

PREGNANT BY THE MAVERICK MILLIONAIRE

Joss Wood



Desire[™]

Joss Wood
Pregnant By The
Maverick Millionaire
Серия «Mills & Boon Desire»
Серия «From Mavericks
to Married», книга 2

Аннотация

When a one-night stand leads to a life-altering little surprise...Her profession might be matchmaking but businesswoman Brodie Stewart isn't interested in finding a husband. What she wants is sexy Mavericks CEO Kade Webb. Happily, the ex-hockey player is all in for a no-strings night of fun. Yet a few weeks later when Brodie realizes her flu is actually morning sickness, Kade is adamant that they raise their baby together. Brodie barely survived heartbreak before. Falling in love can't be part of their deal. But she has a sneaking suspicion her Mavericks baby daddy is forming a plan of his own....

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“We can’t be both friends and lovers, Kade!” Brodie protested.

“We can be anything we damn well want,” Kade replied. “But for now, why don’t we try to be friends first, figure out how we’re going to be parents together without complicating it with sex?”

He confused and bedazzled her, Brodie admitted. She couldn’t keep up with him. She felt like she was being maneuvered into a corner, pushed there by the force of his will. “I don’t know! I need to think.”

Kade smiled, stepped back and placed his hands into the pockets of his khaki shorts. “You can think all you want, Brodie, but it isn’t going to change a damn thing. I’m going to be around whether you like it or not.” He ducked his head and dropped a kiss on her temple.

“You might as well get used to it,” he murmured into her ear.

Pregnant by the Maverick Millionaire is part of the series **From Mavericks to Married**—Three superfine hockey players finally meet their matches!

Pregnant by the Maverick Millionaire

Joss Wood



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JOSS WOOD'S passion for putting black letters on a white screen is matched only by her love of books and travelling (especially to the wild places of southern Africa) and, possibly, by her hatred of ironing and making school lunches.

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One

Funny.

Built.

Sexy.

Smart. So, so, smart.

Courteous, hot, confident.

He was the entire package, a gorgeous combination of everything any woman would ever want or need for a flash-in-the-pan encounter. That being said, Brodie Stewart knew there were at least a billion women in the world who would slap her senseless for what she was about to do and she didn't blame them.

"Brodie? Did you hear me? I asked if you want to come upstairs," Kade whispered into her ear, his hand on her rib cage, his thumb rubbing the underside of her right breast.

She licked her lips and tasted him on her tongue, inhaled the citrus and spice of his soap-scented skin and tipped her head sideways to allow his lips to explore the cords of her neck. Man, he was good at this, Brodie thought.

She should step away, she should stop this...

She'd been saying the same thing for three weeks. She shouldn't have waited for Kade every early morning on the

running trail, shouldn't have felt the butterflies in her stomach when he loped toward her, a six-foot-plus slab of celebrity muscle. She shouldn't have laughed at his jokes, responded to his gentle flirting. And she certainly shouldn't have accepted his offer to return to his place for a lazy cup of Saturday morning coffee/sex after their seven-mile loop around Stanley Park.

As much as she wanted to know what that cocky, mobile mouth could do, she definitely should not have kissed him.

She'd thought she had it all worked out, had convinced herself she could handle this, him. It wasn't like she hadn't had sex since Jay. There had been a few guys—okay, two—since the accident a decade ago. On paper, Kade was perfect. The ex-professional ice hockey player, now second in charge of the Vancouver Mavericks, was resolutely single. Proudly unavailable and, unlike most females of a certain age, Brodie had no desire to change him. In fact, one of the reasons she'd said yes to his offer for coffee was because she knew exactly what he wanted and it wasn't a happily-ever-after with her.

Okay, it had been a while and she was out of practice, but why, oh, dear Lord why, couldn't she get past her hang-ups and have a quick tumble with the gorgeous, very practiced Kade Webb?

Maybe it was because something about him resonated with her, because he was more than a pretty package. Because his kisses were deep and compelling and made her quiver with more than a quick physical connection. He reminded her of love, of intimacy, of emotional connections.

She really didn't want the reminder.

Brodie peeled herself off Kade's wide chest and dropped a quick so-sorry kiss on his chin, her lips brushing the golden stubble on his jaw. She rolled off the leather couch, stood up and walked over to the floor-to-ceiling folding doors leading to an expansive balcony. Brodie placed her hand on the cool glass. From this penthouse loft downtown he had the most amazing view of False Creek and the Granville and Burrard bridges. It was a big-bucks view and absolutely fabulous. She took it in...and gave herself time to form a response to his question.

Reluctantly Brodie turned and placed her hands behind her butt, leaning against the glass. Her heart and libido wanted to return to his embrace, trace those long, hard muscles, taste his naturally olive-shaded skin, shove her hands into his loose, surfer-boy blond hair, watch those brown eyes deepen to black as passion swept him away. But her brain was firmly in charge and it was telling her to run, as far and as fast as she could, before she found herself in a situation that was out of her control.

God, he was going to think she was a tease, that she was playing him. She wasn't, not really. She was just protecting herself.

Emotionally. Psychically. In all the ways she could.

Brodie felt his eyes on her but stared down at her sneakers, wishing she was wearing more than a tight hoodie and running tights. She knew he was waiting for an explanation for her blowing hot and cold, for kissing him senseless and then backing

away. She couldn't tell him—this man she'd jogged with, who knew nothing more about her than her name and that she liked to run—that even though she was crazy horny, the idea of sex, with him, reminded her of intimacy and intimacy scared the skin off her.

He was supposed to be a fun time, a quick thing but, dammit, Kade Webb had stirred up emotions she thought were long dead. Of all the men in Vancouver, why him? He was such a cliché—handsome, wealthy, charming, successful. In Jane Austen's world he would've been called a rake and three hundred years later the moniker still suited him well.

Brodie sighed, wishing she'd played this differently. Everyone knew what a fitness fanatic he was, how fast he ran, and it was common knowledge that he ran most mornings in Stanley Park. She'd wanted to see if she could, in any way, keep up with him. Instead of keeping pace with him at the crack of dawn, she should've hung back and kept her distance. At first he'd been amused with her idea that she could match his long-legged stride, but she'd run track in college. She had speed and stamina on her side. When he realized he couldn't shake her he started bantering with her. Many runs and many conversations led to this morning's invitation for coffee/sex.

She'd enjoyed those random conversations so much she'd frequently forgotten she was jogging with the city's most elusive bachelor. To her, he was just a guy with a wicked sense of humor, a sharp brain and, admittedly, a very sexy body. Running

alongside him had certainly not been a hardship. She'd actually taken pleasure in his appreciation of her.

So much so that she'd thought she was strong enough, brave enough, to have a casual encounter on a Saturday morning as any other confident, sophisticated, modern woman would. Yeah. Right.

"You've changed your mind, haven't you?" His voice was as rich as the sunbeams dancing across the wooden floor. Her eyes flew up to meet his and, to her relief, she didn't see any anger in his expression, just regret.

"I'm so sorry. I thought I could." Brodie lifted her hands in an I-don't-know-what-happened gesture.

"Was it me? Did I do something you didn't like?"

Aw...

Brodie blushed. "No, you're fabulous. God, you must know you kiss really well and I'm sure..." Her blush deepened. "I'm sure you do everything well."

Kade pushed himself into a sitting position on the couch and placed his ankle on his knee. He leaned back and the muscles in his big arms flexed as he linked his hands behind his head, his expensive running shirt pulling tight across his broad chest. She could see the ridges of his stomach and knew the fabric covered a perfect six-pack of sexy-as-sin muscles.

Stop thinking about his body, his stomach, about those hard thighs...

"Maybe you'd feel more at ease if I tell you you're in control

here. You say no—to anything, at any point—and I’ll back off,” Kade quietly stated.

This was a prime example of why she was attracted to him. Beyond the charm, beneath the sexy face and the scorching body, was the man she suspected the public never saw; someone who was thoughtful enough to put her at ease. Someone who could quiet her fears, who could make her consider casting off a protective layer or two.

Thoughtful Kade reminded her of Jay, which reminded her of the person she’d been before her life had been turned inside out. The open, happy, sunny girl who’d loved life with a vengeance. A young woman who had the world at her feet.

That was what scared her most about being with him. He made her remember who she’d been before she wasn’t that person anymore.

Sex she could handle, but she was terrified of feeling good, contented. She couldn’t deal with happiness.

Not when she knew how quickly it could be ripped away.

Brodie bit her lip and lifted her hands in the air. She saw a hint of frustration pass across Kade’s face.

“Okay, then I really don’t understand. You seemed to be as into me as I am into you.”

Brodie scratched the back of her neck. “Yeah, I’m a mess. It’s difficult to explain but trust me when I tell you it’s all me and not you.”

Kade nodded. “Oh, I know it’s all you ’cause if I had anything

to do with it then you'd be naked and panting right now."

Well, there wasn't a hell of a lot to say to that. She should just go. "This was a very bad decision on my part." Brodie moved away from the window and clasped her hands behind her back. "I'm really sorry to blow hot and cold."

Kade stood up and raked his fingers through his hair. "No worries. It's not the end of the world."

She was sure it wasn't, not for him. He'd had a variety of woman hanging off his arm since he was eighteen years old and new to the Mavericks. In sixteen years, that was a lot of women and a lot of hanging. With one call, one text message, he could have Brodie's replacement here in ten minutes.

So, there was an upside to this stupid scenario; she would never be one of "Webb's Women."

As she walked toward the door, Kade's phone buzzed and he picked it up off the coffee table. He swiped the screen with his thumb and frowned as he read the text message.

"Quinn and Mac are on their way up," he said.

Quinn Rayne and Mac McCaskill, Kade's best friends, his ex-teammates and current business partners. Yeah, she wasn't proud to admit that, like every other obsessed Mavericks fan, she read about their exploits in the papers and online. The women, although Kade wasn't quite as much a player as Quinn and Mac, the crazy stunts—mostly Quinn—the scandals... Quinn again. Actually, these days, it was mostly Quinn who gave the press grist for the mill.

Brodie glanced at her wristwatch. It was 7:36 a.m. on a Saturday morning. "So early?"

"Yeah, weird." Kade stood up and walked across the expansive loft to the kitchen area. He opened a huge fridge and pulled out two bottles of water. He waved one in her direction. "Want one?"

Brodie nodded and easily caught the bottle he lobbed in her direction. "Thanks." She gestured to the door. "So, I think I should go."

Kade nodded his agreement, saw she was struggling to crack the top and walked toward her. He took the bottle, opened the lid and handed it back to her. "There you go."

"Thanks," Brodie said and gestured to the couch. "Sorry, you know...about that."

Kade's expression was pure speculation. "Maybe one day you'll tell me why." They heard a clatter of footsteps outside the door. "My boys are here."

"I'll get out of your way."

Kade moved past her and opened the door to his friends. Brodie opened her mouth to say a quick hello, but her words died at the looks on their faces. They pushed past her to flank Kade, looking pale. Their eyes were rimmed with red.

"What's wrong?" Kade demanded, his voice harsh.

Brodie watched as they each put a hand on Kade's shoulders. Her stomach plummeted to the floor at their expressions; she recognized them instantly. They were the bearers of bad news, the harbingers of doom. They were going to tell him his life was

about to do a 180.

She'd seen the same expression on her aunt's face when Poppy had told her that her parents, her best friend, Chelsea, and her old friend but new boyfriend Jay were dead, along with six other people, in a nightmarish accident. They'd been on their way to a dinner to celebrate her twentieth birthday and apparently life had thought being the lone survivor of a multivehicle crash was a suitable gift.

Why was I left behind?

"Tell. Me." Kade's snap brought her back to his hall, to the three men looking like the ground was shifting under their feet.

"Kade, Vernon had a heart attack this morning," Quinn said, his words stilted. "He didn't make it, bud."

She saw the flash of denial on Kade's face, the disbelief, and she quietly slipped out the door. Grief was an intensely personal and private emotion and the last thing he needed was a stranger in his space, in his home. Besides, she was still dealing with her own sorrow, still working through losing her own family, her closest friend and the man whom she'd thought she'd marry.

Sorry, Kade, she thought. So, so sorry. A long time ago she'd had a brave heart and a free spirit and she hoped the news of his friend's death wouldn't change the core of who he was, like the same kind of news had changed her.

But life had changed her and she wasn't that free-spirited girl anymore. She walked back into her real life knowing she certainly wasn't the type of woman who could handle sexy,

bachelor millionaires tempting her to walk on the wild side.

Six months later

Brodie typed her client's answer into her tablet, hit Enter and looked up. Dammit, she thought, instantly recognizing the interest in his eyes. This appointment was already running overtime and she really didn't want to fend off his advances.

This was one downside to dealing with male clients in her matchmaking business. Because she was reasonably attractive they thought they would skip the sometimes tedious process of finding a mate and go straight for her.

"What type of woman are you looking for?" she asked, deliberately playing with the massive-but-fake emerald-and-diamond monstrosity on the ring finger of her left hand.

"Actually, I was going to say a tiny blonde with a nice figure but I'm open to other possibilities. Maybe someone who looks like you...who is you. I have tickets for the opera. Do you like opera?"

Ack. She hated opera and she didn't date her clients. Ever. She didn't date at all. Brodie sent him a tight smile and lifted her hand to show him her ring. "I'm flattered but I'm engaged. Tom is a special ops soldier, currently overseas."

Last week Tom had been Mike and he'd been an ace detective. The week before he'd been Jace and a white-water adventurer. What could she say? She liked variety in her fake fiancés.

Brodie took down the rest of his information, ignored his smooth attempts to flirt with her despite her engagement to Tom

and insisted on paying for coffee. She watched as he left the café and climbed into a low-slung Japanese sports car. When she was certain he was out of view, she dropped her head to the table and gently banged her forehead.

“Another one asking for a date?” Jan, the owner of the coffee shop, dropped into the chair across from Brodie and patted her head. Despite Brodie trying to keep her distance from the ebullient older woman, Jan had, somehow, become her friend. She rarely confided in anybody—talking about stuff and discussing the past changed nothing, so what was the point?—but Jan didn’t let it bother her. Like her great-aunt Poppy, Jan nagged Brodie to open up on a fairly regular basis.

Funny, Brodie had talked more to Kade in three weeks than she had to anybody—Jan and Poppy included—for the last decade.

Well, that thought had barreled in from nowhere. Brodie rarely, if ever, thought about Kade Webb during daylight hours. Memories of him, his kiss, his hard body under her hands, were little gifts she gave to herself at night, in the comfort of the dark.

“Being asked out on dates is an occupational hazard.” Brodie stretched out her spine and rolled her head on her shoulders in an effort to work out the kinks.

Jan pushed a pretty pink plate holding a chocolate chip cookie across the table. “Maybe this will make you feel better.”

It would, but Brodie knew there was something other than sympathy behind Jan’s fat-and-sugar-laden gesture. “What do

you want?”

“My cousin is in her thirties and is open to using a matchmaker. I suggested you.”

Brodie scowled at her friend, but she couldn't stop herself from breaking off the corner of the cookie and lifting it to her mouth. Flavors exploded on her tongue and she closed her eyes in ecstasy. “Better than sex, I swear.”

“Honey, if my cookies are better than sex, then you ain't doing it right,” Jan replied, her voice tart. She leaned forward, her bright blue eyes inquisitive. “You having sex you haven't told me about, Brodie?”

She wished. The closest she'd come to sex was Kade Webb's hot kiss six months ago, but sex itself? She thought back. Three or so years?

She was pathetic.

After taking another bite of the cookie, Brodie pulled her thoughts from her brief encounter with the CEO of the Mavericks professional ice hockey team and narrowed her eyes at her friend. “You know I only take men as my clients, Jan.”

“Which is a stupid idea. You are halving your market,” Jan said, her business sense offended. But Brodie's business model worked; Brodie dealt with men, while her associate Colin only had women clients. They pooled their databases and office resources. As a result, they were doing okay. In the hectic twenty-first century—the age of the internet, icky diseases and idiots—singles wanted help wading through the dating cesspool.

“Women are too emotional, too picky and too needy. Too much drama,” Brodie told Jan. Again.

Brodie snapped off another piece of cookie and wrinkled her nose when she realized she’d eaten most of it. She was a sucker for chocolate. And cookies. Thank the Lord she had a fast metabolism. She still ran every day, but never in the morning.

“The men don’t really want to date me. They just like the attention I pay them. They tend to forget they are paying me to pay attention. And I know far too much about them too soon.”

An alert on her tablet told her she’d received a new email. Jan pushed herself to her feet. “I’ll let you get back to work. Do you want another cup of coffee?”

Brodie already had caffeine-filled veins but why should that matter? “Please.”

She swiped her finger across her tablet and accessed her inbox. She’d received quite a few messages when she’d been dealing with Mr. Suave but only one made her pulse accelerate.

Your donation to the auction at the Mavericks’ Charity Ball filled the subject line and all the moisture in her mouth disappeared. Jeez, she’d had a brief encounter with Kade months ago, shouldn’t she have forgotten about him by now?

Unfortunately Kade wasn’t the type of man who was easily forgotten. And, if she had to be truthful, she still missed those early-morning runs when it seemed like they had the park to themselves. She missed the way her heart kicked up when she saw him, missed the way he pushed her to run faster, train harder.

She'd enjoyed him, enjoyed that time with him, more than she should have.

Brodie rubbed her hands over her face and gave herself a mental slap. She was almost thirty, a successful business owner and matchmaker to some of the sharpest, richest, most successful bachelors in the city. She should not be thinking about the sharpest, richest, best-looking bachelor in the city.

Pathetic squared. Brodie shook her head at her ridiculousness and opened the email.

Dear Ms. Stewart,

On behalf of the Chief Executive Officer of the Vancouver Mavericks, Kade Webb, may I extend our heartfelt gratitude for your donation to the Mavericks' auction to be held on June 19.

Attached is your invitation to a luncheon my department is hosting for our valued sponsors earlier on the day. You are most welcome to attend the ball and charity auction; the cost and details are attached.

We look forward to your presence at lunch on the 19 of June. Please see the attached document for the venue and time.

Yours,

Wren Bayliss

Public Relations Director

Vancouver Mavericks

Thanks but, no thanks. She wouldn't be attending. Donating to the charity auction had been Colin's idea and he could attend the luncheon and ball on their behalf. She wasn't even sure donating

their services to the charity auction would raise any money... What bachelor or bachelorette would admit to wanting to use a matchmaker in a room full of their friends and colleagues? Their business was based on discretion and her clients came to her, mostly, via word of mouth. But Wren, and Colin, had dismissed Brodie's concerns. They seemed to think sisters, brothers and friends would bid on their siblings' or friends' behalf. Besides, the guest could bid silently via cell phone as well, so anonymity, if it was required, would be assured.

Thanks to the competition of online matchmaking Colin was convinced they needed to cement their position as matchmakers to the elite of Vancouver society and they needed to network more and foster relationships. Being part of the Mavericks' silent auction was a huge coup and would be excellent direct advertising to their target group. Since marketing and PR was Colin's forte, she'd told him he could represent them at the luncheon.

Yes, a part of her reluctance was the fact there was a chance Kade would be at the function. Months might've passed but she was still embarrassed down to her two-inch designer heels. She'd acted like a ditzy virgin who said yes but meant no. God! How could she be in the same room with him without wanting to jump him—the man still fueled her sexual fantasies—but also wanting to hide under the table?

Her computer dinged again and she looked at the new message that popped into her inbox.

Hey, Brodes,

I presume you received an invite to attend the sponsor's lunch hosted by the Mavericks? I can't attend. Kay and I are seeing a fertility specialist that day. Can you go and do the thing for us both?

Thanks,

Col

Brodie groaned.

Please let Kade not be there, she prayed.

Two

“Whose stupid idea was this?”

Kade Webb scowled at his two best friends and rolled his shoulders under his suit jacket, wishing he was anywhere but in the crowded, over-perfumed bar area of Taste, one of the best restaurants in Vancouver. He'd spent most of last night reading P&L statements and had spent a long, tedious morning with Josh Logan's hard-ass agent negotiating a deal to buy the hotshot wing, and all he wanted was to plant himself behind his messy desk and make a dent in his paperwork. He was trying to finalize their—his, Mac's and Quinn's—partnership with old man Bayliss, Wren's grandfather, so the four of them could make a solid counteroffer to buy the Mavericks franchise before Vernon's widow sold it to Boris Chenko, a Russian billionaire who owned a string of now generic sports franchises.

Kade didn't have the time to socialize. To play nice.

What he really wanted, despite it only being noon, was a cold beer, a long shower and some hot sex. Or, to save time, some

long, hot sex in a shower. Since he hadn't had time to date lately the hot sex would have to be a solo act later—how sad, too bad—but really, he'd give it all up, sex included, for a solid eight hours of sleep.

He was burning the candle at both ends and somewhere in the middle, as well.

“Will you please take that scowl off your face?”

Kade looked down into the face of his newly appointed director of public relations and wondered, for the hundredth time, why there was no sexual attraction between him and Wren. She was gorgeous, slim, vivacious and smart, but she didn't rock his boat. He didn't rock hers, either. They were friends, just like he was with Mac's new fiancée, Rory, and for the first time in Kade's life he was enjoying uncomplicated female relationships.

That being said, he still wouldn't say no to some uncomplicated sex.

“Kade, concentrate!” Wren slammed her elbow into his side and he pulled his attention back to business.

“Your guests of honor, the main sponsors, should be arriving any minute and you need to pay them some special attention,” Wren insisted, a tiny foot tapping her only indication of nervousness.

“Who are they again?”

Frustration flashed in Wren's blue eyes and Kade held up his hands in apology. “Wren, I've been dealing with player negotiations and your grandfather as our new partner, and

fending off Myra's demands for us to make a counteroffer. Sponsors for this ball haven't been high on my priority list."

"Did you read any of the memos I sent you?"

Kade shrugged. "Sorry, no. But you can tell me now and I'll remember."

He had a phenomenal memory. It was a skill he acquired as a child hopping from town to town and school to school following the whims of his artist father. Within a day of arriving in a new place, he'd find a map and memorize the street names so he'd know exactly where he was at all times. He'd felt emotionally lost so often that being physically lost was going a step too far. His memory helped him catch up with schoolwork and remember the names of teachers and potential friends, so he could ease his way through another set of new experiences.

Wren ran through the list of the bigger donations and then said, "The Forde Gallery donated one of your father's paintings, a small watercolor but pretty."

Jeez, he remembered when his father had to swap paintings for food or gas or rent money. Even his small paintings now went for ten grand or more... It was a hell of a donation.

"We have dinners on yachts, holidays, jewelry, the usual bits and pieces businesses donate. The item that will be the most fun and will get the crowd buzzing is the matchmaking service..."

"The what?"

"Brodie Stewart and Colin Jones are providing their matchmaking services. The winners, one girl and one guy, will

be matched up and sent on three dates to find a potential mate. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Brodie Stewart? His Brodie? The girl who'd kissed like a dream but who'd bailed on him before they got to the bedroom?

"It sounds like hell." Kade managed to utter the response even though his mind was filled with memories of Brodie, dark hair spilling over her shoulders as she lay against his chest, bright green eyes languid and dreamy after one spectacular hot, wet kiss. He dimly recalled her saying something about her having her own business but why did he think she was in consulting?

"Is she attending this lunch?" Kade asked and hoped Wren, or his friends, didn't hear the note of excitement in his voice.

"You know this Brodie person?" Quinn demanded. And there was the problem with being friends with someone for so damn long. There was little you could get past them.

"Not really," Kade replied, sounding bored.

"Let me give you a hint about your boss, Wren," Mac stated, his arm around Rory's waist. "When he lies he always sounds disinterested, faraway, detached."

Unfortunately, being in love hadn't affected Mac's observational skills and he was as sharp as ever. "Shut the hell up, McCaskill, you have no idea what you are talking about. I met Brodie once, a while ago."

"Why didn't you tell us about her?" Quinn demanded, unsatisfied.

"Do you tell me about the women you meet?" Kade

responded.

Quinn thought for a moment before grinning. “Pretty much, yeah. And if I don’t tell you, then the press will.”

Kade pulled a face. The society pages of their local papers and many internet sites devoted far too much time speculating about their love lives. Mac had provided a break for Kade and Quinn as the media devoured the news that he was settling down with the lovely Rory, but recently they’d restarted their probing inquiries about the state of his and Quinn’s love lives. Many of the papers hinted, or outright demanded, it was time the other two “Maverick-teers” followed Mac’s example.

Kade felt that he would rather kiss an Amazonian dart frog.

Only Mac and Quinn knew his past, knew about his unconventional upbringing as the son of a mostly itinerant artist who dragged him from place to place and town to town on a whim. They understood his need to feel financially secure and because they worked together, invested together and always stuck together, the three of them, along with Wren’s grandfather, were in the position to buy their beloved hockey team, the Vancouver Mavericks.

Yeah, he might be, along with Quinn, a wealthy, eligible and elusive bachelor, but he had every intention of staying that way. Legalities and partnership agreements and a million miles of red tape—and his belief in the loyalty of his friends—had allowed him to commit to his career with the Mavericks, formerly as a player and now as the CEO and, hopefully, as a future co-owner.

But a personal commitment? Hell no.

He'd learned that hard lesson as a child. As soon as he found someone to love—a dog, a friend, a teacher, a coach—his father would rip it away by packing up their lives and moving them along. Emotional involvement sent Kade backward to his powerless childhood.

He'd hated that feeling then and he loathed it now. His theory was if you didn't play in a rainstorm, then you wouldn't get hit by lightning. He made damn sure the women he dated had no expectations, that they thoroughly understood he was a here-now-gone-tomorrow type of guy. That they shouldn't expect anything from him.

Despite his up-front attitude, there were always women who thought they could change his mind so he'd still had to ease himself out of situations. Sometimes he managed it with charm, sometimes he had to be blunt, but when he sensed his lovers were becoming emotionally invested, he backed off. Way, way off.

Brodie Stewart was the only woman who'd ever turned the tables on him, who'd backed away before he could. Backed away before he'd even gotten her into bed.

“...she had all the emotional depth of a puddle!”

Kade pulled his attention back to the conversation and caught the tail end of Rory's comment. She was scowling at Quinn and he looked unrepentant, being his bad-boy self.

“Honey, I wasn't dating her for her conversational skills,” Quinn stated.

Rory shook her head and rested her chin on Mac's shoulder. "One day you are going to meet someone who you can't resist and I hope she gives you hell," Rory said, her tone and expression fierce.

"Rorks, unfortunately butt-face here claimed you before I did so I am destined to be a free spirit." Quinn put his hand on his heart, his eyes laughing.

Rory, smart girl that she was, didn't fall for Quinn's BS. Instead, she poked Quinn's stomach. "You will meet her and I will not only laugh while I watch you run around her like a headless chicken, I will encourage her to give you as much trouble as possible." She stretched past Quinn to jab Kade in the stomach. "That goes for you, too, Kade. The female population of Vancouver has spoiled you two rotten."

"I'm not complaining." Kade smiled, taking a sip of his lime-flavored water.

"Me neither," Quinn quickly agreed. He stuck his tongue in his cheek as he continued to tease Rory. "And I don't think we've been spoiled—we've been treated as per our elevated status as hockey gods."

"That just shows how moronic some women can be," Rory muttered. She looked up at Mac and narrowed her eyes. "You're very quiet, McCaskill. Got anything to say?"

Mac dropped a kiss on her forehead and another on her mouth. "Hell no! This is your argument with my friends. But, since I am taking you home and hoping to get lucky, I'll just agree with

everything you say.”

Quinn made the sound of a cracking whip and Kade rolled his eyes before he said, “Wimp.”

“You might wear the trousers but Rory picks them out,” Quinn added and immediately stepped back to lessen the impact of Mac’s big fist smacking his shoulder. “May I point out that before Rory snagged you, you were—”

“No, you absolutely may not.” Wren’s cool voice interrupted their smack talk. “Can you three please act like the responsible, smart businessmen that people—mistakenly I might add—think you are and behave yourselves? The first sponsor has arrived.”

Kade didn’t need Wren’s nod toward the ballroom to tell him Brodie had arrived. He’d felt the prickle of anticipation between his shoulder blades, felt the energy in the room change. He was super aware of her. As he slowly turned, he felt the world fade away.

She hadn’t changed, yet...she had. It had only been six months, but somehow she was a great deal more attractive than he remembered. Her dress hugged a toned body and her long black hair was now a short, feathery cap against her head. What definitely hadn’t changed was her ability to send all his blood rocketing south to a very obvious and inconvenient place.

“Well, well, well...isn’t this interesting?” Mac drawled in Kade’s ear.

“First time I’ve seen our boy gobsmacked, dude,” Quinn added. “Shut your mouth, boyo, you’re drooling.”

Kade ignored his friends. Life had unexpectedly dropped Brodie back into his realm again and he wanted what he'd always wanted every time he'd laid eyes on her: Brodie in his bed, under him, naked and legs around him...eyes begging for him to come on in.

Her perfume reached him before she did and he realized it was the same scent he remembered. It took him straight back to those early-morning runs in the park, to crisp air and the hesitant smile of the black-haired girl who waited for him by the running store and kept up with his fast pace along the seawall. He hadn't run in the park since the morning he'd heard about Vernon's death.

And kissed Brodie.

It had been an incredible kiss and the one highlight of a couple of really tough, horrible months. If only he had the memory of taking her to bed, too...

So it turned out he didn't want long, hot sex with any random woman. He wanted to make love to Brodie. Interesting.

Crazy.

And pretty damn dangerous. He wouldn't—couldn't—allow her to know the effect she had on him, how he instantly craved her and the crazy chemical reaction he was experiencing. It wasn't clever to admit she was the only woman he'd ever encountered who could thoroughly disconcert him, who could wipe every rational thought from his brain.

Okay, he was officially losing it. Maybe it was time, as Wren had suggested, he started acting like the CEO he was supposed

to be.

With anyone else, he could do it with his eyes closed. Around Brodie, he might have to put his back into it.

So here goes...

* * *

Brodie held out her hand to Kade and hoped her smile wasn't as shaky as she felt. "Kade, it's been a while."

"Brodie." Kade took her hand and she held his eyes even though her pulse skittered up her arm and straight to her belly. She met his eyes and felt her heart roll over, as it always did. She knew his eyes were a deep brown but today, against his olive complexion and dark blond hair, they glinted black.

Oh, this wasn't good. He was a sexy man. They'd kissed but that wasn't enough of a reason for her hormones to start doing their crazy dance. She looked down at their intertwined hands and could easily remember what his tanned fingers felt like on her back, his wide hand sliding over her butt, his lips on hers...

Dammit, Brodie!

Kade touched her elbow and gestured to his friends. Hot, hot and steamin'. Brodie wanted to fan herself. Quinn Rayne was the ultimate sexy bad boy, Mac McCaskill was even better looking—if that was possible—after falling in love with the attractive woman tucked into his side, and Kade...? Why, with him looking as fantastic as he did, the urge to jump him and do him on the nearest table was nearly overwhelming.

This was the problem with Kade Webb, Brodie reminded

herself. He had the ability to turn her from a woman who considered all the angles into a wild child who acted first and regretted later. She hadn't made an impulsive decision for nearly a decade and yet, around him, that was all she seemed to do! For weeks she'd met him in the park as the sun rose. Then she'd accompanied him home, kissed him senseless and been so tempted to make love to him. Around him, impulsive was her new middle name.

Stewart, start acting like the adult you are!

Immediately!

Pulling herself together, Brodie greeted Kade's friends, kissed Wren hello and looked, and sounded, like the professional she normally was.

Quinn smiled at her. Whoo boy, it was a potent grin and she could easily imagine girls falling like flies at his feet. That smile should be registered as a weapon of mass destruction, but Brodie caught the wariness in his eyes and the intelligence he hid behind his charm. "So, you're Brodie."

"I am."

"And you're a matchmaker."

"I am." Brodie tipped her head, assessing him. "Would you like me to find you someone?"

She had to smile when Quinn flushed and sent a help-me look at his friends. Since Quinn's exploits, mostly in love, kept Vancouver entertained on a weekly basis, she knew he had no problem finding a date. Finding a partner was a very different

story.

“You know, most of my clients don’t have any problems meeting women and they often date a variety of women.”

Quinn frowned. “So why do they need you?”

“Because they are dating the wrong type of women. They want to be in a relationship,” Brodie patiently explained. “Do you want to be in a relationship, Mr. Rayne?”

She was taking the circuitous route to find out what she desperately wanted to know: would Kade be bidding for her matchmaking services? The thought of matching him to any of Colin’s clients made her stomach roil. Colin’s clients were wonderful women, but Brodie thought the ick factor was a bit too high to match her fantasy man with a flesh-and-bone woman.

She’d rather pick her eyes out with a cake fork.

“Hell no! And why am I the focus of attention?” Quinn complained. “Kade is as much of a lone wolf as me!”

Brodie lifted an eyebrow in Kade’s direction, as if to say “Are you?” He immediately read her question and responded with an inscrutable smile.

Brodie looked around, her eyes falling on the honey blonde surgically attached to Mac’s side. Rory’s look was speculative, bouncing from Quinn to Kade and back again. Brodie recognized her assessing, mischievous look. This was a woman wanting to cause trouble...

Mac’s deep voice broke her train of thought. “Your hands are empty, Brodie. What would you like to drink? Wine? A soda?”

A small glass of wine couldn't hurt, could it? "I'd love a glass of Tangled Vine Chardonnay."

Rory tipped her head and looked at Quinn. "Is that the wine you brought over the other night? It was seriously yummy."

Quinn nodded. "I'll bring a case over tonight. What's for supper?"

"Risotto. Troy is joining us tonight," Rory replied.

Mac looked appalled. "We're having them for supper again? Troy I don't mind, but these two? Babe, they are like rats, if you keep feeding them, we are never going to get rid of them."

"Kade and I are the rats," Quinn told Brodie, smiling. He lifted a huge shoulder. "What can I say? She's a good cook."

Brodie looked into Mac's eyes and noticed the amusement under his fake scowl. Yeah, he looked hard-ass and a bit scary—they all did—but she could see these men shared a bond that went beyond love. It was too easy to say they loved each other, but it was more than that; there was loyalty here and support, a deep and profound desire to make sure their "brothers" were happy. She couldn't help feeling envious of their bond despite knowing she'd chosen her solitary state. She'd had friendships like that; bonds with Jay and Chels that couldn't be broken by anything except death.

She still missed them, every day. She missed the people who could finish her sentences, who got her jokes. She missed the I-know-it's-after-midnight-but-I-brought-you-pizza conversations. She missed Chelsea, missed those crazy antics

—“I’m outside your window and I have a date. Toss down your lucky belt/new shoes/red lipstick/flirty dress.”

She missed Jay, the boy who knew her inside out, the man she’d just been getting to know. His sweet kisses, his endless support, his newly acquired fascination with her body. She still missed the man she thought she’d spend the rest of her life with...

She hadn’t been able to reconnect with people on that level again. She wasn’t prepared to risk heartbreak. Having her heart dented by loss and being left behind without any emotional support sucked. It stung. It burned. It made her cautious and wary. Scared.

She was very okay with being scared. “And I’m sending you a bill for the food we buy,” Mac grumbled. “Spongers.”

“Rory’s a great cook and she likes having us around. Maybe she needs a break from you,” Quinn told Mac as he took the glass of wine Kade had ordered for her off the waiter’s tray and handed it to Brodie, ignoring Kade’s scowl. “I’ll bring the wine.”

Rory grinned. “Excellent. I love that wine.”

“Might I remind you that you won’t be able to drink it for a year or so?” Mac muttered.

Rory frowned and then her expression cleared and a small, tender smile drifted across her face. She touched her stomach and Brodie immediately caught on. It took Mac’s friends seconds longer to catch up. And, judging by Quinn’s and Kade’s stunned faces, that wasn’t news they’d been expecting. But once they realized what Mac had revealed, they swept Rory into their arms

for a long, emotional hug. Kade hugged Mac, as did Quinn, and Brodie felt tears prick her eyes at their joy for their friend. She stepped back, feeling she shouldn't be here, sharing this precious, intimate moment. She half smiled when she noticed Wren doing the same thing.

Weird that Brodie seemed to be present for some of the big, personal Maverick moments. Vernon's death, Mac's baby... She was an outsider, on the wrong side of this magical circle, so it didn't make sense that she was again in the position to hear something deeply personal. This time, at least, it was good news.

"This wasn't how we planned on telling you," Rory said, jamming her elbow into Mac's side.

Brodie looked at Rory, who had her back to Mac's chest, his big hands on her still very flat stomach. "Congratulations," she murmured.

"Yeah, huge congratulations," Kade said, before slanting a sly look at Mac. "Now you're going to have two children under your feet, Rorks."

"Ha-ha." Mac scowled.

"I know, right?" Rory replied, her voice wobbly. "I'm going to be a mommy, Kade."

"You'll be great at it," Kade assured her and tipped his head at Mac. "But he'll need some training."

"I'm not old enough to have friends who are about to be parents." Quinn clapped Mac on the shoulder and nodded to the bar. "We definitely need champagne. I'll get some."

Wren shook her head and stepped forward. “As much as I hate to break up the party we have work to do and a lunch to host.”

Quinn wrinkled his nose. “Our head girl has spoken.”

Wren threaded a hand through his arm and pulled him toward the dining area. “C’mon, brat. I’ve put you at a table where you can’t misbehave.”

Brodie felt Kade’s hand on her back and she immediately, subconsciously moved closer to him, her fingers accidentally brushing the outside of his hard thigh.

Kade tipped his head and dropped his voice so only she could hear his words. “It hasn’t gone away, has it?”

Brodie wished she could deny it, dismiss his comment, but she couldn’t lie to him. Or herself. She forced herself to look him in the eye. “No.”

His fingers pushed into her back at her reluctant admission. “So, just to be clear, we’re saying this crazy attraction is still happening?”

“Yep.” One-syllable answers were all she could manage.

“So are we going to do anything about it this time?”

Wren’s efficient voice interrupted their low, intense conversation. “Kade, you’re at the main table up front. Brodie, I’ll show you to your seat.”

Brodie gave Kade a little shrug and followed Wren into the private dining room of Taste. When she tossed a look over her shoulder, she flushed when she noticed Kade was still watching her.

And he didn't stop looking at her for the next ninety minutes.

* * *

He wanted her. The heated looks they'd exchanged over the three tables that separated them left her in no doubt of that. Jeez, it was a minor miracle the room hadn't spontaneously combusted from the sparks they were throwing at each other.

He wanted her as much as he had six months ago, possibly more. It was insane; it was exciting.

What was she going to do about it?

She knew what he wanted, to take up where they'd left off in his loft. In the ladies' room Brodie pulled a face at her reflection in the mirror above the bathroom sink and ran her wet fingers over the back of her neck, hoping to cool herself down but knowing it was a futile gesture. She was hot from the inside out and it was all Kade Webb's fault.

Every look he'd sent her, every small smile, had told her he wanted her in the most basic, biblical way possible.

She was pretty sure she'd returned his message. With interest.

Brodie sighed. Having a fling with Kade wouldn't hurt anyone. Unlike an affair with a married man it wasn't icky, immoral or dishonest. It wouldn't be embarrassing or hurtful. It wouldn't—unless she did something really stupid, like fall for the guy—be painful.

She hadn't had an affair, or sex, for a long, long time; she hadn't been naked with a man since Jared the IT guy and he was around three, or was it four, years ago? She was nearly thirty and

she was tired of dating herself.

Could she do it? Could she have a one-night stand with Kade? Was she okay with being another puck he shot into his sexual net? Brodie grimaced at her bad analogy. But could she be another of Webb's Women?

If she was looking for a relationship, and she wasn't because she was relationship-phobic, Kade would be the last person she'd be interested in. Brodie gripped the vanity and stared at the basin, thinking hard.

He was famous and she'd matched enough semifamous guys to know how much time and effort it took to date a celebrity. She couldn't think of anything worse than having your life dissected on social media platforms or in the society columns, but some women got off on it.

She hadn't considered any of this that long-ago morning when she'd agreed to coffee. Everything had moved so quickly and she'd only been thinking in terms of a couple of hours spent with him. But she had noticed that over the last six months the spotlight on Kade had become even bigger and brighter. His life was routinely dissected; his dates scrutinized. The press was relentless and easily turned a movie into a marriage proposal, a dinner into destiny.

Brodie shuddered. Yuck.

That being said, she still wanted him.

If she could go through with it this time—and that was a big if—she couldn't ignore the fact that a quick fling with Vancouver's

most eligible, slippery bachelor could have consequences. If they did do the deed and it became public knowledge, as these things tended to do with the Mavericks, it would affect her business. She had a database of clients who trusted her, who confided in her. Quite a few of them thought she was engaged, and a liaison with Kade would not inspire her clients to trust her judgment.

Men, she'd realized, were frequently a lot more romantic—or traditional—than most woman gave them credit for. They could have affairs, play the field and have one-night stands, but they wouldn't appreciate their matchmaker doing the same.

No, it was smarter and so much more sensible to ignore Kade's suggestion that they continue what they'd started. Sleeping with him probably wouldn't be as good as she imagined; she'd probably romanticized exactly how good Webb's kissing was to excuse her crazy, uninhibited behaviour when she was alone with him. No, best to keep her distance...

Good decision, Brodie thought, eyeing her reflection in the mirror. Sensible decision.

Adult decision.

Safe decision.

So why did it feel so damn wrong?

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