politics,” she said, surprising me even more.

After Flynn had met Ariane, I’d come to know a thing or two about politicians’ daughters, and she didn’t strike me as one. “Are you serious? Your parents are in politics too?”

She shrugged. “My father used to be. Ariane and I went to the same elementary school and my dad and her mom used to be invited to all the same fancy dinner parties and events. She and I connected since we were the only two girls our age who got dragged along to all those events. Eventually, we started hanging out together at school too. We became friends.”

Interesting.

The way Ariane told it, she didn’t have many of those. I also knew neither Flynn nor Ariane had ever mentioned a McKinley—or a Mickey—or her son, for that matter. “All of this was back in elementary school?”

She nodded with a soft smile on her lips, her eyes slightly unfocused as if she was remembering something. “Yep. We’ve known each other a long time, I suppose.”

“Sure, but what happened?”

She frowned. “Between me and Ariane? Nothing.”

“Something must have happened. She’s married to my half-brother and I spend a fair amount of time with them. I’d never even heard a whisper of your name from them before the wedding.”

“Oh, right.” She thought it over before she shrugged. “Well, nothing really happened. Her mom just moved her to a different, even fancier school. At first, we still talked every day but then I guess life just got too busy.”

She paused for a beat, her head shaking a little and her eyes still unfocused. “We also developed our own interests. She was always off cleaning up a beach or supporting her mother over weekends and I took up crafting. We drifted apart, but we still catch up every once in a while.”

“And then she asked you to be a bridesmaid?”

McKinley smiled. “Yeah. I was surprised at that invitation myself, but I understood it once she explained about her mom. At that point, almost a year had passed since we’d checked in with each other last, but I was still glad to be there to support her on her big day. Especially if that meant saving her from the wolves her mother would’ve put in her bridal party.”

“On that, we agree. Rumor had it that her mom had a bunch of socialites all lined up and ready to trot out.” I mimed wiping sweat from my brow. “So what happened to your father? He end up making it?”

“In politics?”

I nodded, and she shook her head. “No. It didn’t really pan out for him.”

I wondered why, but she breezed past it and started telling stories about the things that she and Ariane had gotten up to as kids at all those fancy

parties instead. Deciding against pushing her on the subject of her dad's political failure for the moment, I sat back and listened to her stories, finding myself chuckling at her antics even when she'd been a child.

I'd thought it before, but McKinley really was a breath of fresh air. She also had a lot more layers to her than I'd realized, and the more I got to know, the more I found myself wanting to pull back every last layer to discover exactly who she was.

I just didn't quite understand why.

CHAPTER 10



MCKINLEY

After a late, long breakfast, Jude and I finally headed out to go take a look at those investment properties. It turned out that in my inexperience, I'd missed an important part of this whole thing. I wasn't actually going to be the one showing the properties.

I'd been so nervous that I'd failed to realize the realtors having the open houses were going to be showing them. I was just there.

There, but out of my depth and trying my best. I didn't want to let Kent down and I didn't want to mess up an opportunity to make some extra money.

"Let's check out the properties that are in Manhattan today," he'd said as we climbed into his car after breakfast. "It's gotten a little late to head upstate, so we'll have to look at those some other time. Choose your top three in Manhattan and tell me where we're going first."

After blinking hard and feeling the sudden, crushing weight of a five-million-dollar responsibility settling on my chest, I'd gone over the listings mentally and then looked up the first address. Apartment number one had been a swing and a miss.

Coming in just over the five-million-dollar minimum, it was the cheapest of all the listings we had to show him. Jude had been unimpressed with the apartment's size and location. He'd been nice enough about it, but Kent had texted me a frowning face emoji when I'd let him know the client wouldn't be putting in an offer.

With more at stake, I'd nervously given him the address of an old brownstone for potential investment property number two. Once again, he'd been unimpressed.

“That place needs a lot more work than I’m willing to put into a six-million-dollar property,” he said as we got back into his stupidly expensive car.

It didn’t have a backseat. *Where does one put the car seat?*

I realized he didn’t need to have space for one, but it just seemed silly to buy a car that didn’t even have a backseat—especially for how much I suspected this thing cost. I didn’t know much about cars, but I recognized the logo on this one, and even I knew they did *not* come cheap.

“This is why I asked you at breakfast what you were looking for in a property,” I said, trying to keep the pout out of my voice as I settled in against the buttery soft leather seat. “Before we go any further, answer the question you should’ve answered then instead of quizzing me about my son and my personal life.”

He let out a bark of easygoing laughter. “Yeah, okay. Maybe you have a point. I, uh, I’m looking at value for money, obviously. I’m also good with having to do a little renovating. If it needs a fresh coat of paint slapped on the walls, that’s fine, but I don’t want to have to spend almost as much on renovation as I do on the property itself and I definitely don’t want to have to spend the next six months to a year working with a construction crew.”

I frowned. “The brownstone would’ve been fine with just a fresh coat of paint slapped on the walls.”

Jude gave me a disbelieving look. “Let me put it to you a different way. Would you have gone to live there with Henry if someone had simply painted the walls?”

I thought back to all the maintenance that had gone undone ever since the owners had moved to an old-age home. “No, I don’t think I would’ve. Point taken. Okay. Give me a minute.”

Picking up the tablet again, I flicked through the listings and considered the last few in Manhattan itself. There was one in particular I was interested in taking him to, but the pressure was on now. I had to check the state it was in before I even mentioned it.

Once I’d flicked through the pictures again just to be sure, I nodded. “Okay, so the penthouse of a fifteen-unit building right across the street from Central Park is available.”

He groaned. “Why are you only telling me about it now?”

“Because you refused to tell me what you were looking for before,” I teased. “Apartments are very popular as investment properties and you know

as well as I do that you could never go wrong with a brownstone in New York City. If you'd told me this morning exactly what you wanted, however, I'd have eliminated those two and taken you to this one first."

Jude flashed me a proud smile before he pulled off, putting the brownstone in his rearview mirror as we headed toward the park. "Those are pretty valid reasons for taking me to those other two places. You're good at this."

"Hardly." I thought about how intimidated I'd been by the showing realtors of the properties we'd just been to.

With their perfectly tailored suits, pearly white smiles, and assertive attitudes, they were everything I wasn't. Confident, successful, and knowledgeable.

They also knew I wasn't one of them since real estate sales at this level was a pretty exclusive club, and I'd seen the way they'd looked at me. Like I was something stuck to the bottom of their shoes. *Judgmental assholes.*

As soon as we stood in front of the last property we were going to look at today, I knew Jude was interested. Everything about him had changed, his focus visibly sharper as he stood still in front of the building, looking up and down the street and assessing everything about it before we even went inside.

"You like it," I murmured as the doorman let us in and we strode toward the elevator. "I'm not surprised. It's the kind of building movies and TV shows about the city are made about."

"True," he said, jabbing the button to go up before he turned to me.

That light brown hair was styled away from his face again, his jaw clean shaven and his gaze alert. Between that, his suit, and the expensive watch on his wrist, I had to admit that he fit right in here. It looked like he belonged, whereas I definitely didn't.

Me with my pink-stained shirt and day-two slacks. It was weird being on the inside like this while actually never having been further on the outside. I sighed, and Jude slanted his head. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just a nice building, you know? Staying in a place like this would be a dream come true for just about anyone. You wouldn't go wrong investing in it."

"Yeah," he mused, his gaze suddenly flicking around the lobby just before the doors slid open. "I agree, but let's not get too excited. We haven't seen the actual penthouse yet. It could be a dump."

It was not a dump.

The elevator deposited us just a few paces away from the front door, and while the lobby and the street front had been luxurious, even just this hallway was out of this freaking world. What appeared to be original hardwood floors were polished to a gleam beneath our feet, the wallpaper crisp and new.

The showing realtor opened the door before Jude had even finished knocking once, and he grinned like a shark when he saw Jude, but then his face dropped when he saw me. “Welcome. Come on in.”

Jude nodded, but when he motioned for me to go first, I saw the realtor’s disapproval written all over his features. He’d invited Jude in, not me, and he’d been hoping I’d wait outside. *Tough luck, buddy. Where he goes, I go. My bonus depends on it.*

Even so, the realtor focused all his attention on my client, obviously having decided to ignore the fact that my department store shoes were even touching the floor in here. He shot Jude a wide smile and ushered him further in, leaving me to drift along behind them.

After the men introduced themselves to one another, the realtor jumped straight into his pitch. “Now I don’t need to tell you that this place is a once in a lifetime find, Jude. It’s a steal at the price, too. Five thousand square feet of prime, luxury real estate, my man. It won’t be on the market long.”

Jude folded his arms over his chest as he walked through the spacious main living area toward the bank of windows that boasted an unrivaled view of Central Park. “It’s beautiful, but why don’t we cut through the bullshit? Show me around without any of the flowery language. A place like this should sell itself.”

I hid a smile as the realtor gaped at him, but then the man grinned and nodded slowly. “Yeah, you’re right, and it will. I’ve already had someone here earlier who’s very interested in making an offer, and that’s not bullshit. An heiress who wants to buy the place for her kid.”

I practically saw the challenge registering behind Jude’s eyes. “Okay, then. You’d better show it to me before the phone rings. Let’s go.”

While the man took Jude through, I couldn’t help myself from wandering around with them, quickly falling behind as I admired the place. I was in awe of how beautiful it was, fully restored from when it had been built in 1920, but somehow, the owners had kept all of its original charm.

That heiress who was thinking about buying it for her child sure was onto something. As I paused in one of the bedrooms, I imagined what it had to feel like to be able to gift your child with a place like this.

Hell, as I stood in that bedroom with its arched windows, glossy, original hardwood floors, and beamed ceiling, I imagined Henry in it even now. Maybe he was too young to live here by himself like the heiress's child presumably would be, but man, even he would love it.

It took no imagination at all to picture this room full of educational toys, books, and a cool bunkbed. I sighed as I blinked myself out of the fantasy. *If only.*

Jude poked his head in before I plucked up the courage to actually leave the room I could so clearly envision Henry living in. "McKinley?"

"Yep." I gave myself a mental shake and spun to look at him. "What's up?"

"I'm going to make an offer," he said. "Do you mind giving Kent a call for me? Just ask him to get the offer in as soon as possible. Please and thank you."

I stared at him, completely and utterly shocked. I'd known we were looking at this place as a potential investment property for him, but the reality was a different thing entirely. Very soon, this penthouse would belong to him—and I was going to get a *hefty bonus* just for being under this roof with him right now.

That was crazy.

"Of course, I'll get it done immediately." I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. "Congratulations, Jude. It's a magnificent place. Really."

"Yeah. Thanks." He gave me a strange look. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," I repeated, feeling more than a little bit lightheaded. "Let me call Kent. I'll be right with you."

Unsurprisingly, my boss was thrilled when I told him the news. "That's excellent work, Mickey. You'll definitely be rewarded for your efforts."

Part of me had needed to hear him confirm that I was actually going to get paid extra for this, but unlike this morning, my thoughts didn't immediately turn to my regular expenses. If this was real, which I now believed it might just be, I started concocting dreams of using that money for first and last month's rent on a new place.

Not this place, obviously, but a new place.

Henry and I needed to get out of the tiny condo we were in right now. I'd been dreaming about it ever since he'd outgrown the crib I'd had him in as a baby. "Bring Jude back to the office with you and I'll have the paperwork waiting. See you soon, Mickey. Bye."

“Yeah, bye,” I murmured absently before hanging up.

After waiting for Jude and the realtor to say their goodbyes, we drove back to our offices but he stopped me before I could get out of the car. Instead, he turned to look at me with a serious expression on his face.

“Come to the Hamptons with me for a couple of nights next week,” he said. “There are some places there I want to check out and I want you with me.”

With that, all my plans and daydreams came crashing down around my head and I blinked. “I can’t, Jude. I have a little boy and responsibilities, and I’m not a realtor.”

I got out of the car with irritation tightening my gut. Jude was so out of touch with my reality, and while playing make-believe with him today had been fun, I couldn’t just go *check out some places in the Hamptons for a couple of nights*. I got that he was used to getting what he wanted. God, I’d been on the receiving end of *being* the plaything that he wanted, so I really did get it, but for just a minute there, I’d thought he was a little more understanding than that.

Going to the Hamptons to look at properties that cost more than I would make in my entire life and leaving Henry behind with someone while I did it was impossible. Why do all rich people have to be so completely self-absorbed?

I sighed as frustration coursed through me, though I didn’t even really know if the strength of my reaction was warranted. All I knew was that I’d thought he was better than that. More down to earth, and it shouldn’t have annoyed me so much that I’d been wrong, but it did.

Kent was waiting as I stormed into the office. He had a wide grin on his face. “Where’s Jude? I got everything ready for his signature.”

“Right behind me,” I said. “I need to get a few things done in my office before the end of the day. You don’t need me while you’re finalizing the offer, do you?”

He shook his head and gave me another beaming smile. “No, we’ll be fine. Go do your thing. I’ve got it from here, Mickey.”

I nodded and shut my office door behind me, hoping against all hope that Jude didn’t pull me back into this thing. He and Kent could go to the Hamptons together, just two single, childless guys spending a few million dollars together.

No biggie, right? I scoffed as I shook my head. Their life was not mine,

and while my brief foray into it today had been enlightening, I would choose staying home with Henry every day of the week—and twice on Sunday.

CHAPTER 11



JUDE

I was the last to arrive at my mother's house for dinner. Flynn and Ariane's SUV was parked in the driveway next to Beau's car, and I parked behind my brother and his wife, planning on holding them hostage until I was ready to leave.

Grinning as I put the car in park, I inhaled deeply, preparing myself for my mother's boyfriend and her yapping dogs. Beau wasn't a bad guy, though. It was more the fact that I didn't trust any man not to hurt her after everything she'd gone through.

The dogs, on the other hand, were that bad. Little rat-like demons who yipped nonstop and had been spoiled rotten by my doting mother. I sighed, climbing out of the car and resolving that neither of the rats were going to pee on me today. I was keeping my feet and ankles well outside of the splash zone, even if it meant having to sit with my feet up.

Less than thirty seconds after I'd knocked, my mom opened the door with her grandbaby on her hip. Willow was babbling happily and I lit up when I saw her. "Hello, little niece. How are you doing today?"

She smiled back at me and my mother chuckled when I stole Willow from her as she stepped aside. "It's good to know you've got your priorities straight, Jude. It's nice to see you. Hello, darling."

I cradled Willow's little body against mine, snuggling her as I grinned at my mother and leaned forward to plant a big kiss on her cheek. "Hey, Mom. Willow is not *a* priority. She's *the* priority. But it's good to see you, too. You good?"

"Always." She gave me a quick hug on the side I wasn't holding Willow, then motioned me in. "The others are in the living room. The food still has

about thirty minutes to go, so if you want to take our little princess there for now, I'll grab you a drink. Beer?"

"Yes, please." I stared down at Willow's delicate features and those curious, huge blue eyes surveying my face while I held her, and just for a moment, I forgot where I was. The little girl had me in her spell, and I was damn happy to be there.

"Jude?"

"Yep." I blinked hard as I looked up at my mom.

She had this adoring smile on her face as she watched me with Willow, her arms crossed loosely over her chest. Mom was wearing one of her usual flowy, Bohemian-style dresses with a brown belt cinched around her waist and feathered earrings in her ears, and right now, she looked the very picture of one of those free-spirited, goodhearted grans from those feel-good movies chicks liked.

"It suits you," she said quietly, her head tilting to one side as she kept smiling at me. "Having a child in your arms. You should look into having one of your own, but for now, take Willow to look at her parents' wedding photos with them and I'll bring that beer."

Since I'd known Mom was going to get on my ass about giving her another grandchild when I'd stolen Willow from her, her comment didn't come as any surprise whatsoever. Another guy might've rolled his eyes at his mom for it, and in Flynn's case, even just a year ago, he would've been very vocal about her not getting her hopes up, but I just shrugged.

"Maybe I will. Eventually." I glanced at the entrance to the living room, hearing Flynn, Ariane, and Beau's voices filtering out as they looked at the pictures of their big day. "How about Willow and I just come help you in the kitchen? I was at the wedding. I don't need to see the pictures."

She pursed her lips at me, an amused smile growing on them as she shook her head and pointed at the living room. "Go. The pictures are beautiful and it's a rite of passage for every married couple to show off their wedding pictures. We never thought we'd see the day with Flynn, so go on. Fake some excitement if you have to, but put your back into it."

Nodding dutifully as she gave me a meaningful look, I went into the living room to join the rest of the family and she went to the kitchen to check on the food. Flynn, Ariane, and Beau were settled on the sofa with a tablet between them on Ariane's lap.

They looked up when Willow and I walked in, and Ariane smiled at me

with her baby in my arms. “Again, huh? Looks like somebody has a fan.”

“The biggest,” I admitted without even trying to deny it. I hugged her and then shook hands with Flynn and Beau. My mother’s boyfriend motioned me into the spot he’d been in on the sofa. “Have a seat. You’ll have a better view from there.”

I waved him off with my free hand. “Nah, that’s okay. You sit. I’ll stand behind you.”

Flynn gave me a knowing smirk. “The last thing you want to do is look at the pictures, huh?”

“Of course I want to see them.” I scoffed. “It’s just, uh, Beau looks so comfortable and the princess will prefer it if I stand.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Don’t blame the baby, dude. Besides, we just got these back from the photographer and there are a few great ones of you. Trust me, you want to see them.”

Scooting up to make space for me between him and Ariane, he motioned to the TV. “She’s going to cast them so everyone has a good view, but sit here so we can make sure you actually look.”

Cornered and knowing it, I sat down between them. Mom walked in and handed over my beer before she took a seat on the armrest next to Beau. Her arm wound around his shoulders and he rested his head on hers.

Part of me wanted to feel sick at the sight of their obvious affection, but I just couldn’t do it. Mom had been through a lot in her life, with two husbands leaving her with their sons and never looking back. Beau was good to her. Caring. Affectionate. Supportive.

Hell, he even put up with me and my brother, which was saying something.

As the slideshow started on the TV, I held on to Willow and watched her parents’ big day unfold on the screen, and I couldn’t help but feel a little lonely. Sure, I had the baby, but Flynn was holding Ariane and Mom was holding Beau, and here I was, a glorified babysitter.

Until I saw a picture that had me in the background, making McKinley laugh. It brought a smile to my lips and made me feel just a little bit less lonely. She was pissed at me at the moment, but she and I clicked.

There was nothing serious there, but at least there was someone out there I had a connection with. *That means I am able to connect with people, right?*

Ariane turned to me just before the picture changed. “Why did you think it was a good idea to hit on her, of all people?”

I frowned slowly, a little shocked by the protective hostility in her voice. “Uh, she was hot?”

“Mickey doesn’t deserve to be toyed with, Jude,” she said fiercely, that same protective tone from her voice sparking in her eyes as she gave me a look that meant business. “I know this may seem like a foreign concept to you, but not everyone is built for casual, no strings attached flings.”

Defensiveness reared its ugly head deep within my soul. I didn’t even know why. What she’d said was true, but somehow, it felt like she was taking it out of context with reference to what had happened between McKinley and me.

“It wasn’t my intention to toy with her. She was just as down for a good time as I was, and she didn’t seem at all pissy about it when I saw her again.”

Flynn’s eyes shot wide open as he leaned past her to look at me. “You saw her again? When? Why? Are you seeing her now?”

“No.” I scoffed but then quieted my voice when the noise made an almost sleeping Willow start in my arms. “I made an appointment with a realtor to see some investment properties and it turns out that she works for said realtor.”

“Well, it’s hardly like she’s going to get into it with you in front of her boss,” Ariane said. “Did she know you were the client they were seeing?”

“Nope, and if she wanted to get into it with me, she had plenty of time to do it while she was showing me potential properties. In fact, we had breakfast together before she showed them to me and she found me the first property I’ve bought to expand my portfolio.”

Ariane’s eyes flicked from one of mine to the other, and I saw the worry brewing in them. She chewed the inside of her cheek and then sighed. “Are you going to see her again?”

Now is not the time to admit that she turned me down for the Hamptons. “I don’t know. I’m going to be working with her firm for more investment properties, so it’s possible that we’ll run into each other from time to time.”

Her gaze turned pleading, a slight furrow appearing between her eyebrows. “I can’t interfere in your business relationship with her boss, but please keep your distance from her when you’re at their offices.”

“What? Why?”

Ariane looked right into my eyes, her chin lifting just a fraction of an inch. “She’s been through a lot, Jude. Don’t complicate her life just for the fun of it.”

I couldn't help but wonder what she meant, but she turned back to the TV, effectively ending our conversation. If Flynn, Mom, and Beau hadn't been around, I might've pushed the issue but it didn't feel right doing it when we were here for a family dinner.

Ultimately, however, McKinley was on my mind now and she didn't leave it while we finished watching the slideshow. She also didn't leave it when Mom's timer went off and she announced it was time for us to head to the dining room.

And she stayed right at the forefront of my mind for the rest of the night. Since Ariane kept shooting me these questioning looks though, I tried my best to act natural.

As we filtered into the dining room, I gently set a sleeping Willow down in her stroller and covered her with a thin blanket. Then I went to take my seat. Mom and Ariane carried roasting dishes filled with roast chicken, potatoes, vegetables, and gravy to the table, and my mouth watered as the delicious scent of my mother's home-cooked food filled the air.

Mom and Beau asked Flynn and Ariane all about the honeymoon as we dished up, happily leaving me to my thoughts of McKinley without any interruption or more looks from Ariane. Mom had brought two plastic plates for her yippy dogs, and she fed them from the table while we ate.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but Beau smiling when he noticed it broke my stride. If he adored even that quirk of hers, then maybe this was the man she was going to grow old with. She'd been looking for that man since my dad had left her, and the thought that she might've found him was comforting.

After dinner, Beau cleaned up and Flynn and I exchanged an approving glance. While my gaze was on his, he pushed back his chair and inclined his head toward the kitchen. "Let's go get some fresh air. I definitely ate too much. I need to stand for a while until it settles."

I nodded, patting my bulging stomach and groaning at the slight pain that came from it when I stood up. "Why do we always over-indulge when we're here?"

Mom chuckled, winking at me as I left the table. "In your case, it's because you eat too much takeout and you need a good woman to break that nasty habit of yours."

Ariane gave me a look that said *Just as long as that woman isn't Mickey*, and I dipped my chin in a nod in response. I still didn't know what she'd meant earlier, but Flynn was about to enlighten me.

As we walked out into the backyard and got comfortable flat on our backs under the stars on the lawn, he glanced at me. “She wasn’t joking about Mickey. That’s why she gave you that look.”

“Yeah, I assumed so.” I closed my eyes and focused on the cool night air on my skin to distract me from the discomfort of my stomach. “Why is that? Why is she so protective of her? The way McKinley tells it, they haven’t even been that close for years.”

“Whether or not they’re close doesn’t change the fact that Mickey is a good woman, bro. She’s not the type who’s going to fuck around and not develop feelings. If you’re looking for just another fun time, pick someone else. She’s not the woman for that.”

“Why does everyone assume that’s all I’m after?” I grumbled.

Flynn chuckled. “Isn’t it? Are you honestly expecting me to believe that you’ve changed your ways and are ready to start seeing her seriously? Because if not, then do what Arrie asked you and keep your distance.”

I mulled it over. “Yeah, okay. I’ll try, but I like her. Not in the sense that I want to get serious with her right now, but she’s nice. Different, you know?”

“I know all too well.” He sighed. “Just be careful, okay? Mickey has a lot on her plate and she doesn’t need you complicating her life for no good reason other than wanting to get in her pants.”

“But in her pants is such a fun place to be.” I pretended to pout before I reached out and smacked his side. “I’m not that big an asshole, Flynn. In fact, many people say I’m the nice one between the two of us.”

“You *are* the nice one between the two of us, but since I’m the other one, that’s not something to be particularly proud of. I’m not nice and I’ve always known it. Just watch yourself with her, would you?”

“Already said I would.” I opened my eyes again and looked up at the inky black sky and the stars dotting it. “We need to sit down at some point and decide what we’re going to do with the oil rig.”

Just after Flynn had stopped working in the oil industry, he and I had gotten a great deal on a rig he’d worked on before. It’d seemed like a no-brainer to buy it, but now, I was seriously considering selling.

“Yeah, I know, but Ariane has pointed out that if it changes hands, it’ll continue to be detrimental to the environment and you know how she feels about that. But look, at the end of the day, it’s your call. I trust you with this stuff. Just know that you also have to become passionate about trying to protect the planet at some point. We all do.”

“Point taken.”

I already was passionate about trying to protect the planet, though. Before Flynn had even quit his job or made his money, I'd gotten involved in a number of local causes. I did what I could, when I could, organizing and attending beach cleanups, helping with fundraising and lobbying.

Unlike Ariane, I just didn't feel like it had to be my sole focus. Buying the oil rig in the first place had been a mistake. A knee-jerk reaction to being able to afford something like a *fucking oil rig*.

It'd made us some money, to be fair, so as an investment, it hadn't been the worst, but for the environmentalist in me, it was becoming more of an issue than it was worth. I didn't want it hanging over my head, and while the smart thing to do would've been to just sell it and wash my hands of whatever destruction it caused, I just couldn't quite seem to get there.

Whatever I decided, it needed to be smart financially and for the future of kids like Willow, who would be left to deal with the mess we were making of the planet. I didn't want to leave that to her. It felt like I needed to do my part. I just didn't know how to do it yet.

CHAPTER 12



MCKINLEY

At work on Monday morning, Kent came into my office waving a check. *The bonus he promised me for Jude's apartment! It has to be.*

My heart catapulted into my throat and it took everything I had not to leap up and yell, *Gimme, gimme, gimme!*

With my pulse racing, I did my best to remain calm and I smiled as I leaned back in my chair, gripping the armrests to keep my hands from acting of their own accord to pluck that damn check from between his fingers.

"Hey, boss. What's up?"

Kent sat on the edge of my desk, his usual flirty smile on his lips as he bent his head toward me and looked deep into my eyes. "You did brilliant work with Jude Olson, Mickey. Of course, with me as a teacher, how could you not, right?"

"Of course." I swallowed, trying so damn hard not to stare at the check like I was mentally trying to summon it into my hands. "Thank you for the opportunity, Kent."

"You're welcome. I brought him in and you sold him. We make a good team with me at the helm. Keep up the excellent work."

All that bravado for going to meet Jude at the door. *Sigh.*

Kent fancied himself as being all alpha, and in some ways, he was, but at times like this, it just fell flat. Well, depending on how many zeroes were on that check, anyway.

He smirked at me as he got up and straightened his already arrow-straight tie. "I'm off to do a showing. Hold down the fort, would you?"

"Of course." I smiled politely and waited for him to leave before I snapped up the folded check he'd left at the edge of my desk.

My heart pounded in my ears as my fingers brushed the thick paper, and I felt slightly faint. This was my first bonus for making a sale on a property, and if it was even just a fraction of the hundreds of thousands Kent was going to get in commission for a property that had gone for so many millions of dollars, then Henry and I would definitely be able to move.

My hands trembled as I reached for the edges of the check and unfolded it, my breath bated as I closed my eyes and released a slow breath. Opening just one of my eyes a crack, I sighed and my heart plummeted into my stomach.

Five hundreds dollars? So much for moving.

Disappointment seared my insides, making them churn with a bitterness I hadn't felt in a long time. *So Kent gets hundreds of thousands for doing pretty much nothing, and I get hundreds for finding the listing, spending a day with the client, and showing him the place he ended up buying.*

It seemed horrifically unfair. I knew it was Kent's name on the door and his reputation that had brought Jude to it, but if I hadn't agreed to go with him that day, he'd have walked. He'd stayed for me. And it seemed I deserved a little bit more for what I'd done.

As I tucked the check into my wallet, I did my best to look on the bright side. The bonus wasn't as much as I'd been hoping for, but it was still going to come in handy in helping me cover some of my expenses. That was something.

Not much, but something.

A knock sounded from the door as I slid my wallet back into my purse, and my pulse skyrocketed again. *Maybe it's Kent coming to say that he was just kidding and to hand over the real check this time.*

I looked at the door, sending up a quick prayer that I was right. But nope.

"Come on in," I called, and when the door opened, it wasn't my boss with another check, but it was still a pretty pleasant surprise. "Ariane? What are you doing here?"

My childhood friend smiled and held up the takeout coffees she had in her hands. "I thought you might appreciate some caffeine and I was in the neighborhood, so hi. I hope it's okay that I'm popping in like this."

"Yes. Of course." I blinked past my surprise, pushing my chair back and getting up to give her a quick hug and accepting the coffee she handed over. "Thank you for this. You have no idea how much I need it."

"I've considered mainlining caffeine myself a few times since I became a

mother. I honestly have no idea how you do it all by yourself.”

I smiled as I stepped back and waved her in. “It helps that I’ve never known what it is to have help with a child. You can’t miss something you’ve never had.”

She chuckled, gracefully striding further into the office and lowering herself into my visitor’s chair. Then again, everything about Ariane was graceful. She’d been raised for the high-society life, with all the trimmings and trappings of the daughter of a millionaire congresswoman.

Her straight blonde hair always shone brightly and there was never so much as a single strand out of place. Even with a baby at home, her makeup was beautifully and naturally done and her cream pantsuit fit her curvy body to a tee.

Growing up, I’d been the daughter of a politician myself, but I’d never carried it quite as well as she always had. And these days? *Pfft, forget it.*

“How’s Flynn?” I asked as we sat down and sipped our coffees. “I’m happy for you, you know. He seems like a great guy. I haven’t spent a lot of time getting to know him, but it looks like you snagged a good one.”

A dopey smile spread on her full lips. “I definitely did, which is another reason why I’m here. I wanted to thank you for being a bridesmaid. It meant so much that you were able to drop everything and stand up with me after so long.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” I said sincerely. “It’s been a long time, but you know you’ll always have a special place in my heart. We were like sisters once. Time can’t take that away from us.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose you’re right. I hope you know that it goes both ways. If you ever need anything, I’ll always be right here.”

I waved her off. “Thanks, but I’m just grateful that we have the opportunity to reconnect.”

“Same here,” she said. “I never really felt our story was complete. It’s good to have you back in my life. At least sort of.”

“Let’s hope we can slowly work our way back to where we were and get rid of that ‘sort of,’” I said, making air-quotes around the words. “How’s little Willow? I’d love to spend some more time with her, too. She seemed like such a good baby at the wedding.”

“She is.” Ariane smiled. “How’s Henry? You didn’t have any trouble finding someone to look after him for the wedding, did you? I know it was a commitment and that you have a lot going on. I meant to offer to get him a

babysitter if you needed one. It just completely slipped my mind and I'm so sorry."

I chuckled. "Don't be. It wasn't a problem. My friend Tess had him for the day, and he adores Auntie Tess. They had fun together. As for how he is, he's amazing. I can't imagine my life without him, even if it does mean that I'm always beyond busy."

"Now I'm jealous of Auntie Tess." She pouted playfully, sipping her coffee as she swung her arm over the back of the chair and got comfortable. "One day, he'll adore Auntie Ariane just as much. Just you watch."

I laughed. "I've learned never to doubt you. How's married life treating you? You're not regretting it yet?"

She made her eyes wide and shook her head. "Not at all. I could never regret Flynn. Besides, I can't live without him. I tried not to take much notice of him for a long time, but he just stuck like glue. I love him to bits."

"I saw the way you two looked at each other and I'm pretty sure he feels the same way."

From what little I'd seen of the two of them together so far, they were one of those perfect couples. They laughed a lot, challenged each other, and at the same time, couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other. I knew I'd only seen them in the run-up to and then at their wedding, and that they were newlyweds now, but it still felt like they had that deeper connection I'd always wanted.

She smiled. "Well, he stood up to my mother in order to date me and he's been doing it almost every week since, so that must mean he loves me too."

My eyebrows hiked up as I nodded. "Man, he must *more than* love you. He must be over the moon for you to put up with her. How is he with Willow? I overheard a few people at the wedding talking about how they couldn't believe he'd gotten married and had a child. It seemed like he surprised the socks off a lot of people when he settled down."

"Oh, he did." Her eyes sparkled with unshed laughter as her head shook. "He's great with her, though. He's been at home with her since she was born and he's absolutely rocking being a dad."

The offhanded comment hit me right in the gut. I'd been a single mother from before Henry had even been born. Which was definitely better than the alternative of having to try spending my life with his father, who had turned out to be a huge dud, but still.

Ariane was only five months into her parenting journey and she'd already

experienced a side of it I never would. A slight flare of jealousy went off in my stomach, but I mentally stomped it out immediately.

She'd made her choices and I'd made mine. I couldn't exactly shun her for the fact that I'd made a pretty difficult bed to sleep in.

"Enough about me," she said enthusiastically. "What about you? How's work? How's life? What's new?"

"Oh, uh, not much. I have a job I don't hate and a wonderful son, but that's about the only thing going on in my life."

Sad, but so true.

She chuckled. "A job you don't hate? Now that's high praise. Your boss should put it on the website."

I rolled my eyes at her. "Knowing my boss, he'd turn it into a glowing review about how he's the best boss ever. We'd have to give him an award."

She laughed, but I saw the devious spark that entered her eyes just seconds before she spoke again. "So, uh, speaking of your boss, I heard Jude met him last week."

Not so subtle, my friend. "Yeah, he did. Much to everyone's surprise. I honestly wasn't expecting to see him again unless I ran into him somewhere with you."

Her teeth sank into her lower lip. "Are you, uh, are you okay?"

"Of course." I frowned. "It was a fun, one-time thing. I don't regret it at all. I just kind of needed to let my hair down a bit, and he seemed like the perfect person to do it with."

"So something *did* happen?" she asked softly.

I nodded, cringing a little when I realized I'd just confirmed her suspicion. "Yes, it did, but don't worry. Like I said, it was just a one-time thing to blow off some steam."

Ariane looked back at me with worry creeping across her features, tightening them before she let out a deep breath. "I just wanted to make sure that you had your eyes wide open and that you're not expecting anything from him. He's, uh, a work in romantic progress. I mean, he's not a bad guy. He's pretty great actually, but I'm just not sure he's at a place where he wants something serious."

I laughed. "Like I have time for a relationship. That's definitely not what I'm looking for, so don't sweat it. He and I are on the same page."

She searched my eyes for a moment before she let out a relieved breath and smiled. "I apologize for sticking my nose in. I was just trying to protect

you and to protect my brother-in-law from himself, if I'm being honest."

"Well, consider your brother-in-law safe," I joked. "You're right about him being a great guy. I don't know him very well, but he was perfectly honest and open. We laughed a bit and had some fun together, but neither of us expected it to become anything more."

"That's really good news," she said, clearly relieved as the stress eased out of her features and she nodded toward a picture of Henry on my desk. "Tell me about him. I feel like I've missed too much."

As I started gushing about Henry, I realized it felt good to talk to her about him. To let her back into my life—even if I had fibbed a little about Jude.

Not about my expectations. There hadn't been any and there still weren't, but even after she'd left, I found myself thinking about him instead of the disappointment of not having enough money to move. It was weird, but despite Ariane's warning about him, all of the disappointment deep down inside was still because of the bonus instead of not having a future with him.

And still, the disappointment wasn't the first thing on my mind. Jude was, and it remained that way for the rest of the morning. I didn't care that a relationship with him wasn't in the cards. Part of me just wanted to spend a little bit more time with him. Even if he truly didn't understand me or the position I was in at all.

CHAPTER 13



JUDE

“**W**hy does Mom get to babysit Willow?” I complained when Flynn and Ariane joined me at the table I’d reserved for us for dinner and drinks.

Flynn laughed as he clasped a hand around my shoulder. “Because you asked us to meet you here and this place is *not* child friendly.”

I looked around and it took me a moment to realize it, but he was right. There was no one under at least twenty-five in here, the vibe was trendy, and the food on the plates being carried past us looked like works of art. “There’s nary a chicken nugget in sight, but she’s not eating yet, so does it really matter?”

Ariane pressed a kiss to my cheek when I stood up to hug her. “A place like this would boot us for trying to bring in a child. Besides, it’s frowned upon to bring a baby to a bar.”

“It’s a *restaurant* and bar,” I said, placing the emphasis where it needed to go. “Kids are allowed in restaurants.”

“Not in restaurants like this, they’re not,” Flynn teased as he pulled out a chair for Ariane. “She will be allowed here one day. Approximately twenty-four years from now.”

I sighed dramatically as I sat back down in my chair and pursed my lips at him. “Why didn’t you tell me when I first invited you here? I was looking forward to seeing her.”

“I didn’t mention it because it gave us a much-needed opportunity to spend a few hours like grownups.” Flynn dropped into his seat beside Ariane once she was sitting down. “Besides, you wanted to talk business and we don’t want her growing up as part of that kind of conversation.”

“Oh. Right. I get that.” Now that he’d mentioned it, I really did.

She might not understand what we were saying just yet, but apparently, babies were intuitive. Plus, what they did now set the precedent for how they would raise her when she got older, and given the seriousness of Ariane's work and the often heartbreaking revelations surrounding it, I wasn't surprised they didn't want her exposed to the business side of things.

And that's without even mentioning exposing her to Ariane's mother and her politics. That's a whole different ballgame altogether.

Shaking my head at myself for not even having thought about it before, I resolved to be a more considerate uncle in the future and then moved on. "Okay, well, I'm going to need to see her soon, but that set aside, we do have business to discuss."

"The oil rig," Ariane concluded, her eyes sharp and focused as she arched a brow at me. "You've decided to sell it, haven't you?"

I shrugged. "I haven't decided anything yet. Flynn tried to leave the ball in my court, but that's not how this works. We bought it together and I know you trust me, but I'm not making any decisions without at the very least running them by you."

Flynn folded his arms on the table and nodded, his hair loose and wild around head. "Shoot. What have you got for us?"

"An interested buyer," I admitted, looking only at him. Ariane was here and she'd factor into his decision, but he and I were partners in this venture and I didn't need to see the judgment in her eyes for what I was considering. I was judging myself enough for it already. "One of my investment clients has had his wealth explode recently. He made a few excellent choices after he won the lottery and they've paid off big time."

"He wants to buy the rig?" Flynn asked. "Why? Just because he's doing well doesn't automatically mean he wants to get into the oilfield."

"It's never going to be a bad investment. Well, not anytime soon, at least. The point is that he's got money to burn and a background in engineering. He heard I might be looking for a seller and contacted me about it."

Flynn was fairly quiet as he thought it over, but true to form, Ariane had a lot to say since this impacted conservation efforts and the environment. My brother's wife was an activist, and a damn good, effective one at that.

She headed up several charitable organizations, each larger than the next, and her mother had literally won her seat in Congress thanks to her daughter's passion. She'd run on the platform Ariane stood for, and it'd paid off for her.

Big time.

As far back as the first time I'd met her, she and Flynn had gotten into it in a hotel lobby while we were all checking in for a beach cleanup event. At the time, she hadn't known he was there for it, and she had come at him due to his job as an oil worker.

Man, those were good times.

Seeing some strange woman cut my alphahole brother down to size despite the fact that she'd lost her reservation and was in a ton of shit with her mom about other stuff had been one of the highlights of my life. If it hadn't been for the fact that I'd known he had a hard-on for her, I'd have followed them to his hotel room just to see how it ended.

I might even have stopped at the hotel kitchen for some popcorn along the way. Now that I was at the other end of her scorn, though, it suddenly wasn't nearly as much fun.

"You've got an interested buyer," she started. "Do you know what his plans are for it?"

"Uh, no?" I frowned. "Why would I? He heard we might be selling and called to say he'd buy it. We didn't stop to have a philosophical discussion while we were talking about it."

"Well, you should have," she said firmly, exasperation shining in those wide eyes as she shook her head at me. "I realize that you stand to make a lot of money if you go through with this sale, but I have another option for you."

"You do?" I asked cautiously, already knowing I probably wasn't going to like what she was about to say.

She smiled brilliantly. "Abandon it."

My eyebrows mashed together and I tried to find the sparkly dildo that was bound to start growing out of her forehead any moment now. "Wait. Are you serious? You want us to just abandon it?"

"Yep," she said happily, seeming mighty proud of herself for having shocked the living daylights out of me. Her lips curved into a sly smile as she picked up her wine glass once our server came to fill them. "Abandon it altogether. It's the right thing to do."

My brain hit a glitch and I almost felt my eye twitch because of it. "You cannot be serious."

"Oh, but I am."

"Ariane rarely jokes about this kind of thing," Flynn said dryly. "You should know that by now."

“Yeah, I do, but this is insane.” I was stunned, my heart feeling like it was wading through sludge as it tried to beat. “We can sell the rig for hundreds of millions without even trying. If we do that, we can make almost double what we paid for it as profit. This dude reached out to me, but I’m willing to bet I could start a bidding war if I have the necessary incentive. Like your consent to actually do it.”

“Yeah, Jude. I’m sorry, but I can’t give you that.” Flynn sent me a half-apologetic smile as he shrugged. “It’s not just because I know Ariane would insist on me screwing myself for the rest of my life if I do. It’s mostly because now that I’ve seen the very real damage these rigs cause, I feel like I’ve reached my quota for causing harm.”

I blinked hard. “You worked in that field for almost a decade and a half, and now you won’t consent to selling a rig?”

He chuckled. “That’s pretty much it, yeah. I was part of the wrong team for way too long. Sure, as soon as I could, I started donating money to charities that work to counteract the negative impact of what I was doing, but it’s not enough. I can’t in good conscience put profit over the environment. I have a daughter to think of now. I know it sounds crazy, but just listen to Ariane, okay?”

Dumbstruck as I stared at my half-brother and wondered just where exactly she’d hidden his balls, I turned to my sister-in-law. “Okay, sis. I’m listening. What could possibly possess him to support this plan of yours? Shouldn’t you think about the environmental impact we could make if we took that money and put it into organizations we care about to help clean the ocean and the beaches, and to fund conservation efforts?”

“Is that what you’re planning on doing with the money?” she asked curiously.

I shrugged. “A lot of it, yes. Flynn isn’t the only one having a crisis of conscience about all this and you two aren’t the only people who care about Willow and her future. I do too. You know that I’ve been involved in this since before we even met you and I will continue to be until my dying breath. All I’m saying is that it’s a lot of money that could make a big difference.”

“Sure,” she said agreeably, but I had a feeling I hadn’t won her over with that argument. “If you let the rig continue to operate though, all your efforts with funding wouldn’t cancel out the harm just that one rig caused.”

“Hundreds of millions wouldn’t cancel out the harm caused by one rig? I don’t know, Ariane. That seems like a stretch.”

“I know how it sounds, but it’s true. You have no idea how much it takes to get things back to where they were before us humans intervened. Ultimately, even if you pumped every cent you make back into the environment, you probably still wouldn’t break even compared to the harm caused.”

“And if we abandon it?” I countered. “What happens then? It’s not like we can just let it sit there forever.”

Flynn groaned. “Dude, you are going to be so sorry you asked that.”

Ariane pulled her phone out of her purse and beamed at me. “I, on the other hand, am overjoyed that you asked. Allow me to show you.”

“Show me?”

“Yep. I did come up with some information for you about abandoned oil rigs and how crucial they are to marine life. I know it seems counterintuitive, but there are entire organizations now focusing on turning decommissioned rigs into reefs and it’s working.”

“How?”

She unlocked her phone and scrolled to something, then pushed it across the table to me but gave me a quick overview while she did. “Abandoned oil rigs have the capacity to become sanctuaries for sea creatures. The structure of offshore oil and gas platforms can be modified to become the perfect habitats for fish and other sea life. In some instances, they’ve even proven to be more productive than estuaries or coral reefs.”

“Are you serious?”

She nodded and gestured to her phone. “All the evidence is right there. Not every platform can be modified this way, but I’ve looked into it and yours can. Basically, the oil well is capped, the topside facilities are removed and either toppled in place or towed to shore for recycling, and *voila*. The problem becomes a part of the solution. It happens pretty quickly that these rigs become populated habitats that help reefs grow.”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. That was for sure.

As I peered down at her phone, though, I had to admit that her research seemed pretty solid. “I’m impressed, but the idea of just letting go of that amount of money doesn’t sit right with me.”

She nodded. “I understand. At the end of the day, it’s your call, but at least think about it?”

“I will,” I promised, and I meant it.

Just the other night, I’d wondered if there were any other options and

she'd served up the perfect solution, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to go through with it. "Let me sleep on it and I'll let you know, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, leaning back in her chair and finally taking another sip of her wine. "Do the right thing, Jude. I'll email that research to you so you have some light bedtime reading while you're considering it."

I groaned and glanced at Flynn. "You're onboard with this plan? It sounds like it's going to cost us money rather than make it."

"I know, but you said your investor has money to burn and frankly, so do we. Besides, we bought the damn thing in the first place. We might as well dispose of it the responsible way and try to leave something on the oceans behind for Willow and her friends to visit once they get to be our age."

Damn him for dragging her into this again, but I also knew they were right. I hadn't made a decision just yet, but at least I knew now what our choices were. I simply didn't know which one to make.

CHAPTER 14



MCKINLEY

While I was wrapping up at work, Kent was in my office and he was laying it on thick. For a man who'd only given me five hundred bucks as a bonus, he was acting like I was the second coming.

"Do you have any idea how invaluable you are to me?" he purred from his usual perch on the edge of my desk. His hair was slicked back as always and his suit was as expensive as it was impeccable, but for some reason, I felt a shiver of disgust when I looked at him now. "Our team wouldn't be what it is without you, Mickey."

"Thank you," I said politely, trying to get my stuff together so I could get out of here and go to pick up Henry, but Kent was relentless today.

"You really impressed me when you showed those properties to Jude Olson," he continued as if he didn't realize that I had to leave really soon if I didn't want to be late. "We might just be able to turn you into a real realtor yet. You've certainly got the looks for it. It's pretty nice having you around to look at, but on a poster? You'd pull in clients like no other."

Wow, buddy. Offensive much?

Of course, I couldn't say it. Couldn't even hint to feeling that way. He'd been good to me as a boss even if he did regularly blur the lines this way. He'd never crossed it though, so I supposed that was something.

"Thank you, boss." I put slight emphasis on the title to remind him of where we were and what our relationship was. "You don't need another realtor, though. Someone has to be behind the scenes and I'm happy to do it. If you'll excuse me, I really do need to—"

"I'm sure Henry wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes for us to finish this conversation. It's important, Mickey. Without you on our team, we wouldn't

have signed Jude as a client and he's going to mean big things for us all. We should celebrate. Why don't I take you out for—"

This time, he was the one who was interrupted, but not by me. A sharp knock came from my door and relief barreled into me when Jude strode in straight after. He glanced between my boss and me, clearly confused.

Looking painfully handsome in a pair of jeans and a fitted navy long-sleeved T-shirt that clung to his well-defined muscles, he had a pair of sunglasses hanging from the neckline and his light brown hair was neatly styled. I hadn't known he was coming around today and it was certainly out of the blue, but desperation clawed at my insides, so I grabbed the opportunity.

I couldn't afford to lose this job and everyone knew that if you turned your boss down if he asked you out, you were basically buying your own ticket to unemployment. I grinned at Jude as soon as my gaze met his. Then I rushed to his side and grabbed his hand.

"Hey, you. I was just on my way out. I'm really looking forward to our date tonight." I kept his hand in mine, stroking his fingers and being extra affectionate as I smiled apologetically at Kent. "Can we pick this up again tomorrow? Jude and I still have to collect Henry and we've got reservations."

I pulled my shoulders up excitedly as I sang the last word. Then I marched out of my office with Jude in tow. Thankfully, he seemed perfectly happy to play along, giving Kent a friendly wave as he stumbled after me.

"See you around, dude. Have a good night."

Kent called back a similar sentiment as we left, and the knots finally started easing out of my stomach as we cleared the building and I took a breath of fresh—relatively speaking—city air. Finally releasing Jude's hand, I turned to give a tight smile.

"Sorry about that, and thanks for helping me out. I was in a bit of a bind."

He chuckled. "No worries. Want to talk about it?"

I shook my head and glanced at the cheap watch on my wrist. "No, thank you, but I can't. I really do need to collect Henry. That part wasn't a lie."

"At least let me walk you to your car," he said casually, following me when I started walking toward it. "What was that all about, anyway? For the record, I could have reservations for us if you want them. Although it's recently been brought to my attention that children aren't welcome everywhere. Did you have a place in mind or should I hit up Google?"

I fumbled with the keys to my ancient beat-up car. "Uh, no. Again, thank

you for helping me out, but I'm leaving now."

"Don't be like that," he teased, amused light shining in his eyes as he stared down at me. "You wanted me to take you to dinner and I can do that, but you could've asked me a little nicer."

"Don't let it go to your head," I said as I unlocked the car manually and reached for the door handle. "I just have to go pick up my kid and my boss was driving me nuts. You were the bell that saved me. That's all. Goodbye, Jude."

With that, I tugged hard at the handle to get the door to open. Then I climbed into my car, waved, and slammed the door. Jude lingered, though. Hands sliding into his pockets after he put his sunglasses on, he seemed to be waiting for me to leave, seeing through this thing I'd started in Kent's office, but when I tried to turn over the engine, it wouldn't go.

My eyes slammed shut and I forgot all about the rich, sexy man watching me, close to tears when I realized the day I'd been dreading had finally arrived. Another thing to add to the never-ending list of my expenses—car trouble. It probably wouldn't be a cheap, easy fix either because my luck just didn't run that way.

Tears pressed at the backs of my eyes and I drew in a shaky breath. I knew a car was a luxury item to own—any car, even this rust bucket—but honestly, I didn't know how Henry and I were going to manage without it.

Public transport, dummy.

I sighed. Yeah, that was going to be my only option for a while.

A loud rap of knuckles against my window startled me. "Need a ride?"

I blinked my eyes open again and realized that Jude was still there, his sunglasses now sitting on top of his head as concern shone from those hazel eyes. "No, uh, I'm okay. I'll just take the bus. It's not a big deal."

I opened the door and climbed out of the car again, making sure to lock it behind me. Although at this point, if someone stole it, they'd probably be doing me a favor.

Jude gave me an imploring look and stepped into my path when I tried to walk around him. "I'll drive you, McKinley. How do we switch Henry's seat to my car?"

"There's no space for Henry's seat in your car," I muttered miserably. "It's really fine. I'll—"

"I wasn't asking, McKinley. I'm driving you. Right now, you need help and I'm right here. Let me help. I'm not in the Bugatti today. There's space in

this car for his seat. He'll be safe."

Not asking, but not quite demanding either. More just like stating it as a fact. It was an interesting approach, but it worked. "Okay. Thank you."

I unlocked the car again and helped him switch Henry's seat into a fancy SUV parked just a few spaces down from my own. He even opened the door for me and I didn't argue. First, because there was no point. This man did pretty much whatever he wanted, and second, because I did need help. He'd been damn right about that.

"Point me in the right direction," he said cheerfully as his engine turned over on the first try. Obviously, because his car wasn't twenty-five years old and was probably serviced regularly.

I shook off the stab of jealousy that pricked at my gut and shook my head at myself. He was helping me. Right now, that was all that mattered. "Henry's daycare center is just a few blocks down on the right. Bright red wall. You can't miss it."

Jude nodded and eased his foot down on the gas, taking it slow as we merged with the traffic and he got into the right lane. "Are you okay?"

"No, but I'm grateful to you. Thanks for this."

He kept his eyes on the road, shrugging as we slowed to stop behind a snaking queue of cars at a traffic light. "It's no problem. Really."

It was a problem, but not for him. For me, this felt like just this side of the end of the fucking world. I couldn't afford to get my car fixed. Not on top of everything else I had to pay for. But I didn't say any of that.

Jude had money coming out of his freaking ears. He would never understand, even if he did grow up in a pretty cheap neighborhood. I didn't know if he'd simply lived there because his parents liked it or because it was all they could afford, but either way, that had been a long time ago and things had changed.

Silence reigned supreme as we sat in traffic, not moving for ages before we finally crept forward just a few inches. I sighed. "I'm sorry about this. It's always this way in the afternoons. I should've warned you. I can just walk."

"Hey, no. No way. I don't mind. I don't have anywhere to be." He glanced at me, those hazel eyes curious as they met mine. "We might be stuck here for a while, so do you mind if I run something by you while we're here?"

"Go for it." Anything to distract me from my misery. "What's up? Is it about investment properties?"

He chuckled before he lifted one broad shoulder and then slowly lowered it again. “Sort of, but it’s not a property. It’s about an oil rig.”

“An oil rig?” I frowned. “Okay.”

“So, Flynn and I bought this thing after he got out of the game as an investment. Now, however, we’re looking at selling but we’ve run into a dilemma. We’ve got an interested buyer, so that’s not a problem. What *is* a problem is that Ariane has pointed out that if we let the rig change hands, it continues doing work that is beyond damaging to the environment.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So now what?”

“That’s the dilemma. Now what? The rig wasn’t cheap. If we sell to the buyer I’ve got lined up, we’ll make our money back and then some. Once that happens, I intend on donating all the profit I get from my cut to charities that work to clean up the oceans.”

“Let me guess, that’s not good enough for Arrie?”

He chuckled as he inclined his head. “You know her well. What she wants us to do is to abandon the rig. Take the hit on the money we invested and turn it into an asset for the environment rather than an aid in its destruction.”

“You can turn an oil rig into an environmental asset? How?”

“The long and the short of it is that the rig gets turned into a kind of reef. Apparently, they make for incredible habitats.”

Thankful for the distraction, I thought it over. I didn’t know how much an oil rig cost, but I was assuming that the financial hit Ariane wanted them to take ran well into the millions. Which wasn’t something anyone could disregard.

On the other hand, doing good with something that used to destroy seemed incredible to me. “Okay, look, this is way over my head and I doubt my opinion means anything anyway—”

“Your opinion means something to me,” he said earnestly. “I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t want to hear what you think. So hit me. Tell me what’s going on in your head right now.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek for a moment as I considered how much to tell him. “Growing up, I was obsessed with the oceans. I guess most kids are, but also like most kids, I dreamed of becoming a marine biologist at one point.”

A faint smile tugged at the corners of his full lips. “Yeah, I remember that dream. I don’t know about most kids, but I certainly shared it with you when

I was a pre-teen.”

Fond memories of that time of my life played through my head. “The best Christmas I ever had, my dad got us tickets to SeaWorld. Looking back now, I know he must’ve spent a ton of money on airfare, accommodation, and the tickets themselves. I also know now that SeaWorld isn’t what I thought it was, but that’s beside the point. I adored that Christmas.”

“I would’ve felt exactly the same,” he mused quietly. “Mom could never afford to take us, but I’ve always wanted to go. Maybe I should do it now.”

“Maybe you should,” I said. We crept forward, Jude’s foot hardly on the gas as we made our way toward the daycare slowly but steadily. At a snail’s pace. “My point is that if it was me, I would’ve gone Ariane’s route. Let’s be honest with each other for a minute. You bought that apartment without even blinking about the price. You can afford to take the hit.”

Jude didn’t say anything for a few long moments, but it was clear he was considering my advice. His eyes glazed over with thought, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip. Leaving him to it, I turned to face the window and pondered my own dilemma.

It was going to cost me a few hundred dollars at least instead of a few hundred million, but unlike Jude, I couldn’t afford to take the hit. I sighed when he finally pulled up outside Henry’s daycare, shoving the car trouble deep, deep down so I wouldn’t burst into tears as soon as I turned my back on him and had a moment alone.

Henry was waiting in the front room with some of the other remaining kids, and he launched himself at me as I walked in. Tears burned at the backs of my eyes, desperate to fall as I dropped to my haunches and wrapped arms around his small body.

This little boy deserved the world, and I couldn’t even afford to fix our damn car. A shuddering breath escaped my lips, but I bucked up, blinking away the tears and pulling back to look at him.

“We’re getting a ride with a friend of mine this afternoon,” I said. “He has a really fancy car. Want to come see?”

Henry nodded excitedly, clearly thrown off by the car waiting for us as his eyes widened and a big grin spread on his lips. “Is that it?”

“Yep. That’s it. What do you think?”

“Excited!” he screamed as he took off running, no inhibitions in sight as he yanked at the handle to open his door.

Jude stepped around the car then, smiling as he introduced himself to my

son. “Hey, Henry. I’m Jude. Do you think I can take you and your mom out for a bite to eat before we get you home?”

“No,” I said as I lifted Henry up and into his seat, but he had other ideas.

“Pizza,” he yelled as enthusiastically as he had before, little body trembling with the excitement of all this as he looked at me. “Pleaaaaaaase, Mommy.”

I released a long breath and then glanced at Jude as I nodded. “Okay, yes. Pizza it is, but you’re going straight into the bath when we get home, young man. No arguments.”

Jude looked back at me, that semi-permanent smirk on his lips again as he wagged his brows at me once we’d shut Henry’s door. “Feel free to be strict with me any time. That was hot.”

Surprised laughter tore right out of my chest and I shook my head at him, still chuckling when I climbed back into his car and buckled up. How he’d managed to make me laugh with this dark cloud hanging over me, I didn’t know.

But I was quickly learning that he could be counted on to know what I needed. To provide it freely, and to show up unexpectedly at exactly the right time. Interesting qualities for a self-confessed player to display to a woman he’d already been with.

I wasn’t about to question it, though. Not right now. Not even when I realized that he was officially the first *friend* I’d ever introduced to Henry. Right now, Jude was our knight in shining car and for now, that was more than enough.

CHAPTER 15



JUDE

Henry was a pretty cool little dude. Tall for a four-year-old, I thought, and lanky in that way kids are when they're growing like weeds.

Buckled into his car seat, he leaned his head forward as much as he could to look around. "This is a realllllly nice car, Jude. Can you pick me up in it again?"

"No," McKinley said firmly before I could say anything. "You're in it right now, honey. Just enjoy the moment, okay?"

Henry sighed dramatically, but it obviously wasn't the first time she'd told him that and he must've learned better than to argue. Instead, he skipped right past it and looked at me in the rearview mirror. I could feel his eyes as they studied my face with an intense curiosity.

As soon as we stopped in some more traffic, I looked back at him. "What's up, little man?"

"Where are we going for pizza? Mom and I like Crust Hut, but she says it's too expensive. Do you know that expensive means it costs a lot of money?"

My heart gave a little pang as I nodded. "Yeah, I did know that. My mom used to tell me the same thing about pretty much everything."

"Is your mom dead?" he asked frankly.

McKinley twisted in her seat immediately to scold him. "Henry! You can't ask people that question that way. What did we talk about?"

"Being polite and kind. Why do I have to have manners?"

I chuckled. "It's okay, Henry. I like straight shooters, but for the record, your mom is right. A lot of other people could've been hurt by that question. Happily, I'm not because my mom is still alive. I just saw her for dinner on

Sunday.”

“That’s cool,” he said, glancing at his mom. “Will I still have dinner with you when I’m old?”

“Absolutely. Every day until you move out when you’re forty, and then at least twice a week after that. As for why you have to have manners, you just do. It’s polite and respectful. It shows other people you’re considerate and it also shows them how you would like to be treated in return.”

“Forty, huh?” I laughed. “My mom used to say that too, but only until we hit about sixteen. Then she couldn’t wait to get rid of us.”

McKinley rolled her eyes and shot me an exasperated smile. “That won’t be me and I’m not sure that’s true anyway. It sounds like you’re pretty close to your mom. I doubt she wanted to get rid of you.”

I snorted. “She had two teenage boys in her house. Trust me, she was pretty sick of us by the time we finally left.”

Henry tossed out a few more questions as I drove to a pizzeria I knew of nearby. I also knew it was definitely kid friendly. The patio overlooked a playground, and while it had annoyed me the last time I’d ended up there, it would do perfectly right now.

We hit the pizzeria at the start of rush hour but managed to snag a table on the patio. The waiters here were pretty well versed in hungry kids after being collected from school, and they brought his pizza out before we’d even gotten our drinks.

Henry beamed at me, then practically inhaled the first few slices of his pizza, his eyes twinkling as he looked at the playground. “I’m full. Can I go play now, Mommy?”

She glanced at his plate. “Yes, but we’ll keep that safe for you. Come take a few more bites as soon as the playing makes a bit of space in your tummy.”

He nodded dutifully, but then he was out of his chair like a shot, leaving us to talk as he barreled toward the climbing frame. I chuckled at his seemingly never-ending supply of energy and excitement, and then I turned my attention to his mom.

She wasn’t looking at me, though, barely ever taking her eyes off her son while we talked. From the little I’d seen so far, she was a great mother. Severely overstretched in every respect possible, but so damn good with him.

“You were telling me about going to SeaWorld with your dad before. Where is he now? I remember you saying he never made it in politics, but

what did he do instead?”

“He died,” she said, finally looking directly at me. “That’s why Henry is so curious about whether other grownups’ parents are also dead. It started a few months ago, this awareness of everyone’s mortality. One of his friends at daycare had a gran who passed, and it seems the topic has really stuck.”

“Fuck, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” Taken aback, I backpedaled as fast I could. “I apologize for hitting a nerve. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even think —”

“It’s okay.” She gave a smile that softened her eyes before she glanced back at the playground, searching for Henry to make sure he was okay as she continued. “Sometimes it’s good to talk about him to someone new. It brings back a lot of good memories.”

“Your mom?” I’d already put my foot in it, but it looked like she was willing to open up. “My dad is dead too. If that counts for anything.”

“I’m sorry. I guess we’re both members of the Dead Dads club. It’s the worst one in the world to belong to, right?”

I shrugged. “I’ve always been more of a mama’s boy. My dad took off when I was pretty young, so we didn’t have a great relationship. I tried fixing it before he passed, but he definitely didn’t do stuff for me like yours obviously did for you.”

She chuckled. “My mom took off when I was pretty young, so I guess we’ve that in common too. She passed not long after, but I feel the same way about her you obviously feel about your dad.”

“Think yours might’ve made it in politics if he hadn’t passed?” I asked.

McKinley’s greenish eyes widened as she shook her head. “Nah, even if heart disease hadn’t stolen him much too young, he was too goofy for politics. Too kind. His career never would’ve taken off in any big way.”

“He sounds like quite a guy,” I said honestly. “I would’ve loved to meet him.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” she teased. “You hardly seem like the type who goes to girls’ houses to meet their parents, and he was super overprotective.”

I feigned hurt, putting my hand to my heart. “Parents love me. Well, I mean, my mom does anyway. I haven’t met any girlfriend’s parents, though. Not sure I want to.”

She chuckled. “Exactly. How old were you when your dad passed? Maybe that has something to do with it.”

“Nah. It was just a few years ago. I was already in my late twenties.

You?”

“Eighteen,” she admitted softly, the laughter and teasing fading from her eyes as she sighed. “His health was always pretty bad, so we saw it coming, but when it finally happened, it was still painfully difficult to lose him.”

I let out a low whistle. “You’ve been on your own since you were eighteen?”

“Yep. Too old for foster care, but too young to be without a parent. At least I had a boyfriend at the time that I’d had for a couple of years by then, and he and his mom took me in.”

A strange sense of relief trickled through me. I knew this had happened years ago, but still. “I’m glad you had people who were there for you.”

She laughed dryly and shook her head. “That story doesn’t have a happy ending. I got pregnant at twenty and he broke up with me just a few months before Henry was born.”

“Fucker.” My face twisted into a deep scowl. “He left you pregnant and homeless?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It wasn’t a great time for me, but I made it through. Eventually, Kent took pity on me and gave me a job. I found a cheap condo, and with the help of my best friend, Tess, I’ve been holding it all together ever since.”

“Holy shit. I just realized that I made a ton of incorrect assumptions about you. I guess I figured that because you went to school with Ariane and your parents ran in the same circles that you grew up rich.”

McKinley flashed a sad, indulgent smile. “Well, you weren’t completely wrong. I didn’t grow up penniless or anything like that, but we definitely didn’t have Blakely level money. Dad and I burned through most of what we had while he was trying to make it in politics. Then he got sick, and living expenses and medical bills ate through most of the rest.”

Fuck.

My heart ached for her, pounding in my chest as I realized how lucky I’d had it. After my dad passed, I’d inherited a staggering amount of money—more than I’d ever known he had. On the other hand, he didn’t contribute much to my expenses growing up, so I guessed he saved a bundle by never really paying for much for me.

Either way, I’d only ever had to worry about myself. I’d fucked around in a few day jobs as a bean counter and that kind of thing while Flynn went off to work on the rigs. Then I inherited my dad’s money and I put it away

immediately, mainly living off the interest I earned and fucking around some more.

The only good thing I'd ever done was to get involved in all those charities, and then my investments started paying off. *The rest is history, I suppose.*

This beautiful woman sitting across the table from me had been hustling since she was only eighteen years old, and I doubted she'd ever even had time to catch her breath and grieve properly, let alone do anything just for herself.

"You're a rock star," I said as I looked across the table at her. "Seriously. I'm in awe of you right now."

A pretty, pink flush crept up her neck to her cheeks. "Thank you, but I'm not a rock star. I'm just a survivor. I have to be, you know? For him." She jerked her head toward the playground and smiled. "He's everything to me."

"Yeah, I can see that." I followed her gaze to where he was playing with some other kids, clearly already having made friends. "Come to the Hamptons with me. Bring Henry. I'll compensate you for the hours of work you'll miss and I'll make sure you get a cut of the sale on whatever property I buy, but just come with me, please?"

To my complete and utter surprise, McKinley stared at Henry for another beat, and then she nodded. "Yeah. Okay. That sounds like fun and I need a break, so yes. We'll come with you, but we're staying in separate bedrooms."

I laughed as a weird elation zipped through my veins. "Of course. We're friends and we wouldn't want to confuse Henry, but you're serious? You're actually agreeing to come with me just like that? I thought I was going to have to get down on my knees and beg."

McKinley's eyes warmed as she shrugged and then pointed at the floor. "You're welcome to do that anyway. I bet it'd be a sight for sore eyes seeing you on your knees, but I'm serious."

"To be fair, you've already seen me on my knees." The reminder made my cock swell a little, pressing uncomfortably against my thigh when I saw the flare of heat in her eyes.

The flush returned to her cheeks and she gave me a businesslike look. "I'm amending my agreement. We'll come with you, but you're not allowed to talk like that, okay?"

Immediately, I brought my fingers to my mouth and mimed zipping my lips and throwing away the key. For some reason, it made me ridiculously

happy that they were coming with me, and I was willing to do anything she asked to ensure she didn't change her mind.

McKinley deserved that damn break she'd said she needed, and while I was surprised that she was allowing me to give it to her, I sure as hell wasn't going to jeopardize it by making smartass comments she clearly didn't want to hear.

I wouldn't jeopardize it for anything in the world, and I was going to pull out all the stops to make sure she knew it too.

CHAPTER 16



MCKINLEY

Tess was over while I got Henry ready to go down for the night. She sat on the toilet while we did bath time, and she and I talked while he giggled and played in the water with some glowsticks, splashing around and loving it.

The lights were off—for the glowsticks to have the desired effect of making him happy—and kids’ music played from the living room. Tess was used to the chaos of this time of day around here, though. She grinned at me as she watched him having the time of his life in the bath.

“Those are a real hit. Remind me to add a whole box of them to his birthday list.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, he’d love that.”

“You know what else he’s going to love?” she asked with an undercurrent of mischief in her voice. “The trip to the Hamptons. I’m so damn excited for you.”

“I know. You’ve only said it at least once a minute since I told you,” I joked, but also not really. It was true. “Thanks for bringing over the clothes, though. I’m definitely going to need them.”

“Of course you are.” She winked at me, her bleached-blond Pixie cut shining like a misplaced golden halo around her head. “I made sure they’re cute *and* comfortable, and I tossed in a few things for you to wear at night too.”

I made my eyes big at her, sending Henry a pointed look, and Tess laughed. “What? He’s not listening to us, and even if he was, it’s not like I said anything graphic.”

“Let’s just keep it clean,” I suggested, leaning against the wall as nerves fluttered through me again. “We are sure I shouldn’t have turned him down,

right? I mean, I got all caught up in the moment, and since it's a business opportunity too, I didn't feel like I could say no."

"You definitely did the right thing by agreeing," she said confidently. "All you need to do now is relax. Stop being nervous about it and have the best time. Okay?"

"Oh, is that all?" I teased. "How do you suppose I can go about stopping the nerves? I've thought about bailing a dozen times over and I'm still not sure I'm going to be able to get in the car when he arrives to pick us up."

"You're getting in the damned car, Mick," she said sternly. "Not only are you getting in the car, but you're also going to have the best time, sell an expensive property, and then get a good bonus when you get home. Just focus on that and you'll be fine."

"That's *if* Kent gives me more than five hundred dollars this time," I said. "Otherwise, it'll just be a bonus. Not a good bonus."

She sighed loudly. "I freaking hope he gives you more than that this time. He'll have had even less to do with this sale than he did the first one. You deserve to be compensated for that, damn it."

"I appreciate the fire, but let's save it for when the little man has gone to bed, okay?"

Leaning back against the toilet, she pouted at me but nodded, dialing down her frustration about my boss until after I'd finally gotten Henry down. As I poured us each a glass of chilled white wine she'd brought over, Tess sat in the kitchen and watched me, that fire returning to her voice as she ranted about the *hefty bonus* I'd received.

"What an asshole. For all the flirting, come-ons, and bombastic bragging you've had to endure over the years, he owes you way more than that. It's like, come on, man. First, he expects you to basically kiss his feet because he hired you when he did, and now, you're even helping him make these huge sales and he *still* doesn't appreciate you like he should."

"I know." I gave her a slight, *what are you gonna do* shrug as I handed over her wine. "He's the boss though. Any bonus I get is always going to be within his discretion. Plus, he feels like I owe him instead of the other way around, so in his eyes, he probably thinks he did me a huge favor by giving me anything at all."

"No, I get that, but again, what a fucking asshole. So what if he took pity on you years ago and gave you a job? You've more than proven that you were worth the risk he took when he hired a pregnant young girl, and it was

his decision to do it. How long does he expect you to pay for it?”

“I don’t know, but obviously longer than it’s been. Let’s talk about something else.”

She dipped her head in a nod and then grinned at me playfully. “Tell me more about this Jude guy. He sounds amazing. And hot. And like the kind of guy you need to get on top of at least twice a day while you’re on this trip.”

“We’re only going for a weekend, and it’s not like that.”

“No, I know you’re only there for a weekend. That’s why I said *at least* twice a day. Just to make up for it being such a short getaway.”

I laughed, shaking my head at her. “It’s really not like that. We’re going as friends who also happen to have some business to attend to.”

“Exactly. You can show him some properties during the day and then he should attend to *your* business *all night long*. Every night.” She winked at me. “You said he was real good last time you hooked up, so why not?”

“Why not? Because we’re not now, nor are we ever going to be in a relationship. We can’t just keep hooking up.”

Genuine confusion furrowed her brow. “Uh, of course you can keep hooking up. It’s called being friends with benefits. All the cool kids are doing it these days and you, my friend, are the coolest kid of them all. Just do it.”

“I can’t.” Just thinking about it as I sipped my wine made my heart beat faster, though. He really had been good at it that night and I had a feeling he’d be even better the second time.

But no. There can’t be a second time.

“I promised Ariane there was nothing going on.”

“So? When you made that promise, there *was* nothing going on. Something could start going on this weekend, though. Something *should* start going on this weekend. What are a few orgasms between friends, am I right?”

Her eyes sparkled with humor and excitement as she stared back at me. “Honestly, Mickey, you need to get laid. I’ve been saying it for years and this Jude sounds like a guy who can get the job done well.”

My teeth sank into my lips as I thought about it, but then I shook my head. “It’s just not a good idea, and it’s a business trip first and foremost. It’s not like I’m going to *slip into something more comfortable* as soon as Henry’s asleep and ride Jude all the way to morning.”

“Why not? I brought you a few more *comfortable* things to slip into.” She beamed at me. “Wait until he sees you in the powder blue teddy I packed. His cock is going to explode. Guaranteed.”

I laughed. “That sounds painful, so I guess it’s a good thing he’s not going to see me in it. Thanks for the teddy, though. Maybe I’ll just sleep in it one night to feel sexy again for a change.”

Her gaze roamed up and down the length of my body. “Girl, with those curves? You *are* damn sexy. The teddy will make you feel it, sure, but Jude has to see you in that thing. And in the black lace negligee. Oh, also, there’s a pair of crotchless panties in there. Brand new. Don’t worry. I picked them up for you after you called this afternoon to tell me the news.”

“Crotchless panties?” My jaw slackened. “Why? What’s the purpose of such a thing?”

“Sex, honey,” she deadpanned. “Lots and lots of hot sex as soon as Jude realizes he’s got easy access. I packed sundresses too. Wear them, give him a quick glimpse, and I bet he’ll have you up against the wall in a flash.”

My core heated like it’d been placed in a flash-fryer at the imagined image that popped up in my head at her words. Tess squealed and laughed when she saw whatever look I had on my face. “That’s what I’m talking about, Mick. Get it! Now, I’m going to need more details about this guy so I can get all hot and bothered too. I already know he’s good in bed and that he has a thing for protecting you, but what else?”

“He does not have a thing for protecting me.” I scoffed. “He just happens to have good timing and a better moral compass than Kent. Unlike him, Jude believes in paying someone well for their work, but that’s it.”

“Nah, that’s not all there is to it. He got you an Uber to my place the night of the wedding, then he showed up at your office and insisted that you be the one to show him the properties so that you’d get something out of it. And then he showed up at your office again, right in the nick of time, saved you from Kent, gave you a ride, fed you.”

“Yeah, I know. He does seem to pop up when I need him most. At the wedding to help me relax and have fun. At the office to insist I show him those properties just before my rent was due and then again the very day my car broke down.”

I took another sip of the crisp white wine, swallowing it before I admitted the next part. “Despite me not agreeing with your vulgar ideas about how we should spend our evenings this weekend, Jude is kind of growing on me.”

Triumph flashed in her eyes as she pumped her fist into the air. “Yes. Finally. I freaking knew it. You like him.”

“No, it’s not...” I trailed off, realizing that there was no real point in

denying it. “Fine. Okay. I like him, but as a friend. He was super helpful the other night when my car wouldn’t start and, uh, there’s more to that story but —”

“More?” She leaned forward, putting her wine down on the kitchen counter just for the purpose of rubbing her hands together. “What more? Tell me.”

“Well, uh, when I got to my car the next morning, I found a mechanic’s card on my windshield with a note.”

“A note.” Anticipation shimmered in her eyes. “From Jude?”

“No, from the mechanic. It said that he’s given me a jump and that if I brought the car in before we leave for our trip, he’ll have it fixed up with a full tune up by the time we get back. It also said that the bill had already been paid and that he’s expecting my car first thing tomorrow.”

Tess gaped at me, her brown eyes wide as she ran a hand over the full tattoo sleeve on her right arm of flowers and things from her favorite books. “I’m stunned. I don’t even know what to say, other than *fuck yes*. This guy is my new hero. He actually somehow managed to get you to accept his help. When can I meet him? I need an autograph.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m not that bad. I just don’t usually accept help—”

“Usually?” She scoffed and swallowed a laugh. “You never accept help, McKinley Tulley. Not from anyone. Not even from me.”

“That’s not true. You’ve watched Henry for me a few times when I’ve asked.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, but that’s not what I meant and you know it. How did Jude convince you to take his help when you won’t ever let me even get through my offer?”

“He, uh, he didn’t,” I admitted. “Mostly because we didn’t talk about it. He didn’t ask. He just did it. I didn’t know anything about it until I got that note, and at that point, he’d obviously already paid the man. It’s not like I can convince the mechanic to pay back his money, and right now, I need help. I’m just grateful he didn’t ask me if he could give it because I never would’ve accepted.”

“So that’s the secret,” she mused. “Just not asking. Hmm. I wonder why I never figured that out.”

I laughed. “Don’t even think about trying that tactic with me, Tess. I’m already feeling bad enough about having no choice but to accept Jude’s help. I don’t want to—” My phone chirped with a text, and as I glanced down, I cut

myself off to curse under my breath. “Shit. I forgot about that?”

“What?”

I sighed, picking up the phone and shooting my ex-boyfriend’s mother a text in response. “Michelle wants to spend time with Henry this weekend. She asked now when I was going to bring him by.”

“Fuck her,” she snapped. “She raised a dickless nitwit who—”

“She’s Henry’s only grandparent. I can’t deny him the opportunity of having a relationship with the only grandmother he’s got. Besides, I already agreed to let her see him this weekend. I just forgot about it.”

“What are you going to say?”

I shrugged, my eyes on the screen as I typed my message. “That we’re going out of town for business this week but that I’ll bring him by on Sunday evening after we get back.”

Almost as soon as I sent the message, her curt reply popped up on my screen.

Michelle: Fine.

Closing my eyes, I set the phone back down and shook my head. “I’m really not looking forward to that part of the weekend.”

Tess lowered her chin in a firm nod. “Well, Michelle is the Karen of all grandmothers and she raised an entitled little weasel of a son.”

I laughed as Tess went off on a tangent about Michelle, happy to have her here to help me pack and cope with the stress of Henry’s grandmother in my life. Honestly, after my ex broke up with me and she kicked me out of her house, I’d thought I’d never hear from her again.

Oh, how wrong I was.

But I would do anything for Henry, and allowing her to be part of his life after everything was just another one of those things. Now if only she or her son would contribute a cent to his care, that would’ve been great, but I’d long since put that hope to bed.

It was never going to happen, but instead of focusing on that, I chose to allow myself to get excited for the weekend ahead—the part before we had to see her. Jude had a way of being there for me, and once again, he was already coming through for me without even knowing it by giving me the perfect distraction from thinking about my ex and his mother.

I hadn’t been on any kind of getaway for years, not since my dad died, and I could hardly wait for this one. And maybe, just maybe, I’d put on that teddy for him after all. Tess might not have been wrong when she’d said I

needed to get laid.

Jude had awoken that beast in me, and if he was willing to feed it just one more time, then maybe I would actually let him.

CHAPTER 17



JUDE

I loved kids. The more time I spent with any, the more I was realizing that about myself. I didn't just like them. I really did love them and I desperately wanted Henry to have fun on this trip, too.

At the pizzeria the other night, we'd parked next to a Hummer and Henry had stared at it, wide-eyed, for a solid minute. He'd mentioned it looked just like an army tank to him and that he really wanted to ride in one someday—and now, today was going to be that day.

I pulled up in front of their place in my rented, bright yellow Hummer, beyond pleased with myself for having gone the extra mile for him. This thing was super obnoxious and not my style at all, but Henry was obsessed as soon as he saw it.

They'd been waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of their building, and as soon as I opened my door and he saw it was me, he broke into a full sprint toward it. "Jude! Is this yours?"

"No, little man. It's not, but it is ours for the weekend. How're you doing, buddy?"

"Awesome!" he shouted, little green eyes shining as he took in the car. "Are we really going to be driving this the whole weekend? All three days?"

"We are," I confirmed, ruffling his light brown hair as I walked around him to open the back door. "Hop on in. I'll help your mom with your bags in a minute, but check this out. I wanted you to ride in style."

He shrieked when he saw how I'd decked out the back. There was an activity tray that went down over his lap while he was in his car seat, and I'd gotten him coloring books, crayons, activity books, and a new yellow teddy bear named Hummer as his travel companion.

Henry's excitement as he scrambled to get up into the car was palpable, and I grinned, turning to greet McKinley and to help her with their bags. I'd seen them on the sidewalk from a distance when I'd turned the corner, but I hadn't really been paying much attention to her, too eager for Henry's reaction to my surprises, but as I spun to face her, my jaw nearly dropped to the ground.

She looked amazing in a light gray sundress with crocheted details around the neck and hemline. The fabric looked soft and it draped around her curves in a way that showed them off perfectly without being too obvious about it. Her rack was emphasized by the slight stretch of the material at her cleavage, and for a minute, I just stared at the hint of said cleavage offered by the holes in the crocheted neckline.

"Jude?" She sounded amused. "Did I spill something on myself again?"

"No, uh." I finally managed to tear my gaze up to hers, sweeping it across her gorgeous features showcased brilliantly since the front of her hair had been pulled back and secured behind her head with a gray clip.

She wore just a light line of black coal on her eyelids and some mascara, but she took my damn breath away. Arching an eyebrow at me, she cocked her head and gave me a questioning look. "Well?"

I cleared my throat, but I wasn't one to shy away from the facts. "You're breathtaking. Literally. Hi, McKinley. Sorry. I just needed a minute to stare at you."

That pink flush I was starting to love so much tinted her cheeks as she smiled at me. "Thank you, but I'm nothing compared to you."

Surprise trickled through me and my cock stirred. "You checked me out too, huh?"

"Yep. I also know that you rented this thing for Henry and that you spoiled him rotten with all those gifts waiting on the backseat, which makes you even sexier."

I swore I fucking preened. "Since when are you so direct?"

She shrugged, hazel eyes filled with a mischief I hadn't seen since the wedding. "I'm trying it out. Taking a page out of your playbook."

"And?"

"And I like it so far," she said as her smile dimmed a little, her expression searching as she held my gaze. "Why did you do all this for us?"

"Because I could. Also, I'm an excellent friend who wants to make this weekend great for you two. Let me just grab your bags and then we can get

going.”

“I can do that.” She took a step back, but I stopped her with a gentle hand on her forearm.

“Let me, babe. Your only job this weekend is to relax and have fun. Just let someone else do some nice stuff for you for a change.”

“You’ve already done plenty of nice stuff for me,” she said quietly but stepped aside so I could get to their two small overnight bags behind her. “Where did you get the car seat?”

“From the rental place. It’s a brand new one, though. Don’t worry. I made sure of it.” I’d bought it for the rental place, which was how I’d made sure of it, but that didn’t feel like something she had to know about it.

She’d probably think it was weird that I’d essentially bought my own car seat for her son for the weekend. I doubted it would help much if I told her I’d also bought a baby seat for Willow so I’d have one just in case.

After slinging their bags over my shoulder, I strode back to the Hummer and slid them in beside mine in the trunk. It was still early, but it was already getting hot. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky or a breath of wind, and the sun had already started baking the sidewalk.

Heat radiated up to my bare shins from below, and as I turned to comment to McKinley about what a perfect day this was for the beach, I realized she’d been quiet for much too long. Still standing exactly where she had been after she’d stepped aside for me, she suddenly looked a little emotional.

I frowned, going up to her and putting my hands on her shoulders as I ducked down to look into her eyes. “McKinley? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, uh, I’m fine. I’m just really grateful for all this. It’s so kind of you.”

As she lifted her hands and wrapped her fingers around my forearms, a spark shot through me that transported me back to the night of the wedding. She must’ve felt it too because she was suddenly staring at my lips, completely transfixed.

I let out a soft groan and forced myself to drop my hands away from her body. The spell between us broke immediately and she stumbled back a step, her cheeks heating again as she shook her head at herself.

“Sorry.”

“For what?” I asked as I smiled at her and jerked my thumb toward the car. “Also, you’re very welcome for all this, but we should get going. We

don't want to miss a minute more than we have to on the beach on a day like today. Let's go."

I spun my hand in a circle in the air like some kind of tour guide, and she giggled as she walked to the ostentatious car. Unable to help myself, I reached out and smacked her ass when she walked past me, and she laughed, putting a definite extra sway into her step as she kept going.

I headed to the back door first, buckling Henry up before jogging around to open the passenger door for her. Those hazel eyes moved to mine as she grazed past me on her way into the car. "And he's a gentleman too, huh?"

"I've never been accused of that before," I joked. "Hop on in, my lady. Let's go."

"Your lady?" She let out a bark of choked laughter, shaking her head at me as I winked and shut the door behind her once she'd gotten in.

Jogging around the car, I jumped in and grinned at Henry in the rearview as I turned over the engine. "Are you ready for our road trip, little man?"

He grinned back at me, but his gaze quickly hit the coloring book he was busy drawing in again. "I've never been on a road trip."

Something inside me shattered. He'd said it so nonchalantly that I knew he wasn't heartbroken about it or anything, but still. My desire to give him everything I could cram into this weekend skyrocketed. This child deserved the best of the best—just like every other kid—and at least for this weekend, he was going to have it all.

Once we got on the road, I put all that out of my head and focused on making the trip itself as fun as possible. "Should we play a game?"

"Sure," McKinley said, glancing at me. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know," I said. "I-Spy, maybe?"

"What's that?" Henry asked from the backseat, and that made up my mind.

We were playing I-Spy. This kid was getting all the childhood road-trip experience hits in one two-hour drive. "It's a game you play in the car. It usually involves giving the first letter of the thing you see and want everyone else to guess, but let's play it with colors instead."

McKinley nodded her approval. "You catch on fast. I was wondering if you were going to realize that he's only four and that he can't spell yet."

"I'm going to learn spells?" he asked excitedly. "Really? I thought magic was pretend."

"Magic is pretend." Sort of. What I felt when I was with McKinley

definitely was some kind of magic, but I wasn't about to try to explain that to him. "Your mommy meant you're going to learn the letters of the alphabet and how to put them together to form words. That's called spelling."

"Oh. That's not so cool."

McKinley laughed as she glanced at him. "It's cooler, baby. I promise. You love the stories we read before bed, don't you? We wouldn't have any storybooks if writers didn't know how the alphabet works or how to spell."

"Well, that's debatable," I reasoned. "A lot of people who call themselves writers or authors don't know how to spell. That doesn't stop them from writing those stories."

"Fair enough, but do you want to try to explain the nuances of that to a four-year-old? Be my guest."

As I thought it over, I shook my head. "No, I think I'm okay, thanks. Henry, listen to your mommy. Authors can write stories because they know how to spell. I was just being silly."

McKinley laughed and Henry smiled at me, his gaze coming up to meet mine in the mirror again. "I like people who are silly. They're fun."

"The funnest," McKinley agreed as we left the city behind.

Our road trip ended up going by much too fast, and before I even knew it, we were pulling up to the beachfront house I'd rented for the weekend. "Okay, guys. We've played I-Spy, we've sung along to all the iconic songs, we've gotten to take pictures along the way, and we've eaten the snacks. We'll do it all again on Sunday, but for now, here we are."

McKinley leaned forward and lowered her head to look up at the modern beach house looming up ahead of us. "This is where we're staying?"

Her voice was slightly hushed and it reminded me of what she'd sounded like that night when I'd had my head between her legs. Gritting my teeth against the tent about to happen in my pants, I smiled at her.

"This is where we're staying. Do you like it?"

"Like it?" She snorted back a chuckle. "I love it. We're not the only people staying here though, right? It's not only ours?"

"It's only ours." I parked in front of the open front door, and as soon as I unbuckled Henry and opened his door, he was out of the car like a speeding bullet, rushing inside and leaving McKinley and me alone for a moment.

"I'm in awe of how gorgeous this is," she said as she took in the stone-clad house with the greenery snaking up the sides and the massive, wide windows. "Is it really all yours?"

“It’s all *ours*,” I corrected her gently, wrapping an arm around her waist and giving her a soft tug into my side. “This is just the beginning, McKinley. The next couple of days are going to be awesome.”

“I have absolutely no doubt about that.” She leaned her head against my shoulder and smiled up at me, pure joy shining from the very depths of her hazel eyes. “Actually, it’s already awesome. But I’m still not sharing a bedroom with you.”

I faked a disappointed sigh, winking as I took her hand and led her inside. “We’ll see about that once you get a load of this place. Just you wait, McKinley. You’ll be begging to sleep with me real soon.”

She laughed at the joke I hoped wouldn’t remain one, happily following me into the place I’d chosen with her and Henry in mind. This weekend was all about them, and I was going to make sure it was one neither of them would ever forget.

CHAPTER 18



MCKINLEY

The house Jude had rented was right on a private, sandy beach. It was a newly renovated, chic beach house with oceans views from every room. As I walked in, it felt like I'd been catapulted into an alternate reality.

This couldn't possibly be someplace where I was going to be staying, but somehow, it was. Henry was already zooming around the open-concept kitchen, living, and dining room in the light and bright home while Jude laughed and opened the sliding doors leading out to a patio overlooking the beach for him.

My footsteps were slow as I walked through from the front door to the patio, my head on a swivel as I drank it all in. Cathedral ceilings, a wet bar, a cabana with an outdoor shower on the patio, and a cozy den with a fireplace made this house the stuff dreams were made of.

A row of kayaks and paddleboards rested against the wall outside, and in my mind's eye, I could imagine spending entire summers here, having fun in the water during the day, and entertaining and dining on the patio while we watched the sun set over the bay in the evenings.

In the idle, brief fantasy that played out in my head, Jude was with us, he and I raising Henry together. As soon as I realized that part, I shut down the fantasy and leaned against the door, smiling as Jude explained to Henry what a paddleboard was.

"We should get settled," I said, my voice slightly hushed due to the awe. Because I was in awe, not only at the house and the views, but at the fact that Jude and Henry were getting along so well. "Should we go get our bags?"

"I'm on it," Jude said, grinning as he strode toward me and pulled his Aviator sunglasses off. "Relax out here with Henry. I'll be back."

It went against the grain not to follow after him to help bring in our things, but he seemed perfectly willing and capable to carry our two small bags along with his own. Plus, it was clear that he was going out of his way for us this weekend to make it relaxing and enjoyable.

I wasn't going to let my stubbornness ruin the effort he was making, so instead, I looked out at the glittering blue water and sighed. "We should put some sunscreen on you, baby."

Henry spun to face to me, his eyes bright and wild as his head bounced like a bobblehead doll. "Can we go for a walk on the beach? I want to put my feet in the water."

"I'm sure we can manage that, but we need to get settled first, and put that sunscreen on. You'll get burned to a crisp otherwise."

A slight furrow appeared between his brows. "What's a crisp?"

"A child that has been badly sunburned because he didn't listen to his mommy when she told him to come inside until we've got the sunscreen on."

"Oh." He sighed, still frowning as he walked toward me. "Is that true?"

"Partially." I smiled and ruffled his hair when he brushed past me to come back inside. Then I pushed away from the sliding door frame I'd been leaning against and turned just in time to see Jude already coming back with all three bags. "Let me help you take them to our rooms."

"Right. Okay, so we've got three bedrooms. You should take the master, and I'm not sure if Henry is going to sleep with you or if he'll want his own room."

"My own room," he said excitedly, pressing his palms together as he gave Jude a pleading look. "Pleeease?"

Jude chuckled and dipped his head toward me. "That's your mommy's call, kiddo. Don't look at me like that."

"Why?" Henry asked, confused.

Jude glanced at me with a smile in his eyes before he looked back at Henry. "Because I might just buy you your own whole beach house if you look at me like that."

I stepped forward to intervene when Henry's jaw loosened. "Okay, baby. You can have your own room, but you're taking the one right next to mine just in case you need me."

With that said, I lifted my gaze to Jude. "I'm not taking the master. Henry and I will be perfectly comfortable anywhere. You rented the house, so the main bedroom is yours."

Henry looked between the two of us, still a little bit confused, but then he shrugged and took off down the hall. "I'm going to choose my room!"

Jude smiled after him before he turned to me, determination blazing from those hazel eyes as his chin came up. "You're taking the master. It's got a freestanding, claw-footed tub and a shower the size of a football field. Trust me, you want to take it."

"A football field, huh?" I mused, unable to stop the corners of my lips from tilting up. "Sold. I'll take it."

He grinned. "Good. Let's go get settled in. Henry mentioned something about a walk when we were outside?"

"Yeah, he wants to go onto the beach and get his feet wet."

"Well, then I suppose we'd better get ready." He hiked my bag up on his shoulder and strode down the hall after Henry.

When he reached the door at the far end, he pushed it open and reappeared a moment later without my stuff. "Do you need to freshen up before we go?"

"To the beach?" I frowned. "No, I'm all good. We should probably go get some groceries, though. He's going to be starving by the time we get back from our walk."

"Already taken care of." He pulled his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans and waved it at me. "They delivered some basics yesterday, and if there's anything else we need, just take this and add it to the cart on the app."

I pursed my lips at him, wanting to argue about him footing the bill for our food, but then Henry came racing toward us again. "Can we put the sunscreen on now?"

"Sure, honey." I made my way back down the corridor and to my purse on the kitchen counter. Rummaging around, I found the small bottle of sunscreen I'd stashed in there earlier and squeezed some out into my palms.

Henry dutifully came to stand in front of me, closing his eyes and letting me lather it on, spreading his arms out once I was done with his face and helping me rub it in. When he was done, I smeared some on my own face and then handed the bottle over to Jude.

"You too, buddy," I said firmly. "No one is going to look like a lobster on my watch."

His light eyebrows inched up, but he took it and made a half-hearted effort to protect his pretty face before he handed it back. With that done, he swept a hand out toward the door and grinned at Henry. "You ready to go,

little man?”

Henry whooped and broke into a flat run, speeding to the patio, down the few steps to the beach, and then across it to the water. Jude chuckled, and not a heartbeat later, he winked at me and then took off after my son, leaving me to close the sliding doors behind me as I headed out to join them.

The sand was hot under my feet, spraying out behind Jude’s as he ran after Henry. When they reached the water, which was bound to be ice cold, he squealed. As I watched, Jude kicked off his shoes, scooped him up, and splashed right into the waves with him.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I watched them play for a moment before I joined in. My extremities quickly went numb from the cold, but carelessly splashing them as Jude spun Henry in circles and pretended that he was about to dunk him was the most fun I’d had in ages.

Soon, we were all soaking wet, salty, and I, for one, was starving. Jude had to be too, because not even a minute after I’d had the thought, he glanced at Henry. “Let’s head into town for lunch. We can come back out here later this afternoon.”

Henry nodded, even his energy somewhat sapped as we trudged back up the beach to the house. After drying off and putting on different clothes, we piled into the Hummer and Jude took us to a little beachside café, immediately ordering platters of food and cocktails for us, juice for Henry, before we were even seated.

“How am I ever going to thank you for all this?” I asked wistfully as I watched Henry play on the small swing set on the sand close to our table.

Jude shook his head at me. “No thanks necessary, but I am going to need your help with those properties we’re going to see.”

I nodded, not even having to switch to business mode while talking to him about it. “I’ve got one scheduled in about an hour and a half. It’s not that far from our place, I think. It’ll be a great investment property. Four bedrooms and five baths, but not so big that it’ll take a ton of upkeep.”

He nodded slowly. “I have a client that might be interested. Let’s go check it out. Then I’ll send him the listing. Maybe do a video call while we’re there.”

I frowned. “I thought you were looking for more properties for yourself?”

“I am, but I’m also on the hunt on behalf of a few clients. If I’m going to be spending money, I need to be making it at the same time.”

“That’s a good philosophy,” I said as the waitress delivered our neon blue

cocktails—complete with umbrellas and fruit—as well as the first platter of appetizers.

After I called Henry back, we tucked in and didn't stop eating until all three platters he'd ordered were gone. As we finished eating, I checked my watch. "I hate to rush you guys, but we should get going. We don't want to be late for the viewing."

Henry grumbled a bit about still wanting to swing some more, but Jude promised him he'd have fun at the property we were going to look at and managed to coax him to the car without any tantrums. I seriously doubted there was any fun to be had for a four-year-old at a viewing, but I kept my mouth shut.

The house we went to look at was gorgeous, with a yard filled with lush greenery, spectacular views, and so beautifully redone that it knocked my socks off. Jude had Henry sitting on his shoulders, but as we walked through, he did the video call with his client. Somehow, while keeping Henry entertained, he also sold the damn house.

"Will you call Kent to arrange an offer?" he asked. "I could do it myself, but I think it'd be better if it came from you."

"Uh, sure. Of course. Your client is going to buy this place without even coming to see it?" I couldn't quite get my head wrapped around that. "Are you sure?"

Jude nodded as he swung Henry off his shoulders and tickled him on the way down. "Yeah, I'm sure. The guy has a few properties around here and he's making a killing renting them out to the holiday crowd. He's happy to take it at the asking price. It's a steal."

A steal? The place was going for two and a half million dollars. *How is that a steal?*

A little dumbstruck, I put in the call to Kent and watched Jude chatting to the showing realtor while still keeping Henry entertained and laughing. I had to admit, I'd never felt this supported with my son before. It was usually all me, all the time, and it was exhausting, but having him around made it easy.

Surprisingly, it was also easy to let him help me with Henry. None of it seemed to be forced from Jude's side, and if I didn't know any better, I'd have thought that he was actually having fun doing it. *But he can't be, right?*

No alpha male bachelor with so many zeroes in his bank account could have a secret heart for kids. *Only why not?*

Shaking my head at myself, I decided that while they were having so

much fun together and so naturally, I was just going to let it happen. He'd tell me if Henry got to be too much for him.

Kent promised to draw up the paperwork for the offer and send it right over, and Jude shook hands with the showing realtor. "I'll be in touch with that offer shortly, but it's pretty much a done deal."

The man didn't flinch, simply nodding and giving Jude's hand a firm shake. "I'll let my client know. Pleasure doing business with you."

After I said goodbye as well, I buckled Henry into the Hummer and noticed his glassy eyes. "Are you getting tired, hon?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes as he yawned. "I'm not going to sleep."

"Of course not." I smiled, knowing he was going to be out as soon as the wheels started rolling.

We were hardly around the first bend in the road when I glanced back to see that he was out like a light, and I glanced at Jude. "I had a suspicion that the excitement of the day was going to knock him out early."

Jude kept his eyes on the road, so handsome in profile with his hand resting lazily on the wheel as he smiled. "There's a spot up ahead with a beautiful view of the beach. We can pull over and crack the windows to let him sleep for a bit before we wake him up by trying to get him out of his seat at home."

"That sounds great." I hadn't even had to ask, but it would be a huge help if we could let him nap for a few minutes more than it would take us to get back to the beach house. *How is it that Jude just instinctively knows exactly what I need?*

It blew my mind.

I'd never experienced anything like it, and I had no idea if he was just smart, intuitive, and considerate, or if somehow, he was faking it till he made it. Whatever it was, another wave of gratitude toward him washed over me as he slowed at the viewpoint he'd mentioned.

My breath caught as I looked out the window at the white sand and sparkling, clear blue water dotted with boats here and there. "It's so beautiful out here. I can't believe I've never been."

"You've never been here?" he asked quietly as he cracked the windows and then got out.

I joined him in front of the car, surprised when he hopped up on the hood and held out his hand to help me up too. "I'm a first-timer, but if I can ever

afford it, I'm definitely coming back. It's so peaceful."

He chuckled as I sat down on the warm metal of the hood and kicked my feet up on the brush catcher. "It's only peaceful when it's not peak time. It gets pretty congested otherwise."

"I can imagine, but I doubt I'll ever be able to afford coming here over a holiday weekend or in the high summer peak anyway. Besides, I like it like this. I prefer it to the craziness I imagine it becomes."

"So do I," he agreed, shifting to face me and moving an inch or so closer in the process. "You know, I could get in big trouble with Ariane for bringing you here this weekend."

"What?" I frowned, but I saw the seriousness swimming in those eyes when I looked into them. "Why?"

"She warned me not to mess around with you. So did Flynn. Apparently, they felt like I took advantage of you at the wedding."

I laughed. "You didn't, and Ariane is just looking out for me. She's a good friend and she's always been a protector at heart."

Our gazes caught and my heart started speeding up when he reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "What would Ariane think if I kissed you right now?"

"It's not up to her," I murmured as I leaned in, my gaze dropping to his lips to let him know that I was in.

Jude's fingers curled around my cheek and jaw as he moved his head forward, slowly bringing his mouth to mine. When our lips touched, sparks shot through me and I moaned, my mind and body melting completely as he stole the breath right out of my lungs.

I felt him smile against my mouth, his fingers tightening on the side of my face as he held me to him and deepened the kiss, his tongue stroking mine in a way that made me crave more. Just last night, I'd admitted to Tess that he was growing on me, but right now, it felt like a hell of a lot more than just that.

Whatever this was, Jude had stopped being just a friend, and as he kept kissing me in the late afternoon sun with a warm breeze rustling through my hair, I felt an unfamiliar stirring in my chest. I didn't know what it was and I didn't care to examine it too closely, but it was there, and it was real, and it felt so good that I opened myself up to it and let it in without question.

A move I would later realize had been a mistake, but as I leaned into him then, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer, I would

never, ever have thought it.

CHAPTER 19



JUDE

After a great day and a quick dinner of pasta and sauce, McKinley went to put Henry down to bed at barely eight p.m. He'd had that nap this afternoon, but the kid had been beat, almost falling asleep in his spaghetti at the table on the patio.

I poured us each a glass of red wine in the kitchen, then headed back outside to the outdoor lounge set to wait for her. She joined me just a few minutes later, bundled up in blankets and with her phone connected to the baby cam she'd set up in Henry's room so she could hear him if he woke up and needed her.

I smiled as I handed over her wine and moved closer to her side, snagging a corner of one of her blankets and pulling it over my lap. "Today was a little busy for him, huh?"

"Yeah, it was, but he loved every second." She cuddled into my side, willingly surrendering a larger piece of the blanket for me to bundle up next to her. Wrapping her fingers around the glass when I handed it over, she stared out at the dark ocean and sighed. "I wonder if it's possible to tire of this view."

"Nah, I don't think so," I said, still looking only at her.

She'd pulled her short hair up into a messy bun on top of her head while she'd bathed Henry, and a few locks of it had escaped, falling to frame her face beautifully as she leaned into my side. Her warmth seeped into me, reminding me of what she'd felt like melting into me on that hood this afternoon.

Man, if we hadn't been on a public road with her kid in the car, I would've taken her so hard right then and there.

As it was, however, we *had* been on a public road with her kid in the car, so instead of making another move, I'd eventually pulled back and we'd talked for a while before coming back here. Strangely, since I'd known that meant spending more time with her and Henry, I hadn't even minded the no-sex part so much.

McKinley sipped her wine, her eyes still locked on the view as a soft sigh escaped her. "Seriously, thank you for this. I think it was probably the best day of Henry's life."

"Okay, that's enough of that." I eased my arm away from her side and slung it over the back of the sofa so I could turn and face her fully. When her head turned and her gaze met my own, I held it firmly and made sure she knew I meant every word I said. "You don't have to keep thanking me, McKinley. In fact, it's the other way around. You did me a huge favor by agreeing to come. If it wasn't for you, I'd never have found that place for my client, and as soon as I saw the listing, I knew it would be perfect for him."

"Nah, you didn't need me for that. Kent—"

"No," I said, needing her to really hear me. "You are a pretty fucking impressive woman, McKinley. It's about time you accept that."

"I'm not."

"Oh, but you are. I've never met anyone with the kind of grit you have, who works as hard as you, for so little reward, and still manages to keep smiling." When I realized what that must've sounded like, I quickly added, "No offense. It's just that I think you deserve more than what you're getting from Kent."

She cocked her head at me, her eyes wide and interested instead of narrow and pissed off because of the comment. "How would you know what I'm getting from him?"

"I don't," I admitted. "Well, not a dollar amount anyway, but between where you live, Henry's comment about not being able to afford pizza, and all the times you've mentioned something similar, it hasn't taken a rocket scientist to figure out you're not being paid well enough. It pisses me off."

When she gave me a questioning look, I explained before it all went south. No one liked talking about this kind of thing, and McKinley was a proud woman. I had zero doubt that I was going to talk myself into a deep, steaming pile of shit if I didn't clarify.

"I don't mean to overstep and I realize that I already am, but at the same time, someone needs to tell you that you can do better. Kent gave you a job

when you were in a bad spot, but that doesn't mean he owns you or that he can keep paying you less just because he was kind enough to employ you years ago. He's been an asshole."

"Tess told me the same thing."

"Tess sounds smart," I said with a cocky grin, at least knowing now that her best friend had already broken this particular ice with her.

It meant there was less of a chance of that steaming pile of shit suddenly being dumped on me, but I still needed to tread lightly here.

McKinley laughed, but then she sighed, seemingly getting smaller right in front of my eyes as her chest caved in and vulnerability crept onto her features. "Once upon a time, I had bigger dreams than working for Kent, but I've just never gotten around to even starting to think about all that. It's safer just not to."

"No, it's not. Well, I mean it *is* safer, but you deserve more. You deserve at least a chance at living your dreams."

"Maybe, but my time has been so monopolized by my responsibilities that I haven't been able to stop for long enough to regroup. Eventually, I'm hoping to make some time. It's getting easier in a sense now that Henry is getting older and is becoming more independent by the day, but I don't know. His needs are also growing with him, so maybe I'll never have time to regroup. Who knows? It's just about survival, right?"

Nope, but I didn't say that out loud. It was the last thing she needed to hear right now from a guy like me, who had no idea what she was really going through. To me, life had never been only about survival, but I'd never been in her shoes.

I was an asshole, but I wasn't so insensitive to the plight of others that I was stupid about it. "What kinds of things would you like to do when you finally have time to regroup?"

McKinley suddenly giggled, her cheeks taking on a warm glow as she averted her gaze. "It's nerdy, but I like to craft."

"Craft? Like, making scrapbooks and shit?"

She shook her head, finally lifting her eyes back to mine. "Well, sure, that is crafting, but it's not what I want to do."

"So what do you want to do?" I pressed, beyond curious to know what her big dreams were all about.

She glanced back at the ocean for a minute. "You're probably going to think it's silly."

“Try me.”

“I like making bespoke items. Event invitations, birthday cards, and all those sorts of things. There’s a market for it, but I’ve never given it a real go because it would cost a lot to invest in all the supplies I’d need to start a side business. Over and above all that, there’s the fact that I’m beat every night by the time Henry goes down, and our early mornings are already a crazy rush. No money and no time means no side business.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “You know I’m an investor by trade, right?”

She scoffed. “Yeah, but you invest in bigger fish than a tiny minnow like me who wants to splash around in the card-making pond.”

“Uh, no.” I frowned, bringing my arm on the sofa forward to drape it around her shoulders instead. “I invest where I see potential, and I see incredible potential in you, McKinley. And not just with your cards.”

Her breath caught softly and her eyes dropped to my lips again. Groaning as my cock jumped back to life, I took her face in my hands and brought my lips forward, but didn’t kiss her just yet.

“You know I didn’t bring you here for this, right?”

“Yep.” She smiled, glancing up into my eyes as she wrapped her arms around my neck and scooted forward until her thigh was pressed up against my shin where I was sitting sideways on the sofa. “I didn’t agree to come here because of this either, but does that mean we can’t?”

“No. It just means that I don’t want you to think I brought you here thinking you were a sure thing and wanting to fuck you all weekend long.”

Heat flashed in her eyes as she smirked at me. “Do you want to fuck me all weekend long?”

“Yes, I do.” My cock swelled to the point that it was now straining against my zipper and my pulse spiked. “It might get a little uncomfortable to keep doing it once Henry wakes up, but that’s not—”

She smacked my arm and chuckled. “So maybe not *all* weekend long, then.”

“Maybe not, but whenever we get a chance, sure.” I stroked her cheeks with my thumbs and brought my mouth so close to hers that I could feel her soft, warm breath feathering across my skin. “Only if you don’t think Ariane would have a problem with it.”

She laughed at my joke, pushing her fingers into the hair at the back of my neck as she let the tip of her nose run along the length of mine. “Again, that’s not up to her.”

“Someone should tell *her* that,” I murmured teasingly, running one hand down her back with my palm flat against it to rest just above her butt. “You’d tell me if you didn’t want this, right? If you felt like I was taking advantage of you? I’m a big boy. I can handle it, and you don’t owe me anything—”

“Shut up already, would you?” she murmured before she closed the short distance between our mouths, kissing me hard and deep as her body surged forward and her torso pushed up against mine.

Figuring that she’d made it pretty clear what she wanted, I surrendered and stopped worrying. Ariane and Flynn had gotten in my head a little, but they weren’t here and they didn’t know what we had. They also didn’t know that McKinley wasn’t nearly as fragile as they seemed to think she was.

In fact, as she moaned into the kiss and pushed up to crawl into my lap, I knew they’d gotten it pretty damn wrong. She wasn’t fragile at all. She was a strong, independent woman who knew what she wanted and went after it.

No complaints about that here.

Leaning back against the sofa, I kept kissing her as I guided her over me, my hands on her hips as she straddled my lap. I was already rock hard, and when I felt the heat of her radiating through my jeans, I groaned.

“Fuck, McKinley. You’re driving me crazy.”

She ground down on me, whimpering against my lips as her hips rocked back and forth. “I know the feeling.”

I sealed my lips back over hers, dragging my hands up from her hips to cup the undersides of her breasts and moving my thumbs up to flick across her pebbled nipples. She moaned some more, the sound turning me on way beyond what I should’ve been so soon after starting.

“I’m not opposed to a bit of exhibitionism, but we should probably take this inside.”

She giggled, her voice breathy as she scooted back on my lap and planted a few playful kisses on my mouth. “We should. Besides, I’ve got something to show you. I think you’re going to like it.”

Too worked up to think, I wrapped my arms around her waist and stood up with her still on my lap. McKinley let out a soft peel of laughter, hanging on for dear life as she hooked her legs around my hips. “We need to take my phone in with us.”

“We will.” I kissed her again, reaching blindly for the little table where I’d seen her put the device just before she’d sat down.

As soon as my fingers brushed against the smooth glass screen, I swiped

it up and slid it into my back pocket, then walked her inside, intent on insisting on a sleepover this time. Even if it meant sneaking her back to her own bed early enough in the morning so that Henry would never know it'd happened.

CHAPTER 20



MCKINLEY

Jude dropped me on a bed—I didn't know if it was his or mine just yet—and I opened my eyes, shaking my head at him before he kissed me again. “I have something for you, remember? I'm just going to need a minute.”

He groaned but nodded and backed up, sitting on the edge of the bed looking like a boy who'd just been denied his favorite toy. “Does it have to be right now?”

“Yes,” I said playfully. “It's not the kind of thing I can bring out just any time.”

Pouting a little, he watched me get off the bed and then brought his hands up to scrub over his face. “Yeah. Okay. I guess. You know where to find me.”

“Don't move,” I said firmly. “Get comfortable. I'll be right back.”

“By get comfortable, do you mean get naked?” he asked hopefully.

I winked at him from the door. “If you're comfortable that way, then yes.”

With that, I padded quietly and quickly down the hall, checking in on Henry despite the fact that every nerve ending in my body was screaming at me to hurry and get back to Jude. My baby was sleeping soundly though, obviously completely pooped after the day we'd had.

Excitement raced through me. Hopefully, he was so tired that he'd sleep right through without waking up even once, leaving Jude and me to the adult fun we were both so desperate to get back to.

Immediately when I had the thought, I felt guilty, but then I forced myself to remember that we weren't going anywhere. We would be right here if he woke up and needed us, but for now, he was happily snoring away.

Dragging in a deep breath, I also reminded myself that parents everywhere got it on once the kids were asleep. I didn't have to feel guilty or ashamed about doing the same thing. It wasn't like I was choosing this above something Henry needed me to do.

If I went and sat beside his bed just in case he woke up in a strange place and was scared, I'd probably just bother him when he clearly needed to get his sleep tonight. As I walked into my bedroom, I headed straight for my bag.

After Tess had left last night and I'd decided to go with it if something happened, I'd checked out the *after hours* outfits she'd packed for me. It turned out she was right about the teddy. It was gorgeous and so sexy that I'd gotten turned on just imagining wearing it for him.

Reaching in until I hit the bottom of the bag, I pulled it out and quickly shed my clothes, swapping them out for the lingerie. Light blue, skin tight, and cut so that two straps of lace only barely covered my nipples, I felt a little thrill run through me when I put it on.

I'd never worn anything like it, and it made me feel sexy as hell. If he didn't want to get it on with me in it, then maybe I would just get it on with myself.

I doubted that was going to happen, but it was the fact that I even thought it that made me smile. *Turns out lingerie is pretty powerful after all.*

Once I checked that it was on the way it should be, with nothing folded around my ass or twisted, I grabbed a robe from the bathroom and slid it on. *Ready or not, here I come.*

I stole back down the corridor, shrugging the robe off again and letting it trail behind me as I walked into his bedroom. While part of me felt silly for even bringing it, I knew I wouldn't regret it if Henry did need me after all.

Jude was lying on the bed in a pair of black boxer briefs, his back against the headboard and his hands folded on his stomach. He glanced up when I entered the room, but then did a double-take, looking again—and a lot more closely this time.

“You were right,” he said hoarsely. “That was definitely worth the wait.”

My cheeks flushed and my entire body went warm under the intensity of his gaze, but I stopped halfway across the room to let him look at me. “What do you think?”

“I think you should get over here,” he growled, eyes narrowing. “Right now.”

For just a moment, I was confused, but when I saw the flush spreading on

his own cheeks and the sudden bulge in his underwear, I realized that he wasn't angry. He was horny.

A slow smirk spread across my lips as I decided to toy with him for just a minute. Never in my life had I felt like a powerful, sexy, sensual being, but right now, in the teddy and with Jude's pupils dilating as he sat up and reached for me, I felt that surge of feminine power I'd just thought I wasn't destined for.

"Does that mean you like it?" I asked as I sashayed slowly toward him. "I could always go take it off again if you don't."

"I'm going to take it off," he said forcefully, eyes roaming my body as I inched closer to him. "With my teeth if that's at all possible."

I laughed. "That sounds like it might take a while. You may just want to use your hands."

"I'm going to. Just not for that."

As soon as I was within arm's reach, he grabbed my hands and tugged me to him, lying back down on the bed and bringing me crashing down on top of him. He controlled my fall with his strong arms though, immediately rolling over once I was on the bed so that he was on top.

I let out a soft giggle, taking his face in my hands as I stared up into those blue-gold eyes. "So you do like it, then?"

"I love it," he murmured as he rested his weight on his knees and lowered his head to kiss my neck. My shoulders. My chest.

He dragged his lips down between my breasts, moving down to where the straps met just above my pubic bone, but he didn't stop there. Instead, he moved his hands to my thighs and ran his fingers up and down, over and over again as his breath heated me over the fabric between my legs.

Just when I felt like I would spontaneously combust before he'd even touched me, he sealed his mouth over my pussy, dragging his tongue over the lace as his fingers hooked around the front panel of the panties. I moaned loudly, my hips arching as I writhed underneath him.

Jude chuckled against the soaked material, running his fingers through my slick folds as he glanced up at me. "There are hooks down here. Not clips. There's no way I'm getting it off with my teeth."

A low, throaty chuckle fell out of me as I slipped my fingers into his hair. "I don't care. Just get it off."

All my ideas about toying with him had flown right out the window as soon as he'd touched me. It turned out that being played with was just as fun,

and besides, getting to see that look in his eyes when I walked in wearing this thing had been enough.

He obliged without making any smartass comments about it, unhooking the two sides of the panel deftly before rolling it up at the front. Cool air washed over my heated core, and I trembled, tightening my grip on Jude's head and instinctively spreading my legs as I pulled him closer to me.

"McKinley," he groaned as he breathed me in, positioning a finger at my entrance and slowly pushing it into me as he clamped his lips around my clit.

I bit back a cry, really not wanting to wake Henry up right now. My teeth sank into my lips and I strained against the urge to make a sound. Sensation washed through me as he hooked his finger inside me, curling it and finding some super sensitive spot that made me buck my hips against him.

Circling his tongue around my clit in response, he kept gently touching that same spot inside, making me see stars as I screwed my eyes shut. White hot pleasure raced through me and I bit my lip harder to keep the moans from spilling out of me unabated.

I rocked my hips into his mouth, his tongue and fingers finding a rhythm so perfect that I found myself already riding that delicious crest. Not a minute later, the wave broke and the orgasm crashed into me, sucking me dry as my toes curled and my body shook.

Panting and still trembling, I fought to catch my breath as the climax subsided, leaving me boneless and sated in its wake. I opened my eyes, finding Jude staring up at me with pure raw dark need in his eyes. I sat up, forgetting all about my numb limbs and ringing ears as I beckoned him to me.

"Your turn," I murmured, pushing him down on the mattress by his shoulders as he climbed up next to me.

His features were tight, almost scowling as he pierced the ceiling with an angry glare. "Be gentle with me. It's not going to take much."

I chuckled. "Relax. You don't have anything to prove."

He groaned when I sat down on my knees and ran my hands down the length of his abdomen, tracing all those delicious ridges I'd been wanting to lick since day one. With the opportunity now in front of me, I tucked the bits of hair that had fallen out of my bun behind my ears and bent over, my tongue darting out to make contact with his hot skin.

"Shit, McKinley." Jude's hands landed on my head, not quite pushing me down but not pulling me up either.

It was more like he just wanted something to hold on to, and I smiled.

“You okay over there?”

“No, but don’t you dare stop,” he bit out as I drew circles around his nipples with my tongue.

Another thrill of excitement rippled through me. Some might find it strange, but I’d never actually done anything like this before—this slow, playful exploration of another person’s body, doing whatever I wanted at my own pace without any fear of being discovered by a parent.

With David, my ex, everything had always been so hurried. A few quick gropes and tugs while hidden out of sight, and then later, when I’d moved in with them, he’d sneak into my room at night but we still never took our time, too aware that his mother had been sleeping right down the hall to be slow or playful about it.

While Jude was definitely worked up, he didn’t rush me, rather inhaling deeply and letting out soft moans when he needed to, but he let me do my thing. I dragged my tongue with the lightest of touches across his body, tasting every inch of his salty skin before I finally licked a path down the thin trail of hair leading from his belly button.

Moving my hands up the insides of his thighs, I hooked my fingers into the waistband of his underwear and lifted it up over his raging erection before I pushed it down. Jude kicked the garment off as soon as he could while I turned my attention to his dick.

Mere inches away from my face, it suddenly seemed intimidatingly big, but I sure as heck remembered how good it’d felt inside me. This was nothing to be afraid of.

Attached to a lesser man’s body, it might’ve been capable of doing some damage, but he knew how to use it and I couldn’t wait to learn its secrets myself. Tentatively reaching out, I wrapped my fingers around the thick base and reveled in the whispered stream of curses from his lips.

Sure, I didn’t really know what I was doing, but he didn’t seem to know that. Or maybe he just didn’t care because it felt good anyway. Since feeling good was the name of the game, I didn’t let my insecurities hold me back, going with whatever came naturally as I started stroking him, my gaze locked on the shiny, red head of him.

My ex hadn’t been circumcised, but Jude was and the difference was absolutely apparent. I wouldn’t have thought it would make such a big difference to the look of the thing, but I also hadn’t ever really given it any thought.

Jude grunted when I leaned over further and slid my lips around his cock, making sure to fit my tongue snugly against the underside of him. I'd read somewhere that men were particularly sensitive there.

His hips nearly came off the bed when I did it, which told me that the information I'd once stored away for future use had been true. At least in Jude's case.

Paying special attention to that spot and to not tormenting him by stroking too fast, I kept my movements gentle, like he'd told me to, and got so absorbed in the firm but silky feel of him in my mouth that surprise rippled through me when I felt him swell against my tongue. The next thing I knew, his hands were around my shoulders and he was dragging me up and rolling me over. I landed on my back on the bed and giggled as I looked over to where he was putting on a condom like he was trying to win a medal.

He smirked when he settled himself over me, spreading my legs to make space for his knees as he reached up to stroke my cheeks. "You think that was funny, do you?"

After a brief mental debate about whether to be teasing or honest, I finally shook my head. "Not funny. Surprising. I didn't think it would have such an effect on you."

His eyebrows arched as he pushed his tip against my entrance. "Everything you do has an effect on me. I got way too close to losing it."

"So lose it," I challenged as I angled my hips up and wrapped my legs around his waist.

"I'm going to, but only once I'm deep inside you." With that, he claimed my lips in a searing kiss and thrust into me.

My entire body jerked as pleasure sped through me, all the parts that were still sensitive after my orgasm and needy after teasing him lighting up. I wound my arms around his neck, holding him to me as I deepened the kiss and rocked my hips to the rhythm he was setting.

Over and over again, he drove into me, retreated, rolling his pelvis and driving me mad until I felt myself climbing that peak again. With one final, punishing thrust, he sent me spiraling, climaxing as another powerful orgasm swept me into its hold and didn't let go until my bones had been liquefied and my head was spinning.

Jude's rhythm faltered, and he pushed tight against me as he softly cursed his way through his own orgasm. Utterly spent, he collapsed on top of me, his breath fanning over my sweat-slicked skin as he lay with his head on my

shoulders, toying with the strap of the teddy that had never even come off.

“I’m going to need you to wear this again tomorrow night,” he murmured huskily. “Or later tonight, depending on whether you’re sleeping in here with me.”

Thoughts of Henry sleeping down the hall drifted through my head, but if he hadn’t woken up yet, it was probably safe to say he would only be awake again in the morning. He had a tendency to wake up within the first few hours of falling asleep or going all the way through.

It was rare for him to wake up in the early morning hours. “I’ll sleep here with you, but we need to set an alarm for five a.m.”

“I’ve got you.” He reached for his phone and set the alarm before he left the bed to take care of the condom. After cleaning up, he came back to me, pulling me into his arms and switching off the light on the nightstand. “Good night, McKinley. I’ve got a busy day tomorrow, but I’ll meet up with you just as soon as I can.”

I hummed something incomprehensible as the excitement of the day finally got to me and exhaustion set in. My eyes closed, my lids too heavy to rise again as I cuddled into the warmth of Jude’s arms and drifted off, wondering if I was going to wake up in the morning and this was all going to have been a dream.

CHAPTER 21



JUDE

Saturday was going to be all business for me. I had meetings set up with clients and more showings arranged by Kent's office, but I hadn't told McKinley about them because I knew she'd never accept what I had planned for her.

As we drove down a long, winding driveway to the elegant hotel that lay ahead, she frowned and lifted an eyebrow at me. "What's this? You're not thinking of buying this place, are you?"

I chuckled and shook my head, glancing at her from behind the sunglasses covering my eyes. It was another beautiful day outside, and McKinley was dressed in another sundress—turquoise with little white flowers on it this time—with a pair of sunglasses resting on her face.

I'd bought some kids' shades for Henry earlier, and the little man was rocking his neon orange with his shorts and T-shirt. McKinley's hair was loose today, which I liked, and she'd only put on the bare essentials of makeup again.

Her window was open, her hair blowing in the light breeze streaming in from outside as I slowed down in front of the wide, double doors leading into the luxury hotel. "Nah, I'm not interested in buying it. It's a nice place, but the hospitality business on this scale isn't for me right now. This is, however, where you and Henry are going to be spending the day."

"Excuse me?" She dipped to get a full view of the lobby from outside, those wide double doors leading into an elegant, spacious reception area with chandeliers, lots of greenery and fresh flowers, and even a fountain right in the middle. "What are we going to be doing here and where are you going?"

"I've got some work to do, but I've booked an entire spa day for you and

they have a great kids' club for Henry.”

McKinley pulled her sunglasses down to the tip of her nose and glowered at me. “We cannot accept this.”

“Yeah, I thought you might say that, but it’s already been paid for and it’s nonrefundable.” I smiled and gentled my voice a little. “Relax and enjoy yourself. You deserve it. I’ll be here to pick you guys up for our dinner date as soon as I’m done.”

She gaped at me, her head shaking slowly from side to side as she reached down to unbuckle her seatbelt. “I’m supposed to be working this weekend too, remember? Going to a luxury spa does not count as working.”

“With me, it does. It counts as working toward a more relaxed version of yourself by tonight. Go on. Have fun and stop worrying about it.”

Sighing she opened the door, turned back to me, and flashed me a small, quick smile. “Thank you, Jude. This is going to be amazing.”

As she walked around the car and got Henry out of his seat, I heard him babbling about the kids' club and asking what it was, but before I could answer, she shut his door behind them and took his hands, only turning once to wave at me before they disappeared inside. An unfamiliar pang traveled through me as I watched them go without me.

I was beyond relieved that she was going in there without having put up too much of a fight and I was convinced Henry was going to have the best time at the kids' club—it'd come highly recommended on the almighty internet—but somehow, it just didn't feel quite right not going in there with them. Shaking my head at the thought, I put the car back into drive and took off, determined not to let myself get distracted.

Today was going to be a busy one and I'd need my wits about me. My first meeting was a breakfast at an exclusive country club with a client who lived out here. We hadn't seen each other face to face for a few months, and this had seemed like an excellent opportunity to give him some in-person feedback on his investments.

He beamed as he met me in the breakfast room overlooking a lush, green golf course, a Mojito already in his hand. “Jude, it’s so good to see you. Got time for a round later?”

I followed his gaze to the golf course. “Not today, unfortunately, but next time, I’ll definitely get out there with you.”

He chuckled. “Always so busy. You should slow down. It’s good for the soul.”

Says the guy who retired at thirty-nine and has been palling it up with the over-sixty crowd ever since. I grinned as I sat down with him at the table he'd reserved. "I'd like that, but I can't sit still. I need to keep busy, or my mind will start going."

"True that." He took another sip of his Mojito and then regarded me curiously. "So what's up? You're not one to make time for a casual sit-down. What's going on?"

"Nothing bad," I assured him before placing my own drink order—just a coffee since I had to keep a clear mind—and then turned back to him. "You mentioned wanting to get into the higher risk for higher reward category on the phone the last time we spoke, so I've prepared some options for you to look over and I thought it would be a good idea to meet so we could discuss them."

"Oh, right." He rubbed his palms together and took the tablet I handed over to him. "Let's see what we've got here."

After an hour and the best Eggs Benedict I'd ever had, I was back in the Hummer with a new investment strategy in place for my client. My next stop was a property viewing, but Kent had missed the brief completely when he'd set it up.

As an investment property, it would suck. It needed a *ton* of maintenance and everything was so old that I suspected it would have to be gutted and completely redone from the ground up before one could do anything with it. As a prospective family home, it had some merit, but it needed an owner who wanted to make it their own and who had the time to do it.

That wasn't me.

The second property was as much of a bust, a tiny apartment a mile away from the beach in an old-money housing estate. Not exactly my cup of tea.

I moved onto my next meeting, a quick coffee date with a prospective client, decided against taking the guy on, and then headed off to view the next property. For the first time today, my interest was piqued as soon as I pulled up.

It was another beach house, but it had a certain charm to it I couldn't quite describe. Whoever this place belonged to had spent a ton of time on the yard, making it look like the kind of place where kids could play for days and not get bored. There was a wooden jungle gym with slides, and swings, and monkey bars, and even a fireman's pole.

A little track had been built for bicycles around it, complete with lines

drawn on the “road,” stop signs, and even a little pretend filling station. Off to one side was a big shed, and the open door revealed kids’ tables, chairs, and chalk paint on the walls.

My heartrate picked up a little as I took it all in on the way to the front door. All of that was within the fenced-off front yard, and when I walked into the house, I was struck by how cozy it felt inside. Spacious, with loads of natural light and an open design, but still homey. It felt warm, and it wasn’t just because it was a nice day outside.

There were pictures on the walls and a renovated, country-style kitchen with a big island with the stove built into it. Pots and pans hung from above and the doors opened up so whoever was cooking could be “outside” on the patio with the family even while they were in the kitchen.

The patio itself was large and comfortable, with those fancy but cozy egg chairs for reading purposes, a hammock, an infinity pool, a hot tub, and a dining table large enough for ten people. As I stared at it, the showing realtor found me, having walked out his previous clients as I’d come in.

The man had a pearly smile and a firm handshake, but I couldn’t care less. “How much interest have you had here?”

He shrugged. “A bit. It’s our first showing, but I’ve already had a couple who have expressed serious interest. Why? Is it a place where you can see yourself?”

I nodded. The house was incredible. It wasn’t just someplace I could see myself spending a lot of time. It was the kind of place I could imagine spending every summer and every Christmas with my family. A place where we could make memories to last a lifetime.

“Give me a minute,” I said. “I need to make a call.”

The realtor swept his hand out graciously. “I’ll be in the dining room if you need me. Feel free to take a look around here. This place really has it all.”

I was starting to realize that when I spotted the brand new grill installed in one corner overlooking the beach and ocean. Absently sliding my phone out of my back pocket, I walked over to the railing and looked out over the gentle swells on the water as I called Flynn.

“Hey, man. What’s up?” he said when he answered. “You’re on speaker. I’m with Ariane.”

“Hey, Jude,” she sang happily. “Want to come over for burgers later? Willow is going to try her first solid food. Butternut. We’re super excited.

Her doctor said that she's ready, so we're making an event out of it."

"I'd have loved to, but I can't." I really would've loved to have been there for that, though. "Listen, I'm at this property in the Hamptons and it's fucking amazing. I was wondering if you guys would be interested in buying it with me. We could share it as a getaway home for our families."

There was complete silence at the other end of the line for a moment before Flynn spoke up. I heard the frown in his voice. "*Our families?*"

Ahh, shit. I backpedaled quickly. "Yeah, you know. Just, uh, for us. The place is great. Willow will love it."

"What's going on, Jude?" Ariane asked curiously. "Have you met someone you're serious about?"

"Nah, the only thing Jude is serious about is money and tail," Flynn joked. "Right?"

"Yeah. Right. Of course," I said. "It was just a slip of the tongue, is all. Nothing serious. Nothing for you to wonder about or look into. Hey, uh, I think I hear Willow crying in the background."

"She's not crying," Ariane said immediately. "You're hiding something."

"I'm not. Just, uh, I'm sending you the link for the listing. You had better give me an answer about whether I should make an offer or not. At the risk of sounding like a realtor, this place isn't going to be on the market for long and it really is great."

"Are you planning to use the money from the oil rig sale to buy it?" Ariane asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Not everything has to circle back to that, sis."

"I was just wondering."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I bet you were, but do I really need to remind you that I have plenty of money to go around? My buying power isn't going to be impacted in the slightest by whatever we decide to do with the rig."

"Which is exactly why you should abandon it," she said triumphantly. "Selling it isn't going to make any difference to your financial position. You just said it yourself."

"Man, you're sneaky," I complained laughingly. "Look, I haven't made a decision about that yet, but we'll talk about it when I get back. What about the house? Did you get the link?"

"Looking at it on my phone now," she said. "It does look pretty amazing, but we want to think about going in on it with you before we commit. Is that okay?"

“Sure, but we might lose it if we sleep on it. I can guarantee that you’ll love it. Just let me make an offer for us?”

“If you love it so much, you buy it,” Flynn said, but I’d already thought of that.

This wasn’t about splitting the cost with them. It was about the fact that this place deserved kids and life, and not a bachelor who only ever came here by himself. Besides, I’d get way too much shit for it from my family if I bought a place like this by myself.

They’d never accept that I’d loved it so much just because. No doubt they would overthink it for years, debating whether I had a deep-seated, secret desire for a family of my own—which I didn’t, yet—and then they’d start setting me up with every single woman they knew. Except for McKinley.

“We’re not going to budge,” Flynn said after I tried again to convince them. “Let us think about it and take a good look at the pictures. We’ll get back to you.”

I sighed but let them go, a bit dejected for the rest of the showing. The bedrooms were huge and every one had a view of either the water or the awesome playground outside, and as I walked back out to my car later, I knew I was going to regret not putting in an offer today.

Casting one last glance at the place, I wondered why it was so easy to picture myself here. *And why, when I do picture myself, are McKinley and Henry here with me?*

An uneasy feeling started growing in my gut and I shook it off, but for the rest of the day, I couldn’t stop wondering why it’d been there at all. I had a feeling I knew the answers to all of my questions. They just weren’t the answers I really wanted.

CHAPTER 22



MCKINLEY

The couple of hours I spent in the lap of luxury in the spa were amazing. I didn't think my skin had ever been this soft, my heels this smooth, or my very soul this pampered. It was lovely, and while I'd never seen the appeal of a spa before, I sure did now.

The only missing thing was Henry—and Jude, but I was determined not to think about him like that. I wasn't dependent on him and I couldn't expect him to spend every minute with us. Nor was I about to get it in my head or in my heart that we needed him in order to enjoy ourselves.

Wrapping a thick, fluffy white robe around myself over my sundress, I left the spa and headed to the kids' club. I had a full-body massage organized next, but I wanted to pick up Henry first. I missed him and he and I hadn't had much of a chance to spend time together this weekend, and doing that was my first priority—always.

The only thing that could make this better was my son, and when I walked into the kids' club, he seemed just as happy to see me even though this place was an absolute dream come true for any kid and parent. Every kind of climbing and playing apparatus I could think of was here, all brand new and brightly colored. There was a reading corner, cars, bikes, trampolines, video games for older kids, and so many other things that it was overwhelming even for me.

Henry ran over as soon as he spotted me, his green eyes bright with excitement and his feet already bare. "Mommy, Mommy! They have water slides into the pool! Did you bring my floaties?"

"I didn't, but I was wondering if you'd like to come get a massage with me instead?"

A wide grin broke out on his face and he nodded enthusiastically. “Can I come back here later?”

“Whatever you want, kiddo.” It was too rare that I got to say those words to him, and they filled me with a sense of warmth and validation that I hadn’t felt in much too long.

Henry wrapped his tiny hand around mine, and I signed him out before taking him back to the spa with me. I’d checked with my therapist, and she’d said they allowed kids in here as long as it was only one child per adult and they stayed with their parents at all times.

It probably also helped that the place wasn’t overly busy, but they did have a kiddies’ menu of options for treatments, and I traded my mud soak for a kid’s massage. Henry’s eyes were wide as they took us to a private room overlooking the verdant gardens and the ocean beyond, and he giggled for the first few minutes. “It tickles, Mommy!”

“I know, honey. Just relax, okay? They’re not trying to tickle you. It’s supposed to relax your muscles.”

“It feels nice,” he said after a while. “Do you think we can do this again?”

“Let’s live in the moment for today, shall we?” I really didn’t want to ruin it by saying no, but realistically, the closest we would come to reliving this experience was if we had a spa day at home.

I didn’t know how much all this had run Jude, but I knew places like these were notoriously expensive and it was an unnecessary luxury I honestly just couldn’t afford. Henry sighed but nodded, then started chatting up a storm to his therapist about his school, his teacher, and their class pet—an iguana named Jelly.

He was adorably charming, obviously winning her over long before she led us out of the massage room when it was over. “What do you say, Henry? Do you want to try all the cool stuff we’ve got here, or should I get someone to walk you back to the kids’ club?”

He looked up at her. “What have you got?”

She chuckled. “Iced lemon water, cucumbers on your eyes, a foot massage, and a manicure. Exactly what your mommy will be getting.”

“Yes, I want that. All of it.” He turned to face me with wide eyes, his head bouncing up and down as he nodded. “Can I, Mommy? Can I stay with you?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling at the therapist and sending her a thankful nod.

She returned my smile as she led us down a corridor with wooden floors and peaceful, instrumental music flowing through hidden speakers. The entire spa was like a sanctuary, scented faintly with jasmine and eucalyptus, and with an air of peace that I knew I would never be able to replicate at home.

We walked into a lounge-type area with more beautiful views of the ocean, and the therapist motioned us into oversized, leather recliners. “You can relax over here. I’ll be right back with your drinks and then we’ll send in the ladies who are going to be working on your hands.”

“Thank you,” I said as Henry practically dove into his recliner and wiggled his butt until he was comfortable.

She laughed at his antics, striding over to the counter in the corner to get our water. Bringing back a jug of water with lemon slices in it, so cold that condensation had formed on the outside, she poured us each a glass and set them down on the little table between us along with the jug.

“Stay hydrated,” she instructed lightly with a wink. “Now, if you’ll close your eyes, young sir, I’ll go get the cucumber.”

He nodded, immediately shutting his eyes and giggling when she placed the cool slices over them. “Why do people do this? Aren’t you supposed to eat cucumber?”

“Usually, yes,” I said patiently. “Not here, though. Here, the cucumber is used to make your eyes look pretty.”

“How?”

“They reduce puffiness and dark circles, neither of which you need to worry about,” the therapist said. “They give skin a fresh, dewy look, but for you, it’s just for the fun of it.”

He shrugged. “Okay. It is fun. This chair is comfy.”

The therapist placed cucumbers on my eyes next. Then I heard her padding quietly out of the room. Smiling under the cucumbers, I turned my head toward Henry even though I couldn’t see him. “Are you having fun so far, baby?”

“So much,” he gushed. “I love the playground, and the massage lady, and it smells so nice in here.”

“It really does,” I agreed. “The massage lady is called a masseuse. If it was a man, he would’ve been called a masseur.”

Henry must’ve been thinking it over because he was silent for a moment. “Is it a job?”

I smiled. “Yes, it is.”

“Oh, but it’s not your job?”

“No, it’s not.”

I wished I could see his face right now. I loved these moments when he figured out something new about the world and I could hear the curiosity in his voice. Another piece of life’s puzzle had just fallen into place in his head, and while I wasn’t able to see it, at least I got to be here when the realization occurred.

“Why isn’t it your job?” he asked. “If it was, we could live here at the beach and I could play at the playground while you work.”

I chuckled. “I don’t think they allow the children of staff to play here all day, every day, baby. Besides, you like your school and Mommy doesn’t know how to massage people properly without hurting them, so I don’t think they would hire me.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “That’s too bad.”

“It is, but we’re here now, right? That’s something.”

He giggled. “Is Jude going to bring us back here someday? When he has to buy more houses?”

“Well, I don’t know, sweetheart, but probably not,” I said before proceeding with caution. “You like him, huh?”

“He’s the best!” I imagined Henry had sat up and his cucumbers had fallen off, but I heard a soft rustling that told me he’d retrieved them and was settling back down. “He’s a nice friend.”

“Yes, he is.” *No doubt about it.* “Just don’t get too used to him, okay? He’s a very busy man and I don’t know how much we’ll be seeing of him after this weekend.”

That was my primary concern. I had to manage Henry’s expectations because, while Jude might’ve brought us here, it wasn’t likely Henry would be seeing much of him once we got home. The last thing I wanted was for my boy to pine for a man who wouldn’t become part of our lives in any real way.

Diverting Henry’s attention to another subject, I asked him about school, his teacher, and his friends, and by the time Jude came to pick us up, we’d had a great time chatting and playing some more at the kids’ club, and we were both in a content daze.

When I climbed into the Hummer after buckling Henry in, Jude’s light brown hair was still styled just as neatly as it’d been this morning. It was swept away from his chiseled features, and after an entire day, he didn’t look any worse for wear.

There was a shadow in his eyes that hadn't been there before, though. But it vanished when he glanced at Henry in the rearview mirror as he drove us away from the hotel. "How was that, buddy? Did you have a good time today?"

"The best," Henry said sleepily. "The playground is the biggest in the world."

"Well, I don't know about that." Jude chuckled, but then he shrugged and left it alone. "I'm just glad you had a good time."

His white button-down shirt stretched across his bicep as he turned the steering wheel, the fabric rolled up to his elbows giving me a gorgeous view of the muscles rippling in his forearms. In my lazy daze, my gaze stuck to him for a moment and he smirked when he caught me looking.

"You have a good time too?" he asked lightly as his eyes lingered on my face.

I nodded, bringing the back of my hand to my mouth as I yawned. "It was incredible. They let Henry join me in the spa for a couple of hours and we spent some time there together before we headed back to the kids' club. All in all, he's right. It was the best day."

Before I could thank him again, he glanced back up at Henry with a wide grin on his face. "The spa? How was that, bud? Personally, I love massages too."

"When I grow up, I wanted to be a *missur*," Henry said confidently. "I'll give Mommy foot massages every day after school, and rub her back, and make her feel special like the other *missurs* did."

"*Missur*?" Jude frowned for a moment before he snapped his fingers. "Oh, right. Masseur. That sounds great, Henry. I'm sure your mom would love that, but keep your options open, huh? You don't need to make any of those serious decisions right now. You're still so little."

Henry shook his head while I glowed in the passenger seat, feeling so full of love and gratitude for this time to relax and to be with my son. "I'm four. That means I'm big. I'm going to be a *missur*."

Jude inclined his head with a soft smile spreading on his lips. "Okay then, little man. A masseur, you shall be. Think I could have the family and friends discount when I come to you for a massage?"

"What's that?" Henry asked, and Jude patiently explained.

Meanwhile, I leaned my head back against the seat and watched the waves crashing to shore as we drove along the beach back to our house. I

hadn't been sure what to expect of this weekend and I'd been worried that Jude wouldn't really want to bring Henry along to everything, but so far, I was finding that things felt really balanced.

Watching Jude and Henry together lit me up inside, but I knew I needed to get a grip on myself. I also needed to talk to Jude about what this was between us. If it was just a fling that was going to be over in a couple of weeks, then that was fine, but if that was the case, I didn't want Henry to get attached to him.

Which meant that after he dropped us off at home on Sunday, I would have to make sure they said goodbye properly and that both of them knew it really was goodbye. If, however, it was something more, I'd have to navigate things carefully.

Henry already really liked Jude. I had to think about my son and what was best for him, but I had to admit, this felt so darn good. The three of us, being together on a mini-vacation. Spending time together and laughing.

I'd never had anything like it, nor had I had anything feel so good and so natural since I'd lost my dad. It scared me to think it might be temporary, but on the flip side of the coin, it scared me more to think it might not be.

Having someone like Jude in my life would give me even more to lose, and I'd lost so much already that I didn't know if I could take any more. Trying something with him would be a risk, and I just wasn't sure if it was one I could afford to take.

CHAPTER 23



JUDE

After we got back to the beach house, I had a couple more surprises up my sleeve. While McKinley ushered Henry into the house, I walked around the back of the Hummer and took a few bags of groceries out, tilting my head toward the sky to watch the clouds floating in.

The light breeze of the day had turned into a chilly wind, and judging by the clouds, it was going to be a much cooler evening than it had been last night. I nodded at the white crests on the waves, realizing that my plan of cooking dinner together on the patio wasn't going to work.

Thankfully, there was a cozy fireplace in the living room for evenings just like this and an oven in the kitchen we could use instead of the one outside. I headed in, shutting the door behind me and fighting a shiver.

"Man, it's getting cold out there," I said as I walked in, dropping the groceries on the kitchen counter before I strode through the open space toward the fireplace. "Let's get this thing going before we start dinner. I think we're definitely going to want a fire tonight."

"Can I help?" Henry asked excitedly, but his energy levels had definitely taken a dive after the day he'd had.

His excitement was still there, but it was a few notches lower than it'd been since I'd picked them up yesterday. Dropping to my haunches next to the basket of firewood, I glanced at McKinley over my shoulder. "I don't know, bud. You're going to have to ask your mom."

"Can I, Mommy? Please?" He turned to his mom with his big green eyes wide, imploring her to say yes as he pressed his palms together.

"Fine," she said quietly before shifting her gaze to mine. "Only to pack the wood and get everything ready. Stand back before Jude lights it."

“We’ll be safe,” I assured her as I motioned for Henry to join me.

The fireplace was in the center of the wall, with stone cladding and a basket of firewood ready to use beside it, but also a whole pile stacked under the counter on the other side. When Henry made for the pile, I gently shook my head and motioned at the basket instead.

“Let’s use this first. Grab two pieces, then put them down about the length of your forearm apart.” It would make for a tiny space between the logs, but that was okay. It would be easier for him to build it this way. “Is this your first fire?”

He nodded as he carefully picked up the two pieces of wood like I’d directed, then laid them down slowly. When he was done, he straightened up and grinned at me. “Like that?”

“Perfect,” I said. “Now do it again, but with the next two on top of those, facing the other way.”

Henry did what I’d said again and, after a touch of confusion about how to place them, grinned at me again. “Is that okay?”

“It looks good,” I encouraged as I handed over the next log. “Right, now these go on top of those, but the same way as the first ones.”

In no time at all, we had a respectable little tower of wood, I motioned him back to me. “Right, that’s perfect, but before we light it, we need to check the ventilation.”

I picked him up as I showed him what I was doing, then set him down again and sent him to stand with McKinley before I lit the fire. It started smoking and crackling as soon as the first logs got licked by the flames, and I smiled as I dusted off my hands.

“Okay, so now that’s done, let’s go make dinner, shall we?”

Henry frowned. “Me too?”

“Yep. You too.” I winked at McKinley when she frowned at me in turn. “Just trust me. This is going to be fun.”

Her greenish eyes lingered on mine for a beat before she nodded and took Henry’s hand. “Let’s go see what Jude has planned for us this time.”

I led them into the kitchen and went to stand behind the counter, spreading my arms out to my sides as they sat down on stools across from me. “We’re going to have a make-your-own-pizza night.”

Henry blinked at me before a slow grin spread on his face. “Do I get to choose what I want on mine?”

“Yep.” I reached into the first grocery bag and started by unpacking the

pre-made crusts I'd bought earlier. Then I pulled out the variety of toppings I'd decided we needed to have. "Let's see here. We've got mozzarella and tomato sauce because those are the staples, but we've also got ham, pineapple, olives, some veggies, tomatoes, and a few others things."

McKinley gaped at me when Henry curiously started inspecting the toppings, and it seemed being liberal with the choices had paid off. It was definitely engaging him, and she arched a brow when he chose to add olives to one tiny part of his pizza.

"I can't believe I haven't thought of doing this kind of thing before," she murmured as he got started adding the toppings. "We've been having some picky eating issues starting up. It looks like this is perfect to help with that."

"Glad to be of service," I said, smiling as I pushed a crust toward her. "Get started before we finish all the good toppings."

Our eyes met for a beat too long. Then she nodded and got to work decorating her pizza with tomatoes, spinach, olives, some softer cheese I'd found in the deli, and some herbs. Once our pizzas were in the oven, she went to clean the mess Henry had made while adding more toppings to the counter than to his pizza, but I shook my head at her.

"Those are going to take a minute. I'll clean later when you guys have bath time. Do you want to play some cards while we wait?"

Henry nodded enthusiastically and picked up on the rules of Snap pretty quickly. We played it using the suits of the cards to make it easier, and he cleaned us out once he got the hang of it. In no time at all, our pizzas were ready and we sat down at the small dining table to eat.

He eyed his mess of a creation with pride gleaming in his eyes, then dug in, eating a bit of almost everything in the different sections of his pizza. McKinley and I both laughed as he made a show of sampling each topping before he ate it, licking his fingers and rating it on a system that went from *yuck* to *yum* to *yummmm*.

Pineapple, tomatoes, ham, and surprisingly, olives, all got a *yummmm*, but nothing else made that cut. He yawned once he was done eating, then turned to McKinley with bleary eyes. "Can I go take a bath now?"

"Of course, sweetheart." She checked her watch as she got up. "Right on time. Let's go, big guy."

He slid off his chair and trailed after her, seemingly regaining some energy while he was in the bath if the soft chatter and laughter drifting down the hall were anything to go by. I smiled as I cleaned up the mess in the

kitchen and the dining room, then added more wood to the fire, keeping my ears open for any mention of my name.

There was murmuring for a little while, but since I couldn't make out what was being said, I assumed they'd lowered their voices precisely so I wouldn't be able to hear. My pulse sped up, palms getting a tiny bit clammy.

Why I cared what they thought, I didn't know, but the fact was that I did. I fucking cared that they were having fun and that Henry liked me, and I didn't know how to ask without sounding like a needy bitch.

I sighed, but just as I did, Henry walked back into the room with his wet, messy hair and wearing jammies with rocket ships on them. He was holding a colorful book, looking almost shy as he carried it over to me.

"Can you read this to me?"

McKinley caught up to him, cheeks pink and a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead. She wiped it with the back of her arm, still holding his towel as she shook her head. "Not tonight, Henry. I'm sure Jude has had a long day and that he just wants to relax now. Maybe next time, okay?"

The little boy pouted and my heart went out to him, but I wouldn't overstep. McKinley had said no, and even though I would have readily jumped at reading to him, I had a feeling I knew why she was heading it off.

Before we'd come here this weekend, I had thought about the possibility that the boy would get attached to me. I'd simply figured that on account of McKinley being here as well, he and I wouldn't bond so much as to cause any real issues for him going forward.

What I hadn't accounted for was how much I was getting attached to him. Shit, if it had been up to me, I'd have grabbed a blanket, tucked him in right next to me on the sofa in front of the fire, and then read the book over and over again until he fell asleep in my arms.

And that's why McKinley said no.

I wasn't Henry's father and the last thing she'd want was for me to start doing stuff that made him feel like maybe, one day, I could be. Giving him the best smile I could muster, I waved him to me. "It looks like you're off to bed. Sleep tight, little dude."

He ran over and flung his thin arms around my neck, holding me tight as disappointment poured off him in waves. I tried to keep my own in check, hugging him back as I stroked my hand over the back of his head.

"Next time, yeah? I promise."

When I met McKinley's eyes above his head, she gave me a surprised,

questioning look, but then smiled when he let go and turned to face her, yawning as he shuffled back to the corridor. “G’night, Jude.”

“Night, Henry.”

They left, and I waited in the living room for McKinley to get him settled. When she finally reappeared, she was wearing baggy, soft-looking shorts and a pullover, and I offered her a blanket over the back of the sofa next to me.

It was a smooth move—hopefully—to entice her to sit next to me instead of on the other sofa. She tucked her legs in underneath her and I draped an arm around the back of the sofa behind her. “Is he asleep already?”

“Yep. He went down in record time.” She flashed me a soft smile, but there was still something uncertain in her eyes. She moved them from one of mine to the other, exhaling before the smile turned apologetic.

“I’m sorry about not letting you read him the book.”

“Well, I would have loved to, but I get it.”

She looked up at me, that uncertain something still dancing in her eyes. “Do you? I think we need to talk.”

“Should I pour us a drink first?” Without waiting for her response, I withdrew my arm and stood up, my heart doing strange clenching exercises in my chest.

She nodded. “That’s a good idea. We might need a drink for this.”

I chuckled, but I didn’t disagree. The fact of the matter was that if she wanted to talk about what I thought she wanted to talk about, I was definitely going to need a drink. Probably more than one.

Considering that she had a child with whom I was bonding, I understood that we needed to talk about it, but that wouldn’t make it any easier. Pointblank, gun to my head, I honestly didn’t have an answer for her.

I knew what I wanted to say, but I just didn’t know if I could say it. She wasn’t just some woman who was trying to elicit promises from a guy she was fucking. She had a real, concrete reason to require a real, concrete answer.

An honest one that, irrespective of what it was, was the truth. A real, concrete truth she could count on moving forward. And giving her an answer she could count on? I just really didn’t know if I could give it to her.

CHAPTER 24



MCKINLEY

Nervous as hell, I steeled myself while Jude went to go get us those drinks. My mind was racing, sweat was gathering at the nape of my neck, and my hands and feet suddenly felt hot and cold at the same time.

Back when my ex and I had first started our relationship, not only had we been kids with nothing riding on our success or failure, but we'd also gotten caught up in the supposed romance of an under-the-sea themed high school dance.

Silver and blue tinsel had shimmered above the dance floor, catching the light reflected by a lackluster disco ball. At the time, I remembered thinking it was the most romantic setting in the world, and as we'd swayed to the sultry beat of what I had also thought was the most romantic song in the world, he'd put his mouth to my ear.

"Do you think you want to be my girlfriend?" he'd whispered, and my heart had gone nuts. I'd started nodding before he'd even gotten the whole question out, and that had been that.

As far as we'd both been concerned, we were set for life.

This, here, with Jude was a whole different ballgame. One I'd never played before. Hell, one I'd never even *watched* before.

The best I could do was to be honest and to hope that he gave me the same thing in return. When he strode back into the room, still wearing the white button-down and a pair of low-slung dark blue jeans, he was carrying two glasses of wine.

I looked him up and down for a minute, wondering if his heart was as good as he'd made it seem this weekend. A guy this hot should not have been allowed to have a good heart as well—not if he was guarding it and wouldn't

let me have it.

Because at this point, as scared as I was, mine was his for the taking. It simply depended on whether he wanted it and if he could give me the assurances I needed before I'd be comfortable handing it over. *That* was where the issue lay.

On the first night we'd spent together, he'd made it clear that he wasn't the guy who stuck around. He played the field, had his fun, and then moved on.

It hadn't gone quite that way with us, but I wasn't naïve enough to believe I was somehow *special* or *different*. Instead, I was just me and I needed to make sure that my heart and Henry's were safe if Jude was keeping his to himself.

As he sat down, I accepted the glass he handed over and wrapped my fingers around the stem, taking a long sip of the smooth, burgundy liquid and then another once I'd swallowed the first. Jude watched me, his expression curious but patient as I worked up the courage to be vulnerable with him.

"The reason I didn't want you to read to Henry was because it's intimate. Too real." I stared into the dark depths of my glass and watched the firelight flickering on the surface. "The thing is, Jude, you've been great with him this weekend and before, when he met you that day my car broke down. He likes you and I need to protect him. It's my job."

"I know," he murmured. "I figured that's what it was about. I didn't take offense when you said no. Don't worry."

"Thanks." I took a deep breath and finally lifted my gaze back to his. "I have to set some boundaries, and the reading thing felt like a good place to start."

He nodded, draping an arm around the back of the sofa again and flicking a finger against the nape of my neck. "He's your child, McKinley. I get it. Seriously, don't worry."

My tongue darted out and swiped across my lips before I took another sip of wine. "Thank you for understanding, but that's not the only thing we had to talk about."

"Yeah, I figured that too." His eyes never moved from mine, understanding but also worry entwining behind them. "I'm sorry if I put you in an uncomfortable position when I told you to bring him along."

"No." I smiled softly as I thought back to the memories we'd made this weekend. "This getaway has been amazing. We've both loved it and I wish it

didn't have to end, but it's also been a crash course in getting Henry attached to you. I've been trying to warn him not to get used to having you be around so often..." I trailed off and licked my lips nervously again before I just cut to the chase. "I have to ask. Do you intend on being around often?"

Jude blinked hard, seemingly surprised by my directness. I got all flustered, heat breaking out across my cheeks as a bead of sweat ran down my spine. I had a sudden urge to bury my face in my hands. This was too important not to look at him, though.

I needed the answer, but maybe I needed to approach this differently. Immediately, I realized I might've skipped a few steps. "Ah, crap. I'm sorry. Look, I know we came here for work. It was wonderful of you to invite Henry as well. You don't owe us anything. I just—"

I just should've kept this all to my damn self.

Thankfully, Jude stepped in to save me from myself, catching my chin and holding it in a firm grip as he waited for me to look at him again. Once I did, he gave me that lopsided kind of smile people gave the people they adored. Then he leaned forward and kissed me softly.

It started slow, just a brush of his lips against mine to shut up my rambling, but as the press of his mouth got firmer, I was the one to deepen the kiss. If I did this right, perhaps I could distract him enough that he would forget these last couple of minutes even happened by the time we broke apart.

Yeah, that's probably for the best.

My lips parted and I licked along the seam of his, gently demanding entry and taking the plunge when he opened for me. I focused on little things I'd learned from him, playful strokes and nips to keep things from getting too intense.

Ever since this afternoon, I'd been so in my head about Jude and Henry that I'd lost sight of the bigger picture. Jude and I weren't caught up in our own love story. He really had been honest with me from that first night, and Henry and I were simply here because he'd wanted me to check out some properties with him.

To help me. To make it seem like I'd had a hand in him purchasing them so that I would derive some kind of financial benefit from it. Of course, I was hoping that would happen—and that said benefit would be more generous this time.

But jeez. The guy has already gone above and beyond to help me, and then he gave us this incredible weekend away. What am I expecting here, a

freaking ring? I nearly snorted out loud at the thought. I'd allowed my head to run away with me on this, and I needed to fix it.

As we kissed, the passion between us built and built until he was drawing me into his lap and I thought I was home free. That I'd sufficiently distracted him and that hopefully, he'd forget all about the wild tangent my imagination had just taken us down.

There's nothing here but two friends, one of whom is helping the other and happens to enjoy dipping his wick at the same time. And I was okay with that. I had been from the beginning and I couldn't blame him for that.

While I was straddling him, he interrupted my chain of thought by suddenly breaking the kiss. Still gripping my hips, he rested his head against the back of the sofa and looked deep into my eyes. "Stop trying to backpedal and don't apologize, McKinley. You have nothing to be sorry for. I understand where that question came from and I don't owe you anything, but you do deserve an answer. An explanation."

Well, if the answer needs an explanation, then I guessed he was about to say no. He truly doesn't intend on being around often.

Disappointment swelled inside me and my teeth sank into my sensitive lower lip. Jude groaned and tugged it free with his thumb before he shook his head. "It's not like that, McKinley. The truth is that I'm really enjoying spending time with you and your son."

I frowned, taken aback by the admission. "You are? You're not just saying that?"

He chuckled, but it quickly turned into another groan before he squeezed his eyes shut for just a moment. "I'm not just saying it. I mean it. I really am enjoying spending time with the two of you, and honestly, I wish I could spend more time with you."

"Well, you can," I said, unable to deny that hope was taking root in my chest again after it'd been dashed by his comment about owing me an explanation. "If you really do want to, that is."

Jude sighed and opened his eyes to look at me, a thin smile on his lips as he shook his head. "Let me tell you where I'm at."

My heart lurched and then started pounding. "Okay."

He released my hip to take one of my hands, pressing our palms together and glancing at our fingers as he wrapped his around my own. "I admire you, McKinley. I admire your heart, your grit, your determination, and the fact that you're such an incredible mother despite the circumstances surrounding

Henry's birth."

"I sense a *but* coming."

He chuckled, inhaling deeply as his eyes traveled back to mine. "I'm also inspired by you. You make me want to be better, to do more. You've made me realize things about the way I viewed the world before I met you and—"

"Like what?" I asked. "Like how much it sucks if you don't have much money?"

He gave me a disapproving look. "No, not that. You've made me realize how much more there is to life *outside* of money, but you've also made me realize that I ought to do more with my own. Can I finish now?"

I scrunched up my nose. "Do you have to? Can't we just go back to the kissing and forget I ever said anything? I shouldn't have. You haven't led me on or anything. I know where we stand."

"In that case, mind telling me?" he asked, half joking, half not. "I don't know what I want, McKinley. That's my honest answer. If you need a more concrete answer than that, I'm sorry, but I can't give it to you."

I searched his eyes, breathing through the next sting of disappointment. I wished he could be more clear, but at least he was being honest.

As I thought about it, I realized I preferred that to an absolute promise that I wouldn't be sure he'd be able to keep. Besides, we had time. Neither of us were in any rush and it would be better for Henry if we took it slow anyway.

"That's okay." I took a deep breath and dipped my head, giving him another smile as I pressed my lips to his. "I can wait."

"You can?" he asked as he ran his hands down my sides and back to my hips. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, but I can't have Henry tagging along every time we spend time together while you're figuring out what you want. He can't get involved, Jude. Not any more than he already has."

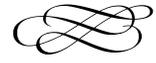
"That's a good call," he said before sealing his lips over mine and kissing me deeply. "Does that mean we keep getting to do this in the meantime, though?"

"Absolutely." I kissed him back and wound my arms around his neck, feeling better for having had the conversation after all.

Maybe I had acted too fast, or maybe not. Maybe it was better that we'd talked and maybe it could've been left alone, but at the end of the day, I was relieved to have it out in the open, with both of us on the same page as to

what was happening between us and how to handle it with Henry.
It wasn't everything, but for now, it certainly was enough.

CHAPTER 25



JUDE

Hard as granite, I laid McKinley down across my bed and kept kissing her as I crawled on top of her. My heart was thudding against my ribs, my entire body primed and ready to devour this woman. She did all the fucking things to me and I couldn't get enough.

Abruptly breaking the kiss, I tugged my shirt off over my head and then reached for the hem of her pullover, my movements almost violent as I worked to get her naked. I couldn't wait and I didn't make any secret of it.

I rarely felt this way—insatiable, frantic, and frenzied.

McKinley moaned when my mouth crashed back down on hers after I'd yanked off her pants and panties, and my cock twitched. As if she'd felt it, her tiny hands reached between us and she started pulling my belt free before undoing my fly.

Not willing to wait any longer than I had to, I pushed my jeans and my underwear off with her, flattening my chest to hers as I kicked them off and deepened the kiss. She looped her arms around my neck, holding me to her as she lifted her back off the bed.

I took advantage of the shift in her position, rolling us over and then patting my chest once she was on top. "Come sit here?"

"What?"

I nodded, my features set in a scowl as need raced through me. "Don't ask questions, McKinley. Please? Just come sit here."

A slight furrow appeared between her eyebrows, but then realization seemed to dawn and red exploded across her cheeks as she scooted up until her knees were at my shoulders. I groaned when the sweet scent of her arousal filled my nostrils, my hands reaching up to wrap around her thighs as

I helped position her where I wanted her.

I was starting to realize that I was addicted to her, living for these moments when I got her all to myself in the dark of night. But right now, I didn't want dark. I wanted to be able to see her properly.

With that thought in mind, I sent my hand flying to the nightstand to find the switch for the lamp, flicking it to on before trailing my fingers up the length of her back. She blinked against the sudden intrusion of the light, then blushed again as she crinkled her nose at me.

"Is that really necessary? You've already got a front row seat down there."

"Yeah, but now I can actually see the show," I gritted out, my gaze now glued to her pussy. She was all natural but neatly trimmed, swollen, and so damn wet.

Another groan tore out of me as I spread her legs further apart, moving my head forward until I could reach every part of her with my tongue. McKinley let out a strangled moan, catching the sound by biting her lips as I licked her folds.

I hated that she had to keep it down, but I understood why it was necessary. Even so, I guessed I just wasn't used to having a four-year-old dictate what could and couldn't happen in my bed. Turbulent thoughts threatened to invade my brain, but I shoved them away before they could complete their sneak attack.

We were done talking for tonight and I, for one, was ready to get to the fun part of the festivities rather than the deep. *So what if I wasn't sure what to make of the things I felt while we had our what-is-this conversation?*

Focusing my attention back where it belonged, I laved at her like a man possessed—an addict, which I was. McKinley tasted so damn sweet that she'd quickly become my favorite treat. *Another problem for another day.*

As I licked her and toyed at her opening with my fingers, her back arched and her breathing grew labored, her body tensing on top of me. I grinned against her slick folds, pushing my fingers in and hooking them until she started quietly keening.

I knew she had to keep quiet, but it got me so damn hot when she just couldn't. On the other hand, if said noises woke Henry, this would be over and I might just die of blue balls.

My free hand shot up to clamp over her mouth while I continued my assault, and she covered it with her own, holding it there as her eyes screwed

shut and she started trembling. The next moment, she was coming, shaking as she choked back her moans and rode my face.

I nearly came right along with her, but thankfully, I managed to grab hold of my self-control just in time and stopped the spontaneous combustion just in time. I was far from done with her tonight. It was our last night here and I had no clue when I'd get to see her again once I dropped her off at home.

If she'd been serious about me keeping my distance from Henry until I figured it out—and I knew she had been—that meant it would be difficult for her to carve out time alone with me. She couldn't just agree to a date and meet me at a restaurant.

There was a whole slew of logistics involved. Finding someone to babysit Henry while she was out, packing for him if he was going to sleep at Tess's, or making sure they had everything they needed at her place if someone was going to be watching him there.

The magnitude of this mission we were embarking on was huge, at least for me, and just thinking about it was going to kill me if I didn't watch myself. Inhaling deeply while she came down, I cradled her gently in my arms and brought her down to the mattress.

She flashed me a dazed smile, wrapping her arms around my neck again and pulling me in for a deep kiss. I knew she could taste herself on my lips, but she didn't seem to mind. Instead, she held me close, adjusting her body underneath mine to line my cock up with her entrance.

As soon as my tip hit that wet heat, I knew I was going to get us both in trouble if I didn't act fast. Breaking the kiss, I sat up without explaining myself and reached for a condom. This was going much too fast, and while part of me wanted to slow it down, savor it since I didn't know how long it would be until it happened again, a larger part couldn't wait anymore.

Hell, I'd been ready and impatient since before I'd even carried her here from the living room. The fact that I'd held out as long as I had was already a miracle. Deciding against denying myself for no good reason, I tore open the foil packet and rolled the condom on. Then I settled back over her and looked into her eyes as I pressed against her entrance once more.

"I can't sleep in your room again tonight," she blurted out, already hooking her ankles around my hips and pulling me into her. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. No. I know. It's okay." I barely got the words out before I thrust into her, my hips acting of their own accord and driven forward by pure, unadulterated need.

McKinley slanted her lips over mine to keep from crying out, and I kissed her hard, pouring everything I was thinking and feeling into her as my hips went flying and my body took over. She gave as good as she got, meeting every one of my hard thrusts with an upward push of her own hips, and it wasn't long before I felt myself racing toward the finish line.

When I realized I was about to reach the point of no return, I hastily reached between us, finding her clit and circling it with my thumb until I felt her starting to contract around me. She milked my shaft, yanking me straight to the edge with her just seconds before she went tumbling over.

McKinley came on a soft, shaky moan into my mouth and I swallowed it just before lightning raced down my spine, igniting the base as I emptied myself deep inside her. In that moment, I had a random, errant thought where usually, there was none at all.

If I hadn't stopped for the condom, I could've just put my own baby in her.

I blinked when I came to after, not sure where the fuck that had come from. *But you do know. Just a few hours ago, you were picturing her, Henry, and a whole baseball team of your own kids running around that damn beach house.*

A shuddering sigh came out of me as I collapsed on top of her, holding her close as I breathed in deep, trying to calm both my body and my mind. With my head resting on her shoulder, I let the racing of her heart against my chest help regulate me.

We were both in something here that we hadn't expected. Hadn't seen coming and hadn't wanted. How we'd even gotten this far, I didn't really know. I remembered everything, but I just didn't know when things had changed.

All I knew was that they had.

I'd told her that I fucking admired her, for heaven's sake. That I didn't know what I wanted anymore. Shit like that *never* happened to me. I always knew exactly what I wanted and exactly what I needed to do to get it.

My breathing finally slowed, but my brain didn't. McKinley didn't say anything, but her eyes opened and stared at the ceiling, her fingers drawing lazy patterns on my back. Obviously, I didn't know for sure what she was thinking and I wouldn't ask—because I honestly didn't think I wanted to know—but I had a feeling she was wrapped up in our conversation from before as well.

Eventually, my lids started getting heavy, and since neither of us had said anything or moved, I knew we were both at risk of falling into an uneasy sleep if we dozed off like this. Torn between wanting her to stay and knowing she had to go, I couldn't bring myself to move or to remind her that she had to go to her own bed just yet.

If I had my way, I'd have insisted that she stay right here—or I'd have left. I didn't know which, but I couldn't have it my way. Not this time. Not with her.

Reluctantly extracting my limbs from the pile of hers, I pushed myself up on my elbow and let my face hover above hers as I smiled. "We should probably get you to bed."

McKinley nodded lazily, dragging in a deep breath before she made to sit up. I got out of the way and she groaned as she swung her legs off the side of the bed. "I wish we could risk just sleeping together again, but it'd really confuse Henry if he catches us."

"I get it," I said, keeping my voice down as I got up and pulled on a pair of sweats. "We were lucky he didn't bust us last night. As much as I'd like for you to stay here again, you're right. It's not a good idea."

She shot me a grateful smile before shoving her pullover over her messy hair and bent over to scoop up her shorts and bra. "You don't need to walk me down the hall."

"What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't see you safely to your bed?" I joked, taking her hand as we headed to the door.

We padded quietly down the corridor, and when we got to her room, I pushed her up against the wall and kissed her again, still feeling that same passion as before burning between us. Just when I was wondering if it might be worth the risk after all and dragging her back to my bed, she broke the kiss and slipped into the room, pausing before she closed the door.

"Sleep tight, Jude."

"You too."

The door shut and my head spun as I scrubbed my hands over my face and walked back to my room. This girl was doing something to me.

Relationships weren't my thing and here I was, picturing her in my future and wanting more and more time with her every time. That talk earlier had been illuminating, and as I hit the light on the nightstand and climbed into bed, I stared at the ceiling in the dark and thought back to what I'd told her.

I'd known what was coming and I'd tried to be as honest with her as

humanly possible, but when I'd expected her to run, she'd kissed me instead. She wasn't scared by my lack of ability to commit to what was happening between us, and that, in turn, scared the shit out of me.

I liked her. I really did, but with Henry in the mix, this was a lot more complicated than just seeing how things went. Plus, McKinley was screwing with my head in a big way, and as I lay there, waiting for sleep that didn't come to claim me, I wondered if maybe I should be hitting the brakes instead of going in deeper with her.

CHAPTER 26



MCKINLEY

Back home after our time in the Hamptons, our tiny condo felt strangely empty without Jude around. Thankfully, I had more than enough to do before the start of the new week to let myself get too caught up in missing the man.

Running around like a chicken with my head cut off, I unpacked our bags and got our dirty clothes together. My washer was still broken and the tub wouldn't cut it for this load.

Henry played in the living room with some blocks while I had one earbud in, talking to Tess and filling her on how things had gone.

"He organized a spa day for you *and* a kids' club for Henry? Gah, I think I'm falling in love with this guy for you. Did you wear the teddy for him in return?"

"Not in return," I hedged, glancing at Henry as I raced into the kitchen to check on dinner. "On Friday night, it was a different story, though."

"Ooooh, details, lady! I need all the filthy details. Did his cock explode? Did he make you explode? Is the teddy still in one piece, or did he rip it apart? Shit, I hope it's still in one piece. It's a damn nice teddy. Did it survive?"

I chuckled, shaking my head at my friend as I squeezed the phone between my ear and my shoulder and stirred the sauce I was making on the stove. "It survived, but that's all I can say right now."

She groaned. "No, you can't do that to me. Talk in riddles if you have to. I know little ears are listening, but you have to give me something."

"Well, everything is still in one piece. Jude included. He does want to thank you for it, though. Other than that, we had a good time. All of us.

Conversations were had, agreements were reached, and lessons were learned.”

“Conversations were had and agreements reached, huh?” she mused. “Does that mean you’re together now?”

“Sort of. Nothing official, but we’re going to be discreet and patient.”

I practically heard her nose wrinkle. “Patient? That sucks. Why?”

“Little ears, remember?” I set the lid of the pot back on, turned off the heat, and leaned against the counter. “I really can’t wait to tell you all about it and to answer as many of your crass questions as I can without invading anyone’s privacy, but I’m going to have to let you go now.”

“Why?” she complained. “We haven’t even gotten to the good stuff yet.”

“I know, but I need to run down to the laundromat across the street to get my first load of laundry out and the next load in. You won’t believe how many dirty clothes we generated on this trip, but between sand and the sea, everything has to be washed.”

“I bet that’s not the only dirty thing that was generated on this trip, but fine. I understand. Is your machine still broken?”

I sighed and gripped the back of my neck as I nodded and closed my eyes. “I’m hoping to be able to get it repaired soon, but the if and the when questions remain. I’m hoping Kent will have something for me tomorrow, but after the last time...”

“Dick,” she spat. “Yeah, okay. You go do your thing, but call me back later?”

“If I can,” I promised before saying goodbye and hanging up.

Letting out another sigh, I smiled at my friend’s never-ending quest for sexy details. On the other hand, she’d been my friend for a long time now without getting any of those details because I hadn’t had any to share, but still.

At least she’d momentarily distracted me from the reality of all the uncertainty in my life right now. The situation with Jude. The money from Kent. If I was ever going to be able to afford to get my damn washing machine fixed.

Pushing away from the counter, I focused on the things that were within my control and strode out to Henry. “Let’s go grab our laundry, honey. Then, when we get back, you can play some more while Mommy makes sure everything is ready for tomorrow, deal?”

“Deal.” He jumped up and reached for my hand, and I locked up behind

us before we started the three flights down to street-level from our apartment.

With Henry in tow, still munching on the handful of goldfish crackers he'd brought along, I wondered if he was missing Jude's presence too. I really was trying not to think about him, but mostly, I was failing miserably.

I'd always heard the beginning part of any relationship was so exciting, but now that I was experiencing it as an adult, I didn't know if exciting was the term I'd use. It was exciting, sure, but it was also terrifying having to be so unsure and vulnerable.

As we climbed down the stairs, my mind wandered to when he'd dropped us off earlier. There hadn't been any kissing—for obvious reasons—but just the way his gaze had lingered on my mouth had told me he'd been thinking about it and the knowledge had brought butterflies to my stomach.

I smiled as I thought about it, wondering if the exhilaration of knowing a man like him wanted to kiss me so bad would ever fade. *Maybe exciting is the right word after all.*

I didn't know. I was so darn confused. While I'd meant it when I'd told him I could wait for him to figure out what he wanted, I also didn't know what I'd do if he suddenly decided that what he wanted wasn't me. Us.

This morning, we'd had a brief talk while Henry had been hunting down toys to pack them all, and Jude had told me he hadn't seen anyone else since he'd met me. I didn't know if I believed him, but I'd assured him of the same thing. We'd also agreed to keep being honest with each other, and I'd asked him to tell me if he met someone else.

Neither of us had said it in as many words, but ultimately, what our various agreements boiled down to was that we were exclusive but casual. Not dating, but also not sleeping around. *What is that called, anyway?*

None of the terms I knew seemed to fit, but I supposed it didn't matter so much. We knew where we were with each other, and I was trying my best to be okay with that, despite the fear of him moving on and the simultaneous fear of allowing him deeper into Henry's life if he *didn't* move on.

Nah, it's not excitement. It's the sense of impending doom or a gigantic clusterfuck.

I shook my head at myself as we reached the lobby, reminding myself to breathe and to simply take things one step at a time. One step at a time was a good pace I could keep up with and adjust to as we went along.

Outside, lazy, late afternoon sunlight bathed the street, and I tightened my grip on Henry's hand before we looked left and right, and then hurried across.

This late on a Sunday in our neighborhood, traffic was light but I could hear horns honking in the distance. *I wonder if one of those belongs to Jude.*

At the thought, I shook my head at myself again. For the umpteenth time today. Stop. Thinking. About. Him.

A soft bell jingled as we pushed open the door to the laundromat, and the guy behind the desk glanced up from his magazine before giving a tight nod when he saw it was us. His gaze dropped back to his magazine and I inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of warm machines and detergent.

It calmed my racing thoughts, and I smiled at Henry as I set the basket I'd brought along down on the floor. "Okay, we're going to fold the fresh laundry after we put the next load in."

He nodded and looked like he wanted to roll his eyes at me. "I know, Mommy."

"Oh, well when did you get so smart?" I teased, opening the machine and replacing the fresh load with the new one before I started folding. "Are you looking forward to going back to school tomorrow? I'm sure your teacher is going to love hearing about your weekend away."

A faraway look came into his eyes and he shrugged. "I'd rather still be at the beach."

"That's how everyone feels, honey," I said soothingly. "That's what makes time away so special, though. If you were at the beach all the time, it would stop being so great."

"No, it won't," he argued lightly, taking one of his pairs of shorts from me and folding it sloppily.

It was going to get so badly wrinkled like that, but I left him to it anyway, intent on refolding it all later instead of making it look like his hard work was a waste. Henry loved helping me out with all our household chores, and I appreciated it, even if mostly it did create more work for me.

Either way, at least he helped instead of lying on the sofa while making a mess and expecting me to clean it up. *That's a win, right? A little one, but I'll take it.*

Once our laundry was folded and in the basket, I tucked it under my arm and took his hand again, leading him back across the street to our building. We'd barely walked through the door when we bumped into our building manager, an awful, sour man named Dolf who managed the building in title only.

He didn't actually do anything, but I figured I might as well remind him

—yet again—of all the issues he needed to attend to. “Hey, Dolf. Do you have a minute?”

He scowled at me. “For what?”

“I just wanted to remind you that our laundry machines in the basement still aren’t working. Also, we can’t use our balcony because the vinyl flooring is peeling up and, uh, most importantly, the smoke detectors haven’t been inspected by the fire department for ages. Do you think you could take care of any of that?”

His scowl deepened as he waved his meaty hand dismissively. “I have lots of things to do today.”

“Okay, I understand, but do you think you can add our things to your list?” I asked lightly. “I have been asking for a few months, so I’m hoping you’ll get around to it soon.”

Dolf’s eyes narrowed as he pointed a thick finger at me. “Listen here, you nagging bit—”

As soon as I realized he was in another one of his nasty moods today, I grabbed Henry’s hand again and left, just turning around and walking away. I didn’t want to cause a scene in front of my son, and moreover, honey worked better than vinegar with him. It always took ages, but at least it meant I didn’t have to be scared in my own home.

In the elevator on our way up, Henry turned to frown up at me. “Why was that man so mad, Mommy?”

I sighed, shaking my head as I tried to come up with an appropriate explanation. “Some people have things going on in their lives we don’t always know about. Sometimes, that makes them mean, which is why it’s always better to be kind in return, and if you can’t be kind, just walk away.”

“Oh. Liam at my school is mean. Do you think there’s something going on in his life?”

“Probably,” I said, adding a potential bully at school to my mental list of things to deal with. “Just be kind to him, okay? Even when you don’t want to be because, often, the people we don’t want to be kind to are the very people who need it the most. It’s called taking the high road, and when you can’t do that, just turn around and walk away.”

“Turn around and walk away.” He sighed. “Do you think that’s what Jude would do?”

I almost snorted. *Absolutely not.*

At least, I couldn’t imagine him walking away from a bully, but that was

the last thing Henry needed to hear right now. “I don’t know, honey, but Jude is a grownup and he’s already figured out how he deals with things in life. You need to figure that out for yourself, with my guidance and not Jude’s.”

Henry pouted but didn’t comment on it again. I knew he didn’t like the idea of walking away. My boy was a bit of a stickler for the rules. He liked respect and doing the right thing. All of which I supposed stemmed from him being raised by a struggling, single mother.

I didn’t know, but that was just the way he was. Chances were that he might try to take my advice now, but that he’d start taking a more assertive approach and standing up against bullies later on. The thought of that in my future made worry churn through me.

How I was going to cope with him by myself as he got older, I really didn’t know. When my phone buzzed as we walked back into our apartment, my heart skipped in my chest.

If Jude really did always know when I needed him, then that was bound to be him, but it wasn’t. Disappointment fizzed in my gut when I grabbed my phone only to see a text from Michelle.

You’re late. I’m waiting. Where are you?

Shit! I totally forgot!

Spinning around, I searched for my purse and gave Henry a quick onceover to make sure he was ready to go. “Hustle, sweetheart. We need to go see Grandma.”

Internally, a string of curses sprang to mind, but I didn’t dare utter them in Henry’s presence. A visit with my ex’s mother was the last thing I needed today, but yet here I was, racing around trying to gather everything we might need to go to her place.

Just once, I wished the universe would cut me a break, but I supposed that was what this weekend had been. A break—and now that it was over, reality seemed so much more overwhelming than it had ever been before.

CHAPTER 27



JUDE

After I'd dropped McKinley and Henry off at their place, I'd headed home, dumped my stuff, and then I'd called my brother to ask if I could come over.

We were home from the Hamptons, but that house I'd seen hadn't left my thoughts for even a minute. In fact, it was like being back in the city was only making my sense of urgency to buy it even more intense.

Not wanting to push for something that was no longer possible, however, I'd called the realtor to make sure it was still available. According to him, it was. That other couple were still seriously interested, but they were getting their finances in order and they hadn't made an offer yet.

That meant Flynn, Ariane, and I had a tiny bit of breathing room for me to go discuss it with them in person. Holding Willow in my arms, I sipped at the coffee Ariane had made me and sent them an imploring look.

"What do you mean, you don't know? What's not to know? That place is amazing. It's got everything this little one could ever need and more, and it's the ultimate getaway house for all of us. It's one of those places that will become immortal in this family's memory if we buy it."

Ariane glanced at Flynn before she looked back at me. "It does look amazing, Jude. That's not why we're hesitating. We're just traveling so often already for all the fundraising events and the volunteering, plus there's everything we've got going on to support my mother, and we just don't know if this is the time to be purchasing another property."

"Sure, okay. Yes, I get that. I know that you guys have a lot going on, but you wouldn't be buying it alone. You'd be doing it with me, and I would get all the paperwork sorted. I'll take care of all the maintenance and stuff, and

hell, I even have access to Flynn's investment account. I could even make your part of the payment for you. You wouldn't have to know that you're buying it. You could just wake up one morning and it would be half yours."

Flynn slid an arm around Ariane's shoulders and regarded me curiously for a moment as he pulled her into his side. "Why are you pushing so hard for this place? Don't get me wrong, the pictures look great and I'm sure Willow would love it, but there are lots of great places down there we could rent if we ever wanted to go on a family holiday. What's really going on?"

"Nothing." I scoffed. "I just happen to think it's an excellent investment and I don't want to regret not making it. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"No, but why not just buy it yourself?" my half-brother asked, clearly curious as well as confused. "What is it about this place that makes you want it so bad when you don't even have—"

His eyes popped wide open and he leaned forward, gaze fixed on mine. "You don't have a kid on the way, do you?"

"No, of course not." I laughed, shaking my head at him. "It's just that one day, I might have one, and for now, it's a paradise for Willow to enjoy. Besides, we could head down there for Christmases with Mom and—"

I was interrupted by the ringing of my phone, and when I glanced at the screen, I groaned. "This is my client. The one who's interested in the oil rig. I need to take it."

Ariane's face fell and her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she watched me answer the phone and get up. "Logan, my man. How are you? To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was just thinking about that rig of yours and I was wondering if you'd meet up with me. Tonight."

"Tonight?" My brows twitched as I walked to the bay window in Flynn and Ariane's living room. "Yeah. Okay. I can do that. Why the rush?"

"No rush, Jude. I just want to know where we're at. I'm going out of town for a bit soon and I want to get as many of my ducks in a row as possible before I go."

I chuckled. "I know that feeling. Sure, let's meet. When and where?"

"Let's make it McAllister's Pub and Grill in an hour? Are you free?"

As I watched the sun set over the skyscrapers and the water in the distance, I nodded. "I'll meet you there."

I hung up.

"Why does he want to meet you?" Flynn asked, obviously having

deduced enough from my side of the conversation to have an idea about what was going on.

I shrugged, letting my gaze linger on the horizon for another beat before I turned to face them. “He wants to know where we’re at and I don’t blame him. I can’t keep him on the hook without reeling him in much longer.”

“Don’t sell,” Ariane said with a rare hint of pleading in her tone. Her blue eyes were wide as I handed Willow back to her. “Please, Jude. Just really think about it. Think about the destruction it will cause. Think about Willow and—”

“Sheesh, I got it, Ariane,” I said, bending over to kiss my niece’s forehead before smacking a kiss on Ariane’s for good measure. “I know where you stand on this. Trust me. I also know all the different things we have to consider.”

Flynn got up to walk me to the door, speaking quietly as he led me out of the living room. “This means a lot to her, bro. This is the first time she might be able to have any say in whether a rig is decommissioned and she’s desperate to see it happen.”

I glanced at him, noticing the haunted look in his eyes and the extra scruff on his jaw. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just tired. We’ve had a few bad nights with Willow. The nurse says it’s just her teeth getting ready to descend. Nothing to worry about, but just think about how tired I already am before you make this decision, okay? Ariane will be heartbroken if we sell, and I’m the one who will have to pick up the pieces.”

I sighed, folding a hand over the back of my neck and tugging as I stopped at their front door, turning to look into his eyes. “What do you want? Honestly and without considering her feelings about it. Do you want to sell or scuttle?”

That haunted look came to the fore in his eyes. “Honestly? I think I’d rather scuttle. My bank account wants us to sell even if it doesn’t need us to, but I don’t know. I worked in that field for a long time, man. My bank account looks the way it looks because of that field, and you of course, but still. I feel like I owe it to the environment to give back.”

I nodded sharply. “I’ll keep that in mind when I meet with Logan. I’ll call you after, okay?”

“This Logan,” he said thoughtfully. “Any chance he’s the kind of person who’s buying it to scuttle it? It would really help if I could tell Ariane that

he's an environmentalist himself."

"Logan Jones," I said. "I've known him for a few years. You remember him, right?"

Flynn frowned for a moment before he snapped his fingers. "Sure, yeah. He's the guy who won the lottery when he was twenty-eight, right?"

"Yep." He'd come to me for advice and then he'd made some wise decisions and that had put him on the path to near billionaire status. "We've become friends in all the time we've known each other, but I don't know that I would call him an environmentalist. He's hellbent on reaching the big B. This rig may be his way of finally getting there."

"So the short answer is no. He's not buying it to scuttle it." Flynn sighed. "Okay, well, it was worth a try. Call me after."

"I will and I'll find out from him, okay? He doesn't really need the publicity, but no one minds a bit of good press. Maybe this is a philanthropic stunt and he'll make a show of scuttling it for the sake of the fish."

Flynn chuckled. "I doubt it, but sure. Find out. See you later."

As I waved goodbye and left, I thought about everything Flynn had told me and my stomach tightened. I had no idea what to do about this, and by the time I walked into the trendy pub and grill Logan had mentioned, I still didn't know.

Being indecisive wasn't me at all, but this felt different. It felt like I had the weight of the damn oceans on my shoulders and that if I made the wrong call, they'd just boil over. On the other hand, if we chose to scuttle it instead, it wouldn't be a sound financial decision and that might damage my pristine reputation.

Selfish, but true.

McAllister's was a brand new place known for prime-cut steaks, cold beer, and good scotch. They'd taken the pub and grill of old and replaced it with an establishment that could compete with other, more upmarket places on every level.

I'd never been here, but I liked it immediately. I also wasn't surprised Logan had chosen it. The guy had made a killing when he'd won the lottery and he'd gone from strength to strength ever since. He was a hard worker who was always chasing the next big thing, but he was also a good guy.

Down to earth—with me at least—he liked the simple things in life, like the prime-cut steaks and the expensive scotch. His version of the simple things.

I grinned as I smacked my palm into his when I reached the table he'd gotten for us. "How are you, Mr. Jones? It was a surprise to hear from you."

He chuckled, getting up to shake my hand and squeeze my shoulder. "It's good to see you too, man. I'm fine. All good. You?"

"Yeah, same."

He waved me into the seat across the table from his and signaled a waiter for another round. With that done, he smirked at me as he leaned back in his chair. "I haven't seen you around for a while. What's up with that? You haven't joined the ranks of the settled-down, have you?"

"Me? Never." I laughed, but for some reason, that reaction—my usual reaction—didn't sit so well with me this time. "How about you?"

His eyebrows shot up and he shook his head. "Never. I'm living my best life as a bachelor. I wouldn't fuck that up by settling down."

"Living your best life? That sounds ominous," I joked. "What have you been up to? Catch me up."

The waiter hurried over with our drinks, and as I wrapped my fingers around the tumbler, I felt something ease deep down inside of me. This was familiar. *It's who I am. Doing business with a client who'd become a friend over a drink on a Sunday night.*

I wasn't bound to anyone or anything. No bath-time routine or bedtime could stop me.

Really? So why aren't you feeling it tonight?

Thankfully, Logan distracted me as he smacked his lips once he'd swigged down his first drink. "I've been traveling all over Europe, meeting like-minded people to do business with."

"And women, of course," I said.

He winked at me. "Of course. Let me tell you about the chicks in Europe, man. It's a different world over there."

I grinned, leaning forward to listen but also not feeling any inclination to hop on the next flight over. Logan was a total player—like me—but as he caught me up on his international shenanigans, my only thought was that it sounded tiring as hell.

"How's Flynn?" he asked once he'd given me all the highlights on his various trips. "I heard he hasn't been back out on the rigs for a long time now. Ran into a guy he used to work with in Amsterdam last month."

"Yeah, he's home for good now," I said. "Married with a little girl, if you'll believe it."

Logan blinked hard. “I don’t even know what to say. I’m stunned. I mean, I don’t know him super well, but I took him as one of us.”

“He was, but he met a girl and the rest is history, I guess.” I laughed. “It’s pretty hard to believe, even for me, and I saw it happen.”

Logan’s laughter joined my own and he raised his glass. “At least we’re still standing, right? Here’s to two lone wolves who will never settle for just one babe.”

“Right.” I clinked my glass against his, my laughter subsiding as I took a sip and steered the conversation in a different direction. “So you wanted to talk about the rig?”

The amusement drained out of Logan’s eyes as he nodded. “We’re talking business now, huh? Okay, I can do that. I want the rig, Jude.”

“Why?”

He frowned. “It’s a huge investment opportunity for me. A chance to get into the oil business. Honestly, I’m surprised you want out.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the right time.”

He swirled the scotch in his tumbler, gaze leveled on mine. “I’m ready to write you an offer right now. What’s your bottom line, Jude? Give it to me straight.”

Much to my own surprise, hearing the words I’d been hoping for didn’t bring me any closer to making a decision. “Fine, you want it straight, so here it is. I need to think about it. I want to get rid of the rig, but I haven’t decided just how to do that yet.”

Logan blinked rapidly, then chuckled as he inclined his head. “I appreciate your candor. That’s fine by me, man. If you need time to think, take it. Just let me know if you decide to sell in the meantime, but let’s meet up again next week?”

I nodded. “When are you leaving?”

“Day after tomorrow, but it’s a short trip. I’ll be back in town for a week before I take off again.” He leaned back in his seat, the seriousness wiped clean off his expression as he smiled at me. “Okay, now that’s done. Catch me up with what’s been going on with you.”

Having bought myself another week, I smiled and shot the breeze with him while we finished our drinks, but when he tried to convince me to go to a club with him, I bowed out. Why? I didn’t know. I should’ve wanted to jump on the opportunity to get out on the town with him after so long, but for some reason, all I really wanted to do was to go home and crawl into bed.

So that was exactly what I did.

CHAPTER 28



MCKINLEY

I knocked on Michelle's door already knowing that I was about to get an earful for being late. The older woman didn't disappoint, not even acknowledging Henry or inviting us in until she was satisfied that she'd given me a good scolding.

Same old dog and pony show. I took it with a sigh, simply nodding as I discreetly ran my gaze up and down the length of the woman who'd evicted me when I'd been pregnant and penniless.

The years hadn't been great to her. She had deep lines around her mouth, eyes, and on her forehead, her skin slightly ruddy and her blue eyes more watery now than ever before. She wore a simple T-shirt and a pair of jeans, her voice husky from all the cigarettes she'd smoked in her younger days.

"It's simply unacceptable, McKinley. I've been waiting for you for over an hour. Dinner is almost ready. Henry will have to bathe soon and then you'll whisk him away for his evening routine before I've spent any time with him at all. You're a disrespectful little brat who needs to remember that the universe doesn't revolve around her."

I nodded, but she wasn't done yet. "Just because your father is dead doesn't give you the right to keep Henry away from his only grandparent. You'd never have done this to your dad, so why do it to me? Really, McKinley, it's time for you to grow up and realize that it was your fault that David dumped you. The poor boy didn't want to, but you gave him no choice. You can't keep making me pay for your own mistakes by lording time with Henry over me."

Fury swept through my veins and my insides were boiling, but I'd gotten into it with her too many times before and the last thing I wanted was to

contribute to the drama being caused in front of Henry. It was better for him if she just got it all out now and got it over with—otherwise, it would continue all night.

When I nodded again, her anger and irritation finally burned out and she smiled at Henry. “Hello, dearest. Go look at what Grammy got you this week. It’s an indoor bouncy house! Go check it out.”

She stepped aside for him to enter and nausea rolled through me at the familiar scent of her onion-heavy cooking. I bit the inside of my cheek, watching as Henry slammed to a halt when he saw she wasn’t joking—she really had gotten him an indoor bouncy house.

I gaped at the bright yellow, orange, and green inflatable toy as Henry hugged her legs and rushed to it with enthusiasm. “This is great! Thank you, Grandma.”

He kicked off his shoes and launched onto it as I shook my head, wondering how this woman had never contributed a cent to the actual food her grandson needed to grow but she was always ready with something like this when he came over. Once he started bouncing, she turned to me and arched a graying eyebrow.

“Come help me finish our dinner,” she demanded, and again, I knew better than to argue.

Having lived with her for two and a half years, I’d learned that it didn’t help to reason with her. She was one of those people who was so stubborn and so convinced that absolutely everything she did and said was right that I’d always just been left feeling worse when I’d tried to argue.

Not willing to put myself through any of that when I had a home—however little—of my own to go back to, I followed her through the modest, single-story home to the kitchen. Staying on the left where I could still keep an eye on Henry while he bounced, I wordlessly accepted the chopping board and the green pepper she handed over.

“Dice, not slice,” she instructed and I dipped my head in another nod, reaching over to pull a knife out of the block on the counter and getting to it.

For the longest time, neither of us said anything else, but that wasn’t unusual. I brought Henry over to see her, but she and I were not friends. We hadn’t parted on good terms, and if I’d had my way, I never would have seen her again.

Unfortunately, as much as she and I didn’t agree on anything, she was the only family Henry had apart from me. The only family he knew anyway.

David made a point of staying away from her house when Henry and I were here, and while Michelle was always quick to defend him, he'd never once made a single effort to even meet his son. Sighing quietly, I diced the green pepper and wondered how much longer we'd have to stay. For dinner, at least, but after that, she was completely right.

I'd only stay here for a few minutes after we were done eating before I took him home for his bath and to put him to bed after. And I wouldn't feel even a little bit guilty for it.

After everything she'd done and everything David had put me through, the fact that we were here at all was enough. I refused to give her more of us than I had to.

We worked together in the kitchen like we used to, in uncomfortable silence I was perfectly fine with until she started speaking. I really didn't give a flying fuck about David, but occasionally, she felt the need to boast about him to me, to rub it in my face that life was just treating him so much better than it had while he and I had been together.

"David has been promoted at work," she started smugly. "He's a manager now at that restaurant he used to bartend at. The pay increase was so good, he just got a new car. On payments, of course, but he's built up his credit enough to get approved and the financing should help even more."

"That's great. Tell him I said congratulations." *Fucking asshole*. "I'm glad he's doing well."

Hoping that shut her up, I scraped the green pepper off the chopping board into the pot and grabbed some mushrooms off the counter next. She and I had made this stew often enough that I knew exactly what she needed me to do, one thing after another, and since I liked to keep conversation between us to a minimum these days, I preferred to just carry on as if she wasn't even here.

Unfortunately, she seemed to be in the mood to talk tonight. "He's in his own condo now too. Only fifteen minutes away. David is just such a good son. Staying close to his mama so he can still come when I need him."

I hummed a sound of approval, wondering if she was ever going to realize just how much of a jerk he really was. She knew he'd never even met Henry and she claimed to love her grandson, but then surely, she had to realize that instead of buying a brand new car, he could've bought his child one stinking pair of socks.

"Did you know that he's started seeing someone?" she asked excitedly as

she stuck a fork into a potato in the pot to test it.

When I shook my head, Michelle brought her hand to her chest and dropped the fork next to the stove. “She’s a lovely girl. A daycare teacher who makes my David genuinely happy. Things are really working out for him. I couldn’t be prouder.”

Oh, really? You couldn’t? Not even if, say, he was a father to his son? I didn’t want him back. Never had, but it was damn rich for her to be bragging and telling me how she couldn’t be any prouder when the little boy on that bouncy house had never set eyes on her damn son.

Anger bubbled in my stomach, spilling over to my guts when she just kept going. On the outside, however, I just smiled and nodded. Truth be told, I couldn’t give a damn to hear how Henry’s deadbeat dad was doing, but it did make me angry that I had to bite my tongue about it.

“David and Heather, that’s his girlfriend, are coming to dinner next Sunday, so I won’t be able to see Henry then.”

No one asked you to, but okay.

“I’m thinking of making roast chicken with all the trimmings, but I just can’t decide. I want her to love my food as much as David does and to want to keep coming back here, so it’s an important decision.”

I inhaled deeply, my teeth cutting into the inside of my cheek as I tried to keep my mouth shut.

“How about you, McKinley? Are you seeing anyone?”

“Me? No.”

I sliced through another mushroom, checking to make sure it was as close to perfectly thin as I could get it. Michelle insisted on having these things in her stew, but she didn’t like the texture of them if they were cut too thick.

“You should at least try dating,” she said. “It’s time, McKinley. You and David are over. It’s no use pining for him for the rest of your life.”

“I’m not pining,” I bit out. “I just don’t have time for a relationship right now.”

“Oh, of course. I sympathize with you. It’s hard for us single moms to find men who are interested in us.”

I swallowed a thousand comebacks, and then I wondered if Michelle could be mentally damaged. I honestly didn’t see how she could say something like that just after telling me how David was doing without realizing that he was the reason I was a single mom. That he was the reason I was struggling.

I really didn't want him back. I wasn't pining for him and I never had. In fact, I'd realized even before he'd broken up with me that we weren't right together at all and that our relationship had been a big mistake.

But that wasn't really the point. How dare she stand in this kitchen, a place where she and I used to dream about what Henry was going to be like, talking to me about how well her prick of a son was doing and then sympathizing with me over how hard it was to date as a single mother?

It boggled my mind.

She had to be suffering from some kind of delusion or something. That was the only explanation. But I shook it off, just like I always did, choosing peace over confrontation while Henry was in the next room.

One day, everything they'd done would come back to them, and for now, leaving it in karma's hands seemed like the best way to go. While we waited for the final additions to the stew to soften, Michelle stuck a pile of plates in my hands.

"Set the table. I know you two don't eat like civilized people at your house, but around here, we have a dinner table and we use it."

We sat down at our dining table every night, but I simply nodded and headed to the dining room, even taking her favorite blue-and-white checkered tablecloth out and covering the table with it before finishing it off with the plates and cutlery.

After that, I went back to the living room to chat to Henry while Michelle did God only knew what to kill the time until dinner was ready. As we sat down, she gave him a stern look. "My house, my rules, young man. No messing around, alright?"

He nodded but didn't say anything, already knowing that she exerted her rules over him at the table from our previous visits. I hated it, but it was her house. We ate in relative silence, with her only asking Henry a few questions about his current daycare and comparing it to stories Heather had told her about the center she worked for.

At least she didn't mention who Heather was, but even Michelle knew better than to rub her son's absence in her grandson's face. I did get a few judgmental looks when the facilities at Henry's daycare center didn't seem to measure up to Heather's impeccable standards, but I ignored them all.

After dinner, I got Henry out of there as soon as it was appropriate, flashing Michelle a tight smile as she opened the door. "Thank you so much for dinner. We need to get Henry bathed and to bed, but we'll see you soon.

Thanks again.”

She sighed dramatically. “Of course. Sleep tight, my little boy. Grandma will keep the bouncy house for you for next time.”

I wanted to roll my eyes so bad. Of course, she’d keep it. She wouldn’t even ask if perhaps he’d like to take it home even for a few days to play with it instead of holding it hostage here at her house, but even though the heartbroken look on Henry’s face about killed me, I didn’t mention it.

Instead, as we walked down to the curb, I put Michelle behind me all over again, buckling Henry into his seat and smiling. “You’re such a trooper. How about we stop on the way home for ice cream?”

CHAPTER 29



JUDE

On my way to see a client on Monday morning, I made a quick pitstop at Kent's office to sign some documents to close on the Manhattan condo. I really fucking wished I could have done all of this through McKinley instead, but I knew that wasn't how this worked.

He was the realtor and she was the assistant, which meant that even though I knew she was doing all the work and, upon my insistence, even the showing, it was still his firm. Kent was at the door to meet me as usual, in professional douchebag mode from the moment he opened the door. But I knew his type.

"Jude, it's so good to see you," he said, oozing loads of fake as hell charm as he shook my hand. "I had a look at the pics of this condo you're buying while I was checking over the paperwork, and I got to say, I'm jealous you beat me to it."

"You snooze, you lose," I said easily, giving his hand a brief, firm shake before brushing past him into their offices. "Have you got the paperwork ready for me? I need to be out of here as soon as we're all set."

"Of course." He swept a hand out toward his private office, then followed me in, leaving the door open behind us.

It made me wonder if McKinley was here yet or if she was running late. I hadn't seen a glimpse of her, which made me think she was probably caught up in the Monday of it all again, but I didn't ask. I didn't trust Kent to know that I cared where she was.

Because I knew his type. I knew that if he caught so much as a whiff of me still sniffing around her, he'd go after her twice as hard. Feigning nonchalance, I sat down on the other side of his wide, stained wood desk and

looked around.

“Well, are we waiting on McKinley for the paperwork or can we get started?”

“We’ll get started.” He sat down and pushed a neatly bound file of papers across the desk. “I had a feeling I couldn’t count on her to make it here on time, so I had her put all this together before she left on Thursday. How was the Hamptons? You only found that one property you liked? Maybe I should’ve gone with you. I’m sure I could’ve shown you a few more that would’ve piqued your interest.”

“McKinley wasn’t the problem. She arranged plenty of suitable properties for me to view. I simply found what I went there to look for on this trip.”

I slid a pen out of my shirt pocket and uncapped it, opening the file and finding it neatly tabbed where my signature was required. I’d purchased a few properties these last few years and McKinley’s file was the most organized I’d ever seen. There was a printed checklist right on top to mark documentation required or received. The colored tabs showed where they needed me to sign, and not a single page of the contract was missing or askew.

After carefully reading through all the terms, I signed on the dotted lines and then looked back up at him. “Is that it?”

“That’s it,” he confirmed with a smooth grin. “This is an excellent investment, Jude. Congratulations. That building is always in high demand and the apartments there are never empty for long.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I bought it.” I pushed my chair back. “If there’s nothing else, I should get going.”

“Well, actually.” He cleared his throat and propped his elbows on his desk, forming a loose fist with one hand and then wrapping the fingers of the other around it. “I was hoping to talk to you about doing some work for me. Rumor has it you’re picky about the clients you take on, but you and I are friends, right?”

My eyebrows twitched up. “What kind of work do you have in mind?”

“I want to give you some money to invest for me. They say you have a real knack for it. That you only choose winners.”

I shrugged. “Well, that’s the dream, but I’ve made my losses. So have my clients. No one wins all the time, every time in this game.”

Kent chuckled, opening his mouth to say more when we were interrupted by McKinley walking into his office. Immediately, his entire demeanor

changed. The chuckling abruptly cut off, the brown-nosing twinkle fading from his eyes as his jaw hardened and his muscles tensed.

“Would you excuse us for a moment, Jude? I need to have a quick chat with Mickey.”

I smiled at her while nodding at him. “Sure. Of course. Good morning, McKinley.”

“Good morning, Jude.” She glanced at me, those green hazels filled with trepidation as she moved them to her boss. “I’ll wait outside.”

Looking amazing in a pair of plain navy slacks and a white button-down shirt, her hair was pulled away from her face and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. If anyone asked me, she was the most beautiful she’d ever been, but I didn’t like the trepidation in her eyes or the stiff way she moved when she turned and marched out of his office.

Kent gave me a curt nod before he stood up and followed her out, not bothering to shut the door behind him. I heard every word as he chastised her for being late and it took everything I had in me not to rush to her defense.

This was her job. He was her boss. She was late. He was well within his rights to address her about it. I just didn’t like the way he was talking to her.

“What’s your deal lately, Mickey? You’re not some big-shot, irreplaceable member of this team. You’re an assistant. I can have another you in less than a minute. I suggest you start acting like you know that.”

“I do know that,” she mumbled, eyes on the floor. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. The traffic this morning just—”

“I don’t care about your excuses, Mickey. This is not the first time it’s happened. You waltz in and out of here like you own the place and—”

“That’s not true and you know it,” she snapped, getting sharp with him, which was unlike her. “I know exactly who owns this place and that it’s not me. I’m doing my absolute best and I’ve apologized. I really am sorry. What more do you want from me?”

“If you think you can speak to me like that in my fucking office, maybe I should start withholding your checks. Remind you of who’s in charge around here.”

Anger simmered in my veins, turning them to mercurial levels as I watched her swallow her pride and mumble another apology. “I’m sorry, Kent. It won’t happen again.”

He scoffed but reached into his inner pocket and handed over two checks. “For your work with Jude. Now, get to work. Jude and I were having a

private discussion before you interrupted us so rudely.”

I hardly thought the interruption had been rude, and besides, Kent was insane if he thought I was taking him on as a client. It was never going to happen and it wouldn't have even if I hadn't just overheard the way he treated his staff.

When he strode back into his office, I was already on my way out, wanting to check on McKinley before I left. She'd been fine when I'd dropped them off yesterday, but her snapping at Kent was so uncharacteristic that something must've changed between then and now.

Kent blinked at me as I nodded when I brushed past him, frowning and then shaking his head when he saw me stride toward McKinley's office. She'd just closed her door, but I knocked softly before I pushed it open.

“McKinley? Are you alright? What's—”

Sitting behind her desk, she'd opened the checks and was holding them both, slack-jawed before she started laughing hysterically. “Seven hundred and fifty dollars total. What is this?”

Shock slammed into me and I was so stunned I couldn't talk. Pushing the door open a bit more, I entered her office and stood on the other side of her desk, watching the disbelief, shame, and disappointment playing across her beautiful features as tears glistened in her eyes.

“That's all that asshole is giving me when I'm busting my butt like this? I do everything around here. Everything. These days, with you, I'm even doing the fucking showings. With the other clients, I do everything except the showings, I set those up after I've matched the client with the listing and then I deal with the paperwork after.”

The edge of hysteria in her laughter increased as she shook her head. “It takes him anywhere between ten and forty minutes to do a showing, he gets these crazy profits, and with you, he's had a couple conversations and I've done *everything* else. I get that he's the boss, but...”

When she trailed off, I gripped the back of her visitor's chair and leaned forward, looking her right in the eyes. “Quit. Today. Right now. You're right. He should've given you a lot more than he did, but that set aside, he treats you like shit, McKinley. You don't deserve to have to listen to his pathetic come-ons all day while you do all the work and receive almost nothing for it. It's not right.”

“Quit?” She frowned. “How?”

“It's easy. You just quit. Fuck Kent, his ass-kissing haircut, and his fake

Rolex. You'll be better off without him. Trust me."

"I can't just quit, Jude," she said, the hysteria giving way to a haunted numbness as her shoulders slumped. "I have no marketable skills. I'm not trained for anything else. It might sound easy to do it, but the repercussions would be anything but."

"I get that, but there are other entry level jobs that—"

She cut me off with a sharp shake of her head, those tears sitting heavily on her lids as she swallowed. "Kent pays more than any of those other entry level jobs. I know he only keeps me around for a piece of ass to look at, but it doesn't matter. I can't afford to quit."

I opened my mouth to argue, but then I heard a grunt coming from the doorway behind me. I twisted around to see what it was, and I realized Kent had been standing there the whole time. Perhaps not in the door because McKinley would've seen him, but certainly close enough to it that he'd overheard everything we'd said.

"I'll do you a solid and cut you loose," he said, eyes flashing with anger as he scowled at her. "God knows, you could use the severance pay. Maybe you could use it to buy yourself some class, because you're in desperate need of that, lady."

My hands balled into fists at my side and I rounded on him, closing the distance between us in a couple of long strides until we were nose to nose. "That's rich coming from you, Brock. What, you can't get laid the usual way so you rely on single mothers owing you something to get your rocks off? What you did to her is harassment. With a decent lawyer, she could take you to the cleaners."

McKinley grabbed my arm after she'd gathered up her purse and the few framed pictures of Henry on her desk. "Let's go, Jude. This isn't worth it."

She ran her hand down my forearm and into my own, and I wrapped my fingers around it, still facing off with Kent fucking Brock and wanting nothing more than to lay him out. McKinley stopped the fight before it could start though, gently tugging on my hand until my feet started moving after her.

Ultimately, the touch of her hand in mine was the only thing that allowed me to walk away. She needed me right now, and that meant a hell of a lot more than decking a guy who had it coming.

Taking control of my emotions, I adjusted my grip in her hand to tighten it, then opened the main door for her.

Kent screamed after us from her office. “You’re a fucking gold-digger, Mickey! Good luck to you, Olson. You’re going to need it.”

Without turning around, McKinley threw her free hand into the air and flipped him off, and we left together, striding hand in hand. When we were half a block away, I turned to her and grinned. “That was badass, McKinley Tulley. I’m proud of you.”

Slamming to a sudden halt, she spun to face me and it was only then that I realized she was fuming. Her nostrils were flaring, her eyes still glistening with tears, and her body shaking like a leaf. As she stared up into my eyes like she couldn’t believe something, she shocked the shit out of me when she put her hands on my chest and shoved.

“Get the hell away from me, Jude,” she seethed, her head shaking hard and fast. “I can’t believe you did that. Just stay away from me.”

I stared back at her, wondering if I’d fallen down a manhole in the sidewalk to another dimension. Confusion rippled through me and my heart started pounding. I had no idea what had happened, but I had a feeling she’d meant what she’d said.

She wanted me to get away from her and stay there. For good.

CHAPTER 30



MCKINLEY

Livid didn't even begin to describe how I felt as I stared up into the blue eyes I'd thought belonged to a person who truly understood me. As I watched, the wide grin faded from Jude's full lips only to be replaced by a slightly disbelieving, slightly confused twist as he stared back at me.

How could he possibly think this is a good thing? I'd been struggling to keep my head above water as it was, and now I was jobless, already drowning in debt, living in a condo on the brink of no longer being safe, barely keeping up with daycare fees and other expenses, and all of that was on top of trying to provide everything else Henry needed.

Tears of frustration burned my eyes as I narrowed them at him. Despair sank into me and I had half a mind to just sit down on the sidewalk and start ugly crying. Because I'd already lost everything else. Why not just toss my dignity away right along with it?

For a long minute, neither of us said anything. I could practically see the wheels spinning in Jude's head as he tried to figure out why I was so pissed at him. Meanwhile, I felt like a damn fool.

In the Hamptons and before, I'd really felt like Jude understood me. I'd believed that he was a genuinely good guy with a good heart who knew what I needed and what I was going through, but I'd been so damn wrong.

In the last few minutes, it'd become perfectly apparent that he had absolutely no clue. Life was a breeze for this guy. A nonstop spending spree where dollars and cents didn't matter at all because there were so many of them, a few this way or that made no difference whatsoever.

That wasn't true for me.

I had to turn over every dollar I had before I spent it, really considering

whether what I was about to use it for was necessary. I blinked away the tears, knowing that this was my own fault. I shouldn't have expected him to understand and I should've kept my distance.

I couldn't just walk into a different job. If I didn't come up with a plan—and fast—Henry and I would be on the streets. I'd be back to where I had been five years ago before Henry had even been born. Worse off even, since I now had another mouth to feed and he would have to come with me where I went.

Crashing on a sofa was fine for a young, early twenties single person. Even a pregnant one. Expecting someone to give us someplace to live when it would be me *and* Henry was a different story. I'd feel bad even asking Tess, regardless of how much she loved him.

More hot tears fell and I shook my head. Jude wasn't a dad, or a single parent, or in any trouble of any kind. He played with other people's money and his own, and he was obviously quite skilled at it.

I wasn't like that.

It wasn't his fault that my problems went way over his head—or below his financial knowledge. Embarrassment washed over me at the thought. My hands flew to my face and I groaned, feeling like an exposed nerve as I turned on my heels and marched to my car.

There was so much left to say. So many questions about how and why he'd gone through the effort of appearing to understand. Why he'd helped me by insisting I had to show him the properties in the first place. Why I felt like such a fool now when I'd known—I'd *known*—he couldn't possibly have the beginning of an idea of what my life was like.

“McKinley! No, don't leave. Just talk to me. I'm sorry.” I heard his footsteps on the sidewalk behind me as he hurried to catch up. “Please just tell me what I did wrong. Let me help you.”

“Help me?” I echoed disbelievingly, still wiping away tears and trying to blink away those that hadn't even fallen yet as I kept marching straight ahead. “I don't need your help, Jude. I don't need anyone's help. Leave me alone.”

“I'm sorry,” he repeated, sounding truly perplexed but that only went to show how little he understood. “Whatever I did, I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you. Please, McKinley. Don't just leave me.”

“I'm not leaving you. Can't leave something I never had.”

An unexpected surge of pain shot through me at the statement, but it was

true. I'd never had him and I never would. Jude didn't want to be had, and after he'd demonstrated that his outlook on life was spectacularly different to mine, it was probably better that way.

"Don't do this, McKinley. Just hear me out."

I kept walking, desperate to get in my car and get home—while I still had one.

"Okay, I know you're worried about money while you're unemployed, but this could be a huge opportunity for you."

"Opportunities don't pay the rent," I snapped bitterly. "Leave me alone, Jude. I'm begging you. Please."

"Opportunities might not pay the rent, but you wouldn't have to either," he argued, not backing down or giving up. "You and Henry could move into the condo in Manhattan. I know you love that place and it has plenty of space. The papers are signed and—"

"Don't be ridiculous. I could never afford to live there."

"Well, yeah. You could if you stayed rent free. As a friend, I'd never expect you to pay. So take it. Move in there with Henry. Why not?"

"Why not?" I scoffed, unable to believe that less than an hour ago, I'd thought we lived in the same world. "Too many reasons for me to name them all, but let's start with the fact that you purchased that place as an investment property and letting us live there for free is not a good investment. In fact, that brings me to my second point. It wouldn't be an investment at all. It'd be charity, and Henry and I are not charity cases."

"I didn't say you were," he protested. "I'm trying to help you here, McKinley. Sure, I bought the place as an investment, but investing in our friendship is worth more to me than any amount of money would be."

My heart wanted to melt, but I wouldn't let it. Jude and I weren't friends. Not really. Friends didn't do the things we'd done together, and since things wouldn't work out on the other front, there was really no point prolonging the inevitable.

If we did, it would only hurt more when the end came, and I'd had it with hurt. I was ripping off this band-aid before the wound started festering underneath it.

"I could subsidize Henry's daycare as well," he went on as if he thought I was keeping quiet because I was actually considering this. "There's one in the first level of the building. Word is that it's a great one. I looked into it after I put in the offer. I mean, I know Henry's happy where he is now, but

it's pretty far from the condo. Think about how much easier things would be if you could just walk him downstairs, and *bam*, he's at school."

I wasn't considering taking him up on it, but he wasn't wrong. Simply walking downstairs and dropping my child off at school would be a luxury I wasn't able to describe. *And to think, some people really live that way.*

For just a fraction of a second, I realized I could too. I could live that way if I took Jude's offer, but a beat later, I remembered why I couldn't. "I won't be bought and paid for and I'm not anybody's charity, so thanks, but no thanks."

"Come on, McKinley. Why not?"

The question only made me even angrier. "Why not? Because you don't get it, Jude. You don't understand. Thinking you can solve this with money and insulting me by insinuating that I can't take care of myself or my son? I'm out. I'll figure this out on my own."

With that, I'd mercifully reached my car and I cranked the music as soon as the engine turned over, driving off without another backward glance at him. I didn't need Jude Olson to be a knight with a shining bank account, riding in to save the day.

I'd been on my own for a long time now, and that was how I'd stay.

CHAPTER 31



JUDE

A week after the epic, unexpected blowout with McKinley, I was on a private jet Logan had chartered for us. We were taking an impromptu trip to the west coast so I could give him an up close and personal tour of the oil rig.

She was offshore along the coast of southern California, and right now, getting out of town, even for a day, was exactly what I needed. Hell, if he'd asked me to go to Europe with him for a month, I might've said yes.

When he'd called real early this morning to say he had a jet ready if I wanted to get on it, I hadn't hesitated. Later on, during the flight, he'd explained that he'd chartered the plane to go check out the possibilities anyway, but that he was glad I'd agreed to come with him.

Honestly, I just was eager for a distraction after a whole week of not having been able to get McKinley—or the guilt over having had a hand in imploding her life—out of my head. A whole fucking week, and I still kept replaying everything that had happened over and over in my head.

She'd been damn right when she'd said I just didn't understand. I really didn't. She'd had a shit boss who had taken advantage of her financial situation for too long, and she'd just put up with it. I could never have done that.

As he and I flew across the country, we drank, we talked, we laughed, but by the time we landed, I realized the guilt had hitched a ride. With thousands of miles between me and McKinley Tulley, I still couldn't shake her or that look in her eyes.

I sighed as I got in the waiting SUV and Logan frowned at me. "Okay, man. I'm done. I was trying to respect your privacy, but what's going on?"

You're acting like I'm dragging you to a shoe-shopping convention."

I laughed, then groaned and scrubbed my hands over my eyes. "Is it really that obvious?"

"Yes," he said cheerfully, winking at me before turning over the engine and driving us down to Huntington Beach from the airstrip. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay, well, tell me about the rig instead. We haven't spoken much about it and I probably should've asked before. I may have gotten a little excited about the prospect of getting into that industry."

I leaned back against the seat, looking out at endless ocean while he drove, and I gave him the specs. He nodded slowly while I spoke, asking questions and getting technical, but thankfully, I had the answers he wanted.

Once we'd pulled up and I'd taken him through it, he grinned at me. "I'm impressed, man. The thing is in much better condition than I was expecting. I want to make an offer, but you still haven't given me your bottom line."

Looking out at the glittering blue water, I sighed. I still had cold feet, which was why I hadn't given him my bottom line, but it was time to come clean. "You know I'm not usually indecisive, but I don't really know what to do about this rig. If I'm being honest, I'm not at all sure whether selling is the right call."

Logan studiously regarded my face before we strolled down to a café nearby and sat at a table right on the sand—which made me even less inclined to sell the damn thing. If I did, I would be contributing to the destruction of the very planet the sand and the oceans belonged to.

A planet Willow and Henry still had to call home long after we were gone.

"You're right. You're not usually indecisive, so where is this coming from?" he asked after we ordered a couple of beers.

I kept my eyes on the horizon, taking in the rig and the water around it. "Do you remember I told you that Flynn was married now?"

"Yeah. Why?"

I sighed and glanced at my friend and client. "His wife is a real environmental warrior. She sits on the board of half a dozen charities and she's an advocate for clean energy. According to her, we could scuttle that thing for half the price of decommissioning it and in doing so, we'd be creating an amazing reef that would help repair the damage the rig has done."

Logan arched a light eyebrow at me. “Are you serious? You’re going to let your environmentalist sister-in-law steamroll a sale like this? Are you crazy?”

I blew out a breath. “Maybe I am.”

He stared at me for a beat longer than usual before he leaned forward and slid his forearms onto the table, his eyes fixed on mine. “Why? Why are you letting her get to you like this, why do you care what she thinks, and why are you stalling a solid offer because of it?”

I shrugged. “I’m learning that family is more important than wealth. Money comes and goes. At least, it does for me, and Ariane might never forgive me if I do this. If I proceed with this sale, I’d lose her and probably Flynn too. He’s wrestling with some pretty big demons of his own for having worked on those things for so long.”

Logan’s eyes narrowed in thought. “Sure. Okay, I get that, but he did what he had to do, and also, they’re family. You could never lose them. You’ve never let your family make any decisions for you before and look how well that’s worked out for you.”

“True, but it’s more than just that.” I inhaled deeply, trying to fight the urge to keep going.

Logan and I didn’t have the kind of relationship where we bitched about what was going on in our lives. In fact, it wasn’t even just that we didn’t have that kind of relationship—neither of us were that kind of person.

Yet, my mind was racing with thoughts of McKinley and her predicament now, the things she’d told me about her father taking her to Sea World, and the look in Flynn’s eyes when he’d spoken to me last about the rig. The urge to just put it all out there was overwhelming, and the next thing I knew, I started spiraling—out loud.

“There’s a girl,” I started.

Logan sighed loudly, wincing as he gave me a sympathetic look. “Ah. There it is. There’s always a girl.”

I rolled my head back and stared at the puffy white clouds floating in the sky above. “Yeah, I know, and I also know what you’re thinking but I’m not about to drop down on one knee.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

A server delivered two beers and a basket of chicken wings, and I took a long sip of my drink as I considered how to answer his question. “The problem is that I care more than I should about the situation she’s in. I didn’t

cause all her troubles, but I sure as shit didn't help either."

"Back up a step. What troubles? Who the fuck did you fall for, man? You're making it sound like she's in witness protection and you outed her."

"Nah, it's not quite that bad. She's a single mom. Her little boy is four and the father is a complete asshole. It doesn't sound like he's ever contributed a cent and she's been keeping them afloat all this time."

"That story is way too familiar." He grimaced, grabbing his own beer and gulping down a generous amount of it. "Let me guess, he knocked her up when they were young and then booted her as soon as shit got real."

I gave him a sharp nod. "Exactly, but she's been making it work. She took the first and only job she could find when she was pregnant and alone. At a realtor's office, Kent Brock?"

"Oh, sure, I've heard of him. Rose to the big leagues after making a name for himself with single mothers. That guy?"

"The one and only." I gritted my teeth. "She's been working for him for years, and I don't know what he was paying her, but I do know it wasn't enough. She practically ran the show around there, but he's never given her the opportunity to grow."

"Ran? As in past tense?" He looked at me, eyebrows slowing sweeping up. "What did you do?"

"Nothing." I shrugged and took another gulp of my drink before I shook my head. "Okay, so not *nothing* nothing. I met her at Flynn's wedding. We had a good time and then, a couple of weeks later, I started looking for investment properties. I got referred to Kent, walked in, and there she was."

His gaze moved from one of my eyes to the other. "Which is when you got sucked in deeper?"

I nodded, glancing back at the water and the swells of the waves in the middle distance. "I insisted she shows me the properties, hoping that he'd make it worth her while if I bought any. She did the legwork. Found me this killer condo near Central Park that I bought on the spot."

"He didn't give her anything for it, did he?"

I snorted. "Five hundred bucks."

Logan blinked hard a few times in rapid succession. "Please tell me you convinced her to quit after that?"

"Nope." I swiped my tongue across my lips. "I should've, but I didn't. Instead, I took her and her kid to the Hamptons for a weekend. Seemed like they deserved a break and I had a client hard up for a property down there."

We found one, he bought the place, and in return, Kent gave her another two hundred and fifty.”

“Thousand?”

“No, dollars.” When he stared at me like he was wondering if I was joking, I shook my head. “Seriously. Two properties sold to cash buyers and she earned seven hundred and fifty dollars. In total.”

Logan’s eyebrows dipped and I saw a flicker of anger behind his eyes. “Seven hundred and fifty dollars doesn’t even get me into my favorite clubs.”

“Yeah, I hear you, but let’s face it, you and I are a little out of touch.”

He lowered his head to one side, then shrugged. “Yeah, maybe we are, but out of touch doesn’t mean stupid. You can’t do much with that kind of money these days, man. A few things, sure, but tell me she’s quit now? That’s just not worth it.”

“I know, which is why I encouraged her to quit. Unfortunately, while she was telling me she couldn’t afford to, her boss overheard us talking and he fired her. He treated her like a piece of ass anyway, so I doubt she’s sorry about the job itself, but she’s got a kid, no family, and I’m pretty sure she doesn’t have any savings either. It’s a clusterfuck.”

“One you feel you contributed to?”

“Didn’t I? If I hadn’t been there that day, encouraging her to quit, she wouldn’t have said the things that ended up getting her fired. I don’t know. I thought it was awesome, but she didn’t share my opinion. I want to make things right. I just don’t know how.”

“Where are she and the kid living right now?” he asked, getting right to the heart of the matter. “It’s the middle of the month, so they’ve probably still got a roof over their heads, right?”

“For now. Henry’s daycare had probably already been paid and at least she’ll be getting her severance pay, so they should still be okay with food and stuff, but...”

“That’s where it ends?”

I looked him in the eyes and nodded. “That’s where it ends. I offered her the Central Park Condo. There’s a daycare center in the building as well that I said I’d pay for, but—”

His eyes went wide. “Please tell me you didn’t?”

“But I did.” I sighed. “It’s that bad?”

“It’s that bad, dude.” He chuckled, taking another sip of his beer. “Women like that are proud and fiercely independent. Did she kick you in the

nuts for it?”

“Nope, but she did tell me to stay away from her.” I frowned at him. “I fucked up. I know that, but how do I make it right?”

“Depends,” he said thoughtfully. “Do you want to make it right for yourself or do you want to make sure the girl can stand on her own two feet?”

“A little of both, but definitely the latter.”

He shrugged. “If that’s the case, I can help. I could offer her a job without her being any the wiser that you had anything to do with it.”

“You’d do that?”

Another shrug. “For her to have gotten under your skin like this, she must be something special. Plus, I believe you that she ran Kent’s firm and I know you wouldn’t have bought two properties just to get into her pants, so she must be smart too if she’s showed you two places that were perfect enough to buy them on the spot. That’s enough for me. I’m always on the lookout for smart people who work hard and who are able to do it independently.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” My heart was beating faster now. “How would you hire her without her knowing it came from me?”

“She must be on LinkedIn, right? I’ll just look her up there. Don’t worry, bro. It’s taken care of. Now look at the damn menu so we can order our food. I’m starving.”

CHAPTER 32



MCKINLEY

I t'd been a week and a half since I'd been fired and I was beyond stressed about how empty my bank account was. Running on fumes was putting it mildly, and although I'd been spending every waking minute looking for another job, I kept coming up empty.

With the end of the month racing toward us, I was now living in a constant state of fear.

Of homelessness. Of malnutrition for Henry and starvation for myself. Of not being able to afford his education.

It was everything I'd been terrified of since my father had passed and it was looming darker and heavier than ever now. After I dropped Henry off at daycare, I sat outside the center in my car, gulping in breath after breath of air and trying to fight the wave of panic that was threatening to engulf me.

Over the course of the last ten days, I'd considered every option available to me over and over again. I'd thought about crawling back to Kent on my hands and knees, begging for my job back, but then I'd heard from the receptionist in the building that my position had already been filled.

I knew it was for the better, but shit. It didn't feel that way.

I'd also thought about taking Jude up on his offer, but I just couldn't do it. Not yet anyway. If Henry and I ended up having to live in my car, I would have no choice but to ask him for help, but we weren't there yet. If we got to that point, I'd swallow my pride for my son's sake—to be able to give him a bed and an education—but it was my absolute last resort.

Something's got to give, right?

After having applied for so many jobs, something had to happen. Someone had to be in need of a skillset exactly like mine, especially since I'd

marked my expected salary as the lowest possible option on every application I'd filled in, adding that even *that* was negotiable.

I couldn't really afford that, but any money was better than no money.

Feeling that wave of panic thundering toward my chest, I grabbed my phone and called Tess, knowing that I needed to blow off some steam. Regain my perspective.

"Hey," she said cheerfully when she picked up. "I was actually just going to call you. I've got a couple of hours between sessions and I was wondering if you'd like a one-on-one."

"I would. Please."

She chuckled. "Great. I'll see you at the gym."

"See you there."

Tess was a cross-fit instructor who had opened her own small gym a couple of years ago. She loved her job and was good at the business side of things, and I couldn't help the tide of jealousy that rose within me at the thought.

How does everyone have it together except for me? What did I do wrong?

A choked sob died in my throat when I swallowed it down. Wallowing in despair wasn't going to get me anywhere, and neither was jealousy or panic. Tess, Ariane, Flynn, Jude. They had it together because of the choices they'd made, and right now, I was making a choice to go get my ass kicked by my best friend rather than to sit here, feeling sorry for myself.

When I got to the gym, Tess didn't just kick my ass. She whooped it. The woman was a machine, one built of pure muscle and grit. She'd finished a session right before I'd called and that should've meant that she'd started the session with me at least a little bit exhausted, but nope.

As I collapsed on one of the mats, my muscles burning and aching, she smiled as she sat down beside me, not winded and with only the slightest sheen of sweat on her forehead. "How're you holding up, babe? It looked like you were about to cry when you walked in here."

"Yeah, that was nothing in comparison to how badly I want to cry right now. That was brutal. You're awful."

She chuckled. "Nah. You just don't come by often enough, but I get it. You've been busy."

"You mean I *was* busy. Not so much anymore on account of the whole unemployment thing."

Concern clouded her eyes as she looked back at me, pulling her knees up

to her chest on the mat beside mine and looping her arms around them. “You still haven’t found anything?”

“Nope. Not even a callback on any of the jobs I applied for. It’s bad, Tess. I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

“Maybe you should reconsider Jude’s offer,” she said cautiously, reaching out to touch my shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I know it’s not ideal, but I opened the link to the listing and it looks like a damn nice place. Plus, Henry would stay in daycare and it’ll buy you time to find a job you love.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I do not need his help.”

Yet.

Tess’s brow furrowed and her gaze zeroed in on my own. “If you really want to do what’s best for Henry, you might have to set your pride aside. Not having to pay rent or keep dealing with your shitty landlord could be exactly the kind of boost you need to start over with a clean slate.”

“No. Way,” I refused firmly. “It’s not just about my pride, Tess. I can set that aside without any problem whatsoever. God, I can’t afford the luxury of pride, but taking him up on it isn’t a sustainable solution. Right now, Henry and I are a pet project for him. What happens when he tires of us? When he realizes that he’s losing money, and a lot of it, on a condo he’s offered us indefinitely and is paying hundreds of dollars for Henry’s daycare a month on top of it all?”

“Hundreds?” she snorted. “Around there, the daycare centers can run into the thousands a month, but I hear what you’re saying. It’s not his responsibility and you’re afraid you’d simply be delaying the inevitable.”

“Exactly. Henry would have to move to a different school probably just after settling into the center in that building. He and I would have to move again. We’d have to start all over and we’ll never know when it’s going to happen. If push comes to shove, then fine. I’d rather have a couple of weeks of stability before we live in my car, but until there’s no other option, I can’t consider it.”

She nodded slowly. “Well, I’ve got some big plans to open a second gym in the next five years, so I need to get the ball rolling. If you’re interested, you could be my gym manager. It comes with the perk of training sessions as often as you want them.”

I chuckled, but the sound was sad—even to my own ears. “Thanks, but again, I can’t do that. I really want to make my own way. I refuse to be a

burden on anyone, but least of all you.”

“You’d never be a burden.” She rolled her eyes at me. “At least say that you and Henry will come live with me. You need to get out of that apartment, and even if your rent is paid up until the end of the month, you have to get out of there anyway. The place is a safety hazard and I’d never be able to live with myself if something happened to you there when you could’ve been living with me.”

“Tess...” I trailed off, dropping my head forward and running my hands into my hair. “I can’t, okay? You live in a one-bedroom. I appreciate the offer, but you don’t have the space for us. We’d be a massive intrusion, and again, that would be a burden, which I don’t want to be.”

“I get it, but at least think about it.” She turned to face me, eyes full of worry and disagreement with my decisions. “Look, you’ve worked fucking hard to avoid the very position you’re in right now. I understand, trust me, but you need a break. A little bit of help. There’s no shame in that.”

“I won’t be a burden on anyone,” I repeated firmly even as despair raced through me once more. “I need to make my own way, Tess. I’m not just saying that because I’m being stubborn. Even since my dad died, I’ve been dependent on people’s good will, and I can’t do it anymore.”

“That’s bullshit. You’ve worked damn hard to—”

I gave my head a hard shake. “No, really. Think about it. As a kid, I was dependent on my dad, which is I guess was fine, but then he passed, and I was dependent on Michelle and David. They kicked me out and Kent gave me a job because he felt sorry for me. I was dependent on him because of that and look at how it worked out. I just need to get on my own feet. I need to be able to rely on myself so I don’t end up back here all over again in a few years.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek for a moment, then sighed. “I guess you’re not wrong, but I don’t know, Mickey. Michelle and David did a number on you. There’s no doubt about that, and sure, Kent gave you the job because he took pity on you, but you kept it all these years because you were good at it and you worked hard.”

“Yeah, I know, but still. I need stability. I need to start making a living instead of just surviving, and I need to be able to depend on myself for all that.”

“I understand. I’m just not sure if now is the time to do it.” Her gaze lingered on mine for another beat before she shook off the worry. “Speaking

of Michelle, how was your last visit with her? Did you end up seeing her after the Hamptons?”

“We did. I totally forgot, but then she texted and reminded me. It was awful as always. She hardly paid any attention to Henry, but she did get him an indoor bouncy house to keep him busy.”

“Well, at least she got him something. Unless she’s keeping it hostage at her place?”

I tapped the side of my nose. “You got it. God forbid she actually gives him anything to take home. I mean, why let him use it and derive an ounce of enjoyment out of something she got him?”

Tess laughed, nodding her head before lying down flat on her back on the mat. “God forbid. Holy hell, she’s a horrible woman. If it was me, she would never have seen her grandson, I swear.”

“I know, but I can’t do that. What makes it even worse is that she’s still so blind to all of David’s mistakes. She even bragged to me about how well he’s doing, how he’s been promoted, and has a new girlfriend.”

“Promoted?” Tess perked up, glancing at me as a smile touched the corners of her lips. “Now repeat after me, children. Can anyone say *child support*? It’s about damn time.”

“No.” I sighed. “I don’t want a cent from that dick. One day, when Henry does amazing things, I don’t want him to be able to claim any credit. Rather let him grovel for Henry’s forgiveness when he finally pulls his head out his ass than to drag him, kicking and screaming, into his life or into court for child support.”

“You’re too stubborn and too proud.” She grinned at me. “That’s part of your charm, though. Alright, I’ll drop it now, but when you need help, smart people know when to ask for it.”

“If I need help, I will ask for it, but for now, I’m still praying for a miracle.”

A miracle that, as it turned out, had been waiting on my phone since about midway through my session with Tess. When I walked into the locker room to change and checked my phone, my heart skipped when I saw a notification from LinkedIn just innocently sitting on my screen.

Palms suddenly clammy, I tapped it, nearly dropping the phone when I saw what it was all about. The message was from a recruiter who thought I would be a good fit for a personal assistant job that was open at the moment.

Tess came up behind me. “Why are you frozen?”

I handed over my phone. “Look at that. More specifically, look at the salary they’re offering.”

It was a whopping eighty thousand dollars a year, and just the thought of that kind of money was enough to make my head spin. Tess squeaked. “This is amazing. Apply. Apply right now.”

The phone fumbled in my hands when she gave it back, but I managed to grab it just before it fell and applied. “That’s almost double what I made with Kent.”

“It’s no less than you deserve,” she insisted with a triumphant gleam in her eyes. “Remember to talk yourself up. A lot.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but what I was sure about was that this could be the big break I needed. The kind of money that could change my life and Henry’s. I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but damn.

If, and that was a big if, I got this job, life as I knew it would change in a heartbeat—or the stroke of pen on the paper of my contract—and I could finally start making all the dreams I had for him and for myself come true.

CHAPTER 33



JUDE

After two weeks of keeping my distance, I was done. I couldn't do it anymore. I needed to make things right with McKinley or I was going to lose my ever-loving mind.

With that thought firmly entrenched in my brain, I headed over to her apartment early on Saturday afternoon. Armed with flowers, coffee, and kid-friendly treats, I strode up the block to their apartment building and mentally practiced my apology.

After getting shit from even Logan about what I'd done that day, I knew I owed her an actual apology that showed I understood what I was apologizing for instead of just the generic *I'm sorry*. While I still thought that the way she'd walked out on Kent had been bad ass, and I wouldn't apologize for that, I knew now that her bad-assery hadn't been what it'd been all about.

To her, it'd boiled down to her very survival. I'd realized that while talking to Logan too. For people like him and me, a job like that didn't seem to be worth it, working for an asshole who underpaid and over-expected, but to her, it'd been a catastrophe.

It was the difference between making rent and getting evicted. Buying groceries, and starving or having to eat at a soup kitchen once her money ran out.

I got that now.

What she'd needed from me that day had been support and understanding, not excitement and an offer to pay for her life. In hindsight, I felt like a bit of an idiot. Trying to fix things for her had come so naturally that I hadn't even thought twice before I made that offer.

It wouldn't have hurt me financially at all, and that had been what I had

been thinking about it. Me. Myself.

It would've been no skin off my teeth to help and I'd also offered the apartment and the daycare costs without even considering her feelings on the matter. But when even Logan had pointed out how insulting that had to have been for her, it'd finally dawned on me that none of what had happened that day should've been about me.

And so, here I was, standing at her door ready to grovel if I had to. I still didn't know what I wanted from her, with us, but I knew that I didn't want to end things. Not now and certainly not like this.

Thankfully, as I approached the main door, someone else came out and I grabbed the door, heading in once they'd gone out. This was the first time I was actually inside their building, and I was immediately struck by the state it was in.

For starters, the heat in here was stifling. It was clear that no measure of ventilation was working and it made me wonder if the heat had been on in the winter. More than that, a faint stench drifted to my nostrils and my nose wrinkled as I blinked, taking a curious look around.

Apart from the heat and the smell, the lobby itself needed some repairs done. Wallpaper was peeling off everywhere and there were cracks between the mailboxes mounted on the wall. The carpet beneath my feet was filthy—likely the source of the smell—and the one light, an old fluorescent type, was flickering so much I was about to get a headache.

All the time I'd known her, this was what she'd been coming home to while I'd taken her to my house at the beach after the wedding and then dragged her to multimillion-dollar properties and purchasing them on sight. *Holy fuck, it's no wonder she said I didn't understand anything. I hadn't.*

A sense of shame built somewhere deep inside and that protective beast that just wanted to fix everything for her reared up again. I was determined to keep it in its cage today, but shit. That apartment in Manhattan was just standing empty, ready and waiting. If I'd had my way, I'd have moved her and Henry out of here and in there right now. Today.

But instead, I headed through the lobby to the stairs, not willing to risk an elevator in a place like this. Conveniently, I ran into a man who had to be the building manager since he was muttering to himself and scowling at the wet drywall he was cutting out in the hallway.

I arched an eyebrow when I saw the mold behind the wall. "You should probably get that taken care of before you replace this."

“Oh, fuck off.” The man shooed me away without even looking at me, and I gritted my teeth, already much too close to breaking my resolve not to interfere.

You’re here to apologize, Jude. Do not make things worse.

“There are protocols to follow,” my mouth said without any permission from me. “This is a health hazard.”

“Leave now or I’ll call the cops,” the man growled in response and I screwed my eyes shut, knowing that I needed to go or else I really was going to make things worse.

He could call the cops, but I wasn’t worried about that. I was here to visit a tenant and I’d simply pointed out something the building manager himself should’ve been concerned about, but McKinley would never forgive me if I caused trouble for her here.

Dragging in a deep breath, I continued up the stairs to her floor, my jaw clenched so tight, my teeth started to hurt by the time I got to her unit. I paused there for a few moments, focusing on my breathing as I reached for the grip I needed to get on myself, and then I knocked.

McKinley opened the door a few seconds later, blinking in surprise when she saw me. As always when we weren’t in the Hamptons, her short hair was pulled back into a ponytail and some of the shorter tendrils had escaped.

Her cheeks were flushed, presumably from running around after Henry, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. In a simple oversized T-shirt that was knotted at her hips and jeans, she was still so beautiful, so wholesome and real, that it made my chest hurt to see her after so long.

“Jude.” She stared up at me for a moment before she frowned. “What, uh, what can we do for you?”

Obviously, she was in better spirits than she had been when she’d gone up one side of me and down the other, and I took that as a good sign. Just as I extended my arms to offer her the bribes I’d brought, Henry appeared at her side and beamed up at me as his hand shot out to grab the box full of sweets and cookies.

“Hey, Jude,” he said in a sing-song voice. “Thank you!”

He spun on his heels and rushed back inside, and McKinley sighed before she twisted to call after him. “Wash your hands before you eat!”

“Yes, Mom,” he shouted back, and she shook her head before she stepped aside, her chest rising and falling on a deep breath as she turned to me and smiled.

“Would you like to come in?”

“Yes, please.” I offered the flowers and the coffee, then cut right to the chase once she closed the door behind me.

Hopefully, I would be able to look around and spend a few minutes with Henry later, but for now, I’d come here for a reason and we might not get another chance to talk alone if he came back. “I’m sorry for overstepping, McKinley. I was trying to help and I was excited for you, but in retrospect, I’ve realized that what you needed just after losing your livelihood wasn’t excitement and someone offering to just take over. I’m sorry for not respecting that. I’m sorry for reacting like an entitled asshole who just assumed that if I stepped in, there was nothing to be worried about.”

To my surprise, McKinley gave me a soft smile. “So you *do* understand now?”

I shrugged. “As much as I can. Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

She kept staring at me for another few seconds before she inclined her head in a nod. “Yes, Jude. You’re forgiven. In the heat of the moment, I might’ve overreacted a little bit myself. I, uh, I just wasn’t prepared for what happened that day, and when you just dismissed it like it was nothing, it set me off.”

“For damn good reason,” I agreed lightly. “Are we okay?”

“We’re okay.” She swept a hand out and gestured at the tiny apartment as a light flush spread on her cheeks. “Well, uh, welcome to our very humble abode. If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve cleaned up a bit but I suppose it wouldn’t have helped anyway.”

When I looked around, I realized what she meant. Henry’s toys were strewn around the open living and dining area with a neatly made sleeper-sofa on the one end. Off to one side was a door that led to the kitchen and on the other was a short, stubby hallway that had two doors I could see from here. One that went into the bathroom—I could see the edge of the bath too—and the other, I assumed, to the bedroom.

Which, at first glance, it seemed she’d surrendered to Henry since the bedding on the sofa-bed was purple with little white flowers on it. Not exactly the choice of a four-year-old boy. Once again, it struck me that they’d been living this way.

The woman didn’t even have a bedroom, for goodness sake, but I kept my mouth shut, realizing she hadn’t only been talking about the toys. The real reason why cleaning wouldn’t have helped much was simply because the

apartment, as the rest of the building, was just about falling apart.

Paint was peeling, floors were lifting, and it was stifling hot despite the few windows and the door to the balcony being open. I bit my tongue, pasting a smile on my face instead as my gaze traveled around the room and landed back on hers.

“I don’t mind the toys. It’s lively. Homey. You’re a mom. It’s okay if your house looks like your kid lives in it.”

She chuckled and lifted the coffee I’d brought. “Thanks for this. You’re a lifesaver.”

“You’re welcome.” I sat down on the edge of the sofa-bed. “So what’s new?”

Henry was nowhere to be seen, presumably inhaling treats in his room, and McKinley grinned but lowered her voice when she spoke. “Uh, well, I actually just got a new job. I’ve told Henry already, but I don’t want him to know too much about the details.”

My heart constricted. “A new job?”

She nodded, excitement lighting those gorgeous eyes as she sat down next to me. “Things worked out exactly like they were supposed to. I start tomorrow at an amazing company. The salary is killer, with two raises a year, full benefits, and a signing bonus that’s going to cover Henry’s daycare for six months!”

Bravo, Logan. You really outdid yourself.

While she was gushing, I reminded myself to thank him—and to make sure he never said a word about me suggesting her for the job. My insides relaxed and my heartbeat returned to normal, the constricting feeling easing when I realized I wouldn’t have to tear him a new one for taking advantage of her situation.

If anything, it sounded like he’d really come through for me.

“Congratulations,” I said, reaching out and sliding my arm around her shoulders to give her a quick, sideways hug. “Can I take you out some time to celebrate? Just the two of us?”

I wouldn’t have minded taking Henry along, but I knew I had to respect the boundaries she’d set for my relationship with him. She hadn’t wanted us always taking him everywhere with us, and since I still wasn’t in any position to make any promises, I wasn’t about to push.

McKinley’s teeth sank into her lower lip as she thought it over. “You know what? I was going to say no, make you work to get back into my good

graces, but I can't. I'm too excited and I really want to celebrate, so yes."

"Yes?"

She grinned at me. "Yes. I might even be able to swing tonight, but I need to check with Tess first. We were going to hang out at her place, but if she doesn't mind hanging out with Henry on her own, you're on."

Surprise flitted through me, but so did relief—and the force of the latter told me that I needed to rethink a few things. Reconsider my position on the whole dating thing.

These last two weeks, I'd been feeling like I couldn't breathe without her. That had told me enough, but the dizzying relief I felt about the fact that she'd not only forgiven me but was willing to let me take her out tonight told me even more.

It told me that I not only wanted McKinley in my life. I needed her, and I was just about done trying to hide or deny it.

CHAPTER 34



MCKINLEY

On my first real date with Jude—sans kiddo—I was more nervous than I'd expected to be. Butterflies zoomed around in my stomach where I sat in the passenger seat of the little sports car again, all dressed up and once more feeling like a princess who was going to the ball. Only, as far as I knew, we weren't going to a ball.

I didn't know where we were going.

Jude was being adorably coy about it, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he was nervous too. That permanent smirk had been replaced with a lopsided smile, and although he looked dashing in a dark navy suit with his hair styled away from his face, there was something boyish about him tonight too. Like a different energy I'd never felt with him before.

Either way, it was really working for me. I felt like more of an equal like this, and I really liked that feeling. For the first time, I was feeling like he was seeing me for who I really was—not as a sure thing or some girl and her kid he was whisking away for the weekend.

His apology had worked wonders for that, but so had his patience in waiting for me to get back to him about tonight and his whole demeanor since he'd picked me up. Something was different about him. I just couldn't put my finger on what it was.

When we pulled up in front of the building his brand new Manhattan condo was in, however, my eyes narrowed when I turned to face him. "Please tell me you're not—"

"I'm not," he said firmly, eyes on mine as he swiped a keycard over a sensor and then entered a code on a keypad to get into the garage. "We're not here for me to convince you to take my offer."

I leaned back in my seat and smiled. “In that case, I’m confused and surprised, but I can wait a few minutes to find out why we are here.”

Jude winked, turning back to face the ramp as we drove into the parking structure. A few minutes later, we were at his condo’s door, and when he opened it, surprise smacked into me.

A beautifully set table sat right in the middle of the living room, twinkle lights strung along the ceiling and the main lights dimmed. A man in a tuxedo appeared from the kitchen, bowing low as he took Jude’s jacket and my purse.

“Welcome,” the man said when he straightened up with a grin and swept a hand out toward the table. “Chef Jackson will be ready shortly with your first course, and my name is Eric. I’ll be your server this evening.”

I blinked hard as Eric seated us and then explained something about the wine before he poured a tiny splash into Jude’s glass. He tasted it, then nodded, and Eric beamed like he was personally responsible for making the wine as he filled our glasses.

As soon as our drinks were poured, he disappeared back into the kitchen and I shifted my attention to my date. “What on earth is all of this?”

“Our own personal restaurant.” He reached across the table and took my hand, his eyes soft on mine as he smiled. “I know you don’t want to live here, but I wanted to do something special tonight and I saw how much you loved this place when we came to the showing, so I got us a chef and turned it into a pop-up restaurant.”

I stared back at him, squeezing his fingers as I shook my head and then took a look around. “There’s still furniture in here. Have you found a tenant?”

“Nope. This was all stuff that came with the apartment when the last owner bought it. He left it behind for me to deal with.”

My gaze snagged on a massive, expensive leather sofa. “Deal with, huh? I know a few people who would kill to take that thing off your hands.”

He chuckled. “Well, I’d offer it to you, but I don’t want to piss you off again.”

I laughed. “Good call. It’s a very nice sofa, though. I’m sure whoever ends up living here will love it.”

Jude shrugged a shoulder. “If they choose to keep it. Otherwise, at least it’ll make it feel a bit more homey when they walk in. I can have it removed before they move if they don’t want to keep it.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to keep it, but I guess everyone who can afford to rent a place like this will have their own furniture.”

“Possibly.” His gaze flicked toward the kitchen. “Chef Jackson came highly recommended. He’s making our food and Eric is a sommelier. He pairs each dish with a nice wine. I’m pretty excited for this, especially now that I can smell whatever it is he’s cooking up in there.”

Having been so distracted by everything else that I hadn’t taken a beat to appreciate the scents drifting from the kitchen, I inhaled deeply, almost moaning at the rich aroma of roasting meat and vegetables that met my nostrils. As I looked back at Jude, I made my eyes big and nodded.

“That does smell delicious.” I touched the delicate stem of my wine glass and brought it to my lips, braving a small sip of what I was certain was the most expensive thing I’d ever drunk. “Wow, that’s smooth. It definitely doesn’t taste like a hangover.”

“Which is great considering that it’s your first day at your new job tomorrow. I wanted you to have a celebration worth remembering. This is the start of a whole new chapter for you.”

I smiled, touched by the effort he’d put into our date and impressed by the speed at which he’d put it all together. I felt totally spoiled, knowing that was probably the most anyone had ever gone out of their way for me.

“I’m sorry about losing my cool that day, Jude,” I said. “You were right. It was bad ass. I shouldn’t have jumped down your throat for saying it.”

“Nah, you had every reason. I should’ve checked in with you first before I started applauding you for sticking it to that prick. I am proud of you for doing it, though. He didn’t deserve to have you working for him.”

“I should’ve given him my notice ages ago, but I clung to the job because of the security it gave and perhaps because of a misplaced sense of loyalty. I just never expected to find something as amazing as this new job once I quit. Part of me thought I was always going to be unemployed if I left Kent.”

“People who work as hard as you and who are so good at it rarely remain unemployed for long,” he said with an undertone of sincerity in his voice. “Take it from me, good help really is hard to find. Especially good help that actually want the position they get and aren’t just using it as some kind of stopgap or stepping stone.”

I canted my head as I stared into those golden blue eyes. “You work alone, though.”

“Yep, because I never found help good enough to keep. I’ve employed a

few assistants and aspiring investors over the years, but no one worth mentioning. None of them stuck more than a week. Eventually, I decided to just keep working by myself, but I'm glad your new boss didn't. You're excited?"

"So excited," I admitted. "I finally feel like I can breathe and I haven't even started my new position. I'm suddenly looking forward to the future again. For me and for Henry. He'll have opportunities now. He might even be able to start a couple of the extracurriculars he's been begging for, and I feel like I'll be able to start living."

"What have you been doing until now, if not living?"

"Surviving." I giggled when he gave me a pained look. "It's true, but that's over now."

He smiled. "You seem to be full of hope for the future. I like it."

"I am, and so do I."

As I said it, Eric appeared in the doorway with another man behind him. The other guy was obviously Chef Jackson, wearing a black apron and hat as they strode toward us with their arms laden with food.

"Your appetizers," the chef said as they laid down a variety of plates containing food so fancy, I couldn't name it if I tried.

All I knew was that there was asparagus and bacon involved, and since I loved both of those things, I was so in for this. Jude and I tucked in when they bowed out, and at the first bite of the first thing I tried, I was in heaven.

"Wow, this is amazing," I said between bites. "What is it?"

Jude chuckled around his own bite, then swallowed it down with a sip of wine before he replied. "Quail Roulade with Beets and Smoked Apple. You like it?"

"I love it."

He grinned. "Try the citrus smoked salmon next. It's to die for."

I nodded. "So far, everything is. Out of curiosity, are these things usually served together?"

"Nope." He winked as he took another small sip of his wine. "I told them I wanted as little interruption as humanly possible, so they're not bringing things out in the order they usually would, and as soon as dessert is served, they're out of here."

My pulse quickened. "You have any big plans for later?"

He laughed. "No. I mean, I wouldn't object if you wanted to make *big plans*, but this is your celebration. Your big night. I didn't want people in and

out, interrupting us all the time. I just wanted you to sit back, relax, and enjoy it without any pressure whatsoever.”

“Even the pressure of talking to other people?”

He shrugged. “That’s really exhausting for some. This way, it’s just us. Being us.”

As I stared back at him, fully understanding the lengths he’d gone to in order to plan the perfect night for me, my heart skipped a couple of beats. “Since you mentioned us just being us, I thought I should tell you that I’ve looked at the hours I’ll be working from now on.”

“You have?” He frowned. “Okay. What are they like?”

“They’re good. Really good.” I looked deep into his eyes. “So good that I’ll even have time to date you. If you’re open to that, because it’s what I want.”

Once again, my forwardness seemed to catch him off guard, but then he groaned. “You’re killing me here, McKinley.”

“Really. Why? If it’s too mu—”

“No, it’s not that. First, your confidence is damn sexy, but it’s because I wanted to talk to you about this tonight, but you beat me to the punch because I was going to wait until we were alone.”

My heart did an uncomfortable flip in my chest. “Is that because you wanted to wait until we were alone to tell me it was over? Have you met someone else or...”

He chuckled, shaking his head at me. “No, I haven’t met anyone else. I haven’t even looked at another woman since I met you, but while we were apart, I’ve realized that I want to do more than just date you. Starting tonight, I want to know you.”

Hope and excitement surged through me and I left my chair, following my instinct to want to be closer to him. As close as I could get with the two men still in the kitchen anyway. Maybe he was right about waiting, but I didn’t and now we were going to have to behave.

Although that was probably a good thing. I wanted to be close to him if we were going to have this conversation, but we did need to have it without being sidetracked. Since those two men were still in the kitchen, now seemed like a good time to talk it out without being able to get distracted.

“What would you like to know?” I asked as I sat down in his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck and playing with his thick, sandy brown hair. “Ask me anything. I’m an open book.”

CHAPTER 35



JUDE

Staring into McKinley's eyes only a few inches away from my own, I realized how much there was that I didn't know about her. In many ways, we'd really only just scratched the surface with one another, and now, she was giving me a free pass.

Where do I even start?

Since she was on my lap, I knew where I wanted to start, but getting her naked wouldn't help me know her in the way I found myself wanting to know her right now. So while it was tempting, I commanded my dick to stand down and forced my blood back into my brain.

"How about we start with the easy stuff?" I asked playfully in order to diffuse the tension building up deep inside.

If the size of her pupils was anything to go by, it was building up in her too, and the last thing we needed was to get distracted by *that*.

She smiled. "Okay, shoot. What easy stuff?"

I hummed for a moment before I snapped my fingers at her hip. "Favorite cuisine. I realized when I was putting together this dinner that I didn't actually know what you preferred."

"This is all great," she said thoughtfully, her brows knitting and her head lowering slightly to one side while she considered the question. "I think my all-time favorite is Greek food, though. I love the Mediterranean flavors and how hearty it is, but at the same time, there's so much freshness as well. Yours?"

"Well, now that you've put it that way, it's probably going to be Greek from now on, but until now, it's been anything home style. Put anything on my plate so long as it's made with love and isn't presented like I'm at a

Michelin-star restaurant.”

She chuckled, combing her fingers through my hair. “Is that a fancy way of saying your mother’s cooking is your favorite food in the world?”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t, but it could be. For me, it’s not so much about what I’m eating as it is about the atmosphere and who I’m eating it with.”

“Fair enough, I feel the same way, but that wasn’t the question. What’s your favorite cuisine?”

I thought it over for a beat. “If it’s about the flavors and the style of food, I’ll go with Japanese street food. I love the way they can make magic with open flames, steel pans, oil, and spices. There’s this channel I follow on YouTube, and it’s just a guy who has a burner at a market, but the food he creates looks so good, it’s almost like I can taste it while I’m watching.”

“I’d like to see that sometime,” she mused, then blinked away the thoughtfulness and smiled again. “Okay, my turn. Have you ever been to Japan?”

“Once or twice,” I said lightly. “Unfortunately, never as a tourist. It’s been business trips to see clients and straight back again. It’s on my bucket list as a destination, though.”

“I think I’ve just added it to my bucket list too,” she said. “Are we done with the easy stuff yet?”

“We’ve got a lot left to cover. Favorite and least favorite colors. Music.”

She brushed her fingers through my hair some more and twined her fingers at the nape of my neck as she looked into my eyes. “True, but I think I’m ready to dive into the deeper stuff. If we use up all the easy questions first, we won’t have anything left when we need a break from the heavy stuff.”

Inhaling deeply, I kept my eyes steady on hers and then asked the question I’d been dying to know the answer to ever since I’d learned she had a child. “What happened with your ex?”

McKinley’s chin lowered and her next blink was just a fraction of a second too long, but she’d obviously been expecting the question and she didn’t try to talk around it. “David and I met in high school. He was a jock. I was the weird, nerdy girl who never thought a baseball player would look twice at her, and when he did, I fell hard and fast.”

My insides tensed. I already wanted to knock him out for doing what he’d done years after that moment when he’d first noticed her, but I didn’t interrupt. Her eyes took on a faraway quality, but it didn’t look like she was

about to burst into tears.

If anything, she seemed kind of detached. Like she didn't care one way or another how this story had ended. "Our relationship wasn't great. It was fine, for high school kids, but it wasn't that epic first love people try recreating for the rest of their lives. Anyway, you already know he and his mom took me in after my dad passed. They didn't treat me badly, but I also didn't feel completely welcome. It just was what it was. I was his girlfriend and I didn't have any family, and they felt obligated to step up since he and I had been together for a couple of years at that point."

"Until you got pregnant?"

She nodded sharply. "As soon as he found out, everything went to hell in a handbasket. We were twenty years old, he was in college, and I was working at a gas station. Both of us knew we couldn't afford a baby, but Michelle, his mom, assured us that she would help."

"Did she?"

McKinley shrugged, then sighed, then shook her head. "She didn't *not* help, but she also isn't the most loving, amazing grandparent you could imagine. After Henry was born, she reached out and said that she would be in his life. She didn't care that she'd kicked me out of her house or taken David's side. In fact, she didn't even mention any of that. Just said she'd heard her grandson had been born and that she expected us to visit her the day after the call so she could meet him."

My eyebrows hiked up on my forehead and my heartrate took on a fast, choppy rhythm. "Did you send her to hell in that handbasket you mentioned earlier?"

"She's his only grandparent." McKinley's nose wrinkled. "She's horrible, if I'm being completely honest, and I hate spending time with her, but she does adore Henry in her own way. I wish she was kinder and more understanding, but ultimately, at least she's there."

I scoffed. "That doesn't sound healthy, McKinley."

"I know, and I *am* worried about the overall influence such a negative, sour, manipulative person will have on my sweet boy, but she's his only other family. I can't deprive him of that. At least you have a brother and a mother. You have memories of a family growing up. I want that for him, and she's our only option."

"*Half*-brother," I corrected her gently. "Trust me. Things weren't always peachy between us. There was a time Flynn couldn't stand me. I mean, yeah,

I do have memories of a family growing up, but back then, we weren't what we are now. Have you ever sat Michelle down and talked to her about your worries?"

"I have not," she said almost forcibly. "If I even try, she'll just make things more difficult for me. She worships David and the ground he walks on. He's her only child and she raised him by herself. The funny thing is that you'd think she'd have more empathy with me since her ex-husband is so, so similar to her own son, but she doesn't see it."

"I don't imagine she wants to," I mused. "At least talk to her about her attitude with Henry. Explain to her that you're worried about the overall influence she's going to have on him if she doesn't shape up."

McKinley kept quiet for a beat as she looked back at me. Then finally, she dipped her head in a small nod. "I'll think about it. I know I should. I'm his mother and I'm supposed to stand up for him, but I guess I'm just afraid that she'll abandon him if I antagonize her. It's a tricky situation."

I tightened my grip on her hips. "I really do admire you, you know? You're so much fucking stronger than you give yourself credit for. So much more selfless and level-headed. You don't deserve the way they've treated you."

"No, I don't suppose I do, but I'm hoping that this new job is the start of a new chapter for me. That's all I've ever wanted. To turn the page, stand on my own two feet, and change my own life as well as Henry's."

"You do that now," I said confidently. "Feel like sharing more about this?"

She considered it for a beat before she shrugged. "There's not much more to say. David and I are ancient history. I haven't seen him since the day he broke it off with me and we're both happy to keep it that way. Tell me more about Flynn and the relationship you have with him now."

I groaned. "I should've seen that coming, but I didn't realize it was going to come quite so soon."

"You don't have to—"

"No, it's fine. Honestly, there's just not much to say about that either. His dad dumped our mom, she met my dad, and I came along when he was only three. For the longest time, I think in his eyes, I was the reason his dad was no longer around. My dad stuck around a little longer than his did, but eventually, he cut and run as well. Broke our mom's heart again, which I think Flynn also blamed me for. Until he was old enough to understand

better, at which point, we started working on repairing our relationship.”

“Is it still rocky?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. He and I are solid. I adore Willow. There’s nothing in the world I wouldn’t do for her, but I won’t lie and say I’m not worried about my relationship with Ariane at the moment.”

“Ariane?” McKinley frowned. “Why? She’s not the kind of person who would want to get between you and your brother.”

“No, she’s not. Not at all, but she’s got some pretty strong feelings about that oil rig I told you about. I’m worried that if I decide to sell, she’s going to be disappointed and so is Flynn, which might just knock us all down for a while.”

“So don’t sell,” she suggested. “Turning it into a reef seems like a win on all fronts to me.”

I stroked my thumbs along her hips as I nodded. “Maybe, but I’m still conflicted about it and I’m under pressure to make a decision. I guess it’s also because when we bought the rig, it was a venture Flynn and I were going into together. It felt good. Letting it go means the end of that venture.”

“I get that,” she said gently. “What would you want to do after?”

“That’s not an issue. I’ll keep investing. It’s what I love and what I’m good at. I’ve just been feeling a little uninspired lately, but that will change again.”

“Uninspired?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “When my father passed and I first got my inheritance, I was in a position where I could help people ‘*make it*’ and I loved the thrill of that. I took on clients who had enough money to play with, but not an obscene amount, and I helped them build lives of wealth they could never have imagined.”

She smiled softly. “And now?”

“Now, I’m only making rich people richer. I’ve known it for a while, but it’s really only started taking a toll on me recently. I want to get back to my roots and lend a hand to the little guy who needs help.”

“I admire that, but you can’t beat yourself up for it. You were just starting out, your career has grown, and it’s natural that your clientele grew with it. If you’re in a position to do it, then you can change that up again now that you’ve made a name for yourself.”

“True. What do you want for your future?”

She blinked a few times. “Stability and space to breathe so I can go back

to the things I used to love, like making cards, art, and creating. You?”

“A family.”

Her eyes widened and her chin dropped down low as she stared at me.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I chuckled and reached for her ribs to tickle her. “Is that really so weird? I’m thirty years old and I’ve built a career. I’m ready for what comes next.”

“No, it’s not weird. It’s just a little unexpected.” She giggled and swatted my hands away from her torso. “I hope you get what you want, Jude.”

As I stared back at her, I released her ribs and motioned around the condo. “Look at how much space you’d have here for crafting. Henry would have the space to play, grow, have friends over...”

She laughed and clicked her tongue at me. “You can be one or the other. Our landlord or...”

“Or?” I dropped my head and pressed my lips to hers, kissing her deeply as I wound my arms around her waist and held her to me.

McKinley didn’t know this yet, but I didn’t plan on giving up. I wouldn’t push, but as far as I was concerned, this place was hers. Theirs. And eventually, maybe one day, it would be mine too.

CHAPTER 36



MCKINLEY

While we'd been talking, the staff Jude had hired for the night had brought in all the rest of the food and wine, and I was pretty sure I'd heard them leave at some point. I couldn't imagine they were happy about leaving their creations untouched on the table, but since Jude had stressed privacy when he'd hired them, I was assuming it hadn't been completely unexpected.

As he kissed me, I wondered if I should break it off and suggest we eat before it all went ice cold, but the truth was that I wasn't hungry for food right then. All I wanted was him. After the intimate conversation we'd just had, I needed to feel close to him, and more than that, having him open up to me the way he just had turned me on.

A lot. Badly.

In the past when we'd been together, I assumed I was like all the rest of the women he'd been with. Not anymore. I doubted he'd ever had a conversation like that with anyone else. I'd seen him in action at the wedding. I'd experienced firsthand how he picked women up, charmed their pants off—literally—and then acted like a gentleman again after.

I also knew that was usually where things ended.

We'd been past that for a long time now, but at the same time, this was the first time he'd let me in quite like that. The first time he'd talked about his family, his past, and his desires for the future, and it turned out to be a massive turn-on for me. As I pushed my breasts against his chest, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding him as close to me as I could, I was burning for him.

My entire body felt achy and shaky, heavy and desperate to let him in—in a whole different way. To show him that I accepted him for his past, his

present, and his future. Although it really had come as a surprise to hear that he wanted a family. Even that part got me hot because it meant he was ready for a relationship.

Ready to hang up his playing gear and join the dating masses. Possibly even with me. The thought that he and I weren't just messing around anymore but that we might just be building something here hit me right in the chest, and it taught me that I was definitely more into emotional sex than casual flings.

Either way, I kissed him back with a frenzy that made me feel like I was trying to devour him whole. If I wasn't sitting right on top of him, I might've wondered if the vulnerability had freaked him out, but the evidence that he was just as super turned on as I was pressed into me, his hips rocking as mine started moving against them.

Until not so long ago, I'd thought this part of my life would be on hold for a long time, but Jude was a pleasant surprise. One I was growing more and more attached to with every layer of him I peeled back.

Since it felt like he was feeling the same way, I didn't hold back, kissing him like I was sharing my very life force freely as I shoved my fingers into his hair and held on tight. He liked that too, groaning loudly as he scooted to the edge of the chair and picked me right up, his hands on my thighs as he carried me to the sofa.

After dropping me down, he crawled onto it with me, his hard body flattening mine into the plush cushions below. I wrapped my legs around his hips, catching his face in my hands as I writhed underneath him, praying that I was right and the chef and sommelier really had left.

If not, they're about to get way more than they bargained for tonight.

Even so, I knew we'd be hidden behind the back of the sofa. Noises and such would definitely give us away, but I doubted they'd actually see anything. Plus, they had been hired to cater a private dinner for two in a condo. They had to have known that this might happen. Hopefully, if they weren't gone yet, they would have the good sense to leave now.

All that food still standing on the table bugged me, but not enough to put a stop to this. We could eat later. In fact, a pre-midnight feast after working up an appetite would probably make it taste even better.

When Jude reached for the hem of my dress and lifted himself half off me to pull it up, I put all my idle worries out of my mind. He'd always made me feel taken care of, and it was because mostly, he did take care of me in ways I

never even thought I needed to be taken care of.

If he was worried about the staff or the food, I had no doubt he'd have taken me upstairs to the bedrooms—one of which might or might not still have a bed in it—or he would've insisted we eat first. In that sense, I trusted him. Far more than I had any real reason to.

He eased back until he was sitting on his knees, the hem of my dress still in his hands as I moved with him, lifting my back and shoulders for him to pull it off over my head. In such a short amount of time together, we'd somehow managed to turn this into a seamless, effortless process that felt more like a familiar style of dance than simply undressing.

As soon as my dress hit the floor, my gaze remained hooked on his as I reached for the buttons on his shirt, undoing them one by one before tugging it out of his pants and pushing it off his shoulders. We never broke eye contact as I started working on his belt and he removed my bra, unhooking it with one hand before standing up for me to push his pants and underwear off.

While I did, he kicked off his shoes and then, when he was naked, he knelt in front of me to undo the straps of my heels and gently pull them off. Left in only my panties, I watched him on his knees between my legs, feeling the material still covering me growing damper by the second.

Although the fact that he was naked had more to do with my growing ache for him than the fact that he was on his knees in front of me. It didn't matter that I'd now seen him naked so many times. The man was still a work of art.

His broad shoulders and bronzed skin. The cut of his strong jaw and the thick, elegant column of his neck. All those bulges and ripped lines that rippled and pulled when he moved. No matter how many times we'd done this or how much he'd just opened up to me, it was still difficult to believe that I'd somehow found a man like him.

Not only because he was so unbelievably hot—although that was part of it, obviously—but also because he was just such a good person. He had such an amazing heart and such a genuine love for children.

After he'd pulled off my shoes and thankfully, my ruined panties, his gaze locked on my ankles, then moved up slowly as it swept along my calves, my knees, my thighs, and then skipped past my pussy to move on to my flabby stomach, my droopy boob—

“Stop that,” he commanded quietly. “You're gorgeous and I saw it when your hands moved just then. You were about to cover up.”

My brain was slow to catch up in the haze of lust it was swimming in, but when I glanced down at my hands, I realized he was right. They had moved up of their own accord, trying to hide all the rolls, the stretch marks, and the fact that it'd been at least four years since my boobs would have passed the pencil test.

Jeez, I'm pretty sure I could fit a whole box of pencils underneath them and they'd all stay. Not even one would fall out.

Perky had gone out the window around my seventeenth birthday when the girls had really filled out, but after the pregnancy and breastfeeding, I'd abandoned all hope of ever getting them back to the way they'd been before.

Jude's features tightened into a strict look as he shook his head at me. "None of that, McKinley. You are, by an extended mile, the sexiest woman I have ever had the pleasure of seeing naked. Never doubt it and never try to hide from me."

"You're on the floor," I pointed out. "That has to be the most unflattering angle anyone could get of another person."

He chuckled. "Maybe, but it does make it significantly easier to do this."

Wrapping his long fingers around my knees, he spread them apart and leaned forward, smirking at me just before he took a long lick between my folds. I moaned, sagging back against the sofa and surrendering to the sea of sensation he was already starting to stir up in me.

I was still pretty sure all he could see from his vantage point was rolls and shiny patches of stretch mark, but it didn't seem to be bothering him at all. In fact, before I'd even completed the thought, I felt his bicep begin to move in a very particular way against my leg, telling me he was stroking himself while he went down on me.

At that point, I let go of all my insecurities all over again. If he wasn't put off by me, and he definitely wasn't, I wasn't about to ruin what we'd started and insist on being taken home as a humiliated mess. I looked the way I looked, and Jude had always made me feel good about that.

It was silly to get hung up on it when the man who was looking at me had never made any secret about how much he liked what he saw. As I let it go, I brought my hands to his hair and tugged on the strands as his lips closed around my clit.

His fingers skated up the insides of my thighs, hovering at my entrance until I arched my hips, panting and silently begging him to slide them into me. Jude moaned loudly when he did, his mouth and hands working together

to bring me to a quick, earth-shattering climax so intense, it left me dizzy in the aftermath.

Before I'd even come all the way down, I reached for him, pulling him up and back onto the sofa with me, stopping him while he was on his knees and leaning forward to take him into my mouth. Brazen and frenzied, I licked his cock like it was a popsicle on a hot summer's day and wrapped my fingers around the base of his shaft, using my fingers on the parts of him my mouth couldn't reach. I even brought my free hand up to play with his balls, which I'd never actually had the courage to do—with anyone. Ever.

Jude's moans ran into one, his hands in my hair and his grip tightening to the point of pain as he thrust into my mouth, clearly nearing the edge as his cock swelled just before he withdrew. Eyes wide and wild, he bent over and reached for his pants, quickly pulling a condom out of his wallet and rolling it on before he was on top of me, kissing me deep and hard as he thrust into me.

The entire encounter was passionate, and it did things to me I couldn't describe. Turned me on so damn much to know we were like this for each other—because of each other.

As he slammed into me, hips moving as fast and deep as his tongue as he kissed me, I felt myself tighten around him, another orgasm approaching at speed. When it hit, I cried out, my toes curling as red hot bliss shot through me and seeped into my very soul.

His stomach dipped and his movements faltered. I felt him swell inside me when he moaned my name, and when he collapsed on top of me, I was still too blissed out to speak or even move. Instead, I just held him, stroking his back as I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing until it returned to normal.

CHAPTER 37



JUDE

On Thursday morning, I met up with Logan at a breakfast café near their offices. I was still extremely unsure whether I was doing the right thing, but at the end of the day, I hadn't made this decision for myself, Flynn, or Ariane.

Ultimately, speaking to McKinley on our date had made me realize that I'd missed one very important point about the rig—there were people working on it. A lot of people.

It'd hit me like a ton of bricks when it'd finally occurred to me that their jobs should've been the primary consideration all along—and I hadn't even really thought about it. I'd already admitted to Logan that I was out of touch, but this felt like a new level.

Flynn, Ariane, and I didn't need the money. It went against the grain for me to literally sink a few hundred million, but it was a knock I could've absorbed. The people working on that rig, however, did so to support themselves and their families.

It was their livelihoods. What kept the food on their tables and the roofs over their heads. I was ashamed that I was only giving that due consideration now, but at least I was doing it before I'd done something I couldn't take back.

Logan was sipping a coffee when I walked into the café, and he tossed me an easy smile and a wave. Standing up when I approached him, he set his mug down and stretched his hand out toward me. "Jude. I'm curious. Why a breakfast meeting and why not at my office?"

I shook with him. "A breakfast meeting because I want to get this done, and not at your office because I felt like bacon and pancakes."

He laughed. “Can’t go wrong with those two things. What are we getting done? This is about the rig?”

I nodded firmly, ordering a coffee for myself as I sat down in the seat across from the one he sank back into. “I’ve decided to sell, but on condition that nobody on the payroll loses their jobs.”

Logan broke into a slow grin. “I’ve got to admit, this is a surprise. I’m glad you finally came to your senses, man. I was sure you were going to scuttle the thing.”

“Yeah, so was I, but people’s livelihoods are at stake. That has to be more important than our principles.”

Even though it would’ve been more than our principles. It also would’ve been fixing environmental damage, but after what I’d just seen McKinley go through, I couldn’t be responsible for so many people getting the ax.

Logan put his hands together and gave me a burst of applause. “I’m going to have my hands full, but you’ve got it. I’m willing to agree to your condition. It’s not like I had my own crew ready and waiting, so this saves me a lot of time and money.”

“I aim to please.” I waggled my brows at him. “You’re sure you’re up to this, though? If not, and if you’re only going to wind up selling it on without that condition, I’d rather know now.”

“Nah, I’m up to it. It’s a new challenge I’m looking forward to and you have my word that if, eventually, I do sell it on, I’ll make people’s jobs a condition of sale as well. Besides, I’ve got an amazing new assistant, or haven’t you heard? She’s doing really well. I’ll get her to help with everything I need to close the sale and she can help with the transition into new hands as well.”

My stomach plummeted. “McKinley? No. That can’t happen. She can’t be a part of this.”

“Why not?” he asked, cocking his head as his eyes moved from one of mine to the other. “You have told her about me, right?”

I cringed. “She can’t find out that you and I know each other yet.”

“Jesus, dude,” he complained loudly and took a big sip of his coffee before he glared at me. “She’s smart, she’s intuitive, and she takes initiative but she knows when not to. Do you have any idea how rare that combination is?”

“Yes.”

He set his mug down with a hard thud. “Then you’ll understand why I’m

so pissed at you right now. When she finds out, she's going to quit and she's taken to my company and to my office like a fish to water. I don't want to lose her."

"You're not going to lose her because neither of us is going to tell her. Besides, you knew I didn't want her to know that I spoke to you about her."

"Yeah, but I thought you just didn't want her to feel like you got her the job. I figured you'd tell her that we know each other when she told you that she had a new job."

I probably should've done that. "I haven't told her anything yet. She needed a win and she wouldn't have taken it if she thought you'd only employed her because of me."

"Well, I mean, I did. I sent her an offer because of you, but I was also sold on hiring her after her interview. And after this week, I've got to tell you, I don't know what I did without her. I just don't really feel right about having an assistant who can't assist where I need her most."

"You only just found out about the rig. I'm sure there are plenty of other areas she's already on where you need her too. Plus, someone who knows your company will easily be able to incorporate new employees during the handover."

He sighed, swigging down the final sip of his coffee and then signaling for another. "True, but it would've been a great learning opportunity for her. I'm kind of put off right now, Jude. I know this girl means something to you, but she's my assistant. You don't get to decide what she works on for me."

"That's fair and I'm sorry. I'm not trying to interfere with your professional relationship with her and it won't happen again. It's just that she's finally feeling good about herself and really positive about where she's at and her future. Telling her now that we know each other will obliterate her confidence."

"Maybe it will, but lying to her hardly seems like the way to go. If you think the fallout is going to be bad now, consider what's it's going to be in a month. A year. She's going to feel like everything she achieves for me was for naught and that all of her hard work meant nothing."

"No, she won't," I argued. "Not if you treat her like a valuable member of your team, and since it seems like she already is, I know you're going to do that."

"She is already a valuable member of the team, but you're not listening to me, Jude. If she finds out eventually that we know each other—and she will

find out—she won't believe that she is. She'll think I employed her out of pity or loyalty to you and that she may as well have spent the time twiddling her thumbs because nothing she did got her this job or would've kept her the job."

"Look, I don't know about that and I will tell her, but once she's settled. You have no idea how much she's been through or how much she needed this personally, not just financially. I know you don't care and I realize that all that matters to you is that she does her job well, but she matters to me, man."

Logan's jaw hardened as he stared at me, shaking his head. "Fine, we'll do it your way. I'll play along, but I'm warning you right now that lying to her isn't a good idea."

"I know."

His brow puckered. "Do you, though? Clearly, you've got real feelings for her and I might not know much about relationships, but even *I* know this is going to blow up in your face."

I sighed before taking a long sip of my cooling coffee and swallowing it. "Honestly, at this point, I'd rather have her send me to hell than to lose the positivity and the confidence this job has given her. So thank you for hiring her and I swear I won't interfere again."

He gave me a pitying look, his nose scrunching up as his next coffee was delivered. "I don't envy you, bro. This is going to get much harder for you before it gets any easier."

"Nothing easy is worth having, right?"

"I'm not sure that's true," he said as his gaze dropped to the menu in front of him. "One last thing before we order. Stop lying to her soon. Very soon. Or you're going to lose her and then I'll be sitting with a heartbroken assistant, which I desperately don't want to be stuck with."

Instead of making promises I couldn't keep, I took another sip of my coffee and picked up my menu, knowing that Logan was completely right. There was every chance that this was going to blow up in my face.

It wouldn't matter then that my intentions were pure—and they were. McKinley had needed someone to cut her a break and Logan had volunteered. It wasn't like I'd begged him to hire her or send her an offer, and he was already excited to have her.

He benefited, she benefited, and so did Henry. Everybody won. *How the hell am I the bad guy?*

CHAPTER 38



MCKINLEY

My first week working for Logan Jones, I'd kicked ass and I knew it. I couldn't stop smiling as I packed up my things, simultaneously looking around my nice new office again.

It wasn't huge, but it was palatial in comparison to what I'd had while working for Kent. Logan's office was next to mine, and while he obviously had the corner, I had a decent space right beside it. With walls of windows behind me, some nice rugs covering the gleaming tiles under my feet, and even a little sitting area, being in here made me feel like I'd arrived.

In truth, I was part of a small army of personal assistants. I'd only gotten this office because the assistant it used to belong to had recently been promoted, but even that made me feel like I would have the opportunity for growth here.

I was one of many, but the atmosphere and camaraderie around the office was great—probably because the big boss knew everyone by name and gave people recognition for what they did all the time. He didn't create the sense among the office that there was any competition, rather opting for the idea that there was enough of everything—money, growth, and recognition—to go around.

I liked that. Almost as much as I liked my new boss.

Not in a romantic way at all, but professionally. As a boss.

Although I couldn't deny that he was exceptionally good looking. If I didn't have Jude in my life, I might've harbored a bit of a crush on the man, but I did have Jude in my life, and to me, no one held a candle to him.

Not even my boss with his piercing, silver-blue eyes, his dirty blond hair, and his cocky smile. As it was, I was happy not to be distracted by him as a

person.

He was a damn good boss, and apparently, he traveled often. When he did, he was perfectly okay with everyone working flexible hours as long as phones got answered and work got done. It was pretty much a dream job.

I glanced down at the pile of paperwork on my desk, proud of myself for everything I'd gotten done this week. To be fair, fitting in at the company had been easy, but I still hadn't expected to be able to do as much in one week as I had.

Logan had been in meetings all day, but while I hadn't seen him, I knew he was waiting on a few contracts from me. I already had them in a separate pile and I was planning on dropping them on his desk before I left, but just as I was ready to head home, he popped in.

A short knock sounded at the door, and then he strode into my office looking like he'd just stepped out of the pages of a menswear catalog. After an entire day of meetings, he still looked fresh and there wasn't so much as a hair out of place.

He was one of *those* people—like Jude. It was like nothing ruffled them. Nothing got to them. Nothing could ever touch them. I envied that about both of them, once again getting momentarily caught up in how alike they were.

I bet they'd be good friends if they ever meet.

Since it'd be weird for me to introduce my boss to my boyfriend for the purpose of the two becoming friends, I'd resolved not to do it, but they really would get along well. Logan grinned when he saw my purse already hanging over my shoulder.

"I won't keep you long. I know you must be dying to get home to your boy. I just wanted to pick up those contracts and tell you that you've done a hell of a job this week. We're lucky to have you, McKinley."

Also like Jude, it seemed he preferred to use my actual name instead of my nickname. Although Jude had now taken to doing it only under certain circumstances—when he was either serious or seriously turned on—but to Logan, it appeared to just come naturally.

My cheeks flushed at the praise. "If there's anything I can improve on, just let me know and I'll make it my mission next week."

"That sounds good," he agreed. "So far, I haven't picked up on anything, but if I do, I'll let you know. I also wanted to thank you for coming in last Sunday for your orientation. I believe it helps when my newbies are able to hit the ground running on a Monday morning."

I smiled. “You’re welcome and it definitely helped. Are you going to need me this weekend? I remember there was talk during our interview about having to work some Saturdays or Sundays.”

“Yeah, but not this weekend. I’ll be out of the office until the beginning of next week. I’m headed down to southern California to check out a business venture I’ve just acquired and to get a feel for it, but I’ll email you over the weekend with everything I need from you this coming week.”

“I’ll be on the lookout for your email.” I stood up and picked up the stack of documentation. “Here are the contracts you needed. Is there anything else before I go?”

“Nah, just have a good weekend, recharge, and come back on Monday ready to work hard all over again.”

I nodded. “Thank you. If you need something from me over the weekend, just call. I’ll be available to help.”

For some reason, he sighed but shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got Melody on the venture down there. Have a good weekend.”

“You too.” We walked to my door together and he gave me a friendly wave before he spun around and headed to his office, his phone already in his hand and on his way to his ear. I shook my head as I strode to the elevators.

I didn’t think that man would know how to take a break if someone forced it on him. Rumor had it that he was a world-class player who did his fair share of partying and letting loose, but I just didn’t know if that was true.

From what I’d seen so far, he was a machine. He was the first to arrive at the office and the last to leave. Even if he did pop out for meetings early or late into the night, he always came here first or came back to wrap up before he called it a day.

Since it seemed to be what worked for him though, I wasn’t about to push my luck by suggesting he take a weekend completely off. It wasn’t my place, but eventually once we knew each other better, I was certainly going to make a booking for him someplace nice and relaxing.

Putting my job and my new boss out of my head when I pulled up at Henry’s school, I went inside to get him, smiling at how excited he was that it was Friday. “Are we still going to visit Auntie Tess?”

“We sure are,” I said as I buckled him in. “She wants to see us to celebrate Mommy’s first week of work and another happy week at school for you.”

“Do you think she’ll come to our Christmas concert?”

I laughed. “We’re a few months away from Christmas, but I’m sure she wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“I’ll ask her tonight,” he decided out loud, then told me all about his day while we sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic on our way to her place. “Music was so great, Mommy. I made a drum *and* shakers. They’re mine now. They have my name on them.”

Something stirred inside me at his enthusiasm. Music was offered at his school as part of their regular program, but he’d been begging me to try the extra music program that was offered in the afternoons. I’d finally enrolled him on Monday and today had been his first lesson.

It sucked that he’d only been able to join in now, but I just had to remember that he was only four. Technically, he didn’t need to participate in any extra activities, and soon, he wouldn’t even remember that he hadn’t done it before.

When we arrived at Tess’s apartment, her bright blonde pixie cut was looking better than ever and she touched it playfully with her palm, pretending to lift it a little. “What do you think? I just got back from the hairstylist. I think he knocked it out the park this time.”

I chuckled, nodded, and hugged her. “You’re looking great as always, honey. How are you? Thanks for having us tonight.”

“Of course! I had to invite you over. We’ve got a lot to celebrate.” She released me and immediately bent over to scoop up Henry, tickling him as she carried him into her apartment. “What do you say you help me with dinner while your mom relaxes with a La Croix?”

“I love helping!” He grinned at me over her shoulder when his giggles subsided. “I’ll get the water!”

With that, he wriggled out of her grasp and ran into her kitchen, appearing a moment later with a bottle of sparkling water and handing it over. “We’ll see you later, Mom.”

Tess laughed when he grabbed her hand, almost pulling her over in his enthusiasm to get her to the kitchen with him. “Yeah, we’ll see you later, Mom. Grab a seat on the sofa and watch some TV or something. We’ve got this.”

She spun and pretended she was about to catch him as she chased him into the kitchen, and I smiled as I listened to their laughter and chatter while they cooked. Feeling a little useless, I drifted to her living room and sat down on the sofa, but I couldn’t bring myself to relax, so I checked my emails and

did a bit more work until they called me for dinner.

Once we were done eating our burgers and fries, Henry quickly fell asleep on the floor under Tess's coffee table, and I covered him with a blanket. At least her carpet in here was nice and thick, so I knew he slept well enough on it.

"Catch me up," she said as she handed over a glass of wine. "How was your first week, for real now that there aren't any tiny ears listening?"

I chuckled, tucking my feet underneath me on the sofa as I cradled the wine glass against my chest, not giving a damn if I wasn't supposed to hold it this way. "It was so good. Great, actually. I can't remember the last time I felt so positive about work, but I think it's because I never have."

She smiled brilliantly. "The pay, your boss, the offices? Tell me everything."

"Well, my first paycheck was like, five of Kent's stupid's bonuses in one, so that's amazing all on its own. My boss treats me with respect and like he knows I'm capable, and he hasn't even almost hit on me. The offices are fantastic. They're new and modern, but they've still managed to create a warm environment. It's like I can't wait to get there in the morning."

"That's amazing, Mickey. I'm so fucking happy for you." She took a sip of her wine. "How are things with Jude? You mentioned you forgave him, but you haven't told me what's happening between you now."

A flush exploded across my cheeks as I thought back to our date last weekend. "Honestly, things couldn't be better. We've had another conversation about us and about what we want in the future, and it's just like everything is finally falling into place. I feel like I've stepped into the next stage of my life and it's completely amazing and freeing."

Her gaze flicked from one of my eyes to the other. "So what's bothering you? I can see something is, but if it's not work and it's not Jude, and I know it's not Henry because he's super happy, then what is it?"

"Nothing serious. There's just one more thing hanging over me that's bringing me down and now that everything else is going so well, I feel like it's a loose end I need to take care of."

Tess gave me a knowing look. "Michelle?"

I nodded. "Michelle. I told Jude a bit about her last weekend and he thinks I should speak to her."

"I've been telling you that for ages."

I chuckled, shaking my head at myself. "I know, but I never really felt

strong enough to do it. I've also been afraid of the repercussions for Henry, but we're seeing her this weekend and I'm going to talk to her about my expectations going forward. This has gone far enough."

Tess grinned and pretended to applaud. "It's about damn time, woman. Shit, I'm so proud of you. You pushed through and stood your ground, and now look. It's all coming up roses."

I returned her grin and even pretended to give her a little bow. "Thank you, Tess. I don't know if I ever would've gotten this far without you, but I'm beyond grateful that I never had to find out."

As she laughed and brought her glass to her lips again, I inhaled deeply, once again struggling to wipe the smile off my face. I hadn't been this happy for a whole week in a long time, and while I was sure it would fade, for now, I was just letting myself feel it and hoping against all hope that there wasn't another shoe about to drop.

Of course, there was. I just didn't know about it yet, and in that moment, I was damn glad I didn't.

CHAPTER 39



JUDE

I had been dreading the conversation I was about to have all week, but I couldn't put it off any longer. As I arrived at my mother's house for dinner, all I could do was pray that they'd forgive me. I took a deep breath, then pushed open the front door and locked it behind me.

Beau and Flynn's cars were already outside, which meant I was the last to arrive. On the group text, Mom had told us that she'd be in the backyard. She'd said that she would be leaving the door open and asked whoever got here last to lock it.

I didn't have to take my time doing it, but I did, buying myself one last, precious minute before I had to face Flynn and Ariane. No one knew this about me, not even McKinley, but the memories of that time when Flynn and I had been on the outs still hurt sometimes.

I'd been a kid with a big brother who hadn't wanted me. I'd damn near idolized Flynn, but for the longest fucking time, he'd acted like Karson Neidum was his little brother instead of me.

While I'd mostly gotten over it, the fact of the matter remained that my relationship with him was the only emotional button I had. Feeling like I might lose him was a definite trigger for me—more so than love, or romantic relationships, or even heartbreak.

We'd both watched our mother going through it, and while it had bugged me, it hadn't turned me into a complete jaded skeptic like it'd done for him. For me, it was more like if I did it, I was going to make damn sure it was with the right person.

In his case, I was pretty sure he had chosen the right person, but it'd taken a lot for him to get to this point. I'd simply always held the view that it was a

“maybe one day, if you’re lucky” kind of thing.

As a result, the damage we’d taken from our childhoods was different. His was the responsibility of being her oldest child and feeling like he had to fix things for her when the men she’d chosen had inevitably wrecked her. And me?

My damage was still feeling like I was lucky to have a relationship with my brother. It was the forever-rejected mentality that made me feel like he could turn on a dime, change his mind, and simply never talk to me again.

I shoved that deep-seated fear down as I strode through the house, hearing my mom’s laughter drifting in through the open windows along with the scent of burgers sizzling on the grill. The dogs were yipping and yapping, charging me in the hallway before I walked out into the backyard carrying flowers and wine for my mother.

I also had flowers for Ariane, but as I extended them toward her, one of the little rats ran right under my feet. In an attempt not to squash it, I immediately lifted my foot, tripping and using the hand with the flowers in it to catch myself. Petals went flying everywhere—right along with my effort to get her in a good mood before I broke the news.

Ariane laughed as I righted myself. She reached for the stems and half-flowers I was holding. “These are beautiful, Jude. Thank you.”

I grumbled about the fucking rats under my breath as I nodded and hugged her hello. Flynn shook my hand next, then carried Willow over to Mom while I said hi to her and Beau as well.

“Could you watch her for a minute?” he asked Mom. “Jude, Ariane, and I need to talk about something real quick.”

“Now?” She sighed, but then cooed and grinned as soon as she had her granddaughter in her arms. “Fine, I’ll have the little cutie pie for as long as you want me to, but behave yourselves. No arguing before dinner.” She winked at Ariane. “That goes for you too, honey. You’re part of this family now. I don’t know what you guys need to talk about so urgently, but I don’t care. Your principles have no place at my table.”

Flynn laughed, but my nerves got so bad that my hands trembled. I’d texted them both earlier to say that I had news about the rig, and now the moment had arrived.

I followed him and Ariane to the living room, glad that he’d had the foresight to hand Willow over and to talk inside rather than out there with Mom and Beau. As he sat down, he nodded at me. “Shoot, what’s the big

news?”

“So, uh, I sold the rig,” I said clearly as I made eye contact with him first. I saw the disappointment bloom in his eyes and rushed to get the explanation out. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not what you wanted, but I was also holding the fate of two hundred employees in my hands. I couldn’t fire them.”

Flynn’s disappointment evaporated right before my very eyes as he nodded, sliding an arm around Ariane’s shoulders. “I understand. I didn’t realize we had so many people working on it, or I wouldn’t have been so eager to scuttle it. You were right not to fire them. Two hundred oil workers out of a job all at the same time would’ve made it near impossible for them all to get another job in the vicinity immediately.”

Relief flooded through me as I glanced at Ariane. Her expression had fallen, but she chewed her bottom lip. “That’s it? It’s done.”

“It’s done. I sold it to an old friend and client. He agreed to take over everyone on our payroll, but I want you to know that it wasn’t an easy decision. In fact, I was going to go with your idea of decommissioning it until I realized the position we’d be leaving those workers in.”

She let out a long breath, but then she nodded. “I didn’t know there were so many people working on it. I still feel like we could’ve helped them find new jobs, so I need some time, but I respect your choice and I know it wasn’t an easy one. Thank you for considering decommissioning as an option.”

“Of course,” I said, so relieved that they didn’t hate me. It was a massive weight off my shoulders to have the truth out there. “For what it’s worth, I really did give it a lot of thought. I’m not proud of how long it took even me to look up how many people we employed. It’s just, uh, I trust Jamie with the business side of things, you know?”

“Jamie is our business manager,” Flynn explained to her in a low murmur, his head turned so he was facing her. “We hired him when we bought the rig since neither of us wanted to be involved in the actual operations.” He glanced at me. “I’m glad you asked him about it. I don’t know if I would’ve thought to do that. Hell, I didn’t even think to ask *you* about it.”

I shrugged. “I might not have thought about it either, but I’ve got this friend who recently had to get a new job and it made me aware of the plight of those employees. According to Jamie, almost all of their families are based there, which means they’d mostly have wanted to stay in the area and you’re right that it would’ve been nearly impossible for them to just walk into

another job.”

Ariane nodded, still looking a little bit disappointed, but at least there was no resentment in her eyes when she looked back at me. “As much as it pains me to say this, you made the right call. I mean, I want to say I definitely would’ve been able to help find them new jobs, but I just don’t know if that’s true. Plus, I might’ve been inclined to try to find them jobs on my side of the fence, but ultimately, they’re oil workers. I definitely wouldn’t have found them jobs in their own industry.”

Flynn chuckled and leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead. “I know this doesn’t feel like the best outcome, but it needs to be. For now.”

She nodded and let her forehead hover against his lips. “I know. Next time, right?”

I barked out a loud laugh. “There isn’t going to be a next time. I’m done with the oil business. Just this one rig gave me so many gray hairs that there’s no way I’m investing in another.”

She giggled. “Well, then I’ll chalk this one up as a win for my side anyway. One less potential oil investor.”

“A few less actually. I won’t be able to advise any of my clients to get into that industry in good faith either.”

“And the client who bought it?” she asked. “You advised him in good faith to go into it?”

I shook my head. “He was already sold on it long before I spoke to him. I told him about your reservations, but he’s just not there yet. He was pretty happy to be getting into it.”

“It’s a great stream of revenue,” Flynn reasoned. “Far be it from me to judge anyone who gets into the game to make money.”

Ariane sighed. “And that right there? That’s the larger problem I need to solve.”

Flynn chuckled as he drew her into his side. “You will, baby. One step, and one investor, at a time.”

“Exactly.” I scrubbed my palms across my denim-clad thighs and nodded at them as I got up. “I’ll give you two a minute alone. Thanks for understanding.”

They both hummed their agreement, already focused on each other as I backed out of the room and headed outside to cuddle my niece. Mom laughed when I snagged the baby from her, and the sense of relief that thundered through my veins as I held her was dizzying.

I'd tried to prepare myself for a much worse outcome. I'd thought that they'd be so mad that they wouldn't speak to me for a long time and that I'd miss out on seeing the little girl I was holding grow up because of it, and I could only thank every god out there that it hadn't happened that way.

As the evening wore on, however, I realized that Logan had probably been right about telling McKinley the truth sooner rather than later. When I ran the conundrum past my brother after dinner, his advice was simple and to the point.

"If you care about her and you want a future with her, you have to tell her the truth. It's also unfair to ask Logan to lie for you, but buckle up, brother. Because it's not going to be an easy ride."

CHAPTER 40



MCKINLEY

On the way to have dinner at Michelle's, Henry and I stopped at a local bakery in her neighborhood. I was very nervous going in, knowing that I was about to have the boundary conversation with the woman who was practically my mother-in-law for so long, and I figured it wouldn't hurt to have something sweet to help cool her down after.

With Tess's encouragement, I'd written a draft of what I wanted to say and I'd read it so many times since Saturday morning that I had it mostly committed to memory now. Not that I was convinced it would help.

Having it written down might help me remember what I wanted to say, but that didn't mean she was going to let me get it all out. It also didn't mean she wasn't going to chase me out of her house again—or that she wasn't going to shut the door on Henry as well this time.

Breathing in the sugary scent in the bakery, I allowed the wafts of freshly baked sweetness to sooth my nerves. This was something I needed to do, and it was also something that should've been done a long time ago.

I was Henry's first and last line of defense, and it was about time I stood up for him. At the end of the day, even if she was his only grandparent, she never made an effort for him. Not to spend one-on-one quality time with him when we were there. Not to be involved in his life when we weren't.

She'd never even asked to take him to the park or for an ice cream. She bought him birthday presents but never attended his parties. Never asked if he might like to take his presents home.

Simply put, she was only ever there when it suited her, and it was only ever at her house. Sometimes, I'd even wondered if she actually wanted to be a grandmother to him or if she was only doing it because she felt too guilty

not to.

Either way, I was laying down the law today. *After we pick up one of her favorite desserts.*

The woman behind the counter smiled at me. “What can I get you, hon?”

“A strawberry rhubarb pie and some vanilla ice cream, please.”

She nodded and boxed it all up for me. I paid and led Henry back to the car, damn proud that I wasn’t showing up empty-handed today. I’d never been able to afford to bring along a treat like this, and even though I questioned Michelle’s attitude and her motives, she’d cooked her fair share of Sunday meals for us.

Now that I had a better income, I was determined to contribute.

As we arrived—right on time today—Michelle opened the door and her gaze immediately dropped to the box in my hand. She lifted her nose at the pie once she’d peeked under the lid.

“Store bought?” she asked mildly as she stepped aside to let us in. “Homemade would have been better.”

I gritted my teeth, biting my tongue and choosing to crack a joke instead. “I can’t bake at all. Homemade definitely *wouldn’t* have been better.”

Michelle tutted her tongue, but left it at that, and I felt strangely relieved. Like I’d won the first round even if she didn’t know we’d gone one yet.

That had been the least harsh greeting I’d received from her in years, and if that was the best she had today, then this conversation was going to be a breeze. As always, she led me directly to the kitchen, and since the indoor bouncy house—which Henry had really been looking forward to—wasn’t inflated, he followed after us. Also as was usual, neither of us made small talk as we trailed after her.

As we walked into the kitchen though, normal screeched to a stop in its tracks and shock radiated through me. David was there, sitting on a bar stool and texting on his phone. Henry’s absentee, deadbeat father was in the same room as him for the first time ever, and I hadn’t heard a single peep about it.

Michelle hadn’t asked me or even told me to prepare Henry. The poor boy had no idea who the man with the paunchy stomach and the balding head was.

He frowned curiously as he reached for my legs, wrapping his arms around it the way he did when he was nervous. No doubt the mood in the kitchen had set him on edge, and he ducked his head behind my thigh as I tried to remember how to breathe.

Fury ripped through me and ignited my veins, making my heart race with righteous anger. All the things I'd imagined yelling at this man over the years came rushing to the forefront of my mind. Henry knew Michelle's son was his father and that his name was David.

She'd even shown him some pictures of him in the past, but David was no dad. He was a complete and total stranger to my son.

Yet, as he finally lifted his gaze away from his phone, he grinned. "Henry, my boy. How are you? Come give me a hug."

Red flashed in my field of vision as David crouched down with his arms outstretched. Despite my own, soul-destroying rage and all the insults I had for the both of them right now, I kept my mouth shut. This was a pivotal moment in Henry's life.

A defining moment, even.

It was the first time he was laying eyes on his father—and while I knew he was still very young, chances were he was going to remember at least snippets of today. I needed to help him. To be here for him but also to set the tone.

As much as I was disgusted by the pasty face of the man I'd once loved, I couldn't yell, or kick him, or tell him to get the hell away from my child. We were in his mother's house and Henry was right here, which meant that I needed to control my own emotions and focus on Henry's.

He didn't move from behind my leg even though David was still sitting on his haunches with his arms out ahead of him. Thinning, light brown hair had been combed over the balding part of his scalp, but the hairless skin still shone under the harsh neon light in Michelle's kitchen.

Henry didn't let go of my leg and I was pretty sure he'd stopped breathing. I reached for him, stroking my fingers soothingly through his hair. "It's okay, honey. You can go."

When he still didn't move, I caught a glimpse of Michelle's jaw ticking from the corner of my eye and I turned to face her just as irritation rippled across her features. "Oh, for heaven's sake. You don't have to be afraid of your own daddy, Henry. Go to your father."

She strode up to us, putting her hands on his back and pushing him forward so hard that I almost fell. I saw red completely then, losing the self-control I'd been clinging to so desperately since I'd realized he was here.

I really didn't want to make a scene in front of Henry, but this was completely inappropriate. It was damaging to my son and I wouldn't fucking

stand for it. If David had changed his mind and wanted to be involved in his son's life, he could've picked up the fucking phone and we could've done this properly.

The same went for Michelle. They were both so fucking selfish that neither had probably even thought that just maybe, it would've been best if Henry had been prepared for this. Spinning around, I reached down and gently pried his arms away from my legs, sliding my hands up his ribs and under his arms so he knew I wasn't about to let him go.

Picking him up, I glowered at Michelle and shook my head when my eyes met hers as I strode past her. Her eyes widened before they narrowed again. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"Home," I said as evenly as I could manage, laser-focused on getting to the front door.

I pressed my thumb down on the latch without any hesitation at all, still holding Henry tight as he buried his face in the crook of my neck. As I yanked the door open, I marched out with them both hot on my heels.

I could hear them panting as they rushed after me, their footsteps muted first on the carpet and then on the front lawn as I raced across it. Clawing around my purse for my keys, I hit the unlock button and opened Henry's door, depositing him in his seat and buckling him up before reaching to the front to put on his music for him.

With that done, I turned up the volume a little, shut his door, and then spun to face David and Michelle who had finally caught up to me. They were both talking over each other at this point, saying a lot of rude and inaccurate things.

"You've never wanted him to know his father."

"Come on, Mickey. You're overreacting. I just wanted to say hi."

"We'll take you to court and we'll win."

"Just calm down, Mickey. Shit. You still like causing drama, huh?"

My fingers clenched into fists at my sides and I got in David's face first, secretly happy that he wasn't that handsome, fresh-faced boy I'd thought I'd loved once upon a time anymore. I didn't even feel the slightest touch of nostalgia as I faced off with the pale, squirrely eyed man I'd never even met before.

As my gaze locked on his, I blew my top, my index finger repeatedly jabbing into his chest. "You had no right showing up like this, blindsiding Henry and then expecting a warm welcome. You bailed. Five fucking years

ago, you bailed. You are not now, nor are you *ever* going to be a part of our lives. I'm managing just fine on my own and he's better off without you."

He opened his mouth, but now that I was finally getting mad, seeing him and being able to tell him what was on my mind, I wasn't anywhere near done. "If you want to take me to court, do it. You've never paid a cent in child support. You don't even know which daycare center he goes to or what kinds of things he likes to do. Bring it. We'll see which side the judge comes down on, but I can promise you it will not be yours."

I shoved my hands into my loose hair, feeling a touch hysterical as I laughed right in his face. "Every day for the last four and a half years, you have chosen to completely ignore the fact that you have a son. If you've changed your mind, then get ready to commit. Get ready to grovel for forgiveness, get ready to make up for every second that he has missed out on having a father, and get ready to fucking pay some money into a college fund or even a fund that he can piss away when he's older if that's what he decides to do with your money, but do not think that you can just show up and decide to have a relationship with him. That's not how this works."

Michelle scoffed, but before she could get a word out, I turned on her. "You are rude, overbearing, cruel, and manipulative. I know you get off on treating me like shit and treating Henry like you're doing him a favor, but you know what? I'm done. If you ever want to see him again, you can apologize, make the effort to come visit at our house, and start proving with your actions that you're done being a bitch."

Breathing heavily, I spun on my heels once more and slammed the door after I got into the car. Then I drove off as fast as I could without putting Henry in any danger. For a few long minutes, I just sucked in breath after breath, trying to calm my wildly beating heart.

"Are you okay, Mommy?"

I smiled at him in the rearview mirror, trying my best to let go of the fury still burning me up from the inside out. "I'm better than I have been in a long time, honey. I'm so sorry you had to see me get mad."

"I'm sorry you didn't get any pie," he said. "I know you were looking forward to it."

I blinked hard, realizing that I must've dropped the pie on the counter when I'd seen David. I didn't even remember what I'd done with it, but I was assuming it was that since Michelle would've started screeching if I'd dropped it on the floor.

Either way, my kiddo's kind heart made me tear up, and I knew I was doing a good job as his momma. "That's okay, sweetie. How about we stop for pizza on our way home?"

CHAPTER 41



JUDE

After dinner at Mom's house, my Sunday nights were always too quiet. Without the chatter and laughter of my family around me, I felt a little bit lost.

It never used to bother me as much as it did now, but these days, my place always felt empty when I got home. Too empty. Too big. Too quiet. Not another breath or sound anywhere at all. *Maybe I should get a dog.*

But no.

That wouldn't be fair to the poor creature who wound up coming home with me. Despite the fact that I worked from home, I just spent too much time away, in meetings or visiting the sites of whatever potential investment I was checking out.

I sighed. Rattling around the house like some forgotten soul, I grabbed a beer from the bar and dropped down on the sofa, staring out at the dark waves rushing to the shore. *So no dog. A cat? Urg. No. Don't like cat pee.*

My mental rambling was interrupted when my phone rang, and I eagerly pulled it out of my pocket, not really caring who was calling as long as I got to speak to someone. *God, when had I become this pathetic?*

I smiled when I saw it was a Facetime call from McKinley, chiding myself about the errant thoughts of being pathetic. *I'm not pathetic. I'm just coming off the high of being at Mom's with the family. That's all.*

"Hey," I said after sliding my thumb up the screen to accept the call. "Thank God. I think I was going to buy a cat if you didn't stop me."

"Huh?" McKinley laughed, her beautiful face filling the screen as her nose wrinkled. "What are you saying about a cat?"

I chuckled, shaking my head as I released a deep breath and wrapped my

fingers around the back of my head. “Nothing. It’s just good that you called when you did. I was bored and feeling lonely.”

“So you wanted to buy a cat? I thought you preferred dogs.”

“I do, which is why it’s such a good thing you called.” I tugged at my neck and leaned back against the sofa. “What’s up? You’re looking particularly bright-eyed this evening.”

“I’m feeling particularly bright-eyed too,” she said excitedly, keeping her voice down so she wouldn’t wake Henry, who I was assuming she’d already put down for bed. “I saw Henry’s grandmother today and guess what?”

“You told her to go fuck herself?” *Hey, a guy could hope, right?*

“Yes!” she practically squealed, beaming from ear to ear as she nodded wildly, very obviously bursting with pride.

I nearly slid off the couch. “What? Are you serious?”

“I am! Well, I mean, I didn’t say it in so many words, but that was definitely the gist of the conversation.”

My eyebrows hiked up. “Wow, baby. I’m so proud of you. How did she take it?”

“Baby?”

I shrugged. “Just trying it on for size.”

“Try something else.” She laughed as her nose wrinkled again. “That one doesn’t fit. It makes me feel like your kid. Maybe it’s because I call Henry my baby all the time.”

“Right. Moving along swiftly, then. Not baby. I got it. Tell me about standing up to the evil grandmother.”

“She’s not evil.” McKinley paused to think about it. “She’s just standing up for her child, I suppose. Her child who, incidentally, was there when we showed up.”

All humor drained out of me and my spine shot straight as I sat up. “Your ex was there?”

“Yep.”

My heart started pounding. “Is Henry okay?”

McKinley sighed, cocking her head as she looked deep into my eyes through the screen. “See, that’s the difference between someone who actually cares about the child and the selfish asses like them. He’s fine, but it was a big shock. I was planning on talking to her today anyway, but then that happened, and it was definitely the push I needed. I lost it on them, yelling on the sidewalk like a crazy person.”

“I’m so proud of you, McKinley. Really. It couldn’t have been easy standing up to them like that, especially when you were outnumbered.”

“It was easy, actually. I don’t think it would’ve been at all if the circumstances had been different, but they’re just so full of it, you know? Neither of them bothered to let me know David would be there, Henry was so scared he didn’t want to let go of my legs, and when I turned around and walked out, they had the audacity to tell me that I was being dramatic, overreacting, and that they would take me to court.”

I whistled between my teeth, my heartrate finally returning to normal since she seemed to be just fine regardless of the shock. “That’s pretty rich coming from them, but I guess people like that always have their heads so far up their own asses that they can’t see things the way they really are. Still, I’m proud of you for making your stand and seeing it through.”

“Thank you.” She grinned at me, hazel eyes twinkling and happy. “I just feel like I’m evolving. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was paralyzed and overwhelmed, and now, I suddenly feel like I’m thriving. Can I send you some links?”

“Links? Sure.” I leaned forward, feeling a smirk curving on my lips. “What are they for? Are we going to watch something naughty together?”

“No!” She laughed. “They’re for condos I’m going to see next weekend. If I find one I like, I want to apply to rent it as soon as possible before it’s gone. I’m ready to level up.”

Before I could say anything, she added, “And I think the universe sent me you as a reward for working hard and being resilient.”

Part of my insides went all warm and weird, but the other part stole itself for the truth. The truth I had yet to tell her and would undoubtedly knock her off this incredible wave she was riding.

Still grinning and oblivious to my internal struggles, she lowered her voice a little more. “Can I see you soon? I want to celebrate.”

“Sure. I can come over right now if you’re not too tired. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

McKinley glanced around, then nodded. “I’ll see you soon, but I’ve got to go if you’re coming over.”

She ended the call without saying goodbye, and I got up, grabbed my keys and wallet from the table where I’d dropped them when I’d come home, and took off again. All the way to her place, I toyed with the idea of letting her have this victory before I broke the news about Logan, but ultimately,

both he and Flynn had warned me to do it sooner rather than later.

Since I knew they were right, I also knew that I couldn't celebrate or do anything else with her until I'd told her. If I did, I would feel like a dirty prick and she'd never forgive me for carrying on as if there had been nothing wrong.

When I arrived at her apartment, she opened the door wearing a lacy nightgown and a smile, and I groaned. *Fuck. Me. Why am I trying to be the good guy again?*

"Hi," she said demurely, waving me in and shutting the door behind me. "I've got a bottle of wine in the kitchen. Want some?"

As I walked in, I realized that she hadn't only gotten dressed up for the occasion. She'd also lit a candle and tidied up. None of Henry's toys were lying about and the place was just too neat to have had a rowdy four-year-old around just a couple of hours ago.

"Uh. No, thanks. I'm driving, so wine is probably not a good idea." I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment before I turned to face her again.

She wasn't wearing any makeup, her gorgeous features bare with her loose hair framing her face. Her lips were a tiny bit shiny though, which made me think she'd glossed them. The nightgown wasn't completely sheer, but it left little to the imagination with a plummeting neckline and a hem that barely covered her panties.

Looking up at me with hooded eyes, she reached out to take my hand, coyly tugging me to her and looping her arms around my neck. I went willingly, my hands sliding around her waist as the faint scent of strawberries drifted up from her.

Since I'd never smelled it on her, I was assuming it was the gloss. I bet it tasted like strawberries too. Strawberries and McKinley. Fucking amazing combination.

She smiled, pushing up on her toes as her body pressed into mine. As she was about to kiss me, my hands dropped to my sides and I groaned again as I took a step back. "We need to talk."

Her face fell and hurt radiated from those eyes as she stared back at me and crossed her arms. "That's never a good thing when phrased like that. Don't tell me. You met someone else?"

"What?" I frowned. "No. No, this is not that. It's not a *we need to talk* kind of talk."

McKinley's head inclined. "But you just said that we need to talk. So

what kind of talk is it, then?”

Shit. This is going to suck.

Instead of dragging it out, however, I decided to just let ‘er rip. “It’s the kind of talk where I admit to you that I know your boss. He’s an old client who is also a friend, and I told him about you when you were unemployed.”

At first, she didn’t react. She simply kept staring at me for another beat. Then her tongue came out to swipe across her lips, and slowly, her eyes started narrowing. “You asked Logan to hire me?”

“No, I—I just told him that you needed a job.”

Ever so freaking slowly, she blinked a few times, still staring at me as she started deflating like a popped balloon. Her shoulders slumped, her chest caved in, her face lowered to the floor, and then she crossed it, striding in the direction of the door.

“You need to leave.”

“I was just trying to help,” I rushed out. “I didn’t ask him to hire you. He offered and I know he treats his people well.”

“Leave, Jude,” she whispered harshly, her head dropping forward as her voice cracked. “Now.”

“No, McKinley. Look, it’s not like I *got* you the job. I was just talking to him about you and one thing led to another. I would’ve told you before, but I didn’t because I knew you would never have taken the job if I did. You were standing in your own way and—”

She grunted and grabbed my wrist, pulling me to the door and then putting me out without saying another word.

I stood right in front of the closed door, staring at it like she might change her mind, but she didn’t. For the longest time, I waited for her to open it again, even if just to yell at me. But it didn’t happen.

Eventually, when I realized the door wasn’t going to open, my stomach plummeted and I felt the odd sensation of something cracking in my chest.

Shit. That really didn’t go well.

CHAPTER 42



MCKINLEY

After Jude left, I spiraled. I wasn't proud of it, but I had no idea what to do. As I stood on the other side of the door, my mind raced and my heart broke into millions of tiny little pieces.

My big break had been a setup.

My boss had hired me because he felt sorry for me.

My boyfriend hadn't had faith that I would find a job on my own.

When I'd received that offer out of the blue from a company I hadn't applied to, I should've known something was up. I should've realized that opportunities like that didn't simply drop into a person's lap when you needed them most.

Should've. Would've. Could've.

Regardless, I hadn't known. Hadn't even suspected.

I'd been so caught up in the amazement of the opportunity, the pride of getting such a great job with such an incredible salary and perks, and so in the clouds about it all that I'd missed it. Completely.

A bark of laughter ripped out of me, followed shortly by a gut-wrenching sob. *Shit, I'm such an idiot.*

Good things didn't just come to good people. They came to connected people, and I hadn't even thought for one second that this good thing had come to me because of my connection with Jude.

Another sob tore out of me as hot tears pressed against the backs of my eyes. *I. Am. An. Idiot.*

Still with absolutely no clue what to do with all the emotions tearing me up from the inside out, I spun on my heels and marched to the kitchen, collapsing into one of the stools and pouring myself a huge glass of wine. I

gulped down half of it in one go, then called Tess, but I was blubbing so much not even I understood what I was saying.

I couldn't stop crying. The tears had long since started falling and my chest felt like it was being torn to shreds by tiny bullets whizzing around in there.

As I was pouring my third glass of wine, my door burst open and Tess came rushing in, holding my spare key in her hand. Her cheeks were completely devoid of any color, her lips parting as she slammed to a halt once she'd sped into my kitchen.

"What happened?" she asked hoarsely. "Are you just buzzed? Is that what this is about?"

"I'm more than buzzed. I'm heartbroken." Another sob worked its way out from my very soul. "It's over with Jude. I can't trust him."

I hiccupped and Tess moved closer to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and holding me tight. "What did he do? Did he cheat on you or something?"

"No. He got me my job."

She went completely still against me, still holding me but her hand that had started stroking my hair paused and I didn't think she was breathing. "He *what?*"

"Logan is his friend. My boss, Logan. Jude asked him to hire me."

She didn't say anything for a long time, but her hand resumed the stroking and her chest started rising and falling again. Eventually, she released me to grab a glass of her own. She filled it all the way up and sat down on the stool across from mine.

"Okay, clearly, this is a huge shock to you, but I'm a little slow. Why does that mean it's over? This wasn't a breach of trust, Mick. I know he should've talked to you about it, but his heart was in the right place. Even if he did overstep."

"Overstep?" I snorted, holding my glass to my cheek as I shook my head. Some of the liquid sloshed out, but I didn't give a damn. "No. Overstepping was when he offered me his condo to live in. This is way beyond that."

Tess's gaze searched mine, slowly moving from one of my eyes to the other as she mulled it over. "If you really look deep into your heart, do you really think he committed an unforgivable sin? You love this job. You love your boss. He didn't match you up with some horrible company and you deserved a good opportunity. You deserved to work for someone who

recognizes your value and treats you with respect.”

I scoffed, my head shaking harder and faster. “Don’t you get it? I told him I didn’t want or need his help, but he ignored me. He went against my expressed wishes, and in doing so, he tried to control me. He took my choice away from me like what I wanted didn’t matter.”

“I don’t think—”

“No, Tess. He managed me like a puppet, pulling my strings while he operated behind the scenes.” I huffed out a shaky breath, fresh tears streaming hot and heavy down my cheeks. “It’s humiliating, Tess. He went behind my back, gossiped about me to his rich friend, and they probably just had an *aww shame, the poor woman doesn’t know what’s good for her* moment. And then, like magic, they waved their dicks around with their wallets and I got a fucking job.”

She blinked at me, then brought her glass to her lips and took a long sip. “Just get it all out, girl. Let me hear it. Tell me everything that’s racing through your head right now.”

“Don’t be like that,” I moaned. “It’s not about getting it all out. It’s about the fact that I’m tired. I’m so tired of being pitied, of being managed, of always being the one who needs help. I really thought that had finally changed. I thought I’d gotten myself a job. A great one. I thought I was finally emerging from the darkness I’ve been struggling to find a way out of since my dad died. I just thought things were going to be different from now on. That I was making something of myself.”

“You *are* making something of yourself, Mickey,” she said emphatically, her eyes huge as they locked on mine. “Things *are* different now. You have a new job, and again, it’s one that you love. You’re working for a boss who’s not staring at your ass and wondering how long it’s going to be before you’ll let him into your pants because you just owe him *everything*. You’re doing well, your new boss has been singing your praises, and the money is fantastic. Who cares how you got there?”

“I do.” I thumped a flat palm on my chest. “I care, Tess. It’s mortifying to know that I have to walk into that office on Monday morning now that I know the only reason I’m there is as a favor to Jude. In fact, I don’t even know if I *can*. Logan might just fire me for ending things with his friend.”

“He won’t fire you.” She let out a loud, long sigh. “Look, I know this must’ve come as a huge shock to you, but you know as well as I do that it’s all about who you know. That’s why the rich are always only getting richer

and the poor are always only getting fucked. It's because the rich know each other and they keep helping each other out."

I snorted. "Yeah, except this time, I was literally getting fucked by the rich. And then he threw me a bone in the form of a job as a thank you."

"No, Mick. That's not what happened—"

On a roll, I kept going, knowing that I was interrupting her, but the wine and fire thundered through my veins, and I couldn't stop myself. "I know you think I'm just being proud and stubborn, and you know what? Maybe I am, but for shit's sake. I told Jude, in as many words, that I didn't want his help."

I snorted. "I've never wanted to be a charity case. Hell, no one does, and you're right about Kent. He *did* keep wondering when I going to spread my legs, but I *did* owe him everything. That's *why* I didn't want help. That's why I wanted to own my *own* success, because that way, I don't owe anyone anything. I wouldn't have to feel like I had to keep spreading my legs for Jude just because he did something for me. I wanted to keep spreading my legs for him. It was a choice and he took it away without even considering what I wanted."

Tess's chest rose on a deep inhale. "Okay, Mickey. I hear you and I know what he did was wrong, but I don't think he expects you to keep seeing him or sleep with him just because he spoke to a friend about you. A friend who's been praising you all week."

I laughed. "That's the thing, though, isn't it? All that praise? What a joke. He didn't mean a word of it. He was probably just saying it because Jude asked him to be nice to the poor little girlfriend who couldn't manage her own life."

She drummed her fingers on the countertop, staring at me until she suddenly got up and strode over to me. "That's it. I'm taking the wine and you're going to bed. Come on. We'll talk more tomorrow."

I surrendered my glass, grumbling under my breath about being sent to bed but going anyway. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I needed to go to sleep. I knew I had drunk far too much wine and that I wasn't being fair to my best friend.

"Here we go," Tess said as she gripped my elbow and walked me to the sofa bed, pulling back the cover before pointing me into it. "Just lie down, get some sleep, and everything will look better in the morning, okay?"

"Okay," I mumbled as I lay down, yawning as soon as my head hit the pillow. "I need my phone."

“It’s right there. I brought it with us from the kitchen, and before you ask, I checked that your alarm is set. You and Henry won’t be late on my watch.”

“Thank you.” I closed my eyes, hearing her pad back to the kitchen and the soft creak of the fridge door opening and closing.

Idly realizing that she must’ve put the leftover wine back in the fridge and was now cleaning up, I still couldn’t stop thinking about Logan and Jude, and how they’d probably had such a laugh at my expense. My head spun and I sat up, spotting my phone on the nightstand where Tess had left it.

Grabbing the device, I unlocked it and saw that she’d been right. My alarm was set but I wouldn’t be going to work tomorrow.

Scrolling to Logan’s number, I hit dial and waited for him to pick up. I knew it was late, but he wasn’t even here. He was in a different time zone. I was sure he was awake.

“Mickey?” he asked as he picked up. “Are you okay? Do you know what time it is?”

I ignored his questions. “Oh, stop with the confused and concerned act, would you? I know you only hired me because of Jude. You two deserve each other. You’re off the hook, Logan. You don’t have to deal with me anymore.”

“Ah. So he told you, huh? Well, I’m glad the truth is out, but I’m not on any hook. Sure, Jude told me about you, but you’re a great employee. No bullshit. Just get some sleep, okay?”

“No. You’re a liar and I quit!”

Tess came rushing out of the kitchen, wrenching the phone out of my hand and muttering to Logan that she’d call him back before she ended the call, but it was too late. Satisfied and with a viciously spinning head, I lay back down and smiled.

No man was going to control me.

Not a rich one and not a poor one.

Not ever, ever again.

CHAPTER 43



JUDE

I had a terrible day at work. Just like I'd had an awful day on Monday and a horrible day on Tuesday. Thursday was probably going to be shit as well. I didn't even have much hope for Friday at this point.

This entire week was just one big crapfest.

I couldn't get McKinley out of my head. Again.

She wasn't taking my calls, and when I'd shown up at her apartment last night, she hadn't opened the door. I didn't even know if she'd been home. Hell, I'd pressed my ear to the door and I hadn't heard anything inside, so maybe she hadn't been, but I doubted she'd have let me in even if that hadn't been the case.

Clearly, telling the truth had not worked out in my favor. She was pissed and I didn't know if she was ever going to forgive me. Not for this. Not again.

I realized I'd interfered, but I'd only wanted to help. All I'd really done was to speak to my friend about a girl I liked. I hadn't forced him to hire her or asked him for a favor. Besides, Logan wasn't the type to employ someone or to keep them around out of pity.

If he didn't believe that she was a good fit for his company, he'd never have made her an offer. It was as simple as that, but I doubted that was the way McKinley saw it. I just hoped Logan told her that was the way it was if she ever talked to him about it.

That, however, was between them. It was their professional relationship, and as much as I was curious to know how it was going at the office this week, I wouldn't ask him. I wasn't going to call Logan just to check up on my girl.

That's a step too far, right?

On the other hand, I didn't think she was my girl anymore. If she ever had been. I sure as hell felt like, at least to some extent, I was hers, but it didn't look like I was doing a very good job at that. *Maybe this whole relationship thing just isn't for me.*

I sighed, getting up from my desk after switching off my computer. I didn't quite know when I'd turned into this guy, the one who had made a habit of aimlessly wondering around his house while worrying about a woman and a kid he had no right to be thinking about.

Actually, I did know. It'd happened after Flynn's wedding. *Stupid curse.*

The only problem was that I didn't know how to go back. *If only I could find the rewind button...*

Then again, even if life had one of those, I probably wouldn't have hit it. Having McKinley and Henry around had brought a new dimension to my life and it was one I really liked. It was just too bad they didn't feel the same way.

Okay. Stop it. That's enough moping. No more.

My phone rang.

Oh, thank God.

I yanked it out of my back pocket, frowning when I saw Logan's name on my screen. "Hello?"

"Hey, man. I'm back in town. I've been down at the rig for the last few days, checking things out and meeting all my new people. Can you meet me for a drink?"

"Uh, sure, but if there are any issues, it's not me you want to talk to. It's Jamie, the business manager. He knows everything there is to know about that rig and the people who work on it."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I met him. Cool guy. Drink?"

"Yeah, okay. When and where?"

"I'm headed to the Yacht Club right now. Meet me there."

"You got it." I hung up, wondering what this was about but eager to get out of the damn house. I was happy for the distraction, and besides, the Yacht Club was always teeming with potential new clients. Their bar area was a hot spot for the richest people in the city to meet up and complain about rich people things—although I supposed I was one of them now, so I probably couldn't judge—but the point was that while they were complaining about those things, they were usually only too happy to talk investments.

If I'd been in higher spirits, I would've used it as a networking opportunity for sure, but as soon as I walked in, I realized that just wasn't going to happen for me today. As always, it was a veritable gold mine of potential new clients, but I just couldn't seem to muster up any enthusiasm.

Instead, I found Logan sitting close to one end of the bar, nursing a scotch as he stared into the amber depths like it held the answers to all of life's greatest mysteries. I clapped him on the shoulder before I pulled up a stool.

"What's going on? You look like you've had a rough day."

He jerked his gaze to mine, then arched a dark blond eyebrow as he smirked. "You're not really one to talk. Did you sleep at all last night, or are you just really hungover?"

I scoffed. "I don't look that bad."

"Have you seen your eyes? They're bloodshot as shit."

"Speak for yourself," I shot back before signaling the bartender for a drink when he glanced my way. "So what did you want to talk to me about? Is there a problem with the rig?"

He blinked hard and frowned before he shook his head. "The rig? No. No problem there. Everything looks great and it seems to be operating smoothly. In the five days I was there, not a single incident happened that got me worried, which is impressive."

"Good. I'm glad, but what's this about then?"

"McKinley," he said simply before picking up his tumbler and taking a small sip of his drink. "I, uh, I just wanted to let you know that she quit."

"She what?" My eyes popped wide open and my heart did a flop before it collapsed. "No, I can't believe that. She quit?"

He shrugged. "Yep. I got a call from her at some obscene hour of the night on Sunday. She sounded wasted, but she told me I was a liar and that I wouldn't have to deal with her anymore. Said I was off the hook. I tried reasoning with her, but then some other woman came on the line, told me she'd call back, and hung up."

"Did she call back?"

He shook his head. "I haven't heard a word from her since and she hasn't shown up at the office, so I'm assuming she really meant it when she said she was quitting."

My mood plunged even lower than it had been these last few days. "Fuck, man. I'm sorry. I didn't think she'd go that far. I told her the truth on Sunday night, so if she was wasted, she must've started drinking after I told her."

“Yeah, I thought something like that must’ve happened. She didn’t take it well, did she?”

I sighed. “Not at all.”

“Big fight?” he asked sympathetically.

“Uh, no, actually. Not a big fight and not a small one either. There was just no fight, which is worse. It would’ve been better if she’d screamed at me, but she didn’t. She just went all quiet and then shut the door in my face.”

Logan winced. “I’m sorry. That definitely sounds worse than a fight. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you, and I figured it’d be better in person.”

“Yeah, thanks. Shit, I can’t believe she quit. I mean, she looked at me like I’d stabbed her in the back, but I thought it was just shock. I kind of figured she’d be pissed at me, but I never thought she would take it out on you.”

“Chicks, man.” He sighed. “I haven’t replaced her yet, but I also can’t keep her spot open forever. Do you think there’s any chance she’ll come back?”

“Do you want her to?”

“Yes.” He gave me a meaningful look. “I wasn’t feeding you bullshit when I said she was doing great. She really was. She was a good fit. I’d take her back any day, as long as the opening stays open.”

“I would offer to talk to her, but I don’t think that would help much. She’s pretty damn pissed at me. I just wish there was something I could do to make it up to her.”

“Flowers,” he said knowingly. “With jewelry, chocolate, and a well-rehearsed but also heartfelt apology. I’ve heard that’s the way to go.”

I laughed. “So have I, but something tells me that’s not going to cut it this time. I don’t know. Every time I try to make something up to her or to help her, I just dig myself a deeper hole.”

“A woman like that is hard to love,” he commented lightly. “Have you ever considered that maybe she just doesn’t want help and that if you’re the savior-complex type, then maybe it’s just not going to work out?”

“First, she’s not hard to love,” I said firmly. “In fact, she’s really fucking easy to love. Too easy. She’s warm, and kind, and the best mother I’ve ever seen. She’s also intelligent, and funny, and sexy, and—”

He laughed and cut me off. “Jeez. Okay. I get it. Track her down, say all that mushy shit to her that you said to me, and *voila*, she’ll forgive you.”

“No, it won’t be that simple, and for the record, I don’t have a savior complex. That’s not what this is. Life has just been harsh on her and it kills

me to know that she's struggling when she deserves so much more. So much better. She's been through so much and life just keeps knocking her on her ass. Is it really so bad that I want to help her up?"

He regarded me silently for a long beat before he shrugged. "Well, the alternative is to dive headfirst into work and to forget about her. Those are pretty much the only options I see here. Apologize and hope for the best, or move on."

Theoretically, I knew he was right. There was nothing else I could do, but I also knew I couldn't just forget about her. I'd already tried diving headfirst into work and it hadn't helped. Forgetting about her wouldn't be possible unless I could find a surgeon to cut out part of my brain, and honestly, I didn't want to forget about her.

I'd rather throw myself onto the fire one last time. Just not yet.

In a few days, when I've had some time to think and she's had some space to breathe.

CHAPTER 44



MCKINLEY

Since I'd already made the appointments to view the condos, Tess, Henry, and I were taking the tours even though I couldn't afford any of these places anymore. I'd tried calling to cancel, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to do it.

Tess had decided to tag along, and now she was trash talking each place regardless of the fact that they were all really nice. At the first place, it'd been, "Ew, crown molding? How obnoxious."

When we'd been standing in the kitchen of the second, it was, "A fridge with an ice dispenser? Super pretentious."

And now, as we made our way through the third, she tutted and shook her head. "*Three* bedrooms? What kind of asshole needs three bedrooms?"

I laughed, but I just wasn't feeling it. I knew what she was doing, trying to keep it light and breezy while I got sadder by the minute and Henry ran from empty room to empty room, giggling gleefully.

Mercifully, he was oblivious to my stresses and woes, but that was where all the mercy ended. Our apartment was literally coming apart at the seams now, and the building manager wasn't interested in hearing about much—much less in fixing any of the issues.

Last night when I'd run Henry's bath, the tap had come off in my hand, and this morning, I'd woken up to a chunk of the ceiling falling on my bed. The wallpaper was peeling more by the day and the vinyl was lifting much the same way.

Which was why I hadn't been able to cancel these appointments. I couldn't afford the places I'd lined up while I'd been working for Logan since I hadn't been there long enough, but Henry and I still needed a new

place to live. I just didn't know where and how I was going to find one I could afford.

With my first and only paycheck from Logan in the bank, Henry and I would be okay until the end of the month. Maybe even for part of next month, but that money wouldn't last to the end of it. Along with my incredibly meager savings, that gave me six weeks tops to figure everything out, but I wasn't sure we could stay in our apartment that long.

Honestly, it was a real safety hazard now, and with the wallpaper peeling, I'd seen some moldy spots behind it. I was getting concerned that it was a health hazard to remain living there as well.

As if my gloom had beamed my thoughts into Tess's brain, she put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "It'll all work out eventually, Mickey. For now, just come live with me. I know it's not ideal, but you have to get out of that building. And who knows? Maybe a change of scenery is the shift you need for everything else to start falling into place."

"We can't, Tess. You have one bedroom. Where would we all sleep?"

She pursed her lips and moved from side to side. "Yeah, I guess it's not a sustainable, long-term solution. How about we look for a place together and split the rent? I'm flexible and I'm pretty sure we'd be able to find a great place that will be big enough for us all."

"I don't want you to have to move just because I can't get my shit together." But I was getting desperate. "Give me one more month? If I'm still in the same place by then, we'll move in with you."

Tess stuck her hand out and smiled. "Shake on it."

We did, but it only made my chest feel heavier. Down and out had taken on a whole new meaning for me this week, and with our apartment in the state it was in, the stakes were higher than ever.

The realtor showing us the final place grinned and handed over her card when we were done. "This one won't be available long. Call me as soon as you've made your decision."

I nodded and took the card even though I already had her info. As we left the building, I slid the card into my pocket and wondered if a miracle would happen that would allow me to call her.

No, that job offer from Logan had been my miracle—and it hadn't been a miracle at all. It'd been Jude.

The mere thought of his name made my heart ache even more than it already was. This last week without him had been the longest of my life. I

missed him something terrible and I had a feeling that it wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

As much I had been the one to end things, I couldn't just turn off my feelings for him. They were true and they were deep, and they were still very much there. I'd given a lot of thought to what he'd done this week, and I'd listened to Tess's advice to look deep into my heart.

The problem was that he'd made me feel like a fool too many times now. I knew that it had always come from a good place and he was only trying to help us. I even understood why he wanted to help. It had to be really hard to watch someone struggle financially when you had enough money to make all their problems go away, but the fact of the matter was I'd asked him to stay out of it.

He'd ignored the request I'd made, and in doing so, he'd rendered my choice not to ask him for help null and void. I refused to have choices taken away from me—no matter how hard it had to be for him.

I'd felt powerless too many times in my life. Helpless. With my hands tied and no other options. I couldn't willingly go through that again, and I didn't want to be powerless or helpless for the rest of my life.

I really just didn't quite know how not to be, because right now, I was completely powerless. I couldn't afford a safe, healthy home for my son. I couldn't find a job. I couldn't make money appear out of thin air.

"How about I take Henry out for dinner?" Tess suggested when we got to her car, yanking me out of my thoughts. "It'd give the two of us some time together and you can have a bit of a break."

I nodded gratefully, hugging them goodbye before I just started walking. Block after block, I just kept going, not heading anywhere or even really seeing where I was. I just didn't know what to do anymore.

After my dad had gotten sick, I'd had my first real taste of helplessness. If he'd needed a kidney or a part of my liver, I'd happily have given it, but it'd been his heart. Those were indivisible, which meant I hadn't had any choice but to sit there and watch him get worse.

When he'd died, I'd been utterly powerless to stop it from happening. Then I hadn't had a choice about where I was going to go.

Michelle and David had taken me back to our house. They'd watched me pack the few things that had belonged to me, and she'd sold the rest of his possessions—to cover a fraction of the cost of my expenses, she'd said at the time.

I kept walking, thinking back to when I used to think that things would get better. Once I graduated. Once I got a job. A place of my own. Once David and I got married. Once the baby was born. Once. Once. Once.

All those onces, and it hadn't gotten any better. I knew I was simply feeling sorry for myself right now, but I also couldn't stop it. I was so damn down in the dumps, so heartbroken, so worried, and so completely powerless to change any of it that I was just giving in.

Eventually, I stopped walking and headed back to my car. Then I started driving. Just driving around without any destination in mind as I wondered if this was really all I was destined for. If being such a sad lump of struggles was really what I had been born to do.

Sometimes, it didn't feel that way—most days, it didn't feel that way—but today, I just didn't know anymore.

When I looked again, it seemed I'd ended up in Manhattan. Near Central Park, of all places. On a whim, I parked my car and walked to the park, sitting on a bench in the shade as I stared up at the window of the penthouse apartment that belonged to Jude.

The empty penthouse apartment.

At least, it'd been that way the last time I'd been there, but I supposed he might've found a tenant by now. I shook my head at myself. It didn't matter. I hadn't accepted the offer when he'd made it and now that ship had sailed.

While I'd often found myself wondering if I should've taken him up on it for Henry's sake, I just couldn't quite bring myself to believe it would've been the right thing to do. I needed to figure all this out on my own. I had to.

If we'd ended up relying on Jude, where would we have been now? Would he have let us stay in that penthouse, or would he have told us to get out? I didn't know. Part of me really believed he'd have let us stay, but I'd also really believed I'd gotten that job by myself and that hadn't been true either.

I blew out a deep breath, lifting my gaze away from the windows and to the sky. Big, puffy white clouds rolled overhead, pops of bright against the hazy blue sky. I wished I could just sit here and watch them until sunset, but I'd have to pick up Henry from Tess at some point.

As I took a deep breath and wondered if it was worth heading home to try to get some cleaning done before I went to fetch him, I pulled my phone out of my purse and checked it. There was no notifications waiting for me, though.

No email or phone call about a job.

Shit. I had to find a way to make ends meet, and I'd applied to every job I could find that I was qualified for—and a few I wasn't. Nobody had called me back. It was tough out there and I wasn't the only person who was currently unemployed.

Maybe I do need to ask for help.

Tess kept telling me I was too proud, and maybe it was true. Maybe it would turn out better this time. Maybe it wouldn't be the same as it had been with Michelle and David, when they'd insisted on helping and had obliterated my trust as well as my ability to rely on anyone.

Tears pressed at the backs of my eyes.

My dad had this one shirt. It was nothing special, just a black-and-gray checked button-down that had been worn soft from all the times it'd been washed. He'd loved that shirt. *I'd* loved that shirt.

It was the one thing of his that I'd wanted to keep. Just one thing, but she'd told me I was never going to wear it and had shoved it into the other boxes filled with our things, telling me she didn't have space for mementos in her house if she was already going to be taking in another person.

In the end, I'd sneaked one small photo album into my purse and that had been it. The only thing I had left that used to belong to him.

That was why I didn't want help. Because if that was what help looked like, I didn't need it. Powerless, pregnant, and destitute eventually, and without even my dad's shirt to comfort me at night.

I took a deep breath, forcing the pain that ricocheted through me with the memories out of my mind. I didn't have the luxury of feeling it right now. I needed help, and I was going to have to ask for it whether I wanted to or not.

As I scrolled through the contacts on my phone, I stopped at the one person I never thought I'd have to talk to again.

Kent.

I hit my thumb down on his name, making the call before I lost the nerve to do it. He answered only a few rings later, already gloating even though I hadn't said anything yet. "McKinley Tulley. This is a surprise. I knew you would call sooner or later, but I wasn't expecting it to happen quite so soon. Are you ready to beg for your job back?"

I gritted my teeth, swallowing my pride as I nodded. "Yes, I am. I'm so sorry, Kent. I made a terrible mistake. Is there any chance you'd consider taking me back?"

“You’re damn lucky,” he said. “Your replacement has the memory of a goldfish. You’re hired, honey. I’ll onboard you on Monday at lunch. Meet me for cocktails.”

He hung up on me then, but I didn’t mind. I’d achieved what I’d set out to achieve when I’d made the call. Now I just had to get my head wrapped around going back to work for Kent and to show up for lunch on Monday.

CHAPTER 45



JUDE

Flynn, Maverick, Logan, and I strolled out onto the lush green golf course, bags slung over our shoulders and caps on. We had all blown off work to spend the day golfing and I, for one, was damn happy to be here.

After a quick cup of coffee, we were about to tee off and I was hoping that this would be the change and the distraction I needed to stop obsessing about McKinley. It'd now been a whole week and I still hadn't heard from her.

She still wasn't taking my calls or reading my texts, and I'd given up trying a few days ago. Clearly, she wasn't ready to speak to me or to hear me out, and I didn't blame her. She didn't owe me anything, least of all the chance to explain why I'd ignored her wishes.

Logan elbowed me in the ribs. "Are you going to hit that ball or are you just going to stand there staring at it all day?"

I refocused on the little white ball waiting for me to take a swing, only lifting my gaze away from it for a moment to wink at him. "I was only staring at it so I could try to decide how best to rub it in your face when I win."

Maverick laughed. "Oooh. Shots fired. I hate to break it to you though, man. You're not going to win if you don't take the damn swing."

"That's fair." I pulled back, lined it up, and took the swing, watching as the ball flew into the air and got some nice distance before it plummeted back to earth. "There. You all happy now?"

Flynn lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he stared at the spot where the ball had landed. "I've been getting better air than that since I was twelve. Step aside and let me show you how it's done."

Logan smirked at him. "I should warn you that I've had a lot more time

lately to play than you guys have. Don't get cocky yet."

"That's only because you're still in your player era while we're building families," Maverick retorted as he wagged his brows at him. "Besides, we don't need that much practice anymore because we're already masters at this game."

"Want to put your money where your mouth is?" Logan teased. "A thousand to a charity of your choice says I walk away with the trophy."

"Make it a thousand per hole and you're on," Flynn agreed.

I frowned as I looked between them. "You guys do realize we don't actually have a trophy to walk away with, right?"

"Fine. Make it a bottle of scotch," Logan said easily. "I'm not fussy as long as it's a good bottle."

"Good is relative," Mav argued playfully. "Pricey doesn't mean good. What is it with you lotto winners and putting a price tag on everything?"

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?" Logan pretended to sigh, wiping droplets of sweat off his brow before he grinned at Maverick. "On the other hand, I only said it had to be good. I didn't put a price tag on it."

"Good for a college kid, it shall be, then." Flynn smirked. "College kids will drink anything, and if it comes in a glass bottle, it's automatically good."

"You know, I didn't drink scotch in college." Logan scratched the side of his jaw, then winked. "Maybe I'm about to find out why. How's the hangover from that stuff?"

"Fatal," Maverick said without any hesitation. "Awful, but you'll enjoy it since you don't have a kid that's going to crawl all over you while your head hurts so much, it feels like it might just implode."

"That's only if you actually win, though," Flynn added. "You have to get past us first."

Maverick lifted his hand for a high five and Flynn gave it to them before they lined up their own shots one by one. The banter continued as we headed back to our cart and I enjoyed it, listening to the back and forth.

Inviting Logan had been a last-minute decision on my part, but I was glad he'd come. He got along well with Maverick and Flynn, and being with the boys was good for me today. *Hell, anything that gets me out of the house and out of my head is good for me right now.*

Occasionally, I joined in with the banter as we made our way around the course, but eventually, Logan realized I wasn't saying as much as the rest of them.

“Still heartbroken, huh?” he asked.

Flynn’s eyes widened as he spun to face me. “Heartbroken? What’s that all about?”

Logan winced as he shot me an apologetic look. “Sorry. I thought they knew.”

“Knew what?” Maverick asked as he selected his next club. “Who is Jude heartbroken over?”

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say Mickey,” Flynn said to him. “You remember her, right? She was one of Ariane’s bridesmaids.”

Mav groaned as he glanced at me. “I said to hook up with one of them. Not to fall in love with her. I had no idea the curse had claimed its next victim.”

I rolled my eyes. “It hasn’t claimed me. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not in a relationship and I’m definitely not getting ready to propose.”

Flynn’s gaze settled on mine. “You told her the truth about Logan?”

I nodded. “It didn’t go well. She ended things and that’s all there is to it.”

“I ended things with Penny once and we’re still together,” Maverick said as he finally pulled another club out of his bag and tested the weight of it in his hand. “Flynn and Ariane almost hit the skids and they’re still together too. It’s a matter of how you deal with the fight.”

“That’s the thing though,” Logan explained helpfully—and by that, I meant not helpfully at all. “There was no fight. She didn’t yell at him or anything. She just chucked him out.”

Maverick grimaced. “I’m sorry, man. That’s not good. Have you tried groveling?”

“I suggested flowers, jewelry, and chocolate,” Logan said. “He doesn’t think that’ll cut it, so I told him to track her down and say all the mushy shit.”

“The latter might work, but the former won’t. Flowers and jewelry don’t make up for lying to her about—”

“I didn’t lie,” I protested loudly. “I simply didn’t tell her at first that I knew him.”

“An omission is still a lie,” Maverick said wisely. “You want my advice? Do what he said. Track her down and say all the mushy shit you feel. It’s either that or let her go at this point.”

“I don’t feel any mushy shit,” I said, but as soon as I did, I realized I was lying again. Judging by the way all three of them were suddenly staring at me like I had testicles growing on my face, they knew it too. “Okay, fine. I do

feel mushy shit, but it's over and that's the end of it. She didn't want my help, and even if I only did it so she'd get out of her own way, she didn't appreciate the fact that I went ahead and helped her anyway. Only, I didn't even really do that. I mentioned to Logan that she was unemployed, is all."

"True." He nodded his agreement slowly. "I offered to take it from there, but you still should've told her. If you had, I wouldn't be out a damn good assistant right now."

"I'm sorry, okay?" I gave him a meaningful look before I shrugged. "Can we stop talking about this now? What's done is done. It's not like I can go back in time and change it, so let's just leave it alone."

A slow grin spread on Logan's face. "Does that mean you're finally cutting her loose? Because if so, I've got a spare invite to this hot new club opening next week. It's in Paris, but I'm chartering that jet again. Welcome back to the player game."

"He doesn't want back into the game," Flynn said suddenly after regarding me for a long beat. "Holy shit. Jude wants out of the game for good. He wants to come over to our *building families* side."

Logan's nose wrinkled. "No, he doesn't. No one in their right mind would want that."

"Can we play golf now?" I asked, stepping forward after Maverick took his swing. "I didn't realize we were coming out here for a therapy session."

"We didn't, but since we're here and you need a therapy session, we're helping," Mav said cheerfully. "All I'm going to say about it is that if you're still thinking about her this long after the wedding, it had to have been more than a fling."

"It *was* more than a fling, but she ended it and that's fine. I need to respect her wishes, which is what I should've done in the first place. She told me to stay out of it and I didn't. I get that. I also didn't really get her the job, but that seems to be beside the point. The point is that I didn't tell her the truth right away and I should've, so she was right to toss me out. All I want now is to make sure she's okay and I can't even do that. I wish I could, but she's not talking to me at all."

The words flew out of my mouth one after the other, and once they were all out there, Flynn reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. "I could ask Ariane to check in on her for you?"

"Thanks. That's a tempting offer, but I won't drag your wife into the middle of this."

Maverick rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s probably a good call. There has to be something you can do if you’re that worried about her, though.”

“Well, that’s the thing. There might be something,” I said slowly. “The condo they’re living in now is a complete dump. Like, it’s so bad that I’m pretty sure it’s not safe for them to live there. I offered her that condo I bought at Central Park, but she refused to let me be her landlord while we were dating. Maybe I can get away with only being her landlord now that we’re not dating anymore. At least that way, I’d know she and Henry are safe.”

“A condo at Central Park?” Maverick widened his eyes at me. “I don’t know much about her, but it doesn’t seem likely to me that she’d be able to afford that after what you guys have said about her so far.”

“Maybe not ordinarily, but I’d charge her pennies. I don’t need the extra income, and when I say her place is a dump, I mean it. There are safety risks as well as health risks involved, and I can’t just stand back and let them stay there when the condo is empty.”

As I said it, I prepared myself to make one last attempt. Memories of that building they were living in haunted me. I’d even had a nightmare about that mold I’d seen on the walls making Henry sick. I knew she didn’t want my help, but I could offer.

As I pulled out my phone, Logan shook his head. “Don’t do it, Jude. Trust me. Don’t do it.”

“You haven’t seen where they’re living right now,” I muttered as I fired off a text to her. “If you had, you’d understand why I’m willing to put myself back in the line of fire over this. I can take her wrath. What I can’t take is the thought of one of them getting hurt or sick while I’ve got a perfectly good condo just sitting there.”

Maverick and Flynn exchanged a look, but I took their silence as an indication that they agreed with me. Even if they didn’t, it was too late. The text was sent. Now I just had to see if she was going to respond to me this time.

ME: I had a rental arranged for the condo that just fell through. Do you want it? No strings attached. No expectations. No weirdness. I just want a good home for you and Henry.

CHAPTER 46



MCKINLEY

Precisely at noon on Monday, I walked into the restaurant Kent had selected for drinks and onboarding. I was pretty sure the onboarding bit was bullshit, though. Nothing would've changed at the office in such a short amount of time when very little had changed in all the years I'd been there.

I was quite sure that he'd just wanted an excuse to take me out, but maybe I was being crazy. Maybe I was just holding the past against him.

Hoping that I was wrong about his motivation for inviting me out instead of simply meeting me at the office, I lifted my chin into the air and smiled as I approached the table he was sitting at. There were already two mojitos on it and he was working his way through his, the straw stuck between his lips as he took a sip before he leaned back in his chair.

As he did, he saw me walking toward him and a wide, smug grin spread on his lips. He looked me up and down slowly, sitting up a little straighter as his lids got a little heavier. *So many little things, and yet, they say so much.*

When I reached the table, I stuck out my hand to shake his. "Kent, thank you so much for agreeing to hire me back."

"Have a seat." He waved at the chair across from him with his free hand while letting the other linger in mine for a few seconds too long. "It's good to see you, Mickey. I'm happy to have you back onboard."

"Happy to be back onboard," I lied, but it was the only way.

It'd been less than a minute since I'd walked into the restaurant, and he was already making me feel uncomfortable again. The way his gaze hovered on my chest when I sat down and his hand had slid much too slowly out of mine.

I was in a bind and he knew it. Again. But he was also helping me out

again. That was something. A very big something actually.

So even it meant I had to put up with being looked at like that by my boss, I could do it. I could do anything as long as it meant Henry and I wouldn't be destitute.

"Let me run you through how things have been working at the office since you left," he said as he pushed my mojito closer to me.

What followed was a rundown of, as I'd thought, the exact processes and procedures I'd followed for almost five years before I'd walked out. Nothing had changed and the onboarding bit really had been bullshit, but I listened patiently, willing to let him have this moment after I'd left the way I had.

Honestly, I'd known I was going to have to let him have a hell of a lot more than just one moment of mansplaining some processes I'd instituted myself to make up for all that. As I listened, I nodded my understanding but didn't interrupt him, and I sipped my drink until a loud, sucking noise told me I had finished the whole thing.

Kent chuckled. "I'll get you a refill before we start talking about my new client."

Thankfully, I hadn't driven today, knowing that he was going to insist on alcoholic cocktails for this meeting. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He signaled to a waiter for another round before he turned back to me. "So, okay. This new client is a big one. One of the biggest I've ever had and he wants to buy properties all the way down the coast."

"That sounds like a wonderful client. Congratulations."

Kent smirked. "He's a big fish to have landed, that's for sure. He took meetings with everyone and their mother, but in the end, he went with the best, which is me."

"Of course."

He leaned forward, sliding his forearms onto the tabletop and looking directly into my eyes. "Obviously, there will be a lot of travel involved for a client like this. My first trip is lined up for next week and you'll be coming with me."

I arched an eyebrow at him, wondering if he'd forgotten who I was. "I can't. I have Henry, remember?"

He waved me off. "Leave him with someone. The kid will be fine. Besides, I don't intend for this to be a child-friendly trip, if you catch my drift."

My blood froze over in my veins at his words and a lump formed in my

throat. *He expects...*

Shit.

Fuck.

I'd come here knowing I was going to have to put up with a lot from him to make up for the way I'd left, but I hadn't, even for a second, thought that he'd expect me to sleep with him. As I stared into his eyes, seeing the sparks of heat in them as he looked back at me after the bomb he'd just dropped, I suddenly realized that was exactly what he expected.

For a second, panic overwhelmed me. I went ice cold and my hands started trembling, my brain flung into a shocked daze. "Mickey, are you alright?"

I was saved from having to answer him when my phone buzzed with a text from Jude. This whole last week, I'd ignored every attempt he'd made to contact me. I just hadn't been able to talk to him yet, but from the part of the text that popped up on screen, I knew I had to read this particular message.

Jude Olson: I had a rental arranged for the condo that just fell through. Do you want it? No strings attached. No expectations. No weirdness. I just want a good home for you and Henry.

I blinked hard at the screen, beyond surprised that he was offering again. *Surprised and torn.*

On the one hand, I didn't want to be a burden. Not to him or to anyone and I knew better than most how much money he could make if he rented that place to a real tenant.

A condo like that with its square footage *and* a view of Central Park would go for *thousands*. But I also knew Jude didn't care about the money.

While finances were a huge deal in my life, it just wasn't like that for him. Not in an obnoxious way. It was just the truth.

Jude had more than enough money and not earning proper rental income from one of his properties wouldn't hurt him in the least. As much as I didn't want to rely on him and as much as all the reasons why I'd previously turned him down still existed, I'd also realized since that I needed to ask for help.

Which was why I'd called Kent in the first place.

A condo like Jude's would be invaluable to Henry. The memories and the life we could build there would be unlike anything I'd be able to offer my son if I didn't accept a little help from a friend. But even if I knew exactly how true that was, I couldn't stop the worries from flooding my brain.

What if it goes sideways? What if my feelings get involved? Can I treat

Jude as just a landlord when I know I've fallen for him?

The answer to that last question was the only one I really knew, and it was that I probably wouldn't be able to treat him as no more than a landlord. While I'd never actually gotten around to telling him this, I absolutely had fallen for him.

Hard.

Hell, as much as I'd been trying all week to forget about him, there wasn't a single minute when he wasn't on my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about him, no matter what I did or the fact that I had so many bigger issues to focus on.

I supposed that was the problem with love. It invaded everything and then, when it was over, it'd already contaminated a person's entire life and there was no way you could just go back and scrub it all clean and forget it'd ever happened.

Whoa, deep breath, Mickey.

But the anger still bubbling inside me didn't subside. It hadn't subsided at all since last Sunday even if, at times, it had given way to sadness. Which was probably the biggest reason to turn him down.

Things would get so messy if I didn't.

Kent snapped his fingers in front of my face to get my attention. "Mickey, are you listening to me? I said I'd get us suites for the trip. Only the best. We could—"

"I want more money," I blurted out without even thinking about it.

Kent's brows swept up and he laughed. "What?"

Fueled by my anger at Jude and the desperation that had forced me to turn back to this man just so I'd be able to put food on the table for my boy, I nodded. "You heard me. I want more money. When I worked for you before, I was too ashamed to tell you the truth about my situation, but here it is. My condo is falling apart and I need to move. My washer has been broken for months and I was going to replace it, but I had to quit my job before I got that far. Henry is growing so fast that he needs new clothes every couple of months and I'm struggling. Always struggling."

I took a deep breath. "The truth is that I bring a lot more value to your office than you've been paying me for. I know I reached out to you, but unless you agree to pay me more, I'm walking. And also, I'm not going on a work trip with you. Not now and not ever."

Kent blinked in surprise, but when he sat up again, those pops of heat had

evaporated from his eyes and his expression was more businesslike than I'd ever seen it when he was looking at me. "Okay. You got it. How much more are we talking about?"

I gave him the figure I had in mind for a salary, and to my complete and utter surprise, he nodded immediately. "I'm willing to agree to that."

"Thank you." I grabbed my purse and finished what was left of my second drink before I shoved the chair back. "In that case, I'll start next Monday. See you then, Mr. Brock."

As I hurried out of the restaurant, a sense of victory and achievement surged through me and I grinned. For the first time in my entire adult life, I'd really stood up for myself. I'd asked Kent for what I wanted and he'd given it to me.

A soft squeal escaped as I let the door swing shut behind me. Finally. I'd finally gotten somewhere all on my own, and it felt so good that I knew it'd been worth waiting for it.

CHAPTER 47



JUDE

Just after I got home from golf, banging knocks rained down on my front door. I frowned, leaving my glass of water on the counter in the kitchen as I started toward the door.

I wasn't expecting anyone and I'd just seen pretty much the only people who ever came here, except for my mother, but if a traveling salesperson was that insistent about getting to see me, then I was pretty curious about what he was selling.

The banging didn't stop as I crossed the living room and dining area, and it only ceased when I jerked open the door, shocked to find McKinley—fist still raised—standing at my door. At a loss for words at finding her on my doorstep after she'd made it crystal clear that she was done with me, I just took her in, wondering what the hell was going on.

Her cheeks were all fiery and there was a glint in her eye I'd never seen before. My frown deepened and my heart catapulted itself to my throat.

“McKinley, are you okay?”

She brushed past me as I asked the question, her body practically thrumming with that same weirdly determined energy that glinted in her eyes. She was wearing a simple pair of jeans and a white cardigan, her hair tied back into a ponytail to keep it out of her face, and black pumps on her feet.

She looked normal. Like McKinley.

But this energy she was radiating wasn't like her at all—and that worried me. *Is this just because of the text? Is she that pissed at me for offering again?*

As she breezed into my house, I shut the door and followed after her, asking again since she hadn't answered me the first time. “Are you okay,

McKinley? Do you need something? Is Henry okay?"

She finally spun around to face me when she reached the living room, pointing for me to take a seat on the sofa with her eyes still blazing. "Henry is fine and so am I. That's not what this is about. Sit down and listen."

"Yeah. Okay. You're in charge here, McKinley." I had no clue what was going on, but if all she needed for me was to sit down and listen, I could do that. I'd probably be a lot better at it than I fared these days when I spoke or tried to do something for her *without* hearing her out before I did.

I sank down on the leather sofa and McKinley glanced at me before she spun again, pacing up and down in front of the bank of windows overlooking the water. It took a few seconds before she slammed to a stop and looked me right in the eyes.

"I have trust issues," she said, and if I hadn't already been shutting up and listening, that sure would've shut me up. Her gaze held mine. "I know I'm stubborn and I know you think I'm too proud and that I'm standing in my own way, and the thing is, I know you're right."

I blinked hard, but I could see she wasn't done yet. The wheels were still turning behind her eyes, and so I kept my mouth shut and waited. "I've been burned before by someone who swore he only wanted to help me, and he ended up making me a single mother before my child was even born."

Moisture filled her eyes, the tears glistening but not falling and her voice cracking but remaining strong. "I have no family left, Jude. My father was the only person who has ever showed me love, besides Henry, and he's long gone."

Her chin dropped and she looked down, staring at the floor for a moment as her hands found her hips. "Dad was as stubborn as I am. He never showed me how to accept help with grace. I have no idea what I'm doing or how to do it. I feel like I'm swimming against the current here, but I want the condo."

Hope surged through me, but I didn't interrupt her just yet. It felt a little bit like she was having a revelation or something right before my very eyes, and I didn't want to break her stride. "I know you can get a lot more money for it than I'll be able to pay, but in exchange, I'll do assistant work for you."

Uh, no. I frowned again, my head canting slightly as I wondered if I should talk yet. Ultimately though, she needed to know I wasn't going to accept her offer before she started laying down terms.

"I don't want anything in exchange, McKinley. Also, offering that sort of

waters down the whole *accepting help with grace* thing. All you need to do is say yes, and if you really want to be nice, you can throw in a thank you but even that isn't really necessary."

She narrowed her eyes at me and I chuckled, holding up my hands. "I don't want to fight with you, McKinley. The condo is yours if you want it. That's all there is to it."

"It's not mine," she argued, her shoulders squaring again as she faced off with me. "I realize that you don't need the money, but that's not what it's about for me. Do you realize that the last time I took someone up on an offer for free accommodation, they tossed me out at the drop of a hat with just a couple of months to go before Henry was born?"

The biggest, brightest lightbulb suddenly went off in my head. I felt my lips forming an "O" and I slumped back against the sofa, my hands dropping with soft thwacks back into my lap.

Mickey's expression softened and she nodded. "Yeah. Oh. What makes this even more difficult for me to accept is that I'd known David and Michelle for years before they kicked me out, and I didn't see it coming at all. I've only known you for a couple of *months*. I know your heart is in the right place, but it's just really difficult for me to trust that it's going to stay there."

Shit, I really didn't like being compared to those two assholes, but I couldn't fault her for doing it. The reality was that they had once offered her a home, and then, when she'd needed them the most, they'd chucked her right out of it.

Obviously, that kind of thing left emotional scars and trauma I couldn't even begin to comprehend. A lot of the pieces of the puzzle that I'd been missing fell into place in my head, and I sighed, closing my eyes as I breathed through the realization.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how I didn't put two and two together. I should have and I apologize for not realizing it earlier," I said sincerely and then I opened my eyes to meet hers. "I'm not them though, McKinley. They're self-absorbed, blinded by their own needs and their pathetic egos. My ego is big enough as it is. I don't need to inflate it by lording anything over others. I don't need people bowing and scraping, or feeling like they owe me anything."

"I know." She started pacing again, staring out at the city before she glanced at me over her shoulder. "I know that you're not them, but this is

really difficult for me. Accepting your offer is the right thing to do. For everyone, but mostly for Henry, and for Tess, who's now insisting that she'll move and find a place with us if I'm still in that apartment in three weeks. I can't allow her to do that."

"So take my offer," I said evenly, not pressuring her but simply laying it out there again. "I won't charge you anything and I don't want rental income from you. I'd rather you use the money to help start your business."

"And then?" she asked quietly. "Let's indulge my fantasies for a moment and imagine that I not only start a business, but that it does well. What happens then? Do you own a stake in it for letting me live for free?"

"No."

"No?" Her brows swept up. "Well, then why bring it up at all?"

"Because I'm still trying to help," I admitted on a long exhale. "Damn it. I don't know how to stop. I'm sorry. It's starting to look like I have a problem."

Her lips curved into a soft smile as she sank down on the sofa across from mine. "Admitting it is the first step, but that being said, it's not really a problem, Jude. You have a big heart and that's a beautiful thing. We just need to figure out how to meet each other halfway. I can't just throw my lot in with yours and hope for the best. The last time I did that..."

"I know. They fucked you over. Hard."

She nodded. "Exactly, but that doesn't mean I can't try again. I'm just going to need you to take it slow. Starting with the condo. Let me at least do some assistant work for you if you don't want me to pay for it."

"I don't really need an assistant," I said. "Everything that comes across my desk is something I need to look at myself. I don't generate any paperwork that I can have anyone else draw up and I don't receive hundreds of emails that I don't personally need to attend to."

She released a slow breath through her nostrils. "Fine. What do you need, then?"

"For you to take me up on my offer," I said. "I'm going to make a nice profit when I sell the condo one day, far in the future, or when I get a new tenant. Either way, for now, I want you to live there at no charge, and frankly, it will feel good to be able to help after what I did. Everything I did. First by pushing you to quit your job with Kent, then acting like it was nothing, and then talking to Logan about you when you explicitly told me to stay out of it."

She lifted her chin.

“Speaking of what you did...” She sighed as she trailed off. “Thank you for looking out for me and Henry. I really do know that your heart was in the right place. I might have overreacted, but it’s just that I can’t allow a man to be my savior. Not again. I don’t need you or anyone else to save me. I need to be able to save myself.”

I paused for a long beat, looking into those soft but determined hazel eyes staring back at me. “I know. I also know you can save yourself. My wanting to help you has never been because I believed any differently. It’s simply been because I can help and I want to. Plus, Logan loved having you work for him. He really did need someone in that position and—”

“Thanks, but I’ve got a new job already. I can’t work without knowing what’s true and what he’s only saying because of my relationship with you.”

My eyebrows rose and I smiled. “You got a new job? Congratulations? Where?”

Her chest rose and fell on a deep breath and she looked me directly in the eyes, her head held high but a flicker of apprehension in her gaze. “I’m back working for Kent.”

My mouth dropped open and disbelief flooded my veins. I’d known she was desperate, but this? *Fuck, no.*

Since we clearly weren’t dating anymore though, I knew I had no right to question her decision and yet... *Over. My. Dead. Freaking. Body.*

CHAPTER 48



MCKINLEY

Okay, seeing the look of shock on his face is kind of satisfying. Instead of jumping to my own defense before he'd even said anything, I let him sit in it for a minute before I explained.

"This is a temporary fix, Jude. Don't look at me like that. I won't let him take advantage of me and I know what he wants. I also know that he's not going to get it and so does he."

Jude's jaw clenched, ticking at the side before he brought his hands to his head and dragged his fingers through his hair, repeating the motion a few times before he screwed his eyes shut. "A temporary fix? Look, I know I don't have any say in this, but come on."

"You're right. You don't and it's already done. I also know that I don't owe you an explanation, but I don't want you worrying about us, which is why I'm willing to give you one."

"Okay," he said slowly, grinding the words out as he swallowed heavily and opened his eyes again. "I won't interrupt."

"Thank you," I said. "As soon as I've got something else lined up, I'll quit. Right now though, I need guaranteed paychecks and Kent gives me that. I also got a raise out of it and I'm going to take advantage of the exposure I have to clients by making cards like I used to. The plan is to give them to clients thanking them for their business and congratulating them on their sale, or purchase, or special event, or whatever."

He blinked hard and then smirked, shaking his head at me as the smirk turned into laughter. "That's actually kind of brilliant."

I grinned, knowing I was being smug and not giving a damn. "I know it is. I also know that working for him isn't ideal, but at least now I know that

he's never going to encourage me to grow or give me any opportunities to really do it, so I'm going to make those opportunities for myself. It's about damn time."

He leaned back on the sofa, relaxing as he looked deep into my eyes. "It looks like all your ducks are lining up. I'm really happy for you, McKinley."

I nodded, smiling as I inhaled through my nose and allowed the frantic energy that had been coursing through me ever since I'd stood up to Kent to leave my body. Feeling kind of mellow in the aftermath, I knew my smile had probably turned dopey, but I didn't really care.

"Thank you," I said. "You had a big role in this, you know? I'm not sure I ever would've made it this far without your encouragement."

"You mean without me pushing you?" he joked playfully, letting the smile linger on his lips for a moment before it faded. "So, uh, I guess I only really have one more question for you."

"Yeah? What's that?"

He held my gaze firmly. "Where do I fit into your line of ducks? Is there a spot for me?"

Although I should've expected a question like that, I'd been so caught up in my victory with Kent, my new plans, and the sense of achievement that I hadn't thought any further. As I stared back at him now though, my heart skipped and butterflies woke up in my stomach.

There was no doubt that I had very real, very deep feelings for this man and I suspected he felt the same way about me. All of the mistakes he'd made had been amplified by my own trauma and reactions, ultimately creating the perfect storm around every one of what otherwise would've been mere hiccups.

I got that and yet, as grateful as I was and as much as I couldn't deny that I was so hopelessly, head over heels for him, I needed him to understand me. If a relationship between us was going to work out, I needed him to respect my boundaries and understand that my actions came from someplace deep inside.

A place I couldn't just eradicate because I knew that he didn't mean to take over or control me. I did know that. I knew it all so damn well and I wanted to try with him because I knew he would never intentionally hurt me or add to my trauma, but still.

"I have a lot baggage," I said point blank. "I *am* trying to unpack some of it and I'm trying to leave parts behind, but it won't happen overnight."

“I know. I don’t expect it to. All I’m asking for is a chance. You just need to tell me where I stand.”

I stared back at him, taking in the sincerity in his eyes and openness of his expression. “You’re perched on the edge between boyfriend and ex-boyfriend.”

Jude considered it for a moment before he gave me a confident grin. “Okay. How can I solidify my position as boyfriend?”

I smiled. “This isn’t a negotiation, but you can start by butting out of my business and letting me handle my own problems. I’m a big girl, Jude. I can deal with my own life and what’s more is that I want to. I need to. If I’m ever going to be able to heal properly, then I need to feel like I’m in control of my own destiny. I’m only really starting to feel that way now, and I’m afraid of having the wind knocked out of my sails again.”

He nodded thoughtfully but didn’t back down. “I hear you and I respect all of that. I’m just not sure I can butt out completely. When the woman I love is carrying a burden, it’s only natural for me to want to lighten the load.”

My heart skipped, restarting at a wild gallop and racing faster than it ever had before. My ears felt slightly blocked all of a sudden as disbelief spread through me like wildfire, but I knew I hadn’t misheard him. I’d just never thought I’d hear that word from him.

“Love?”

Jude scrubbed his palms across his denim-clad thighs, still holding my gaze with his own as he got up and came to sit beside me. Eyes unwavering on mine, he reached for my hand and folded his around it, turning his body so that it was fully facing mine even though we were side by side on the sofa.

“I wouldn’t be fighting this hard for someone I didn’t love, McKinley.”

The words were strong and firm, the expression on his face soft and honest. All of which combined left no doubt in my mind that he was not only certain about the way he felt, but that he also wasn’t lying or trying to play me. He wasn’t simply chasing because I’d run or trying to win a game in which I was playing hard to get.

A slight smile spread on his lips as he inclined his head forward. “I love you, McKinley Tulley. I love you just as you are, stubbornness and all. I love Henry too. He’s like a little light in my life that I didn’t know how much I needed until I got it. I want him, both of you, to have everything you can ever dream of and more, and I won’t apologize for that.”

My heart melted, all my defenses lowering as I stared back into his eyes,

but it turned out he wasn't done yet. "The condo is yours for now and I meant it when I said there were no strings attached. Whether or not we work out as a couple has nothing to do with the fact that it's your home. That will never change, but just so you know, I see my forever with you and Henry and I'll do whatever it takes to get it. So it's yours for now but maybe someday, it will be ours."

Heart beating so fast that I was afraid it might implode, I swept my gaze across his face, taking in every last one of his handsome features. The strong, clean-shaven jaw and the neatly swept back light brown hair, the full curve of his lips, and the soft, barely there lines around his eyes.

The first time I'd seen him, I'd thought he was hot and he was, but he was also so much more than that. He'd proven it to me time and time again, and I'd almost lost him so many times. *No, correction. I didn't almost lose him. I tried to run him off.*

If it hadn't been for the sheer power of his will, he'd have been long gone and I would've been left staring down the barrel of *what-if* for the rest of my life. Right now, though, I found myself sharing his sentiment.

As I looked at him, I definitely felt like I saw my forever.

Henry's forever.

Our happily-ever-after.

"I love you too, Jude." I lifted my hands and caught his face, bringing my head forward until my lips were only an inch away from his. "If you're up for it, I'll figure out how to let you love me your way. Just know that I'm not always going to be graceful about it."

He chuckled and slid his hand up my back and into the strands of loose hair at the nape of my neck. "I'll dial it back as many notches as I can as often as I can so I don't overwhelm you, and I promise to do better at trying to understand why you won't just let me help."

"I can live with that." I entwined my fingers behind his head and pulled him closer to me until his mouth met mine, and then I kissed him like I really believed we would last forever. Because the truth was, in that moment, I did believe it.

I knew we'd have our work cut out for us to make it happen and I also knew that we were probably going to argue about a lot of the same things a bunch more times, but I felt like we'd made major strides already. Every time something like this came up, we learned from it and we understood each other just a little bit better.

We were laying the foundation for a strong relationship, and even though our path hadn't been the easiest, I wouldn't have had it any other way. As I kissed him, crawling into his lap without ever letting my lips break away from his, I knew we were on the right track.

Both of us had been honest and true to ourselves. Neither of us had made any promises we didn't know if we could keep. As long as he kept doing that and keeping the lines of communication as wide open as they had been today, then I truly believed that we would be okay.

And that maybe, Henry and I would get the happiest ever after of them all.

CHAPTER 49



JUDE

With McKinley on my lap, kissing me like she really fucking meant it, my mind raced to catch up. I'd just told this woman that I loved her, and I'd never done that before.

At the same time, the blood was leaving my brain at too rapid a pace for it to really process the fact that I'd not only said it, but that she'd said it back. Honestly, after spending the day with Flynn and Maverick, both of whom had been the last people who'd gone looking for something like this, it shouldn't have come as a shock to me that love was possible.

Any day. Any time. To anyone.

It didn't really care whether you had deep-seated issues like Flynn or a nothing's-gonna-stop-me-now attitude like Maverick. It just came for you, whether you were ready or not.

When I'd woken up this morning, I had *not* thought that it would be coming for me today, and yet now that it was here, I couldn't decide what I wanted more. As much as I knew I needed time to wrap my head around it, my body didn't give a flying fuck.

It was desperate for hers, but it was also more like I needed to get inside her to join with her on some deeper, emotional level. That was what I wanted the most, I realized. I had all the time in the world to wrap my head around the L-word later, but now, I just needed to be with her.

What the hell is going on with me?

I didn't know. *Maybe that's the difference between fucking and making love. Who knows?*

What I did know was that right now, nothing seemed to matter more than this. More than her tongue stroking mine and her chest arching into me as she

rolled her hips against mine.

I also knew that I didn't want this to be a quickie on the couch. I was considering doing it right here anyway, though. Since I didn't know if I could move right now.

Too hard. Need to get inside her too soon.

Once she moaned into my mouth, I scooted to the edge of the seat and wrapped my hands around her thighs, standing up and holding her against me. McKinley squealed and laughed, but I sealed my lips over hers again, effectively swallowing the sounds of her surprise as I carried her to the master bedroom.

The fact was that as much as I wanted to get inside her, this wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to celebrate by getting her naked and taking her hard and fast. Something deep down inside me was driving me toward more. Better.

McKinley wasn't just some woman anymore. She was the woman I *loved*. The woman I wanted to spend the rest of my *life* with.

I was sure that eventually, I'd be happy to just take her on the sofa again, but right now, today, I needed more. A decision I regretted seriously when the trek to my bedroom seemed to take forever.

In reality, I knew it wasn't more than a minute, but it didn't feel that way. Still kissing her as I carried her down the hall, I opened my eyes for a fraction of a second just to check whether the bedroom door was open or closed.

As I did, I caught a glimpse of the door next to mine, and then I realized that soon, that room might become Henry's. They were going to make their home at the condo, and if everything went well, I hoped to move in there with them, but I'd keep this house.

The room that would become his had almost as great of an ocean view as the master, and I was sure he'd love it. *As would all the brothers and sisters who could be taking up the bedrooms all the way down this hall sometime soon.*

The thought shocked me for a moment, but it also just made me needier. More desperate than ever. By the time I tossed her down on the mattress, I was so turned on that I was a little worried that things were going to be over before they'd even started.

Yeah, it's time to take it down a notch, man.

Since I agreed with the voice in my head, I pulled my shirt off over my head but kept my pants on for now, focusing on McKinley instead. She was

lying on her back diagonally across my mattress, early afternoon sun pouring in through the windows and illuminating her in the golden glow.

Her pupils dilated as she stared up at me, her fingers curling lazily as she motioned for me to join her. I shook my head, knowing I needed a minute and choosing to take the time with undressing her.

Moving slowly, I reached for the button on her jeans, undoing it before tugging down the zipper one metal notch at a time. McKinley's breathing grew heavier and her eyes were locked on mine, but she didn't rush me.

Once her fly was undone, I reached for the waistband of her jeans, peeling them down carefully but leaving her panties in place for now. Dropping the heavy denim on the floor, I worked on the cardigan next, lifting it off over her head after she'd done a half sit-up to allow it to pass behind her back and shoulders.

My heart thrummed in my chest, beating way too fast as she lay back on my bed in only a simple white cotton bra and panties. Swallowing hard, I just looked at her for a moment, letting my gaze roam from hers to the elegant curve of her neck down past the swells of her breasts, the creamy, smooth skin of her stomach to where the waistband of her panties lay across her hips.

"Mine," I said suddenly, my voice coming out harsh and savage. The word tripped some kind of switch in me, and the next thing I knew, I was on her, kissing her hard as I shoved her panties down and just about yanked off her bra.

My reminders to myself to slow down did nothing to extinguish the fire once again burning in my soul to get inside her, but McKinley sure didn't mind. Instead, she returned my kisses with the same urgency and reached between us to undo my pants. She got them off in a flash, giving my underwear the same treatment.

As soon as we were both naked, I felt the slippery, wet heat of her on my shaft. I lost whatever tiny measure of control I'd had left, leaving the warmth of her body only long enough to grab a condom and put it on. McKinley watched me through heavily lidded eyes, opening her arms as soon as I was done and wrapping them around my neck again.

I trembled on top of her as I positioned myself at her entrance, looking into her eyes as I slowly pushed into her. She moaned, her brow furrowing as she lifted her forehead to press it against mine. It killed me to keep moving slowly, but I did it anyway, needing both of us to feel every bit of sensation as I gave myself to her.

Physically, yes, but it felt like so much more than that. My previous thoughts about joining flitted across my mind again, and I didn't dismiss them, honestly feeling like that was what was happening. I was fusing myself to her in a way I'd never done before, and it felt fucking incredible.

"Jude," McKinley whispered, her eyes still locked on mine. "I love you."

"I love you too," I gritted out, then started moving, thrusting into her fast and withdrawing slowly, hating to leave but happy every time I got to go back again. My speed increased eventually, my hips acting of their own accord as she started tightening around me.

She slammed her hips into mine when I felt her inner muscles constrict, and then she came, moaning my name as she screwed her eyes shut and shook underneath me. The sight and sensation of her coming apart did me in, and I shuddered as the orgasm exploded through me in a fireball of pure pleasure.

Breathing raggedly in the aftermath, I collapsed on top of her, just holding her long after I'd slid out and lay down beside her. As my heartrate returned to normal, I propped myself up on one elbow and pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

"That was amazing."

She smiled lazily, those green-hazel eyes half closed as she absently stroked my back. "It was incredible, but we've always been good at this part."

"We have, but it's still getting better every time," I murmured as I took in the sleepy expression on her flushed face. "You want to have a nap? I could do with one."

She giggled and shook her head. "I can't. I need to pick Henry up from daycare in a little while. If I fall asleep now, I'll probably only wake up tomorrow morning."

"Fair enough." Sliding my hand down the length of her abdomen, I tickled her ribs and a shout of laughter tore out of her as she rolled away from me. "Tell me about Kent's stupid face when you demanded more money, then. Also, I'm going to need to know what you meant when you said he knows he's not going to get what he wants from you."

"I made it very clear to him," she said confidently. "As for his face, I wish I'd gotten a picture. He couldn't believe I was standing up for myself, but he agreed easily enough."

"Which probably means he's known all along that he was paying you too

little.” Anger and aggravation rattled through me, but I pushed them down, knowing she didn’t need me to fight her battles. Although I absolutely planned to stand by her side through whatever came her way.

Breathing through it, I grinned and tweaked her nipple. “I guess I’ll just have to come visit you at work and let him know that you’re mine.”

“I’m yours?” She arched a teasing brow at me. “That’s funny. I thought I belonged to myself.”

I winked. “Fine. Belong to yourself, but I’m yours.”

Vulnerability flashed in her eyes when they met mine again. “You are?”

I didn’t waste any time, not hesitating or pausing at all before I nodded. “I am, McKinley. Body, heart, and soul.”

She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes lingering on mine for a moment before a slow smile spread on her lips. “In that case, I guess it’s okay that I feel like I’ve been yours for a long time.”

My heart went apeshit in my chest, but instead of saying anything about it, I bent over and kissed her again. Then I kept doing it until we reluctantly got out of bed and got dressed. I expected McKinley to tell me that she was leaving to pick Henry up by herself, but she didn’t.

“Are you coming?” she asked once we were both ready. “Henry’s going to be ecstatic about this, you know. He’s missed you so much.”

“I missed him too,” I admitted, grabbing my sunglasses, wallet, and keys, and then sliding my hand into hers. “I’m definitely coming.”

As we climbed into my car, it occurred to me that I’d been wealthy for a very long time, but with McKinley’s hand in mine and her son part of my life, I felt truly rich for the first time ever—and that was a feeling I planned on holding on to for as long as they would let me.

EPILOGUE



MCKINLEY

One Year Later

Jude was dancing on the makeshift dance floor with Henry on his shoulders. He would've looked ridiculous if Maverick hadn't been right there with him, dancing with his daughter, Brea, on his own shoulders.

Karson Neidum chased after a pair of twins, his wife Payton relaxing on one of the sofas that had been pushed to the side to make space for the dance floor. Her belly was so swollen with their third child that she'd told me earlier she was intent on moving as little as possible today in order to avoid their daughter making a surprise appearance at the wedding.

Wedding.

Just thinking that word stopped me in my tracks and I glanced down, once again marveling at the fact that my abdomen was encased in fine white lace and the skirt of the dress flared out like the tail of a mermaid. *Fitting for a ceremony that had happened right on the beach.*

I felt like a princess, all the way down to having married my real life Prince not-always Charming but who I loved more than life itself regardless. A year didn't feel like that long, but Jude and I had both known that we were meant to be together and Henry had practically begged us to just get hitched already. So here we were.

Hitched.

Married on a perfect summer's day right in front of Jude, Flynn, and

Ariane's new beach house, which, as of about three hours ago, was now mine too.

I drew in a deep breath, putting my left hand up ahead of me and smiling at the sight of the thin, golden bands that now hugged the engagement ring between them. It'd been six months since Jude had given me that ring at Christmas, but sometimes, I still wondered when I was going to wake up from the dream.

So far, I hadn't woken up, and in fact, every day was only getting better than the one that had come before it. While a part of me was still scared that something was going to go wrong, I was slowly learning to trust that this was my life now.

That incredibly sexy man who had loosened his tie and rolled up the sleeves of his crisp white button-down was now my husband. My son who was laughing and holding on to Jude's hair was happy, and healthy, and absolutely in love with his stepfather.

This beach house, which was unlike anything I could've imagined in my wildest dreams, was now a place where Flynn, Ariane, their mom and her boyfriend, Beau, Willow, Henry, and I were going to be spending Christmas this year—and probably every year after that.

Today is our wedding day.

I looked around and all the evidence was there, but it was just still difficult for me to believe it was real.

Fairy lights had been strung up against the ceilings and wrapped around the banister of the staircase that led to the upper level of the house. From where I sat in the dining room that had been rearranged to fit all the guests at our intimate wedding, I had a sweeping view of not only the festivities going on inside, but also the gorgeous white sand and the glittering ocean beyond as the sun set.

It was all completely incredible. An absolute dream come true, and yet, Jude had given me this dream just like he'd indulged every other for the last year.

Today was also our one-year anniversary.

Today, exactly one year ago, I'd arrived at his house to talk about the condo and I'd left there that afternoon with the love of my life firmly by my side. Not only for that day, but every one of the days since and each of them to come.

Tears pressed at the backs of my eyes as my gaze kept sweeping around,

just taking this one minute I'd had alone all day to really absorb it all. To take it all in and file it away as memories of the greatest day of my life.

I paused for a moment as I looked at Michelle, sitting with Jude's mom at a table on the expansive patio. The two women were deep in conversation, but since they were laughing, I assumed it was going well.

I'd been of two minds about inviting her, torn between my loyalty to her as Henry's grandmother and my desire to sever my ties with that part of my life forever. In the end, and with Jude's support, I'd decided to extend the invitation.

For Henry's sake, she and I had been trying to make amends over the last few months. After my blowup that day, it'd taken her months to reach out again. When she had, the text had been simple and straightforward.

It'd said that she missed Henry and that she'd appreciate it if I would let her know when would be a suitable time for her to see him. She hadn't demanded or insisted that we go to her house, and when I'd responded, she'd offered to meet us at Central Park.

Since Henry, Jude, and I lived in the condo right there, I'd agreed, and I'd been surprised when I'd found out that she'd known she was coming to us. I hadn't known who had told her where we lived now, but someone obviously had and she'd been willing to make the trip instead of expecting us even to meet her halfway.

She'd bought him an ice cream and had inquired about our lives, which had been almost as much of a shock to me as her apology. She'd finally said sorry about everything she and David had done, she'd taken responsibility, and then she'd asked if I would allow her to keep seeing Henry from time to time.

I'd agreed—of course—on condition that she accepted that David was out of our lives and that he would stay there. Surprisingly, she hadn't made any excuses for him that time. She'd simply apologized again and had said that he was a huge disappointment to her as a father and that she'd thought she'd raised him better. Had hoped he would come around.

After that, she and I had kept in touch. We both made more of an effort these days to accommodate one another and she was a much better grandmother to Henry than she'd ever been before. It was like her eyes had finally opened and she now took a real interest in him, and for that, I would be eternally grateful.

Smiling as I watched Jude's mom laugh at something Michelle had said,

it occurred to me that Henry really had two doting grandmothers in his life now. It turned out that in Jude's family, once you were accepted as one of them, you really were *accepted* as one of them.

Ariane had attested to me about that fact as well, telling me that she felt more at home in their mother's house than she ever had in her own. It was really weird for me to even be thinking this, but we were now one big, happy family and it was amazing.

Still smiling, my gaze finally skipped away from them to land on Logan holding court at the bar. He was Jude's best man and he seemed to be in the process of charming the money right out of the wallets of some of Jude's clients who had also become his friends.

Over the course of the past year, I'd come to know Logan pretty well. At first, it'd been awkward to see him socially but he'd ripped that band-aid right off when he'd realized how uncomfortable I was. He'd sat me down, looked me right in eye, and given it to me straight.

Listen, McKinley, his voice reverberated through my mind now. Things don't need to be weird between us. Yes, I hired you as a favor to Jude but I also fired all four people who had that office before you. I was desperate for someone who could do the job, and when he sang your praises, it was more a matter of it being a favor to me when you accepted.

I'd felt like a bit of a fool when he'd put it like that, but then he'd grinned and told me not to worry about it. He'd also told me that he was kind of happy it'd happened since I would've had trouble being his friend if I was still working for him, and that he had been hoping we could be friends.

From that day onward, I'd started treating him as a friend and it turned out he was a pretty good one. Between him and Jude, they'd made a point of telling everyone they spoke to about my card-making and craft business.

Word of mouth had done its thing, and before I'd known it, I was so busy that I'd had to quit my job with Kent. Neither of us had been sorry when I'd handed in my letter of resignation this time. The difference was that we'd parted on better terms and I'd served out my notice period and trained the girl who had replaced me, leaving her with strict instructions not to let him get away with the same things he'd done to me for so long.

And so, in the space of one short year, I had started and built a thriving business. I'd even made the invitations to our wedding, and just *that* had generated a bunch of new requests from Jude's clients to become mine.

These days, I was making more money than ever and I was contributing

to all our household expenses, as well as keeping up with all my own regular expenses. Jude still wouldn't let me pay a cent toward our condo, but he didn't know that I'd created a separate fund and I was now putting all the money I would've been spending on rent toward saving for a big, family vacation for his birthday.

It would have to wait until at least next year, but I was planning on spoiling us all rotten. A secret smile spread on my lips as I thought about the other thing he didn't know about just yet and the reason why the trip would have to wait until at least next year.

As I sat there taking it all in and thinking about how far we'd come, the emotion I felt threatened to overwhelm me until I heard a shout coming from the yard. I twisted in my seat, my heart hammering until I realized it had been a shout of laughter.

Jude, Flynn, Maverick, and Karson were now out there with all the kids, and Tess was playing with them on the bouncy house, clearly not giving a damn about hopping around in her maid-of-honor dress. I laughed softly to myself, once again admiring my best friend's devil-may-care attitude.

She'd taken her official duties as my maid-of-honor seriously, but now that all of that was over, it was good to see her cutting loose and having fun. Feeling joyful and fulfilled, I turned around again and sat back, wondering how I'd gotten so lucky.

"My beautiful bride," Jude said from behind me, winding his arms around me and pressing his cheek to mine. "How are we doing over here?"

"Great," I said honestly. "I'm just taking a little breather."

"Yeah, I know it's a little overwhelming," he murmured, pulling back so he was speaking into my ear and then giving me a sweet kiss. "I can't wait to take you up to the main suite later and have you all to myself, but we won't be able to sneak away just yet. The sun has barely even set."

I chuckled and leaned back against his strong shoulder. "True, but a moment alone with you and Henry would be wonderful."

"Your wish is my command." He straightened up and came to stand next to me, reaching down to take my hand and pulling me up to stand with him before he winked. "Operation Sneak Out of Our Own Wedding Reception is officially on. Let's go."

He slid his hand into mine and started pulling me toward the door, grabbing Henry's hand just as we reached the steps at the front.

Henry frowned. "I was coming to find you. Someone said it was almost

bath time and to go get Grandma.”

“Grandma can wait,” Jude said mischievously. “Come on, buddy. We’re sneaking out.”

Henry grinned and took his hand, then followed us around the house. When we reached the beach, we kicked off our shoes and ran barefoot on the sand like we had that first time we’d come to the Hamptons.

The sun had dipped low on the horizon by now, and a sky full of stars appeared above as we ran and played. Behind us, the beach house was alive with music and celebration, all lit up and looking like something out of a movie.

When Henry flopped down on the sand, giggling and staring up at the stars starting to shine bright, Jude pulled me close, looping his arms around my waist and resting his forehead against mine. “Did you have a good time today?”

“The best. I know it sounds like a cliché, but I just can’t believe everything was so perfect. That everything *is* so perfect actually. It was amazing. You’re amazing.”

He pressed a soft kiss to the tip of my nose. “So are you, which brings me to my next question.”

“What’s that?”

“How long are you going to make me wait before we give Henry a sibling?” he asked quietly, so Henry couldn’t hear. “Seeing those kids playing together on the playground earlier made me broody as fuck and I’m done trying to deny it.”

I giggled, feeling my chest fill with warmth and happiness as I toyed with the strands of hair at his neck. “I don’t know if you noticed this, but I haven’t had a sip of champagne or any other alcohol all day.”

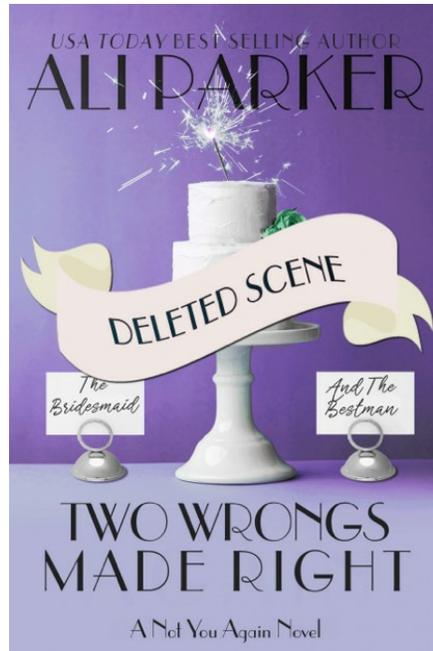
His hazel eyes widened and he pulled his head away from mine to gape at me. “Do you mean...”

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered, my eyes filling with tears as he tightened his hold on me, lifting me clean off my feet as he spun me around in joyful circles on the sand.

Today, exactly one year ago, I’d had a feeling that we were headed in the right direction. That we might have our happily ever after, but right there on our wedding day, with Jude laughing and spinning me around, Henry still giggling on the sand, and the stars and moon smiling down on us from above, I knew that this was it.

This was the real beginning of our happily ever after.

Want to see more of Jude and McKinley? Check out this deleted scene that didn't make the book and just for YOU!! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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What? It was worth it.

Years later she's pissed that we're working



And I love a challenge.
She has her eyes on the deadline.
I have mine on the prize:
Her.

together.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

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Two Wrongs Made Right
A Not You Again Novel #4

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