

THE BEST MAN'S BABY

Karen Booth



Desire

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Аннотация

It's a second-chance baby! Julia Keys has everything going for her—beauty, brains and a Hollywood career. So why does she keep ending up in Logan Brandt's bed? The sexy former pro baseball player has wreaked havoc on her heart for years. But when their latest fling ends with a plus sign on the pregnancy test, Logan makes the case for marriage. Julia knows the only wedding in their future is the one they're both attending, no matter how hot the chemistry between them still burns. Can two high school sweethearts who've made a mess of love finally get it right...even if the baby isn't Logan's?

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"I'm not sure I believe you when you said you didn't feel anything earlier today. When we kissed in front of the cameras."

Logan's voice was low, resonating throughout her body. It wasn't just the kiss that made her feel something. Everything about him made her feel, and that was a terrifying feeling. Leaving herself open to him eventually led to hurt. Always.

A heavy sigh escaped her lungs. "It was a kiss. It didn't change my world," she lied.

Logan reared back his head and brought their dance to a stop. "I don't believe you."

"It was hours ago. I hardly even remember it."

"Then let me refresh your memory."

He clutched her neck and lowered his lips to hers. His mouth drifted to her cheek, his stubble scratching her nose, then he traveled to her jaw and kissed her neck. She kept her eyes closed,

luxuriating in every heavenly press of his lips, not wanting it to end.

“Tell me you don’t feel anything,” he whispered into her ear.

“I don’t feel anything.” The truth was that she was feeling everything right now. Her entire body was so alert she could probably stay awake for the next twenty-four hours.

“You said it yourself earlier today. You’re a terrible liar.”

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Karen Booth



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KAREN BOOTH is a Midwestern girl transplanted in the South, raised on '80s music, Judy Blume and the films of John Hughes. She writes sexy, big-city love stories. When she takes a break from the art of romance, she’s teaching her kids about good music, honing her Southern cooking skills or sweet-talking her husband into whipping up a batch of cocktails. Find out more about Karen at www.karenbooth.net.

For Bryony Evens, my sweet and lovely friend.

May the handsome guy in the flower shop
always flirt with you.

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[One](#)

Julia Keys ducked out of the cab in front of her childhood home amid a hailstorm of camera flashes and shouts from reporters.

Where's Derek, Julia? Is he flying in from LA for your sister's wedding?

Is it true you and Derek are shopping for a house together?

Any chance you and Derek will tie the knot?

Ludicrous questions, and yet they kept coming. She wouldn't date Derek, her current costar, if her life depended on it. The idea made her queasier than her first trimester morning sickness, and that was saying a lot.

Dodging reporters and lugging a week's worth of designer clothes in a roller bag, she marched up the walk, past the rhododendron that had been in full bloom at the beginning of summer, the last time she'd been back in Wilmington. That was also the last time Logan Brandt had stomped on her heart. The very last time. Or at least that was the plan.

Her father raced down the stairs of the wraparound porch and folded her into his arms. "Y'all need to learn some manners," he yelled to the media militia assembled at the curb.

At least the local press had enough respect to stay off private property. The same could not be said for the paparazzi in a big city like New York or Los Angeles. A film career spanning nearly a decade had left Julia a reluctant pro. Judging by the frantic phone call from her publicist that morning, when the story of her nonexistent romance first broke, the press would be arriving in waves over the next several hours.

"Sorry about that, Daddy. Don't talk to them. They'll go away if we don't say anything." She pressed a kiss to her father's clean-

shaven face. It was framed by thick, chocolate-brown hair—the same color as Julia’s, except his had gone salt-and-pepper at the temples. The few wrinkles he had showed deep concern. Of course he was worried—one daughter was getting married, and the other, according to the strangers still yammering at them, had questionable taste in men. When her real predicament—the one that would make her father a granddad—finally came to light, she could only hope he’d stay as relatively calm as he was now.

Her father ushered her inside, which was only about ten degrees cooler than the eighty-degree day. She knew better than to ask her dad to adjust the thermostat. As far as he was concerned, it was September, and therefore autumn, which meant air-conditioning was no longer needed. Never mind that summer in coastal North Carolina could stretch on until Halloween.

Her mother strolled into the living room wearing a pink sleeveless blouse and white capri pants, auburn hair back in a ponytail, pearls completing the look, as always. She wiped her hands with a checkered kitchen towel. Julia’s younger sister, Tracy, brought up the rear. Spitting image of their mother and the bride-to-be, Tracy was a fresh-faced vision in a turquoise sundress, staring down Julia as if she were evil incarnate. Julia was now liking her chances with the school of piranha masquerading as the media outside.

Mom offered a hug and a kiss. “It’s good to see you, hon. I feel so spoiled having you home for the second time in three months.”

Three months. Just enough time to get pregnant. “The high school reunion was one thing. It’s not every day my baby sister gets married.” Julia went in for a hug from her sister.

Tracy was having none of that, planting her hands on her hips. “How long are we going to pretend that Jules isn’t ruining my wedding? If y’all are going to stand around and chitchat like nothing is wrong, I’m asking Carter to fix me a stiff drink.”

It physically hurt to know that her arrival didn’t warrant a hug, but Julia couldn’t blame her sister. If the roles had been reversed, she’d be mad as a hornet about the frenzy in the front yard. “I’m sorry about the mess outside, but it’s all a stupid lie. The press has been hinting at something between Derek and me since before we even started filming. Trust me, I’m not involved with him.”

“I saw the photos. You’re practically kissing him.” Her mother’s sweet drawl teetered on practically. “Are you denying it because you’re not proud of the way he’s behaved? They said he’s been arrested for public intoxication seven times. Why would you want to be with a man like that?”

Julia shook her head, sweat already beading up on her skin. If the press could sell this contrivance of a story to her own mother, they could convince anyone. “Mom. Listen to me.” She grasped her shoulders. “I swear there’s nothing going on with Derek. Yes, it looks like a kiss. We were rehearsing a scene. I have zero interest in him. And he has no interest in me.” And he has the world’s worst breath.

“Then go outside and tell those buzzards precisely that.” Julia’s

father teased back the drapes, peering outside. “We spent an awful lot of money on this wedding. I’m not about to see it ruined.”

If only her father knew the lengths to which Julia was already going to not ruin her sister’s wedding—namely keeping a pregnancy under her hat, which was absolutely killing her. Why couldn’t things be normal? Just once? If her life were normal, she’d walk into this room and tell her parents she was pregnant. Her mother would probably burst with excitement, then sport the start of a nine-month-long smile and ask a million questions. Her father would sidle up to Julia’s loving, handsome husband and congratulate him with a firm handshake and a clap on the back. But of course, things couldn’t be normal. No husband had materialized in Julia’s twenty-nine years on earth, and that was of little consequence compared to not knowing whether her ex or Logan Brandt was the baby’s father. Oops.

“You have to trust me,” Julia said. “If we say anything, they’ll just ask more questions. We should ignore them and focus on Tracy.” Please. Anything so I can stop fixating on wanting to blurt out that I have a tiny top-secret bundle of joy in my belly.

Tracy snorted and shook her head. “Focus on me.” Plopping down on the end of the couch, she broadcast her anger by aggressively flipping through a bridal magazine. “That’s rich coming from you right now.” Tracy had never been much for mincing words. Why start now?

Their father sat in his wingback chair. “Jules, I know you think

you know what you're doing, but I've had my own experience with the media." Julia's father had been a state senator for two decades. Twenty-one squeaky-clean, scandal-free years. "If they've fabricated this much, they'll speculate until the cows come home. Who knows what they'll come up with next."

A heavy sigh came from her mother. "I can't even think about this anymore. I need to keep myself busy in the kitchen. Maybe open a bottle of chardonnay."

"See? Now your mother is upset. I didn't pay all this money for a scandal and an unhappy wife."

"Is that all you care about?" Tracy blurted. "The money? What people will say?"

"I have a reelection campaign to run next year. My family should be an asset, not a political liability."

Tracy tossed the magazine aside. "I swear to God, it's like I'm not even getting married. Julia and money and Dad's job are obviously far more important."

"We've never had a family scandal before, Trace. I intend to keep it that way."

Family scandal. If only they knew. Julia took a deep breath, but it made her head swim. A smooth start to Tracy's wedding was out the window, and it was all her fault. The guilt of that alone was overwhelming. Tracy had played second fiddle in the Keys family for the last decade, simply because of Julia's success. People were always making a fuss, as much as Julia tried to deflect. It was time for her sister to have center stage. Then Julia

could avoid the family microscope and find the perfect time to break the baby news, only after the wedding was over and the happy couple was on a cruise ship to the Bahamas.

Tracy's fiancé, Carter, came downstairs. "Logan just pulled up."

Logan. There was that to deal with as well. Her stomach sank, adding an entirely new and unpleasant aspect to pregnancy queasiness. His hundred-watt smile painfully flashed in her memory. Then came the visions from their last time together. They'd spent nearly the entire weekend in bed. His bare chest, naked shoulders...and other glorious stretches of his tawny brown skin were all that wanted to cycle through her mind. Damn pregnancy hormones. Her pulse raced, stirring emotion—anger over the way Logan had ended things after the reunion, frustration over once again being the girl who never managed to do anything the right way. In between all of that was a churning sea of uncertainty. And some churning of her stomach as well. She was going to be a mom. And Logan might be the father. Or he might not. Either way, she had no choice other than to tell him, deal with his reaction and move on. There was nothing more than moving on between them, and that was to be done as two separate parties. Logan had seen to that.

But first she had to find the right time to tell him. Maybe she'd take the approach her mother did when she had potentially upsetting news to break to her father—she'd tell him while he was driving. A man could only freak out so much with two hands

on the wheel.

* * *

Parked on the narrow tree-lined street, several houses down from the grand Victorian the Keys family had lived in since he could remember, Logan Brandt bided his time in his rental car. Sunglasses on, flipping the keys on his finger, he studied the reporters milling about, consulting their phones. Waiting.

“What a mess,” he mumbled. The buzz of activity was normal when it came to Julia. Even if she’d never become a box office hit or had her stunning face land on the cover of countless magazines, drama still would’ve found her. As to the cause, Logan was so tired of this scenario he could hardly see straight. Julia was once again romantically entangled with a disastrous guy. One of her projects, no doubt, as he referred to them.

His phone rang. Carter, the groom-to-be, his best friend from high school. “Hey,” Logan answered. “I’m just now getting to the house.”

“Liar. You’re sitting in your rental car because you don’t want to deal with Hurricane Julia.”

“How’d you know it was me?”

“Nobody in Wilmington drives a car that expensive. Well, nobody but you.”

Logan snickered. He did have an appetite for nice cars, especially if they were fast, and if anyone knew him well, it was Carter. He and Logan had met freshman year of high school at baseball tryouts. Logan landed a spot on varsity, a harbinger

of things to come—full scholarship to UCLA, eight years as a major league pitcher. Record-breaking seasons. Record-breaking salaries. Then a World Series, a loss, and a career-ending injury. His trajectory had never suggested it'd all be over by the time he was thirty.

Julia was a loss of another kind, although it dogged him in much the same way. His high school sweetheart, the woman who understood him better than most, and yet she'd hurt and disappointed him countless times. He must be a glutton for punishment, because he was still wrestling with his need for Julia.

“You have to come inside and talk to Julia about getting rid of the press. Tracy is freaking out,” Carter pleaded.

“I doubt she’s going to listen to a thing I say after what happened after the reunion.”

Julia and Logan saw each other every year at their high school reunion. The meeting had several time-honored traditions that only they were a part of. First came the downing of a cocktail, followed by merciless flirting—laughing, innocent touches, pointed glances, the flipping of hair from Julia. After the second drink came a spirited round of one-upmanship, including desperate attempts to convince the other how “happy” they were. Once full tipsiness was achieved, the painful stroll down memory lane could commence, usually ending with a heated make-out session. In those instances, one of them was to cut it short before things went too far. It was customary for the other person to stomp on the brakes the following year.

The last reunion had veered off course. They'd both walked in wounded—Logan hated his new career as a network commentator covering the sport he missed terribly, while Julia had just been offered a role playing a much older woman. She'd also made mention of having been dumped by another boyfriend, but Logan had tried to ignore that part. They'd needed each other that balmy June night, and that translated into two unforgettable days in bed, making love, laughing and talking for hours.

Unfortunately, Logan had been shaken back to reality when he got to the airport at the end of their weekend and saw a tabloid story saying there was romance brewing with her next costar—the hapless movie star named Derek. True or not, it was too powerful a reminder that Julia wasn't capable of settling down. She was too busy trying to save the world, too drawn to an endless string of loser guys. Logan refused to be one of her losers. He'd had no choice but to end things before she hurt him again.

“Sorry you had to find out about her new boyfriend like this,” Carter said. “It's gotta be tough.”

“I'm fine. I'd already seen the papers. I knew all about it.” Just like last time. And every other time.

“Will you please get in here so I can offer you a beer and not feel guilty about having one myself at four in the afternoon?”

“I'll be right there.”

Logan did his duty as Carter's best man, strolling down the aged sidewalk to the Keyeses' house. The reporters yelled after him—mostly requests to get Julia to come outside, although

there was one question about life as an athlete-turned-sports commentator. Logan didn't reply; he just waved. He wasn't about to chime in if they asked about Julia and her new boyfriend.

Mrs. Keys opened the door, welcoming him with a smile and a hug. "Logan Brandt. If my eyes don't deceive me. I hope you and Julia can play nicely today. We have enough drama for a lifetime."

Logan nodded, stepping inside and keeping an eye peeled for Julia. "Don't you worry about us." I'll do it for you.

Carter waved on his way into the kitchen. "Two beers, coming up."

Tracy rose from the couch, but grabbed Logan's arms rather than taking the hug he offered. Her eyes were ringed in pink. "Will you talk to her? You might be the only person she'll listen to about getting the press to go away."

"I don't know that I have any sway with..." Her name was poised on his lips when Julia waltzed in from the kitchen. Midstride, she froze. He couldn't move, either. Their eyes locked, and he felt as though he was up to his knees in a concrete block of memories, the most recent ones the strongest—watching her sleep in the early morning as his hand followed the contour of her lower back and a smile broke across her face. When Julia was happy, the world was a beautiful place, and she gave in to it, heart and soul.

For an incoherent instant, he wished he could take back the message he'd left for her. The one that ended everything. Her pull

on him registered square in the center of his chest—a tightening that said two opposing things: he couldn't live without her, but he had to stick to his guns or he'd end up romantic roadkill. "Jules."

"Logan." Julia didn't come closer, which was a good thing, albeit disappointing. She crossed her arms, building a fortress around herself. Still, her vanilla scent found his nose and warmed him from head to toe.

"How are you?" he asked. If ever there was a loaded question, that was it. Stress radiated off her, but she was as stunning as ever. Her silky chestnut hair fell about her face in waves, effortlessly sexy. His hands twitched with the memory of what it was like to have his fingers buried in it. Her peachy skin had a summer glow he couldn't place—she usually avoided the sun. It suited her. Perfectly.

"I'm fine. I'm ready to start talking about the wedding and stop talking about me," she said.

I bet.

"That's a wonderful idea," Mrs. Keys said. "I have a special treat for Carter in the kitchen, and then we'll get started. Trace, why don't we go over the schedule and you can fill us all in on the jobs we need to do."

Tracy pulled out a binder and perched on the middle cushion of the couch. Carter handed Logan a bottle of pale ale and took a seat next to his bride-to-be, putting his arm around her and kissing her temple. Logan had given Carter plenty to envy over the years, but when it came to this, Carter had him beat. Aside

from a temporary breakup, Carter and Tracy's love story was uncomplicated and sweet. Logan would've done anything to have that.

Mrs. Keys triumphantly presented a platter of her world-famous deviled eggs to her future son-in-law.

Carter lunged for one the instant they were on the coffee table. "Oh, man. Thank you. I love these things." He popped it into his mouth and moaned in ecstasy.

Julia made a wretched sound and pursed her lips, turning away.

"You okay?" Logan asked as Mrs. Keys took the remaining spot on the couch, next to Tracy.

Julia clamped her eyes shut and nodded. "Bad experience with deviled eggs on set a few weeks ago. I'm fine."

"Oh, honey. I didn't know," Mrs. Keys said, as her husband grabbed several of the offending eggs. "I can put them away if you like."

Julia shook her head. "Don't worry about me. I know how much everyone loves them."

Mr. Keys sat in his chair, leaving the love seat for Julia and Logan. Once again, their gazes connected, and he had to fight to make sense of what his body was saying to him. The problem was, whenever she was in a foul mood, he had a deep longing to kiss her out of it. He was practically wired to do it.

Logan offered her a seat. "Please. Ladies first."

Julia rolled her eyes. "Such a gentleman."

“I’m just being polite.”

“It’s a little late for polite.”

“No fighting,” Tracy barked. “Julia, I swear to God, you’re going to kill me. I need the maid of honor and best man to get along. The reporters are bad enough. Not that you don’t have the ability to make them go away.”

Julia sat, snuggling herself up against the arm of the love seat, preemptively distancing herself from him. “I can only say it so many times. The story is fake. I know you all think I have the world’s worst taste in men, but don’t worry. I did manage to avoid this one. And if we just ignore the press, they’ll leave.”

Relief washed over him, followed by surprise. No romance with Derek? Really? “Julia’s probably right. They’ll get bored if you don’t talk to them.” Feeling considerably more at ease, Logan joined Julia on the love seat. “We’re getting along just fine. No fighting.”

Tracy’s eyes darted back and forth between them. She seemed unconvinced, but returned her focus to her binder. “Give me a minute to figure out what I want everyone to do. Mom, can you look at this?”

Mrs. Keys slid closer to her daughter and the two became immersed in conversation. That left Carter and Mr. Keys to feast on deviled eggs.

Logan was still computing the revelation about Julia’s costar. If the story was fake, had it always been? “So, no love connection with Derek, huh?” he asked under his breath.

“No.”

“Never?”

“No, Logan. Not ever,” she snipped. “After that lovely message you left for me, I’m surprised you care.”

Ouch. “I never want to see you with the wrong guy, Jules.”

“Okay, everybody. Listen up.” Tracy straightened in her seat and started rattling off orders about the florist and picking up wedding bands, the baker and final dress fittings, like a four-star general about to lead them into battle. That left no time for Logan to continue his conversation with Julia, although he wanted to. At least to smooth things over.

Julia was scribbling notes as fast as Tracy could talk. “Got it. I’m on florist and cake duty. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. The only hitch is that I didn’t rent a car.” She cleared her throat. “Logan, maybe you can drive me.”

“You’re at the same hotel. It only makes sense,” Mrs. Keys chimed in.

True. It did make sense, but he couldn’t escape the feeling that Julia had ulterior motives. Something in her voice told him that she did. Whatever her plan, hopefully it didn’t include ripping his head off and sticking it on a stake in the front yard as payback for the post-reunion breakup. “Of course. Whatever Tracy and Carter need us to do to help make this the perfect wedding.”

Two

Julia was sure there was no sound more unHINGING than that of reporters politely, but incessantly, rapping on the windows of

Logan's rental car, raising their voices as he tried to pull away.

"These people are ridiculous. Somebody's going to get hurt." Logan inched the car out of his parking space. The second he had a clear path, he gunned it.

Julia jerked back in her seat. Her stomach lurched along with it. "Logan. Cool it." She whipped around to look behind them. The reporters were climbing into their cars. "They're following us. Of course."

Logan watched via the rearview window. "We have to get out of here. Now."

He took a sharp turn and ducked down a side street. He knew the shortcuts like the back of his hand. They both did. They'd both learned to drive on these streets. The house Logan grew up in was only seven or eight blocks away.

Logan was intensely focused, eyes darting between the mirror and the road. He ran his hand over his close-cut ebony hair. Being so near him, it was hard not to fixate on what his stubble felt like against her cheek when he kissed her. Or the way his warm and manly smell, citrusy and clean, begged her to curl up in his arms. Everything about being around him again made her chest ache. Things were so much simpler three months ago, for that brief forty-eight hours when she could kiss him and lose herself in him without reservation. Before he ended it forever.

His hands gripped the steering wheel. With the sleeves of his deep blue dress shirt rolled to his elbows, she couldn't have ignored the flex of his solid forearms if she'd wanted to. His arms

could make her feel as if she were made of feathers—light as air. Ready to be taken anywhere he wished to have her.

Logan cut over again, navigating the city grid. All while inducing an acute case of nausea.

Julia crossed her arms at her waist. Maybe she'd be too busy barfing to worry about telling Logan about the baby. "Can you take it easy? I'm feeling carsick."

"First the deviled eggs, now this? You're the girl who wanted to eat corn dogs and go on every upside-down ride imaginable at the state fair. Twice."

Logan had thrown down the gauntlet, only he didn't know it. Logan was a smart guy. She could only keep her secret from him for so long. As soon as she turned down a cocktail this weekend, he'd know something was up. His eyes were trained on the road. Time to put her mother's theory to the test.

"I need to know if you can keep a secret." She rummaged through her purse. It was better if they were both busy doing something that precluded a lot of eye contact.

"About what?"

"I can't tell you or you'll know the secret."

He shook his head, taking a left onto the main road to the hotel. "Fine. As long as it doesn't involve a murder, I can keep a secret." He stopped at a yellow light. Normally, Logan would've gunned it through the intersection, but there was a police car parked at the corner.

Why had her mother never briefed her on the protocol for

stoplights? This was not the way this was supposed to go. Her heart raced, but the secret was going to suffocate her if she didn't tell him. She had to tell him. At least the first part. Then she'd reevaluate. "I'm pregnant."

The light turned green, but he didn't go. "You're what?"

Julia pointed ahead. "It's green."

"Oh." Logan had them again under way. "You're pregnant?"

"I am." She choked back her breath, unable to come out with the part that came next. And you might be the father.

"I take it nobody knows? Your family didn't say a thing about it."

"Nobody knows. I've only known for about three weeks and I didn't want to overshadow Tracy."

"You have to tell your family, Jules. They won't be happy you kept this from them."

Julia swallowed hard. And how does the maybe-father feel about me keeping the secret? "You saw how Tracy is. She's a wreck already. It wouldn't be fair."

Julia caught sight of the hotel. They'd be there any minute. That was bringing up a whole new set of feelings. If only her mother hadn't turned her old bedroom into an office. If only there was another good hotel close to home. If only she and Logan hadn't slept together the last time she was here. Then she wouldn't be suffering from vivid flashes of hot, bittersweet memories—his welcoming pecan-brown eyes, smoldering, telling her every sexy thing he wanted to do to her,

all without a single word leaving his tempting lips. He was a man of action in the bedroom, not big for talk, but when he did speak, it was usually a doozy. You're so damn sexy, Jules. You make me want to lock the door and throw away the key.

He'd done such a number on her. She'd been stupidly hopeful when she was last here, foolish enough to think that finally she and Logan had gotten their act straight. Then hours after they parted, he left his message. We'll never work. Let's just admit it. Once and for all.

And of course, if they hadn't slept together, there was a very good chance she wouldn't be in the business of keeping secrets at all. She cupped her belly with her hand. However difficult, she wanted this. She wouldn't regret her time with Logan, however painfully it had ended, if it had brought her this baby. Her baby wasn't the problem.

Logan turned into the hotel drive. "I don't know why I bothered to try to outrun anybody. The bastards are already here." He pointed to a handful of news vans in the parking lot out front.

"There are only so many hotels between here and Wrightsville Beach. It wasn't going to take them long to figure out where we were."

They pulled up to the valet stand, reporters waiting, but no attendant in sight. Logan grabbed her arm. "Hold on one second. Let me come around to your side of the car. I don't want you out there on your own. You know what these guys are like, and

we're on public property now. It's not like it was at your parents' house."

"I can handle myself."

"Look, Jules. Just cut a guy some slack and let me have my macho moment, okay?"

She cracked a smile. At least chivalry wasn't dead.

"I owned up to it, didn't I?"

"Yes. You did." She folded her hands in her lap to wait.

Logan climbed out of the car. The reporters shouted his name, swarming him like bees. He was at her door in a flash. "Take two steps back, everybody, and let Ms. Keys out of the car."

She put on her sunglasses and opened her door. At this point, nearly a dozen people with cameras and microphones had them surrounded. She hated this more than pretty much anything.

Julia, where's Derek?

Are you having an affair with Mr. Brandt?

The valet pushed his way through the crowd. "Oh. Wow. Mr. Brandt. Ms. Keys. I'm so sorry I wasn't out here when you pulled up."

Logan surrendered his keys and a ten. "If you could have our bags brought in, that would be great."

"You got it, Mr. Brandt. I'm a huge fan. A huge fan."

Logan smiled wide. He was always gracious with his fans. "I'll be sure to sign something for you before I check out." He held back the press with one arm while he put the other around Julia.

This probably wasn't the right message to send, not with the

reporters here, but she liked feeling protected by Logan.

“Are you two a couple?” someone asked. If only they knew the extent to which they were not a couple, even if he could be the father of her unborn child.

Logan picked up their pace as they neared the door. Still, the throng crushed in on them. “Everybody, back off.” His voice boomed above the incessant chatter. He swiped off his sunglasses and straightened, employing all six feet and several more inches of him as intimidation. His audience actually shut up for a moment. Hard to believe. “One step inside and I won’t bother with hotel management. I’ll call the police. Leave her alone and find some other story to chase.” He took her hand, and they escaped through the revolving doors.

“Are you okay?” Logan asked, not letting go of her as they made their way through the lobby.

His touch sent tingles throughout her entire body—unrequited, one-way tingles that served no purpose other than to frustrate her. “Yes. I’m fine.” She stepped up to the front desk. “Checking in. The reservation is under Brady.”

“Marcia?” Logan chuckled.

“Jan Brady. I’m no Marcia,” she mumbled under her breath.

The front desk clerk, who looked familiar, smiled and winked, seeming to enjoy the idea of being in on the joke of a celebrity using a false name. “But, Mr. Brandt. I see you have a reservation with us as well.” Confusion washed over his face as he glanced back and forth between them.

It was then that Julia recognized the man—he'd been working the front desk when she and Logan had had their tryst. They'd ended up staying in Logan's room that time. Julia hadn't bothered to check in before the reunion, and by the time they'd arrived at the hotel, they were about to tear off each other's clothes in the lobby. Two rooms had seemed laughable.

But not anymore.

* * *

Room keys in hand, Logan and Julia filed into the elevator. An elderly couple had joined them. No one said a thing, and the quiet gave Logan's mind plenty of space to roam. Too much space. She's pregnant? And it's a secret? Who in the hell is the dad? He glanced over at her. No baby bump yet. She's known for a few weeks. She can't be very far along. Wait a minute... How far along was she? Could he? No. Not that. But wait. Could he be? The dad?

The elevator came to a stop. Logan held the door to afford the other passengers some time. He caught the uncertainty in Julia's eyes. There was more weighing on her. He could see it, and he had to know it all, even if it might hurt. They made it to the top floor—as Logan remembered it, the only floor with suites. Judging by their room numbers, they'd be across the hall from each other.

“We should talk some more,” Julia said when they'd arrived at their doors. Her voice was ragged at the edges, an apt reflection of her nerves. Considering the pressure from the reporters, her

family and having to keep her secret, she had to be exhausted.

“Yes. We should. I want to hear more about your, um, situation.” He felt idiotic the minute he’d worded it that way, but at least he’d kept his promise to not say anything.

“I need food, too. I’m really hungry.”

“Even after being carsick?”

“Yes. It’s one of the weird things about...it. I feel queasy, but I’d give my right arm for fried chicken and a peach pie. The whole pie.”

He was still getting used to the idea of Julia being pregnant. Talking about it wasn’t helping. It was only making it more bizarre. “With the vultures outside, we probably shouldn’t leave the hotel until we need to.”

“Can we order room service and talk after I have a chance to change?”

The bellman came strolling down the hall with their two roller bags.

“Looks like your change of clothes is right on time. My room? A half hour?”

“Perfect.”

Logan brought his suitcase inside and ordered food—grilled pork for himself, and with no fried chicken on the menu, he chose a steak for Julia, medium rare. Just the way she liked it, and she never turned down a steak. He then unpacked his suit for the rehearsal dinner Friday night, as well as the rest of his clothes, and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. He might as well

get comfortable for whatever it was that Julia was going to spring on him tonight. One thing was for sure. She had a talent for catching him off guard.

Room service was wheeling in the cart when Julia came out of her room. “Sorry I’m a little late. I nodded off for a few minutes.”

She was tired—enough to nod off. That was so unlike Julia, he could hardly wrap his brain around it. She never slowed down. There was always something brewing, always something to do, someone new to meet, some new adventure on which to embark. So this was her new adventure. A baby.

A sweet smile that was tinged with melancholy crossed her face as she stepped inside. It struck him as she padded past, leaving her soft and sensuous smell in her wake—she seemed smaller. Was it because she was as out on a limb as a person could be, all while trying to hide? Although she rarely allowed herself to be vulnerable, Julia was a very open person. Keeping this secret from her family must’ve been one of the most difficult things she’d ever decided she had to do.

She’d changed into a loose-fitting pink top and a pair of black yoga pants. Julia could work a fancy designer dress like nobody’s business, but he really preferred her like this—relaxed. And he had to admire the rear view as he trailed behind her. “We can sit on the sofa and eat.”

They started in on dinner, Julia confirming her claim that she was starving. She’d always been an enthusiastic eater, even when she was skinny as a rail in high school, but this was an impressive

showing. “I’ve been craving red meat, too. So thank you. This is perfect.”

He smiled and nodded, not really tasting his meal, still getting accustomed to the notion of the pregnancy. He’d already psyched himself up for her to tell him who the dad was, although he dreaded the answer—some hotshot CEO, a power-hungry producer or one of her toothy costars. And then there was the voice in his head asking if he might be part of the equation.

The moment was still fresh in his mind—back in his room after the reunion, peeling away her dress, drinking in the vision of her curves, it all hitting him in an avalanche—he’d waited for a very long time to be with her again. The way she moved told him that she was far more comfortable with her body than she’d ever been in high school. As she unbuckled his belt and kissed him softly, she’d said they wouldn’t need a condom. She was on the pill. She’d also quipped, “When I remember to take it.” Then his pants had slumped to the floor and further clarification of birth control was the last thing on his mind. That night alone they could have conceived a baby many times over, and it had been only the start of their weekend together.

“So. Pregnant. That’s big. Really big.” Why he suddenly had so little vocabulary was beyond him. He only knew that his palms were starting to get clammy.

“I know. It is.” She gathered her napkin and placed it on the table. “I was surprised, to say the least.”

“So this wasn’t planned.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

“How far along are you?”

“Three months.”

Just say it. “And how is the dad feeling about all of this?”

She twisted her lips and turned to look at him with her wide brown eyes. He’d never seen them so unsure. “I don’t know, exactly. The truth is that I’m not completely certain who the father is.”

His heart was thundering in his chest. He knew she had men falling at her feet, but was it really this extreme? “Oh.”

“It’s either my ex, the guy who dumped me right before the reunion, or...it’s you.”

His heart came to a complete stop. In fact, the only thing that gave him any indication the earth was still spinning was the bat of Julia’s dark lashes. He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees, nodding. Thinking. Processing. Once again, she’d surprised the hell out of him. He’d prepared for either answer. Not both. I might be the dad? Or I might not? He couldn’t live long without knowing for sure. He sat back up. “We have to have a paternity test. Right away.”

“I knew you were going to say that, but I don’t really see the point. It’s not going to change anything.”

“It’ll change a lot for me.” His brain hurt from the suggestion that they not find out who the father was.

“It doesn’t matter. Either way, I’m pregnant by a man who chooses not to be with me. Do you have any idea how terrible

that feels? I need to focus on the good, for my own sake. I'm choosing to focus on the baby."

Logan still couldn't believe what she was saying. "I'm going to go insane sitting around for the next six months wondering whether or not I'm about to be a dad."

"I'm sorry, but that's just too bad. It's not going to change the fact that we aren't together. We'll have to wait until the baby arrives and then we'll know. It should be fairly obvious once the baby is born. I doubt we'll need a paternity test."

Ah. I see. "So the other guy isn't black?"

"He isn't."

Well, that certainly made that aspect of things convenient. But still the logistics made no sense. Was he supposed to sit in a waiting room with her ex and hope like hell that the baby came out with a skin tone closest to his own?

"I've thought about it, and the most sensible thing is to wait until then and you can decide how involved you want to be. We'll have to negotiate all of that. I'm hoping I can count on you to be sensible and flexible. I don't want to bring in lawyers," Julia said.

His head pounded. She was discussing this as if they were two multinational corporations preparing to merge. "What did the other guy have to say about all of this?" He winced at the thought of her having this conversation with any other man, even when he had no claim on her.

"He's out. Like all the way out. He wants nothing to do with me. He was pretty sure I made up the baby so I could get him

back.”

A low grumble left Logan’s throat. What kind of scum would think a woman like Julia would make up a baby to get him back? And how did she end up with a guy like that? “He’s out? What does that even mean? You get a woman pregnant, you accept responsibility. That’s the first chapter of the book called *How to Be a Real Man*.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. She wrapped her arms around herself and settled back against the couch. “Apparently he doesn’t agree.”

Logan had to fight back his rage. He sucked in a deep breath. If the baby was his, he’d take responsibility. “If it’s mine, we have to get married.”

A dismissive puff of air left her lips. “This is not the time for jokes.”

“It’s no joke. We’re getting married if the baby is mine. You grew up with both parents. I…” His voice cracked, thinking about his father. “I grew up with both parents until we lost my dad. A kid needs both parents. I won’t be able to live with it any other way.”

“I’m not getting married to you. That’s not happening.”

“Yes. You are. Unlike this other guy you were with, I’m a man and I accept my responsibilities. We have to get married if the baby is mine.” He wasn’t even sure what was coming out of his mouth anymore. It seemed perfectly sensible in his head a few seconds earlier.

“And none of that matters, Logan. You don’t love me. You want nothing to do with me romantically. Remember? You were very clear with your message after the reunion. Painfully clear. I can recite it if you want. It wasn’t hard to commit it to memory.”

He’d ended it definitively, there was no question about that. Clarity had been for the sake of them both. Of course, he’d never imagined she’d memorize his message. Had he been too cold? “What was I supposed to do? I get to the airport and you’re on the cover of a magazine that says sparks were flying when you were auditioning with Derek. That was a week before the reunion and you’d just come off a breakup. That told me everything I needed to know about any future between us.”

“There were no sparks with Derek. Why doesn’t anyone believe me?”

“There’s always some other guy around the corner, isn’t there? Some mess of a guy who you can try to fix.”

She shot him a final look of disgust before she bolted from the couch and stalked to the front door. “You can be such a jerk. Really. You have an uncanny ability to say the most hurtful things.”

He rushed to follow her. “Wait a minute. We’re still talking.”

She squared her body to his and poked the center of his chest, hard, even though he had a good fifty pounds on her. Maybe more. “If you think the next six months are going to be difficult for you, how do you think the pregnant woman feels? How about the woman who got dumped by both of the men who might’ve

knocked her up? Did you even take two seconds to think about that?”

“I asked you to marry me. I’m willing to play my part.”

“You did not ask me to marry you. You were issuing a mandate. And that’s not happening, anyway. I’m not marrying someone out of obligation, and certainly not a man who broke up with me. I’m done making mistakes when it comes to you.” She opened the door and stormed out. It closed with a thud behind her.

Logan turned, his eyes wide open. No way he was getting any sleep tonight. Julia had given him more than enough to chew on.

His phone beeped with a text. What now? He wandered across the room and picked it up from the coffee table. It was from Julia.

We have to leave for the florist by ten.

Great. A whole day of wedding errands with the pregnant woman who drove him crazy, refused to marry him and might be carrying his baby.

Three

Logan had been a royal jerk last night—selfishly worrying how he’d survive the next six months of uncertainty, informing Julia that he expected her to marry him. That was not happening. She could do this all on her own. She didn’t need help from Logan.

Although she didn’t mind the view.

“Oh. Hey. Good morning.” He flashed a sheepish smile, standing in the doorway of his room, nothing more than a towel

wrapped around his waist, beads of water dotting his shoulder. “I was just getting the paper.” Bending over to pick it up, he showed off his perfectly defined back.

Julia stood stuck. His velvety voice delivered a too-sexy memory of their last morning in this hotel—Logan’s long, warm naked body pressed against her back in the wee hours, his giving lips on her neck as he slid his hand between her knees, lifted her leg and rocked her world with the most memorable wake-up call, well, ever.

“Jules? You okay?”

“Morning,” she sputtered, pushing a room service cart out of her room and into the hall. “I ordered bacon with breakfast, but the smell was making me queasy. If you want the leftovers.” Sexy, Jules. Real sexy.

He looked both ways, flipped the latch on his door and crossed the hall. He raised the stainless cloche from the plate, grabbing some bacon. “Just two. The camera adds ten pounds.”

“You’re fine.” She stole a glimpse of his stomach, just as hard and muscled as ever. He might not be paid to be an elite athlete anymore, but he maintained his body like one. And to think she’d reaped the benefits—those strapping arms wrapped around her, keeping her close, making her feel for two whole days that she belonged nowhere else. The price of admission had been far more than she’d been willing to pay—every shred of her heart. A big chunk of her pride, too.

“Ready in fifteen?” She braced herself against her door. Being

around nearly-naked Logan was making it impossible to stand up straight.

“Definitely. I called down to the valet. We can go out the side entrance. They’ll have the car waiting for us.”

“You don’t think the press will be tipped off by the eighty-thousand-dollar gleaming black sports car you just had to rent?”

He shrugged. “I’m not about to drive anything less. You’ll have to suffer through it, babe.”

Babe. As if.

Julia retreated to her room and tried not to obsess over her makeup or hair, but it was hard not to, knowing she’d be spending her day with Logan. He deserved to be tortured by what he’d so solidly rejected. It would likely be her only measure of revenge. She dressed in a swishy navy blue skirt that showed off her legs, black ballet flats and a white sleeveless top with a cut that left her expanding bustline on full display. Boobs. At least she was getting something out of this whole single-and-pregnant thing, other than a baby, of course.

She met Logan in the hall, and he just had to be stunning. So effortlessly hot in jeans and a white button-down, sleeves rolled up just far enough to again mesmerize her with his inexplicably alluring forearms. He led her out through the side exit and to his rental car. His plan to remain incognito was working perfectly until he peeled out of the parking lot.

“Why did you do that?” Her vision darted back to the hotel entrance. Sure enough, reporters were racing to their cars.

“They’re following us now.” She shook her head. He always had to have his manly moment.

“Don’t worry. I’ll lose them.”

He tried to shake the media as he had the day before, but they got stuck at a red light and he was left to lead a dysfunctional caravan to the florist, with his fancy car front and center. They found their destination a few minutes later, and Julia dashed for the door while Logan took his chance to reprimand the reporters yet again and tell them to stay outside.

Julia swept her hair from her face as a red-haired woman came out of the back with an enormous bucket of flowers blocking her view. “Can I help you?” she asked in a lovely singsong British accent. She plopped her armful onto the checkout counter. “Blimey. You’re...her.”

Her. Yep. Julia smiled warmly. It was the only way to put people at ease and get them off the subject of who she was. “Hi. You’re doing the flowers for my sister Tracy’s wedding on Saturday. She asked me to come by and look over everything. She’s more than a little picky and I want everything to be perfect for her.”

The woman nodded. “Yes. I’m Bryony. And I remember your sister. Very well. Come with me.”

The bell on the door jingled as Logan walked inside. With a nod, Julia motioned for him to follow her, and he trailed behind her into a back room. While Bryony pulled buckets of blooms from a cooler, Logan assumed what Julia called his jock-

in-command stance—feet nearly shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders straight, chest out proud. This was his way of taking in the world. She'd first noticed him doing it their junior year of high school, eyeing him when they played softball in gym class. What a joke that had been—like sending in an Olympic broad jumper to play hopscotch. No one had ever beamed a softball as hard as Logan.

He'd been so far out of her league in school that it took her nearly a year to get up the guts to talk to him, and only after he accidentally showed up at a party at her parents' beach house. Imagine the horror when it dawned on her during that first conversation, as she drank in the mesmerizing beauty of his eyes up close, that he didn't actually know her name. She must have done something right, though...he was her boyfriend a week later.

And when it came to part a year after that, as they both went off to college at far-flung schools, she'd taken the initiative and broken up with him. It had been a bit of a preemptive strike and her attempt to be mature about something. She was terrified to leave home, but she was even more scared of how badly it would hurt when Logan called her from UCLA and said he'd met another girl. Or more likely, another fifty girls. It wouldn't have taken long. In the end, Logan became the guy in her past she couldn't have. That was all there was to it. Circumstances, fate or other women—there was always something standing between them.

Logan waited dutifully next to her while Julia checked the

array of flowers set aside for her sister. Her mother's penchant for gardening had left Julia more knowledgeable than the average person. She checked each selection off the list her sister had given her. Hydrangea, snapdragons and roses in white. Pink was for tulips, more roses and... Oh no.

"These aren't peonies," Julia said.

"Our supplier was out," Bryony answered. "We had to substitute ranunculus."

Julia shook her head. "No. No. No. Peonies are Tracy's favorite flower. She'll pitch a royal fit if she doesn't have them."

Bryony shrugged. "I'm sorry. That's the best we could do. They aren't that dissimilar."

"Logan, don't you think Tracy's going to be mad about ranunculus?" Julia asked.

"I wouldn't know a ranunculus if it walked up to me and introduced itself." He flashed a wide and clever smile.

The florist tittered like a schoolgirl at Logan's comment. "I'm sorry, but I can't make pink peonies magically appear this time of year. I told your sister there might be a problem getting them."

"I have to fix this." Filled with dread, Julia pulled her phone out of her purse and dialed her assistant, Liz. If Tracy didn't have the right flowers, not only would she freak out, by the transitive property of sisterly blame, it'd be Julia's fault.

"Julia. Is everything okay?" Liz answered.

"Hey. I need you to do something for me. Can you call your flower guy and have four dozen stems of pale pink peonies

overnight to the florist in Wilmington? We need a very pale pink. Not rosy. Not vibrant. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. Of course. I’m on it.”

“I’ll text you the address. And make sure he knows it’s for my sister. I need this to go off without a hitch.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

Julia felt as if it was now okay to exhale. “That’s it for now.”

“Is everything else going okay? The press is really hammering you on this Derek thing, aren’t they? And I saw you’re hanging out with Logan. How’s that going?”

Liz had worked for Julia for years. She might’ve heard her complain and wax poetic about Logan a few dozen times. Or a few hundred. “Oh, um, it’s been fine.” She couldn’t say more, not with Logan in such close proximity.

“You know, if you wanted the press to go away, you could tell them that you’re with Logan,” Liz said. “They’ll run off and speculate about it for at least a day or two. Or they’ll turn it into more of a spectacle. Hard to know, but my gut is they’ll take pictures, write their stories and hound Derek with questions about being heartbroken.”

Julia watched Logan as he chatted up Bryony, who was blushing like crazy. If any man knew how to make a woman feel good about herself, it was Logan. His presence alone—just breathing the same air he did—made a girl feel special. Precisely why it hurt so much when he took it away. “Well, that’s one idea. I’ll think about it. Thanks. You’re the best.”

Julia hung up and took the florist's business card, texting the address to Liz. "The peonies will be here tomorrow morning. Everything else looks great. Thanks for your help."

She turned to Logan. He had the funniest look on his face—both bewildered and amused. She loved that expression, although if she were honest, she loved everything about his face—full lips shaping his effortless smile, square chin with a tiny scar obscured by scruff, and eyes so warm and sincere it was hard to imagine him ever doing something hurtful.

"Your sister is really lucky she didn't put me in charge of this," he said. "I mean really lucky. Imagine how horrified she'd be if she ended up with ranun...you know. Those flowers."

Julia granted him a quiet laugh. "Ranunculus. And you know how much I love my sister. I'm just trying to make the mess I made a little better. Now let's go deal with the cake."

The throng of reporters outside had grown. Either Julia was losing her patience or they were getting pushier. Logan made sure she got into the car safely, making her truly thankful to have him there. On the way to the bakery, she stole a glimpse of his handsome profile, allowing herself to think about what would've happened last night if he'd proposed for real, because he loved her. If he'd never called it off. If the baby was his. They could hold hands, they could stay up late talking for hours, they could make plans. Perhaps that was why she was so dead-set on making everything perfect for her sister. If she couldn't have the fairy tale, at least her sister could.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the bakery and again had to sprint for the door as reporters shouted at them. They seemed to be at the end of their rope. There was much speculation about the reasons why Julia was running around town with Logan Brandt and not Derek. Not good.

Inside, one of the bakers led them to the work space where all three cakes were being decorated—one for the rehearsal dinner, the groom’s cake and of course, the grand, three-tiered wedding cake. Julia took pictures with her phone and sent them to her sister. She got a quick response that, to Julia’s great relief, everything except one of the shades of pink frosting passed muster. After straightening that out, and double-checking the delivery times and addresses, she crossed the bakery visit off the list.

She and Logan stood at the bakery window. The reporters were waiting, clogging the sidewalk out front. Logan was finishing a cookie he’d talked out of the girl working behind the counter.

“What happened to ‘the camera adds ten pounds?’” Julia asked as he wiped crumbs from the corner of his mouth.

“I will always relax the rules for a chocolate chip cookie. It’s my one weakness.” He cleared his throat. “Well, that, and my desire to pop one of these reporters in the mouth.”

“I don’t even want to go out there.” Julia hitched her purse up onto her shoulder.

He rolled his neck to the side as if working out a kink. “I don’t

know if I can take an entire weekend of this. I'm tempted to just tell them I'm your boyfriend to get them to go away."

Exactly what Liz suggested. "It might work," Julia muttered. Of course then she'd have to live with the story. And the myriad ways in which her sister would pitch a conniption. "I'd say we could go out through the alley, but we're still going to have to walk right past them to get to the car."

He took her hand. "It'll be okay. I won't let anything bad happen." He opened the door and out they went, back into the belly of the beast.

* * *

They narrowly escaped the reporters outside the bakery unscathed. One of them, a brutish man with a camera lens so long that Logan wondered whether he was compensating for some shortcoming, had become particularly curt with his questions. It was clear he just wanted an answer. And Logan was inclined to agree, only because he himself had reached the boiling point.

Now they were being followed in the car again. "Maybe it's better if you just say something, Jules. The only thing you seem to be accomplishing is frustrating them."

"I wouldn't even know how to say it. You know me. Give me a script and I can deal with it. In front of cameras, with unfriendly faces barking at me, I get panicky. The next thing you know I'm tripping over my words and accidentally telling the press I'm pregnant. And I'll have to spill the beans then. I'm a terrible liar."

"That's probably an argument for just telling your parents

about the baby before you mess up and the secret comes out.”

“No way. As long as you keep your end of the bargain and keep your mouth shut, it’ll be fine.”

“Personally, I don’t think it’s a risk worth taking. Just tell them. Then you can relax and enjoy the wedding.”

Julia directed a piercing glare at him. “That’s the most harebrained thing you’ve ever said. My plan is not only the best plan, it’s the only plan. My baby. My plan.”

Her plan. Jules was doing what she always did—putting her head down, forging ahead and ignoring what everyone else said. Like a beautiful steamroller. She was far better at handing out advice than taking it, which would make it impossible to change her mind. “And what exactly is the rest of your plan? What are you going to say to your parents about the baby’s father?”

“I’m going to have to tell them the truth. You might be the dad. And you might not.”

Hearing her say that didn’t sting any less today than it had last night. “Have you taken the time to think about how they’re going to react? Because there could be a lot of fallout, and I’m sorry, but most of that is going to fall on me.”

“You have to make everything about you, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t. I’m just thinking this through to its logical conclusion. Do you remember what your dad asked me the night I took you to senior prom?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question. Do you remember what he said?”

She reached into her bag, pulled out a lip balm and rolled it across her lips. Logan was thankful he was driving and only caught a glimpse of what she was doing. He had a soft spot for her mouth, especially for the things it could do to him.

“My dad asked you what your intentions were with his daughter. Doesn’t every dad ask that?”

“Maybe in old movies, they do. My point is that your dad is an old-fashioned guy. And that’s part of what I love about him. He’s going to want to know if I’m accepting my responsibility. And I told you I’m willing to do that.”

“Logan. You dumped me three months ago.” She turned sideways in her seat and confronted him. “Dumped me.”

He didn’t want to feel remorseful about ending things with Julia, but he was starting to. Even though he was also certain that they wouldn’t have made it through the summer. Julia would’ve gotten flighty. She would’ve started doing the things that made him question whether she wanted to be with him, and he never handled that well. “But that was before the baby.”

“Precisely the reason this won’t work. A baby is not a reason to be together. And I’m not going to be with some man who didn’t want me three months ago, just because he’s worried about what my dad might think.”

“A child deserves two parents.” It bothered him to hear his voice crack like that. A few words and the pain of losing his dad returned to the center of his chest, just as it had the night before.

After all these years, it hadn't gotten easier; there were merely longer stretches of time when he could focus on other things. It was hard enough to think about how difficult it'd been on his mom to shoulder the responsibility of three boys, a mortgage and law school. It was even more difficult to recall the promise he'd made at the age of twelve, to his father, his hero, as he slipped away. Don't worry. I'll be the man of the house. I'll take care of Mom and my brothers. "I have to accept my responsibility. I owe you that much, and I won't allow your dad to think anything less."

Logan pulled up to the curb out in front of the Keyeses' house. The reporters were parking their vans and cars. They'd be descending on them in no time. "We have to make a run for it, Jules. Now."

She gathered her things. Logan hopped out of the car and hurried around to Julia's side. They squeezed past the reporters, walking upstream against a rush of people coming at them. The obnoxious man with the big camera elbowed his way next to Julia, butting into her with his shoulder. The woman behind him pushed ahead. Too many people. On a narrow sidewalk flanked by parked cars and azalea bushes.

Julia stumbled. Her fingers splayed to brace her fall. Her purse flew out of her hand. Muscle memory took over. Logan lunged like an outfielder going for the ball. He curled his arm around Julia, pulling her into him. Everyone came to an abrupt stop.

"Are you okay?" he gasped. Adrenaline surged through his veins. That was too close. She could've been hurt. The baby

could've been hurt.

She shook like a leaf, telling him exactly how rattled she was. "I'm okay."

"Don't move." He plucked her purse from the sidewalk and handed it to her. Turning back, he positioned himself directly between Julia and the reporters. He spread his arms wide. If they were going to come another step closer to her, they'd have to go through him. He set his sights on the reckless cameraman. "If you come within fifty feet of her again, you're going to be a very unhappy guy." More like you're going to be in traction.

The man puffed out his chest. "Are you threatening me? The sidewalk is a public right-of-way. We have the right to ask questions."

If only there weren't so many cameras trained on him. Two minutes and this guy would know not to get in Julia's face again. Reluctantly, Logan lowered his arms. He hated to do it, but he had to back down or this would escalate. He couldn't manage to unclench his balled fists, though. "Why don't you show some decorum? We're here for a wedding."

"Yesterday she was linked with one of the biggest stars in Hollywood, and now she's at her sister's wedding with her old boyfriend, one of the most successful athletes of the last decade. You can't blame us for wanting to know what's going on."

"Julia, just tell us if you dumped Derek for Logan and we'll leave you alone," one reporter shouted.

"Yeah. Just tell us," another voice chimed in. "Are you

cheating on Derek? Is that why he's not with you for your sister's wedding?"

Oh hell no. Cheating? With him? Steam was about to pour out of Logan's ears. He turned back to Julia. The color had been sapped from her face. She looked so defenseless, not at all the self-assured woman he knew. All he could think about was the other helpless person in the middle of this—the baby. God, he'd been an ass last night. Julia was stuck at the center of two crises—Derek and the pregnancy—and he'd let his ego get in the way. The question of paternity was painful for him, but she had to live with much more. He did an abrupt about-face. "Julia and I are together. We're a couple. There's nothing with Derek."

For a second, everyone shut up. Then came a single question. "Is it serious?"

He had to act. And he had to say yes. What kind of man says he isn't serious about the woman he got pregnant? Once the baby news got out, that would be the media's logical assumption. "Yes. It's serious. Now leave us alone, please. Her sister is getting married and the family would like some peace."

"Give us a kiss for the cameras first," one of the reporters said. "So we know it's real."

"Don't push it," left Logan's lips before he realized what he was saying. He couldn't help it. Telling the press no was his gut instinct. And a kiss? As if his feelings weren't confused enough. Not that he didn't want to kiss her. He'd spent a good deal of time in her parents' living room yesterday wishing he could do

exactly that. Before things got complicated. Again.

The reporters complained and grumbled. Just a kiss and we're out of here.

He was about to tell them to forget it when delicate fingers slipped into his hand. Julia. He turned. A sweet smile crossed her face. The color had returned to her cheeks. Although by the way she was now gripping his hand, he was fairly certain the flush was anger, not acquiescence.

"If you guys promise to let my sister get married in peace, you can have your kiss. But you have to promise." The words were for the reporters, but she directed them at Logan. Her lips—the lips he'd fixated on so many times, were waiting right there for him. Pouty and plump.

We promise.

He didn't risk waiting another second, threading his arm around her waist. He witnessed the graceful closing of her eyes and took that as his cue to do the same, to shut out the press and tune out everything around them. When it was Julia and him, all alone, things could be right. It was the rest of the world that made things complicated. Her lips sweetly brushed his—a hint of warmth and sugar, enough to make the edges of his resolve melt and trickle away.

Pressing against her, he felt the newness between them. There was no visible baby bump yet, but there was undoubtedly something new there—a slight, firm protrusion of her belly. That hadn't been there at the beginning of the summer. New life. Was

the baby his? Could it bring Julia back to him? Could it bring him back to Julia? Could he really get past that feeling that things would never be right between them?

Just like that, Julia ended the kiss and stepped away, turning toward the house. There was no sentiment, no moment of recognition for what had happened between them.

Logan cleared his throat, trying to conceal how disoriented he was. He was as thrown for a loop by her choice of tactics with the media as he was by his own. Julia, and that kiss, had turned his thinking upside down. “There you go, guys. I expect you to hold up your end of the deal.” He turned to Julia and grasped her elbow to usher her ahead, but she stood frozen on the sidewalk. He caught the surprise on her face as she stared ahead at her parents’ front porch. He followed her line of sight. The whole family was standing there—Mr. and Mrs. Keys, Tracy and Carter. Judging by their expressions, they’d heard—and seen—it all.

There were car doors closing and engines starting behind him. Probably the vultures on their way to the closest Wi-Fi hotspot to break the news. Or in reality, his little white lie.

“Tell me you didn’t just start what I think you did,” Julia muttered under her breath, smiling and waving at her parents.

Logan adopted the same phony grin and began walking up the sidewalk, squeezing Julia’s hand.

“Tell me you didn’t just do what I think you did. A kiss?”

“What about you? It’s serious?”

His pulse was thumping, but he was sure he'd done the right thing. Mostly sure, at least. "I didn't have a choice," he mumbled. "Somebody was going to get hurt. You were going to get hurt. I had to make them go away. And you're worried about ruining your sister's wedding. That was going to ruin your sister's wedding."

Four

Tracy wasted no time letting her opinion be known. "Nice job making my big weekend all about you." She whipped around and stormed into the house.

Logan grimaced and shrugged, apparently at a loss for words. Julia wasn't doing much better. She was too busy trying to get her bearings after the kiss.

We're together?

This was a bad idea.

Fake romance or real, there would be no opening of those old wounds.

And yet here she was, holding Logan's hand, scaling the stairs to the wraparound porch and filing inside her parents' house. Logan closed the door after her, while her father clapped him on the shoulder.

The grin on her dad's face was as wide as the beach at low tide. "Sounds like I'll be marrying off a second daughter soon. Julia's mother and I had always hoped this day would come."

Married? Good God, what was it with the men in Julia's life assuming marriage was the next logical step? "Dad, isn't that a

little presumptuous?”

“The man said serious. What else am I to presume?”

“We’re so happy, Jules. We’ve always thought Logan was the only one for you.” Her mother’s ability to radiate warmth and happiness made everything worse. How would her parents feel when she told them her secret on Sunday? Would they only be happy for her if Logan was indeed the dad? Precisely the reason she didn’t want a paternity test. She didn’t want her baby to be judged because of who his or her father might be. It was such an old-fashioned fixation, anyway. She could be a mom on her own, with no need for a man. The baby was Julia’s, and that was all anyone needed to know.

Julia sucked in a deep breath, not knowing what to say. Logan had put them in a horrible position. And admittedly, Julia had probably made it worse with the kiss, but the press had said they’d go away. She wanted that insurance. Still, playing fast and loose with the truth... Julia might be an actress, but she sucked at lying. “Logan and I aren’t together. He just said that to make the press go away.”

“I knew it!” Tracy exclaimed, breaking her momentary silence. “At least Logan cared enough about me to do something about the problem.” She shot Julia a pointed stare. “Unlike my sister.”

“What about the kiss? That’s what really made them go away.”

Logan nodded in agreement. “True. The kiss was definitely Julia’s idea.”

Don't remind me.

"The kiss was fake?" Her mother's voice was rife with distress, just as it had been the day before when this all started. "No. It couldn't have been. It was so sweet. It looked real."

I bet. Julia still felt that kiss all over every inch of her body. Damn Logan and his resolve-destroying lips. "It was just what they asked for. A kiss for the cameras. Nothing else. I am a halfway decent actress, you know."

Julia had thought she'd have to fake her way through it, that she was still too mad at Logan for the way he'd treated her. That wasn't the way it had gone at all. The second his lips fell on hers, her body cast aside any hurt feelings and went for it. Her traitorous mouth knew exactly what to do, and sought his warmth and touch, his impossibly tender kiss. Her body knew how perfectly they fit together, physically at least, and was all too eager to find a way for them to squeeze three months of lost time into a few short heartbeats.

Logan stepped forward. "Actually, it's not entirely true that Julia and I aren't together."

If Julia could've clamped her hand over Logan's mouth and make it look like an accident, she would have. Tracy threw up her hands, stomped once on the hardwood floor with her jeweled beachcomber sandal and began pacing the room. "Which is it? Will you two get your act together so we can go back to enjoying my wedding week?"

And to think that earlier today, Julia's big concern had been

shades of pink frosting. Now she was far more worried about shades of red. Namely the various hues of crimson coloring her sister's face. Volcano Tracy was about to blow.

"I spent the last six months worrying about everything that could go wrong," Tracy continued, circling the room. "Would the church put us down for the wrong date? Would I find the perfect dress? Would the caterer serve fish instead of chicken? I never imagined that the person who would ruin it would be my own sister. You just can't let me have the spotlight. You have to create all of this drama. You can't live without it, can you?"

Julia's father stuffed his hands into the pockets of his flat-front khakis. "Now wait a minute, Trace. We're just having a conversation. Your mother and I would like to know what exactly is going on with Logan and Julia."

Yeah, Dad. Get in line.

"Julia and I had a long talk last night about..." Logan started, looking over to Julia as if he was waiting for her to say that now was a good time to come out with the baby news, which it absolutely was not.

Julia felt as though she was going to be sick. She tried to send him direct messages with her eyes. One word and I'll never speak to you again.

"Julia and I had a long talk about things," Logan finished, scratching his head. "No one should put the idea of Julia and me, together, out of the realm of possibility."

Julia would've let out a massive sigh of relief about the baby

secret still being under wraps if she weren't so annoyed. The two of them together was out of all realms. She'd wasted enough of her life on men who didn't love her.

The smirk on Tracy's face showed zero amusement. She wagged her finger in the air. "Oh no. I'm calling BS on this. Jules, you told me you two were done. And with good reason, remember? I didn't spend all those hours on the phone listening to you cry for nothing."

Tracy had indeed clocked a lot of time listening to her sob into the phone. She knew Julia and Logan's long history, the one that had taken its first horrible turn when Julia broke up with Logan before they both went off to college. Tracy had listened to Julia complain year after year about the women Logan was linked to in the tabloids—always models, always stunning and perfect, one of them even becoming his fiancée for a short time. Even though his engagement hadn't lasted, it ate at Julia like crazy, and Tracy had to suffer right along with her sister. Tracy knew exactly how dysfunctional they were together.

"Tracy Jean. I don't know why you'd be so rude to your sister," their mother said.

"Come on, hon." Carter walked up behind Tracy and set his hands on her shoulders. "Why don't you and I go in the kitchen and get a nice, cold drink?"

Tracy shrugged her way out of Carter's grip. "Oh, please. I love you, but you don't see what's going on, and you're yet another person who thinks Logan can do no wrong. And Mom, don't even

start with rude. All I'm saying is that Julia and Logan have zero business being together. That ship has sailed. I mean, seriously, Jules? After what happened after the reunion?"

Well, then. Was Tracy about to air Julia's dirty laundry in front of their parents? Julia's mind raced for diversion tactics. If only an earthquake could hit the coast of North Carolina right now. Or a hurricane, at least.

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