

The Business
of

Love

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CHAPTER 1

TAYLOR'S DATE WAS LATE. ONLY ten minutes, but enough to be irritating. It didn't bode well.

Taylor tapped her fork against the cream-colored napkin. The restaurant was fancy—deep red color scheme, plush chairs, exposed brick walls, and low, intimate lighting. It was entirely too fancy for her budget, and her little black dress was just a little too snug. That tended to happen after a disastrous break-up.

She hadn't even wanted to go on this rebound date in the first place, not really. It'd only been two months since Brittany, and she was definitely not looking for a relationship. A night out, sure, maybe some enjoyable conversation, although even that didn't seem to be on the cards tonight.

After assuring the waiter that, yes, her date was on her way and it'd be only a few minutes more, she slipped her phone out of her purse and sent a text off to her best friends, Emily and Jade.

How long are you supposed to wait for a date? Is it the fifteen-minute rule like with professors?

Everyone was late every once in a while. Emergencies came up. Maybe the woman had realized her shirt wasn't ironed and had taken an extra few minutes to look presentable. Maybe she was accepting a humanitarian award and had lost track of time.

Or maybe she just didn't want to go on this date. Maybe she'd stalked Taylor's Instagram and found out she was fat and decided,

based on her looks alone, that Taylor wasn't worth it. As much as that would suck, it wouldn't be the first time it had happened.

Her phone buzzed with a response from Emily.

The traffic could be bad. Just give her a little while longer.

Of course she'd say that. Emily and her new boyfriend, Shane, were the ones who'd set this up in the first place. Her date tonight was one of Shane's oldest friends, and that was about all Taylor knew about the woman besides her name: Mackenzie.

When the waiter came around again, Taylor ordered a glass of wine. If she was going to have to wait, she would just have to show herself a good time.

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Mack leaned back in her desk chair and massaged her neck. She probably should've gone home hours ago, but she would never prove herself to her mother, prove that she could be CEO and take over WatsCorp, the family company, if she didn't put in the work. And since that was what she'd been working toward all her adult life, she *would* put in the work.

The buzzing of her phone interrupted her thoughts. She answered her best friend with a quick greeting.

"Where the hell are you?" Danny asked.

"At work."

"After eight o'clock on a Friday night? When you're supposed to be on a date? Remember that?"

Shit. Mack covered her eyes with one hand. "I totally forgot about that."

"I can tell. She's pissed, by the way. Shane wanted me to tell you because I'm meaner than he is."

"She has a right to be pissed," Mack conceded, skating over Danny's last comment and rebuttoning her vest with one hand. "Look. I'm leaving now. I'll be there in—" A glance at her watch, a quick calculation in her head. "—fifteen minutes."

"Better make it ten."

Mack swore as Danny hung up on her. There was almost nothing she hated more than making a poor first impression.

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When her phone display read eight-thirty, Taylor gulped the last of her wine and got up from the table. She couldn't believe she'd waited this long. As a woman with a size eighteen waist, she'd unfortunately had to learn early in her adult life how to demand the respect she deserved. For dates, especially blind dates, being half an hour late was near the top of her list of things they could do to make her feel worthless. And she had worked on her self-confidence too hard and too long to stand for that.

On the sidewalk outside the restaurant, she sent a brief text to Emily and Jade before shrugging on her jacket and setting off. The walk back to the apartment wasn't that long, and the brisk night air would improve her mood.

Not even a block later, Jade called.

"What kind of bullshit is this?" Jade asked, bypassing hellos. "You're a goddamn goddess. Emily says she's not an asshole, but she must be 'cause only an asshole would stand you up."

Despite the frustration of the evening, Taylor had to smile. Her friends were the best, and the normally sweet-tempered Jade cursing in anger on her behalf warmed her. "Yeah, well, maybe she came in, took one look at me, and walked out."

"If that's the case, then we're making Emily break up with Shane because clearly, he has poor taste in friends. It's much more likely she took one look at you and got so intimidated she couldn't face you."

Taylor chuckled. "Yeah, right. Thanks for trying to make me feel better."

"Is it working?"

"A little, yeah."

"You know what'll get her off your mind entirely?" Jade asked, wickedness in her voice.

"What?"

“Dancing! Let’s go find a hottie to distract you from this jerk.”
Taylor grinned. She couldn’t pass *that* up.

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Mack walked into her apartment building feeling like shit. After hitting unexpected construction, she’d arrived at the restaurant at nearly eight forty-five. Taylor hadn’t been there. Then again, Mack hadn’t really expected her to be. She’d hoped though, if only so she could have a chance to apologize.

She passed a hand over her tired eyes as she climbed the steps to the third floor. She’d moved to the South Side of Pittsburgh the previous year when she was looking for something modest and big enough for only herself. With its grimy walls and the faint, lingering odor of stale cigarettes, the studio was certainly modest. She hadn’t gotten around to decorating, not even putting up pictures of her family and friends. She didn’t spend a lot of time here because work was her primary focus. Always had been.

It was easy to blame her forgetfulness on work, but there was the other matter, too. It wasn’t as if she really wanted to jump back into the dating scene. Shane and Danny had coerced her into it. Even if she’d made it to the date, she likely would’ve been terrible company. She always was until she got to know a person.

Didn’t mean she didn’t feel bad about accidentally standing this Taylor person up though, especially since she was friends with Shane’s new girlfriend.

Inside, Mack dropped her bag to the floor and sloughed off her jacket. She filled up a glass with ice water and carried it to the couch, where Danny was lounging with a bottle of beer and clicking through shows on Netflix.

She settled on the edge of the couch. “Why are you always here?”

Danny *did* have her own place. As much as Mack wanted to attribute her friend’s presence to Danny being lonely in that big apartment alone, the more likely answer was that Danny was checking up on her.

“My favorite Thai place is right around the corner.”

Mack studied her. Danny's typical frown seemed even frownier. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"I'm not mad at you. Taylor isn't *my* girlfriend's friend. Shane's the one who will be mad."

"Shane's too nice to be mad at me."

"Yeah, probably." Danny looked back to the TV and continued clicking through the crime show category. "What happened?"

A question with more layers than Mack wanted to think about. If she was going to succeed her mom as CEO, she needed to be on top of things, and most of the time, she was. She was never late to work, meetings, or business affairs. She never forgot those things, either. Her personal life was different. There had to be a reason she'd let herself forget this.

She shrugged. "Maybe I'm just not ready."

"It's been almost a year."

Mack sipped her ice water. It was easy for other people to say that. She'd always been a bit slow to recover emotionally, and she would give herself the time she needed. She couldn't handle another argument tonight, though. Instead, she said, "I'll send flowers."

"Flowers aren't going to do shit."

Mack acknowledged that with a nod. "I know, but maybe she'll like looking at them for a week or two and won't hate me entirely."

After all, Shane was dating one of Taylor's friends. If the relationship lasted—and it would; Shane really liked Emily—they'd for sure cross paths. Mack at the very least didn't want Taylor to think she was a complete asshole.

Danny lifted her beer in a mock-salute. "To not hating you entirely."

Mack chuckled as she clinked her glass against the bottle, but the sliding feeling in her stomach told her that maybe she'd missed out on something big.

CHAPTER 2

Six Months Later

“I’M SORRY, MISS WATSON. I’VE been over the bylaws and contracts multiple times now, and I’m afraid there’s just no wiggle room.” Hector Montero had been the company lawyer for decades and had the shock of white hair to show for it.

Mack stood by the conference room window overlooking the square below, rubbing her forehead. She loved her parents, and she knew they had loved her, too. So, why this? Why not fix it before she was expected to take over the company?

Then again, it wasn’t like any of them had seen the accident coming. Maybe they had meant to and hadn’t gotten around to it. The worst part was, she couldn’t even ask them about it.

Hector sighed heavily. “I know it won’t make much of a difference, but when the company took off, it was your grandmother’s decision to put a clause in place to secure the line of succession.”

If Mack had been in a better mood, she would have snorted. Gran had always made the company seem like a monarchy rather than what it was: a family-owned corporation that had shot to success after the war and hadn’t come back down.

“I believe your mother had intended to change it,” Hector said, “but she—”

“Died before she could,” Mack said glumly. “Can I petition the board? Maybe they can change it.”

“There would need to be a majority, and as the board stands now, I believe most of them would prefer to honor your grandmother’s wishes.”

“Right, because it’s so important that a woman be married before taking over a family company in order to prove she is, indeed, a family woman.”

Hector removed his glasses and set them upon his legal pad, the page covered in his neat cursive. “Sarcasm won’t help, my dear,” he said, but it was gentle.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I just...I just don’t get it.” The clause had probably made sense when it was written back in the fifties or sixties, but times had changed. She wasn’t going to up and get married to a stranger just so she could officially get the title of CEO. She shouldn’t be forced into that, especially since her desire for a relationship—not even a marriage, just a relationship—had fizzled out over a year and a half ago.

“You don’t have to, though,” Hector said.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t always have to understand a problem in order to solve it.” His expression turned sympathetic. “You’re a smart woman, Miss Watson. I trust you can figure this out.”

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Taylor sat on her couch, a book open in her hands, but her eyes kept darting to the laptop on the coffee table in front of her. She *knew* she should be job searching. In fact, there were at least twenty tabs open with potential positions to apply to. But the prospect of writing cover letters made her want to throw up. Not to mention that none of the jobs was what she wanted.

Mostly because she didn’t know what she wanted.

All she knew was she couldn’t stay working as a barista in a bookstore café. She sighed. Emily and Jade would be here soon to pick her up for the party Emily was dragging them to, and when they realized she hadn’t made any progress on applications, they’d exchange one of those private, pitying expressions she loathed.

She was picking up extra shifts at the café, which helped with the rent money—even if it didn't quite help with paying back her school loans—but working those extra shifts left her too exhausted to think. How was she supposed to put her best professional foot forward when the very sight of those application forms employers made you fill out struck dread into her soul?

She'd tried. She really had, but she only had an hour between getting home from work and having to jump in the shower. How many jobs could she really apply to in that time? Better that she read and relax and get in the mindset for a party.

Not that she was going to enjoy this party. After all, it was being thrown by none other than Mack Watson, the woman who'd stood her up all those months ago.

* * *

Mack's brow creased as she fumbled with her cufflinks.

She wasn't a big fan of parties. Her parents had always been the ones to throw these fancy galas and hobnob with important people. She would always put in as short an appearance as was polite before retreating to the library. But she was a Watson, and she'd carry on their legacy even if she preferred hiding behind a desk and spending more time with figures and reports than with actual people.

"Let me help with those," Sophie said from the doorway.

Mack's little sister was all of eleven years old but somehow seemed wiser and more put-together than Mack herself. She easily snapped the cufflinks into place.

"Thanks, kiddo," Mack said with a fond smile. Sophie looked like their mom but acted like their dad, and half the time it made Mack smile and the other half, it made her want to cry.

Now, Sophie was all she had left. She had to protect that, fight for it. Securing Sophie's future meant she had to officially take over the family company, and to do that, she had to get married. She could do that for Sophie, couldn't she?

Her little sister wore a pantsuit with a bold pattern of dinosaurs, the kind of outfit only a preteen could get away with. Mack loved it.

She tugged on Sophie's tie. "You look pretty cute. Did Caitlin take you shopping this week?"

Sophie nodded. "She knows the best stores."

"That she does," Mack agreed. Caitlin, their hipster nanny, had a unique fashion sense and a skill for finding hole-in-the-wall stores that held treasures. "No dress this time?"

"I wanted to look like you."

Mack smoothed down the front of her plain black suit jacket. "Yours is a bit more exciting than mine, though."

"Well," Sophie said, shrugging, "I'm a more exciting person."

Mack laughed out loud. "Maybe you should host this party instead of me, then."

Sophie's face brightened. "Could I?"

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Taylor groaned as she, Emily, and Jade rode the elevator to the top floor. This whole building was so fancy that they couldn't even get to the penthouse suite on their own. The doorman had to set the elevator in motion with his fingerprint. It made Taylor feel as if she were in a sci-fi movie, which was cool, but by the time they were halfway up the building, it was simply a reminder that this wasn't a world she fit in. She was a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of girl who preferred a night on the couch, sipping cheap wine and watching movies she'd seen a dozen times before. She wasn't someone who was excited by this...extravagance.

"Why am I even going to this?" she grumbled. "I hate parties." Especially fancy-ass ones while she was wearing a fifteen-dollar dress from the thrift store.

"Because I asked you nicely and you love me," Emily said matter-of-factly.

"You did not, in fact, ask nicely," Jade said. "You literally texted us the date and time and wrote, 'We're going to a fancy party, bitches!'"

"Written with love, though," Emily said.

“Whatever,” Taylor grumbled. Maybe she could put in an appearance and be out and in PJs eating ice cream on her couch within an hour.

“You’re just mad because the party’s being thrown by Mack, the object of your weirdly intense and unreasonable hatred,” Emily said, bumping Taylor’s shoulder with her own as they exited the elevator.

Taylor bristled, as she always did at the mention of the name Mackenzie. “It’s not hatred.” And it wasn’t unreasonable. “She stood me up. I’m entitled to dislike her.”

“Sure,” Jade said, “but not *this* intensely. This intensity is on par with dating her for a year and then finding out she’s cheating on you. What it’s *not* on par with is her forgetting about a blind date.”

As they entered the apartment proper, Taylor glared around at the crowd. “I thought you two were on my side.”

Jade pulled her into a side hug. “We are. We love you. And that’s why we’re telling you to let it go. It was a while ago, and she made an honest mistake. It wasn’t a personal affront.”

“Not to mention,” Emily said, leading the way into the apartment, “she’s one of Shane’s best friends, and it would be really great if we could all just get along.”

A young guy in a suit stood in the foyer taking coats and handing out tickets in return.

Taylor shrugged out of her pea coat. “We don’t *not* get along.” They’d hung out in groups a handful of times, and everything had been *fine*. Excessively, unexcitingly fine.

“Right, but you also don’t talk,” Jade said. “You barely even look at each other.”

Emily put her hands on Taylor’s shoulders. “I don’t need you two to be BFFs. I just need you to try a tiny bit harder not to be a jackass.”

“I’m not a jackass,” Taylor protested. So she could be a little petty. She’d figured that out in kindergarten, when she didn’t get invited to Amanda’s birthday pool party and asked her mom to throw her own pool party on the same day.

Emily raised an eyebrow while Jade squinted, an ‘are you sure?’ look on her face.

“Fine,” Taylor said, shifting uncomfortably on her high heels. “I will try to be nicer.”

Yes, the incident was six months in the past, but it still stung, especially because Mackenzie was not only successful but gorgeous, and that was just plain unfair. Still, no matter how many times her friends assured her Mack’s mistake had nothing to do with being ridiculously out of Taylor’s league, well, she had a hard time believing them.

“That’s all I ask,” Emily said with a smile. She grabbed each of their hands and tugged them farther into the monstrous apartment. “Now, let’s get drinks, shall we?”

Taylor nearly stopped in her tracks when they walked into the main area of the apartment. The sheer opulence was ridiculous. The ceilings were positively cavernous. Wasn’t that just a waste of space? Didn’t all the conversations just go up there and make the room even noisier? Obviously, Taylor didn’t hang around in ritzy places enough.

The far wall was entirely made up of windows looking out at the city, and beyond that, a balcony, although the doors were closed against the March chill. The hardwood floor gleamed beneath the beat-up heels she’d had since freshman year of college. And even with tons of bodies and a plethora of furniture in varying shades of white, the room felt spacious. It also felt not very lived in. What a shame.

The semi-open floor plan meant the living room blended right into the dining room. Beyond that, a doorway seemed to lead into a kitchen with marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances. Taylor shuddered. The silverware probably cost more than she made in a month. Oh, man. She’d have to touch as little as possible. Her bank account would never survive if she spilled wine on a rug or got a fingerprint on the coffee table.

Someone poked her in the shoulder blade, and when she turned around, not only were Emily and Jade there, but Mackenzie, too. She wore a plain black suit, perfectly tailored to her tall, slender frame. Her deliciously curly hair was pulled back away from her face and cascaded down her back. She clutched a full glass of champagne in her long fingers.

“Oh, hi,” Taylor managed to say. She hated being caught off-guard, but she forewent glaring at her friends. She had promised to be nice.

“Hello, Taylor,” Mackenzie said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for...inviting me.”

Mackenzie nodded, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. Had she not wanted to invite Taylor?

There went that stab of hurt again, and Taylor swallowed it up with anger.

The truth that she had a hard time acknowledging was that that night with Mackenzie had been the last straw in a string of bad dating interactions. This was all just a knee-jerk, not Mackenzie's fault at all. So why was she finding it so hard to separate her pain from this person in front of her?

“We were just telling Mack how much we like the place,” Emily said.

“Yeah,” Taylor said. “It's, um, it's big.” *No, no, be nice, damn it.* It was like her brain totally shut down around this woman.

“Well, it was my parents'. It's not really to my taste, but I haven't gotten around to redecorating yet.”

That was curious. What was Mackenzie's style? Except for tonight and the occasional magazine spread, Taylor had only ever seen her in jeans and plain sweaters, and if she wasn't that adventurous in fashion, she probably liked simplicity in her décor, too.

“How will you redecorate, Miss CEO?” Jade asked playfully.

“Actually,” Mackenzie said, “I haven't even had time to give it any thought.”

“What about your last place? What was that like?” Emily asked.

Taylor eyed her friends. Either they were really good at small talk, or they were friendlier with Mackenzie than she'd ever noticed. Weird.

Mackenzie shrugged. “Pretty plain. Never got around to decorating that, either.”

A shadow passed over her face, so brief that a second later, Taylor wasn't even sure she'd seen it at all.

“Lots of white there, too, huh?” Jade said.

“And off-white. That’s how it came.”

“Let’s see.” Jade made a show of looking around the room. “You could go for a rustic theme. That’s always fun. Pretend you’re in the woods in the middle of the city. Taylor, what do you think? What kind of decorations should Mack go for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a clock.” The words were out before Taylor could stop them.

She clapped a hand over her mouth and froze. They all froze. Sure, she wasn’t Mackenzie’s biggest fan, but she’d promised to be nice. She should be able to do that—for Emily’s sake if not her own.

And, God, Mackenzie’s parents had died less than three months ago. What the hell was wrong with her?

She opened her mouth to apologize, but Mackenzie cut her off.

“Maybe even two of them,” Mackenzie said gently, a half-smile on her face. Her gaze slid over Taylor’s shoulder. “If you’ll excuse me, I have more guests to greet. Enjoy the evening.”

As soon as she was out of earshot, Emily turned on Taylor and smacked her in the shoulder. “You promised to be nice!”

“I know!” Taylor said in a vehement whisper. “I just... It’s like I can’t help myself. She makes me crazy.”

“Crazy like you want to kill her or crazy like you want to kiss her?” Jade asked, brown eyes sparkling with mischief. “Because honestly, I can never tell.”

Taylor groaned. Mackenzie was so cold and aloof that kissing her would probably be like kissing a marble statue. No, thanks. “Grow up, you two. Two people can dislike each other without any underlying meaning.”

Jade’s indecipherable “hmm” was somehow worse than any coherent comment.

“Hey, there’s Shane,” Emily said, lighting up as she looked across the room.

“Go.” Taylor gently pushed her toward him. “I’ll say hi later. I need to go drink that interaction away.”

Jade followed Emily while Taylor dragged herself over to the crowded bar. Once she got a glass a wine, she squeezed out of the crush and went in search of a less-crowded space. So many people,

and the only ones she knew were Emily, Jade, and Shane. Well, Danny, too, but Danny was intimidating as hell and didn't really like her.

Then there was Mackenzie. That rounded out the number of people she knew at this massive party. She thought of Mackenzie with a little pang that spoke of embarrassment and misplaced anger. She was being an ass toward her, and she knew it, but damn it, every time she looked at her, the rejection was fresh and potent all over again. Surely that feeling would fade soon.

Right?

While sipping her wine, she meandered across the room and ended up near a fancy staircase tucked into the corner at the apartment's far end. No traffic, so it was obviously off limits. But *off limits* off limits? Or just that guests venturing into the living space was frowned upon? Either way, it seemed quiet up there on the second floor, and no one was paying her any attention.

With another sip of wine, she started up the steps. The second floor was just as beautiful and ornate as the first but with a homier touch. There were family photos on the walls—Mackenzie at her college graduation, flanked by her parents; Mackenzie and her little sister, Sophie; their parents at a formal event; the whole family in front of a Christmas tree. Taylor pursed her lips. She'd never met Mr. and Mrs. Watson, but Shane and even Danny sang their praises often. It was hard to lose a parent, let alone two, at any age, and Taylor couldn't imagine how it had affected Sophie. She probably missed them fiercely.

Taylor poked her head into the first doorway. The room was spacious and low-lit. Bookshelves lined every wall, filled to the brim. A giant desk sat at the far end in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, their drapes closed against the night. To the right was an empty fireplace, and in front of that sat a marble coffee table, a brown leather couch, and matching armchairs. A little pretentious, but it looked comfortable.

She'd just be a few minutes. Five, maybe. No, ten. But that was it. Then it was back downstairs with an apology for Mackenzie.

She had to do better, had to be a better friend and a better person. Feeling behind in life didn't entitle her to be rude.

The books were arranged first by category then by author name. There were even little placards that announced the genres. A lot of non-fiction—politics, biographies, and the like—and a generous helping of kids' books, but there was a surprising amount of fiction, too, everything from sci-fi to romance. How many belonged to Mackenzie, and how many were from her parents' collection?

The corner of the room featured another spiral staircase. She took it and emerged into an alcove. It was bare of furnishings and just a corner, really. At the edge of it was a railing where she could look down upon the library. The wide window would provide natural sunlight in the day, and there was a window seat to take advantage of the view. This would make an excellent reading nook, but it looked like even Mackenzie's parents hadn't quite known what to do with the space.

Just as she was going to make her way back down the steps, footsteps sounded as someone came into the library.

Taylor froze.

Shit.

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Mack swiftly turned away when she caught sight of Danny walking toward her from across the room. She snagged a glass of champagne off a tray as she passed a waiter and veered off toward the stairs, heading for the library. Maybe there, she'd be able to get some peace. Nobody really dared to come upstairs at these parties. These parties that she hated for a much different reason than she had when her parents were alive. Then, she'd hated the simpering and the politics of it all. Now, they just made her miss her parents even more than normal.

Because they weren't here, and because now she was the one who had to deal with the fawning and the veiled requests for favors. Had any of these people really been friends? It was hard to distinguish who actually cared about her parents and who had only cared for their wealth and influence. She could manage a company. She had

confidence in that. But she'd never come to terms with this aspect of being in charge.

That was why she'd made sure to invite Danny and Shane, her only two friends. There was no question about their intentions. Of course, she was currently on the run from Danny, but that was only because she couldn't handle her teasing tonight. Shane was as gentle as Danny was prickly, but he was also partly responsible for Taylor's presence.

Taylor had looked... Well, Taylor had looked spectacular, as she always did, no matter what she wore. And Danny knew Mack thought that, and Danny made fun of her, and Mack just couldn't take it. Not at this moment. At this moment, she needed quiet.

She needed the library.

Once there, she closed the door behind her and leaned blissfully against it as the sounds of the party were instantly muted. The room was a comfort. A little opulent for her tastes, a little too mobster-from-the-forties, but it was nice. It smelled like her dad, like his whiskey and cigars. That was something she never wanted to forget.

Her respite was short-lived. As she strode toward the desk, Danny came into the room behind her.

"Thought I'd find you in here," she said.

"Go away," Mack said.

"No. If you're going to hide from your guests, then I'm going to punish you by making you talk to me. Something's been bugging you. More than usual. And I'm your best friend, so don't even attempt to deny it."

Mack sighed. She'd meant to tell Danny. She'd just planned to do it this weekend after she recovered from tonight. Even if Danny was blunt and acerbic at times, she would be on Mack's side.

So, Mack leaned against her desk and said, "Turns out when the business took off, my grandmother had a clause written into the bylaws that stipulates all CEOs must fulfill three requirements before they are given full rein of the company."

Danny's eyes narrowed. "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

Mack hesitated.

“Mack?”

“Because you won’t like it.”

“Okay, now I really need to know. Spit it out.”

Mack held up her thumb. “The first is that I work my way up in the company.”

“Which you’ve done.”

She held up her pointer finger. “The second is that I have a college degree.”

“Done.” When Danny saw Mack was hesitating again, she asked, “What’s the third?”

“The third is that I’m married.”

Danny froze in surprise for a split second before busting out in a laugh. “Are you shitting me?”

Mack flushed, heat rushing to her cheeks. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. I’m not marriage material.”

“No, it’s not that.” Danny straightened and pretended to wipe a stray tear from her eye. “It’s just... Who does that anymore? What does being married have to do with running a company?”

“I don’t know,” Mack said, shrugging. “The lawyer said Gran was concerned that whoever got full control of the company needed to know how to balance their personal and professional lives. Said something about human connection and empathy being necessary qualities for a CEO.”

“Huh. Makes sense in a strange way, even if the outcome’s retro.” Danny sobered. “So, how are you going to get a woman to marry you? You haven’t exactly been dating around.”

No, not exactly. Mack silently thanked her friend for not bringing up what had driven her from the dating world in the first place.

“I have no idea,” she said, deflating. But she had to try. She had a lot to offer. Well, not personally. She was boring and a workaholic and more concerned about spending time with Sophie than going on dates. But she was connected. She...had money. God, she couldn’t even come up with her own good points. It was a wonder any woman could ever be attracted to her.

Guess that explained a lot about her last relationship.

She shoved her hands in the pockets of her trousers and took a deep breath. It could take years for her to find someone she liked and trusted enough to marry, and years were something she didn't have. She was interim CEO for a year, so until next January. She couldn't risk the board wresting the company away from her ten months from now because then what would happen to Sophie? Not to mention what would happen to the company. Mack saw the way the world was moving. Companies couldn't keep chasing profit at the expense of their employees, the public, or the planet. She wanted to be the one who led WatsCorp into the future. And she wanted to make her parents proud, wanted to live up to the example they had set and the expectations they had harbored.

She turned her mind back to the problem at hand. Maybe her hypothetical wife didn't have to be attracted to her, though. Maybe it didn't need to be about love at all.

"What? What's that look in your eye?" Danny prodded.

"I may have the beginnings of a plan."

"Tell me."

"So demanding."

Danny kicked her—gently—in the shin. "Shut up and tell me so I can determine if it's a good plan or if I have to talk you out of something really stupid."

Mack pursed her lips. Danny was the one always bending rules and getting into scrapes. Not Mack. "Oh, it's high up there on the scale of stupid."

Danny made grabby motions. "Let's have it."

Mack met her friend's gaze. She wanted to see her unfiltered reaction. "I hire someone to be my wife for a year or two."

A creak, a loud one, came from the corner staircase followed by a soft, "Shit."

Oh, no. Sophie.

Mack scrubbed her face. Explaining to her little sister that *no, I don't really think I'll ever fall in love, but yes, of course that's still an option for you* was going to be rough. The whole *do as I say, not as I do* thing. It would be a fine balance between admitting her own

vulnerabilities and not scaring Sophie away from the prospect of finding love when she was older.

Mack peered up at the alcove. "Come on down, Soph."

Another few seconds, and then...

Taylor emerged from the shadows at the bottom of the spiral steps.

Shit, indeed. Of course it had to be the woman who could hold a grudge like no other, the woman who already thought the worst of her. If the situation were any different, Mack would admire her perseverance.

"What are you doing here?" Danny demanded, much too forceful for speaking to one of Mack's guests in Mack's house.

"Danny," she warned in a soft voice.

Taylor's cheeks reddened, and her eyes were wide, but other than that, she displayed no outward signs of being ruffled by Danny's rudeness. "Looking for the bathroom?"

"Sure you were," Danny growled. She crossed her arms and jerked her chin toward the couch. "Take a seat."

She was apparently trying for 'bad cop' and, by the look on Taylor's face, succeeding.

"Uh..."

"Danny," Mack chastised again.

She slipped her hands into her pockets and studied Taylor, who actually sat on the edge of the cushion, hands folded expectantly. At her nervous expression, Mack softened. God, what must Taylor think of her? The thought caused her stomach to roil.

Danny glared. "Should we kill her? I think we should kill her."

Mack rolled her eyes. To Taylor, she said, "Don't listen to her. She's an ass."

"Oh." Taylor's eyes were still wide, though, nervous. "Why am I sitting down, then? I mean, if you're not going to kill me?"

"We could have her sign an NDA," Danny said.

Mack leaned against her desk. "Danny, get out of here."

Danny huffed but pushed off the desk and left. At the door, she turned to send a last warning glare at Mack.

Once she was gone, Mack said, “Don’t mind her. She’s a bit protective.” She stood up straight. “Please, find your friends again and enjoy the party. The only thing I ask is that you don’t spread this around.”

“No, of course. I won’t say a word,” Taylor said earnestly.

Mack believed her. Taylor might not hold her in high regard, but she wouldn’t go around deliberately embarrassing her. At least, Mack didn’t *think* she would. “It’s imperative that this marriage, whenever it takes place and whomever it’s with, appears real to as many people as possible. If the board were to find out...” She trailed off with a shrug, hoping Taylor could infer her meaning. If Taylor cared.

But the look on her face was anything but readable.

Instead of trying—and failing—to decipher it, Mack led Taylor to the library door. “I’ll walk you down,” she said. “I should get back to the party anyway. My parents were so much better at this. I keep forgetting...”

Seemed she had a habit of not finishing her thoughts around Taylor.

“If your family company’s important to you,” Taylor said slowly, almost as though she were unsure, and in Mack’s experience, Taylor was anything but unsure, “and it’s easy to see it is, then you of all people can figure out a solution.”

Surprised, Mack paused at the top of the stairs. Was Taylor feeling okay? They’d barely made it through any conversation without her claws coming out, so this was...odd. But in a not unpleasant way, and Mack wasn’t about to sneer at a peace offering.

“Thank you,” she said.

Nodding, Taylor moved toward the top step, but then she stopped and faced Mack again. “Actually, I, uh, I wanted to come find you anyway.”

“Oh?” Mack licked her dry lips.

“Yeah.” Taylor took a deep breath. “I wanted to apologize. I don’t know why I say the things I do sometimes, and that was totally un-called for. So, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was actually pretty funny.”

“Oh. Good,” Taylor said, looking down at her shoes. “So... forgiven?”

“Of course. And I hope you can forgive me for our non-date?”

Surprisingly, Taylor nodded, a shy smile gracing her face. “It’s all in the past.”

Mack’s heart warmed, and her shoulders straightened. She hadn’t realized how much of a weight she’d been carrying from that night. *All in the past* meant they could have a future, even if that future was just two women existing in the same friend circle.

“For what it’s worth,” Taylor said, “and it’s probably not worth much, but I think you could make whoever you marry very happy.”

Oh. Mack struggled for a response, but Taylor was already descending the staircase. As she followed, Mack tried not to let her gaze rest on the pale curve of Taylor’s neck or drift down to the ample swell of her hips. She tried not to notice how good Taylor looked in the curve-hugging black dress. She tried not to let the sweet scents of vanilla and peaches drift into her nostrils, into her lungs, into her consciousness. She tried to ignore the gentle wakening inside her chest of a feeling long dormant, a feeling she’d assumed she’d never experience again.

She tried to do all these things, and she failed—miserably.

CHAPTER 3

TUESDAY NIGHTS WERE THERAPY NIGHTS. Tonight, Mack sat in the waiting room answering work e-mails on her phone while Sophie talked to her therapist. Every other week, Mack had her own session with her own therapist, and then once a month, they attended a session together. It was a lot to carve out of her schedule, but it was absolutely necessary. If she could do one thing right, let it be raising Sophie.

At ten till six, Sophie returned to the lobby. Judging from her red eyes and cheeks and the tissue balled in her fist, she'd been crying.

Shoving her phone in her jacket pocket, Mack stood. "Hey, kid," she said quietly. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," Sophie answered in a small voice, dragging her feet to stand beside Mack.

Dr. Billings walked in after her. She held her hand out to Mack. "Mackenzie, how are you?"

"Good," Mack answered. "And Sophie's doing all right?"

"Progress isn't really something that can be quantified." Dr. Billings smiled at Sophie. "And I know it probably doesn't feel like it, Sophie, but you're doing as well as you can be, okay?"

Sophie nodded unconvincingly.

"Just remember what we talked about, and I'll see you next week."

Sophie nodded again.

"Thanks, Doc," Mack said.

As soon as the doctor turned away, Sophie beelined out of the office and into the hallway. With a sigh, Mack followed, catching

up with her at the elevator. Sophie had already jabbed the ‘down’ button.

Mack cleared her throat. The phone in her pocket weighed her down with e-mails that needed to be sent and decisions that needed to be made. But Sophie clearly wasn’t okay.

Given their age difference, Mack actually didn’t know her sister that well. She’d always thought they’d have time to get to know each other once Sophie was grown up. Instead, she’d just missed out on some great years. She couldn’t take those years back, but she could start fresh now.

“Do you like bowling?” Mack asked. It was the first thing that popped into her head.

A confused expression flashed over Sophie’s face at the non sequitur. “Uh, yeah?”

“You wanna go?” Mack hadn’t been bowling since high school, but it was like riding a bike, right? Muscle memory? Couldn’t be that hard.

The elevator arrived, and they stepped in.

Sophie pressed the button for the garage. “Don’t you have work?”

Mack shrugged. “I can finish it tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Okay, maybe I’ll finish it after you go to sleep tonight,” Mack confessed with a chuckle. “What do you say? We can wear silly shoes and eat fried food. I think they have milkshakes.”

Sophie bit her lip as if she wasn’t quite ready to believe it. “It’s a school night.”

“We’ll be home by nine. Promise. What do you say?”

Sophie needed less than two seconds to think about it. “I’m in! But you better watch out.”

“Why?”

“Cause I’m gonna kick your butt!”

* * *

For six months, Mackenzie Watson had taken up a lot of real estate in Taylor’s brain. Never for this particular reason, though. Never because Taylor actually felt sorry for her, and especially never

because that feeling was causing Taylor to contemplate agreeing to a scheme that was absolutely *bananas*. Yet here she was, contemplating it.

She had meant what she said at the party about Mackenzie being gorgeous and intelligent. Not that money was everything, but with it, Mackenzie made for a very good prospect. If she were a little more approachable, if she posted on social media a bit more, put herself out there, she'd have women lining up around the block to have a chance with her.

So, what was the problem? She "didn't date"? What kind of excuse was that? Come to think of it, Taylor couldn't call to mind Mackenzie ever being in a relationship. Not that she'd ever paid much attention before Emily and Shane began dating, but the business darling was high-profile enough that she'd heard of her.

But if Mackenzie's not dating was a lifestyle choice, why not just *start* dating? Find someone she got along with pretty well and give it a go? Happiness in marriage was a crapshoot anyway. Taylor, for one, believed that as long as both parties entered the union with reasonable expectations, a girl could be happy with a great number of candidates. Trying to find a soulmate among seven billion people was a useless exercise.

"Are you even listening?" Emily asked.

Taylor's head snapped up. "What?"

Emily frowned at her over the rack of suit jackets she was riffling through. Along with Jade, they were vintage-clothes shopping, a shared hobby they liked to do at least once a month. Taylor was less into it than her friends, but only because it was sometimes difficult to find items in her size. She could generally find a cool shirt or two in the men's section, though. In fact, her collection of obscure vintage tees and loud Hawaiian shirts was growing too big for her dresser drawers.

"Shane wants to know if it's okay if we move game night to Mack's place. Her sister's nanny needs the night off, and she can't find a babysitter on short notice, so Sophie will be there, too."

Clearing her throat, Taylor focused on a terrifyingly pink sweater. "Mackenzie doesn't usually come to game night."

“I think Shane wants to involve her more, especially after...”

“Well, it’s not my call, so I’m not sure why you’re asking.”

From over by the purses, Jade said, “She wants to know if you can hold your tongue this time and be nice.”

Taylor twisted her mouth. Okay, she deserved that. But things were different now. How was she supposed to explain that she had overheard a not-to-be-spread-around conversation that made her look like a creeper for being somewhere she shouldn’t have been at the party? Beyond that, how was she supposed to explain that she was beginning to be very, very confused about her view of the woman in question?

She couldn’t, so she settled for saying, “We’re making progress. I even apologized like a big girl.”

“Good,” Emily said. “Prove it tomorrow night.”

* * *

“Why not just hire an escort?” Danny suggested as they ran along the riverfront trail.

Mack glanced around to make sure no one was nearby. As it was just past dawn, the trail was sparsely populated. “No disrespect to the profession,” she said, “but if that got out, the consequences would be horrendous.”

“Well, if the board finds out about you hiring a woman—which is basically the same thing, by the way—they aren’t going to like it no matter what. May as well go all-out.”

“Yeah, but in their minds, an escort would be worse than a non-escort. I might be able to crawl back from the latter, but not from the former.”

“That’s dumb.”

“I know.”

They ran around a bend in the trail.

Then Danny asked, “So, what are you going to do? *I’m* not going to marry you.”

Mack shot her an offended look. “Don’t act like it’d be such a chore.” She dragged a breath into her lungs. Man, she’d been skimping on exercise since taking over caring for Sophie. She’d have to

find a way to fit everything in again. “Besides,” she said, panting, “it’s not like I’m going to do it at all.”

The truth was she didn’t have a lot of friends, not close ones she trusted, anyway. How else could she ever make a scheme like that work?

“Then what’s the plan?” Danny asked. “You’re not going to go back to *her*, are you?” Her gaze flicked toward Mack.

Mack picked up her pace. The burn in her lungs and in her legs helped force her mind away from painful memories of the aftermath of happiness. She couldn’t risk that again—opening herself up, trusting in another person like that, only to be laughed at, have her vulnerabilities thrown back at her. She *wouldn’t* risk that again.

Danny caught up to her and grabbed her by the elbow. “Mackenzie Watson. Look at me.”

Mack stopped, facing the river, and ran her hands over her sweaty hair.

Danny stepped in front of her. “I know we can be assholes to each other, but I love you. You know that, right?”

Of course she did. They’d been through everything from all-night study sessions to saying good-bye to loved ones together. She nodded.

“And you trust me, right?”

Another nod.

Danny took her by the shoulders. “Then we’ll figure this out. We’ll get you your company, and you can do your whole visionary genius thing, and Soph will be able to do anything she wants with her life, and we’ll keep teaching her to be generous and kind, just like your folks did. Okay?”

Tears pricked at Mack’s eyes. For all her bluster, Danny could be awfully sentimental. She nodded again.

“If you believe it, say it.”

“Okay,” Mack said, her voice ragged from the exercise and the unshed tears.

“You deserve happiness.”

“I deserve happiness,” Mack repeated.

Smiling, Danny shoved her shoulder. “Good. Now, pick up your feet. Last one to the fountain buys breakfast.” And she took off.

Feeling lighter than she had all week, Mack followed.

* * *

Mack grumbled as her little sister tugged her arm, but she refused to budge from her comfy leather armchair.

“Come on,” Sophie said.

Leading a company, even as an interim CEO, and taking care of an eleven-year-old consumed Mack’s life so much that when she got a chance to relax and read a decently written murder mystery, she took it. What didn’t relax her was participating in game night.

“Five more minutes,” she groaned.

“Considering I set up all the snacks and people are going to be here any minute,” Sophie said, “no!”

Her sister was big for eleven, tall and strong, and she was fearsome when she wanted her own way. A family trait.

Mack slipped a bookmark into the paperback and stood. “I’m coming. Happy now?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“You look like you just woke up. I laid an outfit on your bed. Go put it on.”

Mack looked down at her T-shirt and sweats. “What’s wrong with this? It’s just game night.”

Sophie’s only response was to roll her eyes, sigh, and leave the library.

Amused and exasperated, Mack traipsed down the hall to her bedroom. Sophie actually had laid out clothes for her—skinny jeans, a maroon button-down, and a belt. Simple, but tasteful. She couldn’t exactly argue with that, but she wasn’t sure who she was supposed to look nice for. Shane and Danny had seen her in sweatpants many times.

The doorbell rang as she was buttoning up her shirt. The muted sounds of greetings and laughter floated up from the first floor. Her fingers fumbled on a button. She took a deep, steadying breath.

Tonight would be fine. Social situations weren't always her favorite, but there were lots of elements in her favor. Sophie was pretty good at drawing attention and engaging guests. And Mack knew everyone coming—liked them, even.

The only one she was unsure about was Taylor. She seemed trustworthy, and so far, there'd been no exposé on any gossip blogs. But, as evidenced in their every interaction, Taylor had a sore spot for Mack that Mack couldn't seem to smooth over. She mostly left her alone because if Taylor wanted to talk to her, she would. Tonight, though, would be their first time seeing each other since Taylor had overheard the sensitive conversation. Would she use it to make fun of Mack, needle her in front of her friends?

"Mack!" Shane called. "Party's starting!"

She sighed and smoothed non-existent wrinkles from her shirt. Yeah, this would be fine.

* * *

Taylor followed her friends into the Watsons' living room. It was still massive, and the lack of a crowd made it seem even emptier. But there was one change. On a side table near the couch was a little statue of a raven perched on top of a skull that was sitting next to a stack of Edgar Allen Poe books. How odd. It definitely hadn't been there a week ago, and that made Taylor smile. But it also made her cringe in embarrassment at the memory of insulting her host over the room's lack of personality. If her mother knew, she would have a conniption. She'd raised Taylor better than that.

"May I offer you a refreshment?" Sophie asked.

Taylor couldn't help but be amused at the fact that Mackenzie's little sister had gotten all the extrovert genes in the family. She followed Sophie to a table against the wall, where bottles of wine, liquor, and mixers were lined up.

"We also have beer in the fridge," Sophie said. "And water, of course."

"I'll have the Riesling, please."

"Coming right up." The tip of Sophie's tongue stuck out of her mouth as she concentrated on pouring the wine without spilling it.

“Your sister’s got you doing the labor tonight, huh? I hope she’s increasing your allowance for the week,” Taylor joked.

“No, I wanted to do it,” Sophie said, her brow furrowing even more.

“Oh, yeah?”

“She’s busy and stressed out pretty much all the time. I wanted her to have fun tonight.” Sophie said it so simply, like at eleven years old, she was already accustomed to looking out for her big sister in social situations.

Before Taylor could formulate an intelligent reply, Mackenzie herself appeared in the living room. She greeted Shane with a hug before saying hello to Jade, Emily, and finally Taylor.

“Hi,” Taylor said. “Thanks for having us.”

Mackenzie’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but she nodded. “Can I get you a drink?”

Taylor held up her wine. “Your sister beat you to it, actually. But thanks.”

Two thank-yous in five seconds? Who was she now? They had officially entered the Twilight Zone. She shrugged off Jade’s confused stare. This was going to be an interesting night.

Once Danny blew in a few minutes later and the pizza had been ordered, they settled on a cooperative board game where players tried to figure out who had murdered their host by communicating with their ghost. Taylor didn’t always like playing new games with new people, but the storyline was intriguing, and it was good they started with a cooperative game. She wasn’t looking forward to when they inevitably had to choose teams—but she definitely wanted Sophie on hers.

* * *

The thing about being introverted and neurodivergent was that Mack couldn’t always predict what would drain her and what wouldn’t. A month, even a week, ago, she would’ve expected tonight to be a bad night. After a week of eleven- and twelve-hour days, she usually didn’t have the emotional energy to interact with people she didn’t know all that well. Then again, she’d known Emily, Jade, and

Taylor for six months now. Maybe she was finally getting comfortable with them. That was good. Shane would be happy, especially since he was pretty serious about Emily.

Just because Mack was relatively comfortable, though, didn't mean she was any good at charades. They were in three teams, with Jade acting as a floater. Since she and Sophie weren't allowed to be on the same team because Danny had insisted they thought too much alike and it would be an unfair advantage, she was teamed up with Taylor.

The timer was running, and Taylor was giving the clues. Mack was good at a lot of things. This wasn't one of them. Especially when it looked like Taylor was...holding something in her hands and then tossing it into the air?

Mack waved one hand around helplessly. "Uh, a spaceship?"

Taylor stopped miming. "Seriously? A spaceship? That's what you got from that?" But she seemed more disbelieving than angry.

"No talking!" Emily shouted.

Giggling, Jade simply looked between the two of them.

Okay, now Taylor was definitely miming boxing. But what did throwing things in the air and boxing have to do with each other? Mack wracked her brain. They'd all written down words on slips of paper and then thrown the papers into a bowl. In the first round, the clue-givers were allowed to say as much as they wanted minus the words written on the slip in order to get their teammates to guess the clue. In the second, the clue-givers could say only one word. Now, in the third round, they couldn't use words at all, just gestures.

The good part was the answer had to be one they'd had in a previous round. The bad part was that Mack was woefully unversed in pop culture, and this seemed like no answer they'd already encountered.

At a loss, she threw out some words. "Boxing! Spaceships! Flying! I don't know how those two things relate!"

"Pass!" Taylor set down the card, picked up the next, and immediately started gesturing.

Again, Mack was at a loss. She ran her hand through her hair to give herself a moment to think.

“Time!” Shane said as the sand in the minute-glass ran out.

Taylor hung her head. When she lifted it, she said, “You didn’t even guess on that one.”

“I was thinking,” Mack said as her face heated up. “What was the one before that?”

Taylor sank into the couch. “*On the Waterfront.*”

“I’ve never even seen that.”

“You know, Marlon Brando? He’s an ex-boxer who raises pigeons and falls in love with Eva Marie Saint?”

Mack repeated the gesture Taylor had used when trying to get her to guess that movie. “What was the... What was that, then?”

“Releasing pigeons into the air!”

“Well, that might have been helpful if I had even seen it.”

Taylor rolled her eyes, and then she was giggling. “Oh, my God. We’re so bad at this.”

Mack sneaked a glance over. She’d expected Taylor to be upset, but instead, mirth crinkled her eyes.

Mack let herself smile. “Yeah. Yeah, we are.”

* * *

When they paused for a break between games, Taylor watched Mackenzie walk up the corner stairs for a fresh bottle of wine.

She had done a lot of thinking over the past week. *A lot.* And even though she hadn’t reached a conclusion, with Mackenzie disappearing up the staircase, it was now or never, right? This was the poorest decision she’d ever made—or ever would make—but she couldn’t shake the idea out of her head. It was the readiest solution to her problem that she could find, and she had to take the chance.

So, she followed Mackenzie and found her in the library, sifting through her wine and liquor cabinet. Mackenzie looked up when she entered, and her eyes...softened? Just slightly, crinkling at the corners before she returned to her task.

Oh, God, now that they were alone, she had no clue how to open the conversation. Did she just come out and say it? Would that be weird? That would be weird. She needed to busy her hands with something, but she also didn’t want to touch anything in here.

The wine bottle opened with a *pop*.

“Do you want a glass of wine?” Mackenzie asked.

“Oh. No, thanks.” Taylor leaned against the sofa and studied the other woman. She was quiet, a little stiff, which Taylor had always taken as haughtiness. But after observing her closely this evening, she wasn’t sure. What if it was shyness? “So, you...want to get married?”

Mackenzie paused while pouring a glass of wine, her gaze flicking up to Taylor, before she resumed and nodded.

“Why?”

Far from being offended, Mackenzie set down the wine and pursed her lips as if she was thinking about her answer. “It seems like the most efficient way.”

“To take control of your family’s company?”

Mackenzie nodded again. With a sigh, she opened a top cabinet, pulled out a bottle of scotch, poured herself a glass, and sipped. “Scotch?”

This time, Taylor found herself nodding. Might as well, because this whole situation was already unreal. The liquor burned her throat and eyes, and when she cleared them, Mackenzie was regarding her with a small smile.

“I’m not a tyrant or megalomaniac or anything,” Mackenzie said as she leaned her butt on the counter and braced her arms beside her. Her sleeves were rolled up, showing off taut forearms. “At least, I don’t think I am. But this company was my mom’s and my grandma’s before her. I grew up knowing I’d take it over, although I didn’t expect it to be this soon, and I want to make sure my sister’s future is secure, too. I can’t do that if I’m not CEO. And I can’t... Well, I’m afraid anyone else would be too shortsighted and turn WatsCorp into something it was never meant to be.”

“What’s that?”

“Corporate.”

Taylor narrowed her eyes. She leaned in a bit and whispered conspiratorially, “But it’s a corporation.”

Mackenzie chuckled. “Thank you for letting me know,” she whispered back.

Taylor crossed her arms. What the hell was it about Mackenzie that drove her crazy? It was as if her presence—that confident posture, the way she was always put-together and elegant even when she dressed casually, the scent of cloves and leather that she carried with her—sent Taylor into a tailspin. She was heading straight for the ground, straight for a crash, and she couldn't even bring herself to care.

Pheromones. Or something like that. Damn them. Mackenzie was *frustrating*; she wasn't *attractive*.

Taylor took another sip of scotch. It tasted moderately better this time, but she still couldn't keep the grimace off her lips.

Mackenzie smirked. "It's not for everyone. Do you prefer gin? Rum? I could—"

"What about me?"

Mackenzie froze in the middle of pointing at the liquor cabinet and squinting to examine the contents. She gazed back at Taylor. "Not gin or rum, then?"

"No, that's not what I'm talking about." Taylor twisted her lips.

"What *are* you talking about?"

"What about marrying me?"

Mackenzie laughed, an honest-to-goodness laugh that erupted from her chest, not the soft little chuckle thing she normally did. If Taylor weren't so offended by being laughed at, she'd be shocked Mackenzie could show that much emotion.

She slammed the scotch glass onto the coffee table and rocketed onto her feet and toward the door. She didn't need this. Nope. Not at all.

"Taylor, wait!"

Taylor kept going, embarrassment burning hot on her face.

"I only laughed because, well, you kind of hate me," Mackenzie said.

Taylor spun. "What? I don't hate you. You..." Taylor's head spun, too. Why would Mackenzie even care what Taylor thought of her?

"At least you seemed to until last week," Mackenzie amended. "And I realized, since then, I never actually explained."

Or did Taylor never let her? Either way, it was finally time to clear the air. “Okay.”

“The truth is I wasn’t ready to date, and on the heels of...” Mackenzie said before pausing. “Well, it wasn’t a conscious rejection, but I think I subconsciously forced myself to forget, it that makes sense.”

It did. Didn’t make it suck less, but it made sense.

“So, I can see why you hate me, and I don’t blame you.”

“I don’t,” Taylor protested, but her voice was weak even to her own ears.

“Dislike, then.”

“I don’t,” Taylor said again. Not anymore.

“Every time we’re in the same room, you say exactly two words to me—hello and good-bye. You barely look me in the eye. You skip outings if I’m going to be there and there won’t be enough other people there to act as a buffer.” Mackenzie ticked off the points on her fingers. “Shall I go on?”

Taylor managed not to roll her eyes, but she couldn’t keep the mockery from her voice. “No, you shall not.” She huffed. “I disliked you, yes. Emphasis on the past tense. But I think you can see it’s easy to jump from getting stood up by a rich, gorgeous, intelligent woman to thinking it’s because that rich, gorgeous, intelligent woman looks down on you for being a broke history major working in a coffee shop.”

Mackenzie’s expression softened. Even her shoulders fell. Her voice was gentle when she said, “It’s also a bookstore.”

Taylor’s lips twitched as she fought a smile.

“I’m very sorry my thoughtless actions made you feel like that.”

It was as though a vise around Taylor’s chest lifted. Even after their talk last week, she’d never consciously processed her anger. It made sense that this was what she needed—an in-person, face-to-face, honest-to-earth apology. “Okay,” she said.

“Okay?”

“Yes, thank you for apologizing.” She forced a deep breath into her lungs. Then she exhaled, slowly, shakily. Why was she suddenly ten times as nervous?

Mackenzie smiled a little. “Okay.” She gestured to the sofa. “Will you sit for a minute? I’ll pour you a glass of something. What do you like?”

Taylor sat on one end of the couch. “Maybe something with vodka? If you’ve got it?”

“Coming right up.” Mackenzie crossed to the liquor cabinet, where she poured herself another scotch. She grabbed a second lowball glass, retrieved a pint of orange juice from the mini fridge below, and mixed it with vodka. Then, both glasses in hand, she returned and handed over the screwdriver.

When she walked around the coffee table to sit in an armchair, Taylor found herself missing the light smell of cloves that accompanied her.

Mackenzie settled in the chair and sipped her scotch. She was quiet, regarding Taylor with that weird calm she always radiated. Her brown eyes seemed to glow in the low light. “Are you serious?” she asked. “About agreeing to this very absurd plan of mine?”

Taylor took a sip of her drink, just the right amount of sweetness and bite. What the hell *was* she doing? Agreeing to marry a woman she’d barely liked just a few days ago was the height of irrationality, no matter how much she could turn the situation to her advantage.

“You’re in a bind,” she said, “and ladies have to stick together, right?”

“I think that generally means to come to your defense on the internet when a man decides your opinion is less valid than his, but I take your point.”

“And who else is going to do it? Danny?” Taylor laughed.

Mackenzie laughed, too. “Yeah, I don’t think anyone would buy that.”

“And you can’t marry Shane because—”

“I’m a lesbian.”

“Right. I was going to say because he’s dating Emily, but yeah, both of those.”

Mackenzie’s eyes sparkled. “You think I don’t have any other friends?”

“No, of course not.” Taylor chewed at the corner of her lip. “But like Danny said, this isn’t something you want to spread around. It’s not like you can put an ad online because you’re, well, you. I don’t know how gossipy the business world is, but I do know the media would eat that up.”

Mackenzie nodded in agreement.

“And I’m here and available to help,” Taylor said, “and I want to help, so...”

“You don’t have to offer because you think it’ll make up for not wanting to be friends right away.” Mackenzie chuckled through her nose. “It’s a little out of proportion, I’d say.”

Smiling, half in embarrassment and half in amusement, Taylor looked down and tucked her hair behind her ear. “No, it’s not that. At least...not all that.”

Mackenzie sipped her scotch again. Her expression was interested but otherwise unreadable.

Taylor smiled, thinking of possibilities, of the root of the matter. “You already know I’m far from perfect, so I’m sure you’re wondering what I’d get out of it. Not having to pay rent would take a load off my back. It’d let me pay my loans back faster.”

“I could pay those.”

“What?”

“Your school loans. If you marry me, if you help me regain control of my family’s company, I’ll pay off all your loans. Plus, like you said, if you live here, you won’t be paying rent. And I’ll give you a lump sum when we get married and one when it’s all over. It probably wouldn’t have to be more than a year. You can use it for a down payment on a house or a business or something.”

Taylor stared. How did Mackenzie know she needed help buying a house? She *pfted* at herself in her head. She was a twenty-something in this economy. Of course she needed more savings for that. Mackenzie seemed to have thought this through, too. “You’d do all that for me? Just for a year of me pretending to be your wife?”

Surprisingly, Mackenzie’s shrug was unsure. “You’d be giving up a year or more of your life and helping me hold on to my family

legacy. Taylor, if you did that for me, I'd set you up for life. But if you're serious—"

"I am."

"Then we should talk details."

"Hit me with them." Taylor relaxed against the cushions and sipped the screwdriver.

"Well, for starters, you wouldn't be able to date anyone else, not even if you're discreet about it. The board has to believe this marriage, so you'd have to appear to be quite in love with me."

"That's fine." And it was. She hadn't really dated since Brittany eight months ago. On and off, sure. A date or two here and there. But no one ever excited her enough for a second date.

A furrow appeared in Mackenzie's brow. Taylor had always thought it meant she was upset, but maybe it just meant she was thinking.

"But what about you?" Taylor asked.

"What about me?"

"Aren't you going to have a hard time not dating?" She was fishing, sure, but if they were going to get married, let her fish a little.

"Oh, I don't date," Mackenzie said.

Okay... That was all she was going to get on that front, then.

"What about PDA?" Mackenzie asked. "Nothing major, but we'd have to hold hands and maybe kiss on the cheek. Maybe on the lips for a photo every once in a while, but nothing too drastic."

"Yeah, that's fine." And it was. Taylor had kissed lots of women. It wouldn't be an issue, especially if they were just talking about pecks.

Mackenzie went quiet again. She had a tendency to do that. It was something Taylor would have to get used to. Finally, she said, "I have one other condition."

Taylor cocked her head, listening.

"If we do this, I want us to be friends. This scheme might take a year away from your life, maybe more. I don't want either of us to be miserable during it."

Taylor nibbled at the corner of her lip. Once she'd acknowledged her grudge had little foundation to stand on, she'd also realized it

was skewing her vision of Mackenzie. It was amazing what one silly game night could do. If Mackenzie wasn't arrogant and elitist as she'd thought, and if Taylor were more open, then she really could see them becoming friends. Maybe not besties, but still.

"I think we can do that," she said.

"Good." Mackenzie crossed the space to hold out her hand.

Taylor stood and shook it.

"What are you guys doing up there? Banging out all your sexual tension?" Danny called from the bottom of the steps.

Mackenzie rolled her eyes in the long-suffering way only people who were friends with Danny ever displayed. "Better go put out the fire."

Taylor, drink still clutched in her fingers for strength, said, "Are we... Are we going to tell them?"

At the door, Mackenzie paused. "Do you want to?"

If they didn't, no one would understand why they were doing this. Except maybe Danny. "Yeah, I do."

"Okay, but I don't think it should leave this apartment."

"Right. If the board catches wind of it, this would all come crashing down. I won't tell anyone but the people downstairs."

"Yeah." Mackenzie's shoulders fell. "And you're... You're sure? You're giving up a lot of your life. This is a big decision, and there won't be any turning back once we make it. Maybe you should take time to think about it."

Taylor sipped her screwdriver. Maybe she was giving up a lot, but she was gaining more, right? She wouldn't have to wake up anymore wondering whether she budgeted enough for food this week so she could eat more than ninety-seven-cent noodles. This giant burden of student loans that had seemed so Sisyphean would be lifted. She'd be able to walk into her mom's house for Sunday dinner and be proud of her life, instead of feeling as if she was a disappointment. And yeah, maybe there was no real difference between taking her mom's money and taking Mack's... Except in the choice. And this money, in a way, she'd be earning.

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm sure. I mean, you don't want to get married tomorrow, do you?"

“I don’t think that would be very convincing.”

“Then we both have some time to really think about it.”

The corner of Mackenzie’s lips quirked upward. “Okay. In that case, can I take you out on a date?”

Taylor spluttered into her glass.

“A fake date,” Mackenzie added. “So we can talk and be seen in public. People have seen us out in the same group. If we’re lucky, they’ll think we’ve been secretly dating for a while and are just deciding to be more public about it. It’ll shore up our stories if and when the board asks for details.”

“Oh. Right. Okay,” said Taylor.

“Does tomorrow work for you?”

“I work until three.”

“I can pick you up afterward?”

“Three it is,” Taylor said. Something unfamiliar, though not entirely unpleasant, filled her. She led the way downstairs.

“Taylor?” Mackenzie asked.

Taylor paused on the steps to look back. “Yeah?”

“Maybe you should start calling me Mack.”

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THE BUSINESS OF LOVE

BY CHARLEY CLARKE

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