

A stylized illustration on a red background. On the left, a man with dark hair, wearing a black t-shirt and black pants, stands with his arms crossed, looking towards the right. On the right, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright yellow dress, is shown from the chest up, smiling and looking towards the viewer. The text is overlaid on the illustration.

HIS DREAM GIRL IS...  
HIS MATCHMAKER.

IN  
YOUR  
DREAMS  
HOLDEN  
RHODES

STEPHANIE ARCHER

**IN  
YOUR  
DREAMS,  
HOLDEN  
RHODES**

*For the romantics*

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## Sadie

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“SADIE WATERS?”

“That’s me.” I gave the receptionist a bright smile.

She emerged from behind the desk and gestured for me to follow her. “We’re still waiting for the others but I’ll get you seated in the conference room.” She glanced over her shoulder with a sympathetic expression. “The celebration of life was lovely yesterday.”

I nodded with a sad smile. “Katherine would have loved it.”

A few weeks ago, my aunt Katherine had passed, and yesterday, half the town of Queen’s Cove had gathered on the grounds of her inn to celebrate her. The event had been more like a town fair than a funeral, with people spread out on picnic blankets, food sizzling on barbecues, and a crowd of kids chasing bubbles from the bubble machine. People read poems about my aunt. Several bands played her favorite songs. A troupe of interpretive dancers performed jerky, writhing, sensual choreography to honor her. That part made people uncomfortable.

It was the weirdest celebration of life I’d ever been to, and it was exactly what she wanted.

My heart panged. Katherine had been so fun, weird, and bubbly, and I missed her.

“Are you in town for long?” the receptionist asked as she led me down the hall.

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m heading back to Toronto after this.”

Dread trickled into my stomach at the idea of driving home. Yesterday had been a welcome distraction from my clusterfuck of a life back in

Toronto.

Outside the door to the conference room, the receptionist paused. “We’re all very interested in who will inherit the inn.”

I held back a snort. A hundred people must have asked me who the inn was going to. This tiny town on the coast of Vancouver Island was exactly how I remembered from when I was sixteen.

Holden Rhodes wandered into my head.

He had worked at the inn the summer I stayed there. Katherine had hired him to do landscaping, general handyman tasks, drive guests to and from the marina, and take them on hikes in the local trails and the mountains. Before my trip, Katherine had talked my ear off about him, and I couldn’t wait to meet him. He was three years older than me, but she was certain we’d be friends.

When I met him, he wanted nothing to do with me. I still cringed, thinking about the scowl on his unfairly hot face.

Katherine would suggest he take me into town, and suddenly his truck was full and he didn’t have any room for me. A guest at the inn would ask if I wanted to join their hike, and Holden said I didn’t have enough hiking experience, so wouldn’t be able to keep up. One afternoon, I was laying out on the porch, reading magazines and painting my nails. Holden was in the yard, weeding the gardens. I stepped inside for a snack, and when I had returned, he had sprayed my magazines with water.

He made sure I knew how unwelcome I was here. Every time I even thought about coming back, I remembered how he couldn’t bear to be around me that summer.

Dick.

I had thought I’d run into him yesterday at the celebration of life, but I didn’t. I knew from Katherine he owned a construction company in town and dropped by the inn to help her out. His mom, Elizabeth, was Katherine’s best friend and the executor of her will. She organized the celebration of life and had scooped me up into a warm hug the second I saw her.

He was probably married with six kids by now. Not that I cared.

“Sadie?”

I blinked and smiled at the receptionist. Right. The inn.

“I’m sure it’ll go to my parents, or Elizabeth,” I told her with a shrug.

Katherine didn’t have any kids and never married, and I was the closest thing she had to a daughter, but there was zero chance in hell she’d leave the

inn to me. The six-bedroom inn was on a huge waterfront property in a busy tourist town. My life was in Toronto. She knew that.

Or, my life was in Toronto. Two months ago, I had a gorgeous apartment, a business loan for my new interior design firm, and the perfect fiancé.

Now I had none of those things.

I was so fucked. So, so fucked.

The receptionist slid the glass door open and gestured inside. “Everyone else should be here shortly. Can I get you anything to drink?”

I shook my head with another smile and thanked her before I stepped inside the room.

My smile fell and I froze.

Holden Rhodes sat at the table, arms crossed and glowering at me with the same serious, intense glare he gave me all summer fifteen years ago.

Wow.

He was hot before, with those intense eyes and pretty lashes, but now? Age had been kind to the guy. His face was tanned from the summer, making his gray eyes stand out even more. His thick, dark hair was unruly on top, and he had a five o’clock shadow that only made his jaw look stronger. Tiny lines formed at the corner of his eyes, and I found them ridiculously attractive.

I openly stared at how his black t-shirt stretched over his broad chest. He had gained about forty pounds of pure muscle. Jesus.

Holden Rhodes was even hotter than I remembered.

His eyes raked down me and my stomach flopped.

No wedding ring, I noticed. Not that I cared.

“What are you doing here?” he bit out.

Ha. Wow. *That* was why there was no ring on his finger.

I gave him a bright, cheery smile to piss him off. “Still a dick, I see.” I took the seat across from him. “Hi, Holden. How are you?”

He scowled at me. “I thought you were leaving.”

God, even his voice was hot. All low and rumbly. Whatever. Asshole. I was done with men and all the problems that came with them until I could figure out why I always picked the wrong guy.

I kept giving him that high-watt smile. “So good to see you again, Holden.”

His jaw tensed and I felt that old ripple of delight at pissing him off.

“How’ve you been?” I continued.

He crossed his arms and ignored me, turning to stare out the window



overlooking the town's main street.

I beamed at him again and his jaw ticked. Giddy happiness warmed my heart. God, I forgot how fun it was, getting on this grouchy asshole's nerves.

I played with my ponytail and his eyes followed my movements. "Me? I'm doing great, thanks for asking."

He scowled harder. His gaze dropped to my left hand before his eyes narrowed at my bare finger. My stomach tightened.

"Relax," I told him. "After the will reading, I'm gone forever."

When he dragged his gaze to mine, and there was something strange behind his eyes. "Good."

How the hell did *this* guy and my aunt Katherine get along? How was it possible he was raised by Elizabeth, one of the warmest, loveliest women I'd ever met?

I rolled my eyes. After today, I'd never have to see him again.

"Hello, sweetheart." Elizabeth hustled into the conference room, all warm smiles, and I stood to give her a hug.

"Thank you again for planning the celebration of life," I said as she squeezed me.

She pulled back and studied me with a wistful expression. "I was happy to." She shook her head at my face. "Gorgeous. Just gorgeous."

My gaze flicked to Holden's and my face heated.

"Good, we're all here." Katherine's lawyer strode into the room and took a seat. "Let's sit and we can get started."

Elizabeth took the seat I was in and I hesitated before taking the only remaining chair beside Holden.

The second I sat down, his masculine scent teased my nose. Butterflies flitted around inside my stomach. He smelled like a mix of deodorant, shampoo, body wash, laundry detergent. Fresh, clean, and masculine. I wanted to grab his t-shirt in my fists and huff it.

I hated that he smelled so good.

The lawyer opened her folder and began to read Katherine's will. My fingers strayed to the ends of my ponytail as she recited all the legal stuff. Someone walked by the door and when I turned, my ponytail brushed Holden's shoulder.

He flinched and glared at me. "Can you sit still for five minutes?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're so uptight."

The lawyer cleared her throat, watching us. Elizabeth glanced between

me and Holden with glittering eyes and a weird, knowing smile.

“Sorry,” I said with an apologetic expression. “Please continue.”

She continued reading. “The Water’s Edge Inn is to go to Sadie Waters and Holden Rhodes.”

The room was silent.

“I’m sorry.” I blinked at her. “*What?*”

## Holden

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FUCK.

She was *gorgeous*. She wasn't supposed to be gorgeous.

For fifteen years, Sadie Waters had lingered in the back of my mind, and after all this time, she got even prettier.

Same long, shiny brown hair, tied up in a ponytail. A plush mouth that made an O when she saw me sitting here in the conference room. Those dark green eyes as they raked over my shoulders with interest.

I couldn't breathe. I knew she'd be here and it still blindsided me, seeing her standing there at the door.

She rattled me. Around her, I couldn't think of anything to say. I wanted to listen to her talk, wanted to wrap that shiny hair around my fist and tilt her head back so I could look into her eyes, and I wanted her to smile at me.

*She's engaged*, I told myself. Even if she could stand to be around me, even if she didn't think I was an asshole, it wasn't going to happen.

Frustration rolled through my shoulders as I shifted in my chair. God, I was pathetic.

Thank fuck she was leaving tomorrow.

The lawyer finished reading the will and I stared at her.

I must have heard wrong.

"I'm sorry." Sadie leaned forward. "*What?*" She lifted a delicate hand and gestured between us. "Us. Together. Sadie Waters and Holden Rhodes. Fifty-fifty."

My chest flipped when she said my name, and I swallowed. Focus, I told myself.

“That’s correct.” The lawyer handed Sadie a set of keys. “Elizabeth, do you have the other set?”

The inn was supposed to go to Sadie’s parents or my mom, since she was the executor of Katherine’s will.

Not Sadie, who didn’t live here and hadn’t bothered to visit in fifteen years, and not me. Sure, I helped Katherine over the years if she needed things fixed around the place, but I wasn’t family.

Sure, I worked there growing up and I was close with Katherine. She taught me how to fix a sink, how to build a bookcase, how to manage staff. Katherine sparked my interest in building things, and was the reason I started in construction.

I visited her often, dropping by to fix things around the inn or saying hello when she was at my parents’ place. She knew I loved hiking the trails around the inn.

My pulse picked up. Holy fuck. Katherine had given us the inn.

Panic filtered into my mind. With the long hours I put in at my company, I didn’t have time to run Katherine’s inn.

My mom patted my shoulder and dropped a set of keys into my hand. “There you go.”

Sadie stared at the keys in her hand, blinking.

“We’ll be in touch regarding documents throughout the probate period,” the lawyer was saying. She gave us a big smile. “Congratulations. Please reach out if you have questions.” She closed her folder and stood.

“That’s it?” Sadie croaked in disbelief. I fought the urge to take her hand. It wasn’t like that with us.

The lawyer paused with a confused expression.

Sadie glanced around the room at each of us with disbelief. “You’re just giving us the inn? Is there a handbook?”

The lawyer smiled. “You’re going to be fine.”

We stared at her.

“This is not going to be fine,” Sadie told her before she let out a delirious laugh. “I don’t know how to run an inn. I’m an interior designer. This is going to be a disaster.”

Her words from that summer replayed in my head and my shoulders tightened. Being stuck with me was her nightmare. I scowled harder.

Now we owned an inn together.

Fuck.

I stood, eager to get out of here so I could think. “I have to go to work.”

The lawyer gave me a pleasant nod. “I’ll be in touch.”

I stalked out of the office and onto Main Street and raked my hand through my hair, trying to get it together, but a flurry of noise and excitement at the end of the street caught my attention. The door opened behind me.

“Oh my god,” Sadie murmured, standing beside me on the sidewalk.

The drum beat started and the high school marching band moved in formation down the street. They were off beat, out of tune, and kept veering off course as they played. Behind them, a line of people followed, carrying a sign across them.

*Congratulations!*

Beneath the word, our names had been scribbled.

Sadie looked up at me with those mossy green eyes and my heart clutched.

She was so pretty, and I was so, so fucked.

I remembered the promise I made Katherine before she passed. My eyebrows pulled together in a frown.

Sadie watched as the parade passed us, and burst out laughing. “This town is fucking weird.”

## Sadie

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AFTER THE WEIRD parade to celebrate our inheritance was over, I watched as Holden stomped off to go glare at newborn puppies or whatever he did in his spare time.

Elizabeth's hand landed on my shoulder and she studied me with a soft smile. "It's so good to see you, sweetie."

Every fall, Katherine visited me in Toronto, and last year, Elizabeth had joined. We spent the weekend wandering the city, visiting street festivals, shopping, touring art galleries, and eating and drinking at all my favorite restaurants. The summer I stayed here, Elizabeth had me over for weekly dinners with her family.

"You, too," I told her, and it was the truth. Elizabeth was one of those people who glowed with energy and love.

Unlike Holden.

"How's wedding planning going?"

My stomach froze into a block of ice.

I still felt sick every time I thought about what happened. I hadn't told Katherine because I didn't want her to worry.

"Well," I started, unsure of how to break the news.

I should have practiced this on the drive out. My throat worked and I sucked a breath in before shooting Elizabeth a bright smile that said *I am totally fine*.

"Things didn't really work out with Grant."

The understatement nearly made me laugh, and I played with the end of my ponytail, a nervous habit of mine. Shame knotted through my stomach.

Her face fell. “Oh, no. Sweetheart, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“We weren’t a good fit.”

Because he stole two hundred thousand dollars from me.

Because he gave me a fake name, swept me off my feet, and encouraged me to follow my dreams of starting my own interior design firm.

Because he asked me to marry him before he took everything from me.

Because I trusted him and I was so, so wrong.

My throat worked again and I crossed my arms. “We wanted different things.”

She tilted her head, studying me. “Was it for the best?”

A sharp laugh scraped out of my throat. I had learned my lesson. My judgement in men was flawed.

“Yes. How’s your family?” Anything to get off this topic.

A huge smile lifted onto her face. “They’re wonderful. My family gets bigger every year, with both Emmett and Wyatt getting married recently.”

I smiled at the memory of the oldest brother, arrogant but charming Emmett. He and Holden started a construction company in their twenties, but he stepped back two years ago to become mayor of Queen’s Cove. Holden’s younger brother, Wyatt, all laid-back confidence, was a professional surfer. The youngest Rhodes boy, Finn, was mischievous and daring, and spent most of the summer I visited with his best friend and next-door neighbor, Olivia. And then there was Holden, the dickhead brother.

An unfairly *hot* dickhead, but still an asshole to his core.

I thought back to his unreadable expression in the conference room when we learned of our inheritance. He was miserable at the news.

Of course he was. He couldn’t stand me. He couldn’t be in the same room with me for ten minutes before he practically kicked the door down to get out.

“Are you staying in town for long?” Elizabeth asked as we walked to my car.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” I frowned. “But now I’m not sure.”

She smiled. “You know you have a place to stay if you need it.”

My heart twisted. Elizabeth was so freaking nice. “I know. Thanks. I’m going to look around the inn, if that’s okay.”

She laughed. “It’s your inn, honey.”

“Right.” I winced. This was going to take some getting used to.

She pulled me into another hug. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

I nodded and we parted ways before I drove back to the inn.

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TEN MINUTES LATER, I parked and got out of my car.

Forested mountains enclosed the inn, and the yard led down to the ocean. The water stretched out to the horizon, sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Waves crashed on the shore. Above me, blue sky as far as I could see. Katherine always said September was her favorite month here on the west coast.

Nostalgia hit me square in the chest, sad and sweet. Damn, I missed her.

I made my way up the path and onto the porch. It creaked under me and I remembered when I used to lounge out here in the afternoons, painting my nails and reading magazines. Katherine would join me out here sometimes with a design magazine, those big, heavy ones that took ages to flip through, and I'd try to memorize and learn from them.

This porch was where she taught me to paint. It was where I realized I wanted to be an interior designer.

When I unlocked the door and stepped inside, the foyer was quiet and cool. Nostalgia rushed at me as I took in the photographs and paintings on the wall, the side table with a vase and a mirror in front of the door. The inn was more of a bed-and-breakfast, a giant house converted so each of the six guest rooms upstairs had a bathroom.

Floorboards creaked as I wandered down the hall. Downstairs, the sitting room faced the ocean, with the couches arranged for people to watch the sunrise or sunset through the giant windows. Mismatched, old furniture and walls overloaded with frames and paintings gave the inn a homey, eclectic vibe. The dining area was the same, a handful of small tables with a view of the forest.

I had forgotten about the original wood floors, scuffed and scratched but still warm and beautiful. The arched doorway between the dining room and the hallway. The built-in bookshelves in the sitting room. Holden had built those the summer I stayed here.

Irritation pinched my stomach at the memory. I had asked him if he needed help and he told me to go away.

The inn even smelled the same—the mix of cedar, old books, and the



lavender-vanilla room spray she used. I heaved in a breath and sighed it out.

When I found the main floor bathroom, I laughed out loud.

Oh my god. These tiles. Dark brown and orange, with a brown sink and laminate counter. Katherine *hated* this bathroom, and I had totally forgotten about it. She had these grand renovation ideas since she bought the place thirty years ago but it was never the right time, there was never enough extra cash, or the tourist season was busy and she didn't want to disrupt it, so they got pushed and pushed until she got sick, and she stopped talking about renovations altogether.

"*You'll help me redesign the place, won't you, Sadie?*" she had asked a couple summers ago while visiting me. I had just been promoted at the hotel chain where I worked as an interior designer.

"*Of course,*" I had told her.

I wrinkled my nose at the brown tiles.

In the hallway, I studied Katherine's photos on the walls, smiling as I recognized faces. There was one of me and her from that summer. There was one of Katherine, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's sister, Bea. There was one of the four Rhodes boys. My gaze lingered on serious, silent Holden.

In the photo, he was in his early twenties. The same intense glare I saw all summer, same sharp jawline, broad shoulders, and thick, unruly brown hair. Same piercing gray eyes that made my stomach flutter with anticipation.

A shiver rolled down my back but I shook it off.

Upstairs, I opened the first bedroom door and let out a loud laugh.

"Yikes."

How could I forget this wallpaper? Pastel pink with thousands of dancing flowers assaulted my eyes. The bed! I clapped a hand over my mouth, smothering my laugh. A colossal, mahogany four-poster bed sucked all the energy out of the room. It looked like something from medieval times, with huge blocky bedside tables and a dresser the size of a church altar.

Even though I knew they were all the same, I wandered from room to room. Now that I had worked as an interior designer for almost seven years, I could see the huge furniture made the room seem smaller and distracted from the fireplace between the windows.

This place had so much potential. Each room had a fireplace with a timeless stone mantle. I could picture this room in a different light, with neutral walls hung with art of photographs, sleek furniture, and a comfy bed with a fluffy white duvet and giant pillows. A chair beside the fireplace to

read in during cold evenings.

Each ensuite bathroom was the same brown and orange color palette as downstairs. I winced.

As I wandered down the hall, a funny feeling panged through my chest. I should have visited more. Like with renovations, it was never a good time. I was either in school or working or had used up all my yearly vacation, and Katherine visited me yearly.

Besides, this town was boring. There wasn't much to do that summer, especially because I had no one to hang out with. Emmett, Wyatt, and Finn were all working during the day, and Holden made sure I knew how unwelcome I was.

I opened the door to Katherine's room at the end of the hall and my heart squeezed. Same floral wallpaper as the other rooms, the same heavy furniture, but this room had an adjoining alcove she used as her office, with a desk in front of a window overlooking the ocean. I walked over to the window and gazed out at the gorgeous view.

The morning's events replayed in my head. I now owned this inn with Holden. I also had two hundred thousand dollars of debt waiting for me back in Toronto, no job, and a broken heart. My fiancé was on the run and I had legal bills to pay.

I needed money. I needed to get back to Toronto so I could fix my life.

I had no idea what to do next.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call and I read the screen.

It was the private investigator I had hired to find Grant so I could get my money back. My pulse picked up and my stomach squeezed up into my throat. I'd been waiting for news from him.

"Hello?"

## Sadie

---

A WEEK after I received my business loan, Grant went on a weekend trip to visit his parents in Vancouver. The morning after he left, he transferred the contents of our company's account to a bank in Mexico City. The detectives with the police department suspected he had left the immediate area, and the investigation hit a dead end.

His name wasn't even Grant Markham. It was Jason Fairfax, and he had done this to two other women in Europe.

That's when I hired a private investigator to get my money back.

"I had to grease a few palms to get the bank security footage," Rick said. "He left here with a duffel bag of cash, like the detective expected."

I let a long breath out, chewing my lip. "Okay, so what now?"

Rick sighed. "Look, you're a nice person, so I'm going to be straight with you. The detectives said this guy has done this before, right? The chances that he's hanging around are slim. If I were him, I would take off down to South America and drink mojitos on a beach for the rest of my life. I'm sorry, but that's the truth. I don't think we're going to find this guy."

A rock landed in my stomach and I swallowed.

"There's nothing we can do?" I asked. "Anything, Rick?"

He sighed again. "You're the client, and as long as you're paying me, I'm happy to sit in bars and ask people if they've seen the guy, but it's a waste of your money."

I rubbed my temple, scrambling for a solution. I knew in my gut he was right.

Grant was perfect, too perfect, and it was all an act. He had practiced this,

and I fell for it. I *always* fell for the wrong guy.

I nodded. “Okay.” My hand was shaking.

“I’m sorry, Sadie, but this guy is a professional. I’ll send you the invoice when I get home.”

We said goodbye and hung up, and I wished I could disappear into the floor.

It was so much money, and I wasn’t getting it back.

I walked downstairs in a daze and confused about the universe.

I was a good person. I paid my taxes. If I saw someone’s skirt tucked into their underwear or food in their teeth, I told them. When my friends had too many margaritas, I helped them get home safe. I had volunteered with Big Sisters in Toronto for five years. When I was done with my grocery shopping, I always put my cart back with the others.

What did I do to deserve this?

This debt was going to take years to pay off. The bank didn’t care that Grant stole the money. When I was building my business plan, the monthly payments seemed reasonable, but now?

No money, no company, no clients, no income.

The loan was in my name, because Grant had spent the last decade in New York before he transferred to Toronto, and was still building Canadian credit.

Fuck. My stomach burned with shame. I was so clueless.

Before Grant, it was Dylan, an investment banker who seemed like the perfect guy until I figured out he expected me to stay home with our future children. Great for some people, but not for me. I loved interior design, and I wasn’t giving it up.

Before Dylan, it was Luke, a painter I had met while doing a fine arts degree. Luke also seemed perfect in that tortured artist way until I overheard him making fun of my paintings.

I blew out a long breath and I closed my eyes. When would I learn? I couldn’t trust myself to pick the right guy, and it was getting worse each time.

While I locked up at the inn, I pushed all the feelings aside.

It didn’t matter. I was done with dating for the foreseeable future. I had enough on my plate.

Twenty minutes later, I strolled back down the main street on the hunt for some lunch when my gaze landed a shop window.

It was a real estate agency, with listings posted in the window for people to browse.

An idea struck me and a smile stretched across my face. The inn was worth a ton of money, and I had a ton of debt.

We could sell the inn. Of course. It was so simple.

Guilt poked me in the ribcage. The inn was Katherine's life's work. She put her whole life into that place. Her passion and purpose was hosting people, showing them the beauty of Queen's Cove, growing friendships with travelers from around the world, and helping people make incredible memories during their vacation.

My forehead pinched and I chewed my lip with uncertainty.

On the other hand, I had zero plans to own and operate the inn, and I doubted Holden did either. The guy had a company to run. What the hell would he want with an inn? Katherine knew my life was in Toronto. There was no way she had expected me to move to Queen's Cove and run the inn, and if she did, she wouldn't have left it to Holden. She would have left it solely to me.

From what Katherine had told me, his company was successful. He didn't need the money. Why was he in the will?

I knew one thing. Katherine did this because she loved me. She left it to me because she didn't have any kids, and we were close. This was her way of giving me a leg up in life.

A surprised, elated laugh burst out of me, and I sent a million *thank you's* up to Katherine, wherever she was in the universe. My golden solution had landed straight at my feet, and I could see my problems evaporating.

Good things happened to good people.

I'd stay at the inn one last night, and tomorrow, I'd go find Holden.

## Holden

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“HEY, BUDDY.” Emmett clapped me on the shoulder as I took a seat beside him at our parents’ house.

I nodded hello to everyone. The whole family was here except Finn, who was off fighting forest fires around British Columbia until late-September, after which he was moving to Whistler for the ski season. Emmett and his wife Avery sat beside me. Across from us, Wyatt had his arm around his wife, Hannah. My parents, Elizabeth and Sam, at the end of the table.

My dad jerked his chin in my direction. “Holden, I heard the big news. Congratulations.”

Emmett whistled. “How’s Sadie doing with the news?”

A rock landed in my stomach and I glanced around, uneasy. My brothers knew Sadie from the weekly dinners she attended during her summer here. She had that same sparkly friendliness Katherine had, and got along with everyone.

Except me.

“Fuck if I know,” I bit out.

Everyone turned to me and I held back a groan. I should have skipped this dinner. I had a thousand emails to catch up on and I knew they were going to grill me.

My mom gave me a strange look before turning back to the table. “She’s grown up into such a lovely young lady. So beautiful.”

Emmett wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Hey, buddy? Do you think she’s so *beautiful*?”

I scowled at him. “Shut the fuck up.”

He started laughing and Wyatt shot me a grin. Off Avery and Hannah's confused expressions, Emmett explained, "Holden had a little crush on her."

I scowled harder. "I didn't have a fucking crush on her."

I had a crush on her. Her hair looked like it was threaded with gold when the sun hit it right.

Everyone stared at me. Hannah raised her eyebrows at my tone, Avery and Emmett exchanged a glance, Wyatt grinned to himself, my dad gave me a chiding look, and my mom narrowed her eyes at me.

Emmett winced at me. "Too bad she's engaged."

My gut rolled with irritation.

My mom made a noise under breath before lowering her voice. "Emmett, don't bring up the engagement around her, please."

He frowned. "Why?"

"They called it off."

I froze. Katherine hadn't mentioned that. That's why she wasn't wearing her ring today.

"That's too bad," my dad said. "Is that the guy Katherine didn't like?"

My mom shushed him.

Possibility flickered in the back of my mind but I shoved it away as the old memory rang in my head.

*"Ugh, why would anyone go for Holden when they could have one of his brothers?"*

"Is she in town for long?" Hannah asked me. "I'd love to meet her."

My shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I doubt it." She couldn't even stand this town for two days.

"That's too bad," my dad said. "Would have been nice to catch up after all this time. You boys always had so much fun all together."

"Not all of us." Emmett wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Okay, that's enough," my mom said.

Emmett put his arm around Avery. "Adams and I are thinking about a weekend in Victoria at the end of September. Anyone interested?"

She smiled up at him and my heart gave a weird, yearning tug.

This gnawing emptiness in my chest started when commitment-phobe Emmett fell head over fucking heels for Avery a few years ago. The guy's life changed when he met her. She was everything to him. After work, he either raced home to spend time with her or went to the restaurant she owned so he could watch her work. And those smiles she shot him, like she'd do

anything for him?

Last year, Wyatt, who never wanted anything long term, agreed to help Hannah find a boyfriend but ended up keeping her for himself. They got married on the beach, and I watched my brother look at Hannah the same way Emmett looked at Avery.

I'd give anything to love someone like that.

I cleared my throat. "I can't take the entire weekend off."

Besides, the last thing I wanted was to watch Emmett and Avery stare into each other's eyes and whisper *I love you* for the fortieth time that day.

Avery raised an eyebrow in concern. "We hardly see you these days."

After a decade, Rhodes Construction employed two hundred and twelve people. When Emmett became mayor two years ago, he stepped down and I took over both roles. Two hundred people depended on me to keep the work coming in. I worked long hours, longer than I'd admit to my family, and it only got worse once Emmett left, but I'd never want him to feel guilty for pursuing something he loved.

Besides, I'd learned a long time ago that the *happily married with a wife and kids* path wasn't going to happen for me.

No matter how much I wanted it. No matter how bored I was, sitting in my big house alone, staring at the art on the walls.

"I don't think we can make it." Hannah gazed up at Wyatt with bright eyes. She chewed her lip and he smiled at her.

Did he look... nervous? I frowned at him.

"Right," my mom said. "When do you two leave again?"

When Wyatt traveled for surf competitions and brand sponsorships, Hannah joined him. She ran a romance bookstore in town but had a full staff to run the store when she wasn't around.

Hannah looked up at Wyatt with a private, hesitant smile, and he winked at her. It was that silent communication thing Emmett and Avery did all the time. I looked away.

"Should we tell them?" Hannah asked Wyatt, and he nodded. She sent that hesitant, excited glance around the table at us.

I frowned deeper.

"What is it?" Avery asked.

Wyatt's face lit up in a proud smile. "The bookworm's pregnant." That was his nickname for her.

My stomach bottomed out.



A baby. My heart thumped in my ears. My brother had met the love of his life and now they were going to have a baby. I pictured Wyatt holding a tiny bundle. A strange, tight ache hit me square in the chest.

My mom gasped and jumped up to hug Hannah. “Congratulations, sweetheart!”

“Fuck, yes!” Emmett hit his fist against the table, and the cutlery clanked. “That’s awesome.”

After my mom hugged Hannah, Avery was next. Before they were sisters-in-law, they were best friends, and Avery whispered into Hannah’s ear before she wiped away a tear.

“You ready?” my dad asked Wyatt after giving him a hug.

“Nope.” My brother shot him a lazy grin. “We have no idea what we’re doing.”

“You’ll be fine,” Emmett told him. “You have us.”

I pictured Wyatt and Hannah’s kid growing up, learning to walk, celebrating birthdays surrounded by our family. Learning to ride a bike. Playing with Legos. Me taking the kid to the art gallery and pointing out my favorite paintings.

And then I pictured it as my kid, with someone I loved. With someone who looked at me like Avery looked at Emmett, or Hannah looked at Wyatt.

My heart lurched.

I stood and gave both Hannah and Wyatt a big hug, careful not to crush Hannah. “Happy for you two,” I told them.

Hannah gave me a soft smile. “Thanks, Holden.”

Hannah wasn’t just my sister-in-law, she was my friend, and even if I envied what her and Wyatt had, I was still going to be the best uncle ever.

“I’m going to spoil your kid rotten,” I told her, and she grinned.

---

THAT EVENING, I returned to my home in the woods, sat on the couch, and stared at the painting hanging in my living room. On the canvas, a faceless, naked couple embraced. His arms curled around her like he was protecting her from the world, and she melted into him like he was a part of her. My heart ached when I stared at it, yet I couldn’t bring myself to part with it.

This painting was everything I wanted, but would never have.

I ran my own company, lived in a beautiful house, and had more money than I knew what to do with, and it still wasn't enough. Every time I came home to a quiet house, the clawing ache in my chest still demanded attention.

The promise I made to Katherine loomed in the back of my mind, and dread rolled through me.

*"I wish I looked harder for someone,"* she had said as I fixed a leaking tap in the kitchen. *"I always thought I'd find someone and it never happened. It would have been nice to find a partner. Promise me you'll try to find someone, Holden."*

Why the fuck did I say yes?

Because I wanted someone who would shoot me private smiles. I wanted to come home to someone making tea in the kitchen, humming or listening to music on the record player in the living room.

Because Katherine was my mentor. She taught me how to employ people and how to give back to my community. She would talk about her paintings and we'd visit the art gallery together. She showed me how meaningful paint on canvas could be. I owed it to her.

*"Why would anyone go for Holden when they can have one of his brothers?"*

My stomach hardened. No one was going to choose the silent, grouchy asshole.

A few months ago, after a few beers, Emmett had confessed to me that he had roped Avery into being his fake-fiancée while he ran for mayor in order to seem more responsible, and in the process of convincing the town they were madly in love, it became reality. Hannah had blackmailed Wyatt into helping her.

If I wanted what they had, I had to go out and find her.

Fine. For Katherine, I'd give it one last shot.

## Holden

---

THE NEXT MORNING, I sat in my office at work, thinking about the inn. The question had bothered me all night.

Why the hell did Katherine leave it to me?

I didn't need the money, and she knew that.

She wanted me to take care of the place, I realized. Even after she passed, she wanted someone looking out for the place.

That made sense. Parents left their homes to their kids all the time, and Sadie was the closest thing Katherine had to a daughter.

I wished she had warned me about this, though.

Sadie's shocked expression from the will reading appeared in my head and I crossed my arms. The weird, yearning twist behind my ribcage was back.

Fuck. Why couldn't she grow up to have onion breath or tiny, beady eyes like a troll. I pictured her with those stupid wheelie sneakers that got on everyone's nerves.

There. That was better.

A new image flashed into my head, of her smiling at me yesterday from across the conference room, her gaze roaming over my chest with appreciation.

I shook myself. She wasn't looking at me like that. She couldn't stand me.

After the meeting ended, I returned to my office, slid the glass door closed, and took a deep breath. I had made a promise to Katherine, and daydreaming about her niece wouldn't help.

I pulled out my phone, downloaded a dating app, and began to fill out my profile.

Name: Holden

Age: 34

Searching for: long-term commitment.

Kids? No, but open.

What do you do on weekends? Work, gym, art gallery, family time.

I swiped on a few profiles and within a minute, I had a match. I tapped out a message.

*Hi.*

*Hey, baby, she responded.*

*Uh. Okay. How are you?*

*I'm sitting in the bath, thinking about you. If you want to know more about me, check out my website:*

I pictured a woman in the bath, but it was Sadie in the tub, giving me that hot, appraising look. My cock stirred.

*Why would anyone go for Holden when they could have one of his brothers?*

I blew a long breath out, shoved her words out of my head, and deleted the app.

I could throw money at this problem. I could hire someone to set me up, like a matchmaker. I leaned back to see down the hall outside my office. Emmett still dropped by sometimes. If my brothers found out I was doing this, I'd never hear the end of it.

I typed *Vancouver Island + matchmaker* into Google before clicking the first link.

A video played on the site. A woman with short, bright red hair and a suit in the same color stared into the camera. A harp began playing through my speakers.

"Are you lonely, lack confidence, and terrible at dating?" she asked in a seductive tone.

A strangled noise scraped out of my throat, and I rushed to hit mute before sending another nervous glance out the door. Her mouth kept moving in the video and words appeared beside her.

*Matchmaker and Life Coach. Speed dating events every Friday!*

Speed dating? Fuck, no. Cold dread trickled down my spine. The idea of speed dating made my skin crawl. I wasn't like Emmett, who could strike up

a conversation with anyone. It would be a disaster. I could already tell I'd go home frustrated with myself.

I returned to Google and stared at the blinking cursor. Self-hate rose in my gut.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," I muttered to myself.

*How to find a wife.*

Zara stood at the glass door of my office. I hit lock screen as fast as I could.

"The candidate for the senior architect position is here," she told me.

"Right." I stood and gathered my things.

---

AFTER THE INTERVIEW, I returned to my office and froze in the doorway.

Sadie Waters lounged in one of the chairs across from my desk, a sketchbook balanced on her lap. She wore a cheerful yellow sweater. Lost in concentration, she erased something on the page in front of her before grabbing one of my pencils off my desk to fix whatever she had erased.

The familiarity of her grabbing the pencil made my heart shoot into my throat.

*Be normal*, I told myself.

At a loss for words, I cleared my throat.

She glanced up and gave me a bright smile. Not a sincere smile, but one of those fake ones she did when she was trying to annoy me.

"Good morning, Holden."

I scowled at her, gaze traveling over her perky ponytail and bright eyes. "I thought you were leaving."

She shrugged and smiled wider. "I guess I didn't." She put her hands up like, *whatcha gonna do?* before she adjusted in her seat. "On account of us inheriting an inn together and everything."

I took a seat behind the desk, acting like my pulse wasn't racing. "I'm busy."

Zara breezed into my office. "Here we go." She set a tea on my desk.

Sadie beamed at her. "Thank you so much, Zara."

I shook my head at both of them. "She's not staying. I have another meeting," I lied.

Zara stared at me with confusion. “You don’t have a meeting until three.”

Damn her and her steel-trap memory. I glared at Zara and she rolled her eyes before sliding the door closed.

I stared at Sadie and my lungs felt tight. This office was too small. My teeth ground together and I folded my arms over my chest, dragging a deep breath in and letting it out.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, stop it. What does your mom always say? Oh, yeah. Stop being so dramatic.”

Her eyes glittered with amusement and I studied her face.

Jesus, she was beautiful. I pictured myself running my fingers through her hair and my hand twitched on my bicep. Her gaze dropped to my arm and she raised an eyebrow.

I cleared my throat again. “What do you want?”

She straightened up. “We have a few things to talk about.”

I gave her a blank look.

“What realtor are we going to go with? What’s our listing price?” She counted off her fingers.

My eyebrows shot up in alarm, but she didn’t notice.

She wanted to sell the place?

“Do we want to change the inside of the house in terms of staging? I guess we can talk to the realtor about that.” She shrugged. “I can help with staging.”

“We’re not selling the inn.”

She frowned and blinked at me. “Holden, what are we going to do with an *inn*?” She whirled her finger in the air, gesturing at the office around us. “You have a company to run.”

I raked a hand through my hair, frustrated. I *knew* I had a company to run, and the inn was going to be a fair amount of maintenance. Grounds that needed to be maintained. I’d need to hire a staff. It wasn’t unmanageable, but it was more on my already-full plate.

Selling felt wrong, though.

“No,” I said in a flat tone.

Her face fell with a mix of confusion, disappointment, and panic. “Why not?”

“Katherine wouldn’t have left half of the inn to me if she wanted us to sell it.” I studied the pinch between her eyebrows. “I don’t need the money.”

Her delicate throat worked and she let out a breath, deflating. She bit her

bottom lip. “Fuck,” she whispered.

“Besides, we have to wait until the probate period is over.”

She turned back to me. “What?”

“Probate. We have to wait until all Katherine’s will documents are processed and the inn is in our names before we can sell. It’ll take up to a year.”

“A year?” she repeated, eyes wide.

“But I’m not selling.”

She chewed her mouth harder before her eyes lit up and she straightened up. “Buy me out.”

“Huh?”

She leaned forward. “Holden, you just said you don’t need the money. Buy me out of the inn, and I’ll be out of your hair forever. You’ll never have to see me again.”

She wiggled her eyebrows at me and I frowned, considering this.

“Two hundred grand,” she hurried to add. “You can buy my half of the inn for two hundred grand.”

My eyes narrowed. The place was worth many times that number. If I bought her out for that price, I’d make a killing, and she’d be leaving money on the table.

Why would she ever propose that?

She shifted under my gaze, fiddling with the sleeve of her sweater.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Her guilty gaze flicked up to mine. “Nothing.”

“Something.” Sadie wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t walk away from this property unless...

She was in trouble.

“Why do you need money?”

Her throat worked and panic flashed behind her eyes. “None of your business.” She pushed the panic aside and shot me a charismatic grin that made my chest flip. “Take the deal, Holden. You won’t regret it.”

Her throat worked again and she glanced down her hands, clutching the closed sketchbook on her lap. Her brow wrinkled.

This felt wrong. I didn’t agree with Katherine leaving Sadie half the inn but it felt worse if I interfered like this. I turned back to my computer and tapped the spacebar to wake it up.

“No.”

My monitors lit up. My previous search appeared on the screen in clear, and my stomach dropped as Sadie's gaze swung to the screen.

*How to find a wife.*



## Holden

---

“HOW TO FIND A WIFE?” She let out a laugh and her eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas. “Is that a joke?”

My face heated. “You need to leave.”

She shook with laughter, unaffected by me. “Oh my god, I love this. So the sad, lonely Sasquatch man wants a companion. That’s so cute.” She took a sip of her tea. “Have you tried kidnapping? Sometimes that goes okay. It’s called Stockholm syndrome.”

Shame rolled through my gut. Why did I fucking Google it at work?

“I’m not buying the inn from you,” I told her. “You’re wasting both our time.”

Sadie bit her lip, still grinning. “I know someone you can marry.” She pulled out her phone and typed something. “She’s really pretty and quiet so you won’t even have to worry about making conversation with her, and the best part is she always puts out.”

She flipped the phone around to show me an image of a blow-up sex doll. “She doesn’t have a name so you can pick whatever you like.”

Her eyes sparkled as she beamed at me.

“Hilarious,” I bit out. “Heard you’re not doing too great in that department.” I glanced at her bare finger, remembering the conversation from my parents’ house last night about her failed engagement.

Her smile dropped. “Wow. Okay. Thanks, asshole.” She stood and picked up her bag. “Have a great life.”

My head snapped up to watch as she slid the glass door open, waved goodbye to Zara, and walked out.

My chest strained tight with regret, and I got to my feet to follow her. All I'd done was point out she also wasn't married. She just suggested I marry a blow-up sex doll, for Christ's sake.

She strode back into my office and my eyes widened as I took a step back. She gave me that cat-like, pretty smile and stared me down.

My brain went blank.

She held my gaze. "If you buy me out of the inn, I'll find you a wife."

I scoffed. "No."

"I'm serious." She flopped back into the chair and I relaxed a fraction.

"So am I."

"Holden, you're Googling *how to find a wife*. It's obvious you have no idea what you're doing."

I hesitated, staring at my screen. I hated that she was right. "What makes you think *you* can find me someone?"

Especially when she thought I was so fucking ineligible fifteen years ago.

She brushed her long hair over her shoulder. "Easy. I've dated lots of assholes so I can coach you on how to hide that part of yourself."

The side of my mouth twitched but I held it down.

"Dating is a numbers game, Holden. I can do the leg work of finding you women who want the same thing. I'll help you plan the dates, give you ideas on gifts to buy them, come up with a pre-approved list of conversation topics for you to rely on."

"I don't need any of that."

She gave me a wincing smile like she didn't believe me. "Sure. The only thing I won't do? Hide the body when you get sick of her."

I glared at her and she winked. "Just kidding. I'll totally help you with that." Her shoulders bounced again. "I'm very motivated."

"Why?" My eyes narrowed.

Something dimmed behind her eyes but she blinked it away. "Because I need the money."

"Why?"

She cleared her throat and studied her hands. "I don't want to talk about it."

I watched her for a long moment. There was something under the surface with her. Something hurt.

"What's with the sketchbook?"

"Oh." The weird look disappeared and she dropped the book onto my

desk before flipping it open. “Just some design ideas I had for the inn.”

It was the floor plan of the inn. I shifted the book closer to study her sketch. She had hatched out the wall separating the front foyer and the sitting room.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “You want to knock a wall out?”

She shrugged. “It would open the space up, make it seem bigger and more welcoming.”

I turned back to the sketch. She had hatched out the wall between the dining room and storage room and labeled the new room *library* but the door had been removed.

She leaned forward and her hair fell onto my arm. I jerked back. She gave me a strange look and tapped the bookcase to the sitting room.

“The entry to the library is through the bookcase.” She bit her lip and her eyes sparkled. “A secret library would be cool. I read about this one in an old mansion back in Toronto, there was a latch under a shelf and then the whole bookcase swung out.” Her hands moved as she talked.

When she was excited like this, her whole face lit up. She met my gaze before leaning over to turn the page.

It was a rendering of one of the upstairs bedrooms, wallpaper removed and different furniture. “I’ve drawn it to scale, so you can see how different the room looks when you have more appropriate-sized furniture.”

I flipped to the next image. The bathroom, redone in modern tile with a glass shower and new vanity.

These sketches looked professional. We worked with designers on homes all the time, and she was just as good as they were.

“Two shower heads?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“For shower sex,” she explained, and I choked. “People have a ton of sex on vacation, Holden.”

The image of us in the shower flashed into my head and my cock stirred.

I cleared my throat. “Yep, thanks.” I snapped the book closed and shoved it back to her. “Designers work in Autocad.”

She nodded. “For clients, I always start with initial hand sketches and sometimes watercolor paintings. I think while I draw and paint. Then, I do it in Autocad.”

A memory of Katherine teaching her how to paint on the porch trickled into my head. “Why did you do these?”

Her mouth pulled to the side and her eyebrows pinched together. “I don’t

know. I started getting ideas last night. I always said I'd help redesign her inn and I never did."

I sat back in my chair and studied Sadie. She shifted under my gaze, fiddling with her hair. I took a long breath in and out.

*Promise me you'll try*, Katherine had said.

Did I actually think Sadie could find me someone? No. Not a chance. You can't sell a product you don't believe in.

But letting her try would fulfill Katherine's wish, even if Sadie did fail. It was worth a shot.

A tiny sliver of me wanted Sadie to stick around for a bit. I couldn't help myself.

In the chair across from my desk, her expression was strangely vulnerable and exposed, like she revealed a piece of herself she wanted to keep hidden, and my heart twisted.

"Okay," I said.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Okay, what?"

"Okay to your offer."

Her eyes lit up and she sat up straight. "Really?" she whispered, like she couldn't believe it.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "A couple conditions."

She chewed her lip, waiting.

I didn't know why, but it was important Sadie still owned the inn. It was the responsible thing to do. Katherine wanted her to have it, and she was clearly in trouble. Her being here stirred up old feelings but I couldn't screw her over.

She was Katherine's niece. She'd want me to help her out.

"I'll pay you two hundred grand and based on the current assessed price, we'll transfer that fraction of ownership to me. You'll still own part of the inn, just not fifty percent."

She frowned. "Why do I feel like there's a major catch?"

My gaze dropped to the sketch in front of me, of a bathroom full of emerald green tiles and sunlight. "You're going to lead the inn renovation."

She froze. "Holden, these are just sketches."

"Turn them into reality."

She glanced out the window overlooking Main Street, considering my counter.

"I told her I'd help her renovate," I admitted.

Her gaze snapped back to mine, confused. “What do you mean?”

Regret clawed at me. “I said I’d help her fix the place up and we never got around to it.”

She watched me, and I wish I knew what she was thinking. She gave me a quick nod. “Okay.”

“One more thing.”

“Oh god.” Her gaze flared. “Are you into something kinky? Like I have to find you someone who also drinks blood?”

The corner of my mouth quirked but I cleared my throat. “I don’t drink blood.” I ran my thumb over the arm of my chair. “I want this done in six months.”

Her eyes bugged out of her head. “You want to marry someone in *six months*? Even Blow-Up Belinda would think that was sketchy.”

I held back a snort. “I want to meet her in six months. I don’t need to get married within six months.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “*That*, I can work with. Deal.”

“We can’t tell anyone about this.”

She snorted. “Obviously. ‘Man looking for a wife’ screams murderer.” She held her hand out. Her nails sparkled. “Holden Rhodes, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

When I shook her hand, it was warm and fit perfectly in mine, and for a split second, I didn’t want to let go.

She stood and I dropped her hand.

“Holden Rhodes, it has been *fantastic* doing business with you.” She winked and slid the door open. “And we didn’t even need to buy you a sex doll,” she said for everyone to hear.

Zara gave me a strange look from her desk.

“Bye, Zara,” Sadie called, striding away.

My gaze dropped to her ass. Those jeans fit her perfectly.

“I love her,” Zara murmured.

My stomach dipped like I was on a roller coaster.

What the fuck did I agree to?

## Sadie

---

THAT AFTERNOON, I unpacked the rest of my suitcase at the inn.

The cash I had from pawning my engagement ring was dwindling fast, and I was spending on credit cards. I could make it another three or four weeks, depending on how much rice and lentils I ate.

Even if I wanted to start my own design firm all by myself, I needed clients, which took weeks, sometimes months. I didn't have that kind of time.

Until I found Holden Rhodes his dream date, I needed a job.

I lugged the last of my stuff from the car. Bringing my painting supplies seemed like a dumb idea back in Toronto, especially since I only used them for client work these days, but I couldn't bear to leave them behind. Katherine had bought some of these brushes for me that summer. I still remembered how thrilled she was when I chose to do a fine arts degree before completing my interior design program.

That was when I used to paint for fun, though, and I hadn't done that in years.

Something occurred to me, and I frowned. Katherine had bought the painting I did for my year-end project when I graduated, but I didn't see it when I wandered through the inn.

I snorted. It was probably at a thrift store or in the trash, where it belonged.

Upstairs, in Katherine's old bedroom, I set my paint supplies down on her desk before picking up a tube of paint to study it. I picked through the colors, studying them one by one. A lick of excitement got me right in the chest at the idea of painting mockups of the inn.

Grant may have taken every dollar I had, but I still loved interior design. I loved changing a space and making it shine, seeing the way clients' eyes lit up when they saw the sketches or final products. No man could take that away from me.

Holden's handsome face appeared in my mind and my stomach twisted. I couldn't believe he liked my sketches. The guy didn't like anything, and now I would have to work with him on the inn project for months.

And find him a wife, I reminded myself.

I laughed out loud.

How *the fuck* would I do that? Frankenstein had a better personality than Holden Rhodes. Yes, he was smoking hot. His body was incredible and I hadn't even seen him naked. I bet he had a six pack. His face was gorgeous, too. All broody and handsome.

He was so good looking, I could probably trick someone into marrying him.

I snorted, but then I realized, that's what Grant did to me, and my lip curled.

After all this time, I still didn't understand why Grant asked me to marry him. The detectives said he had stolen money from two other women, but hadn't proposed to them. His proposal felt like a cruel joke.

I dropped the tube of paint back into the bag and shoved him out of my head.

While unpacking my clothes into the closet, Holden's face kept appearing in my head.

God, he was handsome. This must have been a test from the universe. Keep my hands off the very, very hot mean guy and I would be rewarded with my debt paid off.

I could keep my hands off him. I had self-control.

I stared at the empty suitcase and remembered I left my vibrator back in Toronto. My trip out here was only supposed to last a couple days. It sat in a box in my best friend Willa's storage unit.

I chewed my lip. This might be a problem. The only way I could come was using a vibrator.

I'd just order a new one.

I tucked the suitcase into the closet before I got to work on the paintings of the proposed inn renovation.

Sometime later, there was a knock on the front door. I opened it and gave

Elizabeth Rhodes a big smile. “Hi.”

She lit up. “Sweetheart.” She held her arms out and I stepped into them. She squeezed me in a warm hug.

How did Holden turn out the way he did with Elizabeth as his mom?

Her eyes sparkled when she pulled back. “What an *interesting* turn of events.”

The deal I had struck with him this morning flashed into my head and I bit back a smile.

“You have no idea,” I told her with a grin.

I led her into the kitchen and put the kettle on while we chatted about Katherine’s celebration of life.

“We have some good news. Hannah is expecting.” Elizabeth flushed with delight. “Are you staying in town for a bit? I’d love for you to meet her and Avery.”

I poured the hot water into the mugs. “A couple months, I think.” I remembered the part about keeping the deal a secret. “We’re going to be dealing with the probate stuff.”

“You’ll have to come for family dinner.”

I snorted. “I bet Holden will love that.”

Elizabeth’s eyes glittered with amusement. “I bet he would.”

I rolled my eyes. “Respectfully, Elizabeth, your son is a dickhead.”

She laughed and blew the steam off her tea. “Especially when it comes to you, my dear.”

Something occurred to me and I straightened up. “Hey. If I wanted to find a job in town, where would I go?”

“The bar. Olivia’s working on her thesis this year and needs help.”

Right, I remembered Olivia. She was best friends with Holden’s brother, Finn.

A bar, huh? The tips would mean I’d be making money right away. I’d never worked in a bar or restaurant, but how hard could it be?

I grinned at Elizabeth. “Excellent.”



## Sadie

---

“IF YOU WANT to work here, there are three rules.”

Olivia glanced over her shoulder at me while pouring a beer. Now in her late twenties, she wore a black t-shirt and jeans, and her hair was pink and tied up in a bun, dark brown roots peeking through. Her parents were spending the year traveling, so she was running the bar while they were away.

“Don’t lie to me, don’t steal from me.”

I leaned my chin on my palm on the bar counter. “Deal. What’s the third?”

She pinned me with her gaze. “Never, *ever* let Finn Rhodes inside the bar.” She leaned in, holding eye contact. “Don’t listen to a word he says. He’ll locate your weakness, Sadie, and he will exploit it.”

Her gaze crackled with fury and I shivered. “You guys used to be friends, right?”

Olivia stared at me. “I don’t want to talk about it. That’s my fourth rule.”

I put my hands up. “Say no more.”

The fury dropped from her gaze and she brightened up. “Great.” She gestured for me to join her behind the bar. “Get back here, girl, we’ve got work to do.”

“Oh. Now?”

She nodded with enthusiasm. “Mhm. Right now.”

I made my way around the bar and set my bag underneath. There were so many bottles and glasses back here, I didn’t know where to look first. “I’ve never been behind the bar before.”

She rolled her eyes with a smile. “Cute. So cute.”

Olivia showed me how to pour a beer with minimal head, how to key in drinks and food on the POS system, and how to communicate orders with the kitchen.

“When the keg is low, let me know and I’ll swap it out, okay?”

“You bet.” I shot her a grateful smile. “Thanks, Olivia. This is going to be fun.”

She let out a loud *ha!* and turned back to pouring drinks while I strode over to the table.

Three hours later, the rush died down and I collapsed against the counter.

It was *not* fun.

The flats I had spent a year breaking in were soaked in beer from when I dropped the tray. My yellow cashmere sweater was damp with sweat, beer, and splattered with barbecue sauce. With every step I took, my blisters shrieked in pain, and for one horrifying second, I considered going barefoot on the sticky floor. My makeup had smeared, but there was no time to reapply because people kept ordering more beers.

“I can’t believe you used to do this by yourself,” I gasped at Olivia. “No wonder you hired me on the spot.”

My pants were a Jackson Pollock, splattered with red wine, hot sauce, and chicken wing grease.

Holden Rhodes walked into the bar and his brooding gaze found me like a magnet. He raised an eyebrow and his gaze dropped to my splattered pants.

My face flushed. Of course he’d walk in when I looked my worst. I shook my head at him. “Don’t start.”

He slid onto a bar stool, staring at me with a disgusted expression. “Why are you here?”

“I work here now.”

“So I’m stuck seeing you every night.” He sighed.

“You come here *every night*?” I winced. “Yikes. I wouldn’t advertise you’re a big drinker on your dates.”

He glowered at me. “I’m not a big drinker.”

I leaned on my elbow towards him with a sympathetic expression I knew would piss him off. “Just super lonely?”

Alarm spiked behind his eyes. “I thought you were an interior designer.”

Irritation pinched between my shoulders. “I am, but there are zero interior design jobs on the island.” I shot him a bright smile. “And for six months,

I'm also a bartender."

He regarded me with an unreadable expression. "How's that project of yours coming along?"

The eye contact with him gave me a little jolt. His eyes were so pretty. "Relax, Bigfoot. I have a plan."

He scowled. "Bigfoot?"

"Tall, looming, lurking, communicates in grunts. Like I said, meeting people is a numbers game."

A woman with pale blonde hair and a man in a suit took the seats beside Holden. He jerked his chin hello at them.

"Hi, I'm Hannah," the blonde woman said with a shy smile. "This is Div." The man beside her gave me a wry smile and nod. "You must be Sadie."

"I *am* Sadie." I shot them a bright smile. "Hi, Hannah. Hi, Div." I shot Holden a look. *What about her?*

He frowned and shook his head. "Sister-in-law."

I deflated. "Oh."

The two watched us with interest. Shit, this was supposed to be a secret. "Can I get you two a drink?"

When Hannah ordered a virgin drink, I remembered Elizabeth mentioning a pregnant daughter-in-law this morning, and I congratulated her. She shot me a warm, pleased smile. Div nudged her elbow, hiding his own smile. Once I had their drinks set up, I leaned forward on the bar again.

"Okay," I started, "Say someone wanted to meet a lot of women at once. Where would you do that?"

"Where would *you* do that?" Div clarified, pointing at me.

I nodded. "Yeah."

He snorted. "Easy. Tuesdays is Juicy Taco night at the Rusty Bucket in Port Alberni."

Hannah choked on her soda water. "Div," she laughed.

He raised his eyebrows. "What? That's what it's called because it's two for one tacos. Cheap margaritas, too."

She dissolved in laughter.

Margaritas and tacos? It was perfect. Women loved those things. Holden's eyes were on the TV above the bar, watching sports replays, but his gaze dropped to mine. I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

"Tuesday night, buddy."

He made a noise in his throat that sounded like acknowledgement.

Hannah and Div gave us quizzical smiles.

“Holden and I are old friends,” I told them. I reached over and squeezed Holden’s wrist and the horrified look he shot me could have given me a sunburn. “Super great friends, and now I’m back in town, he’s showing me around.”

Our handshake from yesterday flashed into my head. His hand had been warm, calloused, and huge. Like *huge*. Like *dirty images running through my head of what else he could do with that hand* huge.

Hannah bit back a smile, eyes glittering as she glanced at Holden. “That’s so nice of you, Holden.”

“Yep.” He folded his arms over his chest and kept his gaze on the bar.

Ugh. Even in the face of Hannah’s adorable sweetness, he was surly and dickish. I rolled my eyes and moved to the other side of the bar to key their orders in. How would I find *this guy* a wife?

The bar got busy and the rest of the evening flew by. Olivia was patient with me, especially when the ice bin behind the bar counter was empty so I dipped glasses into the ice machine out back and broke a glass—meaning we had to thaw and drain the machine.

Holden sat at the bar and drank two beers in silence. Every time I looked, his eyes were on the TV above the bar, but when I turned my back, my skin prickled. At one point, I turned and his gaze lifted to the TV.

Was he staring at my ass?

I flushed with heat between my legs.

No, I told myself, shaking my head. I wasn’t even going there.

“Gross,” I said to him with a knowing expression. “You need to stop that unless you want to end up with Blow-Up Belinda.”

He cringed and sipped his beer and I snorted.

By the end of the night, my feet ached and the blisters on my toes shrieked with every step. I reeked like rotten garbage, because when Olivia asked me to take the garbage out, I stupidly, *so stupidly*, hauled the heavy bag out of the bin and dragged it down the hall to the dumpsters out in the alley. When I tried to heave it into the dumpster, the bag ripped open. Hot, slimy, wet garbage slopped all over me, filling my flats with rotting juice. The stench wafted up and I gagged.

Fuck, I hated taking out the garbage. I hated the smell, the way it sounded, the fruit flies, everything. I stood in the alley, scooping up garbage

with the plastic bag and shoveling it into the dumpster. Grant was probably on a beach right now, spending my money and drinking champagne with a new girlfriend.

And I was here, shoveling half-chewed onion rings into a dumpster because yet again, I fell for the wrong guy.

When I squelched back inside, Olivia stood in the hall, staring at me with a grimace. I stunk like a Port-a-Potty at Coachella.

“Did you—”

“Yeah. I did, and I don’t want to talk about it.” My tone was hollow like I had just returned from war.

She disappeared a moment and returned with a wad of cash. “Your tips. Once we sort the paperwork out, I’ll deposit your pay check.” She winced at my stained clothes. “But please leave.”

My eyes burned and my stomach rolled with shame as I took the money. “I’m sorry about the ice thing tonight.”

She snorted. “It’s fine. Last year, I pulled the keg handle too hard and got foam all over the floor. People fuck up.”

I gave her a tight smile. I seemed to fuck up harder and more often than most people.

“See you Wednesday?” The bar was closed on Mondays and Tuesdays.

I nodded and shot her a smile back. “See you Wednesday.” I raised my arms on instinct to hug her but she took a step back.

“No.” She shook her head, holding her hands up in between us. “No.”

I walked home barefoot, ignoring peoples’ worried glances. It was just after ten at night but there were a few people outside the bar and strolling along the Main Street. My feet were tired. My bones ached. Even my hair hurt. Every step shot pain up my legs. My blisters begged for mercy, but finally, I arrived at the inn.

I would take the hottest shower I could, sleep until noon, and tomorrow, I’d burn these clothes in a barrel fire and finalize my renovation plans for the inn. On the front porch, I reached for my bag to get my keys.

I wasn’t *holding* my bag.

My bag was at the bar.

My keys were in the bag.

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips hard together to hold in the scream. A deep breath, in and out, scented with putrid muck.

I couldn’t walk back to the bar. I’d rather sleep in the flowerbeds than

walk all the way back.

On the second floor, I had left a window open.

I climbed the lattice on the exterior of the inn. The vines weaving up the structure looked pretty from the ground but when I had to reach through the leaves to grab hold of the wood, something brushed my ankle and I squeaked. It could have been a leaf, but it also could have been a spider. Or a rat.

“God, I hate nature,” I whispered, wincing and shaking my ankle in the air.

I climbed another rung on the lattice and the piece of wood under my foot broke. I let out another squeak, clinging to the lattice. The rung under my other foot creaked.

At the top, I hoisted myself over the window sill, stumbled into the bedroom upstairs, tripped over a box of paint supplies, and landed flat on my butt. A spike of pain hit my tailbone but I pushed the scream of anger and frustration back down before I lay back on the floor to catch my breath.

My hair was gross, there was grease under my nails, and there was a smushed French fry between my toes. The next six months would suck.

The deal I had struck with Holden appeared in my head, and my chest flickered with stubborn resolve. Grant didn't crush my spirit.

I wasn't leaving Queen's Cove without finding Holden Rhodes a wife.



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## Sadie

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I WAS WORKING on more renderings of the inn renovation the next morning when Willa called.

“Heyyyy,” I answered with a big grin, setting my brush down.

“Hey, gorgeous. How’s the trip home going?”

Oops. I forgot to tell her my plans had changed. “Well,” I started, chuckling. “Katherine left me the inn.”

There was silence on the other end.

“So I guess you’re not interested in having a little party next weekend?”

When the whole Grant thing happened, I couldn’t pay rent on my expensive apartment, so I spent a month sleeping in Willa’s living room. I didn’t even have to ask her, she just moved me into her place. We had met in a painting class back in university, and lived together for four years before I moved in with my boyfriend at the time, Luke, the painter.

I never should have moved out. Living with Willa was a blast. We’d make dinner together while dancing in the kitchen to music or listening to a TV show in the background. We’d host themed dinner parties with all our friends. No matter how tired or hungover we were, we’s always drag our butts out the door for Sunday brunch.

Being roommates with Willa was one of the best periods of my life. After Grant, Willa was right by my side.

*Best friends are special*, I thought with a little knot in my throat.

As I filled her in on the inheritance, the inn renovations, and the weird deal Holden and I had struck, I glanced around the sitting room. The light was incredible in here in the morning, and the view of the ocean was



spectacular. I could picture people lounging in here, drinking their coffee and chatting about their plans for the day while they visited the small town.

Once I had finished, she let out a loud laugh. “You *did* tell the universe you wanted a distraction.”

“What? When?”

“When we were listening to Rihanna and drinking prosecco on my couch two weekends ago.”

I snorted. “Right. I didn’t mean like this, though.”

“The renovation sounds fun.”

I bit my lip, glancing at my rendering of the sitting room with the entrance to the secret library. “It’s going to be incredible.” My mouth twisted.

“I’m going to miss our Sunday brunches, though.”

My heart gave a little tug. “Me, too. I miss you already.” I wrinkled my nose. “I miss Toronto. It’s so quiet here.” I glanced at a photo of Katherine, sitting on the side table, and my chest tensed with guilt. “I should have visited more, though.”

“But you said that Holden guy was such an asshole.”

My nose wrinkled. He was. His look of disdain fifteen years ago, as he told me I couldn’t join on the hike, flashed into my head and my stomach tightened. “Hmm. Yeah.”

I should have talked to Katherine about it. I swallowed past a thick throat.

“You’re there now, and it sounds like you’re making the best of it.”

I nodded. “Yeah. The renovation is for her. We both agreed on that.” I shook myself. “Anyway, enough about me. What’s new with you? Oh, shit.” I gasped as I realized something. “I’ll miss your exhibit.”

Willa taught painting at a community college in Toronto, but her dream was to be a painter full-time. She did at least one exhibit a year with a local gallery. All our friends would get all dressed up and go to support her. She had been working on her upcoming collection for six months.

“Ah, it’s all good. You’ve got your hands full over there.”

Guilt stabbed me in the gut. Willa was there for me when I needed her. I’d have to find another way to make it up to her.

As Willa filled me in on her painting progress, the latest gossip with our friend group, and which of her students were flirting with each other, I missed Toronto more and more. I missed my friend and my old neighborhood with the coffee shop where the barista always gave me a free cookie. I missed the energy of the city, buzzing and bustling.

Willa and I said our goodbyes and hung up, and I sat in the sitting room for a few minutes, staring out the window, missing home.

My time in Queen's Cove was temporary. A six month blip where I could sort my life out before I returned to Toronto, debt-free and on the right track.



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## Holden

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"I AM LOVING the vibe in here," Sadie said, bobbing her head to the nineties music.

The Rusty Bucket, a dive bar in the nearest town to Queen's Cove, was packed for Juicy Taco night. String lights stretching above us faded into different colors every minute and the servers wore pink wigs.

Across the table, Sadie wore a short, hot pink dress with a green palm print. Her ponytail swayed as she glanced around the bar with big, bright eyes.

She leaned in, smiling at me with a sneaky expression while she took another sip of her margarita.

"Alright, talk to me, Holden. Who's catching your eye?"

I had been to this bar before, because Div did drag shows here once a month, and Hannah invited me once. It was fun. I had fun.

Sadie didn't know this was a gay bar, though. Sadie didn't realize the women at ladies' night at a gay bar had no interest in me.

Her, though. With that silky hair, a cute dress that skimmed her curves, and glowing, welcoming smile, she was like a beacon. Every time I glanced around, someone was eyeing her.

I didn't blame them.

Sadie Waters had been stuck in my head for the past few days. Sunday night, I had walked into the bar, hoping to zone out, watch sports highlights, and shoot the shit with Olivia, but *she* was there, striding around in those jeans that fit her ass perfectly and a big smile for everyone.

My chest pitched at the idea of seeing her every day, and my curiosity

was at an all-time high. She needed money, badly, and I wanted to know why. If she was in trouble—

*If she was in trouble, what, Holden? What are you going to do? You're nothing to her. You're paying her to find you a wife, and that's it.*

Sadie lowered her voice and tilted her head to a table next to us. "What about her? In the black sweater." She widened her eyes at me in emphasis. "She's checking you out," she sang.

The woman in the black sweater eyed Sadie with shy appreciation. A funny pressure bubbled up in my chest and my mouth twitched but I covered it by taking a pull of my beer.

I shrugged at Sadie. "She's fine, I guess."

She gave me a scolding look but her eyes danced. "You're not even looking around. You're looking at me. Come on, grumpy guy. Where's that wife-hunting spirit?"

I narrowed my eyes. "It sounds weird when you say it like that."

She winced and nodded. "It sounds weird no matter how I say it, because it *is* a little weird." She wrenched around to her bag and pulled out her phone. "Time for the fun interview."

"Oh, joy," I muttered, which made her smile.

"Question one. What kind of woman do you see yourself with?"

I blew another long breath out. Fuck if I knew. "I don't know." I raked my hand through my hair. "Somebody who has their own career and passions."

She lit up. "Great. That rules out all the sugar babies who want to use you for sex and money."

I choked on my beer and she handed me a few napkins.

"That also rules out Belinda the Inflatable Sex Goddess," she admitted with a teasing grin. "I'll break the news to her. What else?"

"Um." I glanced around the bar. Women were still eyeing Sadie. "Somebody who doesn't talk much."

She snorted. "I'm not writing that down. What else?"

I pictured a woman in my home. "It would be nice if she liked to spend time in the kitchen."

Sadie's eyebrow rose.

"Not in a *servicing her husband* way." I was fucking this all up. This just reinforced her view that I was an asshole. "It would be nice to be with someone who likes to cook, because I can't." I swallowed more beer. "But

I'm happy to clean up after."

She made a note on her phone. "Good save."

I let out a half-laugh. "Thanks."

I thought about Hannah and Wyatt. "Someone who wants kids."

She nodded and wrote it down.

"Someone from here, or someone who plans to stay here for a while."

Sadie's gaze flicked up with a question behind her eyes.

"I don't want to move. My business is here, my home and family are here, and I like it here." I shrugged. "I don't want to move."

"What about hobbies?" She polished off the last of her margarita.

I stared at her.

She stared back at me. "Fun things, Holden. What do you do on weekends?"

"Work. Gym. Family stuff. The bar."

She blinked and her brow wrinkled. "Where do you go on vacation?"

I sucked in a breath and tried to remember the last time I took a weekend off. "I go camping in the mountains." I hadn't done that in a while, though.

"Someone who likes to spend time outdoors," she mused. "That shouldn't be too hard in Queen's Cove."

"What do you do on weekends?" I asked, because I was curious.

She brightened up. "Toronto always has something going on." She spun her finger around in the air at the bar. "There's a place like this a few blocks from my apartment." Her smile dimmed and her throat worked. "My old apartment, I mean. My best friend, Willa, and I go there a lot. Toronto has an amazing food scene, so our friend group is always going out, trying new places. We have a lot of friends in the artist community so I go to a lot of exhibits and shows. In the summer, farmer's markets, where I buy overpriced soap." She shot me a cheeky grin and my chest warmed. "What else? If the weather's bad or I'm feeling lazy, I'll spend the whole day watching interior design shows." She shrugged. "Sometimes I go to real estate open houses to check out the decor and layout."

I snorted. "Really?"

She nodded and bit her lip. "It's fun."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I go to the art gallery here in Queen's Cove sometimes. If they have a new exhibit."

Her eyes lit up. "You'll have to tell me if there's any good exhibits coming up."

“The one now features local Indigenous artists. We should go,” I said without thinking. “You should go,” I corrected.

“That would be a good date spot for you to take the future Mrs. Holden.” She tapped the idea onto her phone before glancing up at me. “Is the marriage thing a must-have?”

I gave her a questioning look.

“Like, what if she doesn’t want to get married?” She tilted her head, watching me. “Not everyone does.”

I frowned. “If she doesn’t want to get married, we wouldn’t be a good fit.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“What?”

She snorted. “That’s narrow-minded.”

Narrow-minded? I thought back to last weekend at Katherine’s celebration of life, surrounded by all the happy, married couples.

*Why would anyone go for Holden when they could have one of his brothers?*

My throat worked and I stared at the condensation on my water glass. “I want someone to choose me.” My shoulders lifted in a shrug and I glanced back at her. “I like the idea of a commitment.”

She pursed her lips before tapping it onto her phone.

I frowned at her. “What, you don’t want to get married one day?”

She scoffed but it lacked her usual warmth. “Nope.”

“Never?”

Her gaze lifted to mine. “Never ever.” Her tone was flat.

This conversation was getting under her skin but I couldn’t stop myself.

I leaned forward, propping my elbow on the table, studying her expression. This didn’t make sense. “But you were engaged.”

She sucked in a breath, blinking like she’d been slapped. “Yeah, and now I’m not.” Her words were sharp. She stood and her chair scraped. “I’m going to use the washroom. If the server comes by, can you order me another margarita and two more pork tacos?”

Without another word, she strode off to find the washroom, and I watched her walk away. My gut rolled with regret and disappointment.





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## Holden

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WHEN SHE RETURNED a few minutes later, I was tapping out an email response on my phone to a contractor. She slid into her seat, no trace of tension on her face anymore.

“Hey, uh,” I started, putting my phone away. “Sorry about that. I shouldn’t have asked about the engaged thing.”

She waved a hand, not meeting my eye. “It’s fine.” She glanced around with amused suspicion. “Holden. Are we in a gay bar?”

“Yep.”

She threw her hands up with a laugh, and I relaxed. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Wanted to see how it played out. What tipped you off?”

“A woman in the bathroom said she loved my eyeshadow and then asked for my number.” She smiled. “No wonder it has such good vibes.”

The server appeared with her tacos, margarita, and water for me.

“Thank you so much.” Sadie beamed at her. “*Oooohhhh*.” The server left and Sadie’s head fell back. She nodded at me. “I get it now. See you next *Tuesday*.” She leaned in. “Like, cunt.”

“Yep, got it.” I slugged back half my water. That bubbly feeling clawed up my chest again.

“I guess I did say *I* was looking to meet women,” she mused. “Good tacos.” Her thumb came up to wipe the corner of her mouth before her tongue darted out. The motion fascinated me.

She tilted her head at me with a little frown as she chewed. “So, why do you work so much?”

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I run my own company."

She took another sip of margarita. "The company won't collapse if you take a weekend off, right?"

My shoulders hitched and I frowned.

She played with her paper coaster. "Your special lady may not like you working so much."

My stomach tensed. I didn't like this conversation. "How's bathroom demo going?"

She rolled her eyes. "I see what you're doing."

I sat back, watching her.

She let out a sigh. "Fine. It's going great. Thanks for having that bin delivered."

I jerked a nod. I had called a company and rented a construction waste container for the inn.

She pulled out her phone to show me her progress. She had smashed out and removed the shower tiles, bathroom mirrors, and cabinets in one of the bathrooms.

"Jesus," I murmured, scrolling through the photos. "You got a lot done in two days."

She shrugged. "I like this stuff. I have a lot of repressed anger I need to get out." She flashed me a pretty smile and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Yeah?" I arched an eyebrow, the side of my mouth doing that weird twitching thing. "From what?"

"You know." She shrugged, and her mouth twisted in a funny way. Her eyes lost a fraction of the humor. "Men. The universe. Etc."

I frowned at her.

"So, the bathtubs. I can't get them out myself. What do you suggest?"

I stared at her for a long moment. Her gaze flicked up to mine and my pulse picked up. Something happened and I wanted to know so, so fucking badly, but I also wanted her to tell me because she wanted to, not because I demanded it.

I hated that I wanted her to trust me.

"Now who's changing the subject? I'll deal with the bathtubs once you're ready. I'll bring a few guys and we'll take them all out at once."

"Great." She shot me a bright smile. The weird energy from before dissipated and my shoulders relaxed. "That would be great, Holden."

She flicked through her photos and showed me the watercolor renderings

she had done over the past few days, alternating with inspiration photos and examples from her previous projects. Her paintings were beautiful.

“Can you send me some of those?” I asked, jerking my chin at the watercolor renderings, folding my arms over my chest. “For my records,” I added.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

When she told me about her plan for the bedrooms and bathrooms, her eyes lit up and her hands moved fast in the air, gesturing.

Sadie Waters was illuminating when she talked about interior design. I couldn't tear my gaze away. When I studied the demo photos, there was a weird tug beneath my ribs.

Her eyes were on her phone as she flipped past photos. “I want to nail this renovation.”

Her comment before about men nagged at me. “Tell me more about this repressed anger of yours.”

She chewed her lip, eyes still on the photos. “It's complicated.” She ignored me staring at her. Her jaw tensed, and for a moment, she looked pissed.

“You were in jail, weren't you?” I asked.

She glanced up with a relieved grin. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“Who did you kill?”

Her grin widened. “My elderly husband. I did it for the money, and I wore one of those long, scary robes that villains wear, with the fur on the cuffs.” She shrugged and studied her nails in an exaggerated way. “I loved jail.”

I snorted. “Yeah?”

She leaned forward like she was confessing. “I was the queen in there. I made so many friends, Holden. I read a hundred books and did three hours of pilates every day.”

My mouth lifted into a smile and I hid it behind my water glass as I took a sip. “Bet you did.”

Her gaze lingered on me for a moment and my heart flipped over in my chest.

The server swung by and we asked for the bill.

“One or two checks?” the server asked.

“Two,” Sadie said.

“One,” I told the server. Sadie opened her mouth to argue but I silenced

her with a look. “You’re helping me.”

She shrugged. “Okay. Thanks, buddy.”

I frowned. I didn’t like her calling me buddy. We weren’t buddies. We weren’t... anything. We weren’t even friends. Olivia called me buddy all the time. So did Avery. Hannah just called me Holden. I normally didn’t care, but I didn’t like it when Sadie called me that.

After I paid the bill, she finished her drink. “This was a dud. Sorry for wasting your time.”

I shook my head as we stood. “It’s fine. You didn’t know.”

She did waste my time tonight, and I should be pissed. I had a mountain of work to do, and I could have used the time tonight to catch up.

I wasn’t pissed, though. I had fun. I didn’t mind watching Sadie stuff her face with tacos, chatting about renos and asking about the best place for bathroom tiles.

Irritation tightened in my shoulders at that thought.

“And you didn’t tell me, either.” She shot me a suspicious grin. I held the passenger door of my truck open and she hopped in. “It’s okay, though. I’ll do my homework for the next one.”

“Next one?” I asked when I got into the driver’s side.

“We’re going to a singles event.”

I stared at her in horror. She burst out laughing before shaking her head at me in mock disbelief. “If you want to meet the future Mrs. Holden, you have to meet people.”

“I hate meeting people,” I told her. “That’s why I have you.”

“I’ll help.” She smiled at me. “I’ll be your wingwoman.”

I didn’t mind the idea of more outings like tonight. My hand came to my chest, rubbing at the weird, warm pressure as I drove, stealing glances at Sadie as she fiddled with the music and rolled her window down to let a breeze in. Her hair fluttered in the wind and she sighed, letting her fingers drift through the air.

The reality of this dating thing became clear. I’d have to talk to people. Socialize. Smile. Be friendly. I couldn’t work as much. I hated that she was right about that. I’d have to talk to person after person, making awkward conversation, until one person could stand me.

My stomach twisted. I hated this.

I let out a groan.

“What?” Sadie asked with a small smile.

“Singles event.” I groaned.

She laughed. Her hand came to my shoulder and she squeezed. My stomach flipped. In some alternate universe where she wasn't my matchmaker, tonight could be a date.

I hadn't had this much fun with a woman...

Ever.

Talking with Sadie was easy. Around her, I wasn't the awkward asshole who couldn't string a sentence together.

Shit. What? No. This wasn't a date.

Sadie was my *matchmaker*. I had promised Katherine I'd try to find someone, and that was the only reason we were out tonight. She had been crystal clear earlier—she wasn't interested in marriage. She shut that down as fast as she could.

She didn't live here. She didn't want what I wanted. She didn't even like me.

A thought pierced my brain. She didn't even like me, and she was trying to set me up?

You couldn't sell a product you didn't believe in.

Her words from years ago played in my head again and my hands tightened on the steering wheel. There was no way she'd succeed at this.

I glanced at her, staring out the window and humming along with the music in the truck. She had put some seventies funk playlist on and was tapping her foot to the beat.

Guilt washed through my stomach. She needed the money for some reason. She was desperate, and I was stringing her along with this plan, knowing she wouldn't find anyone for me.

I'd hold up my end of the deal whether she found me someone or not. I had the money to buy more shares in the inn.

Besides, as much as I didn't want to admit it, as much as it pissed me off, I liked hanging out with Sadie, and didn't mind her staying for a little longer.



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## Sadie

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"THIS WAY, FOLKS," the crew member called as people shuffled onto the boat.

The sea sparkled in the Queen's Cove marina, the September sun warmed my face, and a light breeze lifted my hair. I took a deep breath of fresh air and let it out before smiling at Holden.

"September on the west coast is so nice."

He made a noise of acknowledgement and I admired him in his pale blue Oxford shirt, sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm. His skin was tanned from the summer and dark hair dusted his arms.

Those forearms. Yowza. I wasn't a religious woman but I'd happily pray to the patron saint of forearms for everything she had done for our world. Holden could probably find a wife today based on his forearms alone.

His hand came to my lower back and my stomach dipped at the contact.

"Sadie," he murmured.

"Yes?"

God, he had nice eyes. And he was so tall. I liked that I had to tilt my neck up at him. He smelled nice, too. Warm, spicy, and comforting.

He gently nudged me forward. Oh. The line in front of me had filed onto the boat while I was ogling him.

He held a hand out to help me onto the boat and cleared his throat, giving me the side eye. "You look nice."

"Thanks," I chirped, brushing my hands down my tomato-red pleated maxi dress. The day was warm enough for the thin straps. "This is my lucky dress." I nudged him with my elbow. "Figured it would help you."

His gaze moved over me again before he inhaled and straightened up. “What’s the plan for today?”

The deckhand prepared for the boat to leave the harbor as the last guests climbed aboard.

I glanced around, surveying the group of people. Lots of pretty people here today, I noticed. “The plan is to have fun, Holden.”

He stared down at me.

I blinked back up at him. “Ah! I see.” I clapped my hands together. “*Fun* is when you smile and chat and feel happy right here.” I reached out and patted his chest.

His chest was firm and warm, and I ignored that.

His gaze dropped to my hand before I pulled it away.

“Being on a boat with fifty people is not my idea of fun.”

I grinned at him. “That doesn’t surprise me, but we need to expand your repertoire. That’s how you meet people, Holden. You go to new places and smile and act like you’re a nice person.”

“Holden.” A tall, tanned man with dark blond hair and a very white smile clapped him on the shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

Holden nodded hello. “Hey. I’m, um.” He blinked.

Right. We were keeping this a secret.

“Hi,” I said, smiling bright at the human Ken doll. The guy was gorgeous. Not as gorgeous as Holden, but still good looking. Over his shoulder, I could see women sneaking peeks at him and Holden. “I’m Sadie. I just moved here and made Holden take me.”

“Aiden.” He grinned down at me, radiating charm. If Willa were here, she’d be death-gripping my arm and shooting me the *he’s hot* eyes. “Hi, Sadie.”

“Hi.” I smiled back at him.

“Aiden’s a construction manager for Rhodes Construction.” Holden’s voice had a weird edge. When I glanced up at him, he was giving me the anger eyes. I raised my eyebrows at him.

At the front of the boat, a woman in a captain’s uniform and pirate hat grabbed a microphone “Alright, singles, are you ready to mingle?”

A chorus of *wooooo*’s rose around us.

“Jesus Christ,” Holden muttered.

I grinned at him and nudged him with my elbow. “Get ready,” I whispered.



He rolled his eyes at me.

“I’m Captain Rina and I’ll be cruising us around the coast on this beautiful Saturday afternoon.” Captain Rina walked us through the safety procedures, where to find the life jackets, and what to do if someone falls overboard.

I gestured for Holden to bend down so I could whisper in his ear. “If Blow-Up Belinda fell overboard, she’d float.”

The side of his mouth kicked up.

I shrugged. “Just saying. Everybody has different skills. Consider it.”

Fifteen minutes later, we had drinks in our hands and the boat disembarked from the marina. I inhaled again as the breeze blew past us.

Holden gave me a strange look. “You act like you’ve never been on a boat before.”

I tilted my head, thinking. “I haven’t been on a boat in years.” While sipping my drink, my gaze roamed the other guests, searching for women who were eyeing him up. “The woman in the green top, the woman in the jumpsuit, and the woman in yellow. Pick one and go talk to them.”

His forehead wrinkled and he did that chest-puffing-out-thing that men do when they’re insecure. He shoved a hand back through his hair. “And say what?”

“Holden, I promise if you go up to anyone on this boat, look into their eyes with those gorgeous lashes of yours, and say *hey*,” I said the word in a low voice like his. “They’ll hand you their underwear.”

The side of his mouth twitched and I could tell my pep talk had done the trick.

He glanced at the woman in yellow shorts. The color was incredible against the deep tone of her skin. “That’s Liya,” he said. “She works with Hannah.”

“Great. You already know her. That’ll make things easier.”

The boat picked up speed and my stomach did a weird, uncomfortable roll. I gripped the railing.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” My hand came to my stomach and I took a deep breath. “Stop stalling. Ask her about books. Compliment her shorts. When in doubt, ask what she’s watching on TV or if she’s had any weird dreams lately. People love to talk about their dreams, even though it’s so boring.” I pushed his back. “Go.”

Holden took a deep breath before heading off to talk to Liya, and I turned to watch the marina as it grew further away. The boat hit a wave and I instinctively grabbed my stomach again as the boat bounced.

“Hey, Sadie from out of town,” Aiden said at my side.

“Hi, Aiden with the reality TV smile.”

He laughed. “What?”

“You have one of the most perfect smiles I’ve ever seen,” I told him. “Do you get everything for free?”

He laughed again, chest shaking. “No. I pay for everything except cheese, which I steal.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “The prices are crazy. I don’t blame you.”

He leaned on the railing, his eyes on my face the entire time. “Where did you move from?”

Aiden and I talked about Toronto for a bit. His sister lived close to Willa.

The boat hit another wave and my gut lurched. “Ugh.”

“You okay?” Aiden’s hand was on my arm.

I nodded, sucking a breath into my lungs. “So good.” I nodded, staring at the water, but my attention was on my gurgling stomach. Oof.

“So, are you and Holden...” He let the half-sentence linger in the air while he raised his eyebrows.

I stared at him with a blank expression. “Are we what?” It clicked. “Oh.” I laughed. “No, it’s not like that. I’m just here for moral support.”

Aiden smiled. “Good.”

The boat jumped with another wave and my lunch thrashed. My eyes drifted closed as I dragged in another breath.

“You know, since you’re new to town,” Aiden was saying. “I could help show you around.”

We hit a wavy patch and the boat rocked. The club sandwich I ate earlier clawed up my throat.

Oh god. Now I remembered why I hadn’t been on a boat in years.

“Sadie?”

My head snapped toward him. “Mmm?” I kept my mouth clamped closed.

His sweet, interested gaze roamed my face and he laughed. “How you doing there, champ?”

I nodded, gripping the railing hard. “I’m okay.”

“What do you say?”

“To what?” My stomach twisted and lurched.

“Do you want to get some dinner sometime? I can show you some of the local beaches around here.” He shot me a lopsided grin.

“Oh.” My stomach lurched again but this time, it wasn’t my half-digested sandwich, it was revulsion. Dating. Meeting people. Falling for people.

That wasn’t my thing anymore. At least until I figured out what my issue was.

A weird, tight laugh slipped out of my throat. “Aiden, you are a total babe, but I’m not dating right now.”

His mouth pulled into a boyish grin. “You’re on a singles cruise.”

I let out a light laugh. “Right. Yeah. I meant more, mentally.”

He arched an eyebrow, still grinning. At least he didn’t take it badly. “I feel like there’s a story there.”

“Folks, this is your captain speaking,” Captain Rina said over the mic. “Hold on to the nearest hottie because we’re about to hit a *ROUGH PAAAATCH!*” The music blared and the boat hit wave after wave.

Yeah, I was definitely going to be sick.

My fingers curled around the steel railing as my stomach pitched and dipped with the boat. People whooped and laughed but I kept my gaze on the coast. I had heard once that if you stare at something not moving, it helped with carsickness.

Oh god. My stomach dipped again and the sandwich threatened to claw up my throat. I pressed my lips into a tight line and took long, shaky breaths. I really, really didn’t want to be the barfing girl.

“Are you okay?” Aiden’s hand was around my shoulder.

“I got this,” Holden said at my side in a sharp tone. His hand came to my waist and he pulled me away from Aiden.



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## Sadie

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“CAN you hold it in until the washroom?” Holden’s voice turned gentle as his hand settled on my lower back.

I made a weird moaning noise with an expression that said *I don’t know*.

He moved faster. He guided me down the narrow stairs to the washroom.

“First door on your left,” he said as I made my way down, stomach heaving and hand pressed over my mouth.

I yanked the door open and emptied my lunch into the toilet, holding myself upright with a hand on the wall. The door bumped closed behind me and my eyes watered. My whole body tensed and gave as I puked, and I decided going on a boat was a very bad idea.

The boat stopped swerving and I wiped the tears off my face from my watering eyes, gasping for air. Behind me, the door swung open and Holden stepped into the tiny bathroom with me, holding a pack of Gravol.

“No,” I croaked, trying to push him out but he ignored me. “I just barfed, dude. You can’t be in here.” My stomach lurched again and my chest heaved. “Oh my god.”

Holden scooped my hair off my face as I leaned over and threw up again.

“Get out,” I gurgled at him. “This is gross.” I leaned over and barfed again.

At one point, someone knocked on the door and Holden barked something at them to make them go away while I gagged over the toilet. I could hear the music pumping through the ceiling from outside.

Someone pounded on the door. “*Someone found love!*” A guy hollered from outside, laughing.

Ugh. Men were so gross. Like I would ever have sex in a boat bathroom. The tiny closet reeked of my barf. It was also so small. Holden had to stoop so he wouldn't bang his head on the ceiling.

His fingers brushed the nape of my neck as he regathered up my hair and a shiver ran down my spine.

I was *not* thinking about having sex with Holden in a boat bathroom I had barfed in.

"Done?" he asked.

I drew in another shaky breath and nodded. He let my hair go, wet a paper towel, and handed it to me.

"You should go out there and find a wife," I warbled, clearing my throat and wiping my watery eyes. My makeup was a mess.

"This is preferable." He snorted hit the flush button to whoosh my barf into the ocean. He wet another napkin under the sink and handed it to me, watching as I dabbed my mouth like a lady. "Do you want a Graval?"

I shook my head. "Not yet." I wiped my smeared mascara away. "We're never speaking of this again. Ever."

"But they have another singles cruise next week." His tone was flat.

I shot him a glare and the side of his mouth twitched.

"Hilarious," I told him, opening the door. "I'm cracking a rib laughing at your jokes." My mouth pulled into a grin as we ascended back to the main deck.

A minute later, Holden handed me a soda water and leaned on the rail beside me. The boat had docked in a harbor and music continued to pump from the speaker system while Captain Rina twerked.

"How'd it go with Liya?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Fine."

"Did you get her number?"

His gaze shot to mine before back to the ocean. "Yep."

"Fantastic. Take her out for dinner."

He stared at me for a second. "Do you think this is going to work?"

I tilted my head at him. "What do you mean?"

He folded his arms over his chest and rolled his shoulders, a flash of insecurity in his eyes.

Oh.

A funny sensation burst in my chest. Did Holden not realize what a babe he was?

“Hey.” I tugged on his sleeve and he sent me a side-long frown. “You’re a catch.”

He stared at me. “I’m a dick. You said so yourself.”

My mouth twisted to the side as I remembered that summer. “You are.” I shrugged. “But you’re super hot. You’ll find someone in no time.”

“You think I’m super hot?” he repeated, a smug expression growing on his features.

I rolled my eyes. “You know you’re hot. The rolled-up shirtsleeves thing?” I pointed at his forearms. “I know you know.”

The corner of his mouth twitched and I grinned.

The funny thing was, Holden used to be a dick, but now? He wasn’t. He held my hair back while I barfed. I couldn’t imagine him doing that fifteen years ago. The other night, when I dragged him out for tacos and margaritas, we had fun.

Holden Rhodes and I, having fun. It was mind-boggling.

“Why were you such a dick that summer?” I asked quietly, studying my drink.

He gripped the railing, not saying anything.

“Why did you spray my magazines with the hose?” I turned to him, frowning. “I know you did it on purpose. Why? What did I ever do to you?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, and his gaze locked on mine, hesitant and concerned.

“I, uh.” He cleared his throat and winced out at the coastline. “Those magazines you read were garbage. I saw the covers. They were designed to make you feel bad, like you weren’t enough.” He glanced at me before his gaze returned to the coast. “I didn’t want you to think you weren’t beautiful.”

Oh.

Well.

I.

Wow.

I stared at Holden, and Holden stared at some rocks two hundred feet away. A flush of warm pleasure moved through my body and my face heated.

Holden thought I was beautiful. I didn’t expect that.

Something fizzed in my chest.

He cleared his throat. “So, *Aiden*.” He said the name like it offended him.

“What about him?”

“He was all over you.” His jaw ticked.

I snorted. “No, he wasn’t. That’s his personality.”

He gave me a hard look. “He was flirting with you.”

Probably a bad time to mention Aiden asking me out. “It doesn’t matter whether he was flirting or he has natural charm and charisma. I’m not dating right now.”

Holden’s gaze shot to mine and he frowned deeper. “Why?”

I took a long sip of my soda water. “I’m just not. Not everyone is a rush to get locked down, you know?”

His gaze stayed on my face and my stomach blipped with nerves.

“What?” I said, defensive.

The other night, when he asked me about the whole marriage thing, I should have kept my mouth shut, but I freaked out, got defensive, and ran to the bathroom to catch my breath and calm down.

His eyes were steady on me, like he could see into my brain. My gaze flicked around the party. A group of women surrounded Aiden, all laughing and flipping their hair, and I snorted. Good for him. Maybe I could feign more seasickness and dash into the bathroom to get out of this conversation.

No, Holden would probably follow me inside and hold my hair back again.

Holden was still staring down at me with careful curiosity. My stomach tightened. He was looking at me like he could hear my thoughts. I cleared my throat. “I’m going on Monday to buy bathroom tiles.”

He gave me a side-long look, like he knew what I was doing, before he took a sip of his drink and nodded. “You want help? They can be heavy, especially for six bathrooms.”

“Some help would be nice,” I admitted, “if you can get away. Or we can go in the evening. I’m not working at the bar that night.”

He shook his head. “The store in Port Alberni closes at six. Let’s go after lunch. And then I’m there in case there’s a problem with the card.”

After we had struck up our agreement, Holden had suggested he front the money for the renovations and we’d account for it when adjusting the shares. He handed me a credit card linked to a separate account reserved for the renovations. That way, it would be easier to keep track of costs.

“Thanks again for fronting the renovation money,” I said with a quick smile. We were tip-toeing near the *Sadie is broke* discussion I did not want to have.

He jerked a nod. “You’re working for free. Only fair.”



Captain Rina announced the boat was leaving the harbor and would return to the marina and we watched the shore over the railing as we drifted further away. I remembered the reason we were here and tilted my head at the party around us. “Go talk to more women.”

He took a sip of his drink. “I’m fine here.”

“Holden.”

“You might barf again.”

I snorted. “I said never to talk about that again.”

That mouth twitch of his was back and I grinned at him.

*Beautiful.* Huh.

There was more to Holden Rhodes than I realized.



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## Holden

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“LOOK WHO’S IN HIS LAIR,” Emmett said at the door to my office. He glanced at his watch. “It’s quitting time, don’t you think?”

“Just finishing up,” I lied.

“Liar.” Emmett dropped into the chair. He was in running clothes. “I was out for a run and saw your office light on.”

This shit again. “There are a lot of things going on right now. New projects, wrapping up old projects, hiring more people.”

He studied me for a moment with a thoughtful expression. “So pass off some of the work onto the leads. That’s why we created those roles.”

“I like doing it.”

“You like staying until nine every night?” He arched an eyebrow.

I sighed. I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. What was I going to say? I didn’t trust anyone else to do it. Emmett trusted me to run the company while he was mayor. Once his term finished, he’d come back and he could take some of the workload back.

“Shouldn’t you be home with your wife?” I asked.

“She’s at the restaurant tonight. It’s boring at home without her.”

I held back a groan. I didn’t want to hear more about how much the guy loved his wife. I knew. We all knew. Him and Wyatt talked about it nonstop. Sometimes, it was a bit much. It was like someone talking about how much money they had. People got it. He didn’t need to rub it in.

Emmett shifted in the chair, balancing his elbow on the arm. “Something I want to talk to you about.”

I frowned. “Go on.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the future.” He rubbed his forehead. Discomfort flashed across his face and my eyes narrowed.

“What is it?”

He nodded. “When my term is up next year, I’m going to run again. I like being the mayor. I don’t like all the bureaucratic bullshit and red tape and stubborn fuckers who don’t like change, but I like being involved in the community and making a difference.” He took a deep breath and shrugged. “It feels like my purpose, you know?”

Rhodes Construction used to feel like that until Emmett left and my role changed.

Now I didn’t know what my purpose was.

I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms.

Emmett shot me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I know this is a change in plans.”

“It’s fine.” I stared at the carpet, brain whirring with the next steps.

Emmett wasn’t coming back, and there was no end in sight to this.

He leaned back and studied me. “We should talk about bringing someone on board.”

The idea of handing over half the company to someone made my skin crawl. I couldn’t picture anyone but Emmett in the role.

“No.” I shook my head. “Not this again.”

He groaned. “You are so fucking stubborn. And you’re a control freak.”

I thought about what Sadie said, about me not being able to find anyone because I was a workaholic. I wasn’t a workaholic. I hated working late, but our work was dangerous. Construction sites were full of hazards, and even though we had rigorous safety measures and procedures, a pinching thought always lingered in the back of my mind.

Something could happen, and it was my job to keep everyone safe. It was my responsibility.

Any time my grip on things relaxed, I heard the sickening crunch as Finn fell from the tree in our back yard, when we were kids. I was fourteen and he was ten, and I was supposed to be watching him while everyone was out, but I was gaming in the living room.

Finn cracked his skull. He was unconscious. He could have died. I still heard my mom’s scream echoing in my mind. They came home just as he fell and raced him to the hospital.

I glared at Emmett, folding my arms over my chest. There was no fucking

way I was letting go of the company. It was too much of a risk.

He studied me for a moment, his brow furrowing. “What do you want out of life, Holden?”

My chest constricted. “I want you to stop harping about bringing another partner in.”

“Seriously.” He leaned forward, concern written all over his face. “Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

In my home, with a partner who I loved and who loved me. A couple kids, and a dog or a cat, whatever my person wanted. I didn’t care, as long as she was happy.

The work part was a huge blank. I pictured myself here in my office, working late while my family was at home, eating dinner. Coming in on weekends and missing baseball games and piano recitals. My future partner’s disappointment as I got home late or pulled my laptop out after the kids went to bed.

Something pinched under my ribs.

“I won’t let you down,” I told him. “I’ve got this.”

“I know you do.” He frowned. “That’s not the issue.”

I unhooked my laptop and slid it into my bag. “I’m getting dinner. You wanna join?”

“No, thanks.” He stood and followed me out of my office. “Avery’s off soon, I’m going to head home.”

No surprise there. Why spend time with anyone else when you can hang out with the love of your life? We said goodbye and I crossed the street to the bar.

I walked into the bar and a wall of noise hit me. Classic rock played, people talked and laughed, and Sadie and Olivia cackled at something behind the bar.

My spirits lifted and my conversation with Emmett faded to the background.

“Sasquatch sighting,” Sadie called, pointing at me, and a few people laughed.

“You’re really dragging that joke out, huh?” I took my seat, slinging my laptop bag onto another stool.

She leaned forward with a teasing glint in her eyes. “I’m going to milk that joke.” Her gaze lifted to my hair and she raised an eyebrow. “Your hair is getting long.”

I blew a breath out and raked a hand through my hair. “The barber closes at six and is only open on weekdays.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ugh. Small town shit.” She shrugged and her gaze returned to my hair. “You can pull it off. You have nice hair.”

Warmth curled in my stomach and I tried not to smile. “You like my hair?”

She arched an eyebrow, amused. “Don’t be vain, Holden. That’s my thing.” She winked at me and my heart flipped over. She reached for a pint glass and poured a beer without asking.

She handed me a beer and I thanked her. She leaned on the counter and my eyes dropped to the neckline of her t-shirt. Her skin looked so soft, and this t-shirt hugged the swell of her tits.

Fuck, she had nice tits. Her dress at the boat party had dipped low and I had been picturing her cleavage for days.

My cock stirred but I ignored it, dragging my gaze up to her face.

“You’re wearing makeup.” I frowned. Her lips were more red than normal. “Lip stuff.”

She shrugged. “I read on the internet that people get more tips when they wear makeup.”

Sharp discomfort twisted in my stomach and I frowned. “It’s a bunch of old married guys here.”

A grin pulled on her pretty mouth and I watched, fascinated. She glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “Maybe we can ask them for some pointers for you.”

I glowered at her and she bit her lip and grinned bigger.

I pictured her pretty mouth wrapped around my cock while she gazed up at me with those dark green eyes.

Oh fuck, that was a good image. Too good. I gripped my beer as blood rushed to my cock. I was half-hard, right here in the bar. I turned away, dragged in a sobering breath, and shoved the image out of my mind.

“When are you going out with Liya?” she asked.

Nerves twisted in my gut at the idea of a date.

“Wednesday night.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Nervous?”

“No.” I drank half my beer in one go.

She snorted. “Right, sure. Even if you’re not nervous, I have an idea.”

I shot her a wary look.

She wiggled her eyebrows at me with a big grin. “Practice date.”

“What?” My heart stopped.

“Practice date,” she repeated with more emphasis. “We’ll go on the date you’re going to take Liya on, and it’ll make you more comfortable for the real thing. You can practice conversation skills.”

My pulse sped up. A date with Sadie sounded... dangerous. And too good to be true.

She was so eager, though, and a trial run *was* a good idea.

Besides, I heard her the other day on the boat, loud and clear. No dating. No commitments. No attachments.

“Fine,” I gritted out, finishing the rest of my beer.

Her face lit up and she straightened to standing. “Great. Tuesday night?”

I jerked a nod. A customer caught her attention and she hustled off, and I watched her ass as she walked away.

A tight warmth built in my chest at the idea of us going out.

It’s a practice date, I told myself. It wasn’t real. She was helping me for the money.

*You’re a catch*, she had said on the boat.

I hated that I wanted that to be true. I wanted to impress her.

I pulled out my phone to plan our date.





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## Sadie

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TUESDAY NIGHT, I stood on the sidewalk in front of the art gallery, waiting for Holden. My stomach buzzed with excitement.

Since this was a practice date, I figured I would dress up a bit. That flash of insecurity I saw behind Holden's eyes the other day still bothered me, and I wanted to show the guy he was worthy of a fun date.

I glanced down at my dress with a smile. I looked *good*. When I had tried this dress on at a consignment store in Toronto, Willa had gasped with wide eyes and insisted I buy it. The fabric was a deep red that made my skin glow. The sweetheart neckline made my cleavage look amazing, and the skirt flared at my waist. In the window behind me, my reflection caught my attention. I had blown out my hair all pretty, and it fell around my shoulders in waves.

*Beautiful*, Holden had said.

My stomach gave a funny little flutter. I wondered what he'd wear tonight.

"Sadie," Wyatt called, crossing the street with Hannah at his side.

My face lit up and I waved at them.

Wyatt enveloped me in a big hug. "Heard you were back in town."

I pulled back and gave Hannah a hug. She beamed at me.

"Congratulations," I told Wyatt.

He shot Hannah a proud grin. "Thanks."

"So?" I asked. "Baby's room, what are we thinking? Animal themed, teddy bears, rainbows?"

Hannah cringed and chewed her lip. "We have no idea. Neither of us are very good at that thing."

I gave them a *duh* look. “Dudes. I’m an interior designer. I live for this stuff. Let me help.” I shrugged. “I’m going to be sticking around town for a bit anyway, renovating the inn.”

My mind flicked to Holden.

Hannah shrugged and gave me a shy grin. “If you have the time, we’d love some help.”

I clapped my hands and beamed at them. “Absolutely.”

“I love your dress.” Hannah tilted her head. “Are you waiting for someone?”

I nodded. “Holden.”

Wyatt pointed down the street at one of the buildings. “His office light is on. He’s still working.” He tugged on Hannah’s hand. “We gotta go, this one’s hungry.”

We said our goodbyes and I checked the time on my phone. Holden was supposed to be here five minutes ago.

Ten minutes later, I blew out a long breath and texted him.

*Hurry up, grumpy man!*

No response. I glanced at the building Wyatt had pointed at. My heels clipped as I walked and the fabric swished around my legs.

A little thrill shot through my chest, anticipating Holden’s reaction. He’d like this dress, I knew it.

From the sidewalk outside his office building, I could see him working at his desk on the second floor. I pulled out my phone and dialed.

I watched as he picked his phone up.

“Come on,” I murmured. The evening was chilly and I was hungry.

Holden’s gaze lingered on the phone before he silenced it.

My mouth fell open.

“Are you serious?” I hissed, staring at his office from the street.

I dialed again. He glanced at the phone before turning back to his computer.

Dickhead!

Rejection stung me under my ribcage, and my nostrils flared.

Unfuckingbelievable.

I was helping *him*, and he was blowing me off to read boring work emails?

Something angry and miserable twisted in my stomach and I frowned. Here I was, thinking Holden wasn’t the asshole he used to be.

The joke was on me. Classic, trusting Sadie.

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I ARRIVED HOME IN A HUFF.

I did my hair for that guy. I wore my favorite dress. I was wearing perfume.

Nothing had changed. I thought we were becoming friends, but Holden Rhodes still wanted nothing to do with me.

“Dickhead,” I muttered for the tenth time in the last half hour.

As I pulled my pajamas on, my gaze landed on my painting supplies.

An idea formed in my head and I snorted.

I hadn’t painted outside of work for years. While dating Luke, the artist, I had some friends over for dinner. One of them mistook one of my paintings for his, and he nearly spat out his wine.

“That’s Sadie’s painting, not mine,” he had hurried to tell them with a laugh.

He was offended anyone thought my shitty painting was done by him. Like it was laughable.

I shook my head, pushing the memory out of my head.

This was just for fun. No one would ever see this painting.

I sat down at the easel and lifted my pencil.

*Dickhead*, I thought again as he appeared on the canvas, sitting at the bar, holding his beer, face tilted to the TV above the bar, watching the game. My pencil flew in a flurry, dragging lines and shading as the image came to life.

I stopped to scrutinize my sketch and burst out laughing. The bag of my brushes clinked as I rifled through, pulling out my favorites. When I dabbed paint onto my palette and swirled them together, my heart lifted.

I had missed this. Maybe painting for fun was silly and pointless, but swirling paint colors together and watching them change, hearing the scratch of my pencil on the canvas, inhaling the weird plasticky paint scent, it made me forget about Holden standing me up tonight.

I picked up paint on my brush and applied color to the canvas.

As I worked, the rest of my problems fell to the background. The stuff with Grant, my debt, Katherine passing, it all faded away. I hummed to myself and focused on the canvas alone. The painting was neither detailed

nor well-done, but it was just for me.

I added a dribble of tears to his face. Some tears welling up in his eyes. Extra frown lines around his eyes and on his forehead.

My cackle echoed around the room as I leaned back to study the finished painting. It was perfect.

I set the canvas on Katherine's desk to dry and picked up another.

I painted late into the night. The paintings were neither detailed nor thoughtful. They were rushed and slapped together but my heart thudded with excitement and glee at the images of Holden. I couldn't remember the last time I painted like this, so untethered and delirious. I painted him again and again, my eyes glowing as my hand and paintbrush transferred images from my mind to the canvas.

Holden in his truck, studying the road, crying.

Holden at the gym, doing bicep curls, crying.

Holden at the beach, staring out into the sunset, crying.

Holden outside the coffee shop, holding his coffee and peering into the windows, crying.

Holden at the grocery store, inspecting an orange, crying.

The tight, furious knots in my shoulders loosened and a wicked smile curled at my mouth. I remembered the way Holden had stared at his phone while I called before ignoring me, and a lick of disappointment and embarrassment hit me in the stomach.

I really thought he was warming up to me.

I guess I was wrong.



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## Holden

---

ON THURSDAY MORNING, Sadie opened the front door of the inn with murderous rage in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” I held up a paper bag with grease stains.

She crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes flashed with fury. “I saw you ignore my call.”

Fuck. My chest strained with regret.

“I’m an asshole,” I told her, feeling like garbage.

No wonder Sadie said that about me, all those years ago.

She blinked at me, and I saw hurt behind her eyes. “Why did you do that?”

I rubbed my jaw, hesitating.

The truth was, I planned the hell out of that date. First, we’d walk through the current exhibit at the art gallery and discuss all our favorite paintings. Then I’d take her to Avery’s restaurant, The Arbutus, for dinner. If the weather was still nice, we’d go for a walk along the harbor.

I had looked forward to seeing her all day. The date didn’t feel like it was for practice.

It felt real, and worse, I *wanted* it to be real.

She was leaving. She wasn’t dating. She hated me. She never, ever wanted to get married.

“I got nervous.”

I had panicked. I hunkered down in my office and dove into work, and when she called, I hated myself for ignoring it.

It was for the best, though. For both of us. A practice date was dancing

dangerously close to the real thing.

Sadie would break my fucking heart if I wasn't careful.

I handed her the bag, and she glanced inside before giving me a begrudging look. "Apology breakfast sandwiches?"

I nodded.

"It's okay," she told me with a little smile on her face. "I got you back."

"How?" I frowned.

A wicked smile lifted on her features and she wiggled her eyebrows. "One second." She opened the door and I stepped inside the foyer, watching as she ran up the stairs. She reappeared a moment later on the landing with a canvas and a huge grin. At the bottom of the stairs, she flipped it around to show me.

A laugh burst out of my chest.

She had painted me walking on the beach, staring at the sunset, tears running down my face.

She bit her lip, holding back her laughter. "Do you love it?"

I laughed again. Bright warmth burst in my chest as I studied this ridiculous painting. Her lines were sharp, the colors were bright and bold, and she nailed my features. She captured my messed-up hair, my arms across my chest, and my frown.

"You're talented," I told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh my god. Holden. This is a *joke*."

"Still." I took the painting from her, studying the trees she had painted along the beach. "You're good, Sadie."

She snorted, rolled her eyes, and tried to take the painting from me, but I held on tight.

"Can I keep this?" I asked.

"Absolutely not. These are going in the trash."

"Wait." I shot her a funny look. "*These?* There are more?"

A minute later, I stood in her bedroom, staring at the collection of paintings of me crying. Beside me, she took a huge bite of the breakfast sandwich I had brought.

She rolled her lips to hide a grin. "I was really mad."

"I can see that."

Another pang of guilt hit me in the gut. Sadie was helping me, and I stood her up.

"I guess you have to get to work, huh?"

“I have some time before my first meeting.” The idea of tiling a bathroom alongside Sadie sent a thrill through my chest. When was the last time I had tiled a shower? I couldn’t even remember.

Besides, a couple hours here wouldn’t kill my schedule. I could catch up later.

“The bathroom tiles arrived at the store,” I told her. “I picked them up yesterday.”

Her face lit up. “You did? How do they look?”

“Come see for yourself.”

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“YES, HOLDEN, YES!”

Sadie clasped her hands together in front of the bathroom’s emerald green shower tiles and I tried not to picture her saying those words in a dirty way.

I was only supposed to stay an hour but then we started tiling the bathroom and we were making quick work of it together, so I asked Zara to sit in on the meeting and take minutes for me.

Outside, the sun began to set over the water. I frowned and checked the time.

It was almost six o’clock.

I had spent the entire day working alongside Sadie without realizing it.

She pointed at the tiles. “This color, Holden? It’s bedazzling my soul.”

“What does that even mean?” I straightened up behind her and dusted my hands off.

“It means I have the *yes* feeling and I think it’s pretty.” She stroked one of the tiles with love. “You are so beautiful.” She pointed to another one. “And you.”

“And fucking expensive.”

“Shhh,” she said to the tile. “Don’t listen to the rude asshole. He has no taste.”

I snorted. She was right about the deep green shower tiles working in this space. When she brought the tile outside the hardwood store to show it to me in the sunlight last week, it was the same dark, deep green as her eyes.

“You good to keep working?” I asked her. “We could tile another bathroom.”



She turned with a curious expression. “It’s okay if you need to leave. I can do it myself.”

“It’s fine.” I had a hundred emails to read, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave. “You need supervision.”

She laughed. “Uh-huh. Oh, by the way, how’d your date with Liya go?”

My stomach dropped. I had crashed and burned on my date. I probably could have used that practice date with Sadie.

“Fine,” I lied.

Last night, I had taken Liya out on the date I had planned for Sadie. Every time I had been around Liya in the past, she had been upbeat and talkative, like Sadie. I had thought that would make things easier, but we had nothing to talk about. The date was a lot of awkward silences.

At one point, Liya made a comment about how different I was from my brothers, and I knew it wouldn’t work.

Liya knew Wyatt because he was always at the store, visiting Hannah. She said yes to going out with me, expecting me to be like him—laid back, friendly, easygoing.

Why was I surprised? Did I actually think the date would go *well*?

Sadie watched me with curiosity. “Are you two going out again?”

“No. Where are the rest of the tile spacers?”

“Downstairs in a box by the door. I’ll get them.”

“No, I’ll get them. You should take progress photos.” I strode out of the bathroom and downstairs.

At the front door, I searched for the box with the spacers. Plastic sheeting protected the floor, and construction materials sat in neat stacks and piles. No box.

I opened the door to a box sitting on the porch, addressed to Sadie.

“We should clear the entryway out for when we knock the wall down,” I called up the stairs, using my keys to slice the box open.

Sadie appeared at the top of the stairs. “I can figure it out on my own.”

“I’ll help.” Demo was the fun part. I flipped the box open.

A choked noise scraped out of my throat.

“What?” Sadie asked off my expression.

I reached into the box and pulled out a giant green dildo the size of my forearm. A weird pressure built in my chest and the corner of my mouth twitched.

Sadie’s eyes were wide with shock.

The laugh burst out of my chest. “Is this yours?”

“No!” she shrieked, running down the stairs.

“This thing is huge.” I held it up to her. “We can use it to knock walls down.”

A red flush grew over her face. “Oh my god.” She pulled the box from me and snatched the invoice out, scanning it. “Ugh. They sent the wrong thing.”

I nudged her side with the dildo and she swatted me away. “The wrong color?”

“Very, very funny.” She leveled me with a look and I held back a grin.

“You’re blushing.”

“I am not.”

“So you didn’t order this?”

“No, Holden.” She was definitely blushing. “I didn’t order a dildo that would split me in half.”

I choked. Wow.

“I ordered—” She cut herself off. “Something else.”

My eyebrow arched. “What did you order?”

She wouldn’t meet my eye but straightened up with indignance. “A vibrator.”

It wasn’t just the prissy way she said it that made my cock twitch. It was the image of her using it. Eyes closed, pretty lips parted, gasping as she worked the toy between her legs.

Fuck. That was hot. I tried to wipe it from my mind but there she was again, lying in her bed and moaning my name.

My name? No. I studied her bright red face.

Nice to think about, though.

“I’m not embarrassed I ordered a vibrator,” she told me, gaze snapping to mine before she looked away.

I put the king-sized dildo back in the box without a word.

“A lot of guys don’t know what they’re doing so women need to rely on toys.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“What, you’ve never had a girl use a toy in bed?”

“Never needed it.”

Her gaze snapped to mine again with surprise and something else. Something hot and curious.

Fucking hell.

I lifted a shoulder, a smug grin twisting on my mouth. “There’s no problem with toys, though. As long as everyone gets what they want.”

She made a noise of acknowledgement in her throat, still watching me with wide-eyes. My mind flashed with images of her using a toy again.

The fantasy changed to her using it in front of me, getting herself off while I watched.

Wow. Fuck. I sucked in a breath and she broke eye contact.

“Um. Dinner.” She cleared her throat. “What do you want?”

The weird tension between us evaporated.

I shook my head. “I’ll eat later.” Takeout over the sink or dinner at the bar.

“If we’re going to do another bathroom, it’ll take a few hours,” she said, pulling her phone out. “It’s not good to eat too late. Hi,” she said into the phone. “I’d like to place an order for takeout.”

With the phone propped up against her ear, she stooped down and pulled a small box out from behind the faucets on the floor.

“Spacers,” she murmured, handing it to me. “Okay, ready? We’ll have the pad si ew, the spicy beef salad, two orders of jasmine rice, and the red curry with extra veg.”

My heart gave a sharp tug, listening to her order dinner for us. She had insisted I eat dinner, like she was taking care of me.

I turned around and rolled my eyes at myself. She wasn’t taking care of me. She was back to hating me after what I did the other night.

“Thanks,” I said when she hung up.

She shrugged and waved a hand. “Don’t mention it. I don’t need you getting grumpy halfway through the next round.”

There. See? It didn’t mean anything. She picked up the enormous dildo and yanked the front door open.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m throwing this thing out.” She waved it in the air and another laugh burst out of me. I picked up the invoice from the box and read it.

A grin hitched on my mouth. “Alien dildo?” I called out the front door.

“Shut up,” she called back.



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## Holden

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“TELL ME ABOUT YOUR REAL DATE.” Sadie asked in between bites of Thai food as we sat on the floor in the sitting room, watching the sunset. We had moved the furniture out of here to make room for the renovations.

I sighed. This again. “I don’t know. It wasn’t good.”

“Elaborate, please.”

“It was awkward. I didn’t know what to talk about with her. I could tell she wasn’t having fun.”

She tapped her lip, thinking. “Some people aren’t a good fit.”

Maybe there wasn’t a person out there for me. I blew a long breath out before I squashed those thoughts.

Spending time with Sadie was giving me hope, and I didn’t like that.

“What’s wrong, Sasquatch?” Sadie took another bite of food and studied me.

“It’s hard. This dating thing.”

She laughed. “Yeah, it’s hard. People search for decades for the perfect partner and you’re trying to find one in six months.”

When she said it like that, it sounded impossible.

“Everyone struggles, except Aiden,” she said before taking another bite. “He was at the bar last night. Jeeze, his smile is like—” She made a shocked face. “—high watt.”

That fucking guy. His eyes were all over every inch of her skin that day on the boat. I could see him itching to touch the thin straps of her dress.

So was I, but that was different.

Jesus, she was hot in that dress.

He was there last night at the bar and I wasn't there to run interference. My jaw tensed.

"I thought you said you weren't dating," I bit out, harsher than I meant.

She raised an eyebrow and gave me a slow blink. "I'm not."

"So why are you talking about him?"

She wiggled her eyebrows at me in a teasing way. "Jealous," she said in a singsong voice.

"I'm not jealous." My chest and shoulders strained tight.

She frowned. "What's wrong with him?"

I gritted my teeth. "Nothing. He's a nice guy." Aiden was always in a good mood, always honest and careful on job sites, and I bet he would never have problems on dates.

I didn't like the idea of him and Sadie together. Even if she wasn't dating. Even if she didn't like me.

"Not as nice as your new toy." I shot her a glance and a laugh scraped out of her throat.

"Gross. You are gross," she told me. "Okay, are you ready for your practice date? She's here."

My eyebrows shot up in alarm. "What? No."

After how badly I had done on my date with Liya, I had no interest in a repeat.

She moved to standing. "Close your eyes."

"Sadie," I started, but she had already disappeared into the hall. I could hear rustling.

"Are you closing your eyes?" she called.

I sighed and closed them. "Yes."

Her footsteps echoed around the empty room along with a strange rustling noise, like a balloon brushing against something.

"Say hello to your date."

I opened my eyes and glared at the blow-up doll sitting across from me. My gaze flicked to Sadie, doubled over in silent laughter, eyes sparkling.

"Isn't she pretty?" Sadie asked.

The blow-up doll's mouth gaped open and I cringed. "Where did you get this?"

"Facebook Marketplace."

I stared at her. "It's *used*?"

She blanched. "No, it's not used. The guy said he bought it as a joke, just

like I was.” She slid a wary glance at the doll.

“Did it have a box?”

Her eyes narrowed. “No?” Her expression turned horrified. “Oh god. It’s used. Ew!”

My mouth strained as I tried not to laugh. “And you want me to make conversation with this thing?”

She lifted the doll up and tossed her in the hall. “From what I’ve seen, you don’t need the practice.” Her eyes were warm and she shrugged. “You’re doing fine.”

With her, I was. Talking with Sadie was easy. Annoyance pinched me in the gut. Why her?

Her phone buzzed and she glanced at the screen before unlocking it. Her face lit up and she tilted the screen so I could see.

It was a candid photo of her, chatting with Wyatt and Hannah under the streetlight on Main Street, posted on the Queen’s Cove Instagram account, and she was fucking gorgeous.

I took the phone from her to study it.

She wore a red dress that showed off her incredible tits. Her hair was loose and wavy around her shoulders. She was mid-laugh, her eyes bright and sparkling.

“You look nice,” I murmured, memorizing the photo.

“That was Tuesday, before you bailed on me.”

I turned to her. “You looked like *this* to go out on a date with *me*?”

A wash of pink grew on her face and she shrugged, taking her phone back. Our fingers brushed and the sensation of her soft skin against mine stole my attention.

She had gotten dressed up, put effort in and wore heels, and I acted like a fucking asshole because I was afraid of how much I wanted to go on a date with her.

Warmth pulsed in my chest at the idea that she dressed up to go out with me.

If we had gone out and she had worn *that dress*, I definitely would have kissed her.

My gaze dropped to her plush mouth. Her teeth pinned her bottom lip as she watched me.

Blood pounded in my ears as my gaze alternated between her eyes and her mouth. Her gaze fell to my mouth, and my cock stirred.

I wanted to kiss her, and I think she wanted to kiss me, too.

As I looked into her eyes, energy crackled around us, and I pictured her using a vibrator again. I'd think about that image later in the shower with my hand wrapped around myself.

I could see her pulse going in her neck.

"Holden," she breathed.

My hand came to her jaw, tracing the line until my thumb brushed over her bottom lip. Her shaky breath tickled as she exhaled, watching me with heavy eyes.

I wasn't supposed to kiss her, but I couldn't remember why.

"You shouldn't be looking at me like that." Her voice was soft.

Fuck it.

I tilted my head and ran my lips up the side of her neck, barely touching her. She shuddered under my touch. My cock ached, straining against my zipper. Fuck, she smelled good. Light, warm, and sweet.

"Holy," she whispered, and I pressed a line of kisses down her neck to her shoulder.

"Close your eyes and you won't see me looking at you like this."

My hand was in her hair, tilting her head back.

Jesus, she was so fucking pretty. An angel.

"I mean—" She broke off with a gasp as I sucked the spot between her neck and shoulder. "Hard to think when you're doing that."

"So don't think," I murmured before tilting her head back.

I paused an inch from her mouth and searched her eyes for any sign of hesitation. She closed the distance and pressed her soft lips to mine.

We sunk into a quiet heaven. Her mouth was soft, plush, pliant, and intoxicating. My mind slowed and my blood thickened as she sighed into me. I locked one arm around her and pulled her into my lap. With my mouth, I coaxed hers open and tasted her.

I groaned. She tasted like the fucking antidote to everything bad in the world.

Warm and sweet like sunshine. Soft like silk. Hot like sin.

Her tongue glided over mine and I pulled her closer to me. Her breasts pressed into my chest and a groan scraped out of my throat. I needed to get deeper. I gripped her hair and tilted her open more. She let out a needy moan and it raced straight to my erection.

She was straddling me and her hands were in my hair, threading and



combing and tugging, sending sparks down my spine. Her mouth worked mine and arousal wrapped tight around my spine as I grew harder.

She sucked on my tongue with the right amount of pressure and I melted into the floor, laying back and pulling her with me.

“Fuck, honey,” I groaned.

She bit my lower lip. “Don’t call me that.”

I grinned and took her mouth again. “Yeah? You don’t like that?”

“Uh-uh.” She sucked my tongue again and pulled my hair a little harder. Her hips rocked against my length and we both exhaled groans of pleasure. My balls ached and my brain slowed all the way down.

My hands came to her hips to pull her harder against me as she rocked. She gasped and her head fell into the crook of my neck. The intimacy of it ramped up my arousal tenfold.

“Sadie,” I gritted out, working my hips against her center. “Fuck, you’re so gorgeous. You feel so good, on top of me like this.” I squeezed her ass and guided her into a rhythm against my length.

Her breaths shook against my neck. “Oh my god. Just like that. Holy hell.” Her voice was high and desperate, and I kept rocking at the same rhythm. Her thighs began to shake.

“Yeah? Like that, honey?”

She moaned and nodded into my neck. Holy fuck. She was going to come, I could tell from the desperate, needy way she moved against me, gripping my hair like she was holding on for dear life. My heart beat in my chest like a drum.

This was fucking incredible.

She froze and inhaled sharply. “Stop.”

My hands and hips stilled. “What’s wrong?”

She rolled off me, stood up, and I missed the press of her body against mine. “Nothing.” She blinked at the floor, eyes wide. Her face was flushed and her hair was a mess from me raking my hands through it. “We shouldn’t be doing this.” She spared me a glance. “I’m not doing the dating thing right now.”

I nodded and sat up, catching my breath. “Right. Sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. You probably haven’t been laid in a while.”

My mouth fell open in frustration. “You were about to come from grinding on me and I’m the one who hasn’t been laid in a while?”

Anger flared in her eyes. “No, I wasn’t.”

I snorted. “Yes, you were. Your thighs were shaking.” Her mouth opened and closed in shock and I moved to standing. I was out of breath. “It’s fine. So you have a sensitive trigger button.”

She blinked about six times. “It’s late. You should go.” Her face flushed harder. She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the front door.

“Don’t take the garbage out until tomorrow morning,” I said, picking up the painting of me crying I had left downstairs before stepping onto the porch. “Or the raccoons will get into it.”

She shot me a haughty look. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

I snorted. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

The door closed behind me and I walked to my truck. I was still hard from her writhing on me, and I could still hear her breathy moans in my ear, feel her gripping my hair as she spiraled outwards with arousal.

This was a problem. It would complicate things and get in the way of me finding a long term partner, but as I drove home, grinning wide, I didn’t give a shit about any of that.

I wanted to do it again, and she did too, whether she wanted to admit it or not.



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## Sadie

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I WOKE up the next morning, thinking about Holden.

Sunlight streamed into the bedroom. Katherine's old room was feeling like mine, with my clothes strewn everywhere and my paint supplies all over her desk.

Holy shit. I almost came while *dry humping*. That didn't happen. Ever. I only came with a vibrator, by myself, on a really good day when I was fully hydrated and well-rested, and even that situation was iffy. If I had a tough day at work or was tired or stressed, no dice.

With a guy? Never. Never ever.

All Holden had to do was grip my ass and work my hips against his, and I was almost there.

This was bad. This was so bad. I didn't want to think about what this meant.

It was the press of him between my legs that did it. That thick, hard ridge rocking against me scattered my thoughts.

I chewed my lip. The second I had realized what that build of pressure in my lower belly meant, I panicked.

The memory of his stubble scraping against my neck made me shiver in my bed. The way his mouth had taken mine had dragged me underwater, where nothing else mattered except us tasting each other. He had wound me tighter and tighter with his tongue, sweeping into my mouth, kissing me like I'd never been kissed before. Heat built between my legs as I inhaled his scent.

God. His scent. It turned off all the lights in my brain. The second he

kissed my neck, I was done.

I cringed and covered my face with my hands. We weren't supposed to be making out. I wasn't dating. I wasn't going to tee myself up for a Grant redo. Grant was perfect, until he really, *really* wasn't.

Besides, Holden wanted to get married, and the idea of ever getting involved with that again made my skin crawl.

*Get your shit together*, I told myself.

Holden didn't like me. He was probably horny after seeing that huge alien dildo. I groaned in embarrassment and made a mental note to email the company today. Of all the toys they could have mixed it up with, they sent that thing?

Holden's dark gaze from last night flashed into my head and the apex between my legs ached. I blew out a long breath. That crackly, exciting energy from last night with Holden was because of hormones, those pesky bastards. My hormones told me I needed an orgasm, and Holden smelled good, so they connected the two. If I wanted to avoid more moments like last night, I needed to come, and to come, I needed a vibrator.

I'd pay for rush shipping on the replacement.

Downstairs, I was sipping coffee and staring out the front windows at the ocean when the group of people gathered, staring and pointing at something on the sidewalk. Two people took photos with their phones while the small group watched.

I slipped my shoes on and poked my head outside to see what the fuss was about.

The garbage cans I had rolled out last night were open and garbage was all over the sidewalk. I got closer and gasped at what they were pointing and taking pictures of.

The giant alien dildo lay on the sidewalk.

Alarm spiked in my chest.

"Hi," I called. My voice had a weird, high-pitched edge to it. "Nothing to see here, people, this was accidentally sent by the company."

A petite woman straightened up and studied me with interest. She was mid-forties with a bob haircut.

"I'm Miri Yang," she said. "And you must be Sadie Waters."

"Hi, Miri Yang," I told her in a hurry, bending down to pick up the dildo. The man beside her snapped a photo of me reaching for it.

"The raccoons must have gotten into your trash," the man said before

taking a photo of me holding the dildo.

Right. Holden told me to take the garbage out this morning instead of last night. My lips pinched together. I hated that he was right. Thank god he wasn't here to see this, he'd think it was hilarious.

Miri put a hand on my shoulder. "Nothing to be embarrassed about, Sadie. Sexual exploration can be very exciting."

My face burned beet red. "It's not mine," I repeated with wide eyes. "The company sent it by mistake."

"Really," the man beside her insisted. "We don't sex shame. Miri and I have an erotica book club and honestly," he jerked his chin at the dildo in my hand, "we read about alien penises all the time. We're not phased by that thing." He held a hand out with a big smile. "I'm Don, by the way. I run the Queen's Cove Daily news blog. I'm sure you've heard of it."

I hadn't.

"Nice meeting you all," I said, shaking his hand before I stalked back into the inn with the gargantuan toy in my hand.

"Don't be embarrassed of your desires, Sadie," Miri called. "Your body can do incredible things!"

"Not this body," I muttered under my breath as I entered the kitchen.

This body couldn't even come without mechanical help.

Last night was a blip, I had decided. I probably wasn't even going to get there. My body was tricking me. It didn't mean anything.

It had been an issue with every guy I'd ever hooked up with. Everyone made it sound so easy. In university, I had listened with discomfort as the girls on my floor had talked about their best orgasms and what worked for them. One girl had orgasmed from her girlfriend playing with her nipples.

With. Her. Nipples.

Today, the thought made me laugh. Ten years ago, I tried not to feel worse and more broken about myself, hearing how everyone had such an easy time with it.

Willa and I had been out for drinks after a painting class in fourth year when the topic came up and I confessed I had never had an orgasm. Or I didn't think I had. She had gawked at me for a minute before conversation resumed, and the next time I saw her, she discreetly passed me a bag.

I could have kissed Willa for changing my life.

Even Willa didn't know I faked it with every guy I had ever slept with. I faked it every single time with Grant. In my experience, if a guy couldn't

make me come, he'd stress and worry over it. I'd have to console him and then it would be my problem. Faking it was easier.

I frowned. It was so weird to think of Grant as a real person, when everything I had known about him was fake. His name. His parents probably didn't even live in Vancouver. Did he even have a dog named Pepsi when he was a kid like he told me?

A thought occurred to me. I was glad Grant wasn't able to make me come. It was a little piece of myself reserved for me, and after what he had done, I was happy I had kept it safe.

Once I had retrieved a garbage bag from the trash, I tossed the dildo inside and left the bag out by the shed, where the bins normally hung out.

Next garbage day, I'd throw it into the bin first thing in the morning, and never see that thing again.





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## Sadie

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"I HEARD you're into some weird alien sex stuff," Olivia said at the bar that night.

"Oh my god." I rolled my eyes. "This town is ridiculous."

She smirked at me. "People talk."

"That was a mixup from a store. I didn't buy that. It's not for me."

She shrugged. "You don't need to be embarrassed."

"It's not *mine*." I started laughing out of frustration. "If it was mine, why would I throw it in the garbage? Wouldn't I keep it?"

Olivia glanced over her shoulder from where she was cutting limes. "I don't really want to think about what you'd do with it."

I grinned at her. "Now you're messing with me."

She grinned back. "A little." Something caught her attention over my shoulder and she nodded. "Hey."

Holden took his seat at the bar and nodded at me. "Hi."

"Hi."

My heart gave a strange flutter.

*Stop that*, I told it.

A few minutes later, Hannah and a woman with shoulder-length auburn hair took the seats beside Holden.

"Emmett's wife," I said when Avery introduced herself. "Elizabeth told me all about your restaurant."

She smiled. "How are you liking being back in town?"

I leaned on the bar. "You know, I had this image in my head of Queen's Cove being so boring and sleepy, but I was only sixteen when I visited. The

guys were always working and besides spending time with Katherine, there wasn't that much for me to do." I tilted my chin at Holden, whose eyes were on the TV. "And this one was such a dickhead, no wonder it took me fifteen years to come back."

The corner of his mouth turned up but his gaze stayed glued to the TV.

"How are the inn renos going?" Hannah asked.

I filled her in on the progress. "I did another bathroom today and I'll probably finish by the end of the week."

Holden's gaze shot to mine. "You tiled a bathroom today?"

I nodded. "Was I supposed to wait for you?"

He frowned. "It's a lot of work for one person."

"I have lots of time on my hands."

He gave me a long look over the rim of his beer before he glanced back at the TV. Was he disappointed I worked ahead without him? It was more fun working alongside someone else, but he had a full-time job. He couldn't be at the inn every day.

I raised my eyebrows at him. "Are you hungry, honey?"

His gaze returned to mine and his eyes flashed with interest.

I don't know why I said it like that. I called a lot of people honey here but calling Holden that felt different. Intimate and special.

"Thought you didn't like that name," he said, heat flaring in his gaze.

"I don't." My face warmed and I thought about the way his erection pressed against me the other night. "I call everyone honey here."

He held my gaze and the side of his mouth ticked up. "Sure you do."

I huffed. "Food, Holden. What do you want?"

"Burger, please." His eyes flared with amusement like he knew how flustered I was.

"Be right back." I whirled around, dropped the order off with the kitchen, and told Olivia I'd be in the washroom. Once inside the tiny space, I wet a paper towel and pressed it to my neck. My skin heated.

Okay, so I had a teeny tiny thing for Holden. Of course I did. He was so hot. He had that stoic, silent thing going on. We'd been spending a lot of time together. His eyelashes were fascinating, and so was the curve of his mouth when it did that twitching thing I loved so much. He smelled incredible and kissing him was the hottest thing I had ever experienced, but it didn't mean I had to lose my head over the guy.

I'd done that before and look where it got me. Grant swept me off my

feet, and I missed all the flags.

A thought entered my head and I frowned. What flags were I missing with Holden?

He was a workaholic, I knew that. He stood me up on a date. He was obsessed with getting married.

I thought back to the boat, and him rubbing my back in the bathroom while I barfed, and holding my hair back. He didn't have to do that. A lot of guys wouldn't have done that.

Unease spread through my stomach at the thought that Holden may not be who I thought he was.

That kiss? It was a slip up, and I wouldn't let it happen again. How could I find him a wife when I was making out with the guy?

No way. I was in Queen's Cove still for one reason, and I was sticking to the plan.

When I returned to the bar, Avery and Hannah were whispering to Holden while he scowled. They spotted me and sat up straighter with big smiles.

"We want to come visit the inn," Avery told me. "Can we do a girls' night?"

"We want to see all the progress you've made." Hannah gave me a shy smile. "And we want to get to know you better."

Avery leaned forward, chin on her palm. "We're fascinated by you, Sadie."

I flushed with happiness. "Of course." Olivia passed behind me and I gestured at her. "You're coming, too."

She raised an eyebrow at us. "Fine."

I clapped. "Oh, yay."

We made a plan for them to come over the next week, on Monday night.

"We watch cheesy reality TV on Monday nights." Hannah sipped her soda water. "Join us, please."

I shrugged. "You've given me no choice, and I accept this rose."

She beamed at me. Holden's mouth curled up and I flushed again with delight. Emmett and Wyatt walked in and both Avery and Hannah's heads turned.

"Causing trouble?" Emmett said to Avery, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

She shot him a flirty smile. "Always."

Wyatt slung his arm around Hannah and kissed her cheek. “Hey, bookworm.”

“Hi.” She shot him a shy smile and leaned back against him.

My heart gave a little yearning tug. That looked nice.

“We’re going to grab a table.” Avery nodded to Holden. “You want to join us?”

He shook his head. “I’ll stay here.”

She glanced between me and him with a sparkle in her eye. “Okay.”

Once they were set up at a table and Emmett and Wyatt had drinks, I returned to the bar.

“Your family rocks.”

His gaze flicked down to me. His eyes were warm as he nodded. “Yep.”

I took a sip of my flavored soda water, holding his gaze. My face and neck felt warm. “That’s it? Yep?”

He smirked. “They like you. How’s that?”

“I already know they like me. I could tell you were talking about me while I was away.”

The corner of his mouth turned up higher. Bingo. My chest sparked and fizzed.

“Are you going to tell me what they said?”

He kept his eyes on the TV. “Nope.”

“Sadie,” Olivia called down the bar, holding up a bottle of raspberry cordial. “Do you need this?”

I nodded and reached for it to tuck it out of the way. “I’m mixing it with soda waters. Have you tried it? It’s amazing.” I slurped up the last of my drink. It was fizzy, sweet, and tart.

“Uh.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “How many have you had?”

I shrugged. “A few.” A song came on over the bar and I gasped in delight. “Oh my god. Olivia. I love this song.” I reached up to the stereo system and turned the music up before I danced towards her.

She laughed and backed away from me. “No way. No dancing in here.”

“Come on.” I grabbed her arms and made her dance with me like a rag doll while she laughed and tried to fight me off. “You’re like Holden. You need to have more fun.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him. His eyes were on my backside, heated and focused, and a twinge hit me right between the legs.

“You’re next,” I told him. “I’m going to make you dance.”

He held back a grin and my heart flipped over.



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## Holden

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“WHO WANTS A TEQUILA SHOT!?” Sadie called, holding the bottle high in the air, and the bar erupted in cheers.

She lined a row of shot glasses up and poured before handing them out. She picked up the last one and tossed it back.

I watched from my barstool, arms folded and eyes on her. She glanced at me with a sexy grin and winked.

Against my will, the corners of my mouth turned up.

She walked over, leaned across the bar toward me, and gestured for me to lean forward.

“I have a secret,” she whispered in my ear. Her breath tickled my neck and a shiver rolled down my spine. “I’m kind of drunk.”

I tried not to laugh. “Yeah, honey, we know.”

She straightened up. “I should see if anyone wants more tequila shots.”

Olivia was behind her in a flash, hands on Sadie’s shoulders. “You’re clocking out for the night.”

“What?” Sadie’s face fell like Olivia had killed her puppy. “No! You still have customers.”

“I can handle the rest of the night,” Olivia told her. With her hands on Sadie’s shoulders, she walked her around the bar to where I sat. “Why don’t you hang out with Holden for a bit?”

Sadie’s face lit up. “I *love* that idea. I love hanging out with Holden.” She beamed at me and plopped down in my lap. “Hi,” she said, smiling at me.

Her weight in my lap was heaven. She sunk her hands into my hair and I bit a groan back.

“Hi.” My hands came to her waist.

Her face was inches from mine and I remembered the last time we were this close, when we kissed the other night at the inn.

Fuck, that had been a good kiss. The best kiss I’d ever had.

I really wanted to kiss her again.

“Have I ever told you how gorgeous your hair is?” She tugged it and my eyes fell closed as tingles shot down my neck. “I like sitting in your lap. We should do this more often.”

I let out a silent laugh. Yeah, like that would happen.

“I like it, too.” My hands twitched and I had the urge to rub up and down her back, her sides, her arms, but I held back.

Sadie was drunk. She’d regret all of this in the morning. My sole purpose right now was to make sure she got home okay.

The song changed to a popular nineties hip hop song and Sadie gasped. Her eyes widened as she clutched the sides of my head.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

My face creased with concern. “What?”

“I love this song!” She hopped off my lap and climbed onto the stool beside me.

Jesus Christ. “Sadie, get down.” I stood and tried to pull her down but she swatted my hands away, giggling, while she clambered onto the bar top.

She kneeled in front of me and her hands came to my cheeks. “Holden, one of my life goals is to dance on the bar top.” She looked deep into my eyes. “You wouldn’t get in the way of that, would you?”

I sighed and she smiled.

“Olivia, turn it up!” she shouted, and another round of cheers rose as Olivia obliged with a grin.

Sadie began dancing on the bar top, swaying her ass, arms above her head, tits bouncing as she moved.

Fuck. I swallowed hard with my eyes glued on her. Thank god my family had left or they’d never let me hear the end of this.

Olivia appeared at my side. “I thought everyone knew cordial had alcohol in it.”

The tops of Sadie’s bra cups were visible as she leaned over and desire shot through me, straight to my cock. I let out a heavy breath. After the first minute of Sadie dancing on the bar, people returned to their conversations, unphased. She wasn’t the first person to dance up on that counter.



“Guess not. I should take her home.”

Olivia tilted her head, watching Sadie dance. “Nah. Let her have a bit of fun. I get the sense she’s had a rough couple months.”

I bit my lip, memorizing the fullness of Sadie’s cleavage.

Fuck, she was gorgeous. I wasn’t supposed to be attracted to her, but I couldn’t help myself.

She turned and her gaze met mine. A lazy, pleased grin spread over her face and she pointed at me. “Holden,” she called, walking down the bar toward me.

She kneeled on the bar in front of me and smiled before she began to dance like a stripper.

Holy shit.

All the blood in my brain rushed to my cock, and I stared as she writhed on the bar top, tits in my face.

I should make her stop. In the morning, she would be mortified. A responsible guy would stop staring and take her home this second.

I was a responsible guy.

She winked at me and my balls ached with need.

“Fuck,” I muttered, head swimming.

She shot me that sexy, smug grin, like she knew what she was doing to me. “Holden, you need to have more fun.” She swung her legs around so she was sitting on the bar top, and her legs hung down on either side of mine.

My heart slammed against the front wall of my chest. I should have taken her home, but I couldn’t move. I was frozen, watching the sexiest woman I’d ever met dance for me.

Jesus Christ. I was going to jerk off to this for years.

“Olivia,” Sadie called, gesturing her over. “Bring the tequila.”

“No more,” I told Sadie, hands coming to her thighs. Her chest was at my eye-level. It would be so easy to lean forward and run my mouth along her soft skin.

“It’s not for me.” She grinned. “It’s for you.”

“I’m driving.”

Olivia arrived with the tequila and Sadie lay back on the bar.

“Belly button shots!” Sadie called, giggling, and pulled the hem of her shirt up.

I sucked a breath in at the sight of her smooth skin. My hands tightened on Sadie’s thighs.

Olivia snorted. “You heard her, Holden.”

I raked one hand through my hair, uncertain. Just because Drunk Sadie wanted this didn’t mean Sober Sadie did.

I didn’t know about this.

The door of the bar open and Aiden walked in.

Sadie’s head lifted and she shot him an exuberant smile. “Aiden!”

Possessive feelings yanked tight through my chest and shoulders.

Aiden beamed at her. “Hey.” He pointed at her. “Are we doing belly button shots?”

Oh, fuck no. I stood, hands still on Sadie’s thighs.

I glanced down at her. The way she was lying on the bar, legs parted in front of me, and her center lining up perfectly with my cock?

Dirty, depraved images flashed through my head.

An empty bar, Sadie naked, and me fucking her hard on this bar top, making her mine.

Desire sliced through me like a knife.

“Pour the shot,” I told Olivia. My voice sounded ragged.

Sadie giggled as Olivia poured. “It tickles.”

“Sadie,” I said in a low voice. “Look at me.”

She turned and met my eyes, and a slow, excited grin pulled on her face. I leaned forward and sucked the shot out of her belly button. The liquor burned my mouth and throat as I swallowed but I slipped my tongue against her soft skin, tasting her.

I didn’t know if I’d ever get another chance.

Beneath my mouth, her breath hitched. My hands came to her waist, smoothing against her warm skin. I straightened up and looked down at her.

“Wow,” she breathed. “That was fun.”

My mouth curled up as I gave her a slow nod. “Mhm.”

She bit her lip. “Another?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Aiden had taken the bar stool a couple down. I frowned.

I didn’t want Aiden gawking at Sadie while she was dancing on the bar top and I sure as fuck didn’t want him licking shots out of her belly button.

I shook my head at her. “You’re done.” I took her hands and helped her slide off the bar. “We’re going home.”

“What?” Her face fell. “But I’m having so much fun.”

“Oh, come on, Holden,” Aiden said with a grin at Sadie. “She’s having

fun.”

I glared at him. “No.”

I leaned down, wrapped my arms around Sadie, and hoisted her over my shoulder. She whooped.

“We’re going home.”



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## Sadie

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I WOKE up the next morning with rocks in my brain. A dull, thudding ache sat right behind my eyes. My limbs were sluggish. The light seared my eyes and I squinted.

A heavy arm draped over my waist. A big, warm, hard body curled around me. My pulse skyrocketed.

Holy shit. There was a man in my bed. My other eye opened wide. I was in my bra and underwear under the covers.

Even through my cloudy-headed haze, I noticed the thick length pressing in my backside. My eyes went even wider.

Did I—? My mouth went dry. Did I hook up with someone last night? Holden would have watched me leave with someone. I didn't like the devastating ache in my chest at that idea.

Moving slow so I wouldn't wake whoever he was, I turned my head.

Holden.

He was still asleep. He was over the covers so the blankets separated us but I sank back into the bed with shock and his arm tightened around my waist, pulling me harder onto his erection.

I was in bed with Holden, half naked, and he had a boner. This was like a fucked up game of Clue. *In Katherine's old bedroom with the hot grumpy guy who has major morning wood.*

A rush of heat grew between my legs and I froze. My skin prickled hot but my head was still pounding so it might have been the hangover.

I had to get out of here.

"Holden." I slapped his arm. "Holden, wake up. Someone roofied you

and deposited you in my bed.”

He groaned and gave me one more squeeze before he frowned and opened his eyes. His eyes were bleary, his hair unruly, and he looked so sexy, sleepy, and delicious.

He let me go and jerked back on the bed like I burned him.

“Good morning, Coyote Ugly.” His voice was low and hoarse with sleep and I twinged again between my legs. His gaze dropped to my chest before he rubbed a hand over his face. I twinged again.

*Stop that*, I told my ladyparts.

“I wasn’t aware the Sasquatch slept. I thought he did all his skulking in the forest at night,” I said, pulling the covers up high on my chest. My face warmed. “So, awkward question. Did we—?” I made a hand motion between us.

I didn’t know what I wanted the answer to be. If we did, well, that would make things awkward. Also, if Holden and I had sex, I wanted to be present and remember it.

He grimaced. “No.”

A lick of disappointment hit me at his expression. “You don’t need to act all repulsed by me.”

I’d admit I was curious how it would be with us. He had kissed me like he wanted me, and I couldn’t help but picture him moving over top of me while I moaned. I replayed him gripping my hips hard and groaning over and over again.

“You were blackout drunk,” he told me.

“What?” I blanched in shock. “No, I wasn’t. All I drank were those cordial things. I only had three or four.”

“No,” he said, “You had like eight. And cordial is liqueur. And then you did three tequila shots.”

Oooh. The music. Dancing. Laughing with Olivia. Olivia asking me how many I had drank.

I cringed. “I got drunk.”

He nodded, eyes on my face, expression indiscernible. “Yep.”

“What else did I do?”

He sat up fast. “Nothing. I stayed because I didn’t want you to choke on your own vomit.”

“Nice.” I gave him a thumbs up. The morning boner meant nothing. “Really nice.” I rolled over with the full intention of sleeping for six years.

“Hey.” He patted my leg. “Get up.”

“Don’t you have a job to go to?” I mumbled into the pillows.

“We’re finishing the bathrooms today.”

I raised my head with a questioning glance. “It’s Monday. You don’t take days off.”

He exhaled a frustrated breath. “I moved some things around.” He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “It’s fine.” His phone buzzed in his pocket.

“Aren’t you going to get that?”

“I’m going to get coffee and breakfast and when I get back, I want you in the shower.”

I pictured Holden and I in the shower, him pinning me against the tiles with his hips, bucking into me while I gasped and came all over the thick length pressed into me this morning.

A rush of heat hit me between the legs and I stared at him.

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.” He disappeared out the door and stomped down the stairs. “Ten minutes,” he called up the stairs.

“Mhm,” I mumbled back, already falling back asleep.

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“ANOTHER PACKAGE CAME FOR YOU.”

An hour later, Holden set a box down on my bed as I sipped the coffee he had brought me. He wore a knowing, smug expression.

“Might help you feel better,” he added before he walked down the hall, where he was working on one of the bathrooms while hollering at me to get dressed.

I gave him a strange look as he left before I ripped the box open.

Oh. The company had sent a replacement vibrator. The box had the same red heart pattern as the previous box, so he must have put two and two together.

A wicked idea entered my head of me using the vibe while Holden worked in the bathroom a few rooms away. Heat coursed through me and I squeezed my thighs together.

I shook my head. Wow. We weren’t going there. Not today, Sadie. Not today.

Would be fun to see his face as I announced to him I wasn’t to be

disturbed, though. I snorted.

“You better be getting ready in there,” I heard him call from the other room.

I rolled my eyes and headed to the shower.

An hour later, Holden and I entered the forest beside the inn. I sipped the coffee he had brought me.

“Thanks for doing this,” I told him with a small smile. “I know you wanted to do renos today. I’m just feeling blah.”

He nodded. “I know. It’s okay.”

He watched me for a moment. His hair was damp. He must have run home to take a shower. I pictured him under the spray, water rolling down his abs. I didn’t *know* he had abs, but I felt his chest that night we kissed. His body was incredible.

Internally, I sighed at the memory of the kiss. What a waste of a kiss. So hot and yet it was going nowhere. It was like a little tease from the universe, so fleeting and unfair.

He led me deeper into the forest along the trail and I stared up at the looming trees, craning my neck to see way up. I inhaled the humid, clean forest and let the breath out as a sigh. Even along the trail, I could still hear the ocean from the other side of the inn.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his black parka. “This trail goes into the forest and loops around. Figured we’d do the whole loop or turn back if we got tired.”

“How long is the loop?”

The corner of his mouth moved and his eyes glinted. “If I told you, you wouldn’t want to do it.”

I groaned.

“If you get tired, I’ll carry you.” The corner of his mouth twitched more, and I watched, fascinated.

What would it take to get a full smile out of him? I bet Holden’s smile was blinding. The laugh he had let out when he saw my panting of him was more in disbelief. I wanted the real thing.

I breathed in another breath of fresh air. It was like the forest air was giving my energy back. “It’s nice in here.”

Holden made a noise of acknowledgement in his throat.

We passed a cluster of trees and an idea formed in my head. I grinned.



“What’s that look?” Holden asked and I grinned wider.

“Just daydreaming.”

He nudged me with his elbow. “Tell me.”

“Did you ever have a treehouse growing up?”

He shook his head, eyebrows lifting with curiosity.

“Me neither. I always wanted one but there was no tree in our backyard growing up. It would be cool to have a treehouse out here for the inn, but for adults.”

Our shoes made soft noises on the path as we walked and the idea became clearer in my head.

“Okay, if I had a bazillion dollars,” I told Holden while he listened, “this is what I’d do. There’s this bar in Toronto Willa and I go to all the time. Tiny little place. It’s at the back of a restaurant and it doesn’t even have a name. No one really knows about it, which is part of the appeal. Behind the bar is a wall of windows, and when you sit at the counter, sipping your cocktail, you can look out at all the city lights. Three million people in Toronto, eating dinner in their kitchens, taking the bus home from work, walking to meet friends, grocery shopping. It’s like, everyone is the star of their own story, you know?”

I looked up at him and he studied me with a thoughtful expression.

“I love going there with Willa. We sit and chat and look out at the lights and feel so small and insignificant, like our problems aren’t so important in the big scheme of things.” I shrugged. “Maybe I’m missing Toronto, but it would be cool to do a little bar out in the woods.”

“You want to do a bar in the middle of the woods?” Holden’s eyebrows shot up. Beside us, a squirrel chased another up a tree.

“I know, I know.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s insane. It’s just a daydream. I think it would be fun, especially because we’re doing the secret library so we have the whole whimsical getaway thing going for the inn.” I surveyed the forest around us. “I get that city lights vibe here, funny enough. These trees are hundreds of years old. They’ve seen lots of people walk by, thinking about their own problems, and yet the trees are still standing.”

Emotion stung my eyes and I blinked it away.

“It’s like my problems don’t matter as much here,” I told him, laughing a little. “Which is crazy.”

“It’s not.” He shook his head. “I like that about the forest, too. It’s quiet, and everything grows around each other in harmony.” He shrugged. “And it

smells nice in here.”

I laughed. “It smells really, really good in this forest, but that might be partly due to you.”

He gave me a strange look.

“You smell good,” I explained.

“Really.” He sounded like he didn’t believe me.

I nodded. “Yep. Don’t let it get to your head, though.”

He snorted.

We walked for a few more minutes in silence, and maybe it was the walk or the coffee hitting my bloodstream or the clean forest air, but I perked up. I didn’t even mind the elevation gain as the trail led up into the mountain. Spending time in the forest with Holden cleared my head and put a brighter shine on my mood.

“There’s a painting of this forest at the gallery,” Holden said.

“Oh, yeah?”

He nodded. “I was going to take you there.” He cleared his throat. “On our date.” He glanced at my face and then back at the path. “It’s by a local Indigenous artist. She does a lot of pieces inspired by this area. I like her work.”

“That sounds really cool. I’ll have to swing by and check it out.”

He nodded and continued walking in silence.

“Why do you like art?” I asked, because one crumb of information about Holden wasn’t enough. I wanted him to keep talking about himself.

He glanced at me. In the forest light, Holden looked so handsome, like he wasn’t even real. Like I had imagined him. His skin glowed, his eyes were so clear and bright, and I could smell him—a mix of deodorant and laundry soap and a bit of sweat from working. That scent was like the cordial drinks I chugged last night—addictive and totally intoxicating.

A twinge hit me in the chest. Whoever got Holden was a lucky lady.

“Art makes me feel connected to other people.” He thought about it for a second, frowning a little. “It’s like what you said about that bar. I look at some paintings and I feel small and insignificant, but in a connected way. People are not that different, no matter the time period or where they live or how much money they have. The most famous paintings explore the things that make us human.”

“Like what?” I breathed.

*Please keep talking.*

“Like...” He hummed, thinking. “Like being in awe of the beauty of nature. Or being in love with someone who doesn’t love you back. Or the unfairness of privilege, or how devastating war and death is.” He shrugged and lifted his eyebrows at me. “Or revenge on the guy that pissed you off.”

A laugh burst out of me and he grinned.

Oh, wow.

Holden was already gorgeous. When he smiled, though?

He took my breath away.



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## Sadie

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THE SMILE SPREAD over his entire face as Holden laughed. It sparkled out of his eyes. Little lines formed around the corners of his eyes and my stomach did a slow, warm roll forward.

Holden's smile was radiant.

Dazed and silent, I swallowed. Wow.

"Painters make life a little more interesting with their art." He shrugged. "That's why I like renovations. It's fun to turn something ugly into something beautiful."

"That's what I love about interior design." I bit my smile back. "The inn is going to look so good when we're done, Holden. I know it."

He nodded. The big smile was gone but it lingered in his eyes. "I know."

We walked in silence and I pictured his smile over and over again.

"Do you still paint a lot?" he asked at one point.

"No, only for work." I shot him a side-long look. "And revenge."

He snorted. A tree had fallen across the path and he held his hand out to help me over. His palm was warm with callouses, and for a split second, I thought about not letting go.

I couldn't be holding his hand, though. It wasn't like that with us.

"Do you not enjoy it anymore?"

"I used to." I used to sit at my easel for hours, like the other night.

"What changed?"

The words sat right below my vocal cords. I couldn't even pretend I was too busy or didn't have the interest. I knew why I stopped.

Holden was my friend, I had decided, so I should be honest with him the

way I was with Willa.

Maybe I should trust him. It wasn't like he could do anything with the information.

"Um." I stuck my hands in the pockets of my coat. "An ex, he was a painter, he kind of made fun of my painting, and I lost interest after."

Holden frowned. "What did he say?"

I rolled my eyes. "This is stupid."

"Tell me, Sadie."

He said my name firm and harsh, and a shiver ran down my back.

"Um. Someone thought my painting was his and he got offended." I shrugged and gave Holden an *I'm fine* smile.

He frowned deeper. "Sadie. That guy was a fucking asshole. You're talented."

I rolled my eyes and waved him off. "He had a fragile ego, and he thought he was more advanced than me." Still, my chest fluttered when Holden defended me. "I guess he was, since I've only sold one painting my entire life, and that was to Katherine." I tilted my head at Holden. "Do you know what happened to that painting? I didn't see it in the inn."

He froze and his eyebrows lifted. His gaze shot to mine and he shook his head.

I shrugged. "Probably went to the thrift store."

We walked on through the quiet forest. A bird chirped on a branch above us and the sun peaked through the tree cover. A hundred feet away, a creek trickled and bubbled.

"If this place makes your problems disappear, I'll have to bring you back," Holden murmured.

I studied his handsome face. Against the dark green forest and his black parka, his eyes burned bright. No man should look this good in a parka.

Holden and I were friends, I realized. I couldn't use the excuses I was just helping him find someone or renovating the inn, because what were we doing right now, in the forest? We weren't going to find a wife for him out here amongst the squirrels.

Holden and I had become friends, and I wasn't upset about it. I liked spending time with him. After we got past the initial grumpiness, he was pretty easy to chat with, and when he got irritated with me, I loved it.

He was nice to me. He brought me coffees and made sure I got home okay from the bar.

“Is that the guy you were engaged to?” Holden asked quietly as we crossed a small bridge over the creek.

“No. Different guy.”

He made a noise of acknowledgement in his throat, and I was grateful he didn’t push the issue.

My mouth twisted and a funny pressure rose in my chest.

I *wanted* to tell him about Grant.

I didn’t the other day, when we worked on the inn late at night, but right now, walking in the forest, after he talked about painting and art? I’d changed my mind.

We were friends, after all.

“He stole a lot of money from me,” I blurted out, and my pulse went nuts. My gaze swung to the ground, a tree stump, the sky—anywhere but Holden. “The guy I was engaged to. Like, a lot. He encouraged me to start an interior design firm with him and then he stole the business loan. So. Um.” I shrugged at the ground. “No company, no money, no fiancé.”

Holden stopped walking. His eyes flashed with fury.

“That’s why you need two hundred grand?” he asked, voice low and careful but his eyes flashed.

I gave him a tiny nod.

“Fucking hell, Sadie.”

Pain and defensiveness wrenched in my chest. Ugh.

“I know, okay!” I winced. “I was so stupid to trust him with access to my accounts. I rushed into things with him. I made mistake after mistake and it’s all my fault. The detectives made sure I knew how much I fucked up. I know.” I rubbed my temples. “I’ve learned from my mistake.”

“Sadie.” His hands came to my shoulders. “Look at me.”

“No.” I closed my eyes so I didn’t have to see the judgement in his eyes. Ugh. Why did I tell him? So dumb. I always opened my big mouth.

“Sadie.” He squeezed my shoulders gently and one of his hands came to the back of my neck. His palm was warm and comforting. “Please look at me.”

Against all my judgement, I opened my eyes.

The expression on his face, so caring, concerned, and worried, melted the words right out of my mouth.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said softly, gazing down at me.

“It was my fault,” I whispered. “I trusted him when I shouldn’t have, and

now I'm paying the price."

"I'm sorry this happened to you." His throat worked. His face was close enough so I could see each individual eyelash.

His eyes had flecks of dark blue, I realized. They weren't fully gray.

"Me, too." I rolled my lips to wet them and his gaze dropped to my mouth.

My breath caught and his fingers twitched on the back of my neck. The lights in my head dimmed and my thoughts slowed down. Telling him my deep, dark secret lifted something in me.

His gaze traveled from my mouth to my eyes, then back to my mouth. His lids fell halfway and his gaze went unfocused in the sexiest way. A thrilling little *zing!* zipped down to my ladyparts.

We were totally going to kiss again.

Which was... bad, but I forgot why. I wanted to kiss Holden again. His scent was clouding my brain, all spicy and sharp and fucking delicious.

My phone rang in my back pocket.

Holden blinked and the heat in his gaze evaporated. He let me go and took a step back, raking a hand through his hair.

"Hello?" I answered. I sounded breathless.

"Sadie," a warm, familiar voice said in my ear and I blinked.

"Claire." I smiled. "Hi."

Claire Shi was one of my teachers back in my design program. I had worked with her for my final design project back in school and a couple times a year, we got coffee to catch up. She was a partner at a design firm in Toronto. I loved talking about design with her and hearing about the exciting projects and lessons learned. I considered her a mentor.

I had always wanted to work for her, but the timing was never right.

"Um, can I call you back?" I asked, watching Holden. "In an hour or so?"

"Oh, sure thing. I was calling to talk about the job offer."

I froze. "Job offer?"

Holden frowned at a nearby tree.

"I emailed you a couple days ago, did I send it to the wrong email? We have a position open and I know you're starting your own firm but I wanted to see if you knew anyone who would be good for the role."

My stomach clenched. She didn't know about Grant and I. Of course, how would she know? It wasn't like it was in the news.

I chewed my lip, frowning. "Actually, that fell through."



“Oh.” She sounded surprised. “Well, you’re my first pick if you’re interested. You know I’ve wanted you on my team for years.”

And I’d wanted to work for her for years. Claire was an incredible designer, and her projects ranged from restaurants to hotel suites to vacation homes. I had *always* wanted to work for her.

This was my dream. After all the Grant stuff, I had no clue what to do once I got back to Toronto. I figured I’d find an interior design job somewhere, but this was the best possible outcome.

I glanced at the surrounding forest and then at Holden, who was watching and listening with a frown, and my heart gave a little pull.

I liked this place. I liked working at the bar with Olivia, and wandering through the forest with Holden, and I loved renovating the inn for Katherine.

I couldn’t stay, though. Toronto was home for me, not Queen’s Cove. I had a whole life back there. Willa and all my other friends. All my favorite coffee shops, restaurants, and bars.

“I want the job,” I rushed. “I would love to work for you if you’ll have me.”

She let out a surprised, pleased laugh. “That was easy. Fabulous. You’ll have to do a formal interview with HR but now we don’t even have to do a job posting.”

“The only thing is, I’m here until March.”

“Hmm. That should be fine. Shannon, the designer you’re replacing, is going on maternity leave in April. This is a permanent position, though,” she was quick to add. “We want to grow the team.”

My chest felt funny. Fluttery at the idea of working with Claire, but tight at the reminder that I was leaving. I swallowed. “Great.”

We exchanged goodbyes and Claire promised to send over documents in a few days before we hung up. Holden’s gaze flicked to mine.

“I just got my dream job back in Toronto,” I told him.

He stared at me for a second with an unreadable expression before he nodded. “That’s great, Sadie. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I chewed my lip and bounced on my heels, not sure what else to say.

He nodded at the trail, the way we had come. “Let’s head back.”

As we walked back to the inn through the quiet forest, an image flashed into my head of this morning, curled up against Holden. Another lick of hesitation hit me in the gut.

*No way*, I told myself. This job was what I needed to keep me on the right track. If I were leaving in March, there was no way I'd get attached to anyone here in Queen's Cove.

Especially not Holden.

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THAT EVENING AFTER HOLDEN LEFT, my painting supplies stole my attention.

I took a seat at Katherine's old desk. When selecting furniture for donation, I held off on getting rid of this piece. I could picture her sitting here, gazing out at the ocean through the window. The drawers were still full of her things—pens and sticky notes and old photographs. Also, it fit nicely in her little office alcove. It didn't seem right to part with it.

The conversation Holden and I had in the forest about painting replayed in my head, and my fingers itched with restless energy. What he had said about art making him feel connected to other people.

My chest hummed with a warm, longing sensation. Outside, the sun set, splashing bright colors across the sky.

I picked up one of my smaller blank canvases and propped it up on the desk before smearing paint on my palette. The movements were so natural, like my hands knew exactly how much paint to squeeze out.

And then I began to paint.

I sunk deep into focus, enjoying the weird acrylic scent of the paints, the cool breeze from the open window, and the wavering reflection of the sky across water. I painted what I saw, and what I saw was beautiful.

I liked this version of myself, I realized. Not the woman who got accidentally drunk on cordial. She could stay far away. I'd had enough of her.

This version, the woman who painted? I was happy in this moment. A fraction of the weight on my shoulders lifted.



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## Sadie

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“WHAT IS THIS?” I sniffed the shot and cringed. “Olivia, this smells like death.”

Olivia offered me a wry smile. “It’ll make you feel better. I didn’t put alcohol in yours or Hannah’s.”

“Good. I’m never drinking again.” The four of us tipped the shots back and I made a face. “Is that pickle juice?”

Hannah peered at her empty shot glass with surprise. “That’s good. I like that.”

“It’s a pickleback,” Olivia told us as we sat in front of the fireplace. “It’ll replenish all those salts you lost from taking your top off last night.”

Hannah and Avery dissolved into giggles and I gasped in horror at Olivia. My stomach dropped through the core of the earth.

“No. Shut up.” My hands came over my mouth before I gripped her arms. “I didn’t. Right?”

Holden would have said something this morning.

Right?

I shook her. “*Olivia!*” I screamed, and Avery and Hannah fell over laughing.

She rolled her eyes, shaking with laughter. “I’m kidding, you didn’t take your top off, but you did dance on the bar top.”

My stomach tensed with mortification. I pictured myself thrusting on the bar top and groaned. “I’m never drinking again.”

Olivia snorted. “You also made Holden do a shot out of your belly button.”

“No!” I screeched over their laughter, falling over and hiding my face beneath my hands. I crumpled into a ball on the floor. “He didn’t say a word about it today.” My face was beet red.

She smirked. “He didn’t seem too unhappy about having his mouth on your stomach.”

I pictured it. His rough stubble brushing my stomach, his lips over my belly button, his eyes on me. My lungs were tight. Arousal tugged within me, right to my ladyparts. Was that why he had a boner this morning?

No. Men got boners in the morning. It wasn’t because of me or because of that belly button shot.

“So,” Avery said, eyes on the bowl of tortilla chips in front of her. “Holden was here all day today.”

I nodded. “We went for a hangover walk in the forest, and then the donation people showed up and took a bunch of furniture.”

“On a work day?” Hannah asked.

I shrugged. “I think his meeting got moved? I’m not sure.”

They exchanged a glance.

“What?” I asked. “You’re mind-reading each other.”

Avery narrowed her eyes, like she was figuring out how to say something to me. She wore a small smile. “You and Holden have been hanging out a lot lately.”

I shrugged again. “I guess.”

Olivia snorted.

“What?” I asked.

She ignored me. “He’s at the bar even more now,” Olivia told them. “And he only talks to Sadie.”

I gaped at her and she threw a chip at me. “No.” I shook my head, smiling. My stomach flopped over. “He doesn’t. He talks to you, too.”

“Yeah,” Olivia said through a mouthful of chips. “Because we’re friends.”

“Well, Holden and I are friends, too.” Sort of.

“I still can’t believe he spent the whole day here.” Avery raised her eyebrows, impressed.

I glanced around at the sitting room. This afternoon, we had marked lines on the wall where we would demo the wall leading to the secret library. Holden was so at ease, working here. He never scowled at me anymore.

“He likes home reno projects,” I told them. “I think he misses that about

his company.” I tilted my head at them. “Do you think he likes his job?”

Hannah dipped her chip in the guacamole with a humming noise. “I’m not sure. I always thought he did because he works a lot. He’s always late to family dinners, or leaving early. Sometimes he doesn’t show up at all. It’s his thing.”

“Oh my god,” I sighed, sitting up. “He’ll never find someone if he keeps acting like this.”

Avery gave me a strange look. “What?”

I froze. I danced dangerously close to spilling the details about the deal with Holden. “Nothing.” I shot them a bright smile before I stood. “Let’s do a tour. I want to show you all the changes we’re going to make.”

They stayed seated.

Hannah shot me a sweet smile. “Sadie?”

“Yes, Hannah?” I shifted, still on my feet.

“Why do you keep going to singles events with Holden?” She asked like she already knew the answer.

I pressed my lips tight into a line. “Because I don’t know anyone in town?”

Avery and Hannah narrowed their eyes at me. Olivia gave me a *bitch, please* look.

“I can’t talk about it.”

Olivia snorted. “It’s because she’s helping him find a wife.”

I gasped. “You knew?”

“I heard you two talking about it. Your voice carries, Sadie.”

“You can’t tell *anyone*,” I told her, kneeling beside her. “All of you. You can’t tell a soul.”

Avery’s eyes bugged out of her head. “Tell us everything.”

I hesitated. They already knew, so I might as well tell them the details. I explained the agreement to them while Avery and Hannah listened with rapt interest. Olivia just ate chips and listened.

When I was done, Avery and Hannah exchanged a long look.

“Sadie, you can tell me to shut up, but I have a question.” Avery chewed a chip while studying me.

“I don’t love where this is going,” I told her with a laugh. “But go on.”

“Do you have a thing for Holden?”

“No, of course not.” My face turned bright red. Thanks, face.

“Why, of course not?” Hannah asked.

“Because—” I broke off, squirming. How could I explain the mental fuckery Grant had left behind? “I don’t live here.” I shrugged. “And I’m taking a break from men. And Holden wants a lot of things I’m not interested in.”

Marriage. Commitment.

“Do you think he’s attractive?” Avery asked with a sly grin.

I snorted. “Okay, fine, yes, he’s hot. I have eyes. Of course he’s hot.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“It would never work,” I insisted.

She shrugged. “Okay. For what it’s worth, I like you two hanging out. I think it’s good for him. He never does anything for himself, you know?”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah. He’s always doing stuff around the house for Elizabeth.”

Huh. I thought about the coffee and Advil he brought me this morning.

Maybe that was Holden’s big flaw, that he spent so much time taking care of other people. Who took care of Holden, though?

Avery shifted her legs to the side and stood up. “You want to take us on that tour?”

I let them around the inn, showing them our plans for the secret library, how we were going to open up the foyer, and where we would add windows. They laughed at the gaudy wallpaper in the upstairs bedrooms and I showed them photos of the big, heavy furniture that had been there until the thrift store workers had taken it away that afternoon.

“And this is my room,” I said, leaning on the doorframe as they wandered in. “It used to be Katherine’s, that’s why it has that little office—oh.”

The Holden paintings leaned against the desk and Avery beelined straight for them.

She held up one of the paintings of Holden with elation on her face. “Thank you, Jesus.”

My stomach dropped and I rushed over. “Those are a joke.” I tried to take the canvas from her but she held on tight. “I was pissed off at him.”

“Sadie, this is incredible,” Hannah breathed, studying the one of Holden sobbing in the gym.

Olivia doubled over laughing at the painting of him driving his truck with tears rolling down his face.

“Please let me buy this as a gift for Emmett,” Avery pleaded. “Please, Sadie. He’ll lose his mind over this.”

“No one is going to want these,” I insisted, still trying to pull it out of her grasp. “They’re joke paintings.” I shook my head at her. “They’re just for fun.”

Avery stared at me with raised eyebrows. “If Emmett knows this exists, he won’t stop until he gets it.” She glanced back at the painting and burst out laughing. “Has Holden seen this?”

I rolled my eyes, grinning. “Yes. He thought it was funny.”

Hannah studied me for a moment with a thoughtful look on her face, and butterflies filled my stomach.

Olivia found the painting of him crying at the bar and hooted with laughter. “Sadie, let us buy the paintings off you and you can play whatever music you want at the bar for a week.”

I sucked in a breath. “Ooooooh. Tempting.” I always had to beg Olivia to put my playlists on. Holden had already seen the paintings and didn’t care, and they *were* funny. I shrugged at them. “Alright, fine. Consider them gifts for giving me such a warm welcome to Queen’s Cove.”

Avery clapped and beamed at me, Hannah gave me a shy smile, and Olivia smirked.

“We’re so happy you’re here,” Avery told me.

My face flushed as I grinned back at them. The circumstances that brought me to this town were unfortunate, but after the day I had with Holden, and now hanging out with these fun, friendly women, I felt comfortable here.

Hannah tilted her head at me with a little smile. “Holden thought these were funny?”

I nodded. “Now that I’m getting to know him better, he’s not as grouchy as I thought he was.” I tilted my head, thinking about him as a teenager, so sullen and quiet.

*I didn’t want you to think you weren’t beautiful.*

I remembered the flash of insecurity I saw behind his eyes on the boat a few weeks ago, when we talked about him finding someone.

“I think he’s more sensitive than people realize,” I said, picking at my nail polish.

Hannah watched me for a long moment before she nodded. “I think you’re right.”

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AFTER MY GUESTS had gone home, I puttered around the inn, tidying up, turning off lights, and checking door locks before I padded upstairs and slipped into bed.

I opened my bedside drawer and stared at the purple vibrator, my mouth twisting to the side as I weighed my options.

I hadn't come in *weeks*. As I stared at the toy, arousal flowed through my blood. Heat grew between my legs and I thought about Holden kissing me.

I hesitated. I was totally going to think about Holden while I came. I'd think about him grinding against my center with that thick, rigid length of his. His hands in my hair. The low groan as his mouth met mine.

I shouldn't be thinking about him like that.

On the other hand, if I got what I needed *now*, we wouldn't run into any of those tense situations in the future. A guy couldn't fuck my life up if we didn't do anything together. There was nothing in my no-dating rule about not thinking about Holden while I got off.

Besides, men thought about their female friends all the time while they jerked off.

The apex between my legs thrummed at the thought of Holden stroking himself while thinking about me.

He was in my head from the second I clicked the toy on. I let myself run wild, picturing him on top of me, beneath me as I rode him and he gripped my hips with a drugged, hazy look in his eyes. Pressure coiled low in my belly. I pictured his face when he came, wincing as pleasure tore through him while he watched me. My head fell back, eyes closed. I thought about how he had groaned as I tugged on his hair. A moan slipped out of me. I thought about how thick his length was and how the first stroke inside me would burn in the best way. Heat warmed me between my legs and I was a slippery mess as I imagined going down on him, taking his cock between my lips and giving him a long, slow suck as he watched in fascination. Drawing it out to torture him.

I imagined his head between my legs, hands on my thighs to keep them wide. The pressure inside me spilled over and I came, back arching, moaning and whimpering as I worked the toy between my legs, wishing it was Holden. Waves of pleasure rippled through me and I clenched around nothing.

When it subsided, I lay back, catching my breath and gathering my scrambled, sluggish thoughts. My heart pounded against the front wall of my chest.

Wow. I had emptied the tank on that one. I sighed and sunk into the pillows.

There. Now, nothing would happen between Holden and me in real life.

As I drifted off to sleep, I realized something.

The way Avery and Hannah and even Olivia talked about Holden, it was clear they didn't see the calm, relaxed guy I saw today in the forest, talking about paintings and life. On dates, he had nothing to talk about because all he did was work. He never met anyone because he was stuck in this cycle of work, gym, and bar. Rinse, repeat. He needed a shove outside his comfort zone.

I smiled to myself as the idea formed in my head. If there was one thing I was good at, it was having fun. That's how I could help him.

I was going to teach Holden how to have more fun.



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## Holden

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THE NEXT WEEKEND, I woke up with my hand on my cock, the sheets tangled around my hips, and Sadie's name in my mouth. The memory of her warm curves pressed into me weaved through my sleep-hazed head as I stroked, half-conscious.

I couldn't stop thinking about my fucking *matchmaker*. She had zero interest in dating, zero interest in living in Queen's Cove, and now she had her dream job waiting for her back in Toronto. I'd heard her telling Olivia about it at the bar the other day, all excited and giddy, showing her photos of Claire's past projects.

This place was a pitstop for her.

Her on top of the bar flashed into my head and I groaned. Fuck, she had looked so hot up there.

One last time, I told myself as I worked my length, picturing the swell of her tits as she writhed with the music. Guilt wrenched through my chest. I shouldn't be jerking off to her. Pressure coiled at the base of my spine. This was the last time I'd think about her while doing this because I didn't want to get used to it.

The last time.

I pictured her in the bed with me, and instead of my hand, it was hers. Her eyes flicking between my length and my face as I watched, helpless and in awe of her. Her thick, shiny hair would cascade over her shoulder and I'd wrap the length of it around my fist.

God, she was fucking gorgeous.

My groan moved up through my chest as I came, spilling over my hand

and tensing hard. I exhaled heavily and sunk back into bed to catch my breath.

No more thinking about Sadie naked. No more thinking about us in bed together.

Now that was done, I could focus on women who were available.

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IT TOOK me an hour to write an email that morning.

Saturdays were my most productive day. The office was empty and quiet and distractions were at a minimum. It was the perfect time to focus and get work done.

My mind wandered to Sadie and the inn, and for once, the silence in the office suffocated me.

The gnawing, empty ache in my chest expanded, and I blew a long breath out, tapping my fingers on the desk.

She was probably still in bed, dozing, or drinking her coffee downstairs. Or maybe she was painting. I thought about the painting she did of me and snorted.

Between endless meetings and emails and fires to put out at work and falling on my face trying to date, working at the inn had been solace. Now that I didn't have a major project to get involved with, tiling bathrooms, hauling bathtubs out, and taking mirrors off walls had filled the need to work with my hands and turn my brain off for a couple hours a week.

And Sadie. I liked hanging out with her. Talking with her in the forest last weekend had been so easy, like I had known her for years. I guess I had, but I hadn't *really* known her. Not like this.

Irritation pinched me in the chest. Why couldn't I find someone here in Queen's Cove who was easy to talk to? Whose eyes lit up when she listened to me talk about art or daydreamed about a treehouse bar in the woods?

I stared out the window at Main Street, thinking about her. The sky was overcast, gloomy and gray, and my office was the last place I wanted to spend the day.

The conversation I had with Emmett in this office replayed in my mind and my chest tightened with anxiety at the idea of handing half our company over to a stranger. The report I was working on could wait until Monday.

I jumped up and headed to my truck.



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## Holden

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HER HAIR WAS RUMPLED when she opened the door at the inn twenty minutes later. She took a long sip of coffee. “You get fired or something?”

My chest warmed at the sight of her. “I felt like doing some demo with you today.”

She took the brown paper bag with grease and peered inside before she grinned at me. “Keep bringing me breakfast sandwiches and you can do whatever you like with me.”

Dirty images of us together in bed flooded my mind. My eyebrows shot up and her eyes went wide.

“That sounded different out loud.”

I snorted and she gestured for me to come in.

“So, I had an idea,” she said as we taped protective plastic sheeting to the floor around the wall we were going to knock down.

“Another singles event.” My lip curled with disgust at the idea of trying to get back out there to meet people.

She grinned as she ripped off another piece of blue painter’s tape. “No. Or, not exactly. When Avery and Hannah and Olivia were here, they helped me figure out your secret.”

My gut clenched. They knew from Emmett and Wyatt I had a crush on Sadie as a teenager, but Sadie didn’t, and I didn’t want her to know. We were finally getting along after all these years, and if she found out, it might ruin things.

The muscles in my chest pulled tight at the thought of not hanging out with Sadie anymore.



“Holden, I see it, now.” She sat back on her heels. “All you do is work and go to the gym and the bar. That’s why it’s so hard for you to make conversation on these dates. You have nothing to talk about.”

The bands around my chest relaxed, one by one. Everything was fine. She didn’t know.

“From here on out, I want every Sunday of your time. The whole day.”

I stared at her. The entire day, spent with Sadie while she smiled, teased me, flipped her hair around, and asked me about my favorite paintings.

“We’ll do a bunch of activities,” she continued. “We’ll use the excuse you’re showing me the island. I’ve already made a list.”

Every Sunday spent with a woman who had no intention of getting involved. A woman who snuck into every fantasy I’d had for the last month.

She widened her eyes at me, stood up, and put her hands on her hips. “Don’t give me that look. You want a partner? You need to get used to making time for people. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

This would be torture, and yet, I couldn’t wait.

“Fine.”

She blinked. “Really?”

I jerked a nod. “Yep.”

“And you’re not even going to fight me on it?”

I fought the urge to smile. I shouldn’t be spending so much time with her, but I wanted to. The annoying little voice in my head told me to stop this while I still could but I ignored it.

“You’re right. I need to start making time for people in my life.” I cleared my throat.

She gasped in mock-shock. “You’re agreeing with me?” She raced to the window to peer at the sky. “Is the world ending?”

A grin curled onto my mouth. “It must be.”

She laughed and walked over to me, beaming with bright eyes. “This is going to be so fun, Holden. I promise.”

My chest warmed. I knew it would be.

She looped her arms around my waist and hugged me.

She pressed her warm body against mine, her head leaned on my chest, and her hands squeezed around my waist.

I melted, and every problem I ever had floated away into the sky.

“Holden,” she murmured against my chest.

I grunted, fighting the urge to drop my mouth to the top of her head.

“A hug is where you wrap your arms around someone.” She patted one of my arms.

My arms wrapped around her back and my soul evaporated into the atmosphere.

This was nice. This was so fucking nice. I could smell her shampoo, light and fruity. She fit so well under my arms, and her head on my chest was the best thing I had ever experienced.

Sadie wasn't leaving my fantasies any time, and now we'd be spending every Sunday together?

I was fucked, but I didn't care.

I wanted to keep hugging Sadie. I wanted her to keep telling me she was proud of me.

She pulled back to smile up at me. “Has anyone ever told you that you give really good hugs?”

I shook my head, studying the mesmerizing greens and flecks of brown in her eyes as my hands rested on her back.

“You should put that on your dating profile,” she said with a grin, still leaning against me.

The thought of another date made my stomach twist.

I tried not to be hyperaware of her breasts pressing into my chest. “I don't want to do the whole dating thing for the next few weeks.”

Concern washed over her features. “Why not?”

Because I just wanted to hang out with her, and the idea of dating anyone right now repulsed me.

I heard Katherine's words in my head, and the promise I made her.

I couldn't just give up.

“Let's try your Sunday adventures for a bit, and then I can try again in a month or so.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She straightened up and pulled away from me and I itched to pull her back into another hug. “Let's knock this wall down, shall we?”

We checked that it wasn't a supporting wall, confirmed there was no plumbing or electrical running through it, and cut the power to the house, just in case. I ignored the annoyed look she shot me when I plunked a hardhat on her head and handed her the mask.

“There could be mold or asbestos in the walls,” I told her. “You don't want to inhale that shit and sound like a seventy-year-old smoker.”

“I’d sound sexy,” she shot back, taking the mask.

“You don’t need any help with that,” I said without realizing it.

She shot me a curious smile but it dropped when I handed her the sledgehammer.

I widened my eyes at her. “Go on.”

She scoffed and pointed at me. “You’re the one with all the muscles. You look like a freaking hockey player, Holden. You do it.”

I hid a grin. Hockey player, huh? “You have muscles, too. Come on. It’ll be fun. You can get me back by taking me to get my tarot cards read.”

Her eyes sparkled with delight. “That would be so fun. Great idea.”

It did sound fun. With Sadie, everything was fun.

She gripped the wooden handle and the sledgehammer thunked to the floor. “It’s heavy.” She frowned.

“Yep.”

She sighed, lifted the sledgehammer, and swung it at the wall. It barely cracked the drywall.

She straightened up with a frown. “This is hard.”

“You aren’t angry enough.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I’m *plenty* angry.”

“Then show me. Think of someone who pissed you off.”

Her expression changed, and I remembered our conversation the other day, about the fucking asshole who stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from her.

“Him?” I asked in a low voice. “Are you thinking about him?”

She nodded, not meeting my eyes, and my shoulders tensed. “What was his name?”

“Grant,” she gritted out, fire in her eyes.

There it was. That’s what I wanted to see.

I pointed at the hole in the drywall. “Right there, honey. His face is right there. What are you going to do?”

She lifted the sledgehammer and swung it into the hole. More drywall crumbled. Her eyebrows knitted together with focus.

“Nice. Keep going.”

She hit it again.

“He lied to me,” she gritted out before she hit it again. She hit a plank of wood and it cracked. “I thought he was the perfect guy, and he was a fake person the whole time.” She hit the wall again.

More and more drywall fell away until I could see through the other side. My heart raced like I was the one swinging the hammer. Her face flushed and her eyes raged with fury and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"I can't believe I was going to marry that *ass!*" she spat before she hit the wall again.

"Bullet fucking *dodged.*" Crash. A big chunk of the wall fell onto the plastic sheeting. I took a step back.

She hit the wall again and again and I watched in silence as she knocked it down. Debris flew everywhere. It was noisy, dusty, and dirty, and I could see sweat soaking through the back of her t-shirt, but my heart squeezed as I watched her work.

I liked seeing her like this, strong and in control. He had taken from her but she would be okay. I hoped she knew that.

When she was done, she placed the sledgehammer on the floor with care, turned to me, and burst into tears.

"Honey." I wrapped her in a hug without hesitation, pulling her into my chest and running a hand over her hair. My heart twisted. "It's okay."

"I don't know why I'm crying." She sniffled into my shirt. "I didn't mean to."

"Cry all you like." My voice was soft and low and my heart ached for her. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," she sobbed. "I loved knocking that wall down. It was awesome. I can't wait to do more demo." Her shoulders shook and the tears soaked into my shirt.

I tucked Sadie further into my chest and inhaled her. He didn't just lie to her. He broke her fucking heart.

No wonder she didn't want any of those things ever again.

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WHILE HAULING debris to the waste bin, something inside caught my eye.

Two little paintings, one of the sunset over the water in front of the inn and a recreation of Katherine, my mom, and my aunt.

I frowned. Why were these in the garbage? They were beautiful.

I glanced at the inn. She'd be out any second. I opened the door of my truck and tucked them beneath the seat.



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## Holden

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I WAS in the middle of deadlifts at the gym when my phone buzzed.

*Where would I buy smaller pieces of wood?* Sadie texted. *Like on the trellis outside the inn.*

Sweat poured off of me while I caught my breath. *Hardware store should have it. Is it rotting?*

That trellis was old. West coast winters were mild and wet, and it needed a new coat of poly to protect it.

The typing dots appeared. *I broke a piece. Forgot my keys at the bar last month and had to climb into a window upstairs.*

My heart stopped. I saw a thousand images at once. Sadie climbing. Sadie slipping, falling, hair flying everywhere as she fell until she hit the ground with a sickening crunch.

It was Finn's fall, all over again. My heart thudded in my chest and my hands shook.

She answered on the first ring. "Hi," she chirped.

"What the fuck were you thinking, climbing the trellis?" I bit out. Blood pumped in my ears and terror suffocated me. People around the gym glanced over at my sharp tone.

The other end of the line was silent.

"Sadie," I snapped.

"Don't yell at me." Her voice was just as sharp.

"That was a fucking stupid thing to do." I dragged a hand over my face. My stomach was in knots. My shoulders were up by my ears. "That thing isn't a ladder. It's not designed to support someone climbing on it. Fuck.

What the fuck were you thinking?”

“Oh my god, relax, Holden.” She huffed a defensive laugh. “You’re so uptight about everything.”

“This is serious,” I insisted.

“I’m fine.”

She could have been hurt. She could have broken something. What if she had dropped her phone and it broke, and she couldn’t call for help? What if she had a concussion like Finn did?

What if... worse?

The idea of Sadie getting hurt made my veins freeze.

I should have checked the lattice. I hadn’t inspected it in years. Fuck.

“You could have landed on a bush,” I spat out.

She paused. “A bush,” she repeated.

I sounded like a fucking asshole, but I couldn’t stop myself. The idea of her getting hurt made me sick.

“That Japanese maple out front has been there for over ten years,” I continued, because I couldn’t seem to shut up.

“Wow,” she drawled. “Well, thanks for your help on the trellis. Don’t bother coming to the bar tonight unless you want bleach in your beer.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Sadie, wait—”

She hung up.

---

I WAS WAITING on the porch when she got home that night.

She craned her neck to look at the garden on the side of the inn. She held a pizza box. “Is the Japanese maple okay? Thank god you were here to guard it.”

She shot me a cold look and I stood up. “I’m sorry. I was a dick.”

“Yes, you were.” She wouldn’t look at me as she climbed the steps and tried to pass me.

I put my arm out to stop her. “Hey, hold on a second. Let me apologize properly.”

She sighed and raised her gaze to mine. She shrugged. “Go ahead.”

I kept my hand on her upper arm while I raked the other through my hair. My stomach twisted. “I don’t like when people get hurt. Finn’s fucking

insane, he gets into dangerous situations all the time and it freaks me out.”

I pictured her falling, falling, before the crunch, like I had been all evening, and a shudder rolled through me. The chill in her gaze melted a bit and she frowned.

“I don’t like being snapped at like that.” Her tentative gaze flicked up to mine. “I was really tired that night and I didn’t want to go all the way back to the bar.”

“You could have called me.” My tone was soft. “I would have come running.”

She snorted. “No, I think you would have been happy to get rid of me.” She smirked.

I glared at her. “Don’t say that.” I swallowed past the rocks in my throat. “I would never want you to get hurt. If you get locked out again, you call me, okay? Call me if you need anything, ever.”

She watched me for a second.

“Please say yes,” I whispered.

She nodded. “Okay.” She slanted me a look. “Actually, I do need help with something.”

“Anything.”

She lifted the pizza box with a serious expression. “I got the extra large again.”

A smile curled on my mouth and the tension eased from my shoulders. “That’s too much food for you.”

She held my gaze and raised her eyebrows. “It’s economical to get the biggest size. Help me with it?”

Ten minutes later, we had set up in the sitting room. Heat radiated from the fire in the wood stove and we had our feet up on the coffee table.

“How was the bar tonight?” I asked.

She finished chewing her bite of pizza. “Fine. Kind of quiet without you there.” She elbowed me. “Sorry.”

I shook my head. “I deserved it.”

“You did deserve it. I would have served you a beer full of foam anyway.”

I shook my head, smiling.

“What’s the deal with Finn and Olivia?” she asked before she took another bite. “I’m not allowed to ask Olivia about him.”

I sighed and settled back into the couch. “I don’t even know where to



start. You remember she lived next door growing up?”

She nodded, chewing.

“They were best friends until they were eighteen. Went to prom together and everything.”

She studied my face. “What happened?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know. No one does. One day they stopped talking and neither of them will say why. Olivia left for university in Vancouver and came home every summer to work at the bar, Finn did his firefighter training and got a job here in town, but in the summers, he’d volunteer to get dispatched around the province.”

She made a thoughtful humming noise.

“Finn’s a lot,” I told her. “He’s impulsive and he loves an adrenaline rush.” That familiar stab of guilt hit me in the stomach. I made him like that. “Even when he was a kid, he loved a thrill. My mom calls him the devil because he finds trouble wherever he goes.”

Sadie’s mouth curled up. “He’s your opposite. You’d hate an adrenaline rush.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “I had one today, when I found out you almost fell.”

Her hand came to my arm, warming my skin through my shirt. The inn was silent except for the wood cracking and popping in the wood stove, and the beat of blood in my ears.

“Finn fell when he was a kid,” I admitted to her before telling her the full story.

“Oh my god,” she breathed. “That’s awful.”

“I was fourteen, so I should have known better. He was only ten.”

She frowned, staring up at me, before she shook her head. “No, Holden. It was an accident.”

“I should have been watching him,” I repeated. “My parents trusted me to watch him and I fucked up. He could have died.”

She shook her head again. “You made a mistake. We all screw up. Even if I did fall off the trellis, it wouldn’t be your fault. It would be mine for being stupid enough to climb a rotting trellis.”

I held her gaze. “If you got hurt, I don’t know what I would do.”

Her eyelids fluttered and she bit her lip before her gaze dropped to my mouth. My pulse sped up. I shifted to face her and my gaze flicked between her eyes and her mouth.

Fuck, I wanted her so goddamn bad.

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered, eyes on me.

“What if we did?”

She bit her lip and her gaze dropped to my mouth again.

I knew we shouldn’t. Her life was in Toronto, where she had friends and a neighborhood she loved and her dream job waiting for her. We didn’t want the same things, and the responsible thing to do would be for me to stand up and leave.

I was so fucking sick of being the responsible one, though. For once, I wanted to do the dangerous thing.

I wanted Sadie.

My hand came to her jaw and tilted her face up to mine. “Why are we fighting this?”

Her eyes glazed over, unfocused and adorable. “I can’t remember,” she murmured.

A smile curled on my lips and I lowered my head. “Me neither.”

When I kissed her, she sighed with relief, like she’d been thinking about it as often as I had been. My hand came to her hair, and the other wrapped around her back, pulling her to me. Her mouth was sweet and soft, but desire flared inside me, and I tilted her head back to open her up more before I tasted her.

“Been thinking about this nonstop.” I sucked her tongue and her back arched as she moaned. Blood rushed to my cock and my head swam as I inhaled her scent. I pulled her up to straddle my lap, running my hands over her hips and ass as she kissed me.

She nipped my bottom lip and my eyes rolled back in my head.

“Love it when you do that,” I murmured, my voice low. My hand moved up to her breast and I toyed with the stiff peak through her bra. She gasped.

“Oh my god.” Her hips bucked against me.

I bit back a groan as she worked my length through my jeans. “I guess that toy’s not doing it for you, huh?”

“It’s doing it just fine,” she said against my mouth.

“Show me.”

She pulled back with an embarrassed smile on her face. “No.”

“Let me use it on you, then.”

Her mouth fell open while amusement lit up her face. “No.”

Both of my hands were now on her tits, rubbing, pinching, tugging.

Her head fell back. “I can’t think when you do that, Holden.”

The way she said my name lit my control on fire. This little dance around each other was done. Every time we kissed, we both knew it was inevitable.

“So don’t think, Sadie. What do you want? Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” she breathed. One of my hands slipped down between her legs and stroked her over her jeans. “Oh my god.”

“You want my hand?” I asked in a low voice. “My mouth?” I stroked her again, slow with firm pressure, and her back arched as she pressed herself against me. “Or my cock? I promise I can make you come with any of those.”

She snorted with disbelief, still rocking against my hand. “Every guy thinks that.”

My eyebrows pulled together. “Don’t fucking test me, honey. I’ll give you one of each option, right after the other, until you’ve come too many times to think.” I wrapped my arms around her and stood, hoisting her into the air.

Her mouth returned to mine and I groaned into her. “I love your mouth,” she whispered, wrapping her legs around my hips.

I nipped her bottom lip and her breath caught. “You don’t even know what I can do yet.”

We kissed as I carried her up the stairs. My blood rushed with anticipation. Was this happening?

At the doorway to her bedroom, she put a hand of the doorframe to stop us. “Wait.”

I paused. Pink flushed her cheeks and she was breathing hard. Her other hand came to my shoulder and her gaze locked on mine, wide and uncertain.

“If we do this, we should be careful,” she whispered, eyes on me.

I pressed her against the doorframe and lowered my mouth to the soft, smooth skin of her neck. “I have a condom.”

“No,” she breathed. “I mean, yes, that’s good, but I meant in terms of our deal.”

I stilled. “What do you mean?” I asked against the dip at the bottom of her neck.

“We want different things, in the end, and I’m going back to Toronto,” she whispered into my hair. “So we should be careful.”

I hated that she was right. I lifted my head and searched her eyes. “What do you want?”

She wet her lips. “Friends with benefits.”

I frowned at her.

“It’ll be easier this way,” she insisted. “When you find someone, we end it. No attachments, just sex.”

Just sex. It already wasn’t just sex. I craved her. I’d been thinking about her for weeks. I thought about her laughing at the bar, how excited she had been over bathroom tiles, and the way her eyes lit up when she pitched the renovations to me all those weeks ago.

The way we almost kissed in the forest. The way I thought about her constantly.

I knew she was going home, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t enjoy it while she was here.

“Fine.”

She relaxed in my arms.

I tilted my chin to the bedroom. “Can we go inside now?”

She grinned and nodded, and I dropped my mouth to hers.



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## Holden

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“FUCK, YOU’RE PRETTY,” I told her, easing her back onto the bed before I pulled her shirt off. Her bra was light pink with tiny bows. I ran my finger along the top edge of one bra cup and she shivered. “I’m going to make you come so fucking hard tonight.”

She snorted and I cocked my head at her with amusement.

“Something funny?”

She grinned wider. “You’re confident.”

Deep in my brain, something primal and possessive woke up. “Yeah. I am.” I pulled one bra cup down and set my mouth on the tight peak.

Her head fell back and my other arm wrapped around her waist to hold her up. I laved and sucked the point, moving to kneeling on the floor beside the bed. As my mouth worked, her legs widened a fraction. I let myself grin against her skin. My blood boiled with want. I had been hard since we started fooling around downstairs, and my balls ached with the need to spill into her.

My hand slid from her breast, and while I held eye contact with her, I undid her jeans. Her hands came to my shoulders while I helped her step out of them.

“Lay down,” I murmured, pressing her hips back and guiding her to the bed.

She lay back, propped up on her elbows to watch me, and I admired the matching panties.

“Do you always dress like a lingerie model underneath your clothes?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yes.”

I sucked in a breath and winced. “That’s going to be a problem.”

She laughed and I skimmed my hands up her soft thighs to her underwear. I watched her face, watched how her brows furrowed and she winced with pleasure. My fingers rested over the damp fabric between her legs.

“Oh, shit. You are so fucking wet.”

I rubbed the fabric in slow circles and she relaxed into the bed. A smile curled at my mouth.

My head dipped and I licked a line up the inside of her thigh. A high moan of surprise slipped out of her mouth and she lifted her head with wide eyes.

“What are you—”

I pressed a kiss to the damp fabric before I moved to tug it off. She jerked. Her legs closed and her expression changed. She blinked and sat up.

“What’s wrong?” My hands froze. “Too fast? We can stop.”

She swallowed and shook her head. “No, no it’s fine.” Her gaze darted all over. “You don’t need to do that.”

I frowned and sat back on my heels. “Do what?”

She shrugged again, shook her head, and waved a hand at her underwear. “What you were about to do.” Another shrug. More blinking. Her mouth pulled into what she thought was a smile but was more a grimace. “I want us both to have fun.”

My eyes narrowed and I tilted my head at her. “I don’t follow.”

A nervous laugh bubbled out of her. “Holden. Take your pants off.”

“No. What are you talking about, you want us both to have fun? Why don’t you want me to go down on you?”

The discomfort rolled off her in waves. She glanced at the door to the hallway, then the bathroom, then the window.

“Honey.” I kept my voice low and careful. “Tell me, please.” My hand brushed her thigh, slow, firm, and calming.

She sucked in a breath. “I can’t come that way.”

“Do you enjoy it?” My hand stroked her from ankle to thigh, slow and steady.

“It’s fine.”

“Fine?” My eyebrows shot up.

She squirmed. “A lot of people don’t like doing that.”

“Oral sex,” I supplied.

Her eyes fluttered with embarrassment and her throat worked again. Her fingers played with the bedspread. “And if you do it just because I want it, all I’ll be thinking about is how you don’t really want to do it—”

“Eat pussy.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “So then I won’t be able to get anywhere—”

“Have an orgasm.”

“Holden.”

Her irritation made me grin. She leaned over to her beside table before opening the drawer and pulling out her vibrator. “Use this instead. I can’t come without it.”

My eyebrows lifted at the challenge. “Let’s try.”

She shook her head. “It’ll be a waste of both of our time.”

“Because you think I won’t enjoy it.”

She nodded. “Yep.”

I gave her thighs a quick squeeze. “Do I strike you as someone who would do something I don’t want to do?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “No.”

I waited.

She chewed her lip, watching while I kneeled between her legs.

“Why don’t we try my way first, and if you can’t get there, we’ll do it your way.” I pressed a kiss to the inside of her knee as she watched, uncertain.

“You’re the boss,” I told her before I pressed another kiss to her thigh. Fuck, her skin was so soft. I could kneel at her beside for hours, doing this. “You say stop, I stop. You say slow down, I slow down.” Another kiss. Her lids drooped while she watched. “You say faster, I speed up.”

Her teeth scored her lip and her eyes grew hazier with more kisses on her thigh.

“You say *more* and *harder* and *please*, and I’ll give you everything I’ve got.”

Her throat worked again.

“You’re the boss,” I repeated and brushed my stubble back and forth on her inner thigh. Her breath hitched and her gaze followed my every move. “I’m yours to do what you want with. You want to slap me? You can.” I shot her a playful grin and she matched it.

“What?” Her chest shook with laughter.

“Go on.” I winked at her. “Slap me.” I whispered the dare.



“No.” She frowned but smiled harder.

“Do it.” My fingers wrapped around her wrist and I lifted her hand.

“Holden.” Her chest shook with laughter, her eyes shone bright, and I wanted to marry her. Tomorrow. Tomorrow evening at the very latest. The morning after if we were too busy in bed. I could wait a day.

“Come on,” I urged.

With my hand still around her wrist, she gently tapped my cheek while her eyes danced with amusement. I turned to kiss her palm, scoring the sensitive skin with my teeth.

“I want to fuck you with my tongue so bad.” My gaze pinned her. “Please, Sadie. Let me go down on you. I want to taste you and make this sweet little pussy feel good.” I lowered my mouth to her, just beside the seam of her panties, and sucked the sensitive skin.

Her head fell back with a moan.

“Okay,” she breathed.

“Yeah?” I lifted my head.

She nodded, still propped up on her elbows before she lied back on the bed. She took a deep breath and let it out slow.

“Nervous?” I ran my stubble up and down the inside of her thigh.

“I’m fine.”

“Liar.” My lips brushed the word over her underwear while I skated my hands up and slipped them under the sides, touching her smooth skin.

She let out a soft laugh and the sound went straight to my cock.

Alright, this was better. So much better. She didn’t fully trust me yet but I’d change that in a few minutes. I’d show her this was for both of us.

As slow as possible, I slid her underwear down.



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## Holden

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“LIFT YOUR HIPS, BABY.”

She obliged and I slipped them down her legs, revealing her to me. She was flushed and wet for me and it took everything I had not to rush into this. My cock ached with desire for her.

“Oh my fucking god,” I groaned.

“Hurry up.”

I skimmed up her thighs, so close, almost there but didn’t touch her where she wanted it. Not yet. My mouth fell to her inner thigh and I licked a long line up to her heat. She exhaled again and I smiled against her skin. I kissed higher and higher, closer to her center, hands moving and skimming and brushing and stroking her. Her breathing sped up and she let out a heavy breath.

“Frustrated?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m fine.” She tried to say it like I had asked how her dinner was, but her voice broke as I inched closer with my mouth to the bud of nerves. I dragged my tongue up to her belly button and smiled with the memory of the last time my mouth was on her stomach.

“Did you really do a shot out of my belly button?” she asked.

I laughed against her skin. “Yes. I was so hard I thought I was going to come in my pants.” I pressed a kiss to her stomach. Her chest rose and fell fast. “Still fine?”

“Yep.” Her voice was thin and breathy.

My teeth scraped her hip. “Just fine?”

She tried to shrug but her back arched when I sucked the skin beside her

hip bone. “Mhm. It’s good.”

My fingers strayed closer to her wetness and her breath shook. The scent of her arousal teased me and I groaned. My jeans were too tight and I took my hands off her for a split second to undo my belt. Her eyes flipped open as I stood to yank my shirt off. Her gaze flared with heat as it moved down my body.

A smug smile tugged at my mouth. I liked her looking at me like that, like she wanted me as badly as I wanted her. When her gaze fell to the front of my jeans, her tongue darted out to wet her lips.

I shook my head at her as I pulled my pants off. “Not yet. Wait your turn.”

Her gaze locked on mine with a tentative smile.

I gestured at my straining erection through my black boxer briefs. “See this? This is what the idea of tongue-fucking you does to me. So don’t tell me I don’t want to do it. Understand?”

I loomed over her, staring down into her glazed eyes.

She swallowed and nodded.

“Good.” I dropped back to my knees and sucked on the tight bud of nerves between her legs.

Her legs jerked and she let out a moan but my mouth returned to her thighs, kissing and scraping with my stubble and teeth and running my tongue over her smooth skin at an agonizing pace.

“Can you go back to where you were a second ago?” she breathed.

“I will.” I grinned into her skin, teasing her with my mouth.

Fuck, I loved this.

I meandered my mouth closer to her center, dragged my tongue from her soaked opening up to her clit, before I started back at her knee. She let out a growl and my chest shook with laughter. I did it again, wandering closer before I sucked on her clit for two seconds this time. She moaned like I was torturing her and my balls hurt with need. Her hands fisted the duvet. Her back arched. When I repeated my devious routine and ended it with several tongue swirls on her sensitive spot, she gasped.

“Holden!”

“Mmm?”

“Stop teasing me.”

“I thought you didn’t like this, though.” I set my mouth on her clit and sucked.

Her thighs closed around my head and I nearly came. Pressure built around my spine. Her legs around my neck was fucking heaven.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” she gasped when I took my mouth away.

“You bet your gorgeous, slappable ass I am.”

She lifted her head and her eyes were full of fire. She wanted me. She wanted me so bad, and she wanted to come.

I wanted to make her come more than anything in the world.

“You want this?” I asked, hovering over her clit so she could feel my words as I breathed them.

She nodded, wincing.

“Make me.”

“What?” Her head rose.

“You heard me. I said, make me.”

Her throat worked and worry pinched her eyebrows. Her chest heaved. “How?”

“You’ll think of something.”

As soft and slow as I could, I dragged my tongue around her clit, never touching it. She whimpered and bucked against my mouth, pushing herself onto my mouth. I groaned with appreciation.

“Come on...” I murmured.

“You said I was the boss.”

“So be the boss.”

She sat up, reached for my hair, and pulled my head between her legs.

I let myself go and sucked her clit hard. Her legs slammed closed around my head and I groaned into her.

“Fuck, yes,” I rasped into her, working my tongue hard against her wetness. “You taste fucking incredible, Sadie. So fucking sweet. I’ve had one taste and I’m already addicted.”

“Shut up,” she gasped, grinding on my mouth.

I laughed and brushed a finger over her opening, slipping it inside. Oh shit, she was soaked. My cock jumped as she clamped down on my finger. My other hand came to her tits, massaging and pinching and rolling and tugging. Sadie writhed on my bed under my tongue and it was the best moment of my life.

My tongue slicked fast circles and I crooked my finger inside her, against her warmth. Her hips bucked against my face and my eyes rolled back as I devoured her. I groaned into her, massaging the spot inside her, and her moan

pitched into a cry.

“Thought you said you didn’t like this,” I rasped.

“Thought you said you’d tongue-fuck me,” she shot back.

I’d laugh at that later, when there was time to think, when my head didn’t swim with thoughts of her. I slipped my finger out and replaced it with my tongue. Her hips lifted off the bed and she gasped.

“Yes. Oh my god. Yes.” Her hands came back to my hair, tugging and pressing my mouth further into her. Her hips jerked and I locked an arm across her waist to hold her down, pistoning my tongue in and out of her like she demanded.

Fuck, I love that she demanded it.

Her legs shook against my neck. I pulled my tongue out, slid two fingers into her this time, and found that spot.

“Holden.” Her back straightened and her hips pushed up against my arm. “Yes, Holden. Right there. Fuck.”

“I love doing this for you, Sadie.” I pulled her clit between my lips, dancing my tongue across it fast, swirling circles and dragging pressure and friction across the nerves. “Say my name again. Tell me who’s making you feel good.”

She let out a whimpery moan and her wet muscles flexed around me. She was so close.

“Come on my mouth, Sadie. Get my face all wet and show me what a good job I’m doing.”

I slid my other hand under her ass so I could grip it. I sucked hard on her clit, working her G-spot, and her torso twisted as her eyes clenched tight. Around my fingers, her muscles clamped down, fluttering and flexing as she shook under my mouth. Liquid flooded her pussy and I lapped it up while she gasped and moaned and pulled my hair tight.

She collapsed back onto the bed, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling and heaving air into her lungs. I pressed a lingering kiss to her thigh, not hiding the smug grin on my face. I straightened up and gestured at my erection, straining and aching for her.

“Don’t ever tell me I don’t like doing that.” I wiped my arm across my mouth. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced.”

She watched me with glazed eyes, still catching her breath. Her throat worked as she swallowed, and she nodded.

I lowered myself onto the bed beside her, wrapping my arm around her

and pulling her into my chest. I pressed a kiss to her temple. “How’re you doing?”

“Good,” she breathed. She reached for my cock and palmed it over my boxers.

My mouth fell open. “Oh, shit.”

She stroked it hard and I bucked. “Wait.”

“No.” She pinched her bottom lip between her teeth. “My turn.”

Panic streaked through me, up my neck and then back down my spine. I didn’t know Sadie’s history with sex but thirty minutes ago, she had this fucked up idea that going down on her was a bad idea. I didn’t want her to think I only did it so I could get off. I wanted her to know it was for her.

She stroked hard and I jerked into her hand.

“I won’t last long,” I gritted, reaching for her wrists, but she slipped a hand into my boxers and wrapped her hand around the base of my cock. “Fuck.”

“Mhmm.” A knowing smile pulled at her mouth and her eyes flickered with power.

My cock grew even harder.

Fuck.

I liked that look in her eyes. A lot.

“Take these off, now.”

I nodded, powerless. “Okay.” I slipped my boxers off and my eyes rolled back as her hand worked me. I threaded my fingers into her hair, and the pressure around my spine squeezed as tight as her hand. My chest heaved for air. Her other hand came to my sac and she tugged. A high moan clawed up my throat and heat shot up my spine.

“Did you like going down on me?” she whispered, watching my face.

I nodded, pulling her closer to me. She rested her head on my arm and her hair spilled over my skin, tickling and taunting me. My other hand came to her breast and her breath caught as I pinched.

My thoughts were everywhere, and at the same time, hyper-focused on her, where she touched me, where she pressed against me, her mossy green eyes and how they watched me with fascination, studying my face before she glanced down to my cock.

“Holden Rhodes, you have a gorgeous cock.” Her soft words made me whimper. I think I might have nodded. Anything to keep her talking and touching me.

She stroked me hard once, twice, three times more and I fell off the edge, groaning her name and gasping for air as I spilled all over her hand.

“Fuck. Fuck, yes, Sadie. That’s so good.” I buried my face in her neck as I thrust into her hand. My head spun as I came harder than ever, pulling her so tight to me.

I blinked back to earth, dragging air into my lungs with my mouth against her neck, pinning her down with my body weight.

“I’m going to move in a sec,” I murmured.

“It’s okay.” Her voice was soft. “I like it.”

My heart squeezed. Sadie was underneath me, and she had come all over my mouth in a fucking glorious display before stroking my soul out of my cock.

I heaved in one last breath before I sat up. She watched, and the unfocused desire had faded from her eyes, replaced by something guarded and careful.

“I’m going to grab a towel.” I dropped a quick kiss to her mouth and she blinked in surprise.

After I had returned from the bathroom and cleaned us up, I climbed into her bed, ignoring her confused frown while I pulled her to my chest. I closed my eyes and inhaled her. Fuck, this felt so good. She was so soft and she smelled amazing. I’d never been this relaxed.

“Um, excuse me.” She poked me and I fought a grin.

“Go to sleep, honey.”

“You’re not sleeping here.”

“I can’t walk after what you just did,” I murmured, tucking her into my chest. My chin came to the top of her head.

She inhaled me and sighed into my chest before she sat up. Her eyelids drooped with sleepiness but she wore a little smile. A *well-fucked* smile, I noticed with a pulse of pride in my chest.

“No sleepovers,” she said with raised eyebrows. “Your future wife won’t like it.”

Hesitation twisted in my chest. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. We shouldn’t.” She gave me a teasing look. “I don’t need your boner poking me in the morning.”

A laugh burst out of my chest. “Jesus. Okay, okay.” I leaned over and dropped another kiss on her mouth. I meant to be quick but I lingered, nipping her bottom lip. She sighed and kissed me back before she pulled



away with a grin.

“Go.”

I didn't want to leave, but I knew staying was too much for her. I slid out of bed and pulled my shirt over my head. Her gaze lingered on my body, heat flickering in her eyes and a slow grin curling on her mouth.

“Enjoying the view?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose as I did up my fly. “Not really, you're going the wrong way.”

I grinned at her and leaned over, bracing my hands on the head board as I gazed down at her. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” she whispered, sinking back into the pillows.

“I'll lock up.”

She gazed up at me with a nod and my heart flipped over. I dropped one last kiss onto her mouth.

Five minutes later, as I drove home, my mind flashed with image after image of her naked, coming on my mouth and fingers. I could still feel her skin under my hands, hear her gasps of pleasure as I wound her tighter.

I didn't even care that she kicked me out. I'd take what I could get from Sadie Waters.



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## Sadie

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I WOKE up the next morning to my phone buzzing on the bedside table.

“Good morning,” I answered in a raspy voice, squinting in the morning light.

“Oh, no.” Willa sighed. “I forgot about the time difference. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.” I sat up against the pillows, yawning. “I forgot to set an alarm.”

Last night replayed in my head.

Holy crap. Holden and I didn’t even have sex and it was still the best I’d ever had. I didn’t have to fake it. I didn’t even *remember* to fake it. One second I was teasing him about being overconfident and reaching for my vibrator. The next minute, he was devouring me and making me come harder than I ever had.

With his tongue. Imagine that.

A tiny part of me wished I let him stay, but letting him sleep over was dangerous territory.

“How’s life in the middle of nowhere?” she asked.

Images from last night flooded my head and I grinned. “It’s actually pretty great.”

She did a fake gasp. “What? Did that Holden guy move away?”

I laughed. “No, he’s never leaving this place.” I shrugged, gazing out the window at the overcast skies. I’d go for another forest walk today, by myself this time. “The people are pretty cool here. I’m making friends.”

“Aw. I’m glad.”

“That Holden guy and I have become friends.”

Silence stretched on the other end. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

I laughed. “We’ve been hanging out a lot while working on the inn.” For some reason, I held back from telling her about the deal Holden and I struck, about finding him a wife. “He’s not so bad.”

An image of him pulling his shirt over his head appeared in my head. Muscles rippling and eyes on me. I bit my lip. Not bad at all.

“You hooked up.”

My mouth fell open. “How can you tell?”

Willa let out a loud laugh. My heart panged and I missed her.

She let out a long sigh. “It was the way you said *he’s not so bad*, like you were picturing him naked.”

My chest shook with laughter. Busted. “Okay. We hooked up.”

“I *knew* he had a thing for you.”

My stomach rolled with pleasure and warmth and I smiled. “It’s not like that. We’ve decided to be friends with benefits.” I shrugged. “You know, because I don’t live here.”

And he wanted a wife, my brain reminded me.

Friends with benefits had been a stroke of genius on my part. All the fun without any of the terrifying commitment stuff? Genius, baby. Genius.

It wasn’t dating, because we weren’t letting feelings get involved. It was just sex with an expiration date.

“Good for you. Might as well make your time there worth it.”

Besides, from the way Holden wielded his tongue like he did last night, it would be a *waste* to not sleep with him. Men like him were a rarity.

“It’s already worth it,” I told her, smiling. “I love renovating the inn. I should have done it years ago with Katherine. It feels like...” I trailed off.

I glanced around my bedroom at the overwhelming wallpaper. Once we finished the bathrooms, I’d remove it. My heart twisted at the idea of stripping it, though. The ugly little flowers were growing on me, like when a pet is super old and half bald but you still can’t help but love it.

“What?” Willa asked, her voice soft.

I thought about how excited Katherine would be to see the changes in the inn, and my heart squeezed, warm and happy.

“It feels like my purpose.” I wrinkled my nose at how serious my words sounded. “Like this is what I’m meant to be doing. Like it means something.”

“Awww. You don’t know how happy that makes me, to hear that.”

I wore a little smile on my face, playing with the hem of the duvet. “Yeah. Me, too.” Claire’s call from the other day popped into my head and I gasped. “Oh my god, I totally forgot to tell you. Claire Shi offered me a job in Toronto.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious.” I beamed. “She sent over the paperwork the other day. I start March fifteenth.”

“Babe. That’s incredible. Congratulations.” Her voice wobbled.

I snorted. “Don’t you dare cry.”

She huffed a laugh. “I’ve been worried about you, because of this whole Grant thing. He did a number on you and I know you were uncertain about what to do in terms of work.”

My mouth twisted to the side. “I know, but I’m okay. Really. And this job with Claire is going to be incredible. The office is near our secret bar.”

“Happy hour every day.” I could hear the grin on her side.

“You know it.” My chest fluttered with excitement. The other day, I had scoped out the firm’s social media, studying the photos of a recent renovation for a new restaurant. The design was fascinating, with colors and placement I wouldn’t have thought to choose, but it looked incredible.

“When are you moving back?”

My stomach clenched and I frowned at the weird sensation. “Probably March first. I’ll have to sublet a place for the first month until I find something.”

On the other end, Willa hesitated.

“What?” I asked.

“You know how Bryan and Stuart bought a place, right?”

“Sure.” They had bought into a pre-sale condo a couple years ago while it was under construction. Their apartment was close to my old place.

“They’re moving in February.”

Their apartment was huge and they had been there for a decade. Top floor of a heritage building with high ceilings, bay windows overlooking the street, and a huge patio where we spent many summer evenings. The wall of their living room was original brick. “I’m going to miss their apartment.”

“Well,” she started with a funny, excited tone to her voice. She took a deep breath. “What do you think about us moving in there?”

My eyes went wide. “Oh my god. Yes. A thousand times yes.”

When the guys hosted brunch last summer, the morning light in their

apartment had been *sublime*. It was quiet, it was spacious, and there were two bathrooms.

Two. Bathrooms.

Plus, living with Willa again. Cooking dinner together with music on or a dumb TV show playing in the background. Hosting our own parties with all our friends. My heart burst with excitement.

Willa let out a squeal and I could hear her clapping. “Here’s the best part. The landlord said they could sublet it to us so we can pay the same rent.”

“Are you serious?”

On top of the apartment being a total dream, the guys paid criminally low rent.

“Dead serious,” Willa answered. “This will be amazing. My place is so freaking expensive.”

My nose wrinkled. Willa lived in one of those fancy new high rises where the units were tiny. She had a studio and was always tripping over her own painting supplies. “Yeah, your place is too small for you. You’ll have more room for painting now.”

“Plus, with the extra money I’m saving for rent, I can cut back on teaching and focus more on painting.” She hummed. “Nothing is as good as painting, you know? I really want to give it everything and make a go of it, but it takes a lot of time. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather live with.”

I beamed out the window beside my bed. We’d been wanting to live together for years but like the job with Claire, the timing never worked out.

When I got engaged to Grant, the possibility of living with her again evaporated. But now? Everything was falling into place.

Images of Holden smiling at me last night as he kissed me goodbye appeared in my mind and warmth tugged under my ribcage.

“It’s like fate,” Willa continued.

I thought about Holden again and something sweet and cloying curled in my chest. Landing in Queen’s Cove for six months was what I needed to shake my life up and get me on the right course. Like a reset, but for my whole existence. Back in Toronto, I’d been stuck in a loop, choosing the wrong guys.

Like I told Willa, renovating the inn with Holden felt like my purpose, and walking in the forest with him, talking about art and life and admiring all the trees, breathing in that clean air, it was good for my soul.

And the stuff Holden and I did last night? Well, that was me enjoying

what Queen's Cove had to offer. A grin pulled at my mouth. God, he was good at that tongue thing.

I listened while Willa filled me in on everything else happening in Toronto, nostalgia peaking in my chest as she talked. I missed my life there, and now with my dream job and dream apartment lined up when I returned, I was finally on the right track.





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## Sadie

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“YOU’RE MISS CHEERFUL TODAY.” Olivia shot me a side-long look at the bar that night.

My face heated but I shrugged. “What are you talking about?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You know what I’m talking about.” She leaned in with an intense stare before glancing at the painting I had done of Holden crying in this bar, hanging on display on the wall for everyone to admire.

Shit. She knew.

I kept my gaze on her. It felt like I was back in the interrogation rooms with the detectives, when they wanted to ensure I didn’t know Grant’s whereabouts.

“I don’t know anything,” I whispered, eyes wide. My pulse skittered and stumbled.

She narrowed her eyes at me before she shrugged. “Okay.”

I breathed out a slow breath.

All day, I’d been replaying Holden’s quiet, strained groan as he came last night. I closed my eyes and leaned on the bar.

My underwear was wet again. I pressed my mouth together.

*Stop thinking about it.*

“Hey,” Olivia called and I turned to see Holden slipping into his usual seat, eyes on me.

My ladyparts fluttered with arousal as my gaze traced the lines of his arms. He had such nice arms.

“Hi.” I smiled at him.

“How was your day?” he asked, giving me the same affectionate but

heated look he gave me last night as he kissed his way down my body.

“Good. I donated the rest of Katherine’s stuff and then did some more painting.”

During my spare time, I’d been sorting through Katherine’s things, including her clothes and some of the furniture I didn’t think we would find a place for in the revised design.

“I can bring it to the thrift store in my truck.”

I shook my head, still smiling. “They picked it up today. How was your day?”

“Better now.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

We stared at each other for a moment. “You should smile more,” I told him.

His eyebrows rose with amusement. “Yeah?”

I nodded, biting back my grin.

“Hi,” Olivia said loudly at my side and I jumped. “Sadie, can you help me with a beer keg in the store room?”

I shot a wink at Holden as I followed her into the back. We stepped into the store room and she whirled around with wide eyes.

“You guys banged.”

I gasped. “What? Who told you?”

She stared at me like I was insane. “The two of you showed me *with your eyes*.” She poked two fingers in the direction of her eyes. “*Hi. Hi. How are you? Good. How are you?* You two are acting weird. You had sex.”

I held my breath before letting it out. “Okay, we did. Not like, full sex, but other stuff.” I winced. “You can’t tell anyone, though.”

She wrinkled her nose. “He was that bad?”

I laughed. “No.”

She threw her hands up. “I don’t want to know. I grew up with that guy. So are you two dating now?”

“No,” I blurted out. “Definitely not dating. He wants a wife.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“It’s fine. We’re friends with benefits.”

She stared at me a moment before she closed her eyes. “Oh god.”

“It’s going to be fine.”

“Mhm.” She smiled and opened her eyes.

“Do you think this is a bad idea?”

Her amused expression dropped and she studied me for a moment before shaking her head. “No, I think it’s good. You two are good for each other.”

I thought back to my conversation with Willa today, and the apartment we would share back in Toronto. My throat squeezed.

“It’s temporary,” I told her with a shrug. “I’m not dating.”

She rolled her eyes but continued grinning. “Whatever. Help me with this keg.”

When we had returned to the bar, I poured Holden a beer, put his dinner order in, and made sure all the other tables had everything they needed before I returned to the bar. Holden and I were discussing where to buy new bedroom furniture when Don walked into the bar.

“Hi, Don.” I gave him a cheery wave. He volunteered at the thrift store and I had chatted with him for a few minutes this morning. “Do you want a drink? Sit anywhere you like.”

He clutched the plastic bag to his chest and shifted with a serious expression. “Hi, Sadie, I’m not staying long. I’m returning one of your items you tried to donate today.”

“Oh. Sure.” I shot him a questioning frown.

His eyes were wide. “Now, I hope you don’t think I’m shaming you.”

I narrowed my eyes. Huh?

He pulled the enormous alien dildo out of the bag and Holden choked on his beer. My heart stopped and my stomach plummeted.

“We can’t sell items of a personal nature like this,” Don said with an apologetic expression. “Although someone on Facebook Marketplace might be interested.”

My face turned beet red. Fuck, the bag had been out by the garbage bins, and it must have gotten mixed up in the donations. “I didn’t mean to donate that.” I grabbed the dildo and the bag from Don before other people spotted it.

“Um.” Olivia stopped behind Don and Holden, wide eyes on the dildo as I stuffed it into the bag. “What the fuck was that?”

“It was nothing,” I told her. “You saw nothing. It isn’t mine.”

Don shook his head. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone has needs.”

Holden’s fist covered his mouth as his chest shook.

“Don, I’m really sorry about this.” I clutched the bag to my chest. “Please

don't tell anyone."

Don shrugged. "Everyone at the store already saw."

My face burned harder as I stowed the bag in the back. When I returned, Don had left. Holden and Olivia burst out laughing.

"Really?" Olivia said. "That big?"

I groaned and shot Holden a look. "Tell her."

He took a sip of his beer and shook his head, grinning. "I'm not involved in this."

Him and Olivia burst into laughter again.

"I didn't mean to donate it," I said, wincing as I leaned on the bar. "Do you think everyone knows?"

They exchanged a glance. "Yes," they said in unison.

I put my forehead on the counter top with a groan.

Later, when the bar hit a lull, I took a break on the stool beside Holden.

"I have a question for you." I had been thinking about it all day.

He took a sip of beer, waiting.

"Why do you want to get married so bad?"

He thought about it. "It looks nice."

My brow wrinkled. "Define nice."

"Taking care of someone, having someone to take care of you. Sharing a life with someone. Building something together. Loving someone. Raising kids." He shot me a glance. "Waking up with someone every day."

My heart skipped a beat. *Friends with benefits*, I chanted in my head. He knew the deal. He knew that wouldn't be me.

I tried to picture this euphoric experience Holden described but all I could see was Grant holding out a ring. My stomach churned. I could admit now I didn't even like the ring he bought me. It wasn't me at all.

I sipped my soda water. "It's a huge commitment. It's like getting a dog."

His mouth turned up. "I'd get a dog."

I rolled my eyes but grinned. "I can just see it. The dog would sit in the passenger seat and go with you everywhere."

"Sounds nice." He glanced at me. "Like marriage."

I stared at the TV above the bar. "A dog doesn't sound so bad."

"Katherine wished she got married," he murmured, eyes on the hockey highlights. "She never found the love of her life. She told me she wished she had put more effort in. She thought the right person would show up when it was time."

I considered his words. She had never mentioned this to me.

“I promised her I’d try,” he added.

What if I was like Katherine? What if I never met the right person? I frowned.

Olivia rounded the corner from the back hallway, holding my coat. “It’s dry now. I’ll hang it in the back room.”

“Thank you,” I called after her.

Holden shot me a questioning glance.

“I went for a forest walk today but it started raining,” I explained. “Things take forever to air dry out here and I don’t want it to stink so I asked Olivia if I could put it in the dryer on low for a bit.”

The walk had been serene. Just me, the trees, and a few squirrels. Right before the rain started, fog had drifted through the trees, and I had snapped a quick picture to remember the moment.

He frowned. “You need a better coat.”

I shrugged. “I like my coat. It’s warm.”

“It’s not waterproof, though. You need something for the rain.” He glanced down at my sneakers. “And you need better shoes.”

By the time I arrived back to the inn after my walk, my shoes had been soggy and muddy. He had a point.

“You think you’ll ever change your mind?” Holden asked, eyes still on the TV.

“Hmm?”

“About getting married.”

“No.” The answer flew out of my mouth.

He cleared his throat. “You sound certain.”

“I am.” I shook my head. “I pick wrong all the time and it’s just a piece of paper.”

“It’s not just a piece of paper.” He frowned deeper. “It’s a commitment. It’s someone loving you enough to choose you forever, over everyone else.”

“It’s an anchor,” I bit back. “It gives another person control over your life. I almost married a guy who I didn’t even know, Holden. I didn’t even know his real name.” I let out a sharp laugh. “I guess our marriage wouldn’t have been real if he wasn’t using his real name.” I sighed and rubbed my temples. “I see what you’re saying, and it’s one of those ‘good for you but not for me’ things.”

We studied each other.

“Okay,” he said, expression unreadable.

“Okay.” I shrugged.

I wanted to get up and leave, because it was uncomfortable now, but I didn’t want to leave it like that with him.

“I always pick people who let me down,” I admitted.

He studied my face with a crease between his eyebrows, like he wanted to say something. My stomach flipped.

“So,” I said in a more casual tone. “I bet you have your wedding all planned out.”

He snorted with a grin and his gaze returned to the bar.

“That’s a yes,” I teased. “Have you already booked your venue?”

His grin widened and he shot me a glance. “Hotels are too impersonal.”

I hummed, watching him. So he had planned it. Marriage nauseated me, so why did I find this so freaking adorable?

“Gray, black, or navy suit?” I asked.

His eyes stayed on the hockey game. “Navy.”

I tapped my finger on my lip, studying him. He would look so hot in a navy suit. “Huge party or small and intimate?”

“Huge party.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? You hate parties.”

His expression softened and he glanced at me with a small shrug. “I want everyone I know to be there.” The sides of his mouth turned up.

Adorable. So freaking adorable.

Something on the wall by the TV caught my eye and a noise strangled out of my throat as I pointed at it. “How did that get up there?”

She had mounted the dildo on the wall beside the TV, hanging for everyone to see.

Holden took a sip of beer. “Olivia put it up there when you went to the washroom.”

Olivia returned to the bar with a tray of empties and a big grin. “Leave the alien dong up there or you’re fired.”

“If you fire me,” I told her, “I’m taking my dildo with me.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “So it *is* yours.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hate this place.”

“No, you don’t.” She narrowed her eyes at me as she loaded glasses into the dishwasher.

I sighed and smiled at Holden. “No, I don’t.”

When I returned to Toronto, I'd miss this place.





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## Sadie

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BEFORE HOLDEN ARRIVED SATURDAY MORNING, I headed out on another walk through the forest with a shovel under one arm and the giant alien dick under the other.

I was getting rid of this thing *today*. It had to be cursed, the way it kept returning to me. Both of those times were my fault, I'd admit, but with my luck, the garbage collector would probably fish it out and leave it at my door if I tossed it in the bin again.

A couple hundred meters along the trail, I found a good spot to bury it. My shovel hit the dirt and I began to dig. Sweat rolled down my forehead as I worked, and I stopped to yank my sweat over my head. Once I had dug a small hole, I threw the dildo in, gave it both middle fingers, and packed dirt over top.

"There," I huffed, wiping my hands off on my jeans.

"Hi," Holden said behind me and I jumped.

"Jesus." My hand came to my chest. "What are you doing out here?"

He raised his eyebrows with a bemused look. "I had the same question."

I shrugged. "Just getting a little exercise in."

He stared at me. If anyone could look hot in a black rain parka, it was Holden. The dark color made his eyes stand out even more. And those lashes. So unfair. His hair was damp, like he just got out of the shower.

He studied the ground I had just filled in.

"I was burying the dildo," I explained.

He rolled his eyes with a grin.

"It's cursed, Holden. I need to get rid of it. And this way, someone will

find it in a hundred years and think aliens made a stop in Queen's Cove."

"Okay." His eyes were warm as he watched me. "Got you a coffee. It's back at the inn."

I brightened up. "Thank you." We walked through the forest back to the inn. Although it wasn't raining, the air was damp, intensifying all the fresh forest scents. The ground was soft under our feet and a squirrel chased another up a tree. The fir trees stretched high into the sky, strong and solid.

Kind of like Holden.

"It's nice here," I said as we walked. "The forest is so peaceful."

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he looked at me. "Mhm."

"You live near a forest, right?"

He nodded. "I had a part of the forest cleared and built a house in the middle."

Something occurred to me. "How come I've never seen your place?"

"It's in the middle of the woods. It's a long drive."

I studied him as we walked. Maybe he was worried I'd come over and never leave. Or maybe he had something in his house he didn't want me to see.

"I know your secret," I told him with raised eyebrows.

He stilled and his wary gaze shot to mine. "You do?"

I nodded. "Mhm. You've got a weird doll collection."

He relaxed. "That's it. You got me."

"Do you brush their hair every night?"

He nodded with a mock serious, stoic expression. "They all sleep in my bed with me."

I laughed, cringing. "Ew. That's weird."

We stepped out of the forest and walked across the lawn to the inn.

"What do you want to do at the inn today? We could knock down another wall." I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

His eyes were warm. When he looked at me like that, affectionate and sweet, a thrum hit me in my chest.

"Sure. You can use your big dildo energy."

I tilted my head with a scowl and his eyes glittered as he tried not to laugh. "We're not calling it that."

"What, big dildo energy?"

"Ew. Holden. Stop repeating that or I'll tell everyone you snuggle Cabbage Patch dolls and you'll never find a wife." I opened the door and held

it for him. “Now, where’s that coffee you so graciously brought me?”

“Here.” We dried our boots off before I followed him to the kitchen. A big paper bag sat on the counter and he nudged it toward me. “Got you something.”

I shot him a curious look. “You did?”

“Mhm. Open it.” His expression warmed.

I smiled and peeked in the bag before pulling out a yellow raincoat. It was bright, cheerful, and ridiculous. It was like out of a kids’ book except it looked like it fit me.

“You can’t wear that puffy coat all winter here,” he said, leaning on the counter. “You need a good raincoat.”

“Holden,” I murmured. I didn’t know what to say.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I can return it if you don’t like it.”

“No.” I smiled at him. “I love it. I’m just surprised.”

“Try it on.”

He watched me with his arms folded across his chest as I undid the zipper and pulled it on. It came to just above my knees and fit perfect across the shoulders. He stepped forward and pulled the hood up. I studied his face as he did the snaps up under my chin.

This guy. There was a balloon inside my chest, about to pop. I swallowed.

He reached back into the bag and pulled a shoebox out, flipped it open, and put a brown Blundstone boot on the floor.

“You got me boots?” I repeated.

“You can’t wear sneakers in the rain, your feet will get all wet.” He crouched down and his hand brushed the back of my calf so I could step into them. I set my hands on his shoulders as he helped me into the boots. My throat squeezed at the strange intimacy of this moment.

“How did you know what size?”

“I looked inside your sneaker.” He straightened up. “They feel okay?”

I nodded, staring at him in confusion. “You bought this stuff for me?”

He pulled the string on the hood with a little smile on his face. “Yep.”

“Like, you went to a store in town?”

His brow wrinkled. “Mhm.”

My heart squeezed up into my throat. Faster than I could react, tears stung my eyes and spilled over. Holden’s face fell. He stooped and his hands came to my shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” His eyes searched mine and concern creased his brow.

I wrapped my arms around him and rested my head on his chest. “Thank you.”

I listened to a low hum of approval in his chest. His hand brushed across my back in slow circles. He pulled my hood down and dropped a quick kiss onto the top of my head and my heart flip-flopped. I inhaled his intoxicating smell before I made myself pull back.

Holding him like this was pushing the friends-with-benefits boundary, no matter how good it felt.

“Ready to knock down a wall?” His voice was low and he watched me with an unreadable expression.

I skated my hands over my new raincoat and a grin twisted onto my mouth. “I want to try out my new stuff. Do you think we could take the day off? We can do the demo tomorrow if you’re worried about the schedule.”

He shook his head and warmth filled his eyes. “The schedule is fine. Let’s test out your new boots.”



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## Sadie

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AT THE EDGE of the inn's property, Holden's gaze lingered on some of the trees in the forest.

He frowned. "I should have an arborist out. Storm season is coming up and we get a lot of downed trees during the winter. They cause a lot of problems." He turned back to me. "I'll call on Monday."

"You want me to call?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I got it."

We walked into town with our coffees, saying hello to people we recognized. Holden listened to me chat away about the reality dating show I watched with the girls on Monday nights. Div, Hannah's friend from the bar, and Max, who managed Avery's restaurant, joined us sometimes so I was getting to know them.

"Can we go in here?" I pointed at the art gallery. "I want to see if the gift shop has any coffee table books on art. I think they'd be nice to have in the sitting room, for people to flip through."

He nodded. "Sure."

"I usually go to thrift stores for coffee table books but—" I winced, "—I can't show my face in there."

Holden grinned before his expression turned serious. "Nothing to be ashamed about," he said, imitating Don.

I laughed. "Ugh. Stop."

We stepped inside and I moved toward the gift shop but Holden's hand wrapped around my arm and gently tugged.

"Let's wander through," he said, tilting his head to the gallery.

I shrugged. "Okay."

He slipped a twenty into the donation box and waved me off when I tried to pay him back. We strolled through, stopping to study each painting before moving on to the next.

"Which is your favorite?" I asked.

He turned and pointed. "That one."

"Wow." I blinked and my eyebrows rose sky high. "That's pretty sexy for a small town gallery."

It was a painting of a man and woman, naked and embracing, staring at each other. The colors were rich and dark.

His mouth curled. "Not everyone is a perv like you." He shrugged. "It's honest."

The intimacy of the painting made my heart twist. I stepped forward to read the card. The painting was from the nineteen-fifties by a local artist. She had passed away a decade prior.

Maybe this was her truth, but no one had ever looked at me like that. Intimacy meant honesty, and even if I loved Grant, it wasn't real, because it wasn't true.

I didn't even know if I loved him. I think I loved the idea of having a fiancé more than I loved *him*. My stomach rolled. I didn't even love him and I was *still* so easily misled.

Holden stepped close behind me, barely touching me. He leaned down close to my ear, keeping his voice low. "It's part of a pair, but the gallery won't sell it to the other owner, and the owner won't give his up."

"Maybe they're doomed to be apart forever."

"Or they're both waiting for the other to cave."

I frowned and narrowed my eyes up at him and he wiggled his eyebrows back.

"Which is your favorite?"

"Hmmm." My gaze roamed the gallery. I found Emily Carr's self-portrait. "That one."

His mouth hitched. "That's Hannah's favorite, too."

"Oh, yeah? I didn't know she liked to come here."

He nodded. "Sometimes. She's been tired lately with being pregnant."

"Yes, she mentioned that last week."

He nodded at the painting. "Why is this your favorite?"

I studied it as Emily Carr stared back at us with a haughty, *don't fuck with*

me expression. “Self-portraits are such a mind fuck, Holden.” I shook my head, rubbing my forehead. “I failed a painting class in university because I refused to hand mine in.”

“You didn’t do it?”

“I tried.” I laughed lightly. “I tried all year. It was a two-semester course and I had to take pottery in the summer to make up the credits.” I rolled my eyes at him. “The people in the pottery class kept trying to read my tarot cards.” I bit my lip. “Actually, that was fun, and I got a cool vase out of the class.”

We wandered to the gift shop. “Why couldn’t you do the portrait?”

I dragged in a deep breath, organizing my thoughts. “It was hard. It wasn’t like painting someone else. A self-portrait is you telling the world who you are. I had heard that guy making fun of my painting and I couldn’t get it out of my head.”

My throat caught as the memories rushed back at me. I wished it were different, and I’d never met Luke, the painter ex.

We stepped into the gift shop and found the book section. “I felt like such a failure when I couldn’t finish the painting. Everyone went out for drinks after the last class and I didn’t go because I didn’t want to admit I hadn’t done the painting.”

“You’re not a failure.” His voice was low and quiet but his gaze on me was intense.

“Holden. I literally failed the class.”

His eyes met mine and my stomach rolled at the warmth in them. “You’re not a failure,” he repeated. “Would you ever try again? To see if you could?”

My gut lurched like I was back on the singles cruise. I shook my head. “I don’t like painting myself.”

“You haven’t tried in a while.”

I shook my head with a rueful smile. “I don’t think so. Come on.” I tugged on his arm. “Let’s go say hi to Avery at the restaurant and we can get some lunch.”

He didn’t move. His eyes scanned my face with a little frown.

“Holden.” I tugged his arm again. “Come on.”

“You’re talented, Sadie.”

My lips pressed into a thin line. I wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m good at design stuff, I know.”

“No.” His eyes were bright and it was like I was all he could see. People



side-stepped around us on the sidewalk and we should have moved but the intensity in his gaze rooted me in place.

“You’re good at design, but you’re a talented painter. Self-portraits aren’t supposed to be perfect. They’re supposed to be honest. That’s what brilliant art is.” His hands framed my jaw and my pulse picked up. I couldn’t tear my gaze from his. My throat worked under his strong hands. “Your paintings are incredible, and I think you should give it another try, even if you decide to burn it after. Fuck up, Sadie. Fuck up and move on.”

Were we talking about painting still? I had no idea. “I’ve already fucked up so much,” I whispered.

“And you’re okay.” The firm tone he used weaved something through my heart. Like I didn’t believe it until he said it.

I was okay.

He searched my eyes and I had the urge to raise up on my tiptoes and kiss him, but we were on the street and we were supposed to be friends in public.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he told me.

I shook my head, face still framed by his hands. “Holden, we can’t.”

“I don’t care.”

I opened my mouth to protest but his mouth lowered to mine and I sighed into him. The day was chilly and his mouth was hot, hungry, and inviting. I let him kiss me there right on the main street of Queen’s Cove and any protest in me faded away as his tongue glided over mine. His breath skated across my skin and I melted into him. His words danced in my head.

*You’re okay.*

Holden Rhodes was something special.

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AFTER LUNCH, the sky was still overcast but dry so we took my new boots and raincoat for a walk along the beach. The tide was out and in the distance, surfers in wetsuits rode waves.

“Warm enough?” Holden asked.

I nodded. I had tucked my hands into my pockets. “I love my new jacket. Thank you again.”

He smiled at the sand. “You look cute in it.”

That comment warmed me inside out and I smiled out at the dark ocean.

“You’re going to make someone really happy, when you find her,” I told him while staring at my boots. He was quiet, so I glanced over at him.

He studied me for a moment.

“You’re a good person, Holden. You’ll be an awesome husband. I hope you know that.”

His eyes turned soft. “Thanks, Sadie.”

My throat constricted, talking about him finding someone. For a moment, I hated her, whoever she was, because she got to live the rest of her life with a guy like him, who bought raincoats and liked paintings and said truthful compliments that made me question everything I thought about myself.

“Where’d that asshole go from that summer, huh?” I asked with a sharp laugh. “That guy who sprayed me with the hose.”

He grinned. “I was watering the garden.”

I elbowed him in the stomach and he jerked to get away while laughing. “The garden isn’t on the porch, dickhead.”

He chuckled and we grinned at each other as we walked.

He cleared his throat. “It’s my parents’ anniversary party next Monday. My mom wants you to come.”

I beamed. “Absolutely. Can I bring anything?”

He shook his head. “Just yourself.”

“I can’t bring nothing. I don’t want them to hate me.”

He made a face. “My parents love you.”

I smiled. I didn’t know why that made me so happy but it did. “I’ll bring a bottle of wine.”

A drop hit my forehead and I wiped it away. Another drop hit my hand.

“Want to head back?” he asked.

A dark cloud loomed over the water. “Yep. I think that’s best.”

The rain picked up as we walked back to the inn and by the time we passed through the front gate, it was pouring rain.

“How’d those boots hold up?” he asked as we climbed the porch steps.

“Amazing. My feet are dry.” My jeans from the knee to the ankle were soaked, though, and I shivered as I shook my raincoat off on the porch.

We stepped into the inn and my teeth chattered.

“Shall we knock that wall down, now?” I asked him while my teeth clacked. “It’ll warm us up.”

He frowned. “You’re freezing.”

I shook my head. “Not for long. It’s these west coast winters, it’s above

zero but somehow so much colder than Toronto.” I rubbed my arms to warm myself up. “I’ll be fine.”

He stared down at me before pointing upstairs. “Get into the bath and I’ll make you some tea.”

“I’m fine, Holden, I promise.”

“Sadie.” He gave me a sharp look. “Go.”

“I hate it when you tell me what to do,” I muttered as I climbed the stairs. A bath was exactly what I wanted, I’d admit.

“You can be the boss later,” he called from the kitchen, and I grinned to myself. A thrill ran through me at the idea that we might fool around again tonight. We hadn’t done anything since the other night and I had been burning the batteries out on my toy in anticipation.

In my ensuite upstairs, I turned on the tap and squeezed out a quarter of the bottle of body wash into the stream before I undressed and slipped into the water. The heat stung my skin as I eased in but once the tub was full and I turned the tap off, the rain pounding on the roof lulled me and my muscles relaxed. I inhaled the orange ginger body wash scent and closed my eyes.

I thought about how handsome Holden was in his black rain parka and smiled to myself.

The bathroom door opened and Holden walked in with a hot look in his eyes. I pulled my arms up across my chest and arousal tugged between my legs. He yanked his t-shirt over his head.

“I thought you were making tea,” I breathed, heart racing.

“Changed my mind.” He undid his belt.



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## Sadie

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I WATCHED his every move as he slid his pants and boxers off. His torso was a grid of hard lines outlining his pecs, every ab and oblique.

Dude was jacked.

My gaze dropped to his cock, fully erect, and he motioned for me to move forward before he slipped in behind me in the bath, lowering himself with his legs on either side of me.

“Lean back, honey,” he murmured in my ear, pulling me against his chest.

I relaxed into him with a hum. His stiff length pressed into my lower back and the apex between my legs ached. The bathtub was a little cramped with both of us, but his big arms folded over my stomach and he gave me a light squeeze. I let out a long breath.

“This is nice.” My voice was just above a whisper.

“Mhm.” The sound rumbled through his chest.

My hands glided along his thighs, thumbs digging into the muscles. “You’re tight here.”

“Yesterday was leg day.”

I pressed, pushing the tension out and behind me, he took a deep breath and released it.

I smiled at the intimacy of it. “I like you relaxed like this.”

His hands smoothed over me in soft touches. “I’m always relaxed with you.” His thumb brushed the underside of one of my breasts and my breath caught before his hands came to my biceps, rubbing light strokes.

“Even when I’m seasick and losing my lunch on a boat?”

His low chuckle made me smile. "I was worried about you."

I gave his thighs a quick squeeze. "You worry about everyone else but yourself."

He didn't say anything but pressed a kiss to my shoulder. His erection pulsed against me and I bit my lip. My nipples pinched tight.

"What are we going to do about that?" I murmured.

"Right now, you're going to let me make you feel good." His teeth scored my shoulder and my breath caught again. His hands slipped across my skin to my breasts and his fingers found the stiff peaks. My head fell back against his shoulder as his fingers worked and heat pooled at my center. His teeth scored my earlobe and I whimpered, squirming. I squeezed his thighs.

"Fuck, you're so fucking pretty, honey." His voice in my ear sent sparks down my spine and my eyes closed halfway. "So fucking pretty. When we're together, I can't look away." He reached up and gave my ponytail a gentle tug and I felt it all the way down to between my legs. A whimper slipped out of my mouth. "Thought about wrapping this cute little ponytail around my fist so many times."

Under the water, my clit throbbed, desperate for attention. I could hear myself breathing, trying to get enough air as he touched my sensitive nipples. His hand dropped to my belly button and he gave it a little tap. My chest shook with laughter.

"That tickles," I whispered.

"You didn't mind when I had my mouth on it." He grinned, pressing kisses down my neck. I bit my lip as his stubble scraped my skin. God, I loved that sensation. "I jerked off so many times thinking about that."

His warm hands covered my breasts and I squirmed with pleasure. Sweat dripped down my forehead and somehow I was more comfortable than ever and wound tight at the same time. His hand skated down my stomach, past my belly button, to just above where I wanted it.

"Let's get out of the bath so I can touch you," I murmured.

"Later." His hands rested on my thighs, dragging higher until he reached the crease of my thigh, where he switched direction.

"Now." I squirmed again. Arousal swirled low in my belly and even if we weren't in the bath, I'd be soaking wet.

"Do you know what I said when I made myself come last night?" One hand returned to my chest and with the other, he ran his fingers closer and closer to my center. Up my inner thigh, down the other. Down my stomach,

up the side of my rib cage.

“What?” I breathed.

“I said *Sadie*. I said it over and over again, every time I came. I thought I could fuck my fist and get you out of my head but I couldn’t.”

“Holden,” I gasped, as his hand *almost* touched me but moved away at the last second. “Please.”

His mouth was against my temple. “You’re the boss, remember?”

I shivered. “Touch me,” I whispered.

“And then what?”

“Make me come,” I bit out, and gasped as his hand stroked my heat. Desire wound me so tight my back arched, but his hand across my chest locked me down. “Baby,” I gasped as he slipped his fingers up and down with no rush. “Make me come with your cock.”

“Not yet.”

I groaned in frustration. We still hadn’t had sex and I was desperate to know what the thick length pressing up against me felt like. I wanted to see him come apart while inside me. I was desperate to experience the full force of him as he lost control with me.

“Holden,” I moaned, gripping his thighs. My nails dug in as he swirled my clit. Pressure built in my stomach, but it was different from when I used my vibrator. It was slower, more intense and heavier, like it would knock me over. I heaved for air. Desire clouded my head and my hips bucked to get more friction with him but he pulled his fingers back.

“Are you trying to kill me?” My head fell back against him.

He chuckled and his teeth scored my neck. Goddamnit, even that felt good. “No, honey, I’m not trying to kill you. You know how to get there.”

I pressed my mouth together to hold in the groan of frustration.

“Come on.” His voice was low and teasing. “Boss me around. Tell me what to do.”

“Fuck me with your fingers,” I whispered. “Make me come.”

One of his hands squeezed my thigh and pulled my leg over his while the other delved into me. I moaned as his fingers curled into me and found a spot I had only suspected existed.

“There we go,” he murmured as I arched against him.

He massaged the bundle of nerves inside me and slipped another finger in. I clenched my eyes closed, still gripping his thighs. The heel of his hand rubbed my clit while he worked his fingers in and out of me. My blood

coursed with pleasure.

“How am I doing?”

“Good,” I moaned as he wound my spring tighter.

He fucked me with his fingers and the wave rose inside me. My gasps echoed around the bathroom and my blood boiled hot as the pressure between my legs intensified.

“How can I please you?” he whispered in my ear. My head swam and I couldn’t think as his hand worked inside me. “I need you to lose your mind for me, baby.”

“Harder,” I gritted out. “Faster.”

He doubled the pressure, the speed, the intensity, and I watched his arm flexing.

“Fuck, I love watching you come. Even more than I expected.”

His words tipped me over the edge and stars burst behind my eyes. The pleasure crested in waves, rolling through me as I spasmed around his fingers, clenching and gripping.

“I can feel you coming,” he groaned.

I moaned something incoherent through the last pulses of my orgasm before I collapsed against him. Holden’s arms wrapped around me and tucked me into his chest and I melted.

He kissed my shoulder. “You’re so beautiful when you come, Sadie. It’s my favorite thing to watch.”

My hand covered one of his arms while I caught my breath. Every muscle in my body eased as I floated back down to earth. I shifted and felt the stiff length of his own arousal against my lower back.

“Let’s get out of the tub,” I said softly, turning to meet his gaze.

His gaze burned hot. His eyes were dark and heavy-lidded and he pressed a slow, mind-numbing kiss to my jaw before he raised himself up. I pulled the plug to drain the water and stood. His gaze followed the water droplets trickling down my body and I pulsed again for him.

How? I was a one-and-done kind of lady, but with Holden, nothing was what I had originally thought. His throat worked as he stared at me. My skin prickled under his study.

“Baby?” I asked.

His gaze lifted to mine, heavy and distracted. His cheeks flushed. His cock twitched against his stomach, and a bead of liquid appeared at the tip. “Hmm?”



“Can you pass me a towel?”

He reached for one of the fluffy white towels and wrapped it around me before his hands rubbed over the fabric to dry me off. My heart squeezed with the affectionate moment. Two months ago, I never would have expected Holden Rhodes to make me orgasm in the bath and then dry me off like a spoiled little queen after.

I stepped out and into his arms. He kissed me hard and I sighed into him. His hands framed my jaw and he tilted me to open me up more.

My hands came to his stomach and I walked him backwards, out of the bathroom. His tongue explored my mouth, tasting me and sucking light, thought-scattering pressure.

The back of his knees hit the bed and I pushed him to sitting while I pulled the towel off. His eyes dropped to my breasts and his hands followed. I bit my lip as he pinched and pulled, watching my face.

“Stop distracting me,” I told him, and he gave me a slow, sly smile that made my stomach flip over. I pushed his shoulders back. “Lay down.”

He fell back, eyes on me and chest rising and falling fast. I kneeled between his knees and wrapped my hand around the base of his cock.

Holden’s cock was gorgeous. Thick, long, and so satisfying to hold like this. His hands came behind his head, elbows wide, as he watched me study it. I leaned forward to lick a long line from base to tip. His eyes closed and he let out a long groan.

“Sadie,” he gritted out.

I smiled at him before running my tongue down the other side. His length pulsed beneath my tongue. I dragged it back up and swirled over the tip and his breath caught. When I took him deep between my lips and applied suction, his hips bucked.

His abs rippled. “I’m not going to last long.”

I worked up and down his length, watching his pained expression and meeting his fascinated gaze as I bobbed.

Holden had been so sweet to me today, and now I was going to toy with him. I kept the suction, pressure, and speed light until the tenth stroke, where I hollowed out my cheeks in an attempt to suck his soul out through his cock.

He groaned.

I returned to light, slow, and minimum pressure and he sunk back into the bed, breathing hard. The guy was twice my size and I had complete control over him. I liked being in charge with him.

I liked it a lot.

“Fuck, you look so pretty with your mouth on my cock,” he breathed. “You’re going to make me come.”

“Not yet.” I squeezed his base and gave him two hollowed-out strokes. His hips bucked. “Baby, keep your hips still for me.”

He made a noise of disbelief, eyes clenched closed tight. His thighs tensed. “What are you doing to me?”

He groaned as I alternated soft and strong strokes with my mouth. His hands settled on the back of my head.

“Don’t you dare rush me,” I told him. “Why don’t you put your hands out at your side?”

He rested his arms out, fingers splayed and twitched as my mouth worked. One hand stroked him with my mouth and the other teased his sac, massaging and tugging. I played with him until he dripped pre-cum, breathing hard, and his moans held a desperate, frantic edge.

“I can’t hold off,” he gasped, lifting his head and meeting my gaze.

Pleasure curled inside me. “Not yet. I’m not done.”

He groaned and his head fell back. His cock pulsed between my lips and I slowed down to torture him more. An unearthly, pained noise scraped out of his throat and at his sides, his hands flexed.

Sweat beaded on his forehead and his eyes clouded with lust. “Fuck, Sadie. I need to come. I’m so close. Please, honey.”

“Yeah?” My voice was soft and teasing before I sucked on the tip of his cock.

He jerked a nod, wincing.

“Alright.” I nodded, smiling at him. “You can come, baby.”

“Can I touch you?” he gasped.

I nodded. “Mhm.”

He found my ponytail, wrapped it around one fist, and shuttled his hips fast into my mouth with his other hand on the side of my head. He watched as he fucked my mouth with rapture in his gaze. Thrills of power and arousal crackled through my body as we locked eyes.

I’d remember his look of awe until my dying day.

He whimpered, tensed, before hot, salty liquid shot to the back of my throat. “Fuuuuuuuck,” he groaned.

When he was done, he leaned forward and pulled me to his chest, kissing me hard.

“Holy fucking hell, Sadie.” A sheen of sweat covered his forehead as he caught his breath. His head fell back on the bed and he stared at the ceiling with glazed eyes.

I grinned and nipped his bottom lip. He let out a light whimper and I laughed.

“I would say I finally got you back for spraying me with the hose,” I murmured into the crook of my neck, “but dude, you just pressure-washed the back of my throat.”

His chest shook with laughter. “I’ve never come that hard in my life.”

A proud, pleased grin stretched across my face. “Really?”

He sighed into my hair, arms locked around me. “Really. Jesus Christ.”

I breathed him in and pressed a kiss to his skin. His chest rose and fell against me and I relaxed under the weight of his arms.

His eyes closed and I studied his face, so handsome with his strong nose, sharp jaw, and thick eyelashes.

I remembered our deal, and guilt twanged through me. I shouldn’t have been laying there in his arms, gazing at him like some lovesick fool. I should have been out there, finding someone for him, forcing him to go on more dates. Hanging out with Holden was so fun though, even when we weren’t doing the sexy stuff.

I pushed the guilt aside and tucked myself further into his chest.



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## Holden

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“TWILIGHT?” I asked her with a grimace.

We had set up in her bedroom, because construction supplies cluttered the sitting room downstairs and the couch was in the hallway while we worked on the secret library entrance. The laptop perched a few feet away from us, queued up with the movie. Rain tapped on the roof and against the window and a fire crackled in the fireplace, warming the room. Sadie settled back against the headboard with her pasta we had picked up from Avery’s restaurant.

I settled in beside her and frowned. “Isn’t that movie for teenage girls?”

Sadie nodded. “And now all those thirteen year girls are grown women. This movie is a *critical* piece of cinema to women my age and you need to know all the references.”

A grin hitched on my mouth as she hit play.

Half an hour later, Sadie dissolved into giggles at my horrified expression. This movie was insane, with long, lingering looks between Bella and Edward, over-the-top teen angst, and cringey dialogue.

“This movie is terrible,” I told her.

“I know,” she gasped, laughing harder. “But I still love it.”

On screen, Edward made Bella climb on his back before he raced up the mountain. Sadie glanced at me before she began laughing again.

I shook my head and grinned.

A few minutes later, her head had meandered to my shoulder as we watched the movie. She tilted her head and I glanced down at her.

“I’m so glad we got a do-over.” Her eyes were soft and warm.

My eyebrow lifted. “Do-over?”

She nodded, playing with the duvet cover. “With us. If I never came to Queen’s Cove, we never would have become friends and I wouldn’t have known who you really were.”

Pressure expanded in my chest and I tried not to smile as big as I wanted to. “I’m more myself around you,” I admitted.

“You are?” Her smile lifted, hopeful and sweet. “That’s the best compliment.” Her gaze met mine and her throat worked. “I’m more myself around you, too. The other day, walking in the forest and telling you about my secret bar daydreams, I, just—” She shrugged and glanced back at me, suddenly shy. “I can tell you about those things.”

“I like you telling me about those things.”

I could never admit how much it meant to me when she admitted what happened with her ex. She trusted me. My chest squeezed again.

She sat up with bright eyes. “I made a Pinterest board for my pretend secret bar from my daydreams. You want to see it?”

I nodded and she sat forward, pausing the movie and opened a browser window. She sat back and I settled my arm around her shoulders as she scrolled, explaining the color scheme and showing me images of dark and moody wallpaper. She flipped past pictures of the same little twinkle lights they strung up along the trees on Main Street.

“I love little touches of decor from The Roaring Twenties,” she explained, pointing out the brass light fixtures. “That’s the vibe we’re going for with the secret library, like a speakeasy people can hide their drinks in.”

She pointed at an image with wallpaper. “I designed this wallpaper.”

My eyebrows shot up and I leaned in closer to study the image. The wallpaper was a deep red wine color, with navy stripes. Gold and white birds floated every foot or so.

“That’s incredible, Sadie,” I murmured, picturing it in my own home.

She shrugged with a little smile. “I was thinking about using it for my own apartment at the time. Turns out it’s pretty easy to make your own wallpaper if you have the design finished.” She tilted her head, eyes on the pattern. “I never ended up using it but I think about it all the time.”

She made a sad little hum and closed the window. The next window was an email with pictures of an apartment.

Cold trickled down my back. “Looking for apartments?” I kept a light tone.

She shot me a tentative smile. “This is the place I’m moving into in March with Willa.” She scrolled through the photos. It was an older style of apartment, which meant big rooms, original hardwood floors, and a strange layout, but big bay windows. Lots of sunlight.

“It’s an amazing price, and I’m excited about living with Willa again. I miss my bestie.” A smile lifted on her features, and when she nodded, her ponytail brushed my shoulder. “Things are finally aligning for me back home.” She shrugged and glanced at me. “And in life.”

My chest ached at the idea of her going home but I shoved it away. Sadie had been clear in what she wanted: friends with benefits. No attachments, just sex. I swallowed past a knot in my throat, staring at the picture of her living room. Thoughts of her snuck into my head more and more. I looked forward to seeing her each night at the bar, counting down until I could return to the inn to work on the place with her by my side. Sadie couldn’t be more clear, though.

Any feelings I was having were one-sided. Sadie wasn’t getting swept off her feet. She was planning the rest of her life on the other side of the country.

She put the movie back on and settled against me, pulling a blanket over us and relaxing into my chest. She cuddled against my chest and my hand fell to her arm. I inhaled her hair and she sighed against me, relaxing.

I was falling for her. Or maybe I’d fallen for her years ago and never gotten over her. I’d never liked a woman the way I liked her. While she was in town, there was no way for me to tear myself away from her. She was too addictive, too sweet, silly, fun, and interesting, and spending time with her made me the version of myself I wanted to be.

She saw something special in me, even if she didn’t want me for herself.

Friends with benefits was a terrible idea, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to stop.





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## Sadie

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“HOLDEN TELLS me you made him watch Twilight,” Elizabeth said with a smile as we sat on the couch in her living room. It was his parents’ anniversary party, and laughter and conversation filled their home as their friends and family gathered on this Monday evening.

I grinned. “Whatever he says, he loved it. Women my age loved that movie. He needs to know all the references. I’m helping him.”

Her warm gaze lingered on my face for a moment. “You look so much like Katherine.”

I brightened up. “I do?”

She nodded. “She was about your age when she moved to town.”

“Oh, yeah.” I smiled at my hands. Thinking about Katherine at my age made my heart tug.

Elizabeth readjusted on the couch and leaned her chin on her palm. Her gaze turned distant and she smiled. “She fell in love with that place right away.”

I thought about the forest the other day, so serene and quiet, like a little slice of heaven. “I can see why. I didn’t get it when I was sixteen, but I get it now.”

“How are the renovations going?”

“Great.” I twirled my hair through my fingers. “I’ve never been so hands on with a project and I love it.”

Her eyes lit up. “Holden said you’re a force with that sledgehammer.”

A laugh burst out of me. “I don’t know about that. He supervises me pretty carefully.”

Across the room, Holden's gaze met mine. He was talking with Emmett and his dad but watching me. He shot me a wink and my stomach flopped. A dozen butterflies fluttered inside my stomach.

I turned back to Elizabeth, who glanced between Holden and I with interest.

"Holden takes care of the people he cares about," she said. "He's always been so serious and responsible like that."

I studied him. Tonight, he wore a black knit sweater and jeans. His hair was unruly like he had run his hands through it. His sweater fit perfect across his broad chest and the color made his eyes stand out even more. Every time he glanced over at me and gave me that warm, appraising look, my skin tingled.

"He's not always so serious," I said, studying him. I thought about him laughing at the bar as he lifted me up to detach the dildo from beside the TV.

"That's why you two are so good together. He smiles more with you. Avery said she saw him laugh the other week."

"He laughs all the time." I was still studying him with a small smile. I liked that I brought out his fun side and made him laugh.

Wait. I frowned at Elizabeth. "We're just friends."

She smiled and her eyes glittered like she knew a secret. "That's what I meant."

I nodded. "Good." I cleared my throat to change the subject. "How does it feel to have been married forty years?"

She tapped her finger on her chin as she pondered this. "Like the most natural thing in the world. I married the person I like more than anyone. We've changed throughout the years and I always worried we'd change in different directions, but we've grown around each other." She regarded Sam, gesturing and talking to his sons, and her eyes warmed. "And now he can't get rid of me."

"He's a lucky guy."

She shook her head. "I'm the lucky one."

"How old were you when you got married?"

"Twenty-three."

My eyes bugged out of my head. "That's so young. I feel like I was still playing with Barbies at that age."

She laughed. "It wasn't out of the norm back then to get married right out of high school. Sam and I met in university and he wanted to get married

right away but I made him wait until we finished school.” She shook her head, smiling with nostalgia. “I didn’t want to get married at all.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“My parents were very, very unhappy,” she told me. Her mouth twisted. “I didn’t want to repeat that.”

“What changed your mind?” I caught myself and blinked. “Sorry, Elizabeth, I didn’t mean to grill you. Ignore me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t mind talking about it. It was important to Sam and I would rather keep Sam than break up, even if it meant compromise. And there were many, many compromises over the years, so I figured we’re even now.” She grinned again.

“You look like Holden when you smile,” I told her.

“Do I?” She glowed when I said this. “You’re the first person to ever tell me that, and I’m so glad you did.”

We studied each other for a moment.

“There are lots of risks in life,” she told me, nodding as her gaze swept around the party at all the people she loved. Her mouth twisted to the side, sweet and nostalgic. “I guess in the end, I figured, I’d take the hit if things went south with Sam, because he was worth it. I wasn’t going to say no to the good things in life because I was afraid of getting hurt.”

My stomach knotted over and over again. When Holden asked me if I ever wanted to get married, my fast answer surprised me, but even if I trusted someone else, that wasn’t enough. I didn’t trust myself.

I glanced over at Holden, smiling in that calm, steady way of his at something his dad had said.

I wished I could get over it. I wished it so hard.

Elizabeth sighed, studying me. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Me, too. Thanks for inviting me.”

She chuckled. “I meant, in town. Katherine would be thrilled to see what you’ve been up to.”

I chewed my lip. Sure, I was fixing up the inn, but I was avoiding my whole life back in Toronto. “You think?”

She studied my face. “Yes. I do. She would be so proud of you. Although,” she continued in a brighter tone, “I’m also thrilled you could come by for the party. Holden asked us to move it to a Monday and that worked better with Avery’s work schedule, too.”

My stomach wobbled and dipped with warmth. “He did?”

She nodded as Sam appeared at her side. “Can I refill your drinks?” he asked us.

Elizabeth stood and shook her head before looping her arm around his waist. His arm came up around her shoulder. “I need to check on the food, anyway. Sadie, do you want anything?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m happy.”

They wandered into the kitchen and I surveyed the room. Emmett, Hannah, and Wyatt were talking near the fireplace. Hannah’s bump was showing now and her hand rested on it as she smiled up at Wyatt. Avery was in the kitchen with a few of Elizabeth’s friends.

This was nice. My throat squeezed. Would I ever have this, one day? Would I ever figure out the secret to picking a good guy? Elizabeth made it sound so simple, but I knew it was anything but. Trusting someone enough to build a life with them was a big deal.

I thought back to myself last year when I had said yes to Grant. How could I have been so impulsive? I didn’t even picture a life with him. I just got swept away. I was so excited someone wanted me to marry them, I didn’t even stop to think if I wanted him.

Grant was a little boring, I realized, wrinkling my nose. He was too perfect. He agreed with everything I said and he always laughed at my jokes even when they weren’t funny.

“Hi,” Holden said, taking the seat beside me.

“Hi.” I smiled at him. “You look handsome in this sweater.”

His mouth hitched. “You think?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know you do. Stop being bashful. It’s not a good look on you.”

His eyes glinted. “Are you having fun?”

“I am.”

This time, when I glanced around the room, I realized, this was Holden’s dream. A big house full of people, celebrating a long marriage between two people who loved each other. I pictured him here in forty years with a faceless woman, asking her if she wanted a drink and giving her heated, affectionate looks across the room.

My gut twisted with jealousy and I frowned.

He’d meet someone. He was a catch, and it was only a matter of time before he met another catch and they got a joint bank account and made gorgeous, brooding children. A lump formed in my throat.

I heard my name on the other side of the room. Miri Yang and Emmett watched her phone before they burst out laughing. Hannah and Wyatt leaned over to watch and they started laughing, too.

Miri said something and pointed at me. I frowned and exchanged a curious glance with Holden.

“Sadie,” Miri said, hustling over. “You’ve got to see this.”

Emmett waved at her to come back. “Let’s put it up on the TV.”

He turned the TV on and showed her how to stream it on the screen. The dark, grainy video appeared on the TV and people from the kitchen moved into the living room to watch.

“It’s the bear cam,” she explained to everyone. “They’re hibernating now and we live stream them for educational purposes.”

On the screen, a black bear lumbered past the camera. The night-vision gave everything a green tinge. Another bear entered the frame, holding something. The bear’s eyes flickered as they caught the camera.

Emmett bit his fist in anticipation. His eyes were bright.

The bear lifted the object and swung it at the other bear.

“What is that?” I murmured.

“Doesn’t it look familiar?” Avery asked, hiding a grin.

I squinted at the screen. The bear lifted it again and I gasped. Laughter burst out around me.

It was my alien dildo.

I mean, not *my* alien dildo. It was the alien dildo I was mistakenly sent.

The bear swung the rubber wang and smacked the other bear across the face. A roar of laughs rose.

“It’s Sadie’s!” Miri announced to the party. “It’s Sadie’s dildo.”

My face burned hot and I shook my head furiously. “It’s not mine! It was sent to me by accident.”

Oh my god. Everyone was either staring at me and laughing or staring at the screen.

“Sadie.” Miri’s hand came to my shoulder and she gave me an understanding expression. “It’s *okay*. Women’s sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of. We’re all very excited for this new phase of your life.”

“Miri, play it again,” someone called.

“No—” I started, but Miri unlocked her phone and pressed play again.

Beside me, Holden shook with laughter. I covered my face with my hands as the bear slapped the other bear with the toy.

“I’m posting this.” Miri’s fingers flew on her phone and my stomach tightened again. “Sadie, can I tag you?”

“No,” I gasped, and Holden laughed harder. “Don’t tag me.”

She winced. “I already did.”

“Oh my god.” I wanted to disappear into the couch. “They must have dug it up in the forest?” I asked Holden.

He shrugged, eyes bright with amusement. “You should have left it up at the bar.”

Another round of laughter rose as the video played again and again and I sighed.

“That thing is cursed,” I muttered to Holden, and he grinned and put his arm around me.



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## Holden

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"IT'S LOUD IN HERE," I yelled over the thumping music.

Sadie beamed at me. The person at the door had painted a butterfly on each of her temples. Sadie had insisted I get the same. Under the black lights, her teeth flashed white.

"I know." Her gaze snagged on a person walking by, covered in glowing paint. "Welcome to the Queen's Cove art scene."

I stared around the packed warehouse Sadie had navigated us to. On the dance floor, paint-covered people writhed to the beat. Along one wall, a bar served drinks. Paint pots and brushes sat near the entrance and giant canvases hung from the walls as people flung paint at them.

No wonder Sadie had told me to wear clothes I didn't mind throwing out.

"Come on." She slipped her hand into mine and pulled me toward the bar while I admired her ass in her mini-skirt.

Someone passed me, their face painted like a glow-in-the-dark lion. I cringed at Sadie. "I'm too old for this. Let's go home and watch another Twilight movie."

That made her laugh. "I knew you liked those." She kept pulling me. "By the time I'm done with you, Holden, you're going to be the king of fun."

When Sadie had told me she was taking me on an adventure tonight, I never, ever would have expected this.

I frowned down at her, hiding a smile. "I'm going to ask them to turn the music down."

Her outrage nearly made me break. "No. You're being grumpy."

I grinned at her.



“You’re kidding.” Her tone was flat but her mouth curled up.

I nodded, smiling at her, before I lifted her hand and spun her in a circle. “I’m having fun, only because I’m with you, though. You know this is a rave, right?”

Her mouth fell open. “What? It’s not a rave, it’s a party.”

A guy holding a dozen glowsticks appeared at our side. “Two for ten bucks.”

Sadie’s eyes lit up. She reached into her pocket for cash but I waved her off, handing the guy a bill.

“It’s a rave,” I told her with a little smile as I clipped it around her neck.

Her eyes danced as she laughed. “You might be right.” She lifted the second glowstick and fastened it around my neck. Her fingers brushed my skin and I had the urge to drop a kiss onto her cheek.

So I did.

She blinked at me as I leaned down and brushed my mouth along her jaw. “What was that for?”

I shrugged, holding her gaze. “Felt like it.”

Her hand rested on my chest. “Even if I dragged you to a rave?”

I nodded and shot her a wink.

She narrowed her eyes, grinning. “I knew you were having fun.” She turned to the bartender and ordered for us.

When I handed the bartender cash, she tried to bat my hand away. “We’re supposed to be equals. Fifty-fifty.”

I dropped the change in the tip jar and nodded my thanks to the bartender. “We are. You went to the trouble of finding this place.” I shrugged and slipped my arm around her shoulder. “And I like paying. Okay? It’s not my way of setting you up to owe me something.”

She studied me for a moment with a funny look in her eye. “I know.”

I frowned down at her. “What’s that look for?”

A smile pulled at her pretty mouth and she shrugged. “Just thinking about what a good person you are.”

I remembered her words from fifteen years ago and my stomach flipped. We were friends now, or something like friends, and I knew things were different from that summer, but a tiny part of me still believed what she had said.

This thing I had with Sadie? It was too good to be true.

Sadie moved in front of me with her back to my front and pulled out her

phone to take a selfie of us. I wrapped my arms around her stomach and rested my chin on her shoulder for the photo. Paint covered our faces but we were smiling.

She admired the photo for a moment before grabbing my hand. “Let’s go look around.”

I pushed the thoughts away. Tonight, I’d just enjoy being with Sadie.

We wandered the warehouse, watching as people played with paint, danced, and drank. People made out in every dark corner, groping and tasting each other. The energy inside was chaotic, intense, and hedonistic.

“Are you okay?” Sadie asked, searching my eyes. “I know this is a lot for you.”

I smiled at her and my hand tightened on hers. “I’m okay. Stay close.”

It was dark in here, and I couldn’t risk something happening to her.

She finished her drink, tossed the cup in a nearby recycling bin, and looped her arms around my neck before she raised herself up on her toes and kissed me.

Fuck. My cock stiffened and my arm moved around her back, pulling her into my chest. Her tongue stroked mine and I groaned. She nipped my lip before she pulled back with a little grin.

“What was that for?” I asked, a little dazed.

She shrugged. “Come on, let’s play.” She grabbed my hand and tugged me towards the paints and paintbrushes. We found an area with fewer people and she grabbed the nearest brush before she dragged it through a tray with glowing green paint.

“Take your shirt off,” she told me.

When I hesitated, she skewered me with a hot look.

“Holden,” she warned, smiling a little. Her eyes were on fire and my erection ached. “I’m not going to ask you again.”

Fuck, I loved it when she got all bossy. I grinned and pulled my shirt over my head. She took a step forward, holding my gaze, before she painted a long line down my torso.

She took the shirt from me and tossed it against a wall. “You don’t need that anymore.”

She shot me a devilish smile and blood rushed to my cock. She studied my torso before dragging another stroke across my skin, her gaze flicking from my eyes to my body. I felt the electric contact of her brush *everywhere*, skittering across my skin and arcing through me.

More brushes lay on the table behind her. I reached for one and picked up some paint from the same tray before tilting my chin at her.

“Shirt.”

She licked her lips before pulling her tank top off. Underneath, she wore a black sports bra with straps criss-crossing over her back. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and I brushed the hair out of the way before I leaned down to press a kiss to her collarbone.

Her chest rose and fell fast under my mouth. I painted a line across where my lips had been.

Her throat worked as she watched me with a glazed grin. “How come we never go to your place?” she asked, studying me before she painted a line down my bicep.

My lungs tightened. I’d thought about having her over a thousand times. We’d get takeout, sit in the living room, cuddle under a blanket by the fire while a record played. I’d give her a tour of the place and watch her study the design and decor with interest.

It was too good, the idea of Sadie in my home. It was too sweet and she was leaving, and we couldn’t go there. If I had her over, I’d never let her leave.

Also, the paintings in my bedroom. I still hadn’t told her about those. I didn’t know how to bring it up without her seeing a part of me I wasn’t ready to share with her.

I couldn’t put it off forever.

“Soon,” I told her, turning her around and stroking a line of paint down her shoulder, careful to avoid the straps. She shivered under my touch.

I leaned down so my mouth was an inch from her ear. “Cold?”

She shivered again and shook her head, turning to me and studying my body with appreciation.

“God, Holden, you’re so gorgeous,” she breathed before she gathered more paint on her brush and drew a horizontal line across my abs. “So freaking gorgeous. You’re a masterpiece.”

Pleasure and warmth pulsed in my chest, and my length strained against my zipper. Around us, partygoers danced, painted, and made out, and we were left to our own intimate bubble.

I reached to add more paint to my brush before I dropped three dots down the delicate column of her neck. “Sadie, I didn’t even know what beautiful was until I met you.”

Her gaze lifted to mine and behind them, I saw something hopeful but terrified. Her throat worked and her gaze roamed my face. Beside one of the dots I had painted on her neck, her pulse fluttered. My arm wrapped around her back, pressing her warm skin against mine.

Want tore through me and I heaved for air, watching her bright eyes.

Her teeth scored her bottom lip and her forehead creased with worry. “Is this still friends with benefits?”

My chest strained and I dropped the paintbrush on a nearby table before threading my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

This deal. This stupid, fucking deal. I hated myself for agreeing to let her find someone for me.

It was always her, even if I couldn’t admit it.

Even if she was going home to a better life with a job and an apartment and all her friends, I wanted her.

Something passed between us as we watched each other. Desire flashed in her eyes but there was more. Something longing, sweet, and sad.

My lungs squeezed and I heaved for air.

“Holden, we shouldn’t.” Her gaze stayed locked on mine.

She wanted this. I wanted this. “Why not?”

Her brow wrinkled more. “Because you’re looking for more than I can give you.” She shook her head. “Or, you’re supposed to be.”

“I don’t care.” My thumb stroked the skin beneath her ear and she bit her lip again.

“You should,” she insisted, but her gaze turned unfocused as my thumb brushed back and forth.

“I want to be here with you. That’s all I want.”

Her throat worked as she watched me, vulnerability shining in her eyes. “Holden, you’re going to break my fucking heart.”

My pulse raced in my ears and I shook my head hard. “Never, Sadie. I’ll break my own before I break yours. I’d never hurt you.”

She rolled her mouth and her eyes dropped to my chest.

“Hey.” My other hand came to frame her jaw and I tilted her face up to mine. “Look at me, honey.”

Her eyes met mine, so full of worry. My Sadie, so scared to take the leap. A strobe light went off, shattering her image into a thousand flashes.

“Do you trust me?”

She nodded, wincing. “That’s the problem. I do trust you. I trust you more than anyone.”

My face broke into a smile, ear to ear. Something warm and full of energy and light burst open in my chest. “Let me prove it to you.”

She licked her lips before she nodded at me, offering me a tentative smile. “I love seeing you smile like that.” She bit her lip, shaking her head. “It takes over your whole face.”

“Mhm.” I leaned down to kiss her, taking the brush from her hand and setting it on the table. I coaxed her lips open with mine and tasted her. She moaned into my mouth and I wrapped her ponytail around my fist. Need coursed through my blood as her hands came around my neck, and I walked her to the nearest wall.

She let out a laugh against my mouth. “There’s paint on my back.”

I glanced behind her. I had backed her straight into a canvas. “Sorry.”

“S’ok,” she murmured, hands coming to my hair and pulling my head back down to her mouth. Her lips seared me, so sweet and soft, and I couldn’t get enough of her. I stroked her tongue the way I wanted to fuck her. We still hadn’t done that because I didn’t want to rush her, but it still crept into my thoughts every twelve seconds for the past month.

Without realizing it, I shifted my hips against hers and pinned her to the canvas. She gasped as I rocked my rigid length against her center. Her gaze flared and through the fabric of her bra, her nipples pinched.

“Let’s go,” she murmured, eyes on me, dark and dazed. She grinned like a little devil.

I nodded, took her hand, and pulled her out of there.

When we got to the truck, she paused as I hauled the door open. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes had that adorable, sexy, unfocused look.

“We’ll get paint in your truck.”

“I don’t care,” I gritted out. “I want to get home so I can make you come.”

A light laugh escaped her but her gaze blazed. “God, you have a dirty mouth.”

I stepped forward to tower over her. “You love my mouth.”

She nodded, grin widening. “I do.”

I gave her ass a sharp slap. “Get in.”

She hopped up, I closed the door behind her, and the second I climbed into the driver’s side, she flipped the center console up and deposited herself

in my lap, straddling me in the dark.

She stroked my bare chest and the need in her eyes made me even harder. My mouth fell open as she rocked against me, scattering my thoughts.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” I groaned as my balls ached. Her hand fumbled on my belt. “Are we doing this?” I gripped her thighs.

Her hands sunk into my hair and a shudder rolled through me. “Uh-huh.”

“Right here?” My voice was ragged.

She nodded, kissing me hard. “Right here.”



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## Sadie

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I ROCKED against his thick length again and my head fell back.

No more waiting. One day, this time I had with Holden would be a distant memory. He'd be married with a handful of kids, a dog running up and down the stairs, and a wife who he looked at with stars in his eyes.

As for me? It was all a big blank. I'd be in Toronto, probably hanging out with Willa, drinking mimosas and laughing about a TV show.

He had said it tonight. *I want to be here with you.*

Holden groaned as I tugged on his hair, guiding his mouth back to mine. His cock pressed against my clit, and pressure grew low in my belly.

"Do you want to slow down?" he murmured.

"No. I want you. Now." My head spun but I'd only had one drink inside. Arousal soaked my panties. Holden's masculine scent surrounded me, teased me, intoxicated me, and against my skin, his warmth drugged me.

He nodded as his mouth returned to me. "Need you, baby." His hand worked at his belt and a second later, his cock sprang free. I wrapped around the thick length, stroking it, and he let out another hoarse groan. He was hard and warm and I *loved* the feeling of him, thick and heavy in my hand.

Arousal swirled between my legs. "Condom," I demanded and he nodded before pulling his wallet out. When he slipped the foil packet out, I let him go, watching with fascination as he rolled it down his length.

Oh my god. Holden's cock was huge. I knew this, we'd had our hands all over each other for weeks now, but the thought of riding him?

A thrill of excitement and pleasure shot through me and my eyes widened before they met his. I bit my lip.



His eyes were dark, searching mine as he slipped my skirt up. He supported me as I lifted myself, one hand around the back of his neck, one hand slipping my panties to the side as he positioned himself at my entrance.

I slid down onto Holden's cock and moaned as I stretched around him.

"Oh my god," I moaned into his chest. "Baby."

"I'm so deep inside you." His voice was sandpaper. Ripples of pleasure wavered through my limbs and my nails dug into his arms. "Feels fucking incredible."

Oh god. His length between my legs burned so good, and I couldn't breathe, the sensation was so intense.

"Okay?" he murmured, his hands stroking up and down my back. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead and I had smeared the butterfly on his temple when I collapsed against him.

I nodded, heaving for air. "You're a lot."

"You're okay," he said in a low voice that made me want to come. His hand stroked up and down my back, lulling me into a cloud of pleasure and heat. "You can take it."

I shifted my hips against his. His cock hit the spot he worked when he wanted to make me come, and I whimpered into his chest.

"Even better than I dreamed of." His voice was rough in my ear.

Holden's hands cupped my ass, slipping beneath my panties so he could touch bare skin, and he lifted me up and down on his cock. His length hit every nerve in my body and I began to tremor.

Heat squeezed the base of my spine and my eyes widened at the heat pooling between my legs. I wasn't. I couldn't. I never had. I didn't come during sex. Other people did but I didn't. He slowed his movements more and I squirmed at the pleasure.

I could feel *everything*. His fingers digging into the skin of my ass and hips. The slick sweat between us. My knees on his seat. The brush of his skin against my clit as I rocked forward.

Oh.

My mouth dropped open.

Wow.

"Holy shit," I breathed, clenching my eyes closed tight and resting my head on his chest as he rocked me up and down his length. Arousal pulsed and thrummed in my pussy, and the flutters started.

"Already?" he asked in disbelief.

I nodded, at a loss for words as pressure built. I clutched his arms for dear life, pressing my forehead into his pecs, moaning as he hit that spot. My breathing was ragged.

With one hand still on my ass, supporting me, he reached around to my front and pulled my bra down, freeing my breasts and covering one with his big hand. His warmth nudged me another step towards losing my mind, and I looked up at him, clinging to his gaze with mine. Pressure squeezed between my legs and I began to tip.

“You’re so fucking wild.” He applied a sharp slap to my ass and I moaned, clenching him. “Riding my cock in my truck like this, covered in paint. You make me want to do things like this, Sadie. You make me need you.”

I nodded at him, desperate and needy, and when he pinched my nipples, the sizzle of energy nudged me further toward orgasm. His hand dropped to between my legs and he began to rub fast circles on my clit.

For a moment, my mind suspended, aware of every inch of skin brushing against his, every muscle stretched around him, and every breath of his heaved against my chest.

I came hard, eyes clenched closed, curled into Holden’s chest as I shook, scrambling against him for purchase as the wave rolled through me.

“You’re squeezing my cock so hard,” he groaned. “Oh, fuck, Sadie, baby, yes. *Fuck.*” His arms wrapped around me and he moaned into my ear as he tensed, lips parting. The focused, determined look of disbelief on his face seared my brain. His moan was the hottest sound I’d ever heard in my life. His erection pulsed inside me and I pressed kiss after kiss to his chest as stroked inside me through his orgasm.

“Fucking incredible,” he whispered against my forehead. “Never been like that for me.”

I shook my head, still trying to catch my breath.

Me neither.



WHEN PARKED OUTSIDE THE INN, Holden glanced across the front seat at me. Before he could say a word, I tilted my chin at the inn and climbed out of the truck, holding out my hand for him to follow me inside.

I pulled him up the stairs into one of the new showers with two shower heads.

*For shower sex*, I remembered telling him, way back in his office before everything was different between us. A smile formed on my mouth as I remembered how his eyes had bugged out of his head.

In the warm bathroom lighting, we looked insane, smeared and streaked with paint, both of our hair a mess. I turned the shower heads on, and then, with my eyes on Holden, I pulled my bra off, then my skirt, before I stepped under the spray.

His eyes devoured me.

When he joined me, he reached for the soap I had stashed in here the other day, soaping up my skin and washing away the paint while his strong hands worked my muscles. He washed my hair, gentle and careful, and my heart squeezed with how cherished I felt.

I squeezed shampoo into my hands and reached up to work it into his hair. His eyes closed and he sighed, relaxing as I massaged his scalp, and affection caught me by the throat.

We rinsed off and Holden reached out of the shower for his wallet, pulling another condom out before he walked me back against the tiles, hitched my leg around his hip, and fucked me slow and deep with his forehead on mine. Hot water trickled down his chest and his eyes burned dark, hot, and consuming.

“I’m gonna...” I trailed off as he wound me tighter

He nodded, hungry gaze on me. “Do it. Say my name as you come.”

I moaned *Holden* over and over as he thrust into me, drawing me over the edge of pleasure, and when he came, he held me so tight, like he never wanted to let me go.

After our shower, I pulled him to my bed. He shot me a careful, questioning look, but I smiled at him and nodded.

I couldn’t kick him out, after all that. Whether I wanted to or not, I was falling for Holden Rhodes.



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## Holden

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"I LOVE THIS PART," Sadie said in my ear through my headphones as we watched the second Twilight movie in separate locations.

I tilted the screen of my laptop so I could see the movie better. "What's with the bad wig?"

She let out a peel of laughter and my chest warmed. "I knew you'd notice. She cut her hair for another movie so they put her in a dollar store wig for filming."

I stretched out on the hotel room bed and listened to her talk about Twilight.

I didn't care about the movies. I just liked hearing her voice. I wanted to be near to her in any way I could.

I'd spent the week in Victoria, the biggest city on Vancouver Island, a three-hour drive from Queen's Cove. It had been days of negotiations with a potential client who wanted to build a dozen apartment buildings in neighboring towns to Queen's Cove. It was a big job, and it seemed like we'd get it. Worry flared in my chest at the idea of taking on more work, but I pushed it aside.

All week, I missed Sadie. The meetings started Monday morning so I left Sunday afternoon but I regretted it, since I had to cut our day together short.

I pictured us fucking in the front seat of my truck and my eyes closed as I sighed. Fuck. Every night, I pictured her riding me, gasping and tucking herself into my chest as her wet pussy fluttered around my cock.

The inside of my truck was covered in paint, but every time I saw those splashes of color over the seats, I grinned and thought about what we did in

there. No way was I getting it detailed.

“What’s the bed like in your hotel room? Did you jump on it?”

I smiled. “I think I’d break it if I jumped on it.”

“I’d jump on it for you then.”

“I should have brought you.”

I pictured it. We could go for dinner together, explore the city, find a little Italian restaurant and order a bottle of wine. We could walk back to the hotel through the sidestreets. Maybe she’d slip her hand into mine.

My heart squeezed.

Maybe I’d take her back to the hotel and we’d fuck in the shower again. I stiffened in my pants.

“But who would irritate Olivia at the bar all week?” she asked.

“I’m sure we could find someone to bug her.”

There was a pause on her end before she spoke. “I, um. I’ve missed you this week.”

I smiled openly in my hotel room. “I missed you too, honey.”

Fuck, it felt good to say that to her. There were a thousand things I wanted to say to her but held back. Our conversation at that art rave changed things, but I didn’t want to rush her. She had let me stay over that night. That was a big deal for her.

My mind wandered to the next morning. Waking up next to her was heaven. I had snuck out early to pick up coffee and breakfast for her before slipping back into bed to cuddle. The surprised smile on her face when she woke up to see me before she relaxed into my chest made me feel like everything was right in the world, and I was exactly where I should be.

My chest pulsed with something warm and languid.

This had to be it, right? This was love.

I was in love with Sadie.

Anxiety weaved and dipped through my stomach. She was leaving, so there was no point in saying anything.

The thought of her leaving made me sick, so I tried not to think about it.

“My parents want you to come for Christmas dinner,” I told her. “I wasn’t sure what you were doing for the holidays, whether you were flying home or not.”

“I’m staying here. My parents are staying in Mexico for the winter, and Willa’s going on some art retreat. I was going to order takeout from whatever’s open and watch movies.”

I pictured her sitting alone, curled up in bed, eating takeout and watching Christmas movies while I sat around my parents' dinner table, talking and laughing with everyone.

No fucking way was she spending the night alone.

"Come for dinner."

"It's a family thing. I don't want to impose."

"You're not." My tone was firm. "I want you there. You're coming and I'll throw you over my shoulder and haul your ass there if I have to. We can watch movies and eat takeout on Boxing Day."

She laughed and the sound made me smile. "Alright. That sounds great." She hesitated for a moment. "I painted a portrait of Katherine the other day."

My brows lifted. "You did?"

"Yep." She made a happy, humming noise. "I gave it to your mom. It was how I remembered Katherine, smiling and all tanned after working in the garden all day."

I rubbed my chest, thinking about Sadie sitting at her easel, painting and feeling good about herself.

"It's easier to paint here." She let out a light laugh. "I forget my problems in Queen's Cove."

My throat knotted and I hoped with my entire fucking being I had something to do with that. That I made her life better, made her problems fade to the background.

I wanted to be that guy for Sadie.

I thought about what my dad said at their anniversary party. He said his marriage and his family were his greatest achievements, and everything came next after us. Nothing mattered but the people he loved, and he was grateful to know all of us.

While he talked, I thought about Sadie. I studied her pretty face, lips turned up while she listened to my dad. Her glance had shot over to mine and when our gazes connected, her smile turned up even more, like looking at me made her happy.

If I ever wanted the things my dad had talked about in his speech, I needed to make a change. Tension wrapped around my chest, suffocating me. The idea of giving up control still made me sick, even if it was for her.

I just didn't know how.

I sighed, missing her even harder, and dragged my hand back through my hair. "I wish you were here. I wish you came with me."

She laughed. "You're just horny."

"I am. Been fucking my fist all week, thinking about having my head between your legs."

"Holden," she chided but I could hear the grin at my dirty words.

"What are you wearing?"

She laughed. "You are *not* asking what I'm wearing like you're on a nineties phone sex commercial. Although, with your voice, you'd be perfect for that job."

I grinned. "You like my voice."

"You know I do. And I'm butt naked, wearing the yellow raincoat."

My chest shook with laughter. "I wish."

She snorted. "I feel like I haven't taken it off since you gave it to me. This winter is bumming me out, dude."

"Still raining there?"

She sighed. "Every single day. All day. Just pouring. The property is like a marsh. The forest walks help, though. I love when the forest gets all foggy and spooky."

Katherine's property was a low point in the surrounding area so all the rainwater drained to the yard. In the summer, the grass was lush green and never needed watering unless we were in a serious drought, but in the winter, you couldn't take a few steps without sinking into the muck.

I heard the sharp intake of Sadie's breath.

"What?" I asked, frowning.

She was quiet a moment, listening. "Nothing. I heard a noise. I wonder if the raccoons are going through my garbage again. Oh yeah, they retrieved my stupid fucking dildo from the bear den," she said in an irritated tone.

"I thought it wasn't yours?"

She groaned. "Don't start, asshole."

I grinned ear to ear, remembering her bright red face at the anniversary party while we watched the bear swing the dildo around.

"The park ranger came into the bar the other day to assure me I'd get it back. I kept telling him I didn't want it and he kept telling me it was nothing to be embarrassed about." Sadie laughed. "What is wrong with this place?"

"Everyone wants you to feel comfortable. They like you."

"This place is weird, Holden."

"Do you like it, though?" I stared out the window at the dark sky, listening hard for her answer.



“Yeah.” Her voice was soft. “I do. I can see why you won’t leave.” She made a noise in her throat. “There’s that noise again.” I could hear rustling. “I’m going to check it out at the window.”

Worry streaked through me and I frowned. “Sadie, don’t go to the window.”

“I’m just going to look for a second.”

A memory rushed at me. The freshly fallen tree in the forest. Me telling her I’d call an arborist to check out the trees around the inn.

I forgot. Fuck. I jerked upright. I’d been so busy between the inn and work and having the time of my goddamned life with her, I forgot to call the arborist.

My pulse picked up. “Sadie, get back in bed.”

“Don’t boss me around,” she joked. “I can’t see anything—” She gasped before there was a deafening crash.

“Sadie? Sadie!” I yelled. “What’s going on?” My pulse hammered with terror.

She swore. “The window. A tree just fucking fell through it.” Her voice shook. “Oh my god.”

“Don’t move,” I demanded. “You’ll step on glass and cut your feet. Stay where you are.” My heart beat pounded in my ears and I was already standing. “Are you okay?”

“I’m, um.” She broke off, breathing hard. “I’m okay. Oh. My arm. It’s bleeding.”

“How hard?”

“Not so bad.” Her voice was quiet. She might be in shock.

“Send me a photo. Right now.”

“How did the tree fall through the window?” She sounded lost and confused.

I knew exactly how. It was storming all week, the ground was soft, and combined with the wind, some of the old trees couldn’t handle it. Every year, we had a handful of downed trees. They fell on power lines, in yards, across streets, and on the rare occasion, on houses and cars.

Every instinct in my body told me to *get there*. Get to Sadie, right now. This was my fault. I didn’t call the arborist. This could have been prevented. She could have been hurt. My stomach twisted with anxiety.

I put her on speaker while I began to pack, throwing everything I owned in my bag without care.

“Sadie, send me the photo of your arm,” I barked.

“Okay.”

A couple seconds later, my phone buzzed with the text. I studied the picture. A dribble of blood ran down her forearm but it didn’t seem severe.

Shame and fury at myself gripped me by the throat. This was *my fault*. I could have prevented this and now my sweet, trusting Sadie was hurt.

I told her I wouldn’t let her get hurt.

I swallowed past knives in my throat. “Honey, I’m going to call Emmett to get you.” Wyatt was out of town.

“Why?”

“You can’t stay there tonight.” I tried to keep my tone calm and reassuring even though my shoulders were brittle with tension. “There’s a hole in your bedroom and another tree could fall. Is there glass all over the floor in front of you?”

“Uh-huh.”

I weighed my options. If she stayed where she was, another tree could fall, but the likelihood of it falling in the same spot was low. If she moved away from the window, she’d step on glass and cut her feet.

“Don’t move, okay? Can you stay standing there for ten minutes?”

“I think so.”

“If you hear that noise again, the creaking noise, I want you to get to the doorway as soon as possible, even if you cut your feet. Do you understand?” I swept my toiletries off the bathroom counter into my bag.

“Uh-huh.” She sounded dazed and my heart twisted.

“Repeat it back to me, please.” My pulse pounded in my ears. My fault. I did this.

“Stay here unless I hear the noise, and if I do, get to the doorway.”

“You got it, baby.” I zipped my bag up. “Emmett’s coming take you to their place and I’ll pick you up there.”

“You’re coming back?”

“You bet your goddamn ass I am. No fucking way am I letting you sleep alone tonight.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, or maybe that was wishful thinking on my part. “Okay. See you soon. Drive safe, okay?”

“Call me when you get to Emmett’s. I need to know you’re safe.”

“I will.”

“Bye, honey.”

She said goodbye, we hung up, and I called Emmett.  
“Hey,” he answered on the second ring. “What’s going on?”



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## Sadie

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HOLDEN BURST in the front door of Avery and Emmett's home. His eyes found me sitting in front of the fireplace. My headphones were still in. He had called me from the road, and insisted I stay on the call while I dozed.

He breathed a sigh of relief before stalking over. I stood and he pulled me into his chest, squeezing the life out of me.

"Honey," he rasped into my hair. "Baby. I'm so sorry."

"For what?" I breathed against his chest, closing my eyes.

It was so nice to have him back. My arms wrapped around his waist under his parka and smoothed over his t-shirt. I sighed into him.

"I should have called the arborist weeks ago and I forgot."

"It wasn't your fault." I inhaled his scent and shivered at how good he smelled. "You smell better than I remember."

"How's your arm?"

I untangled it from around his waist to show him the bandage Dr. Beck Kingston, a friend of Emmett and Avery's, had applied in Avery and Emmett's kitchen.

His eyes searched mine. "Does it hurt?"

"A little."

He frowned. His jaw was so tight, and I reached up to brush my fingers over the tense muscles.

"Relax," I whispered. "I'm okay. Everything is fine."

His chest heaved for air and his eyes flickered with uncertainty. "You could have been injured."

"But I wasn't."

“If anything happened to you, I’d never forgive myself.”

I tangled my fingers into the back of his hair. “Will you shut up and kiss me already?”

His mouth covered mine and I felt his frustration, worry, and hunger as he took my mouth like he needed it to live. He stroked my tongue with his and I sighed into him. His hands framed my jaw and he tilted me open, devouring me.

There was a noise at the hallway and Emmett appeared, squinting from the light.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “Did we wake you up?”

He smiled. “It’s fine. Wanted to make sure Holden got back okay.”

Holden straightened up. “Thanks for picking her up. I’m going to take her to my place.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

Emmett shrugged and turned. “Okay. Goodnight, you two.” He disappeared down the hall with a wave.

“I don’t think I should stay at your place,” I whispered to Holden.

He glared at me. “I’m not asking. You can’t stay at the inn. It isn’t safe.”

I chewed my lip. Sparks popped and fizzed in my chest in anticipation. By going to his home, I sunk one inch deeper into Holden’s life, making it that much harder to claw myself out.

“My bag is already in their guest room.” I swallowed.

He scowled down at me. “No.”

I shivered at his firm, demanding tone.

I was curious about his place. Every time I brought it up, he changed the subject or said he had bad Wi-Fi.

“Fine,” I whispered, holding his heavy gaze. “But just for tonight.”

He shook his head. “Until the inn is fixed and the arborist checks every tree.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so stubborn.”

He dropped a hard kiss onto my mouth before he pulled back to look into my eyes. “Yes, I am fucking stubborn, and the thought of you getting hurt makes me insane, so stop arguing, get your stuff, and get in the goddamn car so I can take care of you.”

This furious, bossy, protective version of Holden made me forget everything bad that had ever happened.

I nodded and bit my lip, and his gaze dropped to my mouth.

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WE DROVE UP FURTHER into the mountains before he pulled into a driveway. A house sat among the trees, but it was too dark to make out any distinguishing features, and he hadn't left any lights on.

Once we got out of the truck and jogged through the rain to the front door, I took in the modern log cabin architecture and large windows. He pushed the door open without unlocking it.

"You don't lock your door either," I pointed out.

His expression was wry as he followed me inside and flicked a light on.

"Oh." My mouth dropped open and my gaze roamed the foyer. "Holden. This is quite nice."

Wood floors stretched the length of the foyer, into the open concept living room with vault wood ceilings. Giant windows reached from floor to ceiling. He flipped another switch and the living room illuminated with warm light. The furniture was mid-century modern with some antique pieces from the early nineteen hundreds and modern accents. The seating area revolved around the TV, but a brick fireplace stole my attention. Built-in bookshelves towered along one wall, filled with books, picture frames, and a few decor knick-knacks.

A dark red rug with a Persian-style pattern spread over the living room floor, and a similar runner ran up the hall to what I assumed was the kitchen. Stairs led to bedrooms, I assumed. Beside us, a table held a couple books, a brown glass bowl, and a short lamp that had turned on when Holden had hit the switch beside the door.

Holden's home was like him—warm, inviting, and incredibly cozy. Rich with character, glowing with love and affection.

And the paintings. From where I stood in the foyer, I spotted three. One in the foyer spanned most of the wall, splashes of greens and blues and browns, so similar in style to a famous local artist. Another down the hall to the kitchen, a modern piece with jarring shapes and colors that somehow still worked in the space because it matched the runner rug's color palette. Another painting hung in the living room.

I gasped and pointed at it. "Holden, that's the other painting, like the one in the gallery."

On the canvas, a couple embraced, naked with faces buried in each other's necks.

He watched me for a moment before he nodded. "That's it."

The intimacy of the piece captivated me, holding my gaze. He had this in his living room. He stared at it every day. I thought about him with his head buried between my legs and my core thrummed.

I sighed. "Your home is lovely. It's like an old library."

He dropped his keys, phone, and wallet into the bowl. "I'm in construction," he said, as if that explained how his home had been so beautifully, carefully decorated. "Come on."

He began up the stairs with my bag and I followed without a word, pausing to study the photos on the way up. Photos with his brothers. A teenage Holden with the same brooding expression, too young for stubble but with that thick, dark hair I loved to run my fingers through. A smile pulled at my mouth. Even as a teenager, he was a grouch. Holden's gaze pinned me from the photo, simmering and brooding, and I swallowed.

He cleared his throat right behind me. He glanced to the photo I had been studying of him and his family before he tilted his chin up the stairs. "I put your stuff upstairs and I, uh," his gaze cut to mine, "ran you a bath."

I blinked at him. "I'm sorry. You what?"

He frowned deeper and his hand came to my elbow. "You're shaking."

My chest shook with shivers. My t-shirt, jeans, and socks were soaked. My hair stuck to the back of my neck.

He led me upstairs to the bathroom and something about it was familiar and comfortable. Like I lived there. Like we'd done this a hundred times. Something warm and longing shimmered through me.

I poked my head into the bathroom. Of course, it was beautiful as well. The standalone, modern tub shaped like a giant ceramic basin sat beneath a big window. No curtains or blinds or frosted glass, but his house was in the middle of the mountains so it was just the bears and raccoons peeping in. Dark amber tile decorated the floor. A bold choice.

Holden paused at the door, crossing his arms. The worry from earlier still lingered in his eyes. "I'll be downstairs. Or you can go to bed if you're tired." He stepped into my space and lifted my hoodie over my head, and then my t-shirt. His eyes dropped to my bare chest and my nipples prickled. His mouth hitched and he leaned down to press a kiss against my jaw, hands sliding my pajamas down.

I stepped out of them when they hit the floor and my body thrummed with anticipation. He straightened up to look at me and I bit my lip.



“Not now,” he murmured, kissing me again. “Get in the bath. You’re freezing.”

Bubbles floated on the surface of the bath and I could smell cucumber. A bottle of body wash sat on the counter. My mouth tugged into a smile. This was probably all he had on hand.

Holden had noticed I was cold and ran me a bath. My throat closed up and tears stung my eyes.

“Honey,” his voice was soft like velvet. “What’s the matter?”

I couldn’t tell him no one had ever taken care of me like him. No one had driven three hours in the middle of the night or drawn me a bath or bought me a stupid raincoat I loved.

I couldn’t tell him. It would change things. It would mean something.

So I shook my head. “I’m just tired.”

He nodded. “Have a bath and then I’ll tuck you in.”

I laughed quietly. “Always taking care of me.”

“Mhm. Always.” He dropped another kiss on my cheek and left the room, closing the door behind him.

When I stepped into the tub, I let out an embarrassing moan. A moan similar to what had slipped out of my mouth when Holden and I were in my bedroom. The water was the perfect temperature, just a little too hot, and my cold feet stung. I sighed and slipped down until the water hit my hair. I pulled my hair tie out and tossed it onto the floor, closing my eyes and inhaling the clean cucumber scent.

Even with the bathroom fan on, I could hear rain still pounding on the roof. I traced the edges of the tub with my pointer finger, studying the small room.

There was so much more to Holden Rhodes, and I wanted to dig it all up, inspect the information piece by piece like I was collecting pretty rocks at the beach. Every rock I turned over, every new piece of information about Holden made me fall harder for him.

I shouldn’t be here, in his gorgeous home. Just like I shouldn’t have let him stay over. I couldn’t help myself, though.

Holden was special, and when it was time to go home, every piece of him I had collected would weigh me down, making it harder to leave.

For the first time, I wished I could stay.



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## Sadie

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AFTER MY BATH, I padded downstairs and wandered into the kitchen. A record spun circles on the record player. Holden filled a kettle with water while watching sports replays on the TV in the living room. His gaze flicked to me, then my bare feet, before he hit the remote on the counter and turned the TV off.

“It’s fine, you can watch your own TV.”

He shook his head. “I’m just filling the silence.” He tilted his chin at the bar stool across from him. “You want to go to bed?”

Maybe it was the adrenaline rush from earlier still coursing through my veins or the stimulation of being in Holden’s home, but a jumpy twitchiness coursed through me.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

I slipped up onto the stool and he turned and opened a cabinet. As he reached for a tin, I studied his back muscles and the fascinating way they moved.

“Holden,” I started.

He turned and placed the tin in front of me before retrieving two mugs.

“Your home is beautiful.” I leaned my chin on my palm. His hair was starting to dry all unruly. My fingers twitched, remembering how it felt to drag my hand through it. I rolled my lips together and watched him.

He set his hands on the counter across from me, watching me with an unreadable expression. “Peppermint or chamomile?”

“Peppermint.”

He picked two packets out of the tin, ripped them open, and dropped the

tea bags into the empty mugs. *Queen's Cove Accountants—your money will make cents!* was printed on one of them. The other was for Disneyland. I slid the accounting mug closer to read it again before I shot Holden a curious smile.

“Are they saying you’ll lose money if you go there?”

He winced. “They were going for a play on words. No one had the heart to tell them.”

I grinned wider down at the mug. His gaze moved over my skin and sent a shiver down my spine. When our gazes met again, my stomach rolled forward.

The air crackled, like the moment before we kissed at the art rave.

The kettle switch popped up and Holden blinked and turned to pick it up before pouring boiling water into each of the mugs.

“Where are your socks?” His voice was low and his gaze stayed on the mugs as he poured.

“I forgot them at the inn.”

He set the kettle down and abruptly walked out of the kitchen. He returned a moment later with a bundle before he dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Foot.” His gaze rose to mine and there was something behind his eyes. Warm, liquid heat. Something sweet, too. Caring and comfortable. My throat squeezed and without a word, I stuck my foot out.

Gentle and slow, he rolled a wool sock onto my foot. His fingers brushed the side of my foot and I twitched. His gaze shot to mine.

“Sorry. Ticklish.”

He smiled and resumed rolling the thick socks onto my feet, past my ankle, over my leggings and halfway up my calves. His touch was so soft and careful but I felt it all the way up my legs to the spot between my thighs. My heart beat between my legs. My gaze locked on him and his hands. Ripples of heat moved through my limbs and my skin felt electric.

Holden putting my socks on shouldn’t be so sexy.

He finished putting the other sock on me and straightened up. “Didn’t want you to have cold feet.”

“Thanks,” I whispered, and more crackles went off around us.

He gave me a short nod before picking up our mugs of tea and tilting his head at the living room. “Come on.”

He followed me to the living room. I turned and his gaze lifted from my

backside.

“Were you staring at my ass?”

His eyes flashed with cheeky teasing. “Yes.”

I laughed and took a seat on the sofa, tucking my legs beneath me. He set the mugs on coasters on the coffee table in front of me before retrieving a blanket from the other side of the room, from a basket. He dropped it over me. It was cream, knit, and deliciously heavy and warm.

“Can I get you anything?” The low timber of his voice made me shiver again as he settled onto the couch beside me.

I shook my head and reached for my tea, blowing steam off it. “You don’t need to take care of me.”

“I like taking care of you.”

I bit back a smile and ignored the warm flush in my chest. “I like it, too.”

His eyes warmed when I said that and he relaxed further. His gaze stayed on me.

“I like you here. I don’t want you to leave.”

Did he mean he didn’t want me to leave after tonight, or ever? My pulse picked up, beating hard in my chest.

I swallowed. I could see the surface but I sunk deeper, and the worst part was I *loved* it here. Not just in his home, but in his life. Panic whirled in my head.

I needed a distraction.

“I have an idea.” I set my mug back on the coaster. “Blanket fort.”

He blinked and bemusement passed over his face.

“When I was a kid,” I explained, “I would get scared during storms so I would make blanket forts.” I stood, surveying the room. “We should make one. Where are your blankets?” I found the basket he had pulled my blanket out of. There were three more in there.

Holden sat frozen on the chair with his head turned toward me, watching me pull blankets out of the basket. “Blanket fort,” he repeated.

“It’ll be cozy and fun,” I told him. I reached out and poked the side of his mouth. His eyes followed my finger and when it touched his lip, the corner jumped. A flash of a smile. My breath caught. “You’re getting so good at having fun, Holden.”



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## Sadie

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A BLANKET FORT was a huge mistake.

I had wiggled into the cocoon of blankets and pillows first, and watched as Holden hit a switch beside the fireplace. Flames sprang to life and a moment later, warmth radiated from the glass.

All I could smell was Holden. He was everywhere in here. In the blankets. In the pillows. His masculine, clean, sharp, intoxicating scent filled my nose and my head and made my thoughts float around. It made my blood hum. It made the spot between my legs ache.

Holden slid into the blanket fort and his arm brushed mine. The touch shot sparks all the way to my toes. I was lying on my stomach and my nipples pinched. I held my breath.

He shifted to his side, propped up on his elbow, watching me. I shifted onto my side so I faced him, reached out to touch the corner of his mouth again.

The corner of his mouth tugged up again but I didn't pull away. I dragged my finger along the line where his lip met his chin, tracing softly. His gaze heated.

"You never told me why you avoided me all summer," I said softly.

His throat worked and he exhaled out his nose and his breath tickled the back of my hand. My heart was beating out of my chest.

"You're perfect." His lips moved against my finger. His gaze pinned me, simmering and filling with liquid heat. His throat worked. "You were perfect and you were leaving, and I had the most intense crush on you. Still do."

My breath caught as his hand wrapped around my wrist. He pulled my

hand forward and pressed a soft, lingering kiss on my pulse point. His stubble scraped the sensitive skin and my blood melted in my brain. My pulse beat between my legs. My underwear was damp.

“Your eyelashes are unfair,” I said, because my brain had short-circuited the moment his mouth touched my wrist.

He glanced up at me through those unfair lashes before pressing another kiss onto my wrist. My eyelids fell halfway closed and I let out a long breath.

“Yeah?”

I nodded, pressing my mouth together. My nipples pinched and my sensitive parts ached.

He nipped the inside of my wrist with dark eyes and I let out a soft moan before I crawled on top of him. I pressed a hand to his shoulder and he fell onto his back, watching me the entire time with that heated, hungry look. My body weight settled onto his and I leaned down to kiss him.

Holden’s hand wrapped around my waist as my lips brushed his. His stubble scraped my chin and I sighed with relief. His other hand came to my damp hair, threading his fingers in before he pressed his hand to the back of my head to pull me toward him more.

A low groan came out of his throat and he slipped his tongue against the seam of my mouth.

“Fuck, Sadie.” His murmur traveled straight to the spot between my legs and I shifted, straddling him. My elbows were on the floor beside his head, propping myself up and caging him in.

I tilted my head and slipped inside his mouth. His tongue tangled with mine and I exhaled again. His mouth was so needy and hungry. He explored my mouth like he was memorizing it, tasting me and stroking my tongue in a way that made my brain dizzy.

I sucked on his tongue and he made a noise of anguish and disbelief. He sucked on my tongue and my body twitched against his. A jolt of friction hit me between my legs and his arm slipped down from my waist, palming my ass. He squeezed me before I felt the sharp slap. I yelped into his mouth with a little laugh and opened my eyes.

His eyes blazed. My clit throbbed and I sucked in a deep breath. His hand squeezed my ass again and I clenched around nothing. Our gazes locked, suspended in time in our cozy blanket fort. Flames from the fireplace reflected off his eyes.

“Every time I see the paint in my car, I think about fucking you.” His low



voice rumbled against my chest and my nipples prickled, thinking about that night.

One of my hands found his hair, tangling into the soft strands and pulling lightly. His eyes fell halfway closed and he let out a ragged breath, like he was having a hard time staying in control.

“Every time I have a shower, I think about your cock,” I murmured. I shifted my hips and his hard length pressed between my legs. He focused back on me, watching me with a clenched jaw.

I leaned down and brushed my mouth against his skin below his ear. His stubble against my mouth sent sparks down my spine. My eyes were closed but they rolled back at the acute sensation of rough against soft.

“Tell me you touch yourself while thinking about me. Tell me you say my name while you come on that toy of yours.”

I pulled his earlobe between my teeth and he let out a tortured groan. The devil inside me grinned. “I think about you while I touch myself. I moan your name while I come on my vibrator.”

“Fuck.” His chest rose and fell and he closed his eyes. His throat worked and he inhaled a deep breath.

“Relax,” I whispered in his ear. My teeth returned to his earlobe and I gently scraped my teeth down it. He left out a soft moan.

“You’re torturing me.”

I shifted my hips against his, searching for friction, and he groaned. I smiled against his cheek. “Good. You’re too serious. You could use a bit of torture.”

“Come here.” He fisted my hair and tilted my head so he could take my mouth again, and I moaned as his mouth coaxed mine open. His tongue worked mine, taking my breath away. I drowned in him, head swimming, and it was the best way to die.

Kissing Holden was euphoria.

An unwelcome memory of Grant snuck into my head. He had been drunk after some event and we were back at his apartment, before we moved in together. He had tried to kiss me with his gross beer breath and sloppy mouth, and I made an excuse that I didn’t feel well and took a ride share home.

I had always felt lonely sleeping with Grant, like he didn’t care if I were there or not.

Not like with Holden. He gently nipped my bottom lip, yanking me back

to the present.

“Where’d you go?” he murmured against my mouth, tightening his hold on my hair. The pull made my scalp spark and tingle. I arched and pressed my chest into his.

“Nowhere.”

His fingers massaged my scalp and I melted against him.

“Stay with me, okay?”

I nodded against his mouth. My underwear was damp.

“You gonna be bossy with me tonight, honey?”

The low, teasing tone of his words made me shiver. I breathed a laugh against his mouth.

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” His hand rubbed light circles over the seat of my leggings. Too light. I shifted my hips to get more pressure from his hand but he lifted his hand away. “I like it when you’re bossy with me.” His hand returned to my leggings, teasing circles over me. “I think you like it, too.”

I thought about his head between my legs, and my hand on the back of his head, pushing him further. My core throbbed and I twitched again against him.

His hand slid up and into my sweater, skimming my bare back. I could feel the heat of his hand against me, and I sighed into his mouth as he slid his hand higher to between my shoulders. He made a hoarse noise in his throat. “No bra.”

“I’m going to make you come so hard on my mouth,” he whispered against my ear and I shivered. He dragged tantalizing, warm circles on my back, and in combination with the dim lighting in the blanket fort, the warmth from the fireplace, and the gentle thud of his heartbeat against mine, it lulled me into a blissful dizziness.

“I need it,” he murmured.

My center ached.

“Okay,” I said into his neck.

He flipped me on my back and I yelped in surprise. He didn’t have much room to kneel in the fort so he hovered over me, watching my face as his hand dragged up my leggings. His gaze was dark as he reached for the waistband.

“Your ass looks amazing in these leggings.”

I bit back a smile. His hand traced up my inner thigh and I shivered. My

underwear was wet. I watched his hands and his face with fascination. His thumb found the crease between my thigh and my pussy and he stroked it over my leggings.

My core throbbed again. A smug expression grew on his face while his dark eyes watched.

He leaned down and kissed me above my clit. My heart beat in my ears and I couldn't tear my gaze from Holden. He kissed the band of bare skin between the waist of my leggings and my hoodie before he slid the hem of my hoodie higher. He kissed a trail higher, higher, until he shoved the hoodie over my breasts and pulled a pinched peak in his mouth.

We groaned together. The suction of his mouth made my back arch.

"Holden," I gasped.

"Mhm." His lips worked one peak and his fingers worked the other.

I whimpered as electricity shimmered through my limbs. His teeth scraped one and my legs jerked. His other hand brushed my clit over my leggings, so gently I could barely feel it, but I gasped again.

"Holden!"

"Mmm?"

"You're teasing me."

He dragged his tongue over the point again and kneaded my other breast. I throbbed again and whimpered as pressure grew low in my belly. His finger brushed the seam between my legs again, one slow drag up the center and I bucked.

"Oh no," he murmured against my chest. "You're all wet again." He stroked a strong finger down, harder this time, and my eyes clenched closed.

I had never been this turned on in my life. Never felt this slick and empty. Never wanted anyone this badly. My body hummed and buzzed with need. My brain was somewhere else.

I couldn't think of a single reason we shouldn't be doing what we were doing.

I choked a laugh. "Are you trying to make me lose my mind?"

"That's exactly what I want. Tell me what you want, baby."

"Touch me."

He dragged a finger up my seam, still too gentle.

"Harder," I bit out.

He obliged, and he grinned against my nipple as he pulled it with his lips. His finger dragged up over my clit and he gave it a few firm circles, working

me higher.

“Again.”

He worked my clit over my leggings a few times, adding more fingers and more surface area. I moaned every time he touched the sensitive bud of nerves.

Holy hell, he was good at this. Too good. It was addictive, and I couldn't even think about leaving this blanket fort.

I tugged on his hair. “More.”

His eyes were glazed and dark, cloudy with lust, and the sight turned me on even more.

His hands came to the waistband of my leggings. “Lift your hips,” he murmured.

He slid my leggings and underwear down, taking care to pull them over my feet. I pulled my sweater over my head and there I was, naked in a blanket fort with Holden Rhodes.

My gaze roamed his broad shoulders. “Take your shirt off.”

He nodded and yanked it over his head. His muscles rippled as his arms moved and I studied them, fascinated.

“Pants.”

His hands came to his belt but his eyes stayed on me.

It was hypnotizing, telling him what to do and watching as he followed my orders. My power over this big guy intoxicated me. My throat worked as I swallowed, gaze locked on his as he undid his belt. The front of his pants strained with his erection. I bit my lip at the sight of it.

He pulled his belt out and I held a hand up with a sly smile. “Slower.”

The smug look in his eyes intensified. With my gaze, I traced his abs, pecs, shoulders, and biceps. His forearm muscles moved as he dropped the belt on the blanket and worked at his fly.

His eyes raked my form and my skin tingled. He pulled his pants off, shifted back to sit while he pulled them down his legs, and wobbled. His smug expression slipped as his foot tangled in the blanket and he toppled over onto his shoulder.

A laugh burst out of me. “You were supposed to take them off all sexy.”

He shot me a look of disbelief but a grin pulled at his mouth. “This blanket fort was designed for a Thumbelina.”

My chest shook with laughter as he yanked his pants over his feet and threw them out of the fort before his hands came to my arms and pulled me

forward.

“Boxers, too,” I said against his mouth, kissing him and laughing against his mouth as he struggled to maneuver in the cramped space.

“This was a terrible idea.” He laughed as he kissed my mouth with hunger.

The second his boxers were off, I reached for his cock. My fingers wrapped around him and he sucked in a sharp breath. I’d replayed this moment from last week over and over, picturing the surprise and pleasure on his face as I stroked him. Picturing his expression of agony as he came on my hand. I stroked him and he groaned. His forehead fell forward against mine.

His arms wrapped around me and he sank against me. We were sitting up still, my legs wrapped around his waist as I stroked and as our mouths tangled. His hands rubbed my thighs and my back and my breasts. There were everywhere.

His cock swelled further in my hand as I worked it. Pre-cum collected at the tip and I dragged my thumb through it. He jerked and gasped against my mouth. His hands locked around my wrists and he pulled me away. I made a noise of protest and nipped his lip.

“Tell me to go down on you.” He nipped my lip back. “Want to taste you again. I’ve been thinking about those noises you made. I need to hear them again.” His gaze met mine, dark and hungry and pleading. “Let me make you feel good.” His throat worked.

I nodded slowly. My skin was on fire. It was hot as the depths of hell in this blanket fort.

His hand came to my collarbone and he gently pushed me back until I was laying down. My knees clamped together out of habit and I took a deep breath, staring at the ceiling of the blanket fort, a white sheet with thin gray lines. I swallowed and let the breath out.

“Sadie.”

My eyes met his and affection passed through his gaze. “Now who’s the serious one?”

His tone was so gentle and soft as he skimmed his fingers up and down my thigh. He lowered a kiss to my knee, keeping his gaze on me, and I held it like a life\_raft. He reached for my hand and pulled it to his cock, standing at attention. I gripped it and it pulsed in my hand. My lips parted, fascinated by the thick length.

Holden raised his eyebrows, holding my hand over his length. “Okay?”

I knew what he was asking. It was the same as last time. *See what the idea of eating your pussy does to me?* he had asked.

His other hand moved up and down my thigh and he pressed another kiss on my knee, closer to where my knees connected. "Open up," he murmured, and I moved my knees apart. "Thank you."

I smiled to myself at him saying *thank you*.

"Something funny over there?" He brushed his mouth against the inside of one knee as his other hand skated closer and closer to the needy part between my legs.

"Nope," I breathed, hyperaware of everywhere he touched me.

"Good. Nothing funny about this." His teeth scraped the skin of my other knee, gentle and slow but so delicious. "This is very serious business. I take it very seriously."

A giggle ripped out of me and he met my grin with his own. His eyes blazed with desire and warmth and that grin lit his face up. He was gorgeous, smiling at me. I'd do anything to see it again and again.

He pushed my knees apart and his head fell between my legs.



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## Sadie

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“FUCK, YES,” he murmured, dragging another line with his tongue. My knees shook and my mouth fell open. “You are so fucking good, honey.”

I moaned.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

His voice was warm liquid, running over me and pooling on me, sinking into my skin. He pushed his tongue against my clit, flat and wet and warm, and my hips lifted off the blanket. His arm locked over me to hold me down and I made a frustrated noise of anguish.

“What’s that?” His tone teased. “Didn’t catch that.”

He sucked my clit and my hips lifted again, pushing against his forearm. My back arched hard and I gripped the blanket on either side of me, biting my lip.

“Use your words, honey.”

“Fuck.”

He laughed. “That one works, too.” He traced the tip of his tongue around my clit, not touching it, working me into a frenzy. His other hand moved from my hips to one breast, rolling the nipple and pulling another gasp from me. Every time his tongue got close to my clit, he backed away. I groaned again and shamelessly pushed my hips toward his mouth but he pulled back with a taunting look in his eyes.

“Am I going to have to tie you down?”

My core throbbed. I didn’t mind the idea. Not one bit. I swallowed. “You’d do it if I asked.”

His eyes lit me on fire. “I’d do anything you asked,” he bit out.



“Anything.”

His gaze dropped to between my legs and the taunting expression returned. The corner of his mouth lifted. “Come on,” he whispered.

We were the only people on earth in that moment. The way he looked at me, pleading and encouraging and hungry, it crackled in my brain. I pressed my lips closed tight.

“Say it.”

My chest rose and fell. My pussy ached, dripping wet. I could feel the wince on my face from how bad I wanted him to make me come.

“I need to come,” I moaned.

The fire raged in his eyes. “How. How do you want to come.” He didn’t ask, he stated.

“I need you to make me come with your mouth. Fast. Hard. Now.”

“There we go.” His head dropped and his mouth returned to my clit. No hesitation this time. He sucked, licked, worked my clit with his tongue and lips. There was a straight line from where his mouth worked to the base of my spine, squeezing. My blood boiled. I was saying something but I wasn’t sure what.

Holden. I was saying *Holden*, over and over again. My hands were in his hair, tugging groans out of his throat. He tapped the outside of my thigh and they snapped around his head like magnets. He groaned and buried his mouth deeper in me. His tongue worked inside me, on my clit, around my entrance, through my folds, everywhere. My thoughts fell all over each other, tangled and tripping and heaving.

He sucked my clit harder and I made a strangled noise. Heat pooled low in my belly. “Holden.”

“Mhm.”

His finger worked inside me. “Fuck. You’re so tight around my finger. So goddamn wet, honey.” He added a second finger and I whimpered at the delicious stretch of my muscles around him. He located the spot—*the spot*—and massaged it.

I bucked and my vision blurred.

“Let go for me.”

I jerked a nod, gasping for air, pulling his hair, and the next time he sucked my clit, I fell.

“Coming,” I gasped. “Holden, you’re making me come.”

I shook under his mouth, seeing stars and saying his name over and over,

along with *yes* and *oh my god* and *holy* and *just like that*. My limbs pulled tight and I froze as waves of pleasure rolled through me. Holden rode it out with me, fingers working deep inside me while I squeezed him, his other hand covering my breast.

I floated back onto the blanket, chest heaving for air and staring at the sheet above us. I never imagined *that activity* could feel that good.

But from the way Holden's cock was leaking pre-cum, and the way his gaze devoured me, it was clear. He liked it. A proud, smug grin pulled at his mouth. His hand skimmed my calf in calming strokes as I caught my breath and stared back at him.

I shivered at the way he was looking at me. His cock pulsed against his stomach.

"You want to go upstairs?" His eyes searched mine.

My heart tripped.

Upstairs was real. That was where Holden slept every night. It was different. I couldn't explain it. Here in this blanket fort, though? This was limbo, between all that serious stuff upstairs and whatever we were.

We weren't friends with benefits anymore. We were way, way more, but if I thought about leaving Holden behind in a few months, I'd start crying.

I was staying at his house. The reality hit me like a ton of bricks.

The second we left this blanket fort, everything would change. The thought was heavy, weighing on my chest. This was easy. I could do this, under the sheets and blankets.

Pinned by his gaze, I shook my head slow.

He lowered himself over me so his mouth was inches from mine. "You lured me into this blanket fort so you could fuck me in here?"

A laugh burst out of me. "That wasn't my intention."

His eyes warmed. "I'm yours to do whatever you want with."

*I'm yours*. The words melted in my heart and trickled into my bloodstream before I shook them away.

He leaned down to kiss me. The warmth of his mouth invited me to forget all the little worrying thoughts in my brain. Just brushed them right aside with every glide of his tongue over mine. While our lips were connected, he reached over my shoulder and fumbled around for his pants. There was a rustle and a slap of leather as his wallet flopped open and he slipped the condom out. He ripped the wrapper and nipped my bottom lip at the same time.

When he rolled the condom on, his eyes met mine. He settled in between my legs and pulled one leg up. His cock pushed at my entrance and he leaned down to press a kiss to the inside of my knee again, eyes on me the whole time.

“I forget what happens next.” His low voice made my core clench in anticipation. “Why don’t you remind me?” A cheeky smile played at his mouth.

I squirmed beneath him, trying to meet his hips but he held me down again. I huffed in frustration. “Now, you fuck me like we’ve both been thinking about since last weekend.”

He fed his cock into me and we both moaned. My body stretched in the best way around him and my back arched again.

“Holy hell,” I murmured.

His fingers dug into my hips. I could hear him breathing, long and slow. His jaw was tense. He didn’t move, just dropped his head back and let out an anguished noise.

“Holy fuck, Sadie.”

I squeezed my muscles around him and his biceps and pecs flexed.

“Holden.” I was breathless, wound up and tense, but my voice teased.

“Just a minute, honey.” He breathed through his nose like he was in pain, head still fell back before he lifted it and looked down at me, throat working.

He pulled out an inch and pushed back in and my eyes fell closed at the fullness. When I opened them, his gaze was possessive as he hovered over me, studying me as he slowly thrust in and out. The friction was intoxicating. It wound me tight again, making my toes curl and my back arch. Perspiration beaded on his forehead and his jaw ticked.

“You feel like heaven,” he gritted. “So tight and wet and incredible.”

I moaned as he thrust a bit harder, bottoming out in me. A tremor rolled through my body and his eyes lit up. The hunger in his eyes ratcheted up and he slowed the rhythm of his hips. My hands came to his chest.

Heat squeezed again, rippling through me like a wave, and Holden’s glazed expression turned devilish. He slowed down more and dragged his fingers over the tight bud of nerves.

I jerked and moaned and his eyes lit me on fire.

“Faster, Holden.”

“No.” More circles on my clit, firm and slow, dragging my wetness over me with delicious friction.

“If you keep slowing down, I’m going to—” My words broke off as his fingers worked.

His jaw clenched and the muscles in his neck corded. “I know. I want you to,” he gritted out.

The slow pace at which he fucked me was excruciating. The relentless stretch and pull scattered my thoughts. Heat squeezed tight and my core muscles rippled.

“I thought you liked it when I told you what to do.” My voice was high and strained.

“I like making you come more.” He glared down at me, brow furrowed and focused. “I like it more than anything.”

“Holden,” I repeated, uselessly.

“Sadie.”

It was the sweet way he said my name coupled with the vicious, possessive look in his eyes that made me lose it. The second one raced through me, making me buck, twist, and squirm while he fucked me hard, working my clit. He groaned as he shuttled his hips, falling forward, and I gasped into his tight shoulder.

“Fuck, Sadie,” he rasped as my body gripped his cock. “Can’t hold off.”

I nodded hard with a whimper. “Come with me,” I moaned, pressing my teeth against his shoulder as the last of my orgasm wrung me out.

His arms slipped around me and he buried his face in my neck, finding a fast, hard rhythm with his hips. He groaned, pulling me tight, and his whole body tensed as he swelled even more. One of my hands threaded back into his hair and the other scraped my nails down his back.

“Sadie,” he gasped into my hair, heaving for air before he crushed me with his weight.

His weight on me was incredible. We caught our breaths and my heart raced in my ears.

He heaved in a breath before pulling out and rolling off me. His gaze traced my skin, lingering on my eyes. He looked drained, like I ripped his soul out. “Fuck, baby. What are you doing to me?”

I let out a breathy laugh. “Bossing you around.”

He huffed a laugh and leaned over to give me a quick kiss before ducking out to deal with the condom.

I laid there, catching my breath, listening to my heart pound in my ears. Holden had made me come harder than I ever had in my life. He called me

honey and kissed the inside of my knees. He came to check on me when he was worried about me, and now I was staying in his home.

He made a blanket fort with me, even though it was silly and childish.

When he called me honey, I melted for him.

If I went back to Toronto, I'd miss him. Six months with him suddenly seemed way too short.

And when it was over? I'd pass him off to someone else so he could cherish her forever?

Absolutely fucking not.

These thoughts ricocheted around in my head as I blinked at the thin gray stripes on the sheet.

I didn't have a clue what to do next.



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## Holden

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“THE BARNFIELD COMMUNITY center project should wrap up early December,” Gurneet continued the next morning. Fifteen of us sat around the conference table, reviewing the status of all our projects.

I smiled at her. “Great. Nice work.”

She shot me a confused expression.

“What?”

“You smiled,” Zara said, narrowing her eyes at me. “What’s going on with you?”

I laughed. “What do you mean?”

Everyone exchanged glances.

“Did you and Aiden body swap?” someone asked and everyone laughed.

I rolled my eyes but my grin stayed. Every time my mind wandered back to last night with Sadie, my chest warmed.

Last night changed my life.

There was a light knock at the door of the conference room and Emmett popped his head in with a grin.

“Hey, everyone. What’s going on?”

“Holden is smiling at people,” Zara answered.

Emmett laughed. “Weird. Mind if I stay?” he asked me, taking a seat.

I shook my head. “Not all at.” He probably wanted to speak to me after the meeting about something.

As the next project manager reviewed her project, I tilted my head side to side, stretching my neck. Last night, Sadie and I fell asleep in the blanket fort and I woke up with her cuddled up into my chest, breathing softly and

looking so fucking perfect, like an angel. My neck and back were stiff from sleeping on the floor but I wouldn't change a thing. I saw the flicker of hesitation in her eyes when I suggested we go upstairs to my room. One step at a time.

Spending time with her last night made my solitary, quiet home feel like our own world. I loved having her there.

Her expression before she came as I buried deep inside her replayed in my head and I bit back a groan. She was so fucking *perfect*. She was made for me in every way and I hoped I was for her too. After last night with her, I understood intimacy.

“Holden?” Emmett’s voice jarred me from my daydream and I blinked.

“Hmm?”

He grinned at me and gestured around the table. “Were you going to announce the news we got this morning?”

My stomach tensed. Emmett still checked his email from time to time, and all the business development emails were automatically copied to him. I wasn't planning on telling everyone yet because I hadn't figured out what to do about it. The second I read the email, dread pitched in my stomach.

“As you all know, I was in Victoria this past week in negotiations for the twelve apartment buildings which will contribute to affordable housing on the island.” My throat knotted. “We received the contract this morning.”

“That’s great news,” Aiden said, beaming. “That project is huge.”

My stomach churned with misery.

“You must have wowed them,” Gurneet added.

“Somehow, he charmed them.” Emmett grinned. “The project should secure work for the next four years.”

I should be thrilled. Four years of work for the company meant more security for the staff. Affordable, environmentally responsible housing for the community benefited low-income families. Our work was exceptional so the apartments would be safe and high quality.

The job benefited everyone. Good things all around.

So why did it seem like this was the worst thing that had happened to me in months?

It hit me. Because of Sadie.

No more weekend adventures. No more time at the inn, teaching her to knock down walls and figuring out how to turn Katherine’s old side table into a bathroom vanity. No more forest walks.



This was going to be so much fucking work. I already had a full plate. Balancing the inn and work was already a struggle, and this would tip the balance. Something had to give.

My phone call with Sadie flickered into my head, just before the tree fell on the inn. I wanted to make space for good things in my life. I wanted to make a change, but I didn't know how.

Maybe this was how. I glanced at Aiden across the table, chatting with Emmett. Panic streaked through me at the idea of handing this massive responsibility to him.

Aiden ran smaller projects all the time with no issues. He understood the importance of our safety procedures and I'd never had an issue with him ignoring them. He cared about his work and his crew. How would he grow in his career if I never gave him bigger projects?

This project was bigger than anything he'd ever tackled, but Aiden had never let me down. Besides, I wasn't giving up control of the company. I would still be checking in daily with him, making sure the project was on track. I'd make regular site visits.

I only had a few months left with Sadie and if I wanted to make the most of my time with her, this is what I had to do, even if it fucking terrified me.

"Hey," I called to Aiden as everyone began standing and leaving. "Do you have a second? You, too," I added to Emmett.

"You bet." Aiden sat back down with a curious expression.

I took a deep breath, forcing air into my tight lungs. Emmett sat back and watched with interest.

"I'd like you to run the new project," I told Aiden. "If you're interested."

He reared back with a big, beaming smile. *Ken doll*, I remembered Sadie saying, and my mouth twitched.

"Yes." He blinked. "I would love to."

I nodded once. "You've been doing good work."

We talked for a few minutes about the project, the team he wanted to use, and the schedule before he headed out for lunch. Emmett pivoted his chair back and forth, studying me.

"What?" I snapped my laptop closed and stood.

His grin hitched and he leaned back in his chair. "That was unexpected."

"Don't get any ideas. I'm still not interested in bringing on a partner."

A sharp laugh burst out of him. "Yeah, I figured. You're a stubborn control freak." He tilted his head as if something occurred to him. "But I

guess that was before Sadie.”

My heart squeezed. “Yeah.” I shrugged. Why hide it, especially from Emmett. “Things are different now.” I cleared my throat. “Thanks for picking her up last night.”

He waved me off. “It’s nothing. I’m glad she was okay.”

I nodded and ignored the twisting tension in my chest at the memory of what happened. “Yeah. Me too.”

“So.” He raised his eyebrows at me, eyes glittering. “She’s staying with you now?”

I grinned and his eyebrows went higher.

“Interesting,” he said, smiling back at me. “Very, very interesting. You’re in a pretty good mood today.”

I smiled back at him with a shrug. “Just happy she’s safe.”

“I bet.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t wipe the grin off my face.

“I like seeing you like this,” Emmett said, rubbing his jaw and studying me. “And I like Sadie. Everyone does. She doesn’t put up with your bullshit.”

I scoffed. “What bullshit?”

“When I run down Main Street in the evenings, I don’t see your office light on.”

“I go to the bar until she closes. I still work at home some evenings.”

He tilted his head. “As much as before? You spend every weekend with her.”

“Not as much as before,” I admitted. “I like working at the inn. It reminds me of the old days.”

His expression turned solemn and guilty. “Before I left.”

I shook my head. “Long before you left. When we first started the company. Do you remember that first house we did?”

He grinned and his head fell back. “Oh, god. That project.”

It had been problem after problem. The walls ended up having asbestos. The foundation was cracked. There was a surprise oil tank from the fifties buried in the backyard, leaking toxic oil into the ground.

When the project was finished, though, and I had wandered through, noticing how much brighter the interior was with all the skylights, admiring the view from the new windows and balcony, it was all worth it.

The family had been thrilled to move back in. The project was personal.

I studied Emmett. “I don’t want you to feel guilty for going after what

you want.”

He leaned forward, concern all over his face. “The same goes for you. What do you want?”

I hesitated.

“Sadie,” I admitted. “I want Sadie.” I blew out a long breath.

“Is she...?” Emmett trailed off, waiting.

“Is she what?”

He weighed his words. “Are you two on the same page?”

I shook my head. “We’re not even in the same book. She has a whole new life waiting for her back in Toronto. She isn’t staying.”

He frowned. “Shit.”

I folded my arms over my chest. My gut twisted at the thought of her leaving.

Emmett stared out the window, thinking. “That doesn’t mean you couldn’t show her what it would be like.” He flashed me a roguish grin.

A thousand images flashed through my head at once of what things could be like if Sadie stayed. Us walking through the forest together, me carrying a baby on my back in one of those baby backpack things. Celebrating our anniversary with a weekend away in Victoria. Her cuddled up to me in the living room in front of the fire, drinking tea and listening to music.

Sadie was unsure about commitment, so I had to do everything in my power to show her how good our life together could be.



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## Sadie

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"I HEARD the creaking noise and then it was crashing through the window." I shrugged at the bar patrons. "It was kind of scary."

"And you were standing right beside it?" Miri asked, eyes wide.

I nodded. "I thought the raccoons were back."

"You were so lucky." Don scribbled another note as I talked. He glanced at the bandage on my arm. "Victim sustained minor lacerations." Off my confused expression, he explained, "I'll be including this in the Queen's Cove Daily."

Behind him, Holden watched and listened, eyes on me the entire time with an amused smile.

Our eyes met and my pulse stumbled.

I couldn't wait to get back to his place after the bar. It was mind-blowing, how good we were together. Holden touching me changed my DNA. Every time he made me come, he cracked me apart and put me back together in a new formation, better than before.

In the bar, I did another round to check if anyone wanted another drink before I leaned on the counter in front of him.

"Hi," I said, smiling at him.

"Hi, honey," he said back in that low voice of his. His eyes were steady and warm.

"How'd it go with the arborist today?"

"She'll be out next Monday. You get everything you need from the inn?"

"Yep." He had dropped me off at the inn to pick up my car and another bag of clothes and toiletries. My brain prickled at the thought of staying with

Holden for the next week. His home was beautiful, and the second I stepped across the threshold, I felt like I belonged there.

When I spoke with Willa on the phone today, we decided which furniture we'd keep for the new apartment. She was so excited.

I didn't belong in Holden's home, no matter how much I wanted to. I belonged back in Toronto. I owed it to Willa, so she could pursue her career as an artist. After how she had supported me when Grant left, I couldn't bail on her like that.

"We got that project." Holden's mouth turned up. "The apartment buildings."

I gasped, lighting up. "You did?"

He smiled wider, nodding.

"Holden." I walked around the bar to him before wrapping my arms around his neck in a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, honey," he said into my hair. He was so warm and solid, I could sink right into him. "I gave it to Aiden."

I leaned back to study him. "Aiden."

He nodded, something sweet and interested growing behind his eyes.

"I thought you would run that project."

His throat worked and he dragged in a breath, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm trying to cut back. I can't work like this forever if I want..." He cut himself off before he shrugged. His careful gaze returned to mine. "If I want other things."

I chewed my lip. If he wanted a wife and a family.

He must have really wanted those things if he handed off that massive project at work. My throat constricted, and I didn't know why. I knew he wanted those things. He had been upfront from day one.

So why did it stab me in the heart a little to hear him making steps towards them?

Because I wanted him to want me.

*Ugh. Sadie. You pathetic fool.*

His goals hadn't changed. I was the one losing focus over here, getting swept away by secret libraries and yellow raincoats.

I studied him, threading my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck, wondering what the hell his big flaw was. I tried to picture myself staying and Holden flipping the tables on me, ruining my life like Grant had.

I came up with nothing. He didn't have it in him. He'd drown me with all

the teas he brought me, give me a stroke from having too many orgasms, or I'd go missing because him and I were still walking in the forest, holding hands, twenty years later.

A customer caught my attention and I offered Holden a quick, tight smile. "Be right back."

"I'll be here."

I sighed as I walked over to the customer to take their order.

Why couldn't he be awful? Why couldn't he be slimy and chauvinistic and arrogant? Why did he have to be steady, kind, thoughtful, protective, and handsome as hell?

I felt like I was being tested, and I had no clue what the right answer was.

"Sadie," a customer said a few minutes later. "I heard about the tree. Are you okay?"

Over the rest of the night, I told the story of the tree falling at least a dozen times. Everyone had heard and the bar was busier than usual.

"If your arm hurts, you let me know, okay?" Olivia said later. She hadn't wanted me to work tonight but I insisted I was fine.

Besides, if I wasn't at the bar tonight, I'd be at Holden's place, which meant he'd be there too, and that was risky. Warm, inviting, and super fucking dangerous. I liked the idea of having him all to myself in his gorgeous home too much.

Elizabeth took a seat beside Holden and waved at me. I hustled over, and when I arrived, she stood and gave me a big hug.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she said, squeezing me, and my eyes welled up with tears. I blinked them away as fast as possible. Elizabeth was so freaking nice. She made me miss Katherine.

"I'm fine," I said, laughing lightly. "I'm totally fine."

She pulled back to search my eyes. "I know. I was just so worried when I heard what happened." Her gaze dropped to my arm. "You're hurt."

"No." I rolled my eyes and laughed. "I'm fine. I promise. Please, sit. Do you want a glass of wine?"

"That would be lovely." The worry lingered in her eyes.

"I'm fine," I said with emphasis. "Ask Holden. He'll tell you."

"Oh, yes," she said, beaming at him. "I heard."

He pretended to watch the TV above the bar and I smiled and walked away to get Elizabeth's drink. As I found the wine and poured her a glass, my heart squeezed thinking about how concerned everyone was for me. At least

two dozen people stopped in to the bar to say hi and ask if I was okay. My arm was totally fine and the cut was minor but people treated me like I had been stranded for days and had to chop my own arm off.

I snorted at the ridiculousness of it. People cared about each other here. This town was weird and strangely obsessed with my alien dildo—not *my* alien dildo—but they took care of each other.

Holden's family treated me like I was one of them. Emmett and Avery rushed to the inn last night and insisted I come over to their place like it was nothing, like it wasn't the middle of the night. They were worried about me and wanted to make sure I was safe, just like Holden.

I knew how rare this was, and how unlikely it was I would ever find this little bubble of love and warmth ever again.

Where would I even work in Queen's Cove? I loved working at the bar but I missed interior design. The inn was filling that void for me right now but once it was finished, I'd want something creative and challenging to fill my time. The bar was fun but it wasn't a forever thing.

I realized what I was doing and frowned at the wine glass in front of me. Holy shit. I was thinking about *moving here*? I had wanted to work for Claire for years, and now I was giving that up while fucking over my best friend?

It would be for him. I clenched my eyes closed as I scolded myself. I was doing it again. Deeper and deeper I sank. I was staying with him. I dragged a breath in and anxiety constricted my lungs.

I wasn't moving here. I wasn't giving up my entire life for a guy, no matter how much I liked him. It wasn't happening. I'd have no one to blame but myself and we weren't going back to that.

I took one more deep breath before I brought Elizabeth's drink over.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said and I couldn't help but beam back at her. She put me in a good mood. Her gaze snagged on Olivia passing behind me with a plate of wings for a customer. "Hi, honey," she said to Olivia.

Olivia stiffened and shot her a wary look. "Hi."

Elizabeth rested her chin on her palm and studied Olivia's pink hair, loose around her shoulders. "Your hair looks lovely. Did you color it recently?"

Olivia squirmed under Elizabeth's perusal. "Yep. I gotta run these to a table."

Elizabeth nodded. "Okay. Bye, sweetie."

Olivia hurried off like she couldn't wait to get away from Elizabeth, and I frowned.



A few minutes later, I paused while helping Olivia haul another keg out of the back room. “Why were you so weird with Elizabeth?”

Olivia didn’t meet my gaze. “I wasn’t.”

My eyes narrowed. I’d never seen them interact before, I realized. “Yes, you were.”

Her throat worked and she shrugged, picking at her nail polish. “I don’t know. She’s like, always trying to talk to me and make conversation and stuff.”

“What an evil bitch,” I droned.

She sighed and met my eyes. She pressed her mouth into a tight line and my heart twisted. Her eyebrows pinched with worry.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered.

She closed her eyes for a minute. “Don’t talk to anyone about this, okay?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“I think Elizabeth still thinks Finn and I are going to…” She trailed off but I nodded with understanding. She swallowed again.

“Oh.” I tried to summon Holden’s calm, steady nature. “And that’s not happening.”

She studied the keg at our feet but I had the sense her mind was very far away. “Nope.”

“Okay.” I straightened up. “What do you need from me? You want me to go out there and slap her?”

Olivia snorted and I grinned back at her.

“I’ll do it. Doesn’t matter if she’s Holden’s mom.”

Olivia laughed. “No slapping people in my bar.”

I put my hands up. “Fair. You’re the boss. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Can you handle her orders tonight?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

Our eyes met and I felt the sweet twist of female friendship rise up in my throat. This tiny slice of vulnerability from Olivia deepened our friendship a notch.

“You should stay,” she said, suddenly.

My eyebrows shot up. “Huh?”

She nodded, watching me, before she shrugged. “I mean, if you want to. You should stay here. I know you don’t want to work at the bar forever and

you're an interior designer, but you could figure something out."

I stuttered. Could she read my mind? "I can't."

"Why not?"

How could I explain that my life here was too good to be true? That it couldn't last forever and something was bound to go wrong, and I had surely missed all the signs? If I stayed, I'd be giving up so much without any guarantee. It was too risky.

"I have a whole life waiting for me in Toronto," I told her.

"Right." She watched me. "Well, I'll miss you when you're gone."

Emotion pinched me above my lungs and for the second time tonight, I blinked hard. I pointed at the keg at our feet.

"You're just going to miss me helping you with the kegs."

She snorted. "Yeah. That too."

I pictured Olivia and me hanging out at the bar, ten years from now, and my heart panged. It felt so real and seamless.

"I'll miss you, too," I told her.



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## Sadie

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“YOUR HOME SMELLS LIKE YOU,” I told Holden as we stepped through his front door that night, and he smiled while he kicked his boots off.

The blanket fort was still in the living room. I took a step toward it.

“Well,” I told him with a wave, like the fort was my bedroom. “Goodnight.”

He arched an eyebrow, humoring me, and waited.

I pressed my mouth into a line and stared back at him. My heartbeat picked up and nerves coursed through me.

“Let’s go upstairs.” His eyes were soft and he took a step toward me.

I stepped back. “I’m okay to sleep on the couch.”

He took another step toward me and I backed up against the wall. “I want to sleep beside you again, honey, and I don’t want to sleep on the couch tonight.”

Worry creased between my brows. The idea of moving here was already working its way into my head. I bit my lip and glanced at the stairs. I hadn’t gone upstairs today because I didn’t want to even tempt myself.

He stepped into my space and his hand brushed up my arm, sending shivers across my skin. “Aren’t you curious about what my room looks like?”

He leaned in to kiss the side of my jaw and all the air in my lungs rushed out.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Describe it to me.”

“Come see it for yourself.”

I made a noise of hesitation.

His eyes melted, soft as velvet. “What are you worried about, baby?”

“That I’ll love it,” I admitted.

He pulled back to search my eyes. “And what would be so bad about that?”

My throat worked. Because I’d stay forever.

When I didn’t answer, he pressed a soft kiss to my mouth. My hesitation wavered.

“You’re the boss,” he reminded me before pressing another kiss onto my lips. “If you want to sleep on the couch, we can.”

I bet his room was lovely, and his bed smelled like him.

One night wouldn’t hurt.

“Is your neck sore?” I asked.

His expression was rueful and a little embarrassed.

“I guess you *are* thirty-four,” I told him, wrinkling my nose, and he rolled his eyes at me. I thought about how generous and sweet he was, and I had the urge to give that affection right back. “How about I rub it better?”

His eyes darkened. “I would like that.”

“I thought so.” I glanced at the stairs before I nodded to him.

He took my hand and led me upstairs. When we reached the end of the hall, I stepped through his doorway and my hand flew to my mouth.

It was the painting Katherine bought from me years ago. My gaze shot to Holden’s and he nodded and sighed like he had let out a secret.

I pointed at the painting, gaping at him.

“Yeah,” he said.

“How did you...?”

He stood beside me, studying the painting with a thoughtful expression. “I always loved this painting. She’d catch me staring at it all the time and then she’d think of you and talk about you.” He shrugged. “I liked it when she talked about you, and I didn’t even realize it.”

My stomach wavered with a big feeling. Holden loved some dumb painting I did years ago.

“I asked you if you had seen it and you said no.” I wasn’t mad, just confused.

He watched me carefully. “I wasn’t ready to part with it. I’m still not.”

I shook my head in confusion. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Because then you’d know.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I blinked, but before I could freak out, I saw the other two paintings.

“Holden!” I pointed at the crappy paintings I had done at the inn, looking out Katherine’s office’s window at the ocean. They hung beside the painting of him crying. “I threw these little ones out.”

“I know. They’re beautiful, Sadie. They’re not garbage.”

I shook my head and put my hands on my cheeks, trying to understand it all.

Holden loved me.

The words filtered into my blood stream, winding and coursing through me, warming me and expanding deep in my chest.

Holden was in love with me, and he loved every part of me, even these dumb little paintings I did on a whim for practice.

I should be freaking out. I should sprint to my car and drive straight to Toronto this second. Instead, I felt seen, like I was important to Holden. Like everything would be okay.

*You’re okay*, he had told me at the beach all those weeks ago.

*I’d never hurt you*, he had told me at the art rave.

Maybe I’d be okay if I let myself fall deeper into Holden’s life. Into his bed. Into his family and his home and his love. Just a little deeper. One more taste.

I stared at the painting on his bedroom wall and my heart panged. Again, the thought of staying flickered in my head.

What about all my debt, though? If I didn’t find Holden a wife, I’d be back at square one, paying off my mistake for a decade. I’d be fucking over my best friend for selfish reasons. I’d be turning down the career opportunity I’d been wishing for since I sat in Claire’s first lecture.

I couldn’t make this decision right now. For tonight, I’d let myself sink one foot further into Holden’s life.

“You kept my paintings,” I told him before I stepped toward him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

He nodded down at me, eyes flickering with affection.

I leaned forward to kiss him.



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## Holden

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THE SECOND SHE KISSED ME, my control snapped. I kissed her like I wanted to, without holding back. Little moans slipped out of her throat as my tongue swept into her mouth, gliding over hers. I nipped her bottom lip and she let out a little gasp.

Her hands came to the hem of my shirt and we broke the kiss so she could pull it over my head. I helped her out of her shirt, undid her bra, and tossed it aside before I pushed her back onto the bed. Her tits bounced as she caught her balance and she shot me a lazy grin.

Fuck. My cock throbbed and I undid my belt while keeping my gaze on her. She leaned on her elbows, hair wild around her shoulders, heated gaze flicking between my eyes and my hands at my belt.

“I like you being in my room,” I told her.

I wanted it to be *our* room.

I yanked my belt out of the loops and threw it on the floor before shoving my pants and boxers down. My cock sprang free and her gaze dropped to it, fire flickering in her eyes. She bit that soft bottom lip and my length pulsed against my stomach.

She looked back up at me through her lashes. “We should talk about me staying here.” Her throat worked and worry flickered in her eyes. “And what it means.”

“No.”

She wasn't ready, and I didn't want to hear her tell me how temporary we were. Not yet.

I dropped to my knees in front of her and undid her jeans. When I tapped



her hips, she lifted them, and I slid them off so she was bare for me.

“Fuck,” I breathed, pressing kisses up the inside of her thigh. “Been thinking about this all day.”

“Me too.” Her breath caught as my teeth scraped higher on her thigh. She lifted her head to watch me, and when our gazes connected, I winked at her and reached up to palm one of those perfect tits.

All fucking day, I had been replaying last night. I couldn’t stop thinking about my tongue in her pussy. The soft moan she made when I bottomed out in her echoed in my head. My cock was half-hard all day. Watching her work tonight had been sweet agony. When she was ready to go, I was at the door of the bar in a shot, dragging her by the hand as she said goodbye to Olivia.

There had been something I’d been fantasizing about all day. I paused, kneeling between her legs.

Sadie’s eyes narrowed, breathing hard. “What’s that look?”

My mouth hitched. “I want to try something.”

“What is it?” She chewed her lip, hesitation flashing in her eyes.

I grinned wider, crawling over her on the bed. Her eyes were wide as I nudged her nose with mine. “You’ll see. You might even like it.” I brushed my lips over hers, soft and sweet. “God, you’re pretty. I ever tell you that?”

She laughed. “Only about a thousand times.”

I kissed her again. “So not enough then,” I murmured against her smiling lips.

She laughed again. “It’s enough. What was that thing you wanted to try?”

“Hold on a sec. Don’t rush me.”

I leaned on one elbow as the other hand slipped into her hair, tilting her head to get the perfect angle in her mouth. Our tongues stroked each other and I sucked gently, pulling a soft noise from her throat that raced straight to my cock. Against her stomach, my length dripped pre-cum. My thoughts moved slow in my head as I kissed her, drunk on her taste and the press of her breasts into my chest. I shifted my hips, sliding my aching length up and down her center.

“Jesus,” I bit out the second her wetness touched me. “Love the way you get so wet for me.” I reached down to brush a finger over her and she bucked against my hand. Her eyes closed as I stroked her.

“Oh my god,” she breathed.

I kissed down her jaw, nipping the soft skin and watching her expression of agonized pleasure as my fingers worked her. I stroked a finger inside and

her breath caught. Her inner muscles squeezed my finger and I added a second. She inhaled and let out the breath as a long moan, her hand coming up to my chest. I kissed her temple.

“I love seeing you so close to coming on my bed like this,” I murmured.

She huffed a laugh but dropped it when I brushed my thumb over her clit. “Oh,” she gasped. Her eyes were closed again as I stretched her with my fingers.

I looped my arm under her back and flipped us so I was laying on my back and she draped over me, legs open. My hand returned to between her thighs, slipping inside her soaking pussy, searching for that sensitive spot.

She jerked and moaned. “There,” she gasped against my chest.

My mouth hitched. Found it.

I loved her like this, desperate and pleased and gasping against me. Hair spilling all around her, all over my skin. Writhing, breathless, and draped over me. Her hands grasping my shoulders, nails digging in, shooting electricity straight to my cock.

Her muscles squeezed me again and her back arched.

“Holden,” she gasped, wincing as my finger worked her G-spot. “Let’s talk about how long I’m going to stay for.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with me making you come on my hand?” My thumb swirled her clit and her hips jerked. My hand palmed her ass, squeezing and kneading and guiding her as she tilted her hips against my fingers. She moaned again as I pressed my thumb against the bud of nerves.

“I just—um,” she gasped as I massaged her G-spot, rubbing hard to work her up before pulling back with softer touches. “Wow. That feels so good. Um. What was I saying?”

“Something about how good it felt.” I slapped her ass again and she cried out. My mouth hitched.

“We want different things.” Her eyes were closed tight and I added a third finger. They snapped open and her back arched again. “Oh my god.” She shook her head and her glazed eyes met mine.

“Fucking beautiful.”

“And I don’t want to disappoint you.” Her head fell back onto my chest.

“You’d *never* disappoint me, honey,” I growled. “Never.”

“I can’t move here.”

I froze, fingers buried in her, hand on the soft curve of her ass. Her limbs were everywhere. Her wetness coated my hand and my stomach beneath her.

My cock was so hard it hurt. My balls ached for her. She was a minute from coming and she was throwing everything she had at me to keep us apart.

Something unwelcome streaked through my chest. Sadie in my bedroom felt right, more right than anything I'd ever experienced. Like the missing puzzle piece in my life. My dream girl, who made blanket forts and poked my mouth to make me smile, gasping my name in this room.

I wanted it to be our room.

"You're the boss, honey." I stroked her with my fingers, long and slow, and her head dropped to my chest as she shuddered out a ragged breath. "What do you want?"

She didn't answer, just moaned as I kept stroking her. She wanted this, but she was scared, because everything between us was big, intense, and real.

Something wrapped around my heart. I was scared, too.

In a quick motion, I lifted her and slipped down the bed so her pussy was inches from my mouth. Her incredible, musky scent made me harder and her folds glistened with her arousal. My fingers dug into her hips and I pulled her down to me, driving my tongue up into her wet entrance.

We groaned together and she tremored around my tongue.

"Holden," she gasped, trying to wiggle away. "I'll crush you."

"So crush me." My tongue worked up and down her folds, swirling her clit. I squeezed her perfect ass, cupping it and kneading, pulling her further to my mouth. "Kill me with this incredible pussy. Make my last breaths the best of my life."

Above me, her hands came to the headboard, back arching and tits heaving as her chest rose and fell.

"I'll be fucking my hand to the sight of you riding my face for the rest of my life," I growled against her entrance before swirling my tongue over her.

She ground against my lips, needy and desperate. I sucked her clit and she bucked.

"Have you thought about staying?" I demanded, working her pussy on my fingers. "Have you pictured it?"

She huffed, arching her back as I touched that spot inside her.

"Have you?" I bit out.

"Yes," she moaned. "Okay? Yes, I pictured it."

A slow, lazy grin pulled at my mouth as I watched her ride my hand and mouth. The best view in the whole goddamned universe.

"We're done being friends with benefits," I told her. We were anything

but friends. Liquid flooded my tongue and I grinned against her swollen lips. “You’re staying with me until March.”

She moaned and leaned her forehead on the headboard, hair hanging down in a curtain while I sucked at her clit.

“I’m still figuring everything out.” Her words came out in stutters and gasps.

“You taste so fucking sweet.”

“I can’t do anything serious.”

“This was serious the day I met you. Come for me, honey. Come on my mouth like I need.”

“Holden.” Her muscles were so slick, squeezing my fingers with first flutters as I worked her front wall. “Please, Holden.”

“I’m the one who’s supposed to beg.”

She huffed out a laugh, eyes still closed and face against the headboard.

She wasn’t ready for more, yet, but I’d wait patiently until she was, fucking the life out of her and pulling pleasure from deep within her body.

“Holden, I’m going to explode.”



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## Holden

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“LET GO, HONEY.”

She moaned.

“Tell me.”

“Holden,” she managed. “Make me come.”

She gasped as I sucked her clit hard, worked her G-spot harder, and the orgasm tore through her. Her legs clamped against the sides of my head and I groaned into my sweet center, giving her everything. I was in heaven, her grinding herself and crying out like this. My skin burned with need and my cock leaked pre-cum all over my stomach as she gasped my name over and over again against the headboard, anointing this room as *ours*.

*Mine*. Sadie was mine. She was written into my DNA, she coursed through my blood, her image singed into my brain.

The tremors slowed around my fingers and I eased the suction back a fraction at a time, bringing her down soft and easy. She collapsed onto the headboard and I lifted her down my body so her head could rest on my chest while she caught her breath.

She heaved for air, resting on my chest. I was hard as a fucking rock, so turned on it hurt, but I clung to this moment the way I clung to her against me.

“Anything you want,” I murmured into the top of her hair.

She lifted her head, eyes glazed like she was drugged, mouth hanging open and breathing hard. Her hair was a mess. She nodded like she was in shock.

“Uh-huh,” she said.

Warmth expanded in my chest and my mouth hitched. “Honey, you’re a mess.”

She huffed an embarrassed laugh, pushed her hair off her face and pressed her lips to the center of my chest. My heart beat against her mouth and her eyes met mine. Something passed between us.

“You can pretend this isn’t serious but we know the truth.”

Her gaze held mine and she chewed her lip.

She wanted it, I knew she did. I could see it behind her eyes, the same yearning I carried around with me for so long.

“I’ll never do what he did,” I told her, threading my hands in her hair and studying her eyes. “I’ll never hurt you. You know me better than anyone.”

Her throat worked and she nodded before she leaned over to kiss me.

My chest strained with the need for her to believe me. For her to believe in *us*.

My hands tightened on her hips before I reached over to the bedside table and pulled the drawer open. Her gaze followed the long line of my arm as I stretched and her hands roamed my chest.

“You have the perfect amount of chest hair.” Her soft fingertips skimmed my pecs.

I tore the wrapper open and rolled it down my length. “So do you.”

A laugh burst out of her, making her shake over me. Her eyes filled with light and her skin glowed. Her hair was wild and unruly and I’m sure mine was too.

I loved her like this. My dream girl. Smiling for real at me, laughing and naked and open with me. Letting me please her and work for her.

I’d work for her. I’d work for her so fucking hard.

“Holden?” The smile dimmed as she stared back at me. She swallowed. “You okay?”

I always liked it when she said my name but this one drifted out of her mouth, floated onto my chest, and sunk into my heart, where it would stay for the rest of my fucking life.

I nodded, throat tight, and sucked a breath in through my nose.

“Good,” she whispered, before she lifted her hips, circled her fingers around my cock, and nudged me into her entrance. I gripped her hip, guiding her, heavy gaze locked on hers. She stretched around my length, so warm and slick and soft and tight. Her eyes fell closed and she moaned.

“Fuuuuuuuck.” My voice was ragged. Heat and pressure built low in my

stomach and I clenched my teeth together, breathing hard. My fingers dug into the soft skin of her hips and she slid down until I was in to the hilt.

I held her down on me and dragged my gaze down her body, sitting on top of me with a wide-eyed expression of pleasure. She blinked and breathed through her nose.

“It’s so good, it hurts,” she whispered. Her hands splayed wide on my chest and her fingers flexed against my skin at the same time her pussy clamped me. “So, so good, Holden.”

“I know, baby.” Pressure squeezed the base of my spine. My head pounded with blood. It was too good, being inside her. My skin was on fire, lit up as electricity ripped through my veins. A primal, possessive, desperate need to fuck rose through me and my hands shook as I moved to palm her tits.

“I’m going to go too hard,” I managed. I could feel my brows pinching and the desperate look on my face. “Going to lose it.”

“So lose it.” Power flickered through her eyes and she pulled her bottom lip into her mouth.

My eyes closed, brain short circuiting. I pulsed inside her. “Sadie.”

“Holden.” Her voice teased.

“Take what you need,” I gasped. My vision blurred and I sucked another breath in. She squeezed my cock with a look of mischief and my balls pulled up to my body. “Please.”

She shifted her hips and I groaned. She rose and slid down my cock so I was inside her to the hilt. Pleasure and lust pressure-cooked my brain.

“Like that?” She did it again, eyes gleaming. Her tits bounced with her motion.

“Just like that.”

Her hands flattened on my chest as she leaned forward, working my cock between her legs, and her mouth opened. The sight ripped the breath from my lungs.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” My voice was jagged as I held on to the last shreds of sanity and control. “An angel.”

Her gaze flared down at me and a smug expression washed over her face as she bounced up and down on my cock a little faster. My hands covered hers on my chest. My pulse thickened and heat pooled low in my belly. My abs flexed tight and sweat gathered on my forehead. Every muscle in my body pulled tight.



*Not yet not yet not yet not yet not yet not yet one more minute please please please one more moment like this.*

She flexed around me, I pulsed. Her eyes met mine in surprise. “Oh.” Her head tilted to the side as she leaned back a couple inches and her eyes went wider. “Oh,” she gasped, different this time. Her surprised expression melted into pleasure and she bit her lip. “Right there.” She moved faster and sucked in a breath.

One of my hands slipped out from under hers to brush her clit.

She jerked and squeezed me when I touched the tight bud of nerves. My body strained and sweat poured off my forehead with exertion but I held on with everything I had.

“One more,” I bit out.

I gently stroked her clit and she let out a long, low moan, head falling back. Tits bouncing as she rose and dropped onto my aching cock. Long, delicate neck bared for me. Hands pressed urgently into my chest, fingers tensing each time my length stroked inside her soaking pussy. I swirled the pad of my thumb over her clit in fast circles and her tremors began.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I urged her. “Come on.”

She nodded again and again and my hips thrust up to meet her, pound into her harder. She cried out.

“Say my name.” I was coming apart at the seams, holding on with everything I had as she fluttered harder around my cock.

“Holden.” She gasped it, eyes clenched closed. Her core clamped down on me and fucked her hard from below with everything I had. She shook and gripped me like a tight fist. I choked on air, drinking up everything she was giving me.

“Come with me.” Her words slipped out as moans. “Please. Need you to come with me.”

Fire seared up my spine into my brain and I came hard, releasing everything deep inside her with a shout. Our gazes locked and the moss green of her eyes cut my brain in half and then cut it in half again. My body bowed towards her, lost in her eyes, buried deep within her where I belonged.

Right. This was so fucking right. Nothing would ever be as good as this moment with Sadie sitting on my cock as she worked my soul out through my cock. Nothing.

I fell back onto the pillow, drained, blood still rushing through my ears and heart pounding in my chest. Sadie let out a satisfied sigh and leaned

forward. I pulled her against me, one hand locked tight around her back and one in her hair as I caught my breath. My chest was slick with sweat but she didn't notice or care.

"Holden," she sighed against my chest. "Having sex with you is the best thing I've ever experienced. I never thought it could be like that."

My heart fucking *sang* when she said that. I smiled into her hair, heart rate slowing. Post-orgasm sleepiness crawled through my brain like fog.

"Fucking you is what I was made for," I said into her hair.

She laughed softly and my heart twisted at the sound. I closed my eyes to memorize it.

A few minutes later, when I had taken care of the condom and brushed a washcloth over her, grinning at her embarrassed smile, I pulled her under the covers and against my chest.

Sleep bled into the edges of her eyes but she gazed up at me, watching. Her hand flattened on my chest, stroking lightly.

She gazed back at me like we were the only people on the planet.

I loved her.

It bloomed in my chest, warm and tight. I was head over fucking heels, stars in my eyes, head in the goddamned clouds *in love* with Sadie Waters.

I realized something. All those guys before me, they took from her in different ways. Begging her to stay would be selfish.

I couldn't ask her to choose me over everything she had waiting in Toronto. It had to be her decision.

We lied there a few moments, hearts beating against each other, sinking into the bed and listening to each other's breath. I reached over to turn the bedside lamp off.

She inhaled a deep breath and let it free, deflating and relaxing against me. I pressed a kiss on top of her head and inhaled her hair. She made a muffled *mmm* noise against my chest and I smiled.

When I had gifted her the boots and raincoat, happiness had radiated out of Sadie, like she couldn't believe someone would do that for her.

An idea formed in my head. I didn't have to tell Sadie I loved her.

I'd show her.



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## Sadie

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TWO SUNDAYS LATER, Holden and I were walking along the beach in a neighboring town. The rain had let up for the afternoon and we had spent the morning in bed before I dragged Holden out to have our Sunday adventure.

I slipped my hand into his as we wandered down the beach, watching the waves crash on the shore. He looked down at me and smiled.

“How’d painting go this week?” he asked.

My mouth twisted and I shrugged. “Fine.”

A couple mornings after I started staying at Holden’s, I walked past one of the spare rooms to find him setting up my easel and painting supplies. The morning light shone through the trees and lit the room up. Sometimes I opened the window and listened to the birds chirping.

I’d been thinking about Holden’s words at the art gallery, about trying to paint another self-portrait. I’d shoved it to the back of my mind for years but the idea was back with a vengeance. Holden’s encouragement and belief in me made me want to do it.

Every time I set up my paints and stared at the blank canvas, though, I came up with nothing. I didn’t even know where to start.

As if he could sense my frustration with myself, his heavy arm came around my shoulder, anchoring me.

“It’ll be okay,” he murmured in my ear. “Give it time.” He pressed a kiss to my temple and I leaned into his chest.

Being with Holden was so easy. Every day, I forgot another reason why we shouldn’t. The friends with benefits thing was far in the distance and I didn’t have a clue what we were now.

I avoided bringing it up, in case we uncovered something that would undo it all. I wasn't ready for everything to come undone.

"Did the arborist find anything?" I asked him.

He shook his head, eyes on me with an unreadable expression. "You're not going back to the inn, though. I like you staying at my place."

My heart thrummed with pleasure. This was terrible, and I knew this was terrible, that I enjoyed this pushy, protective side of him. I thinned my lips to hide a smile.

"Fine," I said, as if it didn't thrill me. I hid my grin.

His phone buzzed and he read who was calling before turning to me. "I need to take this. Be right back." He pressed a quick kiss on my cheek before striding off with his phone to his ear.

I stared after him with narrowed eyes. Discomfort swooped and dipped in my stomach.

Holden had been acting weird in the past two weeks. Not bad weird, just... different. He took phone calls in the other room. The owner of the hardware store was chatting with him at the bar and abruptly ended the conversation when I stopped by, like they'd been talking about me. When I asked how Holden's day was or what he had done that day, sometimes his answers were vague or he changed the subject.

He was keeping something from me.

I sat on a log at the beach and watched him talk on the phone. He said something before listening and nodding. His gaze moved to me and he smiled and winked at me.

My stomach pinched. It was happening again.

*He's not Grant*, I reminded myself. I never knew Grant's family. I never connected with Grant like I did with Holden. Holden had opened up his entire life to me, not the other way around. He cared about me. What did I have that he wanted? Nothing.

Holden loved me. He hadn't said but I knew he did. It was in every glance, and every brush of his fingers over my skin.

Grant never loved me. None of those other guys did.

It was fine. It was just a few phone calls.

But why didn't he want me to overhear? I thought about a book I had read shortly after the whole Grant thing happened, about fear instincts. It said we had been through millions of normal interactions, and our guts always knew when something wasn't right.

Holden walking away while he was on the phone was weird.

My stomach tensed. I leaned my chin on my palm while I waited, watching him.

When he hung up, he walked toward me, hands in his jacket pockets and watching me with a warm gaze, and my shoulders eased as I admired him. A gust of wind blew his hair back and I held back a sigh of admiration.

He was so goddamned handsome.

“Let’s get lunch,” he suggested, holding his hand out.

I stood and brushed the sand off my jacket from the log.

It was nothing, I told myself. Holden couldn’t be more different from Grant.

We headed to the town’s main street and strolled past the shops on our way to the sushi restaurant. Holden’s hand wrapped around mine, keeping me warm during the chilly day. We passed a jewelry store and he stopped.

His gaze traveled over the rings in the window. He glanced at me and tilted his head to the store. “Let’s go inside.”

Something in the window caught my eye and my stomach dropped.

It was my ring. Or, my old ring. My actual old ring was probably still sitting in that pawn shop back in Toronto, but it was the same design, with gold instead of silver.

It sat in the display case under glass, sparkling. When Grant had presented it to me, I had gasped in awe and delight. It was the most beautiful piece of jewelry I had ever seen.

I stared at it, stomach twisting like I was going to be sick. My lip curled. It hurt my eyes.

That ring reminded me of everything I could have walked into by getting married. I couldn’t believe I was so stupid as to trust Grant with my entire life.

“I’m hungry,” I lied, staring at it. “Let’s get lunch.”

Holden arched an eyebrow at my disgusted expression. “It’ll just take a moment.”

Every cell in my body protested. He tugged on me hand but I stayed rooted in place. My lungs constricted, like someone was sitting on my chest.

Alarm streaked through me and my stomach tightened into a tiny ball.

“You go in and I’ll wait outside.” My voice sounded strangled.

He stared at me, eyes narrowing. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn’t. The words wouldn’t form in my mouth.

I shook my head, staring at the ground. "I don't want to go in the store."

"Why not?" He took a step toward me.

"Because I don't!" I burst out, eyes wide. My gaze darted around and I heaved in a breath. I couldn't get enough air. I glanced at the ring again.

I hated that stupid fucking ring. I hated everything it represented. My stupidity. My naiveté. All the debt I was in. That ring reminded me I once had big dreams and now I had nothing.

I swallowed past a lump in my throat, still staring at it.

"Honey." Holden led me away from the store and I let him. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

The further we got from the store, the easier it was to breathe. By the time we got to the sushi restaurant, I could almost take full breaths again, although that panicky, shaky feeling still rattled through my blood.

"Sadie." Holden's hands rested on my shoulders and he peered down at me. His gray eyes were bright and concerned.

"I don't want to go in there," I said in a small voice.

He frowned. "Can you tell me why?"

I met his gaze and thinned my lips. "The ring in the window, it was the same design as the one he gave me."

He nodded slowly with understanding. "Got it."

"I freaked out."

"I noticed."

"I'm sorry."

He gave my shoulders a gentle squeeze, his expression so pained. "Honey. Don't be sorry. It's okay." He pulled me into a hug and I sunk into his chest, resting my head against him and closing my eyes for a moment. The tension in my chest and stomach eased as he rubbed my back in slow, steady strokes.

"You're okay," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

I nodded against him.

We stood like that for another minute until my pulse slowed to a normal pace.





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## Sadie

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AFTER LUNCH, we strolled back to the car, hand in hand, and an open house sign caught my attention.

“Do you want to go inside?” I asked him, biting my lip. My shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I like going to open houses for fun sometimes, just to see how they have everything laid out. It helps me get ideas.”

His mouth curled up into a warm smile. “I remember. Let’s do it.”

Oh, right. I had told him that back at the Juicy Taco night, all those months ago. Before I got to know him.

At the front door, the real estate agent greeted us and handed us a brochure before we wandered through the home.

The house was built in the seventies or eighties. We stepped into the living room and my mind whirred with ideas.

“What do you think?” I murmured to Holden, keeping my voice low so the agent wouldn’t overhear. “Mahogany hardwood? Or something lighter.”

“I think lighter.” He frowned, surveying the room. “Not enough light in the room for a dark wood.”

“Could add a few sky lights.” He snorted and I grinned up at him. “You know I love my sky lights,” I told him.

The second we stepped into the kitchen, I grabbed his arm with wide eyes. “This linoleum has to go,” I whispered, and he nodded at me. The main floor of the house had been divided up into rooms like older homes were, same as the inn.

“Could we remove the wall between the kitchen and living room?” I whispered. “It would open up this space so much.”

He studied the wall. “It doesn’t look like it’s supporting.”

“This kitchen would be amazing with an island right here,” I said, gesturing to the center of the kitchen. “With cool pendant lights, and some shelving storage here.” I pointed at the wall beside the breakfast area.

Holden peered through the sliding glass door to the back yard. “The yard is big enough for a deck.”

“Right. Like at your parents’ place.”

He nodded. His eyes narrowed as he thought it through.

All the worry from earlier in the day bled to the background as we tossed ideas back and forth about how to update this old home.

“Come on.” I beamed at him. My stomach fluttered with excitement. “Let’s look at the bathrooms,” I whispered in a sexy voice.

He wiggled his eyebrows at me, walking over. “Maybe the tiles will be *brown*.”

I gasped in faux-horniness. “Don’t get me all turned on in public.”

He snorted and wrapped his arm around my shoulders as we walked down the hallway.

Once we left, I gave his hand a squeeze as we walked down the street. “That was fun.” Flexing my creative muscles and tossing ideas around with Holden had put a bounce in my step.

He nodded and the lines around his eyes crinkled when he smiled down at me. “We’re good at coming up with reno ideas.”

I nodded and gave him another squeeze, bumping him with my shoulder. His gaze lingered on mine and my heart tugged.

On the drive home, the job with Claire trickled into my mind and I chewed my lip while I stared out the window. After spending so much time at the inn, redesigning restaurants and hotel lobbies didn’t seem so spectacular anymore. People didn’t live there, they were just businesses. They weren’t personal like the inn was.

I caught myself. Claire was my mentor. She made everything fun and exciting. She brought passion and purpose to everything she did.

Were restaurants and hotel lobbies *my* passion and purpose, though? Would her enthusiasm be enough for me?

*It feels like my purpose*, I had said to Willa when telling her about the inn.

I frowned. The inn was almost done. We had finished the floors and the secret library entrance yesterday. I had spent a week scraping wallpaper off the bedroom walls, but I couldn’t bear to fully remove it, even though it was

hideous. I left a picture-frame sized square in each room. I'd mount a picture frame over it.

Katherine chose it. I liked that her memory stuck around with that tacky wallpaper. Besides, she would think it was funny.

The inn was almost over, so why was I clinging to this idea that renovating it was my purpose?

I glanced across the front seat of the truck at Holden, driving with a faraway look in his eyes, like he was also lost in thought.

It was time to admit to myself I didn't want to leave Queen's Cove, and I didn't want to leave Holden. My knee bounced as the truth became clear.

If I stayed, what would I do for work?

In the cup holder between us, Holden's phone buzzed and I watched as he glanced at the caller before ignoring it.

"You can take that if you want," I said, watching his face closely.

He shook his head. "I'll call them back tomorrow." He glanced at me. "Next week, I need to have the drywallers come back to the inn for a couple days."

I frowned. "For downstairs?"

He shook his head, staring out the windshield. There was a glimmer in his eyes. "For the window upstairs. It's cracking and I want them to redo it. I don't think they supported it enough." He cleared his throat and shot me a quick glance before turning back to the road. "So you should give them some space to work. They'll be there Monday through Wednesday." His throat worked as he swallowed.

My stomach dipped again. "You're acting weird."

His gaze shot to mine, eyes wide. "Am I?"

"You've been taking a bunch of calls and it's like you don't want me to overhear." I shook my head, dragging air into my lungs. Tension pinched me again. "I have a bad feeling." My hands came to my cheeks and I winced. "I feel like this is Grant all over again. Holden, I'm freaking out. I'm feeling crazy."

He blew a breath out. "Shit. Okay. I wasn't thinking. Yes, I've been taking calls I didn't want you to overhear." He shot me a tentative glance. "I have a surprise for you, but it's not ready yet."

Oh. A few knots in my stomach loosened. A surprise. I cocked a grin at him. "Is it that you're going to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars from me?"

He snorted. “No. You already told me you don’t have any money.”

I laughed. “I don’t.”

His eyes were warm on me. “Honey. It’s a good surprise, I promise. Do you trust me?”

I dragged a long breath in, closing my eyes for a moment before opening them. His gaze alternated between me and the road. The tension in my stomach unwound by half. “Yes.”

He reached over and squeezed my hand. “Good.”

*See?* I told myself. I was overreacting. I had been burned and now I was searching for Grant in Holden, when Holden couldn’t be more different from him.

Holden squeezed my hand again and I squeezed back. A surprise, huh? I bit my lip with excitement as butterflies flitted around in my stomach.

“Can you give me a hint?” I asked him.

He laughed. “No.”

I sighed. “I had to try.”

I smiled out the window, wondering what my surprise could be.



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## Holden

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I STOOD outside my front door, bouquet clutched in my hand, pulse pounding in my ears.

*Here we go.* This was the night I had been putting together for weeks. I hated keeping things from her, especially when she broke down in the car last weekend and I could see how stressed she was that I was keeping something from her.

The look on her face would be worth it, though.

Tonight, I'd tell Sadie how I felt. I wouldn't ask her to stay, but I'd tell her the truth.

I knocked on the door and waited. Footsteps approached and the door swung open. Sadie blinked at me with confusion.

"Hi." She glanced at the flowers. "What are you doing?"

"Picking you up for our date." I handed her the bouquet and she blinked at it. A smile grew on her pretty face but her mouth dropped open. "I thought we were going to watch a movie."

I didn't answer, just smiled and stepped inside the foyer to grab her coat before holding it out. She slipped her arms into the sleeves and I leaned over her shoulder to kiss her cheek.

"Is this the mysterious *surprise* you've been planning?"

"Maybe."

Her eyes sparkled and she clapped. "Yes. Finally."

I laughed. "Come on."

She grabbed her bag and paused before pulling on her boots. "Should I wear something nice?"

“Nope. Casual.”

“Good. I like wearing these boots.”

It made my chest squeeze, hearing her say that. Watching her love the presents I bought her and taking care of her settled something in me that had been restless for a long fucking time.

My dream girl.

She closed the front door behind her before she followed me to the driveway. When she saw the emerald green Porsche, she stopped short.

She whistled. “Nice ride.”

When I had asked my dad to borrow the car tonight, he handed the keys over without hesitation. Last year, as Wyatt borrowed the car to pick Hannah up, I had wished so fucking hard to have someone in my life who I wanted to take on dates and shower with love and attention.

Now, I had her. It was Sadie, all along.

I held the door open for her and she got in.

“We’re still on the whole *trusting me* thing, right?” I asked her.

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“You don’t sound sure.” The corner of my mouth ticked and she laughed.

“You confirming it like that makes me a little unsure.”

I winced and pulled the scarf out from under my seat. “I need you to wear a blindfold.”

Her eyebrows rose way up and she offered me a bemused smile. “Is this a sex thing?” She wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

“No,” I choked out, laughing. “I don’t want you to see until the right moment.”

She studied the scarf. “Fine,” she said with a sigh. “This better not awaken anything in me.”

I grinned as I tied the scarf around her eyes, careful not to snag her hair.

Nervous anticipation flowed through me as I drove through the forest and into Queen’s Cove.

What all of this was in my head? Panic twisted my gut. What if Sadie had this sparkling, warm connection with everyone she met and I was so fucking lonely I clung to it like a life raft, and created an entire life with her in my head like some psycho?

I glanced over at her in the passenger seat, sitting patiently with the blindfold on, humming along to the music.

I didn’t think that was the case, but if it was, I’d regret not telling her over

letting her leave without knowing.

At the inn, I parked and got out of the car before opening her door to help her out.

“Hold on to my arm,” I told her, wrapping her hand around my bicep.

“Don’t let me fall.”

“I won’t, I promise. You want me to carry you?”

She laughed. “I can walk.”

I led her into the forest, along the path towards the twinkle lights. Over the past three days, my family and a dozen others from town scrambled to put this thing together while Hannah occupied Sadie with decorating the baby’s room.

“Where are we?” Her head whipped around, still blindfolded. “Are we in the forest?”

“You’ll see.” I squeezed her arm.

We came around the bend in the path and stopped in front of it.

“Alright, Sadie.” My hands came up to her blindfold and I tugged it off. “You can look.”

Her eyes opened. The twinkle lights shone in her eyes as she craned her neck to see.

“Oh, Holden,” she breathed.

“Do you like it?”

She turned her face to me and nodded, and the look in her eyes was everything I ever wanted.





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## Sadie

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I STARED at the treehouse in the woods, surrounded by twinkle lights. My heart beat hard in my chest and my eyes stung like I was going to cry. A metal staircase wrapped around the tree, leading to the platform twenty feet in the air.

“How did you...?” I trailed off, jaw slack as I took it all in.

Holden took my hand and tugged me towards the bottom of the staircase. “Come on.”

He led me up the winding steps, our footsteps clinking against the metal until we reached the platform, where he opened the door and I stepped inside.

My breath caught. It was *my* treehouse, the one I had told him about while we wandered through the forest. Four barstools sat around the counter, and behind the bar, a wall of windows overlooked the forest and the tiny, sparkling lights. A small antique chandelier hung above the bar, casting a soft glow over everything while a record spun. The record player sat on a shelf built into the wall, playing speakeasy jazz music over the speakers installed in the ceiling. The other shelves were stocked with multi-colored liquor bottles and cocktail glasses.

My gaze landed on the wallpaper and my heart stopped. I covered my mouth with my hand.

“Holden,” I said through my fingers. “That’s my wallpaper.”

Red wine and navy blue stripes, with gold and white birds floating every foot. The one I had designed years ago.

The treehouse was beautiful, like something out of a fairytale, filled with magic and whimsy. My heart lit up like a sparkler on a birthday cake.

And it was for me. Holden built this for me.

It clicked. The phone calls he didn't want me to overhear. The drywallers taking three days to fix a window when it was a job that should have taken one. It all made sense now.

"Why?" As soon as the word was out of my mouth, I knew the answer.

He stared down at me, intense and serious, and my hand automatically came to his arm.

"Because I love you," he said, simply. "It's always been you, Sadie, and now I know that. You wanted a piece of Toronto here, and I'd do anything to make you happy."

His words plucked strings in my chest, filling my heart. I never knew I wanted to hear those words so badly. My throat clutched with emotion and I blinked at him.

"You don't have to say anything." He searched my eyes. "That's not why I said it. I want you to know you're perfect and the most incredible person I've ever met, and I love everything about you."

"Even the weird blow-up doll jokes?" I whispered as a tear leaked down my cheek.

He took my face in his hands, gazing at me with more affection than I had ever seen, and I could have died of happiness.

"Yes, Sadie, even when you joke about me and that stupid doll, I love you." He pressed a kiss to my mouth and I sighed into him, kissing him back.

I pulled back to study the space again. "I don't want to go to dinner," I admitted with a laugh. "This place is heaven."

His expression warmed. "We don't have to." He moved around behind the bar and lifted a brown paper bag onto the counter. "Avery dropped off dinner so we could eat here."

He unpacked the food and I hopped up onto the bar stool, gaze still roaming the space, taking in every detail.

I sighed with happiness before my gaze landed on Holden. "Holden. It's beautiful. I can't believe you did this for me."

The proud, warm expression on his face made me forget every bad thing that had happened in the last year. "I'd do anything for you."

I came around the bar, rested my hands on his chest, and felt his heart beat through his shirt. Holden Rhodes was fucking perfect, and here I was, humming and hawing about what to do next.

Even if I had my dream job back in Toronto, even if Willa and I were

moving into the best, cheapest apartment in town, even if I had made Holden a deal that I'd find him a wife, I couldn't.

I'd *never* find another man like Holden Rhodes.

My conversation with Elizabeth from her anniversary party replayed in my head, and what she had said about taking a risk.

A tear leaked out of my eyes and I wiped it away. The answer was so obvious.

"Why are you crying?" he asked softly, stroking my hair with his hand.

I sniffed and another tear spilled over. "Because I'm so happy with you. I love you, and I don't want to leave."

Wow. There it was, out in the open.

He searched my eyes. "You love me?"

I nodded, gazing up into his eyes. "So much. More than anyone." More tears rolled down my face. "And I don't want to find you a stupid wife."

He burst out laughing and I chuckled. His arm wrapped around me to pull me into his chest and he lowered his mouth to mine, pausing an inch from my lips, watching me.

"Sadie, I have some bad news."

I frowned. "What is it?"

"I'm firing you as my matchmaker."

My face burst into a smile and I leaned up to kiss him. The scrape of his stubble against my skin soothed me and when he coaxed my mouth open to taste me, I sighed into him.

"Stay with me," he murmured against my lips in between kisses. "Let's keep being happy." His gaze seared me, it was so intense. His eyes were electric as he searched mine. "We'll figure everything out."

There was a long list of questions in my head. What about Claire? What about Willa? What about my debt? What would I do for work?

I didn't care, though. Like he said, we'd figure it out. I just wanted to keep being happy with him.

If I didn't stay, I knew I'd regret it.

"Okay," I whispered.

"Okay?" His brow creased with concern. "Are you sure? This has to be your decision."

I nodded and another tear fell over the edge. His thumb wiped it away. "It's my decision. I want to stay with you. We'll figure everything out and it'll be okay."

I'd remember the smile he gave me until my dying day, the look of total adoration, relief, and elation that the uncertainty between us had vanished. He leaned down and kissed me hard, and my hands threaded into his hair.

"I was hoping you'd say that," he told me in between kisses. "I was hoping it so hard. I love you so fucking much, Sadie."

The dam broke inside me and I laughed with relief against his mouth. It felt so *good* to lean into his love and let it happen. I sighed.

He pressed one last kiss to me before pulling back and grinning at me. "Let's eat."

We sat down at the bar counter and dished out the pasta while Holden told me about the process to build the treehouse. He designed it with the help of his dad and the hardware store owner. He had a local company fabricate the panels in their shop and everything was stored at the Rhodes Construction warehouse. Avery and Elizabeth and even Olivia helped during the day, putting up wallpaper and arranging glassware. I flushed with pleasure at the idea of everyone helping to build it for me. Like I was special to them.

"You didn't go to work?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I took three days off."

I gaped at him. "Who are you?"

The pride on his features warmed me down to my toes.

He sat back in his chair, thinking. "I'm trying to cut back. I like spending my weekends with you."

I offered him a soft, wistful smile. "I love our weekend adventures."

"Good." His eyebrows tilted up. "Let's keep doing them."

I beamed at him and ate a bite of pasta. "Deal."

After we had finished dinner, I took one last look around the space, glancing out at the twinkling lights. I bet those old trees had never seen something like *this* in their lifetime.

Holden watched me with that smile I had grown to love.

An idea rushed into my head and my mouth fell open. Holden quirked his brow at me.

These past few weeks, I had been struggling to paint, but now, inspiration hit me like a freight train.

"Holden, when we get home, can I paint you?"

He was silent for a long moment.

"I want to remember this night forever, and I'd like to paint your portrait." I studied his face. "Please?"

He shot me a crooked grin. “Sadie, you don’t even have to ask. I’m yours to do whatever you want with.”

“Good,” I whispered.

Tonight, I’d show Holden Rhodes I loved him.



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## Holden

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SADIE FLICKED the light on when she stepped in the front door and the familiarity of it, her reaching for the light switch, knowing where it was, made my heart ache. I closed the door and reached for her, pulling her against me, kissing a slow line down her neck with her back pressed against the door. Her head fell back and she closed her eyes, humming with approval. Her hands found my hair and she sighed.

She loved me, and she was staying. I kissed her harder. I was never, ever letting her go.

“Are you trying to distract me from painting you?” she mumbled as I backed her against a wall.

“Never.” I kissed her slow, soft, lazy, because we had all night and I wanted to savor her. “Upstairs?”

She shook her head, gaze locked on mine. Her fingers stroked the hair at my nape and my eyes fell halfway closed as the sensation shot tingles down my spine.

“In front of the fireplace.” Her throat worked and her gaze dropped to my mouth. “The light is better.” She leaned up on her tiptoes to press a soft kiss onto my mouth. She lingered and I inhaled her, saturating myself with the overwhelming brightness that was Sadie.

“Be right back. I’m going to change.” She winked and slipped out from under my grasp, running up the stairs, shooting a cheeky grin over her shoulder before she disappeared down the hall.

I stood there, watching her go, with a half a mind to follow her up and help her take her clothes off.



I wanted her to paint, though, and I wanted to watch her paint. I headed upstairs after her to bring down her painting supplies.

When she returned to the living room, I had already settled into the chair. Two mugs of hibiscus tea steamed from the coffee table. The fireplace was on and dancing with flames, casting a warm glow around the room along with the soft lighting.

My gaze skimmed all the places her leggings clung. The curve of her thighs. The shape of her calves. The hem above her delicate ankles. Those toes with sparkly gold polish.

Her hoodie. It was *my* hoodie I had gotten from a client a few years ago from a golf tournament. It was way too big for her. The sleeves bunched and it hung to the tops of her thighs.

“Fucking hell, you look cute in that.”

She smiled openly at me, picking up her mug and blowing the steam off it. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, watching her lips as they moved.

She winked at me and grinned wider. “Easy, tiger. You get comfortable and I’ll put some music on.”

I stayed right where I was as she moved around the living room. Her fingers walked over the records before she pulled a record out. *Rumors* by Fleetwood Mac.

As she slid the record out and set it onto the player, her delicate motions enchanted me, spinning a spell around me, drawing me in and pulling my entire focus. The way her fingers moved. The way she shifted as she set the album cover on the table. How her mouth lifted into a smile every time our eyes met. I swallowed again.

She turned the record player on and Stevie Nicks’ voice scraped into the room at a low volume. She stepped toward me, assessing my position in the chair with a thoughtful, fucking adorable look on her face.

“Shift sideways a bit?” she asked, gesturing. She worried her bottom lip, studying me as I did as I was told.

“I love when you tell me what to do,” I whispered, fighting a smile. I was already hard from anticipating this, and the intimacy of being in my home that now felt like *our* home.

She broke off with a quiet laugh. “You’re so beautiful, Holden. You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever met.”

My pulse beat in my ears. No way in hell I’d ever forget Sadie Waters

standing in my living room, wearing my hoodie with that open expression on her face, like it mattered what I thought.

She grinned but her eyes fell to my straining erection. Her eyebrows lifted.

I shot her a rueful smile, raking my hand through my hair. “You’re wearing my hoodie. How could you blame me?”

She smiled wider. “Of course, wearing your hoodie, how could I tease you like that?”

She laughed softly and set her brushes out, studying them. My side facing the fireplace warmed and I relaxed into the chair, letting out a long breath.

I raked a hand over my hair again, smoothing it. “Hair look okay?”

Her gaze returned to me. “Hair looks perfect, baby.”

My brain melted at her calling me that. I swallowed past a rock in my throat.

“I want the real Holden,” she said, eyes on her paints, a little smile on her face. “Unruly hair and all.” Her gaze cut back up to mine and my heart expanded in my chest.

The cutest little frown appeared between her eyebrows as she concentrated on sketching me. She hummed with the music. The quick scrape of her pencil over the canvas gave me goosebumps. Behind her eyes, she went somewhere else while her gaze cut between me and the canvas, her pencil moving fast. She went somewhere quiet, thoughtful, and focused.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

She studied her sketch, tilting her head and chewing that plump bottom lip, and it took everything I had to stay where I was instead of stalking over, hauling her over my shoulder, and kissing her, touching her, stroking her until she gasped. She chewed her lip in concentration before selecting the colors and squeezing dollops onto her palette.

This was better. Watching her work, watching her pick up paint on her brush and light up as she dragged the first stroke of paint onto her canvas. Watching her relax into it, fall into her rhythm. Glance at me, back at the canvas, stroke. Glance at me, back at the canvas, stroke.

The spell she wove around me intensified, wafting through my head, and now I couldn’t move if I tried.

I reached a new level of contentment, watching her paint, her eyes cutting from her canvas to me, her mouth curling up on instinct every time our gazes met. The soft light from the fireplace on her skin. No makeup, hair pulled off

her face, in a sweater and leggings.

Fucking hell, she was gorgeous. The most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I'd do anything to keep her like this, in her element and at ease. Her tea sat untouched on the coffee table while she worked.

While she worked, I thought about our life together. Fucking hell, I wanted to marry her. I wanted her so bad, painting like this in a home we shared, trusting me and leaning on me and bossing me around like she owned me.

I closed my eyes a moment and swallowed.

She owned me. She owned me through and through. When she was ready, we'd get married. My mind flicked to my grandmother's ring, passed down to my dad. I hadn't seen it in years because it was locked away in a safe but I never forgot the bright, captivating glow of the yellow center diamond.

I wanted to give it to Sadie, if she wanted it. When the time was right.

"I'm done."

Her mouth twisted to the side, chewing and biting her lip with uncertainty as she glanced between me and the painting. I gave her a questioning look.

She let out a nervous laugh. Her forehead pinched and fear streaked through her eyes.

"Honey." My voice was low.

Her chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. Her bravery made my heart ache.

"I'm in love with you," I told her. "Anything you paint, I'll love, because it's a part of you."

She nodded and I could see that my words sunk into her, and that she believed them. She stood and turned the canvas, careful not to smear the wet paint.

It was me, but it was her version of me, and when I saw it, I knew Sadie Waters loved me right back. It was the soft affection in my eyes, with careful, serious watchfulness. The wistfulness in my heart every time I thought about falling in love, written all over my expression on the canvas.

My chest ached and I studied the painting. The long lines of my arms and legs. The unruly mess of my hair. The pull of my t-shirt over my chest and shoulders. My eyebrows rose and I narrowed my eyes at her.

"You gave me extra muscles."

She laughed and shook her head. "I promise I didn't. You're a beautiful guy, Holden Rhodes."

My throat worked as I stared at the painting of myself. Sadie had captured my soul and painted it onto this canvas.

I met her gaze and listened to my pulse in my ears.

Her eyes changed. The softness spiked with terror, and her eyebrows lifted but her gaze stayed locked on mine, like she couldn't let it go.

"I'm still scared," she whispered.

I nodded. "I'm scared, too, baby. Now that I have you, I don't want to lose you."

Her throat worked and she clutched her arms around herself.

I held my arms out. "Come here."

She wandered over and I pulled her into my lap. She straddled my hips and my head fell back against the chair as my hands rubbed up and down her back, slow and steady.

Her weight on my lap felt incredible and blood surged to my cock. "Let's go to bed."

She nodded before pressing a sweet kiss to my mouth.

She led me up the stairs to the bed we shared, pulling on my hand with a little smile to move faster but I took the stairs one at a time, nice and slow, because why hurry when we had forever? In the bedroom, we pulled each other's clothes off, and my mouth and fingers found the pinched peaks.

"If I had known you weren't wearing a bra this entire time," I said in between working one with my tongue while she let out soft gasps.

Her hand tugged at my hair and I groaned, forgetting the second half of the sentence.

My hands came to her hips, slipping her leggings and underwear off, finding her wet center, stroking so soft and slow.

"Holden," she gasped as I brushed her clit.

I walked her back until her knees hit the bed. She lowered herself down and I pushed her knees apart. Everything was slower, this time. I wanted every second of her.

She gasped when my tongue dipped into her. My hands were on her thighs, skimming the smooth skin, touching all of her, memorizing her. I dragged a line up her center with my tongue, groaning at her taste and the way her thighs tensed under me.

"You're torturing me."

"It's different this time." I sucked her clit a brief moment. "Isn't it?"

My tongue worked her clit, massaging it. "Yes," she gasped. "It's

different.”

“How is it different?” I wanted her to say it.

She moaned again as I pulled her clit in between my teeth, so gentle, so fucking gentle and careful with this woman. “Holden.”

“Say it, honey.”

“It’s different because I love you.”

My pulse hammered in my head as I fucked her with my tongue, slipping fingers inside her and working the front wall until she pulled my hair, gasped my name again and again, and squeezed my head with her thighs, coming under my mouth and fingers. She clenched me so hard as the waves moved through her. Pride spiked in my chest.

When her orgasm had subsided, I moved over her, hovering and taking in her gorgeous, glazed eyes. Her messy hair that had fallen out of the ponytail when her hoodie came off. Her chest, rising and falling as she caught her breath.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” I told her.

She lifted up to meet my mouth, kissing me hard and yanking me down until my weight covered her.

Moments later, the foil packet crinkled as I tore it open and rolled the condom on, and I slid inside her slow and steady to the hilt.

“Fuck,” I groaned into her hair, taking a moment to collect my scrambled thoughts as heat squeezed my cock and my spine. “Jesus fucking Christ, Sadie.”

Her hands were in my hair, stroking and sending electricity down my spine. I pulsed inside her and a moan slipped out of her mouth.

“You’re so perfect,” I gritted out as I pulled back and thrust back in with a groan. My hips bucked as she clenched me. “I’m yours if you want me, honey.”

“I want you,” she gasped. “I want you so bad.” She winced and moaned, her eyes falling closed.

My breath turned shallow as I found a slow rhythm, and when I hitched her leg up to get deeper, she let out a high, breathy moan. Her muscles began rippling around me, clenching me and gripping my length. I blinked as pressure built. Desire, lust, need, love, it all sliced through my brain at different angles and even in the dim light, she was so bright beneath me, gasping and watching my eyes with that open look like I held her heart in the palm of my hand.

She arched, mouth falling open and lids falling halfway as she came, bucking underneath me and digging her nails in my back. I was right behind her, groaning as she clamped down on my cock. I watched her come, unfurling beneath me, before white light exploded behind my eyes and I groaned into her neck, holding her hard against me as I emptied myself into her.

“Sadie,” I breathed into her neck, because that was the only word I remembered in that moment.



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## Sadie

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A FEW MORNINGS LATER, I slid the last book onto the shelf in the secret library.

“Sadie.” Amusement flickered through Holden’s eyes as he sat back in one of the burgundy velvet chair. “You’ve been messing around with that book for ten minutes.”

I grinned, tilting my head and stepping back to study the bookshelf. “I know, but I want it to be perfect.”

His arms came to my waist and he pulled me into his lap. “Take a second to look at what you’ve created.”

I chewed my lip and took the space in. My gaze traveled over the floor-to-ceiling bookcases Holden had built, the soft lighting from the wall sconces, and the reading lamps arcing over the chairs. Natural light filtered in through the window and the door we had left open as we put the finishing touches on the room. A Persian rug with burgundy, navy blue, and cream stretched out over the hardwood floors. I inhaled a deep breath, basking in the warm coziness of the room.

“I love it,” I sighed. “It’s so freaking cool.”

It was mid-December. We weren’t finished the kitchen, dining room, or the bedrooms, but we could host a Christmas party in here and the sitting room, or New Years with all our friends and Holden’s family.

My gut tensed. I always spent New Years Eve with Willa and our friends. She knew I was staying in Queen’s Cove over the holidays but she didn’t know I was staying forever. I had been putting off telling her, because I had no clue how.



He tucked me further into his chest, distracting me from my worries. “See what you can do when you don’t hold yourself back?” he murmured into my ear.

My heart tugged and I turned to meet his gaze. “You built it. I just drew it.”

His mouth hitched into a warm smile. “We did it together.” He squeezed my hips. “We’re a team.”

I nodded, and my throat felt thick. My life was so fucking good with him. It almost didn’t seem real. I reached up and brushed his hair off his forehead, studying his handsome face.

“These have been the best three months of my life,” I told him quietly.

His gaze melted. “Me too, honey. I love you.”

Warm, sweet emotion twisted in my chest. “I love you, too.”

He turned to the window. “Sadie, look.”

Outside, snow began to fall on the forest, soft, slow, and breathtaking.

“Wow,” I breathed. “I thought it didn’t snow here very often.”

“It doesn’t. It’s usually too warm.” His low voice rumbled against my shoulder as we watched fluffy white flakes coat the trees.

“It’s like a sign.”

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “What do you mean?”

I pictured Katherine sitting in the other burgundy velvet chair, staring out the window with us.

“I’m right where I need to be.”

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THAT AFTERNOON, I sat in front of my easel in my painting room at Holden’s place, and took a deep breath.

If I hated it, I would throw it out and start again, I told myself.

*See what you can do when you don’t hold yourself back?* he had asked earlier that day.

I thought about Elizabeth’s words, about taking risks. I thought about the secret library and the bar in the woods and how impossible those ideas seemed until Holden made them real.

With Holden, I could do anything, and here in Queen’s Cove, I wasn’t such a failure anymore.

I swallowed, staring at the blank canvas.

Even if it sucked, Holden would probably fish it out of the garbage and put it on display at the local gallery. I smiled and rolled my eyes at the thought. That man.

At the edge of my conscious, all the *you're not good enough* thoughts lurked, waiting for the chance to jump, but I held them back. I thought about Holden's words for the hundredth time.

*You're okay.*

When I painted people I loved, it strengthened our relationship. Painting Katherine had reminded me of all the things I loved about her. It made me feel so connected to her. Painting Holden had been like a religious experience between us. I allowed myself to study him openly and put him on canvas, show him how much I cared about him and how I truly saw him in the way I knew how.

I was still broke, but in three months, I had built a life here like Katherine did when she was my age, and I didn't feel the burning sting of shame about Grant I once did.

It was time to forgive myself.

It was time to be okay, and a self-portrait was how I was going to do that.

I dragged my pencil over the canvas, sketching loose lines and shapes, until my figure took form on the canvas. The landscape behind me came next. As I worked, my mind settled. I sketched and mixed colors, letting my instincts take the front seat as I added tones to the mixes.

After a couple hours, I heard Holden's truck pull up outside, and I sat back to study what I had painted.

My mouth curled into a soft smile. My throat clutched as I studied the painting of me in my yellow rain coat, standing on the beach, smiling. Hair flying in the wind, sky overcast and moody. Trees towering over me, sand stretching out to the dark ocean, waves crashing on the shore.

My life here was beautiful, and I was okay.

"Hi," Holden said, leaning on the door frame with a pleased smile.

"Hi." I gestured at the painting. "I did it."

"You sure did, honey." He walked over and wrapped me in a hug from behind.

I leaned back into his hard chest. "It's not finished yet."

He stared at the painting for a long moment before his gaze dropped to me. His hands rested on my shoulders and I met his eyes.

“What changed?” he asked in a low voice.

I thought back to years ago, when I was terrified to even start my own self-portrait. I filled my lungs and let the breath out as a sigh.

“I guess I know who I am, now. And I like who I am here with you.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “Nothing makes me happier than hearing that, honey.” He leaned down to press a kiss to my cheek.

“Me, too,” I whispered.



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## Holden

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WHEN I STOPPED BY MY PARENTS' house a few evenings later, I followed the sound of the saw to the garage. I waited until my dad finished before catching his attention.

“Hey, Holden.” He stepped back and slid his mask and safety glasses off.

“What are you working on?”

He leaned down, inspecting his cuts in the lumber. “Your mother mentioned the community center bench is looking a bit shabby so I thought I’d build another one.”

My dad was always doing stuff like that for her. Maybe that was where I learned it.

My chest squeezed with the knowledge that after wanting that for so long, wishing for someone who looked at me like Avery and Hannah looked at Emmett and Wyatt, I had it.

“I didn’t know you were dropping by.”

I raked a hand through my hair, suddenly nervous. “It was a last minute decision.”

My dad leaned on his workbench. “How’d Sadie like the treehouse bar?”

I relaxed at the mention of her name. Her expression of awe appeared in my head and I smiled at my plate. “She loved it. Thanks for all your help.”

His eyes sparkled. “Happy to. You know that.”

I nodded.

My dad threw his hands up with a laugh. “Holden, out with it. Come on, you’re making me nervous.”

“I’m here for the ring,” I said in a rush. My gaze flicked up to his to

gauge his reaction.

His eyebrows went up but his smile stayed. He tilted his head. “Really?”

I nodded again. “Really.” I cleared my throat, pulse beating in my ears.

“She’s staying.” His smile widened and he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “That’s great.”

My mind wandered to all the loose ends. The inn renovation would continue until early February, and then she’d want to find a job in interior design. There weren’t many design firms on this side of the island, and I doubted she’d want to work in Victoria because it was so far.

I’d create a position at Rhodes Construction with our architects, but I knew she wouldn’t want to work for me.

We’d figure it out. We’d find a way for her to love her career and be happy here.

“And you’re going to ask her to marry you,” my dad added lightly, studying me.

“Not yet. But one day.”

Hell, I hadn’t even met her parents. She’d only been staying with me for a few weeks. Even I knew that was moving way too fast.

I pictured Sadie wearing my great-grandmother’s ring, and my chest pulled tight with pride. My Sadie.

She wasn’t ready to get married yet. I’d heard her say it a dozen times. One day, though. One day she’d be ready to take the leap.

She painted her self-portrait, and it was fucking beautiful. Better yet, I knew that was how she saw herself, strong and happy and carefree.

I knew she’d be ready one day. She was moving on from her past. She was happy here with me. She told me so, herself. *I like who I am here with you.*

She was so close to being ready. I was so close to having everything I ever wanted. I wanted to see and hold the ring. To keep it somewhere safe in my home until the time was right.

My dad shot me a teasing grin. “So why should I give it to you over your brothers?”

My throat worked. “Emmett and Wyatt are already married. And I doubt Finn wants it. Him and Olivia will never—”

“You don’t know that,” he cut in, arching an eyebrow. “Look at where you were a year ago.”

I sighed and stared out the garage door at the street. “I know she’d love

that ring, and it feels like making her a part of our family.”

When I turned to look at him, he wore a funny expression on his face. Wistful and proud.

He nodded and stood. “I know. Alright, let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“To the bank. The ring has always been yours, Holden, if you want it. It’s in the safe at the bank.”





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## Sadie

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“SADIE.”

My head snapped up as the beer I was pouring overflowed.

Olivia watched with amusement as I washed beer off my hands. “What are you daydreaming about?”

Holden. I was thinking about the mind-bending sex with Holden last night.

I had never felt like this with anyone. I never even realized it could be like this. It wasn’t just the sex. It was everything.

I belonged with Holden, and I belonged here in Queen’s Cove.

I thought about his pained expression as he came last night and a lick of heat hit me between the legs. My mouth curled into a smile.

“Sadie!”

“Yes?” My head snapped up again to see Olivia laughing at me while cutting lemons.

“Wow.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “What were you saying?”

“I was asking where you’re at with the inn. Are you almost done?”

Above her, multi-colored holiday lights hung over the bar, my single allotted decoration.

“We still need to put new cupboards into the kitchen and furnish the bedrooms.” My chest fizzed with pride and excitement. “And we’re waiting on a few finishing decor items to arrive and then we’re done.”

“What’s that look?” Olivia asked while she mixed a drink.

“I don’t want it to be over,” I admitted with an embarrassed laugh.

“Holden would kill me if he heard me say that. He’s put so much work into the place and spent so much time there.” My brain flitted through memories with him in the inn, talking and laughing or bickering over wallpaper. Us picking out tiles in the hardware store. When I knocked a wall down and saw the look of pride on his face. Him in the secret library, watching the snow fall.

Katherine would have loved the way we were making her inn shine.

The inn was where I fell in love with Holden. My heart squeezed at the thought.

“I’ve enjoyed the process,” I told her. “It reminded me what I love about being a designer.”

Olivia’s tentative gaze rose to mine. “I’m happy you’re staying,” she added quietly before she wrapped me in a big hug.

“Aw.” I squeezed her back. “I love you, too. Does this mean I can add more decorations?”

“No. Hug’s over.”

She pulled away and hustled off while I laughed.

My mind wandered back to the inn, and then the job with Claire. A little voice in my head told me after everything I’d learned, I was stupid for choosing a man over a job, but I ignored it.

I wasn’t just choosing a man. I was choosing a town, a group of people, and I was choosing to be happy.

I’d figure the rest out.

I still wasn’t sure what to do about my crushing debt, or the fate of the inn. It felt weird asking Holden to buy me out after everything we’d been through. I was living in his home. We had tossed the word *yours* and *forever* around. I wasn’t sure how to navigate this part.

This was probably the time for me to find a higher paying designer job so I could tackle the debt. I’d keep my bar job on weekends.

We could make extra income off the inn. We could hire a staff. Katherine wouldn’t want it to sit empty. She’d want it to be loved. She’d want people to visit and see the beauty of Queen’s Cove.

I chewed my lip. I had a lot of decisions to make.

Olivia let out a sharp laugh and I shook myself back to the present. Holden had arrived, his gaze flicking between me and the TV. Olivia stood behind him, face turned up to the screen. A few people gathered around them. Olivia shook with laughter before she reached over the counter for the remote

and turned the volume up.

“The viral video was filmed by the Queen’s Cove wildlife conservation society,” the reporter explained, “who host a live feed of the bear den during the hibernation months.”

My stomach dropped through the floor. “Oh my god.”

I hurried over to behind Holden to watch. On screen, a clip played of the bear slapping the other bear with the dildo. My hands covered my mouth and my eyes widened.

“Local conservation officers say the bears played for hours with the toy, hitting each other with it and tossing it around. Miri Yang, a local teacher and philanthropist, says the toy belongs to local bartender and interior designer Sadie Waters.”

An image of me outside the inn that first morning, when the dildo was on the ground, appeared on screen. One of my eyes was closed, my hair was an unbrushed mess, and I wore sweatpants and no bra.

“No!” I screeched, as laughter rose around me. Olivia doubled over laughing and Holden’s arm came around me, beaming. “I’m going to kill Miri.”

The video cut to an interview with Miri.

“Yes, the dildo belongs to Sadie Waters,” she told the reporter, standing in front of the Queen’s Cove marina. “It’s part of the My Ferocious Alien line.” She peered into the camera with a serious expression. “Women’s sexuality is very important, and the town of Queen’s Cove supports Sadie Waters in all her sexual exploration. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

My face burned so hot, I thought my skin would melt. I couldn’t move.

The screen changed to a view of both reporters, struggling to hold back laughter.

“That thing is huge!” one of them said to the other. “No wonder the video has millions of views.”

I buried my face in Holden’s shoulder and he rubbed my back, still laughing.

The front door of the bar opened and a woman walked in, who I recognized as one of the conservation officers.

“No,” I whined when I spotted the bag in her hands.

She shot me a big smile. “Sadie Waters?”

My eyes closed for a brief moment. Everyone around me fell silent, holding their breaths.

“Yes?” I said, even though I knew I’d regret it.

She reached into the bag and pulled out the alien dildo, gnawed and pocked in teeth marks.

The bar erupted in cheers and I dissolved into laughter despite my total humiliation.

“I believe this belongs to you,” she said, handing it over.

“It’s not—” I began.

The bar patrons cut me off. “*It’s not mine!*” they chanted before cheering and clapping as I accepted the toy.

I sighed at Olivia, shaking my head. My face burned but I couldn’t help but laugh along with everyone. “This place is so fucking weird.”

“You love it,” she shot back, returning behind the bar counter.

Holden’s gaze met mine and I nodded at him. “I really do.”



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## Sadie

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WE WERE DOING last call at the bar when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I stared at the number and frowned. I didn't recognize the caller but it was almost midnight.

"Hello?" I asked, stepping into the hallway to the backroom.

There was noise on the other end. People talking, music playing.

"Sadie."

My stomach plummeted. Grant. Or, Jason. It was his voice. My mouth opened and closed but no words came out. I stood there, frozen and blinking and wondering if this was real.

"Sadie?"

"Um," I said stupidly. My heart pounded in my chest. I couldn't think. "Why are you calling me?"

We were over. Everything that happened was in the past, and I was moving on. Why was he calling and disrupting that?

"I've been thinking about you, Sadie."

My lip curled as a disgusted expression pulled over my features.

"Wanted to make sure you're okay," he slurred.

"Are you drunk?" I hissed.

"The whole thing got all out of control," he continued as if I hadn't said anything. "I'm not supposed to call you but I wanted to say how sorry I am, baby."

On instinct, my teeth bared. "Do not call me that." My jaw clenched and I closed my eyes. "If you were sorry, you'd give the money back."

He made a high pitched noise of disbelief. "Can't. Oops, sorry," he said

to someone on the other end. "I loved you, Sadie."

My stomach lurched like I was back on that boat with Holden. I was going to be sick. I shook my head. "No, you didn't."

"I did, baby, I *did*." His words ran together. "I loved you so much and I had to give it all up."

My heart rattled my chest, beating hard. I absorbed his words, turning them over in my head.

"Why did you ask me to marry you if you were going to leave?" I whispered.

He made a noise of regret. "I shouldn't have done that. I wanted to stay. I really loved you."

Confusion and frustration wrenched my stomach. One arm crossed my stomach, hugging myself, while the hand holding the phone shook.

I couldn't talk to him anymore.

I wanted to go back to my nice, calm life here in Queen's Cove.

"I'm hanging up now," I told him in a shaky voice. "Don't ever call me again."

I ended the call.

I stood in the hall for a few minutes, replaying the conversation in my head and letting my pulse return to normal. Tomorrow, I'd contact the detectives and let them know about the call.

Ugh. I rubbed my forehead, closing my eyes as I heard his words again and again.

How could he hurt me like that if he loved me?

An unwelcome realization pierced my brain and my stomach tensed again. I had told myself Holden would never hurt me because he loved me.

Now, I didn't know what to think.

"Hey," Olivia said, stepping into the hall. She shot me a wary look. "What's going on? You look weird."

"Um." I shook myself, dragging a sobering breath in. "Nothing. I'm fine."

I slid my phone into my back pocket and tried to shove the conversation out of my head.

An hour later, once we were home and curled up in bed with the light off, the unwelcome realization crept back into my thoughts.

"What are you thinking about?" Holden murmured as his arm tightened around me. "I can feel your eyelashes moving against my chest."

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“It’s fine. What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

I had convinced myself Holden was Grant’s total opposite, and he’d never hurt me like Grant did.

Now I wasn’t so sure.





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## Holden

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GRAVEL CRUNCHED beneath my truck tires as I pulled up to the construction site for the first phase of the apartment buildings project. The site was bustling as they prepared the foundation. Before I climbed out of my truck, I checked my phone for messages.

Sadie had been acting weird since last night. Quiet and closed off, like she was worried.

I rubbed my chest, frowning. It was nothing. She was probably worried about how to break the news to Willa and Claire. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, thinking about her distant smile as I kissed her goodbye this morning.

Things were so solid with us. Almost too good. I thought back to what she once said to her aunt about me. Was she having second thoughts?

A shout on the construction site snagged my attention and I watched as several people sprinted to the base of the crane. My gut clenched hard and I climbed out of my truck. Someone shouted *call an ambulance* and my heart began pounding as I ran over.

Robert, one of the construction leads, lay on the ground, as the first aid person hovered over him, asking him questions. His arm was slung across his chest and his face was pale.

My blood pressure sky rocketed.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Aiden appeared at my side, looking stricken. I’d never seen him not smiling. “The ambulance is on their way,” he told the first aider before turning to me. “They were lifting rebar for the foundation when one of the

straps broke. The rebar slid out and hit Rob. We think his arm is broken and he might have a concussion.”

Terror boiled up my esophagus and I scrubbed a hand down my face. Fuck. Concussions were serious. In my mind, I saw Finn’s sheet-white face as he lay on the ground beneath the tree.

I glanced at the rebar, scattered across the ground. Those rods were heavy and sharp. If the angle were different, they could have seriously injured him. If he had lost his footing and fallen on his neck or back, he could have died.

Blood whooshed in my ears. This was a big fucking mistake on my part, handing this project over.

“Let me see the strap,” I snapped.

When someone brought it forward, I flipped it over, inspecting it. “Is this an old strap?” I asked Aiden.

He shook his head. “We inspect them before every lift. It was in perfect condition.”

“And the weight—”

“Within the limits,” he supplied. “We were safe, Holden. We checked everything.”

“Obviously not.”

Shame washed over his features.

The ambulance pulled up and the paramedics hurried over with a stretcher. Everyone stepped back to give them space and I watched with a rock in my stomach as they loaded Rob into the ambulance and drove away.

“Job site’s closed until the investigation is done,” I announced, and Aiden swore. I crossed my arms, nostrils flaring. “I’m stepping back into the project.”

His face flashed with frustration and defensiveness. “We followed every safety protocol. This couldn’t have been prevented.”

“It’s not up for discussion,” I snapped, pointing at the rebar laying all over the ground. “You’re way over your head. This is my fault.” Some of the fight left me, leaving only shame. “I shouldn’t have put this on your shoulders before you were ready.”

I stalked off to my truck to head to the hospital. Way, way in the back of my head, I knew Aiden was right. The guy had always been a stickler for our rigorous safety procedures. This wasn’t his fault.

Still, I couldn’t shake the notion that if I had been in charge, it wouldn’t have happened.

Instead, I was building treehouses in the woods and watching Sadie at the bar. My stomach twisted. I hated choosing like this. I had tried to let things go at work and it blew up in my face.

I had no choice. Regret simmered through my chest and I gritted my teeth.

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I SPENT the rest of the afternoon and evening at the hospital, waiting until Rob got out of surgery. Outside his room, I assured his family he would be on leave with full pay and access to as much physiotherapy as he needed before I headed home.

The tension in my chest loosened a fraction as I stepped through the front door. After the day from hell, all I wanted was to see Sadie.

“Hey,” I called as I kicked my boots off. It was just before midnight and all the lights were still on.

“I’m in here.” Her soft voice came from the living room, where she sat in front of the fireplace, gazing at the flames with her arms crossed over her chest.

I stepped forward and dropped a kiss on her cheek. “Jesus, am I happy to see you.”

She stiffened as my lips brushed her face and I frowned, straightening up. She wouldn’t meet my gaze. A crease formed between her eyebrows as she stared at the fire.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She glanced at the coffee table.

The ring my dad had given me sat in the cream velvet box, open and sparkling as it caught the light from the fire. Her gaze rose to mine, and her eyes flashed with pain, fury, and betrayal.

For the second time that day, my stomach plummeted.



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## Sadie

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"I WAS BORROWING a pair of your socks," I told him, staring at the ring. My stomach knotted over and over. I chewed a hole in my bottom lip.

There had to be an explanation for this. Please, please let there be a reason why he had that ring.

All my socks were in the laundry. When I had pulled his sock drawer open to find those comfy ski socks he had lent me weeks ago, there it was. A little cream box, sitting in the corner of the drawer.

A wedding ring.

*A fucking wedding ring?*

I heard the rush of blood in my ears. My gaze lifted to his. His face was drawn and he looked drained. Guilt pinched me in the ribs because I knew he had the day from hell, but I couldn't go to bed without addressing this with him.

"Okay, hold on a second." Holden moved to sit beside me on the couch, taking my hands. "It's not what you think."

Relief loomed at the edge of my panic. Maybe he was holding onto the ring for someone. It was a gift from Emmett to Avery, or Wyatt to Hannah.

"I know you're not ready to get married yet," he said in a low, careful voice.

My eyebrows shot together. "Yet?"

He blinked with confusion. "There's no pressure, Sadie. You can have as much time as you need. I won't rush you."

The ring in his drawer wasn't a misunderstanding.

"You still want to get married," I said uselessly, panic ringing in my ears.

He scoffed. "Of course I do, but not before you're ready."

Oh god. My stomach was in free-fall. It hit me. All this time, I thought we were on the same page. He knew I couldn't get married. I glanced at the ring on the table and my stomach knotted again.

"We love each other," Holden said, rubbing his thumb across the back of my hand in slow strokes. "You're staying in Queen's Cove. We're building a life together. Obviously, we'll get married one day."

On instinct, I yanked my hands back and shook my head hard. He had a plan the entire time. He wanted to get married from day one and somehow, I had stupidly forgotten that very important detail. My pulse pounded in my ears and I wrapped my arms around my stomach, dragging air into my tight lungs.

"I don't want to get married," I told him, sparing him a glance. He stared at me in confusion. "Ever."

He let out a laugh of disbelief. "Don't say that. You don't know how you'll feel in a year or two."

"No," I insisted, tucking my arms under each other, hugging myself closer. I shook my head at him. "Never. I never want to get married."

A tiny voice in the back of my head still thought this whole thing was too good to be true, and now I knew why.

He made a noise of frustration in his throat. "We love each other. That's what people do when they love each other, Sadie."

My hands shook. "Not always," I argued. "There's no law that says people have to get married. Can't people just live together forever and that be enough? Why does there have to be a legal contract involved?"

His jaw tensed. "Because it means you trust me not to screw you over like Grant did."

His words took the air out of my lungs. I tried to breathe but a weight landed on my chest. My hands came to my temples and I closed my eyes, thinking.

My mouth went dry. The living room felt too small.

"I don't understand." He raked his hand through his hair. "I thought you were over that shit. If we're happy together, why does it matter?"

Rage pitched in my blood. "Exactly. If we're happy together, why does it matter if we get married or not?"

"Because it means something, Sadie! It means you're choosing that person." His fist clenched. "When are you going to stop punishing me for

what that asshole did?”

I stood up to get away from him. “You’re not looking *that different* from Grant right now.”

“Don’t say his name in our house,” he bit out.

“*Your* house, Holden. I don’t live here.”

“Yes, you do.” He glared at me. “And we’re getting married. Maybe not soon but one day, we are.”

Every cell in my body wanted out of here.

“You’re being controlling,” I told him, crossing my arms. Misery boiled up in my stomach as I thought about the past couple months. Over the course of this argument, my memories had taken on a new light.

I saw him now. Holden couldn’t give up control in life, in his company, and now in our relationship.

The raincoat. The boots. The treehouse. The coffees and croissants and emerald green tiles.

“This whole time, I thought this—” I gestured between us, “—was real but you were just trying to change my mind about your stupid marriage goal.”

His big flaw I had been wondering about for months? It was right in front of me the whole time.

God. I felt so stupid. How could I miss it?

His face fell. “No, honey, that’s not it.”

I blinked at him. “Don’t call me that.”

The endearment burned me, knowing he hadn’t changed his mind about marriage. They always had an agenda, wasn’t that it? And here I picked the wrong guy, again.

This time, I had no one to blame but myself. It didn’t matter that he loved me.

Now, he stood. “So after all this time, after everything that’s happened between us, you still won’t bend, huh? Is that it?” His eyes flashed with frustration and hurt.

I gritted my teeth. “You’re backing me into a corner.”

He threw his hands up. “Some fucking corner, Sadie. Is this life so bad?” He gestured at the surrounding house. “Me running baths for you and working on the inn together? Making you come every night? Am I such a poor fucking choice that you still won’t commit, even though you want me?”

“It’s not *you*, Holden—”



“It is that,” he spat back. “I heard what you said to your aunt about me, Sadie.”

My brain paused and I squinted at him, shaking my head. “What are you talking about?”

His chest rose and fell hard as he heaved for air. His eyes locked on mine and hurt flared behind his gaze. “You asked her why anyone would choose me over my brothers.” The fight drained out of him, and now he just looked tired. “And you were right.”

My head swam with confusion. “No, Holden, that’s because you were an asshole to me that summer.”

His shoulders lifted once and he folded his arms over his chest. “You were right, though, weren’t you? I’m offering you everything and you still don’t want it. You don’t want me.”

The muscles in my shoulders strained with tension and I tried to swallow past the knives in my throat. Shaky frustration rattled through my blood and my head pounded with an incoming headache. I dragged in a deep breath and let it out slow as the realization filtered into my mind.

I couldn’t marry him. I couldn’t do it and I wanted someone who would respect that.

Holden wanted marriage more than he wanted me.

My heart strained in my chest at the realization that it wasn’t going to work with us, and I closed my eyes for a brief moment to gather my strength.

In another life, it would work between us, but not in this one. The idea of getting married pulsed at the edge of my consciousness, infected and painful and full of misery, and I never, ever wanted anything to do with it.

“We’ll never agree on this,” I said in a quiet voice.

He stared at me in silence, a frown forming on his handsome face. He realized it, too.

My eyes stung with tears. “We’re both always going to be waiting for the other person to change their mind.”

Behind his gaze, something dimmed. All the light and warmth that had grown over the past three months drained away.

“Yeah.” He stared at the floor with an expression of acceptance and regret.

I bet he wished he never inherited the inn with me.

Pain twisted my heart, and a tear spilled over. I turned away so he wouldn’t see, clearing my throat.

I heard him put his boots on before his footsteps approached.

“I’m going to stay at Emmett’s tonight.” His voice was low. He paused.  
“Bye, Sadie.”

My heart broke in half. A tiny part of me thought he’d cave. That he’d love me enough to change his mind.

“Bye, Holden,” I whispered. I couldn’t turn around, or I’d change my mind.

I held back a sob, and when the door closed, I buried my face in my hands and let it out.

Holden and I were over, and it was time for me to go home.



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## Holden

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“ARE you sure you want to do this?” the bank employee asked two days later, glancing between the paper I had handed him and my face with concern. “That’s a lot of money.”

When I returned home this morning after crashing at Emmett’s for two nights, the empty house didn’t surprise me. I had walked through my house, forcing myself to check each room, showing myself it was over. That I was back at square one, like before I met her. My chest had ached with emptiness at the bare countertops in the bathroom.

She had forgotten some paperwork in the kitchen, though, so I had fished out an old bank loan statement of hers and brought it to the bank.

The money didn’t matter. I didn’t even want the extra ownership of the inn we had agreed on. Transferring part of her ownership meant lawyers and meetings, and I wanted this done.

I wanted Sadie Waters out of my life.

Pain ripped through my chest at the memory of the disgusted, horrified expression on her face when I mentioned us getting married. Like she couldn’t imagine anything worse.

She had agreed to marry a guy who gave her a fake name, but the idea of marrying *me* was off the table?

My gut rolled with nausea and I fought the urge to shake my head at myself. I should have fucking known. I wasn’t even angry at her. She had told me how she felt, I just didn’t listen. She swept me away with her pretty smiles and laughter and weekend adventures.

I couldn’t believe I actually thought she’d want me.

Everything my brothers had that I wanted so badly had been within reach, but it wasn't real. Like I suspected all those months ago, I would never have those things.

No one would ever choose me.

My chest ached again but I nodded at the bank employee. "I'm sure. I want to pay the full amount."

Now I could forget Sadie Waters.



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## Sadie

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WILLA'S front door swung open and she hauled her suitcase inside. "Honey, I'm home," she called.

"Hey." I waved from the couch, watching as she kicked her shoes off. "How was the trip back?"

She walked over and collapsed beside me on the couch with a sigh. "Long. Remind me never to travel between Christmas and New Years."

I snorted. "You wanted to see your nieces."

Her expression softened and she nodded. "It was so good to see them. I miss those little brats." She glanced over at me, searching my face. "How are you doing?"

I nodded at her, smiling. "Good."

Things were terrible. I had spent the last two weeks on the couch, watching Grey's Anatomy and doing endless hair and face masks.

When I wore one of those cloth face masks, I didn't need tissues, because the mask absorbed my tears.

So. Yeah. That's how things were going.

He had paid my debt off, and I wanted so badly to pick up my phone and call or text him to thank him, but I knew if I did that, I'd start bawling and one of us would end up on a plane and we'd be in the same mess down the line, because neither of us would change our minds.

Every second of the day, I missed Holden. My mind wandered to him, wondering how work was going and whether he was still working on the inn. Whether he still went to the bar in the evenings.

After I had arrived back in Toronto, Willa was seconds from canceling

her trip home because she didn't want me to be alone for Christmas. I had to put on a big show about how fine I was to get her to go.

She still called me every day while she was away. I didn't tell her what happened with Holden. I couldn't revisit it, it was still too fresh, like a scrape that hadn't scabbed over yet, sharp and stinging.

All the other things I loved about Queen's Cove drifted into my thoughts. Olivia and the bar. Elizabeth and the rest of Holden's family. The inn. The forest, with my sparkling treehouse bar. I stalked the Queen's Cove Instagram account for updates about the town. I'd exchanged a few texts with Olivia but she wasn't much of a conversationalist without me in front of her, drawing the information out of her.

Over and over, I asked myself if there was any scenario where things could have ended differently.

There wasn't. He was loud and clear. He wanted to get married and over time, he'd grow to resent me because I wouldn't cave. I knew that and yet I still tortured myself with memories of him.

"What season of Grey's Anatomy are you on now?" Willa asked.

My eyes narrowed as I thought. "Ten, I think? I've lost track."

She grinned and stood. "I'm going to shower and wash all the plane germs off, and then," she wiggled her eyebrows with excitement, "we'll lay out all our furniture in your design program."

Hesitation wavered through me and I sucked in a breath. Willa had been talking nonstop about the apartment we'd be moving into in March. Now I was back early, we would move in early February instead. I knew she was trying to cheer me up and remind me we had something exciting to look forward to but every time I thought about that apartment, I thought about living with Holden.

When I thought about Holden, I had to run to the bathroom so Willa wouldn't see me cry.

I tried to shove him out of my head. It was time to move on.

Twenty minutes later, Willa danced into the kitchen with wet hair, wearing pajamas, and tossed a ticket down on the counter with a big smile.

"I have a surprise for you," she sang. "Sarah pulled some strings and got a spare ticket to the New Year's Eve ball." Her eyes glittered as she watched my reaction. "Now you can join, too."

Internally, I sunk with disappointment. I was looking forward to hanging with my fictional doctor friends on Netflix that evening. The thought of



getting dressed up, going out, pretending to have the time of my life, it already exhausted me. Everyone would ask how my time on the west coast was, and I had no clue what I would say.

“Babe.” Willa stepped in front of me and held my shoulders, staring into my eyes. “I know you don’t want to go, but you need to wash your hair.”

I snorted.

“Seriously,” she said, laughing. “Getting all dressed up, seeing everyone, having a few drinks and flirting with guys? It’ll make you feel better. I know it.”

My mouth twisted into a rueful smile and I nodded. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

I couldn’t sit around and mope forever if I wanted to move on from Holden Rhodes.



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## Holden

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“STOP STARING AT THE DILDO,” Olivia said, sliding a beer across the counter to me. “It’s freaking people out.”

I rolled my eyes before settling back into a scowl. “I’m looking at the TV.” I gestured at the dildo still mounted on the wall beside it, covered in bite marks. “Why don’t you move it above the door?”

My head rang with a memory of Sadie suggesting Olivia mount it above the hallway to the washrooms.

“*It could be like mistletoe,*” she had said, laughing. “*Mistle-dildo?*”

I let out a snort before the emptiness in my chest rolled back in. Tomorrow was New Year’s Eve. Was she going out with Willa and all their friends? Was she back to living with Willa already?

What did she do for Christmas?

Did she miss me like I missed her?

When the clock hit midnight, would she kiss someone else? Possessive jealousy gripped my chest at the thought of her with anyone else.

A thought crept into my head. Maybe the whole getting married thing didn’t matter. For the thousandth time, I wondered if I made a huge fucking mistake letting her go.

I heard her words again from years ago and flinched. She hadn’t chosen me, and I wasn’t sure if I could ever let that go. It would always loom in the back of my mind.

I folded my arms over my chest and frowned at the hockey highlights, thinking about the way her face lit up when I showed her the treehouse bar. The soft affection on her face as she painted me in the living room that night.

The way she fit right into my life, and now that she was gone, I couldn't forget her.

After a few weeks of her staying in my home, I couldn't look at a single inch of the place without thinking of her. I dreaded returning home.

"Hey," Olivia said to someone behind me.

Emmett slid onto the next stool. "How are you, Olivia?"

She shrugged and shot a glance at me. We hadn't talked about it but I knew she was mad at me for driving Sadie away. I saw it in the sullen way she glanced at me. She didn't laugh as much as when Sadie was here.

Neither of us did.

"Fine," she answered him in her usual flat tone. "Beer?"

He nodded. "Yes, please."

While she poured, he turned to me. "And how are you?"

"Fine." My gaze stayed on the TV.

Olivia slid his beer across the counter and Emmett tilted his head at the empty space on the wall, where the painting of me crying used to hang.

She jerked her chin in the direction of the backroom. *In the back*, she mouthed, cutting a glance to me.

Emmett nodded in understanding. "Gotcha."

She wandered over to a table near the back and Emmett sighed before he drank some of his beer.

"You missed family dinner the other night."

I made a noise of acknowledgement in my throat, eyes still on the TV. I couldn't sit there and watch everyone have what I wanted. I didn't want to be that sulky asshole while they radiated happiness.

"What happened with Sadie?"

I shifted. "We want different things."

Emmett gave me a *go on* look.

"She doesn't want to get married." It pinched, saying the words out loud for the first time since she left. My throat worked and I dragged a breath in.

"Right. And you do."

My gaze cut to his, wary. He gave me a rueful smile.

"Come on, buddy," he said. "Everyone knows your dark secret. You're a fucking romantic."

My chest ached. A lot of good it had done me.

"Why do you want to get married so badly?" He sat back, studying me.

My expression was incredulous as I turned to him. "When people love

each other, they get married.” I sounded defensive. “Look at you and Avery. Hannah and Wyatt. Mom and Dad.” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Some of the anger filtered out of me and I deflated. “I wanted her to want me as much as I wanted her.”

Emmett considered this for a second, rubbing his jaw. “If it wasn’t for that stupid plan I cooked up for my campaign, Avery and I might not have gotten married.”

My eyebrows shot together. “What?”

He shrugged. “I would have won her over, eventually. We’d still be partners but I don’t know if we would have done the whole ceremony and marriage certificate and stuff.”

I stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

He grinned. “Holden, I hate to break it to you, but it really is just a piece of paper. It’s not a one-size-fits-all solution. For us, it was never about the signatures on the paper.” His grin softened like he was thinking about Avery. “It’s about waking up every day together, making her dinner and listening to her talk about her day, sitting on the patio and dreaming about our future together. Picnics at the beach. Getting married is what you make of it.”

I sat there, processing his words. He made it sound so simple.

Emmett sighed. “You’re not getting it. She already chose you, asshole.” He huffed in frustration. “Oh my god, you need to control every situation, don’t you? By staying at your place, she chose you. By telling you she loved you, she chose you. By moving her entire life to Queen’s Cove *for you*, she chose you.”

People glanced over at him as he raised his voice. Emmett didn’t get pissed off often.

My heart slammed in my chest. “If she doesn’t want to marry me, that means she doesn’t trust me.”

He leaned forward with his elbow on the counter. “Look, you’re my brother. I love you and I want you to be happy, and I sure as *shit* am not going to sit around watching you mope for the rest of your life, so listen closely. You blew it, Holden. You had it and you blew it.” He straightened up, chest heaving and hands on his hips. “I can’t even look at you right now,” he said, pulling out his wallet and dropping a bill on the counter. His beer was half-full.

He tilted his head to meet my gaze. “Put your pride aside, trust her, and make the right decision. Don’t fuck this up.”

He stalked out the door of the bar without another word.

A bad feeling bled into my stomach, like I had made a huge fucking mistake.

*She already chose you, asshole.*

She was going to walk away from her dream job for me. She was about to tell her best friend she couldn't live with her, for me. She was ready to start a brand new life here.

For me.

Fuck.

Emmett made it sound simple because it *was* fucking simple.

*You need to control every situation, don't you?*

My stomach churned, because he was right. Control gave me a sense of safety, but it had backfired. By being a stubborn, controlling asshole, I had pushed Sadie away.

With a new perspective, I weighed my options: hold on to my stubborn way of thinking and live a lonely, boring existence without her, or get over myself, beg for her forgiveness, and spend every day with her for the rest of my life?

The answer was so clear. The marriage thing didn't matter, and I wished I realized that months ago instead of this stupid fucking deal I had made with Sadie, but then I may not have gotten to know her and fallen in love with her.

I had to fix this.

The next morning, I got in my truck to catch the first flight off the island.



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## Sadie

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“HELLO, DARLING.” Willa plopped down into the seat beside me, cheeks flushed from dancing. She wore one of my dresses, a cinnamon-colored satin dress that looked incredible with her long, dark blonde hair cascading down her back in curls. She sipped a glass of champagne while her eyes roamed the crowd.

“Hello, lovely,” I quipped back, shooting her a small smile. “That dress is perfect on you.”

She fanned herself with a mock-humble expression. “Stop, don’t stop.”

I snorted.

Above us, a cloud of disco balls hung, scattering light across the club and my friends’ faces. The sound system pumped out ABBA while partygoers danced, toasted to the end of another year, and gathered for selfies, beaming and laughing. My floor-length dress had huge embroidered flowers, sneaky cut outs on the bodice, and a soft skirt that swished around my legs. I had tied my hair up in a sleek ponytail because I didn’t have the energy to blow it out all loose and wavy, and Willa had done my makeup. Despite my minimal efforts, I looked amazing.

I felt like crap.

I couldn’t be more miserable, which was crazy, because I loved wearing pretty dresses, going out with all my friends, and ABBA. I played them whenever Olivia handed over control of the music at the bar.

The west coast was three hours earlier than Toronto so it was only eight thirty there. Was he already there, sitting at the bar, eyes on the TV? Or was his family doing something tonight and forced him to join?



Did he feel as shitty as I did? I hoped not.

I hoped he didn't have this sinking ache in his chest that I did, and every day wasn't worse than the last.

Ugh. *Sadie, you are being so pathetic.*

Willa smiled at me. "It was fun getting ready tonight. Like we were back in university."

I smiled back at her and nodded. "Thank you for letting me stay at your place so long." I winced. "I know it's not ideal."

She tilted her head, giving me a hard look. "Don't give me that. You know I love living with you. Besides," she added gesturing to her dress and wiggling her eyebrows. "If you weren't staying at my place, I never would have tried this on."

I nodded. "True. It's perfect on you."

Willa glanced around. "Have you seen the server? I'm craving snacky foods." Her eyes lit up. "Tacos! That's what I want. With guac on the side."

My mind flashed back to the Juicy Taco night I dragged Holden to. That was the first night we had a real conversation where we weren't sniping at each other. Where I saw a sliver of the guy I would fall in love with. I remembered the way his mouth would twitch in the early days, when I'd tell a stupid joke and he'd be trying not to laugh.

God, I loved it when he laughed.

My eyes stung and I blinked, dragging in a deep breath and pushing the memory away.

"Are you ready to talk about it?" Willa asked, careful gaze on me.

I swallowed past a knot in my throat. "Here?"

She shrugged. "Why not?"

Because I'd start crying, that's why not.

My gaze roamed the party, everyone all dressed up, laughing and having the best time while I was stuck in the past. A year ago, I'd be one of those people out on the dancefloor, breaking it down and taking photos with my friends, toasting to the year ahead.

This year, though, being here felt all wrong. Not just here in the club, here in Toronto. Living with Willa. It was like I returned a different person.

I stood. "I think I'm going to go."

Willa's face fell. "No."

"Yeah." I winced at her. "I don't want to be a bumner. Really. I want to take these heels off and go to bed."

Her gaze darted around again. “Just a few more minutes. Stay until midnight.” Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes were pleading. “For me?”

I hesitated before I sat back down. Willa was my bestie, and we’d do anything for each other. She wanted me here until midnight, so I’d put on a happy face and stick it out for half an hour more.

“I don’t fit in here anymore,” I told her.

She studied me with a thoughtful expression before she nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

My stomach swooped. “You do?”

“You used to love living here and now your head is somewhere else.” A sad smile turned up on her mouth.

I deflated. Was it that obvious? My thoughts strayed back to Queen’s Cove, shuffling through my stack of memories from my time there. Holden. The bar. Olivia. The inn. Holden. Avery. Hannah. Elizabeth. Holden.

Willa sipped her drink. “I can hear you crying at night.”

My gaze shot to hers, embarrassed. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head with a sad expression in her eyes. “You’re not over him, Sadie.”

Regret and pain flared in my chest and I sighed, staring at the floor. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be.”

“That good, huh?”

I turned to her and nodded. “The best, Will. The best man I’ve ever met.” I pressed my mouth into a tight line, thinking about how I’d never walk in the forest, holding his hand, ever again. “He wanted to get married. Not yet, but one day, and I said no.” I swallowed. “I said I’d never want to get married and if he loved me, he wouldn’t push me.”

Holden had once asked me if I thought I’d be able to find someone for him and I reassured him I would.

And then I stomped all over his heart.

Willa blinked. “Whoa. That’s a lot.” Her expression turned baffled. “Oh my *god*. He asked you to marry him?”

The ring I had found flashed into my head.

It was beautiful. I’d never seen a yellow stone like that, all radiant and sparkling. It was so unique. My mind kept wandering back to it and what it meant to Holden.

Why didn’t I take a day to think, back in Queen’s Cove?

“Why didn’t you say something?” Willa asked.

My stomach rolled with nerves and I chewed my lip, gathering the words in my head. Here it was, the conversation I never, ever wanted to have with her.

“The apartment. We’ve wanted to live together for years.”

She gave me a flat look. “Do *not* tell me you were about to give up your dream guy so we could live together in a creaky old apartment.”

I shook my head at her. “It’s so much more than that. You’ve always been there for me, and I want you to have the extra time and money to make a go at your painting.”

She stared at me like I was insane. “Sadie. Do you know how many people have asked if they could move into that apartment with me in case you changed your mind?”

Record scratch. “What?”

She nodded, holding my gaze with wide eyes before she gestured around the party. “At least half of our friends.”

“Oh.”

She nodded with a small smile. “Yeah.”

We sat there without talking for a moment, listening to the music.

“The thought of never seeing him again breaks my heart,” I told her, “and now I’m wondering if I fucked it all up for nothing.” My eyes stung again and a tear rolled down my face. “I think I did. I think I don’t care about the whole marriage thing in the end, if it means I get to be with him.”

My chest pulsed with tight, strained energy and my heart squeezed up into my throat as more tears fell.

“Great.” I rolled my eyes, laughing and wiping it away. “Now I’m *that* girl at the party, crying on New Years’ Eve because she’s single.”

Willa gave me a sad smile. “But it’s because of so much more, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” I sniffled. “Okay, now I really do have to go. At least to the washroom to calm down.”

“Wait.” Willa’s hand came to mine. Her gaze flicked around the room before it snagged over my shoulder. Her eyes were bright as she chewed her lip. “Don’t be mad, okay?”

I frowned. “Why?”

Nerves flashed across her face. “Based on how miserable you’ve been since you got home, I made a few assumptions.”

I stared at her. “Okay?”

She winced. “I knew you were in love with him and missed him, even if

you didn't tell me. On account of all the crying."

"Right." Where was this going? My pulse picked up.

"And I thought..." Her gaze flicked over my shoulder again. "...that you two should talk."

I blinked. She didn't even know his last name. How would she—

"He messaged me on Instagram," she continued with a worried expression. "Or, Olivia did because he doesn't have social media."

My jaw dropped. "He *messed you*?" I blinked about a hundred times, processing this.

"I got him a ticket for tonight and he flew out here."

"Oh my god." That was all I could say in response to her information bombs. "Is *that* why you've been scanning the room—"

Her gaze flicked over my shoulder again and a smile lifted on her face. "I knew he'd show up."

My head whipped around to see Holden in a tux, standing ten feet away.



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## Holden

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SHE LOOKED LIKE A DREAM.

Her eyes went wide as she saw me and she stared at me like she didn't believe I was real.

My heart thumped hard in my chest and I braced myself for rejection. I was taking a big swing and it might not go well. What if Willa was wrong, and she didn't miss me?

Maybe she didn't want me back.

My gorgeous angel stood and held my gaze as she slowly walked toward me until she stood right in front of me. Her eyes roamed my tux, my hands, my hair, my face coated in stubble because I hadn't shaved in days. I needed a haircut and my hair was a mess. I hadn't had a good night's sleep since she left, and I looked like shit.

She stood in front of me, staring at me with an unreadable expression on her face, and it took every ounce of control not to pull her to me, kiss her, and never, ever let her go again.

"Hi," she said, rolling her lips into a line. A crease formed between her eyebrows.

She burst into tears and my gut dropped.

"I hate it here." She sniffed. "I want to come home and marry you."

My mouth was already on hers, kissing her hard. One arm wrapped around her shoulders to pull her into my chest, one sunk into the hair at the base of her neck, ruining her sleek ponytail, but I didn't care.

"Baby," I breathed, coaxing her open and tasting her. Her hands were all over me, in my hair, on my chest, inside my jacket, cupping my jaw.

Someone whistled at us. Her tongue was hot silk against mine and my chest burst open with relief, desire, and love for this woman.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in between kisses. “I’m so sorry.”

“No. I’m the one who should be sorry. We’re not getting married.”

She pulled back with a confused expression. “What?”

My hands framed her face and I sighed, resting my forehead against hers, wiping the tears away with my thumbs. “Sadie.”

Ohhhhh, fuck, it was good to say her name out loud again. To look into her eyes and touch her and kiss her. It felt *right*. There was no doubt in my mind I had made the right decision.

“I don’t want to get married,” I told her. “We don’t need to get married to be in love. I trust you and I don’t want to push you into anything you don’t want to do. If you want to stay in Toronto, I’ll move here for you. I’ll move anywhere for you.”

When I looked into those mossy green eyes I missed so much, I couldn’t believe I almost never saw her again, because I couldn’t get over this one tiny thing. My chest ached at the close call.

I shook my head at her. “I never should have gotten that ring from my parents. That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No,” she breathed. “I freaked out because I was scared. Being without you sucks and I don’t want to do it anymore.” She took a deep breath and my heart squeezed. She was scared, but she was still doing this. “I trust you. I want to come home and live with you and be in love with you. I don’t want to live in Toronto. I love Queen’s Cove.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You,” she said. “Nothing is as good as my life with you.”

My heart beat with love and longing. When we kissed again, she melted into me, and I sighed with relief.

“I love you,” she told me, threading her fingers into my hair.

“*Ten, nine, eight,*” people around us chanted as midnight approached.

She smiled up at me and my heart expanded in my chest. I let my happiness show all over my face.

“I love you, too. I won’t spend the next year without you.”

“*Three, two, one!*”

Her eyes were soft and full of affection. “Fine by me. Happy New Year, Holden.”

“Happy New Year, Sadie.”





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## Holden

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DIM MORNING LIGHT filtered into the bedroom through the hotel room windows. Sadie and I had spent the last three days lying around in bed, naked and whispering to each other, making up for our time apart. Each night, we went out for dinner before we rushed home so I could make her moan my name.

On our path to the bed last night, we had forgotten to close the curtains. Sadie slept beside me, face smushed into the pillow, curled up on her side, with her hand protectively resting on my bicep. Her hair spilled over the pillow behind her.

I remembered her words from New Year's Eve.

*What changed your mind?*

*You.*

My heart pumped harder in my chest, studying her pretty face, the curve of her cheekbone and part of her lips. This was one of the many ways I loved her—relaxed and peaceful.

How could I have ever given this all up because we couldn't agree on getting married?

Her hand tightened on my arm. The way she moaned into my chest as she came last night replayed in my mind. I was already fully hard, no surprise, waking up to a naked, sleepy Sadie, all soft skin and curves and possessive touches.

My hand smoothed over her hair and she made a soft noise, eyes flickering behind her eyelids. I kissed her temple, inhaling her, before kissing her jaw line, tracing it with my fingers. She made a humming noise and

smiled.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I whispered, and she sighed. “I love you so fucking much and I’m lucky to have you.”

The corner of her mouth pulled higher and she cracked an eye open. “You’re such a romantic.”

I grinned at her, my heart flopping over in my chest at the affectionate way she said it. I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her into my chest, dipping down to kiss her. Her breath hitched against my lips when my erection pressed into her stomach.

“Wait.” She sat up straight, holding the sheet up. “I need to do something.” She swung her legs over and hopped out of bed.

“Get back in bed,” I demanded, but she laughed and disappeared into the bathroom before the door closed. “What are you doing?”

“I told you,” she called through the door. “I need to do something. It’ll only take an hour.”

“An *hour*?” What the fuck? “I’m coming with you.”

“You have to stay here.”

If she didn’t sound so fucking happy, I’d be nervous, but her excitement intrigued me. I settled back into bed and listened to the sounds of her getting ready.

She flew out of the bathroom a few minutes later, hair up in a ponytail and makeup free, and dressed as fast as she could.

She pulled her coat on. “You want a coffee?”

“I want you naked and back in bed,” I insisted.

“I’ll get you a coffee.” She shot me a teasing smile before leaning over the bed and pressing a kiss to my mouth. I tried to pull her back into bed but she slapped at me and wiggled away, laughing.

I grinned back at her. “What are you up to?”

She shrugged, biting back a smile. Her eyes sparkled with mischief and my heart squeezed. “You’ll see.” She blew me a kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, honey.”

An hour and a half later, the door beeped and opened and I glanced up from the couch, reading the news on my phone.

Her cheeks and nose flushed pink from the cold but she beamed at me, excited and lovely, and my heart flipped over with happiness. She kicked her boots off, walked over and set a coffee on the coffee table in front of me, and the expression on her face made me pause.

Excitement shimmered behind her eyes, with a hint of nerves. I frowned. “Holden,” she said.

“Sadie.” I narrowed my eyes at her.

She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small black box. My heart dropped through the floor. She sat down beside me on the couch and opened it. A large silver ring sat in the box. My gaze darted from it to her eyes.

“Holden Rhodes, will you marry me?” Her expression turned careful but hopeful.

I blinked. “Sadie, I was serious. I don’t need to get married. You’re enough.”

“I know.” She shrugged with a wistful smile, eyes glowing. “But I was wrong too, and I want to show you I trust you. You’ve wanted this for so long and I want to do this for you. I want to make you as happy as you make me. There’s no doubt in my mind I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to move into that gorgeous house of yours and sleep in your big bed and have a couple kids with you.”

Her smile softened as she spoke.

“I want to sit next to the fireplace and listen to music while sitting across your lap and brushing the hair out of your eyes. Holden, I didn’t even realize what love was until I fell for you.”

My heart clawed into my throat and I thought it might break out of my chest, it beat so hard.

Her eyes shone and tears pooled. “I am so in love with you and I’m not afraid of marrying you. Not one bit.”

A tear spilled over and I brushed it away with my thumb. “Don’t cry, honey.”

She laughed. “I’m crying because I’m happy. I’m so insanely happy you’re here and I didn’t lose you.”

I shook my head, fingers slipping into her hair, looking down into those dark green eyes I loved so much. “You never lost me.”

“So, will you?” Her eyebrows rose with hope and something set right in my chest, like a floorboard popping into place. A perfect fit, and now everything was seamless.

“In a heartbeat.” The words flew out of my mouth, certain and strong. “If it’s what you want.”

She nodded and smiled. “It is.”

She leaned forward to kiss me and I groaned at the contact of her soft, warm mouth on mine, so sweet and lovely and addictive.

“Holden,” she murmured against my lips. “Not even in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would find you.”

I leaned my forehead on hers. “I dreamed about you for a long time, and when you showed up, you were even better than I had imagined.”

She rolled her eyes while laughing. “God, you’re *such* a romantic.”

“One of us has to be.”

I wrapped her in my arms and kissed the love of my life.

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## Epilogue - Sadie

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"IT'S TOO QUIET," I said to Holden, pressing my ear to the door of the inn on New Year's Eve the next year.

He stood behind me and put his hand on my lower back. Even through the thin silk of my dress, his hand warmed me.

"Go on in." His voice was low.

I glanced over my shoulder at him in his suit and sighed. "Holden, you wear that suit well."

The corner of his mouth hitched and his gaze heated. "You've mentioned that once or twice."

I turned and rested my hands on his chest, running my thumbs over his lapels. "If I knew how good you looked in a suit, I might have agreed to marry you sooner."

He huffed a laugh and his eyes warmed me down to my toes. "No, you wouldn't have."

I shook my head. "No, I wouldn't have."

"Come here."

I looped my arms around his neck and he pulled me to him, lowering his mouth to mine and kissing me soft and sweet. His stubble brushed my chin and I sucked in a breath. My head swam as Holden kissed me. As my *husband* kissed me. The word felt funny in my mouth, but not bad funny. Good funny. New and interesting and curious. Something I was excited to explore more of.

"Fuck, I love my wife," Holden growled, pressing me back against the door and kissing down my neck. "Can't wait to fuck you senseless later."

My eyes closed and I gasped as he sucked the sensitive skin beneath my ear. “Holden.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I sure liked the way he said *wife*. All possessive and demanding. I couldn’t wait until he said it again.

“Do you feel any different?” I asked him.

He tilted his head. “Nope.” A playful smile pulled at his mouth while his hand rubbed slow, intoxicating circles on my bare back. “We probably didn’t even need to do that.”

I shook my head at him with exasperation. “Oh my god. I’m going to kill you.”

He laughed and kissed my cheek.

We had married at town hall. During the ceremony, Holden watched me with a small, focused smile, like nothing else existed but us. Like I was everything he wanted. Like he couldn’t believe it was real. Like he’d do anything for me.

I’d never made a better decision in my life than saying yes to Holden Rhodes.

The ceremony went fast. I didn’t even remember repeating the words Emmett said, but I remembered Holden and I staring at each other with funny little smiles, like we were in on a private joke. He slipped his family ring on my finger and my breath caught.

I loved it. It made me think of Holden.

And like that, we were married.

If I had known how easy it would be with the right person, I never would have been so adamant against it.

“Forget about the wedding,” Holden rasped against my mouth on the porch. “Let’s go home.”

I laughed and nipped his bottom lip. He groaned.

The door whipped open behind me and I would have fallen over if Holden hadn’t been holding me against him.

“Surprise!” everyone yelled from the foyer of the inn.

Holden’s hand tightened around my waist and he sighed. “I already regret this.”

I laughed at him and poked the corner of his mouth. It popped up and my heart somersaulted. “You’ll have fun. I promise.”

Emmett pulled us inside the inn and everyone surrounded us with a chorus of congratulations and hugs. We had booked the entire inn out for the

party, and the place was packed. Someone turned the music up and the bartender mixed drinks in the corner of the sitting room while servers circled with hors d'oeuvres. Everyone we knew and loved was here, chatting and laughing and all dressed up. Don circled with his camera, snapping photos of people in the middle of laughter or stories or hugs. Wyatt pulled Hannah to the makeshift dance floor in the sitting room while Elizabeth and Sam cooed over their adorable baby granddaughter, Cora Nielsen Rhodes. Emmett, Avery, and Finn explored the secret library while Willa and Olivia chatted on the window seat. Willa had visited for a few weeks last summer and the two had become friends.

Shortly after I returned to Queen's Cove last January, Holden and I finished the renovations before we had hired a manager who would live on the premises in Katherine's room and run the inn. Amelia was a recently divorced woman in her mid-thirties and had moved here from Nelson, another small town in British Columbia. The second she had stepped into the inn for her interview, her eyes lit up and I knew in my heart she was the right person for the job. With her extensive experience in hospitality, we trusted her to hold down the fort.

Last May, Grant was arrested while trying to cross the border into California. He had spent about half of what he stole from me, and a couple months ago, I had received the remainder in my bank account.

I should have sent that guy a thank you note for what he did for me. If it wasn't for Grant, I never would have gotten to know Holden.

After the inn renovation was complete, Holden and I started our own company, Waters-Rhodes Design. He had promoted Aiden to partner and hired another person to run the business side. He and Emmett sat on the board but weren't involved in the day to day. Besides, he was busy with a home renovation nearby. They had seen our secret library and wanted one of their own.

Outside of our company, I had been working on a collection of pieces for an exhibit at the Queen's Cove art gallery in April. The painting Holden refused to sell to the gallery? It now hung next to its other half, donated last January. He had said he didn't need it anymore.

At the inn, Holden's hand slipped into mine and he held a plate up with a samosa on it. "You should eat, honey." I nodded and took a bite. Someone tried to approach and he shook his head at them with a frown. "She's eating," he told them.

I laughed and rolled my eyes at him. “So grouchy.”

He cut me a glance, the corner of his mouth twitching like I loved. “I want you all to myself for a minute.”

“You’ll have me all to yourself until we die peacefully in our sleep at the age of a hundred and thirty.”

He smiled and his arm came back around my waist. He dropped a kiss on my cheek.

Around us, all the people we loved were having the best time. Life and laughter filled Katherine’s inn to the brim. The fairy lights cast a soft glow on everyone but the warm energy wasn’t from the lights, it was from the people and the inn itself. Love saturated the inn. Katherine had put her life into it and Holden and I had fallen in love under this roof.

Something struck my heart and I placed my hand over my chest.

“What’s wrong?” Holden asked.

“I feel her here.” A soft, wistful smile grew on my face. “I know it’s woo-woo and I can’t explain it but...” I shrugged, smiling to myself. My chest squeezed, buzzing with pressure. “It’s the strangest thing.”

Holden nodded. “I feel it too.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “It’s like she knew.”

He watched me for a long moment before he nodded. “I think she did.”

Katherine knew something we didn’t. She knew we’d be perfect for each other, complete opposites and thus the perfect fit.

“Sadie.” Elizabeth found me and hugged me until I couldn’t breathe, whispering in my ear about how proud she was of me, how happy she was that Holden and I had found each other, and how I was perfect as I was. She covered my cheeks with enthusiastic kisses like I was a child and my heart flip-flopped in my chest.

“Mom, are you drunk?” Finn asked.

She swatted his arm. “I’m *happy*.”

He smirked and took a sip of his beer before he nodded to the two of us. “Congratulations, you two.” His tattoos were visible, poking out from the sleeve of his shirt.

“Thank you for being here,” I told him. “I know it’s a long way from Whistler.”

He had decided to spend another ski season there. When Olivia had found out Finn would be here, it took serious convincing on my part to get her to the wedding. She didn’t want anything to do with the guy and wouldn’t step a



foot in the same building as him. I had to agree to working at the bar one night a week for the next year to get her to say yes.

As if that was a fair deal. I loved chatting with everyone there, talking and laughing, and I loved the way Holden's eyes followed me around.

"Would you like another drink?" Holden took my empty champagne glass and I nodded. He dropped a kiss on my cheek. "Be right back," he whispered in my ear.

"Sadie, I saw your masterpiece of Holden."

"Oh." My eyebrows rose. "Which one?"

Finn's mouth hitched in a roguish smile. "All of them. I need a crying painting, Sadie. Everyone else has one and they won't sell me theirs."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'll paint you one."

His face lit up with a warm grin. "You're the best."

"I'm beginning to see why some people call you the devil."

He nodded and narrowed his eyes. "And how *is* Olivia?" His expression was so casual but he couldn't keep the interest out of his eyes.

"She's good."

"Yeah? How good?"

"Finn, are you snooping on her?"

He adopted an innocent expression. "I'm making pleasant conversation."

"I shouldn't be talking about her to you."

"I promise you, I have only her best interests at heart."

Something in Finn's eyes, so sad and serious but determined, made me open my mouth again. "She isn't going back to school."

"She took a job in Vancouver?"

I shook my head. "As far as I know, she's staying here for the foreseeable future. She wants to take over the bar from her dad."

His jaw ticked, clenched tight and he reminded me of Holden. He tipped his beer bottle back and took a long pull. He let out a sigh and gave a slight shake of his head.

He stared into his beer for a long moment. "I'm coming home this summer."

My eyebrows shot up and his gaze met mine for a brief moment.

"And you can tell her that," he said quietly.

Olivia was not going to like this.

Miri strode past but stopped when she spotted me. "Hello, lovely! Oh my goodness." She gestured at my dress. "Look at you."

“Hi, Miri.” I gave her a bright smile. “Thanks for setting up the decorations.”

She waved a hand. “I loved it.” Her mouth dropped open when she saw Finn standing beside me. “Well, if it isn’t the devil himself.”

“Hi, Miri. How are your roses doing?”

“They never recovered after you rode your bike through them fifteen years ago.” She crossed her arms but she was smiling.

Olivia appeared in the doorway and froze as she met Finn’s gaze. His mischievous expression dropped and he looked strangely stricken. Olivia unfroze and disappeared back the way she came.

Miri’s eyebrows were at her hairline before she gasped. She peered at Finn, then at Holden, approaching with my champagne. Then at Emmett, his arm around Avery, and Wyatt, beaming at his daughter as Hannah wiped her face with a big, loving smile.

“Four brothers,” Miri whispered, frowning to herself, eyes blazing. “Four weddings.”

Finn froze. “No.”

Miri’s gaze lifted to his and a strange smile grew on her face. “Yes,” she whispered, nodding.

“Not likely.” Finn rolled his shoulders. “I need another drink.”

Holden appeared with a champagne glass for me. “Dinner will be served in a few minutes,” he told Finn. “Go sit down in the library.” He handed me the champagne and leaned down to kiss me like he hadn’t seen me in a year. A flash went off and we turned to see Miri snapping a picture. She winked at us and disappeared the way Finn had gone.

Holden led me by the hand to the library and my hand came to my heart. Candles enclosed in deep glass vases sat around the room on every shelf and window sill, and fairy lights hung above the long table that spanned the length of the room. Dark flowers, a deep burgundy red, with greenery decorated the table runner and guests took their seats.

“You like it?” Holden asked.

I gave him a long look. “I love it,” I whispered. “It’s perfect.”

“Come on. Let’s sit.”

He pulled me to a seat in the middle of the table and he took the one beside me. Servers circled with wine in between courses. Laughter and conversation filled the room, and my heart twisted at the sight.

Holden caught my eye and I smiled.

“Just trying to remember this moment forever.”

His gaze warmed me. “We’re going to have lots of these moments.”

My heart flipped over. “I know.”

Emmett appeared behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. “Sadie,” he whispered. “Are you changing your name, or no? I want to get it right in my speech.”

Holden and I smiled at each other. He was behind whatever decision I made, but when I had explained my reasoning, he was even more supportive.

First, I had wanted to be part of Holden’s family. I wanted to be a Rhodes.

Then, I remembered Katherine. She was a Waters, too, and she had given us this inn. She had cared about us.

I wanted to honor her, and having her last name was keeping a part of her with me.

I smiled at Emmett. “I’m still Sadie Waters.”

After our meal was over, Holden took a deep breath, glanced at me, and stood up with his champagne glass. He cleared his throat and everyone quieted down. I shot him a curious glance. We hadn’t talked about him making a speech.

He nodded once at everyone. “Hi.”

I snorted and a couple other people laughed. He glanced at me and his mouth twitched.

“Thanks for coming to our wedding. If you can believe it, I’m the one who wanted to have a big party.”

A few people laughed and he nodded.

“Yeah. I’m not really a party guy but Sadie makes me want to share my life with people I love.”

In a split second, the air in the room changed from humorous to heartfelt.

“Sadie Waters,” he said, gazing at me with warmth and love, “you are the most stubborn person I’ve ever met.”

“What?” I shrieked and the table burst out laughing. “You’re the stubborn one.”

“Oh my god,” someone groaned.

“Holden is way more stubborn than Sadie,” Emmett called.

Holden shook his head at him. “I’m trying to make a speech here.”

“Sadie gives as good as she gets,” Elizabeth called down the table. “And we have the paintings to prove it.”

Laughter rang out.

“Okay, okay. Do you want to hear about how much I love Sadie or what?” Holden looked up and down the table with raised eyebrows.

A chorus of *yes*'s rose up.

“Sadie Waters, you're everything to me. You're the most spectacular artist I've ever met. You're the bravest, most determined person I know. You live with your heart open and vulnerable and you let kindness and love lead you in this world and from the moment I met you, I was terrified of you. I avoided you for a whole summer because I was afraid of how much I liked you.” His gaze rested on me, and my heart clutched. “I'm the luckiest person in the world because I got everything I wanted when I met you. I love you.”

He leaned down to kiss me and the table burst out into *aww*'s and a few snuffles.

When he sat back down, I leaned my head on his shoulder, slipping my hand into his.

I couldn't wait to spend forever with Holden Rhodes.

## Want a spicy bonus scene with Holden and Sadie?

Holden finally gets to watch Sadie use that vibe!

Sign up for my newsletter [here](#) to receive a spicy bonus scene or visit [www.stephaniearcherauthor.com/  
holden](http://www.stephaniearcherauthor.com/holden)

I send 1-2 emails a month with updates about new books, what I'm working on next, and a little bit of chatty stuff about makeup, TV, and podcasts.

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading Holden and Sadie's book! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review online. Reviews help other readers find books they love.

Thanks to everyone who helped Sadie and that sulky dickhead Holden find their way: Maggie North, Helen Camisa, Bryan Hansen, Alanna Goobie, Sarah Clarke, and Brett Bird. You're all wonderful and I feel lucky to know you! Thank you to Jami Nord for your editing wisdom, and for protecting readers from detailed descriptions of Holden reading emails.

Tim, the love of my freaking life. Thank you for making me laugh, bringing me takeout, and telling me it's all going to be okay.

Lastly, the amazing romance community! I freaking love you all. Thank you to everyone who posted about my books, wrote a review, or told a friend. Writing romance is my dream come true.

Next up is Olivia and Finn's book, Finn Rhodes Forever. These two have been sneaking into my head for months. Finn is the devil, and he's going to ruin my life (and Olivia's). If there's a side character you'd like to read more of, email or DM me! I have ideas for future books but nothing is set in stone.

Until next time,  
Stephanie

# Also by Stephanie Archer

## **Queen's Cove Series**

[That Kind of Guy](#) (Emmett and Avery)

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[In Your Dreams, Holden Rhodes](#) (Holden and Sadie)

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## About the Author

Stephanie Archer writes spicy, laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. She believes in the power of best friends, stubborn women, a fresh haircut, and love. She lives in Vancouver with a man and a dog.

