

ONE

Mackenzie Wyatt looked up from her desk as two women went running by as fast as their fashionable heels could take them and sighed.

He was here.

She could turn off her email alert and she could refuse to answer his calls, but she always knew when the lord of the castle had arrived. The surge to the ladies room, the frantic tidying of desks, the energy in the air. It all pointed to one thing—

Ethan Howell O'Connor had entered the building.

It was his after all. And she understood that he needed to make an appearance occasionally. She just wished she could know ahead of time so she could take the day off. He delighted in tormenting her, and truth be told, she delighted in tormenting him. But she was hardly ever truthful with herself about Ethan O'Connor.

She'd given up shutting her door years ago. One unlucky visit she'd tried to hide in the ladies' room, but he was nothing if not dogged, and he'd sent another woman in to get her. After the poor woman had stopped hyperventilating, Mackenzie had found him sitting behind her desk, eating a Snickers from her emergency stash,

grinning that lazy grin, and laughing at her with those sharp green eyes.

She'd stopped hiding right then, and she'd stopped being nice. Very few people realized she *had* been playing nice, Ethan included. Even she knew it wasn't a good idea to insult the boss. She just couldn't seem to help it when she was around him.

But no man took her Snickers without paying the consequences.

Their relationship, if it could be called that, had turned in to a verbal sparring match that was overheard and repeated at every water cooler, and most of the staff wondered why she hadn't been fired yet. She could only tell them that Ethan found her amusing.

She tried not to let him get to her but two minutes of lapping at his toes was all she could last, and then the dam would break and she would find herself insulting the man everyone agreed was the most charming and handsome they'd ever met.

A hush stole over the floor and Mackenzie rolled her neck. She cracked her knuckles.

She did *not* run a brush through her honey brown hair, like the co-worker who'd run to the bathroom at the first news of an Ethan sighting. She did *not* apply another quick coat of mascara around her tawny eyes, like the woman who was hunched behind her desk trying to see her reflection in her black coffee cup. No, Mackenzie kept her expression cool and sniffed her small upturned nose.

And pretended that her heart wasn't trying to beat its way out of her chest. Because no matter how handsome or charming or annoying or fake Ethan was, he was the only person who could make her break her cool. She would find that exciting if she didn't detest him quite so much.

Mackenzie forced her concentration back to her work

but she knew where he was. She could tell by the murmur of voices, the laughter. No one seemed to be able to do any kind of work when he was near and she didn't know how anyone in the New York office got anything done. She thanked God every time Ethan visited that Los Angeles wasn't his home base.

The murmuring and laughter grew closer and louder. He'd picked up an audience and people found things to do near her office. The most charming man in the world vs. the woman who said what she thought and never pandered to authority.

Round one. *Ding.*

"Hello, Mackenzie. Hard at work, I see."

She looked up at tall, lean man and kicked herself. She never remembered how good he looked. When he was away she easily forgot how his long eyelashes framed green eyes with a hint of playful devil in them. And how his blond hair framed a face so pretty it just couldn't be real.

"Hello, Mr. O'Connor. Causing a fuss again?"

He smiled and shut her door behind him. She gave him a look that quite clearly said what she thought about that and he laughed.

She stood and walked around him to open the door, wishing she'd worn higher heels. With Ethan she needed all the help she could get.

"You're not playing by the rules, Ethan. They'll bug my office if they can't hear the show."

She heard him opening and shutting the drawers of her desk and she sternly hid her smile before she turned around.

She said, "How many desks do you search on your walkthroughs? I'm pretty sure that's unprofessional."

He held up the candy he'd found and said, "Talk about unprofessional, what is this?"

“A box of Hot Tamales.”

“And where is the chocolate, Ms. Wyatt?”

She pursed her lips. “I may be able to find some but you’ll have to sit in this chair—” she tapped the supremely uncomfortable chair in front of her desk, “—to get it.”

He grinned, plopping into her cozy, ergonomic chair and propping his feet up.

“Nice try.”

“At least you didn’t find my Snickers.”

He ripped open the box. “I like these.”

“I’m sure you throw up anything you eat in my office, just in case.”

He choked. “Maybe I should have been, but I haven’t.”

Mackenzie shrugged. “You’re not dead yet.”

Ethan eyed the box of candy, shaking it and looking for anything suspicious, and then ate a handful.

“I like to live dangerously.”

She sat down, slouching in the uncomfortable chair. “To what do I owe this visit? I’ll make a note to stop whatever it is.”

“I had to come congratulate the office, and the person, who made such a great sale.” He nodded at her like a king approving his royal decree.

Mackenzie couldn’t help the cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. She’d made him a lot of money over the years but this sale had been a doozy. Her commission had been a doozy.

And truthfully, that was why she was allowed to taunt and insult the boss. He may find her amusing, but no one made more money for him than she did. And they both knew it.

He plopped some more candy in his mouth. “I’ve decided to celebrate that little piece of magic with a company picnic this Friday. I knew you needed a personal invitation or you wouldn’t show.”

“Picnics aren’t really my kind of thing.”

“There will be a very competitive game of softball and I’ve heard you can play.”

“Unfortunately, I’ve already arranged for Friday off.” Or she would as soon as he left. “You’ll have to find someone else to win that game for you.”

His feet slid off her desk and he leaned forward onto his elbows. He smiled fully, his white teeth flashing. They were probably caps.

“Oh, Mackenzie. I know you’ll only play for me when money’s involved. I signed you up for the other team.”

Her breath hitched a nanosecond too long and his smile widened.

Mackenzie got her breathing back under control with a grimace. It had only been a slight slip but he’d seen it. Had been watching for it. And that was exactly why Ethan was so dangerous. He found your weakness, then dangled irresistible bait. And boy, did she want to beat him. She wanted to wipe that smile off his face and make him sweat.

She forced herself to say, “Although I’d love to watch you lose, I still have plans.”

He shook his head. “I hate to do this to you but you leave me no choice. I’m making this a requirement of your continued employment.”

“Are you saying you’ll fire me if I don’t attend this celebratory picnic and play a game of softball?”

Ethan nodded his head sadly. “I am sorry but it means that much to me.”

Mackenzie shook her head, a pity-filled smile playing at the corner of her lips. “If you’ll hand me the small notebook in my top right drawer. Yes, thank you.”

She flipped to the middle and made a notation. “Ethan, you’re losing your touch. It’s only been one week since you last threatened to fire me.”

“One week? Are you sure?”

“You called and left a voicemail congratulating me on my sale and said if I didn’t return your call you’d have to let me go.”

“Oh, yes. I do remember that. You didn’t return my call.”

“You didn’t fire me.”

He smiled at her. “Then I guess we’re at an impasse. You’ll have to come play softball to see who really has the upper hand between us.”

“I’ll see if I can rearrange my schedule.”

He swiveled in her chair for a few seconds, then stood. “Excellent. Keep up the good work, Mackenzie.”

He waltzed out her door and she took a deep breath. She was going to annihilate him at softball. No matter if he had her right where he wanted her, it would be worth it.

She reclaimed her chair and ignored how warm it was and how she could smell his faint aftershave.

Ethan popped his head around the corner and said, “Next time have a Snickers.” And then he winked.

Mackenzie stood, shutting the door firmly behind him. Next time she’d have a mouse trap.

Ethan Howell O’Connor eased into the back of his car and directed the driver to his hotel. He needed a massage, a hot tub, and a beer, and then maybe this growing tension would ease.

He doubted it, but was always hopeful.

It was just he never knew how to handle ugly breakups. And his were always ugly. One day she was happy, the next day she was crying. He always seemed to miss the middle. The part where she realized he wasn’t what she thought he was. The part where she decided that even if he

wasn't quite as perfect as she'd thought, marriage would fix it. How would that fix anything?

It wouldn't. But she didn't really want to marry Ethan. She wanted to marry Ethan Howell O'Connor.

Ethan rolled his head, trying to loosen the knot in his neck.

Alyse had cried. Cried so hard he'd thought her heart must be breaking, and he hated that. Hated tears, hated her disappointment. He kept thinking she didn't really love him, she didn't really know him. She'd only loved the idea of him.

He could tell himself that all day long but he still hated himself.

He was a piranha, preying on women. He built up their dreams and then dashed them to pieces without ever realizing he was doing it.

Ethan leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Tomorrow he'd find a way to fix the mess with Alyse. He just hoped he could do it without marrying her.

He was awoken early the next morning by alternating knocks and bangs on his hotel door. The massage had eased the stress in his neck and back, but the empty beer bottles had left his head fuzzy. He stumbled to the door, cursing whoever it was. And blinked a few times when he looked through the peephole.

"Mother? Grandma?"

He opened the door cautiously. His mother took one look at him and moved forward to hug him.

"Oh, Ethan. Why didn't you tell us? I thought you and Alyse were getting along fine."

He groaned.

His grandmother handed him a tabloid and said, "This

is a fine pickle you've landed in this time. I warned you about that girl; always had to have her own way."

His mother patted him on the back, frowning at the beer bottles. "It does seem you were right, Ellen. I'm sorry I was so friendly towards her."

His grandmother snorted. "You're nice to all the women your son brings home. You need to stop thinking about grandbabies and start thinking about the divorce rate in this country. He needs a woman who can handle him. He needs to stop dating these socialites and models. Worthless."

This was an argument he'd heard many times over and he ignored it to read the paper.

Prince Charming Really A Frog?

Ethan Howell O'Connor, the man voted most charming eligible bachelor four years in a row, is reportedly not all that charming behind closed doors. His girlfriend of nine months, model Alyse Ryan, told this reporter that he "is a workaholic and has commitment issues. We've been dating nine months now and let me tell you he isn't so pretty in the morning. It was time to take our relationship to the next level and he broke up with me instead. You can ask any of his old girlfriends and they'll tell you the same thing— as soon as a girl starts thinking he might be the one, he starts sabotaging the relationship. Late nights working, flimsy excuses about not moving in together, sit down talks where he tells you he's nowhere near ready to get

married. Well, when is he going to be ready? I guess my mama was right, why buy the cow when you're getting the milk for free?" Or why commit to one model when there's another right around the corner?

It wasn't the first time he'd been in the gossip column, and it wasn't the worst article they'd ever written about him. It was the first time someone close to him had been quoted. The first time any of his ex-girlfriends had felt the need to go public.

But he had to admit, Alyce didn't sound all that heartbroken anymore. Angry, but not heartbroken.

He looked up at his anxious mother and disgruntled grandmother and smiled. "It could be worse."

The next day it was. Another quote from a former girlfriend, this time attacking his bedroom technique. It was a little harder to shrug that one off but he consoled himself with the thought that she hadn't complained while they were together.

It didn't help all that much.

His grandmother simply shrugged. "I doubt that'll stop all the women wanting to get in your bed from daydreaming about you. And at least it's the models spilling their guts. Everyone'll think they're high anyway."

Ethan kept his smile on, and if he worked a little harder and a little later, no one thought anything of it. He was the boss, after all.

Friday morning dawned bright and early. He had a call overseas to make before the picnic and he hoped against hope his ex-girlfriends were done with him. It had been a rough week and all he wanted to do was play a little softball. He grinned at the thought of Mackenzie Wyatt in

short shorts running the bases.

He joined his mother and grandmother for breakfast in the best mood since Monday.

“Ladies. Have you reconsidered going to the picnic? I don’t think I’ll need bodyguards.”

His mother picked at her egg whites. “I think it sounds fun. I always like to watch you play the catcher.”

He laughed. “You hate watching me catch. Although I don’t think this is going to be that dangerous of a game.”

He decided not to tell her that at least one person would be gunning for him. His poor mother had never wanted her only child to play any sports and had finally agreed to baseball, and specifically catcher, because of all the protective gear he would have to wear. She hadn’t realized until too late that there was a reason catchers needed protection.

His grandmother, who never picked at her food and would never order egg whites, said, “You’ll need someone to distract the paparazzi if they find you. Plus, I need some sun.”

He ordered his own breakfast, keeping it light and lean. He’d be running bases this morning and didn’t want to feel or look sluggish in front of his employees. At least one employee would take advantage of any weakness she saw and, he had no doubt, would constantly remind him of it.

He said, “I’m sure the paparazzi won’t want to hang around taking pictures of a company picnic. I can’t be the juiciest thing going on right now.”

His mother threw a glance at his grandmother, who ignored it and kept her fork moving.

He looked between them for a few seconds, then went for the weaker link. “Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Was there anything worse today?”

His grandmother said, “Not anything worse. You’re still their soup du jour but I expect that won’t last more than another week. Just ignore it.”

“It will be better if I know what it is.”

His mother put down her fork, abandoning the pretense that she was actually going to eat. “I don’t think it will be better, dear. Ellen is right, just ignore it.”

The only problem with that was his grandmother had never ignored anything in her life. She believed in facing problems head on.

He sighed and changed the subject. His good mood was vanishing fast but he kept a grip on it with iron control. He was going to have fun today, dammit. And maybe they just didn’t want him seeing what kinds of things his ex-girlfriends were saying about him. An ex was never the most reliable judge of a man’s character.

Not A Frog, A Toad!

Sarah Milton, one of New York’s leading socialites, was recently heard telling a friend that when she was dating Ethan Howell O’Connor he hit her so hard he broke her nose. Six years ago, Sarah Milton’s nose job had been attributed to allergies, but now we know she was allergic to a fist! Does Prince Charming have a nasty temper hiding behind that pretty face?

Mackenzie arrived at her first company picnic and instantly decided she shouldn’t have come. She tried hard to keep her real life separate from her work and had never wanted to get caught up in the culture that everyone else seemed to buy into.

She had coworkers she liked but she didn't make friends. She never went out to lunch, never joined in for birthday celebrations, didn't get into office politics, and never, ever went to outside functions. In the sales department, competition was taken to a whole other level and she tried to keep her focus on work. And to leave that work at the door at the end of the day.

Yet here she was. And all because one pretty boy had asked her to beat him at softball. Ethan O'Connor was a dangerous man.

But not as dangerous as the whispers being circulated about him. If anyone could have gotten him to lose his temper, it would have been her the last few years. He wasn't the kind of guy that hit women. He liked to persuade and charm people into doing what he wanted; using physical force would seem like an insult to his mental abilities.

Rob from marketing wandered over to her, looking glum. "You guys are going to whip our ass. There's no way Ethan is going to be in top form today."

She smirked at him. "That is just too bad. You shouldn't have made that bet."

"He was first-team All-Ivy for four years. He's an all-star. We couldn't lose." He watched her take out her worn glove and plop a tattered UCLA visor on her head. He grimaced. "How much did you bet?"

"No bet. My pleasure is going to come in rubbing his face in it."

"You're a cold woman. Maybe you should go easy on him today."

She laughed. "Uh-huh. How much of my team have you tried to guilt into losing today?"

A small grin peeked out before he hid it. "I don't know what you're talking about. He's just going through a rough

time right now. The press is going to go wild now that they know he hits women.”

“He didn’t hit her. And if he was somehow responsible for her broken nose, it was an accident. I *would* bet on that.”

“You can’t be sure. Especially with old money. What happens in private, stays private.”

She said, “True, but I’ve angered him, insulted him, and verbally abused him enough to know that when he gets mad, the charm starts oozing from him. He gets so sweet you want to throw up. He doesn’t get physical.”

Rob nodded, looking thoughtful. “I’ve seen him come out of your office like that. And if he had cause to hit anybody, it would be you.”

“You’re a nice guy, Rob. Now go away and stop talking to my team.”

He laughed. “I’ll just have to remind Ethan how bad he needs to beat you.” He winked. “At softball, I mean.”

A frenzy of activity and a change in air pressure alerted Mackenzie that *he* had arrived. She refused to turn and watch him. Refused to even acknowledge that she wanted to.

He was a beautiful man. And a beautiful man you could admire from a distance was one thing, but a beautiful man who periodically waltzed into your office, sat in your chair, and ate your candy bars was another thing entirely.

He found her quick enough though.

“Hello, Mackenzie. You look ravishing in those yoga pants.”

She turned, bracing herself. He wore a faded blue Columbia t-shirt that outlined his chest and showcased his biceps. His forearms were sprinkled with golden hair and Mackenzie stared down at his bare arms. Then told herself to get a grip. They were forearms. But she stared at them

anyway. Maybe it was the novelty. He was always in long-sleeved business shirts and jackets.

She looked back up to sparkly green eyes and flashing white caps and raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you want to play when you're this pissed?"

His smile dropped a centimeter. "I'm not pissed."

"You look like you're about to sing 'It's A Small World'. And I've seen that look enough times to know you've just about had it."

His eyes stopped that annoying sparkle and his smile dropped another centimeter. "You would know."

"I guess I would. Did you hit her?"

His smile disappeared completely. "No. I wasn't even in the same state when she broke her nose."

"Well, that's what I told Rob when he tried to guilt me into losing to you. If you were the kind of guy that hit women, you would have hit me a long time ago. And just to let you know, I'm still going to wipe up with you today."

He stared at her for a moment before a grin started. "You can certainly try."

She popped her fists onto her hips. "I don't try, I do. And after I've skunked your sorry team I'm going to frame the score so every time you walk into my office you'll remember Mr. All-Ivy lost to a girl."

He mirrored her, leaning in her face just a bit. "And once I've won, I'm going to have it painted on your wall as a reminder that you need to respect your superiors."

She snorted. "Superior? That would be a matter of opinion, and you would be wrong."

He looked her up and down, leaning just a bit closer. "I've never had a complaint before."

"Really? 'Cause I could have sworn I read something just the other day."

"She's been without awhile, probably going through

withdrawal.”

“It’s a wonder none of your exes have tried to kill you.”

“They just get upset when I won’t marry them. They don’t really want me dead.”

She laughed. “Could’ve fooled me. And I know my life would be a lot easier if one of them took you out—”

A shocked woman’s voice interrupted her. “Ethan?”

Mackenzie turned to find not one but two older women staring at her. Ethan chuckled and took a step back from Mackenzie.

“Mother, Grandma, this is Mackenzie Wyatt. She’s the top salesman in the L.A. branch and number one pain in the ass in the whole company.”

His mother gasped, “Ethan!”

She couldn’t get the shocked look off her face but his grandma looked amused. Mackenzie didn’t need two guesses to know who he took after most.

Mackenzie glanced at him. “I’m the top salesman in *all* the branches.”

“Any complaints about where I placed you in the other category? I didn’t think so.” He gestured to the two women. “This is my mother, Christine O’Connor, and my grandmother, Ellen O’Connor.”

Ellen shook her hand. “Nice to meet somebody who doesn’t fall all over my grandson.”

“It’s hard, but I manage.”

Ellen thought that was hilarious and slapped her on the shoulder. “You any good at softball?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. I think I’ll go make a wager. Now, who did you say was taking bets, Ethan?”

He pointed out John from finance to his grandmother and she grabbed Ethan’s mother. “Come along, Christine.”

His mother gave Mackenzie one last worried glance and

then turned away.

Ethan watched them walk to the stands with a big smile on his face. A real smile, nothing charming about it.

He said, "I don't think my mother likes you."

"She looks like she's worried I'm going to hurt you."

He chuckled. "She's always been a little protective."

She looked up at him. He was at least six feet of hard, wily male. On the list of people who needed protecting, he was last.

"But my grandma really took to you. I'm pretty sure she's betting on you."

"She seems intelligent."

He grinned. "We'll see."

The softball game was the main event and the players ate quickly. Everyone else wandered around talking, eating, and waiting for the show to start.

Mackenzie didn't know what they expected. Oh, she liked to talk a good game, and she hoped she won so she could rub a certain someone's face in it, but the teams were pretty well evenly matched. It would probably come down to luck.

Most of the time she would bet on her luck, but Ethan was a golden boy and had been since the day he was born. If anybody's luck was better than hers, it would be his.

And as soon as she saw him squat behind the plate she knew she was in trouble. Of course he was catcher. The one position where he could talk and screw her team's concentration.

She got a little hopeful when his mother became concerned about his lack of gear.

"It's just a friendly game of slow-pitch, Mother. I don't need it." He smiled at his mother, charmingly, and

Mackenzie wondered how that could possibly still work on her. She had to be immune by now.

And then Mackenzie laughed under breath when Christine O'Connor looked right at her and said, "As long as it's a friendly game."

Ethan looked at Mackenzie and his grin was anything but friendly. She should have brought someone to watch her back as well.

Mackenzie turned to her team and gave them one piece of advice. "Don't listen to anything that man says when you're at bat."

Bases were loaded when Mackenzie went up to bat. She loved softball, started playing on a league in middle school, made varsity in high school, and had been throwing the ball around with her grandfather since she was old enough to stand. She joined the city league every summer and spent an occasional weeknight at the batting cages. She was good and she loved it. And having Ethan O'Connor that close to her made her palms sweat.

But she was going to beat him anyway.

He squatted behind the plate. "My God, that field looks beautiful. They're just waiting for you to send them all in. Are you that good, Wyatt?"

She stepped into the box without looking at him.

The first ball came sailing past her face and she tapped her cleats with the bat. "I guess we'll see if your pitcher ever gets it over the plate."

"He's just playing with you. Seeing if you'll bite."

"I do. Hard. Maybe your mom was right and you should go find something soft to wrap your important bits with."

"You better hope she didn't hear you. It's not wise to threaten a woman's only child."

Mackenzie nicked the ball, fouling it out in right field.

Ethan tsked. "Mm. Too bad. That would have been

good if you'd actually hit it."

She fought to keep her laugh back but she was afraid he knew how funny he was. She said, "You just love being catcher, don't you? Get to talk all you want and no one can shut you up."

He squatted, holding his glove out, and she stepped back in the box. He said, "It's one of life's greatest pleasures."

"It's not going to be too much fun when I'm sliding in getting you all dusty."

Another ball thrown in a little too high and she shook her head at the pitcher. "What, am I an amateur here?"

Ethan threw the ball back with a laugh. "I've only got one thing to say before you hit that homer you're waiting for. You slide into me with your cleats up and I'll paint your backside red."

"I'm sure the paparazzi would love a picture of that."

"They won't be invited—"

Mackenzie hit the ball, felt the sweet spot, and knew it was going to be a long run for the outfielder. If there'd been a fence, it would have been over it. But she ran the bases and headed home anyway. She heard Ethan cuss when she ran across the plate. And she couldn't help but notice that his grandmother was very excited, and his mother wasn't.

Mackenzie grinned at Ethan. "Sorry I didn't get a chance to slide. Maybe next time."

"Hell."

Ethan hit a double at his turn to bat and when he finally made it to third base, he said, "Why am I not surprised you're on third."

"I guess it's the same reason I wasn't surprised you were catcher."

"Each to his own strengths. I like to play with people's

minds, you like to play with people's balls."

She blinked and turned to stare at him. For a second he just grinned at her, and then he figured out what he'd said and tipped his head to the sky and cracked out a laugh. She glared at him and when he saw her expression, he bent double, laughing uncontrollably. All the players turned to them, most of them concerned he'd hurt himself since he was clutching his stomach and couldn't breathe.

"Is he okay?"

"Ethan, you okay?"

Mackenzie crossed her arms. "I think he's choking on something. Maybe his foot."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw his mother stand up, a worried look on her face. Mackenzie looked at her and shook her head. She said loudly, "He's fine. He just thinks he's hilarious."

Ethan gave a thumbs-up sign but could not stop laughing, and everyone wanted to be let in on the joke.

There was no way in hell Mackenzie was going to repeat what he'd said, but shortstop gave a little snigger and she closed her eyes. No one was ever going to forget this game.

"Oh God, Mackenzie. I'm sorry. I meant you liked to be in on all the plays."

His apology left a little something to be desired since he was still laughing so hard he couldn't stand up straight. And she could hear barks of laughter round the bases and bleachers.

He glanced up at her face and bit back another howl of laughter. He stepped off the base and hugged her. His arms wrapped around her, trapping her crossed arms in front of her, and he lifted her off the ground.

He said, "Aw, honey. I'm sorry. I've got to start thinking before I open my mouth."

“Put me down, you idiot.”

“Not until you accept my apology.”

“Oh, I accept it. My lawyer, however, is going to have a field day with this.”

He set her down, grinning at her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and walked her toward the pitcher’s mound.

“I am going to kill you, Ethan.”

He kept an iron grip on her shoulders and spoke loud enough that most of the players and crowd could hear him.

The laughter stopped slowly and everyone watched with cheery faces.

“I just want to apologize to Mackenzie and everyone here. Almost everybody knows that she and I have had an ongoing battle of wits since she started working for O’Connor Capital and we like to have fun with each other. We were just razzing each other at what positions we like to play and what I *meant* to say was she likes to be in on all the plays, and third base is a great position because a lot of balls get hit there.”

The crowd chuckled and Mackenzie said, “You’re not making this better.”

“And I want to let everyone, and especially my mother, know that even though she looks like she’s going to kill me, she has already accepted my apology—” Mackenzie snorted, “—and is going to make me lose so bad that I won’t be able to show my face in the L.A. office for a year.”

Everyone laughed again and Mackenzie muttered, “I’d prefer two years.”

“So, Stacy and Dan, wipe those worried expressions off your legal faces— she’s not going to sue me. And let’s go back to playing some ball.”

He chuckled again and walked her back to third with his arm still around her.

She said, "I'm really starting to sympathize with your ex-girlfriends. The society column seems a little tame to me."

"But listen to how much fun they're having. Isn't it worth it?"

"I'm charging you a thousand dollars every time someone says balls to me in the next month. And you'd better pay me out of your own pocket, not the company's."

He turned them around and watched everyone laughing and having a good time. "I guess it'll be worth it."

Then he looked down at her and found her still frowning. He took his arm off her shoulder and patted her butt.

She elbowed him in the side. "Do you have a death wish, O'Connor!"

"It's just so hard to get you all riled up and I want to keep you that way as long as possible."

"You keep your hands to yourself or you'll find yourself flat on the ground. And if you even use the word 'balls' I'm going to deck you."

He laughed, hard. "God, Mackenzie. This is turning out to be a great day. Who would have thought."