

JACK

“Look.” I glance into the classroom, where Ethan is thoroughly distracted by Stephen and no longer keeping an eye on us. “I may have . . . overreacted.”

Pepper shakes her head. “I told you. I get it. It’s your family.”

“Yeah. But it’s also—well, to be honest, this has been kind of good for business.”

Pepper’s brow furrows, that one little crease returning. “What, the tweets?”

“Yeah.” I scratch the back of my neck, sheepish. “Actually, we had a line out the door yesterday. It was kind of intense.”

“That’s . . . that’s good, right?”

The tone of my voice is clearly not matching up with the words I’m saying, but if I’m being honest, I’m still wary of this whole overnight business boom. And if I’m being honest, I’m even more wary of Pepper. If this really is as much of a family business as she claims it is—to the point where she’s helping run the Twitter handle, when even I know enough about corporate Twitter accounts to know entire teams of experienced people get paid to do that—then she might have had more of a hand in this whole recipe theft thing than she’s letting on.

The fact of the matter is, I can’t trust her. To the point of not knowing whether I can even trust her knowing how our business is doing, or just how badly we need it.

“Yeah, um, I guess.” I try to make it sound noncommittal. My acting skills, much like my breakfast-packing skills, leave much to be desired.

“So . . .”

“So.”

Pepper presses her lips into a thin line, a question in her eyes.

“So, I guess—if your mom really wants you to keep tweeting . . .”

“Wait. Yesterday you were pissed. Two minutes ago you were pissed.”

“I *am* pissed. You stole from us,” I reiterate. “You stole from an eighty-five-year-old woman.”

“I didn’t—”

“Yeah, yeah, but still. You’re them, and I’m . . . her. It’s like a *choose your fighter* situation, and we just happen to be the ones up to bat.”

“So you’re saying—you don’t *not* want me to keep this up?”

“The way I see it, you don’t have to make your mom mad, and we get a few more customers in the door too.”

Pepper takes a breath like she’s going to say something, like she’s going to correct me, but after a moment, she lets it go. Her face can’t quite settle on an expression, toeing the line between dread and relief.

“You’re sure?”

I answer by opening the container she handed me. The smell that immediately wafts out of it should honestly be illegal; it stops kids I’ve never even spoken to in their tracks.

“Are you a witch?” I ask, reaching in and taking a bite of one. It’s like Monster Cake, the Sequel—freaking Christmas in my mouth. I already want more before I’ve even managed to chew. My eyes close as if I’m experiencing an actual drug high—and maybe I am, because I forget myself entirely and say, “This might even be better than our Kitchen Sink Macaroons.”

“Kitchen Sink Macaroons?”

Eyes open again. *Yikes*. Note to self: dessert is the greatest weapon in Pepper’s arsenal. I swallow my bite so I can answer her.

“It’s kind of well-known, at least in the East Village. It even got in some Hub Seed roundup once. I’d tell you to try some, but you might steal the recipe, so.”

Pepper smiles, then—actually smiles, instead of the little smirk she usually does. It’s not startling, but what it does to me in that moment kind of is.

Before I can examine the unfamiliar lurch in my stomach, the bell rings and knocks the smile right off her face. I follow just behind her, wondering why it suddenly seems too hot in here, like they cranked the air up for December instead of October. I dismiss it by the time I get to my desk—probably just all the Twitter drama and the glory of *So Sorry Blondies* getting to my head.

“One rule,” she says, as we sit in the last two desks in the back of the room.

I raise my eyebrows at her.

“We don’t take any of it personally.” She leans forward on her desk, leveling with me, her bangs falling into her face. “No more getting mad at each other. Cheese and state.”

“What happens on Twitter stays on Twitter,” I say with a nod of agreement. “Okay, then, second rule: no kid gloves.”

Mrs. Fairchild is giving that stern look over the room that never quite successfully quiets anyone down. Pepper frowns, waiting for me to elaborate.

“I mean—no going easy on each other. If we’re going to play at this, we’re both going to give it our A game, okay? No holding back because we’re . . .”

Friends, I almost say. No, I’m going to say. But then—

“I’d appreciate it if even one of you acknowledged the bell with your silence,” Mrs. Fairchild grumbles.

I turn to Pepper, expecting to find her snapping to attention the way she always does

when an adult comes within a hundred feet of disciplining her. But her eyes are still intent on me, like she is sizing something up—like she’s looking forward to something I haven’t anticipated yet.

“All right. No taking it personally. And no holding back.”

She holds her hand out for me to shake again, under the desk so Mrs. Fairchild won’t see it. I smile and shake my head, wondering how someone can be so aggressively seventeen and seventy-five at the same time, and then I take it. Her hand is warm and small in mine, but her grip is surprisingly firm, with a pressure that almost feels like she’s still got her fingers wrapped around mine even after we let go.

I turn back to the whiteboard, a ghost of a smirk on my face. “Let the games begin.”