



# Hooked on Mack (Hooked #7)

**Author:** *Kaci Bell*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Two legal titans go head to head in a high stakes divorce case that could make or break their careers...

Larissa Montgomery, a woman with a take no prisoners attitude and fiery spirit, is assigned to represent yet another unfaithful husband.

Mack Harrington, a charismatic and optimistic lawyer, has the ability to charm a room with his good looks and warm personality.

As the case begins to heat up, these two find themselves constantly clashing, exchanging barbs and insults at every turn. But one night changes everything.

Will they be able to put their differences aside and make it work? Or will the case push them farther apart?

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

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Mack

The steam from the cup of coffee rose as I took my seat behind my mahogany desk, ready to face the day.

Ava Kennsington, my latest client, was due to arrive any minute now.

The high-stakes divorce case against her husband, Mark, promised to be an interesting one. My fingers drummed against the desk.

“Mack Harrington?” A sultry voice inquired from the doorway.

I looked up to find a woman with wavy chestnut hair and deep brown eyes. Her air of elegance screamed 'money,' even though she had none before marrying Mark.

“Mrs. Kennsington. Please, have a seat.”

“Are you going to win this for me, Mr. Harrington?” she asked, cutting straight to the point as she settled into the plush chair.

“Of course. We just need to prepare you for the preliminary appearance in front of the judge.”

“Good.” She flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Because I want everything.”

“Everything?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Absolutely everything. Mark's fortune is rightfully mine.”

“It's important to approach the case with realistic expectations. Divorce settlements can be complex, and demanding everything might not be...”

“Mack, darling,” she interrupted, leaning forward with a smirk. “I did not hire you because of your good looks and charm alone. I expect results.”

“Understood.” I sighed. “But we'll need solid evidence to support your claims and justify such demands.”

“Then find it,” she snapped, her impatience evident. “I didn't claw my way into this marriage for nothing.”

Her arrogance rubbed me the wrong way, but I had a job to do. Everyone deserves someone to fight for what's fair, even the Ava Kennsingtons of the world.

“Very well,” I replied, forcing another smile. “We'll start by gathering all relevant financial records and any proof of misconduct on your husband's part. But remember, Mrs. Kennsington, we have to play by the rules.”

“Just make sure I get what's mine.”

As Ava left my office, the weight of her demands settled on my shoulders.

I knew the case would be challenging, but her entitlement added an extra layer of tension.

Nevertheless, I was Mack Harrington—undefeated, determined, and always ready for a challenge.

I just hoped that Ava Kennsington's case wouldn't be the one to break my winning streak.

“Mack, have you seen this?” my assistant, Ellen, burst into my office, brandishing a file folder like it was a weapon. “Larissa Montgomery is representing Mark Kennsington.”

“Ah, Larissa,” I mused, leaning back in my chair and steepling my fingers. “The courtroom pit bull herself. This should be interesting.”

“Interesting?” Ellen's eyes widened. “She's ruthless, Mack. We need to be prepared.”

“Ellen, my dear, when have I ever backed down from a challenge?” I grinned. “Besides, I've always been curious about what makes her tick.”

“Remember, we're doing this for Ava, not because you want to play cat and mouse with Larissa.”

“Of course, but it's an added bonus, don't you think?”

Later that day, I met with Ava to discuss our strategy against Larissa. As usual, Ava entered my office like she owned the place.

“Mack, darling,” she purred, taking a seat across from me. “I heard about our opponent. Should I be worried?”

“Mrs. Kennsington,” I reassured her, my charm working overtime. “There's no need to worry. I've faced many tough opponents before, and Larissa Montgomery won't be any different.”

“Good, because I expect nothing but the best from you.”

“Understood. Now, let's focus on the case at hand, shall we? We need to gather solid evidence to support your claims and make the best possible argument.”

“Very well. I trust you. Don't let me down.”

“Never,” I promised, my optimism shining through.

As Ava left my office, the realness of the challenge sunk on my shoulders. Not only did I have to contend with Ava's entitlement and demands, but I also had the opportunity to face off against the enigmatic Larissa Montgomery. The stakes were high, but I was more than ready to rise to the occasion.

“Alright, team,” I declared as Ellen and the rest of my staff gathered around. “It's time to show Larissa Montgomery what Mack Harrington is made of.” We dove headfirst into our preparations. “Let's start by digging into Mark's finances. I have a hunch there's something shady going on there.”

“Already on it,” Sam, our financial expert, said, tapping away at his laptop.

“Excellent. Now, we also need to gather proof of his infidelity and any abusive behavior toward Ava.”

“Consider it done,” Jill, our investigator, added, already dialing a number on her phone. “I've got some contacts who might be able to help us out.”

“Perfect. Now, let's talk strategy. How do we throw Larissa off her game from the get-go? We need something unexpected, something she won't see coming.”

“Like what?” Sam asked, looking up from his screen.

“Think outside the box,” I urged them. “We need something that will make her

question her own tactics and give us the upper hand.”

“Maybe we could use some of her past cases against her? Show that she has a pattern of losing when faced with certain types of evidence or strategies?” Jill proposed.

“Interesting idea,” I acknowledged. “Look into it, but let's not rely solely on that. We need a multifaceted approach.”

“Got it, boss,” Ellen replied. “We'll come up with a plan that's foolproof and, more importantly, Larissa-proof.”

“Exactly.” I grinned at my team, the thrill of the challenge coursing through my veins. “This is our chance to show her what we're made of. Let's leave her speechless when we present our case in court.”

“Here's to victory,” Sam declared, raising an imaginary glass.

“Cheers to that,” I agreed, my optimism shining through. “Now let's get to work. We won't rest until we've done everything possible to win this for Ava.”

We dove into our tasks, each member of the team driven by the desire not just to win, but to outwit and outmaneuver the formidable Larissa Montgomery. The days ahead would be filled with long hours, but I knew that together, we were more than capable of rising to the occasion.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting a gentle purple glow across the city as I stood in my office, surrounded by stacks of evidence.

My fingers traced the edge of a damning photograph with a surge of confidence.

We had more than enough to build a rock-solid case against Mark Kennsington; I just

needed to piece it together perfectly.

“Alright, team, we've got infidelity, financial misconduct, and abusive behavior.”

“Exhibit A,” Ellen piped up, holding up a glossy photo of Mark cozying up with someone who was most definitely not Ava. “Caught in the act.”

“Excellent work, Ellen,” I commended her, before turning my attention to Sam. “What about his finances?”

He grinned, waving a stack of papers bound by a thick paperclip. “Found some questionable transactions in his business accounts. Looks like he's been siphoning off funds.”

“Nice catch, Sam! And Jill, what have you got on the abuse allegations?”

“Plenty of texts and emails from Mark to Ava that show a clear pattern of emotional abuse,” Jill revealed, scrolling through a digital folder on her tablet. “Enough to make your blood boil.”

I clapped my hands together. “We're going to present this evidence in court so masterfully that Larissa won't know what hit her.” My mind raced with strategies and tactics.

“We’ve got this. Larissa has no idea what she's up against.” Ellen smiled.

“We can't get cocky. We need to stay focused and be prepared for any curveballs she throws our way.”

“Absolutely, boss,” Sam chimed in, his eyes locked on the evidence before him. “We'll be ready for anything.”

We poured over the evidence. The future was uncertain, but one thing was clear—we were a force to be reckoned with, and I couldn't wait to prove it in court.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:31 am*

Larissa

“Another one?” I muttered under my breath as I scanned the case file on my desk.

Three years of law school, five years working my way up the ladder in this firm, and here I was stuck with yet another cheating husband in a high-stakes divorce case.

And to make matters worse, my hair appointment had been canceled because my stylist decided to take a last-minute trip to Bali.

“Seriously, what is it about me that screams 'unfaithful men magnet'?” I grumbled to no one in particular. The office was buzzing, papers flying faster than the gossip. As if I didn't already have enough pressure weighing down on me, now I had to deal with this monstrosity of a case.

“Ugh.” I sighed, running a hand through my platinum-blond locks.

“Rough day, huh?” my coworker, Jenna, commented casually as she plopped down into an empty chair.

“Understatement of the year,” I shot back. “I'm starting to think I should just change my name to 'Larissa, Defender of Unfaithful Men.' It's got a nice ring to it, don't you think?”

Jenna chuckled. “Well, at least you can say you've found your niche.”

“Please, don't remind me.”

Another day, another adulterer .

“I’ve got to head over to meet with Mack. Talk to you later?”

“Of course. Good luck.”

I gathered up the materials and walked over to the conference room, ready for our fight to begin.

I'd heard about him, of course—his movie-star good looks, disarming charm, and winning streak that made it seem like he had Lady Justice herself wrapped around his finger. This case would be anything but easy.

“Ms. Montgomery, allow me to introduce myself,” said a voice that could only belong to the man himself. I turned to find Mack standing before me, extending his hand. His brown hair was perfectly styled. “Mack Harrington. I’ve been looking forward to facing off against you.”

“Likewise,” I replied, shaking his hand with a grip that left no doubt who was in control. “But don't think your charm will work on me. I'm here to win.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” he said, still smiling. “May the best lawyer win.”

“Indeed.” As we sat down at opposite ends of the table, my mind began racing. He might have the charisma of Cary Grant and the looks of George Clooney, but I wasn't going to let that distract me from my mission.

“Alright, let's get down to business.” I opened my laptop and pulling up my meticulously prepared notes. “Since I represent the husband, I'll begin.”

As I launched into my case, I was hyper-aware of Mack’s gaze on me. It was

unnerving, but also strangely exhilarating.

“Ms. Montgomery, I must admit, you've done an impressive job gathering evidence,” Mack conceded when I finished. “But we both know that it takes more than a well-researched case to win. It's about telling a story that resonates.”

“Are you suggesting I can't do that?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “I'm merely pointing out the importance of understanding human nature—something I happen to excel at.”

“Is that so?” I smirked. “Well, Mr. Harrington, I may not have your effortless charm, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve too.”

“Really? Do tell.” His interest seemed genuine, and I felt a little flattered.

“First and foremost, I never underestimate my opponent,” I began, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms. “I study their every move—their strengths, their weaknesses, their habits. And then, when the time is right, I exploit them.”

“Interesting strategy,” Mack mused, raising an eyebrow. “And what, pray tell, have you discovered about me?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?” I teased, a sly grin playing on my lips. He chuckled, clearly enjoying our verbal sparring match.

“Very well, keep your secrets,” he said, his blue eyes dancing. “But just remember: two can play at that game.”

“Good,” I retorted, relishing the challenge. “I wouldn't have it any other way.”

As we continued to discuss—and occasionally argue—the finer points of our case, it became clear, this was going to be one hell of a battle.

Once he left, there were many things that needed to be done.

“Janai, I need you,” I called out, my voice echoing through the empty hallway of our law firm. If anyone could help me dig up the dirt on Mark and Ava Kennsington, it was Janai Carlan—my loyal paralegal and best friend.

“Here I am, your legal fairy godmother!” she announced cheerfully as she appeared in my office doorway, her auburn hair pulled back in a messy bun. “What's the plan, boss lady?”

“Operation: Take Down Mack,” I declared, motioning for her to take a seat across from me. “We need to uncover every last bit of information on Mark and Ava. I know there's more to their story than meets the eye.”

“Ah, so we're going full Nancy Drew on this one, huh?” Janai grinned, pulling out her notepad and pen. “Where do you want to start?”

“Let's start with Ava. She's the one who's been playing the victim card, but something about her just doesn't sit right with me.” I tapped my fingers on the desk, trying to recall the details of our previous encounters.

“She's bold, brash, and rude—not exactly the damsel in distress she's trying to portray.”

“Got it,” Janai nodded, scribbling notes. “And what about Mark? Anything specific you want me to look into?”

“His infidelities, obviously,” I replied, rolling my eyes at the thought of yet another

cheating husband. “But also his business dealings. If he's hiding anything, that's where we'll find it.”

“Consider it done,” Janai said, snapping her notepad shut. “I'll get started right away.”

“I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“Let's not find out,” she joked, giving me a small salute before disappearing down the hallway.

As Janai set to work investigating Mark and Ava, I began to prepare my arguments.

Every so often, my thoughts would drift back to Mack—his charisma, his confidence, that infuriatingly handsome smile.

I shook my head, trying to focus on the task at hand.

No distractions . Alright, Larissa, you've got this .

I cracked my knuckles, ready to dive into case law. “Let the battle begin.”

The next morning, I walked into the office, coffee in hand, and immediately noticed the hushed whispers that seemed to follow me as I made my way to the conference room.

In an attempt to ignore them, I took a deep breath and plunged headfirst into our firm's daily attorney meeting.

As I sat down, there was some gossip about Mack Harrington.

“Did you hear about his last case? He exposed that CEO's secret love child and won the entire settlement for his client.”

“Rumor has it he's never lost a case,” another chimed in, her eyes wide.

“Please. That's just a rumor perpetuated by his own ego. Besides, we all know how much he loves to dig up dirt on anyone who goes against him. I'm not worried.”

“Really?” Jeremy asked, raising an eyebrow. “You should be. Mack is known for embarrassing rival counsel by exposing their darkest secrets.”

“Let him try!” I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “I've got nothing to hide. And I'll be damned if I let some pretty boy with a winning smile distract me.”

“Bold words, Larissa,” Jeremy replied. “So, what's your plan?”

“Simple: two can play at that game.” I leaned forward, my eyes narrowing. “You think he's good at digging up dirt? Well, I have Janai on my side, and she's even better. Whatever he throws at me, I'll throw right back at him, tenfold.”

“Ooh, I like this side of you, Larissa,” Jeremy teased, smirking. “Just make sure you don't get too caught up in the battle and forget about winning the case.”

“Trust me,” I replied, taking a sip of my coffee and meeting his gaze. “Winning the case is all I care about. Mack Harrington won't know what hit him.”

I was ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead—even if it meant going toe to toe with the infamous Mack Harrington.

“Alright, everyone,” I said, clapping my hands together and standing up from the table. “Let's get to work. We've got a case to win.”

The door to the conference room swung open with a flourish, and in strode Calvin Stockton, my boss and owner of Stockton everyone knew when Calvin was around, it was time to put on your game face.

“Montgomery,” he said, nodding in my direction as he made his way to the head of the table. “I trust you're ready for today's proceedings?”

“Of course,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the sudden knot in my stomach. “I've been preparing nonstop.”

“Good,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “This case is our opportunity to show the world what Stockton & Associates is capable of. We need to win, and we need to win big.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of his words settle on my shoulders like a lead blanket. It was one thing to face off against Mack Harrington for my own pride, but now I had the law firm barking at me. Talk about pressure.

“Understood,” I managed to say, offering him a weak smile. “I won't let you down.”

“See that you don't,” he replied, his gaze piercing straight through me. “You've got the talent, Montgomery—now it's time to prove it.”

With that, he turned on his heel and swept out of the room, leaving me to stare at the empty space where he'd been standing moments before.

“Hey,” Janai whispered, leaning over to give my arm a reassuring squeeze. “You've got this, okay? You're the best lawyer I know, and you've never let me down.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, forcing a smile even as my mind raced with doubts. What if I wasn't good enough to win this case? What if I couldn't outsmart Mack? What if I

crumbled under the pressure and let everyone down?

As I strode out of the conference room, I tried to push those thoughts to the back of my mind, focusing instead on the task at hand. But no matter how hard I tried to shake them off, the weight of Calvin's words—and the pressure to succeed—hung heavy on my heart, threatening to consume me.

Ready or not, Mack Harrington . Here I come .



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:31 am*

Mack

It was way too early when I got to the office. I leaned back in my chair, rubbing the fatigue from my eyes. My team and I had been through every detail, leaving no stone unturned. Now, it was time to put our hard work to the test.

“Alright, team,” I called out, clapping my hands together to get everyone's attention. “Today's the day. How are we feeling?”

“Ready to rumble,” Sam replied, cracking his knuckles with a grin. Ellen and Jill nodded, their eyes focused and determined.

“Great. Let's go over everything one last time before we hit the courtroom, okay?” I suggested, and they eagerly gathered around the table, ready to dive into our game plan.

We brainstormed strategies, pinpointing Larissa's potential weak spots and discussing how best to exploit them.

We practiced our arguments, refining our lines and delivery to ensure maximum impact.

And as we reviewed the evidence one final time, I reminded myself that our teamwork would be the key to staying on track and winning this case.

“Mack, what do you think Larissa will try first?” Jill asked, chewing on the end of her pen.

“Knowing her,” I mused, “she’ll probably try to poke holes in Ava’s credibility. But we’ve got this—we know how to counter her attacks.”

“Speaking of which,” Ellen chimed in, “I think we should watch out for any surprises she might throw at us. Larissa has a knack for pulling rabbits out of hats when you least expect it.”

“Good point,” I acknowledged, making a mental note to stay vigilant in court. “But remember, we’ve got some tricks up our sleeves too.”

With a final nod, we made our way to the courthouse. The moment we entered, the tension between Larissa and I crackled.

“Morning, Mack,” Larissa greeted me with a tight smile.

“Morning. Ready?”

“Always,” she replied, her voice dripping with confidence.

As we faced off in court, the air practically sizzled. Every objection, every rebuttal, every piece of evidence presented was another volley in our battle of wits. And as the day wore on, it became clear that neither of us was willing to back down without a fight.

During a short recess, I caught my breath. This case was proving to be more challenging, but I refused to let doubt creep in. My team and I were prepared for this. We were ready to stand our ground and fight for Ava.

“Mack,” Ellen whispered as we reconvened in the courtroom, “Stay focused, and don’t let Larissa’s tactics throw you off.”

The trial resumed, and with each passing hour, the stakes grew higher.

Larissa continued to press hard, but so did I.

After all, I wasn't just fighting for Ava—I was also fighting to prove that when it came to matters of the heart, even the toughest opponents could be outmaneuvered.

My team and I would not back down, and we were determined to see this through to the bitter end just like every other case.

“Your Honor,” I began, my voice strong and unwavering, “we have shown beyond a doubt that our client deserves at least half if not more of the husband’s assets.”

“Very well, Mr. Harrington,” the judge replied, her eyes fixed on me. “Proceed.”

I turned to face Larissa, ready for our final showdown.

“While it may be easy to get lost in the details, there's one thing that remains crystal clear: our client, Ava Kennsington, has been wronged. Throughout this process,” I continued, “we have demonstrated that my client's husband, Mark Kennsington, has engaged in infidelity, financial misconduct, and abusive behavior. This is not only unacceptable, but it is downright despicable.”

“Objection!” Larissa called out, rising from her seat. “We have already established that these claims are baseless.”

“Overruled,” the judge responded without hesitation. “Continue, Mr. Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I said, flashing a quick smile at Larissa before turning my attention back to the jury.

“Now, as we've shown, Ava Kennsington is entitled to compensation for the emotional and financial damages she has suffered at the hands of her husband. It is our job—no, our duty—to ensure that she receives what she rightfully deserves.”

“We have spent enough time here today. We will reconvene tomorrow. Adjourned.”

As everyone filed out of the room, I couldn't help but steal one last glance at Larissa. She looked back at me, her expression unreadable. But beneath the surface, I saw a flicker of respect.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Larissa

Our second day in court and honestly, was I ready? Mack definitely lived up to his reputation and ego. The amount of times he smiled at me across the courtroom pissed me off.

“Your Honor, the evidence clearly shows that my client is entitled to a fair and equitable division of assets.” My voice was steady and firm as I locked eyes with the judge. “My client has already offered a more than generous settlement, which Mr. Harrington’s client stubbornly refuses to accept.”

Mack chimed in, flashing his million-dollar smile. “Generous? Your client is attempting to leave my client with next to nothing after twenty years of marriage. My client has dedicated her life to supporting her husband and raising their children. This isn't generosity; it's highway robbery.”

“Mr. Harrington,” Judge Phillips interjected, “please refrain from making inflammatory remarks.”

“Of course, Your Honor. I assure you that my client wants nothing more than to resolve this matter fairly and amicably so both parties can move on with their lives,” Mack said, his blue eyes practically twinkling as he spoke.

Ugh, those eyes . They were like pools of liquid charm, and they seemed to be working their magic on the judge.

“It's refreshing to see a lawyer who understands the importance of civility in these

proceedings.”

“Your Honor, if I may,” I interjected. “I understand Mr. Harrington's desire for civility, but we must not lose sight of what's at stake here.”

“Ms. Montgomery, please,” Mack said in that infuriatingly condescending tone he'd mastered, “let's not resort to melodrama. We're all adults here.” My blood was boiling as his disarming smile returned, making it seem like I was the one being unreasonable.

“Your Honor,” I gritted out, trying to regain my composure, “I simply wish to remind the court that my client is seeking a fair and equitable division of assets, which is his legal right.”

“Very well, Ms. Montgomery,” Judge Phillips conceded, though I couldn't help but notice his gaze lingered on Mack for a moment longer than necessary. I had to find a way to outsmart him before he won over the judge completely.

As we continued our verbal sparring match, I tried to focus on the facts, but Mack's charm seemed to be clouding the judge's judgment.

His laughter filled the room as he shared an amusing anecdote about a previous case, and my grip on the situation continued slipping away. I needed a new strategy, and fast.

“Your Honor, if I may,” I began again, my voice wavering slightly as I tried to keep my nerves at bay. “Can we please return to the matter at hand?”

“Of course, Ms. Montgomery,” Judge Phillips replied, his attention finally returning to the case. “I assure you that this court takes its responsibilities very seriously. Let's pick this up tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I said, swallowing hard as I prepared to go toe to toe with Mack once more. No matter how charming he was, I refused to let his charisma distract from the truth. I owed it to my client—and to myself.

The moment I stepped out of the courtroom, my heart raced as if it were trying to escape my chest. All I wanted was to put some distance between Mack and me.

The heavy oak door closed behind me with a thud, and I leaned against the cold marble wall, pressing my eyes shut.

My thoughts swirled like a storm, each one more frustrating than the last.

“Rough day in there, huh?” Zoey's voice snapped me back to reality. She stood next to me, her dark curls bouncing around her face as she offered a sympathetic smile. No one knew what I was going through right now better than my fellow lawyer, Zoey Lofton.

“Mack Harrington is infuriating,” I growled, gripping my legal pad so tightly that my knuckles turned white. “He's all charm, but somehow, he still manages to win everyone over—even the judge.”

“Hey, don't be so hard on yourself, Larissa,” Zoey said, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You're an amazing lawyer, and you've been preparing. You know every detail inside and out. No amount of charisma can change that.”

“Maybe, but it doesn't help when the judge keeps getting distracted by his witty comebacks.” I sighed and opened my eyes, meeting Zoey's concerned gaze. “I need to find a way to beat him at his own game.”

“Remember when we first started practicing law together? We lost a case to him because of that same charm. But we swore that we'd find a way to beat him someday,

and now's your chance.”

“Right,” I agreed. “This time, I won't let his charm get the best of me. I'll focus on the facts and make sure that the judge sees the truth.”

“Exactly!” Zoey grinned. “You've got this, Larissa. You're fierce, intelligent, and a force to be reckoned with. Mack doesn't stand a chance.”

“Thanks,” I said, my lips curving into a small smile. “With you in my corner, I feel like I can take on the world—or at least, Mack Harrington.”

“Darn straight!” Zoey agreed, punching the air. “Now, let's grab a coffee sometime soon.”

“Of course, good luck on your case,” I said before she disappeared through the door.

I pushed open the heavy courthouse doors. Bring it on, Mack . No matter how charming he was, I refused to let him win.

“Ms. Montgomery,” came that all-too-familiar voice, smooth as silk and rich as dark chocolate. Mack Harrington leaned against the courthouse wall, his arms folded across his chest and a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “I must say, I didn't expect you to put up such a fight today.”

“Is that so?” I retorted, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “Well, Mr. Harrington, you should know by now that I'm not one to back down easily.”

“Clearly,” he replied, raising an eyebrow as he straightened up and closed the distance between us. “But tell me, do you always resort to personal attacks when you can't win a case fair and square?”



I bristled at the insinuation, my hands balling into fists at my sides. “Whatever it takes for my clients. You might try it sometime instead of relying on your pretty face.”

“Ouch,” he said, feigning hurt as he placed a hand over his heart. “You know, charm isn't everything. Sometimes you have to rely on your actual legal skills to make your case.”

The condescending tone in his voice set fire to my anger. “Are you suggesting that I don't have legal skills? That's rich coming from the poster boy for 'style over substance'!”

“See, that's the problem with you,” Mack shot back. “You're so busy trying to prove yourself that you can't even see when someone's giving you a compliment.”

“Compliment?” I snorted, my rage bubbling over. “You have a twisted way of showing it, Mister 'I-Can-Win-Any-Case-With-My-Good-Looks'!”

“Is that what you think of me?” Mack asked, his voice dangerously low. “Just some shallow pretty boy who doesn't take his job seriously?”

“Isn't that the image you project?”

“Maybe, but you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, Ms. Montgomery. There's more to me than meets the eye.”

“Likewise,” I hissed, feeling the heat rising in my cheeks. “And don't ever underestimate me again.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Mack replied, his blue eyes flashing with an intensity that made my heart race. “Good luck, Larissa. You're going to need it.”

My vision blurred as the red-hot rage surged through me. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms, and for a moment, I was completely out of control.

“Fine. Just remember, you started this.”

“Started what?” Mack asked, infuriating me even more. “A friendly rivalry between colleagues? I thought that's what you wanted.”

“Rivalry?” I scoffed. “This is not a game. This is my career, my life. And I won't stand here and let you belittle me.”

“Belittle you? Larissa, all I ever did was try to keep up with you,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “You're the one who made this personal.”

“Keep up with me?” I echoed, my cheeks burning. What had I done? Ugh, I was acting like a petulant child, not a respected lawyer.

Mack sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken. “Look, Larissa, I didn't mean to upset you. But we can't keep going at each other's throats like this. It's not good for either of us.”

“Maybe not,” I admitted, lowering my gaze to the pavement. “But don't expect me to go easy on you in court.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” he repeated, the corners of his mouth twitching into the faintest hint of a smile. “Just promise me you'll keep it professional from now on.”

“Fine,” I muttered, my heart aching with the weight of my shame. “Professional.”

“Good,” Mack said, his voice softening as he extended his hand. “Truce?”

“Truce,” I replied, hesitantly taking his hand.

As I walked away, my thoughts raced with uncertainty about how to proceed.

The last thing I wanted was to be Mack's enemy, but if we kept going down this path, we'd tear each other apart.

I needed to find a way to win without losing myself in the process.

And maybe, just maybe, I could do it without sacrificing the fragile truce we'd just established.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Mack

Larissa was a force of nature, and her no-nonsense attitude challenged me in ways I'd never experienced before. I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake off the tension that seemed to linger after each encounter with her.

“Hey, Mack, heard about what happened outside with Larissa,” a fellow lawyer whispered as he passed by, giving me a sympathetic pat on the back. Unbelievable.

“Mack, my man,” Richard greeted me as we both entered the courtroom together. “You know, you could use what happened with Larissa as ammunition against her in court.”

I raised an eyebrow, considering it. “I appreciate the tip, Richard, but I think I'll try something a little more creative to gain the advantage. Besides, it's always good to have a secret weapon up my sleeve just in case.”

“Suit yourself,” Richard shrugged, clearly disappointed that I wouldn't indulge in some good old-fashioned legal mudslinging.

I took my seat and began reviewing my notes, and everything started swirling in my head. Larissa was tough, intelligent, and infuriatingly captivating all at once. I knew that winning over someone like her would be quite the challenge, but I was more than ready to rise to the occasion.

Bring it on, Montgomery . Whatever tricks she had up her sleeve, I was ready to play along and see where this game would take us.

“Nice suit, Mack,” Katharine said, her red lipstick perfect against her alabaster skin. It was Katharine James, the opposing attorney in this case. Now, she was dangerous.

“Thanks, Katharine.” I flashed her my most disarming smile, wondering what she was up to.

“Look, I know we're on opposite sides today, but I thought you should know something about Larissa.” She leaned in and lowered her voice, the sweet scent of her perfume wafting over me. “Ever since I started seeing her ex, Elliot, she's been acting... out of character.”

“Jealous, is she?” I raised an eyebrow, trying not to let my surprise show. “I didn't think she was the type.”

“Neither did I, but people change. Anyway, if you want to undermine her, try something unconventional. Get under her skin. You know, like you do with everyone else.”

“Interesting advice coming from the opposition,” I mused, studying her closely.

Despite the casual nature of our conversation, I could tell there was more to it than simple gossip.

Katharine had never been one to share courtroom secrets without expecting something in return.

And yet, the idea of getting Larissa to trust me, to see that I wasn't just another shark in the legal pool, was strangely appealing.

“Consider it a professional courtesy,” Katharine shrugged. “Besides, isn't it more fun when we keep things interesting?”

“Perhaps,” I admitted, my mind already racing with ideas. “But I'm not interested in getting involved in your little rivalry. Thanks for the tip, though.”

“Your loss,” she pouted, turning away to gather her things. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I replied, watching her walk away.

As intriguing as her words were, I knew better than to play with fire.

Larissa was a force to be reckoned with, and if she truly was jealous of Katharine and Elliot's relationship, there was no telling what lengths she would go to in order to maintain her professional reputation.

Instead, I decided to push just enough to make her retreat a little, to show her that I wasn't the enemy.

My goal now was to charm her into trusting me, to believe that I had both Ava and Mark Kennsington's best interests at heart.

If I played my cards right, perhaps we could even find a way to work together for the sake of our clients.

Game on, Montgomery. Let's see how well you handle a taste of your own medicine.

My heart pounded from the adrenaline in the courtroom, I stepped into the hallway and nearly collided with Larissa.

“Wow, fancy seeing you here,” I said, breaking the silence with a small chuckle. “How've you been?”

“Uh, fine,” she stammered, a hint of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. It wasn't

like her to be so flustered. “I mean, aside from yesterday, obviously.”

“Hey, no hard feelings,” I assured her, shooting her a disarming smile. “We all have our moments, right?”

“I suppose.”

I leaned against the wall, allowing myself a moment to enjoy the lightheartedness between us. “You know, for what it's worth, I think your passion is one of your greatest assets. Makes things more exciting, don't you think?”

“Is that so?” She raised an eyebrow. “And here I thought you were just trying to butter me up to gain the upper hand.”

“Would I do that?”

“Absolutely,” she retorted without missing a beat. “But nice try, Harrington. Dirty tricks won't work on me.”

“Dirty tricks? I'm wounded.” I pressed my hand over my heart. Inwardly, though, I knew she was right—any attempt to manipulate her would likely backfire spectacularly. My crush on her since Law school doesn't matter right now.

“But if you ever want to grab a drink and discuss strategy... or anything else for that matter, you know where to find me.”

Larissa's eyes narrowed, but the ghost of a smile remained on her lips. “I'll keep that in mind,” she said coolly, before turning on her heel and striding away.

Larissa Montgomery was unlike any other attorney I'd ever faced, and despite our differences, I was drawn to her. Hell, I had been since I ran into her at Law School.

Her out-of-the-box thinking had always been her strong suit.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Larissa

“Janai, are we missing anything?” I called out, tapping my foot.

“Relax,” she replied. “I've got our bases covered. You're just wound up because you want to show off your mad lawyering skills against Mack.”

I scoffed, crossing my arms. “Hardly. He may be charming, but I can hold my own against him. I just need to win this case and prove to everyone that I'm the best lawyer in town.”

“Alright then, Sherlock. Look what I found while digging into Mark's past.” Janai handed me a manila folder with a smirk on her face. “You won't believe what he did.”

My eyes widened as she flipped through the contents of the folder. The pages revealed a surprising secret.

“Janai, this could change everything,” I whispered, stunned by the revelation.

I sank into my chair, my mind racing with possibilities. It wasn't just about winning the case anymore.

Get it together. This is about Mark's case, not your feelings.

I began to strategize, my eyes flitting back and forth between the incriminating documents and my notes on Mark's case. I would find a way to use this secret to our

advantage. After all, I was a lawyer first and foremost, and nothing was going to stand in my way.

Ugh, Mack Harrington . It would be so much easier to hate him if he weren't so infuriatingly attractive. I shook my head, snapping myself out of it. This was not the time for fantasies about my opponent. Time to focus. I rubbed my temples in frustration.

“This complicates things.”

“Complications can be fun,” Janai mused, winking at me. “Especially when they involve Mack Harrington.”

“Janai!” I scolded, feeling my cheeks flushed. “This is serious. And besides, I'm not—” I hesitated, unwilling to admit how much Mack had been on my mind lately. “It doesn't matter. I need to call him about this.”

“Ooh, do I sense a heated phone call in your future?” Janai asked. “I'll leave you to it, then. Good luck, tiger.”

“Thanks.” I took a deep breath, my heart pounding as I dialed Mack's number.

“Hello?” His voice was smooth and confident, just like the man himself.

“We need to talk about Mark.”

“Ah, so you've discovered his little secret, then?” He sounded almost amused, which only served to stoke my growing anger.

“You knew about this, didn't you?”

“Perhaps,” he replied. “But what difference does it make now? You're still going to represent him, aren't you?”

“Of course I am,” I snapped. “But don't think for a second that your knowledge of this situation will give you any advantage in court. I will fight tooth and nail, Mack. And that includes bringing down anyone who tries to stand in my way.”

“Such passion. Just one of the many things I find so... intriguing about you.”

“Keep your flattery to yourself,” I warned, my stomach fluttering despite my annoyance. “This isn't about me. It's about the case.”

“Very well,” he conceded. “I look forward to seeing how you handle this newfound information, Larissa. Just remember—secrets have a way of coming back to haunt us. Both in and out of the courtroom.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I replied, my mind racing with strategies and counterarguments. “But I can take care of myself.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he said before hanging up.

As I stared at the phone, my heart hammered. My feelings for Mack would have to be set aside—at least until this case was over. For now, my focus had to remain on Mark and the battle ahead. And no matter what obstacles were thrown my way, I was determined to come out on top.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Mack

“Risotto and reconciliation”—that’s how I’d describe my last-ditch effort to save the case from going down in flames.

It was time to make amends with Larissa Montgomery, that firecracker of a lawyer who had no qualms about knocking me down a peg or two.

I decided to invite her to Luigi’s, an Italian restaurant near the courthouse.

“Hey, I thought we could talk things out at Luigi’s.”

“Fine, but I’m only agreeing because I happen to like their eggplant parm.”

“Great, see you at seven,” I said before hanging up.

I should not care about what I was wearing, but somehow I changed three times before leaving the house.

Larissa and I had butted heads multiple times since knowing each other in Law School, but that had never stopped me from hoping my chance would come.

How was I ever going to get the chance to shoot my shot when I kept getting cases against her?

The world was against me. But maybe I could change the trajectory after this one.

On the way, I kept thinking of how charming I'd been to her over the last few years. No wonder she thought I was an egotistical asshole, but I had time to change her mind. The truth, I'd been in love with her since hearing her argue a case at Law School. She was a savage, even then.

When I pulled up, Larissa was standing outside.

"Hey. You know, I've always believed that the best conversations happen over a plate of pasta."

"Is that so?" she asked, raising an eyebrow, clearly not amused.

"Absolutely." I held the door open for her as we entered. "There's something about carbs that just brings people together."

We took our seats at a table by the window. I got to play this cool. Maybe she wasn't into me. It'd be my luck, the one girl I wanted would be the one that didn't want me back. But I'd never told her about my feelings, and maybe it was time.

As we perused the menu, I stole glances at Larissa—her hair framing her face perfectly, her eyes scanning the options.

"Alright, Mack," she said as she put down the menu, leaning back in her chair. "Why don't you cut to the chase and tell me why we're really here?"

"Can't a guy just enjoy a meal with a worthy opponent?" I tried to play it cool, but the truth was that I was desperate.

"Save the charm for the judge, Harrington," she shot back, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips. Maybe my optimism was starting to work its magic.

“Alright,” I said, waving away the hovering waiter, who seemed as eager to take our order as a vulture circling its prey. “I’ll get the lasagna, and she’ll have the eggplant parm. And a bottle of the house red to share and I insist on covering this meal. Consider it an olive branch.”

“Fine, but don't think that means you're off the hook.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” I replied, raising my hands.

The waiter retreated, no doubt relieved to escape the tension.

“There's something I've been wanting to ask you. About your ex-girlfriend—the lawyer, right?”

My stomach clenched as memories of my past relationship resurfaced. How had she found out? I tried to keep my voice steady. “What about her?”

“Word on the street is that she cheated on you while working on a case together. Is that true?”

“Where did you hear that?” I asked, gripping my wineglass.

“Does it matter?” She leaned back in her chair, studying my reaction with those piercing green eyes. “I just find it interesting that you're so adamant about playing by the rules now. It's almost like you're overcompensating for something.”

“Maybe I just believe in doing the right thing,” I shot back, trying to ignore that she had struck a nerve.

“Or maybe you're afraid of getting hurt again,” she countered. “And if that's the case, then it's going to be difficult for us to work together.”

I took a slow sip of my wine, buying myself time to come up with a response.

She was right—I didn't want to get burned again.

But I also couldn't let her use that against me.

“Look, Larissa,” I said, meeting her gaze head-on.

“What happened between me and my ex is ancient history. It has nothing to do with this case or how I conduct myself as a lawyer.”

“Good,” she replied, nodding, apparently satisfied with my answer. Though I couldn't shake the feeling that she was still testing me, probing for weaknesses.

“Can we move on from psychoanalyzing my love life now?” I asked, forcing a light chuckle. “I thought we were here to talk about the case.”

“Of course,” she agreed, a sly smile playing at the corners of her lips. “Let's focus on what really matters.”

Was I really just trying to do the right thing, or was there something deeper driving me? And could I trust Larissa not to exploit my vulnerabilities? Only time would tell. But one thing was certain—this case was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

We weren't friends, after all. We were adversaries, locked in a legal battle.

“Promise me that whatever happens in court, we won't let it make us crazy.”

“Deal,” I agreed without hesitation, reaching across the table to shake her hand. “May the best lawyer win, Larissa.”

“Indeed,” she smiled, giving my hand a firm squeeze. “May the best lawyer win.”

Desperate to shift the focus away from our professional rivalry, I decided to double down on the charm. “You know, you really are stunning tonight. That dress brings out the fire in your eyes.”

“Nice try, Harrington,” she retorted, rolling her eyes. “But flattery will get you nowhere with me.”

“Really?” I challenged, raising an eyebrow. “So you're immune to compliments, huh? Well, how about this: not only are you one of the most beautiful women I've ever met, but you're also one of the smartest. If beauty and brains were a crime, they'd lock you up and throw away the key.”

“Okay, okay,” she conceded, a reluctant grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. “I admit, that was a good one.”

“See?” I winked. “I knew I could make you smile.”

“Fine, you win this round.” She laughed. “But don't get too cocky, Mack. Remember, I still know how to play dirty.”

“Wouldn't have it any other way,” I shot back, feeling the electric current between us surge once more.

As we continued to trade barbs and banter, I found myself wondering if this game we were playing was worth the risk.

Rejection was hard, and putting myself out there with her...

my stomach was in knots. But as I gazed into her eyes, there was something real



between us—something that went beyond our professional rivalry.

And for now, that was enough to keep me hooked.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Larissa

The courtroom door swung open with a creak, and I strode in. This was my stage, where I shone brightest.

“Miss Montgomery,” Judge Phillips acknowledged me with a curt nod as I took my place at the table.

“Your Honor,” I replied, giving him a tight smile.

Mack Harrington, opposing counsel and my current headache, sauntered into the room next.

“Ah, good morning, Your Honor. I heard your golf game is coming along quite nicely! Congrats on that hole in one last weekend.”

Judge Phillips' stern face cracked into a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Harrington. It was quite the surprise, I must say.”

Ugh. How did Mack always know just what to say?

“Shall we proceed?” I interjected, impatient to get started.

“Of course, Miss Montgomery,” the judge said, his smile fading. “Mr. Harrington, you may begin.”

“Your Honor,” Mack began, oozing charm from every pore, “my client has been

nothing but a loving, devoted mother and wife. Unfortunately, Mark has refused to recognize her dedication to their family?—”

“Objection!” I snapped, unable to let Mack monopolize the conversation any longer. “We’re here to discuss the division of assets, not to debate Mrs. Kensington’s character.”

“Overruled,” Judge Phillips sighed. “Please continue, Mr. Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Mack beamed, not missing a beat. “As I was saying, Mark has been the primary breadwinner for their family, supporting Ava and their child in every way possible. It’s only fair that she be awarded?—”

“Objection!” I tried again, my face flushing. “This is irrelevant to the case.”

“Overruled.”

He continued on, spinning a fairy tale of his client’s devotion and generosity while I stewed in my seat. I clenched my fists under the table, biting back the urge to interrupt again. I couldn’t let him get the upper hand, but it seemed as though the judge had already made up his mind.

“Your Honor, I have evidence that will shed light on Ava’s true motives in this divorce.”

“You may proceed.”

I stood up, clutching the papers that would reveal the truth behind Ava’s insistence on a hefty settlement. Just as I was about to speak again, Mack interrupted me.

“Your Honor, before she presents her so-called evidence, I’d like to remind the court

that this is a matter of division of assets, not an inquisition into my client's personal life," he said, flashing that disarming smile of his.

"Please ensure your evidence is relevant."

"Of course, Your Honor." I drew in a deep breath and launched into my argument.

But every time I tried to present the crucial information, Mack managed to interject, twisting my words and diverting the judge's attention back to the financial aspects of the case.

"Your Honor, if I may approach the bench?" To my relief, he gestured for me to approach.

"Your Honor," I whispered, leaning in close, "I have proof here that Ava's real motive is to ruin Mark financially as revenge for an extramarital affair.

This isn't just about dividing their assets fairly; she wants to leave him penniless."

"Miss Montgomery, return to your seat." His voice was cold and final.

"But Your Honor?—"

"Enough!" Judge Phillips bellowed, slamming his gavel down with a resounding crack. The courtroom fell silent, all eyes on me.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I returned to my seat, feeling the weight of defeat settling over me. I knew that without presenting Ava's true motives, my chances of winning this case were dwindling by the second.

As the hearing continued, I struggled to focus on the proceedings, my mind racing

with possible strategies to salvage the situation. But one thing was clear: unless I could find a way to present my evidence, the truth would remain buried beneath Mack's charm and the judge's disapproval.

“Mark, you can't seriously think you're going to get custody of our son after what you've done!”

“Me? You're the one who's trying to bleed me dry! You don't care about our son; you just want to punish me for your own twisted reasons!” Mark retorted, his face red with anger.

“Quiet!” the judge barked, but they ignored him, continuing their bickering.

“Enough!” Judge Phillips slammed his gavel down. “Order in the court!” he growled. “I have had enough of this circus.”

Everyone froze, the weight of the judge's words sinking in.

He glared at each of us in turn, his gaze like cold steel.

“Attorneys, control your clients. If you cannot do so, I will have no choice but to hold all of you in contempt.” He paused, letting the threat hang in the air.

“We will reconvene tomorrow morning at nine sharp. In the meantime, I expect everyone to gain some semblance of decorum.”

The hearing came to an abrupt halt. Ava and Mark begrudgingly retreated to their respective corners, leaving the rest of us to pick up the pieces.

I tried to quell the disappointment and frustration bubbling inside me, knowing that I had to keep my emotions in check if I wanted any chance of winning this case.

As the courtroom began to empty, it felt like a tornado had just ripped through the room. But amidst the wreckage, there was still hope. I just needed to find a way to present my evidence without inciting the judge's wrath. The stakes were high, and the clock was ticking.

Ava stormed out of the courtroom. Mark followed close behind, muttering under his breath about the colossal waste of time this had been.

The heavy wooden doors slammed shut, leaving Mack and me alone.

I stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him, afraid that his smug smile would be too much for me to bear.

But when he finally spoke, it wasn't with arrogance or disdain.

Instead, an unexpected chuckle escaped his lips, echoing through the empty room.

I glanced over at him, irritation bubbling up inside me.

How could he laugh after what just happened?

“Can you believe it?” he asked, shaking his head and grinning.

“We spend years studying law, working our asses off to become the best damn lawyers we can be, and then we're reduced to babysitting bickering clients like Ava and Mark.” His laughter grew louder, and despite my annoyance, I couldn't help but crack a small smile at the absurdity of it all.

“Sometimes I wonder if we chose the wrong profession,” I admitted, letting out a short, humorless laugh of my own. “Maybe we should have gone into counseling instead.”

“Or marriage therapy!” Mack added, still laughing. “We could have a joint practice—Montgomery & Harrington: Saving Marriages One Couple at a Time.”

“Only if you promise to handle the golf-obsessed clients,” I shot back. “I’ve reached my limit for hearing about the intricacies of sand traps and putting greens.”

“Deal,” Mack agreed, his laughter subsiding as he wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. “But seriously, Larissa, tomorrow’s a new day.”

“You’re right. Tomorrow, we fight another day.”

“Wait, wait,” Mack gasped between laughs, holding up a hand. “You sounded just like this!” He mimicked my frustrated expression, complete with furrowed brow and clenched fists. “It was almost cute... if it hadn’t been so infuriating.”

“Ha! Very funny.” I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms. “Well, at least I wasn’t fawning over the judge like some kind of lovesick teenager.” I put on my best imitation of Mack’s voice, batting my eyelashes dramatically.

“Oh, Your Honor, I simply adore golf! Why, just last week, I made the most marvelous chip shot from the rough! “

Mack doubled over in laughter, clutching his sides as he struggled to catch his breath. “Okay, okay, you got me,” he conceded, wiping tears from his cheeks. “I may have laid it on a bit thick with the golf talk.”

“Thick?” I snorted. “You practically smothered us all in golf anecdotes. And for the record, I still have no idea what a ‘chip shot’ is.”

“Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do to win a case.” He grinned, raising his hands. “But let’s not forget that you were the one who couldn’t keep quiet long enough to

even present your argument.”

“Because you kept interrupting me!” I exclaimed, throwing my hands up in exasperation. “I’ve never seen someone so determined to monopolize the conversation.”

“Guilty as charged,” Mack admitted, chuckling at our shared frustration. “But hey, at least we found some common ground, right? We both think the other person is unbearable.”

“Speak for yourself,” I smirked. “I’m a delight.”

“Of course you are.” He laughed, shaking his head.

We were so caught up in our moment of levity that neither of us noticed the door swing open until a bailiff cleared his throat loudly.

“Excuse me,” he said, his voice stern as he regarded us with a disapproving frown. “This is a courtroom, not a comedy club. I’m going to have to ask you both to leave.”

“Of course, sir,” Mack replied, struggling to suppress another laugh as we gathered our things. “Our apologies for any disturbance.”

The tension that had been coiled tightly within me seemed to dissipate as we walked down the hallway. Just moments ago, I was ready to tear Mack apart with my bare hands—and now, here we were, sharing a laugh like old friends.

“Thanks for... well, whatever that was,” I said, turning to face Mack. “I didn’t expect to leave that courtroom in better spirits than when I entered it.”

“It’s not every day you find a worthy opponent who can make you laugh.”



“Is that a compliment?” I teased, arching an eyebrow as I tried to decipher his expression. “I’m flattered.”

“Take it as you will.” He shrugged. “But don’t get too comfortable. When we return to that courtroom, I won’t be holding back.”

“Neither will I,” I retorted, my determination surging back to the forefront. “I’ll be prepared for your antics—and I won’t let you derail me again.”

“Bring it on,” he challenged. “I look forward to seeing what you’ve got up your sleeve. Until then.”

This was no time to be distracted by Mack’s infuriating charm. I had a case to win. So I turned around and walked right out of the door without looking back.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Larissa

As I stepped into the elevator, I checked my phone for any messages. Just as I reached for the button to close the doors and whisk me away to my office, my phone buzzed with an incoming call.

“Ms. Montgomery,” a voice crackled on the other end. “I’ve uncovered something important. There are secret assets outside the country that you need to know about.”

“Wait, slow down,” I said, barely containing my surprise. This could change everything for our case. As the elevator doors shut, I somehow managed to keep my cool. “Let’s discuss this further. I’ll get back to you shortly.”

“Very well.”

My fingers danced across the screen of my phone, composing a quick text to Mack. If anyone could handle a discovery like this, it was him. Not to mention, we were both working to get our clients what they wanted.

“Urgent meeting needed. Coffee shop near the courthouse in thirty minutes?”

“See you there!” His response came quickly, accompanied by a smiley emoticon.

As I exited the elevator and entered the familiar chaos of my firm, my thoughts raced. With secret assets involved, this case could become even more complex. But at least I wouldn’t be navigating these murky waters alone; Mack would be right there with me.

“Morning!” my assistant greeted me cheerfully as I passed her desk.

“Morning. I’ve got to run out for a meeting. Hold down the fort, will you?”

“Of course,” she answered with an understanding smile.

As I gathered my things and prepared to leave, my thoughts turned back to Mack. What would his reaction be to this new development?

I took a seat in the corner of the cafe. A few minutes later, Mack strolled in.

“Hey, Larissa, hope you didn't wait long,” he said as he sat down across from me.

“Only a lifetime or two.”

“Alright, let's not waste any more of your precious time, then,” Mack said with a grin, opening his laptop and spreading out the documents we'd need to discuss. This was one of the many things I admired about him—his ability to dive right into work without hesitation.

As we analyzed the information regarding the secret assets, it became clear that this case was far more complicated than either of us had anticipated. We spent hours combing through every piece of evidence.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked Mack, looking up from my notes.

“Positive,” he replied, meeting my gaze with unwavering determination. “We've got to follow every lead, no matter where it takes us.”

His confidence was contagious. Together, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening at Mack's office, bringing our teams together to tackle this

unprecedented situation.

Mack's office was a stark contrast to mine. Warm-toned walls were adorned with framed photographs of his loved ones and a large wooden desk that seemed like a relic.

"Alright, everyone, we've got a lot to do and not much time," Mack announced as we all settled in, phones in hand and laptops fired up. "Let's get to work."

We made phone calls, compared notes, and brainstormed possible approaches to the case. Despite the stakes, there was an undeniable camaraderie that permeated the air; it was clear that both our teams were determined to see this through, together.

As the evening wore on, I stole glances at Mack. There was something about the furrow of his brow as he concentrated, or the way he'd run a hand through his hair in frustration. It was a side of him I rarely saw, and I found myself increasingly drawn to him.

"We need to request an emergency hearing as soon as possible."

He looked up from his notes, his eyes meeting mine. "I agree."

"Exactly." I nodded as we both got to our feet. The rest of our teams continued their diligent work.

"Let's get on it, then," Mack said, and we moved toward the conference room to prepare our arguments for the judge.

As I walked past the break room, I overheard two members of Mack's team engaged in a hushed conversation. Their words caught my attention, my curiosity piquing as they mentioned Mack's ex-girlfriend.

“Seriously, we have to make sure she doesn't show up here again,” one said, a note of annoyance in her tone. “She's nothing but trouble for Mack.”

“Agreed,” the other chimed in. “He's been so much happier since they broke up. We can't let her ruin his progress—or this case.”

I hesitated by the doorway, biting my lip as their whispered words sank in. Did they truly believe that Mack's personal life could jeopardize the case? Was there more to their concern than mere gossip?

My thoughts raced as I entered the conference room, trying to focus on the task. Mack was already there, pacing back and forth as he formulated his argument. He paused when he noticed me, offering a warm smile that momentarily chased away my concerns.

“Hey, we've got this.”

I forced a smile. “We do.”

But as we continued to work side by side, our professional rivalry seemingly forgotten, I couldn't help but wonder about the conversation I overheard.

And as much as I tried to dismiss it, the thought of Mack's ex-girlfriend—and my own growing feelings for him—lingered stubbornly at the back of my mind.

“Have you gone through all the documents?” Mack asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Almost. One more to go,” I replied, focusing on the screen before me. My fingers flew across the keyboard while my heart pounded against my rib cage.

“Great. Let's wrap this up and celebrate with some takeout.”

“Sounds good.”

After placing our orders for food, I decided it was time.

“Mack, can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course, what's on your mind?” he responded, his brows furrowing.

“Earlier today, I overheard a couple of your team members talking about your ex-girlfriend. They seemed worried about her showing up here and causing problems for you—and potentially for this case.”

Mack's face flushed with anger and embarrassment, his fists clenching at his sides. “Was it Rachel? Or maybe Jake?” He paused, his voice softer as he added, “I thought they knew better than to gossip.”

“Does it matter who said it?” I snapped, my own frustration bubbling to the surface. “The point is, they clearly think she could be a problem for us. And if that's the case, I deserve to know about it.”

“Fine,” he conceded, his jaw clenched. “Yes, my ex has a habit of showing up unannounced and causing scenes. But she's out of my life now, and I won't let her interfere with our work. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” I retorted, rolling my eyes. “I just wish you could have been upfront about this.”

“Right, because you're always so open about your personal life.”

“Maybe if you didn't have such a reputation for playing by the rules, I wouldn't have to worry about what your team says behind closed doors!” I exclaimed, my voice rising in anger.

“Is that what this is really about?” Mack asked, his gaze narrowing. “Are you worried about your own reputation being tainted by association?”

“What if I am? We both know how cutthroat this industry can be,” I argued, my heart pounding as I bared my concerns to him. “I've worked too hard to get where I am just to have it all come crashing down because of some ex-girlfriend drama.”

Mack sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Look, I promise you. She won't be a problem. And if she does show up, we'll handle it. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, my anger dissipating as I met his sincere gaze. “Thank you, Mack.”

“Anytime.”

The tension in the air shifted as Mack and I continued to exchange words. Instead of heated arguments, our jabs became playful, almost flirtatious.

“Really, Larissa? You're worried about my reputation?” Mack grinned. “I didn't know you cared so much.”

“Please,” I scoffed, feeling a smirk tug at the corner of my mouth. “I'm just looking out for my own interests here.”

“Ah, there's the Larissa I know and love—always putting herself first,” he teased, but there was warmth in his voice that hadn't been there before.

“Someone has to,” I retorted, unable to suppress a chuckle.

“Is that why you're always so quick to challenge me in the courtroom?” Mack asked, leaning closer. His proximity sent a shiver down my spine, and I found myself momentarily lost in the intensity of his gaze. “Afraid you might actually care about someone other than yourself?”

“Careful, Mr. Harrington,” I warned playfully, though my heart raced at the implications of his words. “You might not like where this conversation is headed.”

“Maybe I will,” he whispered, and before I could process what was happening, his lips were on mine.

The kiss was passionate and intense—more than I ever expected from someone like Mack. My hands gripped his shoulders, my fingers digging into the fabric of his suit jacket, desperate for something to hold on to as waves of emotion crashed over me. In that moment, all my doubts and fears faded away.

Mack's hands moved from my waist to cradle my face, deepening the kiss further. The world around us seemed to blur and fade until all that was left was the two of us, locked in an embrace that threatened to consume us both.

As we finally broke apart, breathless and flushed, I stared into Mack's eyes, my mind reeling from what just transpired between us. My earlier anger and frustration were now distant memories.

“Wow,” I breathed, still feeling the lingering warmth of his touch on my skin.

“Wow indeed,” Mack agreed, a hint of awe in his voice as he traced his thumb gently along my lower lip. “I guess we should probably get back to work, huh?”

“Probably,” I murmured, but neither of us made any move to break the momentary spell that settled over us.



The cold reality of our situation began to seep in as I stared into Mack's vibrant blue eyes, as we still held on to each other.

My heart raced and my cheeks burned; I couldn't believe what just happened between us.

This wasn't like me—losing control and kissing in the middle of his office.

I could practically hear Janai scolding me in my head.

“Listen,” I started, gathering my thoughts and trying to sound professional, “this... this can't happen again.”

Mack nodded, his expression serious but tinged with sadness. “You're right,” he agreed. “Our careers are too important, and we have clients relying on us.”

“Exactly,” I said, forcing myself to step back from him and create some physical distance. “This was a one-time thing, a momentary lapse in judgment. We can't let it interfere with our work.”

“Of course not. We'll just put this behind us and focus on the case.”

“Right. Now, let's get back to work.”

We both attempted to refocus on the task at hand.

I couldn't help but sneak glances at Mack, remembering the feel of his lips against mine and the way his hands cradled my face.

It was hard to shake the memory, and even harder to ignore the lingering desire that stirred within me.

My mind kept replaying the kiss, making it impossible to concentrate.

What if someone found out? How would this affect our reputations, our relationships with our teams?

I forced myself to push those thoughts aside, reminding myself that it was just a kiss, and nothing more.

“Hey,” Mack called from across the room, drawing my attention to him. “Could you take a look at this document? I want to make sure I'm interpreting it correctly.”

“Of course,” I replied, grateful for the distraction as I crossed the room to join him.

As we bent over his desk, our shoulders brushing slightly, I wished things could be different between us.

But as much as I wanted to explore whatever sparked between us, I knew it was too risky.

Our professional rivalry and the potential consequences on our careers simply outweighed any personal desires.

So, with a heavy heart, I focused on the document in front of me, determined to keep our relationship strictly professional.

Mack

As I stood in the empty courtroom, the judge's bench before me, my heart pounded like it was about to escape my chest. It wasn't the emergency hearing that had me on edge—I'd faced countless cases throughout my career—but rather my opposing counsel.

“Mack, are you even listening?” Ava snapped, waving her manicured hand in front of my face. “I swear, if you're not going to take this seriously...”

“Of course,” I assured her, forcing my attention back to the matter at hand. “I'm just running through some last-minute strategies.”

“Damn right, you better be,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her designer blouse. “I am not about to lose everything to Mark because you're too busy daydreaming.”

The truth was, I wasn't daydreaming about winning or losing Ava's case. Instead, I was watching Larissa as she crossed the room, her dark hair cascading down her back and her piercing green eyes locked on a stack of documents. She was formidable, fierce, and utterly captivating.

“Mack, focus!” Ava hissed, clearly annoyed by my lack of attention. “You seem... preoccupied. Is there something you're not telling me?”

My mind raced, searching for a convincing excuse. “I'm just trying to ensure we have all our bases covered. This is a crucial moment for your case, and I want to make sure we're prepared.”

“Good, because if I find out that you're holding out on me, we are going to have a serious problem.”

I nodded, swallowing hard as I watched Larissa approach the table where we'd soon face off.

The thought of pursuing a relationship with her sent a shiver down my spine, followed by an overwhelming sense of guilt.

I was supposed to be focused on winning Ava's case, not fantasizing about the woman on the other side of it.

“Alright, then. Let's do this.”

“Remember,” Ava whispered as we took our seats at the table, “I'm counting on you.”

As the judge entered the room, I couldn't help but steal one last glance at Larissa. Her eyes met mine for just a moment before she looked away. The stakes had never been higher—not only did I have to win Ava's case, but I also had to figure out what to do about my growing feelings for Larissa.

We each presented more of our case, but the judge called for a short recess. I seized the opportunity to escape the tension in the courtroom. My feet carried me down the hall, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. I needed some fresh air—and fast.

“Mack!” a familiar voice called out just as I reached the heavy double doors leading outside. I turned to find Tanner Dixon, a friend and fellow lawyer, striding toward me with a grin on his face. “Man, you look like you could use a break.”

“Tell me about it.” I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. “This case is

driving me up the wall, and I don't even want to think about Larissa right now.”

Tanner clapped me on the back, easing the weight of the world off my shoulders. “Hey, I've seen you work miracles in the courtroom before. You'll get through this one too. Just take a deep breath and trust yourself.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Alright, spill it,” he ordered. “What's going on between you and Larissa?”

“What? Nothing,” I stammered, taken aback by his sudden question. Had I been that obvious? “Why would you even ask that?”

“Come on, Mack,” Tanner replied, rolling his eyes. “I've known you since law school, and I've never seen you this rattled over an opposing counsel before. Plus, your little glances across the courtroom haven't gone unnoticed. Are you sure there's nothing going on?”

“Absolutely not,” I insisted, trying to keep my voice steady. “Besides, I have a duty to Ava and her case. I can't afford to get distracted by... feelings.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Tanner said, raising his hands in surrender.

“But remember, dude, you're only human. And sometimes, the heart wants what it wants—even if it's not the most convenient thing for your career.

Alright, I'll drop it,” Tanner said, his eyes darting over my shoulder for a moment before meeting mine again.

“But you might want to know that Larissa's been watching you this whole time we've been talking.”

“Seriously?” I asked, trying not to let the surprise show in my voice. I resisted the urge to glance back at her, reminding myself that I had more pressing matters to focus on.

“Yep. She hasn't taken her eyes off you,” Tanner confirmed, his eyebrows raised. “I'm getting the feeling there might be something mutual going on here, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Even if that were true,” I began, keeping my voice low so only Tanner could hear, “it doesn't change the fact that pursuing anything with her would be... complicated.”

“Ah, the classic 'opposing counsel' dilemma,” Tanner mused, leaning back against the wall and crossing his arms. “I get it, man. But sometimes, life throws us curveballs. And sometimes, those curveballs are wrapped up in sharp-tongued, green-eyed packages that make us question our priorities.”

I couldn't help but crack a smile at his description of Larissa. It was accurate, to say the least.

“Look, I'm not saying you should throw caution to the wind and start making out with her in the courthouse,” Tanner continued, chuckling at the thought.

“But maybe, just maybe, it's worth considering the possibility that there's something real between you two—even if it means stepping outside your comfort zone.”

“Isn't that a risk?”

“Of course it is,” he admitted. “But what's life without a little risk, huh? Besides, I've seen the way you two spar in the courtroom—there's definitely some chemistry there.”

I sighed, rubbing my temples as I tried to process Tanner's words. On the one hand, he was right—there was something undeniably electric between Larissa and I. Tanner had no idea about my crush on her in law school.

“Maybe you're right,” I conceded, looking back at Tanner. “But for now, I need to focus on Ava and her case. If... if there's something worth exploring with Larissa, it'll have to wait until this trial is over.”

“Fair enough,” Tanner said, nodding. “Just don't let your feelings cloud your judgment, alright?”

“Trust me, I won't.”

Only time would tell if we'd ever find out what that something more could be.

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders, feeling the weight of Tanner's advice bolstering my resolve.

My chest swelled with confidence as I strode back into the courtroom, ready to tackle the case head-on and reveal the secret that would secure Ava's victory.

“Your Honor,” I began, my voice steady and unwavering, “I need to present some crucial evidence in this case.”

“Proceed, Mr. Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” I turned to face the opposing counsel, catching a glimpse of Larissa out of the corner of my eye.

Her gaze was fixed on me intently, and for a moment, I felt a flicker of warmth amidst the cold tension of the courtroom.

“I present to you Exhibit A,” I said, holding up a stack of documents that had been hidden from view.

“Exhibit A contains records of undisclosed assets held by my client's spouse,” I explained, handing the documents over to the judge.

“These assets were expertly concealed during their marriage, but our investigation has uncovered the truth. My client is entitled to a fair share of these assets in the divorce settlement.”

Judge Phillips studied the documents. The air in the courtroom crackled, and I stole a glance at Larissa once more. Despite the revelation that threatened her case, she appeared calm and composed—almost impressed.

“Very well, Mr. Harrington,” Judge Phillips announced, setting the documents down. “The court will take this new evidence into consideration when determining the final settlement.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I said, feeling a surge of triumph as the gavel fell. It was far from over, but I could see the scales tipping in our favor.

Ava turned to me. “Mack, I... I don't know what to say. Thank you.”

“Of course, Ava,” I replied, giving her a reassuring smile. “It's my job.”

As the courtroom began to empty, I noticed Larissa gathering her belongings with a grace unmatched by anyone else in that dreary room.

“Congratulations, Mr. Harrington. You certainly know how to pull a rabbit out of your hat.”



“Thank you, Ms. Montgomery,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the pounding in my chest. “But as they say, all is fair in love and war—or in courtrooms, I suppose.”

“Indeed,” she said, allowing a small smile to touch the corners of her lips. Those lips... focus, Mack .

As she turned to leave, I knew our future was uncertain, and yet, this was only the beginning of something incredible.

Mack

“Your Honor, I'd like to present a piece of information about Mr. Kennsington that has not yet been disclosed.” My heart raced as I made the decision to reveal this crucial detail. I knew it could be risky, but it was the only way to counter Larissa's relentless assault.

“Very well,” Judge Phillips said, nodding his approval. “Proceed, Mr. Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Taking another deep breath, I looked straight at Larissa, trying to gauge her reaction. “During our investigation, we discovered that Mr. Kennsington has a son from a previous relationship—a son he has never acknowledged or supported financially.”

Larissa raised an eyebrow, her green eyes narrowing in suspicion. “And what does that have to do with the current case, Mr. Harrington?”

“Everything, Ms. Montgomery,” I replied emphatically.

“You see, the existence of Mr. Kennsington's son directly contradicts his claims of being a devoted family man. This new information is relevant to our case as it demonstrates that Mr. Kennsington has made a habit of withholding important facts and evading responsibilities.”

“Objection!” Larissa shot back, her voice sharp and filled with venom. “This information is irrelevant to the current case and serves only to tarnish my client's reputation!”

“Overruled,” Judge Phillips responded firmly. “The information is relevant. Continue, Mr. Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” I could feel a surge of confidence coursing through me as I looked over at Larissa. For the first time since this trial had begun, she seemed genuinely rattled.

“Mr. Kennsington's refusal to acknowledge or support his own son,” I continued, “demonstrates a pattern of behavior that we believe extends to his current situation. It is our contention that he deliberately concealed assets during the divorce proceedings in order to avoid splitting them fairly with his ex-wife.”

Larissa clenched her jaw, clearly struggling to maintain her composure. But I wasn't about to let her off the hook.

“Your Honor, we request that the court consider this new information when determining the division of assets between Mr. Kennsington and his wife.”

As I sat down, I stole a glance at Larissa. She was glaring at me with an intensity that could have melted steel, but I could tell that her confidence had been shaken. And as much as I knew I shouldn't enjoy it, there was a part of me that reveled in this small victory against my fierce opponent.

The room fell silent as if someone had flicked a switch, cutting off all noise. The sound of shuffling papers ceased, pens stopped tapping, and even the ventilation seemed to hold its breath in anticipation.

“Ms. Montgomery?” the judge's voice broke the silence, though it was quiet and hesitant, as if she too was caught in the spell of the moment.

Larissa stared at me, her piercing green eyes narrowing.

It felt like standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the ground beneath you to give way.

But then, she straightened up, an icy smile spreading across her face.

“Your Honor,” she began, her voice deceptively sweet, “I must commend Mr. Mack on his theatrics. They certainly make for a dramatic courtroom.”

She paused, the smile never leaving her face, but her gaze only grew colder. “However, it is unfortunate that my esteemed colleague has chosen to use this stage to introduce unsubstantiated claims instead of following proper procedures.”

As Larissa spoke, I could feel the air in the room grow tense, the electricity crackling between us like static. The spectators leaned in, eagerly anticipating the next move in this high-stakes game of chess.

“Ms. Montgomery, are you implying that Mr. Mack's claims are baseless?” the judge asked, his patience clearly wearing thin.

“Of course not, Your Honor,” she replied, feigning innocence. “I simply find it curious that this information is being brought to light now, in such a public manner, rather than during discovery, as protocol dictates.”

Her words were like daggers aimed straight at me, and I couldn't help but wince as they found their mark. She was right—I should have brought this up sooner. But I had wanted to catch her off guard, to see her facade crack, even if just for a moment.

“Your Honor,” I interjected, trying to regain control of the narrative, “I apologize if my actions seem unorthodox. But given the gravity of this new evidence and its implications on the case, I felt it was crucial to bring it to light as soon as possible.”

“Mack,” Larissa cut in, her tone dripping with scorn, “your flair for the dramatic is truly commendable. But perhaps you should focus less on making a scene and more on doing your job—by the book.”

Her words stung, but they also ignited a spark within me. I couldn't let her win, not like this. I had to fight back, even if it meant playing by her rules. As the room held its breath, I prepared for the next round in our battle of wits, knowing that the stakes had never been higher.

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Larissa

Just as the courtroom was about to call it a day, the doors swung open with a dramatic flourish.

In strode the surprise witness: a petite woman in her late forties, sporting a pixie haircut and wire-rimmed glasses.

Dressed in a smart navy-blue pantsuit, she had an air of confidence that commanded attention.

She took the stand, and the room fell silent, hanging on her every word.

Unbelievable!

As we prepared to cross-examine the witness, things were about to take a turn for the worse. A storm was brewing, and it threatened our case.

“Your witness, Ms. Montgomery,” the judge said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I replied, forcing a smile. As I approached the witness stand, I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

“Can you please state your name for the record?” I asked, my voice wavering slightly.

“Maria Reynolds,” she answered, her voice shaking as well.

“Ms. Reynolds, can you please explain your relationship with Mr. Kennsington?” I continued, my mind racing as I tried to focus on the task at hand.

“Um,” she hesitated, clearly unnerved by our earlier argument. “I was... involved.”

“Involved how?” I pressed, my heart in my throat as the tension mounted.

“Objection! Leading the witness!” Mack barked, his voice strained.

“Overruled. The witness may answer.”

“We had an affair,” Maria finally admitted, tears filling her eyes.

“Thank you, Ms. Reynolds,” I said quietly, feeling the weight of her confession settle heavily on my shoulders. As I walked back to my seat, I could feel the storm inside me growing stronger, threatening to tear apart everything I'd worked so hard to build.

“Your witness, Mr. Harrington,” the judge announced, and I braced myself for the worst.

“Ms. Reynolds, isn't it true that you have a history of dishonesty?” Mack asked, his voice tight. It was clear he didn't want to attack her character, but he had no choice.

“Objection! Character assassination!”

“Overruled. Continue, Mr. Harrington.”

As Mack continued questioning Maria, I couldn't help but think about the future, both of our case and our relationship. If things continued down this path, what would be left when the dust settled?

“Ms. Montgomery,” the judge's voice interrupted my thoughts. “Do you have any further questions for the witness?”

“No, Your Honor,” I replied, swallowing hard.

“Very well. You may step down, Ms. Reynolds.”

“I will be taking everything into consideration and will give my ruling tomorrow. Court is adjourned.”

As the courtroom began to empty, I stood frozen in place, my mind racing. The unresolved conflict between Mack and me felt like an unbearable weight, and the storm inside me threatened to break loose at any moment.

“God, I hate cheaters.” The hypocrisy of it all didn't escape me, given that Mark was the very man I was trying to protect. But then again, a lawyer can't always choose their clients.

“Ms. Montgomery, wait!” an intern called after me, struggling to keep up with my long strides.

“Handle it,” I barked over my shoulder. “I've got things to do.”

As if on cue, the lobby erupted into chaos. A crowd gathered near the entrance, their curiosity piqued by the spectacle unfolding before them. Security guards were scrambling to break up a scuffle between none other than Mark and a woman who could only be described as his mistress.

Who does he think he is? This isn't some trashy reality show!

“Mark!” I yelled, fighting my way through the horde of onlookers. “What do you



think you're doing?"

"Stay out of this, Larissa! This doesn't concern you!"

"Are you kidding me?" My voice cracked. "I'm trying to save you, and you're out here brawling with your mistress like a caveman! Get it together!"

Ugh, men are such idiots!

The security guards were having a hard time separating the feuding pair, their efforts only adding fuel to the fire. It was obvious that they had no idea how to handle such a volatile situation—not that I could blame them. Mark Kennsington was a force to be reckoned with, but so was I.

"Enough!" I shouted, drawing myself up to my full height and channeling every ounce of authority I possessed. "Let the guards do their job!"

"Fine!" Mark huffed, finally allowing himself to be pulled away from his mistress. "But don't think this is over, Larissa. Not by a long shot."

"Mack?" I blurted out, caught off guard by his unexpected presence. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to help," he replied with a rueful grin. "But it seems I might have only made things worse."

"Join the club," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

"Look out!" Mack suddenly cried, lunging toward me with outstretched arms. But instead of protecting me from some unseen danger, his sudden movement only served to startle me further.

“Ah!” I shrieked, instinctively swinging my fist in self-defense. Unfortunately, my impromptu haymaker found its mark square on Mack's nose, eliciting a yelp of pain from the hapless attorney.

“Ow!” he groaned, clutching his face. “Larissa, what the hell?”

“Mack, I'm so sorry!” I stammered, horrified by my own actions. “I didn't mean to?—”

“Never mind that now,” he interrupted, wincing as blood began to trickle from his nostrils. “We need to stop this before someone else gets hurt.”

Blood blossomed from Mack's nose like a crimson rose, and for a moment, we both just stared at each other in shock.

“Mack, oh my God,” I whispered, horrified at the damage I'd done to his perfect face. “I'm so sorry.”

“Ah... it's fine,” he said, trying to grin through the pain. The effect was more of a grimace, and he looked like he might pass out. “Just... didn't see that coming, that's all.”

“Here, let me help you.” I reached out, steadying him as he swayed on his feet. “You're bleeding pretty badly. Sit down, and I'll find something to clean you up.”

“O-okay,” he stammered, bravely attempting another smile. “Thanks, Larissa. I appreciate it.”

As I guided him to a nearby bench, I couldn't help but feel a sudden rush of protectiveness toward him—a strange emotion, considering I'd just pummeled him in the face.

But now that Mack was injured, it was like some primal part of me had kicked in, demanding that I do everything I could to make things right.

“Here,” I said, pressing a crumpled tissue against his nostrils. “Hold this while I find something better.”

“Y-you don't have to do this,” he protested weakly, but I silenced him with a stern look.

“Of course I do. I hit you, remember? The least I can do is help patch you up.”

“Right.” He sighed, wincing as he applied pressure to his nose. “Fair enough.”

“Okay, just sit tight,” I told him, scanning the lobby for something—anything—I could use to stem the flow of blood. My eyes fell on a first aid kit, and I hurried over, my heart pounding with a mix of adrenaline and guilt.

“Here,” I said, returning to Mack's side with gauze and antiseptic wipes in hand. “Let me take a look.”

“Thanks,” he murmured, gingerly removing the tissue from his face. “I hope it's not as bad as it feels.”

“Only one way to find out.” I gently tilted his chin up, my fingers ghosting over his jawline as I examined the damage.

The sight of his bruised and bloody nose made my stomach churn with remorse, but I forced myself to focus.

I was responsible for this mess, and I'd be damned if I didn't do everything I could to fix it.

“Okay, it doesn't look broken,” I announced after a few tense moments. “But you're going to have one heck of a shiner tomorrow.”

“Great,” he groaned, wincing again as I dabbed at his wounds with an antiseptic wipe. “Just what I need.”

“Sorry,” I said, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “This is all my fault.”

“Hey,” he said, reaching up to squeeze my hand. “It's okay, Larissa. We're both caught up in this madness, remember? And besides... you were just trying to protect yourself.”

“Still,” I sniffled, blinking away the tears. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Accidents happen,” he replied, giving me a lopsided smile. “Besides, now we have a great story to tell, right?”

“Right.” I laughed, despite myself. “The time Larissa Montgomery decked Mack Harrington in the middle of a courthouse lobby.”

“Exactly.” He grinned. “Now that's a tale for the ages.”

“Maybe so,” I agreed, smiling back as I finished bandaging his nose. “But let's try to avoid any more accidents in the future, okay?”

“Agreed.” He chuckled, and for a moment—just a brief, shining moment—all the chaos around us seemed to fade away, leaving only Mack, me, and the bond we'd forged in the heat of battle.

“Excuse me,” I said, gently nudging a gawking bystander as I helped Mack to his feet. We turned just in time to see security guards and police officers swarming Mark

and Zippy like bees to honey.

“Mark Kennsington!” Zippy shrieked, pointing an accusatory finger at him as the authorities separated them. “You lying scumbag!”

My eyes flicked from Zippy's enraged face to Mark, who had the audacity to look sheepish. He tried to smooth out his disheveled hair and clothing, but the damage was done. Ava, meanwhile, stood off to the side with an air of smug satisfaction plastered across her face.

As the commotion began to die down, I realized that the responsibility of untangling this mess fell squarely on my shoulders. With a sigh, I turned to Mack. “I suppose we should start figuring out what happened here.”

“Agreed,” he replied, touching his bandaged nose gingerly. “Though I must say, this is one of the more... interesting cases I've been involved in.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, scanning the room for any clues or witnesses who could shed light on the situation.

“Hey. You don't think this will affect our case, do you?”

“Unfortunately, I have no idea,” I admitted, feeling a twinge of guilt for punching him earlier. “But I promise you, I'll do everything I can to make sure it doesn't.”

“Thanks,” he said, and I could tell he meant it. His faith in me warmed something deep within my chest, and I couldn't help but smile.

“Alright, let's get to work,” I declared, rolling up my sleeves. “We need to talk to Mark, Zippy, and Ava, and then we'll see if any of these fine folks”—I gestured to the crowd that had yet to disperse—“witnessed anything useful.”

“Lead the way,” Mack said with a grin. Together, we waded into the aftermath, determined to find answers amidst the chaos.

Mack

“I might have underestimated how quickly things would escalate.”

“Underestimated?” Larissa snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. “Mack, what part of that didn't scream disaster to you?”

“Ah, but where's your sense of adventure?” I teased, nudging her. Her laughter bubbled up, infectious and bright.

“Adventure,” she muttered, shaking her head as our laughter died down. “You're going to be the death of me, Mack Harrington.”

I winked at her, trying to ignore the pounding in my chest. The truth was, I'd follow her on whatever adventure she chose. Even if it meant sitting on this cold floor, surrounded by police and security guards who were no doubt wondering how two lawyers managed to land themselves in such a mess.

I tilted my head back to stem the flow. My nose throbbed with each heartbeat, and I held my suit jacket against it, the once pristine fabric now marred by bright-red stains.

“Are you okay?”

“Never better,” I mumbled through my makeshift bandage, offering her a lopsided grin. “I've always wanted to see how I'd look with a crimson accessory.”

“Very fashionable. Go clean yourself up. There’s a bathroom over there.”

I glanced around the hallway, noting the uniforms and walkie-talkies that surrounded us like a swarm of bees. “I think our friends in blue might have something to say about that.”

“Can't hurt to ask. Excuse me, Officer? My friend here could really use a trip to the restroom.”

One of the officers approached us, his face stern and unreadable. “I'm sorry, but we can't let Mr. Harrington leave this area. We need to preserve any potential evidence, and for safety reasons, we have to keep everyone contained.”

“Even if I promise not to touch anything?” I tried, giving him my most charming smile despite the blood still dripping from my nose.

“Sorry, Mr. Harrington. Rules are rules.”

“Great,” I grumbled as the officer returned to his post. “Looks like I'll be sporting this new look for a while.”

“Hey, don't worry. We'll figure this out. We've faced worse situations before, right?”

“True,” I admitted. “But none of them involved me looking like a bad extra from a horror movie.”

“First time for everything,” Larissa winked.

Suddenly, Mark Kennsington strode up to us, his face contorted with rage. He pointed an accusatory finger at Larissa and shouted, “I want my lawyer!”



“Uh, Mark,” I said, trying to wipe the blood from my nose without smearing it all over my face, “Larissa is your lawyer.”

“Exactly!” he yelled, not even bothering to lower his voice. “And she's supposed to be protecting me from this circus!”

As if on cue, a swarm of reporters descended upon us like vultures, their cameras flashing and microphones shoved in our faces. Some shouted questions, while others stayed eerily quiet, as if they knew something we didn't.

“Mr. Kennsington, can you comment on the allegations against you?” one reporter demanded.

“Ms. Montgomery, how confident are you in your client's innocence?” another chimed in.

“Mack, how's your nose? Is it broken?” asked a third, her morbid curiosity almost comical.

“Okay, everyone, back off!” Larissa snapped. “This is a private matter. We will not be answering any questions at this time.”

With the reporters silenced, I took the opportunity to share my own thoughts with Larissa.

“Hey,” I whispered, leaning in close, “do you really think we can get out of this unscathed?”

“Of course,” she replied, her voice firm but gentle. “We've faced worse situations before, right? Trust me, Mack, we'll make it through this.”

Just as the reporters began to fire off another round of questions, the elevator doors slid open with a soft ding. Judge Malcolm Phillips emerged.

“Judge Phillips,” Larissa acknowledged.

“Miss Montgomery.”

But then, out of nowhere, Larissa started laughing.

It was the kind of laughter that built gradually, starting as a small chuckle and escalating into full-blown hilarity.

I blinked, dumbfounded. This was not the time for laughter, and yet, there she was, nearly doubled over with glee.

The reporters, equally stunned, ceased their questioning as they turned to watch her.

“Mack, just look at us,” she managed between giggles. “We’re like some twisted movie—the lawyer, the bleeding billionaire, and the grumpy judge!”

I had to admit, she had a point. The absurdity of our situation was almost comical, and the more I thought about it, the more I felt the corners of my mouth twitching upward. A chuckle escaped my lips before I could stop it.

“Miss Montgomery, are you finished?” Judge Phillips said, raising an eyebrow. His stern visage only served to fuel Larissa’s laughter, inciting a fresh wave of giggles.

“Apologies, Your Honor,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “It’s just... sometimes, you have to laugh at the absurdity of life, don’t you think?”

“Indeed,” he replied, allowing the faintest hint of a smile to grace his lips. “Now, if

we could all return to some semblance of order...”

“Of course, Your Honor,” Larissa agreed, her laughter finally subsiding. “We’ll get this sorted out in no time.”

As Judge Phillips turned to address the police and security guards, I marveled at Larissa's ability to find humor even in the darkest of times. Her laughter had been like a lifeline, reminding me that we were more than just pawns—we were two people who had found each other.

“Let’s just go grab something to eat until they get booked.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ve got an extra jacket in my briefcase.”

Mack

As I sat across from Larissa in the Mexican restaurant, my head was wrapping around the fact that The Kennsington family was a chaotic mess, like a tornado that had crashed into an erupting volcano.

And now, here we were, two lawyers caught in the eye of the storm.

Ava's determination to take everything Mark had, coupled with his unfaithfulness, made this divorce case a ticking time bomb.

“Have you ever seen a situation so impossible?” I asked, swirling my margarita around in its glass.

“Only when I try to find matching socks in my laundry,” Larissa replied. It was moments like these that I found myself drawn to her even more.

“Careful, Montgomery, I might just start believing you have a sense of humor,” I teased as I took a bite of my enchilada.

“If I didn't have a sense of humor, I would've run for the hills by now.” Her laughter was contagious, and soon we were both laughing, our worries momentarily forgotten. We were walking a fine line, balancing our personal desires against our professional responsibilities.

“Another round of margaritas?” I suggested, trying to distract myself from the intensity of her gaze.

“Only if you promise not to get too tipsy.”

“Deal,” I said, signaling the waiter.

“Mack,” she said, her voice suddenly serious. “Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we weren't on opposite sides?”

“Of the courtroom or the restaurant table?” I asked jokingly, but my heart started to race at the thought.

“Both.”

“Truthfully? Yes, I do.” Admitting it out loud felt both terrifying and freeing. “But we have a job to do, and as much as I'd love to see where this could lead, our clients need us to be focused for one more night.”

“Agreed.” Larissa sighed, her eyes drifting down to her plate. “I just wish things could be different. Let's promise each other that once this case is over, we'll figure things out.”

“Promise.”

We needed a moment to unwind, to enjoy each other's company without thinking about the Kennsington case.

“Did I ever tell you that Mexican food is my favorite?”

“Really? I would have pegged you as more of a pizza guy,” she teased, flashing me a playful smirk.

“Guilty as charged,” I admitted, chuckling. “But there's just something about the

combination of flavors and spices in Mexican cuisine that I can't resist.”

“Same here,” she said, nodding enthusiastically. “I love experimenting with different dishes at home, too. Cooking has always been a stress reliever for me.”

“Seriously? Me too!” I exclaimed, genuinely surprised. “What's your specialty?”

“Enchiladas verdes. My grandmother taught me how to make them when I was a kid,” she replied, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

“Nice! I'll have to try your enchiladas sometime. I make a mean chile relleno myself.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said with a smile, raising her margarita glass in toast. “To good food and great company.”

“Cheers.”

Our conversation moved beyond food, and I found out just how much we had in common—from our dedication to justice to our passion for helping others.

“Mack, I never thought I'd meet someone who understands me.”

“Likewise,” I replied, my heart swelling with affection for this incredible woman. “You know, sometimes I think that if we put our heads together, we could change the world.”

“Or at least the legal system,” she joked, but there was a seriousness in her eyes that told me she believed it too.

Larissa and I had something special worth fighting for—both in and out of the

courtroom.

As we left the Mexican restaurant behind us, a slight chill in the air made me pull my jacket tighter around me.

“You know, it's been a long time since I've felt this... uncertain about the future.” I glanced over at her, surprised by her candidness.

“Uncertain?” I asked, trying to gauge her thoughts.

“About everything—the case, us, life in general.” She sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I guess it's just that I'm so used to having control, and right now, it feels like everything is up in the air.”

I nodded, understanding where she was coming from. “I think that's part of what makes life interesting, though. The uncertainty, the potential for unexpected surprises.”

“Maybe,” she conceded with a small smile. “But surprises aren't always good, you know?”

“True,” I admitted, remembering some less-than-stellar surprises in my own life. “But sometimes they can lead to amazing things. Like meeting someone who challenges you and makes you see the world differently.”

“Or finding yourself on the same side of a courtroom with someone you never thought you'd get along with, let alone have feelings for,” she added.

“Exactly,” I agreed, chuckling. “And while I have my own fears—about the case, our careers, and what could happen between us—I also have hope. Hope that things will work out one way or another.”

“Hope, huh?” Larissa mused, her expression softening. “Maybe that's what's been missing from my life lately. It's hard to hold on to hope when you're constantly fighting battles.”

“Then let me be your hope.”

She looked at me for a moment, her eyes searching mine before she finally nodded. “Alright, Mack. Let's hold on to hope—and each other.”



Larissa

“Guess who I ran into downstairs?” Mark said, grinning like a kid who'd just found the cookie jar. “Ava!”

“Of course you did,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

“Turns out, we both had a lot to say to each other, some apologies here and there.” He paused for dramatic effect. “And we've decided to give our marriage another shot.”

The news hit me like a ton of bricks. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” he said, feigning hurt, but his smile betrayed him.

At that moment, the guard stepped forward, observing their interaction with suspicion. “Everything okay in here?”

I forced a smile, as if my facial muscles were frozen solid. “Just peachy. Don't worry about us.”

As the guard retreated, I took a few calming breaths before addressing Mark again through gritted teeth. “So, how did you get yourself in this mess? Why are you even behind bars?”

“Ah, well, it happened right after Ava and I hugged,” he began, a dreamy look on his face. “We kissed... you know how these things go.”

“Get to the point, Mark,” I snapped, already regretting asking.

“Alright, alright,” he conceded, chuckling. “So, while Ava and I were kissing, Zippy—you remember Zippy, right? My mistress?”

“Vividly,” Larissa bit out. How many paramours could one man have?

“Anyway, she saw us and didn't take it too well. Started punching me in the back of the head—” He rubbed the spot gingerly for emphasis. “And it escalated from there.”

My anger reached a boiling point, rendering me temporarily speechless. I wanted to be anywhere but here, listening to Mark describe his cavorting with Ava while his mistress attacked him. The man had no shame, no self-awareness, and it astounded me that I'd ever found him charming.

“Are you kidding me?” My voice cracked as I struggled to process this new information. The man had an uncanny ability to make every situation about him.

“Hey, don't look at me like that! People change, Larissa,” he said. “We've both made mistakes, and now we're trying to fix them.”

I stormed out of the jail cell, leaving Mark's pleading voice echoing behind me. The metal bars slammed shut, marking my exit from that infuriating conversation.

I pushed his voice to the back of my mind, focusing instead on the burning anger that coursed through my veins.

My thoughts swirled like a tornado, each one more incensed than the last. The frustration bubbled up inside me until it threatened to burst forth in a stream of expletives.

I had to find an outlet for this rage, and fast.

“Out of my way!” I snapped at a guard who was blocking my path. He jumped aside, eyes wide with surprise at my sudden outburst. I didn't have time for apologies; I needed air, space—anything to help calm the storm inside me.

I finally reached the exit, pushing the heavy doors open and stepping out into the sunlight.

The warmth on my face did little to soothe my temper, but at least I could breathe again.

“How does one man cause so much trouble?” I muttered under my breath, mentally preparing myself for the inevitable fallout from Mark's latest escapade.

“Rough day?” a familiar voice asked, startling me out of my inner turmoil. I turned to find Mack leaning against the hood of his car, concern etched on his handsome features.

“Rough doesn't even begin to cover it.” I sighed, feeling the weight of the day bearing down on me.

I knew he'd be able to read the exhaustion and irritation in my eyes.

“Mark just informed me that he and Ava have decided to give their marriage another shot.

Oh, and he's currently behind bars for getting into a brawl with his mistress.”

“Wow,” Mack said, raising an eyebrow. “I knew things were complicated, but this is... something else.” He pushed off from the car and came closer, offering a

sympathetic smile. “Want to talk about it?”

“Later,” I replied, suddenly feeling drained. “Right now, I just want to go home and take a long, hot bath. Preferably one filled with wine instead of water.”

“Good luck. See ya tomorrow.”

Mack

I stood next to Larissa, my heart pounding as we faced the judge's wrath. Our clients flanked us on either side.

“Mr. Harrington, Ms. Montgomery,” the judge addressed us, his brown eyes piercing our souls with every syllable.

“I am extremely disappointed in the behavior displayed by both counsel and your clients during yesterday's proceedings.” He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. “This is a court of law, not a circus.”

“Your Honor,” I began, trying to muster whatever charm I had left after the previous day's disaster, “we apologize for any unprofessional conduct on our part. We understand the seriousness of the actions and will ensure that it does not happen again.”

“See that it doesn't, Mr. Harrington,” he warned. Larissa nodded beside me, her green eyes reflecting the same contrition I hoped was mirrored in mine.

“Moving on,” the judge continued, flipping through pages of documentation before him, “I have reviewed the terms of the proposed settlement agreement and find them to be reasonable under the circumstances. Therefore, I grant Ava Kennsington ownership of the four properties she requested, along with everything else on her list.”

Ava smirked, while her husband clenched his jaw in silent fury. This case had been a

roller coaster from the start, and frankly, I just wanted off the ride.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I said, my voice betraying a hint of gratitude. Larissa echoed my sentiments, and together we vowed to uphold our end of the bargain, regaining control over the proceedings that had previously spiraled out of hand.

“Very well,” Judge Phillips concluded, “court is adjourned.” With a final resounding crack of the gavel, the room was dismissed.

I didn't even glance at Larissa as we rushed out of the courtroom, eager to put some distance between ourselves and the judge's disdainful gaze.

We arrived at the elevator bank, still not speaking. I tapped my foot impatiently while waiting for the doors to open. Finally, the elevator dinged, and we stepped inside, careful to keep a respectful distance between us.

“Floor?” I asked, my voice low and defeated as I reached for the control panel.

“Ground,” she muttered, and I pressed the button without another word. Our descent was slow and agonizing, much like our collective pride that continued to plummet alongside us.

“God, that was humiliating,” I confessed, running my hand through my hair. “I don't think I've ever been chewed out like that in court.”

“Join the club.” Larissa sighed, her piercing green eyes focused on the elevator floor. “I guess there's a first time for everything, huh?”

“Seems so,” I agreed, trying to chuckle, but it came out more like a choked cough. We fell silent again, lost in our thoughts. My mind raced, replaying the judge's words over and over, each time feeling a new sting of shame.

The elevator jolted to a stop, and we stepped out into the cold, sterile hallway of the courthouse. We trudged past the security guards, heads down, avoiding eye contact.

“Hey, have a good day!” one of the guards called out, his voice dripping with sarcasm. I forced a smile, but Larissa didn't bother to respond, her expression set in a steely resolve.

“You know,” I began, suddenly desperate to fill the silence. “We'll bounce back. We always do.”

“Sure,” Larissa replied, but it was clear she didn't share my optimism. The weight of defeat hung heavy in the air as we continued onward, wondering what the future held for our bruised egos and reputations.

“Mack,” Larissa suddenly said. I looked over at her, concerned, only to find her struggling to hold back a fit of laughter. In the juxtaposition of our solemn departure from the courtroom and the ridiculousness of our defeat, it seemed that she had found something infinitely amusing.

“What's so funny?”

“Us!” Larissa gasped, finally giving in to her laughter. “We just got our butts handed to us by Judge Phillips, and all I can think is... what a spectacular show!”

Her laughter was contagious, and soon I found myself joining in, my own chuckle turning into a full-blown guffaw as I leaned against a nearby car for support. Our laughter echoed through the parking garage.

“God, you're right,” I wheezed, wiping tears from my eyes. “I don't think I've ever been more humiliated in my life.”

“Neither have I,” Larissa admitted, her laughter slowly subsiding as she wiped her own tears away. “But it feels good to laugh about it.”

“Absolutely.” I felt lighter and more relaxed than I had in weeks. It was as if being able to find humor in our situation had stripped away some of the weight of our failure, allowing us to breathe again.

Larissa turned to me with a curious glint in her green eyes. “Do you have any place to be right now?”

“Uh, not really. Why? What's up?”

Larissa bit her lip. “Well, since we're both free, and we've just survived that disaster of a case together... I was thinking...”

Her hesitation only served to heighten my curiosity, and I eagerly awaited her suggestion—whatever it might be.

“I think you owe me dinner after the disaster we just went through together. There's this place I've been dying to try—Trattoria dell'Arte. You in?”

“Trattoria dell'Arte?” I echoed, my eyebrows shooting up. The restaurant was known for its exquisite Italian cuisine, but it wasn't exactly the most affordable option in town. Still, the thought of indulging in a luxurious meal after the ordeal we'd just experienced was undeniably appealing.

“Are you sure?” I asked, still somewhat taken aback by her suggestion. “I mean, I'm all for treating ourselves after that fiasco, but that place is pretty pricey...”

“Consider it a peace offering. Besides, I have a feeling we could both use a little pampering right now.”



Her words struck a chord within me. After weeks of tension, stress, and ultimately, humiliation, the idea of a lavish dinner at one of the city's finest establishments sounded like the perfect way to unwind and put the whole ordeal behind us.

“Alright, you've convinced me. Let's do it.”

“Great! Meet me there.”

I made my way to my car and slid into the driver's seat. We may have been defeated in the courtroom today, but there was something about Larissa's invitation that made me feel like we were on the cusp of a new beginning.

As I pulled out of the parking garage and onto the city streets, I smiled, the lingering embarrassment from earlier already fading as I looked forward to a night of good food, laughter, and the unexpected company of a fierce and captivating woman.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:32 am*

Larissa

Mack and I found ourselves standing outside the entrance of the quaint little Italian eatery.

“Shall we?” Mack asked, offering me his arm.

“Of course.”

Inside, the atmosphere was cozy and intimate. “Table for two?” the maitre d' inquired, giving us a welcoming smile.

“Yes, please.”

“Right this way.” He guided us to a secluded table near the back of the restaurant, giving it a sense of privacy, the conversation from other diners only a low hum.

As we settled into our seats, there was something about his effortless charisma that always managed to draw me in, despite my usual guarded nature.

“Quite the romantic setting, don't you think?” he whispered, leaning in slightly across the table.

“Indeed,” I agreed, a blush warming my cheeks. “I'm looking forward to whatever comes next.”

“Did you hear about the latest case over at my firm?” Mack asked, swirling a piece of

bread in olive oil before taking a bite.

“Which one?” I replied, picking up my own slice and echoing his movements. “It seems like there's always something new happening.”

“Ah, well...” He chuckled. “I'm referring to the one involving our rival firm and their client who tried to sue the city for damages after tripping on an uneven sidewalk.”

“Ah yes, that one. They really thought they had a chance, didn't they?”

“Indeed, but it just goes to show how unpredictable our work can be.” He took a sip of his wine, his eyes never leaving mine. “Speaking of which, how are things going outside of the office? Any exciting plans on the horizon?”

“Nothing too thrilling,” I admitted with a shrug. “Just trying to find more time for myself, you know? Rediscovering hobbies and interests outside of the courtroom.”

“Ah, that's important.” He nodded. “What kind of hobbies are we talking about?”

“Believe it or not, I've been getting into painting recently,” I confessed. “Nothing too serious, just a way to clear my mind and express myself creatively.”

“Wow, Larissa, I never would have guessed,” Mack said, his surprise not judgmental. “You'll have to show me some of your work sometime. I'd love to see it.”

“Maybe, if you're lucky,” I teased, enjoying the unexpected turn in conversation.

“By the way,” he added, looking me up and down with an appreciative smile, “you look incredible tonight. That dress is absolutely stunning on you.”

“Thank you.”

“Ah yes, Italian food, my one true weakness,” he admitted with a grin. “Though, to be fair, who can resist the allure of fresh pasta and authentic tiramisu?”

“Only a monster, I assume,” I joked, reveling in our easy banter. “But really, you should branch out more, Mack. There's a whole world of culinary delights just waiting to be discovered.”

“Perhaps you'll have to show me some of your favorites,” he suggested. “Consider it another way to expand my horizons outside of work.”

“Maybe I will,” I agreed, savoring the excitement that bubbled up inside of me as we continued to chat and laugh throughout the night.

“Alright,” I chuckled, placing my wineglass down on the table and gathering my courage. “I have a confession to make.”

“Ooh, a confession?” Mack asked, raising an eyebrow. “This should be good.”

“Okay, don't get too excited,” I warned, feeling the familiar sharpness of my tongue soften ever so slightly in his company. “It's just that... well, I've been thinking about this for a while now, and I?—”

“Wait!” he interrupted, leaning forward with mock seriousness. “Before you continue, let me guess: you're secretly a superhero by night, fighting crime and saving the world?”

“Ha! Not quite,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “Though I can see why you'd think that, given my many talents.”

“Of course, of course,” he agreed, grinning. “But please, do go on. I'm all ears.”

“Right,” I breathed, my heart pounding like a gavel in my chest as I prepared to reveal my true feelings. “I was just going to say that I... I would really like to go on a proper date with you, Mack. Like, outside of work events and random dinner outings. An actual, intentional date.”

There, I said it. Much to my relief, Mack's smile widened, crinkling the corners of his eyes with genuine delight. “Larissa, I've been waiting,” he admitted, reaching across the table to briefly touch my hand. “I would love nothing more than to take you on a real date.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” he assured me, his eyes twinkling like the stars outside the restaurant window. “In fact, I already have a few ideas in mind for our first.”

“Is that so?” I raised an eyebrow. “Well, I do hope your plans involve something other than Italian food, Mr. Harrington.”

“Trust me,” he winked, leaning back in his chair with a confident air. “You're in for a treat.”

A warmth spread through my chest as I reached for my wineglass. “Mack, you have no idea how much I'm looking forward to this.”

“As am I,” he replied, his eyes never leaving mine, causing a flush to creep up my cheeks.

All the years I'd spent burying myself in work, chasing success at the expense of my own happiness, and for what?

The brief moments of pleasure were few and far between, often overshadowed by late

nights at the office and weekends filled with paperwork.

As I looked into Mack's warm, inviting eyes, it was time for a change—time to start truly enjoying life beyond the courtroom.

“I need to admit something,” I began hesitantly, trying to find the right words. “All these years, I've been so focused on my career, on winning cases and building a reputation. But tonight, there's so much more to life than just that.”

He nodded. “It's not always easy to find a balance. But I believe we owe it to ourselves to try.”

“Exactly. I want to start enjoying life more—and I think this date is the perfect beginning.”

Mack raised his wineglass, the corners of his mouth lifting into a familiar, charming smile. “To new beginnings, then.”

“New beginnings.”

“Come on. Let's let loose tonight! I know the perfect place. There might even be... dancing involved.”

Dancing? The thought thrilled and terrified me. My heart pounded at the prospect. “Alright.”

“Trust me, you won't regret it,” he promised, shooting me a reassuring wink that made the butterflies in my stomach flutter even more.

Mack

The weekend with Larissa had been nothing short of heavenly, and it was going to take more than the usual Monday morning blues to dampen my spirits.

“Morning, everyone,” I greeted my coworkers, who were scattered about the office, hunched over their desks or congregating in small clusters.

The place was buzzing with activity—phones ringing, fingers tapping away at keyboards, and the gentle hum of the photocopier in the corner churning out fresh pages of legal jargon.

“Morning, Mack!” came a chorus of responses, accompanied by knowing smiles and a few mischievous glances exchanged among my colleagues.

It seemed like word of my romantic escapades had found its way around the office grapevine, and as much as I wanted to keep my blossoming relationship with Larissa under wraps for now, I wasn't ashamed of it either.

If anything, I felt invincible—like it had given me a new kind of strength I never knew I had.

As I settled into my leather chair, feeling the familiar embrace of its well-worn contours, I took a moment to absorb the energy of the room.

This was my sanctuary, the place where I felt most alive and capable.

And now, with Larissa by my side, it seemed as though even the toughest cases and longest hours would be a breeze.

“Alright, let's get this show on the road.” I powered up my computer and dove headfirst into the day's work. But even as I busied myself with emails and legal briefs, I couldn't shake the persistent feeling of happiness.

“Hey! How was your weekend?” My coworker, Samantha, asked. I looked up from my computer screen, feeling the corners of my mouth tug into a knowing smile.

“Great, actually.”

“Really? Just great?” Samantha nudged, raising an eyebrow. “Because, you know, Becky and I might have seen you and Larissa at that fancy restaurant on Saturday night. Table for two, candlelight... very romantic.”

A few other coworkers who had been listening in snickered and exchanged knowing glances. Suddenly, I found myself at the center of office gossip. I knew there was no point in denying it—the cat was out of the bag.

“Ah, so you two were spying on me, huh?” I teased back, attempting to deflect the attention. But Samantha was relentless.

“Can you blame us? After all, we've never seen our golden boy, Mack Harrington, so smitten before!” She grinned, winking at me.

“Did you guys share dessert?” another coworker chimed in, his voice dripping with innuendo. The office erupted in laughter, and I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“Alright, alright, enough with the third degree!” I exclaimed, trying to maintain my composure.



“Come on, Mack, you can't expect us not to be curious!” Samantha said, grinning broadly. “You two certainly make quite the power couple.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I replied sheepishly, feeling the weight of their gazes upon me. In my heart, I knew that what Larissa and I had was special, and no amount of teasing or gossip could change that.

The laughter continued, my face turning as red as a ripe tomato. Clenching my jaw, I tried to keep my cool, but the teasing was really getting under my skin. My fingers tightened around my pen, threatening to snap it in half.

“Alright, guys, let's give Mack some space,” said Pete, noticing my discomfort. But his words only seemed to encourage others.

“Come on, we're just having a bit of fun,” chimed in Mindy with a sly smile. “Besides, isn't Larissa the one who usually puts people in their place?”

“Ha! You've got that right.” I managed a chuckle despite my irritation. My heart swelled with pride at the thought of Larissa—her intelligence, her confidence, and her unwavering determination. We were a formidable team, both in and out of the courtroom, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

“Look, I know you guys are just teasing, but I'm genuinely happy. Larissa is an incredible woman, and our relationship is something I'm proud of. So yeah, we had a great weekend together, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.”

There was a pause, and then everyone started talking at once, offering congratulations and expressing support for our newfound romance.

“See, Mack, we knew you'd come around. Just remember, we're all here for you—even if we can't resist poking fun every now and then.”

“Thanks, guys.”

As the chatter died down and everyone returned to their work, I allowed myself a moment to take it all in.

Sure, this office was filled with gossip and teasing, but at the end of the day, we had each other's backs.

And as I settled back into my chair, my thoughts returned to Larissa when her name appeared on my phone.

Larissa: Can't wait to see you later tonight.

Me: Neither can I.

I immersed myself in a particularly complicated case file, trying to push away the lingering unease that still clung to the edges of my thoughts.

As the day drew to a close and the office began to empty, I took a deep breath, letting the last remnants of tension dissipate into the air.

My coworkers had shown their support for my relationship with Larissa, and any lingering doubts or concerns would have to be faced in due time.

Larissa

I glance at the clock for the hundredth time. Butterflies flutter in my stomach, leaving me feeling excited and nervous. It's funny how quickly things have changed between us since the divorce case ended. We've been seeing each other every night.

Get a grip, Larissa. It's just a date. It's just Mack.

“Talking to yourself again?” My friend, Jess, teased from the doorway.

“Ugh, don't sneak up on me like that!” I exclaimed, startled by her sudden appearance.

“Sorry, I couldn't resist. So, this Mack guy must be pretty special if you're this worked up about a date.”

“Maybe he is.” Since the case, Mack had really opened himself up to me, showing a different side to him that I found incredibly endearing.

“Ooh, I want details!” Jess insisted, sitting on my bed and giving me an expectant look.

“Later, okay? I need to focus on getting ready.”

“Fine, fine. Have fun, lovebirds!” she called out as she left, causing me to roll my eyes.

With Jess gone, I took a moment to remember the Mack I'd come to know.

I applied the finishing touches to my makeup, taking special care to accentuate my features without looking overdone.

Tonight felt different somehow—as if there was something new and exciting waiting just around the corner for Mack and me.

Before leaving, I gave myself one last once-over. Wow, Montgomery. You clean up pretty good. Okay, this is it. He's the one you've been waiting for.

I'd always been so guarded, so focused on my career and success. The idea of opening my heart to someone had always seemed too risky, too vulnerable. But with Mack, it suddenly felt worth the plunge.

As I arrived at the restaurant, Mack was already waiting for me, his eyes lighting up when he saw me. God, he looked amazing in that suit.

“Wow, you look absolutely stunning.”

“You don't look too bad yourself.”

“Shall we?” he asked, offering me his arm. I took it with a smile.

As we perused our menus, I was torn between the lobster risotto and filet mignon. Decisions, decisions. Though, honestly, I was more focused on the man sitting across from me than the food tonight.

“Have you decided?” Mack asked, setting down his menu.

“What are you getting?”

“Salmon and shrimp,” he said confidently. “You should try it; it's supposed to be their specialty.”

“Alright then, salmon and shrimp it is,” I agreed, grateful for the suggestion. The waiter took our orders, and we clinked glasses of wine in a silent toast.

“So, tell me more about your family. What were they like growing up?”

Mack paused for a moment, considering. “Well, my parents... They've always been pretty hard to please, especially my dad. He's the main reason I became a lawyer, actually.”

“Really?” I leaned in closer, intrigued. “How so?”

He sighed, swirling his wine around in his glass. “Growing up, it was all about making him proud. And since he's a lawyer himself, the best way to do that was to follow in his footsteps.”

“Did it work?” I asked, wondering what kind of man would be so difficult to please.

Mack chuckled bitterly. “Not really. As an adult, I've learned that nothing will ever be quite good enough for him.”

“I'm so sorry. That must have been really difficult.”

“Hey, it's okay,” he assured me, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I've learned to accept it, and it led me to where I am now. Plus, look at the bright side—if it weren't for my dad, we might never have met.”

I smiled, squeezing his hand back. “Well, I'm certainly grateful for that.”

“I’ve been waiting for this. Larissa Montgomery, the woman who single-handedly dismantled an entire law firm and then danced on its ashes.”

"Okay, okay. But I’m not exactly the more spontaneous person.”

“You are perfect just the way you are. No need to change anything about yourself.”

He sure had a way with words. I was lucky to get to know him without all his defenses. He was charismatic, but there was so much more to him.

Oh my god, I’m falling for him...

Mack

Three years later...

Larissa and I stood side by side in our living room.

“Can you believe it's been three years already?” Larissa asked as she cradled Serenity.

I grinned. “I know, right? It feels like just yesterday that we were two lawyers trying to outwit each other in court.”

“Ha! And look at us now,” Larissa teased, her sharp wit as quick as ever, softened by the warmth of her smile. “We moved in together, got married, and now we're raising this little bundle of joy.”

I nodded, my heart swelling with pride as I watched Larissa tenderly stroke Serenity's cheek. It was true—we had taken our relationship to the next level, motivated by our shared desire to be good parents and devoted spouses. We combined our lives seamlessly.

“Remember the day we decided to move in together?” I asked, reminiscing about our journey. “We spent hours debating whose apartment was better, only to realize that neither of them was big enough for both of us, let alone our extensive law libraries.”

Larissa laughed. “Yes! We ended up finding this place, which is perfect for us. And I have to admit, I really love our home office.”

“Me too. I'll never forget our wedding day, surrounded by all our loved ones, pledging our lives to each other. It was the happiest day of my life.”

As we pulled apart, Serenity let out a coo, reminding us of the joyous responsibility we shared. Together, hand in hand, Larissa and I faced the future, ready to embrace whatever challenges and triumphs life had in store for our little family.

“Being a father is the most amazing thing I've ever experienced. I mean, don't get me wrong—being a husband to you is pretty fantastic as well.”

“Flatterer,” she teased, but I could see in her expression that she felt the same way about our life together.

As I wiped Serenity's face clean, I marveled at the miracle of her existence—this tiny person who was equal parts Larissa and me, and yet so uniquely her own individual.

From her golden curls inherited from Larissa to her feisty spirit that was unmistakably mine, Serenity was the living embodiment of our love.

“Her first steps, her first words, even her first tantrum... I wouldn't trade any of it for the world. And the best part is knowing that we get to guide her through life together, as a team.”

“Absolutely. We're in this parenting adventure side by side, and there's no one else I'd rather have by my side.”

As Serenity babbled incomprehensible but enthusiastic words at us from her high chair, it was impossible not to feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the life Larissa and I had built together.

We were a family and I couldn't wait to see what new memories we would create as the years continued to unfold before us.



“Mack!” Larissa called out, her green eyes twinkling as Serenity wobbled toward me with open arms. “Our little monster is coming for you!”

“Ah! Save me from this terrifying beast!” I feigned terror, scooping her up into my arms and showering her with kisses as she squealed. We had embraced our roles as parents wholeheartedly, finding joy in even the smallest moments of our daughter's life.

“Your turn, Mama.” I grinned, gently tossing Serenity into Larissa's waiting arms. This was what motivated us—being there for each other and for her, showing her how important family was, and knowing that we'd always be there to catch her if she fell.

“Alright, alright, it's time for bed, little monster,” Larissa cooed, expertly balancing her on her hip. “Say good night to Daddy.”

Serenity reached to me for a hug.

“Good night, sweetheart,” I whispered, my heart swelling with pride as I hugged her. She may have inherited her mother's sharp wit, but she also possessed a warmth that reminded me of her father—me.

After putting her down, she came back downstairs. “I’ve got some wine chilling and a movie cued up for us.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Larissa leaned her head on my shoulder, letting out a contented sigh. “Mack, I never imagined I could be this happy, but every day with you and Serenity just keeps getting better.”

“Same here, love. We've come so far from those headstrong lawyers who couldn't

stand each other, haven't we?"

"We certainly have," Larissa laughed softly. "And I wouldn't change it for the world."