



A  
WORTH  
THE WAIT  
NOVEL

FIND MY  
*Way* HOME

T C MATSON

# FIND MY WAY HOME

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WORTH THE WAIT

BOOK 2

TC MATSON

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## TO MY READERS

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*Never be ashamed of who you are.  
YOU are one of a kind.*

## SENSITIVE CONTENT WARNING

This book contains sensitive content that could be triggering.

Childhood trauma, verbal abuse, and suicide are discussed.



# CHAPTER ONE

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## HOLDEN

Work. That's where I should be. Where I'd rather be. Tucked behind my desk scanning over all my reports or going over the R&D assignments. Hell. At this point, I'd even take a mind-numbing meeting. Unfortunately, I'm doing none of that. Instead, I'm hiding out in a coffee shop drinking a latte, checking my emails on my phone, and anxiously awaiting a scathing text from my mother because I'm not at her house yet.

The plan was to go to my parents' house to eat and celebrate the life of my sweet Aunt Hazel with everyone else. But right after the services, after all the handshakes and slaps on the shoulder, and after all the condolences, I slipped out. I needed a breather from the heaviness. Sure, I should've told my parents I was dipping out, but they know I'll eventually show. I always do.

I'm reading over the email my assistant Janie sent earlier today regarding changes for this week's schedule and who they'll be delegated to when a breeze passes by carrying the scent of jasmine and coconut. The sweet misty scent pulls me to glance up from my cell phone, and I catch sight of a beautiful woman just as she slips behind the counter and ties her gray apron behind her back. Her black shoulder-length hair is damp with the sides in a twist that wrap around until it meets the back of her head in a knot. She smiles at the lady who served me, speaking as she taps the point-of-sale system.

My phone vibrates in my hand, pulling my attention back to it.

**Mom: I know it's been a while since you've been home. Did you get lost?**

It's a subtle jab. I haven't visited home in almost three years. With my headquarters and home two thousand miles away, I don't come back here as

often as I should. Time gets away from everyone when they're busy.

**Me: I'll be there soon.**

Hopefully, she doesn't make me define "soon." It's not that I don't love my parents. I do. Very much. I couldn't ask for better people to raise, guide, and support me through everything. Dad helped me start my business by fronting part of the startup money without asking for a single penny back. I even tried to make him a partner, but he vehemently refused it, saying he knew nothing of the business I was so passionate about. "I just want to see you succeed at your dreams" is what he told me.

And succeed I have.

I busted my ass during the first year. I worked hundred-hour weeks and traveled constantly to build the company, earn trust, and prove my worth.

Within two years, Slade Engines became one of the largest aircraft parts suppliers in the US.

In year three, we became the largest global engine distributor.

"Would you like another latte?" The soft voice breaks me from my thoughts.

My gaze lifts and immediately I fall into strikingly beautiful round eyes, green as the forest with a golden-yellow halo encircling the pupil. She has a sun-kissed oval face, smooth skin fresh with very little makeup—only mascara and eyeliner accentuating her eyes and a slight shine of lip gloss on her full lips. She's pretty in the girl-next-door kind of way.

The smile she has plastered on her face is fake, though. Not the freeing one I saw her give the other waitress earlier. This one doesn't reach the mossy swirl in her eyes. As happy as she's trying to seem, it's a façade.

"No. Thanks," I reply.

"Okay," she says. "Just let me know if you need anything."

"Actually..." I say just as she turns to leave, stopping her. "On second thought, I'd like to get a large coffee with cream and sugar to go, please."

She smiles widely...again, fake. I've got to give it to her. Whatever is on her mind, she's trying hard to cover it up. "Sure. I'll be right back."

She's probably five-foot-three max with a supple ass, curvy hips, and perfect legs. My phone vibrates again, tearing my attention away from the waitress and back to my hand. It's another email from Janie, forwarded from Ashley, my CPO's assistant, containing the minutes from the meeting I missed yesterday.

As much as I want to be at work, I'm pleased with my team. They're

dedicated and determined. With demands high, they're fulfilling them effortlessly.

I'm scanning over the notes when a large coffee is placed on the edge of the table. "Here you go," she says softly, like she hates interrupting what has my attention. "It's two dollars and eighty-five cents. You can pay me or up at the register."

Her smile is still very much a fraud, but even so, she's as beautiful as ever.

"I'll pay you." I get to my feet, tucking my phone into my pocket and grabbing my wallet. "Why are penguins socially awkward?" I ask, lifting my eyes to hers.

Confusion pinches her brows together. I'm sure she thinks I'm some sort of an oddball.

"They find it difficult to break the ice."

Corny as hell, but it does the trick. A true smile pulls her lips into a grin. I mirror it as I hand her a twenty.

"That smile is much better than the fake one you've been wearing since you got here," I tell her.

A blush tints her cheeks as she looks down at the bill and slips it from my fingers. "I'll be right back with your change."

"Keep it. I hope your day gets better." I pick up my coffee and stroll out the door.

At my parent's house, cars line the driveway and spill out into the cul-de-sac. I find a spot to park and then make my way into the house, heading toward the back where I know everyone will be. But just as I step into the kitchen, I spot my mother with her palms splayed out onto the counter and her head bent down.

"You alright, Mom?"

Her shoulders jump slightly, and she turns around, offering a soft but tired smile. Mom's black hair is slicked back in a low bun, but several strands have fallen around her face. Her eyes don't shine like they normally do, and she looks completely exhausted. "I was beginning to think I needed to send a search party for you."

Mom wraps her arms around my middle, rests her head on my chest, and squeezes. I've towered over her since I was fifteen. Coming in at five-foot-four, she may be petite, but she's mighty.

"I'm glad you came."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here any sooner." I kiss the top of her head.

"You work entirely too much." She pulls back and tilts her head to look up at me, scratching my scruffy cheek. "Did you not pack a razor?"

"Misplaced it a few days ago."

Mom titters under her breath, shaking her head as she smooths her hands over my collar. "You smell like coffee."

"See. You didn't need a search party after all." I toss my arm over her shoulder as I guide us outside.

"We have a ton of food here. Make sure you eat and then eat some more."

I kiss the side of her head with a chuckle. "Yes, Mother."

Dad approaches us and sticks his hand out for a shake. "Good to see you finally remembered where you used to live." He laughs under his breath as he pulls me into a hug. "Sorry I missed you before the services. How was the flight in?"

"Good. I caught up on some emails before snagging a quick nap."

Dad shakes his head with an unsurprised laugh. "Even with family matters, you're always working."

"And look where it's gotten me," I say neutrally. I understand my parents' frustrations, but I didn't get the success I have by wasting time. I've worked my ass off for everything I have. Unfortunately in the process, I've slacked on being a good son and missed a lot of family things.

Mom leans into Dad's arm, patting it. It's her silent way of telling him that now isn't the time to bring it up.

"I'm here until Sunday," I inform them.

Mom's blue eyes beam. Dad's pleased too.

"Good. We miss you," Mom says.

"Holden." The familiar voice, full of warmth, grabs my attention.

My smile is automatic. "Hey, Mrs. Hodges." Her son, Shawn, was one of my best friends and also my neighbor growing up. She became like a second mother to me since I spent a lot of time four houses down from ours.

Her laugh is melodic as she steps in and gives me a hug. "Mrs. Hodges," she mocks. "After all these years, I still can't get you to call me Holly." She pulls back but leaves her hands on my shoulders. "You look good."

“As do you. Where’s Shawn?”

Her lips turn down. “Unfortunately, he’s out of town visiting with Bethany’s parents in Oregon. He sends his condolences.”

Bethany is Shawn’s wife and the very love of his life. She moved here our junior year in high school, and Shawn was instantly mesmerized by her. They started dating shortly after and then married when they were twenty-one.

“It’s a good thing.” I flash her a boyish grin. “That way we can’t cause any trouble.”

Mrs. Hodges titters, squeezing my shoulders before dropping her hands. “You two were and will always be trouble. It’s so good to see you, Holden.”

After several more minutes of catching up with everyone from the neighborhood, I excuse myself to use the bathroom. Once done, I wash my hands and step into the hallway, running right into Brianna, my old girlfriend.

“Holden. Hey!” She beams.

I haven’t seen her since right after high school and she’s still beautiful with long silky blonde hair, pretty blue eyes. She was my Achilles’ heel. We were the prime example of burning so brightly we burned out. We dated all through high school—from freshman to senior year—and were wildly crazy about each other. For four years, everything was great and then... nothing, as if a switch was flipped for the both of us. We loved each other but fell completely out of love. Knowing we were wasting each other’s time, we called it off broken-heartedly.

“Hey,” I say, leaning down as she reaches up to hug me.

“Damn, you grew up hot.” She giggles as she tucks a piece of her hair behind her ear. “You look really good.”

“And you’re just as beautiful as ever. How have you been?”

“Great, actually. I’m working at Dad’s firm now.”

“Just like you wanted. I heard you got married.”

She bites a smile and mars her face up, causing her eyebrows to hike high. It was something she did when she knew she’d made a huge mistake and had to admit it. “Never marry the rebound from your first love. Newsflash. It doesn’t end well.”

Seems like her reaction hasn’t changed.

“You didn’t?”

“Oh, I did. Huge mistake. It only lasted two years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” And I mean it.

“Don’t be.” She waves her hand dismissively. “It was a good lesson learned. Enough about me. I’m sorry to hear about Aunt Hazel. Chatley Bay won’t be the same without her.”

“She’ll definitely be missed.”

“How have you been? Is business still doing well?”

“Excellent actually.”

Her grin explodes across her face as pure happiness beams from her eyes. “That’s really great, Holden. I’m so happy for you.”

As we walk back down the hallway toward the rest of the guests, she pauses at the door of my old bedroom and laughs. “Your room looks a little different.”

Now it’s a guest room that looks nothing like it used to. My bed and dresser have been replaced with something newer, and the blue-green walls have been repainted to a warm gray. It’s no longer a teenage boy’s room.

“Not quite as messy,” I say with a slight chuckle.

Brianna’s big blue eyes flash to me. “I hope that phase of your life has passed.”

Grinning, I nod. “I’m a bona fide neat freak now.”

Something leaning against the wall in the corner catches my attention. Entering the room, I almost laugh as I pick it up. My old corkboard with all my old photos still pinned to it. Several are of Shawn and me making ridiculous faces for the camera, some of Callen being his stoic self while I stand beside him making silly faces, and a whole slew of Brianna and me.

“I remember giving you this.” Brianna runs her fingers over the heart-shaped note that says, “*You are my person I’ll love for all eternity.*” Hanging from the same pin is a black bracelet with a wooden rectangle block with our names and September sixteenth—the day I asked her out—engraved in it. “God I was livid that you wouldn’t wear it.”

I chuckle at the memory, giving her a sidelong glance. “Cool points, Brianna.”

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever. You didn’t give a damn about cool points. You were just being a typical guy.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I set the board down on the bed. I need to ask my mother why she still has it. I thought she tossed it years ago. I slide my phone out of my pocket and check to see if it’s the email I’ve been impatiently waiting on. Unfortunately, it’s not, but within seconds, my phone rings.

“Excuse me,” I tell Brianna as I step away to answer. “Hello?”

“Are you seriously checking your emails while you’re supposed to be surrounded by family who are mourning?” Janie fusses at me. I can imagine her face is screwed up with exasperation.

“No.”

“Holden Slade,” she chides. “I can see when you open emails. You realize that, right?”

Shit. I forgot she has access to my emails.

She groans in frustration.

Although she’s my assistant and the one who effortlessly keeps my life straight, Janie’s like a sister and just as brutal as a boss. Truthfully, I’d be completely lost without her.

“For once,” she grits, “quit working and be with your family. We all know what to do and how to do it.”

“Has the proposal from Unison Bearings come in?” I ask. I know it hasn’t, but I love ruffling her feathers.

“Since you’ve been constantly checking your emails, you’d know.”

“Did you sit in on the meeting with Mason?”

“Yes. And I’ll be in the one tomorrow with him and Aaron’s team. Holden...” My name sweeps through the receiver on an annoyed exhale. “We’ve got you covered. More importantly, I’ve got your back. You know if anything comes up that I can’t handle, you’ll be the first to know. For once, stop working and just be with your family. Please.”

I wish it were that easy. My company runs in my veins, always on my mind, and stays at the forefront. I wouldn’t want to turn it off even if I could because it speaks to the workaholic in me like an addiction. It’s all I’ve known for years.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I tell her and hang up before she can gripe at me any longer.

Brianna’s putting the board back where I found it when I turn back toward her. “Did you know Callen got married?” she asks.

“I did. I was in the wedding.”

She smiles, and it makes her glow. Back when I was younger, I’d do just about anything to see that particular smile. It always had a way of making a rough day better. “How long are you in town?”

“Until Sunday,” I answer.

“We should grab lunch before you head back.”



My brows raise as I tilt my head.

She cracks up realizing how that sounded. “As much fun as it would be to take a trip down memory lane to find out just how well we grew up, I really do mean just a lunch.”

Giving my head a jerk, I motion for us to get out of this room. No need to drum up more memories. “I’m not sure what my week holds,” I tell her as we enter back into the kitchen.

Brianna laughs under her breath. “I know an easy letdown when I hear one.” She turns and gives me that brilliant smile as she stretches to her tiptoes to give a quick kiss to my jaw. “It was really good to see you again, Holden. Don’t be such a stranger.”

## CHAPTER TWO

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## RAINE

The alarm on my phone blares, the noise shrill and annoying as hell. Reaching out, I tap the off button on my screen and then stretch out my body before gathering my things. I roll my uniform shirt and pants carefully so I don't get them wrinkly and then place them into my backpack before grabbing my shower bag from where it sits beside my plastic drawers. I take a quick peek out of the window from behind my dark curtain and declare the coast clear before stepping out of the back of my SUV.

I make my way across the parking lot and small alleyway until I reach the back door of OceanBrews. Since my shift doesn't start for another twenty minutes, I knock out my code—tap, tap-tap, tap. A few seconds later, Lucy, my friend and coworker, unlocks it to let me in.

“Good morning,” she chirps a little too cheery for five-twenty-five in the morning. But that's Lucy—always bright, always cheery, always great.

“Morning,” I grumble giving her a tight smile.

Quickly, I make my way up the old wooden stairs. The building used to be a home many, many years ago, and while the downstairs has been completely renovated to fit the needs of the best coffee shop in Chatley Bay, the upstairs remains untouched. Tucked between three bedrooms that are currently being used as supply storage rooms is a working full bathroom that I sneak to use.

Undressing, I adjust the water, test the warmth, and step in. Hot water cascades around me, and as much as I long to stand here and enjoy it, I don't have the time nor the luxury. After washing, I hurry to dry off and get dressed so I'm not late for my five-forty-five shift. Cathy, the owner, frowns upon starting even one minute past your scheduled time. She's a hard-ass but in a

good way. She keeps her employees straight and her business running smoothly. She doesn't put up with slacking off, and she despises lateness.

I'm lucky that after a few months of proving myself as a good asset to her, she gives me as many hours as she does. I do not want to mess that up. I can't afford it.

After I put on mascara and eyeliner, I throw my hair into a low bun and then clean up all the evidence that I was here just in case we get a surprise visit. Cathy's known to do that from time to time. Once, she showed up twenty minutes after I had showered, went upstairs to check a few things and stumbled upon the wet shower.

Lucy didn't even bat a lash when Cathy started asking questions. She told Cathy that on her way to work she smelled something, and it wasn't until she got to work that she realized she stepped in dog shit. So she went upstairs to rinse off her sneakers. Cathy believed it and my heart found its way back to a steady beat.

I rush back to my SUV and hang my towel on the rod that stretches between my headrests. Then I toss my shower bag beside the plastic drawers, drop my bookbag along with my dirty clothes in a pile at the end of the air mattress, and head back in to get the day started.

"I'm here," I tell Lucy as I come up behind her and clock in with five minutes to spare.

She casts me a glance out of the corner of her eye and slides me a caramel latte. My favorite. "This one's on me."

It's on the tip of my tongue to argue with her. I hate pity, and I hate handouts. But I know there's no point. We've been through this a thousand times, and no matter my argument, she always wins. She gives a mean stank eye.

So, without disputing it, I take it with a smile. "Thanks."

"I'm off for the next few days." Her lips turn down into an apologetic frown. "Chelsea is scheduled."

Chelsea is Cathy's niece and a total suck up, which means I have to watch my every move. I also won't be able to shower here. "It's no big deal." I shrug. "I'll hit up the truck stop if I need to."

Lucy's face both deflates and screws up at the same time. "Or you could just come to my house. You're more than welcome. We've got an extra bedroom, a bathroom, and you can do your laundry. Even Michael wishes you'd come stay with us."

Michael is her husband and the man every woman wishes she could find—handsome, romantic, sweet, and oh so madly in love with his wife. The thing I like most about him is any time I'm around him, he's always treated me like family and has never made me feel degraded because of my living situation.

The bell above the door chimes, saving me from having this conversation right now. But I know she won't relent. She never does. In fact, she hasn't let it go for a full year since she found out I was living out of my beat-up SUV.

Being homeless was easier to hide when I worked as a receptionist for Luscious Lather, a high-end spa on the other side of town. It was in a shopping center, which meant the parking lot always had cars, and no one noticed mine. I moved it to a different spot every day just in case, though. And just like here, I was able to shower at my job. Being the one who opened the place made that an easy task.

Unfortunately, though, the bitch from the travel agency beside Luscious Lather caught on, and instead of being a decent human being, she reported me to my manager. Since I couldn't prove I lived at the address I supplied when I was hired, I was forced to fess up, hoping like hell Susie, my boss, would take pity on me.

She didn't.

I lost my job.

Yep. I wasn't allowed to work to make money so I could get a place to live because I had no place to live to begin with. Talk about a screwed-up system.

At least here at OceanBrews, apartments are right next door, so most people won't bat an eye at my car in the parking lot all the time.

"So..." Lucy singsongs, dropping her hip to the counter. She crosses her arms over her chest, but not in an authoritative manner. "Will you please come stay with me? At least for the days I'm off work so I don't have to worry about you."

Once the first customer broke the proverbial seal, the morning flew by blurred with customers and orders. With the rush past us and the cleanup finished, I knew this was coming. Like I said, she won't let it go.

“I’m fine.” I smile. “I actually enjoy it.” It’s more like I’ve adjusted to it, but whatever.

Lucy raises an eyebrow, pursing her lips and calling my bluff.

“I do.” I laugh. “Think of it like van life living where people convert vans and travel the world. That’s me minus the world travel.”

“At least come to my house and do laundry then.”

“Why? So you can steal my keys in a non-kidnapping kidnap?” I tease. “Good try but the laundromat is literally around the corner.”

When she sighs, it’s long, drawn out, and very overdramatic. “You realize that accepting help doesn’t make you weak, right?”

“I know. I just don’t want to be indebted.”

“You wouldn’t owe me a single thing.” She looks toward the ceiling for a beat. “Actually, you’d owe me a good conversation over a glass of wine.”

The door chime sounds.

I bump her shoulder. “You’re trying to get me drunk so I have to stay with you.” I laugh. “Thank you for the offer. I promise you’ll be the first person I come to if I need something.”

Lucy glances behind me. “I hope one day you let someone else take care of you. Even superheroes need a break. I’ll let you get this one,” she ends in a whisper before walking away.

“Good morning.” The voice is rich, smooth, and deep with a gravelly edge. It causes a prickle of excitement to travel down my spine, and I know exactly who it belongs to.

I can’t help but smile as I turn. My stomach flutters as my gaze lands on the drop-dead gorgeous guy from yesterday.

His lips curl higher, deepening his grin, and he quirks an eyebrow. “Now that one is real. I’m assuming either the awful joke from yesterday is still in effect or you’re genuinely happy to see me.”

Oh, I’m happy to see him alright. Those blue eyes that are the color of my favorite denim jeans, his square jaw with a dusting of dark scruff, a broad chest hiding under a dress shirt, and tall, over six-foot... He’s gorgeous. The image of him with his boyish grin yesterday has been etched into my memory and has popped up often.

“Definitely the awful joke,” I reply with a playful lift to my lips.

God, even his chuckle is rumbly and sexy. “I’m glad to see it continues to have the same effect.” His gaze is intense and full of wondrous curiosity, and it makes my heart flutter. “I’d like a latte, please.”

After I ring him up and he pays, he tells me he's going to find a seat. Once I finish his drink, I find him at a small table along the edge of the room with his laptop open and a look of concentration on his face as he types. I take a moment to appreciate the view. The top button of his white dress shirt is undone, and the sleeves are rolled up to his forearms. He looks like he could be a model. His hair is dark, messy on top like he woke up, ran his fingers through it, and knew it was perfect before walking out the door. It's a mixture of bedhead and sex hair, and I'll be damned if it doesn't make him sexier.

His phone lights up, vibrating against the table. Quickly, he brings it to his ear. I don't hear how he answers, but his expression changes from concentration to an easier disposition. Quietly, so I don't disturb him, I set the coffee on the table. But just as I do, his gaze flips up to me and the smile he blesses me with causes something inside of me to catch fire.

Politely, I smile back and scurry away. The look he gives me is enough to have me sell my soul to the devil. The last thing I need is a distraction, and this man is a colossal one. I could sit and stare at him all day, relishing in the way he makes my insides light up in a way they haven't in years... which is why I disappear into the kitchen as quickly as possible.

Lucy hits me with a knowing grin as I lean my head against the wall and blow out a long breath. She titters quietly but doesn't say anything. She's waiting for me to be the first to admit it.

"It should be illegal to look that good," I say.

Lucy hums to herself before she says, "He is easy to look at."

I snort, pushing off the wall and rolling my eyes. "Such a married thing to say."

For the next hour, I stay busy, stealing glances here and there of Mr. Hotness while he works at his table. Unfortunately, I had to run upstairs to grab some extra supplies, and when I came back down, he was gone. I was both relieved and saddened that I had to finish my shift without the delicious distraction.

## CHAPTER THREE

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## HOLDEN

As usual, when I step into the coffee shop, a soft chime sounds through the building, and the savory aroma of coffee rouses the coffeeholic in me. But the woman who looks up from behind the counter isn't the one I was hoping to see. Instead of beautiful raven black hair, slender with bright beautiful green round eyes, I'm met with a younger woman with long brown hair and deep-set brown eyes.

"Good morning. Welcome to OceanBrews. What can I get for you?" Her tone is flirty and overly cheerful.

As I order, she bats her eyes and fucks with her hair, making it abundantly clear that she's interested in me. That or she's trying for a big tip. If that's the case, she's going to be sorely disappointed. One thing I can't stand is unprofessionalism and overly flirty, fine line or not.

When I pay her, I retreat to the same small table against the far wall and set up my laptop. My emails are always first on my agenda, and just as I open the weekly operations, Janie calls.

"You're doing it again," she says as way of greeting.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Holden." My name is an exasperated scold. I'm moving up. Yesterday, she griped at me. Today, she's ready to strangle, me and it's not even nine a.m. yet. "You're supposed to be spending time with your family. Not working."

"I'll get to that in a little bit. Did you go to Aaron's meeting?"

"Yes."

"Why did he have to let Joel go, and why isn't it stated anywhere?"

"He came in drunk. You could smell him from across the plant."

Perplexity draws my brows together. Surely, I didn't hear her correctly. "Joel did?"

"Apparently he found his wife in bed with another man. At least that's what he was rambling on about."

"Shit. Why didn't Timothy just send him home?" Timothy is my operations manager. "Joel has been with us for years, and to my knowledge he's never had a single disciplinary action."

"That was the plan, but when Timothy told him he was calling a cab to send him home, Joel became irate. Things got physical then and several people had to help settle him down. Aaron was pulled away from a conference call, and after getting all accounts of what happened, he had no other choice. Joel had violated too many policies to overlook."

"Shit," I grumble again, rubbing my forehead with my fingers. "I'm sure Judith already knows? Has Kristi been contacted?" Judith is my head of HR and Kristi is my CFO. Both women are fucking bulldogs when it comes to protecting the image of Slade Engines.

"Yes, and yes."

"Set up a meeting with everyone for Tuesday," I tell her.

The familiar scent of jasmine and coconut tickles my nose just as my latte is placed on the table. My gaze snaps up to the woman I was hoping to see when I walked in. She gives me a polite smile before turning away. I don't know what possesses me to do it, but I quickly reach out, gently grasping her wrist to stop her from leaving. She pauses, her gaze dropping to where my fingers wrap around her skin, and immediately I release her.

"I'll call you back," I interrupt Janie and then hang up. "Good morning."

Those green eyes of hers narrow slightly, curiously, not mad. "How do you go from serious to unbothered and relaxed in a blink of an eye?"

A lopsided grin pulls up one corner of my mouth. "It's a knack."

When she laughs, the smile I've come to thoroughly enjoy slips across her full lips and radiates from her eyes. "I thought I had a knack too until you came in and called me out on it. What's your trick?"

Her.

But instead of telling her so, I say, "Every moment is just a moment. Anything can change in that time frame. You just have to learn to close the door on one thought and open the door to the next one without tainting it with old emotions."

She releases a sound of disbelief even though her smile widens. "You

read that from an inspirational poster, didn't you?"

I chuckle giving my head a shake. "Years of practice."

She scrunches her nose, still grinning at me, and it's cute as hell. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Your name," I say. "I'm Holden, by the way."

Those green eyes gleam, and the look comes in a close second on the list of things I enjoy about her. "Nice to meet you, Holden. I'm Raine."

Raine. Such a uniquely beautiful name. It definitely fits her. I stare after her as she walks away, taking in her willowy body, the accent of her hips, the firmness of her ass, her slender legs...

I rip my attention away from her body before my thoughts get completely out of line. The last thing I need is to get involved with anyone in Chatley Bay, fling or not. Work is my life, and I haven't found a woman yet who can accept that. I quit looking years ago.

I call Janie back and go over a few details before she starts fussing at me some more for working while I'm here. I'm entirely grateful for her. I hired her five years ago when I finally buckled to the idea of an assistant. I was overtaxing myself, constantly buried under a mountain of secretarial things. Janie's been nothing but a blessing—and a pain in the ass. Although she talks to me like no assistant should ever talk to their boss, she knows her boundaries and rarely ever toes the line. We're more like brother and sister on payroll.

After I get off the phone with her, I call Bill Furner, the COO of Bearing Tech. They're one of our bearing suppliers, but they had a massive shipping fuck-up, which caused a snowball effect that sent us scrambling. It was unacceptable and it better be the very last time that ever happens again.

Nearly three hours later, I'm reviewing an analysis my CMO, Neil, sent over when a tall to-go cup of coffee appears on the table.

"You should talk to your boss about setting up an office for you in a coffee shop. I heard it's the new rave."

Chuckling, I glance up to Raine. "I've got an office, but it doesn't have this view." I pan my hand to the window front, where the palm trees line the street. Sure, it's a bit of a lie. I could give two shit's what's outside the window.

"Cubicles don't count as an office," she quips and it makes me laugh.

"What makes you think I work in a cubicle?"

"You're working in noise with people hustling all around you, and you're

not the least bit distracted.”

My grin is wide. “Maybe I’m good at blocking out distractions?”

A smile softens the “yeah right” look she gives me.

“Are you rushing me out of here?” I nod to the coffee.

“No. But for the past few days, you usually leave around the three-hour mark.” She lifts her wrist to check an invisible watch. “Which is in the next ten minutes.”

My brows hike high, surprised she’s paid that much attention.

She lifts a shoulder like it’s no big deal.

I pull my wallet from my pocket and hand her a twenty-dollar bill.

“I’ll be right—”

“Keep the change.”

She visibly flinches, looking down at the money with apprehension. “This is a lot of tip for a three-dollar cup of coffee,” she says, her tone matching her dubious expression.

“Consider it assistant’s pay.”

She glances around the lobby. “And now I have my own cubicle too,” she jests, thankfully with a smile. “Thank you.”

“How is everything?” The young woman from earlier glides to my table, her smile a little too saucy.

She glances between Raine and me like Raine has something she wants. It makes me bristle as annoyance slithers through me, but I keep my features smooth. “Great. Thanks.”

Raine rolls her lips between her teeth, her eyes finding mine. “Might want to practice harder on that knack of yours.” Her voice shakes with amused laughter. “That smile is clearly fake,” she whispers and then heads off leaving me with Miss Overly Zealous.

“Are you new in town?”

“Here for business.” I close my laptop and shove it into my messenger bag.

“Well, while you’re in town, if you need—”

“Thanks.” I jerk to my feet, interrupting her before she can finish. “Have a good day.”

Pushing out the door, I chance a glance behind me to find Raine watching me with laughter glimmering from her eyes. She covers her mouth and ducks her head, hiding her face. And it leaves me grinning like hell the entire way to my car.

My parents are at the restaurant when I arrive. Typical. They're always early—it's in their blood—while I'm always right on time. Mom's back is toward me when I arrive at the table. I drop a kiss to the top of her head. "Hey, Mom." I move to my father and give him a handshake before pulling out my chair and taking a seat.

"You smell like coffee again," Mom muses.

I nod. "I went to the coffee shop downtown and did a little work before coming here."

"What's wrong with the hotel?" Dad asks.

"Nothing. But the room will close in on me after a while. I prefer the noise." The moment the words cross my lips, an image of Raine flashes in my mind. I'm positive if she were here, she'd have something to say about my cubicle at her workplace. I fight the urge to smile at that.

The waiter comes, takes my drink order, and then leaves.

"How's business going?" Dad asks.

But before I can answer, Mom interjects. "We're not talking about work." She gives us both a stern look. "I've lost you to your company, and I don't get to see you as often as I'd like because of it. You two can talk shop another time, but for now, talk about anything else. Sports, moving back home, when you'll give me grandbabies, but no work."

"You look beautiful." I smile at her.

Mom laughs. "Complimenting me won't get you out of trouble, Holden."

"It was worth the try."

The waiter brings my drink and then takes our orders.

"Janie sends her condolences," I say as he leaves.

"Tell her I said thank you and that I miss seeing her." Mom takes a sip of her tea. "I go next week to look over Hazel's will."

"She had a will?" I ask surprised. "She didn't have anything except her apartment and the things in it."

Dad chuckles over his cup of coffee. His coffee addiction runs in my DNA. "You know how Hazel was. I'm willing to bet she cataloged everything and is distributing each item one by one."

Mom titters. "I tried telling her that I'd let Pearl and Keith go through and get whatever they wanted, and after that, we would. Everything left over, I'd donate. But she insisted on a will."

Keith and Pearl are Hazel's children, both older with their own families and living out of town.

"Are you holding up okay?" I ask. Hazel was her sister and her best friend. Mom's the eldest by two years, but they've been nearly inseparable their entire lives. When my grandparents passed away a year apart, their bond only grew stronger.

Mom nods. "I am." Her voice is as watery as her eyes. She inhales deeply and then blows it back out as she straightens the napkin on her lap. "It brings me peace to know she doesn't have to go through all the cancer treatments anymore." She blinks up to me and I can read exactly what she's thinking. I should've visited more often.

"How's the weather in Colorado lately?" Dad quickly breaks the heaviness.

Weather. Of all the subjects to change it to, he went with weather to stop Mom before she could voice her thoughts. But it serves the purpose. Had Mom said what was on her mind, it wouldn't have ended well. She'd turn into a blubbering mess about how badly she misses me, and it always breaks my heart.

And so for the next hour, we talk about everything yet nothing at all while we catch up on the years I've missed as I do my damndest not to talk about my passion—work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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## HOLDEN

No one is at the counter when I step into OceanBrews the next morning, but just as I approach the counter, Raine pops out from behind the metal door drying off her hands with a towel. The moment she spots me, her feet slow, but her smile is automatic. It tightens something in my chest.

“You should really tell the boss you want the weekend off. Maybe lie and tell him your new office is closed.”

“I don’t get many weekends off,” I tell her honestly. “But thankfully, I’m not here to work. I just need to grab a redeye to go, please.”

“Are you a coffeeholic all day or just in the mornings?” she asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“Mornings and some evenings when I run out of steam.” I hand her a twenty.

She rings me up and attempts to hand over the change. I give her a pointed look.

An uncomfortable smile touches her lips and her shoulders tense slightly. “I’m not your assistant today.” She nods toward her outstretched hand.

“Then count it as a tip this time.”

She swallows and reluctantly drops the change into one of the front pockets of her apron. “One or two shots?”

“Two, please.”

As she works on my drink, I force myself to peruse the different pastries in the display instead of checking her out. I don’t know what it is about her, but I like the pull she has on me, even if I despise it too. It’s... different.

I’m untrusting and uninterested, but...

That damn “but.”



“The other waitress from yesterday...” I start, wanting to hear Raine’s voice.

“Chelsea?”

“I never caught her name. She was...” I search for the proper word that isn’t offensive. “Friendly.” I settle on.

Raine snickers as she sets my drink on the counter. “You mean you didn’t like her batting her eyes at you?” she asks, batting her own gorgeous green eyes dramatically. “Or the way she played with her hair?” She tucks an invisible strand of hair behind her ear looking coy. A bubble of laughter tumbles out of her, and I decide that is my favorite sound now. “She’s the owner’s niece, so she tends to think she’s high up on the totem pole. She was charming, don’t you think?”

The tease in her tone stretches my grin wide. “Right. Charming. That was exactly my thought.”

Raine tilts her head back and laughs. It’s beautiful. *She’s* beautiful. I could stare at her for hours, just taking in her beauty along with everything about her, and that feeling catches me off guard.

“Tell the boss since your assistant is off tomorrow, you should be too.”

My expression may not falter, but disappointment drops a boulder in my stomach. This will be the last time I see her before I leave for home. That thought doesn’t settle very well. “I’ll see what I can do. Enjoy your day off.” With a forced smile, I leave.

Seconds after knocking on the door, Callen opens it.

“Pretty boy,” I tease with a smirk.

His left brow raises slightly, and he blows a chuckle under his breath.

Where I look like an average guy, Callen always looks like an all-American surfer, regardless of how closed off he may be or how many tattoos he’s gotten. Which, by the way, is a fuck ton.

I slap my hand into his and pull him in for a one-armed hug. “It’s good to see you, man.”

“Yeah.”

Don’t let the clipped responses fool you. He’s never been a man of many words. It took a lot of getting used to, but over the years, it grew on me.

“How’s married life?” I ask as we step into his house.

“Good.”

“The kids?”

“Good.”

I chuckle. Although he’s a few years older than me, I’ve known Callen since elementary school. He was the quiet kid with dirty, tattered clothes and threadbare shoes who always sat by the fence during recess. One day, I watched him walk out of the school with the rest of the class, and instead of playing with the rest of us, he took to his normal spot—away from everyone. When I plopped my ass down beside him, little did we know that very moment would be the beginning of a brother-like friendship that would last well into our adulthood.

While everyone whispered behind Callen’s back, I stood beside him along with Ethan, Callen’s best friend turned true brother after Callen’s mother’s death. Those two had a special bond, much different than what Callen and I had, but I never let it bother me. Somehow, even at a young age, I knew Callen needed Ethan in a way I couldn’t fill. It didn’t stamp out our friendship at all.

Callen’s had a hell of a life, a heartbreakingly awful hand that was dealt to him from birth. So to see him married with a family, loving and being loved, and happy, well that makes me happy, too. If anyone deserves a great life, it’s him.

“Everyone’s out back.” He jerks his chin before strolling toward the back door.

Callen’s wife, Morgan, is sitting on the outdoor couch under the shade of the pergola with a sleeping Jesse beside her.

Bending down, I place a kiss to her cheek. “Hello, beautiful.”

The sun glistens from her aquamarine blue eyes as she smiles up at me. “Hey, Holden. It’s good to see you.”

Callen takes a seat on the other side of his wife with Jesse between them.

“Holden!” I hear my name called out.

Spinning around, I spot their older son, Colby, sprinting toward me. “Colby? Is that you?” I joke, rubbing my eyes.

His little giggle is sweet. “Of course it’s me.”

I ruffle his hair. “I couldn’t tell with you grinning like a cheeseball.”

He cracks up laughing.

“How old are you now? Twenty-two? Twenty-three?”

Have I mentioned how much I love his little laugh?

On the couch, Jesse begins to stir. Instantly, Colby goes into big brother mode and moves over to him to start rubbing his back. Jesse's head pops up, his eyes trailing around with his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat.

My attention slides to Callen. "You cannot deny that child one bit. He looks exactly like you."

A smirk quirks the corner of his mouth and his eyes move to his wife. "He's got her temper, though."

Morgan titters, slapping him on the shoulder. "That's all you."

Callen's brow tics, clearly disagreeing but smart enough not to say anything.

I learned early in our friendship that although Callen is a man of little words, all his mannerisms speak loudly for him. Distinctive tics, nods, and grunts all mean something different depending on the conversation. The man can have a full-blown discussion with you without so much as saying one word.

Jesse pushes up and rolls until he sits with a little help from Colby. He coos and babbles as he reaches out and grabs Colby's hand, instantly bringing it to his mouth.

Callen smirks at Morgan. "That's all you," he mocks.

Morgan huffs playfully as she scoops Jesse up. "Let's go feed you and get you changed."

"Want me to change him?" Callen asks looking up to her.

Morgan shakes her head. "I've got it. Hang out with Holden." She glances back to me. "I'll be back in a few."

Just as she steps inside, another body steps outside. "Uncle E!" Colby shouts and dashes off toward Ethan, who scoops him up and presses him into a hug before placing him back to his feet.

Ethan approaches and I stand, sticking my hand out. "Look who brought his ass back home," he says light-heartedly. "I'm sorry to hear about your aunt."

"Thanks," I say, sitting back down.

Ethan takes the recliner across from us as Colby makes his way back to his swing set. I haven't seen them since Callen and Morgan's wedding a little over a year ago. I may not come back here as often as I should, but I sure as hell wasn't missing his wedding.

"How's business going?" Ethan asks.

“Excellent. Yours?”

Ethan and Callen own Rowe Rentals, a real estate and property management firm they started years ago. For the next thirty minutes, we discuss business and how it’s thriving for us.

When Morgan comes back from inside, Callen steals his son, holding him on his lap as he talks to him. Jesse cackles as Callen gives him a raspberry on his neck, and I can’t help but grin as I watch.

“When are you going to find a good woman and settle down?” Ethan asks me, and it tears my gaze away from father and son.

Callen and I snort. “You sound like my mother,” I tell him. “Question is, when are *you* going to find a good woman and settle down?” I deflect his question.

Ethan’s smile slowly erupts. “I’m actually seeing someone.”

Morgan bursts out laughing. “Yeah right.”

“Seriously. I am.”

This causes Morgan to sober up. She looks intrigued. “Seriously?”

Ethan nods. “We’ve been seeing each other for almost a month.”

Morgan’s head swings to Callen. “Did you know?”

Callen’s eyebrow tics. Clearly that was a yes.

Morgan glares at her husband for a beat, not seriously at all, and then looks back to Ethan. “You need to bring her over for dinner. I’d love to meet her. I need another girl in my circle of testosterone.”

“I’m still feeling it out. I’ll let you know when,” Ethan says to her and then gives me a smug grin.

Ass.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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RAINE

Kaleb pushes out from behind the wooden door wearing a pair of black skinny jeans and a hooded tee that I bought him a few weeks ago. I was tired of seeing him sweat to death in a hoodie, so when I found out they made hooded T-shirts, I stockpiled a few. He's always wearing the hood up regardless of the temperature.

Teenagers...

The moment he spots me, his grin explodes. "Hey, Raindrop." He gives me a chin lift.

A fricking chin lift.

I bump into his shoulder with mine as we walk out the exit door together. "How's the week been?"

"Aced a math test. Flunked an English paper. Everything else was good, though. Chris got grounded," he air quotes, "for punching Ramsey in the stomach after he found out he stole from his candy stash."

We slide into my SUV. "Good job on the math test, but why did you flunk the English paper? That's one of your favorite subjects. What was it about?"

He looks a little sheepish when he answers, "If I could have dinner with someone from the past or present, who would it be and why?"

"How'd you mess that up? Seems easy enough." I crank the engine as he buckles up.

He tosses me a lopsided frown. "I chose Alan."

My head snaps toward him. "Dad? Why? And why not Mom?"

He shrugs and averts his gaze out the window. "Figure if I could go back a few years and poison his food, I wouldn't have to talk about Mom in past

tense.”

Shit. I can't say I blame him. I've thought about all the “what ifs” too, even the morally wrong ones. What if I had paid better attention? Would I have recognized something was off? Would I have noticed the abuse? What if I had spent the day with Mom instead of spending it with my boyfriend? Would Alan—Dad—still have had killed her?

Our lives fell apart that day. One atrocious act obliterated our normal. The only thing Alan did right that day was call the police and tell them what was about to happen before Kaleb got off the bus. By the time the cops got there, it was too late to save Mom, but thankfully they managed to stop Kaleb from finding both our parents dead. That would've traumatized him worse.

One selfish and evil act changed our lives forever. Mom was an only child. Grandpa had passed away several years prior, and Grandma was in a dementia care unit. Alan's only brother was in prison for robbery and his parents had passed away when I was a baby. So it was just me and Kaleb. We only had each other. I fought like hell to get guardianship of him, but because I was young and not financially stable, the state placed him in a group home an hour away in Chatley Bay.

The good news? Because of the sensitivity of the entire situation, the state put a stipulation in place that Kaleb wouldn't be put up for open adoption for five years to give me a chance to provide a safe and stable living environment for him and keep us together.

The bad news? I have two years left to get my shit together and I'm not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel yet.

Once they moved him to the group home, I packed up and moved to Chatley Bay too. Within a month, I had a great job, an apartment, and a roommate to help me get on my feet. I was well on my way to getting my brother back.

Then my roommate screwed me over.

She and her boyfriend got into some trouble. Turned out, dumb and dumber robbed the property manager of the apartments and were caught on camera. Because she was my roommate, I was guilty by association, and the manager evicted me, regardless of my begging and pleading.

Using the three months of rent I had saved up, I ended up staying in a cheap motel while trying to find a new place to live. I made decent money working as a receptionist for a highly reputable accounting firm. It was nine to five, Monday through Friday, so I started looking for a weekend job to

bring in more money. I made a grave mistake by confiding in a coworker, who I thought was a friend. He turned out to be a dirty rat and the nephew of one of the senior partners of the accounting firm.

I found that without a permanent address no business wanted to hire me, which is ridiculous. I need to work to afford a place, but they need me to have a place before I can have a job.

Needless to say, the past three years of my life have been brutally trying.

"I'm assuming they didn't like the poison part?" I ask.

"Mrs. Ellis said it was all in bad taste, and I was better than that."

"I agree with her."

He lifts a shoulder, avoiding eye contact with me. "I was having a bad day."

"Do you have those often?" I take my eyes off the road to glance at him.

"No." He shakes his head. "Only occasionally."

"Promise?" After everything with our parents, I'm not taking any chances with my brother. Although I'm lost without Mom, I'd be utterly lost without my brother.

His gaze meets mine. "I promise you." There isn't any deceit in his hazel eyes. Thank goodness he's got Mom's eyes. "I got to look at my classes for next year. I decided to do a dual enrollment. That's where I get college credits too."

Playfully, I shove his shoulder. "You got all the brains of the family."

"And all the looks," he teases with laughter.

I crack up as I pull into the parking lot of Burger Bites. "You can't have both."

"Who says?" He opens the door and gets out. "Matt Damon and Ashton Kutcher have high IQs. Smart and good-looking." He smirks from across the hood of my car.

"So you're saying I'm ugly and stupid?" I arch a daring brow.

My little brat of a brother chuckles and says, "You've got pretty eyes."

"You shit!" I squeak.

Cracking up, he holds up a finger and gives it a shake. "Language," he tries to mock me but fails as proof of puberty breaks his voice.

"Don't make me eat in front of you without feeding you." My threat is empty, and he knows it.

He harrumphs, rolling his eyes. "Yeah right." He tosses his arm over my shoulder. "You love me too much to do that."



I bat my lashes at him. "Tell me I'm pretty and smart and I'll feed you." My tone is sheer innocence.

"You're stooping to quid pro quo, Raindrop. That's so below you."

My feet stop at the entrance of the restaurant. My mouth gapes with a smile on my face. "You've been waiting to use that, haven't you?"

"Hell yes."

I snicker. "Well, Mr. Brainiac, when you make it big don't forget about me."

He kisses the side of my head. "That could never happen."

We may be ten years apart, but my little brother is my everything. From the moment Mom placed his little body in my arms as I sat next to her in the hospital bed, I knew he was going to be my best friend. I hate not being able to see or talk to him every day, but knowing I get to have some time with him on Sundays gives me something to look forward to every week.

"You look lost," Lucy steps up beside me at the counter and looks out over the coffee shop lobby.

Sighing, I grab a towel and begin wiping down the counter. "You remember that illegally good-looking guy?"

"Oh yes. The hottie with the eyes for you."

"He's not been here at all this week. I..." I trail off and shrug. "I'm worried he may have gotten in trouble at work."

Confusion causes her eyebrows to furrow. "Why would you think that?"

"I have no idea, honestly. I teased him about working here and even suggested he talk to his boss about moving his office here." I don't know why I care. People pop in and out of here all the time. Regulars fall off the grid and new customers replace them.

"Maybe he had to go out of town for business?"

"What if Chatley Bay was his out of town?" I don't like how that makes me feel.

She hits me with a knowing grin. "Do you have yourself a crush?" Lucy singsongs.

I'm shaking my head before the word comes from my mouth. "No." Yes. "He was funny and a great tipper. A breath of fresh air. That's all."

“And ridiculously handsome.”

“Yes, and ridiculously handsome.” I wipe off the counter *again*. Anything to avoid looking her in the eyes.

“Next time he comes in, you need to get his number. That way when your thoughts wander, you can call and check in on him.”

I burst out laughing at her suggestion. “He’s only being nice. He’s not interested. Besides, I’m from the wrong side of the tracks for him. He’s got class. I’ve got... a blow-up mattress.”

Lucy waggles her brows. “Maybe he could show you his mattress.”

“It’s probably so soft and beautiful that I’d fall face first and sleep for days.” I titter. “I need to focus on making money so I can get Kaleb anyway. Not daydreaming about some cute guy’s mattress.”

“Nothing wrong with daydreaming,” she says. “Are you nervous about your job interview?”

She may be my manager, but she’s my friend first and I love her for it. “Yes. No. Not really. Extremely,” I admit.

“Sounds like you’re ready then,” she quips.

“I’m ready to get Kaleb, and in order for me to do that, I need to work my ass off so I can get a place.” I tap the screen and clock out. “I’ll see you Friday?”

“Unless you take me up on my continued offer and come stay at my house.”

She has so much hope in her voice that it kind of breaks my heart to turn her down. I wink and blow her a kiss walking backward. “Don’t wait up, dear.”

“Don’t forget you can use my address.” Her voice is just above a whisper.

When I push out the door, the sun hits my skin. It warms me and instantly puts a smile on my face. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with fresh air. I’m going to nail this interview.

I didn’t nail it. The job interview went to shit before I even had a chance to grab a hammer to hit the damn nail with. When I stepped up to the receptionist—the very position I was interviewing for—Oscar Davis stepped out of his office and locked eyes with me. Although his face didn’t show

emotions, I saw recognition in his eyes. Then he turned and strolled leisurely down the hall. I almost cringed when I saw him, but I was hoping he had forgotten who I was. He was from the accounting firm that fired me, and he was one of the people vehemently against having a homeless girl ruining their reputation.

Ten minutes after seeing him, I was called into the interview only to find out the position had been filled earlier in the day. I could tell Mr. Grossi was lying to me, but his words were final. I had no chance to tell him how qualified I was for the job, or about the year and a half experience I had with the other accounting firm, or the two years with a marketing firm back home. I didn't even get the chance to lie and give them Lucy's address.

The fact of the matter was the moment Oscar Davis saw me, he made sure I had no chance in hell.

Bastard.

## CHAPTER SIX

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## HOLDEN

I'm in the middle of an accounting meeting listening to Glenn Finke drone on and on and on. I'd much rather listen to my CFO Valerie. While she also drones on, she's not mind-numbingly monotone. My phone lights up in my lap. Glancing at it, I frown. It's a message from Janie stating my mother called and asked for me to give her a call ASAP.

Huh. Why didn't Mom call my phone herself?

Quietly, I push away from the table, offering everyone an apologetic smile as I exit the room. The door hasn't even shut behind me when I dial Mom.

"Hey, sweetheart," she answers, and if something is wrong, her tone doesn't give her away. "I'm sorry to bother you at work, so I'll keep this short. I need you to come home."

My brows fly up. "Did I miss curfew?" I jest as I grab a paper cup and fill it from the water cooler.

"You've been mentioned in Hazel's will."

"I... What?" This surprises me. While we were close when I lived at home, I would have never thought she'd mention me, or anyone else for that matter, in a will. Hazel was the type of person that if she wanted you to have something, she gave it to you. Point blank.

"Apparently my sister had some secrets," Mom adds.

"What kind of secrets?"

"Interesting ones. How soon do you think you can be here? I need to arrange Pearl and Keith to join us so I can knock out three birds with one stone."

"I'll have to get with Janie after my meeting." Janie could manage my

schedule in her sleep.

“Hopefully sooner than later,” she says.

“Mom, you know you can call my phone instead of Janie, right?”

Mom exhales. “I do, but I didn’t want to bother you at work.”

“You’re never a bother,” I tell her. “If I can’t answer, I can’t answer.”

“Call me and let me know when you can come. I love you, son.”

“I love you too.”

Something tells me whatever is in her will is about to shock the shit out of me.

“This sounds mysterious.” Janie bites her bottom lip and waggles her brows as she takes a seat in the chair across from my desk and pops open her laptop to check my schedule.

During the rest of the meeting, I was distracted. So when it was finished, I had Janie meet me in my office.

My Aunt Hazel was far from taciturn. She was always an open book. Or so I thought. I can’t imagine her having any secrets.

“Maybe you’re her biological son, but she was too young or not in a very good situation, so her wonderful sister stepped up to keep you in the family?”

A laugh rumbles from me. “Hazel has two children. One older and one younger than me. Your theory is flawed.”

Janie pouts, pushing out her lips, but then they spread into an excited grin. “Maybe she was a bootlegger?”

My brows pinch together, dipping low as I study her. I think she’s finally lost her mind under the stress. I knew it would happen one day.

“Gambling debts?”

I continue to stare at her.

“Maybe she knows some mob secrets and she’s going to tell you where Jimmy Hoffa’s buried from the grave?”

I blink and then blink again. “Are you feeling well?”

Janie ducks her head as she laughs, her shoulders shaking. “Sorry. My sister’s gotten me into these murder mystery thrillers.”

“Seems you’re rather invested. Your imagination is very creative today.”

She ignores me and peers at her screen. “You’ve got two meetings

tomorrow and three on Thursday that were rescheduled from last week. I could try to reschedule them again if you'd like."

I give my head a shake. "That wouldn't look good."

"I agree." She taps her keyboard a few times. "I can clear Friday for you and most of next week. They're mainly inside meetings, so we can handle them without you."

Resting back in my chair, I run a hand over my jaw, feeling the scruff under my fingers. "Keep them tentative for me for now. Once I find out what's going on, I'll let you know."

Tap. Tap. Tap. Her fingers type on her keyboard again as my mind filters through all the possibilities of why Hazel would have me in her will. She was the aunt every aunt wanted to be like. I was the center of her attention when I was around, even as I got older. Growing up, she'd play cops and robbers, throw the football with me, shoot hoops, and whatever else I wanted her to do. We'd sing silly songs and she'd sneak me candy. And man did that woman know how to give great gifts. She'd give me the things my parents refused to. Even when Pearl and Keith were with her, she made sure I knew I was her favorite nephew... regardless if I was her only nephew.

The best thing about Hazel, I knew I could talk to her about anything and it would always stay between us. Didn't matter what it was. I trusted her immensely.

"Would you like for me to book your flight and hotel room?" Janie pulls me from my thoughts.

"Please. And a car rental."

"I'll email you the details." She closes her laptop and stands, holding her laptop to her chest. "Your meeting with the team about the Joel incident is in twenty minutes in the conference room. Peachy will be there, so I'm sitting this one out." Her nose scrunches.

Shannon Peach is Aaron's assistant, and she's not peachy at all to deal with. If I could get out of it, I would, but since I called the meeting, there's no getting out of it.

"Have you told them about the letter you received?"

The letter from Joel came this morning. In his handwriting, he apologized profusely for his actions, hating the way he acted and saying how ashamed he is for disrespecting the people he's considered family for years. He didn't ask for his job back. In fact, he stated he didn't want it back because he'd never be able to look anyone in the eyes again, specifically me. He thanked me

profusely for giving him the opportunity to be part of the Slade family. He's full of remorse and even stated if charges were pressed, he'd understand.

Joel was an exceptional employee, dedicated, trustworthy, dependable, and incredibly loyal. Unfortunately, one bad action resulted in us losing him. It sucks, but that's the name of the game.

"No," I answer, holding her gaze with rigidity. "And I won't. That letter was addressed to me and me only." I haven't told Janie what was in that letter either. It was personal, detailing exactly what happened with his wife that led him to throw himself into a bottle of vodka. Twenty-three years of marriage annihilated...

After my plane lands, I pick up my rental car and then start the forty-minute drive to my parents' house. Chatley Bay has always been quiet and charming, quaint and sundrenched, tucked away from the world and never touristy. Those types of cities are thirty minutes away or more.

Thoughts of Raine have filled my mind often over the last week: the way her green eyes glow when they're being kissed by her smile, the way her laugh is carefree and beautiful, the way she'd tuck her raven-colored hair behind her ear, and the way her jasmine-coconut scent captured the beauty of an exotic island. Replaying her banter has brought many smiles to my face over the past several days. She wasn't laughing and joking with me for a personal gain. She didn't know or care what I have to offer. The small talk was real and not some conspiring way to gain access to my money. She had no way of knowing, which makes her interactions with me one-hundred-percent authentic. That alone makes me smile wide.

She's one of those people who come and go in a fleeting moment but give you a long-lasting memory. And no doubt, she will always be a smiling one. She's a dangerous woman in the sense of occupying my mind. No woman has accomplished that in years. I haven't let anyone idle there. Yet somehow, Raine has. Maybe I'll stop in and see her while I'm here again.

As I pull into my parents' driveway, I force all thoughts of Raine out of my mind. I park to the side where my basketball goal used to be so I don't block in Keith's suburban or Pearl's sedan. Everyone's sitting on the back patio around the table, tucked under the shade of the umbrella. Mom instantly



pops out of her chair and greets me with a wide smile and a hug like she hasn't seen me in years. I kiss the top of her head and then give Dad a hug before greeting Keith with a handshake and Pearl with a kiss to the cheek.

Even though I'm impatient to find out what's in the will, we settle into small talk. Keith tells me about his upcoming wedding, while Pearl tells us how Paul—her husband, has been promoted to partner at the law firm. And of course I tell them about Slade Engines.

After a few minutes, my mother pats my hand. "Do you want some coffee?"

I flash her a boyish smile. "Am I awake?"

She laughs under her breath and gives me a wink. "Made you a pot before you got here." She stands. "Go grab a cup while I gather everything."

"Do you need any help?" I ask stepping into the kitchen behind her.

Mom dismisses me with a wave of her hand. "Grab your coffee and go sit down. Trust me. You're going to want to."

My curiosity has officially piqued higher.

Once I make my coffee, I rejoin everyone at the table just as Mom filters out of the house carrying three large manilla envelopes.

"Apparently, Hazel had some secrets that even I didn't know about." Mom passes out the folders. "She named me as the executor of her will but made me swear I wouldn't read it until after her death." Mom sits, scoots closer to the table, and then puts on her glasses. "She left us all something."

Pearl and Keith share a quick look of confusion.

"Hold that look until you see what she left us." Mom's expression reveals that even she can't believe this.

We all open our folders.

I start to scan it over.

Holy. Shit. Hazel was loaded. And not just a little bit either.

Pearl gasps a sob, her hand flying to her mouth. "How did she..."

Keith clears his throat trying to keep his emotions in check.

"Seems your father had a huge life insurance policy," my mother supplies. "And Hazel had some lucrative investments. Pearl and Keith, you have been left three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars each. She also left me two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but if you oppose, I have no qualms with splitting my portion between the both of you."

"No," Keith is quick to reply. His voice indicates he's still shocked from all the news. "You are her sister, and that's what Mom wanted."

Pearl agrees with her brother, and while they discuss it, I continue to read, scanning through all the directions of where she wishes her belongings to go until I hit my name.

My eyes fly up to my mother's face. "Aunt Hazel had a house?"

Mom's lips turn down as she shakes her head. "I didn't know about it."

Neither did Pearl or Keith judging by their expressions.

Blinking back down, I continue to read the guidelines. Hazel's given me strict instructions. I'm never to sell it. It's to stay in my family, which only includes my wife, my children, my grandchildren, and the generations that follow.

I reread that.

Twice.

Three times.

"Holden." My name has me glancing back up to my mother.

"I..." I scratch my forehead trying to get my thoughts under control. Then I clear my throat. "I don't live in Chatley Bay. Wouldn't this be best suited for you and dad?"

Mom's eyes are welling up with tears as she gives me a sad smile. Dad places his hand over hers and gives it a squeeze. "Whatever her reason, she very clearly specified you. We can't go against it."

"What am I supposed to do with a house two-thousand miles away?" I voice my thought.

Dad grins. "Guess you'll have to visit more."

"The house will sit vacant more than it's used. I don't understand what she could have wanted to achieve by bestowing me a house. A house not resided in will deteriorate." My thoughts fire out of me.

"This isn't a business meeting, Holden. Quit talking like you're in front of executives," Mom demands sternly.

My brows jump high. It's been a long while since she's used that tone with me. I take a breath, trying to calm the shock of all this. "All I'm stating is that I don't live here. It would be more of a vacation home that would be used very little. I don't find that fair to Keith, Pearl, or you and Dad. If none of you want it, I could sell it and split the money between us all."

"You may want to keep reading, son," Mom says knowingly. "If you fail to meet her requests, we all reap your consequences."

Dad smiles again, this time fully aware that Hazel, in her own unusual way, is forcing me to visit Chatley Bay more often than I have. More often

than I have time for.  
What the hell...

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## RAINE

With the afternoon storms rolling through, OceanBrews has been dead. The pouring rain comes down in seething sheets, which has kept the customers at bay and me going stir crazy.

After sending Denise home, I cleaned everything I could and restocked before taking a seat at the table closest to the counter with the tablet Lucy let me borrow so I can job hunt. I'm getting a little desperate for another job. I'll even take a second part-time job. I've got two years to prove myself to the state, and knowing my hardheaded brother, if my time passes and someone wants to adopt him, he'll not consent to it to keep giving me a chance. At this rate, he'll age out before I can get him under my roof and close.

Thunder crashes so loudly, it rumbles the ground and causes the windows to shake slightly. The lights flicker, but thankfully, the power stays on. If it stays out longer than thirty minutes, I have to lock up and go home, which means I'll lose money that I desperately need right now.

Another loud clap of thunder hits, and the lights flicker again, but the little coffee shop holds its ground.

"If you find another—"

A scream rips from me. I drop the tablet to the table and jump clear out of my skin and onto my feet. My gaze lands on a familiar face as I slap a hand over my chest. "Holy shit!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," Holden says sincerely although his eyes dance with laughter.

"I think I'm missing my soul." I take a breath. "How did you get in here without the chime going off?"

"Perfect timing, I assume." He lifts a shoulder.

I pull in another deep breath, trying my best to calm my racing heart.

“If you find another job, who will keep me on my toes?”

God, he’s as handsome as ever. Striking, really. Dark scruff lines his jaw, but it doesn’t take away from the strong angles of it. He’s dressed in black slacks, and his powder-blue shirt is covered in wet drops. His blue eyes glimmer, but I notice more than anything, they look tired.

“You look exhausted,” I note.

His left brow tics. “And you can fix that for me.” His tone is all too charming, and it makes something deep inside of me flutter to life.

“Latte, coffee, or a redeye?” I ask trying to sound as if his charm didn’t affect me.

His gaze doesn’t leave my face. Something about it excites me and calms me at the same time. Like my words affect him just as much as his charm does me.

“Large coffee, please.”

As I move past him, the scent of his cologne surrounds me. Masculine, zesty, and sexy, it causes my skin to tingle from head to toe. I wonder if his sheets smell like... I need to make his coffee.

“Did you get in trouble with your boss for being here?” I ask the very question that has swirled around my brain often over the past week. I put a splash of milk and two sugars into his cup.

“I did not.”

My shoulders sag with relief. “I’m glad you didn’t.” I place his coffee on the counter.

He scans my face, his eyes devouring me. That flutter from earlier erupts into a fire inside of me. His gaze is a mixture of uncertainty and curiosity, and rippling in between those emotions is attraction. The way he’s looking at me causes heat to slip up the back of my neck and across my cheeks.

“You were worried?” he asks simply.

“I was,” I reply honestly, raising a shoulder to try and seem nonchalant about it.

“You shouldn’t.”

“What if your boss is an asshole?”

The corner of his mouth tips up. “I don’t think he is.”

“Are you the office ass kisser, or do more coworkers agree with that?”

His lips twist into a sexy as sin smirk. Lord, help me. At this rate, I’ll be reduced to ashes before he leaves. “I assure you I’m not an ass kisser. It’s

also safe to say my coworkers don't think the boss is an asshole either."

I raise my brows. "You know, the ass kisser doesn't realize he's the office ass kisser, right?"

His chuckle is deep and rumbley, and it does wild things inside my chest. His grin turns wickedly boyish, and a dimple pops out. His blue eyes sparkle and a tingle races down my spine. That look right there should be illegal in every state.

"You're looking for a job?"

"I am. You should tell your non-asshole boss that you need a full-time barista who will not become the office ass kisser." I giggle.

"I could arrange that." His tone has lost the playful edge. "What kind of job are you looking for?"

"Something more professional, corporate." I shrug, feeling a little shy under his scrutiny. "Something I can make a career out of."

He studies me silently for a beat. "I'm sure whatever you find you'll do well at. You've got a great personality for anything."

If only I could find a job. "Thanks."

"Do you work tomorrow?"

The question sends a thrill zipping through me. I'll see him again. "Open to lunchtime and then I'm off until Monday. Chelsea will be here, though. I'm sure she'll tend to all your coffee needs," I jest, waggling my brows.

His shoot up high, and I can't help but to laugh at his scandalized expression. "I've got a few things to handle in the morning, but I'll try to swing by."

Hope blossoms in my chest. I know I should stay focused on Kaleb, but somehow Holden has me in a fool's paradise craving to see him even if it's for ten minutes.

"Don't go out of your way." My grin and tone are both flirty.

He drops a twenty on the counter and picks up his coffee. "Keep the change. Assistant's pay." The way he smiles at me strikes my nerves and sets them on fire. "Have a good evening, Raine. Try and stay dry." By his tone, he knows what he's doing to me.

I watch him stride across the lobby. The further he goes, the tighter my chest gets. "Holden?" I call out just before he pushes out of the door. He turns, glancing back at me. "Will you be back next week, or will you disappear again?"

"Can't make any promises." And then he's gone.

Thankfully, the storm passed and didn't knock out the power, but the place remained dead minus a few brave coffeeholics. Once my shift ends, I lock up, toss my apron in my SUV, and grab my purse. Instead of my usual Soup-in-a-Cup for dinner, I'm craving a sandwich from the deli just down the street. I blame the extra pep in my step on Holden.

As I hang a left, I pull out my phone.

"Hey, girl," Lucy answers on the second ring.

"He came back tonight." I'm grinning from ear to ear.

"Who came ba—Oh! Hot stuff. Did he say why he pulled the disappearing act?"

"I didn't really ask," I admit.

"You get his number?"

I bark a laugh. "No. He's just fun to look at. I don't need to lose focus."

"Doesn't mean you can't live life and have fun while doing just that. Studies have proven that sex helps with focus."

"Holden's way out of my lea—"

"Wait," she interrupts. "Are we on a first name basis with him? When did this happen?" Her voice rises an octave with her excitement.

"He introduced himself the other week."

She sucks in a breath. "You floozy!"

I crack up laughing. "Anyway. I called to tell you that he assured me he didn't get in trouble at work."

"That's great." And I know she means it. "What are you doing now?"

"Jumping over puddles as I head to Fiddlers to grab a sandwich."

"Someone's in a really good mood," she thrums. "After you pick it up, you should come here. More bad storms are on the way."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay."

"You're just as infuriating as my husband."

"That just means you love me."

"The offer stands. I don't care what time of night it is. If you need to come to the house, you come. After tomorrow, you're off until Monday, right?"

I already know where she's going with this. "I am and I'm going to ask you if I can stop in on Sunday and borrow your shower."

"Of course." I can hear the smile in her voice. "I'll get Michael to cook



something delicious.”

“I’ll pitch in for food or whatever,” I offer.

“Let me talk to him and I’ll call you tomorrow to let you know.”

“Okay.” I pull open the door to the deli.

“I’m happy you got to see Mr. Hottie, you floozy.” Lucy snickers. “Be safe tonight and don’t think twice about coming to the house if the storms get too crazy.”

“I won’t.”

After we hang up, I pay for my food and head back to my SUV. About halfway there, the first raindrop hits my forehead and then the bottom falls out. Rain hammers down on me as I jog down the sidewalk, thankful my sandwich is in a plastic bag. Oddly enough, I’m still smiling, and it’s all because of Holden.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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## HOLDEN

This morning I wasn't able to get to the coffee shop to see Raine before her shift ended. David, from my operations team, called early to discuss production and strategies, and time got away from us. It's one subject I lose myself in. Before we knew it, we had been on the phone for three hours, and I didn't have enough time to get ready and go to OceanBrews without looking like a total slob.

After I showered, I decided to check out the house Hazel left me. As I pull into the driveway, I stop and check the address again. Just beyond the open black metal gates and masonry stone columns sits a picturesque scene. Trees with long branches stretching across the concrete line the long driveway, and just at the end of it sits a beautiful two-story home.

When the hell did Hazel buy this, and how the hell did no one know about it?

I park in front of the double garage, step out of my car, and look around. Tall palm trees decorate the front yard. Flowers and blooming bushes infuse color against the soft yellow siding and white brick sidewalk. Birds chirp and chatter in the distance, but otherwise, it's quiet. The house sits far away from any main road, and as far as I could tell driving to it, not a neighbor is in sight. It's peaceful out here.

Suddenly, the wooden front door opens. I spin around and am met by an older woman with chestnut brown hair pulled into a low ponytail. A smile is set on her face, warm and inviting. "Mr. Slade, I presume?"

"Yes."

She steps out of the house, her heels clicking on the concrete porch and pauses at the top of the stairs, folding her hands in front of her white pencil

skirt. She's an older woman, maybe early sixties. "I'm Ana Beker. I've been expecting you. I'm sorry for your loss."

She looks vaguely familiar. I rack my brain trying to remember. "You were at the funeral."

A sad smile turns her lips down. "Hazel and I have known each other for a very long time."

I raise a skeptical brow, not moving from where I stand.

"Many years ago, after her husband Godwin passed away, Hazel believed in me when no one else did. She surprised me by investing in me." The lucrative investment Mom brought up. "Against her hardheaded, stubborn resistance, I have paid her a percentage every month since."

Describes my aunt perfectly.

"Are you still indebted to her?"

Ana's lips stretch wide, showing off her white teeth. "No. I paid her back within ten months." Pride laces her tone.

"Yet you continued to pay her a percentage after?"

"I owe all my success to Hazel. Without her, I wouldn't have the fortunes I do. Therefore, she deserves..." She shifts uncomfortably and swallows. "Deserved to relish in the faith she had in me. I wouldn't be here. My business wouldn't be here. She didn't ask for a single penny in return. But just as stubborn as she was, so am I. Paying her is what I wanted to do."

"And your business?"

"Still prospering." She grins, sidestepping the real question. "Come inside, Holden."

I follow in behind her. Stepping inside the house is like stepping back into a different time period, yet still being in the same generation. It boasts of grand historic charm with a touch of modernness.

"It was built in 1887, updated and modernized in 2004. She's two stories with all the bedrooms upstairs as well as a second living area you can use for anything. The living room is to your left. Kitchen to your right. And between the two areas behind these beautiful grand stairs are collectively the dining room. Out back is a stunning pool that's screened in with a gorgeous seating area. A terrace overlooks the backyard and stretches across the back of the house, and it can be accessed from the main bedroom, the second living area, and one of the guest rooms. The fireplaces have been converted to gas, and they all work. The electrical is up to date as well." She swivels toward me, a broad smile still in place. "I'll let you look around. Just holler if you need

me.”

I move from room to room, taking it all in. In the kitchen, all the appliances have been updated to black stainless steel. The countertops are creamy white with dark cabinets. The living room is large with a lot of windows and French doors that lead out back. Actually, three sets of French doors sit along the backside of the house. Oak wood floors span the entire bottom floor, from one end to the other.

Upstairs are two bedrooms on the left, both pretty standard with small walk-in closets. The space in the middle is set up as a living room with a couch, a recliner, a coffee table, and a TV hanging on the wall.

The main bedroom is massive with a four-post king-sized bed, dark brown furniture, and oak wood floors. Attached to it is a bathroom the size of a small apartment. It’s stunning mixed with old world elements and stylish modern touches. There’s a large walk-in shower, and just on the other side of the glass wall sits a soaker tub. It’s like a picture ripped from a luxurious hotel abroad.

Pushing out of the French doors in the bedroom, I step out onto the terrace and look across the yard that’s surrounded by a thick tree line. The sun glistens against the pool water, beckoning me for a swim. I take a seat in one of the chairs, lean my elbows to my thighs, and rest my chin on my thumbs. I take a long, deep breath, trying to wrap my head around all this. The place is impressive. How in the hell did this house stay a secret? It had to have cost Hazel a fortune.

I’m so deep in thought, I don’t hear Ana step outside until she’s beside me holding out a bottle of water.

“Thank you.” I take it.

She takes a seat in the chair on the other side of the little glass table beside me. “Gorgeous, isn’t it?”

I nod. “It is.” There’s not a single house in sight. “Did Hazel live here?”

“No. Although she fell in love with it the moment she saw it, she never stayed.”

My brows furrow. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” she says on an exhale.

“Why wouldn’t she give this to her children?” Before the question bothered me. Now it’s burning me. Pearl and Keith have families. This would be the perfect getaway for them.

“She cherished Keith and Pearl. Loved them fiercely and talked about

them a lot. But you?” Warmness softens her eyes when she glances to me. “You held a special spot in her heart, too. She doted on you often and was very proud of you and the success you built yourself. She said you two had a special bond.”

Blowing a chuckle under my breath, I rest back in the chair. “We did, and if I was getting in trouble, most likely she was involved somehow. She taught me how to flip the bird correctly. My parents about had a coronary, but Hazel only laughed so hard she cried.”

Ana titters. “That sounds just like Hazel.”

I’ve missed so many years with her.

“Who kept up the house?” I ask.

“My daughter and me. Once a week, we cleaned it, washed the sheets, and I’ll be honest with you, I’d often swim.” She lifts a shoulder shyly. “I hated seeing the pool empty and unused.”

“And the yard?”

“You’ve had the same landscaper for years. Salvador. He comes once a week as well, and as you can tell, he takes a lot of pride in his job. If you decide to let him go, please do so very easily. He’ll be heartbroken.”

I shake my head. I don’t plan on making any changes. Not yet. Not until I figure something out.

Ana gets to her feet, straightens her skirt, and reaches into her tote bag. She pulls out a thick manilla envelop and places it on the table in front of me. She’s no longer casual. She’s all business-like. “All the documents you need are in there. I’ve typed up everything, including her requirements. You cannot sell this house, Holden.” Her voice is serious. “It’s to stay in your family, first-degree relatives only, excluding your parents and any siblings I wasn’t made aware of. That includes your wife, your children, your grandchildren, and any of the generations that follow. In case you pass away before your wife, she cannot remarry and leave it to her new husband. It’s to stay within the Holden Slade family.”

A family—something I haven’t even thought about, let alone put on my radar.

“How soon do you need this back?” I nod to the manilla envelope.

“Preferably within the next week. I’ll be leaving the country soon for vacation, and I’d like to have it taken care of before I leave.”

I nod. “I’ll have my legal team look over it.”

She blesses me with another wide smile. “Please do.” She hands me a

business card. “Here’s my number should you need anything.” Then she pulls out a set of keys from the small pocket of her tote and holds them out in front of me. “There were only two sets. I had one and my daughter had the other. It won’t hurt my feelings if you change the locks, though. I’ll understand. You’ll also need to change the alarm code. The instructions are in the folder.”

I take the keys as I stand to shake her hand. “Thanks.”

Reaching back into her tote, she hands me a white envelope. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I hope this answers them for you.”

After I see Ana out, I find myself sitting on one of the black stools at the kitchen counter. I slide my thumb under the envelope’s seal and pull out the letter. Immediately, I recognize my aunt’s handwriting and smile at the nickname she gave me.

Denny,

*I know you’re confused, and you’re probably wondering if this old bat had lost her mind. I assure you I was in my right mind when I decided all of it. This was the only way I could get you back home. Pearl and Keith have families, homes, and jobs. Their roots are planted in other places, which is why I gave them money. To help them continue to blossom. But you don’t need money. You have enough as it is.*

*What you don’t have are flowers.*

*Do you remember when you were eleven, well before you became a successful entrepreneur, how you started to think about your future? You wanted a great job, a lot of success, and you wanted to be able to roll around on your money like Scrooge McDuck. You said you wanted a legacy and to make a footprint in the soil. Well, congratulations, Denny. You set out and accomplished exactly what you wanted to do. I couldn’t be prouder of you and all your hard work.*

*My only wish for you is for you to stop and smell the flowers. Success is greater when you can share it with someone. Life becomes extraordinary when you let love in. While a legacy is footprints in the soil, a family is footprints in your soul. Love is far richer than what’s in your pockets.*

*Don’t waste life away living it alone. You’re a good man, Denny. Quit being a damn workaholic and learn to relax. Fall in love. Build a family. Quit being scared of it.*

*Come back to your roots.*

*Smell the flowers.  
Take a break.  
And get your ass in the house.*

*I love you. Always and repeatedly.  
Hazzey.*

My eyes sting as emotions rip through me. “Dammit, Hazzey,” I curse the empty house. “You would do this when I couldn’t dispute it. Sneaky ass.”



## CHAPTER NINE

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## HOLDEN

I love many things about Colorado—the scenery, my home, my business, my life—but the one thing it doesn’t have is the delicious Cuban sandwich from Danko’s. Hands down, they have the best one in the US, which is why at almost eleven o’clock at night, I’ve just picked one up and am heading back to my car. I haven’t eaten here in years, and after the day I’ve had today, I couldn’t ask for anything better to brighten up my day.

After reading Aunt Hazel’s letter, I went back through the house, looking around more closely at everything, and eventually found myself outside by the pool scanning over the documents. I contacted Kristi and explained the situation. Thankfully, she said she’d look it over and search for any loopholes. I don’t want to dishonor Hazel’s wishes, but I can’t exactly hold up my end of the bargain without the house continuing to never be lived in, which would be a shame. It’s beautiful. However, I will keep it in my family, just not the way Hazel requested. I just need to find a way so everyone won’t suffer the consequences. Kristi is unparalleled at her job. I’m certain she’ll find a way.

As I walk along the sidewalk, through the stream of lights drifting down from the streetlights above me, the night air is sticky with humidity. It’s a typical Florida night, quite the opposite of Colorado. Glancing around at the intersection to make sure I can cross safely, something catches my attention. Rather, *someone* does. Just past my reflection in the window of the laundromat stands Raine folding clothes.

Before I realize it, my feet take me in her direction. As I step in, Raine lifts her basket, turning to leave. She spots me and startles, sucking in a gasp.

“I’ve heard of cleaning the house when you can’t sleep, but never doing

laundry,” I say with a light-hearted smile.

Tonight, her hair is pulled back into a messy bun with strands falling around her face. She’s wearing gray sweatpants that are pulled halfway up her calves and a loose, long-sleeved plum-colored shirt that hangs off one shoulder revealing a white tank top under it. Comfortable and without a stitch of makeup, she shines brighter than anyone I know.

Her forest green eyes glance down to the brown bag in my hand. She arches a brow. “Says the man with a bag of fancy food at this hour.”

Her witty remark makes me chuckle. “Nothing fancy about a Cuban sandwich, fries, and piece of key lime pie.”

Those eyes of hers narrow with mirth. “Crinkle cut or straight fries?”

“Crinkle,” I answer.

“Don’t downplay it, Holden. That’s very fancy,” she quips.

I love how easy she is to be around. “Are you parked close? I’ll walk with you.”

I’ve seen Raine smile with her eyes. I’ve seen a burst of fear in them when she’s startled. But the shudder of panic that flickers in them now is new, and I don’t like it. At all.

Quickly, it’s blinked away. “Thanks. But I’m close. I’ve got it. You can go and enjoy your fancy midnight snack.”

No damn way will I pass up the opportunity to talk with her. Not when she always puts a smile on my face. I push open the door, and as she moves out, I fall into step beside her. “Would you look at that. We’re heading in the same direction.” I reach and take the basket out of her hands.

“You really don’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I didn’t get a chance to swing by the coffee shop this morning, so this gives me a good excuse to talk to you.”

Tittering, she arches a dubious brow at me. “You don’t seem like a man who needs any excuse to talk to people.”

My head bounces to the side. “That’s beside the point.” I flash a boyish grin. “Have you always lived in Chatley Bay?”

She shakes her head. “No. I moved here about three years ago. You?”

“I grew up here but moved to Colorado about six years ago.”

“Oh.” Her lips form around the O and the sight of it makes my dick twitch. “What brings you back now?”

“My aunt passed away a few weeks ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she sounds genuinely sincere. Not the typical

empty condolences everyone tosses around. “Your disappearing act makes sense now. You went back home.”

Maybe it’s just me, but I swear I catch a tinge of disappointment in her tone. “Yes. Business called.”

“But you’ve come to realize that you like your office here better.” The moonlight sparkles from her eyes when she glances up to me. “Maybe you should ask for a relocation? Would you like for me to call your boss and give him a strongly worded argument?”

I laugh, loving her playful side, and the fact that she doesn’t know anything about me makes this conversation very authentic. “And what would you say?” What can I say? The boss man inside of me is curious.

She pretends to be horrified as her eyes flash, eyebrows raised high, and her mouth pops open. “You can’t put me on the spot like that.”

I lift a shoulder trying to downplay my curiosity. “You seem to think pretty quickly on your feet. Surely, you’ve got something.”

She purses her lips contemplating. “How do I tell a man he should let one of his employees, possibly the office ass kisser, which will make you his favorite, relocate to a new town because the coffee shop has a better office feel and definitely better coffee?” When she blows out a breath, it puffs out her cheeks. “Excuse me, sir.” She deepens her voice, which simultaneously pinches her eyebrows together. “I’m not sure what type of business you have, but I’m positive it could thrive here in Chatley Bay. Think of the increased profits by just expanding your market. Same job, new city, more gain. But by staying in a single place, you’re restricting an opportunity for growth. Furthermore, you’ll save cost on rent since Holden enjoys working from a coffee shop instead of an actual office.”

I can’t fight the grin that’s stretching from ear to ear. While she’s not ready to stand in front of a table full executives, her message was full of conviction, which is just as important. “Impressive. Nice touch with the profits and growth.”

Suddenly bashful, she lifts a shoulder and ducks her head, hiding her face from me as she pushes a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Years ago, I was a receptionist for an accounting company. I may or may not have eavesdropped occasionally.”

“Sounds like you were soaking up everything.”

“Yeah.”

As we come to the parking lot entrance beside OceanBrews, she turns and

grips the basket in my hand. "I can take it from here. I'm parked right over there." She tips her chin.

Only two vehicles sit in the parking lot, both toward the back where apartments are tucked away. "I've come this far. What's fifty more feet?"

Again, a shudder of panic flickers in her eyes, and again, she blinks it away quickly. Her smile turns forced and nervous, no longer carefree, and I don't like it one bit.

"Do I make you nervous?" I ask, watching her fidget with her car keys.

"No. I..." She hits me with a soft smile. "Kinda. But not in a bad way."

She unlocks the passenger door of a dark blue SUV. It's older and beat up, and I notice sunshades up in all the back windows. She takes the basket from me, deposits it into the seat, and quickly shuts the door before spinning toward me.

"Does this mean I owe you assistant's pay now?" The nerves are gone and she's back to her playful tease.

"No. Like I said, it was a perfect excuse to talk to you again."

Our gazes meet, and it causes something inside of me to spark to life. It catches me off guard. My heart has always beat solidly, steady and normal, but looking into her tantalizing greens has it thumping untamed and fiercely. My blood warms my body. I want to kiss her cupid-bow lips to see if they're as soft as they look, to sink my fingers into her hair and pull her flush against my body to find out if she'll moan into my touch. I thirst to taste her, and my dick begins to swell in my jeans.

Swallowing the lump of lust, I clear my throat. "Thanks for letting me walk with you. Have a good night." My voice is thick, strained.

She looks so damn sweet and innocent like she knows the effect she's having on me. The right side of her mouth pulls up slowly. "You too, Holden. Enjoy your midnight snack."

With a nod, I quickly spin around and walk away, fighting against the urge to turn around and claim her lips. What the hell has come over me? Never have I craved someone as much as I do her.

Back at my hotel, I take off my shoes and place them by the closet before sitting at the desk. As much as I wanted this sandwich, it does nothing to quench the thirst I have for Raine. The attraction is insane, powerful, and I want her like I haven't wanted anything in a long damn time. And strangely enough, I don't just want her in my bed. I want her company. It's been a while since I've been on a date. I've been too focused on my business and not

myself, and I think I'm about to rectify that.

Well, Aunt Hazel. I think I may have found a flower.

## CHAPTER TEN

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## RAINE

I smell his scent before I see him. The zesty masculinity of his cologne tickles my nose, and a zing of excitement wraps around my spine and bursts into my limbs.

“Good morning.” The deep timber of his voice causes my insides to swirl and clench.

Whatever passed between us Saturday night has played havoc on my mind. In those seconds of being held hostage by his pretty blue eyes, I wanted him to kiss me. Desperately. The urge was so strong and so violent that it took everything in me not to reach out and pull his mouth to mine. I’ve never experienced something like that in my life. And part of me, the part that forgets I have responsibilities and a mission, has been stuck daydreaming of his lips on mine.

Turning around, I smile, hoping it doesn’t reveal how nervous and excited he makes me. When my gaze lands on him, I’m met with a new sensation, one I can’t even describe. It rushes up my spine, spreads through my veins, and prickles along my skin. He’s devastatingly handsome, dressed in dark jeans, a powder-blue shirt opened at the collar, and a dark suit jacket. Business-casual Fridays never looked that good at the accounting or marketing firm.

My mouth runs dry. “Good morning,” I force out. He doesn’t have his messenger bag, which means he won’t be staying long. That disappoints me. “Large coffee?”

That handsome, charming and boyish smile whips out his dimples and my core twists. “Please.”

I don’t ring him up as I go about my business to make it. My hands shake



as I feel his attention on me. He's overwhelming my senses—thoughts, needs, and wants.

I place the cup on the counter. "This one is one me. I know you said I didn't owe you assistant's pay, but..." I shrug, feeling bashful.

He starts to reach for his wallet anyway.

"If you pull out any money, so help me, I'll dump this coffee over your head." My tone is seriousness tinged with sarcasm.

It surprises him, his eyebrows jumping high.

"It's a three-dollar drink. Accept it."

Oh, god. When his tongue slips out and sweeps across his bottom lip, my insides go wild. Scorching heat ricochets through my limbs and pools around my core, causing my pulse to pick up.

"Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?" he asks.

Now, *that* sends my senses into a freefall. Butterflies explode in my stomach. My pulse skyrockets. My brain all but short circuits. I've got to get it together.

I grin, flirty. I can't help it. I'm a bubbling mess trying to keep it together. "Did I woo you with my strongly worded relocation request?"

"Yes." God, I want to lick his sexy smirk. "Yes, you did."

I laugh under my breath, giving my head a quick shake. "Enjoy your coffee, Holden."

"Is that a no?"

Even his tone threatens to cave me.

"It's a no," I say, ruefully.

He hums, his eyes glinting at the challenge. "I'll try again tomorrow, then."

Shit. He's hot. "And you think my answer will change?"

"One can hope." He grabs his coffee. "Have a good day, Raine." The way he says my name, like he tastes every letter with a low purr, also licks every inch of my skin and causes my clit to throb. It sets my panties on fire.

Long after he's gone, I'm still staring at the door, reeling from him, from the way I wanted to throw myself over the counter and kiss him, asking him to put his mouth right where he's affecting me the most. Unfortunately, for the rest of the day, my head stays in the clouds, distracted.

My willpower is hanging by a thread.

I'm in deep trouble here.

Last night, I slept in hour increments, tossing and turning with anticipation. Today, I'm a bundle of nerves, no thanks to Holden's promise. I'm so damn confused about what to do. On one hand, he and I are on two different levels. He presumably has a great job with the ability to drop a twenty with every coffee he gets. I'm a homeless barista saving every penny I can with nothing to offer him.

On the other hand, the ache in my chest, the loneliness? That's very real, and I haven't felt this way in a very long time. I want to jump at the idea of going on a date with him and experiencing his mouth on mine.

Lucy pushes through the kitchen door carrying a rack of clean mugs fresh from the dishwasher. She places them on the counter and gives me a hard look. "If he comes in and asks you again, and you tell him no, I'll disown you. I'll tell him you're an alien from Uranus, which is also where your head is stuck."

I snort at her dramatics.

"I'm serious, Raine. Take him up on his offer. Let him take you on a date. You two clearly have chemistry."

I chew on my lip. This could get difficult. I abhor lying, and if he brings up anything with my living situation, I'd have to get creative with my answers. And something tells me, Holden would see right through my try at dodging the truth.

"Come to my house," Lucy continues, "shop my closet, take a shower, doll yourself up, and go on that damn date. And since you're against charity, if you want to rent my clothes for five dollars, you can. Or don't and just borrow them. I don't care. Just please go on the damn date."

"I don't know." I give up on my lip and begin twisting my fingers.

"What don't you know? Clearly you're interested in him and he is you. What is stopping you?"

I give her a side eye. "You know exactly what's stopping me."

"So tell him you live with me," she says nonchalantly. "He can even pick you up from my house."

"I really don't like lying."

"Then tell him the truth." The chime sounds, and she glances over my shoulder before her gaze hits mine and her grin turns devilish. "Whatever you choose, you'd better do it fast."

“Wha—”

“Good morning.” His voice melts me in the very spot I stand.

My eyes bug out at Lucy as she hides a knowing smile and begins putting away the dishes. Swallowing down the unexplained shyness and, of course, the excitement, I turn and smile. “Good morning.” He’s without his messenger bag again. “Another coffee?”

“Actually, it depends on your answer.”

Tilting my head, I bite back my smile. “My answer to what?”

“Will you let me take you to dinner Friday? I’d offer sooner, but I’ve got a plane to catch, and I won’t be back until late Thursday.”

“And why does my answer determine your drink of choice?” Oh, that was overly flirty.

The corners of his lips curl sexily...victoriously...and it makes my stomach dip. “If you turn me down again, I’ll need a large coffee to help me lick my wounds, but if you agree, I won’t need much caffeine since I’ll be high on life.”

“Oh! That was good,” Lucy calls out behind me.

Holden chuckles. His eyes sparkle and never leave my face. “What do you say, Raine?”

The look on his handsome face, the sexy glint in his eyes, and the sultry tilt to his lips crumble me. My pulse triples at my answer. “I guess I’ll make you a small coffee then.”

Immediately, his eyes catch fire with victory, both dimples making a panty-melting appearance. Behind me, Lucy squeaks her elation as she continues to stack the dishes.

When I set his coffee on the counter, he reaches over it, and plucks the pen clipped to my apron pocket. He writes his phone number on a cardboard sleeve, and then the look that he gives me doesn’t just melt my panties. It obliterates them. Holy. Hotness.

“Text or call me tonight so I have your number.” He begins to drop a twenty on the counter.

“You’re not going to ask me on a date and then tip me an ungodly amount.” I ring him up and hand back his change.

He tosses me a wink while giving me a delicious smile and then leaves me staring at his back as he exits... leaving me with the change.

The second he steps out of the shop, Lucy squeals again, jumping up and down. “Oh, my god!”

Heat creeps up the back of my neck and splashes across my cheeks.

“If he gets any sexier...”

“I’ll combust from the inside out,” I finish the sentence while fanning my face with my hand. “I’m already nervous, and our date isn’t for another three days.”

Lucy beams, her eyes sparkling. “If you weren’t nervous that would mean he’s a dud. But you two have a load of chemistry. It sizzles in the air around you.”

I think back to my last date—Daniel. It was three years ago. We met through my roommate, and he indeed was a dud. He was boring as ever and loved to talk about himself, specifically, his job. Which, in a nutshell, he was the water boy for a college football team and had way too much pride for a job that wasn’t going anywhere. But Lucy is right. I was never nervous nor was I ever excited about that date with him.

“Even if nothing comes from this but a fabulous night in the sheets, go and enjoy it. Soak it up. The way he looks at you... You’d be a fool to not experience it.” She drops her hip to the counter. “When’s the last time you’ve gotten laid?”

*If only I could remember...* “It’s been a long while,” I admit.

Lucy’s expression is one of pleased mischief. “Then scream that man’s name when he has your soul ripping from your body.”

I purse my lips. “Who says I’d sleep with him on the first date?”

“Oh, no. Toss those lady morals out the window and ride him like he’s the answer to your prayers.”

I can’t help but to burst out laughing.

“I’m serious, Raine. The attraction between the two of you is palpable. I bet if you sleep with him, the sheets will spontaneously combust with how hot you two are.”

“Stop talking about sex, Lucy. You’re making me more nervous than I already am.”

“Fine.” She pushes off the counter. “I’m a little jealous of you at the moment anyways. You’ll be getting the stank eye for the rest of the shift.”

True to her word, I do, but the little smirk doesn’t go unnoticed, and it does nothing to mollify my nerves. I’ve never met a man who has such a pull on me, who awakens every nerve in my body and sets them on fire. Three days. That’s all I have to get my shit together.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## HOLDEN

My plane touched down an hour ago, and now I'm pulling into the—*my*—house. Kristi looked over the documents but wasn't able to find a single loophole. Hazel made sure there weren't any. She went above and beyond to cover all the bases, and if I don't keep my end of the requisites, Pearl, Keith, and my mother will lose or have to pay back their inheritances to the library of Chatley Bay.

In other words, Hazel has cleverly strong-armed me.

While I can't possibly live here full time since my business and my home are established in Colorado, I'll have to use this as a vacation home for when I come back to visit, which now will be more frequent than the past years.

"This is beautiful," Janie says as she steps into the house, wheeling her suitcase behind her.

I brought her for several reasons. Businesswise, I need a trustworthy witness as I sign the agreement who is not a family member—another stipulation per Hazel. I'm also going to have her set me up an office here and help order new furniture and decorations. Personal-wise, her being here gives me some semblance of normalcy to this new wrench being thrown at me.

"Come on. I'll show you where you'll be staying." I grab her suitcase and carry it up the stairs as she trails behind me with her duffel bag.

"Oh... wow." She exhales taking in the bedroom.

I place her suitcase onto the bed, and she drops the duffel bag beside it before looking out the French doors that overlook the pool.

"I can't wait to rub this in Toby's face." She sounds giddy and her smile is devious.

I chuckle. "My room is across the hall, but we share the same balcony.

Do not go out there in the nude to further rub his nose in it.”

Shaking her head, she titters. “I’m way too old fashioned for that.” She grabs her laptop from her tote and sits in the highbacked chair by the French doors. “Ana said she’d be here by six.” Tap. Tap. Tap. “Do you have groceries here?” She glances up, and I shake my head. “Okay. I’ll order some finger foods for our meeting with Ana and make an order for groceries.”

“Thank you.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll see how soon I can get internet and also start on your office.”

“Will you order me a car? The same Porsche I have at home but blue.” My Porsche at home is cherry metallic.

“To rent or buy?”

“Buy.” She gives me a look, and I lift a shoulder. “If I’m going to be coming here often, I’ll need my own car.”

Tap. Tap. Tap. I leave her to her excellence and head to the rental to grab my luggage and take it to my room to put everything away. I’ve decided I’ll be staying for a little while until everything gets delivered and finalized.

My phone buzzes on the dresser indicating a text. After putting away my toiletries, I check it. Instantly, relief settles in my shoulders when I see the unknown number. I realized quickly that I made the ultimate fuck-up when I hadn’t heard from Raine in two days. I should’ve gotten her number instead. I blame it on being out of the game for a while.

**Unknown number: Have you made it back to Chatley Bay yet?**

After I save her number, I call instead of texting back. I’ve been patient long enough.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” she answers.

I’ve missed her sarcasm. Hell, if I’m being honest, I’ve missed her smile and easy-going attitude. She’s another reason that made the decision to stay a while easier. “I got back about an hour and a half ago. I’m unpacking now.”

“Ew. Are you one of those weird people who unpacks a suitcase even if you’re only staying one night?”

“No. Usually, I hang up my shirts and suits and live out of my suitcase for the rest of it. This go around, though, I’ll be here for a while.”

“Oh. Are you sure you’re not the office ass kisser? How’d you get the boss to sign off on this?”

“I may have kissed his ass to get back here,” I jest.

“I knew it.” I really like her laugh among everything else about her. “Did

you have a good trip?”

“I did.”

“Well, you didn’t miss anything at your OceanBrews office. Chelsea may have found a new obsession, so be prepared to have your heart broken.”

I bark a laugh. “Oh, how will I ever survive this?” I deadpan and Raine giggles. “Do you work tomorrow?”

“No. I’m off until Monday.”

Thoughts of keeping her in my bed for an entire weekend filter through my mind. I’m positive sex with her will be just as unforgettable as the greens in her eyes.

I hear a soft knock on my door before Janie steps in—a reminder that my dirty thoughts won’t play out this weekend. Not unless I send Janie to a hotel. I hold up a finger, silently telling Janie to be quiet.

“You haven’t changed your mind about our date tomorrow, have you?” I ask.

Janie’s eyes fly up to me, her eyebrows raised and lips parted in surprise. It’s been a while and she knows it. I got tired of worrying who was out for my money and who was in it for me. Having to filter through the fake smiles versus the real ones felt like a huge waste of time. Besides, my company is my focus, and most the women I took on dates wouldn’t be okay with being second place.

“No. I haven’t.” I can hear the smile in her tone.

“I’ll pick you up at six.”

“You don’t have to pick me up. I can meet you.”

Her independence and how she doesn’t expect anything from me only adds to her attractiveness. I damn well like it. “I’ll be picking you up like a proper date.”

“Okay. I’ll, um,” she hesitates, a rarity for her. “I’ll be at Lucy’s if that’s okay? I’ll text you the address.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you outside of the office,” I jest.

She snorts and it’s cute. “If your boss finds out, he may not let you relocate. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

I’m beaming from ear to ear. “I’m willing to take the chance. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After we hang up, I turn to Janie to find her studying me with curiosity. “Can you get me reservations at Briggs for six thirty tomorrow?” I pause, my lips turning down. “I believe they’re still in business.”



Janie's left eyebrow slowly raises. "I'll see what I can do."

"Don't be nosey, Janie."

"Oh, I'm going to be very nosey, Holden. You leave for a funeral and two weeks later you have a house and a date. Forgive me for being interested."

"Nosy," I correct with a chuckle.

She straightens her back with a defiant tip to her chin. "I'm allowed to have hope for you. It's been a few years since you've been on a date."

"That you know of." I give her a pointed look.

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, please. Don't act like I wouldn't know. You've shown no interest in any woman in a while. You weren't even remotely intrigued with...the tall brunette. I forgot her name. Anyway, your concentration has always been on Slade Engines and never yourself. You're a workaholic, and while you're also a go-getter, it only applies to work. So yes, Holden. I'm very curious and probably more excited than I should be that someone has caught your attention enough that you're finally doing something for *you*. So sue me for caring." She taps some keys on her keyboard. "Briggs is still in business. I'll set up the reservations."

"Thank you."

"What's her name?"

"Raine," I answer.

"Is that her name or are you hoping for dreary weather so you can find an excuse to sabotage it before it begins?"

Infuriating woman. If she were anyone else and I didn't adore her like an annoying little sister, I probably would've fired her smart mouth years ago. "It's her name."

Janie's face splits into a broad grin. "I like it. Is she as pretty as her name?"

*Beautiful.* "Just get me the reservations, please." She's pushing me a bit too far. My personal life has never much been the topic of conversation, and truthfully, it's making me antsy. Something that's not my normal.

I do understand why she's curious. My last serious relationship was Brianna, way before Janie's time. It's not because my heart is in tatters over the breakup. I'm not emotionally stunted and scarred against all serious relationships. Janie's right. I'm busy. Not that I haven't had my fair share of "dates." When I get an itch, I scratch. But I quit looking for anything serious after being let down over and over again.

But then there's Raine. Something about her intrigues me to my soul, and

for the first time in a very long time, I want to get to know a woman. Confusing as it is, Raine stirring something awake in my chest gives me hope again. Nothing may come from this, but I'm going to enjoy every minute I have with her.

Ana knocks on the front door, and when I answer, she greets me with a lopsided smile. "I have never knocked on this door. That felt strange." She enters, adjusting the tote on her shoulders.

"It's good to see you again." I shut the large door behind her.

She glances around the foyer before her gaze hits mine. "Are you adjusting well?"

"Actually, I just got back a few hours ago. This will be my first time staying here."

She hums, almost like she knew it.

"I haven't had much time to get furniture, so I hope it's okay that I've set our meeting up outside by the pool."

"Perfect. It's a beautiful evening."

Ana leads the way out and takes a seat in one of the wicker chairs just as Janie pops out of the door. "Ana, this is my assistant, Janie. She'll be our witness."

"It's great to meet you." Janie's polished as she shakes Ana's hand. "There are finger foods inside. Help yourself. Can I get you a drink while we do business?"

Ana declines as she pulls out a folder.

"She left no loopholes," I note, taking a seat.

Ana laughs under her breath, glancing to me with a knowing smile. "Did you expect anything less from Hazel? She said you were smart and the first thing you'd do is pick apart all the stipulations. She made sure you had no means of escaping without the repercussions falling on someone else for a reason. She said your heart would win over the business brain."

"Why did she include a clause stating my mother couldn't be here for this?" I ask.

Ana's eyes gleam mischievously. "Do I have your word that this is a done deal?"

Intrigued, my lips tic and my brows raise. “There is a loophole.”

Ana squares her shoulders. “For whatever reason, Hazel wanted you to have this house, and she’s making sure you gain the ownership. Not her biological children. Not her sister. You. I didn’t question her motives. Hazel was smart as a whip. She knew what she was doing.”

For the next hour, we get down to business, going through the stack of paperwork. Ana explains how Hazel left her enough money to cover all the fees that may incur during the transfer, and anything that’s left is Ana’s. Of course, there’s a signed and notarized document for that as well. Hazel took every precaution and absolutely no shortcuts. It’s very well thought through and completely circumvents the need for probate. The more Ana explains and discusses, the more I realize I should’ve offered Hazel a job. The woman was nothing short of a hidden genius.

After every document has been signed, and the house officially mine—short of the filing, which will be handled tomorrow morning—Ana tucks everything away into her tote and heads inside to grab a plate of food with Janie. I stay rooted in my chair, staring out over the pool and into the backyard. A house in Chatley Bay... What the hell am I supposed to do with it? I’ll keep the landscaper, who I missed meeting this week but have spoken to over the phone. I told him to continue to take care of the yard, and I got his information so I could keep paying him. Salvador was beyond thrilled and thanked me profusely.

But without Ana and her daughter, I’ll have to hire someone to keep the house clean—a house I’ll rarely visit yet pay to have maintained because my aunt was a clever shit.

Ana and Janie come back out of the house and settle into their chairs. Ana clears her throat, and it compels me to rip my gaze from the pool to her. “You could’ve paid off Pearl, Keith, and your mother.”

Out of my peripheral, I see Janie’s hand pause, and she slowly turns her head to gauge my reaction. I don’t say anything, letting Ana continue.

“It’s the only loophole and the reason why your mother wasn’t allowed to be here. Hazel was worried that if the thought had crossed your mind, you could’ve convinced your mother to go with it because in the long run, you would’ve had nothing but gain.”

Resting back into the wicker chair, I cross my ankle over my knee and steeple my fingers. Hazel was right. I could’ve paid everyone their inheritance price, sold the house, and still made a profit. Fuck. “The thought

honestly never crossed my mind.”

Ana’s smirk is smug. “Like Hazel had hoped, your heart outweighed the business.”

Dammit, Hazel. You knew me all too well.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## RAINE

“I’m so damn nervous,” I tell Lucy as I apply my mascara. It’s a daring move since my hands are shaking. I’m not wearing much makeup, though. Mom always said to keep it natural. Makeup should flatter my features, not make me unrecognizable without it. She used to say a woman who paints her face was a woman who was insecure about how she looked. I may have flaws, but I’m not insecure.

“Well, I’m excited,” she says from where she’s perched at the bathroom door watching me get ready.

Heavily, I exhale as I place the mascara back into my makeup bag and then glance down at myself. Lucy let me borrow a royal blue wrap dress that falls just below my knees with a neckline that slips between my not-so-stellar breasts. I look good, elegant, but...

“I need bigger boobs,” I complain stepping past Lucy and into her bedroom. I sit on the bench at the foot of her bed, staring at the black heels that are hers, too.

“Your boobs are fine,” she says softly.

We hear a knock on the door, and my heart explodes. My eyes bulge out of my head. Panic laces through me. “I can’t do this. Tell him I was called into work.” I fan my face. “No. He’ll show up there. Tell him I moved.”

Lucy rests a hand on my shoulder giving it a gentle squeeze. “Breathe, Raine.” I do. “I’m going to answer the door while you put on your shoes, and you’re going on that date because you are smoking hot, and I’m willing to bet so is he.” She leaves me in her room to compose myself.

I slip on the heels and fasten the strap before standing and looking down at myself again. I really do wish I had bigger boobs. My cleavage is

depressing in this beautiful dress.

Oh my god, I'm about to go on a date with a handsome guy with a sense of humor, a grin that could have any woman falling to their knees for him, and who seems to have his life's puzzle pieces together better than my scattered ones. I'm not nervous. Nope. Not one fricking bit. I'm freaking the hell out.

"You've got this," I whisper and then fill my lungs with a deep breath.

Lucy's still at the door, her back toward me when I approach, but then she steps out of the way revealing Holden. The deep confident breath I took in her room rushes out of me. My eyes feast over him. Wearing a white button down with the collar open, a well-fitted deep navy-blue suit jacket and dark jeans with his black hair tousled on top, Holden looks like a damn model. A devastatingly handsome man one only dreams of as they drool over him in the magazine pictures.

His blue eyes travel down the length of my body, licking every inch of my skin and then torturously tracing back to my face. "Damn." His voice is thick.

My self-esteem does a little victory dance.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks.

No. "Yes."

Lucy looks like a proud mother sending her daughter off to prom. "Have fun." She's beaming and waving like a total goof.

Holden guides me down the walkway with his hand on the small of my back. It's an innocent gesture, but the heat from his hand through my dress sends a delicious tingle to race down my spine, which only ramps up my nerves.

My feet falter as I spot his expensive car, another reminder of our differences. "Nice car," I deadpan.

"Admittedly, it's not mine. It's a rental."

I pause, glancing to him. "Please tell me you didn't rent it just for our date?"

Surprised, both of his brows raise. "If I did?"

Oh god. My heart stalls. "Then I'm calling off our date. There's no need to go out of your way to impress me."

He flashes a heart-stopping smile and attached to it are his illegal dimples. He pulls open the passenger door. "Lucky for me, you won't have to call off our date. Since I fly in, I have to rent a car."

When he shuts the door and walks around the car, I take in the sleek leather and breathe in the new car scent mixed with the zestiness of his cologne.

Holden takes his spot in the driver's side and cranks the car. It purrs to life. "You're nervous," he points out with a chuckle as he pulls into the road.

"Very," I admit.

"You should shake it off."

"Shake it off," I repeat, blinking to him.

He lifts a shoulder. "It's what I do when I'm nervous. I literally shake it off." I watch as Holden shimmies in his seat, his body shaking from his hips to his shoulders, just before he shakes off the arm not holding the steering wheel.

My smile hangs open.

"Try it. It helps." His tone is riddled with humor.

My lips roll, holding back my laugh. "You're serious? You do that when you're nervous?"

"I do."

"I don't believe you," I snicker but give in and try it anyway. Mimicking him, I shake my hips, my torso, my shoulders, and my arms, cracking up as I do it.

"Feel better?" he asks with laughter shaking his voice.

"Now I'm blushing from head to toe, but yes. I do."

"I haven't done that in years," he admits.

My head snaps to him, my mouth falling open. "Oh my god. You're an ass," I chortle.

It cracks him up, and I love how it pushes his cheeks under his eyes while also creating wrinkles. He's genuinely happy. "But you feel better, correct?"

"You could've hit me with one of your awful ice breakers instead."

"What fun would that have been?" The way he looks at me, the heart-stopping grin and eyes glinting with amusement, sends a thrill through me. God, he's so good-looking.

We travel just outside of Chatley Bay's limits into the next town over where tourists come to experience the finer things our sleepy, quaint town doesn't offer. He pulls in front of a building, and instantly a valet opens our doors. My nerves spike again. I know about the high-priced restaurant at the top of this building.

Anxiety eats away at me. I twist the diamond and silver wrap-ring my



mother gave me around my finger. “We don’t have to eat here. I know it’s very expensive, and I can’t really afford to help with the bill.” I let him know up front.

A smile quirks the corner of his mouth. “Good thing I’m paying for it then.”

With a hand returning to the small of my back, Holden guides us inside to the elevators. When he hits the call button, the doors immediately slide open like they were waiting on us. As we step inside, I take another breath trying to calm my nerves.

“You shouldn’t spend this type of money on a date,” I say.

“I can afford it,” he reassures me.

“Doesn’t mean you should,” I whisper.

Reaching down, he slides his hand over mine and squeezes. Electricity shoots up my arm. “But I want to.”

The door opens and my breath escapes me. The softest blues and oranges stretch out before us, the sunlight flitting across the sky and dancing through the few clouds that litter the sky before it sets for the evening. I’ve seen pictures of this rooftop restaurant, but seeing it in person is beyond any words.

Holden gives the maître d his name, and we’re led toward the side underneath a large cream-colored sail canopy with round lights giving off a soft romantic glow.

Once we’re seated, I look around nervously. “Shaking off here would be frowned upon, wouldn’t it?”

He laughs, but before he can respond, the waiter brings the menus and Holden orders a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

“This place is beautiful.” I take in everything. Buildings of different heights surround us. Some of the tables are set up like the one we’re at while others sit out in the open with lit candles placed in the middle. Couples are emersed in hushed conversations, all enjoying the atmosphere.

“I’ve always wanted to come here,” Holden informs me, pulling my attention back to him.

It makes me smile. “Well, I’m glad I get to experience it with you.”

The waiter comes back to pour our wine, and we order our food. Once he leaves, I take a sip and try to relax. “What made you move to Colorado?”

“Business.”

“Must’ve been a great view.”

He takes a moment to taste his wine before he replies. "Opportunity and the economy."

That was quite professional. I tilt my head and narrow my eyes as I study him.

He taps his fingers on the stem of his wine glass as he watches me for several long silent moments. "You're going to freak out."

My face pinches, my brows dipping low. "I don't freak out easily."

Holden looks at me like he doesn't believe me. "Money makes you nervous."

"What makes you think that?" I ask, bemused.

"Observation." A playful twinkle in his eyes accompanies a twist to his lips.

"Is this another knack of yours?"

He chuckles and licks his lips. At the sight of it, heat warms my center, blazing outward into my limbs. "Only when I like what I'm watching."

A blush slaps me. "Okay, so clearly whatever you do for work is going to make me uncomfortable. Are you a professional hitman?"

He shakes his head slightly. "I own Slade Engines."

I blink.

"I manufacture aircraft engines," he adds.

A boulder plummets into the pit of my stomach. As all the things begin to click in my mind—the way he carries himself, the confidence, some of the things he has said, the cryptic way he's talked about working—I feel sick. I knew we were on extremely different playing fields but not like this. I thought maybe he was a car salesman or an insurance broker, but instead he owns a whole damn company. This is a cruel joke played by the universe. It's my luck I meet a man who is phenomenal while I'm entirely inadequate. He'll find out my past and my present, and he'll hightail it away.

Then...realization smacks me in the face with a mortifying reminder. "Oh my god," I groan, dropping my head into my hands. "I've called you the office ass kisser, and your boss an asshole, which would be you." I lift my face and narrow my eyes. "You could've warned me."

"I didn't want to," he states simply. "Your interactions with me were purely authentic. I didn't have to wonder if you were joking with me because you wanted what I have to offer. You didn't have any idea who I was. Therefore, I knew the answer."

Oh, god. Is he famous?

“Are you... are you like a celebrity? Am I supposed to know who you are?”

He drops his head with a chuckle. “No. I’m not a celebrity.”

I twist my ring again, massaging my finger to try and help relieve some of the tightness knotting in my chest. “Holden,” his name crosses my lips on a rueful exhale. “When people see you with a small-town barista, what do you think their first thought will be? I’m well beneath your social class.”

“If I gave a damn about what anyone else thought of me, I would have never gotten where I’m at. What you do for a living doesn’t mean a damn thing to me. I like you, and that’s all that matters.”

His blue eyes glow with determination, a quiet plea for me to understand him. “Don’t overthink this, Raine. I enjoy the fact that you give me hell like I’m just a normal nobody. There’s no ass kissing. No red carpet being rolled out. No hidden agendas. You treat me like an average schmuck, and I don’t want that to change.”

I hear a hidden plea in his voice, and it reaches his eyes. It begs me to accept him for exactly who he is and not what he has to offer. He wants me to be different than what he’s experienced in the past. And I am, just not in the way he’s expecting.

And since I feel a connection with him, I completely give in.

“You are an average schmuck with awful ice breakers and bad advice on how to get rid of your nervousness.”

A grin explodes across his face like I’ve given him life’s answer to something profound. It’s full of victory and relief, and it makes something in my chest warm. “It made you smile both times,” he says.

I like that whenever he’s around me, his main focus is to make me smile. At first, I thought that was who he was, that it was just a part of his charm, and essentially, it is, but he genuinely likes to see me happy. Witty banter and awful jokes and all. I take a sip of my wine. “I guess I really did woo you with my relocation speech.”

Holden licks his lips, places his forearms on the table, and leans forward. “What would you have done had I told you I was a hitman?”

My smile stretches across my face. “Probably relax.”

The carefree, deep and rumbling laugh forms lines at the sides of his eyes, and I realize I really like them. Holden can’t be anything but handsome. He’s a different type of good-looking compared to what I’m used to. His confidence is sexy and when he’s happy, well, that’s a panty-melter.

When our food is placed in front of us, our conversations slows but never stops. I don't know if it's intentional or not, but he doesn't bring up his business again. I'm not sure how I feel about it. On one hand, I'd really like to know more about him, but on the other hand, getting to know him on a different level puts *me* in a difficult position. It'll be a constant reminder.

We talk about nothing of importance but everything significant. I learn that he can twirl a pen—something he started in high school when he was bored in class and has continued after. He even proved it with a butterknife. He contributes his basketball skills to his childhood friend, Shawn, and oddly enough, he can't whistle well.

As often as he tried to put the conversation on me, I'd switch it back to him. I much prefer learning about him than him learning much about me only because I'm scared the conversation will get too deep and he'll find out he should run.

After dinner, we drive back to Chatley Bay to the Summer Pier. The sun has completely set now, and the night skies are dark, littered with bright stars. As we stroll along the wooden deck, Holden weaves his fingers with mine. It feels... good.

We pass through the soft glow of the pier lamps. "When do you go back to Colorado?" I ask, the question feeling heavy in my stomach.

We come to the end of the pier when he lets go of my hand and leans against the railing facing me. "I'm not sure," he answers, his eyes on me. "I inherited a house from my aunt and finished all the paperwork yesterday afternoon."

Owns a company and has two houses. Great. If I need another reminder of just how much we don't match up, I just got it.

He reaches out, taking my hand and pulls me closer. "I'd rather not think about it."

With his gaze locked to mine, he lowers his head and everything slows. His lips brush mine, tentatively, once... twice... and then he captures them. The kiss is both soft and hard, promises of panty melting and heartbreak. But I couldn't stop it if I wanted to. I usually have good control over my body, over my willpower, but in this very moment, my body defies me. As he deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping over mine, I moan into him. His hand lands on my hip, his fingers flexing into my skin.

A soft groan rumbles from him as I slide my hands up his chest and around the back of his neck. Between the strokes of his tongue and the way

he pulls me flush against his body, a blaze of need burns up and down my spine. The hardness I feel against my stomach almost makes me come undone. It boils the blood in my veins.

Just as I drag my fingers into the hair on the back of his head, Holden breaks the kiss, pulling back. "Is it too soon to ask you on another date? More specifically tomorrow?" His voice is thick, strained, and sounds just as desperate as I feel.

I peer up to him through a lustful daze. "You're becoming clingy, Holden," I tease still breathless from the mind-bending kiss.

Softly chuckling, he runs the side of his nose along mine keeping his eyes on me like he wants to see into my soul.

Something wiggles its way into my thoughts. "I'll only agree if you promise not to take me anywhere expensive."

He leans back to look at me, his eyes full of an emotion I can't quite put my finger on. Appreciation? Amusement? "Even though you know I can afford it?"

Feeling splayed open from the inside, I look away. "I... Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

He kisses me again. This time slower, gentler, but still just as urgent. I melt into his arms, but it ends too soon. He grabs my hand, walking us back in the direction of his car.

"I promise," he finally says.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## HOLDEN

Over the years, I've been excited for business deals, different stages of Slade Engine expansions, and growth of suppliers. Even when I moved to Colorado and started my business from scratch, even through the uncertainty, I was always eager. For years, I've poured every ounce of my being into my company and not a single time has that same level of eagerness made its way into my personal life.

But...

That damn *but* again.

For the first time since I took Brianna on our first date, I'm both excited and eager for a second date. Raine has stirred awake something that's been stagnant for years. Sure, I've dated over the years, but I've never found a woman who could pull my attention away from work. Normally, I don't care to go on a second date because nothing has yet kept my attention. But since last night, all I can think about is Raine. Not work. Not the accounts or the reports or the meetings. Just her and her expressive eyes and perfect smile and that damn kiss.

It was intense and mind-blowing, and it left me feeling drunk. I was instantly addicted and wanted to keep tasting her. I had to force myself to be gentlemanly and not fuck her senseless on the pier.

As I make my way downstairs and into the kitchen, Janie steps in from the back porch in shorts and a tank top. When she spots me, she flinches. "Look at you looking..." she waves her hand at me, "good." The curl in her top lip makes me chuckle.

"The amount of disgust in your tone does extra great things to my ego."

"It's just weird to think of you as looking handsome."

My brows hit high.

Janie snickers and rolls her eyes. “You’re like my bossy big brother. You’re not supposed to be handsome.”

I know exactly how she feels. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” I grab my keys off the counter. “Are you sure you’re fine without a ride?”

“Yes. A delivery of decorations came this morning and I want to tackle that. Besides, there’s food, wine, and a beautiful pool. What else would I need?”

“Well, if you think of something, call an Uber and make sure you put it on the company account.” I give her a pointed look. She always tries to eat the cost of minute things. “I dragged you here. If you want to do something, then I’m damn well paying for it.”

She hits me with a “whatever” look. “Have fun today.”

Raine told me to pick her up in the parking lot by OceanBrews. The drive there is only about twenty minutes, but of course, I hit every stop light and traffic at every stop sign, making it feel more like an hour. The amount of excitement throbbing through my veins is making me impatient. And I like this feeling. I like the tendrils of hope licking through me.

When I pull into the parking lot, I spot Raine leaning against her SUV in a pair of jeans, a loose peach-colored tank top, and white sandals. It’s simple and gorgeous, and why the hell am I nervous?

Before I can get out and open the door for her, she opens it and drops into my car.

“Hey.” The nerves are clear in her voice as her gaze sweeps over me. “I feel underprepared for this date. I find it offensive that you wouldn’t tell me what we’re doing.”

I hit her with a grin. “You don’t like surprises?”

“Only if I don’t know they’re coming. Not knowing how to dress stresses me out.”

“You look great.”

Suddenly, she shimmies, shaking out her arms and shoulders, her torso and hips, and kicking her legs out. It cracks me up. I reach over, grabbing her hand and giving it a squeeze. “You’re nervous again?”



“This time it’s worse.”

Taking my eyes off the road, I glance to her, surprised.

She lifts a shy shoulder and sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, chewing on it. The sight shoots a sensation straight down my spine and causes my dick to twitch in my jeans. The light turns red, and when I come to a stop, I tug her hand toward me at the same time I lean over the console meeting her halfway. I slip my hand through her hair as I cup the back of her head and press a kiss to her soft, silky lips. Unhurried, I taste her.

When I pull away, she makes a soft sound of protest as her eyes flutter open slowly.

“Better?” My voice is thick and barely a whisper.

I watch as her lips pull up into a smile. “Much.”

Just before the light turns green, I give her a quick kiss, fighting the urge to deepen it because I know once I start, I won’t stop until I get my fill of her. Thankfully, for the rest of the ride, Raine relaxes, and our conversation comes easy.

That’s until I pull into the airport. Child-like wonder fills her features—eyes wide as she watches a passenger plane speed down the runway.

“What are we doing here?” she questions, her eyes narrowed with skepticism.

“I’m meeting a friend.” I park my car at the hangar like I was instructed.

Raine hops out of the car and meets me at the trunk. “A friend?” I hear a touch of frantic in her tone.

Linking our fingers together, I walk us toward the front of the hangar. “Yes.”

When we round the corner, Carl spots us and starts toward us with a wide smile.

“Carl.” I shake his hand when he approaches. “Thank you for this.”

“It’s good to see you again. I’ve got her all filled up and ready to go.”

Beside me, Raine winces and snaps her head my way.

Flashing a roguish smile, I squeeze her hand. “Have you ever seen Chatley Bay from the air?”

A chaos of worry sets fire through her forest green eyes, blazing brightly.

Shit. “Are you afraid of flying?” I feel like an asshole for assuming she wasn’t.

She blinks, eyes frantically everywhere else before they land on me. “Yes. No. I don’t know.” She shakes her head and digs her fingers into her

forehead. When she looks at me again, her expression is full of disappointment, and it makes my stomach sink. “You promised me nothing expensive.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

The aversion she has about spending money both frustrates and pleases the hell out of me. She’s nothing like any other woman before her. I like her and the challenge she presents. I run my thumb over her knuckles. “I’d never break a promise to you.” I hold her gaze. “I’ve known Carl for a long time and I’m cashing in an IOU.”

She looks over my shoulder where the sleek black Bell helicopter sits. “You don’t have to keep doing these things to impress me.”

My grin is a little goofy. “Impress you? No. I’m not going out of my way for that. I enjoy seeing your smile and *that* makes me go out of my way. I want it there permanently.”

The corners of her lips pull up but not fully as she releases a breath. “I’ve never flown before.”

Something tells me her admitting this was colossal, and it warms my chest. “I promise you’re in good hands. Carl’s been flying for years.”

I can feel how sweaty her palms are, but I don’t dare let go of her hand until I help her into the helicopter. I get her buckled in, place the headset over her ears, and dip my head to look her in the eyes. They’re full of fear. “You good?”

Although she’s pale, she nods anyway.

“We don’t have to go up if you don’t want to. Say the word and we leave.”

The smile she gives me is small and a little watery, but determination flares in her features. “I want to. Just don’t pick on me if I scream like a girl.”

Chuckling, I kiss her cheek. “I most definitely will. You’ll never hear the end of it.”

The glare she’s giving me doesn’t do what it intended. Instead, I laugh and take my seat beside her.

I’m sure Chatley Bay is beautiful from the air. I’m positive the hues of blues and teals coming together in rippling waves before unrolling into white creases along the white sandy coastline is a stunning view. I’m certain the houses look like a beautiful pastel rainbow below us.

But nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, is as remarkable as how Raine looks. At first, she was tentative and nervous, but that soon morphed into a mesmerizing awe. With wide eyes full of delight, she takes in the

scenery below us. Her lips are parted and pulled up at the sides. She's only glanced to me once, but the brilliant smile she blessed me with paired with the sparkle in her eyes shifted something deep in my chest. Spectrums of wonder and fascination light up her face and she isn't just happy. She's absolutely glowing. I damn well intend to keep that look on her face.

It dawns on me in this very moment that I'm in a lot of trouble. All the shifts in my chest are more than desire. I'm truly enamored by her, and that worries the hell out of me. This is only our second date and hell, I haven't even slept with her. But I know more than anything, I want to spend time with her.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## RAINE

My heart is still hammering in my chest when Holden helps me out of the helicopter on wobbly legs. I'm high on adrenaline and an insane amount of excitement. I think I can understand why there are adrenaline junkies in this world now. That was incredible.

After we take a moment to thank Carl for the ride, we start back toward Holden's car. Without thinking, I stop and throw myself into him, wrapping my arms around his neck and hugging him.

"Thank you. It was beautiful and I loved it."

Firm hands slide around my waist as he looks down at me. "I take it you're no longer mad at me?"

I swear I could stare at his lopsided smirk all day. "No." My words pull his smirk into a full grin.

One of his hands moves to the back of my head and he lowers his mouth to mine. My heart pounds in my chest as a warm and destabilizing sensation slides from my head to my toes. When he tilts his head and deepens the kiss, my entire body tingles. It's slow but hungry. Intense yet passionate. And I almost want to stomp my foot when he breaks it.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." His eyes tell me he's just as drunk off that kiss as I am.

"It was absolutely beautiful," I tell him again, still wrapped in his arms.

"Couldn't have been as beautiful as how you looked." There's a twinkle in his gaze and dammit, his words make me blush. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm sure I am, but after sightseeing from the air and that kiss, my senses are scrambled," I admit.

He places a kiss to my forehead with a chuckle and then releases me to

slide his hand around mine. After he opens the car door for me, he gets into the driver's seat, and we begin to make our way back to Chatley Bay. Instead of a restaurant, we pull into the public parking lot at the plaza on the beach.

Spotting a food truck, he leads the way. After we order and get our food, we take a seat at a metal picnic table covered by a red umbrella.

"I can't remember the last time I've eaten from a food truck," he says as he picks up his slider.

I snort. "Your upper class is being snobby."

He laughs and then takes a bite. We eat our food in silence and watch as the ocean waves stretch to the shoreline before quickly retreating back into the depths. The breeze blows a strand of Holden's hair and causes it to tumble across his forehead. The sun makes his blue eyes seem bluer, deeper like the ocean before us. He's so damn good-looking.

Once we finish eating, he grabs our trash and tosses it into the garbage before taking my hand and leading us to the beach. Just as we reach the end of the sidewalk, where the concrete surrenders to the sand, I step out of my sandals while Holden takes off his socks and shoes. He takes my sandals and hooks them on his pinky before interlacing our fingers with the other hand.

After a moment of walking on the beach, he breaks the silence. "What is it about money that makes you nervous?"

I titter. "You've been sitting on that one since last night, haven't you?"

He glances to me with a lopsided smile, but he doesn't answer me. He doesn't have to. I know he has.

I think about my answer for a moment. I don't want to tell him too much and give away my situation, but I also don't want to lie. So I go with the partial truth. "Money doesn't make me nervous. Only when you spend it on me. I feel awkward that I can't reciprocate. I can't contribute. It makes me feel inadequate."

He squeezes my hand. "You're not inadequate."

A bubble of dry laughter tumbles from me. "Compared to you, I very much am."

He flashes a look of disbelief my way.

"When's the last time you had to figure out which bill you can pass on so you can pay another? Robbed Peter to pay Paul? Penny pinch to make it until payday?"

His lips turn down. He doesn't have to answer. I know.

"I know you've worked hard to get where you're at, but I struggle to

make my ends meet.” Man, this is embarrassing. “So yes. Inadequate.”

He stops, turning to face me. “But you don’t like big tips either.”

Quite the observation... “Setting a cup of coffee on your table doesn’t warrant a tip six times more than the coffee. Those types of tips make me uncomfortable.”

His lips tip into a wry, boyish grin that makes me want to kiss his face. “What if I’m tipping for the commentary?”

Snorting, I roll my eyes. “Then you live a very boring life.”

Reaching out, he wrangles a piece of my hair that’s caught in the breeze and tucks it behind my ear. “My life has been anything but boring since I met you.” My heart flip flops at his words. “But you need to understand. I’m old-fashioned, Raine. My father raised me to open doors, pay for dates, and be chivalrous. Not because women are beneath us but because women should be worshipped and cherished. It’s been a very long time since I’ve wanted to do either. I promise I’ll do my damndest not to make you uncomfortable, but I won’t change who I am. And I damn sure won’t apologize for it either.”

Woo... his tone. The intensity in his eyes. The seriousness of each word has all but set my poor ovaries on fire.

“I don’t care what your job title is,” he continues, “or what people may think of us. Keeping people caffeinated is a very serious job,” he jests as his mouth twists into a lazy smile. “You’re not inadequate in my eyes, and your struggles don’t make you incompetent.”

My breath? Gone. My heart? Floating off into the breeze. My ovaries? Exploded.

A dopey grin slips across my lips. “You can’t say things like that to me.”

As he opens his mouth to respond, a voice comes from our side. “Holden!”

Holden rips his gaze off me, snapping his head to his right. Instantly an easy expression softens his features.

A young boy, probably six or seven, comes running toward us. His dark hair is wet and messy, bouncing with each of his steps. He slams into Holden’s waist, wrapping his arms around him. “What are you doing here? Dad said you went back to Colorado.” When he lifts his head to look up at Holden, I notice the pink tinge on his cheeks from the sun.

“I did go back to Colorado, but I have several things here I have to do. Where are your parents?” Holden ruffles the boy’s hair.

The young boy turns and points. I follow his finger to a man who is

watching us intently. “Dad’s over there. Mom stayed home with Jesse so we can have a big boys’ day,” he explains. Then, like he’s just now noticing, he eyes Holden from head to toe. “Why are you at the beach dressed like that?”

Holden chuckles. “Impromptu beach trip. I wasn’t planning on coming here,” he explains. “Colby. This is Raine.”

Colby smiles up to me as he holds out his little hand. “Hi. You have a weird name.”

Holden shoves Colby’s shoulder playfully.

I laugh and take his hand. “At least my awesome weird name doesn’t sound like smelly cheese.”

Colby bursts out laughing, and my heart melts at the sound of it. It reminds me so much of Kaleb when he was that age.

Holden pushes Colby again. “Come on, troublemaker.”

We start toward the man Colby said was his dad. He’s muscular with a broad chest and six-pack abs. He’s tall with wet, messy light brown hair. Dark tattoos wind down both arms and stop at his wrists. The lines of his face are sharp, almost like he was cut from granite, and his eyes are the color of mercury. They’re also fiercely intense as he watches Colby.

He and Holden share a quick handshake that turns into a bro-hug before Holden steps back and introduces us. “Callen, this is Raine.”

Those formidable eyes slide to me, and something tells me this man doesn’t miss much. He tips his chin. “Hey.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Callen gives Holden a once-over, and the corner of his lips tic but never raise. “You forget how to dress for the beach?”

“This wasn’t planned,” Holden says.

“You should’ve been here earlier,” Colby cuts in excitedly, bouncing on his toes. “We’ve been surfing. I’ve got good. You should see me.”

“He sent me some pictures a while back.” He jerks his head toward Callen but doesn’t take his attention away from the kid. “You’re looking good out there.”

“Dad said you used to surf. We should come back tomorrow and surf together. A true boys’ day. Mom can come too, but she won’t surf because of Jesse.”

I want to tell him if Mom comes, it wouldn’t really be a true boys’ day, but I don’t dare bring that up. He’s too cute to argue with.

Part grunt, part laugh, deep and rumbly escapes Callen.



Holden scratches his jaw with a chuckle. "I haven't been on a board in years. I'd wipe out."

"Dad said it's because you're old."

I cough a laugh, rolling my lips to fight back my laughter. Neither Callen nor Holden looks a day over thirty.

Holden cracks up. "You're older than me, pretty boy."

"I stay young. I'm still in the water, still throwing a hammer around, and I play with my kids. What do you do besides sit behind a desk?" Callen jests.

"I'm not just a desk jockey," Holden replies.

Callen puffs a breath from his nose and shakes his head slightly. It causes a strand of his hair to let loose from its wet confines and fall to his forehead. He would make a killer front man in a band. "How long are you in town for?"

"Not sure. I've got some business to handle."

Callen simply nods.

"We need to do another dinner soon."

Another sharp nod from Callen. "You've got my number."

Holden ruffles Colby's hair. "Be good for your momma but give your dad extra hell."

Colby cackles as he gives Holden another hug around his waist.

"Nice to meet you," Callen says, his view dropping to where Holden takes my hand.

"You, too."

We only make it a few steps away before I burst. "You used to surf?"

"A lot. I loved being at the beach."

"And now?"

"Now I miss surfing. Unfortunately, Colorado's beaches are awful." He arches a teasing brow.

I titter. "Colorado has snow, though. Do you not ski?"

"Skiing is far different from surfing. It's fun, don't get me wrong, but nothing is as freeing as surfing."

"I've skied once, but I've never surfed."

"Ever tried to?"

I shake my head. "No. Open ocean water terrifies me." He nods like he understands. "Callen seems... intense."

The corner of Holden's mouth quirks up into a smirk as he glances at me. "He's been like that since elementary school. He had a rough life growing up. Other than his brother, Ethan, I think I was his only friend. Even then, he was

intimidating.”

“Still is,” I say.

“I guess knowing him the way I do, I don’t see it anymore. He’s a good guy.”

We come to an empty lifeguard stand, and Holden leans against the post, draping his arms around my shoulders as he pulls my back to his front. We’re both looking out over the ocean watching the sun glisten over the blue waves. I could easily get used to this feeling of the warmth of his body pressed against me.

“You told Callen you had business to handle this week? Does that mean you have to leave?”

“I do.” I feel him nod. “I leave tomorrow.”

An ache forms in my chest. “Are you coming back?” I’m not sure how I’ll respond if he tells me he isn’t or it’ll be a while before he does.

Holden shifts my hair off my shoulder and kisses my skin. Goosebumps raise and race over me and I shudder. “Who’s being clingy now?” he whispers against my flesh with a tantalizing lilt. The warmth of his breath causes another shiver to scurry down my spine. “I’ll be back on Thursday.” Another kiss, another quake of the ground under my feet. “My car will be ready for pickup by then too.”

“Why would you buy a car instead of just renting one if you’re not living here?” I’m proud I managed to think coherently. His mouth on me is doing magical things.

“Renting gets expensive.”

I snort.

“Besides, I could be here for a day or for a few weeks. I prefer to have assurance. Having my own car does just that.”

“And what happens when you’re gone for years again?” I hate the ache in my chest and the burn of my words. This is supposed to be only fun, a fling, a... whatever. Yet I find myself way too interested in him and *I haven’t even slept with him yet*. The connection I feel with him is magnetic.

“Then it’ll collect dust or I could let my father enjoy it.”

I rest my head back onto his chest. “You seem to have an easy answer for everything.”

“Because usually there is. People often put too much thought into things, and that’s when they become a mess.”

Was he reading the chaos in my mind? Feeling the strange ache in my

chest?

I turn in his arms to face him. “Creating a plan is usually a good plan of action.”

He brushes the hair from my forehead. “Creating a plan versus all the what ifs are two entirely different things. It’s smart to have a plan and even a backup plan, but none of them should include the words ‘what if.’”

“Backup plans always have a what if. That’s why you create them.”

“What ifs are hypothetical. Plans are solid.”

Pursing my lips, I raise a flippant brow. “I swear you memorize inspirational posters.”

Something shines in his eyes—soft and gentle yet promising power. And revolving around that is desire. “My brain isn’t wired for what ifs. I don’t stress about what if I ask you on another date and you say no.”

“What would you do if I did?”

“Then you do.” He lifts a shoulder. “I’ll cherish the memory and cut my losses.” He bends pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “After I do my best to convince you differently.” He kisses me again and when his tongue dips in, my pulse explodes. My palms slide up his stomach and come to a rest on his chest.

“I’m convinced,” I whisper against his lips.

A low rumble in his chest vibrates under my palms. “Thursday when I get back?”

Dammit. “I can’t. I close Thursday and Friday.”

“Saturday then,” he states. It’s final, and he claims my mouth again.

The kiss may be slow, but it’s hungry. He makes a small growl, and I feel it lick through my body. Heat pools between my legs. Everywhere throbs. One of his hands slides between my shoulder blades and up into my hair while the other tightens around my waist and pulls me closer. I’ve never really been kissed like I’m the air needed to exist, but he kisses me like he’s starved.

Voices begin to trickle in through the fog, reminding me that we’re standing in the middle of a public beach and we’re not alone. Pulling away, I glance around us, half expecting everyone to be watching. Instead, a group of people are setting up two volleyball nets and not paying us any attention.

He tips my chin, pulling my face up to his. “I’ve been doing my best to be a gentleman. That won’t last too much longer. I only have so much restraint.”

That has to be the hottest thing a man has ever said to me, and it makes

my body throb. “No one asked you to be a gentleman.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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RAINE

Miss Sue disappears from the counter, slipping behind the large wooden door that separates the main house and the entry. Ten minutes later, Kaleb comes out wearing a black and white tee with the hood over his head and black pants. With him comes the riled air of exasperation.

“You keep this look up, and I’ll think you’re going full emo,” I tease trying to get a smile from him.

It doesn’t work. Instead, he rolls his eyes. “Where are we going?” He’s full of attitude.

We push out the front door and head for my SUV. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Pizza and beer,” he says this without an ounce of humor.

“The best I can do is pizza and root beer.”

He pulls open the passenger side door and mutters, “Deal,” before dropping in and shutting it with more force than necessary.

Well, okay then.

I crank the engine and blast the AC. Today is scorching hot and this goofball wore pants. “How was this week?” With the mood billowing off him, I’m actually afraid to ask, but I do anyway.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he grumps looking out the window.

“Uh-oh. Are you ragging?” I try teasing him again. Maybe I’ll pull out a smile from him?

“No. I’m pissed,” he snaps instead of giving me that smile I was hoping for. I thought for sure I’d get one. “I got grounded.”

“Watch your mouth. What did you mean you got grounded? What happened?”

He stews for a moment as he bounces his knee. “This new kid came in with a chip on his shoulder, and it got directed toward me. I tried ignoring it, but the guy’s a dick. We got into a scuffle.”

Taking my eyes off the road, I glance to my brother, searching for evidence of a fight. I see none. “How bad did you beat him up?”

“I didn’t throw a single punch. I only wrestled him to the ground and held him there after *he* threw a punch. I told him to chill the fuck out.”

“Language,” I groan, lifting my face to the roof. My baby brother isn’t supposed to have our father’s mouth. “Did he get in trouble too?”

“I wish,” he harrumphs, crossing his arms over his chest like a moody child. “They said since I’ve been there for so long I should’ve known better. I should understand,” he mocks. “He’s in a new place, scared, blah, blah, blah. He got no punishment and now fucks with me daily because I haven’t been adopted and he calls me a nerd because of my grades.”

I give up on his language. Clearly, he’s not going to listen to me. “Does he know why you haven’t been adopted yet?”

Angry, glaring eyes fix on me. “No. Not like I’ll get out of there before my eighteenth birthday anyway.”

An offensive gasp rushes out of me. That hurt. “Don’t you dare sit there and act like I’m not trying. You can bet your ass I am. I’m working as hard as I can, living out of my car to save every damn penny I can so I can get you out and with me where you belong. I hate this just as much as you do.”

He’s quiet for several long moments and I’m glad. I need to calm down too because if he lashes out again, I’m pretty sure I’ll lose my shit on him. We pull into the parking lot of the Pizza Shack.

“I’m sorry,” he sounds ashamed. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just piss—mad.”

“Don’t take it out on me,” I chide. “I’m not out here doing nothing, Kaleb. I’m putting in as many hours as Cathy will allow, and I’ve had multiple job interviews. But newsflash, it’s hard to find a job when I don’t have an address. It kills me you’re there and not with me. You deserve to be with me. We deserve to be together. I’m trying so damn hard.” My throat is tight, emotions clawing. I take a slow breath, calming myself. “I’m incredibly proud of how smart you are. I know if Mom were here, she’d tell you the same. You need to remember that when you’re running a business being all badass behind a desk in your corner office with a great view, that guy will be a nobody still bullying people who are better than him because he’s insecure.

Ignore him. Don't stoop to his level. You're better than that."

He studies me for a beat before he nods. "Let's eat. I'm starving." Then he's out of the car.

Conversation officially over.

Kaleb opted for a Coke instead of root beer and a calzone instead of pizza. Sundays are the only days I ever really spend money, and it's always on Kaleb because he deserves a great day. Plus, I love seeing the smile it puts on his face. After our spat in the car, his attitude changed for the better. He's back to himself, fun and carefree, and goofy as ever. He doesn't bring up the guy or the scuffle, only chatting my ear off about the things he learned in school. It's official. My brother is the genius of the family. Where I graduated high school by the skin of my teeth, Kaleb is doing it with his eyes closed.

"I've kind of met someone." Why am I so nervous to tell him this?

I should've waited until he wasn't taking a sip of his drink. Kaleb sputters and coughs as he chokes. "What?" he croaks, his eyes watering. He coughs a few more times. "Who? How'd you meet him? Is he good to you? I want to meet him." Everything rushes out in rapid fire.

"Aw. No need to be overprotective, little brother." I grin innocently at him. "It's really new, like only two dates new. But it won't turn into something serious because he lives in Colorado. He's here for family matters."

"Then why waste your time? Or is this one of those summertime flings?" His top lip curls in pure disgust. "Oh, god. Please do not tell me it's a booty call. I don't want to think about my sister getting it on."

My mouth falls open with a laugh. "Wha—you're thirteen," I whisper-shriek. "You shouldn't know about any of that."

Kaleb gives me a pointed look. "I'm young. Not stupid."

"It's just been two dates. Nothing has happened."

He lifts a shoulder. "You can have sex on the first date." He winces at the words.

A lightning strike would be a relief right now. This conversation wasn't supposed to take the turn it did, and this is excruciating. "He's smart and witty and very handsome." I steer the conversation in a different direction.

Kaleb's body deflates, his shoulders sagging. "You just described me. I guess I won't be having sex on the first date."

"Stop with the sex talk," I whisper-hiss with a laugh. I can't hold it back,



not with him looking the way he does. “You’re... you’re young. Don’t think about that stuff yet.”

“I’m a teenager. That’s all I think about.” He grins wickedly. He knows he’s killing me here.

“Staahhhppp,” I whine.

“Does he know about everything?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“What about you living out of your car?”

I sigh. “No.”

“So you’re lying to him? I’m no expert, but this doesn’t sound like the right thing to do.”

I level him with a look. “I’m not lying to him. I haven’t lied. It hasn’t come up.”

“Omitting the truth is the same as lying. Your words.” He points his fork at me. “Not mine.”

I roll my eyes. “Quit mothering me.”

The grin on his face stretches wide. “Mom would totally want me to mother you.”

“No. Mom would want me to mother you.”

“And you’re doing such a great job,” he deadpans. “So these dates? Where has he picked you up at?”

I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to see if I’ve actually lied or not. “Once was at Lucy’s house, the second time was at my SUV.” I tilt my head and smirk at him.

“Why date this guy if you know he’s not going to stick around?”

“He’s fun.”

“So is my math teacher, but it doesn’t mean I want to suck face with her.” A look of horror crosses his features, and he shakes his head. “Ew.”

I crack up at his expression and take the opportunity to shift the conversation again. “Lucy asked if she could come one Sunday. She’s heard a lot about you and wants to meet you. Would that be okay with you?”

Kaleb’s brow arches high. “Nice subject change.” Then he lifts a shoulder. “As long as she doesn’t treat me like I’m some sort of pity party.”

“Lucy would never do that. Although she may give you a huge hug and then spoil the hell out of you.”

And just like that, my brother perks up even more.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## HOLDEN

I'm in a meeting with my head in the clouds. Not a good thing for the CEO who's been gone more than he's been around lately surrounded by his chief execs. Being unfocused and absent has never been my style. Usually, I'm completely devoted and thoroughly absorbed in my work. My company is my priority.

But...

That damn *but* again.

All I can think about lately is a woman who has happened to crawl under my skin in two dates. Two. That's all it took for me to want, for my heart to kickstart like an old machine that hasn't run in ages.

When I decided to ask her on a date, I never expected her to consume me. I just liked her, enjoyed her company, liked how she treated me like an average guy. I figured she'd be an exceptional night in the sheets and that would be that. But on that first date, I realized I didn't just want to fuck her. I wanted to actually take the time to get to know her. I've quickly found that I like her, truly enjoy her company, and I love how even after finding out who I am, I'm still just an average guy to her. With her quick wit and smartassery, I'm addicted. I get lost in every kiss, every touch. No woman has ever made me lose sight or get so lost in them that I forget where we are.

I meant what I told her about my restraint. I wanted to get to know her on an emotional level, to see if she'd change the way she treated me after some thought. I wanted her to shake her nerves and be more comfortable around me. Now, I fucking need to taste every inch of her skin. If I get lost in a kiss, I can only imagine how out of my mind I'll be inside of her. I want—

“Mr. Slade?” My name rips me from my thoughts, and I land back into

the meeting with a thud. Mason Weil, my CPO is looking at me expectantly.  
Shit.

“I’m sorry.” I clear my throat and sit up straighter. “I missed the question.”

All the suits at the conference table exchange a look, but Aaron locks eyes with me. I ignore him.

“I was discussing the Boeing project.”

His words click my thoughts into place. “I’ve got a meeting with the engineer team later this week to look over the prototype. If approved, you’ll need to come up with a strategy to keep the current manufacturing line moving as well as the new Boeing one.”

Mason nods, and I breathe relief. “I’ve been working on various outlines and should have them to you by Friday morning.”

The meeting continues, and I force all thoughts of Raine out of my mind. Forty-five long minutes later, we wrap up and everyone leaves, except Aaron. He lingers behind.

“Not like you to miss a question,” he states when it’s just him and me. “You okay, Holden?”

Aaron’s been with me so long, he treats me more like a son than a boss. “Yes.” I nod.

“You’ve been distracted lately. You need to talk?”

No matter how he treats me, I’ve always kept my personal life close to me. Business is business, and I don’t ever mix the two. “I’m fine.” I give him a reassuring smile. “My mind got wrapped around the house back home.” I realize my mistake instantly.

Aaron’s eyebrows shoot up, defying his normal poker face. “You haven’t considered Chatley Bay home in years.” A knowing gleam appears in his dark brown eyes. “Ever think about expanding that way to get you closer to your family?”

Raine and her silly deep voice as she pitched me a relocation offer comes to mind, and I suppress the smile it gives me. Truthfully, I’ve never thought about it. Our numbers are good here. My time is well-spent. I fear if I had a second location, I’d be pulled in a lot of directions. Not that I’m not up for the challenge, but I haven’t had a definitively good reason. Until now. “The market is there as is the demand.” And that’s the truth.

“You’d derail and shut out most of the competition.” I know that too. “Your commitment to lead the industry and provide the most advanced and

top-of-the-line aircraft engines is superior.”

“You’ve been reading the company’s vision statement.”

Aaron chuckles as he shakes his head. None of his salt and pepper hair moves. “Just reminding you that although you have an outstanding team who is capable of anything, you lead the way. We’ll stand behind you. You’ve never led us astray, and we’ve never doubted you.”

Pride hits me in the chest. “Thanks.”

“You’ve been thinking about a second location.” He words it as a statement. He knows.

“Recently, yes.”

“But you’re worried about the demand of your time and being spread too thin.”

“It’s just an idea tucked away in the back of my mind. I haven’t put any real thought into it. No need to get into the schematics of anything yet.”

That pacifies him and he nods. As he starts out the door, he stops short, glancing back at me. “Don’t let work stop you from living a life.” That knowing gleam is back in his eyes. “Also, remember that Zoom calls exist and work for long distances.”

Stepping out of the elevator and into my empty penthouse, I toss my keys into the bowl on the kitchen island and don’t bother to turn on the lights. It’s a habit I don’t bother to change. There’s no need. The moonlight that streams through my floor-to-ceiling windows illuminates the entire floor.

I make my way down the hallway to my bedroom and enter the bathroom, where I strip off my clothes and shower. After I’m dressed in a pair of black sweatpants and a T-shirt, I pour two fingers worth of bourbon and take a seat on the sofa. Still in the dark.

The place feels empty and too quiet. Desolate. A month ago, this was a salve I craved after a long day, but all that has changed since I went back to Chatley Bay. More specifically, since meeting Raine. She’d give me something to look forward to every morning—her smile and the way it touches her eyes, the smell of jasmine and coconut, her banter, and as of lately, the way she seems to reach into my chest and squeeze my heart.

I haven’t talked to her since I arrived home. I hoped a few days away

would ease my thoughts. It's too soon to feel as connected as I do. It's too soon to feel the want like I do. But being away has only doused fuel on an already blazing wildfire. I've tried my best to think about anything else but her. Even after Aaron's talk today, I buried myself in work. It didn't help. She kept creeping into every corner of my brain, and it only got worse when I was the last one in the office.

I give in and grab my phone to text her.

**Me: How was your day at work?**

Twenty minutes go by with no response. I begin to worry she may be sleeping. It's eight here, which means it's ten there. Just as I'm about to give up, the dots begin to bounce.

**Raine: Good. Yours?**

Deciding I'd rather hear her voice, I call instead of replying.

"You are an introvert's worst nightmare," she answers and I hear the smile in her tone.

I laugh, instantly grinning from ear to ear. "Your tendencies lean heavily on being an ambivert."

"Fake it 'til I make it."

"You sound tired," I note.

"I am. I worked open to close no thanks to Shelia calling in. Not that I'm complaining, though."

"You work a lot."

"I sense the boss man in you is impressed with my work ethic." She titters and I hate I'm missing the way her nose scrunches when she does.

I'm so screwed.

"Work ethics are hard to find nowadays," I tell her. "Are you still looking for another job?"

There's a moment of silence on the other end. "Are you going to tell my boss?"

I blow a chuckle under my breath. "I can keep this one to myself."

"Says every gossip ever," she teases. "Yes. I'm still looking for another job. I'd like to have a full-time job as well as a part time job."

"That's a lot of hours, Raine. You'll spread yourself thin." The irony of that statement isn't lost on me. "Where do you fit into that schedule?"

"I could ask you the same thing," she counters.

"Up until recently," I remind her.

"Prior to inheriting your house, you worked all the time with long hours,

right?”

Although inheriting the house started my visits back to Chatley Bay, Raine has me finding every reason to go back.

“I still do, but I delegate and lean on my team while I get things sorted.” That was such a lame business response.

“Right,” she sounds as if I just dismissed her. “What time did you get off work today?”

“Seven.”

“And you were in the office at six this morning. So, Mr. Slade, where do you fit into that schedule?”

Mr. Slade. My eyes almost roll hearing her say my name like that. “Touchè.” I take a sip of my bourbon. “I won’t be back on Thursday. I’ve got a meeting Friday morning.”

“Is this your way of telling me you need to reschedule our date?” she asks, not sounding upset.

“No. I just... wanted you to know.” The words feel strange in my mouth. The only person I’ve ever cared who knew my plans were Janie, and she usually already knew. “I’ll be damned if I miss our date.”

“Where will we be going? And if you tell me it’s a surprise again, I may strangle you.”

Chuckling, I take another sip of my drink. “How about you come to my house?”

“In Chatley Bay, right?” She laughs. “How does one decide which house they want to sleep in at night? Do you draw from a hat?”

“I have a house in Chatley Bay and a penthouse in Denver. Not sure I’d like to draw Denver when I’m in Florida. That would be a hell of a wait for sleep.”

“How close is your home from work?”

“On a good day, forty-five minutes.”

She hums. “That’s still a hell of a wait if you ask me.”

“The drive helps clear my head. By the time I’m home, my business brain is shut off... mostly.”

“Something tells me your business brain rarely ever shuts off.”

“You have a distinct way of shutting my brain down. A kiss from you can make me forget to breathe.”

“Must you be so sexy when you’re being sweet?” she groans.

“I could ask you the same. I don’t think you realize just how fucking

beautiful you are.”

“So our date at the Chatley Bay estate,” she imitates an English accent. I’m learning when she’s uncomfortable, she switches the subject. “Will you be cooking for me?”

“Oh no.” I burst out laughing, shaking my head although I know she can’t see me. “Unfortunately, I’m a horrible cook. Although I’m a master at grilling, the kitchen is not my forte. I’ll order something.”

“You just lost some of your sexy points, Holden.”

“Damn. Guess I’ll find another way to get them back.” My voice is thick and low. “Bring your bathing suit Saturday.”

“Of course, he’s got a pool at his estate.” She snickers and I know she just rolled her eyes.

We talk for several more minutes when I hear her stifle a yawn. “You should get some rest,” I tell her. “Can I call you tomorrow?”

“I’d like that.”

“Sleep well, Raine.”

After we hang up, I rest back into my sofa and finish off my drink before heading to bed as well.

Hazel wanted me to stop and smell the flowers. Well, I’ve got a flower that I’m quickly losing my mind to, and I’m enjoying every step of the journey.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## HOLDEN

Raine is leaning against the hood of her car in jean shorts, a loose gray and white shirt, and sandals. Her hair is down, soft waves touching her shoulders, and damn if I don't break out into a huge grin. Of course, before I can get out and open the door for her, she pops it open and tosses a pink duffel bag onto the floorboard before dropping in.

"Look at you, fancy pants. Nice car," she teases flippantly with a beautiful, brilliant smile.

Reaching over, I cup the back of her head and bring her mouth to mine. A soft moan slips from her, and I swallow it down, sweeping my tongue across hers. When I pull back, it takes a few seconds before her eyes flutter open to reveal the green drenched in lust. "I've missed you."

"You just added points," she whispers with a lopsided smile.

I steer my new Porsche back out of the parking lot and head toward my house. This time, she's not nervous, and she doesn't do the shake out. Instead, our conversation is comfortable like we've done this every day. She asks me about my workweek, listening curiously as I tell her the highlights. She worked a lot of hours—happily—because Shelia came down with the stomach bug, which I already knew. Talking about such mundane things has never felt so enjoyable.

Once we turn into my driveway, the only words spoken from her have been, "Oh, wow." Her beautiful eyes are full of awe as she takes in everything. I click the button to the garage and drive in. I take her bag and lead her into the house by the small of her back. The moment she steps across the threshold, she pauses.

"Oh, wow," she exhales, scanning the room.

I could stare at the way she looks for days. The dazzle in her wide eyes, the parting of her mouth...

"Thanks. I've been slowly redecorating. The way my aunt left it to me felt like I was stepping into the roaring twenties." I lace my fingers with hers. "Let me show you around."

We only make it out of the kitchen and into the living room when the doorbell sounds. "Food's here." I go and open the door. My eyes spring wide.

A younger guy stands with multiple bags. "Mr. Slade?"

"Yes. Let me help you." I go to reach for the bags, but he shakes his head.

"Show me where to go."

Once he deposits everything on the counter, I give him a gracious tip and send him on his way. My phone begins to ring as I'm unpacking all the food, and Janie's name pops up on display.

I answer it on speaker phone. "Did you order the entire place?"

"Oh, good," she chirps sounding pleased. "I was making sure the food got there on time. You didn't give me any hints on what to order, and I didn't know what Raine would like, so I may have gone overboard."

"Definitely overboard." I pull out several Styrofoam boxes and place them on the counter. "I've never had to tell you what to order."

"That's because I'm usually ordering for executives and not a date," she fusses. "Anyway, I've got to go. Call me if you need anything else." She hangs up.

I look at all the boxes of food before flicking my gaze up to Raine. "I hope you're hungry."

Raine's smiling, biting back her laughter. "For a month?"

"My assistant, Janie, apparently bumped her head."

"She wants to make sure you're properly fed."

"You heard her. All this..." I spread my hands out. "Is for you."

We start opening the boxes when suddenly Raine bursts out laughing. I don't even have to look at her to know. It's the only thing I requested.

"Crinkle cut fries. Had I known this was a fancy date, I would've worn something more elegant."

"You're beautiful in what you're wearing."

Pink tinges her cheeks and her smile warms my chest.

We make our plates and then eat outside by the pool, again emersed in a comfortable conversation about everything and nothing at all. After we finish, I toss her trash and show her the bathroom where she can change into

her bathing suit while I head upstairs to do the same.

I've just put down two beach towels on a lounge chair when Raine steps out of the house in a bikini. My mouth instantly becomes a desert and my pulse spikes. Pastel yellows, blues, and peach stripes line her halter top while the bottoms are solid peach. Her skin is silky smooth, tanned. Her legs are tone, hips curvy.

I notice three things.

One. She's uncomfortable in her skin, evident by the tense shoulders and bashful pink dotting her cheeks.

Two. She's drop dead fucking gorgeous and I'm one lucky son of a bitch.

Three. We're not making it into the pool.

Her gaze feasts on me, scanning over my chest and shoulders before dipping lower to my stomach. She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip and fuuuck, I feel it in my dick.

I watch her body as she walks to me, only flicking my gaze up to hers when she's close enough for me to reach out and grab her by the hip. I pull her flush against me as I sink my fingers into her hair and claim her lips. The kiss is hard and desperate as I pour myself into it. Her fingers wrap around my ribs, and I know she needs it to ground herself. She always melts into our kisses, another thing I rather enjoy.

"You're so goddammed beautiful," I whisper thickly against her lips, running a thumb over her cheek.

Deep red mixes with the pink of her blush. "I was thinking the same about you.

"The way you look at me is such a turn-on."

Her teeth find purchase on her bottom lip and I groan.

"And that," I say. "I really like it when you do that." Her lip slips out from between her teeth as I bring my mouth closer to hers. But instead of kissing her, I suck on her bottom lip, sinking my teeth into it gently.

A moan slips from her and my restraint is officially snapped. I lift her by her ass and her legs wrap around my waist. Our mouths are fused together. Her hands are all over me, gripping my neck and scraping through my hair as I carry her up the stairs and into my bedroom. I lower her feet to the floor, keeping my eyes locked on hers. I pull the strings holding her top, and it falls to the floor. Next, I tug the strings to her bottoms, letting them drop to the floor, and then guide her to my bed.

My gaze devours her. She lies naked with spectacular breasts that have

creamy skin with pink nipples. Her stomach is smooth, and her pussy is bare. Leaning over her, I trail kisses along her throat and down to her breast. I take a tight pink nipple into my mouth while palming the other. Raine grasps my hair and arches into me. The sounds she makes urge me on. She shivers as I swirl my tongue and suck, her fingers twisting deeper into my hair. I worship the other breast just the same before dragging my mouth down her stomach.

I kiss the inside of her thighs and then do what I've been fucking dying to do. I dip my head and taste her. The moment my mouth kisses her clit, the sexiest mewl escapes her and she rocks her hips. I lick along her clit and suck on it. Her little gasp turns into a moan that turns me greedy.

Over and over, I bring her to the edge and stop just before she falls. I want her wound up so tightly she loses all control.

Pressing two fingers into her, I groan against her skin at how wet she is.

"Oh god," she gasps, her hips meeting the thrusts of my hand.

I glance up her body and am spellbound by just how sexy she looks. The muscles in her stomach jerk every time my tongue slips over her clit. Her eyes are closed, mouth parted and panting. Her nipples are tight, and she's got one hand fisting the blanket with the other in my hair.

When I lightly scrape my teeth over her clit and give it a gentle suck, Raine fires off. She cries out, her pussy clenching and legs quaking. Her words are inaudible as she mewls, the sound almost causing me to blow in my pants.

Once she slows, I quickly shed my swim shorts, feeling the weight of my swollen dick spring free. I grab a condom from the drawer of my nightstand, thankful I had the forethought to buy them. Raine watches me with hungry eyes as I roll the condom down my length, never taking them off me when I press open her thighs. I run the head of my dick up and down her wet folds and push in, sinking in inch by inch until I'm balls deep.

"Oh my god," Raine gasps, her eyes rolling closed.

Pulling out, I push back in, finding a steady rhythm and loving every damn delicious sound she makes. My fingers flex against her thighs, pushing them open wider as I watch my dick slide in and out of her. With every thrust, her breasts bounce and small, panting gasps escape her. She's so fucking sexy.

Slipping my arm under her back, I haul her up the bed to the middle needing to feel the warmth of her skin on mine. Her arms fall around my shoulders as her legs wrap around my waist.

“You’re perfect.” I kiss the corner of her mouth. “You feel so good wrapped around my cock.”

I relish the mewl from her parted lips, loving how her hands explore my body, scratching and gripping my back, my arms, my shoulders.

I alternate my pace, fast and hard, slow and deep, short and long strokes, learning what she likes most and how her body reacts. Her face drowns in pleasure, and I feel like a fucking god. Pushing myself up, I move one of her legs over my shoulder and pump into her.

“Oh,” she gasps, slapping the blanket and fisting it.

I reach a hand between us and rub her clit. Just like I expected, Raine reacts instantly. Her pussy tightens around me, and her hips roll faster. Heat spreads from my balls and up my spine. Feeling my release burning low in my stomach, I know I’m not going to last much longer. I become ravenous, hitting deeper and harder, one hand rubbing her clit, the other gripping her hip.

She becomes more frantic, more desperate, and gluttonous as she begs for more and harder. I deliver everything she pleads for. She bursts right before my eyes, crying out as her head digs into the mattress. A flush spreads across her chest and crawls up her neck. Her legs shake, and her body shutters. It’s a goddamn glorious sight. And it’s not helping me at all.

Gritting my teeth, my arms shaking, my body tense, I wring every second of pleasure from her body until it’s all too much and it sends me spiraling after her. My hiss turns into a groan as my orgasm tears through me, ripping me apart limb by limb. Bright lights flicker behind my eyes. A pleasure so extraordinary, so fucking intense, floods me and with one thrust, I still on top of her.

I move her leg so I can hold my weight off her and kiss her neck, her jaw, her mouth, trying to catch my breath and calm my racing heartbeat. Her arms drape across my back as she draws up and down my back.

This didn’t feel like a simple fuck. It felt as if she just claimed my heart, and that thought is both terrifying and exhilarating.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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## RAINE

I wake up to sunlight, deliciously sore muscles, and the smell of coffee tickling my nose. Holden sits on the edge of the bed looking like a sexy god with a sexy smile and a cup of coffee.

Yesterday, after our incredible sex, we made our way to the pool and ended up having more incredible sex. Then again in the shower. And then after we had dinner, he carried me back upstairs to his bed where he left me numb and boneless. I guess that's when I passed out.

I've been with a total of four guys in my life, and I have never, ever felt this way during sex. And I'm not talking about his size although that was most definitely a plus. Holden was greedy for me and watched me as if I was the most mesmerizing woman he's ever seen. I got lost in the sight of his naked body, in the feel of him, in the words he whispered against my skin, and god, the sounds he made...

"Morning," he says, his smile turning into a smug smirk like he knows what I'm thinking. "I don't know how you take your coffee so I made it how I drink it just in case."

The man and his sweet charm. Gripping the sheet to my chest, I sit up and scoot back to the headboard. Holden's hair looks like a trophy, proud of the way my fingers pulled at it last night because he hasn't touched it. He's in a pair of black sweatpants and no shirt, looking like every woman's wet dream.

I take the mug from his hands. "I'm sorry I fell asleep last night."

"Don't be. I slept better than I have in ages. I even enjoyed waking up with you hogging all the covers and curled into me. I would've let you sleep in, but I didn't want you to sleep the day away."

I swallow a sip of coffee. "My bed isn't nearly as comfortable as yours."



If he only knew. “What time is it?”

He checks his phone. “Ten after ten.”

Ice cold panic starts at my head and slithers down to my toes. “Oh shit!” I shove the covers off me at the same time as I place the mug on the nightstand. I throw myself off the bed and quickly go in search for my clothes. My bra and tank top are in a pile at the end of his chaise lounge, and my shorts are at the end of the bed on the floor. I shove my bra on and then yank my shirt over my head before stepping into my shorts and tugging them on.

“I didn’t think you worked on Sundays,” Holden says, sounding confused.

“I don’t,” I rush. “It’s my brother. I have to sign—I have to be there by eleven. Will you please take me back to my car?”

Holden comes to stand in front of me and runs his hands down my arms. “Will he be that upset if you’re a few minutes late?”

I want to tell him Kaleb won’t be upset, but the home will. “You don’t understand,” I choke out, urgency gripping me by the throat. “I can’t miss the time. Sundays are our days. I’ve only missed three in three years. I can’t... Please,” I plead.

His eyes flick between mine. “Okay. Let me get dressed.”

While he does that, I rush and use the bathroom. I scramble to make something out of my hair, only giving up on it and pulling it back into a bun. I grab my bathing suit from the top of the shower stall, rush back into the bedroom, and shove it into my duffel. Holden steps out of the bathroom, dressed in shorts and a deep red T-shirt, holding a toothbrush still in its packaging. I wish I had time to stare at how domestically handsome he looks right now.

“I had an extra. Use it,” he says.

I do, and once I’m done, I place it in the side pocket of my duffel bag and glance to my phone for the time. Ten thirty. My panic turns into worry and then spins into dread. I’m never going to make it to my car and then to Kaleb on time. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Ready?” Holden tucks his wallet into his back pocket and grabs his keys off the dresser. Even in my panic, my heart breaks at seeing his hair fixed.

“Yeah, but could you...” Shit, this will put him close to what I’m trying to hide. “Could you drop me off somewhere instead?”

The closer we get to the group home, the more my nerves ricochet off every edge of my body. I'm wound tightly. My fingers tap my leg. Holden hasn't said anything, hasn't asked any questions, only nodding when I tell him the turns to take. It's like he knows if there's a break in the silence, I may crumble.

The group home looks more like a school campus, and I'm extremely grateful for it. Several brick buildings line the road just before the main building comes into view. I can't remember if there's a sign on the door or not, so I tell him, "Right here is fine," as I point to the building closest to the main one.

As he comes to a stop at the curb, I lean over and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for bringing me. I'll call you later." I grab my duffel and am about to push out the door when he stops me with a hand on my wrist.

Concern and curiosity etch the blues in his eyes, braided with another emotion I can't place my finger on. "Raine." My name sounds too stern and I don't like it.

I plaster on the brightest, most assuring smile I can give him. "Clingy much?"

The seriousness in his expression doesn't wane, even when he gives me a fake smile. I don't like it either, but I don't have time to try and change it. "How will you get home?"

"My car isn't far."

That doesn't pacify him, but he nods anyway. "Call me when you get home."

"I promise."

Stepping out of his car, I take off in a sprint, not bothering to take the pretend way I was going to that cuts behind the bushes along the building I had him drop me off at. Instead, I hightail it straight to the main building with my heart thundering in my chest. Last I looked, I had five minutes, and that was before Holden stopped me.

Out of breath, I plow through the door. Miss Sue jerks up to look at me and then glances to the clock. I follow her gaze, and instantly I'm filled with relief. Two minutes to spare.

"I'll go get him." She pushes the sign-out papers to me.

Times like this piss me off that Kaleb is here. I know the rules are in place for a reason, and I also know that the state allowing me to visit Kaleb is a privilege that I'm grateful for. I truly am. But being punished if I'm a minute late and only having one damn day to be with my brother is ridiculous.

I'm still trying to catch my breath when Kaleb slips out from behind the door. His eyes rove over me, and he arches his brow. Shit, he looks like our father when he does that. "You look like you've had a rough morning, Raindrop."

Thank goodness he doesn't sound like Alan, though.

I exhale a breath, blowing my bangs off my forehead, and grin. "You have no idea."

"I can't wait to hear."

My grin is devilish. "Be careful what you wish for, little brother."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## HOLDEN

I watch as Raine runs toward a completely different building than the one she made me believe she needed to be at. I recognized this place the second we pulled up to it. It's a group home for orphans, built when I was a child. My parents donate to it yearly. What the hell is she doing here?

Instead of leaving, I wait. Curiosity eats at me. She's a long way from her car regardless of the lie she fed me, and that doesn't settle well in my gut. I hate being lied to, and something tells me she's got a lot of secrets. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Ten minutes later, Raine steps out with a boy wearing a teal shirt with the hood over his head, gray shorts, and black shoes. He's almost as tall as her and is stockier. They turn right, and Raine bumps his shoulder beaming at him. The boy shakes his head, but I can't see his face.

I put my car in drive and pull alongside of them. I roll down my window. "Need a ride?"

Raine nearly jumps out of her skin. Her green eyes bulge out of her head, perturbation seeping across her features. The boy's head jerks my way, his back snapping straight as he puffs out his chest. His nostrils flare, eyes cold. He's maybe twelve or thirteen, but I know definitively he's Raine's brother. They resemble each other a lot.

"Who the fuck are you?" His voice is drenched with attitude as if he's ready to kick my ass. I admire his need to protect his sister.

Raine slaps his arm. "Watch your mouth," she hisses.

"You know him?" He points to me but is looking at Raine.

"Yeah." Raine's gaze flickers to me for a fleeting second before landing back on the boy. "He's a friend of mine." She sounds apprehensive to let him

know this.

She's talked about her brother a few times but has never divulged much information about him. That's about to change. "Get in. I'll take you two to lunch."

"You don't have to—"

The boy spins back to her with a mix of eagerness and confusion. They have a silent conversation before Raine finally concedes with a nod. The boy wastes no time popping open the back door and sliding in. As Raine is getting in, the boy leans forward between the seats and takes it all in.

"Dude. Your car is bad ass!" So much for kicking my ass. "Porsche Panameras are sexy as hell."

Raine spins toward him. "Watch your mouth and buckle up." She turns back around mumbling something about stranger danger and then takes a deep breath. "Kaleb, this is Holden. Holden, this is my pain in the ass little brother."

I glance to him in the rearview mirror "What's up, man?"

Kaleb doesn't have Raine's green eyes. They're hazel, more golden than anything. His gaze roams over my face. "You look familiar."

"You wouldn't know him," Raine rushes out, turning to share a look with him that clearly means to keep his mouth quiet.

Unfortunately, I don't think he gets the message. "Is this the guy you told me about?" She doesn't say anything, which makes Kaleb crack up. "I definitely can't wait to hear about why you look like you had a rough morning. I'm assuming you got past your—"

"Kaleb," Raine scolds and she means business. Sounds like if he mutters one more word, she'll hurt him. "Normally, we grab a burger and head to the park," she tells me, not giving Kaleb a chance to finish his sentence. I hate I won't get to find out what she got past.

Glancing to Kaleb in the mirror, I can tell the idea doesn't excite him. That smile may stay in place, but the gleam in his eyes dims.

"You rather go to the beach today?" I suggest.

That lights him up.

Beside me, Raine snorts. "You and the beach."

I glance to her, giving her a wink. "What do you say?"

"Please say yes. Please. Please." Kaleb squeaks on the last word and then clears his throat. Ah, puberty.

Raine chews on her lips for a moment before she sighs. "Beach it is."

The ride isn't long, and in the eleven minutes, I learned just how right the decision to go to the beach is, thanks to Kaleb's nonstop rambling about it. I park in the plaza, and we grab burgers from one of the small restaurants before finding a table outside that spreads the beach out in front of us. It makes me miss the beach even more. Colorado might have gorgeous views, but nothing beats this one.

"How was your week?" Raine asks then takes a bite of her fry.

"Aced another math test." He shrugs like it's no big deal. "Oh. Mrs. Ellis let me redo my English paper, the one where if I could have dinner with someone past or present. She said the best she would give me was a seventy-five because she allowed me a redo."

"It's better than a zero," Raine says. "Who'd you pick?" I catch the apprehension in her tone.

"Henry Ford." A proud smile sweeps across his face and lights up his eyes. "I'd like to know what gave him the idea to invent the automobile, how he felt when he failed, why he wouldn't upgrade the model T, and how he felt when his business exploded." He shrugs again, losing the confidence. "It was a safe subject."

I can't fight the grin. This is a subject I know a lot about, thanks to my own English papers. "Contrary to popular belief, he didn't invent the automobile. That answer isn't straightforward. But Ford did produce a car that average Americans could afford, which was the Model T."

Kaleb's head snaps to me with a tentative smile and a flicker of giddiness. It makes me wonder if he has anyone to have these types of discussions with.

"He also didn't invent the assembly line like some people believe," I continue. "Instead, he improved it and found a new way to manufacture a large number of cars. It cut down hours of labor. And Ford didn't see failure as failure. He was once quoted that he saw it as an opportunity to try again. As far as upgrading the Model T, I don't know for certain why he resisted it, but I'd assume he refused to accept that the times and people were changing. During that time his sales were dying while other companies were soaring. He eventually relented, though."

"Did you know during World War II, he shut down making cars and started making bomber planes to help?"

"Willow Run," I smirk. "After trial and error, he was able to produce one bomber every sixty-three minutes."

"How do you know all this?"

“You’re speaking to the nerd in me,” I jest. “I have to credit Henry Ford as well as many of the airplane pioneers for most of my English grades.”

“So, you’re a history buff?”

I shake my head. “Not really. I was just fascinated with airplanes, and that made me really interested to learn more.”

“Did learning that Henry Ford made bombers spark your interest in planes?”

I like that he’s curious.

“Actually, my love for planes is what made me learn about Henry Ford. Finding out about the bombers is how I stumbled onto him. I mean, I knew about him, but I didn’t know much in-depth information.”

Kaleb narrows his eyes. “What’s your last name?”

My gut tells me he already knows. “Slade.”

Instantly, his head jerks back, eyes grow the size of silver dollars. “Ho-lee shiiit. I read an article about you in business class. You’re the youngest entrepreneur to ever have a business explode the way Slade Engines did. Your biggest competition is IAE and you live in Colorado.” He switches his attention to Raine. “This is the guy you were telling me about?” Without letting her answer, his head swivels back to me. “What the hell are you doing in this rink-a-dink town?”

I’ve done two interviews in my life, *Times* magazine and *Entrepreneur*, and they both asked basically the same questions.

I chuckle. “You didn’t read my backstory?”

Kaleb looks a little guilty as he shakes his head. “No. I quit reading it.”

“Too bad. Then you’d know I’m originally from this rink-a-dink town.”

“Seriously?” his voice squeaks again and he clears his throat ignoring it. “Cool. How’d you get into airplane stuff?”

I laugh at his choice of words. “Well, when I was a kid, I was fascinated by *airplane stuff*. Models, remote controls, books. I wanted to know how they flew and how an engine could power fifty tons worth of metal through the air. That led me into the intricacies of engine designs. As I got older, I realized there weren’t many engine manufacturers and an idea blossomed.”

“Is this going to turn into one of those ‘if you put your mind to it, you can achieve anything you want’ speeches?”

“No. Something tells me you already know that. But I will say it’s okay to be a little nerdy.”

“You don’t look like a nerd,” he says and then smirks like the devil. “My



sister thinks you're hot."

"Kaleb!" Raine backhands his arm, looking every ounce of horrified.

Kaleb cackles while I swallow my laugh. "You feel like hitting up the beach?" I change the subject to save Raine.

He looks to his sister and exchanges a silent conversation before he looks down at his clothes. "Nah. I, um. I don't have any swim shorts." Something tells me he means that literally. I wonder if he gets to enjoy the beach much at all.

Standing, I rap my knuckles on the table. "Me neither. Come on, let's fix that."

Raine jumps to her feet. "You don't have to do that."

Instead of arguing with her, I dig my keys out from my pocket. "Yours is in the car." I hand my keys to her. "Grab it and meet us at that store." I tip my chin toward a surf shop. "I'm sure you'll be able to change in there. Come on, kid."

Kaleb is just as cautious with money as his sister. He went straight to the clearance rack, but unlike Raine, he didn't put up a fight when I led him away from it and to the section with full prices. It doesn't take him long to pick out a teal, black, and white pair. I grab a solid blue. Once paying for them, we head into the changing room.

Raine's already in her bikini and shorts when I step out from changing. She's looking at a bathing suit coverup, but when she spots me coming toward her, she quickly puts it back. I can already see the argument spinning in her head. Kaleb's not here, so I suspect I'm about to get an earful about how I shouldn't spend my money on them.

I don't give her a chance to open her mouth. I bend, giving her a quick kiss. "Please don't." I look her in the eyes. "You'll piss me off. Let the kid have some fun."

She exhales and then the best words come out of her mouth. "I don't have any sunscreen for him."

I know that took a lot for her to ask for, and it sends a warmth to spread through my chest. I grin. "Do you like the coverup?"

"You don—" The argument dies on her tongue. "Yes." She sounds small and uncomfortable, and I hate it, but I want to spoil her.

"For a day, don't struggle. Let me shoulder that for you."

She swallows down the fight, her gaze never leaving mine.

"You're not inferior. I want to spoil you, and I'm keeping it to a

minimum out of respect for you, but I'd like to have the same respect from you. Pay me back with a smile and please tack on a thank you kiss later." My lips and a brow quirk up.

Before she can reply, Kaleb shouts. "Raindrop! Check these out. Cool as shit, right? I'll catch all the girls' attention." He smooths his hands over the material with a cocky twist to his lips.

Raine groans, digging her fingers into her forehead before casting what I can only describe as a glare a mother would give their child. "Quit thinking about girls. You are way too young for that."

Oh, if she only knew. At his age, that's all he thinks about.

"We need beach towels," I switch the heat off him. "Grab three."

Thankfully, Raine goes with him, which allows me to grab the bathing suit coverup, sunscreen, a foam football, and two boogie boards because why the hell not? I'll make the bite in her eyes go away later when Kaleb isn't around. Kissing her seems to do the trick.

As we step out of the store, I hand Kaleb the items and then take the duffel bag from Raine. "Go find a good spot on the beach while I take this to the car."

When I return, the sight before me stops my feet in the sand. Kaleb and Raine sit side by side on a towel, leaning into each other as they look out across the water. They look happy and without a care. Whatever chains weigh on their shoulders aren't there, and it makes me wonder how often they get to just enjoy life together. I know they spend Sundays together, but is it a joyful time? Or is it heavy with stress? My mind instantly wanders to her frantic morning, and the anxiety that was drowning her the closer we got to the group home. She always beats around the bush when she talks about her brother, keeping the details short, and she's never brought up her family. She's always quick to turn the subject back around on me.

I have a lot of questions.

Raine insisted I stay in the car while she walks Kaleb back inside. Nerves were instantly present the moment we started to pack up and leave the beach, and while she tried to stay cheery for her brother, I could see straight through it.

The moment she comes back to the car, she's tense, muscles coiled waiting for the inevitable.

"Thank you for giving him a really good day. He needed it." She doesn't meet my gaze.

Reaching over the console, I place my hand on her thigh and give her a reassuring squeeze. She doesn't relax and it bothers me. "So did I. I haven't thrown a football on the beach in years. The kid's got a hell of an arm. Does he play sports?"

She shakes her head, still not looking at me. "No. He keeps his nose in the books."

"He's smart," I agree. "A pro at the boogie board too."

The corner of her mouth tips up but doesn't reach a full smile.

"Raine? Why is he in a group home?"

The silence that fills the car is deafening and the tension palpable. I can feel the uneasiness billowing off her and thickening the air. It turns it rigid and heavy. She stares out the window for a long while, and I begin to think she's not going to answer me. But then she sighs.

"Our parents are dead. I was twenty. Kaleb was ten. Because I wasn't financially stable to care for him, the state took him." Her tone is full of pain and chagrin.

Money. Struggling to make ends meet. Needing a second job.

Raine's been carrying a lot of weight on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry."

She doesn't respond, doesn't explain the deaths of her parents as she keeps her attention out of the window and taps a finger to the door panel. I'm sure talking about it is hard, so I don't push her for the details.

"Is he available for adoption?" I ask carefully.

"Not yet." She shakes her head so slightly I barely register it. "The state agreed to give me five years to get my shit together."

"How close are you to getting him?"

A sad, defeated laugh scrapes out of her. "The way it looks, he'll either get adopted or age out. I can't find a second job without having to travel thirty or more minutes away in a car that's on its last breath, so I'm stuck begging for overtime I can't always get."

I can't fault her for sounding bitter. The situation she's in is hard.

I park beside her SUV. I don't want to leave her when she's upset. I want to wrap my arms around her and kiss her body so she can forget, even if it's

for an hour. I want her to look just as carefree and happy as she did today on the beach as she smiled and laughed often.

“Let me walk you to your door,” I say.

Panic slithers into the greens of her eyes, brushing away the sadness. She places her hand on my forearm and blinks up to me. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t want you to. It’s my slice of quiet, untainted, and judgment-free haven.”

“You think I’d judge you?”

A pitiful smile sweeps across her lips. “Your worst is beyond my best.”

I glance to the apartments just beyond her car before back to her. “One day I’ll prove to you I don’t take notice of the things you don’t have.”

Leaning over, she presses a soft kiss to my lips. “Says the guy with a house, a penthouse, two cars, and who is insanely hot.”

So it’s the fact she lives in an apartment?

Deciding to give her the relief of the subject change, I cup the back of her head and lick across her bottom lip before sucking on it. “I’m glad you think I’m insanely hot because I find you impossibly beautiful.”

The blush that touches her cheeks makes me smirk. Slowly, I kiss her, and the tightness in my chest from her situation unravels. So do the chains that hold my heart down.

I’m falling, and I can’t do a thing to stop it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## RAINE

My skin crawls with familiar heat, an onslaught of raw desire building low in my core and making my body throb with want. I'm painstakingly aware of Holden's stare on me, undressing me from afar as he sits at the small table against the wall. He strutted into OceanBrews an hour ago, ordered a latte, sent my heart fluttering as he flirted with me, and then tipped me a twenty with a challenging and cocky smirk before sitting down. He popped open his laptop, and although he's been working, he's watched me. It's worse when he's on the phone because he tracks my every move as he talks.

"You two have been ogling each other all morning," Lucy whispers from behind me. She hits me with a warm smile when I glance to her. "It makes me happy to see you happy."

I feel the blush race up my neck and land on my cheeks. "I really like him."

"It's clear he likes you too."

"It makes me nervous," I admit. "Him being him and me being me. There are a lot of differences."

"They say opposites attract, but I think you're failing to see all the ways you two are alike."

My brows raise. "Which are?"

"For starters, your work ethic. You two might be working for different reasons, but the drive is there. You two share the same sense of humor. You two are both incredibly smart."

"I couldn't own and operate a business like him." How he manages to balance it and still get things done is baffling to me. I'd be dropping so many balls. But I've never seen Holden have an emergency. Maybe he does but

hides it from me? I make a mental note that I need to find out more about his company.

“Have you told him that you’re...” *Homeless* she wants to say but doesn’t. She believes once she puts it out into the universe, it’ll somehow find the way to the intended person unexpectantly.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ve managed to skirt around that without lying to him. But he got to meet Kaleb yesterday, and I had to admit that my parents are dead. I didn’t explain how, though. Anyway, he took us to the beach and we had a really great time, especially Kaleb.”

“Wait. He got to meet Kaleb but I haven’t? How did he manage to join in on your sacred Sundays?”

I try tucking my impish grin between my teeth, but I’m not fast enough and she catches it.

“What did you do?”

“Overslept.”

Reading between the lines, Lucy’s eyes burst wide as her mouth pops open with a gasp. “You slept with him?” she whisper-hisses.

My face is on fire. I nod.

“Well, that explains the ‘I want to bend you over the counter and fuck you right now’ look he keeps giving you.”

I drop my head into my hands. “You’re killing me.”

She titters but doesn’t say anything.

My chest squeezes with the need to talk to someone about how I’m feeling. All the chaos and messy thoughts. “I’m starting to fall for him,” I whisper.

“But you don’t want to?” Confusion is heavy in her tone. “Why not?”

I inhale a breath, needing this. Times like this I miss Mom so damn much. She’d tell me how to navigate this. “Because I know this has an expiration date. I won’t move away from Kaleb, and Holden’s life is in Colorado. I know you told me to live life and have fun, and I am, but I didn’t think I would start feeling things for him.”

Lucy’s expression shifts and it softens. “You can’t help how you feel, Raine.”

“I’m setting myself up for heart break.” I sigh. “Being with him makes me forget everything. All the stress, all the worries, all the obligations. For the first time in years, my soul feels anchored and that scares me. Kaleb should be my main focus, and he is, but Holden’s quickly stealing some of it.

And I don't want to change it."

"Maybe you should talk to him about the situation you're in?"

I chew on my lip for a moment. "He'll leave. He'll think I was using him for his money all along or realize that I'm nothing he wants because what type of well-put-together man wants an un-put-together woman."

"I think you're wrong. I think he'd want to help."

"And if he does, I'll forever be indebted to him. Will our relationship be real, or will I be working off my debt?"

Lucy squeezes my hand. "If you're happy, wouldn't that be all that matters?"

"What do you think I should do?" Because Lord knows I can't figure this out.

She thinks about it for a second. "I think you should stay happy while you figure it out. The answer will come to you."

"So, you want to be an accessory to my heartbreak too?" I give her a small smile.

"Truthfully, I don't envy the situation you're in, and I wouldn't know what the hell to do if I were in your position. But I know I'd reap the benefits while trying to figure it out. It either works itself out or I'll be here when the fallout hits."

"You're a good friend, Lucy."

"Live and have some fun," she shrugs. "That's how I got Michael."

We busy ourselves with chores—straightening the coffee area, restocking, wiping the counters. My mind has been all over the place thinking about what we discussed, and I realize I'm in a mess. I can't help but think Mom would agree with Lucy—keep having fun until you figure it out—but she'd also tell me to try not to hurt myself in the process. And *that* is what I'm doing regardless of what I do.

Holden's been engrossed in a phone conversation. He's focused on his laptop, typing, reading, and speaking. Whatever he's talking about has stolen his attention. He hasn't tracked my movements in the past ten minutes, which has given me an ample amount of time to watch him in his element. I would never get a damn thing done if I worked with him.

Concentration mars his features—a crinkle between his eyebrows, his eyes sharp with seriousness. Easygoing and relaxed Holden is just as good-looking as focused and a leader Holden. He's discarded his suit jacket on the back of the chair beside of him, and the sleeves of his sky-blue dress shirt



have been rolled up to his forearms. The fabric fits snugly against his body, and every time he moves, I can see the flex of his muscles. I notice as he listens, he occasionally he taps his finger on the edge of his laptop, other times the muscles in his jaw tighten or his lips quirk up on one side.

Working looks sexy on him.

At the three-hour mark, I make him a large coffee to go, but before I can take it to him, he's already at the counter. "When do you get off work?" he asks.

"One."

Holden checks his watch. "Do you have plans afterward?"

"If I did?" I ask, coyly.

"I'd tell you to break them and spend the day with me."

"Hmmm... That's almost tempting."

"Pack a bag and spend the night with me. We'll have dinner, a dip in the pool, some wine. I'll make sure to bring you back to work tomorrow with sore muscles." That damn cocky smirk of his. "Tempting enough now?" The promise with a low and gravelly voice melts me into a puddle.

His tongue peeks out and swipes over his bottom lip, and it takes all my strength not to close my eyes and moan. I know how skilled he is with his mouth, and with that one simple movement, I feel it all over my body.

A deep chuckle rumbles his chest and brings him back into focus for me. "I'll pick you up about one thirty." He knows what he just did. Damn him.

"I haven't agreed."

That arrogant smirk pops out a dimple. "Your body did." He winks.

Dammit. "I'll be ready by my SUV."

His gaze drops to my lips before quickly meeting my eyes again. "I'll be here."

Punctual as always, Holden picks me up at one thirty on the dot. When we arrive at his house, he pulls a spread of different meats, veggies, fruits, and bread out of the fridge and leads us outside to the table. He asks about my day, so genuinely interested it catches me off guard. It's been a long time since someone has asked me that besides my brother.

I ask about his, and he keeps it short and sweet, not divulging a lot but

enough that I understand I need to learn more about his business. It feels like we've done this for years.

His phone vibrates on the table. He checks it, glances down at his watch, and frowns. "Shit."

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He stands and then bends over me, bracing his hands on the arm rests on each side of me. An apology is coming. I can feel it. "I've got to make a call. I may be a while. I'm sorry."

Stretching up, I kiss his jaw. "Business calls. Go get all the juicy gossip."

Cupping the back of my head, his lips capture mine in a long, intoxicating kiss that makes me both dizzy and delirious. It completely invades my senses. The fingers on the back of my head tighten as he deepens it, his tongue teasing mine and causing heat to zip across my skin and settle between my legs.

Holden knows his way around a kiss. I could kiss him for days.

I slip my fingers through his hair and tug, eliciting a soft groan low in his throat.

Pulling away slightly, his gaze meets mine, his eyes dark and blazing with desire. "Fuck. Now I'll be agonizingly hard and distracted the entire call. I'll miss the gossip because I'll be fantasizing about what I'm going to do to you when I get done."

My body heats. I give him a saucy grin as he stands while adjusting his dick.

"Make yourself at home. I'll try to be as quick as possible."

Twenty minutes of waiting, I decide to take a quick dip in the pool. I do two laps before making my way back to the lounge, not bothering to dry off. I've always loved the feeling of the sun doing it for me.

Sighing happily, I rest back into the chair, close my eyes, and succumb to pure relaxation.

Feather light kisses trail across my stomach and down over my hips. Heavy hands run up the outside of my thighs, and the feeling pulls me from my sleep. Holden meets my eyes as he places a kiss on the inside of my knee.

"I'm sorry it took so long." He presses his lips to my skin again.

"You'll have to make it up to me."

A wicked grin slices across his mouth. "I plan to."

Rising to his feet, he holds out his hand for me. I slip mine into his and notice his hair is a mess, like he's run his fingers through it too many times.

“Your call go okay?”

He tugs me into him and wraps his arm around my waist, resting a hand on my ass. “No. I couldn’t stop thinking about fucking you.” He squeezes my ass and then lifts me. My legs instantly wrap around his waist, and my arms fall around his neck. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about the sounds you’ll make when I taste your pussy and sink my cock inside of you.”

His dirty talk thrills me, but something tells me his call went to shit, and I’m about to reap the reward because of it. “It sounds like you didn’t hear a thing that was said.”

“Oh. I heard.” He licks my throat as he carries me inside and to his bedroom.

When my feet hit the floor, he spins me around and tugs the strings of my bathing suit. Once I’m naked, he shifts my hair off my shoulder and trails heavy kisses along my skin, putting just the right bit of pressure to curl my toes. As his hands slide down my sides and grip my hips, I lean my back to his chest.

“Bend over.” His demand is silky, gentle, and strict, and I don’t need to be told twice.

Kneading my butt cheeks, he crouches behind me and spreads me. I gasp as his tongue licks across my clit and then moan as his hot mouth covers my pussy. He strokes my entrance and dips back to my clit.

I’m so turned on I feel like I’m going to combust. I’m on my tiptoes, my hands twisted tightly in the comforter. I drop my head on another moan, my eyes rolling shut. My hips grind against his face as he pushes his fingers into me. Thrust after thrust, a swirl of his tongue against my clit, he brings me right to the edge of my orgasm. Heat begins to lick through my limbs, the prickle of my nerves coming together just before they explode.

But then it’s gone.

No fingers.

No tongue.

No orgasm.

I make a sound of protest, and it causes him to chuckle against the back of my thighs. Then he bites my ass, not hard, but not soft either. The quick bite of pain quickly dissipates when he soothes the spot with his tongue.

He places a hand on the small of my back as he stands, firmly holding me there. “Don’t move. You look so fucking gorgeous spread out for me.”

I hear the sound of his zipper, the fabric as he undresses, the crinkle of

foil. I'm a bundle of need. My heart thunders with anticipation as he slides the tip of his dick up and down through my slick heat, and then sweet, sweet pleasure as he glides into me. He doesn't wait until I'm ready before he drags himself back out and thrusts in hard.

My name falls from his mouth in a raw, unadulterated hiss, and it sends a feverish charge all over me. My skin feels like it's electric. His hands move to the curve of my ass, wrapping around my hips and holding me still. Thrust and pull, drive and drag, he pounds into me over and over. It's brutal. It's brilliant. It's perfect.

His hands worship my skin, caressing my ass, soothing over my shoulders, and back. I feel him everywhere, exquisite and possessive.

Leaning over me, he slips his hand between my body and the mattress, brushing his fingertips over my clit. I'm mindless, making wild sounds as his mouth kisses, and he drags his teeth against my shoulder. The sounds he makes, the grunts, the pants, make me delirious. He drives harder. My breath catches in my throat as the promise of my orgasm sends ripples through my veins, lighting up every nerve ending.

My gasp turns into a mewl as my body constricts. Pleasure fills every limb. I erupt, bursting from the inside out, gripping the sheets. Holden pushes back off me and sinks his fingers into my hips to hold me still as he fucks me hard and fast. His rhythm is savage. It's all too consuming and only adds to the fire bursting in me.

When my wave crashes and begins to ebb, he pulls out of me, flips me over to my back, and sinks back in. He moves my legs to his shoulders and leans forward, bringing his face closer to mine.

Our eyes lock, and even though this feels overwhelmingly intimate, I don't dare look away. Not from the pull of his brows, the muscles clenched in his jaw, the blaze in his eyes, or the way his mouth is parted. I can't.

Holden grinds his hips into me and then draws out with several long strokes. It hits every... perfect... spot and suddenly, another orgasm tears through me. I catch sight of Holden's face twisting in pleasure, the awe in his gaze as he watches me before I succumb to the urge to close my eyes. He follows me over the ledge with a groan and slams his mouth to mine in a rough kiss.

Our breaths are shallow, bodies sweaty. He places several soft kisses to the corners of my mouth, my jaw, my chin. I can feel his heart thumping wildly against mine. I wince when he pulls out of me. I'm definitely going to

be sore tomorrow, but I don't give a damn.

A few hours later, after dinner, after we fooled around in the kitchen as we cleaned it, I'm lying in his arms, limp-limbed and satiated again. The moonlight filters into the room through the French doors, sweeping across the room. He didn't bring up the call he had all afternoon, and it makes me wonder if he'll even talk to me about it.

"Your call earlier didn't go well, did it?" I ask.

"What makes you think that?"

I giggle under my breath. "You were a bit more... frustrated today."

The rumble of a quiet hum vibrates my palm that's on his chest. He doesn't immediately reply. Silence fills the room for several long minutes as he draws soft lazy lines up and down my arm. "I've got to go back to Colorado tomorrow." He sounds unhappy about it. "I won't be able to come back for a few weeks."

My heart fractures at his words and I hate that it does. Our little bubble has burst. But we've known this is part of whatever this is. I've known, but it doesn't quell the ache in my chest. I wonder if he feels this way too?

Shifting, Holden rolls to his side, props his elbow up on his pillow, and puts his head on his hand. He sweeps my hair from my face with eyes full of an emotion I can't quite put a finger on. "I don't want to leave," he says softly. Something tells me that's a colossal moment for him too. "I want to stay here and continue to build whatever this is. I don't know how we're going to make this work, or if you even want a relationship, but I'm going to keep coming back until you tell me to stop."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to stop. We're charting dangerous territory, one that involves more of my heart, more emotions, more everything. I need to tell him my secrets before either one of us get any deeper. How my selfish father took my mother with him and broke my family into pieces, and now I'm homeless without a break in sight. But I can't push the words past my lips. For once, I'm too damn scared to lose him and all these feelings he evokes because I'm sick of feeling lost.

I can feel the emotions tightening my throat. Before he has the chance to see them in my eyes, I press a kiss to his lips. It's supposed to be a short, quick kiss, but when Holden cups my face and deepens it, what follows behind it is pure passion.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## HOLDEN

It's been three days since I had to leave Raine, and I'm nothing but a lovesick puppy, pining for her and barely functioning. My days have consisted of meeting after meeting trying to juggle between a major fuck-up by one of our suppliers and the Boeing project. Even with the excitement of Boeing's approval of our design and my team working on the manufacturing line, I still can't keep her off my mind.

For the first time since starting Slade Engines, I'm trying to figure out ways to run it from afar. I'm hands on, always present, always available. But as of lately, I've been trying to unscramble my thoughts about Raine and putting in real thought about handing some of the reins over to the people I know are very capable of running it without me always present so I can figure out what exactly is going on between Raine and me. In my gut, I know I want more. I want every damn thing she has to offer me and more. Even though this is new, I know without a shadow of a doubt, I want her in my future.

I drop myself into my chair behind my desk like the weight of the world sits on my shoulders and rake my hands up my face. I'm smart enough to know I can't have my cake and eat it too, but it's exactly what I'm trying to do.

I live in Colorado. Raine lives in Florida.

My business is here. Kaleb is there.

Neither one of us can cut ties easily, which makes the situation painful.

Long distant relationships don't sound appealing. Hell, with the way I've been feeling since I left her, it sounds like an awful idea. I'm miserable missing her, and let's not forget about how damn distracted I am.

Raine doesn't have the means to fly to me, and I know she won't accept me buying her a plane ticket every damn weekend. Plus, that takes away from her working for the money she needs although I could offer her a weekend job here, something easy that won't take much of her time. She'd probably smother me with a pillow if I offer her anything.

I tug at my hair.

A soft knock on my office door pulls my stare away from the paperwork in front of me and into the face of Janie. She stands in the threshold with her laptop against her chest and sadness oozing from her features.

"Got a minute?"

"Yes." I straighten in my chair. I may be miserable, but I'm still the leader. I need to look like I have my shit together, even if I don't.

She sits in the chair across from my desk instead of the leather couch like she normally does. "You look miserable, Holden," she says tenderly as she opens her laptop.

"I'm tired," I half lie. I didn't sleep well last night thinking of all the ways I can make this work with Raine.

Her eyes narrow. "And I'm the queen of England."

"Should I bow?" I offer a smile.

She rolls her eyes and then jumps right into work. "You're packed full of meetings and travel for the next several weeks. Your meeting with Airbus next week has been confirmed, and they'll have all their head execs there. Aaron and Mason will be attending with you. The week after is Bombardier. Mason and Marshall will be with you. The following week are the quarterlies with each department followed by the chief and managerial meetings."

I've never resented myself so much for being hands on. Before Raine, I lived for this. Breathed it. Now I'm staring at my calendar with hatred. At this rate, I'll be buried back into work without seeing her at all.

"You have a dinner meeting with Bill Furner from Bearing Tech next Thursday, but he called and asked to move it to Wednesday. It can work if you move the meeting with Unison Bearings to earlier in the day."

I nod. "That will work out to my advantage. Bill's desperate to kiss my ass since the screwup and Patrick's determined to gain my business. Having them back-to-back will be interesting."

She nods as she types. "You also have Tuesday's Door, the charity gala in New York in two weekends. You—"

"Cancel that and make a large donation." That's the weekend I told Raine



I'd be back. No damn way I'll miss it.

"It's aviation themed. They're expecting the leading commercial engine supplier to attend especially since you've already RSVPed."

My brows knit together. "When did I RSVP?"

"Six months ago."

I sigh. "I'm assuming I added a plus one. You and Toby go in my place. You're capable of representing—"

"Holden," she interrupts sternly. "They're expecting you and a plus one."

A plus one... an idea blossoms. "Would you be upset if I took someone else?"

Janie's grin is immediate, and it touches her eyes. "I'd be upset if you took me *instead* of that certain someone else."

Now I'm challenged with convincing Raine to take off work and let me spoil her for a few days. I'm not looking forward to the work that will involve before she caves.

I step into my penthouse and head straight for the shower to wash my day away. Once I throw on a pair of lounge pants, not bothering with a shirt, and make a glass of bourbon, I grab my phone and hit the sofa to call Raine. We've texted a lot in the past three days, quick hellos and her witty thoughts, which I especially enjoy, but nothing compares to hearing her voice. That's my favorite part of the day.

"You're early today. Did you sneak out of work?" she answers.

My smile is automatic as her voice erases the stresses of my day. "I did. Don't tell anyone."

She laughs and I picture the way her eyes shine when she does.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Actually, I just left. Your favorite person didn't show up to work today, so I covered her shift."

My brows pull together. "Another double?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't a very busy day. I basically babysat a bunch of chairs. How about you? Did you have a good day?"

"It was full of meetings."

The groan she releases is playful. "That sounds like a prison sentence. Do

you have to pay attention, or can you doodle?”

I chuckle as I take a swallow of my bourbon before replying. “Paying attention is important although I haven’t been too focused lately.”

“That’s not good. You’re supposed to be on top of things, eager, and with a pocket protector.”

Thank goodness I wasn’t taking a drink. I bark a laugh. “Aren’t those for nerds?”

“Eh. Toe-may-toe, tah-mah-toe.” I love her sarcasm.

I take a breath, steeling myself for an impending argument. “Can you take off the weekend in two weeks?”

“Um, I’m not sure. Why?”

“I have a charity gala and was hoping you’d be my plus one.”

“Oh,” she exhales and then falls silent.

“I promise to have you back in time to see Kaleb on Sunday,” I add before she can get too far into her head.

“What would I have to wear?”

Seems like I didn’t get far enough. This is going to be the tricky part. Although I respect and enjoy the fact she doesn’t want me to spend my money on her, it frustrates me that I can’t simply spoil her without bracing for impact.

“I’ll take care of all of it. You’ll stay with me.”

She’s quiet, and it makes my pulse pick up. If she says no, I may just have to kidnap her because no way can I go three weeks without seeing her.

“Please,” I add softly when the silence stretches out.

“Is there a way I can repay you?” Her voice is barely a whisper, and I hate that I’m not there to reassure her with a kiss that she is not insufficient.

“Yes. Be my date. Be on my arm. You’ll be my trophy because I know you’ll outshine every damn woman there with your beauty. And make sure you bring your smile because fuck, I miss the hell out of it.”

She goes quiet again and I let her have this moment. “I’ll ask Cathy if I can have it off in the morning.”

Sweet relief surges through me. “You’ve just made me the happiest man in the world.”

“Don’t get too comfortable, Holden. The only reason I’ve agreed to this is so I can strangle you when I see you.”

“As long as I get to see you, I’ll die a happy man.”

She titters and dammit I wish she was here.

I want to tell her that I'm falling wildly in love with her, and I'm downright miserable without her, how I miss her scent, the way her tongue peeks out from the corner of her mouth when she's deep in thought, and how I think about her all the damn time.

But I don't because I can't. For once, I have what ifs stealing my confidence. If she doesn't feel the same way, I'll lose her, and that would fucking destroy me. If she only knew how much of me she owns... I've never given a woman this much of me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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## RAINE

Cathy ended up letting me have the weekend off, plus Thursday since I've been covering everyone's shifts. Holden jumped all over it when I told him, and instead of flying out tomorrow, he booked my flight for today. Although I need to work, I'm more eager to see him. It's been almost two weeks since I have, and texts and phone calls aren't cutting the need to touch him.

Thankfully, Lucy has the morning off too and offered to bring me to the same little airport Holden brought me to for our helicopter ride. When I asked him if commercial flights fly out of here, he skirted around my question and told me not to worry and that everything is taken care of. That didn't help my nerves. I've only ever flown once, and that was with Holden. Now I'll be in a tube with wings alone. My lungs are tight, and I can't get enough air. My heart pounds, and dammit, I'm sweating. Holden's going to think I'm crazy when I come running off the plane and kiss the ground.

"Text me when you get there." Lucy's done well keeping me distracted, but there's no way she can now.

I blow a long breath out of my mouth. "You think he'll be upset if I don't show? How long do you think it would take to drive instead?"

Lucy laughs, dropping her head to the back of the seat as she does. "And here I thought you were nervous on your first date with him."

"I'm only a few more shallow breaths away from a panic attack."

Lucy's expression changes from laughing at me to immensely amused. Great. I'm definitely losing my mind. "Well, I think you better take a few more deep breaths because I don't think you're getting out of this." She tips her chin behind me.

Turning, all the air rushes from my lungs. My heart stalls and then cuts a

few cartwheels before tumbling into my stomach. It's a wild sensation. Holden strides toward me, all swagger and confidence, looking as if he's stepped right out of a movie. Dark blue slacks, a white dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up his forearms, sunglasses. Shit, he's gorgeous.

"Ho-lee shit," I voice.

"My thoughts exactly." Lucy sounds just as breathless as I feel.

After not seeing him all this time, I forget about everything as a burst of elation storms through me. I scramble out of the car and rush toward him.

Holden stalks right up to me, cups my head, and slams a kiss to my mouth. It's slow and deep and soft and urgent. So many emotions are being poured into this kiss, I fist the fabric of his shirt to keep on my feet.

"I've missed you so fucking much," he whispers thickly against my mouth and then presses several more quick kisses to my lips.

I feel dizzy as I smile up to him and smooth his shirt. "I couldn't tell."

"You two are so fricking adorable," Lucy says from behind me.

It steals Holden's gaze as he glances up to her. "Hey, Lucy. Thanks for bringing her." He releases me and goes to grab my—*Lucy's*—suitcase.

Lucy gives me a hug. "Enjoy. Have fun. And don't forget to let me know when you get there." She hits Holden with a stern glare. "Don't let her forget."

"I won't." He laces his fingers with mine. "You ready?"

"No," I give him a dose of my honesty.

He squeezes my hand and gives me the sexiest smirk. "You'll do fine."

If he keeps looking at me like that, I have no doubt.

Once I give Lucy one more hug, Holden guides us toward the front of the hangar, and when we round the corner, my feet falter. A white plane, smaller than a commercial one, sits with the door open and stairs down.

"You're kidding me?"

A chuckle is all he gives me as he brings me to the stairs and tips his chin for me to go on. My poor knees shake as I ascend the steps, and I pause just before I step across the threshold. It's the thing keeping me safe on the ground. Holden nudges me in by the small of my back. Of course, he's getting a kick out of this. A sexy rumble proves it.

If I didn't know any better, I could think I'm in a small, tubular apartment. It's got white leather seats and even a couch with black and white throw pillows, a small table, and gray flooring. It's cozy. It's beautiful. It's a damn airplane.

He deposits my suitcase in a seat, grabs my hand again and moves me to a white and extremely comfortable seat.

He drops in beside me, leans over, and kisses my cheek. "Breathe."

"If I breathe anymore, I'll hyperventilate."

"Are you ready, Mr. Slade?"

*Mr. Freaking Slade.*

Holden looks to me expectantly with a smirk and an arched brow that in this very moment, I want to smack off his face. Here I am seconds away from a heart attack and he's looking delicious as ever.

"I'm Terri, Mr. Slade's flight attendant." She's probably sixty and looks like the sweetest grandmother. I may need to hug her. Possibly while I'm bawling from fear. "Would you like anything to drink?" Even her voice is sweet.

"A water, please." Holden answers for me.

With a nod, she disappears behind us.

"You have a damn airplane." I'm not angry, I'm just trying to grasp a sense of reality.

"Slade Engines does. I do not."

I snort. He *is* Slade Engines. "I should've driven."

Chuckling, he takes my sweaty hand and dips his head to meet my gaze. There's a wickedly sexy glint in his. "There's a bed in the back. I can help you forget all about being nervous."

My mouth drops open.

"We could join the mile high club together on your first flight." He waggles his brows.

I know what he's doing, and I adore the hell out of him for it, but the rational part of my brain that wants to do that is nowhere to be found. "How in the world can you think about sex when we're in a giant tuna can with engines?"

He laughs as he kisses the back of my hand. "They're my engines. They're safe."

I scoff.

"I've missed you." He doesn't even try to hide the laughter in his voice.

Before I can tell him how much I missed him until he put me in this tube, Terri hands me a glass of water. I take a huge, unlady-like gulp. Holden buckles me in just as the engines fire up. My pulse threatens to break my ribs and burst out of my chest. My body begins to vibrate with fear. I wasn't this

nervous in the helicopter. What the hell?

Holden takes the glass from me, sets it in the cup holder on the other side of him, and then slides his hands into my hair, bringing my face to his. His gaze is anchored onto mine as he kisses the corners of my mouth and nibbles my bottom lip.

“You’re going to be really mad at me,” he says low.

My face scrunches, my brows knitting together. “Why?”

“We’re not going to Colorado.”

“What?” I try to lean away from him, but he holds me in place by the hand in my hair.

“The gala is in New York.”

A pressure settles heavy on my chest, pushing me further back into the seat. I see the scenery moving outside the window, but I’m too focused on his words and the exasperation they make me feel. “In New York?” My temper causes my voice to squeak. “I can’t pay you back for any of that, Holden. It’s New Y—”

“You’ve already brought your smile and you’ve held my hand.” He chuckles with a playful gleam, completely ignoring my anger. “And I’ve quite enjoyed you freaking out. But most importantly, that kiss when I got to put my eyes on you could pay for a thousand trips.”

Dammit. I blush. Traitorous body.

His fingers curve around my neck as he brings our faces closer and drops his forehead to mine. “I know you hate when I spoil you, and I’m trying to be respectful of that, but I wish you’d give me this occasionally. You have no idea what that look of awe on your face does to me.”

My heart skips a beat and then another. His words cause a flurry of thoughts and sensations to move through me. I exhale through my nose. “You’re a very stubborn man.”

His lips spread out in a sexy grin. “Yeah? I’m learning from the best.”

I close the distance between our mouths and give him a kiss with a laugh. But what was supposed to be a simple kiss, Holden deepens, and it becomes a slow, sensual torture. Chills race over my skin and cause goosebumps to spread while a silky warm heat chases right behind it.

“I’ve missed you so damn much,” he rasps.

The way he sounds, the look in his eyes, the emotions dancing between us... “I love you” is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t bring myself to tell him, to be that vulnerable and open to him. I know he wants to try at a



relationship, but I'm still hiding part of myself. Still got a mask on. Still scared he'll leave.

So instead of telling him what's soul deep, I offer a smile. "I've missed you too."

"I don't like having time zones between us," he says, and dammit, my chest threatens to explode. I need to slow down. "Let me show you around the plane." He unbuckles. I grip the armrest, unmoving. He reaches and unbuckles my seat belt. "Come on."

Clutching my hand, he helps my shaky legs to stand, and for the next little while, he shows me his fancy ass plane that he says he doesn't own even though he fucking owns it. No mile high club was joined although we said a lot of jokes and innuendos while a lot of touching and kissing happened. Maybe one day, but today's not the day to have a one-flight stand.

Terri, in fact, is the most precious woman I've ever met, and I may have adopted her as my grandmother. Holden doesn't hog all my time. He shares me with Terri, and I love him more for it. All the distractions helped me not think about being in a metal kite.

After we land, we head to pick up his rental where I pull to an abrupt stop when I see it.

Holden pauses beside me. "I think Janie is trying to impress you."

I give him a sidelong glance that says "whatever," but I don't say anything.

He puts our bags into the trunk and we climb in.

"I've always heard you don't really need a car in New York," I say.

He cranks the engine and shakes his head. "You don't, but I don't like not having one. Makes me feel stranded."

Getting to the hotel took twenty-five minutes and check-in only five minutes more. Janie is really good at her job.

"Ho-lee shit." The words tumble out of me when we walk into the hotel room. I knew it was going to be beautiful from how the lobby looked, but this? This is incredible and more like a high-class apartment. Hotels that I can afford have a bed, a TV, and a crappy coffee maker on the dresser. But I'm standing in the middle of elegance. A small kitchen with black granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances is to my right. The living room has a gray sofa, matching chairs, and tall lamps with floor-to-ceiling windows that showcase New York City behind it.

This is a movie set. It has to be.

I find Holden in the bedroom—one of the *separate* bedrooms, as in not in the same room as everything else—hanging up his suit bags. The floor-to-ceiling windows extend into the room, the dresser and decor just as stylish and sophisticated as the rest of the place. To say I’m a little awed is an understatement.

Holden moves to me and rubs his hands up and down my arms. “I like the look on your face.”

“The one that proves I’m entirely out of my element?”

“You look beautiful when you’re awestruck.” He kisses my forehead. “Are you hungry?”

After not eating this morning or during the flight, my answer is definitely, “Yes.”

“Do you want to order room service, or would you like to go out?”

I take in his face. He looks completely worn out with exhaustion heavy on his features. Dark circles have dulled his blue eyes, and scruff peppers his jaw. He woke up early to surprise me so I didn’t have to fly alone. Even as busy as he’s been, he still had the notion to make sure I wouldn’t be anxiety ridden by myself. And that’s after his dinner meeting ran late last night.

“Let’s order room service and just relax. I know you’ve been busy.”

The smile he hits me with is full of appreciation and it melts my heart. While he’s busy wanting to spoil me with his fancy-pants ways, I want to spoil him with the things he seems to not give himself—relaxation.

“I’ll grab the menu,” he says.

While he places our order, I shoot Lucy a quick text letting her know we arrived to the hotel, but before she can respond, Holden takes my hand with a naughty gleam in his eyes and leads us to the bathroom. He reaches into the walk-in shower, flips on the water, and then slips his fingers into my hair before brushing his lips across mine.

“You’re taking a shower with me.” My body hums with pleasure at his demand.

He knew while we were flying I wouldn’t be able to really concentrate on anything much other than the fact that we were flying. Although he helped keep me distracted by touches and kisses, he worked me up. And he knows it. He also thoroughly enjoyed it as much as I did.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I reach out and start undoing the buttons on his shirt. He grabs the hem of mine and pulls it over my head and then reaches behind me to unsnap my bra. I moan when he palms my breasts

and then gasp when he pinches my nipples, bringing his mouth to my neck. I unbuckle his belt and unfasten his pants, but before I push them down his legs, he grabs a condom from his wallet.

Quickly, I step out of my leggings as scalding hot excitement rushes through my veins. I've missed him... all of him. He wraps his arms around my waist, bringing our naked bodies together, and steps us backward into the spray. His mouth slams to mine in a hard kiss fueled with impatience and need. One hand slides up my back to splay between my shoulder blades, the other firmly squeezing my ass.

I wrap my fingers around his dick and stroke it, thrilled at the half hiss, half moan he gives me. He places open-mouth kisses to my neck and drags his hand down my body, settling between my legs. He presses his fingers into me at the same time he sinks his teeth into the curve of my neck. I all but explode right there. It's been too long since I've felt him.

"You're already wet for me." I can hear how pleased he is with that.

"I've missed you." I blink up to him, giving him a peek of my vulnerability.

It seems to spur him on. Grabbing my waist, he twists me to the wall and places my palms to the tile. "I'm too fucking impatient to wait to feel you. I'm taking what I want now." His voice is husky against my ear and I almost feel the restraint snapping in it. "I'll give after dinner."

The crinkle of the foil sends a zing of anticipation as hot as lava to burn down my body. Arching my back, I grind my ass against his crotch to show him I'm just as impatient as he is.

He grabs my ass and then plunges deep inside of me.

I moan.

He hisses.

Both his hands clutch my hips, his fingers spreading over my ribs, holding on tightly as he pumps into me, pulling my body down to meet his hard thrusts.

It's rough.

It's raw.

And my body sings its praises.

Water cascades around us, steam filling the area. Moans and grunts, the sound of our skin coming together echo off the walls. It's erotic as hell and intensifies the pleasure.

Holden lifts my leg and places my foot to the bench without ever losing

his pace. The change of angle amplifies all the right spots he's hitting. Every. Single. One. Of. Them.

The thrumming inside of me becomes deafening as my pulse soars into my ears. I cry out, splintering apart. My fingers try to find purchase on the slick tile to no avail and I arch more, grinding frantically. Holden's thrusts grow urgent, harder, primal, and raw. I feel him swell, and as I look over my shoulder, I'm just in time to see all the pleasure in his face. His jaw clenches and eyes roll shut as a groan pushes out between his gritted teeth. The grip he has on my hips becomes relentless, and he shoves forward one last time before dropping his head.

Gently, he pulls out of me as he moves my shaky leg off the bench and turns me to face him. His arms fall around me and he drops his head to the top of mine. I slide my hands around to his back and we stand under the water trying to catch our jagged breaths. I've missed him more than I realized I did. My heart is in this more than I realized it was.

We stay standing like this for a long time while all the emotions swirl in my chest. I want to be honest and give him a slice of my vulnerability by telling him how I feel and how I can't control it anymore. I want to tell him how he's untangled the barbed wire I've placed around my heart, how he's chipping away every brick in the wall. I want to beg him to never leave me and to promise he'll never hurt me. I want to tell him all my secrets.

But I don't.

The fear of him leaving me controls that.

As we finish getting dressed, our food arrives, and instead of eating at the table, we eat in the bed. The TV is on, but we're not paying attention to it. We're both talking about our weeks while we were apart. I listen as he tells me about his meetings and his projects he's working on, and he listens when I tell him about the coffee shop and how pathetic my job hunting is going. When I say I feel cursed, he laughs and tells me maybe it's a blessing. I love his support.

When I get back from taking our trash to the garbage and brushing my teeth, Holden's lying back in the bed, shirtless with the sheet pulled up to his hips... fast asleep. He doesn't stir when I turn off the lights, nor when I gently snuggle up beside him. I knew I made the right choice by staying in tonight. I saw the exhaustion on his face even though he tried his best to conceal it.

Outside the night is early, people are still milling around, but I don't give

a damn. There's absolutely no place I'd rather be.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## HOLDEN

I wake with Raine pressed against my side with her arm draped over my stomach. She has an entire king-sized bed, yet she's cocooned into me. I can't contain my smile. I could wake up to her every day. I always sleep the best with her nuzzled into my side. She looks peaceful with her wild hair spread out on the pillow behind her, her lashes fanning her cheeks, and her mouth is slightly parted. I don't know what I like more—the way her smile touches her eyes or how she looks when she sleeps. I wanted to spend time with her last night, but after dinner, my exhaustion sank its claws in deep.

Quietly, I slip out of the bed and head to the bathroom. After I'm done and have washed my hands and brushed my teeth, I go to the kitchen and give the coffee maker my full attention. Room service follows in close second. I check my emails and drink my coffee as I wait for the food, and once it arrives, I set everything up on the table. Then I make Raine a cup of coffee and go wake my sleeping beauty.

She hasn't moved an inch from where I left her. I brush her hair from her forehead, and her eyes flutter open instantly, landing on me. A sleepy smile sweeps across her lips.

"Good morning. I brought coffee," I lift the cup, "and breakfast is waiting on us in the kitchen."

She stretches, arching her back as she brings her arms above her before she sits up. "I slept soooo good."

"I did too. I'm sorry I fell asleep on you. I wanted to—"

"You were tired," she interrupts me. "It was written all over you. Don't apologize. I'm just glad you got some sleep. You needed it."

Another piece of my heart unchains and my chest squeezes at the warmth

it unravels. I kiss her cheek. "Come on. Our food is getting cold."

Five minutes later, she comes into the kitchen still in her pajamas, but I notice her face pink from where she washed it and her hair is brushed. She looks like a damn angel with how the sunshine follows her into the room, haloing her silhouette.

"I had no idea what you wanted, so I got a spread of everything," I say.

She takes in the scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, waffles, hash browns and fruit and then blinks up to me. "You're going for brownie points today?"

I chuckle over the rim of my coffee cup. It's everything she likes. "More of an apology for falling asleep."

Her brow arches and she gives me the cutest "shut up" look, but she doesn't say anything.

We sit in comfortable silence and eat our breakfast. One thing I've learned about Raine is she takes breakfast pretty seriously. She also has to let her brain wake up, so she doesn't talk much in the mornings.

"What's the plan today?" she asks as she places her napkin beside her empty plate and grabs her coffee before resting back into the chair.

This is part of my plan I know she's going to fight me on. Her pride will get in the way and she'll argue that I shouldn't spend my money on her. I'm prepared for it, but I'm not looking forward to it.

"Today, we get you a dress and if we have time before the gala, we'll go sightseeing." She's told me she's never visited anywhere outside of Florida. I'm excited to see her face when she takes in New York.

The argument is there. I watch as unease glazes her beautiful green eyes. Her shoulders tense up, and she taps her finger on the side of her coffee mug. It's her telltale of her nerves. "I know I agreed, but this is still hard for me."

Reaching out, I take her coffee cup, place it on the table, and then pull her to my lap. With her legs on either side of me, she wraps her arms around my shoulders as her fingers skim the back of my neck. I rest a hand on her hip, using the other to tuck her hair behind her ear. "I know, but I'm hoping one day you'll learn to be okay with it. I love seeing the way you light up, and I thoroughly enjoy knowing I had a hand in it."

"So, you do it to stroke your ego?"

"I wish you could see what you look like through my eyes," I tell her. "The way your eyes sparkle, the beautiful smile on your face. Maybe then you'd learn to be okay with it. I'm not doing anything I don't want to do, and I definitely have the means."



She averts her gaze. "It's just different for me." I hate how small she sounds.

"Good. I want to be different than anything you've ever had. I'm determined to be a cut above the rest. I want to give you everything, Raine—from expensive dresses to scrambled eggs and everything in between. I respect how you want to pave your own way, and while I wish I could give you the world to help you along the way, I know that's not the way to your heart. What you want more is me beside you, and that's where I'll be, but I'm going to spoil too. I'm great at business, but I'll admit I'm not good with communicating emotions very well. That's how I show my feelings. It's the only way I know to."

Her eyes are soft as her fingers continue to play with the hair at the nape of my neck. I love you is right there on the tip of my tongue. I desperately want to tell her, but I freeze. Although I'm pretty damn sure she feels the same way I do, I'm scared to scare her off. The last thing I want to do is lose her.

She takes a moment before she says, "I promise I'll try to do better."

Fire catches in her eyes as does mischief. Leaning down, she licks across my bottom lip as she rocks her hips. The friction swells my dick. My fingers tighten around her hips. She drags her fingers along my shoulders and down to my chest where she presses her palms into it. I love the way she looks at me, the way my body affects her. I tug her shirt over her head and am more than happy she's not wearing a bra. I suck her taut nipple into my mouth. She moans and grinds her pussy against the swell in my pants.

My hands graze down her stomach and slip into her shorts to find she's not wearing any panties *and* she's fucking soaked.

I grin devilishly. "You're greedy for me." My voice is thick.

She bites her lip. "It's hard not to be when you're looking this hot."

I love the way her words make me feel. I stand, intending to rid us of our clothes, but before I can rip those tiny shorts off her body, she tucks her thumbs into my waist band and sinks to her knees. Her tongue sweeps across the head of my dick, her wide hungry eyes rolling up to me just as she sucks me into her mouth.

"Shit," I growl, trying to keep my gaze on her and not let my eyes roll to the back of my head.

I bask in the glory of her being on her knees, my cock sliding in and out of her mouth, over her lips as her hand meets the bob of her head. I stand

still, focusing on not fucking her mouth as hard as I want until I fucking can't.

Wrapping her hair around my hand, I guide her a little deeper, thrusting into her mouth a little faster. She takes it. All of it. Fuck. My blood hums, flames licking up my spine. She cups my balls as her tongue swirls. She sucks harder, takes me in further.

My skin comes alive. I'm crazy with need. "Stop." I tug her hair. She comes off my dick with a pop.

I pull her up and slam my mouth to hers, kissing her roughly. Breaking the kiss, she shimmies out of her shorts, and I snatch my wallet from the counter, grateful I tipped the hotel employee. I rip the condom open like my life depends on it, roll it down my dick, and am about to bend her over the table when she plants her hands on my chest and pushes me to sit. She throws her legs on either side of me, straddling me as she lines up my dick and sinks down.

This time, I can't stop my eyes from rolling. She feels so fucking good. Gripping her hips, I hold on as she begins a steady pace, up and down, gyrating. The way she looks, the way she sounds... not a fucking thing in this world is as good as this. As her.

Her hands are on my chest, and she begins rocking fervently. A flush creeps up from her breasts, up her neck, and across her face. My fingers flex. I thrust upward, teetering on the edge, barely hanging on as I deepen my strokes. I need her to get there because I'm about to lose it.

Reaching between us, my thumb finds her clit. She drops her head back with a moan, pushing her tits into my face, and begins working me harder, faster. Frantically. Her pussy tightens and I clench my teeth, determined to wring out her pleasure, but as a shudder races down her body and she grinds so deeply down on me, she pulls me over the edge too.

"Shit, Raine." I growl, quickening my thrusts, fucking upward.

After we slow, she drops her head to my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around her. Our shallow breaths fill the room as my heart thunders in my chest.

A few minutes later, she pushes up and looks me in the eyes. In that second, I see every emotion, the words both of us aren't saying, and then it's gone when she blinks. "I was impatient," she throws my words back at me with a roguish gleam in her gaze. "I need to shower. Come with me."

I grin at her, still drunk from my orgasm. "Gladly."

We step through the glass doors of the boutique, and I hear Raine suck in a breath. I take her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze just as a lady with red hair pulled back into an elegant slick bun approaches. She's in a black pant suit with bright red high heels and matching lipstick.

"Welcome to Luvelle Couture. My name is Marion. What can I help you with?"

"We're looking for a gown," I say.

Marion's eyes rove over Raine's body, and she hits us with a blinding smile. Clearly, she loves what she sees. Me too, Marion. Me too. "With a body like yours, there isn't a dress here that won't be perfect for you."

Pink tinges Raine's cheeks.

Marion reaches out, takes Raine's hand, and flicks her gaze at me. "You're more than welcome to come join our fun or you can wait in the waiting room. Or, if you prefer to get out of all of it, there's a coffee shop three doors down."

"I'll wait out here," I answer her, giving Raine an amused look. She thought I'd choose the coffee, I bet.

Marion smiles back to Raine and leans into her like they've been the best of friends for years. "Come on, gorgeous. Let's make sure you knock his socks off."

I make my way to the waiting room and scan through my emails. Janie has forwarded a report from my operations team with a note in the subject line titled: DO NOT LOOK AT THIS AND ENJOY YOUR TIME. Chuckling, I go against her wishes and open it.

I have no idea how long I sit here pushing through many emails and reports when Marion steps into the room. Her smile is wide, all-knowing, and very pleased. "We're all done. She's finishing up with getting dressed, and my team is packaging the dress. She's got the perfect body and thankfully no alterations were necessary. I'm more than positive you'll be very pleased with what she chose."

Raine could wear a trash bag, and I'd still find her attractive.

Since we still have several hours until the gala, after I pay for the dress and take it to the car, I take Raine to lunch and show her around New York. I love every second of the way her eyes take in everything with awe.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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## RAINE

When I chose this dress, I had a lot more confidence than I do now, thanks to Marion and her well-timed compliments. But now that she's not here to hype me up, my nerves are getting the better of me. My hair is up in an exaggerated, chunky French braid with messy loops tucked at my nape in a loose bun with strands falling around my face. Thank you, YouTube. My makeup is more than I usually do, and I gave my eyes a smoky look but didn't go heavy on anything. I'm not trying to cover up just accentuate.

The navy-blue dress I chose clings to every curve of my body before the fabric gracefully flows down my legs to my silver heels. The neckline plunges between my breasts showing off just how little cleavage I have, and my back is open. Marion insisted a bare back will tease Holden and the slit that slices up my leg to my thigh will make him lose his mind. I've never dressed like this. I just hope Marion is right and Holden loves it.

I take in a deep breath and steel my insecurities before heading out to Holden. The click of the bedroom door seems to echo louder when I step out. Holden is straightening his cuffs as he turns, and immediately my breath gets sucked right out of me. Ho-lee shit. He's in a tuxedo, sharp and well-fitted, snug against all his delicious muscles. He's clean shaven and he's kept his hair the way I love it so much—tousled. Holden looks more suave than ever and every bit of sexy perfection.

He devours every inch of me from my head to my toes and back up. When his gaze meets mine, they're blazing with desire.

"Do I look okay?" I ask, my nerves making my voice shake as I look down at myself.

"No." My head snaps up, my eyes flying to his face. "You are absolutely

brehtaking.” He eats up the distance between us. “You...” His gaze roams over me again. “Shit, Raine. You’re going to outshine every damn one tonight. The red carpet should be rolled out for you.”

Dammit, I blush.

His hand slips into the slit and he grips my thigh, pulling me against his body. “I’m going to have a damn good time taking this dress off you tonight.” With a heavy sigh, he takes a step back, brings my hand to his mouth, and kisses my knuckles. “I’m also going to ruin your makeup tonight.”

If I thought I was nervous getting ready for the gala, nothing compares to how I feel when we pull up to the venue. I tap my toes, tap my fingers to my thighs, and twist my ring, which catches his attention often. He tells me to shake it off. I tell him my boobs will fall out. Of course, that grants me his sexy grin and a plea for me to do it. It makes me laugh.

As the valet opens the doors, Holden tells me to wait until he comes to my side. When I slide my hand into his and allow him to help me out, bright lights begin to flash, the sound of cameras clicking becomes a deafening uproar, and questions start being thrown from all directions.

I sway slightly, but Holden tucks my hand through his arm to keep me steady. My pulse soars into my ears and my heart promises to burst out of my chest. My breath comes fast as I try taking a sip of air, but my lungs aren’t pacified. I feel dizzy as panic starts to tingle in my stomach.

Holden leans down, placing his mouth right beside my ear. “Breathe,” he whispers. “None of this is inside. It’s quieter, less busy. I promise.”

It doesn’t go unnoticed how his voice helps settle my fears, but if I could muster up the strength to glower at him right now, I would. He didn’t even give me a warning. Instead, he led me into the bear’s den without so much as preparing me. I’ll strangle him later.

With his shoulders pulled back and a polite smile on his face, Holden guides us inside. He doesn’t answer any of the questions being shouted. I can barely understand them. They’re coming from all different angles. By all the ruckus, they act as if he’s famous.

Just as he promised, the moment we step through the beautiful tall doors, soft music fills the area and drowns out the photographers. He surprises me when he doesn’t go straight into the ballroom, instead moving us to the far side of the large room away from everyone.

“You good?” he asks, concern lacing his tone.

I blow out a breath. “A warning would’ve been nice,” I hiss.

Dipping his head, he kisses my cheek. “A warning would’ve had you more strung out than you already were.” He drops his view to where I twist my ring and slides his hand into mine, brushing his thumb along my finger. “Tell me about your ring.” He looks at me. “You’ve only worn it twice since I’ve met you.”

The memory pulls my lips up but puts an ache in my chest. “My mother gave it to me on my sixteenth birthday.” I give him a sad, watery smile. “Anytime I’m nervous about something, I wear it. She was the strongest person I knew, and I like to think I can feel her strength through it.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat and look at the diamonds sparking under the lights. “It makes me feel close to her.”

Holden cups my face. Something flickers in his gaze as he smooths his thumb across my cheek. I lean into his touch, feeling grounded. “She’d be proud of you, Raine.” He gives me a soft kiss.

With his hand on the small of my back, Holden leads me through the lobby and into the ballroom. Soft music plays, barely audible over the hushed conversations. Blue and purple lights climb up the walls and shine across the high-vaulted ceiling where lights that look like a thousand tiny dancing stars hang above us. Round tables covered in white cloths line three of the four walls, and in the middle is a marbled dance floor cascaded in dim lighting.

All around us people mingle. Women in elegant gowns and expensive jewelry, men in designer tuxedos with matching expensive shoes. If I ever had a single doubt just how different Holden and I are, this just confirmed it. With every step further into the ritzy and glamorous room, Holden looks comfortable, in his element with his charm and poise. None of this feels comfortable to me. It’s too high-classed, too lavish. I’m a stowaway in the first-class area. I feel fake and know I don’t belong here.

A waiter walks by carrying a tray of champagne flutes, and Holden grabs two, handing me one.

“You look like you’re ready to find the roof to jump off of,” he says with a chuckle.

“Would you happen to know where the stairs are?” I tease, trying to hide the fact I’m a total imposter in his world.

Holden opens his mouth to reply but is interrupted when a hoarse, raspy voice comes from our left. “I was hoping to see you here.” He’s a heavier-set man, gray hair slicked back, and deep-set brown eyes. “Mr. Slade. How are

you?” He holds out his hand.

*Mr. Freaking Slade...*

Holden shakes his hand with a polite smile. “I’m doing well, Mr. Stimson. Hope you are.”

Mr. Stimson’s attention slides to me and his smile widens. “And this must be Janie?”

“Actually.” Holden slips his hand around my waist. “This is my girlfriend, Raine.”

*Girlfriend.* I manage to keep myself from swaying and my facial expression steady, but inside my body, I both swoon and wilt. I know more now than ever that I have to have a serious conversation with him.

Mr. Stimson’s expression twitches slightly, and if I wasn’t paying attention, I’d miss it. What I don’t miss, though, is the way he looks at me now like I’m nothing more than a trophy on a shelf for all to admire. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I smile. “Likewise.”

Annnndd, I’m forgotten about. He quickly turns his attention back to Holden and engages him in a discussion about a meeting they had two weeks ago. Soon, more men join us, introducing themselves and their dates, but quickly going back to talking business. Holden’s in his element—businesslike, charming, and suave, as he listens sincerely to every word. Words like manufacture, development, turbofan, projects, and several different types of airplanes are tossed around. And the whole time, his fingers draw circles on the small of my back.

The other women have gathered to talk, but I caught the look one of them gave me, and I don’t want to be anywhere near them. Pretentious comes to mind.

After twenty minutes of standing here, I squeeze Holden’s arm to get his attention. “I’m going to find the restroom.” And possibly find the stairs to the roof.

Once I finish, I find Holden still surrounded by men vying for his attention, and women pretending to be invested. Instead of joining him, I decide to take a look around, starting with the upstairs balcony that caught my eye while I stood beside Holden. Along the walls, dim light casts a shine from the floor to the ceiling, displaying a lot of artwork. Some of it is intricate, others are abstract. Statues and sculptures rest between much of the paintings on the wall.



A picture of an airplane wing that's focused on the engine pauses my steps. I would have never believed it's been painted if not for the tag in front of it. It looks insanely real. The metals seem to shine right off the canvas, and the bright blue and white puffy clouds make me feel like I'm standing directly in front of it. Just below the painting is a miniature version of the engine that's on the plane with a section of it cut out so I can see all the details inside of it. A few steps away is a metal abstract sculpture of a plane. Well, I assume it's a plane. I recognize the tail end, but the body, the wings, and the front are all different pieces with a metal circle encasing it. I think it's a representation of a plane flying through the sky. Is this what the artist intended or am I just ignorant to this world?

"A lot of pieces."

Holden's voice startles me, and I jump slightly, glancing over my shoulder. "Is this what you make?"

"No. I would make a horrible artist."

I giggle and smack his arm. I point to the welded sculpture wondering if he interprets the same thing I do. "What do you see?"

He points to the painting of the engine with a section cut out of it. "Parts of an engine." Then he points back to the sculpture in question. "Welded into a plane that's flying around the world. The artist used the exact parts they withdrew from that and made them into this."

Oh.

We move along several more paintings and sculptures, discussing each of them in depth, until one picture in particular catches his eye. His feet stop, his face lighting up as he studies it with a curl to the corners of his lips. On a plain white canvas is an engine, specifically the internal view of one, and every single inch of it has been hand-drawn with colored pencils. Just like many of the other paintings, this looks incredibly realistic even down to the shine of the metals. The lines bend and bleed together. Most of it is black, gray, and white with some details in red. And in the right-hand corner are the words: Slade Engine SEGT7X.

"*This* is what I make." His gaze never leaves the drawing. He's completely enrapt as he examines it. Pride and awe billow from him. If this is the look he says I have when he spoils me, no damn wonder he likes it. I'm ready to sell my soul to keep this look on him.

"That's a lot of detailed pieces," I say.

"Over eighteen thousand of them." His voice is besotted.

I titter. “And here I give up on puzzles over a hundred pieces.” His attention slides to me and I don’t miss the euphoria in them. “You’re such a nerd.”

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he pulls me flush against his body and feathers kisses across my jaw. “You say that now. Wait until I win it in the auction, and it sits above my bed.”

I drop my forehead to his chest with a laugh and shake my head. “At least I won’t have to worry about you cheating on me with a woman. My only competition seems to be airplane things.”

His chuckle vibrates under my head. “Airplane things. You sound like Kaleb now.” He lifts my face to his by my chin. “And you’ll never have to worry about me ever cheating on you. I would never do that to you.” He looks like he’s about to say something else, but he grabs my hand and tugs me. “Come on. I need to put a bid in before we leave.”

“Oh, god. You were serious?”

“All except putting it above my bed. It’ll look better in my office.” He tosses me a wink.

Unfortunately, we have to stay a little while longer before we can leave. Holden whispers things into my ear about what he wants to do to me—with my heels on—every chance he can. Although it helps me in that moment, it doesn’t distract me from how I feel like a complete and utter fake. An imposter. I’m a damn barista playing Cinderella with my prince charming who is none the wiser to my situation. Although I haven’t necessarily lied, I’ve deceived him in many ways. That thought makes my chest constrict. Would he leave me? He may be okay that I’m just a barista, but how would me being homeless affect him? Would he be disgusted or would he try swooping in to help?

“Ready to sneak out?” he whispers against my ear, yanking me out of my thoughts.

I smooth my features as I grin up to his handsome face. “I’ll follow you.”

The valet helps me out of his car when we pull up to the hotel. Holden meets me around my side of the car, interlaces his fingers with mine, and leads us to the elevators. He seems to be on a mission, and I’m pretty sure it involves my

heels. The door slides open, revealing an empty car, and when we step in and they close behind us, he sinks his fingers into my hair and captures my mouth. The kiss is hard, raw, and desperate. It ends way too quickly.

He drops his forehead to mine and holds my gaze. "I love you," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion.

My heart skydives. Free falls through the clouds while my body hums with electricity. My palms slide to his chest, feeling the power of his heartbeat thundering.

"I love you so terrifyingly much that it consumes every fiber of me," he adds.

My pulse is in my ears. I know I need to tell him everything, but right now, I want to be completely honest with him. I tip my chin up and give him a sweet kiss. "I love you, too."

We barely make it to the hotel door. Our hands are tangled in each other's hair, and his mouth is all over mine and my neck. The braid I spent so much time on has come loose, breaking away from the bun, and Holden uses that to his advantage. He twists my hair around his fist, pulling my mouth to his. The door shuts hard behind us. I slide my hands under his tux jacket, pushing it off him. He pushes the dress off my shoulders, his attention dropping to my breasts. He looks pleased that I couldn't wear a bra with the dress. Fire burns in his eyes as he bends and takes a nipple into his mouth.

I gasp at the sensation and become flooded with greedy urgency. I'm losing my mind as I unfasten his pants and tug his dress shirt out so I can touch him. I need to feel his skin. With expert finesse, he unbuttons the top several buttons with one hand and then yanks it over his head. He crashes his mouth back to mine and steps out of his shoes while I shove his pants down his thighs.

He hisses when I wrap my fingers around his heavy cock and stroke him. He drops his hand to my pussy and then growls when he finds me wet. I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. He's worked me over all night with the things he whispered in my ear. I'm so turned on, I'm about to burst at my seams with how badly I need him.

With his mouth on my neck, biting and sucking, his fingers circling my clit, and his other hand holding my head hostage, he backs me into the bedroom where he lowers me to the bed. His eyes devour me as he drags his hands up my left leg, lifting it to press kisses to my ankle as he takes off one heel.

“I know I said I wanted your heels on, but that’s before I wanted to fuck you slow.” God, his words make me shiver.

He spends the same amount of time on my other leg, and I’m so damn turned on. After he puts a condom on, he moves me up the bed, positions himself between my thighs, and thrusts into me slowly, not stopping until he’s fully rooted.

My eyes roll closed. Sliding a hand down the outside of my thigh, he brings my leg to his waist and rocks into me.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he murmurs against my jaw, making a line to my mouth. He nibbles on my bottom lip and drives me wild.

Bracing his forearms on each side of my face so he can peer down at me, he brushes my bangs off my forehead. The way he’s looking at me is tender and full of love. My heart feels full. He said he’s better at showing emotions through spoiling me, but I will argue with him until the ends of earth that *this* is so much better than that. No dress, no helicopter ride, nothing he can buy can show me what I see in his eyes right now.

His hips swivel and I gasp at the depth he’s pushed. His movements are slow and precise, dragging out and pushing in with long smooth strokes. Over and over. He watches me, eyes anchored to mine, his mouth parted as he pants and grunts with every thrust. It’s consuming me. Pressure begins to fill me, and he knows it. His pace picks up, eyebrows furrowing with concentration as he lifts to his hands. The thrusts become insatiable, hard and deep, as he brings his fingers to my clit. My orgasm crackles just below the surface, heat touching every inch of my skin.

Then... I shatter. Back arching off the mattress as I cry out, I slap my hands to the sheets, fisting them. Holden pumps into me, his jaw clenched as he grips my hips with force and hauls me down into his thrusts. His body becomes tense, and then he groans as he pulses deep inside of me.

He hangs his head, sucking in air. I feel torn in two, but in the most delicious and vulnerable of ways. I’m limp, boneless, and satiated. Thoroughly. I don’t open my eyes when he slides out of me and goes to the bathroom to get rid of the condom. I haven’t moved an inch when he comes back, covers us up, and wraps his arms around me.

I’m on the verge of succumbing to sleep when he kisses the back of my head. “You make it so damn hard for me to leave,” he whispers. “I’ll be gone for a few weeks.”

The muscles in my chest cramp, pushing out a sigh with it.

His arms tighten around me. “Promise me if it gets too much, you’ll talk to me. I want you too much to let long distance ruin us. I’ll do everything in my power to keep you happy.”

Guilt begins to trickle in. I need to tell him, but I’m so damn petrified of losing him. I take a breath and steel myself for what’s to come. “I have something I need to tell you.” This gets his attention. He shifts to his elbows and rolls me to my back. The way he’s looking at me, with worry and love... Shit. I can’t do this.

“I think I agree with you. Your boss isn’t an asshole.” I feel like the most selfish person in the world right now.

A smile reaches his eyes as he chuckles. “I told you he wasn’t.”

I swallow. “I promise I’ll tell you if I can’t handle what’s happening.” I should be doing that now, but I’m too scared of losing him to do what’s right.

We kiss for several minutes until he makes love to me again. But as he’s peacefully asleep holding me, I’m staring at the curtains on the wall, conflicted as ever. I should’ve never let us get this far without telling him my truths. Now when I tell him, I won’t just be humiliated, I’ll be devastated as well. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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## HOLDEN

It's been five days, a hundred and twenty hours since I've seen Raine. After flying her back to Chatley Bay, we said our goodbyes, and I flew back home where I was slammed with work again. Of course, we've texted and called, and even tried to FaceTime a few times, but she picked up extra shifts, so she's going in early and leaving late. I miss seeing her, feeling her, kissing her, and witnessing the way her face softens when I talk to her.

At the gala, I knew there wasn't any more holding back. When I kept getting stopped, she rolled with it, staying poised beneath her nervousness and always politely smiling. She wasn't in her element, but damn if she didn't look like she fit right in, especially right beside me. And then watching her truly curious with the art had my heart humming. But the moment when she stood just inside the lobby after being subjected to the photographers, under the dim lights where she gave me a piece of her vulnerability, I knew just how irrevocably in love with her I am.

Finally saying how I felt was like a weight lifted off my shoulders, but hearing her say she felt the same way? That was a high I've never in my life experienced. One that hasn't let my feet hit the ground since.

I rearranged my weekend so I could surprise Raine. She has no idea I've come to Chatley Bay, but I couldn't go a minute more without seeing her. I step into OceanBrews in search of her, but instead of the raven-haired beauty I came for, I find Lucy. Immediately, I put my finger up to my lips. Lucy smiles at me and gives me a quick nod.

"Raine!" she calls out as I make my way to the end of the counter, slightly hidden behind the kitchen door. "The damn espresso machine is at it again."

In the kitchen, I hear Raine shout something about it being turned on. Lucy laughs. "Of course, it's on."

Then the door swings open and out steps the very woman who makes my heart beat faster.

"It's probably another clog—" Her words die on her tongue when she spots me. Something explodes in my chest and so does the smile on her face. "Your boss is going to be really pissed you're here."

Chuckling, I waste no time, clutching her hand and tugging her against me. I capture her lips, kissing her softly and with a whole helluva lot of desperation. Her hands slide up my chest as she melts against me.

"He'll get over it." I kiss her again. "I've missed you."

"Please tell me you didn't fly here just to kiss me and tell me you missed me and plan on leaving anytime soon."

I quirk a brow at her. "And if I did?"

"I'll be so pissed off at you."

Dipping my head, I taste her lips again. "Then I'll have to make it up to you when I pick you up in an hour and bring you back to my house."

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, and as usual, it stirs my dick.

"I've got to run by my parents' place. I'll be back in about an hour. Pack a bag." I slide my hand to her ass and squeeze. "I've got some time to make up." I toss her a wink as I reluctantly let her go.

Mom stretches a kiss to my cheek. "You smell like coffee again," she muses.

My mother called Tuesday and said she and Dad had a few things they wanted to discuss with me. She said it wasn't a rush, but that didn't deter me from asking Janie to rearrange my schedule.

My arms fall around her shoulders as I kiss the side of her head. "I made a pit stop before I came over. Where's Dad?"

"He'll be down in a minute." She pulls out a pan of brownies from the oven. "Do you want coffee?"

"Am I breathing?" I jest, making my way around to grab a mug.

"Make one for your father, too."

Of course. What kind of person would I be if I didn't make the man who made me a coffeeholic a cup?



I set it on the corner of the counter as I pull out a chair at the dining table and wait.

A minute later, Dad enters and dramatically inhales. “Brownies and coffee. My heaven.” He slaps me on the back of the shoulders. “Son.”

He grabs his coffee and sits at the table with me as Mom brings us both a plate with a brownie. I eye her. “You’re buttering me up for something.”

“You’re right. I am.” Her smile is all too sugary. She takes a seat beside Dad, holding my gaze. “We want to know how you’re settling into the house.”

This isn’t it. She’s warming me up and it sets me on guard. “Everything is coming along well.”

“Have you thought about relocating here?” Dad asks.

There it is. My attention fully settles on him. Where exactly is he going with this? “Why do you ask?”

I see the slight roll in Dad’s shoulders, and I brace myself. Whatever is about to come is going to be monumental. “We decided we’d like to donate a hundred grand of the money from Hazel to help you establish a place closer to home.”

I nearly choke on air. I shake my head vehemently. “Although I appreciate the thought, keep your money. If and when I decide to build a second facility, I can handle it.”

“We figured if we donated some money, it would put a fire under your tail end to do something with it.”

“Yeah. It would. Like give it back.”

Mom sighs, settling back into her chair with a look in her eyes that makes me feel like the time I told her I was moving to Colorado. “I like having my son close to me. For years, I’ve only seen him a handful of times. You know what that does to a mother’s heart?”

“Mom—”

“We’re not getting any younger,” she interjects.

Concern pushes my pulse into my throat. “Are you okay? Are you sick?”

“No. I just...” She trails off and then swallows. “Losing Hazel has made me start thinking. No matter your age, you’re still my baby, Holden. I hate missing you all the time and I hate all the time we’re missing.”

“I’m just a phone call away, Mom. You know if you need me, I’ll be on the next flight here.”

“Flight.” The laugh that scrapes out of her is dry and pained.

“Truth be told, I’ve tossed around the idea of a second facility here in Florida.” Dad and Mom both perk up at that. “I...” I scratch the back of my neck, unsure if I should tell them about Raine. It’s still early in the relationship, and although I’m wildly in love with her, we’re playing it day by day. I have no idea how the long haul looks for us. “I met someone. Here in Chatley Bay,” I clarify. “We’ve been seeing each other for a few months.”

“How do you make the long distance work?” I don’t miss the hope in Mom’s voice.

“I’ve flown here several times and flown her to me once. Phone calls and text in between.”

“I don’t know if I want to be mad that you’ve been here and not visited or happy that you’re seeing someone.”

“Is it serious?” This is from Dad.

“Yes. I believe it is,” I admit.

“And she’s made you think about coming back home?” Dad taps his finger on the table.

I nod. “I’ve contemplated it, yes. I don’t want to get ahead of myself and make a business decision based on my personal life. My thoughts are only in the early stages as is my relationship.”

“When can we meet her?” I knew that question was coming from Mom. She’s been on me about meeting a woman, marriage, and giving her grandbabies

“I need to plan a weekend I’m here for more than a day.” Mom deflates at my words. I’m sure she was hoping Raine would pop out from around the corner. “I’m only here until Monday morning. I’ve got a surprise planned.”

Mom’s brows raise. Then she rests back in her chair, crosses her arms over her chest, and stares at me.

Oh, shit. Here comes the silent and *very* determined inquisition. It’s been years since I’ve been involved in their good cop, bad cop interrogation. I was a teenager the last time. Mom plays bad cop with her piercing stares and silent questions that I hear loud and clear. Dad plays the “sit back and let her work her magic” cop.

The first question is written all over her. “Yes, I like her a lot,” I answer.

That damn brow of hers stays high.

“Come on, Mom.” I laugh. “I’m an adult. Don’t do this silent questioning. It’s not going to work anymore.” It’s a lie and we all know it.

She doesn’t budge.

Dammit.

“Fine. I’m in love with her.”

How does she still have this power over me? I’m a grown ass man.

Dad’s smug with his smirk.

Mom’s still giving me the look.

I blow a breath. “I’ll plan it, Mom.”

A grin explodes on her face. “Don’t make us wait forever.”

“I’ll talk to her about it this afternoon.” I check my watch.” I’ve got to go. She gets off work soon.” I finish my coffee and take the mug to the sink.

Mom gives me a hug and then smooths my shirt over my chest. “Where does she work?”

I plant a kiss to her forehead. “OceanBrews coffee shop.”

“Ah,” Mom singsongs. “Then she really has captured your heart.”

She has no damn idea.

After I give my dad a hug, I head out to see my girl.

Raine heads upstairs to put her bag in the bedroom while I make us drinks and something to snack on. Just as I’m grabbing a wine glass for her, I hear her squeak.

“Oh, my god. You didn’t!”

Grinning to myself, I leave everything on the counter and move up the stairs.

She’s cracking up when I hit the top step. “I thought you said you were going to hang it up in your office.” She’s staring at the unbelievably talented hand-drawn picture of my engine that I won at the auction. I offered an insane amount of money to make sure no one else was getting it. Call me selfish, but it’s incredible, and the moment I saw it, it was mine.

“I didn’t specify which office,” I say flippantly, shoving my tongue into my cheek to keep from laughing.

She looks around the room. “It would look best there,” she points to where the TV is mounted on the wall, “if you’re keeping the desk where it is. Do you even like being crammed in the corner? You look more like a ‘I demand the middle of the floor’ type of guy.”

She’s right. I do, but for now, Janie’s placed it against the wall. The only

positive thing is the view looking out the French doors to the backyard.

“I’m not sure if I want my office here or in that room.” I point to the smaller of the two rooms, the one without the view to the backyard.

She glances to the room and then meets my gaze again. “You’d hate it in there. But I don’t see why you bother. Your office at OceanBrews has a better view.”

I pull her flush against my body. “I *really* like the view at the coffee shop,” I whisper thickly, loving how she shivers. “But I wouldn’t be able to fuck you on top of the desk like I can here.”

Heat skitters in the forest green of her eyes.

With one hand holding her back, I slip my other hand under the hem of her shirt and cup her breasts over her bra. She sucks in a little breath, dragging her hands across my chest. With a wicked gleam in her eyes, she tosses her shirt somewhere behind me and reaches behind her back, unhooking her bra. She grips my shirt and walks backward. When her ass hits the edge of the desk, we unravel.

Our hands are everywhere—hers getting rid of my shirt and pants before gripping my hair, mine stripping her shorts off her and caressing her breasts. I lick across her collarbone as I gently squeeze her breast, and then drop my head to suck on her nipple. I love the beautiful, needy sigh that elicits.

I cup her pussy and find her soaked for me. My gaze slips up to hers and I smirk like an arrogant ass. “Fucking you on my desk turns you on.”

I don’t wait on a reply, not that I was expecting one. She’s not much of a talker during sex. She is a noise maker. I stroke her and push my fingers in. She moans, grabs my hair, and yanks my face to hers.

“Take now and give later,” she whispers as pink hits her cheeks.

She was reading my mind. I want to fuck her hard now and make love to her later.

“You’re so damn perfect,” I husk, driving my fingers deeper and provoking another moan from her.

Fuck... I lift her ass onto the desk, quickly snatch a condom from my wallet, run it down my dick, and then grip her thigh with one hand and my dick with the other.

Then I shove into her.

Raine’s eyes roll closed on a gasp. I grip her thighs, pushing them apart, and watch my dick drag in and out of her. The desk groans underneath us as I rock into her, fucking her hard. Her tits bounce with every thrust. Her mouth

is parted, skin flush.

“Fuck, you’re so damn beautiful,” I pant.

She rocks her hips faster against me as her sounds become more frantic. My gaze flies up to her face to catch the first ripples of ecstasy washing over her. She clenches around me as she cries out, slapping a hand to my chest and digging her nails into my skin. Electricity scalds my skin, chasing up my thighs and boring into my spine as I concentrate on fucking her fast and deep, coercing every damn ounce of her pleasure. Her sounds, the way she looks, the way her pussy grips my cock—it’s all too much. I pump once, twice, three more times and lose it. Groaning, I burrow deeply as white lights flash behind my eyes.

I drop my head to her shoulder trying to drink in air. “Now I’ll be thinking about fucking you on my desk at my office.”

She hums with a satiated lilt to her lips.

I pull out of her and help her off the desk before tying off the condom and heading to the bathroom. I’m definitely going to bend her over my desk and fuck her, and I want every damn soul in the building knowing what I’m doing. The possessiveness hitting me in the chest is new, and I have no idea where it came from, but damn if I’m not grinning at the idea of it.

We’re lying in the bed with the moonlight filtering over our naked bodies. Raine’s nuzzled into me, her head on my chest, arms draped across me with my arm wrapped around her body. This is what heaven feels like. Everything with her feels right.

“My parents want to meet you,” I say.

She tenses against me. “You told them about me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She doesn’t answer and starts trailing a finger over my stomach.

“Does that bother you?” I ask after several long moments.

She shakes her head. “No. Just that...”

She doesn’t have to finish the sentence for me to understand. The forlorn tone tells me everything she’s not. *Her parents*. She’ll never get to introduce me to her mother, and that thought fractures my heart. I squeeze her.

“Tell me about your mother.” I don’t ask about her father. The few times

she's brought him up, I've heard the anger. It's left me wondering about their deaths, but that's a question for another time.

"She was the best mother anyone could ever ask for. Loving, kind, supportive. She was a hands-on mom too and loved doing things with us."

"How—"

"Don't ask me that. Please. Not right now." Her pleading tone is barely a whisper, and it puts the question of how her parents died away. "How long are you in town for this time?"

She's not going to be happy with this one either. "Just until Monday morning. I've got an important meeting with Boeing in Washington state on Tuesday. They approved the prototype but want to know how we're going to handle the production line."

"I know nothing about your business, but I'm sure they have nothing to worry about."

"They don't."

"Alabama one week, Canada and Montana the next. How are you not worn out?"

"It catches up with me sometimes. You saw that in New York."

"It also explains your need for coffee. Doesn't flying back here as much as you do wear you thin? Your schedule is demanding as it is."

"I inherited my coffee addiction from my father. Unlike him, though, I turn to bourbon or water in the afternoons whereas he drinks it twenty-four-seven." Then I kiss the top of her head. "You're worth all the flights. I'm happier when I can kiss you, and I sleep better when you're in my arms."

I want to ask her if she's already having doubts, if the long distance is becoming too much for her. Instead, I don't but say, "I travel a lot for work. Coming here is my highlight. Besides, I can sleep during the flights."

She doesn't respond, and after a little bit her breathing evens out. Although it is a lot of traveling, the only thing becoming too much for me is the way I feel for her. I crave her all the damn time, her eyes, her smiles, her touch. It finds me in meetings, consumes me when I'm lying in the bed without her.

She's all-consuming and I wouldn't change a damn thing.

Except having her near me every day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

---

## HOLDEN

This morning, I woke Raine up with my mouth on her, and after delivering her two orgasms, I told her to get ready. She knows I have a surprise for her today, and it's driving her crazy. She's been sexily glaring at me and making it hard to not pull over and ravish her body again. I deserve an award for the self-restraint.

Confusion mars Raine's face, her eyebrows pulling together and forming a deep crease between them as I pull into the group home. "I can't get him until eleven."

This I know. I had to pull a lot of strings and make a very generous donation for an extra incentive to get them to allow this.

Reaching over the console, I squeeze her thigh. "Sit tight. I'll be right back."

After showing the older lady with wild kinky gray hair and brilliant smile all my information, she disappears into the back. Several minutes tick by before Kaleb pushes out of the wooden door.

Inwardly, I release a sigh of relief to see him in shorts and a hooded tee. It's going to be hot as hell today, and what I have planned is mainly outside.

He eyes me warily. "Where's Raine?"

"In the car."

His golden hazel eyes narrow slightly. "Miss Sue said I'll be gone all day?"

"Yes." I nod. "It'll be late before you get back. I'm surprising Raine too."

"Where are we going?" He finally takes a step toward me.

My smile breaks free. "I can't tell you that. It's a surprise for you and your sister."



“How’d you pull this off?”

Chuckling, I slap a hand on his shoulder and start toward the door. “Just know this is the most expensive date I’ve ever been on.”

Raine pops out of the car and slams a hug into Kaleb.

“Hey, Raindrop.” He hugs her back.

“Did you know about this?” she asks him.

“No.”

She studies him for a moment before nodding and getting back into the car.

Her gaze finds mine and I note all the questions in her eyes. I don’t answer. Instead, I smirk and steer the car out of the parking lot.

They catch up for the week the entire ride. School, Kaleb’s assignments, and things that’ve happened this week. But when we pull into the airport, Raine grows very quiet. When I park, she’s quick to round the car and meet me at the front.

“Holden. What do you have planned?”

“There’s a car show in Miami. I thought we could make a day of it,” I reveal.

Both of her brows hit her hairline. “And we’re getting there by...”

She knows the answer. It’s in her tone. “Helicopter.” I grin.

“No shit!” Kaleb squeaks his excitement and then fist pumps the air.

Raine doesn’t reprimand his cursing. She’s too busy staring at me like she’s unsure if she wants to strangle me or kiss me. I’m positive it’s both.

I interlace my fingers with hers and kiss her cheek. “You can’t get mad at me. I’m not spending money on you. I’m spending it on him.” My smirk has a roguish edge to it. “He’s already paid me back with his smile.” I wink.

“I really want to be mad at you.”

I squeeze her hand as I lead us to where Kaleb is looking around the helicopter with awe. “I know. But you can’t.”

A laugh breaks from her.

It’s clear Kaleb could care less about flying, Raine on the other hand still needs distracting. Unfortunately, I can’t distract her by kissing her until she’s limp, but Kaleb’s excitement about everything below us and me massaging Raine’s fingers helps her.

When we land, I have a car waiting for us, and twenty minutes later, Kaleb’s literally vibrating out of his skin with excitement as we pull into the venue. Kaleb’s smile is permanent as he checks out every single car, truck,

motorcycle, vendor, and everything in between. He bounces on his toes as he drags Raine by the arm to show her everything he deems incredible, which is everything.

It's getting close to time to leave when I suggest we grab something to eat. I promised the group home I'd have Kaleb back by seven, and I don't want to fuck up or else they may never let me do it again.

While Raine goes to the restroom, Kaleb and I make our way to the concession stands.

"You really like my sister," Kaleb states, eyeing me.

"I do."

"She likes you too. She hasn't dated anyone in years, or she hasn't let me know."

The possessiveness inside me thumps my chest at that information.

"Do you see each other a lot? I mean, how does it work with you living in Colorado and her here?" he asks.

"We call and text a lot when I'm gone, and I try to fly here when I can."

"In a helicopter?"

I shake my head with a laugh. "No. An airplane."

"I should've known." He rolls his eyes as we move up to the counter.

Unlike Raine, Kaleb doesn't give two shits that I'm buying, and it makes me happy. There is no tension, no stubbornness, no arguing. He just orders what he wants. And because Raine isn't here, I order her a soft pretzel with her drink and then move to the side to wait for our food.

"Have you helped her try to find a better place to live? Oh!" He lights up like he's just thought of the best idea and hits me with an eager look. "You own a big business and you're her boyfriend. You should give her a job and pay her a lot so she can find a place. Would you get in trouble if you did that?"

"If I gave her a job, that would mean she'd have to move, and I can assure you she won't leave you no matter the price. Besides, what's wrong with her place?" I may not have ever been there, but the apartments look nice on the outside.

Kaleb takes a sip of his drink and then laughs. "What's wrong with her place? Bro. Doesn't matter how she has her car set up, it's not a home. I've tried—"

*What the hell did he just say?* My head snaps to him. "What?"

Kaleb's head jerks to me, horror wiping away all the cheerfulness and

laughter of the day. “Oh, shit,” he says aghast. “Nothing.”

“No. Not nothing. What did you say?”

“Fuck. She’s going to kill me.” He’s looking everywhere frantically. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

My pulse is hammering in my chest and throbbing in my ears. Surely, I misunderstood him. Dipping my head, I level my eyes with his. “Kaleb. What did you mean her car is not a home?”

He doesn’t lift his gaze to mine. His shoulders drop. “Please don’t make me say anything. She’ll be so furious with me. I thought you knew and...” Dismay drips from every word. “Please,” he whispers.

“She’s living out of her car?” I ask.

He averts his attention again.

“Kaleb.” I’m desperate for the answer and my tone proves it.

When he gives me a slight nod, the ground drops out from under me. My heart plummets into the pit of my stomach. Air seizes in my lungs and makes my chest constrict. Hot anger rushes through my blood followed by icy cold anguish chasing behind it. It causes me to break out in a sweat along with goosebumps.

How the hell did I not know? How could she not tell me?

“Please don’t tell her I said anything,” his voice cracks, this time not because of puberty. “I thought you knew. She’s going to be so mad at me. Please, Holden.”

Swallowing through the tightness in my throat, I nod. “I promise I won’t.” Taking a breath, I exhale through my mouth and then put on my best smile. “Liven up or she’ll know something’s up.”

Thankfully, when Raine returns, Kaleb’s so busy scarfing down his burger that she doesn’t notice the change in him. Although I’m vibrating with worry, I manage to keep myself composed and joke with them both. Once in the air, Kaleb keeps himself distracted by watching the cities pass below us while I keep Raine preoccupied by massaging her fingers again and sharing flirty looks while fighting the hurt growing inside of me.

The ride home to the group home is quiet, but that’s only because Kaleb falls asleep within ten minutes. Once back at the home, I leave Raine in the car under the assumption that since I checked him out, I’ll have to be the one to check him in.

“Thanks for today,” he says as Miss Sue holds open the door for him.

I offer him a reassuring smile. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you had fun.”

He turns but before the door can close behind him, I call his name. He pauses, looking back to me. "I promise our conversation stays between us."

A small smile slips over his features and he nods. Without another word, the door shuts and locks behind him.

The moment my ass hits the driver's seat, Raine slings her arms around my neck and slaps a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you so much for today. For doing that for him. I haven't seen him that happy in years."

I give her a quick kiss and then smirk. "Payment received."

We drive toward where her SUV is parked. Thoughts of her living in it swirl. I've picked her up once at Lucy's. Every other time has been in this parking lot by her vehicle.

*"Your worst is beyond my best."*

I fully intend to keep my promise to Kaleb, but I have all these questions and no way to ask them. How could she not tell me? After everything, after all I've said and all I've proven to her, why hasn't she trusted me enough to tell me? Why couldn't she trust me to love her through it?

The thought hurts.

My pulse begins to hammer when I park beside her car, my hands vibrating. Leaning over, I cup the back of her head and pull her face toward mine, kissing her.

"I wish you didn't have such an early flight," she says against my lips.

*Why? Would she invite me in?* I want to ask, but I don't, afraid it will push me to break my promise when she beats around the bush.

My lips tilt at the edge. "Me too."

*How could she not know I'd move mountains for her?*

She kisses me again, this time taking more time. "I work in the morning, so text me when you land."

"Of course. I love you." I hope she fucking knows it. It's not just three meaningless words to me. They come from my heart.

Her eyes soften. "I love you, too."

Uncertainty sets in as I watch her walk toward the apartments. Maybe she didn't tell Kaleb she got a place? Maybe she did but he wasn't paying attention? Maybe this is all a misunderstanding. I *hope* it's just a misunderstanding. Surely my girlfriend hasn't been hiding this from me the whole time. Fuck. She's got me dwelling in the maybes now.

Instead of going home like normal, I quickly steer my car behind the shopping center across the street, kill my headlights and then park behind a

large box truck. And I watch.

I watch as Raine makes her way back to her SUV, glances around, opens the hatch, and gets in. My heart sinks as a wave of emotions crash over me. Pain and anger collide. I'm infuriated she didn't tell me. She didn't trust me enough. I'm pissed I was blind to it all. How could I not fucking notice? Why didn't I push her harder?

I feel powerless... worthless.

And so damn unimportant.

Behind all these emotions rushes the feeling I've only felt a handful of times—possessiveness.

I drive back across the street. My hands shake as I get out, and my ribs feel too tight.

"Raine." I'm met with silence. "I know you're in there. I *watched* you. Don't pretend you're not."

The door clicks open and slowly she slinks out. She's already changed into a pair of black sleeping shorts with a gray shirt, and she's pulled her hair back. Instead of the confident woman full of banter, she doesn't even look at me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I'm breathless and angry.

"It's none of your business," she whispers and I catch the waver in it.

My jaw tics. "The hell it isn't. Pack a bag. You're staying with me."

This gets her attention. Her eyes fly up to mine, burning with outrage and pride. "No."

"Don't be stubborn," I grit.

"Don't make this out to be bigger than it is. I'm fine. This isn't your problem."

A humorless laugh scrapes out of me. "It *is* my problem. My girlfriend is living out of her car, and I can easily fix that for her. I can help you. Let me." I end softer even though my anger still boils.

Her head barely shakes, and if I had blinked, I would've missed it. "I don't want your help." The words she murmurs are like a knife to my chest. First comes the pain, and then as the blade digs deeper, a frustrated rage seeps from the wound.

"Goddammit, Raine. I would do anything for you. How do you not realize this? Why haven't you talked to me?"

A spark in her eyes ignites as resolution settles on her face. She tips her chin defiantly as a cold glaze sweeps over her. "This was supposed to have an

expiration date. You don't live here. You don't work here. I do—"

"Don't," I bite. "Don't pretend this is something less than what it is. Don't you dare minimize us." I slam my fingers through my hair. "Do you not trust my feelings for you? Is that why you haven't talked to me about it? Raine, I can help and support you. Why don't you fucking trust me?" I grit, my anger hitting its boiling point.

Tears well up in her eyes. "It's late and I need to get up early. You—"

"Raine," I growl through my clenched jaw wanting to move to her.

"Please, Holden," she pleads, and I abhor how vulnerable she sounds. "I have to work early in the morning. You have a flight. Just..." She takes a breath and nails me to the ground with a tear-filled and deadly cold glare. "Go away. Don't make me call the cops. They'll make me leave the premises."

My heart tumbles on itself. Icy dread slithers through my veins leaving me frozen. I'm entirely speechless as I watch her get back into her SUV and close the door behind her.

I've been dismissed.

What the hell just happened?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

---

## RAINE

Peeking out the window, I blow a heavy breath when I spot Holden asleep in his car parked beside me. Last night was a nightmare come true. Deep in the back of my mind, I knew I would have to come clean, but I kept pushing it away because I was afraid of losing him. Then I selfishly let myself fall in love with him. Now look at us. The last thing I ever wanted was for him to look at me with pity and exasperation. He was so angry and frustrated, and worst of all, hurt.

I watched him from a small crack in my curtains stand there and stare at my SUV for a long time before he shook his head and got back into his car. I haven't felt that much pain in my heart or cried so hard since losing my parents. I knew better all along, yet I did nothing to stop it. Now look what happened. I have no idea where we stand or where we go from here. If we can even go anywhere now that he knows I've hidden my life away from him.

Quietly, I get out and make my way to OceanBrews where Lucy cuts me a look that says she's seen him parked out there. She knows. I shake my head at her, not wanting to discuss it. Not yet. Not when I haven't had time to digest it all.

I make a large coffee and tell Lucy I'll be back in a minute before I head outside to where Holden's asleep. The sun isn't up yet. Only the streetlights light up the parking lot as I walk across it. His head is lolled to the side, his body slumped into the seat. I know from experience he's going to be so sore.

I take a deep breath, steeling my nerves, and then knock on the window. Immediately, he jumps and tired eyes land on me. He gets out of the car, stretching his back out as he gets to his feet. He looks worse than I've ever



seen him. His hair is a mess, his blue eyes dull with dark circles under them. His clothes are wrinkled. He's exhausted... again.

"You've missed your flight." I hand him the coffee.

"I had Janie change it." His voice is still gravelly from sleep, and it makes my chest squeeze. "Come with—"

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me, Holden." I lift my chin, begging for my strength. I hate the way he's looking at me. With love. With pity. Full of hurt. "I've carried the responsibility of trying to get Kaleb back, trying to cope with the fucked-up situation I'm in, and still mourning the loss of my parents. For years, the only person I've had to depend on was me. It's been rough, but I've done fine making it work. I never told you because, honestly, what would be the point? You've told me time and again that you appreciate that I'm not after what you have. You told me that my interactions with you were authentic, and you enjoyed the fact that I didn't know anything about you. How would it have looked if I had told you I was actually homeless and living out of my car? I don't want your money and I don't want your help. I'm not a charity case." I swipe at the stupid tear that's tracked down my cheek. "I told you from the beginning I wasn't in your class. I wish you had listened to me. None of this would be happening."

"Marry me." His words seem to stun even him. His brows pull low and determination lines his face.

"What?" I nearly shriek.

"You need a place to live and stability to get your brother back. If you're my wife, everything I have is yours. It won't be just my money. It'll be yours too."

My mouth hangs open as a strangled sound of disbelief rushes out. I can feel the heat of my rage twisting through my veins. Even my ears feel like they're on fire. "You're kidding, right? You're trying to buy me so I'll take your help?"

"You're so damned stubborn, Raine. I don't know what else to do." He jams his hand through his hair. "I don't understand why you didn't trust me with this. I can help you. I *want* to help you. I'll give you anything, including an opportunity that allows you to help yourself."

At this rate, my mouth is going to fall off my damn face. "An opportunity?" Disgust drips from the word. "Marriage isn't a damn opportunity, Holden. It's a commitment. It's sacred. An intimate union. And you're tossing it around like it's a damn business deal. Un-fucking-

believable.” I throw my arms up.

“If you won’t marry me then let me help you, Raine. Please.” The request comes out in a bite. “I have a house that sits empty. The only time it’s ever used is when you’re there. Move in. Move your brother in. You won’t have to pay me a thing, just keep it clean and be there when I come home so I can enjoy you.”

Another burst of disgust grates out of me. “Wow, Holden. You’re on a roll. First you try to buy me and now you’re trying to make a deal with me for sex.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s exactly how it sounded.”

Inhaling, he digs his fingers into his forehead and then rakes both hands over his face. “This is coming out all wrong.” His arms fall to his sides, and he looks utterly defeated. “I want to help you, Raine. I want to love you and support you, and I want you to fucking trust me enough to do that.” He pauses, reining in the anger that touched his words. “What do you want me to do, Raine?”

I’ll never be able to lean on him like he wants me to. I won’t ever be able to pay him back or afford the luxuries he wants to give me, and at some point, he’ll think I’m just like everyone else—only there for his money. He deserves better than me and I love him enough to know it.

Emotions claw up my throat forming a lump. Tears begin to sting my eyes and my chest tightens. “I want you to leave.”

He winces, his head jerking back. He blinks like I’ve just slapped him.

“We’re done, Holden. This is over.” The sounds of my heart shattering echo all around my chest and into my soul.

He takes a step forward and I take a step back. “Raine.” Panic flares in his eyes. “Don’t do this. Please.”

“You’re going to miss your flight again.” I frown and then turn my back to him and head to the coffee shop. My legs feel like Jell-O, like they’re going to buckle, and my feet feel like I’m sludging through quicksand.

Thankfully, he doesn’t follow me, and I don’t look back. The moment I push through the door, and it shuts behind me, I shatter. Agony. Sadness. Embarrassment. Regret. They slice me wide open and tear me apart. Covering my face, my back hits the cold metal door, and my legs give out. A sob chokes out of me as I slide to the floor.

Lucy drops beside me on the floor and wraps her arms around my

shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Raine." Her voice is heartbreakingly soft.

"I'm such an idiot," I cry. "I should've called this off before things got serious."

"You can't help falling in love."

"If I had stayed focused on Kaleb, none of this would be happening." I smack the stupid tears on my cheek. "He thinks I didn't trust him."

"Part of that is true, Raine."

I glare at her. "I need you on my side right now, Lucy."

She holds her hands up in mock surrender and doesn't say anything else. But I know she's right. I didn't trust he loved me enough to not leave me when he found out. Him helping me never crossed my mind. Only leaving me. And I know I hurt him.

Lucy sits on the floor beside me while I bawl my heart out. I miss my mom so badly right now. I miss her so fucking much the pain of not having her is only magnifying the pain of losing Holden. I wouldn't have ever been in this situation if she were here, and that pisses me off and devastates me all over again. I slide my hands into my hair and tug it.

If Mom were here, she'd have something profound to say. She always gave the best advice. *Be nice to yourself*, she told me once when I thought Joseph Templeton from third grade was going to marry me but instead gave another girl a valentine. *Learn from this but don't let it stop you from allowing your heart to beat for someone else. He didn't break you. Shed your tears, pretty girl, and then wipe them away and lift that chin. You're unbreakable.*

I don't know how long I've been sitting here crying, but I fill my lungs with air and try to push away the pain. For now, I have a shift to work and money to earn. I need my brother back with me just as much as I need the air I'm breathing right now.

I wipe off the wetness from my face with a heavy breath and give Lucy a weak smile. "Let me wash my face and I'll be ready." I push to stand.

She looks at me like I've grown two heads. Her eyes are wide with concern and unshed tears. She scrambles to get to her feet. "Raine. If you need to take the day off to—"

"No," I interrupt her. "I can't. I need the money." I sigh and then admit, "I need the distraction too. If I don't work, I'll spend the day thinking. I just... I need to work. I'll be fine."

*I'll be fine* has quickly become my mantra.

Thankfully, she doesn't argue, and after I've washed my face and pulled myself together, I get to work. Lucy keeps a close eye on me while I keep an eye on the door, strung out that Holden will pop in. I can't handle another dose of him yet. And as much as it hurts to say this, I really hope he just stays away. Lucy helps keep me distracted by making me do most of the orders, and I'm grateful for it because for the entire time, I do just fine.

That's until I'm curled up in the back of my SUV, lying on my small air mattress listening to the still of the night. That's when Holden sneaks back into my thoughts, last night and this morning on repeat playing over and over. Each time, his words sound more and more heartless and jarring. I break down again, weeping into the night and hugging my blanket to my chest to keep my heart from ripping out. I cry so hard and for so long, sleep takes forever to come, but when it does, I surrender to it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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## HOLDEN

I screwed up. Phenomenally. I blurted the words. Didn't even ask. Instead, I *told* her to marry me because *it was a good opportunity*. What a fucking colossal mess. I love her and I care for her deeply, but marriage? The thought has never crossed my mind. We're still new, still trying to figure out how it's going to work, and I just *blurted* the words in a last-ditch effort to get her to let me help her.

But now I've lost her and all I can think about is how I really *do* want to marry her. Forget my company. Forget myself. Raine is the best part of my life. And I had to fuck it up and lose her.

I made my meeting in Washington but was barely present for it. Since being back in Colorado, nothing has changed. I'm absent, I can't sleep, and I don't feel like fucking being here. I want to be in Chatley Bay fixing my mess-up and showing her exactly how much she's in my heart. I want to figure out a way for her to learn to trust me unequivocally. No matter what I've said in the past, I want her to have no doubts in me.

But how the hell does one recover from calling a marriage an opportunity and a chance to enjoy her?

My fingers scrape through my hair, and I give it a tug just as Janie steps into my office without knocking. She stands in front of my desk looking concerned, but on top of that, she looks mad.

"You missed your meeting with Marshall and his team."

I raise my gaze to her, lifting a brow. "I wasn't reminded."

She pulls a look and I swear steam billows from her ears. "Exactly three times," she snaps. "Twice yesterday and once this morning." She lifts a finger for each time.

Scratching my jaw, I look to my dark computer screen and tap the spacebar to wake it up so I can check my calendar. And there it is. The meeting blocked out in bright blue with a reminder box at the bottom of the screen glaring at me.

“Shit.” I rake my hands over my face.

“What happened, Holden?” Janie’s tone softens. “I’ve never seen you so negligent. Did you and Raine have an argument?”

“We split up,” I offer.

Janie flinches back, blinks, and then drops her ass into the chair like her legs can’t hold her anymore. I know how she feels. When Raine said we were done, it about knocked my knees out from under me. Hell. This entire week I’ve been walking around on unstable legs.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Janie’s voice is gentle and caring. Long gone is the anger from missing the meeting.

“You mean, do I want to admit how badly I fucked up?” I grit through my clenched jaw. “Not particularly.”

Her lips flatten, a crease forms between her brows. “Did you... did you cheat on her?” There’s a cutting edge to her voice.

A humorless laugh huffs past my lips. “No. I proposed and botched it up. I made it sound like a business deal.”

Janie’s mouth drops open. “Holden...”

I lift my hand, stopping her. “I know.” Trust me, I know.

She takes a moment before she asks, “Do you really want to marry her? Like really ready to make that commitment or was it all in the heat of the moment?”

I’ve had *days* to think about those very questions. “Without a doubt, I’d marry her.”

“It’s not just the newness of the relationship?”

“It’s her. Our chemistry. Our connection. The way she makes me feel. The way she gives me purpose outside of this company.” I spread my hands to my desk. “She doesn’t care who I am or what I’m worth.” I bounce my leg. “Doesn’t matter now, though. She made it clear we’re done.” I swallow and plaster a smile on my face. “I’ll be fine in a few days. I just need to get my head back on straight.”

Thankfully, Janie buys my words and leaves it alone. It’s hard enough to admit I screwed up. I’m in no mood to dive deeper into my feelings.

Janie gets to her feet and moves toward the door, but then she stops,

glancing back at me with the look only a sister could give. It's full of love, empathy, and care. "I've known you for years, Holden. There isn't a mistake you've not been able to clean up. If you feel that strongly about her, fix it. You can do anything you put your mind to—that I'm positive of. But don't make things right for selfish motives. Think outside of your heartbreak, and if it's still there, you have your answer." She exits on that, shutting the door behind her and leaving me alone with my thoughts.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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RAINE

*Three weeks later...*

Two Sundays ago when I pushed through the door to the group home, I was still a disaster. Everything was still raw and I could barely keep my tears at bay. I failed miserably when I told Kaleb that Holden and I had broken up. Then Kaleb admitted that he slipped up and accidentally told Holden about me living in my car. I bawled trying to assure him it wasn't his fault. It was bound to happen, and I should've told him before he found out. None of this was Kaleb's fault. It was mine. One hundred percent all mine.

Things have progressively been improving over the weeks, and today as I push through the doors, I'm better. My tears have dried up and I've finally been able to sleep a little better. Of course, I'm still hurting, and I miss Holden terribly. Breaking up with someone is like grieving a death. There are stages for it. I've accepted what's happened and now I'm left with missing our calls, the time we had together, his banter, and everything in between. But life moves on, right? Mom taught me to keep putting one foot in front of the other no matter how painful or devastated I may feel. I've learned with Mom's death that a broken heart heals around a gaping crack.

Even if it feels like I'm dying too.

As I reach for the sign-out sheet, Miss Sue's words stop me dead in my tracks. "He's not here."

My hand is frozen midair as ice cold dread prowls through my veins. My pulse soars into my ears as my stomach plummets with the ground beneath me. "What do you mean he's not here?" I glare at her. "I was promised that I would have a chance to get him before—"

“Raine,” she interrupts me gently and gives her head a small shake. “He’s not here because he’s been signed out already.”

My eyes fly to the clock. “Before eleven? Who signed him out?”

She hands me an envelope. “Kaleb told me to give you this.”

I rip it open with so much force, I almost tear into the letter.

*Went to the beach. Come to Summer Pier.*

Only one person comes to mind who would sign him out, who *could* sign him out before eleven, but I know Holden didn’t. It’s been three weeks. He hasn’t contacted me once, respecting my wishes. Knowing that’s my only day to see my brother and it’s sacred to me, he would’ve asked me. Plus he has no ties. So I know it’s not him. Which leaves me with one glaring question.

“Who the hell signed him out?” I snap at Miss Sue. “This doesn’t tell me who he left with.”

I hate her sympathetic smile right now. “I’m not allowed to release that information.”

“If something happens to him...” I don’t finish the threat as a burst of fear steals my words. “Oh, god.” I turn on my heels and race out of the door.

My drive to the pier is a blur as panic saturates my soul. This isn’t like Kaleb. He isn’t impulsive. He would’ve told me in the letter if it was Holden and warned me to stay away. If he had met someone, he would’ve told me that last Sunday. My thoughts spiral. I know he has access to the internet. What if some predator has tricked him? I can’t lose him too. He’s all I’ve got.

I’m barely parked before I’m shoving out of my SUV and scanning the area for Kaleb. I race to the beach, not giving two shits about the sand in my shoes. Kids squeal in delight as they play in the surf. A group of teenagers are shouting through a serious game of volleyball. People are sunbathing. Everything looks normal. My head swivels left and right searching for Kaleb, for anything that looks out of the ordinary. But I find nothing and it makes my heart slam in my chest.

I’m just about to take off in the direction to my right when my eyes land on Kaleb coming out of the ocean and up onto the sand.

Relief nearly sweeps my legs from under me. “Kaleb!” I cry out, charging

toward him.

His grin is instant, and he changes course coming toward me. I don't slow down as I approach him and slam into him, wrapping my arms around him. We stumble back, but he keeps us upright. Tears of relief pour down my cheeks.

"Did you miss me that much?" he asks with a chuckle.

I break the hug to shove him hard in the shoulder. "What the hell, Kaleb? You scared the shit out of me." My voice breaks and I hate it. I hate he sees me scared and vulnerable. I'm supposed to be the strong one.

The carefree smile widens into a goofy grin. "Language, Raindrop." He mocks me. "I told you where I was in the letter."

"I've been in a panic, Kaleb." I shove his shoulder again. "You told me where you were but not who signed you out. For all I know it's some predator trying to prey on you."

He slings his arm over my shoulder and starts walking. "I'm young, not stupid."

"Then who the hell signed you out? Only me or the people who want to adopt you are allowed to sign you out, but I've still got a few years left to try. No one—"

He grabs my shoulder just as we reach an oversized blue and coral striped beach towel and spins me toward him. The intensity in his eyes steal my words. "Don't be mad."

Tingles prick my skin. The breeze catches my hair, and I try wrestling it behind my ear while fighting the urge to throttle him. I know what he's going to say, but dammit, I hope I'm wrong. "You can't start with that. It means I'm certain I'll end up that way."

"Holden signed me out."

For the second time today, my stomach drops and the ground falls out beneath me. Anger riles up inside me, threaded with hurt. "What?" My voice is barely a whisper. "How could..." I stop. It took everything in me to convince Kaleb that he wasn't the one who brought on the breakup. Even with his slip-up, none of it was his fault. It was mine. I should've trusted Holden's feelings for me. Something I've done a lot of thinking about. "I'm not ready to see him yet." Nervously, I look around but don't spot him.

"But you love him." The hopeful statement shows off his age.

"And that's what makes seeing him hard, Kaleb. I'm not ready." I scan around again. "Where the hell is he? He just left you alone out here?"

Kaleb looks away. "He went to grab us something to drink."

I take in a long, deep breath. "I know you and he have fun together so spend the day with him." The words feel thick and acidic across my tongue as it corrodes my heart. "You need guy time and I respect that. I'm going to go before he comes back, but next Sunday is mine." Hot tears cling to the backs of my eyes as I reach out to hug my brother.

Grabbing my forearms, he stops me. "Raindrop. Answer me. Do you love him?"

"Kaleb," I protest but he just looks at me expectantly. He looks so much like Mom right now with how he's staring at me. I know what he's trying to do. He's going to make me admit it so I can't file it away and forget it. She always made me deal with my emotions. "You're pulling the mom card?" My lips tilt up.

He grins. "She always had a way of making you talk. Is it working?"

I titter, shaking my head and give him what he wants. The faster I can get out of here, the faster I won't see Holden. "Yes, Kaleb. I love him and that's what—"

"Then marry me."

Holden's voice startles me, and I jump at the stab of panic. Spinning around, I come face to face with him. My chest cramps. God, he looks so good shirtless and in his swim shorts. His smooth skin, the patch of dark hair that leads a trail below his waistband. It short circuits my brain.

He reaches out and clutches my hand, running his thumb over my knuckles. My first thought is how I want to throw myself into his arms. My second thought is how badly I want to throttle him, too.

"I messed up." His tone is sincere. "I asked out of desperation and frustration. Not from my heart."

Time slows to a crawl as I watch him reach into his pocket and lower himself onto one knee. Everything around us mutes. People disappear. The edges of my vision blur as a mix of anger and surprise prompts tears. "Don't do this," I mutter through a thick throat, but he doesn't listen.

"The moment you called me the office ass kisser I knew you were something special. The moment you first kissed me I knew it was hopeless to try and stop myself from falling in love with you. You are the most independent, self-reliant, thoroughly stubborn, genuinely authentic, and unique woman I've ever met. You make me see life in a new way, bigger and brighter, and it reminds me to stop and smell the flowers. I want to make you

my wife because I love you. Because when I'm not with you, I'm not whole. I want to always feel the way you love me because it's better than anything I've ever experienced. And I'm trying to always love you because it's exactly what I want to do."

I can't breathe. My lungs feel like they're squeezed tightly, and I can't take in a sip of air. My heart bangs against my chest, loud and jarring, threatening to break my ribs. When he opens the ring box, I feel lightheaded. I was expecting to see something expensive and over the top because that's Holden, but instead, it's a small diamond that sits on a platinum band lined with several smaller ones surrounding it. It's modest and simple, and most of all it shows he put thought into this.

"Let me love you forever. Marry me, Raine."

A sob erupts from my chest and I sway. Holden takes me by the hand and pulls me onto his lap, cradling me. "How could you possibly want to marry me?" My voice is muffled as I bury my face into my hands.

"Because the love I have for you breathes life into my soul." He moves my hands away from my face and dips his head to look me in the eyes. "These past three weeks have been nothing but a nightmare without you. I'm sorry for giving you a reason not to trust me to talk to me, and I'm sorry for being such an idiot."

At his words, I close my eyes, resting my head on his chest. His arms tighten around me, and he kisses my hair.

"If this is what happens when you ask your girlfriend to marry you, I'm never doing it." Kaleb sounds horrified.

I burst out laughing.

Holden holds the box in front of me again. The sun glistens off the diamonds. "Will you marry me, Raine?"

Fear and doubt. They're such awful feelings. One stops you. One slows you.

I look up, meeting Holden's blue eyes and in his gaze, I see all the love he has for me.

"Yes."

"Finally!" Kaleb shouts. "Any longer and I was going to graduate from college first."

Holden slides the ring onto my finger, and I take a moment to really look at it. The diamond isn't too large, and I couldn't be more thankful for it. The band alternates round and marquise diamonds... I love it.

Holden helps me to my feet, cups my cheeks, and captures my lips, breathing life back into me, into my soul, and into my life.

My head rests on Holden's chest, our bodies tangled together as he trails feather light touches up and down my lower back.

After he proposed, we celebrated our engagement over greasy burgers, crinkle-cut fries, sodas, and a good time. Then Holden took us to an arcade where we stayed for a few hours before he had to take Kaleb back. To know Holden planned this with Kaleb and made sure to still have fun afterward makes my heart full.

Once we got back to Holden's, we barely made it in the door before he ravished me, passionately and desperately. We made up for lost time. It was hectic and frantic while at the same time slow and easy with so many emotions twisting us together.

"I asked Kaleb for his permission to marry you." He lifts my hand and straightens the ring on my finger.

My heart gives me a loud, loving thud.

"He thought he was the reason we broke up," I say.

He nods. "We had a talk about that, too. He's protective of you," he continues. "He told me that if I hurt you, he'd find a way to make me choke on my nuts." He laughs under his breath. "He's a good kid."

"We've always been close, even before our parents died. I used to rush home from school to see him and then when he was able to walk, he'd run down the driveway to see me when I'd get off the bus. Even when I got older, I'd read to him and tuck him into bed before I'd go out with my friends." The memory makes me smile. "I knew when Mom put him in my arms, he was going to be my best friend." I frown. "I hate seeing him only on Sundays. I've missed years of being near him."

I know Holden's next question. I can sense it, the change in him, and I brace for it.

"How did your parents die?"

"Kaleb didn't tell you?"

"I didn't ask him. I asked you."

Inhaling, I steel myself to answer his question. That day with all the pain

and chaos is still hard to talk about. It sends a stabbing pain into my chest. “My father shot and killed my mother before turning the gun on himself.” My words sound miserable. “I don’t know why either. There were no signs of anything before then.”

Beneath me, Holden tenses and tightens his grip on me. “Shit, Raine. I’m sorry.”

“You would’ve loved my mother. She was so beautiful inside and out with a huge loving heart, and she always gave the best advice. She also made the most amazing blueberry pancakes.” I sigh. “Kaleb reminds me a lot of her, but there are moments I catch a glimpse of Dad in him. Those times are hard.”

“Kaleb reminds me a lot of you,” he says and pauses for a beat. “My house is yours, Raine. You want your brother, go get him and bring him home.”

The words hit me. For so long, I haven’t had a place to call my own. I haven’t had a kitchen or a bathroom or a bedroom. And now, Holden’s giving it to me. An actual house that’s not just a roof over my head but a home.

Taking my silence as doubts, Holden continues, “I don’t want you to feel pressured into moving in with me. If you want to stay at your place for a while, I won’t be happy about it, but I’ll learn to deal with it. But I’ll be very upfront. I hate thinking of you open and vulnerable in your vehicle. I’d be more comfortable with you here. With me.”

Dammit. Hot tears spill over. They slide over the bridge of my nose and pool onto his chest beneath me. Then my insecurities flare, raising from the depths of my mind. “I don’t want to marry you if you’re only doing it bec—”

Holden shifts us, rolling me to my back and looking me in the eyes. “No.” He shakes his head. “I put time into thinking everything through. My Dad used to tell me ‘when you know, you know’ and I always thought it was a load of crap until you. I think I knew with the first kiss that you were my future, but I spent a lot of time fighting it because everything was—*is*—new. But time away from you made me have a very honest conversation with myself. I want to marry you because you make my life fuller. I want to share my life, my successes, my failures, my happiness with you. I want to be the one at your side when you succeed, to comfort you if you fail, and I want to be the one who revels in your smile. Of course, I want to help you, but you prefer to do things your way. I respect that and I won’t stand in your way. Just know I’m here if you need me.”



Be still my heart.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” I whisper.

He shakes his head and kisses the corner of my mouth. “I’m sorry I put doubts in your head for you not to trust me. I didn’t listen to you closely enough. If I had, I would’ve seen there was more to it than just your aversion to my extravagance. You never lied to me. You were cryptic with your answers, and I was blind to it.”

“How’s this going to work long distance?”

He kisses me again. “How soon do you want to get married?”

Trust him... “Will it be okay if we wait until Kaleb is living with me?”

The corners of his lips pull into the sweetest smile. “Of course.” He bends his head and kisses against my throat before lifting to look at me again. All the playfulness is gone and replaced with unhappiness. “I have to go back to Colorado tomorrow afternoon, but I’ll be back next Saturday for a few days. I’ve got a big project that unfortunately is going to take up a lot of my time for a little while.”

Scrunching my face, I purse my lips. “Guess you need to convince me to not change my mind about marrying you then.”

He may chuckle, but his eyes blaze.

And boy does he convince me.

Twice.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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## RAINE

A lot has changed in a month. For starters, I'm no longer homeless. After another conversation, I decided to move into Holden's—*our*—house before he left again for Colorado. I didn't want to put more stress on him by worrying about me when he should be focused on his project.

He told me I could make any changes I wanted since it was my home, too, so I immediately put up pictures of Kaleb, several of us with Mom, and one that included my entire family. I could tell he wasn't happy about the lack of space I needed, at the shortage of belongings I owned, but he didn't say anything. Although I spent the first week alone there, I wasn't uncomfortable. It gave me a chance to settle in. I also added food to the fridge and bought a better coffee maker.

Between him being gone more than he's been here, no thanks to the project he's been working on, and Kaleb not yet under our roof, we haven't set a date for our wedding yet. But we FaceTime every night and every morning, something I couldn't do while living in my vehicle. We also text a lot more throughout the day. It's like being engaged has me missing him more.

When he is here, we've decorated and added some artwork to make the house more "us." One day while we were in the living room, he showed me the letter his Aunt Hazel left him, and suddenly his words about smelling the flowers made sense. I bawled like a baby. And the stories he's shared of her, I know I would've loved her.

I met Dora and Norman—Holden's parents—one evening after work. When I got home, they were waiting for me. Dora immediately pulled me into a hug, showering me with love while Norman couldn't hide his smile at

watching his wife. Holden looks a lot like his father and has the softness of his mother. Before they left for the night, we exchanged phone numbers, and not a day has gone by she's not called me. When I gained a fiancé, I also gained loving parents.

As I push out the door of the coffee shop to head to my SUV, my heart skitters and my feet slow. Holden's leaning against his car dressed in jeans and a white button down with the sleeves rolled up. He's looking down at his phone, legs stretched out in front of him with his ankles crossed. Like he senses me, he looks up. His chiseled jaw shifts into a grin as he tucks his phone into his pocket.

Tilting my head, I purse my lips playfully while fighting the urge to throw myself into him. "You're home earlier than expected. Did you get fired?" He was supposed to be here Sunday. Not Wednesday.

He looks sheepish when he lifts his shoulder. "I could. I'm playing hooky."

"Your fall from grace is going to be painful." I erase the distance between us and throw my arms around him.

His arms snake around my waist, and he pulls me closer. His mouth finds mine and home has never felt so good.

"You didn't drive the car," he grumbles against my lips.

Yet another change he talked me into. He asked me to drive his car because he didn't want it to collect dust, and he was worried about my SUV breaking down. I couldn't *not* agree. He had his mouth on my clit and his fingers pressed into me.

I roll my eyes, leaning back. "I have been, but I felt like driving mine today."

"Because the gas tank is empty." His tone is flippant.

"That's beside the point." I titter. "I thought you weren't coming back until this weekend?"

"Freed up some time." He slants his mouth back to mine to give me a quick, sweet kiss. "Plus, I missed the hell out of you. Ride with me home. I'll bring you back in the morning."

As we step into the house, I suck in a startled gasp and my feet freeze at

the sight of a clean-cut man sitting at the kitchen island.

“This is Toby, Janie’s boyfriend,” Holden says as he nudges me inside.

Before I can say hello, I catch a flash of brown hair out of the corner of my eye, and instantly I’m engulfed in arms. “Finally, I get to hug your neck.”

Janie. I recognize her voice. We’ve spoken several times over the phone.

When she breaks the hug, I’m taken aback by just how beautiful she is. Like stunningly beautiful. Silky hair, big, bright light-brown eyes, and a perfect smile. If I hadn’t been a witness to their brotherly-sisterly relationship, I would become wildly jealous.

“Sorry. Sorry. I got excited.” She snickers as she smooths down her skirt with pink tinged cheeks.

“I couldn’t tell. Your professionalism surprises me,” Holden quips.

She throws him a playful glower before sliding her attention back to mine. “I don’t know what you see in him,” she says teasingly.

“I have to look over a lot.” I grin sheepishly.

Holden and Toby both laugh.

We move outside and sit around the large table. While I decide to plop my butt down in my favorite spot at the end of the love seat, Holden sits at the head of the table and Janie takes the chair to his left, popping open her laptop. Holden looks like he’s about to lead a meeting. When he places his elbows on the arm rests and steeples his fingers, my brows kick up. Holy shit, he’s hot.

“After consideration and evaluating the market, I’ve decided to open a second facility in Florida.” His tone is drenched in professionalism.

Businesslike Holden is drool worthy.

My heart kicks me in the gut with adrenaline-laced excitement. A place here means he’ll be home more. My mouth tilts into a smug smile. “You really were impressed with my relocation speech.”

Holden’s lips twitch.

Janie rolls hers between her teeth to keep from laughing.

“I’ll be in need of a personal assistant here,” he says.

My pulse triples. Is he... Is he offering me a job? I swing my feet from out from under me and sit up straighter. I look to Janie for hints, but she’s not giving any. “Are you offering me a job?” I ask Holden.

A slow smile spreads across his mouth as a mischievous glint lights up his gaze. “I am.”

I narrow my eyes.

“Janie will still be my assistant but from afar. You and she will be working together until the new facility opens and is operating. Then she’ll relocate here. From there, we’ll have to make some decisions, but we’ll worry about that closer to time.”

“I—” I have no damn idea what to say. He’s offering me something I’ve always wanted—a career instead of just a job. “I know nothing about your company, Holden. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“That’s where I come in,” Janie chimes in. “If you accept, we start tomorrow on setting you up. HR will issue your login and email. You’ll get a company laptop as well. You already having office experience helps, but we’ll work side by side until I have to leave at the end of next week to help you learn the ins and outs about the company.”

All types of thoughts are spiraling in my head. Doubts too. “Is this some sort of sympathy play?”

Holden’s jaw tics. “No,” he states sounding like the businessman he is. “Your work ethics are admirable. You’re dependable, determined, ambitious, and eager to learn. When you set your mind to something, you’re diligent until it’s complete. You’d be an asset to my company. *That’s* why I’m offering you a job.”

“What if I hate the job?”

“Then you put in your notice. I won’t stand in your way of whatever you want to do, but I do want to give you an opportunity.”

“If I accept the job, I don’t want any special treatment. I want to get paid like a newbie, and if I screw up, I want to get disciplined.” I catch the fire spark in Holden’s eyes before he blinks it away. “All their rules apply to me. Okay?”

“The only rule you’re allowed to break is flirting with the boss.” Holden’s smirk is smug.

I arch my brow and match his expression. “You’re hiring me because you want a personal barista, aren’t you?”

“Clearly.”

“I’ll need to put in a notice at OceanBrews. I won’t just leave them.”

“I figured as much. We’ll work around your schedule during that time,” Holden assures me.

“And you’re sure you want to spend all this time with me?” I ask.

“Without a doubt. Will you be able to handle it?”

I lift a shoulder. “I guess when I throw something at you, you’ll have

your answer.”

Janie snorts. “I love that she said when and not if.”

I catch the twitch in Holden’s lips.

Holden’s offering me something I’ve longed for, something I need. While I love working at the coffee shop, I know there’s no ladder to climb. The highest position is manager, and unless Lucy or Chelsea quit, I’ll never get it.

I wipe my sweaty hands on my thighs. “As long as you treat me the same as the rest of your employees... with the occasional kiss, I accept.”

Holden’s face breaks out in a pleased smile. Janie, on the other hand, claps her hands as she bounces in her seat, which garners an amused look from Holden. She ignores him. “I’m letting HR know now. Your laptop is already here.”

Pride blossoms in my chest. It’s a feeling I haven’t felt in a long time. “Is this meeting over?” I’m barely able to keep still.

“If you have no other questions, yes.”

Leaping to my feet, I round the table and throw myself into Holden, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”

“I’d move the mountains for you, Raine,” he whispers back. “If you don’t like the job, don’t feel obligated to stay. I’ll support whatever decisions you make.”

After all these years of ups and mostly downs, life finally seems to be easing up on me.

“I need call your mother. She’ll be so happy,” I say.

He laughs. “She already knows. I’m actually surprised she’s not here with her ear to the door listening in.” That does sound like something she’d do.

I give him another kiss. “I’m totally going to sleep with my boss.”

Janie makes a gagging sound, and it throws us all into a fit of laughter.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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HOLDEN

*Six months later...*

When my soon-to-be bride told me she wanted a small and intimate wedding, I couldn't have been more pleased. I wanted the same although it didn't matter to me if I married her in a packed stadium or just the two of us and an officiant of the courts. As long as it ended with her being my wife, I'd be happy either way.

When she finally settled on a date, I was happy. I've never wanted anything more in my life than to have her as my wife. And in less than an hour, she'll be making my dream come true and my life complete.

The door to the guest bedroom opens, and Kaleb steps in with a sour look and a charcoal gray tie hanging from his hands. "She said I had to wear it."

"I told you she wasn't budging." I eye him through the mirror as I finish tying mine.

"Can you help me?" he asks, sounding grumpy. "I have no clue how."

Kaleb moved in with us five months ago and quickly adjusted to home life. Overall, the kid is great. He picks up after himself, studies hard for school, and does chores without a fuss.

"You nervous?" I study him as I work on his tie. Raine asked him to walk her down the aisle before he takes his spot beside me as my best man.

"Nah." He shakes his head, but he's a horrible liar. I don't think he realizes he looks away when he doesn't tell the truth. "You?"

"Nah," I mimic him. "Quite the opposite actually." I finish his tie and put my hands on his shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "When I get nervous, I shake it out."

He quirks his left eyebrow up as his golden hazel eyes meet mine. “Raine told me about the shake out. I’m not as gullible as her.”

“Ah.” I straighten, hiding my laughter. “So she told you that it helps, then?”

Skeptical, he studies me, his gaze searching for any hints that I’m pulling his leg. A beat later, a shake works its way down his body—his arms, torso, and to his legs. “That only made me feel like an idiot.” He smooths his hair back down.

Grinning, I shove his shoulder. “But you’re not nervous anymore.”

In typical teenage fashion, he rolls his eyes while trying to hide his smile.

A knock on the door sounds before Callen steps in, his attention immediately falling on Kaleb. “I should be upset that you took my spot.”

Kaleb shakes his head. “You wanna kick someone’s ass, kick his. It was his idea.” He throws his thumb at me, tossing me right under the bus without a care.

These two hit it off the first time they met, just like I knew they would. Callen’s great with kids, and Kaleb speaks to the inner angsty teenager in him. When I said that out loud, Callen punched me in the arm... just like a moody teenager and proving my point.

Callen grunts a chuckle swinging his attention to me. “Time’s up if you want to run.”

I said the same thing to him on his wedding day.

No damn way I’d run.

On second thought, I would. Straight to Raine. I’ve been waiting for this moment for what feels like an eternity.

I’ve made my way to the altar—iron rods with sheer curtains that are blowing in the breeze. Even with all the money I have, Raine didn’t splurge on anything. She even saved part of her paychecks to buy her dress.

Only thirteen people are here, all seated together before us. Neither one of us want there to be sides. We’re joining our lives and our people. My parents are sitting the closest and Mom is smiling so big with happy tears in her eyes. She and Raine have a special bond, and I know without a shadow of a doubt if things go sideways, my mother will disown me.

I think of Hazel and when I found out about this house. I thought she had officially lost her mind, but while I stand here impatient as ever waiting on the woman I fell head over heels for in less than a blink, I realize Hazel had a big part in all this. I owe this moment to her.

The first slow chords of the piano begin, and my heart trips before it pounds. Not from nerves or panic, but from exhilaration.

Lucy walks out of the front door wearing a beautiful mist-blue gown and holds a small bouquet of white and blue flowers. Callen guides her off the sidewalk and onto the lawn, and then she hits me with a knowing smile that promises my mother's words—I'm about to have my socks knocked off.

"Da-da!" Jesse pipes out when he sees his father.

Callen gives his son a smile as Morgan shushes him quietly and bounces him a few times while Colby slaps a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

My eyes are locked onto the front door. When Raine finally steps out, nothing prepares me for it. All the air rushes from my lungs and my throat clamps down. The world falls away. No longer do I hear the music. I don't see our friends. I don't see her brother. I barely register Lucy sniffing beside me. All I see is her. She's jaw dropping. Her dress has a sweetheart neckline with straps that drape her arms. The bodice has a flower design and the airy, soft white fabric flares out at her waist and flows down her legs with a slit up to her right thigh.

My ego explodes knowing *she* is what I get to love for the rest of my life. That love burns in my soul and spreads outward. I fight the urge to run to her, toss her over my shoulder, and race back to the altar to rush through our vows, so I can kiss her.

But I don't move. I'm paralyzed by just how beautiful she looks.

She shares a soft laugh with her brother just before she stops in front of me. I'm met with a watery smile and tears in her eyes. I take her hand from her brother and pull her closer to me.

My gaze sweeps over her. "You're breathtaking," I whisper thickly. "I've never wanted to love someone as much as I want to love you. No words could ever come close to explaining how I feel for you."

A throat clears behind us. "Shall we start?"

"Could we hurry?" This comes from my bride. "I'd really like to get to the kissing part."

It's all a blur. Listening, devoting our lives, sliding our rings onto each

other's fingers. I'm struck by her beauty, struck by how elated I am that she's finally becoming my wife, and when I hear the words "you may kiss your bride," I waste no time. Cupping the back of her head, I capture her mouth. It's a promise to cherish her, to love her, and to be her everything she'll ever need.

Cheers go up around us and Raine pulls away with a laugh. Her forest greens are full of a roguish fire. "This doesn't mean I'll start using your credit card."

I gave her my credit card months ago and have found it in every obvious place there is—the fruit bowl squeezed between an apple and orange, inside a bag of pretzels, taped to the shower wall. Of course, she'd banter with me on our wedding day.

I burst out laughing as I lace our fingers together. "No, but you'll have to use your bank account."

"Holden..."

I kiss her forehead. "Yes, Mrs. Slade." I really like the sound of that.

Before she can argue with me, my mother comes in and gives Raine a hug.

She's going to be pissed when she finds out I'm taking her to Fiji for our honeymoon instead of staying home for a week like we planned. She'll give me angry glares, but that's okay. I'll kiss those away and enjoy every second doing so.

THE END

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