

# Better Together



Patty Schramm

# *Better Together*

By  
Patty Schramm

©2015 Writing as Pat Cronin

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# Advance Praise for *Better Together*

“Pat Cronin’s new romance, *Better Together*, stretches the boundaries of love across the Atlantic and back again. Combining the grittiness of *Real Life* with the magic of seeking true love, this book is sure to please.”

~ Lori L. Lake, author of *The Gun Series*, *Eight Dates*, and many other novels and stories

“Pat Cronin has written well-rounded characters a reader can care about in a believable and touching story that is much more than a romance. *Better Together* is also about the love between two friends and how that love endures, even in the darkest of hours.”

~ Chris Paynter, Author, Editor, Lambda Literary Award Finalist - *Survived by Her Longtime Companion*, GCLS Ann Bannon Popular Choice Award Winner

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Many thanks to Chris Paynter for taking the time to read this and give me a cool blurb.

# Dedication

To my wife, Sandra.

*Beter samen, voor altijd en eeuwig. Ik hou van jou.*

# Chapter One

Ringtones can be handy in identifying the person calling. But at one forty-five a.m., Mackenzie Bradenton decided the theme to *Cops!* annoyed her. She slapped the cell phone as if it was an alarm clock, and it slid off her nightstand and onto the floor. She tossed her covers away and fished for the phone, silencing it.

“Hello?”

“Mac, it’s Pepper. Sorry to call you so late.”

“It’s early now. What’s up?” She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, trying hard to wake up. If Sergeant Troy Pepper of the Cincinnati Police Department called at this hour, it must be important.

“I’m at the scene of a drive-by. Two dead and one injured.”

Mac was fully awake now. As the director of the Over-the-Rhine Community Center, she knew he was to be referring to one of the kids she worked with. “Who?”

“Jace Cano.”

“Oh shit.” Mac got to her feet, grabbed a pair of jeans as she balanced the cell phone between her chin and her shoulder. Her heart hammered against her chest. “How bad is he?”

“Take a deep breath, my friend. He’s on his way to University Hospital. He got shot in the leg, but it didn’t look too bad.”

“Thank God. Where’d it happen?”

“Twelfth and Vine.”

“What was he doing there at this hour?” The area was notorious for drug activity.

Pepper hesitated and it made Mac nervous. “One of the boys said something about a birthday party. They’d left the Below Zero Lounge when the shooting occurred. The lead investigator thinks the two dead were part of the Tu Crew and it’s a retaliation hit. But no one’s sure right now.”

“Jace lives with his aunt. Did you guys get a hold of her?”

“Heh. Yeah. She told me, and I quote, ‘Tell that white bitch he’s her problem now.’ Then she hung up on me.”

“Nice. He just turned eighteen today. I can’t believe she kicked him out so fast. I’ll get over to UC and check in on him. Will he be able to go home today if he’s not admitted?”

“Probably. I’ll let the investigators have your cell number so they can find him if need be. I have a feeling you’ll be getting a roommate for a while.”

“Looks like. Thanks, Pepper.” Mac ended the call, finished dressing, and hurried out the door in record time.

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The drive to University of Cincinnati Hospital lasted all of fifteen minutes. Hardly a soul on the road at this hour, and Mac took advantage of it and drove faster than normal. Jace’s injury scared her. Even worse—he’d been with gangbangers. Once she knew he’d be okay, Mac planned to knock some sense into him.

She’d mentored Jace for a year and continued to work toward getting him into college and out of his deplorable home conditions. Mac always worked hard for her kids, but Jace was special. She connected with him. And to think he’d managed to get involved in a shooting scared her.

Part of her wanted to wrap him in a hug and hide him from the world. The other half was inclined to yell at him until she was out of breath—and then hug him. By the time she got to the hospital Mac was more concerned with making sure Jace was okay. She parked her car and ran through the emergency room entrance.

She identified herself at the nurse’s station and was told where to find Jace. He lay on the bed, one leg of his jeans cut off to reveal a stark white bandage against deep brown skin. Traces of blood stained the other leg of his pants. Mac waited until the nurse finished speaking to him before entering the cubicle. She closed the curtain behind her.

“Jace.”

He immediately held up a hand to stop her.

“Oh no, young man. You’re going to hear the lecture whether you want it or not.”

“I already know what you’re gonna say. I ain’t at fault here. Seriously.”

“Seriously?” Mac studied him. “You’re lucky to be alive. And you can stop with the gangbanger speak. You know better than that.” His eyes pleaded with her, but Mac couldn’t give in. “You’re lucky the bullet only hit flesh and didn’t tear into any muscles or bone. You’re lucky it was your lower leg and not your thigh, because otherwise you might have bled out. You’re lucky you’re not in the morgue with your two buddies.”

“Wait, they ain’t—aren’t my buddies. I didn’t know those guys. Honest. We were coming out of the Below—”

“I know. A bar. You’re underage.”

“I drank one beer.”

Mac folded her arms across her chest. “Go on.”

“So we were coming out, and these two guys stopped us. I saw one of ’em wearing a blue bandana, and I knew they was—were bangers. I told Oscar we needed to get going, but the one with the bandana, he was a big dude, he says he wants money. I backed away and just then this car comes by and I hear a bunch of pop, pop, pops. Me and Oscar hit the deck. It was over in like a second, and the car took off and the two dudes were dead. Mac, I swear I didn’t have anything to do with them.”

Tears formed in his eyes and Mac gave in, pulling Jace into a hug. She sat on the edge of his bed and soothed him as he cried. “I believe you. You scared the shit out of me. That’s all.”

“It scared the shit out of me, too.”

“Have you talked to Florence?”

Jace turned his head so it rested on her shoulder. His voice barely a whisper, he said, “She kicked me out. Said I’m eighteen now and I need to get out.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Oscar was there and gave me a lift to his place. My stuff’s over there. I figured I’d call you on Monday when the shelter opens up. No sense in ruining your weekend, too.”

Mac held him tighter. “Damn it, Jace. You know better. You have my cell number so you can call me whenever. Promise you won’t do that again.”

“Which part?” He pulled away from her, and the sincere expression on his face made her smile.

“All of it. No going out with Oscar to a bar. No getting shot, and no deciding to call me on Monday when you need me that minute. Clear?”

“Yeah.”

She handed him a tissue and waited as he wiped the tears from his face and blew his nose. “You’re coming home with me tonight.”

“Why? I can go to Oscar’s. They said he could go home after giving a statement. He’s probably there now.”

“Why is he home when you’re here?” Mac asked. “Jace, I know you and Oscar went to grade school together, but Oscar isn’t much better for you than your aunt. He got kicked out of school for doing drugs. There’s no way I’m going to let you stay with him.”

“He ain’t that bad, and he don’t make me do drugs with him. He knows I’m clean. Besides, I don’t got any place to go.”

“Yes, you do. We’ll go over and get your stuff from Oscar’s, then you’re coming to my house. You know I’ve got two guest rooms for this kind of thing.”

“You don’t have nobody there right now?” Jace raised one eyebrow and gave her a half smile.

“As in a girlfriend? You know better. I don’t get why you kids think I’m some kind of female Romeo.”

“Well, you’re hot. I mean, like, in a good way. Like most dudes would want to do you. So I figured the chicks would feel the same way.”

“That’s such a guy thing to say.” She stood up. “I’m going to get some coffee then find out when we can spring you. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Funny.”

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Mac and Jace got to her home at an ungodly hour. She settled him in her guest bedroom and lay down for a few hours of sleep. When the alarm sounded at seven, she wasn’t sure she’d slept at all. Dressed in her T-shirt and undies, Mac dragged herself toward the bathroom. She peaked into the guest room to find that Jace wasn’t there.

Panic gripped her, though she tried hard to tamp it down. Mac hurried to the kitchen, where she found Jace eating a bowl of cereal at the table. “Shit.”

“What?” He stopped eating, his eyes wide as if he’d done something wrong. “I got hungry and—”



“No, no. It’s fine. I didn’t realize—I wasn’t sure where you were.”

“You told me to stay here.”

“I know,” Mac joined him at the table. “You’re up early.”

Jace took a long drink of milk before saying, “I always am. It makes Aunt Florence crazy.”

“Did you get enough sleep?”

He shrugged. “Guess so. I got a chemistry test today I can’t miss. It’s okay that I go to school, right?”

“Of course.” Mac joined him at the table, watching him shovel in the cereal as though he were starving. “I’ll drive you there. No sense in you walking any more than you need to.”

“Cool. Can I take some of this cereal with me?”

“You want to take it with you? Why?”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead he stared at the bowl. “I get hungry around eleven. I thought it’d be a good snack. It’s okay, though.”

“Please tell me you have lunch at school.” He shook his head, not meeting her eyes. Mac wanted to find that bitch aunt of his and slap the crap out of her. How could she send a growing boy to school without lunch? No wonder he acted starved. “Okay, I’ll give you money for lunch today. We can go to the store after I’m off work tonight and get you food, for here and for school.”

“I don’t want to be trouble. Like I said—”

“You aren’t any trouble, and this is what we’re doing.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Finish your cereal. I need a quick shower and we’ll take off.”

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“You did what?” Kristy Baker, Mac’s best friend since grade school, shouted into the phone.

Mac’s headache increased with each word from Kristy’s high-pitched voice. Not the best way to begin her morning.

“Are you insane?” Kristy asked. “You can’t have a young boy staying at your house. Mac, that’s beyond inappropriate.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let him stay with Oscar? Try to get Aunt Florence to take him back? Not a lot of options here.”

“But he’s in your house. And he’s a kid. What are people going to say? What if they decide you’re a pedophile?”

Mac took a deep breath and let it out. “I would hope they’ll say I’m a good person for making sure he’s safe and sound. And he’s eighteen now. Nothing illegal about that age so I can’t be a pedophile.” She heard Kristy take a breath, and cut off her rant. “I sent him to school today with instructions to not be the tough guy about surviving a drive-by. Last thing he needs is to win friends because he got shot and lived to tell about it. I need to make sure he gets through this last semester of school. He’s going to NKU in the fall.”

“I know, Mac. God love ya, but I worry. Is he staying with you until September?”

“Probably. I’ll make sure Child Protective Services knows what’s going on in case they get a kid they want me to foster. I’m going to need to focus on Jace for a while.” She glanced at her watch. “I need to head to work. Stop by for lunch?”

“Of course.”

Mac slipped the phone into her jeans pocket. She couldn’t stop focusing on Jace and his future, debating whether to let him stay with her. But Jace didn’t have any family worth a damn, and she wasn’t going to kick him onto the street. He had a future ahead of him. His partial scholarship to Northern Kentucky University along with the grants he received would set him on the path to a future, one he’d never have with Florence.

Right or wrong, she’d made the decision and Mac planned to take Jace shopping after dinner. He’d need a long list of things, and she hoped her credit card could handle it.

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The OTR Community Center was situated on East Liberty Street in the heart of Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati. Mac chose the location to establish her center because it put her closest to the kids she wanted to help. She’d spent ten

years working for Hamilton County Human Services before realizing that the long arm of government couldn't do enough to assist kids.

Five and a half years on, the OTR gained influence in the area and a lot of respect from parents and civic leaders, most of it due to the single best decision Mac made—hiring Cindy Hannah as her assistant director and PR manager. She didn't think she could survive without her.

Mac stepped into the lobby and stopped dead in her tracks when Cindy greeted her. To call Cindy a force of nature would be a gross understatement. She was high-spirited and could push through a brick wall if need be. Cindy glowered and Mac cringed. She stood toe-to-toe with Mac, her head tilted back slightly to glare into Mac's eyes. Those grey blue beauties narrowed, and Mac felt the way she did when her dad admonished her for whatever regrettable thing she'd just done.

Cindy planted her hands on her full hips and lit into Mac. "Ever heard of a phone? Since they come in those tiny sizes these days, I figure you must have one in your pocket at all times. All the irresponsible kids have them pretty much sealed into their hands."

"Cindy, I—"

She raised a hand, "No!"

Mac closed her mouth.

"You talk later. I talk now. Don't you ever forget to call me again if something like this happens. In five years, I've never had to hear about anything secondhand but today—first thing this morning—that blowhard, Franklin, at Children's Services leaves a voice mail. Franklin. Not you."

"What—"

"You didn't bother to call."

Mac regretted speaking when Cindy narrowed her eyes at her. It was scary. "I had to hear from him that one of our boys got shot last night? Franklin, that stupid bastard, didn't leave a name or details, but said you signed a juvenile out from the ER. He's all worked up over it, saying you didn't have the right to do that." She sighed, running the fingers of one hand through her short-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. "He wants you to call him. Immediately."

"If he calls back, hang up on him. Jace is eighteen—"

"Jace?" Cindy's face blanched. "Is he okay? What happened?"

Mac explained what she knew, repeating a few times that Jace was fine. "He's at school, and I'm sorry I didn't call you. We had a long night—well, morning."

Cindy nodded her acceptance of the apology. "Franklin is going to run with this. He's been gunning for you since he found out you and Steph were dating."

"I know." Mac headed to her office. "He can bite me. I'll e-mail Steph and tell her I can't take any foster kids for a while."

"You going to let Jace stay at your house?"

"Yep. It's the only solution that makes sense. Where else is he going to go? And with about six weeks left of school... I can't take away his one chance of making a life for himself."

"You're a good woman, Mackenzie. How 'bout I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Caffeine would be wonderful. I'll love you forever."

"You damn well should. Now get an email sent so that blowhard doesn't call us again. And get a hold of Pepper. He's called here three times. Why don't you get to work at eight? It would make my job easier."

"Because it would make your job easier." Mac ducked the backhanded jab from Cindy and stepped into her office.

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Three and a half-dozen calls later, the door to Mac's office opened and Kristy Baker bounced in with a couple of McDonald's carry-out bags.

"Lunch is served." She placed the bags on Mac's desk and flounced her petite frame into a chair. Her feet didn't reach the ground, and Mac found that funny every time. She tried not to giggle, focusing instead on Kristy's expressive brown eyes. Something was wrong, because she wouldn't look at Mac.

Kristy flipped her long golden locks behind her back and crossed her legs at the knees.

When they were little, Mac wanted hair like Kristy's. She considered the reddish brown of her own hair boring. Whenever she'd complain, Kristy would remind Mac that her eyes, which were light brown with tiny yellow flecks in them, were her best feature. Kristy liked to say the flecks were gold, proving the beauty of Mac's soul.

"The usual?" Mac asked.

"Of course. Your ever-boring number one, with a diet coke. Though why you get a diet coke with all that fat is beyond me."

"I'm watching my weight."

"Whatever. Eat up."

"So, how did it go with the oncologist?" Mac asked.

Kristy hesitated long enough that Mac glanced up from her lunch.

"Not as good as I'd hoped it would be."

Mac pushed away her food and leaned back in the chair. "More radiation?" Mac's chest clenched. Kristy's face was colorless, and she wouldn't meet Mac's gaze.

"No. I'm not going through that again." Kristy played with the hem of her skirt. She'd gone through four months of chemo and radiation the previous year to rid her body of aggressive brain cancer. Two weeks ago, the headaches that originally led the doctors to find the cancer had returned.

"Kris, what did he say?"

"It's back." Her deadpan voice disturbed Mac. "And bigger than before."

"Then you've got to do the chemo—"

"No." Kristy raised her eyes, wet with tears. "I can't. I just grew my hair back." She tried to soften her words with that bit of a joke, but Mac knew better. Kristy was frightened.

Mac came around the desk and squatted beside her. "We'll do this together. Same as last time. I'll even shave my head to show support."

Kristy placed a shaky hand on Mac's shoulder. Her lower lip quivered as she spoke. "It won't work. He said I could go through it and maybe get a few more months of life, but that'd be all."

"I—but at least you'd have that much more time."

"Mac, you're my best friend. Have been since we were five years old. But I'm done fighting this. I want to live whatever is left of my life the way I want to. Without being constantly sick and tired. I want to travel, see the world, go to Paris."

"Paris? How can you talk about that right now? If you don't do the treatments you'll die." Mac stood up and paced.

"I'm dying anyway. Don't you get it? I want to do this on my terms." Kristy rose and moved into Mac's path, her hand held up like a traffic warden. Mac gazed down at her. Kristy wasn't quite five feet tall and maybe weighed ninety pounds. She'd always been tiny, but that never stopped her from doing what she wanted. Mac saw the determination in her eyes and understood this time was no different.

"Your terms. I get that, but I don't want you to die." She angrily swiped at her own tears. "Kris, you're too young to die. How can you die before you ever reach fifty? You're all the family I have. What am I supposed to do without you?"

"You still have your brothers and sister."

"None of which I'm close to. You're the most important person in my life. Seriously, Kris. I don't know what to do."

"You'll be fine. I promise. Besides, that's a long way off." Kristy placed her delicate hands on Mac's arms. "And we've got lots to do before then."

"How long?"

"Awhile."

"Kristy Belle Baker, how long did he say?"

Kristy glared at Mac and stepped back from her. "I wouldn't let him. Mackenzie, you know me better than that. You think I'm going to let some doctor put a time limit on my life? Seriously?"

"But how will we know—I mean, how can we—"

"There's a sentence in there dying to come out." Kristy slapped Mac's arm when she didn't laugh.

"Ow!"

"I'm trying to lighten the mood here. A little help would be nice."

"You just told me you're dying. You can't expect me to be in a happy mood now."

"I can and I do. Remember, on my terms. You're either with me or you're not, but I'm not going to go out all sour and depressed. I plan to have fun. Now sit down and finish your lunch."

Mac obliged, but she couldn't find the desire to eat. "I'm serious when I say I don't know what I'm supposed to do here."

"It's okay. You're not any more ready for this than I am, but I do have a plan."

"Why am I not surprised?"

“See, that’s better.” Kristy reached into her purse and produced a single sheet of paper. “I have a bucket list.”

“Bucket list?”

“Yes. Like in that movie. It’s a list of things I plan to do. I’ll finish the list, and if you’re willing, I’d like you to help me.”

Mac took the list and scanned it. The first entry mentioned the Eiffel Tower. “You want to go to King’s Island? You’ve been there a million times. And we’ve been up on the Eiffel Tower a million times, too.”

“You’re so dense for a woman who’s so intelligent. I don’t mean the amusement park, I mean the real Eiffel Tower. As in Paris, France.”

“You don’t even have a passport.”

“I’ll have it in a few weeks. So, in the meantime, I plan to do some of the stuff a little farther down the list.”

“Exactly when are you planning a trip to Paris?”

Kristy shrugged. “I figure we could go in June. It’s during tourist season, but that’s okay. Everything will be open, plus I have a friend who said she’d meet us there.”

“Who do you know in Paris?”

“Actually, she lives in Holland.”

Mac set the list aside and folded her hands on the desk. “Lennie? Your Facebook buddy?”

“Will you stop calling her that. I told you the ‘e’ is pronounced with a long ‘a.’”

“That’s not how it’s spelled,” Mac said.

“It is if you speak Dutch.” Kristy folded her arms across her chest. “But, yes. She’s going to be in Paris.”

“You want to go to France with someone you barely know?” Mac clearly thought it a bad idea.

“No. I want to go to France with my best friend and meet my Facebook buddy. Besides, we spent a whole weekend in New York last year. I feel like I know her almost as well as I know you.”

“You can’t know someone from one weekend and a few chats online.”

“Fat lot you know. Lenie and I talk once a week. Her mother died a year ago of the same cancer I have. I’m not looking forward to telling her mine is back.” Kristy met Mac’s gaze. “So, are you coming with me or not?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really. I already told Cindy I’d be recruiting you and that she should be prepared for you to be gone a whole month.” Kristy gave Mac that smile her parents were so proud of. “I have to get moving. I’ve got plans to make. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“I guess so.” Mac watched her reach for the door then turn back. “What?”

Kristy said, “Don’t make plans for Thursday evening.”

“Why not?”

“Karaoke night at The Docks. You’re taking me there.”

“I have to go to Karaoke?”

“Yep. You’ll find it a bit farther down on my list. I always wanted to sing in front of someone who’s not from our church, so I’m going to do that Thursday night. See ya.”

Kristy swept out of her office and left a stunned Mac to process the news, the bucket list, and an impending trip to Paris, France.

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Five o’clock came and went without Mac making much of a dent in her paperwork. The OTR was on stable financial ground, something Mac hadn’t expected to occur for another few years. The big issue now was how to keep it there. Donations, grants, fundraisers, all good ideas, but Mac needed more volunteers to get them done.

She needed to stay late and finish up. But she didn’t feel like it. She wanted to get home to check on Jace and figure out how they were going to work out their new living arrangement.

Mac had risen to leave her office when Pepper stepped in. “Going somewhere?”

“Home. You?”

“Hoping to catch you before you leave.” Pepper removed his hat and held it in front of him, running his fingers along the brim. “Got a minute?”

“Of course.” Mac rested her hip on the edge of the desk. “What’s up?”

“Are you really letting that boy stay with you? In your house?”

Mac took a deep breath and considered how to respond. Pepper was a good cop. One of the best she’d ever worked with. His kind eyes held hers as he patiently waited for a response. Pepper was older than Mac, maybe by a

good twenty years. If not for his grayish hair, you'd think him younger by how he acted, and not well into his fifties. Years as a cop failed to harden him as it had a lot of his colleagues.

"Yes. Jace is staying in my guest room. He's eighteen, Pepper. Nothing illegal going on there."

"Never said there was." He lowered his tall, bulky frame into one of the chairs in front of her desk. "It doesn't look good, Mac. He's legal, but he's still young."

"And I'm still gay. Not sure there's anyone around here that doesn't know that by now. Especially after Imogene Anderson found out. Hell, there are probably people in Covington who know."

He gave a half-hearted laugh. "Okay. You win. Be careful. You never know if the shooters from that drive-by are still searching for him. I don't want you involved in all that."

"You're a sweetheart, Pepper, but I'm already involved." She slid off the desk as he stood. "Jace didn't know those guys, and I'd be willing to bet they don't know him. Seems to me they got the guys they were looking for. But if it makes you feel better, I promise to be careful."

"It does and you'd better be." He held the door for her as they left the office. "Hey, I got a couple of guys to come help me on Saturday. Figure the group of us can get work done on those back rooms pretty fast. You ought to have one nice big room when we're done."

"Pepper, that's awesome." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. She found his blush adorable. "I got twenty-four desks donated to us so we could have a real school room by next week. A teacher friend of Kristy's said he'd donate his time to set up a GED course."

"Congrats then. It'll all be worth it."

"Yeah. Now if we can get more money, I'll feel better."

They reached the front doors, and Pepper waited while Mac locked up. "I thought you got a couple of grants?"

"I did, but these grants are for specific things. That last one was for the computers, PowerPoint projector, and screens for the classroom. Can't spend it on anything besides tech stuff for the students. We need more donations. Something steady coming in."

They walked to the parking lot behind the building. "I can't help you with steady income, but I might have an idea for donations. A buddy of mine arranges the cops versus firefighters hockey game each year. Maybe we can schedule a baseball game at the high school and charge a small fee to attend. I'm sure Cindy can get the reporters out there."

"It can't hurt. You check with your buddy and get back to me. I'll take anything that might help." She put her laptop bag in her car and climbed in. "Anyone ever tell you what a cool guy you are?"

"Yeah. You." He put his hat back on and stood there until she started the engine.

Mac rolled the window down. "Thanks."

He waved her on like he was a traffic cop. "See you Saturday."

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Mac opened her back door and called out, "Jace, I'm home." No immediate response. She resisted the urge to yell for the kid. Instead, she put her laptop case on the kitchen table and headed for her guest room.

She heard the game's music long before she got there. Jace was comfortably seated on her floor rocker gaming chair, his leg propped up on the edge of her TV cabinet while he frantically tapped and pushed the buttons on the game controller. Mac stood right behind him, and he clearly didn't see or hear her.

"Jace, I'm home!"

The controller flew out of his hand. He turned a shocked face up at Mac, who doubled over with laughter.

"You scared the crap out of me!"

"Better clean it up then, because I won't."

Jace reached for the controller, but Mac got to it first. He said, "C'mon, Mac. I'm almost through this level."

"I can see that. Get finished up so we can get to the store. We need more food."

"Got it."

They were in and out of the grocery store in under an hour. Mac tried hard to say no to most of the junk food Jace wanted, convincing him to get more healthy options, though she did relent and buy cookies and chocolate milk.

Once back at the house, Mac showed Jace where to store everything. "I'm too tired to cook so I'll buy pizza for dinner. That'll be enough junk food for a few days. We could watch a movie, too. Sound good to you?"

"Cool. Can I pick the movie?"

"I'm probably going to regret this, but sure. What movie do you want?"

“Anything with Vin Diesel. That dude is awesome.”

“Done.” Mac herded him into the hallway. “Go wash up. I’ll order the pizza.”

Jace paused at the door to the bathroom. “Mac?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Mac gave him a sideways smirk. “You’re welcome.” Being an emergency foster parent was one thing, but those kids stayed a few days while awaiting placement. Jace was a more permanent prospect.

She sat at the table. Mac wasn’t entirely certain how that made her feel. She loved being an emergency foster parent. It gave her a chance to make a positive impact on the life of a child in a bad situation.

She’d been working with Jace so long that he already felt like a son. Did he think of her as a parent? Was she ready for that?

Jace sauntered into the kitchen. “How long have you lived here?” he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

“Most of my life. This is my parents’ house. You’re in their old room.”

“Why would they move from here? I mean, this house is huge. I’ve never seen one with so many rooms.”

Mac felt sad at that statement. The house contained three bedrooms, one bath, kitchen, and living room. An average home in an average neighborhood. Then again, raised in one of the city’s poorest areas where an efficiency apartment might house a family of five or six, her house must look enormous. “It won’t feel so big once you’ve been here awhile.”

“I doubt that,” he said, taking a seat at the table. “So, do your parents live nearby?”

A lump formed in her throat, and her chest constricted as it always did when she thought of her mom and dad. “No. They died seven years ago. I have two brothers and a sister, but they didn’t want the house so I inherited it. I used the rest of my inheritance to buy the Over-the-Rhine Community Center building.” She found him staring at her. His expression made her think he was caught between wanting to cry or ask more questions. “I’m okay to talk about them.”

“You’re an orphan.”

“I am.”

“That…they died at the same time?”

She nodded. “And it was very hard for me. Kristy helped me get through it. It wasn’t long after that I bought the OTR and quit my job at the county.” Mac now wondered who would be there to help her get through losing Kristy. She pushed that thought away as Jace spoke again.

“What’d you do there?”

“Children’s Protective Services.” She gave him a crooked smile. “I was good at it, too, but I didn’t like all the rules. I guess I needed a big change, but I still wanted to help kids like you. So there you go. I opened up the OTR.”

“Are you rich now? With the money from your parents?”

His directness surprised Mac, but she found it refreshing. It was the first time they’d talked about such personal things. She never realized Jace could be so curious. “No, I’m not rich. I spent most of the money on the community center so I still worry about money, but I’m better off than most people. I guess I’m lucky that my parents found a way to keep taking care of me after they were gone.”

“Wish I’d been that lucky.”

Mac stood and pulled him to his feet. “You are that lucky. You got me. Now, I’m going to order dinner. Anything you don’t like on pizza?”

“Don’t know. We only ever got pepperoni.”

“Then let me broaden your horizons.”

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*The Fast and the Furious* kept Jace and Mac entertained through the first half of the evening. While Jace raved about Vin Diesel, Mac kept to herself her thoughts on the super hot Michelle Rodriguez. She’d seen the movie a dozen times, but it never got old. It made her happy Jace enjoyed it, too. The downtime provided Mac with the chance to let her mind relax and not re-live her lunch with Kristy.

While Jace cleaned up the mess they’d made from dinner, Mac decided to call Kristy. She answered on the first ring. “That was fast. Were you sitting on the phone?”

“No.”

Mac heard the tears in that single word. “What happened?”

“Mom and Dad just left.” Kristy’s voice shook. “They don’t understand, and nothing I said made any sense to them. Dad—Dad wants to get my medical power of attorney. He’s angry that I signed a DNR today.”

Mac was stunned. She never expected Kristy would have gone so far as to sign a Do Not Resuscitate order. It brought such reality to the entire situation. “I can’t say as I blame him.”

“Mac! He has no right to be angry at me. I didn’t decide to die.”

“Kris, chill out. You’re his only daughter. You have to see it from his perspective. I mean, what parent wants to outlive their child?” Silence on the other end of the phone. Were it not for the occasional sniffle, Mac would have thought the connection lost.

“I know,” Kristy said. “He doesn’t get that I want the rest of my life to be quality. I don’t want to just survive. I want to live.”

“He’ll get it. Give him time. Want me to come over?”

Another bit of sniffing. “No. I think I need to be alone tonight. Maybe I’ll call and talk to him.”

“Good idea. Call me and I’ll be there in ten minutes if you need me.”

“You better make it five minutes.” Kristy tried to laugh. “Lunch tomorrow?”

“Of course. Later.” Mac put her phone down and stared at it, as if that would make it ring. Kristy might have needed to be alone, but Mac needed to be with her.

“Hey.”

The soft voice startled her and she turned to meet Jace’s face. She’d forgotten that he was there. “Ready for another movie?” she asked.

“If you are.” He sat beside Mac on the couch, his expression fearful. “Was that your girlfriend?”

“Were you listening to my phone call?”

“Uh, well, yeah. I mean, it’s not like you’re quiet.”

“Gee, thanks. No. Kristy’s been my best friend since we were five.”

“Cool. I don’t still know anyone since I was five. Well, just my cousin.”

He stared at his hands, and Mac saw he had something else on his mind. She waited him out and hoped he’d open up to her. She didn’t have to wait long.

“I love my aunt.”

“I know.”

“Why doesn’t she love me, Mac? I never got in trouble. I always did my homework. I got good grades. I did my chores. I mean, I never gave her a minute of trouble.” Tears welled up in his young eyes, and Mac put her arm around him.

“I wish I could tell you why. It’s not fair and it’s not your fault. You can’t make someone love you, no matter what you do.”

“Do you think my mamma would have loved me?”

Mac closed her eyes, careful of her word choice. Jace’s mother, a meth addict, gave birth to him in prison. Florence took him in with the promise of more welfare money. Jace’s mother died in a prison fight five months later. “I can’t believe a woman could carry a child in her belly and not love him. It must have been hard for her to give you up. In her own way, I’m sure your mother loved you very much.”

“Can I stay here?” He wouldn’t bring his eyes up to meet hers.

Mac leaned back and regarded him. “I sort of thought that was the plan. You’re heading to NKU in September, and you’ve got six weeks left of high school. Where else you gonna go?”

He shrugged, and again she waited for him to continue. “I don’t have any other family. Least none I know about. You sure it’s okay for me to stay?”

“It’s not only okay, it’s mandatory. I’m not letting your ass out of my sight until I drop you off at your dorm in the fall.”

The hint of a smile crossed his features.

“I’m going to expect you home for as many weekends as you can manage and all the holidays. Deal?”

“Deal.” He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt, and Mac held back a comment. “Can we see another movie?” He asked. “I’m not tired yet.”

“Sure. How about *Resident Evil*?”

His eyes lit up and that made Mac laugh. “Seriously? I’ve always wanted to see that one. I played the game at Oscar’s but never seen the movie.”

“Movies. Plural. I have them all, so what the hell. But only one tonight. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

## Chapter Two

Mac settled behind her desk at 8:30 a.m. Her laptop booted up just as the phone rang. The caller ID showed the number generated from a Hamilton County office. She recognized James Franklin's phone number.

"Good morning, James. What can I do for you?"

"You can return my calls," James said. He sounded as pissy as ever.

"I know, but yesterday was busy. I'm sure you can understand that. I—"

"No longer work for CPS." Pissy changed to asshole. "You can't go picking up a kid from the hospital and taking him home. I don't give a shit what you do at your center, but you'll damn well follow the law when it comes to a kid in our system."

"He's eighteen, so legally, he's not a kid. He's also not in your system. So get your facts straight before you call me and chew me out."

She was about to hang up when she heard a different voice on the line. This one familiar. "Mackenzie? You still there?"

"Steph?" It shocked her. Not only was Steph Day her former supervisor, she'd also been Mac's lover. "Hey."

"Hey, can I come down there and talk to you? We need to get a few things sorted out. I have time this morning if you do."

"I'll make time," Mac said, suddenly comforted by the sound of Steph's voice. "When?"

"How about an hour?"

"Done. See you then." She hung up the phone and only noticed someone standing in the doorway after Cindy cleared her throat.

"Morning."

"Good morning. Now, for whom am I clearing your schedule?"

"Steph Day. It's about Jace."

Cindy appeared contemplative, and Mac could almost imagine her mentally rearranging Mac's day. "Done. But are you sure it's a good idea to see her here? Last time..."

"I remember last time." Mac leaned back in her chair and tried not to blush. The last time Steph visited the OTR they'd gotten "busy" in the office. So busy that Cindy knocked several times to get their attention, as Mac had clients waiting. "We'll be good. That's all over with anyway, Cindy. She's moved on."

"Uh-huh. I'll make sure you're clear until lunch."

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Steph didn't look a minute over thirty. Long, dishwater blonde hair in a French braid accented her high cheekbones. Her smooth skin was more tanned than the last time Mac saw her. Mac figured she still visited the tanning booth regularly. And the gym. Mac could still recall the feel of those muscled thighs...

"Have a seat." Mac stood while Steph removed her light jacket and draped it across the back of her chair.

"It's good to see you again." Steph pinned Mac with those sharp, hazel eyes. "You seem tired. Everything okay?"

Mac settled in her chair and wondered how much she should tell Steph. They hadn't spoken much over the last six months. Not because they didn't want to, but work and life always seemed to get in the way. In moments like this, when they were face-to-face, Mac wondered why they'd ever broken up.

"The week didn't start off too well, as you already know."

Steph nodded and removed a file from her briefcase. "I do. I talked with Franklin in regards to your phone call. Apparently, a nurse friend of his was on duty and thought Jace was a minor and lying about his age. She called him at home. He was not on call last night. Needless to say, you won't be hearing from him again."

"Thanks."

"We do need to discuss what happened with Mr. Cano. I've read the police report and spoken to his aunt, but I have a feeling you have a different take on things than she does."

Mac resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "She's angry that she won't get any further financial assistance now that Jace is eighteen. She'll get her last check in one week, since it's nearly the end of May and he graduates mid-June."



Did Franklin tell you that Jace got accepted to NKU? He's got three grants and one partial scholarship and plans to get a part-time job to pay for the rest."

"He did tell me that. But you know, strictly speaking, it's not appropriate that you took him in, Mac. You're a foster parent. What if we needed you for an emergency placement?"

"Where was he supposed to go? He's a legal adult with a few weeks left of high school, and he's on his own. It sucks that the system let his bitch aunt have custody of him to begin with."

Steph gave her a tight smile. The kinks in the system, as Steph would call them, were always a point of contention between them. Maybe that's why they'd broken apart. "I'll make a note that you're not available for any placements for a while. But next time you have to call me and let me know what's going on. Franklin is on the warpath to get you removed as a foster parent. I've calmed him down for now."

"Thanks." Mac accepted that, knowing Steph was right. "Anything else?"

"That depends on you." Steph crossed one knee over the other, revealing enough skin on her thigh to give Mac heart palpitations. "You don't quite seem yourself. Tell me what's going on."

Mac took a sip of cold coffee, letting the bitter flavor distract her. "It's Kristy. She's dying."

Steph's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, but no words came out. Her expression a mixture of shock and hurt. "Why didn't you call me? Mac, she's my friend, too. I deserve to know."

"I only found out yesterday, and I think Kristy's been too busy dealing with her parents to call anyone." Mac stared at the calendar on her desk, unable to meet Steph's gaze. She carefully explained the conversation with Kristy the day before, being certain not to leave out any details. When she was done, she swiped at sudden tears. "I'm supposed to be all up and happy that we're going through this list of hers, but how can I?"

"You can't. Not really." Steph dabbed at her own eyes. "You have to be there for her. If that means being happy and having fun, then that's what you do. She needs you more than ever, and I can't imagine what it's going to be like for you. Has she said what she plans for—well, for when she can't travel or do anything anymore?"

"We haven't talked about it. I guess that's the part that worries me most. I mean, it was hard watching her go through the chemo and radiation. But to stand back and watch—watch her die? I don't know that I can do it."

"You won't be standing back, Mackenzie." Steph fixed her with a firm gaze. "You'll be holding her hand. Personally, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have with me."

"You're biased."

"Maybe." Steph got up and motioned Mac to join her. "I have another meeting to get to. Let's have dinner later this week. Catch up?"

Mac nodded, not ready to let her go. "Steph, would it be okay if I call you? I mean, just to talk?"

"You have to ask?" She pulled Mac into a warm hug.

"Thanks." Mac leaned her head on Steph's shoulder and sobbed against the silky fabric of her blouse.

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Karaoke had been and would never be something Mac enjoyed. Except for last night. Seeing Kristy there, her bright smile lighting up the room better than any disco lights could, made it all worthwhile. The headache and accompanying hangover, however, gave her regrets. All of those were related to tequila shots and more beer than she'd had in years. Good thing Kristy drove. Such a nice thing to have a friend who never drank.

Mac awoke to the feeling that her entire body would implode. At the office, it got worse.

Cindy stood at the door waiting for her with a coffee cup in hand. "You have to go to the school."

Mac squinted at her, tempted to ask Cindy not to shout. "Be specific. There's over a hundred schools in Hamilton County."

"Funny." Cindy took her laptop case and grabbed the steaming cup of coffee. "Oyler High School called. Jace got into a fight. He's okay, except for a cut over his left eye."

"How could he get in a fight already? I only dropped him off ten minutes ago." She took the coffee, sipped at it, and handed it back.

"Fight happened right after you drove away."

"Dammit."

"I'll have fresh coffee and bagels when you get back." Cindy tilted her head toward the door. "Go."

Mac walked out to her car, a million scenarios going through her head. What could have happened in those few minutes to cause a fight? Especially a fight big enough for the school to call her.

Mac encountered light traffic and reached the school in no time. She parked her car and trudged to the principal's office, feeling more like she was the one in trouble and hoping her hangover wouldn't be obvious. The expression on Jen Aspers's face told Mac that it was. Jen became principal at Oyler High School more than ten years ago. Mac couldn't count the number of times she'd been in this office as a child protective services caseworker. This time felt weird.

"Hey, Mac, come on in." Jen held the door for her and closed it behind Mac. Jace sat in front of the desk, his head hung low and his body slumped in the chair.

"Thanks, Jen. So, what happened?" Mac sat beside Jace and gave him a quick once-over for any injuries other than the cut on his face.

"I think I'll let Mr. Cano tell you." Jen rested her hands on the desk and gazed steadily at Jace.

He seemed to wither under the principal's scrutiny. "I stopped to say hi to Oscar as I was coming into school. He said something about the shooting." Jace gazed up at Mac. "He said something about you. I told him to shut the hell up, and he shoved me. I shoved him back, and next thing I know, we're on the ground and I'm punching him. Then Mr. Stark came and broke it up, and I guess they called you."

Mac noticed bruises on Jace's right hand. "What exactly did Oscar say?"

Jace hesitated. "Do I really have to say it?"

"It's that bad?"

Jace met her gaze. He'd been crying. "It's that bad. I can't believe we was ever friends. What a dick."

"Jace," Jen said in that teacher voice which received an immediate apology from him. "I'm not going to suspend you, but you will have detention, starting today, for the rest of the week."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What about Oscar?" Mac asked.

"He was expelled last year and banned from being on the school property. He ran off when Mr. Stark broke up the fight, but if he comes back, we'll call the police. I told Jace he should consider charges against Oscar for assault."

"Jace?" Mac placed her hand on his knee. "You want to do that?"

He shook his head. "I just want to go to class."

"Go see the nurse, first," Jen said and pointed to the door. Jace, his head lowered, left the office. Jen turned back to Mac. "He's a good kid."

"I know. But I'm kinda glad he got into it with Oscar. That guy is bad news and no good for Jace to be around."

"I agree." Jen leaned back in her chair. "So, did you have fun last night?" Her voice held a lot of sarcasm.

Mac groaned. "I'm pretty sure we did. I don't actually remember all of it, but I do know I'm too old for this. Hangovers are for twentysomethings."

"I didn't think you could be old at thirty-eight, but the way you look this morning, I believe it's possible. You should go home and go to bed."

"Nope. Got meetings this afternoon. I'm working on a grant for the OTR to get renovations to the building. Can't miss that one."

"You do good work over there, Mac. You should be proud."

Mac stood. "I am. Thanks for taking care of Jace. I'll be here to pick him up after detention."

"Uh, Mac. I talked to Steph earlier today. She told me about Kristy. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. Me too." She said. "Tell that husband of yours he still owes me twenty bucks."

Jen laughed heartily. "He'll never pay up. He's too pissed that you won the bet."

"Never bet against me when baseball is involved."

"Lesson learned. But I'll be happy to remind David."

Mac smiled, despite the pain that shot through her head.

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Kristy bounced Mac's office at noon and plopped a McDonald's bag on her desk. "Lunch is served."

"Ugh. No food."

"Ugh? Are you a cavewoman now?" Kristy sat down and got her food out. "You have to eat. You'll need your energy."

"Why?"

"Because your body has to have sustenance. Didn't you go to health class?"

Mac rolled her eyes. "Why do I need energy? After I get Jace from detention, I'm going home to bed."

“Jace has detention?”

“Yes.” Mac gave a brief description of what happened. “Now, why do I need energy? My grant meeting got postponed so I don’t see why I need to be energetic about anything.”

“Your memory sucks,” Kristy said between bites of her cheeseburger. “I have tickets to the Reds game tonight. Kroger bleacher seats. I want to be the one to put up the strikeout K’s, and if we’re lucky, we’ll walk away with a free pizza.”

How did she agree to go to a ball game after a night of drinking? “You want to put up the strikeout signs?”

“Yes. I always thought that’d be cool. And since Homer Bailey is pitching tonight, I figured there’d be lots of K’s going up. Best shot at getting that free pizza if he gets eleven strikeouts.”

Mac closed her eyes and resisted the urge to bang her forehead on the desk. “How do I let you talk me into all this stuff?”

“Because I’m cute and loveable and you can’t say no to me.” Kristy gave her an adorable wink and shrug. “And if I was gay you’d be all over me. So there.”

Mac nearly spit out her drink of Coke. “You’re not my type.”

“I’m totally your type.”

“No, you’re not.”

Kristy leaned across the desk, her expression serious. “Mackenzie, I’m female, single, and breathing. I’m totally your type.”

Mac tossed a napkin at her. “You’re an idiot.”

“Again, you love me, so it doesn’t matter. Come pick me up at 5:30. We’ll have dinner at the park.”

“Why am I driving?”

“You know I hate driving to the game. Too many people who have no clue where they’re going.”

“What about Jace? I have to get him from school, and if I pick you up, he’ll have to stay—”

“He’s going with us. I got him a ticket. I know he got in trouble, but the kid hasn’t been to a game before. I want to do something nice for him.”

“That’s very sweet. I’ll make sure he knows he’s grounded.”

“Fine. Now eat before it gets cold.”

“It’s already cold.”

“Eat it anyway.”

Mac took a bite of her burger, hoping it wouldn’t come back up. “There. Happy?”

“Not until you eat all of it. Today is a good day for junk food.”

“Did I ever tell you that I hate it when you’re so peppy?”

Kristy gave her one of those, I’m too cute for words, smiles. “Frequently.”

“Okay. Just making sure.”

Kristy pointed to the burger and fries. “Eat.”

“Yes, dear.”

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Jace waited for FOR Mac at the front doors to the school. The bruise over his left eye was now as prominent as his limp. He wore cut-off shorts and the white bandage on his leg stood out. Mac glanced at it to make sure no blood showed through. Then she pulled him into a hug before guiding him to her car.

“Talk. What exactly did Oscar say to you?”

“I don’t wanna say.”

“Wrong answer.”

“Mac, he’s an asshole. Can’t we leave it at that?”

“Nope. We need to discuss what was said.”

Jace took his time getting into the car and putting on his seatbelt. “He called you a dyke.”

Mac forced back a laugh. “I am a dyke.”

“Yeah, but—I mean—he don’t got no right to call you that.”

“It’s only a word.”

“And he said that if I was a real man I’d fuck you straight.”

“Ah. Is that what set you off?”

“Yes.”

“First off, I don’t care if someone calls me a dyke. Words like that only have power if we give it to them. So that word doesn’t mean anything to me. Second, you’re right. Oscar is an asshole, and anything he says is a load of crap.” She twisted in her seat to face him. “Third, you can’t let assholes like Oscar get to you. Ever. You’re going to come across a million Oscars during your life. You plan on fighting them all?”

Jace touched the swollen area by his eye. “I don’t guess so.”

“Good. Next time you see Oscar, walk away.”

“I don’t know—”

“The hell you don’t, young man. You can and you will. You’re better than that. Better than him, and the best way to show it is to walk away.” She started the engine, and they were silent for a few minutes.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Getting into that fight. I guess I lost my temper. I can’t—don’t—you’re like family, and I ain’t gonna let nobody diss you.”

Mac considered his words, touched he wanted to defend her and that he considered her family. “Like I said before, what people like Oscar say doesn’t matter to me one bit. And it shouldn’t matter to you.” She tapped the side of his head. “Get that through your thick skull.”

Jace smiled. “Is it gonna be better in college? Will the people there be different?”

“No, and some. It doesn’t get easier, just more complicated, but that’s life. And you’re going to meet all kinds of people. Some you’ll like, some you won’t, and some you’d sooner knock their heads into the wall as look at them, but you won’t.”

“I’ll walk away.”

“Yes! Progress. By the way, we’re going to a baseball game tonight.”

“Seriously? On a school night? Is it a Reds game?”

Mac glanced at him, happy to see a genuine smile on his face. “Unless there’s someone else playing at Great American Ball Park, and yes, on a school night. We’ll be home by eleven.”

“Cool. It’s the first of three against the Cubs. Homer Bailey’s pitching, and if he can win this one, it’ll be ten wins on the season.”

“Geez. You sound like a sports announcer. How do you know so much about baseball?”

Jace shrugged. “I read it in the papers. Catch a game on TV sometimes. Haven’t seen many of them this year, though. Aunt Florence didn’t pay her cable bill, so we only got the regular channels. Not much to watch there.”

“Well, Aunt Florence sucks. I pay my bills, and I’ll get you a cable box for your room but not until after you’re done with detention. And as long as you keep bringing home good grades. Deal?”

“Hell yeah!”

“No shouting.” Mac rubbed her forehead. The only real cure for a hangover was sleep, and that wouldn’t happen until late tonight. “While we’re on the subject, you need to clean up your speech.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?” She mimicked him. “You’re an intelligent young man, Jace Cano, but sometimes you sound like an ignorant hick. Or worse, random street kid without enough sense to come in out of the rain.”

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“Use proper grammar. I might have to give you demerits for every ‘we was’ or ‘I ain’t gonna’ that you say.”

“Demerits? Seriously?”

“Seriously. Too many demerits, no TV.”

“What if you say it?”

Mac refused to smile and glanced at him. “I suppose I’ll have to clean up my language, too.”

“Can I give you demerits?” He giggled and she had to grin at him.

“Yes. You can give me demerits.”

“Cool,” he said. “Too many demerits and no girlfriends spending the night.”

They shared a laugh. “Point made.” Mac pulled into her driveway and parked. “Now get inside and clean up. We have to get Kristy in an hour.”

“Can I make a sandwich to bring? I’m kinda hungry.”

“No. We always have dinner at the park. It’s hotdogs, nachos, whatever tonight.”

“Mac, I don’t have any money.”

“No one asked you to spend money.” She put her arm across his shoulders and led him into the house. “I’ll take care of it. Get ready. You can grab a snack if you’re hungry, but don’t spoil your appetite. Trust me when I say that Kristy will insist on feeding you one of everything there.”



## Chapter Three

Saturday morning came earlier than Mac would have liked. She'd managed to get a bit of sleep the night before, having left Jace alone with the entire set of *Star Wars* movies.

She stepped into the living room to find him fast asleep on the couch, the TV still on. Mac shut everything off and stood there for a moment, watching Jace. With his face so relaxed, she could see how young he was. The age might be eighteen, but those boyish features showed in his sleep. Mac wanted to hold him and protect him from the harshness of the world. She wanted to give him the childhood he'd missed. Seeing him at the baseball game, the way his face lit up, was simply amazing. She never imagined something she took for granted could have such a positive impact on anyone.

A knock at the door surprised her, and she hurried to answer it, hoping it wouldn't wake Jace. She was surprised to see Steph, holding a paper tray with coffee cups and a small bag. "Breakfast is served."

"C'mon in, but let's be quiet. Jace is sleeping on the couch."

Steph followed Mac to the kitchen. "Didn't you set him up in the spare room?"

"Yeah, but I let him stay up to watch all the *Star Wars* movies. I have no idea when he went to sleep. I gave up around midnight."

"You gave up on *Star Wars*? Seriously?" Steph pressed the back of her hand to Mac's forehead. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Ha ha. I'm tired. Kristy is kicking my ass. Karaoke, baseball, hell, I feel like I'm back in college except I don't have the energy to go on so little sleep."

Steph's laugh, soft and low, still sent a thrill down Mac's spine. "You're getting whiny. I don't think I've ever known you to be bothered by lack of sleep."

"Usually I'm not. I guess being worried about the OTR's finances, Jace getting on his feet, and Kristy..."

"I sort of figured. Oh, here." She gave the bag to Mac. "Fresh bagels and a nice cappuccino. It'll give you energy for today."

"Ah, you are a wonderful woman, Steph Day." Mac took the offering, and they sat at the table eating quietly for a few minutes. "So, are you ready to get dirty? Pepper's got a bunch of his buddies coming over, so it should be quick work. Might even get the first GED class going next month."

"I'm not ready to get dirty, but I've got a few people joining us, too."

"As long as it's not James Franklin."

"Hardly." Steph sipped at her cappuccino as if searching for the right words. "I've met someone, Mac. That's why I haven't called you in a while."

Mac didn't know how to react to that. She and Steph had broken up a long time ago, and she didn't have any claim to her, but somehow she felt hurt. And maybe jealous. "That's great. Anyone I know?" She tried to smile, but it didn't work. Steph must have sensed her discomfort.

"No. You've never met her. She's from Columbus and moved down here about a year ago. She works Human Services." Steph reached across the table and took hold of Mac's hand. "I know we couldn't make it work, Mac, and I'll always have a place for you in my heart, but it's different with Heather. I can't explain it."

"You don't have to. Not to me." Mac squeezed her hand before releasing it. "I think a tiny part of me wanted us to get back together, but I know it'd never work. We're too different and too alike at the same time." She met Steph's gaze, and this time her smile was genuine. "I still love you, though."

"I know. But I'd like you to meet Heather and get to know her. I think you'll like her."

"Is she coming to the center this morning?"

"Yep. She and a few girls from the county softball team," Steph said. "I sort of spread the word about the center and the work you're doing to expand. I talked to Cindy, and the big surprise today is that the media is going to be there."

"How did you manage all this without telling me?"

"Cindy and I set it up. We need the word to get out about it, and this will help. Plus the ball game Pepper is working to set up...it's all going to be great publicity for you. And I've got an idea to get you steady income."

Mac rested her arms on the table. "I'm listening."

"Sell sponsorships to the center. You can call them donors or patrons or whatever and put their names up on a plaque on the wall. You can have different levels of sponsorships and maybe even have a couple of open houses to let

them come down and see what's been done.." There was excitement in Steph's eyes that Mac hadn't seen in years. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea and a lot of work. You willing to help out?"

"Hell yes." The voice didn't belong to Steph and both women turned to as Jace entered the kitchen. "I rock in economics and tech skills. I can get you all set up with a program on the Internet so people go your web site and buy the sponsorship without any fuss."

"How long have you been standing there?" Mac asked.

"Long enough. So, can I help out?"

"We don't have a web site."

Jace looked stunned. "Mac, it's 2014. How can you not have a web site?"

"We have a page with basic information but that's it. And it's all I could do." Mac felt a little embarrassed, especially since it never occurred to her to use the web site for anything more.

"Web sites are easy. I'll need a computer, though. Can I come to the center and use yours?"

Steph grinned like a cat that ate the canary. "I think you just recruited a volunteer."

"Me, too." Mac finished her bagel and tossed the last one to Jace. "Eat your breakfast while I get a quick shower. You can come to the center with us to help work on the classroom. We'll discuss the computer and web site stuff later."

"Cool." Jace sat at the table and was engaged in an animated conversation with Steph before Mac had stepped into the bathroom.

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The OTR was open, and a flurry of activity met Mac, Steph, and Jace when they arrived. Kristy stood in the middle of it, organizing the chaos. Her thin, blonde hair was covered by an old Reds hat, but tufts of it still poked out. Mac recognized the oversized T-shirt as one of her University of Cincinnati shirts she'd long ago given to Kristy. She looked so cute in it, like she wore an older sibling's clothes. Her face set with determination with a glint of mischief in her eyes. She enjoyed this.

"How far along are you? All done yet?" Mac asked.

"Not even close. And where have you been? We got going at seven this morning." Kristy tapped her watch. "It's past nine now."

"Wow, you're a real slave driver." Steph put her arm around Kristy's shoulders. "Send us to work, boss."

"You're part of the take-away team." She pointed to Jace. "And so are you."

"What's the take-away team?" Jace asked.

Mac held back a laugh. "It's the team that takes away all the trash. Pepper and his guys are going to knock down a wall to make two rooms into one. You get to help haul the rubble to the dumpster out back."

"Cool," Jace said.

"Yeah. Cool." Steph was less enthusiastic but accepted the gloves that Kristy handed them. "C'mon, Jace. You and I have work to do. I can hear the wall coming down already."

Jace followed Steph, his conversation going back to her fundraising ideas.

"And my job?" Mac stood with her hands in her pockets, interested in what Kristy had in store for her.

Kristy gave her a sideways glance. "I really had a hard time pinning you to one job. There's so much to do and so many volunteers." She paused as if to consider her decision. "I do have a job for you, if you'll accept."

"Kristy Belle, what do you want me to do?"

"Supervise."

"Isn't that what you're doing?"

Kristy shook her head. "Nope. I got them organized. Now you get them supervised. The wall thingy is easy enough, but we've got to repair the new walls, paint, lay the carpet, get the furniture moved down here from upstairs so it's ready to go in, and don't get me started on the computers. But there's a guy here from the cable company hooking up a new wireless router."

"We never ordered a new router."

"I know. He heard about the GED program, and he's doing it on his off time for free. He also donated the router. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Very." Mac glanced down the hallway that led to the classroom. "How did he hear about all this?"

Kristy grinned. Mac should have known. "I may have spread the word at work."

“At work? What did you do? Send an e-mail to everyone in the city?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Mac asked. “Kristy, define sort of.”

“I posted on Facebook what you’re trying to do here. It sort of went viral.”

“What did you say?”

Kristy shrugged. “That my best friend is the salt of the earth, and that the center is here to help anyone get an education without having to pay for it. I wrote that you needed a new router for the Internet, money to fund more educational materials, and volunteers to make it happen.” The smile on her face mirrored Mac’s. “And maybe that you could use other donations as well.”

“Such as?”

“Volunteers, school supplies for the kids in the neighborhood, stuff like that. And they should start showing up around nine.”

“Kristy—”

“It’s all good. I have Cindy and her husband on the way to help keep things running smoothly. You go supervise the construction and stay out of my way.” She maneuvered Mac down the hallway. “Go.”

“Thanks, Kris.”

“You’re welcome.” She went to the doorway. “We got more people coming in.”

Mac watched as Kristy led a couple of people to a corner of the reception area to sort through the items they’d brought. The sight of so many people there to help amazed her. Kristy worked so hard to make it happen. She’d always been Mac’s single biggest supporter of the OTR and Mac wondered what she would do without that support.

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By the time the room was cleaned up and painting had started. Pepper came through by bringing six of his fellow officers with him, and the work seemed effortless. Mac was excited by how fast it went. By the end of the day, the room would be finished and she could schedule classes.

The pizzas she’d ordered arrived, along with a few gallons of pop and water. She ordered everyone to stop working and eat. Pepper reached the pizzas first. “I knew you loved me,” he said. “You remembered the anchovies.”

“Yes. I asked for your disgusting little fishy friends on one pizza. And if you’re nice to me, I’ll even let you have the leftovers.”

“You’re too kind,” he said, his mouth full of pizza. “Did you get some sleep?”

“Enough. There’s always tomorrow. After church I’m pretty sure you’ll find me asleep.”

“I would join you, but the wife has plans for me tomorrow. Since I’m here today, I get to mow and clean the gutters. And that’s after she drags me to the mall. Apparently she needs my advice on a birthday present for Lauren.”

“You’re her dad. You should give your opinion on her gifts.” Mac playfully elbowed him. “How old is Lauren now? Twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three and I don’t mind having an opinion. I don’t want to spend half the day opinionating.” He sighed dramatically. “Michelle is going to drag me to every clothes store in the mall searching for the perfect outfit, and when we don’t find it there, we’ll be off to the outlet malls. I don’t know when she thinks I’m going to be doing the yard work.”

“My dear, long-suffering friend,” she said and put her arm around his shoulders. “I’m quite sure you’ll survive. Maybe you should get Michelle to go with you to Galls in Lexington. I’m sure she’d enjoy it.”

His deep, rumbling laugh made Mac smile. “She hates Galls. Hates the smell of leather and says I spend way too much time talking shop with the guys working there than I do buying any ‘cop stuff’ as she calls it.”

“Sounds like you’re stuck, buddy.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Hey, Mac!” Steph moved toward them, her arm around a woman Mac didn’t recognize. “I want you to meet Heather.”

Oh joy. Mac forgot Heather was going to join them. She wasn’t a remarkable woman and Mac was sure she’d never notice her in a crowd of people, but her smile was sweet and there was kindness in her eyes. “Hi, Heather.”

“Mac.” They shook hands, not in the girly way that Mac hated, but with a nice strong grip. “I’ve heard a lot about you. This is such an amazing place you’ve set up here.”

“Thanks. Have you been given the grand tour yet?”

“Nope. Just got here.” She smiled at Steph and twined arms with her. “But I’d love to see everything.”



“There’s not much.” Mac held her arms wide and motioned around the room. “You’ve seen our reception area, which is currently doubling as a loading dock.”

Heather laughed. “I see that. But it’s temporary, from what I hear.”

“Cindy, my public relations secretary and basically in-charge-of-the-whole-operation person, will make damn sure this is a reception area again by Monday morning.”

“She’s formidable,” Steph said. “I do my best to never cross her. If you want on her good side, make sure you have a fresh cup of coffee with you.”

Cindy startled Steph when she walked up behind her. “I prefer it black. And if you bring anything sweet, I’ll kick your ass out. I’m on a diet.” She patted her slightly overweight belly. “But I never say no to a bagel.”

“Noted,” Heather said, her smile making Mac smile as well. “How long have you worked here?”

Cindy scoffed. “Since the day Mackenzie conned me into this crazy adventure.”

“Which translates to over five years,” Mac said. “I’m going to give these two a tour.”

“Be my guest. I’ll be at the front door keeping Kristy on track. That woman is so damn hyper. How do you keep up with her?”

Mac smiled. “I don’t.” She motioned to Steph and Heather and continued the tour.

The OTR used the entire first floor of the building, which at one time served as a sewing factory. Most of the walls had been torn down and rebuilt dozens of times, and there were telltale signs of that on the dirty-white ceilings.

A hallway led from the reception area to the offices, which consisted of three rooms: one for Cindy, one for Mac and the other held their rickety copier, any office supplies, and basically anything else that would fit in there. Even Heather, as skinny as she was, couldn’t negotiate the path between boxes in the room.

“Any chance you’ll be able to organize this place?” Heather asked.

“Not soon, no. Cindy and I are too busy, and we made a pact a long time ago that we weren’t working any more weekends unless for a special reason. Such as the stuff going on today. And we’re the only employees, so the room sort of gets used for whatever it needs used for.”

“It’s such a big place. Are there other offices?”

Mac and Steph exchanged glances, and they both laughed softly. “Yeah, but none of the rooms are usable. No electricity. That’s on the to-do list.”

Heather arched an eyebrow. “Must be one helluva to-do list.”

“Honey,” Steph said, “that list has been a mile long since Mac opened the place. She usually gets one thing knocked off and replaces it with something else.”

“But it’s getting done.” Mac said. “The biggest bit is coming off the list today. We get that classroom finished—it’s taking up the space of about five offices—then we’re well on our way. That’s the most important thing right now. We’ve got three rooms that we made into one large area for the kids to play games and study or whatever they need to do. But we want to make use of all the area we have. Hell, we own the whole building. I got it dirt cheap as part of an estate auction. My dream is to have a work out center with locker rooms and showers on one floor, and small apartments on another where I can put some of these kids, like Jace, when they get kicked out of their homes.”

“Wow.” Heather made her way out of the storage room and followed Mac to the construction site. “You’ve got a lot of stuff you want to do.”

“And I need a lot of money to do it,” Mac said. “So, that’s the grand tour. The other three floors are more storage space right now. The second floor has all the desks and computers currently. But that’s why I’m always seeking grants and donors. Got to keep the place up and running first. The other stuff will come later.”

“You need a volunteer?” Heather asked.

Her offer surprised Mac. “Sure. What would you like to do?”

“Get you more organized.”

“When can you start?” Cindy asked. How she could pop up like that stymied Mac.

Heather said, “I work during the week, but I can come over around five on Monday and see what I can do. I’m sort of obsessive-compulsive about being organized, and that room by your offices gave me hives.”

Cindy took Heather’s hand and walked down the hallway. “Forget Monday. You’re here, I’m here, let’s get this thing rolling.”

“What about watching Kristy?” Mac called after them.

Cindy waved dismissively. “She’s got it under control well enough.” As Cindy and Heather walked away, Mac heard Cindy already making plans with her new volunteer.

“That was weird,” Steph said, a big smile on her face. Her eyes didn’t leave Heather until she disappeared down the hall. Mac watched her and wondered if Steph had ever looked at her that way. She supposed not. That smile had love written all over it.

“Thanks for bringing her here. We do need organizational help—with the building. Cindy’s got the other stuff well under control.”

“I know.”

They stood in an awkward silence for a few moments. “Heather’s a nice girl.”

Steph nodded but didn’t meet Mac’s gaze. “She’s the best. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

An unexpected pang of jealousy hit Mac. Her busy life held a lot of good times, but was still lacking. She realized at that moment how much she wanted—needed someone to share her life with. “I’m happy for you, Steph.”

“Thanks,” she said, her face flushed. “I better get in there with the guys. I came here to work.”

“C’mon.” Mac linked arms with her. “I’ll join you.”

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Most of the volunteers headed home around seven in the evening. Mac fed them well on pizzas and White Castle hamburgers. In the end, the classroom was completed, all the desks lined up, and ready for the computers once the electric was done. One of the officers promised to get that finished on Monday morning. Mac felt incredibly happy and exhausted, but she was too energized to go home.

Kristy, on the other hand, seemed ready to drop. Her face showed her exhaustion, and Mac knew she needed rest. “Hey, want me to take you home?” Mac asked.

“No. I’m good. I’m going right home and to bed. I can shower next week when I wake up.”

“Eww. You’ll be pretty damn stinky by then.”

Kristy stuck her tongue out at Mac. “I don’t care. You’d be dirty too if you’d actually gotten your hands involved. You going to get a beer with the guys? Pepper says they’re all headed to that dive on Main Street they like. I don’t remember the name.”

“The Space, and no. I would have gotten dirty if anyone would have let me help out. I don’t like supervising.”

“Sure you do. You’re bossy and it suits you,” Kristy said. “Are you going home now?”

“No. I want to go to Marianne’s. I feel like dancing.”

“Does this have anything to do with Steph’s new girlfriend?” Kristy stared up at Mac with a knowing gaze on her face.

“No.” Mac didn’t lie exactly. But she wouldn’t admit Kristy was right. It might have something to do with the fact that Steph moved on. Or it could be that she needed to expend energy. Or both. “I need to go out and have fun. That’s all.”

“Yeah. Right. Want me to take Jace back to my apartment?” Kristy arched an eyebrow and gave Mac a wicked smile.

“Not necessary, but it would be nice if you drop him off at my house. I don’t expect to be home until late.”

“Okay, but don’t blame me if you decide to not to go home alone and you can’t because Jace is there.”

“Kristy, I’m not out to get laid.”

“You never are. Doesn’t mean it won’t happen.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Mac on the cheek. “Just be careful and have fun. I’ll see you at church.”

Mac waved and made her way to her car. In fifteen minutes, she pulled into the lot of Marianne’s at Newport on the Levee. The bar, which used to be called The Rainbow Lounge, sat between two other nightclubs. Crowds hadn’t formed yet due to the early hour, which was fine with Mac. She entered and took a seat at the far end of the bar.

The last time Mac visited Marianne’s, Steph accompanied her. Must have been six years earlier at least. They’d come after work with friends to celebrate something. Mac couldn’t remember what. She did remember that she left early after an argument with Steph. This time she didn’t recognize a single face. Those she saw made her feel old. Very old. How many of these women were even legal? She ordered a drink and watched the women around her while she waited.

At the end of their relationship, arguments were their only communication. Somehow, they’d managed to stay friends. Mac probably made that easier when she quit the county job and set up the OTR. Her Amaretto Sour arrived, and she sipped at it, wondering what she’d been thinking coming here. She was lonely. Plain and simple. In her younger days, she’d find a dance partner, and eventually go to the backseat of the car with her. Occasionally she went home with them, but that never came out well. She had a knack back then for picking women with butch ex-girlfriends, or even current girlfriends. Kristy hated her sexual exploits but never judged. Maybe she understood better than Mac did that Mac needed to get the wild out of her system.

It was well and truly out now, and Mac sat there wondering why she’d come back.

“Can I get you another one of those?”

A woman sat beside her and slid a twenty-dollar bill onto the bar. Mac gazed into light grey eyes that sparkled with desire. Perhaps this is why she'd returned. “Sure, as long as you join me.”

“That's the plan.” She spoke to the bartender, then gave her full attention to Mac. “I'm Rissa.”

“Mac.”

“Nice to meet you.” Rissa slid her hand across the bar to cover Mac's. “I haven't seen you here before.” Mac took in the view of Rissa's full breasts bursting to come through the thin fabric of her white T-shirt. She didn't wear a bra and erect nipples pointed at Mac as if to tease her. It worked and she held back from pressing her hand against them.

“I haven't been here in years.” Mac moved her stool closer to Rissa and leaned in as the music cued up. She smelled like roses. “Place hasn't changed. Just the faces.”

“All too damn young.”

“Exactly.” They shared a laugh. When their drinks arrived, Rissa raised her glass to tap it against Mac's. “Here's to age. Like a fine wine, we get better.”

“I'll drink to that.” Mac felt a buzz starting as she downed her second drink. “You like to dance?”

“Yep.”

Mac stood up and held out her hand. “Mind if I lead?”

“Not at all.” Rissa followed her to the already crowded dance floor. Rissa wore a black skirt just above her knees and Mac wondered if she was wearing any underwear. She hoped not.

Was she back to being a horndog? Maybe it was the light buzz, the electric atmosphere, or Rissa suddenly being plastered to her side, but horny described how Mac felt. Rissa wrapped one leg around Mac's and rubbed against her thigh. Nope. No underwear.

Talking proved impossible, as the music blasted, so Mac pulled Rissa closer and clamped her lips down on Rissa's mouth. Rissa leaned her head back, and soon their tongues were dancing to the same beat as their hips. Mac buried her hand in Rissa's thick, black hair. She felt the wetness between her own legs and brought her thigh up higher, grinding it into Rissa's center. Mac pulled back a little, and from the expression on Rissa's face, she thought the woman might have an orgasm right there on the dance floor.

Mac led Rissa to the door and toward the parking lot. They kissed and pawed each other until they got to Mac's car. “You want to leave your car here or follow me? I live about twenty minutes away.”

Rissa untucked Mac's T-shirt from her jeans and ran her fingers along her belly and up to her bra, sliding her fingers under the soft fabric. “Do we have to leave?”

Mac passed that phase years ago and now preferred a nice, comfy bed. “Yeah. But I promise it'll be worth it.”

Rissa kissed her again, gently biting her lower lip. “I'll follow you.”

“Okay,” Mac said, instantly feeling the loss of Rissa's touch. Her heart was pounding, and when she got the keys out of her pocket, she noticed her hands were shaking. It was the longest twenty-minute drive ever.

Rissa met Mac at the front door of the house. Mac juggled Rissa and her keys to get the door opened as Rissa's hands fumbled with the zipper of Mac's jeans. Once in the house, Mac pushed Rissa against the now closed door and pulled the T-shirt over her head, freeing those lovely breasts. Mac took one taut nipple into her mouth, suckling until Rissa nearly fell to the floor. Mac wrapped her arms around Rissa's slim waist. “I told you it would be worth the wait.”

“Yes, you did. Now, where's that bed?”

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Mac woke up to the sound of screams. It took a minute for her brain to register the screaming came from the hallway outside her bedroom. She jumped up and ran for the door but then realized she was naked.

She grabbed a T-shirt and her jeans, dressed at lightning speed and opened the bedroom door in time to be run over by someone wearing only a towel. They both tumbled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. In the distance, she heard Jace apologize before a door slammed.

The woman in the towel, whose name Mac couldn't remember, got to her feet and pointed toward the bathroom. “There's a man out there! Who is he? Are you married?”

“Huh? Married? No. That's Jace.”

The woman stood there with one hand on her hip, the other held the towel in place. “Who's Jace?”

“He's, um, he's—” What was he, exactly? Mac faltered. “He's Jace and he's staying with me for a while. What happened?”

“He came in the bathroom as I was getting out of the shower.”

Mac’s sleep-filled brain finally registered that the woman was dripping wet. Rachel. That was her name. Right? “I forgot. I mean, I should have told you to lock the door, but if I remember, we were busy when we came in.” She got to her feet and carefully closed the door. “Do you still need the bathroom?”

Grey eyes that Mac recalled were burning with desire a few hours earlier, now glared daggers at her. “No. I think I’ll go home.”

“I’m sorry.” Mac helped her retrieve most of her clothing. “Where’s your shirt?”

“I think it’s by the front door.”

“I’ll go get it,” Mac said and left. She walked into the living room but not before seeing Jace pop his head out of his room. He grinned. She got the T-shirt and pointed at him. “Not a word.”

Jace saluted and shut his door.

Mac handed Regina—or was it Rochelle—her shirt. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. You said that already.”

“I meant it.”

The anger clearly forgotten as she stood next to Mac. Her fingers touched Mac’s chin. “It was worth it, Mac.” She pressed her lips against Mac’s and sucked on her lower lip. “I have to go to work in a few hours, but I’d much rather stay here.”

Mac reached under her shirt and cupped naked breasts. “Call in sick?”

“Can’t. But maybe a rain check?” She slipped something into the pocket of Mac’s jeans. “Call me.” She kissed her one last time, lingering a bit too long, and quietly walked out of the house. Mac stood in her room until she heard Rissa’s car drive away. “Rissa. Dammit. That was her name.”

“You didn’t know her name?” Jace asked from the doorway of Mac’s room. “You do that a lot? Bring some chick home you don’t even know?”

“No, smart-ass, I don’t. Last night was an exception.” Mac remembered what an exception it was and as the heat rose to her cheeks. Sex talk with Jace—not what she wanted to do. Ever. “You get your shower.”

“I want to hear details.”

“Not a chance.” She shooed him out of her room. “Shower and church. That’s the order of the day.”

“Can I get breakfast first?”

“Maybe. Shower and we’ll talk later.”

Jace headed for the bathroom, a big smile on his face. “She was pretty hot, Mac. I hope she comes back.”

“Shower! And make the water extra cold.”

“You’re no fun,” he grumbled.

Mac waited until she heard the water running before she reached into the pocket of her jeans. She pulled out a scrap of paper with a phone number written on it. She put the number and Rissa’s name in her cell phone and wandered into the kitchen in search of food.

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For Mac, the best part of going to church was hearing Kristy sing. Sure, she believed in God and Jesus, but when she heard Kristy’s voice above all the others in the choir, she felt a peace she couldn’t describe. Kristy believed in God, did her best to live a good Christian life, and never once said a word about Mac being gay and going to hell for it, like some so-called “Christians” had been known to do.

There were others in the congregation that Mac felt sure thought she would go to hell, or that she shouldn’t even be allowed in the building. But if they ever said anything, Kristy defended her. Odd to think of tiny Kristy letting someone have it over whether or not Mac belonged in their church, but it was also cool. Mac had the best, best friend in the entire world.

The singing came to an end, but not before Kristy had a solo. Mac closed her eyes, absorbed the sound of Kristy’s voice, and sighed when it ended. She and Jace made their way to the choir loft and waited for Kristy to join them.

“That was the most awesome performance ever,” Jace said, his eyes glowing with excitement.

“It wasn’t a performance, Jace. We were singing our praise for God.” Kristy took his hand. “Let me introduce you to the choir director. He wants you to come to choir practice on Wednesday.” She said to Mac. “You stay put.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Besides, I’m looking forward to kicking your ass at Scrabble after lunch.”

“Mac, you’re in church.” Kristy shook her head. “I can’t take you anywhere.”

“Nope.” Mac patiently waited while Kristy did her introductions. Fifteen minutes later they were heading back to Mac’s house and Jace couldn’t stop talking about joining the choir.

“Hey, Kristy, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, Jace.” Kristy twisted in her seat so she could see him in the back of the car. “Be careful, though. I’m always honest.”

“I hope so. I was wondering how often Mac brings ladies home? Should I maybe be careful in the mornings?”

“Jace...” Mac wanted to warn him, but stopped at Kristy’s giggling. “What?”

“I told you I should have taken him home to stay at my place.”

“Ah ha.” Jace leaned back, his arms crossed over his chest and a broad smile on his face. “Man, you’re like a stud, Mac.”

“I’m not a stud and stop giggling.” Mac gripped the steering wheel hard enough to make her knuckles whiten. “Kristy may be right, but that’s the first time I’ve brought a woman home like that in years. Maybe even in more years than you’ve been alive, Jace.”

“Hardly,” Kristy said. “You were still out getting laid until you began dating Steph. Don’t lie to the boy.”

“I’m not lying, exactly.” Mac released a sigh. “Besides, I’m a grown woman and if I want to bring a chick home I can.” She glanced in the rearview mirror at Jace. He still beamed. “But you, on the other hand, cannot. No women. No men. No sex in my house. Got it?”

“That’s not fair,” Jace protested. “Why am I not allowed?”

“Because you’re only eighteen, and no way are you getting some girl pregnant or some guy so wrapped up in you that you don’t go to NKU in the fall. You have to finish high school and go to college. My house, my rules, and no, they do not apply to me.”

Jace harrumphed. “Kristy, has she always been this bitchy?”

“Pretty much.”

Jace frowned and leaned forward to meet Mac’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “And what makes you think I’m bringing a dude home?”

“I don’t assume anything, Jace,” Mac said. “If you’re gay, that’s your business. I only want you concentrating on school. Okay?” She pulled into her driveway, and they went into the house. When Jace passed her, Mac rubbed the top of his head. “I care about you, so I’m going to be hard on you.”

Jace stopped and hesitated before going to Mac and embracing her in a bone-crushing hug. He whispered, “Thanks,” and headed to his room.

Mac felt as proud as if she were his real mother.

“You gonna stand there all day, or are we gonna play?” Kristy already set up the game on the kitchen table.

“I’ll kick your ass as soon as I order pizza. I need fuel to think.”

“You need crap to give yourself a heart attack. You should eat healthier.”

Mac paused in dialing the phone. “This coming from the queen of the fast food places? If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I’d have ever gone to McDonalds. Or Roy Rogers, Taco Bell—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the point,” Kristy said. “Just don’t forget extra onions on my side.”

“Have I ever?”

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Mac spent the next several days getting the classroom in order. Twenty new computers were set up, and by Friday, everything was hooked up to the Internet and ready to go. The first GED class would be in mid-June, over two weeks away. The waiting list was long enough that there would be at least two more classes, and she suspected that demand would not slow down anytime soon.

Teachers were scheduled, and that particular project was finished for the moment. Mac felt a sense of pride at the accomplishment. First thing Monday morning, she would get to work on the recreation room. It was larger than the classroom, since they managed to merge four offices and one storage room. However, the furniture needed replacing, the ping pong table long ago lost its net, the pool table appeared beyond repair. The duct tape around the bottom of the pocket webbing wouldn’t keep the balls from falling to the floor forever.

Cindy left after lunch for an early start to her weekend, and the volunteer staff hadn’t yet arrived. Mac checked her watch. Quarter past three, which meant that Jace should be coming in. Since his fight with Oscar and after his detention was served, Mac put him to work. As if on cue, Jace wandered into her office. His leg felt better, and Oyler

High was close, so he walked to and from the OTR and school. Jace dropped his backpack and plopped into a chair across from her desk. Mac stopped reading her e-mail and patiently waited for him to speak.

“Life sucks.”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Care to be more specific?”

He stared at his hands, a sure sign of his uncertainty. “I seen Oscar today.”

“You *saw* him where?” He didn’t react to her correction of his grammar.

“He showed up at school during lunch. Me and a couple guys was outside hanging out, and Oscar comes up and starts his shit. First he tried to sell the other guys some crack, but then he started in on me.”

So Oscar was selling drugs? Mac made a quick note to call Pepper and let him know this. “The other guys...they didn’t buy from him, did they?”

“Hell, no. Jimmy’s got a scholarship—full ride—to OSU for basketball, and Scott’s as straight as they come. Jimmy went to get the principal. Scott and me walked away from Oscar, but he kept following us.”

Mac searched his face for any more bruises or cuts. She didn’t see anything there or on his hands. “Did he catch up to you?”

Jace nodded and met her eyes. “I walked away like you said, Mac. I turned my back, and me and Scott kept talking, ignoring him. But Oscar don’t like to be ignored and came up and grabbed my arm. He was gonna take a swing at me, but Scott stopped him.”

“Did Scott get hurt?”

“No, he didn’t have to do nothing. Scott was ready to fight him, but that’s when Ms. Aspers showed up. She’d called the cops, and Oscar lit out of there like his ass was on fire.”

“Did he come back after school let out? I assume nothing happened, since I didn’t get a call from *Mrs. Aspers*.”

“He was there, just not close enough for anyone to see him.” Jace gazed out the window of her office, as if he would see Oscar. Mac felt compelled to peek as well, but no one was there. “I don’t know if he followed me or not, but he was watching me. Oscar can be a mean dude. I don’t want nothing to happen to you—”

“Me? Jace, what makes you think something would happen to me?”

He wouldn’t meet her eyes and stared at his hands again. “‘Cause he said something would.”

“When?”

“Back when we got in that fight. He said he’d show you a real man, and that he’d get you when no one was around. I didn’t think he was serious, like he was saying shit to piss me off, but after today...”

“You never told me he said that. What else happened that you’re not telling me?” When Jace didn’t answer, Mac got up and pulled a chair next to his. “You’re a good kid, Jace Cano, and I know you know that. No matter what, nothing that’s happened or is going to happen is your fault. But you need to tell me if Oscar made threats against you or me. I need to get the police involved.”

“That’s what he said you better not do.” Miserable brown eyes met hers. There were tears on his cheeks. “If you call the cops, he said he’ll rape you and make me watch. He thinks I told the cops that he was selling drugs the night of the shooting. Mac, I swear I had no idea he sold drugs, and I didn’t tell that to the cops, either. I didn’t know it that night, but the guys that got killed were his dealers.”

Mac grabbed a tissue off her desk and handed it to him to wipe his tears away. “The cops figured it out for themselves. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were searching for Oscar right now. But to be sure, I’m going to call a cop over here right now and we’re going to make a report. Jace, you can’t let this kind of thing go without involving the police. That’s what they’re here for.”

“I want to. I really do, but they ain’t gonna believe me. I’m just some stupid kid that’s probably as involved in drugs as Oscar and anything I say will go nowhere.”

“What makes you say that? The police aren’t going to be like that, Jace. I promise.”

He shrugged and blew his nose. “They always are, Mac. If you’re black, go to a black school, and live in a black neighborhood, that’s how it is. They make a report and nothing else ever happens.”

“I know that’s the way it happens sometimes, but it won’t be like that this time. I promise. And it’s not because I’m white, either. Don’t you know what I’ve been doing here the last five years?” She nudged him so he’d look at her again. “I’ve been working with the police, local businesses, anyone who lives around here, trying to change all that. It’s slow going, of course, because trust is hard to build up, but change is happening and you’re going to prove it to them. We’ll get this asshole Oscar off the streets. You with me on this?”

She saw indecision in his eyes, but he nodded. “I’d do anything for you, Mac. You know that.”

Mac gave him a quick hug. “Good. Go clean your face, and I’ll call the station. I’ve got connections, and I’ll get a good officer over here to get this going.” She shoed him out with a wave of her hand and called Pepper on his cell phone. He would be at the center within the hour. It felt good to know people with influence.

Once Jace returned, Mac thought it best to let him be, but Jace had other plans. "So, what's the project you want me working on?"

"It can wait."

"No, I want to do it now. Please?"

Mac put an arm around his shoulders. "We need to clean out the second floor. I thought we could maybe come over tomorrow afternoon if you're not busy. You and I can get this knocked out in a few hours and afterwards we can get pizza and rent a movie. What do you say?"

Jace cocked his head to the side and eyed her suspiciously. "You're bribing me. I like it, but what do you want in return?"

"A nice job." She pointed him to the box of cleaning supplies. "Take that upstairs. Anything that's broken and unusable, put in the garbage bags. I need to get some stuff done before Pepper gets here, so after he does his report and all, I'll be able to help you."

"Pepper's coming?" Jace brightened and surprised Mac with a smile. "Man, that dude is cool. If he's the cop, then I guess it'll be okay."

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Time may be a relative thing, but for Mac it went by way too fast. Jace would graduate from high school on Saturday. As a gift, she and Kristy paid for him to have his senior pictures taken, even though it was late in the year and they wouldn't be in the yearbook. Mac felt it important for him to have them. They also paid to purchase his yearbook. They'd offered to send him to the prom, but he was too shy to ask anyone and didn't want to go alone. Mac wondered if he was scared that Oscar might show up.

Pepper made sure to get a protection order for Mac and Jace against Oscar, though those things rarely worked the way they were meant to. She understood Pepper did his best, but until Oscar did more than make threats, he couldn't arrest him.

She'd played with the idea of transferring Jace to a school farther away, but two of his friends were going to NKU.

Cindy leaned her head in Mac's office. "You busy?"

"Define busy."

"Then that's a no." Cindy walked in and sat down. "I've got everything planned for your trip. You have one meeting with the county about your childcare program on Monday. Nothing else on the agenda."

"Seriously? One meeting? How'd you do that? I know I've got a helluva lot more work to do than that."

"I'm good. Besides, Heather's going to help me with the grant writing, and she has an accountant friend who's going to go over the books for us as a favor. So there's no reason for you to be concerned about anything. In short, have a good trip."

Mac leaned back in her chair, stunned, as always, at the work Cindy did. "Thanks. You're amazing."

"I know." She stood up and paused in the doorway. "I'll be picking up Jace Monday evening."

"Why?"

She arched an eyebrow at Mac. "You don't honestly think I'm going to let a teenage boy stay at your house for a month while you're gallivanting around Europe? He may be eighteen, but that's still teenager enough that he needs supervision."

"Does Jace know about this?"

"He will when you tell him. Make sure he packs at least a week's worth of clothes so we're not doing laundry all the time. I can run him to your house if he forgets anything."

"What made you decide to do this? What did George say?"

"My grumpy-ass husband was all for it. Especially after all this nonsense with Oscar. I'd feel safer if Jace stayed with us. I think he'll feel better, too. Besides, Tommy's room makes a nice guest room. He'll be comfy."

"I'm sure of that, but he won't know what to do with all the trees." Mac smiled, thinking about Jace being at Cindy's farm for a month. It would be an interesting learning curve. "Just don't work him to death."

"Oh, I won't. Can't say that about George, though."

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Lightning flashed in the background and illuminated the night sky. Mac was close to her target, and she allowed her instincts to guide her. The road curved ahead, and while she couldn't see much through the driving rain, she knew he lurked close by. Sword in hand, she inched forward, her feet sloshing in the puddles.

She saw the silver streak too late and fell to her knees. Blood gushed from the center of her body.

"Gotcha!" The childish giggling was so out of place that Mac ended up joining in. It felt ridiculous, but there it was. "I killed your ass," Jace said, doing a celebratory dance in his gaming chair. He held the game controller up like it a trophy. "I win."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Mac set her controller down, stood, and stretched her back. "I think I'm getting too old for these marathon gaming sessions."

"Nah. But you might need glasses."

"What makes you think I need glasses?"

"Seriously? I was so right up in your grill. You could have seen me coming a mile away," Jace said. "Face it. You now suck and I rule."

"That right?" She reached for him, but Jace moved fast, jumped out of the gaming chair and ran toward the kitchen. "Get back here. I got a point to make."

"Uh-uh. Kristy! I need help in here." Jace turned away from Mac long enough for her to close the distance and tackle him to the ground. She tickled him until tears came to his eyes. "I give! I give!"

Kristy stood over them, her arms folded across her chest. "Children, dinner is ready if either of you can stop playing long enough to eat."

Jace wriggled away from Mac and ran to the kitchen. Kristy and Mac joined him at a more sedate pace. "Thanks for cooking," Mac said to Kristy and plopped into the chair across from Jace. "You keep doing this, and I'm going to be very spoiled. I doubt I'll ever be able to get a woman who cooks half as good as you."

"You'll survive," Kristy said as she placed the last of the food on the table. "Besides, if she only cooks half as good as me that means you'll lose weight."

Jace giggled and Mac playfully kicked him. "I don't need to lose weight."

Kristy eyed her for a moment. "Whatever makes you feel better, dear. Now, Jace, it's your turn to say grace."

"Okay." He reached for Mac's hand before saying, "Dear heavenly Father, thank you for this great food that Kristy made, bless this meal, and watch over Kristy and Mac when they're in Europe and bring them back safely. Amen."

Mac felt a swell of pride at that moment. Despite reservations about being away from Jace for so long, she had a feeling he would be fine. Especially with Cindy looking out for him. "Before I forget, Cindy and George want you to stay with them during my trip to Europe."

"Seriously? Why?" He didn't sound incensed or upset just genuinely curious.

"Cindy's worried that something will happen while I'm gone. It'll make her feel better if you're right there next to her. And I think she's planning to put you to work at the OTR."

"Cool. I was hoping I could work there over the summer."

Kristy dished out pieces of her famous herb-baked chicken to each of them. "See, no worries then."

"I wasn't worried," Mac said, perhaps a bit too fast. When Jace peered up at her from his food, she amended, "Not really worried."

"It's cool, Mac. I don't mind if you're worried about me."

"Good." Mac was probably the first person in his life who ever cared enough to worry about him. "You okay that we're leaving the day after your graduation?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" Jace stuffed mashed potatoes into his mouth as if someone would take them away at any moment. "Besides, I've got a date."

"Oh? Who?" Mac asked.

Jace wouldn't face her. "Amanda Rice. I don't think you know her. She transferred to our school at the beginning of the year."

Mac and Kristy exchanged amused expressions. Kristy said, "Is she pretty?"

"Um, to me she is." He stopped playing with his food and lifted his gaze. "I mean, she's not like a cheerleader or whatever, but she's fun and cool to be around. She loves video games and baseball. We're going over to Newport for a few hours then back to her house. Her mom and dad'll be home. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is," Kristy said before Mac could. He looked so damn cute as he talked about this girl he liked that Mac could hardly contain her smile. She wanted to ask more questions, but Kristy subtly shook her head. Probably best she didn't.



“You’re a legal adult now, Jace,” Mac said. “Only thing I ask is that you be careful.” She waited for him to meet her gaze. “You know what I mean by careful, right?”

“I think so.” Jace pushed his plate away. “I’ll be in my room for a while. Okay?”

“Sure.” Mac waited until his door shut before saying to Kristy, “Did you know he has a girlfriend?”

“Nope. Weird though, because he’s been talking my ear off lately. Guess he’s still shy about that sort of thing.”

“I hope so. I don’t want him to end up in trouble.”

“Trust him. He’ll be careful. Besides, I left a box of condoms in the top drawer of his dresser.”

Mac nearly spit out the sip of water she’d taken. “Kristy!”

“I said trust him, but that doesn’t mean to be stupid,” she said. “I’d love to see the look on his face when he finds them.”

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“Yes, I do. Now, let’s go get you packed.”

Mac followed Kristy as she put the remnants of dinner away. “We’ve got three days yet. I don’t need to pack.”

“Oh yes you do. I know you, and I also know you’ll forget a ton of things.”

“Such as?”

“Toothpaste, toothbrush, socks, undies—”

“I’ve never forgotten socks,” Mac said. “Are you ever going to let me live down forgetting my undies when we went to Mammoth Cave?”

“Nope.”

“Nice.”

“C’mon you big baby.” Kristy took her hand and led her toward the bedroom.

## Chapter Four

Mac watched Kristy stare out the tiny window of the plane. The map on the itchy bitsy TV screen said they were about an hour from Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. Mac could hardly believe it. A few weeks ago she learned that Kristy's cancer returned. Now they were on a trip to strike items from her bucket list. It felt so frivolous to be wasting time and money on a trip this big. But the smile on Kristy's face—the pure joy—made it worth it.

Mac wanted to put the worst of it aside and enjoy their time left. If only it could be that easy.

"We're almost there," Kristy said.

"Good. I want to take a nap soon as we get to the hotel."

"Nap? No way. We've got to hit the ground running. I want to get some shopping done before we meet Lenie tomorrow."

"Why is she meeting us here?"

"She promised me a tour of the Louvre, and since she has work to do there anyway, she's going to meet us. She's only got a couple of days to hang out, though."

"Don't sound so disappointed. We're staying two weeks with her."

"I know. Just doesn't seem long enough."

The whole trip couldn't be long enough for Mac. She wanted another fifty years with Kristy. Many years ago, Kristy decided that she would grow up, get married, and have lots of babies for Mac to spoil and send home. Kristy wanted to be a grandma and eventually be Mac's roommate in the old folks' home where they'd listen to Dolly Parton and Metallica and drive the nurses crazy.

"Earth to Mac." Kristy nudged her. "Are you listening to me?"

"Nope. Sorry."

"Humph." Kristy paused a moment and Mac felt she knew exactly what Mac was thinking about. "Maybe you do need a nappy."

"I do and you'll be taking one with me."

"Mac, I could never do that. I'm not that kind of girl."

"Ha ha ha. Smart-ass."

Kristy giggled, and despite being a bit grumpy, Mac laughed as well. "I am and that's why you love me."

"Is that why?"

"Yep. Besides, I sprung for this trip. Another reason to love me."

"No, a reason to want to smack you for buying the tickets before I even knew you wanted to go. I can pay my way, you know."

"And we agreed I can spend my money how I want to. Besides, you needed a vacation, and I know darn well that the only way to get you out of the OTR is to buy you a plane ticket."

"You think you know me so well?" Mac asked.

"Of course I do. You won't let a ticket like this one go to waste. That's why I got Cindy to clear your schedule. Anyway, I don't think there's anyone in this world who knows you better than I do," Kristy said. "Though I hope some lucky woman gets to know you someday. You deserve it."

"Shut up." Mac playfully shoved her. "No matchmaking, Kristy Belle Baker. You promised."

"I did not. I promised to stop setting you up on blind dates. Matchmaking is much more serious business."

"Kristy —"

She held up her hand to stop Mac. "Nope. It's done."

"What's done?"

Kristy's eyes widened, and it was obvious she hadn't meant to say that. "Nothing."

"You found someone to set me up with, didn't you?" Mac tried to look her in the eyes, but Kristy returned to gazing out window. "Who is it? Is she going to show up at the OTR when we get back? Am I accidentally on purpose going to run into her?"

"I'm not telling—no—and I hope not."

Kristy had a smile on her face but wouldn't answer any more questions from Mac. No matter how hard Mac tried.

It was going to be a long four weeks.

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Mac gazed into the blue of the afternoon sky, determined not to look down. No matter what. Not even if someone offered her a million dollars. Well, maybe for a million.

"It's incredible!" Kristy stood next to her jumping up and down with excitement. "I can see the whole city. Mac, there's the Statue of Liberty! I wonder if it's a copy or something."

"Yes, sort of," Mac said, still keeping her eyes to the sky.

"Sort of?"

"There are two of them here. I think that one was a replica made with July 4th on it and the date of the storming of the Bastille."

"Wow. How do you know all this stuff?"

Mac smirked, used to Kristy's amazement with her trivia-packed mind. "I read. Are we done yet?"

"No way. I've only seen one side. I'm going all the way around."

"Okay." Mac closed her eyes and took two steps back so she wouldn't see the height so well. She stood on the top deck of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Were it not for her acrophobia, Mac would enjoy it more. But today wasn't about her.

She searched the crowd and found Kristy wriggling in front of people to get a better view. Kristy stood five feet two if she wore heels and weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. Most of the crowd parted, probably thinking she was a kid.

Mac chose to stay along the elevator walls, still able to see parts of the ancient city, but not so close to the wired viewing area that her knees weakened. In another hour, they were scheduled to meet Kristy's friend Lenie Zonneveldt. Mac checked the time as she followed Kristy to another side of the tower.

"Mac, can you come over here please?"

Mac eyed Kristy, who held out her camera to an older man with two cameras hanging from his neck. "Kristy—

"You don't have to look, you big baby. Stand here and get a picture with me."

Mac did as asked, catching a glimpse of the city and the ant-sized people walking around below them. It made her dizzy.

Kristy set up the shot as she always did, instructed the man on how to operate her camera, and cuddled into Mac's side. "Say cheese!"

Mac held her close and smiled through all three photos. Kristy thanked the man, and they headed for the elevator. Mac was relieved.

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An hour later they were at the entrance to the *Musee du Louvre*. Mac surveyed the throng of people in the courtyard, and her gaze landed on a young man and his girlfriend. They were seated on the same marble bench as Kristy, splashing each other with water from the fountain behind them. Mac didn't speak French, but she noticed a woman who stood on the other side of the fountain wagging her finger at a boy who was probably her son. His hand dripped with water. She must have been scolding him for doing the same thing.

The sun was bright and it caused her to sweat. "Damn, it's hot."

"Yes. You're a hot babe." Kristy winked at her.

"That's true. I've always been a chick magnet."

"But what kind of chick are you a magnet for? Cute little femmes or tough butches?"

Mac pretended to consider her answer. "You know how I hate labels. But I'd say I'm seeking a woman who isn't afraid to get dirty or be a girl."

Kristy wrinkled her nose. "Girls hate dirt. No wonder you're single."

Mac stuck her tongue out. "Look who's talking. I can list at least a dozen guys who would walk over broken glass to drink your bath water."

"Eww."

"Just sayin'."

"I won't be that gross, but I know a few women who'd like to catch you."

"As long as you promise not to set me up."

"But—"

Mac placed a finger over Kristy's lips. "No. When I'm ready, I'll find her."

"You won't find her at Marianne's. Those chicks are good for one night and one night only. I don't want you to be alone, Mac."

"I'm not," Mac said. She was so used to this conversation she could have it by herself. "I'll be fine. Besides, I called Rissa before we left. We're going to get together when I get home."

"Seriously? Rissa? Mac, you can do better than that."

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it. You couldn't even remember her name the next morning."

"How the hell—have you been talking to Jace?"

Kristy flashed a wide grin. "Of course. I now have a spy, and he tells me everything."

"Yippee."

"Like I said, you can do much better than that. You deserve better than some chick whose name you barely remember."

Mac shrugged. "It's good enough for now. Why are we discussing my love life?"

"Because when I'm gone—"

"Is far enough away not to worry about." Mac put off the inevitable and would continue to do so as long as possible. "Besides, I'm thirty-eight. There's no rush."

The expression on Kristy's face made it clear the conversation wasn't over. Mac deliberately glanced away. "So, what does Lenie look like again?"

"Cute, tall, wavy hair, and awesome blue eyes."

"That narrows it down to about half the women here." She sighed and Kristy stood up and wrapped her arms around Mac.

"Why are you hugging me?"

"Because I can and I think you need it." Kristy released her from the hug and said, "Lenie should already be here."

"Should we call her?"

"No. Let's give her five more minutes."

"Okay." Mac went back to observing the crowd around them. She should have asked Kristy to bring a picture. She figured more than five minutes passed when her gaze fell upon the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen. There was a quiver in her belly the moment Mac gazed into eyes as blue as the ocean and hair like the sun on a warm summer day. Her breath caught in her throat. No woman had affected her like this before. For the first time in her life, Mac was speechless.

The woman smiled and Mac did as well, hoping she didn't appear like a complete dork. Even though she knew she did.

"Lenie!" A blur of blonde hair whipped past Mac as Kristy rushed to the woman who Mac now recognized as Lenie. "You made it," Kristy said, her face buried in Lenie's chest. For once, Mac envied Kristy's height.

"Of course I did," Lenie said, her voice soft, with a touch of an accent. "You know I keep my promises. I would have been here sooner, but the train was delayed." She tucked a few curly locks of hair behind her right ear. Mac followed every move of her fingers. There was a hint of brown mixed in with the blonde. Mac wanted to reach out and feel the softness of it.

"It's good to see you in the flesh again. I almost forgot how pretty you are. Don't you think she's pretty, Mac?"

Mac nodded as speech still failed her.

"Oh, sorry." Kristy stepped back so she stood between them. "Mac, this is Lenie. Lenie, Mac."

Lenie held out her hand, the grip was strong and it sent a flutter of excitement through Mac from the touch. "Nice to meet you, though I feel like I already know you."

"Me, too," Mac said. At the lameness of her words, the heat of a blush warmed her face. She held Lenie's hand a few seconds too long before letting go.

"Shall we go in?" Lenie asked.

"Sure." Kristy linked arms with her, and they headed for the entrance. It took Mac a moment to follow them.

"Kristy tells me you've been busy at your center, Mac."

"Yes." She shook her head as if she could clear her thoughts that way. "Did she tell you she got a social media campaign going that resulted in us getting ten new volunteers? My assistant director, Cindy, has already put them to work. It's amazing."

“It must feel good to have people coming together like that.”

“And for the kids,” Kristy said. “You have no idea what wonderful work she does, Lenie.”

“I’m sure she does know, because I know you, Kristy Belle,” Mac said. “You’ve probably talked her ears off about it.”

Kristy stopped long enough to stick her tongue out at Mac before they entered the museum. “I’ll go get our tickets.”

Mac stood next to Lenie, her hands shoved into the pockets of her cargo shorts. Nerves kept her from talking, though a million things floated through her mind. How old was Lenie? Was she single? She really, really hoped Lenie was single. She relied on her gaydar and Lenie set it off the moment she smiled at Mac.

“How was your flight?” Lenie asked, her voice as smooth as ice cream.

“It was okay. Kristy slept most of the way, and I caught up on some reading. Did it take you long to get here?”

“About six hours by train normally, but there was a delay, so it was closer to seven.”

“Wow. Seven hours? That’s got to be boring.” Mac gazed at Lenie, whose eyes twinkled when she laughed.

“I’m used to it. I come here at least once a month.”

“That must be interesting.”

“Not really,” Lenie said. “I have to be here, and I don’t get a lot of time to sightsee. I have three museums I do business with, and I hardly ever get to visit them properly.”

“That sucks.”

“It does indeed.”

“Got them!” Kristy waved the tickets at them. “Let’s go.”

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The Louvre turned out to be larger than Mac expected. Kristy and Lenie took off to a particular display that Kristy wanted to see. That left Mac to wander around on her own. Art didn’t excite her so she walked along and glanced at the paintings, stopping when something caught her interest.

One particular painting made her look twice at it. After three hours of gazing at the thousands of paintings the famous museum offered, Mac found this the most bizarre. She doubted she’d ever seen anything quite like it.

The portrait of a man—at least that’s what the plaque said—had, instead of a face, pieces of fruit that shaped his head, eyes, mouth, and nose. It reminded her of the lady in the Chiquita Banana commercials. Weird.

“Guiseppe Archiboldo. A mannerist painter best known for his work in Vienna and Prague.”

The voice was soothing and oddly familiar. Mac shivered and found Lenie standing so close they were nearly nose to nose.

“His brush strokes are precise, yet delicate, like a lover’s caress.” Lenie drew in a breath. “Beautiful.”

“Yeah.” Mac remained mesmerized by Lenie’s voice and the way her eyes lit up as she continued.

“It’s amazing that this painting is from the mid-1500s and yet the colors are so vibrant and clear.”

They appeared old and faded to Mac. “I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?”

Mac pointed to the banana person. “That. Who makes a face out of fruit? It’s plain weird.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t get art in general. Most of the time it looks like a little kid tossed paint on a canvas and a proud momma framed it.”

“Ah. Well, this is mannerism and not so much like what you describe. It’s called *Summer*. It’s full of symbolism. The golden color of the jacket is a not-so-subtle reference to the Order of the Golden Fleece, members of which wore golden collars into battle. They were a chivalrous brotherhood. It’s thought the painting was done to be a gift from Emperor Maximilian, the secular head of the Catholic Empire, to the Protestant Augustus as a gesture of peace.”

“You got all that from the painting?”

Lenie’s nose crinkled with her smile. “No. I got all that from university. I was an art history major.”

“I only get that it reminds me of the Chiquita Banana lady.”

“Who?”

“Someone from a TV commercial. I only like the paintings with landscapes. Those I can enjoy.”

“There are certainly plenty of those to view. Shall we catch up to Kristy? She sent me to find you.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Kristy hurried toward them. "What's the plan? Tell me you guys don't have other plans now. We still have the *Musée d'Orsay* to see."

"All in one day?" Lenie asked.

Mac spoke up. "Lenie, you have to know that Kristy is like the Energizer Bunny. She keeps going and going and going. So either keep up or be left behind."

"Then I guess we'd better go," Lenie said. She linked arms with Kristy and Mac and led them out of the museum.

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Kristy slowed enough for dinner around seven. Lunch had been a baguette, but Mac insisted on a full meal at the end of the day. She worried that Kristy would get sick if she didn't eat well. They entered the first restaurant they saw, Mac being lured in by the smell of fresh bread and garlic.

"I'm so hungry I might try one of everything," Mac said.

"You're exaggerating." Kristy followed Mac to a table near the window and chose the seat across from her. Lenie sat beside Mac. "We had lunch a few hours ago."

"Yes. However, you've been snacking on everything you could get your little hands on. I don't know how you put so much food away. You're like a garbage disposal."

For the hundredth time that day, Kristy stuck her tongue out at Mac. "I'm on vacation, and I plan to get as much of the Parisian experience as I can."

"Even if it makes you sick to your stomach?"

"Yes." Kristy grabbed a menu after ordering a bottle of wine. Her French was passable, with a little help from Lenie. "*Merci.*"

"*Du tout,*" Lenie said with a laugh. "And if you get a bellyache from the food, it's probably going to be the chocolate. You should wait until you're in Amsterdam to go after chocolate. Ours is much better."

"Oh, I like the sound of that. Okay. I'll stay away from the chocolate. But I'm still pigging out on whatever I can."

"You do that." Lenie excused herself to go to the restroom.

The moment Lenie stepped out of earshot, Kristy leaned across the table, her expression mischievous. "What do you think of Lenie?"

"She's nice."

"And?"

Mac peered over the menu at Kristy, who grinned like the Cheshire Cat. "And..."

"Oh come on, Mac. You like her. I know you do."

Mac shrugged. "Sure. She's nice."

"And?"

"Will you stop?"

"Ah ha! You do like her."

"I said she was nice."

"And cute."

"And cute." Mac so did not want to go there.

"And your type."

"Who happens to live on another continent. Kristy, I'm not interested in an international affair."

"Pity." The crisp response surprised them both as Lenie had returned from the restroom. "You never know what you might be missing."

Mac held the menu, none of which she could read, high enough to hide the growing blush on her face.

A delicate, slim finger pulled the menu down, and Mac was greeted by a pair of twinkling blue eyes as Lenie gazed at her. She could so easily melt into those eyes.

What the hell? She barely knew this woman. It'd been so long since she and Steph had been together. Right before Kristy's first cancer diagnosis. And Kristy was right about one thing—a night or two with Rissa wouldn't do much good. It might satisfy Mac for a while, but she needed more. She was lonely. But so lonely that after a few hours with a beautiful woman she was ready to jump into a relationship? Not to mention hoping for a few nights of hot sex?

Yes. She crossed her legs, trying to slow down the throbbing in her crotch. But it was more than that, and she knew it. Lenie drew Mac to her in a way Steph never did.

"Mac?" Lenie's soft voice cut through her musings.

“What?”

Lenie opened her mouth but closed it as if changing her mind. “Can you read the menu?”

“Uh, no. My French sucked in high school and is pretty nonexistent now.”

“Sucked?” Kristy piped up. Mac had forgotten she was there. “You flunked. No one could get you through that class. As I recall, whenever Madame Winters said ‘*ménage*’ you’d say ‘*à trois*’ and get kicked out of class.”

Mac giggled. “It’s still funny.”

“You have the mind of a thirteen-year-old boy.”

“What?” Mac feigned innocence.

Kristy said, “Sixty-nine.”

Mac doubled over from laughing.

Kristy gave Lenie a long-suffering look. “See what I mean?”

“Hmm. It’s a serious condition indeed. What do you suggest we do about it?”

Kristy sighed dramatically. “I have no idea. She’s been like this since we were ten.”

“Ten?” Lenie asked. “Seems a bit young for puberty.”

“Heh.” Kristy shook a finger at Mac. “That one was born prepubescent and hasn’t changed yet.”

“Was not,” Mac said.

“Was, too.”

“Not.”

“Too.”

Mac turned to Lenie. “She’s always got to have the last word.”

“Do not.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Yes, you do,” Lenie said. “When we chat on the phone or on Skype, you always speak last.”

“I do not.” Kristy crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. “This is a conspiracy.”

“Really?” Mac said. “Poor little Kristy Belle.”

“That’s right. And you, Mac, are double mean for not protecting me.”

“So I’m mean?”

“Yep.”

“I can’t win.” Mac sighed dramatically.

“Nope.”

“Women,” Kristy and Lenie chorused, and they all three burst into a fit of laughter.

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Dinner lasted until nine, by which time Kristy looked exhausted. Mac followed her to their room, and when she switched on the light, Kristy winced in pain. “I knew you were getting sick.”

“Off, please.”

“Soon as I get you settled and into bed,” Mac said. It took a few minutes, and soon Mac sat at Kristy’s side in the dark. “You need anything? Water maybe?”

“I already took my meds,” Kristy whispered. “I need sleep. Go hang out with Lenie. No sense in you not having any fun.”

“Kris, I’m here to hang out with you. How can I have fun when you’re sick?”

Kristy took hold of Mac’s hand and squeezed it lightly. “I’m going to be sick for a long time. Go. Enjoy the evening. We’ll hang out in the morning.”

Mac hesitated. “I don’t feel right—”

“Go. Please.” Kristy released her hand and gave her a weak shove. “Bye bye.”

“Fine. Stubborn ass.” Mac paused at the door. “I won’t be gone long.”

“Yes, you will. Have fun.”

Mac quietly closed the door and joined Lenie in the lobby.

“Migraine?”

“Yes. Good guess.”

“No guess. My mother was always ashen when she had a migraine. Not much we can do to help her.”

“I know,” Mac said. “I hate leaving her like this.”

“She needs dark, quiet, and sleep.” Lenie linked arms with Mac. “We need a long walk and fresh air. What do you say? Wander through Paris with me?”

Mac felt that now familiar excitement at Lenie’s closeness. The timbre of her voice made her weak in the knees, and her smile reassured her that Kristy would be fine without them. She’d be a fool not to accept Lenie’s invitation. Besides, Kristy would kick her ass if she didn’t. “Show me Paris.”

The evening air was cool, and it felt cool against Mac’s skin. She hated the heat. Paris wasn’t muggy like Cincinnati, and she appreciated that. As they stepped away from the hotel, Lenie pulled her hair into a ponytail. Not all her curls obeyed, leaving a few strands along the side of her face. The ponytail accented Lenie’s narrow face. Mac felt the urge to run her fingers along the delicate lines of Lenie’s cheeks. Full lips that were ready to kiss formed a smile that made Mac smile back.

Then she realized Lenie caught her staring and glanced away.

“Any place you’d like to see?”

“I think it would be cool to see the *Arc du Triomphe* again. I didn’t get to take a picture earlier. We saw it from the boat on the way to the Eiffel Tower.”

“Ah, that’s easy,” Lenie said and sauntered down the sidewalk. Her strides were long, and Mac moved faster than normal to keep up. Lenie wasn’t taller than Mac, but she sure could power walk.

“You walk like you live here. Ever thought of moving to Paris, since you come here so often for work?”

“Yes. I’ve thought of moving here, perhaps getting a job at the Louvre.”

“Why don’t you?”

Lenie didn’t answer right away. “I like my job at the Rijks. It’s the most important art museum in my country, and it’s special to be so close to our heritage. It’s hard to explain how much it means to me.”

“No, I can understand that. I feel that way about my work.”

“Kristy’s proud of your work,” Lenie said.

“Kristy’s biased. But I do what I can.”

“From what I understand, you do a lot more than that.” Lenie stopped at an intersection. “She says you live and breathe your work.”

“She probably says how unhealthy it is, too. She’d rather I spend more time playing than working.” Mac saw something in Lenie’s eyes that she couldn’t discern. Like Lenie wanted to comment but held back. “It’s not like I have a family to go home to, so work keeps me busy and it’s necessary. The OTR is still having growing pains that I have to deal with.”

The light changed, and they crossed the street. Lenie kept quiet for a few minutes. “Kristy told me what happened to your parents. I was sorry to hear it.”

Mac’s eyes turned skyward as if to ask God for patience. “I love Kristy. She’s my best friend, but damn, she talks too much.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s that she’s told you everything there is to know about me.” Mac laid her hand on Lenie’s arm to urge her to stop. “My parents’ car accident was horrific—it was so many years ago that I can finally not think of it every single minute of my day—but it’s part of why I work so much. Keeps me busy, you know?”

“I do. I never knew my father, but when I lost my mother, it was like my whole world stopped. I didn’t know if I should even get out of bed anymore.”

Now Mac understood what she’d seen earlier in Lenie’s expression. Sadness. “Why don’t we pass up this subject for now? I’m sure we can find something else to chat about. Right?”

“Of course.”

But they were silent as they continued walking, and Mac wondered if Lenie needed to talk about her mother. Kristy told Mac that Lenie’s mother had died a year ago this past spring, so it must be fresh in her mind. Mac remembered how that felt. For a long time, the faces of her parents haunted her every waking minute and sometimes into her dreams for a long time. She imagined it would be the same for Lenie.

Will it be the same when Kristy dies? Mac tossed that question away immediately. That would not happen for awhile, and she refused to think about it. Even if it came to mind every time Kristy got sick, like tonight. It would be worse than losing her parents. Kristy was her rock, and without her, Mac would never have survived that time in her life. How would she survive losing Kristy?

“Mac?” Lenie’s voice penetrated her brain, and Mac realized she’d been talking to her. “You okay?”

“Sure. Sorry about that. My brain decided to go off on its own for a while.”

Lenie gave her a half smile as if to say she understood where Mac’s brain went. “I was perhaps asking too personal a question anyway.”



“No, go ahead and ask. You’re friends with Kristy, too. Doubt there’s much you can ask that’s personal at this point.”

That made Lenie laugh, and Mac thoroughly enjoyed the sound of it. “I wondered if you have a girlfriend?”

“You were?” Mac was surprised and excited at the same time. “I think I smell a little Kentucky fried rat-fink.”

“I’m sorry?” The expression on Lenie’s face was priceless. Confusion and a hint of humor mixed together.

“No. No, I don’t have a girlfriend, but I think we have a friend who’s playing matchmaker.”

“Kristy? Why would she do that?”

Mac shook her finger at Lenie. “You don’t know how devious that little woman can be. She’s been pushing me to go out and find someone to date instead of—” Mac felt self-conscious about speaking her thoughts aloud. She wanted to say something about the one-night stands she typically enjoyed, but was too embarrassed. Weird.

“She wants you to have a relationship. One that lasts longer than twenty-four hours.”

“Exactly. I think she’s trying to set us up.”

“Is it working?” Lenie asked. Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“That depends on you. Is it?” Lenie surprised Mac when she lightly touched Mac’s cheek with the tips of her fingers.

The touch sent tingles down Mac’s spine, and she closed her eyes at the intimacy of it. “I think so.”

“Me, too,” Lenie said.

Mac released the breath she’d been holding. When she opened her eyes, Lenie held her gaze. “We were on our way to see the *Arc du Triomphe*.”

“So we were.” Lenie held out her hand. Mac took it, letting the contact rush through her body. “Shall we?”

“Oh yes,” Mac said. At that point, she’d have followed Lenie into the gates of Hell.

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They got back to the hotel close to midnight. They’d giggled for the past few blocks and tried to quietly contain their hilarity in the silent lobby. It didn’t work well, and Mac wondered if their laughter would wake someone up.

“I’d better get up to our room. I’m sure Kristy is passed out, but she’ll be raring to go the second the sun is up. We’ll both need sleep.”

“You’re right, of course.” Lenie still held her hand and appeared reluctant to let it go. “I suppose I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Yep.” Mac released Lenie’s hand, missing the feel of it. She kissed Lenie on the cheek and headed to her room.

Kristy was still asleep, so Mac tried to be quiet. She put on her sleeping shorts and removed her bra but kept her T-shirt on and sat on the edge of the bed. She started taking off her socks but stopped. She was too awake to even try to sleep. Thoughts of Lenie swirled in her head, and she knew she’d be unable to rest. She got up and walked to the window.

The street below was deserted, which didn’t surprise her. The clock beside the bed glowed a bright-red one-fifteen a.m. She wished she’d found out Lenie’s room number. Something pulled her to Lenie in a strong way. Mac had never felt like this about anyone. Not even Steph. Certainly not Rissa.

She considered going for another walk but would probably end up lost. Maybe she’d go into the lobby and read for a while. The light wasn’t especially bright there, but at least she wouldn’t wake up Kristy. She grabbed a magazine from her backpack, got dressed, put her shoes on, and headed downstairs.

She went to the lounge and found Lenie seated on an antique sofa. An outside street lamp cast a shadow across her face. Tears glistened on her cheeks.

“Hey,” Mac called in a whisper, uncertain what to do. When Lenie didn’t reply, she moved forward and sat next to her on the couch. She waited silently, her shoulder gently pressing against Lenie’s.

“Thanks.” Lenie wiped her face with a gray and white hankie and blew her nose. “Why are you still up?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Actually, I’m not even tired.” Mac rested her hand on Lenie’s thigh. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really. Please don’t tell Kristy I’ve been crying, okay?”

“Sure, but if you’re crying about Kristy, don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t want us to. There’s no reason for tears, since this is the start of a bigger journey.” Mac hesitated, wondering if her words fell flat. “That’s what she says, sort of. It’s because she believes she’s going to heaven.”

“And you don’t?”

“Doesn’t matter whether I do or not. Only that Kristy believes it.”

“I think you’re wrong there.” Lenie twisted sideways to peer at Mac. Their eyes met, and she held Mac’s gaze as she spoke. “It matters to Kristy, because she’ll know if you believe or not.”

“No way. I go to church with her, bible study, choir—that’s enough. I never argue with her about it.”

“Eventually, it won’t be enough. She needs to know that you believe she’s going to heaven and that you’ll meet there again.”

“Why is it so damn important? When she’s dead, she’s dead. She’ll be gone from my life. Won’t exist anymore,” Mac said, but immediately regretted it.

“It’s important for a Christian to know that she’ll be with her family again. Kristy will never be gone as long as you and I and her family are here. We’re not going to forget her any more than I will ever forget my mother.”

Mac shifted away, unwilling to let Lenie see the torrent of emotions that flowed through her. Did she believe in God? Sure. Of course. Was she pissed at God for taking her Kristy from her? Hell, yes.

“I’m sorry, Lenie. Believing in heaven is one thing. I do believe, but it’s not enough. I can’t even consider my life without Kristy. She’s my best friend, my sister, my family, and I don’t want her to go to heaven because that means she’s gone for good.”

Lenie’s hand touched the side of Mac’s face, nudging her until their eyes met. “I understand. I was angry with God. Why would he make someone as good and kind as my mother suffer like that? Was it a sick cosmic joke?”

“Was it?”

“No.” Lenie’s eyes filled with tears. “Bad things happen to good people because that’s how the world is. God isn’t cruel. He doesn’t cause these things. But He will help us get through them. He will help you. He helped me when my mother died.”

“How’d he do that?”

“Her cancer was the same as Kristy’s. I needed someone to talk to and took a chance by going to a web site about brain cancer. I found a forum where people were sharing their experiences. That’s where I met Kristy.”

Mac reached out and wiped a tear from Lenie’s cheek with her thumb. “And she’s helped you.”

“Yes. And so are you.”

“How?”

“By being here.” Lenie leaned closer and lightly pressed her lips to Mac’s. “Let me help you.”

“You already have.” Not for the first time, Mac’s stomach fluttered. The sensation of Lenie’s lips against hers had felt like no other kiss. And she wanted more. “Lenie, I—”

“Shh. Don’t talk.” Lenie kissed her again, soft at first, then more demanding, her tongue pressing against Mac’s lips. Mac felt more than desire build in her. It was need. Like she was in the desert in search of water. She needed Lenie’s touch. She needed to feel close to her, to know this woman, this amazing woman, was real.

Lenie’s hand found Mac’s, and she pulled her off the couch. “Perhaps we should go upstairs.”

Mac hesitated, suddenly unsure. A moment ago she’d been ready to throw Lenie on the ground and have wild sex with her. But in a split second, she found herself unable. The feelings were all still there, the desire very much present, but it wasn’t right.

“What’s wrong?” Lenie’s eyes conveyed her concern. She cupped Mac’s face in her hands. “I’m not asking for anything, Mac. I think we should continue our talk in private.”

“That’s just it, Lenie. I think I’m asking for something here. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Tell me what’s on your mind. Don’t worry about how it sounds. Just say it.”

“I barely know you, but at the same time I feel like I’ve known you my whole life. It’s crazy, but at the same time I don’t want to—to have one night with you.” Mac ran her fingers along the edge of Lenie’s chin. “I’m leaving in a few days for England. I know we’ll be seeing you again for two weeks, but I don’t know if that will be enough. I can’t—don’t want to ruin this.”

“You can’t ruin anything, Mac.” Lenie’s smile was as gentle, as the kiss she placed on Mac’s lips. “I understand. There’s more between us than a, what do you call it? One-night stand?”

“Exactly.”

“Come up to my room. Let’s take our time and see what there is between us. I like you, Mac, and I’d like to get to you know you better.”

Mac accepted her offered hand. “I’d like that.”

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Mac woke to find herself comfortably wrapped around Lenie. They were both still dressed but lying in Lenie's bed. Her head rested on Mac's shoulder, which was stiff from being used as a pillow. But Mac didn't mind. It was right to be holding her. Lenie's body molded into Mac's as if they'd been lovers for years. And yet they hadn't done much more than a bit of kissing and a lot of talking.

She played with Lenie's hair, letting it glide through her fingers. She glanced at the clock, surprised to be awake so early. It was ten past seven, and the last she remembered, it had been a little past four in the morning. Kristy would already be awake and ready to go back to sightseeing. Mac wanted to stay right where she was.

"Kristy is probably awake by now."

Mac laughed. "You must be reading my mind."

"I think we both know her well." Lenie leaned on her elbow to gaze at Mac. "And we'll have to do some explaining to her."

"Hmm. That will suck, because if we tell her we spent the night together, she'll be planning our wedding."

Lenie kissed her softly, taking Mac's breath away. "That would be interesting. But a bit premature. Why don't you go back to your room while I take a shower. We'll meet downstairs for breakfast."

Mac pulled Lenie into her arms, not willing to go anywhere. "I wish I could stay here all day. This is more fun for me."

"Me, too. But this trip is about Kristy." Lenie disentangled herself from Mac's embrace. "I believe you and I'll have plenty of time to figure things out. Yes?"

"Yes." Mac gave her a quick peck on the cheek and got out of bed. "See you in about a half hour?"

"Of course."

Mac entered her hotel room to find Kristy already in the shower. She set out fresh clothes and made sure everything else got packed away. After double-checking the room to be sure nothing would be left behind, Mac sat on the bed and waited for Kristy to be done. She didn't have to wait long.

Kristy came out of the bathroom, dressed and ready to go. "Decided to show up, huh?" She planted her hands on her hips like a mother about to scold her child. "And where were you last night, young lady?" The twinkle in her eyes belied the admonition.

"I plead the fifth."

"Bull." Kristy tossed a hand towel at her, hitting Mac in the face. "You better have been with Lenie."

Mac tossed the towel back into the bathroom. "And if I wasn't?"

"Then I might have to hurt you." Kristy flopped onto the bed beside her. "So? Were you?"

"Were I what?"

Kristy punched her in the arm and none too lightly. "Don't make me get violent."

"You're mean. Yes, I was with Lenie. No, we didn't have hot monkey sex, though I wouldn't have minded. We talked most of the night until we fell asleep."

"Aww, that's so sweet. So you do like her."

"And then some." Mac stood and headed for the bathroom. "Let me shower and change so we can all have breakfast together. I promise to give you more details later."

"You better," Kristy said as Mac closed the bathroom door. "And don't think you're off the hook for not at least telling me where you were last night."

Mac peeked out the door. "You were asleep. No way I was going to wake you up. Not after that migraine."

"Just leave me a note next time, okay? I couldn't call you, since I don't have a cell phone that works here, and I worry."

"Sorry, Kris. I won't let it happen again."

Kristy shook her finger at Mac. "Better not. It's fine, though. I'm glad you two were together."

There was something wrong, but Mac couldn't quite put her finger on it. She apologized again and turned on the water for her shower. She'd pry it out of Kristy later.

## Chapter Five

Their week in Paris ended before Mac knew what happened. Lenie took them to all the tourist spots the first couple of days, then she gave them a real tour of Paris that only a local could show them. Kristy beamed with enthusiasm, and Mac hardly remembered any of it. All her thoughts and energy were on Lenie. On the days that Lenie worked, Mac felt an ache in her chest that quieted when Lenie met them for dinner.

No matter what happened next, Mac knew one thing for certain. She utterly and completely fell in love with a woman she'd known for a week. It was crazy to think it possible, but there it was. She was desperate to explore this new relationship but held back. She should be concentrating on Kristy and not herself. It was beyond selfish.

During dinner at the hotel, Kristy explained to Lenie their itinerary for England.

"We'll arrive in Dover tomorrow, late afternoon. I want to walk around the city for a while and see what there is to see, because we're headed for London day after that. Two days in London, then we'll be heading west to see Stonehenge. We're in Dublin for two days and Edinburgh for two days. Then we head to Amsterdam to spend time with you." She took a breath and beamed her beautiful smile at Lenie and Mac. "That's where the real fun begins."

"If I survive the UK," Mac said. Kristy kicked her under the table and she choked on her water. "Ow. Why are you so damn violent?"

"You bring out the best in me, Mackenzie. Anyway, Lenie, can we visit that place with all the flowers when we come to see you?"

"*De Keukenhof*? Of course. We can go anywhere you want to, Kristy. Tell me, and I'll make it happen."

"You're such a sweetie, Lenie."

"Flowers?" Mac didn't bother to hide her lack of enthusiasm. "This like a garden or something?"

"More like a giant garden with thousands of varieties of flowers and other plants." Kristy smiled like a little kid. "Lenie tells me it's amazing."

"Amazing, huh?" Mac turned to Lenie. As long as she was there, anywhere they went would be amazing. "Guess I'll see if I can find allergy medicine while we're in England."

"Are you allergic to flowers?" Lenie asked.

"Every spring is like torture," Mac said. "But as long as I take my meds it's bearable. I usually only need them when the flowers are first coming up."

"You should be okay then."

Kristy said, "I packed your meds, Mac. Take a peek in your toiletry bag."

Mac raised her eyebrows. "When did you get my meds?"

"When I came to get you for the airport. I knew you'd never think of it, and I don't want you getting sick on our vacation. You're supposed to have fun, too, you know."

Mac felt Lenie's hand on her knee and covered it with her own hand. "I know. Thanks, buddy."

"You're welcome. Now, if you all will excuse me, I need to get some sleep. Got a lot of traveling to do tomorrow."

"Good night," Lenie said.

Mac was about to say the same, but Kristy stopped her. She leaned close to Mac and whispered, "I don't expect to see you until morning," then walked away.

Once again, a blush warmed Mac's cheeks. What the hell? She hadn't blushed this much—ever.

For a few minutes, she and Lenie sat in companionable silence. Mac squeezed her hand. "I guess we should probably get some sleep as well."

Lenie swung in her seat and faced Mac. "Sleep? Are you sure that's all you want?"

Passion burned in Lenie's eyes, and Mac didn't even think twice before shaking her head. "Not really." She pulled Lenie close and kissed her to prove what she wanted.

"Shall we head to my room?"

"Lead the way."

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For the second time, Mac awoke with Lenie curled around her, her head cradled on Mac's shoulder, but this time they were both naked. Mac enjoyed the feel of Lenie's skin against hers. No sunlight streamed in the window, so Mac knew it to be the middle of the night. The time was hard to tell as they were busy the moment they entered Lenie's room.

Mac recalled taking her clothes off and being naked in record time. Lenie's touch was tender and passionate, and each moment they shared was etched into Mac's mind. She smelled their lovemaking in the room and let the intoxicating scent burrow into her memory.

She ran her fingers along Lenie's soft skin, hoping this would not be their only time together. No woman ever brought these feelings out in Mac. Tears formed when she reached orgasm, the culmination of emotion, desire, satisfaction, connection, and pure joy. In that moment, Mac knew she didn't want one night with Lenie. She wanted a whole lifetime.

Lenie stirred and lifted her head. Mac couldn't see her face well, but the movement of her hand let Mac know she was fully awake.

"Hello there," Mac said.

"Hi. Been awake long?"

"Nah. Just a few minutes. Long enough to know I'm rested now."

"That so?" Lenie's hand traveled down the length of Mac's body and rested in the curls of her pubic hair. "I wonder how awake you are." Her fingers worked their way between her legs. "Oh, very wet." Lenie kissed Mac on the mouth, and Mac pulled her closer, helping her hand find the right spot.

"All for you, baby. All for you."

"I know." Lenie's fingers began their work and Mac stopped thinking about anything else.

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Breakfast didn't last long enough for Mac. She'd be seeing Lenie in a week, but it didn't make the goodbyes easier. They stood on the platform, waiting for the train to arrive. Awkward could not begin to describe how Mac felt.

"I can't wait to see Dover," Kristy said. "I hope the weather's good. I want to see those white cliffs."

Lenie said, "I read in the paper that it should be a nice afternoon. You should be able to see them, my friend. Take pictures. It's been years since I've been to Dover."

"Do you go there often? To England?" Mac asked.

"I do. My job takes me all over Europe and sometimes into the States. But the traveling isn't always fun. I don't get to play tourist as you two will."

"You need a vacation," Kristy said. "And I mean a real one, not when you're playing tour guide. You need to have fun."

"I shall be doing that next week when you're visiting." Lenie hugged Kristy as the train pulled into the station. "Go and have a great time. I'll be at the ferry to meet you next Monday. Okay?"

"Thanks, Lenie." Kristy gave her another hug, grabbed her suitcase, and headed for the train. "Don't take too long, Mac," she called over her shoulder.

Mac didn't know what to say. She didn't want to say goodbye to Lenie. Not yet. She stood there, unsure if she should hug her, kiss her, or walk away.

"I know," Lenie said. She stepped closer to Mac and pressed her hand to Mac's cheek. "I'll see you in a week. Make sure our friend has a great time, and when you're back, we'll talk. I promise."

"You sure?"

"Yes." Lenie kissed her, and Mac's knees buckled. "Go." Lenie gave her a little push toward the train. "They won't wait for you."

"Yeah." Mac grabbed her and kissed her with all the passion she felt, leaving them both breathless. She picked up her bag and ran for the train, not daring to look back.

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Mac was quiet for the first hour of the trip. She kept her gaze out the window, not actually seeing much of what passed. Her thoughts were with Lenie as she wondered where their relationship would go and if they could make it

work. They lived thousands of miles apart. Two different continents. Two different countries. Two different cultures and languages. Yet her heart told Mac that Lenie was the one. After less than a week, could it be that she'd found the woman she would spend the rest of her life with? Was that even possible?

Kristy nudged her out of her thoughts. "You okay?"

"Not really."

"Tell me what happened with you and Lenie. I couldn't help it, but I saw you two saying goodbye on the platform. It was sweet and romantic. Except when Lenie cried."

"What?" Mac felt a quick pain in her chest. "She was crying? Oh God. Did I do something wrong?"

Kristy smiled and put her hand on Mac's knee. "Honey, if you made the woman cry, then you clearly did something right. I saw the look in her eyes. She likes you as much as you like her, and I think it's amazing. I'm so happy you found someone."

"Kris, we barely know each other."

"That's the fun part. You get to know each other better as you go along. But I think you two are meant to be together, and I'm glad I got to see it."

"I'm not sure where it's going with us, but it was damn hard to leave her. I've never felt this way about anyone, Kris. Not even Steph."

"I guess that's saying something."

"I know, right?" Mac leaned her head against the seat. "Lenie kissed me, and I thought I would die right on the spot. Knees weak, butterflies in my belly, all that stuff you read in books. God, Kris. I think I might be in love with her."

Kristy also leaned back and rested her head on Mac's shoulder. "I think the feeling is mutual. Wow. So romantic."

"Yeah." Mac closed her eyes and let the rhythm of the train relax her.

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The sound of Idina Menzel belting out "Defying Gravity," surprised Mac as she followed Kristy into their hotel room in Dover, England. She dropped her suitcase and fumbled to get the phone out of her pocket. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Cindy." Her tone was flat, and immediately Mac's stomach sank.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Before I say anything, you need to know that nothing happened and everyone is okay."

Mac settled onto the bed. Kristy joined her and leaned close to hear the conversation. "If nothing happened, you wouldn't be calling me."

"True." Cindy paused a beat. "Oscar showed up last night when Heather and Jace were locking up."

"Crap."

"He was drunk and threatened Jace, saying something about telling the police that he was dealing drugs and then he went off, yelling at them and generally not making any sense. He tried to get Jace to fight him, but Jace wouldn't do it. You'd be so proud of that kid, Mac."

"I am. How'd they get Oscar to leave?"

"Heather was behind Jace, calling 9-1-1. The coward beat it out of there before the police arrived. But the worst of it is that Heather saw a gun tucked into Oscar's pants."

"Damn."

"I talked to Pepper, and we agree that Jace needs to stay away from the center for a while. Pepper will put an extra patrol in the neighborhood, but he thinks we should upgrade our security system so it has a panic button and maybe window sensors."

Mac didn't reply right away, allowing Cindy's words to sink in. She wanted to find Oscar and kick his ass. "I'm sure Pepper's right. Crunch the numbers, and see what we can do with the security system. Is Jace there with you right now?"

"Sure. Hang on."

Kristy slipped her arm around Mac and rested her head on Mac's shoulder. She didn't say anything. Didn't need to.

A moment later, Jace came on the line. "Hey, Mac."

"I'm proud of you, buddy. I'm sorry that asshole showed up. Wish I'd been there."

"I'm glad you wasn't. He was packin', and that scared the shit out of me."

"I know." Mac took a deep breath and exhaled. "You hang out at Cindy's farm, enjoy the fresh air until I get back. You and me will figure this out. Promise. Okay?"

"I'm sorry I fucked up your vacation," he said.

"Hey, language buddy," she said sternly, then in a lighter tone went on. "None of this is your fault, and you didn't mess up anything. To prove it, I'll find something cool and bring it home for you. Don't worry about me. Seriously. We're having a good time here."

"Give me that." Kristy swiped the phone from Mac. "Listen here, young man. You don't worry about us. We're fine. You do what Mac says and enjoy the time on the farm. City kid like you needs to get fresh air, so do it." Kristy stopped for a few seconds. "Correct. We both love you, Jace. Email me tonight, and let me know if that sweet girl of yours calls you. Yes, I'm sure she does. Okay, bye."

Kristy handed the phone back. "Done."

"You're real bossy."

"I know. It's what I used to get paid for. Now, are you all right?"

Mac shrugged. "I'm worried. That Oscar is bad news. He's not likely to find Jace at Cindy's. It's just that Jace can't hide forever. I hope Pepper finds Oscar first. He's done enough damage. His ass needs to be in jail."

"Agreed." Kristy hugged Mac. "Jace has the right people in his corner. You know that. He'll be fine. We'll find him a super cool gift from London. I'm sure we can find an Adele shirt and maybe her latest CD. It'd be awesome to buy it from England, even though he can get it at Walmart at home."

"He likes Adele?"

Kristy sighed. "Mackenzie, the boy has a serious crush on her. He loves jazz and her voice, to him, is erotic. I can't believe you didn't know that."

"Me either. Guess he connects with you better." Mac felt a pang of sadness at that. Had she done something wrong with Jace? She's always made an effort to get him talking about his day. How could she miss something like his favorite music?

"Stop second guessing yourself," Kristy said. "He looks up to you like a hero. With me, we're buds. It's a completely different dynamic. Trust me when I say that he absolutely adores you."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. You saved his life. Literally and figuratively. You're the closest thing to a parent that young man has ever had." Kristy kissed her on the cheek. "I'm proud of you. Now butch it up, buttercup. We got shopping to do."

"We just got here." Mac intentionally sounded whiney and giggled at the stern look on Kristy's face. "Can we eat first?"

"If you must. But as soon as you get enough fuel down your gullet, we're off to the shops. I got stuff to buy."

"What kind of stuff?"

"The kind you'll have to carry. Come on."

## Chapter Six

England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland was a lot of ground to cover in a little more than a week, but Kristy's tight schedule made it possible. And it turned out to be an amazing adventure. Kristy dragged Mac to all the places on her bucket list, successfully maneuvering them via the train and subway system as if she lived there. For Mac it was bittersweet. Kristy mingled with locals and tour guides, completely in her element. Not once did she let on to anyone that about the insidious disease that would soon take her life. She charged forward as if on a mission, enjoying every minute of time she had. Mac was both proud and devastated. This would be a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

It occurred to Mac, as they were taking the train to Harwich, that Jace might not know that Kristy had terminal cancer. She eyed Kristy, who was gazing out the window at the English countryside. Mac could tell she was tired. At least at Lenie's, they'd be able to rest a day or so.

"Since you've been talking to Jace so much, have you talked to him about the..." Mac couldn't say the word. Uttering it gave the term power and finality.

"Cancer?" Kristy continued peering out the window. "It's okay to say the word, and no, I haven't told him yet. I figure we'll deal with that after this trip."

"It's up to you, but we will have to tell him." Mac didn't state the obvious—how hard it would be for Jace to lose one of the few friends he had. "How long before we get to Harwich?"

"About three hours, give or take."

"Enough time for you to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. I can sleep later. I don't want to miss anything."

"Kris, the only thing you'll be missing is the graffiti along the walls near the train station. Other than that, it's mostly trees and a few houses here and there. Nothing we haven't seen before."

"I don't want to miss anything, okay?" Her voice held an edge to it Mac had never heard before. "I won't get to see this again, and I'm going to keep watching out the window." She returned her gaze to the passing trees and farms. Her shoulders slumped, but when Mac touched her, she pulled away.

Mac heard her snuffle and felt helpless. Kristy not wanting comfort was confusing and frustrating. Mac leaned back in her seat and pretended to read a magazine, all the while keeping her eye on Kristy. After a half hour, Kristy leaned her head against the glass and fell asleep.

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From Harwich they boarded a ferry to Hoek van Holland. The sun set by the time they boarded, so Mac had no trouble getting Kristy to lean her chair back and sleep. Her cheeks were blanched, and Mac worried. Kristy needed to get some serious rest now or their time in Holland would be a bust.

While Kristy snored softly, Mac decided to check her e-mail. Nothing unusual from Cindy, who noted Oscar had not been seen again at the OTR. Jace sent her an e-mail that held several photos. It took a while to download, but it was worth it. The pictures were from his high school graduation. They must have been taken by a friend of his, because Mac didn't recognize a lot of the people in the photos.

But one of them caught her eye. The three of them, Mac, Kristy, and Jace, standing near the entrance to the school. She had her arm around Jace. Another photo showed Kristy and Jace in a fit of laughter. Kristy's face shone in the afternoon sunlight and her eyes were lit up with her smile. Mac couldn't control her emotions. Tears slid down her cheeks in a cascade, and she let them fall.

She and Kristy were proud of Jace and his strength as he accomplished his first goal—graduating high school. He'd be going off to college in a few months, but Mac wondered whether Kristy would be around to see it. She clicked back over to her e-mail and wiped her cheeks. She didn't want Kristy to see her crying.

A smile found its way to her face when she saw an e-mail from Lenie.

*Hey, Mac!*



*I am sorry I didn't write you sooner, but work has been crazy since I got home. But don't think for a moment that I haven't been missing you terribly. I wish now that I had taken a picture of you. We will correct that when you arrive tomorrow.*

*I hope you two have had a great time. As soon as you get off the ferry, I'll be there to welcome you to my country and give you the hug and kiss I've wanted to give you for a whole week. Perhaps more once you've rested up.*

*XOXOXO*

*L*

Mac read the e-mail three more times. Her stomach fluttered each time she thought about kissing Lenie. She'd dreamed of seeing her again, still shocked that she could have such feelings for a woman she didn't know all that well. Mac had never believed in love at first sight, but she was fairly certain that was exactly what happened to her.

She clicked the Reply button and stared at the blank screen for what felt like hours. What should she say back? That she'd fallen in love with Lenie? That she couldn't wait to see her either? Perhaps she should tell her about their trip to England. No. Kristy would do that about five minutes after seeing Lenie again.

Her fingers lightly tapped over the keys before she opened her e-mail.

*Lenie,*

*No worries about the late e-mail. I understand how work can be. I hope it won't be so bad when we're there. I'd like to spend more time with you. I'm really looking forward to those kisses.*

*Kristy is pretty much wiped out, so don't be surprised if she's not as energetic as she was last week. I think she'll need serious downtime before we begin touring Holland.*

*I miss you.*

*XOXO*

*M*

She read it over twice before hitting Send.

E-mails finished, Mac decided to go through her pictures from France. Mac had taken several of Lenie without her knowing it. A personal favorite showed Lenie standing in front of a building that Mac recalled was built in the late 1600s. The afternoon sun shone off her blonde curls and her green, button-down blouse hugged her body in a way that Mac found incredibly sexy.. Lenie's jeans were form fitting as well, and the complete picture took Mac's breath away.

She right-clicked on the photo and made it her desktop image. Lenie wore sunglasses, obscuring Mac's view of her amazingly blue eyes. She continued to stare at the picture, nearly convinced that Lenie was watching her from behind the dark lenses. Maybe she was. That idea warmed Mac's heart.

A yawn came and went, and Mac realized she had a couple of hours left to sleep. She shut off her netbook, stowed it in her bag, and leaned back her seat.

When she closed her eyes, Lenie's face greeted her.

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The moment they stepped off the ferry, they found Lenie, as promised, standing on the dock to meet them. She hugged Kristy first, then pulled Mac into a gentle embrace, kissing her firmly on the lips. "*Welkom in Nederland.*"

"Thanks." Mac brushed her fingers along the side of Lenie's face, enjoying the soft feel of her skin. "It's good to be here."

Kristy playfully pushed them apart. "I'm hungry. You guys can fondle each other later. We need to eat."

"She's a bossy ass lately," Mac said. "It's like I'm the hired help and not her traveling buddy."

Kristy narrowed her eyes at Mac. "If you're the hired help, then I paid way too much because you suck at it."

"Oh really? I've been lugging your crap all over the UK. How is it I suck at that?"

"Because you whine too much." Kristy bumped her hip against Mac's. "As I was saying, I need food. Lots of yummy, Dutch food."

Lenie's gaze went back and forth between Mac and Kristy. Mac smiled at the bemused expression she wore. "Well," Lenie said, "I believe I can oblige you. We can either have some cafeteria food here, or we can find a restaurant in town. Which would you like?"

"Both," Kristy said, a silly grin on her face. "You told me the cafeteria stuff was your version of junk food. I want one of those cracket thingies. Then we can go to a real restaurant and try something else."

"Cracket?" Mac asked. "What's a cracket?"

The laughing caused little crinkles around Lenie's eyes. "*Kroket*. It's a fried food. Hard to describe. You need to try one, though they can be spicy."

"The spicier the better," Kristy said.

"How about you, Mac? Are you up for trying new things?" Lenie met Mac's gaze, and Mac heard a double entendre in that sentence. She liked the idea.

"Always," she said and took Lenie's hand as they went into a cafeteria. Lenie made the order and handed Mac a paper tray the size of her hand.

The tray was warm and the *kroket* smelled good. Mac picked up a thick, breaded sausage and took a bite. A mixture of meat, onions, potato, and spices she couldn't identify burst in her mouth. She ate more of it, hoping to figure out of the ingredients, but couldn't decipher it all. Didn't really matter. It was delicious.

"This rocks," Mac said.

Lenie laughed. "Good. We consider it junk food, but it's nice for a snack."

"If this is your idea of junk food, I'm eating junk food from now on."

"Crackets are the best," Kristy chimed in. "What else can we taste here?"

Lenie said, "Plenty, if you're hungry."

"Kristy is always hungry," Mac said.

Kristy stuck her tongue out. "I happen to be hungry at the moment, so I want one of everything."

"I'll make an order to take home with us." Lenie moved to the counter.

"Isn't this fun?" Kristy asked.

"Loads," Mac said. She'd finished her *kroket* and tossed the paper tray into a recycle bin. "Are you really going to eat one of everything?"

"Nope. You and me are."

Mac groaned. "I don't think I have room in my stomach."

Kristy patted Mac's abdomen. "Make room. It's an adventure."

She never could say no to Kristy, and this was no different. "Remind me not to go on any more adventures with you."

"No way. You're my adventure buddy. You have to go with me."

"Do I have to eat?"

Kristy laughed. "Yes. But I might take pity on you and only make you taste things."

"Taste I can do. That *kroket* filled me up."

"It's temporary, like Chinese food. You'll be hungry later."

Lenie joined them and handed a box full of white, paper bags to Kristy. "Enjoy."

"Thanks," Kristy took the box and headed for a table outside the adjoining café.

"Do you think all that food will make her sick?" Mac asked.

"Most of it is deep fried. I imagine she may have a stomach ache later."

Kristy waved for Mac to join her. As they approached the table, Mac said, "Remind me again why I'm doing this?"

Lenie placed her arm around Mac's shoulder. "Because you are a good friend."

"Oh yeah," Mac said. "I'm a good friend. You'll need to tell me that later tonight when my stomach is hurting."

"I will." Lenie gave her a gentle shove toward Kristy. "Enjoy."

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The next morning, Mac awoke without the expected abdominal issues. Kristy had complained a little when they returned to Lenie's, but somehow had managed to shove a lot of food into her little body. Her appetite never ceased to amaze Mac.

Mac was up, showered and dressed before Kristy got out of bed. That almost never happened, and it worried her. Mac pulled the covers back and touched Kristy's shoulder. "Hey, you. Everything okay?"

"Hey." Kristy wouldn't open her eyes and tried to put the covers over her head. "It hurts. Too much light."

"Oh." A migraine. It didn't surprise Mac that after all they'd done, she'd have one now. At least they were at Lenie's where Kristy would feel comfortable. "Want me to get you anything?"

"Water."

"Done." Mac was quick and placed a fresh bottle of water on the nightstand. "We'll stay here today. I can make you—"

"No. You go have fun. I can see stuff tomorrow." Kristy buried herself under the blanket, leaving no room for Mac to argue.

Mac left the room and found Lenie in the kitchen. "Going to be the two of us today. Kristy isn't feeling well."

"Migraine?" Lenie asked.

"Yep. I'm surprised she didn't have one sooner."

"Me, too. I'll go in there and fix the blinds, so the afternoon sun is not so bright."

Mac helped herself to bread and Nutella. So yummy to have chocolate for breakfast. She could get used to this.

"She's all set now. Poor thing."

"I know. I hate it when this happens to her, but she did make me promise we'd go have fun today anyway."

Lenie continued to pour her tea, not looking at Mac. "Then fun we'll have." When she caught Mac's gaze, Mac's knees felt weak.

"I'd like that." Lame. Very lame, yet Mac could think of nothing else to say.

"Excellent." Lenie sipped at her tea. "We can walk around, and I'll show you what the locals see. I'm sure Kristy has an itinerary for tomorrow, so we will leave her to that."

"I think that sounds like fun." Mac finished her glass of milk. "Ready when you are."

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Lenie held the door open for Mac. Once outside, Mac took hold of her hand. A pleasant tingle went up Mac's arm as they intertwined fingers. "We should talk," Mac said.

"I thought we were."

"I meant about us."

Lenie squeezed her hand. "Us? Hmm. That could be an interesting topic. But I think one we should broach later. Why don't we have fun? Live in the moment?"

"I'm not sure I can. I have a hard time not getting attached, if you know what I mean."

"I do. But for now let me show you my city."

Mac saw the excitement in Lenie's eyes and couldn't say no. "Okay. Show me."

Lenie began their tour along the canal closest to her house. "Do you know much about Amsterdam?"

"It's your capital city, and Kristy hasn't stopped talking about coming here and going to the Anne Frank house. Other than that, not much."

"We're known as the Venice of the North because of our canals." Lenie stopped on a bridge over a canal and leaned against the rail of the iron fence.

Boats of every size imaginable lined the edges of the canal for as far as Mac could see. The water rolled at a gentle pace. The muddy color reminded her of the Ohio River. "Does everyone have a boat? There's got to be a few dozen parked here."

"You would think so, huh? But no. Most of those are house boats and expensive to own."

"I don't see how that would be any fun. I'd get claustrophobic in one of those."

"You would be amazed at how much room they have. One of my colleagues held a party on her boat after work. Fifteen of us fit in quite nicely."

"Wow. So not for me."

Lenie's hand rested on the small of her back, and Mac felt her stomach flip-flop again. "Shall we continue the tour?"

"Love to." Mac allowed herself to be led away from the bridge and farther into the city.

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Mac found the eclectic buildings fascinating. Some were built in the 1500s while others were as young as 1950s and all of them situated up against each other. Cincinnati had its share of block neighborhoods, but these buildings were all tall and skinny. The façades were the most fascinating. The building in front of them had one that was squared off like steps, three tiers leading to the highest point of the structure. One building melded into another, creating a row of houses, no two showing the same style or decade of architecture.. The only real similarity was the width. At most, Mac guessed them to be around fifteen feet wide.

“How do you all live in these skinny buildings? Most of the floors look pretty close together, too.” Mac asked.

Lenie said, “You get used to it. Hundreds of years ago, the Dutch people were taxed on how wide their houses were, so we built them to minimize the cost. The Dutch are very frugal. Plus, we used to be shorter, so the height wasn’t an issue.”

“That’s so weird. It’s like someone put a bunch of different buildings together, but didn’t even try to make them match up.”

“That’s what makes Amsterdam so special. We’re a trade city, so we have a lot of different influences. You might be surprised by how many Americans live here.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“I was born in my house and stayed there off and on between work and university over the years. What about you? Have you always been in Cincinnati?”

“Yep. Went to college there, got the job for the county as soon as I graduated, and moved out of my parents’ house soon after that. I couldn’t wait to get out on my own.”

“Why were you so anxious?”

Mac shrugged. “Most kids are. I’d have left when I graduated high school, but it was too expensive to live on campus, so I stayed at home. Mom and Dad would have paid for a dorm, but I thought it was stupid when I could live at home and catch the bus to school.”

“Very practical.”

“Did you go to school here?”

“For university, no. I went to Cambridge, England. My mum hated me being gone so long, but she supported my decision. My first job was in Belgium. It took a few years before I could come home and work at the Rijks Museum.” Lenie tucked her hands in the pockets of her jeans, her shoulders hunched a bit. She reminded Mac of a little kid wanting to hide away from the world.

“She must have been proud of you.”

“She was.” Lenie gazed into the distance for a few moments. “It’s almost one. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” Mac said.

“Excellent. I know a cafeteria close by. I would like to treat you to typical Dutch food. Are you game?”

Mac had sampled French food, which didn’t taste too bad, since it included a lot of seafood. In England, she’d found the food closer to something familiar, so how different could the Dutch food be? “Yep. Let’s go.”

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After getting lunch, Lenie guided Mac to a public park. They walked down a tree-lined path for a few minutes before coming to a wooden bench where they enjoyed the view of a pristine lake. In the center, on a tiny mound of land, sat two white swans.

The midday sun shone off the peaceful waters while a soft breeze cooled Mac’s warm skin. They settled on the bench and Lenie handed Mac what she thought resembled a large hotdog in an oversized bun. The hotdog thing looked brownish and a little wrinkled, like it’d been cooked too long.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“*Frikandel*,” Lenie said with a wide smile. Her brown eyes twinkled with mischief. “It’s Dutch fast food.”

“Okay, but what is it exactly? What kind of meat?”

“Um, pork mostly.” She handed Mac a condiment packet. “It’s better if you put this on it.”

“What is this?”

“Curry.”

“Curry?” Mac asked.

“Yes. A bit like sweet ketchup. Just try it.”

“Okay.” Mac spread the reddish brown sauce on the *frikandel* and took a bite. She chewed for a long time, trying to recognize the taste. Nothing she’d ever eaten could be compared. If it had pork in the thing, it was mixed with a lot of other stuff. The after taste was full of spices, but it wasn’t unpleasant. “Not bad.”

“Well done,” Lenie said. “That’s only the start. There are plenty more flavors for you to try out.”

Mac found herself staring at Lenie’s lips and used her napkin to wipe a drop of curry from the corner of her mouth. “I can’t wait.”

“You don’t have to.” Lenie shifted on the bench and put her head close to Mac’s. “I’m right here.” She pressed her lips against Mac’s for a long, tender kiss.

“So you are.” Mac knew she had a ridiculous smile on her face, but she didn’t care. There was something magical happening and she wanted to take in every moment of it. Their lips met again and Mac lost track of everything.

When they parted again, tempted as she was, Mac knew they needed to stop. She’d heard the Dutch were liberal, but any more kisses like that and they’d be making love on the bench. She didn’t think they were that liberal, so she stopped and said, “This is a beautiful park. Do you come here a lot?”

Lenie laughed at her distraction. “Most weekends and sometimes after a long day at work. It’s very restful, as long as there aren’t too many tourists. The museum isn’t far from here.” Lenie pointed in the direction Mac assumed would be her place of work. “This is called Rembrandt Park. It’s always open, and I love to sit here and watch the swans and think.”

“What do you think about?”

Lenie didn’t answer right away. “Life, mostly. How fleeting it can be. How fickle it can be.” She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. “There are days when not much makes sense to me. Those are the days I find myself sitting here, sometimes for hours.”

“Does it help?”

“I don’t know. But it’s better than going home to an empty flat.”

“I can understand that. When I moved out of my parents’ house, I was amazed at how quiet my place could be. It was never quiet at home. I have two brothers and one sister, and noise filled the place.”

“We do come from different places. With my mum, it was always quiet. We didn’t have to talk a lot to know what was going on with the other. She could read me like no one else. And when we did talk, it lasted for hours. We could talk so long that we would watch the sun rise on the next day.”

“I was close to my parents, but not like that.”

“She was all the family I ever had. I never knew my father. He died before I was born.”

“I’m sorry,” Mac said. “It must have been hard.”

“It wasn’t really. My mum talked about him so I would know about him, but Mum was so much a part of my life that I didn’t miss not having a father.”

Mac followed the urge to hold Lenie’s hand and brought it to her lips to kiss her slender fingers. “It’s got to be hard for you sometimes.”

“Some days it’s hard to get out of bed.” Lenie squeezed Mac’s hand. “Memories of my mum are everywhere. It’s a blessing and a curse. I can feel her presence, and while that comforts me, it makes me miss her that much more.”

“You were born in the house? Didn’t she get to the hospital in time or something?”

“Most babies are born at home. At least they were then.”

Mac found that hard to believe. “Sounds dangerous. What if something goes wrong?”

“Well, she called the doctor first. He saw me born. It’s a pretty normal thing here. Were you not born at home?”

“No way. Dad packed up my two older brothers and a small suitcase and carted Mom to the hospital. I was born the next day. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone born at home. That’s kinda cool.”

“Glad you approve.” Lenie chuckled softly.

“Oh, I approve.” Mac placed her napkin in the bag from the cafeteria and scooted close enough to Lenie that their bodies touched. “You should know I approve a lot.” She kissed her, allowing herself to sink into the pleasure of it. Mac’s heart beat quickened, and her stomach fluttered in a way she’d only ever read about in books. A warm sensation traveled down her body to her toes. Her hand cupped the side of Lenie’s face as they slowed their passion and touched foreheads. Mac took a moment to catch her breath.

“I hope you have more time to approve later.”

“Me, too. Though I think it might be a bit crowded for us to, um, have a lot of private time.” Mac blushed at her awkward words. “I know Kristy would be happy, but I’d be uncomfortable. I mean—”

Lenie stopped her with another kiss. “Why don’t we go back to my flat and see how our friend is? I promise there will be time for us to talk later.”

Mac took a shaky breath and slowly let it out. “Great idea.”

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Kristy greeted Mac and Lenie when they returned, sporting a big grin. Her pallor had faded some, but not entirely. “Did you two have fun?”

“Lenie’s a great tour guide,” Mac said. “How are you feeling?”

“Better and a little hungry.”

“Did you eat?” Lenie asked.

“If I’d recognized more than the apples on your counter as food, I wouldn’t still be hungry.”

Lenie clearly held back laughter. “Sorry, Kristy. It never occurred to me to have to translate food for you. I thought you could eat anything.”

“Ha, ha.” Kristy stuck her tongue out at her. “Can we order a pizza or something?”

“You’re in Europe and you want pizza?” Mac touched Kristy’s forehead with the back of her hand. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“It left after the nausea was gone and the hunger returned.”

“We can get pizza if that’s what you want,” Lenie said. “Or I can make a nice meal for you.”

“I vote for the nice meal,” Mac said. “But only if you give Kristy a cookie or something to tide her over. I don’t want her to faint.”

“I can do that.” Lenie motioned for them to be seated at the table. She went into the kitchen, and when she came back, she placed a round tin in the center of the table, and opened it up. Mac couldn’t make out what kind of cookies were in there, but they all looked tasty.

“Don’t spoil your dinner, girls,” Lenie said.

“No, ma’am.” Mac grabbed a rectangular cookie with a thick layer of dark chocolate and took a bite. “Mmm. Heaven.”

Kristy closed her eyes and hummed her appreciation. “Thanks, Lenie. You’re a life saver.”

“Of course,” Lenie said, busily gathering pots and pans from the kitchen cupboards. “Any objections to onions or peas? I know you Americans don’t like your veggies.”

“You mean you know that Kristy doesn’t like veggies. I, on the other hand, enjoy healthy food, so onions and peas are fine with me.”

“I hate peas,” Kristy said, a bit of a whine in her voice. “And why do I need to eat healthy? I’m on vacation, and I intend to eat as much junk as I can.”

“But if you’re not feeling well, eating healthy can fix that,” Lenie said.

Mac snickered. “She’s got a point.”

“Hey, you’re not supposed to take her side.” Kristy pouted.

“If it means you’re feeling better, then I take that side.” Mac blew her a kiss. “So eat your damn veggies and like it.”

Kristy stuck her tongue out again, and Mac made a grab for it. “Hey!”

“You keep doing that, and I’m going to rip the damn thing out.”

“You sound like your brother,” Kristy said.

“Which one?”

“The putz.”

“The what?” Lenie asked.

“Putz,” Mac said. “She’s called my brother Richard a putz since we were kids. Right after he dumped her for a cheerleader.”

“What does putz mean? I can’t translate it.”

“It’s the perfect word to describe Richard,” Kristy said before Mac could reply. “He’s a putz, or jerk, or ass, whatever you want to call him. And he didn’t dump me, I dumped him.”

Mac considered her response. It was an old hurt she doubted Kristy would ever get over. The moment they hit puberty, Kristy developed a crush on Richard. He never returned the feelings. “Okay, he was a putz when he was seventeen. You’d think after twenty some years you’d be over it by now.”

“I don’t think you are ever over your first love,” Lenie said. She sat next to Mac and leaned closer to her. “Your first love is always with you. Her name was Jeanet. We were in fifth form, so that would make us about ten or eleven. She was my neighbor, so we were always together. Sort of like you two, but I was totally in love with her.”

“What happened? Did you ever tell her?” Kristy asked.

“No. Her father got a new job, and they moved to Rotterdam at the end of the school year. I never heard from her again, but I will never forget how giddy I felt whenever we played together.”

“That’s a sweet story.” Kristy nudged Mac. “Which reminds me, you’ll never guess who I got an e-mail from today.”

“Michelle Obama.”

“I wish. Try one Richard Bradenton.”

“Rich e-mailed you?” Mac raised one eyebrow. “What did the *putz* have to say?”

“It was sweet, actually. I didn’t realize you’d told him what was happening.”

“Duh,” Mac said. “I told the whole family, including our friends. Did you think I’d keep it a secret?” Mac couldn’t tell what Kristy was thinking, and that scared her. Kristy wouldn’t look up at her until Mac took hold of her hands from across the table. “Hey, you have a ton of people who love you, and every one of them deserved to know what was going on. I feel like a jerk for waiting until we were ready to leave before telling them. I have a feeling that Jules is going to kick my ass as soon as we get back.”

“Jules?” Lenie asked and Mac thought she saw a glimpse of jealousy.

“My little sister. Rich and Ben are older than I am, and Jules is younger. We’re all a couple of years apart in age. Since Kristy was at our house all the time, they think of her as a sister, too.”

“The closest family I had were a couple of cousins who lived on our street when we were kids. I can’t imagine having three siblings,” Lenie said.

“And I can’t imagine being the only kid. Who did you play with?”

“Kids at school, kids in the neighborhood—sometimes with my mum.”

“Going to the Bradentons was like going to the circus,” Kristy said. When Mac peered at her, Kristy’s eyes were misty, as if she was close to crying. “It was heaven for a kid who needed to spend some energy and didn’t want to be in a quiet house anymore. My parents are great, and I love them dearly, but I always wanted to be at Mac’s because that was where the action was.

“I especially loved it when one of the boys got in trouble. Mac’s mom knew how to hand out the discipline and make it so they regretted whatever they did.”

“It was her Italian Catholic side,” Mac said. “She was a master at guilt. Especially if we broke something while playing. I still feel bad about the time I broke a vase that probably cost her twenty bucks. I was bouncing a soccer ball around inside. It went left and I went right and the next thing I hear is glass breaking. Mom came running in, made sure I was okay, then laid on the guilt.”

“Mac cried,” Kristy said.

“I did not cry.”

“You cried like a baby who got her bottle taken away.” Kristy made a face and cried an impression of Mac. “Just like that. It was sad at the time but pretty hilarious now.”

“But I’m not laughing.”

“I am,” Lenie said through a fit of giggles. “You act all tough, but inside you’re a girl.”

“You two are ganging up on me, now,” Mac said. “How kind.”

Lenie gently kissed Mac on the forehead before getting up to fix dinner. “I’ll make you feel better, honey.”

Mac felt the blush filling her cheeks and tried to hide her face, but Kristy saw and immediately commented.

“You’re so damn cute.”

“Shut up.”

“Should I expect to spend my time in the guest room alone?” Kristy wagged her eyebrows, and the expression on her face made Mac laugh.

“Maybe.”

“Cool.” Kristy touched Mac’s cheek with the palm of her hand. “Very cool.” She whispered, “I thought you two would be good for each other. That’s awesome.”

“Jumping the gun a little, aren’t you?”

“I don’t think so. You two’ll be fine. I’m sure of it.”

Mac shook her head. “Kris, I know where you’re heading. Don’t get your hopes up, okay?”

“Too late,” she said. “Enjoy getting to know her. I think you’ll find something you’ve been missing for a long time.” She got up to help Lenie in the kitchen.

## Chapter Seven

Mac stepped out of the bookshop at the Anne Frank House and into the midday sun. She put her sunglasses on and walked across the bricked street to the canal. A breeze floated in and she turned her face to it, welcoming the cool air against her skin. She leaned against a bench and gazed out at the water, mesmerized by the ripples created in the wind.

A hand lightly touched her shoulder, and it startled her. She found Lenie smiling at her. Mac rested her butt on a nearby bench and easily took Lenie into her arms. She greeted her with a tender kiss.

"I came out to tell you that Kristy is still in the bookstore, unable to decide which book to buy and whether or not she should get a new copy of *Anne Frank's Diary* and trying not to cry while she looks."

"She's crying? Why?"

"You know she took extra time in a few of the rooms but caught up to me at the end. By the time the video with Otto Frank was over, she was struggling."

"Oh man. I should have known. She cried for a week after we read the book in grade school. Maybe I should go check on her." Mac headed across the street as Kristy walked toward them.

She blew her nose while trying to juggle her bag of purchases and her camera. "I'm hungry," Kristy said once she caught up to Mac. "Let's go eat."

"You sure?" Mac took the bag and camera from her. "Do you need to take a minute to decompress?"

"Nope." She sniffled. "I'm good. It's even more heartbreaking when you see where she lived. Sort of brings history to life, you know? Makes it so much more real."

"Yep. I get that." Mac gave her a one-armed hug. "We need to counter this with something fun." She glanced over her shoulder to see Lenie joining them. "Got a fun place to see next?"

"Certainly. Lots of fun places here."

"Food first. Fun later," Kristy said.

Mac laughed. "It's not been long since breakfast. What do you do with all that food?"

Kristy patted Mac's stomach. "Obviously, I metabolize it much better than you do."

"Hardy har har."

Kristy flashed a brilliant smile that made Mac smile back.

She handed Kristy her camera and stowed the purchases into her backpack. "Okay, oh great and powerful tour guide, where to go for food before the little one faints."

"I thought it might be fun for you to try *Hollandse Nieuwe*."

"I'm game," Kristy said.

"You would be." Mac said to Lenie, "Dare I ask what that is?"

Lenie hesitated. "Perhaps you should first try it."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"C'mon, ya big chicken." Kristy linked arms with Mac and followed Lenie in the direction of a row of street vendors.

The first one they came to advertised New York hot dogs, and the smell made Mac's mouth water. "I want a hot dog."

"You're in Europe and you want a hot dog?" Kristy asked with mock astonishment. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Firmly in place, but the smell of those dogs is making me hungry now. I want one."

"If you don't like the *Hollandse Nieuwe*, then we'll get you a hot dog," Lenie assured her with a grin on her face. She stopped in front of a vendor, and almost immediately, Mac got a whiff of fish. Very fresh and very raw fish. Her expression, she imagined resembled a sour beer face from the old commercials.

Lenie laugh at her. "Don't like fish?"

"Dead and grilled with breading—sure. I like fish. Freshly dead and not cooked—no."

"Hmm. Pity." Lenie stepped up to the counter and made her order. A few moments later, she held two palm-sized paper plates, one in each hand. "*Smakelijk*."

"What does that mean?" Mac asked, staring at the plate Lenie handed her. It contained a raw fish with a lot of raw, chopped onions smothering it.

"It means enjoy your food."



“That’s food? I think we need to get you a dictionary because you’ve gotten the translation of food wrong,” Mac said. She took the plate and sniffed. It smelled as horrible as raw fish should. “I don’t think I can eat this.”

“Sure you can.” Kristy took the other plate from Lenie. “Down the hatch.” She grabbed the fish by the tail, held the plate up to keep from losing the onions, and took a large bite. Then promptly spit it all back out, making gagging noises as she did.

Lenie was gracious enough to hand her a napkin and a drink of water while Mac laughed hysterically as much at the face Kristy pulled as her reaction to the food.

“Are you okay?” Lenie asked, giving Mac a sideways glance, her eyes narrowed as if to admonish Mac for laughing.

Kristy drank most of the bottle of water, using some of it to swish in her mouth. She glared at Mac, but it made Mac laugh harder. “You’re mean. And that was gross.”

“Yes, but you were dumb enough to put a huge bite in your mouth.”

“I’m adventurous.” Kristy put both hands on her hips. “You need to try it now. It’s your turn.”

“No way,” Mac said and thrust the plate toward Lenie. “You can have your Holland new thingy. I don’t want any.”

“Hollandse Nieuwe and how do you know you don’t want it if you haven’t tried it?”

“I saw Kristy’s face when she ate it. That’s all the info I need.”

“Chicken,” Kristy said.

Mac stuck her tongue out at Kristy. “Yep.”

Lenie took the plate from Mac, held the fish in two fingers, stuck her tongue out, and gingerly, slowly, took a bite. She looked at Mac, who watched Lenie’s lips and weirdly wished she’d been the fish.

“Sure you don’t want any?”

Mac licked her suddenly dry lips. “Uh, sure.”

Lenie held it out for her and helped Mac take a bite, keeping most of the onions on the fish. Mac chewed and chewed, working to taste the onions more than anything. It didn’t work well. She managed to swallow it and avoid gagging.

“Yuck!” She grabbed for a bottle of water and did as Kristy, downing most of it in one try. “Okay, I tried the damn thing. What was it?”

Lenie finished off the morsel. “Herring. It’s a Dutch delicacy.”

“Next time, can we cook it?” Mac asked.

“No, that would be horrible. It has to be eaten raw, fresh, and with lots of onions.”

“This is one time I’m going to agree with Mac on food,” Kristy said. “I think I want a hot dog now.”

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An hour later, Lenie took them to the Rijks Museum. Mac paused on the walkway to gaze at the massive structure before them. The entry hall stood about six stories tall, with beautiful leaded windows that caught the midday sunshine and reflected the blue skies above. There were towers on either side of the entry reminded Mac of a castle. Beyond each tower the building expanded for a city block.

As they moved closer, Mac saw various etchings along the reddish brick walls and was awed by the craftsmanship.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Lenie indicated the artwork directly above the main archway.

Mac stared while Kristy took photos. “How old is this place?”

“It was built in 1885 to house *De Nachtwacht*, the pride of Holland. I’ll show you that later.” Lenie headed for a doorway away from the crowds of tourists. She unlocked it with a key card and held it open. “I’m going to give you a tour few ever get.”

“Can we see where you work?” Kristy asked.

“Of course. We’ll go there first, since I need to see Baan for a moment. Then I’ll take you to see *De Nachtwacht* and a few of my other favorite places here.”

They walked quietly through nondescript hallways before coming to a group of offices. Three doors had names on them. Kristy took a picture of the one labeled Lenie Zonneveld.

“Why did you take a picture of the door?” Mac asked.

“Because it’s Lenie’s office door. That makes it important to me.”

It looked like any other office. Maybe ten by twenty feet with a modern desk near the single window and the walls lined with bookshelves that were crammed full. A few books were stacked neatly on the floor and along the edge of the desk.

There were two chairs in front of the desk, and Kristy sat in one of them after taking several more pictures. “Nice. Any chance you’ll be moving to that bigger office?”

“No. Baan took that one, and his old office is the same size as this one.”

“Who’s Baan?” Mac asked.

“The boss from hell,” Kristy said, before Lenie got a chance to. “He’s a total ass. Pushes Lenie around and—”

“Has the office across the hall and understands English.” Lenie shook her head at Kristy. “You can have your tirade about him later when we’re home. Right now, I need to go over there for a minute. I won’t be long.”

Lenie walked out, closing the door behind her. Mac sat in the chair next to Kristy. “Big mouth.”

“Heh. I’ve heard him yelling at her when we Skyped. I didn’t have a clue what he said, but I know mean when I hear it. He constantly makes her do stuff that isn’t part of her job and sends her on the stupidest errands. I was surprised he let her go to Paris. She’s been after him to approve the trip for two months. And not because we were there. She’s really got a lot of stuff to take care of.”

“She’s pretty serious about her job?”

“As serious as you are,” Kristy said. “So, how are things progressing between you two? Other than the fun stuff at night.”

Mac slapped Kristy’s leg. “We aren’t always doing something at night, you lech. But it’s going okay so far. I mean, it’s hard to say. It’s not like we’re actually dating. I don’t know. I kinda feel like we’re doing this all backwards.”

“That’s ‘cause you are. As long as you’re both happy, that’s all that matters.”

Mac caught the look on her face before Kristy turned away. “That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it? I’ve been noticing something was wrong since we left Paris, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You suck at lying, Kris. You always have.”

Kristy shrugged. “So what? I’m worried about my friends.”

“Don’t be. Whether or not Lenie and I work out, we’ll be fine. Right now we’re enjoying the moment.”

“I can hope for more, right?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

Kristy gave Mac her most disarming smile. “I am and quite proud of it. But don’t say anything to Lenie.”

“Why not?”

“She’s got enough to deal with. I don’t want her to know I’m worrying about her.”

“I’m sure she already knows.”

Before Kristy could respond, Lenie came back in. “Okay, girls. Shall I show you the reason this magnificent museum was created?”

A few minutes and several corridors later, they stepped into an enormous room with a vaulted ceiling. Multiple paintings adorned the walls, but the one in the center of the room caught Mac’s attention.

At least ten feet tall and maybe twelve or thirteen feet wide, it depicted a group of people, mostly men, in various poses and dress. Mac guessed it must be from around the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. There was one guy located dead center in the painting with his hands out in a gesture like he was showing the guy next to him something interesting.

“*De Nachtwacht* by Rembrandt. Or, in English, *The Night Watch*.” Lenie urged Mac closer, while Kristy took pictures again.

“Hey, is she allowed to do that?”

“Yes, of course. As long as there’s no flash, it’s fine.”

“I’ve never known an art museum that let you take pictures,” Mac said, motioning back to the painting. “I don’t get what’s going on in this painting, but it’s flawless. How old is it?”

“He painted it in 1643. The proper title is *Militia Company of District II Under the Command of Captain Frans Bannick Cocq*. We recently did a full restoration on it and on the museum building itself. This is the only painting that was put back in its original place.”

“Because the building was made for it.”

“Exactly. It’s one of the most famous paintings in the world.”

“Wow.” Mac moved as close as the thin rope barricade, which kept visitors from being able to touch the masterpiece allowed. The colors were so vibrant and clear, it could have been created recently. It didn’t look hundreds of years old. “You all did a great job I’d say. This is awesome.”

“Thank you. I had nothing to do with the restoration, but the movement of the other pieces as well as two new exhibits were my doing. I can’t tell you how proud we all were when the museum opened its doors again. I was lucky enough to be here when Queen Beatrix visited.”

“I thought you have a king?” Kristy asked.

“We do, but she was still queen when she visited us.” The expression on Lenie’s face reminded Mac of their time in Paris. She loved the art work in front of her. Her eyes caressed the painting as she gazed at it, clearly filled with wonder.

“Thanks for sharing it with us,” Mac said, meeting Lenie’s eyes and smiling at what she saw. Lenie’s passion for art was obvious, and Mac wished she could express how she felt in that moment, seeing her so happy.

“My pleasure. Shall I show you more?” She reached out for Mac’s hand.

“Sounds good to me.” Mac accepted her hand and they moved toward the doorway, dragging Kristy along with them.

# Chapter Eight

Mac's sleep-fogged brain couldn't quite focus. She stretched her right arm out, and it flopped onto the spot where Lenie slept. The glow on the alarm clock displayed five minutes before four a.m.

"Lenie?" Mac called out softly, but received no answer. She climbed out of bed, put on a T-shirt and underwear, and headed for the living room.

She found Lenie standing in front of the picture window, her arms wrapped around her body as if she were hugging herself. Dim light came in from the street below, allowing Mac to see sobs shaking her body.

In a couple of steps she stood beside her, holding Lenie in her arms. Mac didn't speak as she held her. They stayed there several minutes before Lenie pulled away. "Mac, I..."

Mac kissed her on the forehead. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I can't do this." Lenie moved so that Mac couldn't see her face.

"Can't do what?" Lenie didn't answer, instead she paced. "Please, baby. Tell me what's wrong."

"Us. Whatever this is—I can't do it."

Mac felt the breath leave her body, and her knees felt weak. "We—I don't understand. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no. It's not you at all." Lenie stopped, but kept distance between them. "You're perfect. You're perfect and that scares me."

Mac took a step forward, but Lenie moved back. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Yes. I think it's the best thing for me—for us. I should never have let it get this far."

"Hang on here." Mac's entire body shook, from fear or anger she couldn't be sure which. "I know we haven't known each other long, but I feel like there's more going on here than you're telling me."

Lenie's shoulders slumped, and she said in a voice so low that Mac could barely hear her, "I can't take the chance."

"Chance? Chance on what?"

"On falling in love with you."

It felt like Mac's heart had been ripped out of her chest. Lenie loved her and wanted to break up because of it. "Let's take a step back, okay? Maybe we're moving too fast. I mean, we sort of skipped the whole, 'Gee, is she as attracted to me as I am to her' part and went right to the sex. We haven't taken the time to get to know each other."

"How are we going to do that? You live thousands of miles away. We won't be able to see each other and go for coffee or take a walk together. How can we possibly get to know each other?"

"Skype, telephone calls, e-mails, I don't know, but we can figure it out. Maybe you can come visit me in a few weeks, and I'll try to come back here after that. Lenie, I'm just asking for a chance to make this work before we call it off."

"I don't know if we can. My last girlfriend lived two canals over, and we couldn't make things work."

Mac closed the distance between them and cupped Lenie's face in her hands. "I'm not her. I might not live down the street, but I'll be here with you as much as humanly possible. We won't ever know if this can work unless we try." She pressed her lips to Lenie's letting her know exactly how she felt in that moment.

When the kiss ended, Lenie leaned her head on Mac's shoulder. "I can't make any promises, Mac, but I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask." Mac kissed her again. "Now, can we go back to bed? I'd like a few more hours of sleep before Kristy sees the light of day and wants to head out."

Lenie's soft laughter soothed Mac. "Sure. Sleep would be nice." She took Mac's hand and led her back into the bedroom.

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Mac never woke when Lenie went to work, but missed her presence when she got up. Sleep hadn't come easily that night, and by nine she awoke, showered and headed for the kitchen. Kristy was already there finishing her breakfast.

“‘Bout time you woke up. I thought I was going to have to set off a bomb in there.”

“That works for you, who sleep like the dead. I’d have been up sooner, but I woke in the middle of the night and couldn’t go back to sleep.” Mac filled the tea kettle with water, turned it on and grabbed a tea bag, choosing strawberry flavor. She’d always been a coffee drinker, but she found this unusual flavor refreshing. Even if she missed the massive jolt of caffeine.

“Did you have trouble sleeping?”

“Yes and so did Lenie.”

Kristy pulled out a chair at the table and motioned her to sit. “Tell me.”

Mac recapped their conversation. “I never gave it a second thought until she brought it up last night. It’s all been so fast and wonderful and right. I know we live worlds apart, but I guess I assumed that wouldn’t make a difference.” She sighed, finished making her tea, and sat across from Kristy. “I guess I never thought, period.”

“Of course you didn’t think. You found this woman you like and jumped in with both feet. It’s what you do, Mac. You did the same thing with Amy, Chris, and Steph. It’s just that Steph lasted a lot longer than the other two.” Kristy reached across the table to take Mac’s hand. “You have two gears when it comes to women. Either the fast gear of jumping into bed with them the minute you meet, or the faster gear where you jump into bed with her and get the U-Haul ready to load.”

“I’m not that bad,” Mac said. “Am I?”

Kristy nodded. “But this time it’s different, isn’t it? I mean, you were so bummed when we left Paris, and I don’t think I’ve seen you this happy in years. Yet it’s a different happy.” She narrowed her gaze, making Mac want to squirm under the intensity of it. “You’ve fallen in love with her.”

“I don’t think I could deny that if I wanted to,” Mac said, almost wishing Kristy didn’t know her as well as she did. “I’m pretty sure she’s the one, even though we hardly know each other. It’s crazy.”

“No, it’s not. It’s called love at first sight. Now you have to figure out how it’s all going to work out.”

“That’s what Lenie is worried about. How do we have a relationship long distance? She told me about a girlfriend who lived a few streets away and they couldn’t make it work. I loved Steph, but we never found a way to make things work and we tried for five years. How are we going to do this?”

“One day at a time, my dear friend. Don’t be so pressured about the future. Right here, right now, is what’s important.” Kristy got up and moved into the kitchen, and Mac suspected she was crying.

“Hey, you all right?” Mac went to her side, but Kristy wouldn’t face her.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I get a little sad thinking about it sometimes.”

“Thinking about what?” Mac asked. Kristy didn’t and wouldn’t have a future with someone special in her life.

“It’s not important.”

“Bull.” Mac put her hands on Kristy’s shoulders and maneuvered her so they were face-to-face. “I know you better than that, Kristy Belle. It’s important that we talk about this stuff. You don’t need to keep it all inside. I’m here for you, remember?”

“I do. I’m feeling sorry for myself.”

“And you’re allowed to.” Mac pulled her close and gave her a warm hug. “I wish I could change things for you. I really do.”

“Me, too.” Kristy moved away and dried the tears from her face. “This is depressing. Let’s go do something.”

“What would you like to do?”

“Just walk around and explore.”

“In other words, walk around and get lost?”

Kristy smiled, even though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’ll be an adventure.”

“Sure. An adventure it is then.” The doorbell rang. “Should we get it?” Mac asked.

“Of course. It might be a delivery or something.”

“But I don’t speak Dutch.”

Kristy shoved Mac toward the door. “Nearly everyone here speaks English. Go answer it.”

“Why me?”

Kristy smirked. “Because she’s *your* girlfriend.”

“Smart-ass.” Mac opened the door. A dark-haired woman stood there. She wore black-rimmed glasses, and her face held a severe expression as her eyes bore a hole into Mac.

“*Waar is ze?*”

“What?”

“*Waar is ze?*” The woman put emphasis on each word like she spoke to a small child. “*Ben je doof?*”

“I don’t speak Dutch. Sorry.”

The woman rolled her eyes and sighed. “Where is Lenie? I want to see her.”

“Sorry, she’s at work. Can I help you with something?”

She squinted at Mac like she couldn’t make a decision. “Who are you?”

The chick got on Mac’s nerves. “Who are you?”

“Frieda. Tell her to call me.” Frieda huffed, spun on her heel and left so fast Mac couldn’t respond

Mac closed the door and shook her finger at Kristy. “Next time it’s your turn.”

“Who was that?”

“A nasty woman named Frieda.”

“Frieda? Oh no.”

“Who is Frieda?” Mac asked.

“Her crazy ex. What did she say?”

“She asked for Lenie, and I told her she was at work.”

Kristy grabbed the house phone and handed it to Mac. “You better call Lenie. That crazy woman will probably go to the museum. She needs to be warned.”

“Is Frieda violent?” Mac wondered why Lenie had never mentioned her before. Then again, they’d hardly had time to discuss their former girlfriends.

“I don’t think so, but she’s caused problems for Lenie at work before. And she’s got enough to deal with Baan. She doesn’t need Frieda showing up.”

Mac dialed the number Lenie wrote down for her, glad when Lenie picked up on the first ring.

“Lenie Zonneveld.”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hi, Mac,” Lenie said and Mac could hear the smile in her voice. “Did you sleep okay?”

Her smooth voice distracted Mac until Kristy slapped her arm. “Yes, I slept good enough. Someone was here looking for you.”

“Oh?”

“Her name was Frieda.” A pregnant pause, followed and Mac thought they’d been disconnected. “Lenie?”

“I’m here. What did she say?”

“Some stuff in Dutch, but then she demanded to know where you were. I didn’t know who she was, so I told her you were working. I’m sorry if that was the wrong thing to do.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll make sure Security knows to stop her, though I doubt she’ll come here.”

“Should we come over there and walk home with you? Are you going to be all right?”

“That’s sweet of you, Mac, but I’ll be fine. Frieda is a lot of talk, but she’s not violent. Just possessive and pushy. We broke up a year ago, and she hasn’t accepted it yet. I ignored her calls this morning so I’m sure that’s why she went looking for me.”

“If you’re sure—”

“I am. Thanks for the call. Go have fun, and I’ll see you this evening.”

“Okay.” Mac hung up, still not convinced that Lenie was all right. “So, she’s been warned. Now find that map of Amsterdam. We’ll go wander around, but I want to be at the museum when Lenie gets off work.”

“Aww, you want to escort her home? How gallant.”

“Whatever. I want to be there if Frieda shows up.”

“Of course you do.”

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Mac leaned against the wall of the arch at the entrance to the Rijks Museum, while Kristy wandered around and took more pictures. Mac watched her, glad to see her have a good time, but a worried that she did too much. After a day of walking through Amsterdam, Kristy looked pale and her pace slowed. Maybe she needed to eat. Or perhaps her energy had waned.

Mac hoped that Lenie would be coming out of work soon. She’d like to get Kristy to a place she could relax for a little while and, more importantly, get food.

“Did you come here to be my bodyguard?”

Lenie’s voice came from behind Mac and she turned around. “It’s quite a fine body and I would think it needs guarding. I don’t want any woman coming up and messing with it.”

“Is that so?” Lenie asked. “Feeling possessive?”

“A little.” Mac ran her hand along Lenie’s butt and up to her back, letting the tips of her fingers brush the soft skin under her cotton shirt. “I can show you more later if you’d like.”

“I like.” Lenie placed her hand on the back of Mac’s neck and pulled her close for a searing kiss. “I like it a lot.”

“Me, too.” Mac took Lenie’s hand and lead her toward Kristy’s current picture-taking spot. It was then she saw Frieda’s squinty face frowning their way. “Uh-oh.”

Lenie squeezed her hand. “I’ll speak to her. Just a second.” She kissed Mac on the cheek and stopped Frieda a few yards away from where Mac stood.

She couldn’t hear what they were saying, nor could she see Lenie’s face, but from Frieda’s reaction, Mac figured Lenie was laying in to her pretty well.

“Is that Frieda?” Kristy asked.

“Yep and she doesn’t look happy.”

“I hope Lenie claws her eyes out.”

“Kris, that’s not nice.” Mac nudged her with her elbow. “Why are you so pissed at Frieda? You don’t even know her?”

“Because she hurt Lenie really bad.” Kristy hesitated a beat. “She should be the one to tell you this, but I’ll at least say that Frieda cheated on her. When they broke up, Frieda got all freaked out and while she finally stopped calling Lenie a few months ago, every once in a while she shows up. Lenie’s gotten Security to kick her out of the museum twice, and they banned her from coming back.”

“So she’s stalking Lenie.”

“Pretty much. Lenie says she’s not violent, but you never know with people like her,” Kristy said.

As if on cue, Frieda moved closer to Lenie and the motion gave Mac the impression the talk would soon come to blows. Mac raced over and got between them, shoving Frieda away.

“You need to leave,” she said, keeping Lenie at her back. “Now.”

Frieda responded to her in Dutch, and for a moment Mac thought she would end up a fist fight. Frieda scanned the area around them, apparently noticing there were still several people milling about. Mac guessed she thought better of it, but before slinking away, Frieda said something in Dutch that caused Lenie’s face to blanch. Frieda walked off with a swagger that said she’d won.

“What did she say?” Mac asked.

“It’s nothing.”

“No, that’s not true. I see the look on your face. Please tell me what she said.”

Lenie shook her head and reached for Mac’s hand. “Not now, okay? It was ugly and I really don’t want to talk about it. Please?”

Her eyes pleaded and Mac sensed she should drop the subject. At least for the moment. “You going to be okay?”

“Yes. Shall we get Kristy? I’m sure she’s hungry by now.”

“Let’s.” Mac kissed her fingers and motioned for Kristy to join them. “Ready for food?”

“Always. As long as it’s cooked.”

Lenie laughed. “I’ll do what I can.”

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Mac enjoyed dinner. Kristy was indeed undernourished and sucked her food in without much chewing. She wasn’t in the mood to do much experimenting, so Lenie helped her order a well-done steak. Mac was happy to see the color return to Kristy’s face and a little bit of energy come back.

After they’d all satisfied their stomachs, the trio went back to Lenie’s house. Kristy admitted to being tired and headed to bed.

Mac made sure Kristy was settled and asleep before joining Lenie in the living room. “I’m sure she’ll be up early again tomorrow, but for now she’s resting. I was so worried that she’d end up with a migraine or pass out from being too weak. She scares me sometimes by pushing herself so hard.”

“I doubt she’s going to stop doing that anytime soon.” Lenie patted the couch seat, and Mac settled beside her. “You should rest, too. It’s been a long day.”

“It has,” Mac said and snuggled against her. “But I think we need to talk.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Lenie put her arm around Mac and set aside the magazine she’d been reading. “I’m not going to repeat what Frieda said today. It’s too ugly.”

“You don’t have to, but I am curious about what happened between you two. If you’re up to telling me about it.”

Lenie ran her fingers through Mac's hair, not answering her immediately. "Frieda and I were together for two and a half years. I never had any illusion that she was someone I'd spend the rest of my life with, but I was comfortable with her."

"Did your mom like her?"

"No, which should have been a warning to me, but Ma never told me what to do. If I was going to make a mistake, it was mine to make. Though I wish she'd been more adamant about her feelings regarding Frieda."

Mac rested her head on Lenie's shoulder. "Kristy told me she cheated on you."

"Yes, but I'm sure Kristy left out the most important detail." Lenie said. "The day Ma died—not an hour after she was gone—I went to Frieda's apartment and found her in bed with another woman."

Mac sat up and asked Lenie. "What the hell? Your mom was dying, and she wasn't there?"

"She told me she wasn't feeling well. I thought she was avoiding being around the house. She kept saying it was too depressing."

"What a bitch. Of course it was depressing. I'm so sorry she treated you like that. You didn't deserve it." Mac brushed her fingers along Lenie's cheek. "She has no idea what she's missing out on."

"Thanks. But I was so angry that day that I nearly hit her. I told her to never come around me again."

"She clearly didn't listen to you."

"No. She came to the funeral. I refused to speak to her. She called me so often I changed the number of my house phone and my mobile phone. She called me at work after that, and I changed that number, too. It's been a mess."

"Does she still follow you? I mean, shouldn't you tell the police?"

"Yes and yes, I have made a report. Today is the first time I've seen her in a few weeks."

"What did she want?" Mac asked, noting the worried expression on Lenie's face. "She said more than ugly things, didn't she?"

Lenie closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the couch. "Yes, she did. She saw us walking around together and demanded to know who you were, not that it's any of her concern. I told her as much and that's when she got more insistent. I used to feel sorry for her because her parents shunned her when she told them she was gay."

"Really? I thought people here were accepting of gays."

"Most are, but we still have those who aren't. They wanted her to marry and have children and follow the rules of normal society. Her parents were part of a group that opposed our mayor allowing gays to marry back in 2001."

"That sucks. But it's no reason for her to be so mean to you. And to not be there when you needed her most—I don't get that."

"Neither did I." Lenie gazed down at her hands, which Mac took hold of. She smiled at her. "But it's in the past. Frieda will eventually give up."

"Or I'll kick her ass."

"No you won't." Lenie kissed her on the cheek. "You're such a protective butch. I've never had a girlfriend like that before. It's rather nice."

"Girlfriend? Are we official?" Mac said in a teasing tone. She liked the way Lenie was watching her. "I'm good with it if you are. I don't mind being exclusive."

"Neither do I."

"Then it's a deal," Mac stood and pulled Lenie with her. "Shall we celebrate our new deal?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

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Their two weeks in Amsterdam raced by, and when it came time to leave, Mac found herself profoundly sad. She remained quiet on the trip to the airport to allow Kristy to chatter on about some of the other activities on her bucket list and how she'd be sure to e-mail Lenie lots of pictures. Mac knew the talking covered up Kristy's own sadness and let her ramble on.

Lenie guided them to the airline desk, and once they had their boarding passes in hand and baggage checked, Kristy left to find the restroom. Mac and Lenie stood at the entrance to the passport control stations to wait. Mac adjusted the straps on her backpack for the tenth time and checked her passport. She wasn't ready to go home. She wasn't ready to leave Lenie.

"You nervous about the flight?" Lenie asked.

"Not at all." Mac couldn't find the right words. "I don't want to leave. We—this thing we have is so new, and I want to be here with you to see where it goes."



“I know. I want that, too.” Lenie kissed her and smoothed the hair back from Mac’s face. “But it’s going to be okay. Remember, we’ll call, Skype, e-mail—all the modern forms of communication—until I can come over to visit. Promise.”

“Okay.”

“All good now,” Kristy announced when she joined them. She gave Lenie a big hug and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks for the wonderful time, Lenie. I’m going to miss you.”

“No you won’t. You’ll be Skyping me tomorrow.” Lenie mussed Kristy’s hair. “In the meantime, I’ll miss you, too.”

“You’re coming to Cincinnati soon, right?” Kristy glanced anxiously between Mac and Lenie.

“As soon as I can get Baan to approve my holiday time. Then you can be the tour guide. Deal?”

“Deal.” Kristy hugged her again and grabbed her carry-on bag. “I’m going on ahead.” She disappeared into the throng of people.

Mac fidgeted with her backpack. “I’ll call you as soon as we land.”

“Skype me. It’s free,” Lenie said and pulled Mac into an embrace. “I’ll be here, *lieffe*. Just have a safe flight back.”

“Leaf yuh? What does that mean?”

“It means sweetheart.”

“I like it.” Mac kissed Lenie for all she was worth. She wanted to say, “I love you,” but something in Lenie’s eyes stopped her. It was too soon. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too. Now get going before you’re late. The passport lines can take awhile.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mac gave her a mock salute and moved into the line of travelers. As she made her way to the passport control booths, she periodically gazed toward Lenie. She could see her up until the point she reached the booths. Her chest ached, but at least the tears didn’t come until after she’d gotten through the passport check.

## Chapter Nine

They'd arrived late in the evening on Sunday. The trip from Amsterdam to Cincinnati, which took over twenty hours to complete, had exhausted Mac. The moment she and Kristy stepped foot outside the airport, Jace was there to greet them, along with Cindy, inundating them with questions and excitement. It didn't end when Cindy first dropped Kristy off at her house and then took Jace and Mac home. Jace kept up the banter long into the late evening and only stopped to down a sandwich for dinner. That was when Mac escaped to her bedroom for some much needed rest.

Mac felt refreshed after a good night's sleep and when she eventually made it to the kitchen, she was greeted by the smell of fresh bacon and maple syrup. "Mmm. Something smells good."

"Thanks. Have a seat," Jace said, waving at her with a spatula. "Cindy showed me how to make pancakes and bacon. I've got the syrup in the microwave. Unless you like it cold."

"Hot syrup sounds yummy." Mac stole a piece of bacon and missed getting hit with a spatula.

"Hey, no eating before it's done. Sit."

"Yes, sir." Mac settled at the table and enjoyed watching Jace move around the kitchen as if born to it. "Is this all she showed you?"

"Nope. She let me help her cook dinner. She's great. We had an awesome time," he said as he flipped the pancakes. "She got me hooked on a couple of cooking shows and got me three cookbooks. I hope you won't mind me experimenting sometimes."

Mac was amazed at the transformation in Jace. He was stuck between kid and adult when she left for Europe. A month later, Jace was firmly on the adult track. "No, I don't mind at all. I guess I'm surprised by the excitement over cooking."

"I always wanted to cook," Jace said. He set a plate of piping hot pancakes and bacon in front of her. He came back, set the microwave to heat the syrup, and poured her a cup of coffee. "I used to sneak and watch Rachel Ray when Aunt Florence wasn't around. We never had enough food or ingredients for me to try her recipes, though."

"I feel like I'm at a restaurant." Mac dug into her food as soon as the syrup finished heating. "But this is way better. Jace, you have my permission to experiment anytime you want to. We'll go to the store tonight, since I know there wasn't much left here. I'm sure you got all this stuff from Cindy."

"I did." He sat across from her. "Can I come to the OTR with you today?"

Mac hadn't given it much thought. Her brain was just waking up. Cindy explained to her in an e-mail, shortly before they left Amsterdam, that the police still searched for Oscar. "Are you sure you want to?"

"Yes. I liked working there, and what am I going to do here? Besides, Cindy told me it will look good on my resume. I want to work there every summer and help you out when I come home during the holidays, spring break, and whenever I can."

Mac smiled, even though tears threatened because her heart swelled with pride. "Sure. You can work at the OTR whenever you want."

"Cool. Thanks."

"Now get done with your breakfast so we can be there on time. I don't want Cindy mad at me my first day back."

"Aren't you the boss?"

Mac laughed. "I might be the boss, but it's a technicality. Cindy runs that place, and don't you ever forget it."

"I won't. But I think she's going to be worried about me being there, since the cops can't find Oscar."

"I'm worried about that, too, but you can't hide your whole life." Mac got up and gave Jace a quick hug. "Let's get moving. Remember, we're not going to be late today."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Traffic did not help any, making Mac and Jace a half hour late getting to the Over-the-Rhine Community Center. Cindy waited for them at the back door, arms crossed over her chest and a definite scowl on her face. Jace took one look at her and motioned Mac go in first.

"Hi, Cindy." Mac spun back to Jace. "Chicken."

“Yep,” he said, still hesitant to enter.

“Where have you been? Is your cell phone dead? Jace can’t call me from his phone?”

“Jace has a cell phone? Since when?”

Cindy put her hands on her hips and narrowed her gaze at Mac. “Since that Oscar character showed up here. I bought him one that night. You’re not answering my question.”

“Yes, I have my phone, but we were chatting and stuck in traffic and completely forgot to give you a call.” Mac gave Cindy a quick kiss on the cheek. “But I love that you worry about us. Now, can we come inside?”

Cindy stepped aside, pinning her gaze on Jace. “That phone of yours does text messages.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jace reminded her of a little kid under that stare, and Mac giggled.

“I told him we shouldn’t be late,” Mac said. “But it’s not his fault, so let up on the poor kid.”

“The poor kid owes me some free labor. I left files on your desk, Mac. Most of it is paperwork you need to sign. I tried to reschedule, but you’ve got an appointment today at eleven fifteen. It’s about the county grant, so I didn’t argue with her too much. Still don’t see why she couldn’t come tomorrow.”

“What’s her name?”

“Amy Pratt.”

“Ah.” Mac avoided Cindy’s questioning stare but knew she’d have to explain. “She’s an ex from a long time ago. She probably didn’t reschedule because she doesn’t like me.”

“That would explain why she was so pissed off that you were on vacation for a month,” Cindy said. “She had the gall to say something about you being gone so long, but since she holds our grant in her hands, I decided not to tell the bitch off.”

“Good thing. I’ll do my best to be nice to her when she gets here.”

“You do that.” Cindy started for her office. “And do me a favor. Let me know how many more ex-girlfriends I’m going to encounter, especially ones who work for the county or the city. I’d like to be prepared.”

Mac grinned sheepishly. “She’s the last surprise ex. I got around a lot as a kid, but she and Steph were the ones I stuck with longer than a few weeks. Promise.”

“Okay. But if I find another one, I’m going to make you deal with her.”

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Just after finishing her lunch and decompressing from a difficult meeting, Mac opened Skype on her computer. It was after six p.m. in Amsterdam, and time for her first call to Lenie. They’d set it up before she left, and Mac wanted to see her.

The system made a bleeping sound, and Mac answered the call. “Hey, babe,” she said, watching as Lenie’s face came into view.

“Hi, yourself. How are you feeling? Still jet-lagged?”

“Not too bad. I managed to sleep on the way home, and after answering a million questions from Jace, I got to bed early. Slept another eight hours or so.”

“Good.” Lenie leaned her arm on the desk and rested her chin in her hand. “I’ve been thinking about you today.”

“Only today?” Mac asked and they shared a laugh. “I’ve been thinking about you, too. I miss you.”

“That’s a good thing, I think.”

“It’s very good. I wish I could fly back tomorrow.”

“Wow. You’d be pretty wiped out by the time you got here.”

Mac shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind.” She sighed, feeling like a love-sick teenager. “Tell me about your day.”

“That’s a boring topic.”

“I don’t care. I want to know what you’ve been up to.” When Lenie laughed, Mac smiled. The sound was soft and sweet and warmed her heart.

“Okay, if you insist.”

“I do.”

Lenie spent the next twenty minutes regaling Mac with her day-to-day work routine. She spoke with great passion about the art she loved so much. She’d recovered two paintings that were lost during World War II, and her pride obvious. Mac felt that same pride as she listened to her.

“Amazing. You’re damn good at what you do.”

“I’ve been told that. I’ve gotten a few offers from other museums over the years, but it’s been my dream to work at the Rijks Museum.”

"I can tell. Your eyes sparkle when you talk about it. Did I ever tell you how beautiful you are?"

Lenie blushed and Mac found it adorable. Yes. She was definitely a love-struck teenager.

"That's sweet, but I believe you are seeing me through rose-colored glasses."

"Nah. My eyesight is perfect."

"But your timing sucks," Cindy announced from the doorway. "Pepper is here and he needs to talk to you about that incident with Jace."

"Your timing is the one that sucks," Mac said. "Tell him to give me a few minutes, please?"

Cindy snuck a peek at the computer screen. "She's cute," she said, then left Mac's office and closed the door behind her.

"Well, I guess you got to meet Cindy, sort of. I'm sorry I have to go soon."

"It's okay. I'm hungry and need to get dinner made. Call me in a few hours so we can talk before I go to bed."

Mac touched the computer screen as if she could touch Lenie. "Promise."

"Bye," Lenie said and the screen went back to the generic Skype wallpaper. Mac logged off and opened her office door to let Pepper in.

He greeted her with a hug. "Did you manage to have fun on your trip?"

Mac leaned on her desk. "I did. And if I know Cindy, she's already told you about Lenie so ask whatever it is you want know. Ask it now and get it over with."

"I didn't have questions, but now that you mention it..." He paused for a beat. "How are you going to manage a long-distance relationship? She's on the wrong side of the Atlantic."

"Good to know your geography is well in place. But honestly, we're not worried about that yet. It's too new. We'll figure it out as we go."

"Be careful."

"Yes, Dad." She cuffed him on the arm. "So talk to me. You got any leads on that little asshole yet?"

"Not yet, but I've been working with our drug guys, and they say he's been making the rounds, trying to make a name for himself. We know he's selling—mostly to high school kids—but he's working to move up the food chain."

"You think he'll come after Jace again?"

"I'm not sure. I've got my guys coming around here as much as possible, but we've been busy as hell lately. Probably won't slow down until school begins again, and by then, Jace is going to be at NKU. I doubt Oscar is going to follow him there, if he even knows he's going."

Mac hoped Oscar didn't know and that the police would find him long before then. "Anything I can do? I can't keep Jace glued to my side. He needs to get out there and enjoy his summer, even though he insists on working here during the daytime."

"Keep an eye out for anything out of place. Call 9-1-1 no matter how insignificant it seems. I'd rather my guys come here for nothing, than you not call when it's important."

"You know I will."

"Good. Now, will we see you Saturday evening? The wife has been bugging me about it."

Mac smiled, thinking Pepper looked cute when he talked about his wife, even though they'd been married over twenty years. "Yes, we'll be there. Tell Michelle I'm bringing the drinks, no arguing."

"I'll tell her, but if she calls you, it's not my fault. She ordered me to tell you to bring you, Jace, and Kristy. That's it. She'll have the rest there. Anything else and she'll get pissed at me."

"I'm sure Michelle will be fine."

"Thanks, buddy," Pepper said.

"Anytime. See you Saturday." She waved as he left her office. It felt good to be home again, even if she missed Lenie. No matter where she went in the world, Mac knew this would always be her home. She hoped someday Lenie might see it that way as well.

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On Saturday, Mac and Jace headed to the OTR. They planned to spend the morning and afternoon, before the party at Pepper's, painting the reception area to get ready for newer, donated, furniture. Mac was glad to replace the old vinyl couch and chairs that reminded her of a doctor's office.

The sun shone brightly through the floor-to-ceiling windows, warming the area enough that Mac sweated before they ever got started. "You want to put the painters tape along the floorboard or the ceiling trim?"

Jace shrugged. "Don't matter."

“Well, you’re younger so you get to be on your hands and knees doing the floorboard.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jace gave her a mock salute and got to work.

“Kristy tells me you might have a new girlfriend.”

“Kristy’s got a big mouth,” he muttered.

“I could have told you that. But she also thinks it’s really cute.” Mac paused, but when Jace kept quiet, she continued. “So spill it. What’s her name? How old is she? Where’d you meet her? and what happened to Amanda?”

Jace leaned back on his haunches and stared up at her as she climbed the stepladder. “You sound like a cop interrogating someone.” He smiled as he spoke. “She’s nineteen and I met her at the new student seminar that Cindy took me to last weekend at NKU. Her name is Caroline. And I only had one date with Amanda. She wasn’t exactly my girlfriend.”

“Caroline. That’s a sweet name. Any chance I’ll get to meet her?”

“Next weekend. She works today and tomorrow, but she said she’d come over on Saturday, if it’s okay with you.”

“Yes it’s okay. Besides, it’s your house, too. Don’t forget that.”

“I try not to.” He stood up. “I need to use the restroom. Be right back.”

Mac ran out of blue tape and came down off the ladder. As she bent over to pick up some new tape, an enormous explosion rocked the room and the glass in the windows imploded.

# Chapter Ten

The blast deafened Mac. Glass broke all around her. Mac reflexively hit the ground and covered her head. She thought she heard a couple of explosions but couldn't be sure. It all happened in a matter of seconds, and once she realized the noise stopped, she immediately searched for Jace.

"Jace! You okay? Where are you?"

"I'm over here," Jace called from the entrance to the hallway, well away from the shards of glass that littered the floor. "Holy shit. I can't believe it happened again." He huddled on his haunches, holding his knees tight. "You okay?"

"I think so," Mac said and made her way to him. Once assured that Jace was uninjured, she wheeled around to survey the damage. Three of five windows in the front of the building were shattered, and the window blinds hung loose or were completely destroyed. She couldn't comprehend what happened. Was it an explosion somewhere on the street? Natural gas or something?

She crunched across the debris and peeked outside. No other buildings were damaged. Several shop owners and a couple of people she recognized as living in the apartment building across the street were gathered around, all staring at the destruction. Mac stood there in a daze until Jace came to her side.

"You got blood all over you." His face paled and his voice wavered.

Mac didn't feel hurt, but his expression made her find a seat without glass on it and sit down. "What happened?"

"You never been shot at before, have you?" Jace asked. "That was one of those automatic guns, maybe an AK or something. Must've fired a dozen rounds or so. I did see a black car, but it went by too fast to tell who was in it."

"Shots? Seriously? Someone shot at us?"

Jace nodded and took off his shirt and pressed it against Mac's neck. "You're bleeding a lot. We gotta get you help."

She took the shirt from him. "Go call 9-1-1."

"I just did." Fred Smith, who owned the apartment building across the street, came running in, nearly sliding to a stop in front of Mac. His large belly popped out of the too-small T-shirt he wore. He was soaked in sweat. "I couldn't get a license number, but I'm sure I know the little shit who drove that car." Fred's breath came in heavy gulps and he mopped sweat from his brow with a dark-colored hanky.

"Thanks, Fred. You better sit down before you have a stroke."

He sat heavily next to Mac, his face creased with worry. "I knew this would happen eventually. You're doing good work here."

"I guess so. Are you sure you know who it was?"

Fred grimaced. "Pretty sure it was that Leroy kid lives down on Main Street. Or maybe it's Fifth Street. I don't remember. I'll tell the cops though. Not gonna let those little bastards get away with shooting up our neighborhood."

Mac patted him on the leg. "Thanks."

Blaring sirens and squealing tires announced the arrival of the police. Pepper came through the door first and stopped at Mac's side. "You hurt?"

"She's bleeding," Jace said. "Got a lot of cuts on her neck and stuff. I think they had a AK and it was a black car—four-door I think."

"Yes!" Fred jumped to his feet. "That's Leroy Matthews's car."

Pepper examined Mac and took in the damage. "Jace, you and Fred stay here. I need to go outside and see if there are any witnesses. When the ambulance comes, you make sure they check on Mac, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Jace said.

"I don't need an ambulance," Mac muttered. "I'm fine."

"No, you're bleeding. My T-shirt is already full of blood."

Fred looked ill and Mac felt her stomach lurch.

"And it's all yours, so you're going to be examined by the paramedics."

Mac wanted to argue with him but realized it was fine if Jace took on the role of the adult in this instance. "I need to call Kristy. I don't want her hearing about this on the news."

"I'll call her," Jace said. "Where's your cell phone?"

Mac handed it to him. "Don't make it sound like I'm bleeding to death, okay? I don't want her freaking out."

"You got shot at." Jace dialed Kristy's number. "She's gonna freak out."

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Mac refused to go to the hospital by ambulance, even after Kristy arrived and tried to all but carry her into the vehicle. The cuts on her neck were deeper than the ones on the backs of her arms, and they would need stitches, but Mac insisted she would go to the hospital later. The paramedics cleaned her up as best they could and left.

“We’re going to the ER right now,” Kristy said.

“Not until the police are finished. I need to make sure the place is okay.”

Pepper took Mac by the arm and led her toward Kristy’s car. “Stitches first. When you’re all done, come back. I’m sure we’ll still be here.”

Mac might win against Kristy or Pepper but not when they teamed up. Even Fred was on their side, so she let Kristy take her to the hospital.

Mac filled out the insurance paperwork, while Kristy paced in front of her bed. “Kris, you’re making me nervous. Please sit down.”

“I can’t. You got shot at. You should be nervous.”

“I’m in shock. I’m sure I’ll be scared and nervous later. I’d rather get this all over with so I can get back to the OTR.”

“No. You’re not going back there.” Kristy’s expression a mixture of fear and determination. “Close it down. It’s too dangerous.”

“What? Kris you can’t possibly expect—”

“I can. I’m the one who’s supposed to be dying here, not you. And I’m not about to spend my last days on Earth without you.”

“Where is this coming from?” Mac tossed the clipboard onto the bed and stood up. “You know damn well I’m not closing the OTR. Especially not after your Facebook campaign to get us more money and volunteers. Kris, this is the first time I’ve felt like we’re gaining ground instead of running in place. We’ve got one hell of an opportunity here, and I’m not going to waste it.”

“But someone tried to kill you. How can you go back there knowing that?”

Mac took hold of her by the arms to stop her pacing. “I’m pretty damn sure it was Oscar or one of his buddies and not a random thing. I think he was trying to scare me or Jace or both.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier. I’m scared something will happen to you.” Kristy’s eyes filled with tears as Mac enveloped her in an embrace. “I can’t do this without you.”

“You won’t. I promise.” Mac felt her own tears forming and fought to keep them at bay. “Have I ever broken a promise to you?”

“No,” Kristy said. “Not that I know of.”

“Never.” Mac said. “I’m fine. Jace is fine. And tomorrow we’ll get the door and windows fixed. No problem.”

“I don’t share your optimism.” Kristy stepped away and wiped her face with a tissue.

“You will. In the meantime, why don’t you get a cup of coffee?”

Kristy stared at her, clearly ready to continue the conversation, but something in her demeanor changed and she relented. “Sure. You want one?”

“Yes. I think it’s gonna be a long day.”

Kristy hadn’t been gone long when Mac heard another familiar voice.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.” Rissa stood at the foot of the bed, one delicate hand on her hip. She wore turquoise blue scrubs, and her nametag indicated she was a nurse. “Thought maybe you’d call me first.”

“I’ve been busy traveling,” Mac said.

“That’s what they all say.” Rissa stood behind Mac. “Wow. What happened to you?”

“Got cut by flying glass.”

“How did the glass get flying?” Rissa leaned over Mac’s shoulder to examine the wound, and Mac caught a faint whiff of perfume. Last time she smelled that particular scent, she and Rissa were hurriedly undressing in her bedroom. “Did it have help?”

“Well, I—uh—got shot at.”

“What? Who shot at you? Did you call the cops?”

“Not sure who, but yes. They’re at my center right now and—”

“Over-the-Rhine Community Center?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“It was on the news a few minutes ago. I saw it on my break. They didn’t say someone got shot.”

"I didn't get shot," Mac said. "Did I?"

"You got hit, yes," Rissa said. "The gash in your neck is too deep to come from glass. You've got several smaller cuts around it, but I'm sure the worst of it came from a bullet. I've certainly seen enough of those to know one when I see it."

"Damn."

"It's not bad, though," she said. "Couple stitches and you'll be fine. It's deep, but not very wide."

"Damn." It was all Mac could think to say. She'd been shot. If the bullet had strayed much closer, she'd have been killed.

"Hey." Rissa stood in front of her, one hand on her cheek. Mac saw her concerned expression. "You're okay and you're safe. Did I see you come in with someone?"

"Yeah. My best friend."

"Best friend, huh?" Her voice teased and Mac did her best to smile.

"Yes. Been friends since we were little kids." Mac leaned forward as Rissa went back to administering to her wound. "Please don't tell her I got shot. She's already freaked out."

"No problem there. You're secret is safe with me."

"What secret?" Kristy asked, handing Mac her coffee.

"If I tell you, it won't be a secret," Rissa said. "I've got you all cleaned up for now. I'll go let the doc know, so we can get you patched up and out of here." She smirked at Mac before leaving.

Kristy rolled her eyes. "Really? You were flirting with the nurse?"

"If there was flirting, it came from her, not me. Besides, I know her."

"From where? I've never seen her before." Kristy sat down and crossed her legs. "I'm pretty sure I'd remember it if you dated a nurse."

"It wasn't a date, exactly." Mac felt the blush and chose to study her shoes. "That was Rissa."

"Rissa? The dancing chick you brought home?"

"Shh! I don't want her to hear you."

"You're such a teenager."

"And you're mean." Mac saw Kristy smile and it made her feel better. "Good thing you're my friend."

"Lord help me."

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A few hours later, Kristy was able to take Mac to the OTR. Police tape lined the front of the building and several officers still moved around the area. It would be awhile before the police would allow Mac to place boards on the destroyed windows. She had to do something to secure the building, especially with all those new computers there.

Reporters came and went, and thanks to Cindy, Mac didn't have to say a word. She was grateful because at the moment, she didn't feel she could handle the press.

Pepper greeted her and led Mac to her office. "So, what did they say at the hospital?"

She sat behind her desk and slumped in the chair. "Got a few stitches, but the doctor and the nurse are both sure that a bullet grazed me. What am I supposed to do now?"

"We have a broadcast out for Oscar and Leroy. Drug task force guys told me that Leroy's been selling for Oscar for a year or more. They think they can turn him on Oscar once we arrest them. But don't worry about all that. You should go home and rest up. I can take care of things here."

"You know I can't do that. I appreciate—"

"You can appreciate me from your house. Kristy is already bugging me about when you all can go. Jace is wiped out, and I'm sure the kid could use a break. I'm off duty in twenty minutes, and I'll come right back here to get the windows and door boarded up. I've set up extra patrols, too. There's nothing you can do, Mac. Go home."

"Thanks, Pepper. Guess the next question is going to be where the money will come from to fix the windows."

"We'll deal with it from my apartment," Kristy said as she joined them.

"As much as I appreciate the offer, I'd rather sleep in my own bed tonight," Mac said.

"Then I'll be on your couch. I'll be in the same building as you and Jace the rest of the weekend. I packed a bag because I wasn't sure you'd come home with me."

"You packed a bag before coming here?"

"Yes. Jace told me you were okay, and since he wasn't freaking out, I knew I had time. Besides, it's not like I need a lot. Anyway, I'm not leaving your side." Kristy straightened and started for the door. "Any idea when we can



leave? I'm hungry and I know you have nothing to eat at your house. I want to get something at the store on our way there."

"Go on," Pepper said. "Get out of here and let her fix you both a nice dinner." He held the door open for both women. "I'll call you when I've got the place secured."

"Tell Michelle I'm sorry about the party. I promise I'll make it up to her."

"Just get some rest, Mac. She'll understand."

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Kristy insisted on driving, telling Mac they'd get her car in the morning. A quick stop at Kroger's Grocery for food, then they were at Mac's house. Kristy instantly got to work in the kitchen.

"Can I help you?" Jace asked. He could be so childlike one minute and adult the next. Poor kid missed out on his childhood, and Mac suspected he had a lot of emotions still bottled up.

Kristy handed him the peeler and a bag of potatoes. "Get to peeling. You ever make mashed potatoes?"

"Cindy showed me a lot of stuff while you were gone. Aunt Florence never let me near the kitchen."

"Not even to get a drink of water?" Kristy asked.

"I used the bathroom sink for that." He started peeling like he was a pro.

"God love that Cindy," Kristy said. "She's got you well trained. Next thing you know, you'll be on *Hell's Kitchen*."

"That'd be cool. I could kick Ramsey's ass."

Kristy said, "I love that show, but you better learn more about cooking than Cindy or I can teach you. You need to be able to do everything from risotto to lamb chops to the difference between the taste of a beef steak and the taste of a pork roast. And don't be afraid of being yelled at. Man, that Ramsey can cuss a sailor under the table."

That gave Mac and Jace a good laugh. Mac said, "I'd like to see you go up against him."

Kristy gave her a cocky look that elicited more laughter. "He wouldn't know what to do with me. I'm too short and he'd be yelling at the top of my head. I could probably walk away, and he'd never know it."

"Probably," Mac said. "So what's for dinner?"

"Pork fillets, mashed potatoes, and green beans. I went simple on short notice."

Mac elbowed Jace. "She means she has to slum it because she's cooking in my kitchen and not hers."

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"A plethora of herbs and spices. I've got salt and pepper. It bugs the crap out of Kristy that I never cook with anything that isn't salt and pepper. So here she is, in my little kitchen with no good pots and pans and not a single spice or herb to be found. I'm surprised she hasn't been whining about it."

"I'm officially ignoring you, Mackenzie."

"She calls me Mackenzie when she's mad or aggravated at me."

"Jace, be a dear and hand me a knife."

Jace did as asked, while Mac hovered close by. "See, she's hit the 'ignore' button now."

"Do you guys always fight like this?" Jace asked.

"Fight? No one's fighting here," Kristy said. "I'm sure Mac understands perfectly well why I'm ignoring her. Besides, we've done this since we were kids. Always passing insults back and forth, intentionally aggravating each other. It's fun."

"Fun?" Jace shook his head.

"You'll figure it out soon enough, Jace. Stay around us, and pretty soon you'll be doing it, too," Mac said.

"Yeah, but after the kind of day we had...I can hardly believe you guys are—I don't know."

Mac realized she and Kristy side-stepped the issue of the shooting. Neither of them was ready to pick up again on their earlier conversation and Mac was damn sure she didn't want to deal with it yet. She'd have to at some point, not right then. "Sometimes it's how we deal with stuff. Today was horrible, and we didn't want to talk about it." She waited for him to look at her and saw fear in his eyes. "Unless you do. Jace, I'm here for you. If you need to talk about what happened, let's do it. You don't need to keep your feelings all bottled up, and you sure don't have to hold back with me or Kristy. If you're pissed, be pissed. If you're hurt, be hurt. But let me know."

"I'm pissed and hurt and really pissed that you got all cut up and that they can get away with this shit. Oscar meant what he said, so we got to watch our backs. I got to find a way to make sure he don't get to you, Mac. I ain't gonna let him hurt you."

"You don't have to protect me. I'll be fine."

“You ain’t fine right now! You got shot at! You got glass cuts all over, and I don’t know how they didn’t hit you. What if they had? Then what? You could have died...”

Mac realized what went unsaid. Jace considered her family. Kristy was right. He’d latched on to her the moment she brought him home, and now he saw himself as her protector. The idea scared Mac, but she would deal with that later.

“I didn’t die, and that’s what we think about. There’s no sense doing the ‘what if’ game. It didn’t happen and that’s that. We move forward. I won’t let some chickenshit punk scare me off. It means you and I have more work to do tomorrow.”

“You still want to paint that room?” he asked.

“Yeah, why not? We made plans, have the paints and paint supplies already there—we have to do more cleanup and get the rest of the trim taped. We can still get the room painted tomorrow, and maybe on Monday we’ll get the trim painted, and it’ll be all done. Then we’ll move on to the next project.”

“I can’t—I guess I don’t get how you go on. I’m scared it’ll happen again. I heard guns being shot in my old neighborhood. I’ve never been shot at in my life, and now it’s happened twice. How do I know it won’t happen again?”

Kristy adjusted the temperature on the potatoes. “Sit.” She followed Jace to the table and placed his hand in hers. “We never know what’s going to happen next. Not ever. It could be that you never see or hear from Oscar again. He might shoot at you tomorrow, but you can’t live your life worrying about what might happen. You have to move forward, be as safe as you can be, but move forward with your head held high. You let him get you down and he wins.”

Mac put a hand on his shoulder. “Life can be scary sometimes. You accept the fear and make it work for you. For instance, everyone was scared to leave their houses on 9-11. But now we all celebrate that day as Patriot’s Day. We changed it into something positive, and now we celebrate instead of being scared.”

“I guess I get that. But how do you get something positive out of being shot at? What good happened today?”

“Excellent question. I’m sure we’ll figure out the answer eventually, but it won’t come easy. Maybe it’s enough that we’re happy, both here, safe and sound, and tomorrow we go fix the place up.”

“It sucks.”

“Amen to that,” Kristy said as she rose. “Now, are you going to help me with dinner or not? You’re going to need to be able to cook when you’re in college. Can’t let you starve.”

“I was planning to eat from the dollar menu at McDonald’s.”

Kristy glared at Mac, who held her arms out in the “what did I do” pose. “I’m blaming you for that. He’s a growing boy and needs good food. Food with nutrition.”

“You guys eat there every day,” Jace said. He stood and held his hands out, palms up. “Why is it good for you and not me?”

“Because we’re adults and can make all the bad decisions we want. You’re young and need guidance. Do as I say, not as I do. Okay?”

Jace stared down at Kristy, and the expression on his face made Mac giggle. He was strong enough he could pick Kristy up and carry her off. But his face read a mixture of admiration and confusion. “I ain’t gonna have a lot of money for food.”

Kristy waved a spoon at him, as if to push him out of her way. “You’ll have plenty of money, Jace. Have faith.”

“Where will I get money? If I manage to get a good job, it’s going to pay for school and nothing else really. And our dorm room won’t have a kitchen anyway, so I can’t do any cooking.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Kristy made a tsk-tsk noise. “You’ll be fine. Trust me.” She handed him a fork. “Now get over here and help me finish dinner. I’m starved.”

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It was half past two in the morning, and Mac checked to make sure that Kristy and Jace were both asleep before stepping into the living room to call Lenie.

“Hi, baby,” Mac said, trying to be quiet while pacing. “Good morning.”

“Good morning to you, too. Why are you up so late? Or so early I should say.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Mac hesitated. “We had an incident at the OTR today.”

“An incident?” Lenie said the words slowly. Mac could imagine the expression on her face, and it wouldn’t be good. “What sort of incident? Did you get hurt?”

"I did, but it's not bad. There was a drive-by shooting." Mac went into detail about the damage and that the police were trying to find Oscar. "He was probably trying to scare Jace or me, or both."

"It bloody well worked then. Mac, you have to get security or something for that place. Maybe consider not going to work for a while. Not until they find him and put him in jail."

"I can't do that, Lenie. I won't give in to this kind of violence. That's the same as giving up." Silence on the other end stretched for too long. "Lenie?"

"I'm still here," she said, her voice quieter.

"I'm fine. Just some scratches and one cut that needed stitches. Nothing serious."

"This whole incident is serious. Please tell me you're taking it seriously."

"Of course I am." Mac settled onto the couch, leaned back and closed her eyes. "I was scared when I realized what happened. Jace—he's lived through being shot at twice now. It's bad enough in his old neighborhood, where shootings were common place. But the OTR is supposed to be a safe place. Somewhere the kids can gather and not worry about anything."

"And now?"

"Now that trust has been broken and I have to fix it. It's not about me at all. I have to go back, fix the physical damage, and make sure everyone knows that our center is still there and not about to close down."

"You're as passionate about this as I am about art," Lenie said. "I never realized how important it is to you."

"It's my life. I won't give up."

"I know that now. Can you call me on Skype? I want to see you face-to-face. I need to see you."

Mac touched the cuts on her face. "I don't think you'll like what you see."

"I want to see you." Lenie sounded like she might be crying. "I have to see that you're okay."

"Sure. But I need to be quiet so I don't wake up Kristy and Jace." Mac moved into the house, found her laptop, and headed for her room. She set it up and dialed Lenie on Skype. Once the connection completed, she hung up the phone, put her earbuds in, and smiled when Lenie's face appeared on the screen.

Lenie wiped tears from her cheeks. "You look like you've been in a fight."

Mac smiled. "If that's the case, then the windows won. I've got more scratches on my arms and the back of my neck." She moved to let Lenie see the bandage on her neck. "I don't want Kristy to know this, but the medical people at the hospital think the big cut came from a bullet."

Lenie blanched. "So you were shot?"

"Apparently, but like I said I'm fine."

"Thank God. I just don't know what to say, Mac. It's overwhelming."

"I know. Trust me, I know." She touched the screen, wishing she could hold Lenie in her arms. "I'm missing you right now."

"Me too."

Mac yawned, relaxing enough that sleep felt possible. "Sorry. I guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"Please go get some rest. I'll worry more if you aren't sleeping."

"I'm sorry you're worried. I didn't mean for that—"

"Of course I'm worried. I care about you, Mac," Lenie said. "Promise me you'll rest?"

"I promise. I'll call you later today."

"Skype me again at noon your time. I'll make sure I'm home. I want to see you so I know if you've gotten rest."

Mac couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. "I promise. Have a good day, sweetheart."

Lenie blew her a kiss and signed off. Mac closed the laptop, crawled into bed, and went right to sleep.

# Chapter Eleven

Mac used the back entrance of the OTR and walked in ahead of Kristy and Jace. She switched the lights on in the reception area. Four panels of wood now covered the front of the building, blocking out the morning sun. Her feet crunched broken glass as she walked across the room to survey the damage.

A series of holes, with no discernible pattern, filled the wall opposite the windowed front. Mac didn't want to count them but guessed around a dozen or more. They'd need spackle to patch them with.

The three-seat vinyl couch she'd purchased two months ago lay in shreds. One of the matching chairs remained intact, but blood stained it. Probably her blood. The thought that she'd been shot at—shot—in this room made her feel queasy.

"You're not supposed to be in here." Pepper came up to her, hands on his hips.

"Why not?"

"It's still a crime scene." He pointed to the familiar yellow tape that hung on the outside of the building. "Don't know why they didn't put it up on the back door. I asked Kristy and Jace to wait by the car."

"When can we start cleaning up?"

He shrugged. "Detectives will be here in about an hour to go over the place. Crime scene techs have already done their thing. If the detectives are okay with it, might be able to get it started tomorrow."

"I'd rather do it now." Mac wanted to sit on the chair, but stopped, remembering the blood there.

"The hospital report says you were shot." Pepper watched her, nervously fiddling with his hat. "I'm going to kill that fucker when I find him."

"A bullet grazed me, Pepper. I wasn't really shot." She peered behind him to make sure they were alone. "And don't say anything to Kristy or Jace. I didn't tell either of them."

"You better. It's in my report, and that will end up on the news."

"Dammit."

"Exactly. Listen, I need to scoot you out of here before anyone else comes along. I'm working overtime today, so I'll call you soon as they release the scene. Okay?"

"I guess." Mac said, "Why the hell did this have to happen?"

"I don't know," he said, his hand at the small of her back as he guided her out. "But I'll find him."

"I'm sure you'll try, but how do we prevent it? Should I have done something different? Maybe reached out to Oscar when I started working with Jace?"

"Oscar was long gone before you ever met Jace. There's nothing you could have done." He stopped her when they were outside. "But you saved Jace. That's what you've done and what you should have done. He's the future you're building." Pepper gave her a one-armed hug and went back into the building.

Mac strode to the car. "Guess we need to make new plans for today," Mac said.

Kristy opened the car door. "That's okay. You can go shopping with me and Jace."

"Shopping?" Mac and Jace echoed the word.

"You say it like it's a bad thing." She flashed that adorable smile of hers. It won Jace over just as it did everyone else. "Jace is going to need clothes for college. We can't send him off without a good wardrobe."

Jace said, "Kristy, I don't have any—"

"Money. I know. But I've got a credit card that hasn't been used yet. No arguments." She pointed to the car. "In. Both of you."

"Yes, ma'am." Jace climbed into the back seat.

Mac hesitated. Over the top of the car she asked, "Kris, you sure you can afford to do this?"

"Didn't we already go over the money thing?"

"Not really. And you're going to need a lot more once you—"

Kristy waved at her in dismissal. "I have it. No worries. Besides, have you ever known me to overspend?" Mac opened her mouth to reply, but Kristy stopped her. "Never mind. Don't answer that. Get your butt in the car."

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It took most of the following week for Mac to find a repair company with a reasonable price to replace the reception area windows. She talked herself all the way up the line until she reached to the company owner. They spoke for twenty minutes, but when she hung up the phone she'd been assured that by the same time next week, the windows would be replaced.

She'd temporarily hired a security guard for nights and weekends and would be happy when that expense was gone. While it would be great to keep a guard around, the OTR couldn't sustain the cost.

Mac left her office and entered the reception area. Pepper placed plywood over the damaged areas, leaving the room darker than usual. In the afternoons, sunlight provided enough heat the temperature rose five degrees higher than the rest of the building. Mac felt a shiver, despite the fact that it was eighty degrees outside.

"Hey, you okay?" Cindy asked.

Mac hadn't realized she was there. "I don't know."

"Well, I know that I'm not. I just got off the phone with a pissed-off man. He said, and I quote, 'My kid ain't coming there no more until you people get some kind of security'."

Mac said, "I wish we could, but security guards couldn't have stopped them from shooting at the building."

"That's what I told him. Then he asked if any of us, I'm assuming he meant me and you since we're the only employees here, carried a gun. As if that would make everything better."

"What kind of message does that tell the kids who come here? It's safe, but only if you're armed? Who was this guy?"

"He didn't give his name," Cindy said. "But it was a local number on the caller ID. I hope he's the only one thinking like that. It's bad enough we have to be closed all week. What are we going to do next week?"

"Same thing we always have," Mac said, peering out one of the remaining windows. "We're not going to shut down because of a single incident. That sends the wrong message to the community. We'll be open Monday, and I'm sure there will be kids coming in and adults showing up for GED classes. Call the news stations and see if you can get them to run an announcement on Friday and over the weekend."

"Sure thing. Have you talked to Pepper today?"

"Not yet. I've got my fingers crossed that he stops by later and tells us they found Leroy. Then we'll be a step closer to getting Oscar and maybe find a little peace again."

"I hope so."

"Lunch is served!" Kristy's voice echoed as she entered the reception area from the back hallway. She carried McDonald's bags. "Anyone hungry?"

"If you got me a double cheeseburger without onion," Cindy said.

Kristy held out one of the bags. "You know I did. Besides, they know me so well that the order is half ready before I even open my mouth."

"Thanks, Kristy," Cindy said. As she headed to her office she opened the bag, pulled out a French fry and popped it into her mouth.

"They do your order practically in advance because we eat there every day," Mac said. "Let's get a pizza tomorrow. Shake things up."

Kristy scoffed. "No way. It's tradition to eat at McD's for lunch. Where's Jace?"

"Upstairs cleaning out of the storage rooms and inventorying what he finds."

"Keeping the kid busy?" Kristy asked.

"Are you kidding? He came up with the idea all on his own. And he's damn good at it, so yeah, he's keeping busy."

"Good. But don't let him overdo it. We have plans for Saturday."

"We, as in you and Jace, or all of us?" Mac asked on the way to her office.

"All of us. We're going to the zoo."

"Why?"

"Because Jace hasn't been there since he was in first grade. It's about time he got out and saw the world. He's going to college in two weeks, and I want him to at least have seen the best parts of the city he grew up in before he goes." Kristy sat down with a huff. "You haven't been to the zoo in years, either, so it's about time we go."

"Kris, why is it so important to you that Jace does all this stuff?"

Kristy hesitated. Her eyes were downcast and her expression sad. "I'm not going to have the children I've always wanted. I might live another month, maybe even six more months and I—I want to do for Jace what I'd do if he were my son." She lifted her face to Mac, and Mac's heart broke. Tears filled Kristy's eyes. "If I wasn't dying, I'd adopt him. He needs someone to look after him like a mother. I know you'll do that, Mac, but I want to do it, too, as long as I'm here. It makes me happy to see the excitement in his eyes and the wonder on his face when he does something new."

“You’d be a great mom. I’m sure of it. And I’m sure Jace loves you for all the stuff you do with him and for him. So, if you want to go to the zoo on Saturday, then that’s where we’ll go.”

Kristy blew her nose and wiped the tears from her face. “Good. Now eat. We’ve got more plans to make.”

“We do?”

“Duh. I still have ten things on my list. And the next one is skydiving.”

“Oh dear.”

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Saturday, the weather was perfect for a day out. Sunny, a little wind, no humidity, and a comfortable temperature in the eighties. At Kristy’s insistence, they arrived at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens at nine a.m., found a close parking spot, and were at the entrance when it opened for business.

Jace used his map and headed for the giraffe enclosure, planning to make sure they went to every exhibit in the park. Mac trailed along, taking pictures of Jace and Kristy, rather than the animals. She wanted to keep this particular memory as she watched the two of them bond over giraffes, cute critters, birds, and seals.

It was noon by the time they got to one of the restaurant areas. “I’m starving,” Jace said. “Can I get pizza?”

“Sure.” Kristy handed him money. “Go get what you want. We’ll find a table.”

“Thanks.” His childlike grin made Mac smile.

“What do you want to eat?” Mac asked as she and Kristy found a table.

“I’m not hungry, just tired.” Kristy sat with her back to the sun and pulled her ball cap lower.

“You getting a headache?”

“Started about ten minutes ago. Don’t tell Jace, okay?”

Mac didn’t like the idea, but she kept quiet. “If you’re tired, we can always go home and come back tomorrow.”

“No. Jace’s having too much fun. I’m not gonna ruin it for him.”

“You’ll ruin it if he figures out you’re sick. Maybe I should go see if there’s a scooter we can rent for you.”

“Don’t you dare.” Kristy narrowed her eyes at Mac, her tone of voice unusually harsh. “I can damn well walk and I will. I’m not a fucking invalid.”

“Easy does it.” Mac held up her hands in surrender. “I’m trying to help.” She’d never heard Kristy curse before. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you. I have a headache.” Kristy got up so fast it startled Mac. “I’m going to get food.” She walked toward one of the food stands, leaving Mac alone to wonder what happened.

Something was very wrong, and Mac wondered if it was more than just a headache. Did Kristy get news from her doctor that she hadn’t shared?

Jace ambled over, set down a plate stacked with slices of pizza, and took a seat at the table. Mac decided to ask him what he knew. “Hey, has Kristy said anything to you lately? Like that she got news from her doctor?”

The confusion on Jace’s face told Mac the mistake she’d just made. Her heart sank. Kristy hadn’t told him about the cancer.

He paused, a piece of pizza halfway to his mouth. “Why would she go to a doctor?”

“Never mind. Just wondering.” Mac looked away from him, but her gut told her that Jace knew something was wrong. She turned back to him, and he stared at her, as if expecting her to elaborate. She couldn’t lie to him, and he deserved the truth. Mac, however, didn’t believe right then was the time for it. “She’s got issues, but I don’t want to get into right now. It’s her place to tell you.”

“How bad is it?”

“I’m not going to get into it. Drop it for now. I promise we’ll talk about it later. Okay?”

Jace didn’t act like it was okay with him. Mac knew he had a hundred questions going through his head, but he didn’t ask any of them. “If you promise.”

“I promise.”

Mac sighed. “I’m gonna get something to eat. When Kristy gets back you act normal. Figure out where we’re going next, and if she seems pissy, ignore it. I think she’s got a headache.”

“Will do.” He looked skeptical. “But she’s okay right now. Right?”

“Of course.” Mac patted him on the shoulder and walked away, needing a few minutes to re-group and figure out how to approach the subject with Kristy later.

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It was mid-afternoon before Mac got Kristy alone while Jace enjoyed a show that featured trained otters and seals. She pulled her out of the amphitheater and they sat on a bench near the entrance.

“What the hell is up with you?” Mac asked, being as direct as possible. “I’ve never heard you drop the f-bomb in our entire lives.”

“I don’t know. I got angry, and a few minutes later it was gone. I’m sorry I yelled at you.” Kristy fiddled with her hands. “Are you mad at me?”

“Of course not, just worried about you. And wondering why you haven’t told Jace yet.”

“Told Jace what?”

Mac could always read Kristy like a book, and it was clear Kristy had no idea what she meant. “Cancer. You haven’t told him about the cancer.”

“I didn’t?” Kristy appeared confused. “I thought I did.”

“No. I talked to him earlier, and he has no idea. But now he’s asking questions, and you’re going to have to tell him.” Mac held Kristy’s hand. “Unless you need me to do it.”

Kristy shook her head. “It should come from me. I can’t believe I forgot to tell him. I meant to do it when we got home.”

“I know, Kris. Let’s not worry about it too much. Though I think you should talk to him tonight. Better now than later.”

“I will. I promise, but will you stay with me when I do?” Kristy looked ready to cry, and Mac gathered her in her arms.

“You know it.” She held Kristy for a few moments, then leaned away and examined her face. “Everything’s going to be all right. Now let’s go catch the last bit of the show, so he doesn’t freak too much about us being gone.”

“Did he notice us leave?”

“Oh yes. He’s been watching you like a hawk all afternoon.” Mac slipped her arm around Kristy’s shoulders and guided her back into the amphitheater. “I mentioned a headache, and he’s been keeping an eye on you.”

“Is that why he keeps making sure I’m drinking water?”

Mac laughed. “He thinks you have a headache because of the heat, so he’s making sure you’re hydrated. Let him do that until we leave. It’ll make him feel better.”

Kristy sighed. “I’m going to have to pee a lot.”

“As if that’s something new. Kristy Belle, you have the smallest bladder in the world.”

Kristy elbowed Mac. “I’m little. I can’t help it.”

“That has nothing to do with it. You’ve never been able to hold your water.”

“And you’ve never been able to hold your liquor.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Mac asked. “I hold my liquor just fine.”

“You keep believing that, my dear. Though I’m sure women like Rissa will argue with you on it.”

Mac stopped and when Kristy turned to her, she was beaming from ear to ear. “What’s Rissa got to do with anything?”

“Nothing at all. Except maybe I talked to Lenie last night, and maybe I mentioned that she shouldn’t let you drink too much because you get frisky and flirty. But if she plays her cards right, it could be to her advantage to get you drunk.”

Mac stared at her and tried to figure out if Kristy exaggerated or not. Her cocky smile was cocky, and twinkle in her eyes told Mac she did.. “You did not tell her all that.”

“Didn’t I?”

“Kristy Belle...”

“Mackenzie.” Kristy pushed her toward the seating area. “Jace is waiting. Get your butt in there and enjoy what’s left of the show.”

“If you told Lenie all that I’m so going to kick your ass.”

“No you won’t. I’m too cute to get my ass kicked.”

Mac smiled slyly. “Don’t bet on it.”

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Kristy managed to keep up with Jace for the rest of the afternoon. They'd planned to go to a nice restaurant for dinner, but Kristy's pallor made Mac decide to go to her house where it would be more restful.

Jace insisted on cooking for them and disappeared immediately into the kitchen.

"He's really into this cooking stuff," Kristy said, dropping down onto the couch with a sigh. "I'm glad because I don't have the energy to do it."

"You feeling all right? Maybe you should lay down for a while. You can go into my room."

"Thanks, but I don't want to move from this spot," Kristy said, her voice lower than usual. "If you hand me the afghan from the back of your easy chair, I'll be more comfy."

"Sure." Mac did as she asked, tucking it around Kristy's thin body. She touched her face and waited for Kristy to face her. "You'd tell me if you need to lie down, right?"

"I'm good. Once I get food in me, I'll have the energy to go home."

"Oh no. No way. You're spending the night." Mac held up her hand to ward off any further commentary. "You're too tired."

"It's a ten-minute drive."

"I don't care if it's across the street. You're staying here and that's that."

"You okay, Kristy?" Jace asked, stepping into the living room. He grabbed at a hand towel that hung over his shoulder and used it to dry his hands.

"Moment of truth," she said and patted the couch next to her. "Come sit with me for a few minutes."

Jace did so, his face etched with fear. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Kristy showed a brave face, but Mac knew she was terrified. "Yes. It's bad." Tears pulled in her eyes, and Mac stepped forward, kneeling in front of Kristy and taking her hand.

"I got this," Mac said. "Jace, Kristy has brain cancer. She's had it for a few years, and last year we went through a round of chemo and radiation. The doctors thought it was over, but a couple months ago it came back."

"So what are they going to do?" Jace asked, his voice shaky. "I mean, you gonna get more chemo or something? Does it hurt? Will it take a long time?"

Mac gripped Kristy's hand and tried not to glance over at her and see the tears. "No. There are no more treatments. Even if they did all that again, it might give Kristy an extra month or two, but she'd be in pain and miserable, so that's it. She decided not to do any more treatments." Mac took a deep breath and placed her hand on Jace's knee. His frightened eyes latched on hers. "It's terminal, Jace. Kristy doesn't have a long time to live."

"H-how long?"

"She didn't ask her doctor. Could be a few weeks, could be six more months. But that's not important. What's important is that she's here with us now and that we enjoy the time we have left."

He nodded and Mac could tell he was trying hard not to cry. "So—I mean—is that why you all went to Europe? 'Cause she's dying?"

"It was on her bucket list." Mac said. "Let me tell you, she's got one hell of a list, too. And it's up to you and me to help her cross stuff off it, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Jace reached forward and took Kristy's other hand in his. "I'm right here for you, Kristy. I promise."

"You're a sweet boy, Jace." Kristy squeezed his hand and let it go. "You go finish dinner and let me rest a bit. We'll talk later. I promise."

Jace gently hugged her and headed back to the kitchen.

"Thanks," Kristy said. "Now go help him. If I'm asleep—"

"I'll let you sleep and put food aside for later." Mac kissed her on the forehead. "Holler if you need anything."

"I will."

Mac joined Jace in the kitchen and found him hunched over the sink, his shoulders shaking with his sobs. Without a word, Mac pulled him into a comforting embrace and let him cry.

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Well past three a.m. Mac gave up on sleep. She'd given Kristy her bed, and while they would normally share the space, Kristy was so tired she sprawled out and took up most of the queen size bed. Mac settled into the third bedroom, but the evening's stress still bothered her.



When she realized the time, Mac decided to call Lenie. For her, it would be around nine a.m. and she'd be starting her day. Mac knew that Lenie checked her e-mail first thing in the morning like clockwork. She booted up her computer, clicked on Skype, and waited.

"Hey, sweetie," Lenie said, a big grin on her face. "What keeps you up tonight? I thought you were going to call me later?"

"I was, but I need to see you and hear your voice." Mac wanted to touch Lenie and leaned closer to her computer.

"What happened? Is Kristy okay?"

"She had a bad day." Mac explained what happened. "I'm scared. I know it's going to happen, and I know it's not all that long from now, but I can't—I don't know how to deal with it."

"That's the hard part," Lenie said. She leaned on her elbows as if she could get closer to Mac through the computer. "And it won't get any easier. She's going to have mood swings, be forgetful, get tired easily. I'm so sorry, Mac."

"Me, too. I wish you were here. I could use a hug right now."

Lenie gave her a sad smile. "Let me talk to Baan. I've needed to go to Chicago for a while now. Maybe I can plan a visit to Cincinnati while I'm there."

"That would be awesome. I know Kristy would be excited to see you. She's currently on a mission to show Jace everything there is to see in the city. I'm sure she'd have no problem dragging you around."

"I'm sure she would." Lenie put her hand on the screen, and Mac did the same. "I'll do what I can to come visit, but I'm a phone call away. Promise you'll call me if you need to talk."

"I will. I promise."

"Good. Now get some sleep. You look terrible."

"Gee thanks. That's what I hoped my girlfriend would say."

"You know it's true. Now follow directions like a good girl. Lie down, get to sleep, and call me later to check in. I'll e-mail Baan now so I can get things arranged on Monday."

"You're the best. Thanks."

Lenie blew her a kiss. "Good night."

"Night." Mac returned the kiss and turned off her computer. She curled up on the bed, put her head on the pillow, and allowed sleep to take her.

## Chapter Twelve

Monday morning the Over-the-Rhine Community Center opened for business at eight a.m. Mac and Jace arrive a half hour early to get things cleaned and ready to go. A new GED class started at nine, and much to Mac's relief, all of the students showed up. She did a brief introduction about The OTR, thanked them for their attendance, and left the instructor to his class.

Jace was waiting in her office when she got back. "Hey. I thought you were going to be working on your project upstairs?"

"I am. Just need to talk to you first."

"That sounds serious." Mac sat on her desk while Jace stood nervously in front of her. "Spill it."

"Cindy's been helping me with something today," he said and waited a beat. Mac didn't interrupt. "I'm going to defer my grants until next year. I'm not going to college next week."

"What? No. Jace, you—"

"I can and I will." His face unusually stern. He planted his feet and met Mac's gaze and dared her to argue further. "It's my decision and we've already started the paperwork. Cindy told me I can claim a family emergency, and that would allow me to put everything off until next term or next year."

"Family emergency? What happened?" Mac thought Jace had severed any ties with his family months ago.

"Kristy's cancer. I'm not going to NKU when she's got who-knows-how-long to live." He angrily swiped at a tear. "I'm staying here to help you and spend as much time as I can with her. I want to help her with her bucket list."

Mac didn't know if she should be beaming with pride or crying from sadness. The young man found a family he could love, and he was losing part of it already. But she was so damn proud at how he was handling it. "I don't like that you're putting off college, but I understand why you're doing it. You might have a fight from Kristy, though."

"I can handle that."

"I'm sure you think you can. Make sure you tell Kristy next time you see her. Don't wait on it. She's expecting to drive you to school."

"Do you think she's gonna be mad?"

"A little disappointed but not mad. She'll be proud of you—after she gets done fussing about it."

He nodded his acceptance and turned to leave, but he stopped in the doorway. "I'm doing the right thing, Mac."

"You are. I'm proud of you for it, too. Now get your ass to work before I fire you."

He laughed. "You can't fire a volunteer."

"Watch me." She hopped off the desk and made like she would kick him. He ran out of the room laughing. Mac watched him head toward the upstairs area before going to her desk to dig into the day's work. She'd just put her butt in the chair when her cell phone rang.

Pepper came on the line and said, "I got good news. They arrested Leroy last night."

"Hot damn! Did he tell where Oscar is?"

She could hear Pepper smile. "Better than that. He was scared shitless at being caught with more than ten kilos of cocaine. That's enough to put him away for most of his life. He asked for a deal and spent most of the night outlining Oscar's network. Well, what there is of it."

"So Oscar is as good as arrested, too?"

"Pretty much. The drug task force guys are practically having a party. Once they tie Oscar to all this, he's going to get a one-way ticket to Lucasville, home of Southern Ohio Correctional Institution. He won't get out of there until he's an old man."

"That's awesome. Call me when he's caught. I want to be the one to tell Jace."

"You know it. Later."

Mac put the cell back in her pocket and leaned her elbows on her desk. She felt a sense of relief. The stress and fear would be over soon, and Jace wouldn't have anything more to worry about than spending time with Kristy.

She'd been slightly conscious of murmuring voices in the reception area, but was pulled from her thoughts when she heard Cindy's voice rise and say, "Get the fuck out of here!"

Mac got to her feet in an instant and rushed out her door. Cindy never yelled. Cindy didn't swear on the job either.

"I've already called the cops!"

Mac heard something break as she came around the corner and slid to a stop. Oscar stood above Cindy, who'd been knocked to the ground. She was struggling to get to her feet. Coffee stained the front of her dress, and broken shards of a mug lay near her amidst the brown liquid on the floor.

"Get out!" Mac shouted.

"Where is he?" Oscar sounded eerily calm as he stepped toward Mac. Cindy scrambled to her feet and backed toward the wall.

Oscar said, "Tell me where that motherfucker is."

Words failed Mac. Her heart was in her throat, and she couldn't speak. Did he have a gun? His hands were empty, but what if he'd hidden it in his baggy pants? "You need to leave." Her voice sounded stronger than she felt. She shook on the inside.

"I ain't gonna ask again. Where the fuck is he?"

"I'm right here you son of a bitch." Jace stormed into the room and got between Mac and Oscar. "You best be ready for an ass kicking."

"Like you could kick my ass, you little faggot."

"Try me." Jace marched toward him, but Mac grabbed his arm.

"No, Jace. I got this. Please make sure Cindy's okay."

Jace wouldn't take his eyes off Oscar, and he wouldn't face her. "I'm not letting you fight my fights."

"No one's going to fight here."

Mac closed the distance and stopped inches from Oscar. "You're lucky I'm not the one kicking your ass right now. Get the hell off my property."

"Fuck you."

"Not a chance in hell." Mac shoved him backwards. Oscar tripped and stumbled next to the front door.

"You wanna die, doncha, bitch?"

"Keep calling me that, and I'll get violent." Mac heard the sound of sirens and smiled. "Looks like your ride is here."

Oscar bolted out the door and down the street. Before Mac knew it, Jace was speeding past her, hot on Oscar's heels. She rushed out the door in time to see Jace tackle Oscar. He managed to stay on top of his struggling ex-friend until two police officers caught up to them.

It took Mac a few minutes to sort everything out and explain to the officers what happened. Relief flooded through her when Pepper showed up.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes. We're fine." She nodded to Jace. "But I'm going to kick his butt for chasing after Oscar like that. Damn kid could've gotten hurt."

Pepper gave her a crooked smile. "Don't. Think of it as him closing the book on Oscar and on his drug-dealing buddies. We picked them up earlier this morning, too."

"Ah, so that's what Oscar was so pissed about."

He gave her a big grin, then walked over and put his arm around Jace's shoulders. They shared a laugh, and when Jace saw Mac, he smiled at her.

Cindy guided Mac inside. "Now that's one way to make Monday a little happier."

"Happier?"

"Yeah. He's going to prison. I'm pretty damn happy. Plus, I get to file assault charges against him. Maybe add a couple years to his stay."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Bumps and bruises, nothing major. How about Jace? Think we should sign him up to go to summer football camp with the Bengals?"

That made Mac laugh. "His skinny butt would get crunched by those huge guys. He'd have to be a place kicker."

"I don't know." Cindy watched Jace and Pepper talk. "He's a tough kid. Haven't seen a tackle that good in a long time."

"Honestly, neither have I."

"There you go. Football it is." Cindy winked at her. "I have to finish my report with the cops. Then I'm going to talk to the news media and make sure we only get good publicity out of this."

"Good plan. Thanks."

"You bet."

Mac went back to her office and sat, allowing the adrenaline to fade away. As she calmed down, she felt exhausted. Her cell phone rang and she pulled it from her pocket.

"Hey, Kristy. Feeling better today?"

“A little. How’s your day going?”

“Um, that’s not such an easy question.” Mac hesitated, but went into the details of the morning, not pausing until finished. The line remained silent so long that she worried they’d lost the connection. “You still here?”

“I am.” Kristy was quieter than normal. “So he’s going to jail? We don’t have to worry about him anymore?”

“Nope. He’s gone. And Pepper found out that three guys worked for him. They arrested them this morning.”

“Thank you, Lord. How’s Jace?”

“Getting accolades from Pepper, so I expect he’s on cloud nine right now. He’s got closure and that’s all good as far as I’m concerned. I didn’t like that he went after Oscar, but I guess I should have expected it.”

“He was protecting you guys. I think it was very brave. I’m going to bring pizzas for lunch so we can celebrate.”

“Pizza? Wow, that’s pretty elaborate. You sure you want to break with tradition?”

Kristy laughed. “I do and I will. It’s a special occasion. I’ll even bring some two liter bottles of Coke. None of that diet crap.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan. Guess we’ll see you in a few hours. Take your time. The only one ever starving here is Jace.”

“He’s a growing boy,” Kristy said, a hint of pride in her voice. “I need to make sure he’s well fed.”

“Of course you do. See you soon.”

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Three weeks can feel like a lifetime. For Mac, it seemed even longer as she ticked down the days, hours, then minutes before Lenie arrived. She paced in the waiting area of the Greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Airport. Several flights came and went, streams of people meeting loved ones or rushing past to get their checked luggage. One family hung signs and balloons to welcome their daughter home. From the signs, Mac figured the kid did gymnastics, if the stick figures on them were any indication.

When the teenager walked down the long hallway and past the TSA “point-of-no-return,” she wore gym shorts, a t-shirt that read, “Ohio USA Women’s Gymnastics,” and a medal around her neck. Mac thought it might be a bronze one. She enjoyed the happy reunion and nearly missed seeing Lenie.

She wore tight-fitting jeans, a white, short-sleeved blouse, and pulled a bright orange roller bag behind her. Her smile melted Mac’s heart, and in seconds they were embracing and kissing, heedless of the public space they were in. As she pulled back, Mac spied the young gymnast watching them and their eyes met. She smiled at Mac and let her family rush her up the escalator and Mac couldn’t help but grin.

Mac gave her attention to Lenie. “It’s so damn good to see you in person. I’ve missed you.”

“I know.” Lenie kissed her again. “Let’s get my checked bag and get out of here. I’m tired of airports.”

“Your wish is my command,” Mac took her hand and led her to the baggage claim area. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes. I almost missed my flight out of Chicago because of an accident that backed traffic up for a dozen kilometers. It should have been a ten-minute drive but took us an hour and a half. So I didn’t have lunch.”

“Then we’ll stop and get you fed before we head to my house. Kristy’s going to cook dinner, but that’s not for another four hours.” Mac made like she was examining Lenie and let her gaze take on a more lascivious meaning than necessary. “I don’t think you’ll make it that long.”

“I believe you are correct.” Lenie touched her cheek, her eyes filled with desire. “But I think food is necessary first.”

That got a laugh from Mac. “A woman after my own heart. Yes, food first.” She leaned close enough to whisper, “You, later.”

“A very good plan,” Lenie said. “Now be a good girl and fetch my bag. It’s the same color as this one. I’m sure you won’t miss it.”

“As you wish.” Mac half-bowed and stepped over to the baggage belt to scan for the orange suitcase, feeling every bit like a horny teenager and not caring if anyone noticed.

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After eating lunch, Mac took Lenie to her house. Lenie exchanged hugs with Kristy and she was introduced to Jace, who also gave Lenie a welcoming hug. Kristy shooed Mac and Lenie out of the kitchen while she and Jace worked on dinner.

“What is she making that’s going to take hours to prepare?” Lenie asked, sitting on Mac’s bed.

“I have no clue. She saw something on a cooking show last week that she decided to try out. And since Jace has been learning to cook, I’m guessing he’s her *sous chef* for the day.”

“I can’t wait. I do enjoy a lot of American flavors.”

“Do you?” Mac grinned like a big kid, and it made Lenie laugh. “I have flavors you can try out later, if you’re interested.”

“Oh, I’m interested.” Lenie pulled her onto the bed and, between giggles, kissed her. “I look forward to dessert.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Mac paused and sat up. She missed Lenie terribly and wanted to make love to her, but she still worried about the physical distance between them. “I want to make this work, Lenie.”

“Make what work?”

“Us. I know we live worlds apart, but I don’t think that matters if you care about someone enough. And I care about you a lot.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Lenie traced the edge of Mac’s jaw with her fingers. “I don’t know that anything is guaranteed. I’ve never been in a long-distance relationship.”

“Me either, but it doesn’t matter. I want you in my life and if that means a lot of Skype calls and frequent flyer miles, I’m up for it. I’ll do whatever it takes to be with you.” Mac kissed her gently. “Did I just sound like a crazy stalker?”

Lenie laughed. “To someone who doesn’t know you? Maybe. But I think it’s sweet. I would like to make this crazy relationship work, too. We’ll have to see how it goes. I travel a lot, so I’m sure that whenever I’m on this side of the Atlantic we can get together.”

“Awesome. I don’t know if I can go to Amsterdam again anytime soon. I need to be close in case Kristy needs anything.”

“Of course. I promised her I’d help her tick something off her bucket list while I’m here. Any idea what that might be?”

“I remember seeing skydiving on the list. Could be what’s next…”

“Oh dear. And to think I left my helmet at home.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll buy you a new one.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Are you sure there isn’t something else on her list we can do? Like going to a museum or something?”

“Yes, I’m sure. The list is getting smaller each day, and I’m sure that’s near the top.” Mac winked at her. “Be prepared.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I know.” She rose and held out her hand to pulled Lenie off the bed. “I can tell you it’ll be a lot of fun. And I promise I’ll be there with you.”

“You’d better.”

Mac wrapped her arms around Lenie and kissed her thoroughly. “We’re better together, baby. You’re not getting rid of me.”

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Mac stood next to Kristy on the tarmac of the Blue Ash Airport, staring at the helmet in her hands. She’d thought Kristy was joking when she told them at dinner what her plans for the next day were. But no. Skydiving. Insane. Ridiculous. Yet here they were, outfitted with all the correct gear, been given a few hours of safety instructions and would soon be boarding the plane.

“I’m so excited,” Kristy said, adjusting her straps for the tenth time.

“Tandem skydiving. I never realized there was such a thing.” Mac glanced toward the office building, where Lenie and Jace waited for them. She had the urge to run in there and declare Kristy completely nuts.

“You’re not backing out on me, are you?”

“No,” Mac said so fast that Kristy giggled. “I can’t believe I’m standing here waiting to get into a perfectly good plane only to jump out of the damn thing. And where are we going to land?”

“In a marked field not far from here, and stop being such a damn wuss. Butch it up, buttercup!” Kristy grinned from ear to ear, her eyes bright with excitement.

Mac promised to be there for every event on Kristy’s bucket list, so backing out for this one wasn’t an option. No matter how much she wanted to. No matter how much her fear of heights kicked in her flight reflex. “Yeah yeah.”

Kristy elbowed her when the instructors motioned them over. “Here we go!” She ran toward the plane, while Mac took her time.

The plane was bigger than Mac expected, and once inside, they went through more instructions, safety measures mostly, and their skydivers told them how it would all work. Mac and Kristy would be strapped to the front of each skydiver, and in tandem, they would jump from the plane. All Mac and Kristy had to do was follow instructions and enjoy the ride.

Kristy’s face paled as they got closer to the time of the jump. They were both already attached to the professionals, waiting for the door to be opened. Mac tapped Kristy on the arm and shouted, “Are you okay?”

Kristy nodded, though Mac knew she was terrified. Mac was even farther along the terror scale. What had she been thinking? No freakin’ way could she do this. She closed her eyes and wondered what would happen if she upchucked as soon as they opened the door. It took everything she had to bite her tongue and not run screaming to the tiny restroom and lock herself in until they managed to return to the sanity of earth. Mac considered asking Kristy to call the whole thing off, but knew better. Kristy was as stubborn as the day is long and when push came to shove, she would go through with the jump—even if it required her to give Mac a push and a shove.

Mac’s skydiver, a muscular man named Frank, gave the signal, and the door opened. The sudden gust of wind took Mac’s breath away. The beautiful blue sky welcomed them. Fluffy white clouds swirled past, and Mac wondered if they would be close enough to touch one. No, she wasn’t going to touch a cloud—no way. The time had come to speak up because this was one of the stupidest things she’d ever agreed to do. She opened her mouth to protest.

Then Frank jumped.

The air sucked right out of Mac’s chest in the free fall. Everything whirled around her. When she caught her breath, she thought she heard Frank let out a whoop, but she couldn’t tell. The sound of the wind in her ears was so loud she felt deaf. Then she saw Kristy and her tandem partner, Spencer, spin out of the plane.

Mac felt Frank guiding them as their fall became controlled flying. Then she was face-to-face with Kristy, close enough they could hold hands. Above her, Frank and Spencer locked hands, both of them giggling like little kids at the sheer enjoyment of it all. The skin of Kristy’s face pulled back by the force of the wind, but the smile on her face told Mac that she was enjoying the freefall as much as Frank and Spencer.

Mac was fascinated by how high they soared. Her brain knew they were a mile from the ground, but from this perspective, it didn’t appear like such a bad thing. She saw landscapes but nothing discernible except the Ohio River. At least she thought it might be the Ohio River. They’d done so much twisting around that she couldn’t tell where they were. Maybe over Kentucky?

The view was incredible and breathtaking and worth every minute. Perhaps the fear made it so much fun. Or the knowledge that Kristy was having a great time. Either way, Mac was glad they’d done it.

Frank shouted a warning, and she felt the quick jerk as the parachute opened. After a brief sensation of lift, they were floating like a feather toward the ground. The dark blue and red of the chute blocked out the sun and her view of Kristy.

Mac’s pulse quickened the closer they got to the ground. She saw the tops of houses and trees, all approaching her at a rate much faster than expected. And then they were on the ground, Mac sitting on Frank’s legs as they slid to a stop. Her heart pounded in her chest as he helped her to stand.

“Perfect landing, Mac! You did great for your first jump.” Frank was way too enthused for Mac’s taste.

“Good thing since that was my first and last landing.” She took off her helmet while he unhooked all her gear. “But thanks, Frank. You made it fun.”

“Anytime.” He clapped her on the shoulder. Two guys from the skydiving school showed up and got to work collecting the parachutes and gear. Kristy came running over and jumped into Mac’s arms, almost knocking her over.

“That was amazeballs!”

“Amazeballs? Where did you hear that word?”

“Who cares?” Kristy hugged her so hard she nearly squeezed the air from Mac’s lungs. “This was the best thing we’ve ever done. I can’t believe how beautiful it is up there, flying around like we had wings, then drifting to the ground.” She took a deep breath and said, “You’re the best for going with me. I couldn’t have done this by myself.”

Mac pulled back to inspect Kristy, whose eyes teared. “Of course I went with you. I promised, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” Kristy hugged her again, grabbed Mac’s hand, and pulled her to the spot where Jace and Lenie were waiting for them. “It’s so cool. I can hardly describe it.”

“Good thing you won’t have to,” Lenie said, giving Mac a kiss when she reached them. “I asked them for a copy of the video for both of you. We can pick it up when we get back to their office.”

“Cool!” Kristy gave Lenie a jumping hug. “This is the best day ever. I want to do this again.”

“Can I go next time?” Jace asked, his eyes wide and expecting.

“Sure.” Kristy said. “I know that the big wuss over here doesn’t want to do it.”

Mac gave Kristy a playful shove. “I did it once, so I’m not a wuss. I don’t feel the need to repeat the experience. Besides, I’ll have it on DVD so I can watch whenever I want to.”

“Like I said. The wuss won’t repeat the experience.” Kristy stuck her tongue out at Mac and took hold of Jace’s hand. “Let’s see if we can schedule another jump.”

Jace let Kristy lead him away. Lenie put her arm around Mac and pulled her close. “You’re an amazing woman, Mackenzie.”

“How so?”

“I know you have a fear of heights, and yet you jumped out of a plane to make your best friend happy. If that’s not amazing, I don’t know what is.”

Mac felt a blush creep up her cheeks. “Kristy said it’s amazeballs. What does that even mean?”

Lenie laughed heartily. “From Kristy it means she loved it. And I’m pretty sure she’s going to talk her way into another jump today, so Jace can experience it.”

“Do you want to jump?” Mac asked.

“No thank you. Planes are for flying in, not jumping out of.”

“Exactly what I said to Kristy. You’re a woman after my own heart.”

Lenie gave her those bedroom eyes. “I thought I had your heart already.”

“Oh you do. You most certainly do.”

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Kristy did indeed manage to schedule another jump. As she and Jace were walking out of the building after their safety orientation, Kristy stumbled and fell. Mac watched from the office and ran onto the tarmac, heedless of someone shouting at her to stay back. She ran to Kristy’s side.

“Kris, you okay?”

Kristy looked dazed. Her eyes searched Mac’s as if she couldn’t to focus. “What happened?”

“You fell. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head and Mac helped her remove the helmet. Jace squatted next to them, his eyes wide with fear.

“I don’t think I’m hurt,” Kristy said. “How did I fall?”

“You stopped talking, and the next thing I know, you were on the ground,” Jace said, his voice wavering. His eyes met Mac’s. “It happened so fast I couldn’t catch her.”

“It’s okay,” Kristy said, reaching for his hand. “It happens a lot these days. My brain doesn’t always tell my feet what to do.” She tried to smile, but Mac knew she was scared and tired. Several of the airport employees, including a paramedic, rushed toward them. Kristy tried to ward them all off. “I’m fine. Mac, help me up.”

“Not until they check you over.” Mac stepped aside to let the professionals do their job.

Kristy was fussy and aggravated by all the attention. After a good ten minutes, she finally managed to convince everyone she was fine. The only people to voice their concern were Mac and Spencer, her tandem partner. He kindly explained that he couldn’t let her jump again.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t look well. I can’t take the chance of you passing out or being sick. If you go back to the office, they’ll refund your money.”

“I’m not worried about the money,” Kristy said to Jace. “I don’t want to ruin your chance to have fun.”

“I’ve had a great day,” Jace said, putting up a good front. Mac saw the disappointment in his eyes. “As long as you’re okay, it’s all good.”

“Can you take him up anyway?” Kristy asked. “He needs to do this.”

Spencer smiled at them both. “Of course. Nothing wrong with him that I can see. Ready to go up?” he asked Jace.

“If it’s okay with Kristy.”

“It’s more than okay. Get moving.” She gave him a hard shove, though from her it was more like a gentle push. “Have fun. We’ll compare stories later.”

Jace hesitated, looking from Mac to Kristy and back again. Mac gave him a reassuring nod, and he headed off with Spencer.

Mac put her arm around Kristy and guided her back to the office. Once there, she made Kristy sit down while Lenie got her something to drink. Kristy's pallor worried Mac. It was obvious how tired she was. Mac and Lenie agreed with Spencer. Kristy could not do a second jump.

They helped Kristy out of her gear so they could drive to the pickup site to greet Jace.

Kristy was quiet on the way there and opted to stay in the van while Lenie and Mac went to watch for Jace.

"I'm worried about her. I've never seen her this bad before," Mac said.

"She's exhausted. We need to go right home after Jace is finished. I think she needs to get food and then sleep. That usually worked for Ma."

Mac waited a beat, trying hard to form her next question in a way that wouldn't upset Lenie. "Was there any, um, anything that told you she was getting close to..." She couldn't even finish her own thought.

Lenie slipped her hand into Mac's. "When I look back, there were signs. The doctor told me about things to watch for when we started hospice."

"Things like her getting weaker?"

"For instance," Lenie said. Her voice full of compassion and thick with emotion. "Ma often fell but was too stubborn to use a walker or a cane. She was forgetful and sometimes confused. All of those things got worse as time wore on. Unlike Kristy, Ma continued her treatments until the doctors told her there was nothing more they could do."

"I'm sorry to bring all this up," Mac said, squeezing Lenie's hand.

"Don't be. You need to know what's going to happen. You need to be prepared as much as you can be. It's going to get harder now."

"I know."

"But I'm here for you, sweetheart. Even though I have to go back on Sunday, I'll just be a phone call away." Lenie kissed her temple. "And I will come over on the first plane if you need me to."

"Thanks, babe. That means the world to me."

"Whoo hooo!" The yells came from Jace as he landed. Once unhooked from Spencer, he ran to Lenie and Mac, talking so fast that Mac didn't understand much of what he said until he stopped to take a breath. "That was amazeballs!"

"What does that mean?" Mac asked with a laugh.

"Incredible. I have to do that again sometime." Jace glanced around them. "Where's Kristy? I gotta tell her how it went."

"She's in the van." Mac stopped him before he rushed over there. "She's tired, Jace. Once we get our DVDs, we need to head home so she can get some sleep. Be careful when you climb in next to her. I have a feeling she's already got a major headache."

Jace nodded solemnly. "You got it. Is she going to stay with us tonight? She can have my bed."

Mac loved that he would make an offer like that. Such a great kid. "You ask her, and I bet she'll say yes."

"Cool. We can keep an eye on her then." He hurried to the van where Mac knew he would talk Kristy into staying with them for the night. The kid was amazeballs.

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They stopped at McDonald's for food at Mac's insistence. Kristy looked ready to pass out. The food did the trick, and Kristy slept the rest of the way to Mac's house. Once there, Mac lifted Kristy into her arms and carried her to Jace's room. She gave her a T-shirt to sleep in and helped her into bed. She kissed Kristy on the forehead. "Have a nice sleep, Kris. You've earned it."

"It was worth it," she said, stopping Mac from leaving. "Every second of it. I've never felt so free in my entire life. Like I could do anything."

"You can do anything, and I think you proved it today."

"Nothing as exciting as today is left on my list." Kristy paused a beat. "I thought I'd get this one done before I was too weak."

Mac swallowed the lump in her throat. "Good idea. Now get some rest. If you're up to it, we'll do something fun tomorrow."

"Promise?"



“Yep.” Mac kissed her on the forehead again and slipped out of the room. She leaned against the closed door and tried to compose herself. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She closed her eyes and prayed for strength. Moments later, Lenie’s strong arms wrapped around her into a comforting hug.

Mac rested her head on Lenie’s shoulder and wept.

“I won’t tell you that it will get easier. Just be strong and make her last days the best ever.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Lenie gently kissed her wet cheeks then her lips. “That’s all anyone could ask of you.”

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Mac tried to sleep in, but couldn’t. The giggling coming from her kitchen was loud enough that each time she closed her eyes, she was awakened again. Lenie wasn’t in bed, and she suspected the laughter might be coming from her.

She put on shorts and a T-shirt and wandered into the kitchen. White powder flew past her face, and she waved it away while coughing. “What the hell—”

“Gotcha!” Jace held a flour-covered oven pad in one hand and smiled in the most silly way. “You’re too slow.”

“I’ll get you back, young man. Promise you that.” Lenie wiped flour from her face. “You are a bad boy.”

He giggled again. “Your girlfriend’s mean. She thought she could do pancakes better than me. So I told her no way, and she tried to take the spatula from me and then...” He waved the spatula at Lenie. “Then she got between me and the flour and, well, there you go.”

“I can make better pancakes because I’m Dutch. It’s part of my culture.” Lenie folded her arms across her chest and tried to be serious, but the smile belied it.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Jace said. “Now get out of my kitchen. Both of you.”

“Uh, it’s my kitchen,” Mac said, doing her best to hold back her laughter.

“Not when I’m cooking.”

“Okay then.” Mac guided Lenie toward the living room. “We best get out of the man’s way.”

Lenie called over her shoulder, “I’ll get you back.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jace waved at her and went back to his cooking.

“I guess I should say I’m glad you two get along.” Mac handed Lenie a towel she’d grabbed from the kitchen. “How old are you?”

Lenie winked at her. “Old enough. So, did you sleep well?”

Mac shrugged. “Well enough.” She kissed Lenie, then wiped the flour from her lips. “You ready to have fun on your last day here?”

“You make it sound like I’m never coming back.” Lenie slipped her arms around Mac and nuzzled her. “I’m not leaving forever.”

“You better not be.” Mac pressed her lips to Lenie’s, tasting a mix of flour and coffee. “Kristy has scheduled us to go on a riverboat for dinner tonight. I think she wants to treat you for coming to visit.”

“She’s crazy, but I’m sure it will be fun. I checked on her this morning, and she’s still resting. Let’s hope she’s feeling better this afternoon.”

“Should we let her sleep?” Mac asked.

“Yes. Let her body decide when it’s time to get up.” Lenie hugged Mac close. “This is going to happen a lot from now on. She’s going to need a lot of sleep. More than ever before.”

“This sucks.”

“It does indeed.”

“It would suck less if you two didn’t hide in here and talk about me.” Kristy stood in the doorway. “I’m tired, but I’m not dead yet.”

“Kris, we—”

Kristy held her hand out to stop Mac. “No. I’m fine. And we’re going on that river cruise come hell or high water. I’m going to take a shower while Jace makes us a nice breakfast. You two cheer up and join us. No sad faces or grumpy people allowed.”

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The B&B Riverboat cruised steadily along the Ohio River and offered the best view of the area. Mac gazed out the window and watched a seagull sail alongside the boat. She turned her attention back to the table as Kristy and Jace raced each other to finish off the last of the barbecue wings. The two of them put away more food than Mac had eaten in the last two days. At least it seemed that way to Mac.

She reached for Lenie's hand and gently squeezed it. "What do you say we go for a walk and enjoy the view?"

"Sure."

"What about dessert?" Kristy asked, wiping sauce off her chin. She'd won the contest, though Jace tried to argue the point.

"You can have mine," Mac said.

"I love me some apple pie," Kristy said with a lot of satisfaction.

"Maybe I want it," Jace whined.

"I won. Loser doesn't get anything."

"You're mean."

Mac led Lenie onto the deck, laughing as Jace and Kristy continued their argument. "They're cute together."

"They are. He's good for her. If circumstances were different, I think Kristy would have adopted him."

"She wanted to," Mac said. "She told me she's decided to pretend he's her son, though they act more like siblings."

"As long as she's happy." Lenie tucked her hand inside the crook of Mac's arm. "This was a nice idea. It's a beautiful evening, and the vista is lovely."

"It is." Mac pointed out a few landmarks, telling Lenie a bit about the Underground Railroad and the houses along the river that were part of it. "It's nice to know I came from people who cared and did what was right."

"You love living here, don't you?"

"Oh yes. It's my home. I don't think I could live anywhere else." Mac paused as they stopped at the rail. "Could you leave Amsterdam?"

"I have before and not to go to school. I worked in Belgium for a few years but moved back when my mother got sick. She was never healthy, but a few years ago, when she had the heart attack, I never bothered to move out. It was better for me to stay and take care of her."

"I understand that. You're a good woman, Lenie."

"I don't know. I did what was right."

Mac put her hands on Lenie's hips and moved closer to her. "Which is why you're a good woman. And a big reason why I love you."

"You do?" Lenie's face registered surprise. "I don't think I expected that."

"I don't think I did either. It sort of came out. You don't have to do anything, just know that I meant it. It's crazy, I'm sure, that I'm in love with you after such a short time, but there it is."

Lenie ran her fingers along the side of Mac's face. "I care about you, Mac. It's not crazy, because I feel it, too."

"What comes next?"

"What do you mean?"

"We live worlds apart—and that's almost a literal statement. I don't want to see you go home tomorrow."

"Me either." Lenie kissed her softly, lingering long enough that Mac knew how much she loved her. "But we'll figure it out. I have holiday time saved up. I hardly ever use any, so I'll make plans to come back in a few weeks. I want to see Kristy as much as I can, and in the meantime, you and I will do as we've been doing."

"Lots of Skype and phone calls, e-mails, that sort of thing," Mac said. She leaned her forehead against Lenie's. "I know I've said it before, but this sucks."

"It does. Let's try to make the most of it when we get to your house." Lenie kissed her again, this time making promises that caused Mac's stomach to flutter. "In the meantime, let's keep our friend happy. Deal?"

"Yep. How about we go in there and see if she's passed out from all the sugar or too bloated to get up?"

"I don't think we need to." Lenie nodded behind her, and Mac spun around to find Jace leading Kristy toward them. She held onto his arm as if she needed the support. When they were closer, Mac noticed Kristy's waxen appearance.

"Hey, you all right?"

Kristy patted her stomach. "I think I ate too much."

"You don't say?" Mac didn't hold back the sarcasm. "You come out here for fresh air?"

"That and a better look at the scenery." Kristy let go of Jace and held onto the rail. She tipped her face into the wind, closing her eyes. "I love the smell."

"Smells like mud," Jace said.

“Your nose doesn’t work well then.” Kristy took a deep breath and slowly released it. “I can smell the river, sure, there’s some mud in it, but it’s a sweet smell to me. I can smell the flowers along the bank, too. It’s amazing.” She opened her eyes, and Mac saw she was crying. “I don’t think I’ll ever see it again.”

“Kris, please don’t talk like that,” Mac said, and placed a hand on Kristy’s shoulder. “We don’t know—”

“I do.” Kristy wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, Mac. I know that it won’t be much longer.” She tried to smile, but it faded quickly. “Thanks for this weekend. All of you. It’s been amazing.”

Mac managed to hold back her tears as she spoke. “Don’t you mean it was amazeballs?”

Kristy giggled. “Do you even know what that means?”

“No, but it sounds kinda cool.”

“Then promise me you’ll use it a lot. It’s a cool expression.”

“You got it.”

Kristy moved her face back into the breeze and the group fell silent. Mac reached out for Jace’s hand, holding it tightly as they gathered around Kristy, enjoying the evening with her.

# Chapter Thirteen

Two more weeks swept by before Mac realized it. She'd been busy working on two new grants for the OTR, figuring out how to set up a day care, and splitting what time she had left between calls to Lenie and evenings spent with Kristy.

The one person she'd never been without since the age of five was slipping away. Increasingly, over the last several days, Kristy had become weaker. She couldn't walk well, though she still refused a walker or cane. She'd fallen five times in as many days, and no matter how persuasive Mac could be, Kristy would not move into her house.

More than once it occurred to Mac to ask Jace to stay with Kristy. She worried Kristy would fall and not be able to get to the phone. But she also worried if Jace could handle being a nurse to his friend. Mac called Kristy's parents, who visited their daughter daily, but they too ran into a brick wall of stubbornness. Mrs. Baker wanted Kristy to hire a nurse. That got shot down quickly. Mac rested her head in her hands, elbows on the desk, wondering what she should do.

"Should I come back later?" Jace asked from the doorway of her office.

Mac motioned him to come in and sit down. "What's up? You need another project?" He'd already cleaned the third floor of the building so well that Mac made plans to get it into use. "Maybe head to the attic?" she teased with a smile.

"You know I will, but that's not why I'm here. I need to talk about Kristy."

"Did something happen?" Mac's stomach clenched. Wouldn't someone have called her?

"Not that I know of," he said. "I know she's been falling a lot lately. I don't know how you'd feel about this, but I think I should stay with her."

Mac's chin dropped. "Are you a mind reader or something?"

"No. I know you've been worried about it. I heard you talking to Mrs. B last night. Kristy isn't going to hire a nurse, but she'd let me stay there. I'm sure of it. I can still work here in the daytime, then go to her apartment in the evening any time we can't talk her into coming to our house. That way someone's there overnight." He swallowed visibly, his eyes avoiding Mac's. "We all know it won't be much longer. I want to do whatever I can to help out. I don't have a real job like you all do, so when the time comes, I can stay there twenty-four-seven."

"Jace, you amaze me sometimes. No, all the time. You're a damn good man, and I think Kristy would be stupid not to let you stay with her, since she's too damn pigheaded to come stay with us. You call her and make it happen, and I'll take you over there tonight. Okay?"

"Thanks, Mac."

"Don't thank me. It's going to be hard. You need to know that she's—"

"Going to get worse and angry and sleep a lot more. I've been doing research on the Internet. I know the symptoms are going to get bad, and she should set up something with hospice now. There's a lot of paperwork involved in that."

"Wow. Yeah, you're right. Let's talk to her today and see what she says. I already made an appointment with hospice for next week. I need to take Kristy to the doctor at two. Want to go with us?"

"Yes." Jace stood up, meeting Mac's eyes with determination. "I'll call her now. Then I'll get up to the attic. I already brought a few things down. Did you know there are a dozen old fold-up beds in there?"

"I had no idea. There's a ton-o-junk lying about."

"It's not junk. I think I can clean them and sell them to make money for the center. We could have a sidewalk sale or something. I'll work it out with Cindy." He gave her a wave and left the office.

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Dr. Pooja Gupta sat behind her desk, her delicate hands folded together in her lap. "I have the DNR ready for you to sign. I'm sad that you choose not to go through further treatments, Kristy. I must be clear that you understand this DNR. You'll be given pain medicine and nothing else. There will be no resuscitative efforts made. No artificial respirations. No CPR."

"I understand all that, Doctor. I want to go in peace." Kristy sat up straighter. "I had my will made yesterday, and this is the last thing I need to do. We're meeting with hospice next week. I'm not going into any hospital. I'll die at home."

Mac felt sick. She listened to Kristy bluntly talk about dying as if it were a normal thing. How normal is it for a woman who isn't yet forty to die? She felt like jumping up and shouting at Kristy and Dr. Gupta to stop. Stop talking so they could leave and Mac could pretend this wasn't happening.

Yet it was. Dr. Gupta spoke, but Mac asked her to repeat the question.

"Are you going to be the witness?"

"Witness to what?" Mac asked.

"To my signing the DNR." Kristy rested her hand on Mac's knee. "There has to be a witness."

"Do we have to do this now?"

"I think it's a good idea." Dr. Gupta's said. "Based on her current symptoms, it's my professional opinion that Kristy doesn't have much longer."

"How long?" Mac asked.

Kristy held up her hand to stop Dr. Gupta. "It doesn't matter. I told you before, my life doesn't go by someone else's clock. I'm dying, Mac. That's why we're here. Whether it's tomorrow, next week, or next month, doesn't matter. It matters that it's happening." Kristy gazed at her for a long moment, and Mac felt Kristy's strength and again wondered how she would live without her. "Will you sign it?"

"Yeah, of course." Mac scooted her chair closer to the desk and waited her turn to sign. Her hand trembled as she scribbled her name on the thin black line.

And that was it. Dr. Gupta gave them copies, instructing them to have the copies with them at all times, then stood to shake their hands. Kristy led the way back to the car. Once there, Mac rested her head on the seatback and sighed. Kristy sat in the passenger seat and took her hand.

"It's okay, Mac. It's what I want. It'll be easier."

"Nothing about this is easy, Kris. Nothing." Mac said. "I don't know why I didn't talk you into doing the damn treatments months ago. We might not be going through this." She pulled out of the parking lot faster than she should have, squealing the tires as she hit the street.

"Excuse me," Kristy said, "but you never had a say in this. You couldn't have talked me into or out of anything. I made up my mind over a year ago."

Mac shot her an incredulous stare. "What?"

"After the final treatment I decided it would be the last one. Period. All those nasty chemicals in my body might have killed the cancer then, but it was killing me. There were so many times I just wanted to curl up on my bed and die."

"You never—"

"Nope. I never said a word. Instead I curled up and prayed each minute until the pain would go away or I'd go to sleep. I prayed through the vomiting, through the weakness, the hair loss, all of it. And the answer I got—if it comes back, then it was meant to happen. Sometimes there's nothing we can do. This is one of those times."

Mac slammed her fist on the steering wheel. "Dammit, Kris! This is insane. You're too young to die."

"How old should I be?"

Mac was stunned by the calmness in Kristy's voice. "Ninety. We were supposed to grow old together and go to the same nursing home where I could annoy you with my heavy metal music and you could chase all the cute male nurses. That was the plan. Not this."

"Plans change." Kristy's voice got softer. "You can annoy me with your horrid taste in music now, if you want. I'm sorry I won't be there in person when you're old, but I will be there."

Mac slammed on the brakes, nearly running a red light. "I feel like I want to scream my damn head off and punch something, anything."

"Maybe we should pull over so you can calm down," Kristy said.

Mac knew she was right, but they were close to Kristy's apartment. "I'm fine. I'll be fine." They made the rest of the drive in silence. Mac pulled into the parking garage, and as soon as the car stopped, Kristy got out and came to the driver's side. Mac stood and Kristy wrapped her arms around her. She closed her eyes, rested her head against Kristy's, and cried.

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Mac left Kristy's apartment later that night, after getting Jace settled in. She was glad he'd be there, but also glad to have time alone at home. As if on cue, the phone rang the moment she walked in. Mac took her time walking into the living room, hoping they'd would hang up. That didn't happen so she answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, sweetie."

Lenie's voice soothed her, and she let out a long sigh. "Hey, babe. I didn't expect you to call tonight."

"I wasn't planning on it, but I felt you might need to talk."

Mac plopped onto the couch and leaned back, closing her eyes. "You're right about that." She relayed what had happened at the doctor's office and with Kristy afterward. "It's sort of hitting me hard right now. Like maybe it wasn't so real before when we were traveling and doing all those fun things. Now—"

"Now it's time for reality to sink in."

"And it almost feels like she wants to commit suicide with that damn DNR. How am I supposed to let her stop breathing and do nothing?" Mac felt the warmth of tears trail down her cheeks. She couldn't stop them if she wanted to.

"It's not suicide. She doesn't want to have a body that's alive without her being in it." Lenie hesitated a beat. "Mac, the DNR means that we let her die. CPR can bring someone back, but sometimes they are brain dead. Kristy wouldn't want that."

"Did your mom? Did she have a DNR?"

"Yes. When hospice came, they helped us set that up. At first, it hurt to think she didn't want to live longer and spend more time with me. But I eventually understood that she was ready to go, and who was I to keep her here? I didn't want to be that selfish, and I don't think you do either."

Mac considered Lenie's words. Was she being selfish? Shouldn't this be about what Kristy wanted? "I don't want her to suffer, but I don't want her to leave me either. I don't know if I can do this, Lenie. I don't."

"You can. You're a strong woman. I promise you'll get through this."

"You're a lot more confident than I am."

"I've had to do this, and if I can, then I know you can. I spoke to Baan yesterday about my holiday time."

"What'd he say?"

"He doesn't like it and made me promise to work remotely as much as possible and that I stop in Los Angeles first."

"Stop in LA first? Um, does he know where LA is?"

Lenie gave a short laugh. "He has no clue. He's horrible at geography. But he's allowing me to leave tomorrow. I'll spend the weekend in LA, and I'll be on your doorstep around eight p.m. Monday evening."

Mac sat up so fast she made herself a little dizzy. "Monday? As in four days from now?"

"Yes, darling. I'm not about to let you go through this alone. I have eight weeks of time, but he's letting me have four of them right now."

"I had a talk with Martine, the woman who's Baan's boss, and we discussed my working remotely. I don't know if it will work or not, but she's willing to let me bypass Baan and give it a go. Most of what I do can be done via e-mail or phone calls."

"So staying here won't interfere with work?" Mac tried not to sound as hopeful as she felt.

"No. For the most part, I'd be able to stay as long as you need me to."

"Wow." Mac couldn't speak for a moment. "I love you."

"I know. I love you, too."

Her heart swelled so much she thought it might burst from her chest. "That's the first time you've said it."

"I know. I wish I had said it in person."

"You can do that on Monday."

"It's a deal."

"I have to go for now. There are things I need to take care of before leaving. Will you be all right?"

"I will now. Thanks, baby."

"Call me if you need to talk more," Lenie said. "I don't care what time it is."

"I promise."

"Good night, sweetheart. Sleep well."

"Good night." Mac pressed the off button and held the phone to her chest, leaning back again. She didn't have a clue how she'd managed to find someone like Lenie, but she thanked God for bringing them together.

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Two days later, Mac, Jace, Kristy, and Kristy's parents met with a representative from hospice to set up how things would go during Kristy's last days. They ordered a hospital bed since Kristy insisted upon staying in her apartment. Mac knew in reality Kristy didn't want to die in her parent's home. It'd be too hard for them. Her apartment was a neutral place and also the place Kristy was the most comfortable, with all her things around her.

Mac felt as numb as the Bakers appeared to be during the long process. Jace remained stoic. He was the only one to ask questions and make clarifications. The meeting lasted two hours, and when it finished, Mac followed the Bakers to the front door.

Mrs. Baker paused before following her husband out. "I don't know if I've ever told you how much you mean to us, Mac. You're like a daughter—" She sobbed, then took a deep breath before continuing. "Don't leave us when it's over. Okay?"

"No way in hell, Mrs. B." Mac hugged her. "I love you guys, and you're not about to get rid of me. Ever."

"Thanks." She patted Mac on the face then headed for her car.

Mac closed the door and leaned her forehead on the doorjamb. She jumped when she felt a hand touch her back.

"You okay?" Jace stood there, concern evident on his face.

"Not in the least," she said. "I'm feeling overwhelmed."

"Yeah, I figured that when you sat there staring into space while Mrs. Peterson talked."

"Who?"

"The hospice lady. Her name is Mrs. Peterson."

"Oh, yeah," Mac said. "I don't think I heard much of what she said. Glad you asked questions, since I wasn't much use."

"It's cool. I took notes, and she gave me a big packet of stuff you should read over. I'm going to keep it with Kristy's medical papers on her coffee table so you know where it is."

Mac stared at the man before her, wondering where the young, inexperienced kid had gone. She'd been so focused on Kristy that he'd matured when she wasn't looking. "You rock, Jace. Plain and simple."

"I know." He winked at her. "You look like crap. Why don't you go hang out with Kristy, and I'll get us something for dinner. Sound like a plan?"

"It does." Mac wandered into the living room and found Kristy staring out the window. "Hey."

Kristy's shoulders were slumped, and her head hung low. She didn't respond so Mac went to her side and saw that she was crying. She put an arm around her and stood in silence. Kristy would talk when ready.

"It sucks, dammit," Kristy said. "I don't know if I should be pissed off, cry, scream, or run out and do as much stuff as I can before my body gives out on me."

"All of the above."

"You're not helping."

"I'm serious," Mac said. "You should do whatever makes you feel good at the moment. Remember what you said? One day at a time. Or one hour at a time if that works better for you."

"None of it works. I don't want any of it." Kristy pulled away from Mac, took a shaky step and fell. Mac reached for her, but Kristy shoved her hands away. "I'm not an invalid."

"Kris, I'm trying to help you."

"Don't." She got to her feet by using the arm of the couch to pull herself up. "I do not need help."

"I wouldn't be here if you didn't need help."

"You can leave whenever you want to." Kristy refused to meet her eyes. "And take Jace with you. I don't need a babysitter."

"Clearly, you do." Mac grabbed hold of her arm and turned her so they were staring at each other. "You're my best friend, and I'll be damned if I'm going to leave. And I doubt anything you say is going to make Jace go either. So stop the bullshit."

"I don't know how," Kristy said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't know how to do anything anymore. Mac, I'm terrified."

"Me, too." Mac held her arms out. "Let me be here for you, Kris. That's one thing you can do."

Kristy choked out a sob and fell into Mac's outstretched arms.

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Lenie arrived on Monday as planned, and Mac picked her up at the airport. Several hugs and an hour later, they were in Kristy's apartment. The hospital bed arrived that morning, and they found Kristy sitting on her couch, staring at it. When she realized Lenie was there, Kristy got to her feet and almost bowled Lenie over with her hug.

"You're here! I didn't know you were coming. Why didn't I know you were coming?"

"It was a surprise," Lenie said, laughing and giving her a kiss on the top of her head. "Did you think I wouldn't come back?"

"I wasn't sure," Kristy said. "It's a long way to fly." She glared at Mac. "She managed to keep a secret from me. That's never happened before."

Mac shrugged. "You were distracted. Anyway, she's here now. We wanted to stop by here first, then we're heading to my house so Lenie can rest. She flew in from LA, and because her boss is a cheap-ass, she changed planes three times."

"Baan sucks," Kristy said.

"He does indeed." Lenie ruffled Kristy's hair, much to Kristy's obvious annoyance. "I need to get rest, but how about we have dinner tonight. Anywhere you want."

"That, uh—I don't know where..."

"It's okay," Lenie said and put a hand on Kristy's shoulder. "You don't have to choose now. We'll figure it out."

"Okay. You're coming back?"

Mac glanced from Lenie to Kristy and saw Kristy was confused. "We'll be back. Promise."

"Okay." Kristy didn't appear convinced. "I missed you, Lenie. Thanks for coming over."

"Of course." Lenie gave her a one-armed hug.

Jace joined them. "Don't I get one of those, too?"

"Of course."

Jace eagerly got his hug, then motioned Mac and Lenie toward the kitchen. "We need to talk," Jace said.

"What's wrong?" Mac asked.

"She's getting more and more confused. If you ask her a question, you need to make it so there's a yes or no answer. She can't figure stuff out anymore." He looked down at the floor. "And she's falling more often. I talked to Mrs. Peterson today, and she's going to send a nurse every day to check on her."

Lenie put her arm around him. "I'm sorry, Jace, but this is to be expected. It's going to get worse now." She peeked at Mac over his shoulder. "Honey, perhaps we should stay here. I think Jace is going to need our help."

Mac didn't hesitate. "Not a problem. I'll head home and get stuff together."

"And I'll sleep on the couch," Jace offered. "I'll change the sheets, and you two can have the spare bedroom." He pulled away from Lenie. "Thanks. I thought I could handle this on my own, but now I'm not so sure."

"You don't have to handle it alone," Lenie said. "You've got help, so no worries. Now, where's that room? I'll help you change the sheets."



## Chapter Fourteen

It took seven days for Kristy to accept the hospital bed and use it. In that short time, she'd become incontinent, even more confused, and slept a lot more than normal. Mac rarely left her side, working from her laptop and having all her calls transferred to her cell phone. At almost two in the morning, Lenie came out of the bedroom and sat beside her on the couch. They'd already convinced Jace to use Kristy's room.

"Can't sleep?" Lenie said.

Mac shook her head and put aside the laptop and the file she'd been working on. "I keep watching her. Thinking about all the living she's going to miss out on. Once in a while, I'll think she's stopped breathing, but then I see her chest rise."

"I did the same with Ma. I think this is the hardest part. Waiting."

"I feel like a ghoul. I'm sitting here, waiting, wondering, and sometimes I even wish it would be over. It's so hard seeing her like this."

"That's normal, baby." Lenie took Mac's hand. "I feel it, too, even though I don't want her to die. But she doesn't deserve this. She's lived her life to the fullest, and she's ready to go. Think about how she'll be at peace when it's over."

"I've been trying," Mac said. She kissed the back of Lenie's hand. "I couldn't do this without you. I hope you know that."

"You most certainly could." Lenie pressed her lips to Mac's. "But you're right that it's nicer to be together."

"It is."

"Mac? Is that you?" The voice, though weak, belonged to Kristy's.

Mac jumped to her feet and went to her. "I'm here. You need something?"

"I have to go."

"Go where? You need to pee?"

Kristy reached for her hand. "I have to go. I don't want to be late."

Mac glanced at Lenie. "I don't understand."

Lenie stood beside Mac. "It's okay, Kristy. We'll take care of it. You go back to sleep."

"You sure?" she asked, even as her eyes were closing.

"Absolutely." Lenie tucked the blanket in around Kristy's shoulders. She was soon asleep and they returned to the couch.

"Was she dreaming?" Mac asked.

"No. It's all part of the brain not working right. She doesn't know where she needs to go, just that she needs to go. It's hard to explain, but she's going to say a lot of weird stuff. At the end Ma saw my father. He'd been dead for years. She never woke more than an hour at a time, because of the pain medicine."

"Should we call the nurse in the morning? Do you think it's time to have one here around the clock?"

"I don't know. We should get the nurse in and see what she thinks. Kristy might need more pain medication."

"Yeah." Mac stretched out, put her head in Lenie's lap and curled her legs up to fit on the couch. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Try to rest. I'll keep an eye on things," Lenie said, brushing her fingers through Mac's hair. The steady movement and comforting sensation soon put Mac to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

Another week passed with Kristy's health on a steady decline. Mac felt more helpless each day, watching her wither away before her. Kristy could barely eat and lost at least ten pounds, maybe more. Her body was so skinny it frightened Mac.

Mac stopped working altogether, preferring to spend every minute she could watching over Kristy. Friends came and went, though most of the time Kristy slept. An hour earlier, Mac convinced the Bakers to go home for some much-needed rest, promising to call them if anything happened.

"Hey." Kristy's voice cracked a little. "You okay?"

"Peachy."

“Liar.”

“What of it?”

Kristy made a sad attempt at sticking her tongue out.

“I have something for you.” Mac retrieved Kristy’s tablet and opened a video. “Do you remember this?”

Kristy furrowed her brow.

“That’s okay. It’s the train ride to Harwich, when we caught the ferry to Holland. You were staring out the window trying to memorize the view. You fell asleep, so I recorded the whole trip for you. I’d almost forgotten about it until I found it in my pictures folder.”

A weak smile formed on Kristy’s face. “Cool.”

“I thought you’d like it.” Mac held the tablet so Kristy could finish watching. Close to the end, Kristy’s eyes kept drooping, so Mac put it away. “I’ll never forget that trip, Kris. One of the best times we’ve ever had.”

“Please—I—want…”

“Shh. I’ll be fine. Stop talking. Rest.”

Kristy mouthed the word, “No.”

Mac talked so Kristy wouldn’t. “I’m fine. Lenie’s here and already told Baan she’s taking another two weeks off. Your parents are home and hopefully asleep by now and so is Jace. I practically had to pry his hands off the bed rail to get him to bed. So I’ve got everything covered.”

“I know. I wanted to tell you thanks.” Kristy took a shaky breath, already winded from a few words. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kris.” Mac leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Don’t talk so much. I promise I’m not going anywhere.”

“I am.” She tried to smile but failed. Her eyes were so old, to Mac it felt impossible that this could be the same woman she’d grown up with. “Tell Mom and Dad I’ll see them again.”

“They already know.” Mac felt her heart racing, her own breathing quickening. Was this it? Should she get someone? Lenie? Jace?

“If—if I’d been gay, I’d have—have married you.”

Mac smiled through her tears. “I know. But we’d have made a bad couple. You’re way to girly for my taste.”

“Liar.”

“Maybe. Do me one favor. Tell my parents hello for me.”

Kristy closed her eyes but managed a weak reply, “I will.” She didn’t speak anymore. Mac stared at her for a long time, watching as her chest rose and fell irregularly. She gripped Kristy’s hand and leaned forward far enough to press her forehead against Kristy’s. She whispered, “It’s okay, Kris. You can go now.”

\*\*\*\*

Mac heard the preacher’s voice at the graveside service, but his words didn’t penetrate her brain. A steady, icy rain came down around her, plastering her hair to her face. She stood off to one side, intentionally distancing herself from the other mourners.

Kristy’s parents sat in the front, closest to the casket. Jace and Cindy stood right behind them. Mac shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket, feeling the cold more as the rain got harder. She felt Lenie standing at her side but didn’t dare look at her. If she did, she’d break down.

Kristy’s mom gently placed a white carnation on the casket, and Mac figured the preacher must be done speaking. Kristy’s dad followed suit. Jace led Cindy to the casket, steadying her when she stumbled. He kept his arm around her, nodding to Mac as they passed. Several others walked out of the tent and headed for the vehicles lining the cemetery road. Mac waited until everyone left before going to the casket. She endured the long lines at the viewing the previous day, accepted condolences from people who hardly knew Kristy. She couldn’t even remember who showed up. The day was a blur.

But today slowed to a near stop. It felt like hours since Lenie pulled Mac out of bed and gently urged her to take a shower and get dressed. Breakfast never happened because Mac felt like she would be sick to her stomach at any moment.

She stared down at the shiny brown casket until her eyes became unfocused. She swiped the tears away and placed a white rose on top of the carnations. Her gut clenched and she found herself unable to move. Her best friend, whom she’d grown up with, been through countless boyfriend and girlfriend dramas, work changes, adventures, and

more wonderful moments than Mac could ever count, lay in the box in front of her. Mac understood it was only a body, not what made Kristy an amazing person. But that didn't matter.

"I miss you, Kris," she whispered. "I have no idea how I'm going to move on, but I promise I will. Keep an eye on me, okay? I'm sure I'm going to need it."

Mac touched the casket for a long time, Lenie standing at her side.

"I can't believe it's over," Mac said after a while. "It happened so fast."

"It's best that it did. No one wanted her to suffer."

"I know. I'm not sure I can go to the Baker's house. I don't know if I can handle everyone talking about her and being all sad. Kris wouldn't want that."

"Then we'll go and make sure that doesn't happen." Lenie put her arm around Mac's shoulders. "It's our job to see that there are no more tears. Right?"

"I know she'd want us to, but I—I don't feel capable of much right now." Mac stared into Lenie's eyes, drawing strength from the compassion she saw there. "I feel broken. Like walking is hard enough, how am I going to be all smiles and happy?"

"You don't have to force it," Lenie said. "We'll go there and share fond memories with those who weren't as fortunate as us to know Kristy. We'll celebrate her life."

"You make it sound easy."

"It's not, believe me. But if you're with me, it'll be bearable."

Mac leaned into Lenie, resting her head on Lenie's shoulder. "I'm always with you."

"Then it's settled." Lenie took Mac's hand, led her to the car, and gave her support through the reception at the Bakers.

They returned to Mac's house late that evening. Jace, exhausted, retreated to his bedroom without much comment. Mac wanted to go after him, but Lenie stopped her. "I think he needs some time alone."

"I suppose so," Mac said. "I don't think he expected to be the life of the party, but he sure knows how to spin a story."

"He was adorable. And I'm sure he now needs sleep."

"Me, too." Mac put her arms around Lenie. "He got enough encouragement from you. For that matter, so did I."

"I'm glad I could help." Lenie kissed her softly. "I loved her, too, you know."

"I do. And you've held up so well. If it wasn't for your strength, I'd have never survived today."

"I think you'd have done fine." Lenie moved toward Mac's room. "Why don't we get some sleep as well? It's been a hellacious day."

"Sure, but first I want to know that you're okay." Mac noticed that Lenie no longer met her eyes. "You'd tell me if you need to talk as well. Right?"

Tears streamed down Lenie's cheeks. Mac brought Lenie into the comfort of her embrace.

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Lenie's time in Ohio ended sooner than planned. Baan called and ordered her to Paris to retrieve a painting they'd been trying to acquire for years. Mac wasn't pleased, but she could do nothing about it. She sat on her bed and brooded as she watched Lenie pack her bag. "Maybe I could come with you for a while."

"To Paris?" Lenie asked, a twinkle in her eyes. "I don't think you'd enjoy it, babe. I'll be at the museum all day and on a train heading to Amsterdam as soon as I've finished prepping the painting for shipment. I doubt I'll sleep for two days."

"I don't mind." Mac got to her feet and wrapped her arms around Lenie from behind. "I don't want to be without you."

"I'll be a phone call away." She leaned back into Mac. "I'll call you the second I touch down at Charles de Gaulle."

"That's not entirely what I meant." Mac waited as Lenie faced her. "I want to be with you always. As in the rest of our lives."

Lenie gently touched Mac's cheek. "I know you do, sweetheart. I'm sorry that we can't do that right now, but we'll talk more about that when I'm home."

Mac frowned like a petulant child, but she didn't care. "We can't talk about it now?"

“No. We need a lot of time to figure things out, and right now, I need time to finish packing and get to the airport.” She kissed Mac’s pouty lips and smiled. “I promise. I’ll call when I land. We’ll talk after I get home and catch up on sleep. I know I’ll be wiped out.”

“I’m sure you will, honey. I’m sorry if I seem pushy.”

“Pushy? You? Mac, I don’t think anyone would ever call you pushy. Stubborn, persistent, or sweet, maybe. But not pushy.” She went back to packing.

“I love you, Lenie.”

“And I love you.” Lenie zipped shut her bag and set it on the floor. “Now, love me enough to drive me to the airport, after I say goodbye to Jace.”

Mac took Lenie’s luggage to the car, loaded it in, and within twenty minutes parked at the airport. She followed Lenie through the process of checking her bag and getting her boarding pass. It all happened too fast to suit Mac, and she pouted as they stood near the entrance to Security.

“I hate this part,” Mac said, sounding whiney.

“I know. Perhaps you can arrange to come visit after Christmas. Maybe for New Year’s Eve. We have the most spectacular fireworks at midnight. You can see the whole country from space.” She was smiling, her attempt to cheer Mac on working a little. “Come on, baby. It’ll be fine.”

“I’m going to take you up on the fireworks. Even if Cindy wants to kick my ass for taking more time off. She’s practically running the place by herself, and while she won’t complain, I know she’s stressed. And if it’s a chance to be with you, I’m there. New Year’s it is.”

“Excellent.” Lenie glanced at her watch. “I better get through Security so I have time to get something to eat before my flight leaves. I hate airplane food.”

“Me, too.” Mac cupped Lenie’s face in her hands and kissed her tenderly, rubbing her cheeks with her thumbs. “I love you. Have a safe flight and call me when you’re in Paris. I don’t care what time it is.”

“I promise.” Lenie gathered her into a fierce hug then hurried to the Security entrance. Once in line, she waved at Mac.

Mac felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach. Something was off, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe it was the expression on Lenie’s face, but she couldn’t be sure. Lenie moved away to follow the stream of travelers before her. She shrugged it off and headed to her car, wondering how she would convince Cindy to run the OTR without her over the end of the holidays.

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Christmas day had always been Kristy’s favorite holiday and so important to her that rather than leaving a conventional will, she left her “will” in multiple envelopes to be delivered on Christmas Eve and opened on Christmas Day. Mac understood that rather than have everyone gathered and once again discussing her untimely passing, Kristy planned it so she could leave those she loved one last gift.

Mac held her envelope and pointed to the one in Jace’s hand. “You first. I have no idea what she left you, and the suspense is killing me.”

“What about your gift?” Jace asked. “Aren’t you curious?”

“Yes, but I have a feeling I know what it is. Now, open yours.”

Jace took a deep breath and ripped into the envelope. He read it over, and his jaw dropped. “Holy shit.”

“Jace, don’t cuss on Christmas.” Mac slapped his thigh. “And don’t keep me guessing. You could read it out loud you know.”

“Uh, it’s pretty short actually. The reason she had all her furniture put in storage is so it would be there for me when I finish college. She paid the storage place for six years up front.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“That’s not all.” He put the paper down, his face still registering his surprise. “She’s left me her car. She paid it off this summer and decided I would need it to get to and from school. She specifically told me to stay here with you and drive to and from school. She didn’t want you to be alone.”

Mac smiled. “Thanks, Kris.” She motioned to Jace’s letter. “Is that it?”

“That’s enough, but yeah, that’s it.”

“Check again. There’s more on the back of the sheet.”

Jace picked up the letter and read for a few minutes more. If his eyes got any wider they’d pop out of his head. “She made me a partial beneficiary of one of her life insurance policies. It’s enough money to pay my entire tuition.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised. I’m the other beneficiary. She took out a second policy a few years ago, after the first bout with cancer. Her parents get the original policy, and two months before she died, she changed it so you and I split the other one. She did look on you like a son, Jace.”

“I wish she could have stayed here with us. Rather have her than this.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Mac patted his leg. “Okay, ready for mine?”

“Sure.”

Mac carefully opened the envelope and removed her letter. As she unfolded it, an SD card fell out. She picked it up and read the letter. The part about Kristy’s insurance policy she knew but nothing mentioned the SD card. She read it twice to be certain. “Guess this is a surprise.”

“Well, let’s find out what’s on it.” Jace grabbed his laptop, powered it up, and took the card from Mac. She tried to be patient while it loaded but found her nerves were on edge. Kristy was never known for being technical with anything. What could possibly be on the card?

“We Are Family”, burst forth, and Mac’s eyes were drawn to the photo display before her. Pictures from their childhood, or from the only time they were ever the same height, as Kristy liked to say, moved in at all angles, fading in and out. Several pictures shuttered to life, some blinked, but each one told a distinct tale of their lives together.

They’d first met in Mrs. King’s kindergarten class. Day one, Mac saw a bigger boy trying to bully Kristy. While she held her ground pretty well, Mac chose to intervene. She shoved the boy into the dirt and found a best friend for life.

The video moved on to their early teen years, when Mac grew almost a foot taller than Kristy and more awkward. Kristy was always rail thin, her soft, full, blonde locks fell around her face and accented her sparkling blue eyes. That look never changed for Kristy, even when she gained a bit more weight so she wasn’t a self-described skeleton.

Mac sniffled and Jace handed her a box of tissues with a label on it. “For Mac.” She laughed. “You helped her?”

He pointed to the screen. “Keep watching.”

They were now moving into their college years. Where most students were partying on the weekends, Mac and Kristy studied hard, both completing their degrees a year early. The prize for doing so was a trip to Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. It was, of course, Kristy’s dream come true, and while she spent most of her time exploring Dollywood, Mac enjoyed some downtime with a cowgirl they met at the park. Mac couldn’t remember the woman’s name, but the behind-the-scenes tour made it all worth it.

As the photos moved into their thirty’s and forty’s, Mac entertained with the occasional girlfriend on her arm and the four boyfriends that came and went in Kristy’s life. The last few shots were of their European adventure, ending with an incredible photo of her and Kristy after coming to the ground from skydiving. Kristy looked full of life and Mac ashen, shaken and ready to be sick. The photo made her laugh.

As the song faded, Kristy’s face came into view. “Hey, Mac,” she said, sitting in her hospital bed. “I finally managed to kick your butt out of here for a while. You’re one stubborn woman, but Jace confirmed you’re asleep so we can get this done.”

Mac reached for another tissue.

“I know it’s Christmas by now, or you wouldn’t be watching this. We just had Thanksgiving, and I’m so grateful to you both for making it such a wonderful day. I’m pretty sure it’s the first time Mom didn’t make the turkey, but she seemed pretty happy about it anyway. Do me a favor and take care of her and Dad for me. They’re going to be lost, and they’ll need you both in their lives, and I know you two could use some strong parenting. Especially Mac.” Kristy grinned and stopped to get a drink of water. “Merry Christmas. I hope you two like the gifts I gave you. That’s all I’ll say.” She said, her voice smug.

“I love you both dearly. Mac, I could not have asked for a better friend. You and Lenie are made for each other, and I’m pretty darn proud of myself for the matchmaking, despite your constant objections. Make sure you give me all the credit at the wedding.

“Jace, if I could have adopted you, I would have. Since it wasn’t legal, consider yourself the son of my heart. I always wanted kids, and you certainly fit the bill.

“Now, you two go on and have great, happy lives. Know that I’m always with you, and if you aren’t happy I’ll haunt you both.”

The video ended.

Jace removed the SD card and handed it to Mac. “Merry Christmas.”

She tucked it into her pocket and hugged him. “Merry Christmas.”

# Chapter Fifteen

The entire day turned crazy for Mac. Bad enough to be a Monday, but it was the Monday after the day she should have arrived in Amsterdam. Her flight was supposed to leave late afternoon on Saturday, arriving Sunday morning in Amsterdam. Mother Nature, however, chose the weekend to spread two inches of ice across the tri-state area, effectively shutting down the airport. Her flight got rescheduled for the Tuesday morning, and she felt nervous that it would be canceled again, as the weather hadn't let up.

Mac rushed through the morning, unable to concentrate on anything. Apparently it drove Cindy crazy, as she pointedly told Mac before lunch, "I want you to leave and not come back until next year. Well into next year, actually."

Mac eyed Cindy, who stood in her office doorway with her arms folded across her chest. "And what am I supposed to do until tomorrow?"

"Not my problem, but if you don't get out of this office, I will have no choice but to kill you."

"Cindy, I have to do something. I'm nervous as hell."

"You'll be fine. You can go home and clean out your attic or your office or whatever." Cindy placed her hands on Mac's desk and leaned across it. "There's nothing that needs done here. We're closing shop on Wednesday, and we won't open again until the third of January. I don't expect to see you here until well after that date. Your flight will leave on time tomorrow, and you'll be in Amsterdam as planned. Have a good time, be safe, and good bye." Cindy straightened up and Mac knew that was that.

Mac got to her feet and pulled her coat on. "I would have hated having you as a mother. You're mean."

"I'm direct, and you do have me as a mother," she said. "Bye bye."

"Later," Mac said, holding back a laugh. Cindy was right, of course. She'd be useless in the office, but she had no damn clue what she should be doing otherwise.

Rather than go home, she chose to take a walk. The weather warmed to a steamy thirty-two degrees, and the sun shone bright enough she wore sunglasses. The cool air felt good and fresh as she moved through the neighborhood she knew so well.

After maybe twenty minutes, her phone rang. She half-expected it to be Cindy asking why her car remained at the OTR. "I'm taking a walk."

"That's good to know," Lenie said, surprising Mac with her lilting voice. "I have been watching the weather reports. Your flight should be on time tomorrow."

"I hope so. I so need to see you in person." Mac held the phone as if she could feel Lenie on the other end of the line. "I miss you, baby."

"I know," she said, her voice more terse than expected. Mac sensed something was wrong. Before she could speak, Lenie continued, "I have to work the day you come in. Can you take the train? I can leave a key on the stoop."

"Sure," Mac said. She stopped and hesitated before saying, "Are you okay?"

"Just busy. I need to go. I will see you soon."

"Okay. I love you," Mac said and received silence. Lenie'd already hung up.

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The flight went well, but Mac enjoyed being on the ground again. She made a mental note to reconsider flying during the winter. She proceeded through the all-too-familiar process of entering the country, boarded the first train she could, and arrived at Lenie's house ten minutes later. The key was in its place, so she let herself in.

A strange emptiness fell over her as she walked through the living room and into Lenie's bedroom. She found a note on the kitchen table that told her where to find food for breakfast and lunch and that Lenie would be home for dinner.

The note lacked a salutation. No "Love, Lenie" or "I love you." Nothing. She placed the note back on the table and decided to take a nap. Her appetite was gone.

Less than an hour later, Mac's cell phone rang. She did her best to wake up and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mac," Lenie said. "Did I wake you?"

"Yeah, but it's okay. What's up?"

“Baan, my manager, has told me I can go home early. Do you need anything?”

Mac tried to clear her head and formulate an answer. She needed Lenie but didn't say it to her. “Nah. I'm good. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

Mac set her phone down and stared at the ceiling.

She must have fallen asleep soon after the call and awakened when she heard Lenie come in. Mac sat up as Lenie walked into the room. “Hey.”

Lenie settled beside her, situated so she faced Mac. “Hey.” She touched Mac's cheek, letting her fingers move to the back of Mac's neck. Lenie pulled her closer, planting a gentle kiss on Mac's lips. “How do you feel?”

“A little tired, but not bad. I took a nap.”

“How was the flight?” Lenie said, though she wouldn't meet Mac's gaze.

“Fine, once we actually got started. Flying in winter sucks.”

“I understand. Would you like something to eat?”

“Not right now.” Mac placed her finger under Lenie's chin and lifted her face until they were eye to eye. “I want to talk. I need to know what's wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong, Mac. It has been difficult at work. Baan is...being Baan.” She paused, or perhaps hesitated. Mac felt Lenie held back. “He gave me a problem over my use of holiday time to see Kristy.”

“What? What do you mean he gave you a problem?”

Lenie closed her eyes, and Mac could see her frustration. “No. I did not translate that right. He did not like that I took holiday time on short notice.”

“But he still approved it.”

“He did. That does not mean he is not angry about it. I can't explain it.” Lenie stood and stepped out of her pants. “I am on holiday now, so why not enjoy it? No more talk about work.”

“Okay.” Mac got up and moved to stand in front of her. Lenie unbuttoned her shirt, but Mac stopped her. “I'm sorry it's been tough for you lately. But I've got seven days to make it up to you.”

“Yes, you do. Any ideas?”

Lenie's eyes sparkled and Mac relaxed. “By loving you into a new year.” She brought her lips to Lenie's in a kiss filled with passion. “I love you, Lenie.”

“I know,” Lenie said, returning the kiss. “No more talking.”

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Ten minutes before the new year's arrival, Mac felt refreshed and ready. She and Lenie had enjoyed each other over the past couple of days, and as she squeezed Lenie's hand, any previous doubts or worries slipped away. The night sky was clear, and Lenie assured Mac she would see a spectacular show from inside the house.

“I can't believe it's legal for everyone and their brother to shoot off fireworks here.”

“Only tonight. Technically, they can set them off at ten in the evening, but as you heard, most start much earlier.”

“Yeah,” Mac said. “My ears are still ringing from all the bangs this morning.”

“I read that about fifty-four-million euros were spent this year on fireworks.”

“Damn. I'm in the wrong business. I should come here and set up a new shop.”

Lenie laughed. “That's low for us. It's usually much higher. And it is in December that the big sales come in. Your shop would have to sell something else.”

“Hmm. That's a downer. Maybe we should have gotten some to set off.”

“We won't need to. Trust me.”

“I do. Implicitly.” Mac kissed her on the cheek. “Any chance you'll be able to come back to the States this summer? I really want to spend time when it's not so cold. Maybe you'd like to see a baseball game.”

“How does August sound?” Lenie giggled at the shocked look Mac gave her. “August isn't good? I could get a refund on the ticket I suppose.”

“Don't you dare,” Mac said. “It's the perfect time to come over.”

Before Lenie could reply, the show began. Mac first spotted bright white flashes to her left, then red, blue, and green to her right. Directly ahead were more colored displays as well as white streamers and screamers. Within seconds, it was too loud for either of them to be heard over the noise. Mac stood behind Lenie, wrapped her arms around Lenie's waist, and kept her eyes on the sky.

She'd seen a lot of fireworks, but this show was special. Maybe because it came at her from all sides, or perhaps the company she kept, or the uniqueness of the new year celebration. Whatever the case, Mac felt calm, happy, and satisfied with her life. Her thoughts went to Kristy, thinking she would have enjoyed this as well. Perhaps she watched it, too, from whatever vantage point she now enjoyed.

It took another half an hour for the spectacle to die down. Lenie turned in Mac's arms and kissed her soundly. "Happy New Year, Mac."

"Happy New Year, Lenie." Mac kissed her again. "And here's hoping that we have many, many more. Too many to count."

Lenie's smile looked a little sad, but it was hard to be sure in the darkened house. The light from the fireworks wasn't enough for Mac to see her face very clearly.

"I love you," Mac said.

In answer, Lenie kissed her. "These will last another hour or so. Would you like to stand here and keep watching?"

"Nah. I'd much rather celebrate...privately."

Lenie leaned into her, her hands already pulling Mac's shirt free of her slacks. "I think that's a fine idea."

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Mac stood at the entrance to passport control, fiddling with the tag on her carry-on bag. She wanted to delay leaving as much as possible, even though a few more minutes wouldn't be long enough for her. She didn't want to leave Lenie and kept entertaining the idea of not going home. But she had to.

Lenie wasn't meeting her gaze again, and Mac felt off balance. She took hold of Lenie's hands and pulled her close. "I'm going to miss you so much. I hate this part."

"It's what we have to do. No choice."

"Lenie, there's always a choice," Mac said. She brushed her knuckles along the soft skin of Lenie's cheek. "I love you. We'll find a way to make this work. I promise."

"Of course." Lenie's smile didn't reach her eyes. An incredible sadness emanated from her and Mac couldn't help but worry. Lenie said, "You better go. You have less than an hour to get to your gate."

"It won't take that long. Never does. It's more important that you tell me what's wrong. Something is troubling you."

"Mac, you're going back to the States. Did you think I wouldn't feel sad?"

"No." Mac kissed Lenie one more time, feeling a weird finality there. Had she done something that shook Lenie's faith in their relationship? "We'll see each other in August, like we planned. We'll call, e-mail, Skype, whatever. I know it's not the same, but as long as we're in contact—"

"It's not the same. I want you here all the time, but that can't happen. Mac, we can't have this conversation here, in an airport." Lenie glanced around them. "Please, go to your gate. Call me when you are home. I don't mind what time it is."

Mac saw the moisture in Lenie's eyes and kissed her cheeks, then her lips again. "I love you."

"You, too." Lenie motioned her to go and Mac did. She kept looking back as she made progress toward the passport control booth. Lenie left as soon as Mac got in line.

When she reached the gate, Mac got through Security and sat to wait for her flight to board. She looked at her cell phone and wondered if she should text Lenie. It vibrated and she almost dropped it. She clicked on the message.

*I love you, too. Be safe.*

Mac knew she looked like an idiot with a goofy smile on her face, but she didn't care. She swiped away unexpected tears, then returned the text with hearts and kisses emoticons.



## Chapter Sixteen

Mac returned to work the following Monday. There were piles of forms and papers to go over so she could close out the fiscal year for the center. The IRS never failed to surprise her with the amount of accounting needed. Twenty minutes into her day, Mac wanted to run back to Holland and hide in Lenie's house forever. A sly smile spread across her face as the idea worked its way into her brain.

"First day back after vacation, a new year, tons of paperwork and you've got a shit-eating grin on your face," Cindy said from the doorway. "I'm officially scared."

"You should be. I'm going to Holland and never coming back."

"Like hell. You got too much to do here. But if you're a good girl and get all your paperwork done, I'll consider letting you play on Skype at lunch."

"Ha ha. Speaking of lunch, I sort of skipped breakfast. I think I'll order something early. You in?"

"If you promise me Chinese. I've been wanting to try the takeout at the new place up the street."

"Deal," Mac said. "Write down your order, and I'll take care of it. I'll even pay."

Cindy grabbed her chest and pretended to be shocked. "Are you sure you can part with it? After all, you're a world traveler. Don't you need it for your next plane ticket?"

"I'm racking up frequent flyer miles. I'm good." Mac tossed a wadded-up piece of paper at her. "Now get outta my office."

"Going..."

Mac checked the time. Lenie should be at her desk. She ignored the paperwork and clicked on the icon for Skype. No answer, even though Lenie showed as being online. A few minutes later, Mac still got no answer. She sent Lenie a text via Skype, figuring she'd see it when she got back to her desk or was done with whatever she needed to work on.

Mac's cell phone rang as soon as she sent the text. "Hey, babe. I was calling you on Skype. I could use the sight of your beautiful face." The line remained silent and Mac checked the display on the phone to make sure they were still connected. "You there?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"Lenie—"

"I don't want to Skype anymore, Mac."

"Um, okay. Why? Did something happen?"

"Yes—no—yes."

Mac released a nervous laugh. "Well, which is it?"

"I won't be coming to see you in August, and I don't want you coming to see me. I can't do this anymore."

"Lenie, what are you talking about?" Mac asked "Baby, tell me what's going on."

"I'm done. Call it the distance, the drama, the energy it takes, I don't know. But I can't be your girlfriend anymore. I'm sorry, Mac, but we're through."

"What? W-wait a minute. What are you talking about? Last night you said you love me and today you're breaking up with me? Over the phone?"

"I can't exactly come there in person now can I?"

"I don't know. Lenie, you're confusing me. Why are you breaking up with me? Did I do something wrong?" Panic built in Mac's chest, seeping to her neck and threatening to choke her. She took several deep breaths, but they did nothing to calm her down.

"It's not you at all. You've always been perfect. Perhaps that's the problem. I can't do it, Mac. I'm sorry."

"I'm perfect and that's why you're breaking up with me? Lenie, this is crazy. Please, let's talk about this."

"I'm done talking. I've made my decision. Please don't make this any harder than it is."

"Are you kidding me?" Mac wanted to scream. "I love you, and if that makes it harder to break up with me, too bad." Mac thought she heard a click sound. "Lenie? Are you there?" The line was dead. Mac dialed Lenie's number but got no answer. She tried eight times before switching on the computer. As soon as it booted, she tried Skype, but Lenie showed offline. She sent her a message, and a quick e-mail that said, "Call me."

Two hours passed and still no response. Cindy ordered their lunch, but Mac refused to eat, despite Cindy's best attempts. The rest of the day felt like torture to Mac, and the moment she finished with her paperwork, she left. She couldn't even remember if she'd said goodbye to Cindy.

Once at home, she booted up her desktop to check her e-mail and Skype. Nothing greeted her on either. She leaned back in her chair and tried not to cry. The sound of Jace's voice startled her. He'd come into her room and now squatted beside her. "Hey, you okay?"

"Lenie—" It was all she could get out before crying.

"I know. Cindy called me." Jace's voice remained calm, though his eyes reflected fear. "Tell me."

Through her tears, Mac told him about their brief conversation.

"That doesn't sound like her at all."

"I know. But she won't answer my e-mails, texts, phone calls, nothing. I don't know what to do."

"Me neither. Cindy said you didn't eat all day. You gotta eat. We're ordering pizza. Then we'll figure out what to do." He handed her a box of tissues and disappeared for a few minutes. He came back wearing an old T-shirt and jeans. "Get out of your work clothes, and let's go sit in the living room. I'll turn on my laptop so you can watch for her e-mail. This is crazy," he said and left again.

Mac joined him after dressing in a T-shirt and sweatpants. She flopped onto the couch, leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, and rested her head in her hands. "I feel like I've been punched in the chest."

"You look like it, too."

"She said I was perfect. She told me she loved me. Where does a breakup make any sense in all that?"

"Something happened. You guys talk about anything in particular the last few days? Maybe about her living here?"

Mac thought for a moment. "She did mention in passing that it would be easy to do her job and live anywhere she wanted."

"Did Lenie say anything about you two living together? I thought you were going to ask her about that?"

Mac shook her head. "I wanted to, but it's too soon after Kristy. I don't think Lenie's ready."

Jace slapped her arm. "You dumb-ass. First, Kristy would smack you for using her as an excuse. Second, did it ever occur to you that Lenie might want you to ask her to move here? Maybe she's waiting on you. That bit about working remotely is what I'd call a big-ass clue."

"No way." Mac rubbed her arm. "No way she's mad about that. If she wanted to bring the subject up, she'd have done it. I don't think that's it."

"It's not too soon, though. You and Lenie need to be together, and one of you has to move to do it. It's time you talked about that."

"I can't. Not when she won't take my calls."

The doorbell rang and Jace got up to answer it. He came back with paper plates, napkins, and an extra-large pizza. "Eat, then try calling again."

"I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask if you were hungry," he said, passing her a piece. "If she doesn't answer tonight, call her first thing tomorrow. Maybe she's pissed and needs time to calm down."

"But what is she pissed about?"

He shrugged. "Sorry, but you'll have to figure that one out yourself."

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A week and a half passed by at a snail's pace without a word from Lenie. Mac felt useless at work but stayed each day despite Cindy's repeated attempts to send her home. She would rather be useless around people than useless alone.

There was a knock at her door. Mac stared at the computer screen, checking her e-mail for the millionth time, and waved the person in. When she looked up, she found Steph sitting in front of her.

"Hey, Steph. What brings you here?"

"Cindy. She threatened to drive to my office and drag me kicking and screaming if I didn't show up today. I moved three appointments to be here."

Mac furrowed her brow. "Why? What's the emergency?"

"You are, my dear friend. Cindy said, and I quote, 'She's moping around the office like a beat puppy dog, and I can't take it anymore.' She went on to tell me to get my ass down here a.s.a.p. and talk sense into you. I'm not clear on what that might be."

"I should have known. I'll kick Cindy's ass later." Mac told Steph what happened with Lenie. "So I'm sort of in limbo. She won't contact me, and until she does, I'm sort of screwed."

“Mackenzie get on that computer, buy a plane ticket, and fly over there. If she won’t come to you, go to her. Regardless of the reason, you deserve to be told face-to-face.”

“I can’t do that, Steph. I don’t know—”

“And you won’t know, sitting here feeling sorry for yourself. Get on the Internet, book your flight and a hotel room, just in case. Then go to her house, and make her tell you to your face. She’s being an bitch doing this to you, Mac, and it’s not right. She should have the balls to do it in person. And if she doesn’t, or even if she does, she doesn’t deserve you.”

“I love her, Steph. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. She’s the one.”

“Then fight for her.” Steph motioned to the computer. “Get busy. At the very least, you’ll make Cindy happy by not being underfoot here. And before you say it, I’m sure she and Heather can handle whatever happens while you’re gone.”

“Thanks, Steph.”

“Thank me when you get a resolution. Be careful, Mac. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Too late.”

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The flight felt longer than normal and Mac collapsed on the bed in her hotel room. She hadn’t slept much in the last two weeks and certainly not during the flight across the Atlantic. Her brain went into overactive mode as she worked through exactly what she would do and say. Life without Lenie wasn’t an option, and she’d come to convince Lenie that, no matter what, they were better together. Even if it meant that Mac moved to Holland. Not the best option, but she was ready to make that choice.

Losing Kristy was hard enough, but losing Lenie... She debated giving her a call but didn’t think Lenie would pick up the phone. The hotel she’d chosen was within walking distance from Lenie’s house. Quarter past ten in the morning, and on a Tuesday; Lenie would be at work. Mac set the alarm on her cell phone and decided to try for a few hours of sleep.

Exhaustion took hold of her, and she drifted off.

The sound of a guitar strumming was more than a little annoying, and it took Mac a while to figure out where it came from. She reached toward the bedside table and slapped her cell phone. The noise stopped, but she didn’t want to wake up. She desperately needed sleep and could probably go for a few more hours, but she wanted to see Lenie.

Mac forced herself out of bed and into a shower. In twenty minutes, she felt renewed enough to head for Lenie’s house. She bypassed the hotel restaurant, unsure if her nervous stomach would be able to keep any food down.

The moment she stepped outside, the biting wind took her breath away. She zipped up her jacket, put her head down, and trudged to Lenie’s. Sleet mixed with rain pelted down and made Mac shiver. She brought clothes for the cooler late winter temperatures in Ohio, not the frigid temperatures of Holland. Why hadn’t she thought to bring a winter coat? Probably because she left in such a panicked state.

She reached the house and stood at the stoop for a few moments, working up the courage to knock. How would Lenie react to seeing her here? She’d been clear that she and Mac were over. But that’s what brought Mac there, after all, to see her and make Lenie break up with her face-to-face. Or convince her they belonged together. Mac raised her hand, pressed the doorbell, and held her breath.

Lenie opened the door and stared openly at Mac. The shock obvious, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

“Can I come in? It’s pretty damn cold out here.”

“Of course.” Lenie stepped aside so Mac could enter. She took her coat and held her arm out to indicate that Mac should go into the living room. “What are you doing here? When did you get here?”

Mac rubbed her hands together to warm them up while working to form the right words. “I flew in this morning. You can’t expect me to accept you breaking up with me over the phone. I love you, and I know you love me, so what’s the problem here?”

“The problem is that you didn’t listen and showed up at my door. I told you we are done, Mac. Why can’t you accept that?” Lenie walked around her and headed toward the kitchen. She wouldn’t look Mac in the eyes, keeping her back to her.

“Because it’s nonsense. You never once told me there was anything wrong. Never said you don’t love me. Never said a damn thing until one day you tell me we’re done? I deserve to know why.”

“You do,” Lenie said. Shoulders hunched, she stood leaning against the kitchen counter. “Let me make some tea, and we’ll talk. Go sit down.”

Mac took a deep breath and made herself comfortable on the couch. She ran her fingers over the soft fabric and remembered the night they'd made love there. It was incredible, and she smiled at the memory.

Lenie joined her a few minutes later and handed her a cup of tea. "Strawberry. Your favorite."

"Thanks," Mac said, happy for the warmth. "What's wrong, Lenie? Why can't you talk to me?"

"I don't think you'll understand." She set her tea cup on the end table. "I'm not sure I can explain it to you. I can't be in a relationship right now."

"Why? What changed?"

"Kristy. She died, and that reminded me of how everyone I love eventually leaves me. I can't take that anymore, so it's best we part now before either of us gets hurt."

Mac couldn't believe what she heard. Lenie still wouldn't look at her, instead focusing on the floor. "I'm right here. I'm not going to leave you. If it's because we live so far apart—I'll move."

That made Lenie look at her. "What?"

"I'll move. Cindy can run the OTR. We've got more volunteers than we can handle, so I'm sure she'll be okay. The thing that matters is us being together. I don't want to be without you." Mac knelt in front of her and took hold of Lenie's hands. "Please. I'm right here."

"I know you are, but I can't let you move here. You can't give up your life's work like that. You'd end up resenting me. It won't work."

Mac kissed her hands. "You don't know that."

"I do. Ohio is your home. To take you away from that isn't an option. I won't let you do that." Lenie pulled her hands free and cupped them around Mac's face. "I will never stop loving you, but I want you to move on. Find someone to be happy with. I'm sure she's out there somewhere."

"She's not out there. She's sitting in front of me."

Lenie dropped her hands. "Oh, Mac. Please don't make this harder than it should be."

"I'm going to make this as hard as I can. I'm not giving up."

Lenie stood and walked to her door. "I know, but I am." She held out Mac's jacket. "I'm sorry you wasted money on a trip here."

Mac took her jacket but hesitated at the door. "I'm not leaving, Lenie. I'll be back. I'm not done."

"Yes, you are. Please, Mac, just go."

"I'll see you later," Mac said and headed out into the rain and wind.

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Bright sunshine and cold wind replaced the rain. Mac took a walk, not mindful of temperature. She needed to think and managed to find her way to the Rembrandt Park. She followed the path until she found a bench in the sun and sat down. The jet lag kept her from having a clear head so she leaned back and closed her eyes, turning her face to the warmth of the sun.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but her stomach rumbled its complaint of being too empty, so she got up. The day felt peaceful enough, although Mac hadn't come any closer to figuring out what she needed to do other than deciding she wanted to see Lenie again.

"I thought I might find you here."

Mac was surprised to find Lenie standing beside the bench. "You did?"

"It's a great place to think."

"Yep." Mac glanced around, glad that the park sat fairly empty. "I didn't come all this way to fight with you. I came here to fight for you. I love you, and I'm not ready to give up on us."

"I can see that. I'm sorry that I've hurt you. That was never what I wanted to do. Not ever. I can't do this, and I don't know how better to explain it."

"I need you to explain it. I need to understand why you don't want me in your life." Mac shivered as the wind picked up. Lenie didn't appear to notice it.

"I don't know that I can," Lenie said.

"You're not even going to try." Mac's heart sank. "After all we've been through, don't you think I deserve more than this?"

"You deserve a lot more than I can ever give you." Lenie smiled sadly. "Go back to Ohio, Mac. Please."

She couldn't move. Her legs felt like they were made of concrete. Lenie looked right at her, or perhaps through her. Mac wasn't sure. The one thing she could be certain of—the emptiness she felt in that moment. She wanted to

curl up on the ground and let the cold freeze her to death. The only other time she'd felt this helpless was when she watched Kristy take her last breath. It felt impossible to survive the pain of that day. With Lenie at her side, she'd done it. Together they moved past the loss of Kristy to begin to build a new life. Or so she'd thought.

"Mac, did you hear me?" Lenie's voice brought her out of her musings. "Are you all right?"

Mac found her voice and her anger. "Of course I'm not all right. You're breaking my heart. How the hell could I be all right?"

"Please. Don't make this—"

"Don't make it what? Difficult? Hard? Look me in the eyes, and tell me you don't love me." She waited, but Lenie said nothing. "You can't because it's not true. I know you still love me."

Lenie tried to speak several times, but no words came out.

"I'd tell you to have a nice life, but I'm having trouble getting that out. I'm too pissed off, hurt, depressed—whatever the hell you want to call it." Mac brushed past Lenie and stopped. "I will always love you," she said and hastened out of the park and back to her hotel.

## Chapter Seventeen

Mac slammed the door to her hotel room and paced. She'd cried during most of the walk back, and now the hurt became anger. Did Lenie honestly expect her to accept the end of their relationship, give up and fly back to the US? After all they'd been through, to give up so easily?

Mac felt rage rising and realized she couldn't stay at the hotel a moment longer. She had no idea what would happen or what she'd say, but she knew she had to go to Lenie's again. She was not about to give up on her.

Twenty minutes later, she knocked on Lenie's door. For a few seconds, Mac felt unsure of what to do or if she'd made the right decision. Then the door opened and she looked into a miserable, tear-stained face. The urge to wrap her arms around Lenie was strong. Puffy, red eyes stared at her in shock.

"We need to talk," Mac said, finding her voice.

"I thought—I thought you left."

"Is that what you want?" Mac shivered in the cold wind but made no move to go inside.

"Please. Don't do this."

"Do what? Fight for you? For us? Because that's exactly what I intend to do. I love you and I don't believe for one second you don't love me."

"Love isn't the issue." Lenie took a deep, shaky breath. "We live in different worlds."

"Stop making excuses, Lenie. Tell me the truth. Tell me what has happened that you suddenly don't want to be with me. I need to know why. It's the least you can do."

"I—everyone I love—everyone I've ever loved is gone. I can't go through that again. I'm not strong enough. I can't bear watching you die, too. It would kill me."

Mac tried to speak several times but couldn't. It clearly wasn't what she expected. "I'm not dying," she said softly. "I don't understand."

"I'm better off alone, Mac. If we part now, at least I'll know you're safe and alive and that eventually you'll move on. You'll be fine, Mac. You're a special woman, and I know you'll find someone else."

"But I don't want someone else. I want you. I've never been so sure of anything in my life. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"I'm sorry." Lenie went to close the door, but Mac stopped her. "Please..."

The pain in that one word ripped Mac's heart apart, and she moved so Lenie could close the door.

She stood there for a few minutes. The rain poured and Mac found her feet. Shoulders hunched forward, she walked back to her hotel, too numb to think.

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Mac spent the next two days in her hotel room, only leaving to eat, even though she didn't have much of an appetite. Jace called and e-mailed a few times, but she didn't want to talk. She didn't feel like getting up, but her flight would be leaving in a few hours and there wasn't much left for her in Amsterdam.

She headed toward the train station, but then she realized she had one thing left to do. Within a few minutes, Mac stood on the stoop to Lenie's house.

"Mac?" Lenie said and stared in obvious disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't leave without saying goodbye. If you ever want to contact me, you know how. I'll always be there." Mac leaned forward, gently kissed Lenie's lips, and turned away. She took the steps off the stoop, and heard the door close. It felt like a knife going into her heart.

"You need to go back to America."

Mac looked behind her to find Frieda standing there, hands on her hips. "I am. But if you're planning to bother Lenie, I suggest you walk away."

"Who are you to talk to me? Lenie wants you not. You hear her?"

"She doesn't want you, either." Mac set her bag down and stomped to where she stood inches from Frieda's face. "I have enough respect for Lenie to walk away when she asks me to. But I don't have any respect for you, nor do I have a problem kicking your ass if you don't stop bothering her."

Frieda straightened to her full height, but was still not as tall as Mac. "Lenie loves me, not you. I shall remind her of that."

“No. You intend to stalk her. You don’t respect her, and you sure as hell don’t love her. You don’t treat someone you love this way.” Mac grabbed the front of Frieda’s shirt and twisted the fabric in her fist, pulling her closer. “Go, before I make it so you can’t walk.” She released Frieda and shoved her hard enough Frieda stumbled.

She glared at Mac but wasn’t brave enough to continue. Without a word, Frieda spun on her heel and left. Mac retrieved her bag and headed for the train station, not allowing herself to look back.

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The flight home was uneventful. Mac took over-the-counter medicine to help her sleep, and when she arrived at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Airport, she felt groggy and still wiped out. At least physically. She retrieved the car from the parking lot and immediately went home. She pulled in and parked beside Jace’s car at ten that night. Mac went straight to her room, deposited the bag on the floor, and flopped onto the bed. Her stomach rumbled a bit, but she was too tired to move.

“Hey. I thought I heard you come in.” Jace sat next to her. “I thought you were going to call before you left Amsterdam.”

“I didn’t think of it. Sorry.” Mac sat up but didn’t look at him. “I didn’t have anything to say.” Her shoulders slumped forward as she fought back tears.

Jace rested his hand on the small of her back. “You went all the way over there, and she still broke up with you? What is wrong with her?”

Mac shook her head. “She’s afraid. Losing Kristy hit her harder than I imagined. Lenie can’t deal with another death, so instead of giving our relationship a try, she dumped me. Like she’s better off being alone than being loved.”

“That’s crazy. I’m going to call her—”

“No. Leave her alone.”

“But someone needs to tell her this is wrong. She can’t do this to you.”

“Jace, it’s over between Lenie and me. There’s nothing you or me can do about it. I tried. Believe me, I tried.”

“Maybe I can talk some sense into her.”

Mac cupped his cheek, surprised to find tears there. “You’re a good man, and I love that you want to fight for me, but you can’t. This is something she’s going to have to get through herself.” She stopped him when he wanted to interrupt. “I told her she could contact me anytime. I have to hope she does—when she’s ready.”

“And how long will that be?”

“It’s not that simple.” She wiped his cheeks and kissed him on the forehead. “I need to get some sleep. We can talk more in the morning, okay?”

“Sure.” He stood but hesitated before leaving her room. “Mac, are you sure I can’t contact her?”

“Of course you can. I suspect she’d like to be friends with you, promise you won’t get on her case about me, okay?”

“I promise to try.”

“Good enough.” Mac waited for him to close her door before curling up on her bed and crying herself to sleep.

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Mac went to work the next morning, despite Jace’s repeated attempts to keep her home. He insisted she needed rest. She insisted she needed to work. Cindy greeted her with a cup of fresh coffee and a compassionate expression that told Mac Jace spread the word about Lenie.

“Did he call you as soon as I told him?” Mac asked.

“Pretty much. He was upset. Of course, after we talked I called Steph. She’s pissed.”

Mac resisted the urge to roll her eyes as they walked to her office. “Lenie has the right to do what she thinks is best for her. Am I really the only one here not pissed off?”

“Yes,” Cindy said, leaning on the doorframe as Mac settled behind her desk. “You are the kindest, most forgiving person I’ve ever met. But aren’t you a little pissed off? This is just—dammit, Mac. I thought she was right for you.”

“So did I, but Lenie doesn’t. And yes, I was pissed off at first. I yelled a little, cried a lot, went to her house three times and talked to her once in the park, but she was firm on her decision. I don’t understand it, but there you go. We said our goodbyes, and I came home.”

"You're leaving all the details out."

"Some, maybe. But that's the gist of it. There's nothing I can do. You know that old saying? Something about if you let it go and it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was? That's how I feel right now. I've let Lenie go. I'm praying she comes back."

Cindy let out a big sigh and took a sip of her coffee. "The patience of Job, my friend. You've got the patience of Job."

"Maybe. I wish I had his faith."

"Help her," Cindy said, looking upwards. "She needs you."

Mac gave a short laugh. "I don't ever think I've seen you pray."

"Oh, that wasn't a prayer. That went to Kristy. I know she's up there watching out for you, and you need her help. Maybe she'll even come back as your fairy godmother."

That made Mac giggle. "She'd be good at it, too. If she shows up, I'll let you know."

"Deal. Now call Steph. She wants to talk to you and not just about your love life. She's got a thirteen-year-old girl who might need emergency placement. She called about a half hour before you got here."

"Done." Mac picked up the phone and dialed Steph's number.

An hour later, Steph showed up with the young girl in tow. Her name was Anna, and the bruises on her face pained Mac. She held out her hand. "I'm Mac. It's nice to meet you."

Anna narrowed her soft green eyes at Mac before accepting her hand and shaking it. "Mac's a boy's name, but you look like a girl."

"It's short for Mackenzie."

"That's a weird name."

Mac shrugged. "I think my mom thought it was unique. There's not a lot of Mackenzie's in the world. I got to be the only one in my whole school."

"There are six Anna's and two Ann's in mine. I'm not anything special."

"Oh, I doubt that. Do any of them have curly red hair?" Anna shook her head. "Do any of them have pretty green eyes?"

Anna gave Mac another suspicious look. "Don't know. I never checked."

"Hmm. I kinda doubt it. Anyway, welcome to the Over-the-Rhine Community Center. Do you have any school work to do?"

"Yeah. Miss Day made a stop at the principal's office before we left the school."

Mac leaned close to Anna and whispered, "Well, she can be kinda mean. How about I show you where you can relax and play video games? I have to be here until five, then we can go to my house and have dinner. My roommate Jace is staying with friends for a few days, so it's you and me. I've got a third bedroom that you can have."

"Jace? You people got weirdo names."

"Who's a weirdo?" Jace entered the reception area sporting a wide smile. "If you're talking about me, then cool. I am pretty weird." He stuck out his hand to Anna. "I'm Jace. The dude giving you two some quiet time together. And no, you can't go into my room."

"I'm Anna, and why would I go into your room? Do you know where the room is with the video games?"

"Yep. Heading there now. C'mon." Jace chatted with Anna as he led her to the game room.

Steph was clearly relieved. "I never know how you do it, but that's the most she's talked all day."

Mac and Steph headed for her office. Once the door closed, she asked, "What happened to her? Parents?"

"Her mother's an alcoholic. After a three-day bender, she came home and found Anna watching TV instead of cleaning the house. Let's just say there wasn't a lot a kid could do to make the place livable. Her mom beat her, but since it happened on a Friday, no one noticed until today when she showed up at school with bruises. There's more on her thighs where her mother used a belt."

"I hope the bitch is in jail."

"She is, but you know she'll end up out in a few days. Jail's overcrowded. Anyway, I have a family who wants to take Anna in, but they're on vacation and can't get back until Thursday. I'm glad you're home now, even if the trip didn't go so well for you."

"Me, too. At least here I feel like I can be of use. I'll let Jace hang out with Anna for a while. Is there anything else I need to know about her?"

"Just that if I have my way, she'll never go back to her mother again."

"I hear ya," Mac said.

Steph looked at her quizzically for a moment.

"What?" Mac asked.



“I don’t think I’ve ever known you to not argue with me about how the system failed her, or that we should be able to help her get her life together after she’s eighteen...”

“If you have a family for her, then she’ll be okay. But you’re right. I would denounce the system and that the abuse should have been discovered sooner as obviously she’s been getting beaten for a long time. I know the various stages of healing bruises. This was the most recent of beatings. I’m sure it’s been happening most of her young life.”

“Now there’s the Mac I know and love. Keep that passion, my dear friend. Lenie has no clue what she’s losing out on,” Steph said. “Trust me. I know exactly what she’s missing. I’m happy with Heather, but I pissed away the chance at a relationship with the best woman I’ve ever known.”

Mac managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Steph. Now get out of here. I got work to do. Call me when that family gets home.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Ann brought a small duffel bag with her, one set of clothes and her school books shoved inside. Before leaving the OTR, Mac took Anna to their new supply room, where Heather and Cindy sorted out clothes, shoes, school supplies, and anything else a kid might need, whether the kid was four or nineteen. The room used to be four offices and belonged to the second-floor project Jace began during the summer. It was made to look like a small department store.

“You’re going to need more clothes.” Mac glanced down at Anna’s feet. “And a new pair of shoes.”

Anna stood in the doorway, clearly trying to take in the size of the room as well as the contents. “Shoes? Really? I never had new shoes ever.”

“I’m not surprised. Shoes are over here on the left.”

“Wait. I don’t got money. I can’t buy nothin’ in this store.”

“It’s not a real store, and it’s all free. We made it look like a store so it’s easier to find stuff.”

“Free?” Anna gave her that suspicious look again. “Nothing is free.”

“This is. I promise.” Mac nudged her along. “We get donations all the time. A lot of it is new, but some used. You won’t really know the difference. Now, shoes.”

Anna followed along, cautious at first, but by the time they were finished, she’d found tennis shoes, three outfits, a dozen socks, underwear, a Cincinnati Bengals hat, and two books. Mac made note that she’d chosen *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *The Lightning Thief (Percy Jackson and the Olympians #1)* by Rick Riordan.

“You like fantasy stuff?” Mac asked.

Anna shrugged. “I saw commercials for the movies. Thought they’d be kinda cool to read.”

“The books are always way better than the movies.”

“You’ve read the books?”

“Sure. I love to read. I finished the last Hunger Games book a couple weeks ago. The series gets better as it goes along.”

“Cool,” Anna said. “Can I have one more book?”

“Of course,” Mac said, as a smile crossed her face. Anna chose *The Bible*. She smiled because Kristy gifted their entire supply in her will. Maybe she was watching over them. “You need anything for school?”

“Bunches of stuff.” Anna put the books in her new duffel bag. “Can I get a new backpack? I don’t have anything good to carry my stuff.”

“No problem.” Mac led her to the school supplies and waited patiently as Anna chose one of everything. “Do you like school?”

“It’s the best part of the day. I got some cool teachers. Miss Renee always makes sure I have enough paper for my Spanish homework. Mr. Williams gave me some new pens last week when mine ran out of ink.”

“They sound cool. If you find out you need something else, I’ll make sure you get it. Okay?”

“Are you going to be my new mom?”

Mac was surprised by the question and paused before replying. “Um, Miss Day has the Anson family set up to take you in. I’m sort of a short stop along the way. It’s kind of complicated, but it’s not up to me if you get to stay.”

“Who’s it up to? I like you and I don’t want a new family.”

“Anna, you’ve known me a few hours, but I’m glad you like me. That’s important.”

“Then let me stay with you. I’m little. I don’t take up much room.”

Mac put an arm around her shoulders and guided her out of the supply area. “Let’s get you settled at my house, and then we’ll see what we can do.”

“Can I sleep on the couch?” Anna asked.

“I guess so, but I think the bed might be more comfy.”

“I get a bed?”

The question stopped Mac in her tracks. “Of course you do. I have a room set up for kids who might stay awhile. It’s got a nice bed, shelves, a closet, and a desk. I put my old laptop in there in case you need it for school.”

“That’s awesome. Do I get a whole room with the Anson’s when they get home?”

“I’m sure you will.”

“I hope so.”

“Me, too.”

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That evening, Mac ordered a pizza and she and Anna sat down to watch *The Hunger Games*. Mac had hoped Anna would be ready for bed when it finished, but instead, the movie had energized her. She chatted about the movie as they cleaned up after dinner, while Mac helped her get ready for bed, and even after Anna got under the covers.

“That was the best movie ever. Can we watch it again tomorrow night?”

Mac tried not to laugh. “If you get your homework done.”

“I will. I promise.” She sat up, leaning against the headboard. “Is my mom going to be in jail forever?”

The question stunned Mac. She’d forgotten how easily kids can change topics in conversation. “I don’t know. She did some bad things.”

“I know. She drinks all the time and hits me if I don’t do what she thinks I’m supposed to. I never know what that even is. I don’t understand why she doesn’t love me. I never did anything I wasn’t supposed to.”

Mac settled beside her on the bed. “I don’t know if your mom loves you or not, Anna. I hope someday you’ll get to see her again and ask her yourself. What she did to you was wrong. Parents shouldn’t hit their kids. I know she’s been doing it for a long time, but I want you to know that you did nothing wrong. Nobody deserves to be beaten.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure. Look, think of staying here like a little vacation. Your job is to go to school, do the best you can, and make sure your homework is done every day. I’ll do the rest. Deal?”

Anna hesitated and stared down at her hands as she worried the blanket. “I do pretty good in school. Mostly B’s, but sometimes I get A’s.”

“That’s awesome. You must be pretty darn smart.”

Anna shrugged. “I guess.”

“Hey.” Mac put her finger under Anna’s chin and tipped her face up so she could look at her. “You’re thirteen years old. From now on, you worry about school and whether or not that cute boy in your class likes you or if you like him.” Anna blushed, and it made Mac smile. “That’s it. It’ll be the same with the Anson’s. Maybe they’ll ask you to keep your room clean and maybe take the trash out—little stuff like that. But I promise it’ll be a good thing.”

“How do you know? What if they’re like my mom?”

“They won’t be. Miss Day wouldn’t let you stay with them if they were. It’ll be good. You’ll see.”

“Will I get a new family every few months?”

“I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

“A boy in my class, Denny, he says that after his dad got put in jail he’s been with fifteen families. He says that happens when you’re in the system. You get bumped around all the time, ’cause sometimes the family can’t keep you, or their real kids don’t like you.”

“I would say that Denny is an exception. I know that sometimes it’s possible you’ll be with a family who can keep you for a little while, sort of like me. But Miss Day thinks the Ansons are someone you can stay with and not have to move away from.”

“Will I get a dad? I never had a dad.”

“With the Anson’s, yes. There’s a mom and a dad.”

“But I can’t stay with you?”

Mac saw the inevitable in her eyes. She expected disappointment before Mac ever answered the question. “Right now, no. But that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. We’ll have fun while you’re here, okay?”

“I guess so.”

Mac gave her a hug. “Best thing to do right now is sleep. Stuff always feels better in the morning.”

Anna yawned and slipped under the covers. “Kay. G’night.”

Mac tucked her in and stood back to watch as she fell asleep. She switched out the light and went to her own bedroom.

A photo of Mac and Kristy in Paris hung on the wall next to one of Lenie and Mac in Amsterdam. Beside them was one of Jace in his graduation gown, Mac and Kristy on either side of him. They were her family, and right then Mac felt completely alone.

There were still times when she reached for her cell phone to call Kristy, or expected her to barge into her office at the OTR with a bag of fast food for lunch. She’d even caught herself driving toward Kristy’s apartment after work, wondering what Kristy might have in mind for dinner.

Kristy’s absence loomed larger than Mac could have ever anticipated. It all seemed easier somehow knowing she could rely on Lenie. The word bearable came to mind. Without Lenie, nothing seemed bearable.

On top of it was the thought of letting Anna go in a few days. It made no sense to Mac, but in a matter of hours, Anna had become important to her.

Mac flopped onto her bed, fully dressed, and curled into a ball around one of her pillows. Life had never been easy, but why did it have to be so hard? And at what point did Mac get chosen to do it all alone?

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Mac enjoyed her three days with Anna. When it came time to drive her to the Anson's, she didn't want to. Over the years, Mac fostered a few dozen kids, most of them for less than a week, and none managed to worm their way into her heart like Anna did, perhaps because of the hole Lenie left or the fact that with Jace gone most of the time she felt alone.

More likely, it was that long-repressed desire to have children. Part of the reason she'd opened the OTR was due to her love of children. Like Kristy, Mac always wanted her own family, but it took a backseat to her career.

Anna stood beside the door, shuffling her feet and staring at the duffel bag that Mac knew was jam-packed with everything Anna acquired in the last seventy-two hours. Her shoulders were hunched forward as she tried to hide her tears.

"Hey. You ready?" Mac asked.

"I guess so," Anna said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Okay." Mac picked up the bag and opened the door, following Anna to the car. The drive to the Anson's took all of twenty minutes, most of it done in silence. Anna got out before Mac came to a full stop. Mac jumped out and stopped her. "Hey, you're not leaving without saying goodbye are you?"

"Who cares? I'm going to live here now."

"I care." Mac squatted down so she had to look up a little to see Anna's face. Her expression broke Mac's heart. "Hey," she said quietly, "why don't we make a deal? You stay with the Ansons for a while. If you don't like it, you call Miss Day and I'll work it out so you can come stay with me again."

"Permanently?" Her eyes brightened a little.

"I'll do what I can, but you have to give the Ansons a try first. I know this whole situation sucks."

"It sure does. I liked living with you."

"I know. Like I said, you give the Ansons a shot. If it doesn't work out, I'll be right here. Okay?"

"Can I call you anyway? I mean, even if I like it here?"

Mac gave her a crooked grin. "You bet. I put my business card in your duffel bag. It's got my house number and my cell phone. You need me, you call."

Anna threw her arms around Mac's neck, nearly squeezing the life out of her. "Thanks, Mac."

"Anytime." Mac retrieved the duffel bag and escorted Anna to her new home.

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Steph waited in the parking lot of the OTR for Mac the following Monday. Mac couldn't recall Steph ever being there to greet her. Not even when they were dating. She locked her car and met Steph at the door. "To what do I owe the honor of such an early visit?"

"I'm here to kick your ass."

"Oh, well, let's go inside so you can do that in private."

They went to Mac's office, and Steph closed the door behind them. She waited until Mac sat down. "Okay, so you told Anna she could come live with you?"

"Um, not exactly." Mac felt like a little kid being yelled at by the principal. It'd always been that way with Steph. She explained her conversation with Anna. "I was trying to make her feel better. She worried the Ansons would be a short stop to another dozen homes. And yes, if it doesn't work out there, I told her she could come live with me." She met Steph's gaze openly. "I meant it."

"I know. I'm worried that you might have to follow through."

"Why? What happened?" The last call she'd gotten from Anna made it sound like everything was going well.

“Nothing happened, but Anna’s not responding to them. She goes to school, comes home, and goes to her room. She stays there until dinner, then back to her room. She doesn’t talk to them, and she doesn’t even acknowledge their daughter, who’s a year older than Anna. It’s like she’s afraid to speak to them.”

“She probably is. There’s a kid in her class who’s had serious issues in the foster system, and he’s got her all freaked out. I think she’s glad to be away from her mom and that horrible apartment, but at the same time, she’s terrified she’ll be bounced around.”

“Can you talk to her?” Steph asked. “Get her to give the Ansons a chance? They’ve been a foster family for ten years, and they want to find a child to adopt. Anna has a good chance for that to happen.”

Mac felt a little disappointed. A part of her hoped things wouldn’t work out. A major part of her wanted to be the one to adopt Anna. Yet reality stared her in the face. It would probably be best for Anna to have two parents and a sibling.

“I’ll go over there later today and talk to her.”

Steph stared at Mac and it made Mac nervous. “You don’t sound too enthusiastic. You’re usually ready to take off and get it done. What’s wrong?”

“Feeling down.” She met Steph’s worried gaze. “And alone. I briefly entertained the idea of adopting Anna. I mean, Jace is gone more than he’s home and that’s how it should be. He’s a young man finding his way. But I get so damn lonely...”

“Call her.”

“No. I’d rather go over to the Ansons—”

“No. Not Anna. Lenie. Call her and tell her how you’re feeling. It’s been long enough.”

“It’s only been a week.”

“That’s long enough,” Steph said.

“I don’t think it’s going to matter. If she wants me, she’ll call. I have to let her be.”

“For how long?”

Mac shrugged. “As long as it takes. Look, I’m sure I’ll be ready to move on eventually. It’s all so close to Kristy dying. Give me time.”

“Call if you need anything. We’re still friends.” Steph leaned across the desk. “I’m serious. Call me.”

“Yes, dear,” Mac said. “In the meantime, I’ll go see Anna and report back to you tomorrow morning. Deal?”

“Deal.”

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Mac visited Anna the next day. The moment she pulled into the driveway, Anna shot out the door and ran into her arms. Mac held her tightly, looking at Mrs. Anson in confusion.

“She refused to eat dinner, saying she would wait for you to get here,” Mrs. Anson said. “I think we need to talk.”

“Me, too.” Mac let go of the girl, but kept an arm around her. “Why don’t you go inside for a few minutes? I’ll be right here. Okay?”

Anna nodded and went into the house. Mrs. Anson joined Mac. “She won’t stop talking about you.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No.” Mrs. Anson held her hand up to stop Mac. “Don’t apologize. That child worships you. She keeps saying that you’re going to come here and take her back.” Mrs. Anson looked sad but smiled at Mac. “I know you’re an emergency foster parent, but I think you should consider taking Anna permanently, or at least until the courts can decide what’s going to happen to her.”

“I don’t know—I’ve never fostered longer than a few days.” Mac felt relief and panic at the same time. “I still have Jace at home. He’s not a foster kid, technically, but would that even be appropriate? I mean, he’s eighteen and in college...”

Mrs. Anson laughed. “Miss Day told me you’re her best emergency foster parent. I have a feeling she’d like this idea. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a child take to someone so fast and so strongly. But taken to you she has, and I don’t believe Anna will be happy here. She needs you.”

Mac took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I would be happy to have her. I’m sorry it didn’t work out for you.”

Mrs. Anson patted her on the shoulder. “I’m happy it’s going to work out for Anna.”



## Chapter Nineteen

Two months later, Anna had not only settled into life with Mac and Jace, she'd embraced it. Mac still worried what would happen should Anna's mother be released from jail and want her back and whether the courts would allowed that to happen. Not unheard of, but it scared Mac.

She decided to take a break from work and give Steph a call to find out what she could about Anna's situation.

"So, tell me some good news," she said when she reached her.

"Wish I could," Steph said. "She hasn't signed away her rights to Anna. I tried to reach her court-appointed attorney, but you know how busy they are. I'm expecting I'll hear from him next week."

"I want to keep her, Steph."

"You will. I've approved you as her foster parent."

"No, you don't understand. I want to adopt her as soon as that's possible. Anna needs a permanent home and family. She needs stability, and I need her." Mac hesitated, half expecting Steph to talk her out of her decision. "I can hardly believe I'm saying it, but I need a family as much as she does."

"I'm not surprised at all. You've always been the family type. And when I saw you with Anna last week, I knew. It's my job to know these things."

"Of course. I should have realized. You don't think I'm making a mistake?"

"If I did, I wouldn't have left Anna with you. I'm happy for you. I think she came into your life at the right time. I have to go on another home visit in a few minutes. You good?"

"I am. Thanks, Steph." Mac hung up and was about to call Cindy into her office to share the good news when there was a knock at her door. It creaked open, and the woman behind it caused Mac to suck in a breath. Her knees weakened and if she hadn't been seated she might have fallen over.

"Hello, Mac," Lenie said, not moving from the doorway.

"Hello." It sounded lame, but Mac didn't know what to say, or feel for that matter.

"May I come in?"

"Sure." Mac waited while Lenie removed her coat and settled in one of the chairs. She looked thinner, paler than Mac remembered.

"How are you?" Lenie asked, leaning back and crossing her legs. She wore tight-fitting jeans, and Mac felt a tiny thrill in the pit of her stomach.

"Miserable," Mac said, staring into Lenie's eyes. "You broke my heart. How am I supposed to be?"

"I'm sorry," Lenie said, her voice quavering. "I know I hurt you—"

"Do you?" Anger bubbled up, and Mac chose not to suppress it. "Do you have any idea what you've done to me? I trusted you. Put my faith in you, and without warning, you shoved me away."

Tears streamed down Lenie's face, and Mac fought the urge to go to her.

"Mac—"

"No. My turn to talk. I have never loved anyone as much as I love you. I can't explain what it's been like these past couple of months. I feel so out of control and empty inside. I don't know if I should move on, try to call you, give up...and now you're here. Sitting in front of me. What am I supposed to do with that?"

Lenie shook but kept eye contact with Mac. "I have always loved you. I tried to explain that, but it didn't work. I know none of this makes sense to you, but I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of us. Of you. It's all so—I don't know. I'm afraid if I give you my heart it won't be enough and you'll leave me."

"So you left me instead?" Mac asked. "Are you here to break up with me again? Trust me, you don't need to. I got the point the first time."

"No. That's not it at all. I'm here to talk."

"You didn't need to fly four thousand miles to talk."

"Yes, I did." Lenie dried her cheeks with a hankie. "I needed to see you in person. You deserve to hear this in person."

Mac crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair. Tears threatened, but she managed to hold them back. "Go on."

The misery in Lenie's eyes was obvious. "I've been miserable, too. I don't—can't live without you, no matter the consequences."

"I can't just jump into your arms like everything's okay. You broke my trust, Lenie. I can forgive you, but I don't know if I can take you back."

Lenie looked at her hands. "You're right, and I don't know if we can get past that, but I'm here to try." She stood up and put her coat back on. "I should go."

Mac got to her feet and moved to Lenie's side. She reached out to her but drew her hand back. "Don't go."

"You need time. I can see that." Lenie faced her, and Mac thought she saw regret in her eyes.

"You can't pop in here and then take off."

Lenie placed a card on Mac's desk. "That's my hotel information." She smiled wanly. "I never thought I'd be able to let anyone into my heart again. But the first time I saw you, I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I would love you forever." Lenie brushed her fingers along Mac's cheek, then turned and walked away.

Mac's knees gave out, and she collapsed in the nearest chair, placing her fingers where Lenie touched her.

"Was that who I think it was?" Cindy entered the office and sat opposite Mac. "Did she—was she here to..."

"Yeah, it was her. No, we're not back together." Mac shook her head as if to clear it. "I don't know what we are. She came here to talk to me in person. She said she loves me—that she wants me back."

Cindy kept quiet so long that Mac wondered if she would even respond. "What did you tell her?"

"That I don't know if I can take her back. I feel more lost now than I did before she showed up." Mac leaned forward, resting her forearms on her thighs "I was talking to Steph a bit ago. She's going to let me know the minute Anna's mother either signs over custody or gets released. Either way, I'm going to fight to keep Anna." She looked up enough to meet Cindy's gaze. "I want her to be my daughter. I need her in my life."

"And it will happen," Cindy said. "I'm sure of it. If that woman has any sense, she'll sign Anna over to you. If not, I'm sure you can beat her in court. I'll be there to help you."

"Thanks. So, that was the good news for the day. But what do I do about Lenie?"

"I wish I could tell you, but you're going to have to figure that out for yourself. I suggest you let Jace know she's here. It wouldn't be pretty if he finds out on his own."

"I'll call and ask him to come straight home after class tonight." Mac scrubbed her face with her hands and stood. "For now, back to work. I'll have to deal with life soon enough."

Cindy gave her a brief hug. "Good luck with that."

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"When did she get here?" Jace asked as soon as Mac told him about Lenie. "Did she at least call you first? I've e-mailed her a million times and never got a single response. How can she show up like this?"

"I have a feeling she didn't think it through much. She looked thinner, worn out. Maybe she got in today. I didn't ask."

"It's wrong. It's just wrong," Jace said and paced. "I'm glad Anna had her reading club after school today. I don't want her to hear all this."

"She's going to have to be told, Jace. If I do take Lenie—"

"Big if."

"If I take her back," Mac continued, "then she's going to be part of Anna's life, too."

"I don't think you should take her back. Not now. You've just started getting your life on track." He paused a beat. "We got past Kristy's dying and then Lenie breaks your heart—but now Anna is here, and it feels like you're back to being the woman who took me in and straightened my life out. I'm not going to let Lenie ruin things for you."

"You're a sweet man, Jace, but it's my decision. Not yours. I needed to let you know she's here in case she comes to the house. I'm going to have to talk to her again, and it's not going to be easy. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Jace stopped pacing. "How do you get over what she did?"

"I won't. Not completely, but I still love her. I felt that same love from her today as if we'd never been apart. I can't explain it. We're better together."

"Is she going to move here? She's going to have to move here. You can't go live in Europe. Not with Anna in the picture now."



Mac stared at him, pleased that the kid she used to know could be so protective of his new family. He'd grown so much in the past year, and he made her proud. "I know. I don't plan to move, and she's going to have to accept that."

"If she does—if she comes to live here in the US—will you take her back?"

Mac sighed. "Maybe. Jace, I don't know. I think I need time on this one. But I promise to tell you once I've made up my mind. Though I don't think you'll be the first to know."

"Just be careful, please."

Mac saw the concern in his eyes, and it touched her heart.

Jace said, "I'm going to get Anna. I'll be back in a little while."

"Okay." Mac leaned against the kitchen counter and watched him go. Her happy little family got turned upside down before they'd been given a chance to get settled in. Was it even fair of her to bring Lenie into this mix now? Would Lenie want to be a mother? They'd never talked about it.

Mac felt more confused than ever. No matter what she decided, it needed to be right for all of them. Even if it meant she'd be spending the rest of her life alone.

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Mac didn't sleep that night. Her brain couldn't stop trying to digest what happened in the space of a few days. She'd made the decision to adopt a child, and out of nowhere, Lenie shows up wanting to patch things up between them. Mac had been prepared to move on. Now she didn't know what to do.

One thing was certain. Regardless of what she did, she had to consider Anna. Mac made a commitment and refused to go back on it. Despite the early hour, she called Lenie at her hotel. Lenie picked up on the first ring.

"Look, I'll make this short. Well, as short as I can," Mac said. Lenie kept silent, so she continued. "I have a kid I'm fostering right now, and there's a chance I'll be able to adopt her. Her name is Anna."

"Really?"

"Yes. She needs me, and I won't go back on my deal with her. Anyway, whatever I decide to do concerning us, has to take her into consideration."

Mac waited and after a few tense moments, Lenie said, "I understand. Of course Anna must come first. Do you think I can meet her?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think it'd be fair to her if she meets you and then it doesn't work between us."

Mac thought she heard Lenie crying. "Yes. That's sensible. Can I see you today? Perhaps for lunch?"

"I think that's a good idea. We need to talk. I'll call you, okay?"

"All right."

Mac took a quick shower and met Jace and Anna at the kitchen table. "So, what's for breakfast?"

"Eggs and bacon," Jace said.

"With toast," Anna added, holding up bread. "Jace said, if it's okay with you, he'll teach me to cook."

"Of course it's okay with me. I'll like having someone else cook for me." Mac ducked when Jace playfully swung a spatula at her head. "So, have you heard from your girlfriend?"

Jace squinted his eyes at Mac. "Have you heard from yours?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"We're having lunch."

Jace's expression showed his skepticism. "You need to take it slow. Don't go rushing back to her."

"I don't intend to, Dear Abby, but thanks for the advice."

Anna stared at Mac, her arms folded across her chest. "You've got a girlfriend?"

"Yes." Mac waited, hoping this would go well. "I'm a lesbian. Have been my whole life."

"I heard that's a sin."

Mac shrugged. "Depends on who you talk to. But that's not for me or you to decide. That's up to God."

"Maybe. Who's your girlfriend?"

"Lenie. She's from The Netherlands."

"The what?" Anna asked.

Mac looked briefly at Jace, but he held up his hands to make sure she knew she was on her own. "It's a country in Europe. I'll show you where it is tonight. Right now you need to eat so you aren't late for school."

"Do you love Lenie more than me?"

Anna's directness shocked Mac. She saw the same reaction on Jace's face. "No. I don't love anyone more than anyone else. My love for you and Jace is different than the love I have for Lenie."

"So is she going to live here?"

"I don't know."

"If she does, do I have to give her my room?"

Jace put his arm around Anna, his smile kind and his voice soft. "They'd share a room. Like if Lenie was a boy."

"So they'd be married?"

"Sort of," he said.

Anna looked to be contemplating all the information. "I don't know if I like that."

"It's okay," Mac said, pushing a plate of food toward her. "We'll talk more later. What's most important is that you eat. Breakfast is the one meal you're not allowed to skip."

"Yes, ma'am." Anna stopped her questioning and ate her food. Mac knew then the questions would not be over anytime soon.

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Mac spent the morning in her office, locked away from everyone. As usual, Cindy covered for her, giving Mac the much-needed time to think. When Lenie arrived around noon, Mac made her decision.

"Hi," Mac said and let her into the office.

Lenie sat down but didn't remove her coat. "I'm sorry, Mac, but I cannot stay long. Baan has booked a flight to Toronto that leaves in four hours. He wouldn't make me go if it was—"

"It's okay. You have to work."

Mac settled in the chair across from Lenie, both seated in front of Mac's desk. They were so close their knees nearly touched.

Mac said, "I'm going to get straight to the point. I love you with all my heart, and I don't see that changing. But I don't know about us. I don't know if I can trust you."

"I love you, too. I thought it would be enough."

"Not right now." Mac straightened up, her resolve crumbling at the sight of Lenie's tears. "I have Anna to think of. That changes everything."

"Please, Mac. I need you."

"I needed you, too. But you turned me away." Mac handed her a box of tissues, trying hard to keep some distance between them. "I thought you were gone from my life after you broke my heart. That's not easy to come back from."

"Tell me what to do." Lenie's voice shook, as did her hands. "I do not want to live without you."

"I don't want to be without you either, but you're going to have to give me time. I have to think about all this. It's too much too fast."

Lenie stood suddenly, and Mac blocked the door. "I can't—I..." She collapsed into Mac's arms, her sobs wrenching Mac's heart.

"I love you, Lenie. Please understand. That's not the problem." Mac rubbed small circles along her back, trying to calm her. "I need time."

"I do understand." Lenie pulled back, allowing Mac to wipe the tears from her face. "I hate that I must leave."

"Me, too." Mac leaned closer and pressed her lips to Lenie's. "I promise we'll talk soon. Call me when you get to Toronto."

"Are you sure? I thought you would need me to stay away."

"We need to keep communicating. I've got you back in my life. There's no way I'm letting you go."

Lenie smiled through new tears and hugged Mac. She tried to speak, but Mac stopped her. "I love you. Be safe."

"I love you, too." Lenie walked out of the office and closed the door. Mac crumpled into a chair and cried.

## Chapter Twenty

Mac tapped on the door to Anna's room, waiting patiently for her to answer.

"What's up?" Anna asked.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." Anna stepped aside. "What's up?" she asked again.

"I think we need to talk about this morning." Mac settled on Anna's bed. Anna sat at her desk. "I probably should have told you sooner that I'm gay. I didn't mean to spring it on you like that. Jace is used to it, but you deserve a chance to get used to it, too. I—"

"Why do I need to get used to it? You're gay. So what?"

"You said you weren't sure you liked it."

Anna looked at the ground. "There's gay kids at my school. It's no big deal."

"Anna, what aren't you telling me? If it's no big deal, then what were you talking about?" Mac leaned forward, close enough she could touch Anna. It took a few moments before Anna spoke.

"I don't want to say. You might not like me for it."

"I'm sure that's not true. In this family, as long as you tell the truth and don't keep secrets, we'll be good. Nothing you can say would make me not like you."

"I don't want Lenie here," Anna blurted out. She met Mac's gaze and as quickly looked away.

Mac hadn't expected this. "What makes you say that?" She kept her voice light and gentle. She didn't want Anna to think her angry or disappointed.

She shrugged. "You wouldn't understand."

"Anna, remember what I said. You need to tell me what's going on. I can't help you if you don't. And I'll still love you. No matter what."

"Not if she's here."

Now they were getting somewhere. Mac could see that Anna held back tears and reached for her hand. "Anna, look at me." She waited until Anna's soft brown eyes met hers. The tears were slowly falling. "If Lenie comes here to live, or is in my life in any way, that won't make me feel any different about you. I want you here. I want to be your mother."

"You do?"

"Yes. I've already talked to Miss Day. There's a lot of paperwork that has to be done, and it's going to take awhile, but we're working on it. I want you here, Anna. That's not going to change."

"How can you be so sure? My real mom didn't want me around when she had a boyfriend living with us. That's when she'd hit me the most." Anna touched the side of her face, as if remembering those times. While the damage to her skin had faded, Anna's eyes showed the remnants of her abuse.

Mac moved from the bed to kneel in front of Anna. "I'll never hit you. I know it's going to take a long time for you to trust me that way. I might yell at you, but I won't ever raise my hand."

"But what if Lenie's here? You won't want me around."

"That's not true at all." Mac rested her hands on Anna's knees. "Lenie's very important to me. I don't know what's going to happen, or if she'll live here or not, but my love for her is different than my love for you. And Lenie or no Lenie, you're here to stay. I'm not about to let you leave."

"Will you promise me?" Anna asked through her tears. "Will you promise me that I can stay here forever?"

A smile spread across Mac's face. "I promise. You can stay here forever."

Anna almost knocked Mac over by wrapping her arms around her neck. "Thanks, Mac."

"You're welcome."

"Can I ask friends over after school tomorrow?"

Mac should not have been surprised by the sudden change in topic. Such a teenager. "Sure, as long as you give their parents our phone number and let me know if they're staying for dinner."

"Okay. Maybe on the weekend I can have a sleepover?" Anna's tears were gone now, and her face brightened.

"Sure. But let's start with a limit of two friends and see how it goes, okay? I need to know it's okay with their folks."

"Got it." Anna released her and sat at her desk. "I'm gonna IM Jenny and Tina right now."

"You do that," Mac said as she stood. "Make sure you get your homework done before dinner."

“Yes, Mom.”

Mac felt her chest swell at the simple reply. She couldn't speak and walked out of the room, closing the door softly.

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The rest of the week turned out to be crazy, and by the time Friday rolled around, Mac couldn't wait to lock her office and hand the center over to her weekend volunteers. She'd been so tired that she barely remembered coming home and going to bed. Saturday morning she awoke to a bright, sunny day and an unexpected phone call.

It took a minute to find her cell phone, and when she did, a smile creased her face. “Hi, Lenie.”

“Good morning.”

“I don't know yet. I'm still in bed.” Mac glanced at the clock. Past ten.

“Oh. I'm sorry. Should I call back later?” Her voice held a note of disappointment. “I didn't mean to disturb you.”

“Hey, it's fine. I was sort of awake.”

“Okay.”

An awkward silence ensued that Mac couldn't fill. They'd not spoken much since Lenie's trip to Toronto. She'd spent the week hard at work and now that Lenie was home, they could finally talk. And the silence stretched to uncomfortable.

“How's the weather been?” Mac asked, wincing at how lame it sounded.

“Not bad. Wind, rain, cold. Normal January here.”

“I think I'll trade your rain for our snow. We got five inches of it last night. I'm glad I don't have to work and that the kids don't have school. It's not a day I want them out in.”

“That's sensible,” Lenie said.

More silence ensued. “I had a talk with Anna about you the other day.”

“Good or bad?”

“Neither really. She's worried that I won't love her if you're around. She's got severe abandonment issues.”

“Poor child.”

“It occurs to me that you and I never really talked about having children,” Mac said, anxious to hear Lenie's thoughts on the subject.

“It has never been something I considered. I suppose my career has always come first, and after a point, I assumed I would not be having children.”

“But if we create a life together, you'll have two children. Even though Jace is hardly ever here, he needs adult guidance. And Anna...she's going to need a lot more.”

Lenie didn't answer right away. Mac could hear her steady breathing. “I do not know what to say, Mac. It's a lot to consider. Do you believe Anna will like me?”

“I think eventually, once she gets to know you.”

“But you don't want that to happen unless you and I...”

“Unless we decide to move forward together,” Mac said. “I'm sorry, Lenie. I feel like I'm pushing too much at you. I made the decision to foster Anna without giving it a lot of thought. My gut told me it was the right thing for both of us, so I did it. I didn't even talk to Jace first. It was more or less an impulsive thing to do.”

“But your friend Steph said she believed you were doing the right thing. Mac, you have a heart of gold, and I love that about you. Don't apologize for something like this. Anna has the chance at a wonderful family. I hope I can be part of that.”

“So do I.” Mac heard Jace and Anna talking, figuring they were getting breakfast made. “I should go. The kids are up, and I'm going to have to keep Anna entertained today. Unless one of her friends has dug a tunnel to our house, she's not going anywhere and her friends aren't going to make it for their sleepover.”

Lenie laughed and the sound comforted Mac. “Be with your family, Mac. Enjoy the day.”

“Can we Skype next weekend?” Mac asked.

“It's a date.”

“Cool. Bye for now.”

“Bye.”

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Breakfast was over fast, and before Mac could say no, Jace and Anna dragged her outside. The temperature remained a degree above freezing, but they needed to run off their youthful energy, which included the creation of a monster-sized snowman.

"I've never done this before," Anna said, watching Jace gather snow in his hands. "How do you even get started?"

"You have to make a giant roll of snow so the base is solid," he said, showing her how to pack the snow into a ball. "When it's big enough, then we get going on the next part. But we have to figure out what it's gonna look like. I mean, if it's a real snowman or a dog or—"

"A griffin?"

"A griffin?" Jace asked.

"Yeah, like in Harry Potter. He's from the House of Gryffindor. It'd be way cool if we could make a griffin."

Jace turned to Mac who shrugged and said, "You're the master snowman maker."

"Gee thanks," he muttered. Jace sat on his haunches, tossing a ball of snow back and forth between his hands. "I got it!" He jumped to his feet, issuing instructions. Mac fell into step with Anna, enjoying every moment of the process.

It took them three hours, but Jace managed to help mold heaps of snow into something that resembled a lopsided horse. He stood back from their creation, hands on his hips, and looked at Anna. "What do you think?"

"He needs a tail," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing.

"I might be able to fix that," Mac said and headed for the shed. She returned with a piece of old garden hose that froze in a curly shape. "Will this do?" she asked Anna.

The smile on Anna's face warmed Mac's heart. Anna took the hose and carefully put it in place. "There. Now it's done."

"So," Jace asked, "are we officially a part of the House of Gryffindor?"

"Yes," Anna replied proudly. "Can we eat? I'm starved."

"Sure thing. I've got burgers thawing for lunch." Mac nudged Anna and slipped something round and cold into her hand. She whispered, "But first I think that Jace needs cooled off a little. You take the first shot, okay?"

Anna didn't have to be told twice. She slung the ball of snow, hitting him squarely in the chest. Jace narrowed his eyes, scooped up two handfuls of snow and came running after her. Anna tried to hide behind Mac, who couldn't seem to get out from between the two of them. The trio ran around the yard, Anna screeching, Jace giggling, and Mac trying to get to the back door.

Jace let go of the snow, hitting Mac in the face. Bits of snow went into her mouth, and she spit it out. "I'm gonna kill you," she said. His giggle turned to a yelp when Mac tackled him to the ground and rubbed snow into his face.

They wrestled around for a few moments, both of them wet from the snow. Jace lay there, breathing heavy and nearly crying from laughing. "You're mean."

"No, I have had my revenge." Mac tried to sound menacing, but the giggling ruined it. "Okay, I have to pee now." She got up and did her best to wipe the snow off her clothes. Her jeans were soaked through, and when she met Anna's gaze, she stopped. "What's wrong?"

"I thought—you guys were fighting—"

"No, no." Mac moved fast to pull Anna into her embrace. "We were playing. That's all. It's fun to roll around in the snow. That's one of the best parts about having this much to play in."

Anna looked up at her with genuine fascination in her eyes. "You guys were laughing, and I thought it was funny, but I wasn't sure."

"It was fun," Jace chimed in. "And after we get dried out, I promise to shove snow down your shirt. But right now I want to eat."

The look on Anna's face—priceless. Sort of a cross between fright, humor, and maybe a bit of challenge. "You wouldn't do that to me," she said with a confidence Mac didn't think she felt.

"Wanna bet?" To prove it, he chased her. She squealed and ran into the house.

Mac followed at a more sedate pace, hoping the house wouldn't be full of snow when she got inside.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Skyping once a week quickly turned into twice a week, and by mid-July, Lenie and Mac were using Skype nearly every day. In that time, Mac saw a remarkable difference in Lenie's disposition as well as her face. In the beginning, Lenie seemed drawn and tired, as if life weighed her down too much. But today, on Mac's birthday, Lenie's eyes were bright and shining and her smile felt like a warm caress.

"I was thinking," Mac said.

"That is always dangerous."

Mac stuck her tongue out at Lenie. "Any chance you might be coming to see me this summer? We did talk about it awhile back."

"Hmm, I do seem to recall something about it. Go on."

"Do you still have your ticket?"

Lenie pretended to be thinking, and it made Mac smile and marvel at how cute she was. "As a matter of fact, I do."

"Good. I hoped you'd use it and come visit me for a while. If Baan will let you go, that is."

Lenie rolled her eyes. "That could present a problem. However, I asked for that time off already, and he approved it. I'll be in Ohio for at least two weeks."

Mac felt the urge to jump up and down with excitement. Instead she said, "Amazeballs."

They both laughed, and Mac knew they were each reminded of Kristy.

"Indeed. But I may have one condition."

"And what would that be?"

"I love you very much, *lieffe*. Happy birthday." Lenie brought a red rose close to the camera. "You should be getting a knock at your door." She glanced off screen. "Right about now."

Mac waited and heard Jace answering the door. "How'd you do that?"

Lenie shrugged. "Go see."

"Okay." Mac stretched the word into three syllables then headed for the door. She met Jace halfway there. He was holding a long, white box securely closed by a red ribbon.

"I believe this is for you," he said, and she could swear she saw a conspiratorial smile on his face.

Mac placed the box on the kitchen table, her hands shaking as she carefully opened it. A dozen red roses were inside, neatly tied together. There was a note attached, and she was afraid to read it. She was already close to tears. No one had ever given her flowers before.

The message was short. "Be mine. Love, Lenie."

She held the flowers to her chest and clutched the note in her hand and returned to her room. She sat in front of her computer with her gift and tried hard to contain the surge of emotions. "Yes."

The smile on Lenie's face was amazing. Lenie was amazing. "Good," she said and Mac heard the tremble in her voice. "I'll e-mail you my flight information."

"I—"

Lenie put a finger up to stop her. "Let's leave it this way. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Mac couldn't reply. She sat staring at her computer screen long after Lenie logged off.

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"Lenie's coming here?" Jace jumped up from his seat at the kitchen table. Mac tried to find something to put her flowers in. "Then it worked?" He clamped his hand over his mouth the moment the words came out.

Mac stopped and stared at him. "You knew?"

"Well, duh. How do you think the flowers got here with such perfect timing?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

"I bought them yesterday," he said, hanging his head in fake shame. "Lenie texted me at the right moment, and I pretended to get the delivery. Anyway, she said she'd know if she was coming or not based on your reaction." He studied her for a moment. "You've been crying."

"Yes, I have." She hit his arm. "You little shit. I can't believe you ganged up on me like that."

"Well, just me. Anna had nothing to do with it, since she had school today. And I'm not sure how she feels about Lenie. Anyway, you shouldn't be so surprised that I'd be helping Lenie out." He reached under the sink and produced a thin, blue vase with smooth sides and the top flowered out. "Here," he said and handed it to Mac. "I knew there were no vases here, so I got this one for you."

"Thanks," she said. "So you've been talking a lot with Lenie?"

"Mostly e-mails, but sometimes we talk." He waited for Mac to finish putting the flowers in the vase. "I really hope you two get back together, Mac. I like Lenie and I miss her."

Mac felt he missed Kristy more, but let that pass. "It's complicated, but we're working on it."

"That's why I helped with the flowers."

Mac kissed him on the cheek. "You're a sweetheart. It worked very well."

"Awesome. So, I've been talking to Anna about Lenie."

"You have?"

"Yeah. I want her to know what she's like. You know, so she doesn't get too freaked out when Lenie's here."

"Makes sense," Mac said. "What did Anna say?"

"Not much. She sort of clams up when we talk about anything heavy. I guess she'll be okay with it."

"She's had a lot to get used to in a short amount of time. But you, young man, have proven to be a good big brother."

"Aw, shucks," he said with a grin. "That's real nice of you to say, ma'am."

"Where the hell is that accent coming from? You sound like a hillbilly." Mac laughed at the silly expression on his face.

"Guess I've spent too much time on Cindy's farm."

"Cindy does not sound like that."

He shrugged. "I guess I've been hanging with the wrong crowd."

"Guess so," she said, shaking her head at his cute, but idiotic, hillbilly voice.

"Oh, there's more to your present," Jace said and raced off to his room. He returned in a flash. "Lenie mailed this to me about a week ago."

Mac opened the envelope and read the note inside.

*Mac,*

*There is not much I can do from thousands of miles away to show you how much I love you. Please take a few moments to yourself and place the USB drive into your computer. Please remember that, no matter what, you and I are always better together. I don't want us to be apart anymore.*

*I love you,*

*Lenie*

Mac held the drive in her hand. "Do you know what's on this?"

"Nope. But I was told that you need to see it in private and might want to wait until the evening."

"Hmm. Interesting. I don't know if I can wait that long."

"You have to because she sent me some money, and the three of us are going to have a nice meal at a nice restaurant. You, Mackenzie, are being treated to an evening out. Now, per Lenie's instructions, take a shower, dress fancy, and be ready to go by four. And trust me, you're gonna love this."

"Jace, after today I'm having a hard time trusting you."

"Cool." He stuck his tongue out at her and headed for his room.

Mac was tempted to put the drive in her computer but set it next to her screen when she walked back to her room. She'd do what Lenie asked. Even if the suspense killed her.

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The Montgomery Inn Boathouse, located along the banks of the Ohio River, was Mac's favorite restaurant. She and Kristy would find any excuse to celebrate something by going there to enjoy the famous barbecue ribs. Kristy could easily eat a whole rack by herself, while Mac always ended up with leftovers.

As if Kristy had coached him, Jace downed an entire rack of ribs, with enough space left over in his stomach for dessert. He couldn't have been more like Kristy's son if he tried. Anna's reaction to Jace's bottomless pit was to stare at him through most of the meal.

"How come you're not fat?" she asked him.

Jace paused with a bit of rib halfway to his mouth. "I got good genes. And I'm gonna burn off all this later tonight."

"Doing what?"

"Kicking your butt on the Play Station."

"Whatever," she said and went back to her meal.

Mac kept quiet, enjoying their banter.

The meal lasted more than an hour, and by the time they got home, Anna felt too tired to play video games. She went right to her room. Jace, on the other hand, his endless energy intact, wandered off to play games alone.

Mac waited until they were settled for the rest of the evening and sat in front of her computer. Once it booted up, she inserted the USB drive and clicked on the icon that read, "For Mac."

Lenie's image appeared on the screen. "Hi, *liefje*. I hope you enjoyed dinner. I told Jace he could eat as much as he wanted, so long as he left you some spare ribs. He's a good boy. Well, a good man, I mean. So, you should have had a fun evening. I'm sorry I could not be there, but you know how difficult it is for me to get vacation time from Baan. The man is such a, what was the word Kristy used...oh yes. Putz."

Mac laughed. The word sounded odd coming from Lenie. Perhaps it was her accent.

"Anyway, I tried hard to be romantic. You know I'm not good at that. It's not a Dutch thing. But the last surprise for your birthday is this—I will be visiting in August for two weeks, just as we planned. You probably already know that because I cannot keep a secret from you. What you don't know—well, I will tell you in person. It's too important for a video message." A mischievous twinkle filled her eyes. "I'll see you soon, *liefje*. I love you." She waved goodbye as her image faded from the screen.

Mac leaned back in her chair. She had no clue what Lenie referred to, but it didn't matter. They'd be together in just over a month. And Mac had a surprise of her own for Lenie soon.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

The weeks flew by, and while Lenie and Mac had talked every day, Mac found herself nervous on the day that she waited for Lenie's flight to arrive. She paced the enclosed waiting area, pausing to scan the faces of people leaving the secure area. Lenie's flight landed, and according to the digital board, they were deplaning, but that could take forever.

Mac checked her watch again. Five minutes passed. Then she glimpsed a familiar face. She ran out of the waiting area and nearly bowled Lenie over with her hug. "Welcome back, baby."

Lenie laughed so hard she dropped her carry-on bag and wrapped her arms around Mac. "Wow. Thanks, *lieffe*. You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry," Mac said, though she didn't really mean it. She couldn't stop looking into Lenie's face, holding onto her to make sure she was actually there. "I missed you."

"I can see that." Lenie said. "I missed you, too."

"Did you?" Mac asked. She cupped Lenie's face in her hands and pulled her closer for a long, sweet, kiss. "Care to show me?"

"Not right here," Lenie whispered. "Take me home, first."

"Home. Good idea."

After gathering Lenie's luggage, they made the short trip to Mac's house. There wasn't much talking between them, though Lenie's hand remained on Mac's thigh for most of the trip.

When they arrived at the house, Jace ran out to meet them, grabbing Lenie into a big hug. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Me too." Lenie stood back and examined him. "Did you get taller? I thought we were closer to the same height."

Jace blushed. "Yeah. I had to get new pants after Christmas."

"And new shoes," Anna said from behind them. "You got the biggest feet I ever saw."

Mac got between them. "If you were over six feet tall your shoes would be big, too. Now come over here and meet Lenie." She made a quick introduction.

Lenie held her hand out. "It's nice to meet you, Anna. I've heard a lot about you."

Anna hesitated but shook Lenie's hand. "You, too. Mac, can I have an ice cream?"

"Not until after dinner. Did you get your homework done?"

"Got it done yesterday so I wouldn't have to do any over the weekend." Anna gave Lenie a quick glance and headed into the house.

"Did that go well?" Lenie asked.

"About as well as any first meeting with Anna," Jace said. "She takes a long time to warm up to people. Unless your name is Mac." He grabbed Lenie's suitcases. "I'll put your stuff in Mac's room."

"Thanks." Lenie twined her fingers around Mac's. "I hope she likes me."

"She will. Give her time."

Lenie grew quiet as they entered the house. Jace and Anna made themselves scarce, so Mac guided her to the bedroom. "Why don't you rest a bit?"

"I will if you rest with me."

"You have to ask?"

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Lying naked, her body wrapped around Lenie's, Mac couldn't remember a happier time. The two of them had worked hard at communication over the last few months, and she felt her trust in Lenie had returned. But more importantly, she understood the only time she didn't feel empty was with Lenie beside her. She rolled onto her side, propped herself up on one elbow, and stared down at the incredible woman beside her. "I need to ask you something," she said.

"That's funny. I was thinking the same thing." Lenie sat up, so Mac did the same. They were in front of each other, legs crossed and knees touching. "Why don't you go first?"

"I'm not entirely sure how to ask this," Mac said. "Let me begin by saying that when you're not with me, something is missing." She paused a beat to collect her thoughts. "When I came home in January, I felt broken. Like I had this huge hole in my heart, and no matter what I did, I couldn't fill it. At first I think I chose to foster Anna to make myself feel better. I guess, in a way, it did, but ultimately there was still something missing. The moment you stepped into my office, I knew what I'd been missing. You. Face it, apart we're awful, but together, we're great."

She reached for Lenie's hand and motioned her not to reply yet. "I'm babbling, so let me try to get to the point." Mac met Lenie's patient eyes and smiled. "I love you, Lenie. Will you marry me?"

Lenie's expression went from surprise to joy right before she burst out laughing. "Mac, I don't know how you managed to do it, but you read my mind."

"I did?"

"Remember I told you I have something for you? In my bag I have a ring. It belonged to my mother, and if you'll put it on, I'd be happy to call you my wife."

A quirky smile formed on Mac's face. "Damn, woman. I love you."

"I know." Lenie kissed the knuckles of her hands, working her way up Mac's arms, neck, cheeks, spending extra time on her lips. "We can be married legally in Amsterdam, but if you want to be legal here in the States, I'm sure we can find a place to do that."

"We certainly will."

"Shall I get the ring?"

"Please." Mac waited, then held out a shaking hand when Lenie she came back to the bed. She slipped the solid gold band on Mac's finger. It fit perfectly. "Wow. It's beautiful."

"I'm glad you are the same size as Ma. It must have been meant to be."

"Must have," Mac said. "Now for the big question. Are you willing to move here? I don't think I should or could take Anna to Holland. She's been through—"

Lenie stopped her with a kiss. "The Cincinnati Museum of Art has offered me a job. It happened when I visited you last. I thought I would explore all my options, just in case." She placed her palm on Mac's cheek, and Mac turned to place a kiss on her soft skin.

"What about the Rijks Museum? It's your dream job."

"I have worked there long enough to have made a few connections. I'll be consulting for them."

Mac hardly knew what to say. "So it's that easy? You're going to come here to live?"

"It will not be easy. I'm not sure I understand all the immigration paperwork, but the museum is going to help with that. As my employer, they are going to sponsor me to be here. And if we get married in a legal state, that will help us as well. So there is a lot that we have to do, but it doesn't matter. I'll do every bit of it. I love you, Mackenzie Bradenton."

"I love you, too, Lenie. We're better together, right?" Lenie's smile was so bright It dazzled her.

"Better together."

The End

## About the Author

Patty is the Goldie Award-winning co-editor of *Blue Collar Lesbian Erotica* with Verda Foster. She and Verda also coedited *Women in Uniform: Medics and Soldiers and Cops, Oh My!* and *Women In Sports*. Her first novel, *Souls' Rescue* was a finalist for the Ann Bannon Popular Choice Award. Patty is a retired paramedic and currently resides in The Netherlands with her wife, Sandra, and their kitties. Visit her website at [www.pattyschramm.com](http://www.pattyschramm.com)

# Books by Patty Schramm

From Flashpoint Publications

## *Finding Gracie's Glory*

Gracie Kato survived years of abuse at the hands of her wife. While her body has healed, her heart and soul remain damaged. Gracie seeks solace at her grandfather's home in the Yukon Territory of Canada. There she'll be able to work at his gold mine, named for her grandmother, Gracie's Glory. It's the perfect place for her to start over again. Liv Templeton's heart was crushed years ago and she doesn't see any chance of recovery. She's never alone unless she wants to be, but never seeks any commitments. Instead she puts all her energy and time into running the family mining business. From the moment they meet, Gracie and Liv's connection, physical and emotional, is obvious to them both. Is Liv ready for a serious relationship? Even if she is, will she be able to convince Gracie to trust again? To let her soul heal? Will Gracie open herself up to Liv? Or will she close her heart forever?

ISBN: 978-1-949096-15-6

eISBN: 978-1-949096-16-3

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## *Reflections of Fate*

Leoni Wolf lived and worked on the Qualla Boundry in Cherokee, North Carolina her entire life. It was her home and the place she belonged. Leoni once believed in fate and that everything happened for a reason. Until her wife, Tayanita, was killed in a tragic accident. What possible reason could there be for her death? The event shattered Leoni's world.

Each day Leoni awoke, gazed at her reflection in the old free-standing mirror and convinced herself she could get through one more day.

Nicola Daelis was tired of fate intervening in her life and wanted to throttle her. Before Nicola could act on the event that could change it all, fate landed a beautiful, dark-eyed woman in her lap and turned Nicola's world upside down.

Fighting for their lives, and often against each other, Nicola and Leoni must embark upon an adventure that could be the beginning of something new. Or the end of them both.

ISBN: 978-1-949096-12-5

eISBN: 978-1-949096-13-2

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## *Souls' Rescue*

Kelly McCoy is a firefighter and paramedic who's lived most of her adult life in New York. After 9-11, she relocates to Cincinnati, nursing a broken heart and looking for a new start. She takes one day at a time, trying not to let her losses overwhelm her.

Talia Stoddard is an insurance wiz who's always been smart on the job, but unlucky in love. After years of being told that she's too big, too tall, too black, too lesbian, and not a very snappy dresser, Talia has resigned herself to a life alone with only her dear gay friend Jacob for a diversion.

When Kelly and Talia's lives crash into one another, it's under the most stressful and threatening circumstances. Talia is in terrible danger, and it's up to Kelly to rescue her. In the horrendous situation they end up in, neither expects to find a friend, much less a soul mate.

Will they rescue one another and heal the wounds of their pasts? Or will they both continue to believe that they're not worthy of the kind of love the other might offer?

*Souls' Rescue* is the story of opening up to love, taking chances, and building a life that everyone dreams about, but few people ever find.

ISBN: 978-1-949096-06-4

eISBN: 978-1-949096-07-1

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From Regal Crest Enterprises

***Because of Katie***

Siobhan Landry's granddad had one wish before he died. That she would travel from their small town in Indiana to the place of his birth in southern Ireland and become the artist he knew her to be. She never expected how much her life would change when she got there.

Katie O'Briain nearly lost her life, but that couldn't stop her from doing what she's always loved—being a marathon runner. However, no matter how much she pushes herself, or convinces herself life is good, there's something very obviously missing.

But Katie has a lot of scars and even though her attraction to Siobhan is immediate, can she bare those scars to the lovely American?

Siobhan also feels that attraction. Will she be able to move beyond her broken past and let Katie heal her heart?

Or will the scars they both hide keep them apart forever?

ISBN: 978-1-61929-380-9

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## *Love Is In the Air*

Love Is in the Aira collection of romantic short stories about love that comes to us in different ways, different forms, and in ways we might never suspect. Whether we feel worthy or not, love is there. And it will find us all.

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## ***Women In Sports: Sweaty, Sexy and Hot, Oh My!***

Women in Sports: A collection of romantic and erotic tales.

Hot. Sweaty. Tight shorts. Sports bras. Six-pack abs. What sparks your imagination? Muscular legs? Hands that are strong and sure? Baseball, soccer, hockey, track and field...does it really matter? She's sexy, she's incredible and she's all yours. Sit back, relax and enjoy some wonderful tales from this group of talented authors. Women in sports—does it get any better than that?

This amazing collection of romance and erotica includes stories from: Lee Lynch, Jessie Chandler, Mary Griggs, MB Panichi, Tonie Chacon, Kate McLachlan, A.L. Duncan, Jeanine Hoffman, Erica Lawson, Sharon G. Clark, Nann Dunne, Pat Cronin and Verda Foster.

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## ***Women In Uniform: Medics and Soldiers and Cops, Oh My!***

Cops, medics, soldiers, chefs, forest rangers...let's face it...who doesn't appreciate women in uniforms? Whether it's a nurse in Vietnam, a lesbian about to deploy to Iraq, a horny football player, a cop who likes bondage, a medic who needs pampering, or a security guard who finds out she's not past her shelf date, these stories of erotica and romance will rev you up, touch your heart, and make you feel.

You'll be delighted by great stories from some of today's top writers: Catherine Lundoff, J.M. Redmann, Lee Lynch, Analza Otis, Lori L. Lake, Chris Paynter, Sammo, M.J. Williamz, Ms. M, Diane S. Bauden, Karen D. Badger, V.W. Massie, Victoria Oldham, Bliss, R.G. Emanuelle, Andi Marquette, Jessie Chandler, Pat Cronin, and Lee Coats.

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## ***Blue Collar Lesbian Erotica***

Blue Collar Lesbian Erotica is a collection of stories about the average lesbian in hot, steamy encounters in not-so-average places. Santa and her elf, a tryst in an oil mechanics pit, or what nuns really do in the convent, this anthology goes outside the norm.

Several talented authors have joined together for this collection of erotica including Karin Kallmaker, Radclyffe, Ali Vali, Kate Sweeney, Verda Foster, Vada Foster, Trish Sheilds, Nann Dunne, Sammo, Cheri Crystal, Pat Cronin, Georgia Beers, Anne J. Kingsley, MJ Williamz, Kathy Smith, and Victoria Oldham.

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